

Church Renewal: Where Do We Begin?

The most used Bible verse, when speaking about revival, is without a doubt II Chronicles 7:14. This verse speaks about humbly admitting our sins, praying for forgiveness, and changing in repentance.

Admitting sins

Admitting our sins begins by confessing that we have strayed from being the church that Jesus intended us to be. Jesus had explicitly stated that He wanted to be the Head of His Church. As human beings, however, we have taken control of Christ's vineyard and, at the expense of neglecting the Great Commission, have developed men-controlled organizations.

- We have developed innumerable denominations.
- Our pastors are no longer shepherds, but CEO's.
- Elders are not chosen upon Biblical qualifications, but upon church loyalty.
- Our main concern is not the unreached or needy, but self
- As believers, we no longer practice being a kingdom of priests but have become spectators and consumers of God's grace.

Praying for forgiveness

Seeking forgiveness does not begin with praying for revival but with admitting to the errors that we as a church are practicing and placing these before the Lord. It was David who already prayed in his days:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" Psalm 139:23.24

Preaching repentance

Throughout church history, the message that led us to revival has always been a message of repentance for the errors of our ways. I remember so clearly in our earlier years when a couple of evangelists would come to our town, they literally turned the Christian community upside down by exposing the carnality in our Christian walk.

When it comes to church revival, should we do anything less? We have developed the unbiblical system of clergy and laity. We are using unbiblical methods and compromise with the world to achieve church growth. We form denominations based on our interpretation of Scripture, but where is our tolerance for other views? We have not been seeking Christ's kingdom-growth but rather our own. It is from these and other sins of neglect of biblical teachings to which we must confess and from which we must repent.

Then I will hear from heaven...

When Israel repented in sackcloth and ashes, God heard from heaven and restored His people many times. Are we willing to step out of a faulty system? Are we willing to turn to God or will we rather turn to New Age concepts and go even further astray? The Church that Jesus had in mind for us would be a church that is

- bursting with people involved in ministry;
- preparing people for service in discipleship;
- not focusing on itself, but on making an impact for Christ; and
- allowing the ministries of the Spirit (Ephesians 4) to unfold in their midst.

The church that Jesus has in mind for us is:

- a place with the wonder-working power of the Spirit and answers to prayer,
- a place where funds are being used as Jesus instructed they be used, and
- a place where members care for and love each other in the Lord.

Where is such a church?

Today most churches are no longer formed by the apostolic design and are turning further and further away from the Bible. If you have a church that is still doing a good work for the Lord, even in its imperfections, treasure it and stand with it. Personally, I first heard about what a real church could look like when I grew up in Nazi-occupied Holland. Our pastor, who had prayed for liberation and an end to that war, was sent to a concentration camp. While incarcerated and being tortured, he developed a close relationship with other men of different religious backgrounds. They prayed and worshipped together, and upon release, he told us that during that time, he had experienced the church of Jesus Christ in a very special way.

In prisons

I also remember reading a book by a pilot who was shot down and was captured in Vietnam and spent several years in a prison camp. Many of these men came back, stating that as they prayed for each other, they experienced Christ's presence like never before.

Thirdly, Chuck Colson, of Prison Fellowship, says in many of his writings that in some of the darkest and most horrible South American prisons he experienced the purest church and deepest fellowship he had ever seen.

The persecuted

Christian persecution is spreading more and more across the world, especially in China. Here the house church movement has no great buildings and no pastors who are formally trained. Many would not know one denomination from the other, but they have chosen to follow Jesus even if this will cost their lives. As they gather, they experience Christ's presence and see answers to prayer in most powerful ways. From a few thousand believers in the 1950's, there are now conservatively estimated over 160 million believers.

Small beginnings

Last, but not least, through the years, my wife and I have conducted house groups in various homes. At those times, we focused on Jesus, not on our particular church. We discussed the Bible, not from one doctrinal perspective, but let various people share theirs. We rotated in leadership, but more than anything else, we asked Jesus to be in our midst. In our own simple way, we sought to be a church by Christ's design. And guess what? We, too, experienced in many ways the presence of the Lord in our midst, and today, many people still talk about these meetings.

Yes, God is most eager to restore His Church today, but are we willing to admit we have gone wrong in the way we practice church? Are we willing to do our part toward change so that God may grant us revival? Or are we like the Pharisees in Mark 12:12 who knew their error but remained unchanged? When it comes to revival, are we looking for and merely praying for a free handout from the Lord, or are we willing to admit our sins and practice repentance and pray for forgiveness?

