

The Solemn Assembly as It Relates to Revival in the Church – Taken from Chapter 8 - The Path of Revival by Rev. Mark Barnard (Churchsmart Resources 2009)

This excerpt covers the following topics.

An Introduction to Solemn Assemblies
Biblical Elements of Solemn Assemblies
Solemn Assemblies in American History
Recent Examples of Solemn Assemblies
Summary

An Introduction to Solemn Assemblies

“John Davidson of Prestonpans, Scotland became burdened for the welfare of his beloved church and gave expression of concern at the Synod of Fife in 1593 and the Assembly in 1594. His presbytery of Haddington joined with him in petitioning the General Assembly of the Church to set aside time for a Solemn Assembly at the annual meeting of 1596. The Assembly met at St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh in March. A very thorough catalogue of sins was prepared which covered the misdeeds of every class of persons from the King on down to the meanest subjects. More space was given to the sins of ministers than to the wickedness of all other classes put together. The Solemn Assembly occurred on the Tuesday of the second week of the General Assembly and some 400 men, mostly ministers participated . . . The Holy Spirit of God came down and the ancient Cathedral Church resounded with the sobs and cries of hundreds of ministers humbling themselves before God on the dirt floor. The spirit of corporate repentance was carried into all the Presbyteries and the revival of 1596 followed.”¹

This snippet of Scottish Presbyterian history illustrates the impact of a service of corporate repentance. Sometimes called a “Repentance Service” or a “Reconciliation Service” or a “Corporate Renewal Service,” biblically it is termed a “Solemn Assembly”.²

The final phrase of 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, *“then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”* I want to focus on just one key word: *“then.”* This little word *“then”* is the fulcrum on which the promise of revival rests. If revival is conditioned upon the requirements we have investigated to this point, *when* is revival triggered? When is this *“then”*?

“Then” refers to the point in time when God’s attitude and disposition toward His people changes. In that moment, a fresh encounter occurs with God’s Spirit which results in a recovery of God’s blessing. The occasion under which God unleashes His blessing is an assembly where God’s people right their relationship with God. That event where we transact such serious spiritual business is known as a Solemn Assembly.

¹ Roberts, [Sanctify the Congregation](#) 12.

² See the *Facilitator’s Guide for Healing the Heart of Your Church*, by Barnard and Quick, ChurchSmart Resources (2008).

A Solemn Assembly gives leaders and the rest of the church an opportunity to remedy the sins and wounds in the history of their church. It's where individuals address personal sin as well.

- It is the place where the body's leaders exercise their mediatorial authority and identificational repentance before God.
- It allows participation in repentance among the congregation.
- It gives the congregation a specific time and date to mark the changes they seek in their corporate behavior.
- It makes a collective statement of sorrow for the sinful past before God.
- It encourages congregational forgiveness and healing as the church humbles itself before the Lord.
- It presents an opportunity to enter into a corporate covenant with God as a church aspires to move in a new direction.

Solemn Assemblies provide more than a *theoretical* solution to sin. It's *the way* God's people got right with Him in the Bible. It's also the way our spiritual forefathers did it in American history. Local churches today are following this model with near instant results. The church atmosphere and sense of corporate blessing change almost immediately when church leaders follow this Divine prescription for making things right.

In this chapter we will explore the elements found in Solemn Assemblies outlined in the Scriptures. We will also look at their roots in American history. We want to describe several modern examples of Solemn Assemblies and the way they impacted their congregations. Finally, we will examine some warnings related to use of Solemn Assemblies and give the reader balanced expectations of what corporate revival can and can't do.

Biblical Elements of Solemn Assemblies

The examples we read about in the Old Testament carry weight and relevance for New Testament believers. Romans 15:4 says, "*For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*" We find a viable solution to unresolved sin and wounds in the Old Testament Solemn Assembly. God has provided a remedy in His mercy.

The role of Solemn Assemblies is established early in the writings of Moses. Leviticus 23 describes such "holy convocations" as times of humility, special offerings, national atonement, and complete dedication to the things of God. 2 Chronicles 7:14, the very promise of revival we have made our focus, occurred in answer to Solomon's prayer during a Solemn Assembly at the dedication of the Temple.

Solemn Assemblies were special times prescribed by God for His people to reset their relationship with Him and address their faults and failings. It provided an opportunity to refresh and renew their relationship with God.

Ezra and the Problem of Intermarriage

We find the most detailed example of a Solemn Assembly in the book of Ezra. From this example we see the various elements that go into the making of an Assembly. Ezra faced an “engaging” problem. It came to his attention that some of the exiles that returned to replant the nation had started to intermarry with women from neighboring peoples. This breach of covenant faithfulness threatened to undo God’s blessing on the restart nation. Ezra did not turn a blind eye, nor relax God’s standards, nor passively say, “What’s done is done, we’ll have to move on from here.” Rather, in Ezra 9, he tore his clothes in grief and cried out on behalf of God’s people. Satan had planted the seeds of sin and compromise all over again, the very things that had caused their exile in the first place.

Ezra put the problem in clear spiritual perspective when he said, *“But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage . . . And now, our God, what shall we say after this for we have forsaken Thy commandments . . .”* (Ezra 9:8, 10).

Ezra’s grief spread among the godly people of Israel. As their hearts broke, they called a Solemn Assembly in Jerusalem. Along with Ezra, the leaders and the elders of Israel agreed to this course of action. In the midst of pouring rain, the vast assembly gathered to acknowledge the sin infecting their nation and to resolve the matter before the Lord.

Several things are evident in this Solemn Assembly. First and foremost we discover the element of *hope*. Shecaniah says in Ezra 10:2, *“We have been unfaithful to our God, and have married foreign women from the people of the land; yet now there is **hope** for Israel in spite of this.”* I like Shecaniah because he saw beyond God’s judgment to God’s mercy. When we discover our failures as a church, we should grieve appropriately but not as those who have no hope. We need not be discouraged to the point of despair. God makes a way to restoration from the sin that may have snared us as a church. God made a way for Israel and He makes a way for us too. No sin is beyond the scope of God’s grace, even when it defiles the entire body of a church. We call for a Solemn Assembly in order to be cleansed of our sin through corporate confession and seek to restore God’s blessing on our congregation. God promises to restore our blessing if we take seriously how we have fallen and repent (Rev. 2:5, 6). That is what revival is all about. When we decide to have a Solemn Assembly, like the Israelites in Ezra’s day we should do so with the hopeful anticipation that, as we humble ourselves and turn from our wicked ways, God will once again bless us.

Secondly, Shecaniah outlines another element of Solemn Assemblies when he says in 10:3, *“So now let us make a **covenant** with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and those who tremble at the commandment of our God.”* Solemn Assemblies should be times when we renew our commitment to follow the Lord as a body. Developing a *corporate covenant* helps us articulate the behaviors that displeased the Lord in the first place and allows us to promise to avoid those things and make commitments to aspire to better things in the future. Identify the specific issues that Christ had against you as you reviewed the history of your church. That should be the starting place for developing your corporate covenant. What was the original purpose of the founders of your church from which you may have

departed? That too might be a place to start. These questions form the basis of the corporate covenant you formulate.

To give you an idea of what a corporate covenant might look like, one church wrote the following after a careful review of their church's history. They used this covenant as one aspect of the Solemn Assembly to address unresolved sin in the history of their church. Each statement in their covenant reflected an underlying negative tendency identified in the history of their church. The negative tendencies are included here to put the positive statements in proper context.

Sample Corporate Covenant

- 1. We aspire to be a unified fully functional church body for God through clearly defined avenues of communication.**
(Negative tendency: A lack of open communication and cases of individual offense in the body.)
- 2. We will demonstrate a commitment to each other that takes precedence over conflict.**
(Negative tendency: A tendency to leave when we don't like what is happening, running from conflict.)
- 3. When the Holy Spirit is leading us into a faith situation we will pursue it.**
(Negative Tendency: A tendency to play it safe, slow reaction to opportunities for growth.)
- 4. We as church leaders will pursue open, transparent, two way communication in the relationship with our pastor.**
(Negative tendency: A tendency not to talk about major problems especially in relation to the pastor.)
- 5. We will protect the integrity of this ministry through mutual accountability as church leaders.**
(Negative tendency: un-remedied pastoral sin and weak lay leadership.)
- 6. If we fail in any of these aspects we will acknowledge it before God and seek reconciliation with God and the Body of Christ.**
(Acknowledges the possibility of failure as we grow and mature in these commitments and what we will do about it if we fail in one way or another.)

I find #6 especially significant. A corporate covenant and a Solemn Assembly cannot guarantee to prevent regressive behavior. The covenant document gives a church a standard to which they can aspire, but it also acknowledges the possibility of human weakness and failure as they seek to change their corporate behavior. They won't be perfect, but they will keep trying. We'll talk about corporate regression later, but for now it is important to see how a corporate covenant can set a new course for the church to follow.

A third element of Solemn Assemblies which shows up in the Ezra account is *confession*. Ezra instructs the whole assembly in 10:11, “Now, therefore, make **confession** to the Lord God of your fathers . . .” To their credit, they were willing to confess the sin as if it were their own. They saw the sin of the men who married foreign women as their own responsibility. The guilty individuals had not been specifically identified, but the congregation understood that, because of their corporate standing before God as a body, they shared the perpetrators’ guilt.

They were also willing to let the leadership of the congregation represent them before God in relationship to their sin. The congregation’s wise input follows, “Then the assembly answered and said in a loud voice, ‘That’s right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do. But there are many people, it is the rainy season, and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter. **Let our leaders represent the whole assembly . . .**” (Ezra 10:12-14). This is the role of mediatorial authority in the setting of the Solemn Assembly. Spiritual leadership has the authority to make things right before God on behalf of the congregation, to speak to God on their behalf. Any Solemn Assembly held today should be led by the church’s recognized/appointed leaders. They have authority from God to make matters right before Him, things that have hindered His blessing on the congregation. Thus church leaders should be thoroughly involved in the planning and execution of the Solemn Assembly, especially in confessing their corporate sin.

After confession we see the **resolution** of the problem. They undertake an investigation to identify those who had married foreign women. This discipline was necessary to make things right before God. Dealing with the tangle of relationships between an Israelite husband, a foreign wife, and their children would have been tough to say the least. It is no less difficult to deal with the discipline problems we have ignored in our churches. No one wants to make things right if they don’t have to. Yet to confess without resolving the issues we confess in a godly way stops short of authentic repentance. Be prepared to address your substantive issues before God in preparation for and in conclusion of a Solemn Assembly. The last thing any church wants to do is go through the motions of confession without correction of the problems at hand. That kind of solution is insufficient to restore God’s blessing.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, another issue we see is *resistance* to the conclusions drawn by the leadership in a Solemn Assembly. We read in Ezra 10:15, “Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah **opposed** this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.” Not everyone will agree with the conclusions drawn by a church’s leadership as it relates to corporate sin. There will be those who are unhappy about addressing long-ignored problems, even if these are the very things that hinder God’s blessing. Some will deem it inappropriate to go public with the problems, yet humility calls for tactful public acknowledgment of corporate shortcomings. Some could have interpreted the rainy weather as a sign they should delay or put off their Solemn Assembly. But Ezra and the leaders did not let inclement weather hinder the change they needed in their corporate heart. Those godly people went forward with the Solemn Assembly in spite of the heavy rain and in spite of those who resisted their decision to move forward.

Finally, the Ezra account of a Solemn Assembly includes both **real and symbolic acts of repentance**. Those whose sin infected the nation “pledged to put away their wives, and being

guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense" (Ezra 10:19). The men who had intermarried with foreign women first pledged to *"put away their wives."* This was the *real* act of repentance. They had to dissolve the marriages into which they entered. This was proof that they were willing to submit to spiritual authority and the will of God. Superficial repentance stops short of undoing the trouble we have caused because it is too costly or difficult; not so with these men. They dealt with the spiritual compromise they had made.

Symbolic acts were also involved in their repentance. We note that each man offered a ram from his flock as a sacrifice for his offense. This was the *symbolic* payment for his sin and guilt. It would be helpful if the believers who cause their churches trouble always demonstrated the same pliable disposition. Often the sin gets perpetrated by individuals who are unwilling to repent. That's where church discipline should enter and the wayward individuals choose then to flee from godly correction or submit to their discipline and grow from it.

In the account of Ezra's Solemn Assembly, we see the interplay between personal and corporate sin. The actions of individuals led to the nation's guilt before God. The entire nation stood liable in God's sight for this sinful behavior. In the resolution of the problem, the whole nation took responsibility through the mouths of their leaders, and the sinful ones had to correct their hearts and behavior as part of the corporate repentance process. Corporate sin and personal sin are often intertwined. God holds entire bodies of believers accountable for the unrectified historical sin of individuals within those bodies. Solemn Assemblies take responsibility for the decisions, actions and dispositions of those who have wounded or hindered the body of Christ in the past. Until those issues are addressed, the church languishes under the disciplinary hand of God. Fear of a return to being under divine discipline motivated Ezra and the other leaders of the nation to make things right before the situation got worse.

Their example shows us many of the elements of a Solemn Assembly which it is good to contemplate before enacting one. By way of review, they are:

- 1) The hope that God *will* restore us
- 2) A corporate covenant
- 3) Corporate confession of sin,
- 4) Mediatorial authority
- 5) Resolution of sin's impact
- 6) Resistance to the idea of correcting sin
- 7) Real and symbolic acts of repentance.

It takes courage. Even godly Ezra needed encouragement to follow through with it. Shecaniah said to Ezra, *"Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act"* (Ezra 10:4). We pursue these matters because, as leaders, we are stewards of the body of Christ. We want His Bride to be radiant when the Groom arrives. We will find this courage because we have hope that God will once again forgive our sin and will also, as Ezra prays in 9:8, *"grant us a little reviving."*

Prince Street's Preparation for a Solemn Assembly

Prince Street Church in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania held such a Solemn Assembly. They were not making the ministry progress they might normally expect under the hand of God's blessing and the pastor and staff had gone through a number of painful experiences. They examined their history and discovered historical patterns of sin impacted the current ministry of their church. They identified the good that God had done in the past as well as the patterns of pain. In preparation for the service they published a Q & A fact sheet to prepare the congregation for this service. Through it you get a feel for the thought and planning that went into their service.

Prince Street Church

Service of Repentance Q & A Sheet

Q: What is the Scriptural basis for this process?

A: The concept of the Lord of the Church, Jesus, calling His people to repentance runs throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. But the primary basis for this process comes from the book of Revelation. In chapters 2 and 3, the Lord writes letters to seven churches. Although these churches are made up of a collection of individuals, Jesus writes to them as one unit. In each letter, Jesus shares things He commends, things that are sinful, a call to repentance, and a warning of what would happen if the church refused to repent. Essentially, we have been asking the Lord of the Church, Jesus, to show us what His letter to us would be.

Q: Who made the decision to do this?

A: At each step of the process, the Board was unanimous in every decision that has been made.

Q: Who was involved in the process?

A: All Board and staff members and their spouses were asked to participate. We also specifically invited all ministry staff personnel. We also invited everyone in the congregation to join us for this process. Approximately 30 people participated in the seminar and retreat.

Q: Why can't we just let the past be the past?

A: The Lord of the Church, Jesus, doesn't just forget corporate sin. This is why He disciplined Israel with 40 years of wilderness wandering and 70 years of exile. He offers to forgive, but only if His people come to Him in repentance. Until that happens, sin, and its consequences remain. He forgives us individually when we repent individually, but corporate forgiveness requires corporate repentance.

Q: Why do we have to do this together?

A: The Lord of the Church, Jesus, looks at Prince Street Church as one body. When one sins, it impacts all of us. That's why all of us must repent together.

Q: What's going to happen at the Service of Repentance?

A: We'll begin by celebrating seasons of fruitful ministry and all that Christ has done in our midst by His grace. We'll conclude the service by rededicating ourselves to being the body of Christ. But the majority of the service will include a series of people repenting of sin on behalf of pastors, their wives, lay leaders, and the congregation.

Q: How long will the Service of Repentance take?

A: None of us knows, exactly. We want to get this right. We want to be sure that we have repented of everything the Lord of the Church, Jesus, is calling for us to confess. Therefore, we expect the service to take significantly longer than our normal worship services.

Q: Will ministry for children be provided?

A: Yes. We are planning to provide children's ministries for infants-5th grade.

Q: Who will be coming to this service?

A: We would like everyone who is a part of Prince Street Church to be part of this service. We have also sent letters of invitation to more than 100 people who we believe may have experienced hurt during their time of being part of Prince Street Church.

Q: What will I be expected to do?

A: The congregation will join together in singing, greeting each other, praying, Scripture and unison readings, and Holy Communion. We will also provide opportunity for each person who desires to do so to hammer a nail into a large wooden cross symbolizing that we find healing in the cross of Christ. But rest assured that no one will be expected to speak who does not wish to do so.

Q: What can I do between now and June 1st?

A: Please join us in praying. Our enemy, Satan, will do everything he can to discourage and divide us. But God's power is greater than anything our enemy can place in our way. If we will keep our eyes fixed on the Lord of the Church, Jesus, we will find healing for Prince Street Church.³

Price Street Church's thoughtfulness and preparation evidenced by their Q & A sheet demonstrate their passion to pursue God's blessing on their ministry. We want to see many such congregations work to hear from the Lord and as Prince Street did and make the necessary course corrections to honor the Lord of the Church and be blessed by Him again.

Solemn Assemblies in American History

Special days of fasting and prayer were the norm in the earliest era of American history. It was not unusual for church leaders to interpret natural disasters as a warning or judgment from God. When people felt themselves under God's disciplinary hand, they scheduled Solemn Assemblies for the purpose of corporate repentance. When you read the sermons pastors preached on these special days of fasting and prayer, you see that early American preachers did not hesitate to recognize corporate pain as God's means to get their attention. They saw a tight connection between their painful events and the disciplinary judgments God inflicted on Israel in the Old Testament. We have lost this discernment.

In Richard Owen Roberts one-of-a-kind book, *Sanctify the Congregation*, he assembles the sermons of many early American preachers who called for their people to return to the living God. The following excerpts were taken from sermons they preached on days of humiliation and fasting. These Solemn Assemblies were times when they recognized the downward trends of spirituality evident in the Church and society. Joseph Rowlandson, of Weathersfield, Connecticut

³ http://www.princestreetchurch.com/files/Microsoft_Word_-_Repentance_Service_Q_A

preached a sermon in 1678 titled, *The Possibility of God Forsaking a People*. The message formed the exclamation point on this preacher's life as he died two days later. He preached it on a day set apart for fasting and prayer throughout the colonies. He writes:

"A people must know that God has forsaken them when He ceases to protect them from their enemies as in times past and does not provide for them as He was generous in doing on earlier occasions . . . How is it with the Churches of Asia – those once famous golden candlesticks? They had epistles of warning written to them. Are they not in a forsaken condition now? As far as we know there is not the trace of a Church to be found among them . . . Here it must be noted that God may exercise a great deal of patience and forbearance toward such as He is about to forsake . . . He is very likely to give them warning and in patience to bear a while with their forwardness, to wait and see if there be any returning to Him before He inflicts this heavy and sharp judgment."⁴

Rowlandson further describes how a church ultimately disappears from a community where God planted it. He notes that, when sin infects the body of Christ, God sends divine judgments on His people. These judgments and the resulting loss of divine comfort evidence a loss of God's presence. That loss of His presence drops a congregation's divine protection. Unless they change direction, the loss of protection leads to the increase in evil. The light of the church eventually flickers out. God's patience is long but not infinite with a wayward church. Unless they demonstrate a change in their heart, the church's future may be in question. Returning to God becomes more important than ever.

On March 17th, 1680, Increase Mather preached a sermon titled, *Returning Unto God the Great Concern of a Covenant People*. Mather, an early graduate of Harvard and the first to receive a doctoral degree from that institution, served as president of Harvard on two occasions. His church, North Church in Boston, entered into a covenant with God as a result of the Solemn Assembly they held in 1680.⁵ Here is an excerpt of the covenant the church embraced. Its content reveals their consciousness of their accountability before God:

"We do also give up ourselves one unto another, in the Lord according to the will of God, freely covenanting and binding ourselves to walk together as a right ordered congregation and Church of Christ . . . And whereas the Messengers of these Churches, who have met together to enquire into the reason of the Lord's controversy with this His people, have taken notice of many provoking evils as the procuring cause of the judgments of God upon New England; so far as we, or any of us, have been guilty of sin in respect to any of them, we desire from our hearts to bewail it before the Lord and humbly to entreat for pardoning mercy for the sake of the blood of the everlasting Covenant."⁶

The covenant goes on to describe their commitments to each other in the body, their relationship with God as a body and their walk with the Lord in the home. What is clear is the association they

⁴ Ibid 79-86

⁵ Ibid 96.

⁶ Ibid 117-118.

understand between corporate sin and divine judgment/discipline on their church. This is a connection we today either fear or fail to recognize, and it is killing us.

Another Harvard graduate, William Williams, preached *The Danger of Not Reforming Known Evils*. This message, preached in Hatfield, Massachusetts in 1707, warns about ignoring sin in the histories of our churches. Williams writes:

“The inveterateness of a disease is shown when it resists and overcomes healing medicines. Just so, when suitable means are used to bring a people to repentance and all prove frustrated and ineffectual, it shows their incorrigibility and irreclaimability . . . When there is not that humiliation, repentance, brokenness of heart for sin and humble waiting upon God for mercy that ought to be present, but when men put off God with empty shows and external devotions, they heighten rather than moderate His anger . . . It is a fact that the sins of God’s professing people are the provoking causes of their calamities . . . It is the abounding of iniquities among us that has made way for the many rebukes of heaven that we have been under . . . Oh that you would consider it! Is it not better to part with the dearest lust than to be an Achan to trouble our Israel at such a time as this?”⁷

In the years after the earthquake of 1727 and before the First Great Awakening, John Webb preached *The Duty of a Degenerate People to Pray for the Reviving of God’s Work*. The occasion was a special day of fasting and prayer at the new North Church in Boston. Webb wanted to motivate believers to pray for revival. His understanding of the corporate nature of revival reflects once again the early American emphasis which we have now lost. He said:

“A thing never begins to revive until it begins to recover the life and strength and beauty it once had, nor can it be fully revived until it is fully restored to itself in these respects. Therefore, when we pray that God would revive His work among us, we pray that He would recover *us* from *our own* declensions in religion and that He would make the life and power of godliness to grow and prevail as much as ever . . . We must acknowledge that *we* do not have nearly as much of that zeal for the honor of God and of that indignation against sin as was once the glory of these *churches* . . . When we go into a *Christian assembly*, how little we have of that religious attention, love, and delight which were once to be seen in the countenances of God’s people, and how few of the hearers now make it a matter of conscience to water the seed of the Word with their prayers to God. As a direct result of this neglect of means, thorough and saving conversions are comparatively rare in our *churches* . . . But alas, as though nothing of the most amazing thunders and lightnings and the most terrible earthquakes could awaken *us*, we are at this time fallen into as deep a sleep as ever. Indeed, there is scarcely anything of the working of God’s Spirit to be seen among *us* now . . . We must pray that He will abundantly pour forth His Spirit from on high and recover these declining *churches* to their first love and their first works⁸ (Italics mine).

⁷ Ibid 120-141

⁸ Ibid 218-242

Reading that excerpt, it's hard not to wonder "How have we become blind to the way God deals with us as *churches*?" What have we left in the dust by ignoring the corporate nature of repentance and revival? How can we expect revival to come when our churches are full of sinful attitudes and behaviors and values, and clearly under Divine discipline for it? The early preachers of this country had not yet been contaminated by the philosophy of individualism that now pervades our culture. We hear our individual walk with the Lord emphasized every Sunday. We direct people individually to go deeper with God. We speak of how God must sanctify us individually but we overlook the sanctification of our churches. What kind of bride can the Groom expect to find upon His return? All of us need to examine our hearts and more importantly we need to examine the heart of our church. The viability of our church's testimony hangs in the balance.

Recent examples of Solemn Assemblies

Fortunately, some churches are becoming aware of their true standing before the Living God. They have recognized God's purpose in the depths of their corporate pain. Churches, like people, often wait until they have no place to look but up before they cry out for help. But why wait until we find ourselves on Death's doorstep before we seek the Lord? Why wait until our flame is nearly extinguished before we cry out for revival?

It's better to go see the doctor now than to ignore your symptoms and end up in the emergency room later! The Lord longs for us to come to Him. He wants us to stop assuming the next great program or pastor will save our church. He wants us to get a clue as to the real nature of our church's problems. Until we do and until we address the real problems—the things *He* says are our problems—His blessing will be muted on every program or ministry initiative we pursue. Such was the case with the two churches I want to describe. The stories are real. Their present problems were reflections of their past problems, but once they heard what Jesus was telling them through their problems, they repented and, using a Solemn Assembly, made things right. To grasp the significance of their Solemn Assemblies, we must understand what they discovered about themselves and then what they did about it.

Church A

Their pastor had just left. On the surface he and his wife were pursuing a call to missions. Below the surface, five years of tension had percolated between the pastor and lay leaders. The church was largely made up of those who had left other churches of the same denomination for one reason or another. They found a home at "Church A," which had a park-like setting. However, the beauty outside did not extend inside. The tension boiled over when the younger half of the church left at the same time the aforementioned pastor departed for the mission field.

On a human level, there was no reason why this church should not have grown and prospered. They had a couple of lay leaders I deemed "Ten Talent Men." They were greatly gifted and had carried significant roles with other successful churches. Yet their presence in this church did not lead to ministry blessing.

The pastor had worked tirelessly at building relationships with those outside the church but his hard work never translated into church growth. An Ethnic group, which met Sunday afternoon, packed out the same sanctuary that was three-quarters empty when the Anglo congregation used it on

Sunday morning. Demographics did not fully explain the contrast. The city in which the church was located was growing, indeed so was the entire region. There were plenty of folks to be reached, and the church had been successful reaching them in the past, but not now, despite the pastor's best efforts.

Some might suppose the church's lack of visibility played a role in its stalled ministry. Though situated on a beautiful piece of property, the church sat near the back of it. Their signage, however, appeared adequate to let passing cars and people know they were there, and the entrance to the property appeared inviting. Regardless, the church seemed to languish.

Historical Review

In the time between the departure of their last pastor and the arrival of their next one, the lay leadership consented to review the history of their church for the purpose of discerning what Jesus was saying to them.

Much of what we discovered in this journey was positive. Through the church's thirty-year existence, they enjoyed positive ministry to youth and children, a strong Sunday School and missions programs, and for a time they were held up as a model of cutting-edge ministry. They renovated their facility just five years earlier to enhance their ministry. All these things Jesus commended. Yet their attendance figures remained erratic and, after an initial growth spurt in the early 1980s, the church never recovered its previous numerical strength.

As we examined the crises in their history, a curious pattern emerged. It seemed the relationship with every pastor they had ended badly. We discovered that their first pastor had deeply wounded the church with an adulterous affair. Their second pastor, after years of faithful ministry, got undermined by lay leaders. The next pastor departed the church so wounded that he left ministry altogether. Their last pastor had committed to be there five years and made that promise publicly. He stayed exactly five years and though his departure appeared gracious, it was not without an undercurrent of strife.

The Real Problem

What the church experienced in the present reflected what they faced repeatedly in their history. The cycles of pain reoccurred and, while they varied in their manifestations, they could not be denied. What wasn't so obvious? The underlying causes of the church's behavior. Only after several days of discussion did one person who had been at the church from the beginning share two stories that unlocked the real problem.

Eight people started the church, people who previously attended another church of the same denomination. They "said" they wanted to plant a denominational church closer to their homes. However, something odd became apparent when they started an *independent* church rather than one affiliated with their denomination. What motivated their actions?

It seems those eight were disgruntled at how a denominational leader had handled the discipline of a former pastor of the "sending church." (Ironically, that pastor's wife now *attended* this daughter

church thirty years later! Her quiet presence was God's reminder of the church's real problem.) Now the issue was not how the denomination handled the discipline of that former minister, but the deception of the eight people who disguised their real intent in planting that new church. They took matters into their own hands when they chose to start what became their new church home. The church eventually became part of the denomination they left but this only occurred when they needed money to build and requested help from the denomination's development fund.

Would such a story ever have surfaced under normal operations of the church? No, but the church's beginnings did not escape the eyes of the Lord. They are too pure to overlook the evil we think we have "gotten away with." Could He bless a church that started in deception and rebellion?

The other story that confirmed this underlying problem related to the purchase of the church's lovely property. At the time the property was available, the governing board set out a fleece of sorts. If the property passed a perk test and a septic system could be installed, they would purchase the land. When the environmental engineer tested the soil, it simply would not perk. None of the locations on the property he tested met the absorption requirements for a septic system. Instead of relinquishing the right to purchase, the board had dirt hauled in to create an area that met the septic requirements. This explained why the church built at the rear of the parcel, near the septic location. The man who knew this story shared it through tears. He had known the church overstepped the Lord, not abiding by the very stipulation they set before Him. This knowledge plagued him for twenty-five years!

As the present leaders reviewed this history, they labeled the behavior founding the church, the purchase of the land, and ultimately the church's treatment of its pastors as "taking matters into their own hands." The very DNA of the church's founding carried through to the departure of their last pastor. This was the issue they felt they needed to focus on in their Solemn Assembly.

Preparation

In preparation for that Assembly, they wrote several letters of apology to previous pastors and denominational officials. They acknowledged the damage the church had done to its shepherds. All the leaders signed these letters. On the day of the Solemn Assembly, most of the lay leaders participated in the service. Some described the blessings which Christ commended, others the challenges and one shared the things Christ had against them. The man who shared the two stories with the board that helped them understand the heart of the matter now repeated those stories for the congregation. They sought to break their cycle of sin and disciplinary pain from God. They utilized mediatorial authority and identificational repentance to bring healing to the wounds caused by a previous pastor. During the open time of prayer, the congregation shared encouraging verses as well as heartfelt prayers of confession.

God's Presence was apparent during the open time of prayer. Each person in attendance placed a long-stem flower in a vase as a symbol of the restored beauty of the body of Christ. Our intent was to turn the church over to its rightful Owner, the One Who purchased it with His own blood. One key leader felt the church was finally back on the right track. Another felt it was as if the weight they had been carrying had been lifted.

It was not all sweetness. One lady abruptly left the church and wrote a scathing letter about bringing up the past. Another person, however, felt the Solemn Assembly to be one of the most meaningful services they ever experienced. People had an undeniable sense of spiritual relief. It was as if the Lord had waited for this day for decades. The rare beauty of a church repenting of their long-held sin is a joyous thing.

Church B

“Bobble-head leadership” was a new term to me. I first heard it used during the historical review of “Church B.” Its meaning became clear as we looked closely at the progress of the church through the years.

I would describe it as a “neighborhood church”—one of many small churches located in neighborhoods throughout the community. They moved to their current location after fifteen years in a poorer section of town. Forty years later, the once new area they moved to had itself become older and less desirable. The town is home to a large military base. Nearly everyone works at the base or is connected to someone who does.

Initially, like most churches, they did not perceive themselves in need of corporate revival. What they felt, was their need to find a new pastor. Gradually though they came to see that underlying issues hampered their ministry, things which needed to be addressed before the next pastor arrived. Their leaders agreed to review their history.

Historical Review

We highlighted many good and commendable ministries as they began their review. Words like “dedicated” and “persevering” were used to describe the character of the church’s constituency. They had a strong youth ministry since the start of the church. They enjoyed good preachers, a vibrant women’s ministry and a men’s breakfast that attracted men from other churches. Missions and prayer were also strengths. The church held revival meetings for years which also proved a blessing. They heard Jesus commend all these positive efforts as glorifying to His name.

But as the church had its peaks, it also had its valleys through its fifty-five year history. Four peaks and four valleys to be exact. When we charted their attendance, it resembled a jagged mountain range with a valley following each peak the church reached. The church rose to the maximum sustainable attendance given the size of its facilities, only to decline in the years following its heights. At one point it declined to the point of closure and a pioneering pastor restarted it. They suffered three drawn-out exoduses of people and one dramatic split, each leading to a “valley.”

Behind the Roller Coaster Ride

What was behind this roller coaster ride? As we explored the various eras of the church Christ made it clear that the lay leadership followed whatever pastor they had, for good or for ill. Following a good pastor—and they had some—is a good thing. But lay leadership is responsible before Christ to protect the congregation from pastoral leaders who may want to lead the church astray. “Church B” had a few of these too, which caused them a load of corporate pain.

One pastor decided he wanted to be a farmer at the same time as being a pastor. He bought twenty-five acres and began to charge farm equipment to the church account(!). By using the church's line of credit, he was not charged tax. He thought that if he paid the bill promptly it would never get back to the church. Before long though the church got sued by the equipment company for lack of payment!

Another pastor, overly eager to see growth, authorized architectural plans to enlarge the facility. His heart was in the right place but he did not work along with the board. When he left the church, they owed \$20,000 for building plans they never used.

In the early years of the church's ministry, when things were growing, a new pastoral couple came on the scene. He was a very good preacher and the previous pastor approved him as the right man for the job. However, an exodus began almost immediately. Through tears, one woman shared how this pastor's wife alienated the women of the church through judgmentalism and a highly critical spirit. Over the course of four years the church's attendance was cut in half.

What would Jesus say to a church like this? It became apparent that the lay leaders had displayed great passivity in the face of pastoral misconduct. They became more concerned with moving on to the next leader than addressing the discipline that would have kept the church healthy. We settled on this passivity of the church's male lay leadership as the root cause of the church's problems. They tolerated misbehavior without discipline.

I had a hard time understanding how a church with strong ties to a military base could be so passive. If they sent personnel all over the world to step up and do difficult things, how could they be so passive in the church? When I asked that question one board member piped up, "It makes perfect sense. It's 'bobble-head leadership'." I asked him to explain, and he said, "On the base, we have no say in what we are asked to do. Our assignments get handed down to us from others with authority. We simply do what we are told." He called this "do-as-you're-told-without-questioning" approach "bobble-head leadership." We labeled it "blind submission to authority" combined with a spirit of indifference. I found it amazing that the culture on base had so completely influenced the church. In church histories we often see sin enter the camp through such localized cultural influences.

Preparation

In preparation for their Solemn Assembly, we met to deal with issues related to reconciling with a former pastor. The board also discussed getting right before God as a body. Each man had a part in the service we planned. We explained the things Christ commended through the years, the challenges He recognized the church faced and the things He had against them as a body. We shared what we believed to be the root problem and the leaders publicly signed a corporate covenant committing to break with the patterns of their past. They implemented both mediatorial authority as well as identificational repentance for the poor behavior by some of their pastors. The change in spirit actually began before the service proper. The leaders had spent time in confession before the Lord, changing the spiritual climate of the church. The most significant aspect of this change was a fresh sense of freedom and unity enjoyed among the leaders. They began to look forward to what God would do in the future.

What to Expect

Solemn Assemblies settle things before God on a corporate level. God waits for His people to take ownership and responsibility of their painful problems which keep hindering them. Church people are prone to ignore pain and put off treatment as long as they can. So God keeps sending the painful episodes to challenge us to seek His face and hear what He is saying to us. When we go before the Lord in a Solemn Assembly, we start to function in *God's* reality. We face and address the spiritual reasons for our corporate ill health. Remember, revival brings a restoration of *spiritual health*.

Taking responsibility in humility before God results in a rapid improvement of the spiritual climate and the renewal of energies of your church's leadership. Hope replaces confusion and a renewed spirit replaces ministry frustration. This is the universal experience of churches honestly pursuing the Lord in this manner. Pastor Marsh Sorber of CrossPoint Church in Binghamton, New York reports, "Since the service there has been a great sense of release and joy that was missing previously. Praise The Lord!!!! The attitude of the church has been visibly changed; you can see it on the faces of the people as we gather on Sunday mornings. There is a new sense of joy that was missing in the past."

Observers of the change in another church write, "The body of Christ was ready to look deeply to Jesus and at their history to surface what He would commend, what challenges they faced and what He might have against them in each period of the church's life. We celebrated and grieved, rejoiced and repented. Truly God's spirit was bringing cleansing, conviction, and comfort. It was a beautiful experience . . . We believe revival has begun and will spread."

One of the Elders at Barcroft Bible Church in Fairfax, Virginia reports, "We sense a growing work of God in the corporate heart of our church. Healing and hope are beginning to capture one heart at a time." Jim Bolich, pastor of Prince Street Church, reported on the change in the spirit of his church after their Solemn Assembly. He writes, "I sense clearly that the Lord of the Church, Jesus, has forgiven us. I sense a willingness among the people to extend forgiveness to one another. Now, we must learn to live as the Body of Christ."

The Lord loves His churches and longs to bless them. When a church repents, it recovers God's blessing; where their efforts seemed hampered in the past, they enjoy a new spiritual foundation on which to build their future ministry.

A Word of Caution

God takes Solemn Assemblies seriously. Once a church becomes aware of its true condition before the Lord and confesses its corporate sins, they gain both a new footing and new *accountability* for their ministry. It is one thing to live through years of a church's struggling ministry ignorant that God has a complaint against your church, but it is another thing entirely to repent of those things and then return to the same behaviors again.

I believe that, once a church repents, the Lord holds it to a new standard. He expects a change in line with the repentance. It is not unusual for a church, like an individual, to regress into its former displeasing behaviors. The question is: to what degree do they regress and have they learned

from the regression? Does their regression include a recovery that shows the congregation is maturing as it grows out of its past? Or does the regression instead betray superficiality in the original repentance?

Just as an individual experiences salvation and then growth in the Lord, gradually to become sanctified from past sinful tendencies, in the same way a church becomes sanctified corporately. It is up and down, but with an overall track upward. Corporate revival represents a jump upward in spiritual life, but increasing sanctification in the pattern of its life must follow. The Lord will often test the repentance of a church by challenging its new-found liberty with difficulties. We should expect the Lord to test our corporate sincerity. He is, after all, the Lord of our church. The Groom wants to show openly what is in the heart of His Bride.

“Church A” was tested subsequent to their Solemn Assembly. They regressed so completely that, after they called their next pastor, they became embroiled in conflict within months of his arrival. The church closed its doors shortly thereafter. Their lampstand was removed from the scene.

“Church B” also faced a test after their Solemn Assembly and dealt with some regressive behavior. They recognized their lapse and brought it before the Lord. They learned through it and still have hope of being a light in their community.

Picturing a church as a tree with branches (ministries) and fruit (results and growth), we can see corporate revival as “root work.” It addresses the unseen network of deep spiritual roots that feed the life of the church. Corporate revival functions like fertilizer, bringing nutrients into the root system facilitating the tree to once again produce much fruit.

Often pruning needs to be done as well and God leads us to take care of it in the tests following a Solemn Assembly. Relational problems which have gone unaddressed will need to be faced. If leaders have ignored disciplining sin in the congregation, it will have to be confronted. A test will force this. If disunity or a critical spirit has caused problems, these will have to be addressed. Pruning represents an adjustment to the way the body has functioned. Once Christ makes clear what He has against our church, He expects us to rectify any of those problems on the branch level. These may have been ignored for a long time, but Christ strengthens leaders by leading them to face and deal with what they have avoided.

You must grow into a true body of believers under one roof, not just the assemblage of individuals who meet together on Sunday morning and are totally disconnected from each other. Revival is a corporate experience and benefits the overall life of the church. You want that health and vibrancy it provides to grow into a beautiful expression of Christ in your locality. It is that unique beauty Christ provides which visitors will find appealing and the lost will find attractive.

Summary

Corporate revival is exciting. Seeing a group of church leaders and a congregation make things right before the Lord is as thrilling as it gets. As we survey the Church in America, we see a nation full of local churches in dire need of corporate revival. Many are unaware of their need. Our nation’s decaying culture spirals down in concert with weak churches, leaving them isolated and

irrelevant as true change agents. Unless these churches gain new spiritual vibrancy, nothing will stop the secularization that suffocates Christ's bride.

What about your church? Are you willing to bet your eternal reward on the current health of your local church? If you are not so confident or if you think there could be a problem, look into your history. See what you discover. Don't let another day go by without finding out what Jesus is saying to your church. Forego the artificial church culture that may be blinding your congregation to its true state before the Lord. Dare to pray that God would restore the health of your church and your own spiritual health in the process. If we long to see this nation blessed and influence the world for Christ, we must avoid the fate suffered by the churches in Europe. They could never regain their spiritual footing. Now they are irrelevant in their cultures. We still have time, but probably not long.

Gerald Sittser writes, "Churches move slowly, just like glaciers . . . but when they do change, they can become as powerful as an advancing glacier that sweeps away everything in its path."⁹ Shall we enter a new ice age that leaves us immobile, entrenched, frozen solid or can we free ourselves to become a powerful force for God in the coming decades? The choice is up to the church. Shall we seek the Lord and prepare our church's heart for revived life? The Lord Himself waits for us to do so. *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"* (Revelation 3:22).

For more information contact Blessing Point Ministries at blessingpoint.org

⁹ Gerald Sittser, Water From A Deep Well. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2007) 294.