

THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US

For if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure – not to put it too severely – to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

- 2nd Corinthians 2:5-9, ESV

-- THIS IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE CHAPTER, THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US IN REPENTANCE A COSMIC SHIFT OF MIND AND HEART. IT ADDRESSES THE IDEA OF CORPORATE REPENTANCE --

GODLY SORROW AGAINST THE OFFENDER

The Corinthian's attitude toward a sinful brother prompted a stern rebuke from Paul. They had a sinner in their midst, and *they were proud!* (1st Corinthians 5:2) What was their source of pride? There's no pride in a member who takes his father's wife (v. 1). It seems that they were proud of their open-minded tolerance! "*Shouldn't you have been deeply sorrowful instead* (v. 2)," Paul countered. He then called for the man's expulsion.

The Corinthians, we later find out, begin to sorrow over the expelled sinner. We likewise discover that Church discipline works! Paul later writes them, "*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him*" (2nd Corinthians 2:6-9, ESV). The offender, effectively disciplined by the Church, has repented.

The Church learned a lesson, too. They almost over-learned it, as most errors produce equal and opposite reactions. They turned so sharply from their arrogant toleration of sin that they risked *overwhelming the brother with excessive sorrow*. The pendulum of pastoral care, however, did not swing too far in Corinth. Paul rejoiced that the Church responded well to his reproof, for they exhibited a *godly sorrow* (see chapter 7) *that produces repentance*:

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. (2 Corinthians 7:8-11, ESV)

THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US

Paul described godly sorrow as a corporate or collective phenomenon. In fact, Corinth's godly sorrow produced repentance on two fronts. Their appropriate sorrow toward the offending brother sparked his *personal* repentance – even after all other efforts had failed. And their sorrow produced their *collective* repentance from their arrogant mindset.

Since corporate bodies – specifically, Churches – are capable of collective sin, they are also capable of collective repentance.

CORPORATE REPENTANCE

Individualism saturates contemporary Christian thought. It creeps in unnoticed. Here's a statistic, therefore, that might surprise you. The noun *metanoia* and the verb *metanoeo* appear fifty-two times in the New Testament. How many of those fifty-two appearances center on the idea of a plural or corporate repentance? Forty-one; only eleven address the repentance of individuals. And in the Old Testament, the corporate aspect dominates repentance. Corporate entities – families, dating couples, church cell groups, companies, the Cubs, nations, schools, and entire churches – are capable of sin. God, in turn, demands their repentance.

Repentance, as it happens most often in the Bible, is a group project – like a lackluster football team who needs to turn things around at halftime (bear with this analogy; it will haunt you a few more times). But when was the last time you repented as a group? I'm not talking about a public confession of private sin (*The quarterback confesses that he broke curfew last night to go out drinking*). That happens from time to time in most Churches. Nor am I talking about the public confession of the Church leader's personal sin (*The team complains about the poor play selection by the coach*). Nor am I talking about the minister's reproof of the Church's sin (*The coach brings the fire in a classic halftime speech with plenty of volume*). Instead, I'm talking about a corporate conviction/confession of sin with a collective response of godly sorrow that produces repentance (*The coach provides the wake-up call, but the team likewise voices indignation at its mediocrity and challenges one another to go all out in the second half*). During these "solemn assemblies," the Holy Spirit works both individually and collectively to forever change the group's future.

THE SACRED ASSEMBLY

Have you ever been summoned by a boss to a "mandatory meeting?" Employees typically enter these meetings on the defensive, because most corporations fail to foster a gracious culture in which conviction produces repentance. God also calls His people to mandatory meetings, which the Bible describes as "solemn assemblies." They are the means by which God – with abundant grace – calls believers back to corporate repentance. And they are occasions for the Holy Spirit's great work of conviction:

THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US

After they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. They fasted on that day, and they confessed there, “We have sinned against the Lord.” (1 Samuel 7:6, NET)

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. (Ezra 10:1-2, ESV)

the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. (Nehemiah 9:1-3, ESV)

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; (Joel 2:12-15, ESV)

I recently participated in a solemn assembly of approximately 60 Christians. It seems that a malaise had settled over our fellowship. We had become lax, distracted, self-centered, worldly, and halfhearted. We were in collective sin and, therefore, in need of repentance. In preparation for the gathering, some of us fasted and prayed for clear conviction from the Holy Spirit. On the night of the meeting, we read the accounts of the solemn assemblies recorded in the Bible. And we invited the Holy Spirit’s inspired Word to convict us of the corporate sins that we were committing:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” (Revelation 2:4-5, ESV)

“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief,

THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US

and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.” (Revelation 3:1-3, ESV)

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth...Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:15-16, 19-20, ESV)

One by one, we then called on our God. The Spirit’s work of conviction astounded me. We enjoyed fellowship in the light. We confessed our sins (1st John 1:6-10). Each prayer filled the room with the pleasing fragrance of godly sorrow. I’ve attended prayer meetings with more emotion, more tears, more volume, and more drama. (To be candid, I silently prayed for more tears to “ratify” the repentance produced in our meeting.) But I’ve never attended a meeting with more resolve for repentance. Even the youngest of Christians exhibited remarkable discernment as they prayed for our return to God. In the end, we came to our collective senses. We woke up. We got up. And God rushed to greet us with a warm embrace. Our return was more than an emotional high. We marked our commitment by collectively entering into a stringent course of spiritual disciplines. Our repentance has been refreshing, liberating, and overdue. And I pray that we will now bear the fruit that proves our repentance.

All churches sin. But not all churches repent. It often happens, therefore, that churches respond to the Holy Spirit’s wake up call of conviction with worldly sorrow. They “spin” their shortcomings, craft reasonable explanations for transgressions, minimize damage to their reputation, and issue statements with tones of remorse. They strain to reform and improve themselves. But they do not repent! Are you part of a body of believers in need of repentance? Are you a pastoring a body of believers in need of repentance? Don’t resist the Spirit’s call. Times of refreshing await you... and perhaps your community.

REPENTANCE AND REVIVAL

A repentant and contagious fellowship sparks... revival. Revival changes the face of entire nations. King Jehoshaphat sent his officials to teach the people about the Word of God. *And they taught in Judah, having the Book of the Law of the LORD with them. They went about through tall the cities of Judah and taught among the people. And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah (2nd Chronicles 17:11).* Judah’s repentance affected the unbelieving society around them!

In 1904, a small group of students sparked a revival in Wales. What began as a prayer meeting quickly spread throughout their country and the world. Welsh churches reported an increase of over 100,000 members (10% of the nation’s entire population) during the years of 1904 and 1905; the Bible Society saw orders for Bibles *triple* in Wales; Welsh coal mines reported dramatic improvements in productivity (the only

THE CHURCH RE-ORIENTS US

problem was that the work horses were conditioned to obey foul language); Welsh pubs suffered record losses; Welsh judges enjoyed lighter dockets. The London Times observed, “The whole population had been suddenly stirred by a common impulse. Religion had become the absorbing interest of their lives. They had gathered at crowded services for six and eight hours at a time. Political meetings and even football matches were postponed...quarrels between trade-union workmen and non-unionists had been made up.”¹ Even David Lloyd-George, the future Prime Minister of England, saw his campaign rally taken over by revival.

The Welsh Revival of 1904 began as Christians decided to:

1. Confess all sin;
2. Reject and remove all “doubtful” practices in one’s life;
3. Immediately obey to the Spirit and His Word;
4. Publicly proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Many seek revival for their society and repentance for their church. Few are willing to surrender to its selfless demands. The Spirit will use those who do... to revive fellowships, reform societies, and rewrite history.

¹ <http://www.openheaven.com/library/history/wales.htm>