PRAYER IN A DIGITAL WORLD:
Practical Suggestions for Using Technology to Assist in Our Prayer Life

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Introduction

1 Thessalonians 5:17—ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε. There are many different ways to translate this short command: *pray continually*[1]; *pray constantly*[2]; *pray without ceasing*[3]; *never stop praying*[4]. Yet though there are many translations of these two Greek words, the idea is conveyed quite clearly in each version. Christians need to pray all the time.

The imperative itself has the idea of an ongoing action. The present tense makes it a command that suggests we should keep praying and praying and praying. Paul gives added emphasis and importance to this command as he adds an adverb that says essentially the same thing. The sense of it is that we are to *keep praying and praying and praying and never stop praying and praying and praying*.

In my experience, I have found this to be a verse that most Christians have heard before. Those older than I by a generation or more seem know the KJV by heart—*pray without ceasing,* while those of my generation seem to have learned the NIV's *pray continually*. Even those who do not know the Bible well, or even know this verse, seem to have a natural understanding of a Christian's need to follow this command. A whimsical pop quiz I offer Bible Information Class students is this: When can we pray? Where can we pray? What can we pray about? I don't think I have taught one person who answered any of the three questions wrong.

Yet there is a very big problem that Christians of every age and experience encounter. This command is well known. This command is very clear. This command is easily understood. However, this com-

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[1] NIV 2011, NIV 1984
[2] HCSB, LEB
[3] ESV, NASB 1995, NRSV, KJV, NKJV
[4] NLT

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mand is impossible to keep. While I've never met a Christian who doesn't understand the concept of this command, I've also never met a Christian who is able to keep it perfectly.

Therefore, Christians have been asking good, faith-filled questions since Paul penned the command nearly two millennia ago: How can we learn to pray continually? What can we do so that we don't forget? How can we help ourselves remember? What tools are available to help us pray continually and constantly?

Over those same two millennia Christians indeed have used many methods and memory aids in pursuit of obedience to this command. From phylacteries to strings on the finger, from scrolls to books to hymnals, from rosaries to a scratch piece of paper—there have been many tools employed by Christians to try to *pray continually.*

But we live in very different times. This 21st century brings a vast array of technology and data which is available at the fingertips of most Christians. Computers, laptops, smart phones, tablets, and E-readers are only the tip of the digital iceberg. Such tools make use of cellular networks and the World Wide Web to access and store billions of bits of information. They also offer countless functions and applications that could be used in various ways to assist a Christian's prayer life.

This paper assumes that Christians know they need to *pray continually.* This paper assumes that Christians know how to use rudimentary tools like prayer beads, pad and paper, or even simple office software like Microsoft Word.

The purpose of this paper then is to function as a survey of technology opportunities currently available to Christians in the year 2013. Technology has changed a lot and quickly over the years, especially over the last few decades. It is understood that many of these technology opportunities not only might but *will* change, perhaps even very soon. Yet my prayer is that this survey would both share current opportunities and stimulate thoughts and ideas for the future. God-willing, Christians will be able to use some of this technology to help them joyfully *pray continually.*

To-Do Lists

As stated above, Christians have been using some form of to-do lists for ages. Maybe it was a pastor writing down a few names with quill and ink. Maybe it was a family putting sticky notes on the fridge. Maybe it was a modern day pastor keeping a prayer notebook on his desk. But technology has brought other opportunities for to-do lists.

One digital to-do list option is with Google Applications. More attention will be given to Google later. In brief here, users can add dif-

ferent names or topics of prayer to their Google to-do lists. As those things are prayed for they can be checked off the list. One valuable feature of Google, one that will be a recurring valued feature below, is that these Google to-do lists can sync across multiple platforms and devices. So if you enter a prayer item on your computer, it will automatically and immediately sync with your smart phone, tablet, or other Google-enabled device.

Besides Google there are hundreds of other to-do list applications available to users. Business or personal productivity and efficiency are hugely important in our world. Therefore countless developers have tried to create the perfect to-do list application for end users. Remember the Milk, Orchestra, Astrid Tasks, and Pocket Lists are some of the more popular applications used today.

I will highlight one that I use every day—Weave. Weave is an application that is made by Intuit, the makers of Quickbooks. Thus, it has some real developer and financial power behind it. Weave is very easy and simple to use. To-do's can be scheduled very easily, even for specific days and times. The praying Christian could use Weave to schedule prayer times throughout the day or even specific prayers for specific times. Weave could then give you a reminder notification and alarm when it is time to pray. Also, to-do's can be grouped in folders in Weave, meaning you could use the application for spiritual, personal, and professional reasons all at the same time.

Using a digital to-do list can help the Christian remember when to pray and what to pray about as they *pray continually.*

Dropbox

Dropbox is an application that allows users to back up and save information digitally. It is another application that is cross-platform and "in the Cloud." This means that the software is hosted online on the Dropbox servers and that it is accessible from various devices like computers, phones, and tablets. There are many different cloud storage programs. It is my opinion that Dropbox is one of the more usable, functional, and reliable options. Those who use other, similar programs can feel free to apply the thoughts below to those programs as possible.

While you can't type anything on Dropbox, the benefit of this software for the praying Christian comes in two ways—the saving and the sharing. Some keep a prayer journal of things that have been prayed about. I know of one pastor in particular that has decades of notebooks filled with prayers and prayer thoughts saved somewhere in cardboard boxes. But what happens if there is a fire or a flood or some other disaster? The advantage of Dropbox is that if you type prayers, prayer thoughts, or prayer reminders you can easily and

automatically save those documents to your Dropbox. They will never be lost again!

The other advantage of this technology is that files in your Dropbox can be shared with others with the click of a button (and yes, even automatically, too). Thus Christians could have a prayer file or a prayer-chain file saved in a public Dropbox folder, and that file would be accessible to any person at any time anywhere in the world. Anyone could edit the file and have it sync back to that public folder for all to see those changes.

Using an online storage program like Dropbox will enable Christians to easily save and share their prayers as they *pray continually.*

Facebook and Twitter

Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social networking services in the world. Hundreds of millions of people are registered users for each. Perhaps the applications toward prayer are obvious for Facebook and Twitter. The benefit of these services comes from the ability to be social and connect with other people.

Christians regularly post prayers and encouraging words on their Facebook and Twitter timelines already. Prayer requests are also posted regularly on both. Users can then quickly reply with comments, or prayers, in response to the first post. Personally, I have often posted requests for prayers for members of the congregation or even my own family on Facebook. It is encouraging to have people quickly respond that they will indeed be praying!

The advantage of these networks is the social encouragement that one gets along with the ability to inform people of prayers and prayer requests quickly. Another advantage is that these services are also available on multiple devices (computers, phones, tablets, etc.). Those wishing to have private prayer groups or prayer chains can set up a private group on Facebook and utilize many of the various privacy settings on Facebook or Twitter.

Using social networks such as Facebook or Twitter can keep Christians connected and informed as they *pray continually.*

Text Messages

As I'm writing these words, I'm at the same time in the middle of a text message conversation with a couple from my congregation. They texted prayer requests to me as they are on the way to the hospital to check on the health of their unborn twin babies. One of the two seems to have some complications. I have been sharing encouraging text messages and thoughts with them over the last ten days.

Text messages are simple and quick ways for Christians to communicate their need for prayers or their prayers given on behalf of others. They are a good way to inform others of those special requests that come up. They are a good way of encouraging others by letting them know that you have prayed for them.

Some phones are able to send text messages to multiple recipients simultaneously. Software such as Apple's iMessages can do the same. These technologies could allow for a prayer chain to take place instantly via text message.

The immediacy of connecting and informing by text messages can help Christians *pray continually*.

Siri

There are many different voice command options for today's users of technology. Many different devices and computers are able to perform many different tasks at the command of the user. Apple's Siri seems to be the one used by the most people in the world today, perhaps because it is built into the popular iOS on iPhones and iPads. The advantage of voice command software is a hands-free approach to technology.

Siri, for example, can be told to write an email, send a text message, or give a reminder at a future date and time. Thus, Christian users could use Siri on the run or in the car (or lazily instead of typing) to send a prayer or prayer request to any friend or family member. Or, as a real life example, you could tell Siri to remind you to pray for your sister when you get home. The GPS and reminder features of the phone will then pop up a message with an alarm as soon as you pull into the driveway—*Pray for your sister!*

Voice command software can bring a hands-free and simple approach in assisting Christians to *pray continually*.

Calendar Apps

Calendar applications function much like the to-do lists mentioned above. The difference is that calendar applications will have more features and will—go figure—look like a calendar. Just as there are countless to-do list applications, there are also countless calendar applications.

Microsoft Outlook is one calendar application very popular with many. However, the Microsoft Office suite seems to be fading slowly but surely into non-existence. The emerging dominance of Apple and Google is bringing an end to the Office suite. Because Apple and Google have their own computers, phones, and tablets with their own native software, Microsoft products are facing an uphill battle.

This is not a paper about technology trends. However, this is mentioned only as background for my opinion that Apple's iCal and Google Calendar seem to be two of the better options for calendar applications. They are reliable programs from reliable companies with well-developed programs.

The use in the life of the Christian with these and other apps is again very much like with to-do lists. Christians can schedule prayer times or specific prayers on their calendars. They can set up various notifications and alarms to remind themselves to pray for specific things. Also, calendars can often be shared between different users. Google Calendar seems to be the easiest for this. Christians could use this feature to create a prayer calendar that is shared by groups or even the whole congregation. Each user could view or add prayers to the calendar depending on the permission given to each. In addition, many calendar applications, like iCal and Google Calendar, even include to-do list features and sync with email programs. This opens up many other options for the Christian user when using these calendars!

Using calendar applications to schedule and share prayer reminders, prayer requests, and prayers themselves will help Christians to *pray continually*.

Google Apps

Google Calendar is just one application in a whole suite called Google Apps. There are dozens of Google Apps available to users. The most commonly known and used for personal productivity are Google Calendar, Google Mail (Gmail), Google Drive (formerly Google Docs), and Google Sites. The concept of using email and calendars for prayer has already been touched on.

Google Drive could be used in many of the same ways as Dropbox could be used in the prayer life of a Christian (for backing up and sharing files). But Google Drive has other features that are very useful. Google allows users to create documents and spreadsheets online and in the Cloud. The documents look much like Microsoft Word documents and the spreadsheets like Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. The advantage though is again common to many of these applications—the ability to save and share easily.

Christians might like to use Google documents or spreadsheets for prayer journals or prayer thoughts or many other "prayerful" reasons. The convenience of Google Drive is that these things are automatically and instantly saved online. Also, anything written on a Google document or spreadsheet can be shared with others in real time. In other words, I could be typing a prayer request on a Google document in Florida and another person in China could be typing a prayer in

response to that request at the same time as they see me typing it! Privacy settings can be employed as desired to make documents or spreadsheets open to the public or restricted to specific users.

One other useful Google App is Google Sites. The application here is that a Christian or a congregation could create a website dedicated to posting prayer requests and prayers. Again, that site could be open to the public or restricted to specific users.

Using Google Applications to save and share prayer requests and prayers can help Christians to *pray continually*.

Logos

Many pastors, including many in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, use Logos Bible software. As Logos has grown over the years so have the number of features it offers. Most pastors use Logos for exegesis, research, or the reading of books. But there are many other handy features that Logos offers.

One is the Prayer List feature. Users can add prayers and notes about those prayers in Prayer List. If desired, you can even write answers to those prayers later. Also, you can schedule prayers to occur on a regular basis.

Though Logos is available in various forms to all Christians, it is not even remotely as accessible or usable as an application like Facebook or Google. In addition, the Prayer List feature is very rudimentary and not the easiest to use. Some Logos users could find good benefit in a simple listing of prayers and prayer requests where they do their Bible study, that is, within the Logos program. But most would likely find that the Prayer List feature of Logos is less helpful than other applications.

Bible study software like Logos and its Prayer List, though, can also help Christians to *pray continually*.

Church Management Software

Just as CRM is known in the business world as Contact Relationship Management, CMS is becoming known in the church world as Church Management Software. In many ways they function in the same way—managing data about people. CRM software can be used in a church setting to manage contacts (members/prospects) and other similar information. However, CMS also manages the pertinent data that churches want to keep track of, such as offerings, attendances, and more.

Some CMS programs are very robust and high-tech. Others are very simple and just "get the job done." Some are flexible and can

track everything you could ever imagine. Some are out-of-the-box, you-get-what-you-paid-for programs. Some are hosted on local computers. Others (maybe most) are now hosted in the Cloud.

Two examples out of many that seem to stand out are Fellowship One and a newer program called Table Talk. Fellowship One offers a full-fledged CMS suite with thousands of possibilities. Users can do everything down to checking in children for events or signing up for volunteers for service opportunities. Fellowship One also offers some possibilities for members to connect online in small (or large) groups. This would provide the opportunity to connect with prayer requests and prayer thoughts.

Table Talk is an online program that could either stand by itself or work in conjunction with CMS like Fellowship One. Table Talk isn't exactly a full suite of church management applications. Table Talk is geared more toward connecting members through announcements, calendars, online discussions, and the like. Table Talk seems to be the kind of application in line with the focus of this paper—Christians making use of technology in their prayer life. Table Talk is fairly easy to use and navigate. It also provides good opportunities for people to connect online and discuss topics or, more pertinently here, share prayer requests and prayers.

CMS programs like Fellowship One and Table Talk can also assist Christians and congregations as they *pray continually*.

Evernote

Since I have the privilege (and assignment) of writing this paper, I get to be the one to choose to "save the best for last," as I desire. I will readily admit a bias that I personally think Evernote is one of the greatest pieces of software in the world today. It is digital sliced bread, so to speak. Reader beware.

Evernote is essentially a digital notebook, or collection of notebooks. If you imagine having a stack of notebooks for every category or part of your life—personal notes, shopping lists, reminders, passwords, spiritual notes, Bible notes, prayers, or anything else you could possibly think of—Evernote then sorts, stacks, and saves those notebooks digitally.

Evernote has countless slick tricks. But some of the best features are: it is hosted in the Cloud; it updates automatically; it is available on any computer or mobile device; it is fully searchable; and individual notes can be tagged for easy finding.

So a very practical example of using Evernote for your prayer life would be as follows: You create a folder, or notebook, called Prayers.

Every note you create in that digital notebook could be an individual prayer, a day of prayer, or a person/family to pray about. There is no limit to how many notes you can make. But then every time you add a note with a person to pray about or a day of prayer, you can add tags to that note.

Assume then that in this notebook called Prayers you have a new note to pray for Tom's heart surgery next week. You type your notes about the event and your reminders about what to pray for. Then you add tags to that note like "Tom & Judy," "Surgery," and "2013."

Not only is Evernote capable of searching any text you ever type, but the tags help for sorting things quickly. You could have two million notes in your Evernote notebooks, but if you tagged one as "Tom & Judy" you will find your prayer note about Tom's surgery immediately. The possibilities of using Evernote as a prayer journal, log, or to-do list are really endless.

One other feature of Evernote that is excellent is that you can share any note or notebook with other people. Those notes could be read-only or fully editable notes. So you could have an entire group or congregation of people with Evernote accounts continually viewing and updating prayer requests and prayer notes at any time from anywhere in the world in a shared Evernote note or notebook.

Evernote is another example of incredible modern technology that can help Christians to *pray continually.*

Concluding Thoughts

Pray continually. Pray constantly. Pray without ceasing. Never stop praying. Say it however you want. Even say it as ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε if you want. But never forget the encouraging command. Christians are to keep praying and praying and praying and never stop praying and praying and praying.

Our heavenly Father graciously opened up the communication lines through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. He tenderly invites us now to speak with him as children speak with their own fathers. What a joy to communicate with our dear Father in heaven![5]

The trouble is that Christians continually battle against their sinful flesh, along with the assaults of the devil and the world around us. We may *want* to pray continually. But rarely do we. Thus God's people continually approach God's throne of grace with simple prayers that he help us to pray continually.

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[5] See Luther's explanation of the Address of the Lord's Prayer!

We now live in a modern era with endless kinds of electronics, software, and technology. The New Man inside us, empowered by the Spirit, wants to pray continually. Thus, the New Man inside us may desire to make use of God's gifts of technology to help to pray continually. Some may not like or understand technology. But it is undeniable that the possibilities for using technology in a Christian's life of faith and prayer are very exciting.

It is inevitable that in the not-too-distant future the information in this paper will no longer be applicable. Either these companies mentioned will go out of business, or some other company will replace them, or more likely, technology will change yet again. (Perhaps I or another will write a follow-up paper in a few decades . . . or a few years.)

But my prayer, continually, is that the Spirit working through his Means of Grace might lead Christians to use the ideas mentioned here to *in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present [their] requests to God.*[6] God-willing, this paper and modern technology might help people to *pray continually.*

God grant that prayer. *Continually.*

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[6] Philippians 4:6