

The Relationship

Once upon a time a church planter went forth to do good. He planned, put in his time, worked his networks, and kept good relationships with his team. He worked hard at that last one. He observed his devotions (mostly), was an exemplary family man, and had good relations with the people of his country.

But lo and behold, after much work, that's all that remained, much work. There seemed to be little fruit, but that wasn't too disturbing because in mission retreats he discovered that all the other fields were "hard" as well. Either he was not at the right place at the right time, or God had other plans, or he was not cut out to be a church planter. Rejecting the last, and not knowing about the second, he determined that he was at the right place and just needed to try harder.

And so he did. He was sure there was a methodology, a program or something out there that would unlock the door for church growth and, of course, allow him to write good prayer letters back home.

Being a sensitive man, the thought bothered him that maybe, just maybe, God had decided not to visit this people at this time with the gospel. How would he know? While praying about it, the idea came to him that possibly the problem was not in God, nor in the location, nor even in the methods. The problem could be simply that above all else God wanted him—not his work, not his efforts, nor even his programs. God just wanted him. Before all else God's desire was to restore in him the fellowship lost in Eden, and that everything that the missionary would ever want or do or be would come from that relationship.

The church planter saw that Jesus maintained and even worked at keeping such a communion with his Father via prayer. This missionary had tried that, but from his training he thought that to have such an alliance he would have to get up before sunrise or stay up after bedtime. He didn't function well on less than seven hours sleep, so he had given such a life over to others. But Luke's report caught his attention: "... the news about him (Jesus) spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:15-16).

Hey, thought the missionary, Jesus fellowshiped with the Father

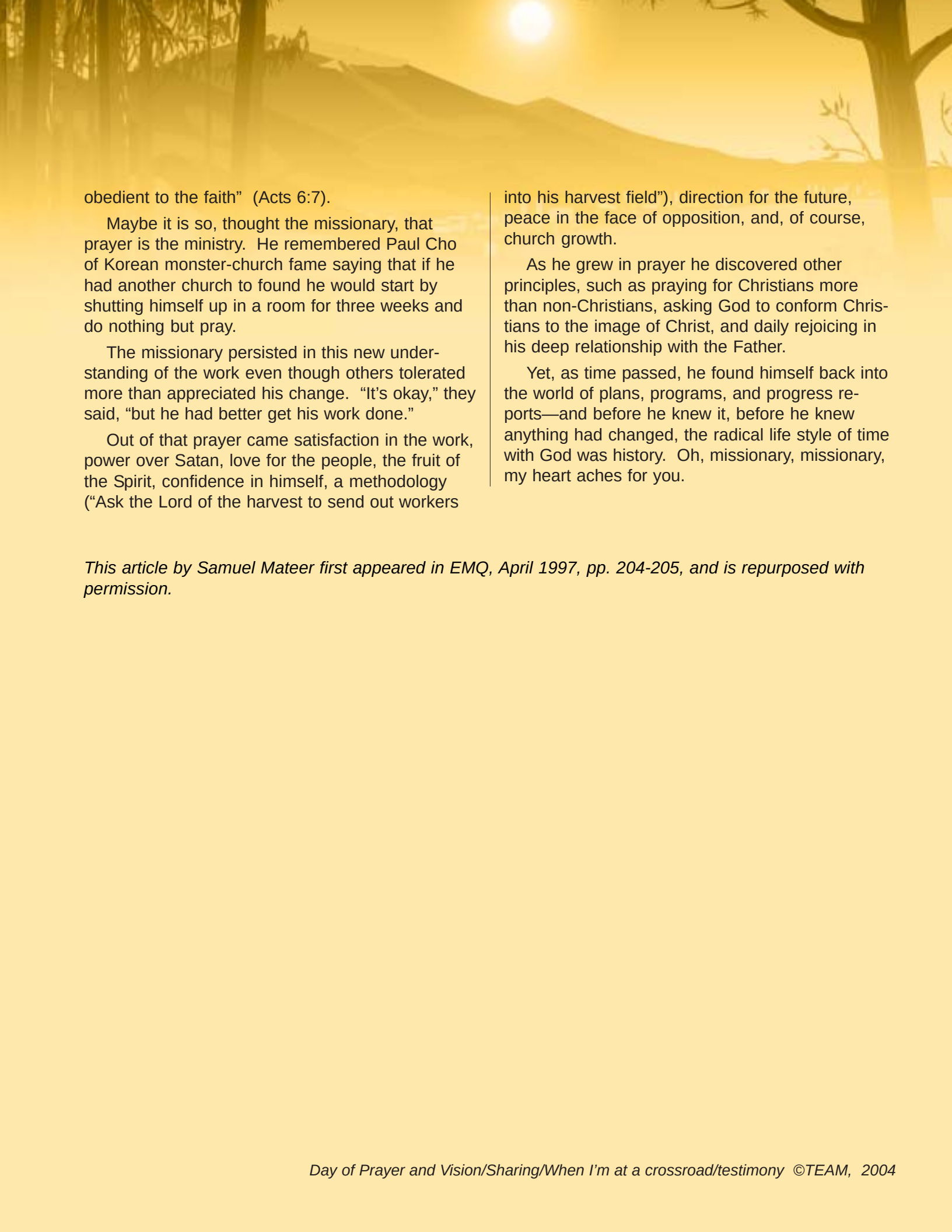
during the day, not just all night or a great while before day. He spent time with the Father during work hours, even when he was very busy and in great demand. He made time to be with his Father, and he made that time regularly, no matter what ministry was pressing in on him.

Furthermore, the church planter discovered that the apostles were doing exactly the same thing. They were imitating Jesus in making time for prayer with the Father. Thus, the apostles were careful to leave admin-

istration behind—the main occupation of ministers and missionaries—in order to give space to the Father. Being proactive before there was such a term, the apostles suggested the church appoint deacons to wait tables so that they could devote themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the word," listed in that order as that is how they esteemed the importance of the two activities (Acts 6:4).

The church planter began to think about the implications of this life style for himself. Luke reports that as a result of the apostles' decision to limit their activity to prayer and the ministry of the word, that: "... the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became

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obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Maybe it is so, thought the missionary, that prayer is the ministry. He remembered Paul Cho of Korean monster-church fame saying that if he had another church to found he would start by shutting himself up in a room for three weeks and do nothing but pray.

The missionary persisted in this new understanding of the work even though others tolerated more than appreciated his change. "It's okay," they said, "but he had better get his work done."

Out of that prayer came satisfaction in the work, power over Satan, love for the people, the fruit of the Spirit, confidence in himself, a methodology ("Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers

into his harvest field"), direction for the future, peace in the face of opposition, and, of course, church growth.

As he grew in prayer he discovered other principles, such as praying for Christians more than non-Christians, asking God to conform Christians to the image of Christ, and daily rejoicing in his deep relationship with the Father.

Yet, as time passed, he found himself back into the world of plans, programs, and progress reports—and before he knew it, before he knew anything had changed, the radical life style of time with God was history. Oh, missionary, missionary, my heart aches for you.

This article by Samuel Mateer first appeared in EMQ, April 1997, pp. 204-205, and is repurposed with permission.