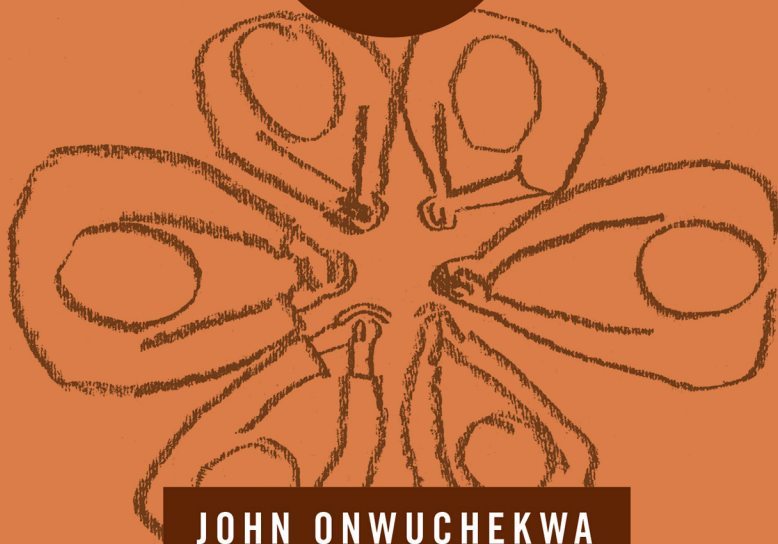


IX **9Marks** BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

PRAYER

HOW
PRAYING
TOGETHER
SHAPES THE
CHURCH



JOHN ONWUCHEKWA

"I don't know if I've ever read a book on prayer that left me feeling the entire range of human emotion—until reading John Onwuchekwa's *Prayer*. Here is a human book—beautiful, poignant, funny, gritty, and pastoral. This book is better than a correction to our often languid prayer lives. There's no guilt-based manipulation. Onwuchekwa writes like a fellow traveler, and as a fellow traveler knows what travelers need most: refreshment. Here's a thirst-quenching encouragement to join together in seeking our great God. I pray every church reads *Prayer* together; it will change our congregations. Here's a warm invitation to the entire church, beckoning the people of God to the wonders of prayer."

Thabiti Anyabwile, Pastor, Anacostia River Church, Washington, DC;
author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

"*Prayer* is an excellent book by my dear friend John Onwuchekwa. It is biblically and theologically rich. It is also real and honest. Want to get a corporate prayer meeting started in your church? This book is a very good start."

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Everyone remembers that auntie or uncle who hushed our fears with the words, 'Baby, we just gon' pray on that.' John Onwuchekwa is that voice for today, calling the church back to one of the simplest and most powerful tools in her arsenal—the habit of communal prayer. He doesn't merely want to reawaken our atrophied prayer muscles; he invites us into the much harder work of reorienting our priorities so that they're more in line with God's. Onwuchekwa's call to return to such 'first things' is an excellent start to seeing Christian communities moving in the same kingdom direction."

K. A. Ellis, Cannada Fellow for World Christianity, Reformed
Theological Seminary

"There's likely something missing in your church, something you haven't thought much of and likely haven't even noticed. It's prayer. Onwuchekwa shares compelling, insightful, and biblical reasons why corporate prayer should be a priority for the church. What a privilege it is to pray together as a family—this is the vision Onwuchekwa casts for us. This book has the potential to transform not only individuals, but also our relationships and the culture in our churches. I highly recommend it."

Trillia Newbell, author, *God's Very Good Idea; Enjoy; and Fear and Faith*

"The early church moved forward in power because they were a praying church (Acts 4:31). If we today are so proficient at ministry mechanics that we can succeed without power from on high, we have failed. But if our churches today will heed this compelling call to prayer by John Onwuchekwa, we too will prevail against all earthly powers, for God's glory!"

Ray Ortland, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This is a thought-provoking book about the life of prayer in the local church. Onwuchekwa builds a theological framework and then gives tangible and practical solutions for fleshing it out. I’ve had the privilege of working with John over the last decade, and I’ve seen no one better able to take lofty concepts and present them in a way that is palatable for the body of Christ. This book is an outworking of his gift. He takes biblical principles and communicates them in an effective way. His work on this subject is a gift to the church.”

Dhati Lewis, Lead Pastor, Blueprint Church, Atlanta, Georgia;
Executive Director of Community Restoration, North American
Mission Board; author, *Among Wolves: Disciple-Making in the City*

“What more could be needed by our churches than a revival of gospel-centered spirituality? And what more could we do to experience this revival than to recommit to nourishing communion with our Father through prayer? This is why I’m thankful for this exceptional book by John Onwuchekwa. It is an accessible, practical, and relatable guide to the depths of the enormous, glorious privilege of speaking to the God of the universe.”

Jared C. Wilson, Director of Content Strategy, Midwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary; Director, Pastoral Training Center, Liberty
Baptist Church, Kansas City, Missouri; author, *Supernatural Power for
Everyday People*

“I have a lot to say about this little book, because it’s so good. In fact, I think this is one of the best books in this series. Brief and well written, this book by pastor John Onwuchekwa looks especially at two sections of the Gospels—the Lord’s Prayer and Jesus’s prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Onwuchekwa shares significant observations that seem intuitive, but are also surprising. It is well illustrated, biblically faithful, and theologically accurate. This book is useful to think not only about when we should pray, but also about how we should pray, and even what we should pray about. It reintroduces us to the ignored topic of praying together at church. Hope-giving and inspiring, specific and practical, the whole book is sweetened by touches of humor. You and others could benefit from investing your time in reading this small book on such a grand topic.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington,
DC; President, 9Marks

PRAYER

9Marks: Building Healthy Churches

Edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman

Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus,
Jonathan Leeman

Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents
Jesus, Jonathan Leeman

Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of
God, Bobby Jamieson

Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus, Jeramie
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Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus, Mack Stiles

Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today,
David Helm

The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ, Ray
Ortlund

Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus, Mark Dever

Conversion: How God Creates a People, Michael Lawrence

Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global, Andy Johnson

Biblical Theology: How the Church Faithfully Teaches the Gospel,
Nick Roark and Robert Cline

BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

PRAYER

**HOW
PRAYING
TOGETHER
SHAPES THE
CHURCH**

JOHN ONWUCHEKWA

■ ■ CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church

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To my mom, who taught me to pray.
To my dad, who modeled the courage that came from prayer.
To my wife, Shawndra, my lifelong prayer partner.
To Ava, you are the ripened fruit after a
long season of prayers sown.
To Cornerstone Church, your faith and
love have increased mine.

CONTENTS

Series Preface	11
Introduction	13
1 Breathe Again: The Problem of Prayerlessness	17
2 A Class Act: Teach Us to Pray	27
3 The World Is Yours: A Family Led	39
4 Soul Food: A Family Fed	55
5 Roots: A Family Bred	65
6 Glory: The Role of Prayer in Corporate Worship	77
7 Lean on Me: The Role of Prayer in Corporate Care	91
8 Doing the Right Thing: The Role of Prayer in Missions	107
Conclusion: Fighting Temptations	119
Notes	129
General Index	133
Scripture Index	135

SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks seeks to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus a few more on sound doctrine, prayer, and missions. Look for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations.

Series Preface

We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
series editors

INTRODUCTION

If you were to walk into most churches next Sunday, what would you find?

You would hear music and singing. It might be loud or sparse, the songs new or old. Yet the basic structure would be almost identical whether you were in Billings, Montana, or Atlanta, Georgia.

There would be some sort of sermon. It might be topical, brief, and generally lighthearted. Or it might be expositional, long, and generally serious. Depending on the Sunday, you might see a baptism, participate in the Lord's Supper, or engage in a corporate Scripture reading.

But you know what you probably wouldn't see a lot of? Or participate in?

Prayer.

I don't mean that no one will talk to God. But the prayers will likely be brief and few, a couple of cursory words as musicians and speakers shuffle on and off stage. They will likely be biblical but vague, focusing on the general promises of God for an undefined subset of people. They will likely be informative but territorial, rarely going beyond the immediate needs of those within earshot. They will likely be emotionally intense, springing forth from the hearts of people

Introduction

who really do have an earnest desire to communicate with their God.

The thing is, the prayers won't slow down and linger on the glories of God, his attributes, and his character. They won't meditate unhurriedly on his Word. They won't ask hearers to study their own hearts and confess specific sins. They won't ask God for help to do what only he can do: save the lost, feed the hungry, liberate captives, give wisdom to world leaders, fix broken institutions, sustain persecuted Christians.

This is a problem—and it seems many churches simply don't realize how little they pray together, or how little their prayers reflect the bigheartedness of God. I'm reminded of John Stott's description of a prayer service he once visited. Does it sound familiar to you?

I remember some years ago visiting a church incognito. I sat in the back row. . . . When we came to the pastoral prayer, it was led by a lay brother, because the pastor was on holiday. So he prayed that the pastor might have a good holiday. Well, that's fine. Pastors should have good holidays. Second, he prayed for a lady member of the church who was about to give birth to a child that she might have a safe delivery, which is fine. Third, he prayed for another lady who was sick, and then it was over. That's all there was. It took twenty seconds. I said to myself, it's a village church with a village God. They have no interest in the world outside. There was no thinking about the poor, the oppressed, the refugees, the places of violence, and world evangelization.¹

What Stott describes here is likely true for so many churches: village prayers to village gods.

I've heard Mark Dever say that we should pray so much in our church gatherings that the nonbelievers get bored. We talk too much to a God they don't believe in.

Maybe that's hyperbole, but certainly we—by which I mean we as Christians and church members *together*—should pray bigger and better and more biblical prayers.

In a sentence, that's the goal of this book: learning how to pray better and more as churches. Just as our private prayer lives can be improved by God's grace, so too can our corporate prayer lives.

THE ROAD AHEAD

No single book on prayer can say everything that needs to be said about prayer. Plus, a fruitful prayer life is cultivated by constant practice, not the comprehension of propositions. Yet as we take this journey together, I want to make sure that you're aware of my intended destination. My hope is that this book will be a guide and a springboard that helps you enjoy the amazing gift of prayer we have *as a church*.

Of all the books that have been written on prayer, this one has a very specific purpose: examining how prayer shapes the life of the church. So much has been written about prayer as an individual discipline. Not much has been written about prayer as a necessary and communal activity that shapes local churches, either by its presence or absence (though Megan Hill's *Praying Together* is helpful [Crossway, 2016]).

Think of this book as offering a few crucial puzzle pieces that were missing from an already assembled, five-hundred-piece

Introduction

puzzle on prayer. I'm the beneficiary of others who have done the hard work of assembling most of the picture.

Let me give you a preview of what we'll cover in this book. Chapter 1 will present our problem: corporate prayerlessness. Chapter 2 offers a road to a solution. We'll take some time understanding what we mean by *prayer* so that we can move forward together.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine how Jesus talked about prayer, which offers us a template. Chapter 5 moves from propositional truths about prayer to examining Jesus's powerful practice of prayer in the midst of crisis.

The last part of the book, chapters 6–8, will be more practical. Having established the benefits of corporate prayer and how it shapes the church, these chapters will discuss how to incorporate prayer into the life of a church. We'll address various topics: prayer in corporate worship, prayer meetings, and how corporate prayer shapes both our corporate mission and our pursuit of diversity.

In the appendix, I'll point you to other books on prayer that will help you see the completed picture. I'll suggest just a few books because it's so much easier to read about prayer than to actually pray. I want to give you just enough to whet your appetite, but not too much to distract you from the actual work of praying.

May you take this book for what it's worth, and may your church flourish through robust and regular corporate prayer.

BREATHE AGAIN

The Problem of Prayerlessness

PRAYER IS BREATHING

Well, here you are reading another book on prayer. Maybe the last one didn't make you feel guilty enough, and you're a glutton for punishment. What good is a book on prayer without an initial quote that surfaces your shortcomings as a pray-er? Without further ado, here it goes: "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing!"¹

All jokes aside, that may be the most potent and challenging statement on prayer I've ever read. Breathing—as a metaphor for Christian prayer—captures so much of what prayer should be. It reminds us that prayer is something essential to our existence. Breathing is necessary for everything we do. It enables every activity. Likewise, prayer is basic and vital. It's tied to both our present existence and perpetual endurance. Prayer is breathing. There's no better metaphor of what prayer should be for the Christian.

That's why the struggle many Christians have with prayer is so puzzling. Isn't it strange how so many Christians believe this truth in principle, but so few churches ratify it in practice?

PRAYER

Our problem isn't the way we talk about prayer. We talk about it with all the fervency and eloquence it deserves. Our problem is the way we treat prayer. Our practice doesn't line up with our proclamations, which is always a sign that something is off (see James 2).

A total absence of prayer in the church isn't a likely problem. Maybe a church somewhere out there never prays at all, but I don't assume that's happening in yours. I don't know your church, but I bet there are times you come together to pray. Such praying may be sparse and sporadic, but it happens.

And therein lies what I think is the biggest problem: not a complete lack of prayer, but too little prayer. Here's another quote to surface more of those prayer-related insecurities: "So we come to one of the crying evils of these times, maybe of all times—little or no praying. Of these two evils, perhaps little praying is worse than no praying. Little praying is a kind of make-believe, a salvo for the conscience, a farce and a delusion. The little estimate we put on prayer is evident from the little time we give to it."²

When prayer is sparse and sporadic, when it's done just enough to ease the conscience and not much more, we've got a problem. We've all been a part of churches where prayer is present but neither purposeful nor potent. Unfortunately, our prayers in the church too often feel like prayer before a meal: obligatory and respectable, but no one really gets much out of it. Our church prayers get reduced to a tool for transitioning from one activity to the next. Let's have everyone close their eyes and bow their heads, so that transitioning the praise team on and off the stage isn't so awkward.

Do you see the danger in too little prayer? Where prayer is present, it's saying something—it's speaking, shouting. It teaches the church that we *really* need the Lord. Where prayer is absent, it reinforces the assumption that we're okay without him. Infrequent prayer teaches a church that God is needed only in special situations—under certain circumstances but not all. It teaches a church that God's help is intermittently necessary, not consistently so. It leads a church to believe that there are plenty of things we can do without God's help, and we need to bother him only when we run into especially difficult situations.

Reflect with me for a moment about the racially inflammatory events that bombarded the United States during the summer of 2016. In one week our nation witnessed the deaths of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and five police officers in Dallas. People took sides, and every side had something to mourn. It was against this backdrop that many churches gathered corporately to pray for their communities, churches, leaders, and nation. Some churches gathered with churches across denominational lines. For a season, our prayers seemed potent, pressing, and purposeful. It was our screaming out, "God, we need your help!"

Once these crises had passed, however, corporate praying like this all but ceased. That's telling, isn't it? It reveals that we treat prayer as something special, meant to take care of things that we can't "handle" on our own. We don't treat prayer like breathing. We treat it like prescription medication meant to rid us of an infection. Once the infection is gone, so is the frequency and fervency of our prayers.

PRAYER

A MOMENT OF HONESTY

Allow me to be brutally honest for a minute. Since I don't have to look any of you in the eye, I feel a bit more courageous in admitting my faults. If you're anything like me, and reading a book on prayer makes you feel like a failure, then please know that writing a book on prayer makes me feel like a hypocrite. I'll be the first to admit that I'm no expert when it comes to prayer. I don't feel particularly proficient at it. I wouldn't put "mighty man of prayer" on my résumé. I struggle with prayer. I always have. I feel like my prayers are often weak.

I say this because I've seen people who are mighty pray-ers, and I know I'm not one of them. My mom is. I remember watching her come home from work every day and greet us briefly en route to her room. On those days when her bedroom door was cracked, I would squint through the opening and see her get on her knees by her bed to pray. She emerged a different person. She did this *every day*. To this very day, she won't let me off of a phone call until she prays for me. And if she forgets, she calls back and leaves a voice mail. My dad was the same way. So when they planted a church in 2001, that church inherited their praying DNA the same way the Onwuchekwa kids inherited their noses.

My parents and the pastors, preachers, and authors who have most influenced me were all mighty men and women of prayer. They put my best attempts at prayer to shame. I know what it looks like to be a prayer warrior (if you'll allow me to use that term) because I've witnessed it firsthand, not because I've exemplified

it throughout my Christian life. For most of my journey, I've found myself deficient in the very qualities I admire.

MY TURNING POINT

A few years ago, something both terrible and wonderful happened. Six weeks before planting the church I currently pastor, my thirty-two-year-old brother suddenly died. No explanation. No cause of death. Nothing conclusive in the autopsy. No foul play. Just gone. Gone. For the first time in my life, I felt like all the wind was taken out of me. I couldn't breathe. If you've ever had the wind knocked out of you, then you know just how much it complicates everything. But this tragedy, in God's grace, was the best thing that could have ever happened for my relationship with the Lord and our church. God used a terrible situation to birth a wonderful thing in me.

I'm crying right now for the first time in months. I thought I had worked through my brother's death, but my heart is still incredibly tender as I reflect on this. Having the wind knocked out of me, literally and figuratively, was the tool God used to help me understand that prayer is breathing.

My filter vanished as my tongue was unhinged in prayer. I was both shocked and relieved, ashamed and angry at the words coming out of my mouth. I called God a liar. He seemed cruel and uncaring. Then in the same breath, I asked him to shower me with grace. I felt disdain, anger, hatred. And I told him. I couldn't help but tell him. It all just kept coming out. Pain felt like a truth serum that forced me to confess all of my unworthy thoughts of him. And he took it. Every ounce of it.

PRAYER

He corrected my negative view, not with words of rebuke but words of consolation.

While I was drowning in sorrow, he emptied my oxygen tank to force me to come up for air. When I came up to him, I wasn't met with the cold shoulder I deserved, but with open arms. Whatever I was doing before wasn't praying. It was formal, cold, sterile, rehearsed, and rote. For the first time in my life, I felt like I knew what it was to pray, to commune with God. When I offered the cares of my heart—every one of them—I met a God who wasn't as scared to take those cares on as I was to share them.

God transformed my brother's final breaths into some of my first. As a result, my whole life pivoted. And this forced a pivot in the church I was preparing to lead. By God's grace, this tragedy and several other hardships our church experienced early on helped to reinforce this often forgotten truth: prayer is vital and necessary to spiritual life. Prayer is like breathing.

THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

I have pastored two churches over the past decade, and I've been involved with networks, organizations, seminaries, collectives, and other groups of Christians. I've sat with visionary leaders who have churches filled with great systems. I've also sat with leaders who aren't visionary and who have churches with poor systems. I've done ministry with gifted individuals, people with average gifts, and people with very little gifting or proficiency at all. I've partnered with attractional churches, missional churches, megachurches, medium churches, and

meager churches. Throughout my experience, I've learned that these distinctions aren't the most important; they're peripheral and secondary. If I had to draw a line to create two categories of churches, it wouldn't follow these distinctions. I've learned to see churches as those that pray and those that don't. As I'll explain later, a church's commitment to prayer is one of the greatest determiners of its effectiveness in ministry.

Prayer is oxygen for the Christian. It sustains us. So it follows that prayer must be a source of life for any community of Christians. It is to the church what it is to individuals—breathing. Yet many of our gatherings could be likened to people coming together merely to hold their collective breath. This would explain why people seem to have so little energy for actually living out the Christian life.

But breathing together is what our churches need. Prayer humbles us like nothing else. When we pray, we're reminded that prayer is not like other disciplines in the world that require impressive aptitude and increased exercise to bring about great results. If someone hopes to get rewarded or compensated for playing an instrument, for example, then he must first achieve a level of expertise through years of practice. Great results spring from a grueling, long-term regimen. There's no initial payoff for novices of any kind.

Prayer isn't like that because great results don't come as a direct result of a grueling regimen and expertise. Great results come from our gracious Ruler, the great Rewarder and Reward of his people who cry out to him.

Many great accomplishments in prayer come from apparent novices. Abraham met God, and God offered to hear

PRAYER

his prayer to spare the town where his nephew resided (Gen. 18:22–33). Moses met God at a burning bush, and not long after he successfully interceded for Israel (Ex. 32:31–34). In the forty days following Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, the disciples began to pray differently. They stopped praying for self-preservation and more for gospel faithfulness and boldness (cf. Mark 8:31–34; Acts 4:23–31; 5:40–41). God rewards the prayers of novices, which encourages consistent prayer in the lives of his people.

If prayer is like breathing, then it isn’t about our expertise. It’s about our experiencing the power of the One to whom we pray. It’s about the great expectations that grow in us when we have a genuine experience of the God who hears and answers. We don’t need experts, and that’s a strong encouragement to churches filled with many members and even pastors who feel like novices. I’ve experienced the beauty of weak prayers that meet a willing Savior. Our church has, too. It’s a lot like taking the first breath after having the wind knocked out of you. The experience makes you eager to take another, and another, and another.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book won’t talk much about prayer in the life of the individual Christian. There are better, more comprehensive works for that. This book is about prayer in the life of the church, and when it comes to corporate prayer, what do our churches need more than encouragement?

As someone who has helped lead churches of various sizes, budgets, and neighborhoods, I’ve had a wide range of

relationships with other Christians and pastors. From my diverse experience, I've become convinced that prayer is among the most vital keys to a successful ministry. It's as necessary as breathing. It's not meant to replace work but enable it. If we want to see our churches thrive in faithfulness to God, then our churches must pray like their lives depended on it. We must learn how to breathe together.

My prayer is that this book doesn't have a long shelf life. There are wonderful Christian classics that will never lose their relevance until Christ returns. But my prayer is that soon, and very soon, a book like this would find as little of a market as I expect a book entitled *How to Breathe with Your Family at Dinner* would find.

My prayer is that this book will one day be more for edification when our energy wanes, and less for persuasion that our energies should be directed toward corporate prayer in the first place. My prayer is that regularly, fervently, and corporately crying out to our Father would be so ordinary and expected that it would be laughable that someone actually took time to write a book about it. I hope that happens one day. But since that day is not today, let's start this journey together and pray that God blesses it.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE CHURCH?

Prayer is as necessary to the Christian as breathing is to the human body—but it often doesn't come quite as naturally. In fact, prayer in the church often gets subtly pushed to the side in favor of pragmatic practices that promise tangible results.

This book focuses on the necessity of regular prayer as a central practice in the local church—awakening us to the need and blessing of corporate prayer by examining what Jesus taught about prayer, how the first Christians approached prayer, and how to prioritize prayer in our congregations.

“If we today are so proficient at ministry mechanics that we can succeed without power from on high, we have failed. But if our churches today will heed this compelling call to prayer, we too will prevail against all earthly powers, for God's glory!”

RAY ORTLUND, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book has the potential to transform not only individuals but also relationships and the culture in our churches. I highly recommend it.”

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THABITI ANYABWILE, Pastor, Anacostia River Church, Washington, DC; author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

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**This volume is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.*

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY / PRAYER