

SOLEMN ASSEMBLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

By Elaine Helms

As we look toward a corporate solemn or sacred assembly in our church, many are wondering what it is and why it is needed.

What is a solemn assembly?

A *solemn assembly* is a biblical term for gathering the corporate body of Christ to bow before God for inspection by Jesus, the Head of the church. A *solemn assembly* is a gathering of the body of Christ to

- **Confess** - to admit corporate sins,
- **Repent** of our sins - “turn from our wicked ways,” (See 2 Chronicles 7:14), and
- **Return** to our first love in recommitment to wholehearted devotion to God. (See 2 Chron. 16:9, Acts 3:19, Rev. 2:4-5).

The entire **Body** gathers together

Dr Ron Clement, Colorado Director of Evangelism and Prayer emphasizes that *all* gather,

“In Joel 1 and 2, 2 Chronicles 20:3-13, and other biblical examples, *all* residents were expected to set aside time to gather together to seek God in humility, confess sin, cry out for mercy, and commit wholeheartedly to return to him. The *all* included mothers nursing babies and newlyweds. Typically, these were given an exemption from attending other important events. However, in the case of a nation in crisis, the people of God living in captivity to sin with the sinful, and the imminent judgment of God, *all* were expected to show up. This required *all* people to set aside their own plans and excuses in order to demonstrate to one another and before God that *all* were, at least to some degree, sinful before God. When *all* come before God in humility to repent and seek His face it indicates that the church belongs first of all to God, operates under the headship of Christ, and lives in covenant relationship with one another as equally important and responsible devotees to the body of Christ.”

The Body gathers to confess corporate sin

In the American church, an unbalanced emphasis has often been placed on the spiritual growth, rights, and Christian responsibilities of the individual believers to the neglect of an emphasis on corporate responsibility and growth as a body of believers. Paul addresses this in Romans 12:5, “*So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*” And in Romans 15:5-6 he says, “*Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Just as individuals need to keep short accounts with God and have regular times of extended heart examination with the Lord, churches also need to come together corporately, at least annually, to pray and seek God’s face in a spirit of repentance, allowing God to bring to the surface those sins in the church that have been overlooked and/or rationalized.

The Body gathers to repent and receive forgiveness

It is easy to compare ourselves to others and feel good or even smug about our Christian walk. However, Jesus is the model and we are to strive to be perfect as Jesus is perfect, to “*be holy as God is holy.*” (See James 1:4 and 1 Peter 1:16) As a church we can also look around at other churches to compare our church to theirs and think that we are doing great. However, we are to look to the Head of the church, Jesus Christ for direction, examination, and obedience. Jesus examined specific churches, similar to modern day churches, in *Revelation 1-3 and they came up lacking. (*Review and discuss the good actions and the shortcomings of the seven churches Jesus addressed and how modern day churches compare. What can we learn?)

Ephesians 4:1-16 clarifies the importance of the corporate body “*growing up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.*” (v.15) A time of solemn assembly is not only a time to repent, but is also a time to receive forgiveness, (See 1 John 1:9), to renew our commitment to “*preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,*” (v.3), and to grow in maturity, (Heb. 5:11-14, 1 Peter 2:1-2.)

Why do we need solemn assemblies?

Following Jesus can be difficult, especially with our human tendency to wander, so we need regular heart examinations to see if we have veered off course. (See Psalm 139:23-24) In our Christian walk, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus – the prize – and not on our circumstances or our activities that can get us off track. Peter was able to walk on the water when he asked Jesus to invite him to come to Him. He did great until he looked down on the waves and began to think logically that he couldn't walk on water. He took his gaze off of Jesus. (See Matthew 14:28-30) In the same way churches and bodies of believers, such as the SBC, can take their eyes off of Jesus and focus on themselves, their programs, or problems and forget the God who has called them there.

Discuss how easy it is to get off course:

- How many can write on a chalkboard or dry erase board without angling either up or down? It doesn't take long to veer off the straight line across.
- How about planting a row of flowers or vegetables in a straight line? A farmer explained that when he was using a mule and plow, he had to keep his eyes on the distant point to keep the mule in a straight line.
- Why do you suppose there are lines on the highway? We'd have a hard time staying in a straight line without them. When my daddy taught me to drive, he told me to focus my eyes on the distant center of my lane in the road to keep the car within the lines.

Why do we need a solemn assembly NOW?

Our nation is spiraling at breakneck speed into before now unimaginable, degradation, rampant immorality, and depravity. Sadly the church has not been the salt and light as commanded and has therefore become irrelevant, failing to set the standard for our communities. While we have been preoccupied with doing good things and trying to please and attract people, we've moved gradually and unnoticeably away from God's high standards for His church. The result? These telling statistics: 70% of SBC churches are plateaued or declining; 25% baptized *no one* last year.

Dr. Richard Harris, former Interim President of the North American Mission Board recently wrote in the Baptist Press:

“When we look at year-to-year trends, unfortunately the news gets worse. In 2008, 25 percent of reporting churches indicated "0" baptisms. In 1999 that percentage was 18 percent. It has grown steadily since then to 19 percent in 2000, 20 percent in 2001 and 2002, 21 percent in 2003 and 2004, 23 percent in 2005 and 2006 and 24 percent in 2007. With each year that passes, a larger percentage of our churches baptize no one.

Since 2001, the sad fact is an increasing number of our churches are baptizing no one, fewer of our churches are baptizing 10 or more people annually and an increasing number of our churches are baptizing no teenagers.

I believe these statistics bear out that our primary problem in the SBC is spiritual. It is reflected in plateaued and declining churches, in decreasing baptisms, conflict in churches, dissension among church leaders, moral failure on the part of pastors and church staff, and a diminished or total loss of a burden for lost, unchurched and/or unreached peoples. The church in North America increasingly is too much of the world and the world's ways are too much in the church.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God makes it plain when a nation or a people move away from God, the Father looks first and foremost to His people, the church. First Peter 4:17 says, *‘For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.’*”

It is time to stop, take stock of the situation and return to whole-hearted devotion to God. We must ask, ‘are we challenging people to surrender to Christ?’ Or have we tried to make it easy to be a Christian by overlooking the words of Jesus to His would-be followers? He said in Luke 9:23-26, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”* He is not so interested in our comfort as He is in our obedience.

Marv Rosenthal, of *Zion’s Fire* magazine, said in a letter about the mid-term elections:

“Changing our government without calling our nation (at least a significant part of it) to true, genuine repentance, with the attendant embracing of the precepts of the Bible and

the God of whom it speaks, will do about as much good as lighting a candle at noon, outdoors, on a sunny day. Sin – not the economy, nor ultimately those at the helm of our government – is our great national problem and, as a society, we don't even want to speak about sin, let alone deal with it. . .A rabbi was one day asked by his students, 'Rabbi, why are your sermons so stern?' The rabbi replied, 'If a house is on fire and we choose not to wake up our children, for fear of disturbing their sleep, would that be love?' Our national house is on fire, and we must try to arouse many of God's sons and daughters whom we love, from their slumber –even if it disturbs them."

Dr. Claude King, in *Consecrate the People*, says in reference to 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, "The healing of our land is waiting on the repentance of God's people. So is the healing of our marriages, families, churches and cities. Sacred assemblies are appropriate times and ways for people, families, churches, cities, and nations to return to the Lord. Now is the right time for us to declare a holy fast, sound the alarm, and call a sacred assembly. Now is the time for us to return to a right relationship with God. Now is the time to renew our covenant commitments to Jesus Christ."

Is a solemn assembly biblical?

Solemn assembly is God's idea as a way to draw His people back to Himself. He created us and knows that we are prone to be unfaithful and easily distracted by the charms of this world. The most well-known Scripture about solemn assemblies comes from the Old Testament book of the minor prophet, Joel. The people were in a distressing situation with gnawing, swarming, creeping, and stripping locusts devouring everything in sight. The people were desperate about their circumstances when Joel called them to a solemn assembly. He said in Joel 1:14, "*Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.*"

God spoke through his prophet in Joel 2:12-15, "*Yet even now,*" declares the LORD, '*Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping and mourning; and **rend your heart** and not your garments' Now return to the LORD your God. . .Blow a trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly. . ."*

Man may see the outward, spiritual-looking appearance but God looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7, 1 Kings 8:39, Chron. 28:9, Luke 16:15) We can fool some of the people some of the time, but we can never fool God. He knows us inside out and that is why He says “rend your heart.” We have to decide whose approval we are seeking. Jesus said to the Jews in John 5:44, “*How can you believe when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?*”

Other biblical leaders proclaimed a time of fasting and solemn assembly:

- **Moses** in Exodus 19:10 (God told Moses to consecrate the people for receiving the ten commandments)
- **Rehoboam** in 2 Chronicles 12:1-8 (Leaders assembled and humbled themselves before God in fear of annihilation by Shishak)
- **Asa** in 2 Chronicles 15:1-19 (in their distress they sought God and He let them find Him.)
- **Jehoshaphat** in 2 Chronicles 20:1-29 (v. 12, “*we are powerless before this great multitude. . .nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You.*” God answered in v. 15 that the battle belonged to Him)
- **Hezekiah** in 2 Chronicles 29-31 (consecrating the people, cleansing the temple, restoring worship, and calling people of both Israel and Judah to unite to celebrate Passover together.)
- **Josiah** in 2 Chronicles 34 (the book of the law found and read to the solemn assembly bringing recommitment)
- **Ezra** in Ezra 10:7-9 (called remnant to confess, recommit to God and separate from foreign wives)
- **Nehemiah** in Nehemiah 8-9 (Recounted the mighty works of God, confessed and recommitted to obey God)
- **Jonah** in Jonah 3 (The wicked city of Nineveh repents in sackcloth and fasting)

- **Jesus** in Acts 1:4-5 (Just before His ascension, He told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem and they assembled together in prayer for ten days before receiving the Holy Spirit.)

Solemn assemblies and revivals in America

Since biblical days, solemn assemblies and fervent prayer gatherings have led to revival and recommitment to God and His laws. The first Great Awakening in America was from 1726-70 and the second was from 1787-1843, the layman's prayer revival of 1857-59 may have laid the groundwork for reunification after the Civil War. There was a global awakening in 1901-10 and some regional and specialized awakenings, but there has been no Great Awakening of wide-spread recommitment to obeying God for more than 100 years. We are in great need of a move of God. Only He can revive His people, but we can position ourselves in humility and seek His mercy for His bride, the church, and for our nation. (See *Firefall, How God has Shaped History Through Revivals* by Malcolm McDow and Alvin Reid for more details about these revivals.)

1989 SBC Call to Solemn Assembly

I was new to church prayer ministry leadership when Avery Willis, Henry Blackaby, T. W. Hunt, and other agency prayer leaders issued a call to Southern Baptists to pray and participate in a solemn assembly. Leading up to the annual meeting that year, they invited prayer leaders to gather for a few days of fasting and prayer at New Orleans Seminary. Amazingly God took my appetite away and my focus was on Him and learning about this seemingly new idea of solemn assembly.

A most vivid memory is one evening we began a 7:00 pm evening prayer and worship service with a planned ending time of 9:00 pm. As confession was invited, I remember one person standing on the left of the sanctuary asking for prayer as they sought God's help to overcome a "besetting" sin in their life. Almost immediately someone on the right stood and announced that God had given him the victory over that same sin and he would come over and pray with him. That led to a flood gate of heartfelt confession of sins common to all –pride, religiosity, greed, unforgiveness, apathy, and more.

Occasionally someone would spontaneously lead out in a chorus and as we stood to sing together, my watch caught my eye. It was midnight! The time had flown in the presence of the Holy One. He filled us with boundless energy and enthusiasm for Him. Time didn't matter as hearts were being cleansed and commitment to Jesus was restored.

1991 Leadership Solemn Assembly

Another time I was with three interdenominational leadership groups all meeting separately in the same hotel in Atlanta. I had been there early in the morning to meet leaders and give a presentation about Quest Atlanta '96 to the National Prayer Committee, so got invited to stay for that evening when the groups combined to observe a solemn assembly. At one point the leader asked us to get into small groups to pray and seek the face of God together. I didn't know the men in my group and since I was a visitor, I planned to stay quiet and observe. However, God would not let me do that. He impressed on me that I should pray for healing of relationships and for reconciliation among those in the room. I resisted as long as I could, but I finally prayed, "Lord, I don't know why you want me to pray this, but in obedience to you, I'd like to ask You to bring reconciliation between any people in this room that need to get right with each other." Whew, that was hard.

When the prayer time was over, the leader asked if anyone wanted to share what God had said to them. To my surprise, the gentleman next to me, stood up and said to the leader, "I have been harboring anger and bitterness against you and your denomination . . . but God won't let me keep it in anymore and I want to apologize to you and ask your forgiveness." Of course forgiveness was given and asked for in return and that led to others confessing to each other and an amazing cleansing time of release of all those awful emotions that can eat people up.

2010 Examples of God at work through His people humbling themselves

A number of churches have begun to take returning to God seriously in recent days and God is bringing healing and powerful impact in their communities. Visit www.namb.net/Godatwork and read some of the God at Work 'previous articles' such as

“21 days of prayer for spiritual awakening,” “community revival finds town responsive,” and “God at work in deaf revivals in New Mexico,” to name a few.

What corporate confession looks like . . .

Phil Miglioratti, Illinois Baptist prayer coordinator, offers thoughts on corporate confession:

- Much of the biblical teaching and examples of sacred assemblies are a corporate expression of corporate sin
- Corporate sin can be the result of a preponderance of individuals (maybe especially religious, political, and economic leaders) walking in that specific sin (greed, lust, dishonesty), so much so, it has become a stronghold in the culture.
- When we ask God to forgive us as a congregation or nation, we are admitting that this group I am a part of has offended the Lord. I may not be guilty of that particular sin but I am in danger of experiencing any judgment the Lord decrees.
- So, when a corporate group confesses corporate sin, we come to the throne as a delegation on behalf of the entire congregation or nation. We confess, seek forgiveness, for those guilty who may not have the faith or understanding necessary to do so - Our prayers do not bring salvation to them but are presented to God so that our congregation/nation might have his blessing rather than judgment.
- A group process:
 1. Each person should ask the Holy Spirit to cleanse and fill their praying so that we pray with humility, not superiority
 2. Each person asks the Lord to grant us, collectively, the mind of Christ, so that we pray in agreement and alignment with our Lord's perfect view of our congregation/nation
 3. Each person asks the Father to reveal our sin, how have we offended him and disobeyed his will.
 4. All-room feedback: Create a list based on what each group has heard in their time of listening prayer, then assign the entire list to each group or ask each group to focus on one of the sins on the list

5. Consider a closing segment that moves from earlier declaring what we have done wrong (confession of sin) to, now, declaring what we desire to do rightly (love, serve, witness, etc), then to celebrate the joy of the Lord in the freedom and reconciliation we experience from cleansing and forgiveness.

Dr. Rick Shepherd, Florida Director of Prayer and Spiritual Awakening offers an acrostic to make it easier to understand the process:

H.—Hear—Hear God and His Word—His Heart. Take time in the Scriptures, ask God to speak to you.

E.—Empty—Empty of sin and self will—a Clean Heart. Eager to obey all He says. Ask God to show you any sin that you have not dealt with His way.

A.—Ask—Ask the Lord to bring to mind the burdens on His heart, the people to pray for, the things in your own life—a Burdened Heart.

R.—Receive—Ready to obey all He says in this time of Solemn Assembly—A Receptive/Ready Heart.

T.—Take Home—Take Home in your heart all God has said to be and to do, ready to obey—an Obedient Heart.

Conclusion

When God's people humble themselves before Him and seek his examining search light in their hearts, He responds and gently convicts and restores that wonderful, right relationship with Him. There is power in the fervent prayers of the righteous and that is what is needed in this desperate hour in our country. Will you commit to surrender your agenda to God and seek His cleansing in your life, in your family, and in church relationships? We can begin the journey into holiness today and use the heart preparation guide each day this week. Pray for a powerful worship experience as we come with prepared hearts to meet together with God next week in solemn assembly.

Teaching notes:

- Discuss the similarities between the stiff-necked children of Israel—with their cycles of commitment, disobedience, repentance and restoration—and the church of today. What are some of the sins common to man that trip us up?
- Study some of the biblical examples so that you can tell about them in your own words sharing a key verse or two from a lengthy passage. (Nehemiah 9 gives examples of many repetitive cycles)
- Look over the heart preparation guide that will be handed out to all members for use during the week leading up to the Solemn Assembly. Give an overview of the guide and recommend a serious application of personal time be given to inviting God to examine one's heart and mind.
- Repeat several times during the class, the importance of *all* of us individually and as families preparing to participate in the corporate solemn assembly.

Resources:

Consecrate the People by Claude King, LifeWay publication

1989 Call to Prayer and Solemn Assembly by SBC prayer leaders

Returning to Holiness by Greg Frizzell

Visit www.namb.net/SBCDayofPrayer for info about January call to prayer, along with these and more resources.

Follow-up Small Group Study:

Establish several small groups of class members for Bible studies to create accountability and spiritual growth following the solemn assembly.

The following are suggestions:

Come to the Lord's Table by Claude King

Returning to Holiness by Greg Frizzell

Prayer 101, What Every Intercessor Needs to Know by Elaine Helms

Fresh Encounter Devotional Guide by Henry Blackaby and Claude King