

# Praying Circles

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Prayer is surely one of the most blessed of all privileges afforded the child of God. Just to think that sinners, even forgiven sinners, are invited to approach the throne of grace where we will receive mercy and grace in our time of need ([Heb 4:14-16](#)) is nothing short of astounding. In prayer we worship and praise our Lord ([Psalm 34:1-3](#)); in prayer we call on God to fulfill His great purposes ([Matt 6:10](#)), ask for our daily provisions ([Matt 6:11](#)), request forgiveness ([Matt 6:12](#)), and plea for protection from temptation ([Matt 6:13](#)). In prayer we ask for deliverance from the wickedness of others ([Psalm 31:1-2](#)), make our requests known ([Phil 4:6](#)), cast all our anxiety on the Lord ([1 Pet 5:7](#)), and much more. Christians love prayer, even when they foolishly do not take time for it. No believer is against prayer and anything that will encourage and inform us about prayer is welcomed. Anything, that is, which is biblical.

Unfortunately, it is often because of the very benefits and blessings of prayer that the people of God seem so easily deceived in its use. Two of the books I have written have substantially addressed this very issue. My first book, "*I Just Wanted More Land, Jabez*," challenged the prayer of Jabez craze that had been invented by Bruce Wilkinson. Wilkinson, who should have known better given his theological training and ministerial background, ripped an obscure prayer out of the Old Testament and offered it as a model which, when prayed, "correctly," virtually guaranteed a life of miracles and prosperity, or so he said. His book (*The Prayer of Jabez*) sold tens of millions of copies and generated a cottage industry of other books, products and ministries. My book challenged the whole premise behind Wilkinson's application of the prayer of Jabez as well as the misguided hermeneutics Wilkinson used to come up with such an off-based interpretation of Scripture. What staggered me at the time (15 years ago), and still does today, is how many people, many of whom were/are surely Christians who love the Lord, could be taken in by such obviously misguided and deceitful claims. My most recent book, *Out of Formation*, examined the Spiritual Formation Movement which promotes numerous biblically unfounded disciplines that are supposed to enhance the believer's spiritual life. The central discipline within the movement founded by Richard Foster and Dallas Willard is

contemplative prayer, which is a form of mystical praying found nowhere in Scripture and yet proclaimed by the adherents of this movement to be the highest form of prayer. Today millions of those who would consider themselves Christians practice some form of contemplative prayer.

What unites the prayer of Jabez and contemplative prayer is that neither is taught in Scripture as a form of biblical praying and yet both have been embraced by great numbers of Christians. Believers are being duped on a regular basis because of their lack of discernment. And now they are being introduced to praying circles which, like the Prayer of Jabez and contemplative prayer, lacks biblical foundation.

## **The Circle Maker**

This latest prayer fad stems from the teachings of Mark Batterson, lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington D.C., and in particular his 2011 book, *The Circle Maker*. The publisher claims that Batterson is offering a new way of praying (see advertisement on page 233 of *The Circle Maker*) based on a Jewish legend of Honi the Rainmaker, also called Honi the Circle Maker (pp. 11-13, 226). Honi, who lived a century before the ministry of Christ, supposedly drew a circle in the dirt, stepped into that circle and prayed for rain to end a devastating drought. He told God that he would not leave the circle until the Lord sent rain and, according to the myth, God soon sent rain. It should be noted that the story of Honi is at best a legend and most likely a myth. There is no independent or historical evidence that anything like this event ever took place. Even more importantly, this account is not drawn from Scripture. Nevertheless, when Batterson discovered the story he claimed it forever changed the way he prayed (p. 21). Now he circles his prayers, either by stepping into a drawn circle (it is recommended that a circle be drawn on the ground with chalk) like Honi, or by walking around the object of his desire, as the Jews walked around Jericho in the Old Testament. Batterson teaches that circling our prayers will result in God responding by producing a miracle. If my count is correct, and I am sure I missed a few, the word “miracle” shows up some 166 times, averaging almost one appearance per page of actual text. While certainly God can and does bring about miracles today, Batterson has cheapened the meaning and reduced it to the accomplishment of an improbability rather than the reversal or defiance of the laws of nature that the Lord set in place. Walking on water is a miracle, the purchase of a piece of property that was hard to get is not. Batterson does not distinguish

between the two. Despite these obvious issues, on the back cover of the book it is boldly stated:

In *The Circle Maker*, Pastor Mark Batterson shares powerful insights from the true legend of Honi the circle maker, a first-century Jewish sage whose bold prayer ended a drought and saved a generation. Drawing inspiration from his own experiences as a circle maker, Batterson will teach you how to pray in a new way by drawing prayer circles around your dreams, your family, your problems and most importantly, God's promises. In the process, you'll discover this simple yet life changing truth.

There are numerous red flags in this short blurb. Two that should be noted immediately is that the author is "drawing inspiration from his own experiences," not from Scripture. Experiences are not inspired, the Bible is. Therefore personal experience, not backed by the Word, is of little value at best and highly dangerous and destructive at times. We must never base our lives and theology on experience but on God's revealed truth. Secondly is the word "new." Batterson is offering us a "new" way to pray, which means it is not taught in Scripture. When someone offers us something new as a way of living the Christian life, the wise believer runs the other way. If it is new, it is not of God. If the Lord wanted us to incorporate something into our lives He revealed it in the Bible. *The Circle Maker* is much like *The Prayer of Jabez*. Both promise miracles if we will but follow little known and obscure prayers found in the past. Despite the fact that these prayers are not taught or mandated in Scripture, and not even drawn from Scripture as in the case with Honi, a unique system of prayer is based on these stories. It should not take a theologian, or even a very mature Christian, long to realize that something is wrong with drawing circles as part of our prayer life, and especially making outlandish promises in connecting with this method.

The very fact that a church leader and author is attempting to instruct fellow believers how to practice the Christian life, especially in a vital area such as prayer, based on an extra-biblical myth rather than Scripture, should be all a discerning believer needs to know to walk away from his teachings on the subject. But it might prove helpful to dig a little deeper into Batterson's theology. This is especially true given that Christian notables such as John Ortberg, Ruth Graham, and Rich Wilkerson (founder of Peacemakers) endorse *The Circle Maker*, and that Batterson considers Andy Stanley and Louie Giglio among his close friends. In fact, he has spoken at Stanley's Catalysis Conference on a number of occasions. [1] And his teachings on

prayer have been adopted by Nancy Leigh DeMoss of Life Action Ministries (more on this later).

Below are some concerns about Batterson's approach to Scripture and his theological teachings, in addition to the fact that the whole circle prayer methodology is based on an ancient myth and not Scripture:

- We are told that every promise in the Bible is ours to claim, no matter the context. For example, Batterson was reading from the book of Joshua concerning the Lord's promise to Joshua that he would give "you every square inch of land you set your foot on – just as I promised Moses." As he read this promise given specifically to a biblical character he felt that God wanted him to stake claim to the land that he believed God was giving him and his church (p. 17). Such misuse of Scripture and misappropriation of biblical promises to others, but claimed for himself, are found throughout the book (see pp. 15, 41, 53-55, 59, 89-90, 100-101, 128, 131, 151, 199). Batterson is even willing to mistranslate Scripture to make his point. The most blatant example is [Habakkuk 2:1](#), in which the author inserts "circle" into the verse to support his theology, translating, "I will stand upon my watch, and station me within a circle" (p. 159). The NASB reads, "I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me..." Batterson claims that Habakkuk and this text were the inspiration for Honi: "His inspiration for the prayer circle was Habakkuk. He simply did what the prophet Habakkuk had done" (p. 159). This clearly is not true. At no time did the Old Testament prophet (or any other personage in Scripture) draw a circle and then step into it to pray.
- Prosperity theology abounds. In addition to the constant use of the word miracle to describe answers to prayer, statements like the following are common: "I'm confident that you are only one prayer away from a dream fulfilled, a promise kept, or a miracle performed" (p. 15), and "[God] allows our small plans to fail so that His big dream for us can prevail" (p. 71). Nor are these mere cheerleading slogans which echo the preaching of Joel Osteen and other prosperity teachers, (pp. 15, 51, 71, 180-188, 197-198); Batterson obviously embraces the theology behind the prosperity gospel which is that

visualization plus faith plus verbalization lead to miracles. At one point he tells his readers to record their vision (visualization), have faith and verbalize (pp. 184-185).

- Following prosperity methods, He adds that drawing a circle and stepping into it in prayer are the keys to getting what we want from God. Batterson often promises that by drawing circles around what we want will lead to miracles and fulfilled dreams (e.g. p. 16). After all, “God said it, I’ve circled it, and that settles it” (p. 94). This quote is found in the context of a story of a young boy who is unable to talk. A pastor claimed [Isaiah 59:21](#) as a promise from God that someday the boy will be able to speak. Apparently the promise has not been fulfilled ten years later, but his parents have circled it in their Bible and are convinced that God will one day deliver on His promise. The tragedy of accepting false teachings becomes real when a story such as this is read. It is more than a bit irritating that people buy into these deceptions; it is heart breaking (cf. pp. 23, 37, 64, 79-80, 129, 138).
- Much of Batterson’s understanding about how God directs us is based upon the idea that the Lord will speak to us directly apart from Scripture. Batterson assures us that we should expect God to prompt us regularly, giving us revelations which carry the full weight of His promises. It is these subjective promises that we can claim, not just biblical promises. In addition to the story above we can expect God to give us the name of our child (p. 26), define our specific purpose in life (p. 29), give us revelation about the purchase of property (pp.40-41, 107), show us how much money He will give us (pp. 63, 67-68), and tell us when to take wool socks to work (p.115). He will occasionally tell us what to preach (p. 131) and prompt us to make phone calls (pp. 200-202). And despite the fact that there is no clear way that these so-called voices can be discerned to be the Lord’s (something he admits), still we need to obey these promptings as we would Scripture (pp. 117-121, 125, cf. p. 208).

Given the obvious problems with the exaggerated claims of Batterson and the clearly unbiblical basis and assertions in reference to prayer circles, what is the attraction? Apparently, the incredible promises given coupled with such little effort (praying inside a drawn circle or walking around the object

of one's desires while praying) are just too much to resist. After all Batterson tells his readers, "*The Circle Maker* will show you how to claim God-given promises, pursue God-sized dreams, and seize God-ordained opportunities. You'll learn how to draw prayer circles around your family, your job, your problems, and your goals" (p. 16). In a YouTube video Batterson adds, "You can't just read the Bible, you need to start praying circles around the promises." [2] I guess such an offer is just too good to refuse for many Christians. Of course, those who actually analyze Batterson's promises in light of Scripture, especially that the basis of prayer circles is an ancient myth and not the authoritative Word of God, will see through the deception.

## **The Influence of Prayer Circles**

Batterson is clearly misguided in *The Circle Maker*. And after critiquing his many other theological problems, his embracing of the prosperity gospel, his emphasis on the subjective, and belief in additional revelations to believers today, his atrocious hermeneutics and misuse of Scripture, it would be easy to dismiss him as a confused pastor who will affect only those already in his theological camp. If that were the case, I would not have bothered to write this analysis. I have already mentioned that Andy Stanley has promoted Batterson and his errant teachings to tens of thousands of Christian leaders and young adults by inviting him to preach at his conferences. Even Glenn Beck is promoting *The Circle Maker*. [3] But it gets worse. At Revive Our Hearts women's conferences sponsored by Life Action Ministries and led by Nancy Leigh Demoss, unsuspecting Christian women, mostly from the conservative end of evangelicalism, have been introduced to prayer circles as an acceptable and biblical method of praying. Nancy DeMoss has been on the staff of Life Action Ministries since 1980. She is the author of numerous books and a sought-after conference speaker. She is also the host and teacher for Revive our Hearts and Seeking Him, two nationally syndicated radio programs. In an article found on Revive Our Hearts' website, DeMoss writes:

It's a challenge Life Action has issued repeatedly to men, women, teens, and even children. It's a simple expression of a heart prepared for God's work—and no matter how many times it's done, it keeps illustrating something critical about the revival we are praying and pleading for God to send. It involves a simple piece of chalk. This piece of chalk represents a turning point, a moment of surrender, a change of heart. It marks the difference

between those who would pray, “Lord, change them” and those with humility to plead, “Lord change me!” It is a piece of chalk with which we kneel and draw a circle around ourselves and then look to heaven expectantly and pray, “Lord God, send revival, and begin it right here in this circle.” [4]

Shortly after writing this short piece DeMoss spoke at a True Woman Conference in Indianapolis in September of 2012. There chalk circles were drawn throughout the conference room and the ladies at the conference were told to step into these circles for prayer. An article on the website states:

On the very first night Nancy Leigh DeMoss opened the conference by sharing an illustration of a British evangelist of the 1860s, who encouraged people to “Go home, lock yourself in your room, draw a circle around yourself, and pray fervently that God would start a revival within that chalk circle.” Throughout the convention center white circles had been applied to the floor. Women were encouraged to step into the circle to ask God to start His work of revival in their heart first. It was thrilling to see that occurring throughout the conference. [5]

Pictures of participants doing so can be found at the conference’s web address as well as below: <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/radio/revive-our-hearts/report-true-woman-12/>. Those attending the conference were also sent home with little bags containing chalk so that they could immediately begin drawing prayer circles at home and perhaps at their churches.



A dialogue among the main speakers including Jan Parshall, Priscilla Shirer, Joni Eareckson Tada and DeMoss is recorded below. Over 8000 women attended the conference from all over the country and many other parts of the world:

**Leslie** (interviewing the others): This is *Revive Our Hearts* with Nancy Leigh DeMoss for Monday, October 1. Today, we'll hear highlights from the conference and we'll hear from some of the True Woman speakers. They'll describe the work God did in their own hearts as they sought the Lord for personal revival.

**Bob:** We began the event first thing by asking all of the speakers who were going to be speaking in the main session to come up on the platform.

**Nancy (conf):** There was an old-time revivalist whose name was Gypsy Smith. Perhaps you've heard of him. The story is told that Gypsy Smith would go to a town to preach—he was an itinerant preacher. He



would come to the town where he had been invited, and he would come to the outskirts of the town. He would stand and draw a circle in the ground, in the dirt on the outskirts of town. Then he would step inside that circle, and he would begin to pray for God to move in that town. He would say, **“Lord, please send revival to this community. But, oh God, let the revival start inside this circle. Let it begin in me.”**

**Holly Elliff:** I loved that during the conference around the auditorium and in various places there were circles. And those circles were symbolic because they represented the fact that every woman wanted to put herself there, draw a circle around her own life and say, “God, what do You want to do in me?”

**Nancy (conf):** And as you pass by those in the days ahead, I want to encourage you, if there is room, to just step inside one of those circles.

**Bill Elliff (conf):** And those circles just remind us that it’s always personal . **We can get real theoretical about revival and awakening. But it starts with me. And if it doesn’t start with me, if it doesn’t start with you, then it doesn’t start.**

**Leslie Bennett:** I can’t live on yesterday’s revival. The white chalk circles all around this conference center were a constant reminder that I need revival. Every moment of every day I must humble myself before God and ask Him to come into my heart to do what only He can do as I seek Him and I’m repentant before Him—that He will make my heart afresh. He will make my heart anew and fan the flames of my heart for Jesus. I so appreciated that reminder as we went about the conference all weekend long. Revival starts with me.

**Nancy (conf):** Your face, Lord, I will seek.

**Leslie:** Not with anybody else. It’s not them. It’s me.

**Nancy (conf):** It’s not my brother, not my sister, not my mother, not my pastor, not my friend who came with me. It’s me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of You.

**Bob (conf):** One of the unique things about the way the stage is set up this year is that the speaker’s podium, the platform podium, there’s a large white circle around it.

**Nancy (conf):** Because seeking Him starts right here in our hearts as we’re speaking.

**Bob (conf):** And so as we’re calling women to seek God and to seek Him for revival in their own lives and then in their churches and then in our nation, we’ve drawn a circle around the podium.

**Joni :** **Because all the speakers had an opportunity to stand in it. And of course, I had an opportunity to wheel inside that circle. May revival begin with me.**

**Juli:** **I’m preaching to myself first. I’m the first one who needs the very messages coming out of my mouth.**

**Bob (conf):** You can’t go and call women to a place if you’re not ready to go there yourself. That’s hypocrisy.

**Joni:** May renewal in the church begin with me inside that circle.

**Nancy (conf):** And to step inside that circle and say, “Lord, would You send revival to my family? Would You send revival to my church? Would You send awakening to our nation, to our world? We desperately need it. But oh, Lord, would You start the revival inside this circle? Let it begin in me.”

**Janet:** So let me tell you what happened for me as a speaker when I stepped into that circle. I was under very strong conviction. David said, “My sins are ever before me.” That’s what I felt when I was in that circle. I thought, “Lord, I’m not here to teach these women. I’m here to seek Your face.” [6]

There is no desire here to question the sincerity of these women, nor their Christian character, nor is their doctrinal content as a whole being challenged. But this is just the point. Even among Christian leaders who take solid theological stands, and who are well-respected within conservative circles we are finding a strange acceptance of a practice found nowhere in Scripture. Unfortunately, however, prayer circles can be found in many pagan religions. American Indians, Muslims, Hindus and Mormons all practice prayer circles. [7] And even Wiccans use circles in their practice of magic. [8] This is not an accusation that those using prayer circles are participating in witchcraft or pagan religions. It is to say that there is nothing distinctively Christian about prayer circles. As a matter of fact, there is nothing Christian about them at all since they do not stem from Scripture.

## **Biblical Prayer**

To hear all the praise being poured out on Mark Batterson’s *The Circle Maker* and prayer circles, the unaware child of God might swear that this kind of prayer is what Jesus practiced and taught His disciples. But this is not true. As a matter of fact, circle prayers are not mentioned in the Bible at all. David did not write a psalm about them, Jesus did not mention them, and the epistles, while calling on us to pray without ceasing, are silent on the subject. Paul, in his marvelous New Testament prayers (e.g. [Ephesians 1:15-23](#); [3:14-21](#); [Colossians 1:9-14](#)) ignores them. At no time or place in all of the Word of God are we commanded, told to examine, follow as a model, or use circles for our prayers.

It would be good to close this paper with a very brief overview of what the Bible teaches about prayer. It is not as if the Bible has no instruction concerning how to pray. And it is always of utmost importance to begin with Scripture on any subject and let it inform us before we jump in another direction. What do we know about prayer from God’s Word? There is so much mentioned concerning prayer in the Bible that whole volumes could not do it justice, so we will narrow our scope to just one incident in the life of Jesus. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray ([Luke 11:1](#)), what did He say? Did He say, “Well, boys, first you draw a circle in the sand; next you stand in the circle and pray for what you want”? Not at all. In [Luke 11:2-4](#) He gives them what we often call the Lord’s Prayer. It begins

with God and His greatness. Next it focuses on the big picture of God’s plan for the future – His kingdom. Concerning the individual the requests are simple. While there is certainly nothing wrong with bold prayers, and there are many found in Scripture, most are not “big, audacious, and hairy” as Batterson calls for (p. 179). The disciples were taught to ask for daily physical needs, “Give us each day our daily bread.” And they were to seek the forgiveness of their sins even as they forgave others. And finally they were to ask for deliverance from temptation. While other prayers in the Bible, especially the prayers found in the epistles mentioned above, line out many other things for which we are to pray, it is most instructive to read Jesus’ answer to a direct question about how to pray. How simple, clear, free of gimmicks, and authentic is this example of prayer. No true Christian wants to minimize the power of prayer, but it must be prayer as taught in Scripture not based on myth and/or invented by people.

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[1] <https://catalystconference.com/read/seven-hard-earned-lessons-about-calling/>

<http://catalystconference.com/read/the-rule-breaker/>

<http://catalystconference.com/read/catalyst-atlanta-speaker-spotlight-mark-batterson/>

[2] [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg6ymCcIFDE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg6ymCcIFDE)

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcpP-H2IRKQ>

[4] [www.](http://www.)

[5] <http://www.truewoman.com/?id=2250>

[6] <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/radio/revive-our-hearts/report-true-woman-12/>

Only portions of this dialogue are recorded. The full conversation can be read on the link above.

[7] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer\\_circle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer_circle)

[8] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic\\_circle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_circle)