

# Body Aches

The Experience of and  
Response to God's  
Discipline of Your Church

By Kenneth Quick



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I owe a debt to two special men I cannot repay by an acknowledgement, but want them to know how deeply I appreciate what they have given to me:

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Some of my “warriors” have invested even more heavily in me beyond their prayers, offering to read and edit this manuscript and others, to check for accuracy and appropriateness, to correct my grammar and misstatements, to ask probing questions. They are John Beukema, Marg Mikelait and Karen Blanchard, lasting friends whose friendship has been forged in fire. Their assistance, encouragement and editing skill with all my writing projects has contributed to make me sound more coherent and wiser than I am.

I am also grateful for the people from the churches whose “body aches” I document, for letting me share their corporate spiritual histories in so public a manner. I recognize they risk embarrassment from their transparency, but to their very great credit, they’re committed to accepting potential humiliation in order

to help other churches. They model what churches under divine discipline should do “that the rest may fear.” I also owe gratitude to the numerous churches whose stories I don’t tell here, who nevertheless were God’s instruments to teach me many of the lessons and principles I learned and share in these pages.

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# FOREWORD

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“You are a big church, but your reputation is small.”

“Why do you all look the same?”

Phrases like these drifted across the video screens as nearly 2,000 people sat in silence, punctuated with sounds of weeping. This was our Service of Reconciliation, the climax of six months of preparation by our Ministry Staff, Elders, and Board where we took responsibility for our failures before the Lord of our church. The messages on the screen were those things our people had heard Jesus saying to us.

On the dysfunction scale, King Street Church was not a heavyweight. It was not even the worst of the churches I’ve pastored. Shortly before becoming King Street’s fourth pastor in 80 years, I was pastoring in Chicago, and working for *Christianity Today* as Associate Editor in Preaching Resources. In that capacity, I wrote a review of my dear friend Ken Quick’s book, *Healing the Heart of Your Church*. Ken’s biblical principles and approach to church health made a lasting impression.

Learning a church’s spiritual journey is always high on my ministry agenda, but I have not always treated the information with the significance it deserved. In the churches I’ve served, I have uncovered historical events, ugly and beautiful, glorious and shameful. While I have taken that into consideration in leading the church forward, my tendency was to leave smelly things under the rugs where they were swept, board up the closets with skeletons, and start fresh. I am now convinced that failure to confront and resolve serious issues from a church’s past might simply lead to repeated future pain.

*Body Aches* gives the proper diagnosis to churches that are in pain and can’t understand why they struggle. Many pastors will recognize their congregations and themselves in the characteristics Ken defines. Leaders will see that it isn’t

a program or a particular person standing between them and healthy ministry. Instead, churches, pastors, and leaders may understand for the first time that Jesus has something to say to them as a church, indeed has been speaking to them for a while. Ignore Him, and the pain will not get better.

In hindsight, it should not have surprised us when God put King Street's fresh commitment to the test immediately. This time, leaders were united and agreed to do the hard thing. While the decision carried a price, it was the right decision. It was also the evidence many people needed that this was indeed a new day. From that time on the atmosphere improved, the trust level increased, and the ministry moved forward.

I love Ken Quick. He has been a great friend, counselor, teacher, encourager, and bass fishing buddy for more than 20 years. But that friendship doesn't bias me in recognizing this new book as vital to the Kingdom. Knowing Ken's heart and knowing the state of far too many churches, I am absolutely sure God wants to use this truth in a mighty way. I am anxious to hear the "success" stories that will come as a result of those who read and apply this material. Some, whose lampstand was in danger of removal, will instead burn more brightly than ever before. To God be the glory.

Dr. John Beukema  
King Street Church, Chambersburg, PA

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Days of Hosea

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*When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him,  
“Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty  
of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.”  
So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim.*

*Hosea 1:2-3*

*There are three things which are too wonderful for me,  
Four which I do not understand:  
The way of an eagle in the sky,  
The way of a serpent on a rock,  
The way of a ship in the middle of the sea,  
And the way of a man with a maid.*

*Proverbs 30:18-19*

We often sing things we do not think through completely. “These are the days of Elijah ... and these are the days of Your servant Moses”<sup>1</sup> goes one popular Christian chorus. It’s a mostly positive song about the mighty works of God taking place in the land “though these are days of great trials, of famine and darkness and sword.”

Those who remember biblical history realize that the days of Moses and especially Elijah were not all that warm and positive. Moses led an unbelieving people for forty years through the scorching wilderness of Sinai and forfeited his temporal inheritance in the Promised Land. He lost his temper and disobeyed God because of their complaining. Elijah came to the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the time of the ascendancy of Baal worship through the influence of wicked queen Jezebel. Elijah finally lost his courage and ran in the face of her threats. Ministry was tough in “those days.” Do we really want to sing that we are in them?

Then again, maybe we really are in similar days. Ministry today challenges us just as it did Moses and Elijah, leaving many of us angry, devastated, bolting for safety to some other occupation and/or vowing never to involve ourselves in ministry leadership again. Statistics abound to confirm it. Respect for those in ministry sinks lower and lower. Things that never used to be okay are just fine with many professing Christians now.

Meanwhile we watch the Church flourishing and the Gospel sweeping through places like China and Korea, Africa and India, while it withers in our land. Will God just let that happen? If not, how would He let us know what's wrong and how to fix it? Maybe the "days of Elijah" are exactly what we need – fire falling from heaven once again on the hearts of God's people and they fall on their face and cry out "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!"

God has prepared us for that powerful work, exactly as He did in the days of Moses and Elijah – through corporate discipline. He causes the local manifestations of His Body – local churches – to "ache" by His discipline to get our attention and to confront us with the things which prevent us from becoming (or staying) instruments of spiritual change in our communities.

God's discipline – its principles and purpose – is one of the least understood aspects of the spiritual life. Many of us in spiritual leadership, as a pastor, ministry leader, associate staff or lay leader, experience pain in our role as spiritual leaders. Ministry causes us, and perhaps our family, a great deal of discomfort, stress, even agony. We may not realize that this pain manifests Divine discipline, but less on a personal level than upon the corporate body we serve (though God has His reasons for putting us there for this moment, even as He did with Moses and Elijah). If the pain grows too great, it can cause us to make grave mistakes. We lash out at the church in anger or quit ministry altogether. Wait! That's also exactly what happened to Moses and Elijah!

Why should we experience pain leading the one community on the planet which should be marked by love, peace and unity? Shouldn't we instead have the joys of new spiritual births, baptisms, dedications and calls to ministry on keen young people in our congregations? Shouldn't we watch people grow in grace, deepen in commitment, and widen in their capacity to love one another as Christ exercises more Lordship over their lives?

Shouldn't we also observe faith growing, worship excelling, fears lessening, wounds healing, spiritual gifts all in blossom, and walls between cultures and ethnicities coming down, making massive spiritual synergy as the whole becomes

so much greater than the sum of the parts? Isn't that the church as God designed it? Isn't that what we signed on to do, what we saw in our mind's eye when God called us into ministry and we sought to serve Him as a pastor, elder or deacon?

Where did all these corporate or "bodily" aches and pains originate? If we were looking for a prophet whose ministry experience best parallels our own right now, we might better sing "These are the days of Hosea...."

Take a deep breath, clear your head and buckle your seat belt. God is up to something you may not have realized.

When God wants to confirm and deepen a friendship with a human being, He does something quite unusual: He invites them to share His suffering. Abraham, God's friend, experienced this when God asked him to take "your son, your only son, whom you love and offer him as a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:1). Paul, in his awesome description of the path to "gaining Christ" in Philippians 3, says one achieves it though "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10) and, in Romans 8:17, calls us "fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him." We come to know Him at a much deeper level when He inducts us into the experiences of His great heart, especially when it comes to carrying the burden of His people.

We identify our best, closest friends through similar methodology. People who stick with us in tough times, who stand by us when others desert us, these folk are our true friends. "Fair-weather friends" – the people who say they're our friends and who we might expect to stick by us when difficulties multiply – conveniently disappear when trouble comes.

Hosea, along with all the prophets to some degree, received this invitation into the pain of God's heart. A student of mine once described Hosea's day as "the last swirls of the toilet bowl before the Northern Kingdom went down" – graphic, but true. The Expositor's Bible Commentary gives the following description of that time:

Hosea, prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, ministered in the stirring days just preceding the fall to Assyria. When he began his work, one would not have thought the end was near. Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.; cf. 2 Kings 14:23-29) was the ruler, and a strong one. He had established approximately the same boundaries on the east and north of his country that had been held in the empire days of David and Solomon. This success had given him a remarkable position of influence along the entire Mediterranean coastland.... By this time there had been peace for many years, and with it had come

economic prosperity. The land was again producing abundantly (2 Chronicles 26:10), and many people were becoming wealthy. Luxuries had once more become common. Building activity was flourishing on every hand (Hos 8:14), and this led to a widespread feeling of pride (Amos 3:15; 5:11; Isa 9:10). Though people are pleased with conditions of this kind, seldom does prosperity lead to behavior that pleases God. This was true at this time in Israel. Social and moral conditions developed that were wrong and degrading. Side by side with wealth, extreme poverty existed.<sup>2</sup>

Does that description of Israelite culture sound familiar? It's America and the West in the beginning decades of the new millennium.

God invites Hosea, as He did Abraham, Moses and others, to join Him in His pain. It went beyond what one might expect Him to ask of any human. God directed Hosea to find an adulterous woman, probably a known prostitute, and marry her and have "children of unfaithfulness." In other words, he didn't know whether the children she bore were his or a result of her adulterous relationships. Hosea obeyed, "found Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim" and married her.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose here is not to wrestle with the ethical issues of God asking this. He did not require Hosea to commit any evil himself in marrying Gomer. That would have been a moral problem for sure. However, most of us feel uncomfortable with a loving God issuing a call for anyone to go and willingly enter into the experience of such pain.

We fail to realize that God does this all the time. He does it especially in our day and our culture. Now, instead of an adulterous and troubled marriage partner, He directs many of us He calls into ministry to the experience of local churches which He has under discipline for their unfaithfulness and disobedience. He asks us to share His pain, to ache with His Body aching. We share the suffering of His heart and the burden of carrying and caring for an increasingly disobedient people, just like Hosea by his marriage. Many of my pastoral ministry students at Capital Bible Seminary realize that pain awaits them in an established church. Some will seek to avoid it by planting their own church instead.

However, just as with Hosea, the potential comes for a profound change, a depth of cleansing and redemption, of love confirmed and triumphant. God exhibited through the prophet what He felt for Israel. He exhibits through modern day pastors and lay leaders the same feelings and desires for the localized manifestations of His Bride and Body, the local church.

In the days of the Old Testament, God sent prophets to tell the people when they diverted from His ways and to explain the disciplines which fell upon them. The leaders and people probably struggled as we do now to know why such painful things happened. The prophet Zechariah's opening verses give a picture of this communication:

"The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Return to Me," declares the LORD of hosts, "that I may return to you," says the LORD of hosts. "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds."' But they did not listen or give heed to Me," declares the LORD. "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'""

(Zechariah 1:2-6)

The people of Zechariah's day wondered "Why are we in pain? Aren't we God's people? Why is life such a struggle?" The prophet explains that God's anger goes back to "the days of their fathers" and that His feelings sat unresolved until they repented. He deals with them exactly as their "ways and deeds" deserve.

Does God feel such anger toward local churches today and how would we know if He did? How would He communicate it? Revelation 2-3 provides a picture of the way Christ reproves, rebukes, and disciplines His churches. He inflicts pain on the local churches and Christian organizations with which He feels unhappy. The leaders of these ministries share this pain with Him.

Switching gears (and metaphors) just a little, we know the Church universal and the local church are "the Bride of Christ," and Christ's relationship with her falls under the category of "the way of a man with a maid." The writer of Proverbs 30:18-19 struggles to understand such dynamics. But if human relationships seem too wonderful and incomprehensible for him, the way of Christ with His Bride is much more so. Of His relationship to her the Bible tells us that "After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body" (Eph. 5:29-30 NIV).

I spent my first twenty three years in ministry as a senior pastor, fulfilling my calling inside two church "bodies." These last years I have served as seminary professor at Capital Bible Seminary outside Washington D.C. and director of their Ministry

Leadership program. I also consult with local churches and denominational leaders as a “Church Cardiologist”<sup>4</sup> with Blessing Point Ministries.

In this latter role, I see the “body aches” God lays on many churches and Christian organizations. This résumé has also allowed me to observe the breadth and the depth of Christ’s love for His Church universal as expressed to His local churches.

Sometimes that love means inflicting painful discipline on them. “Those whom I love I reprove and discipline,” He says in Revelation 3:19. His marvelous ways with a local church or ministry, especially when she misbehaves or gets away from His purpose for her, continually astound me. His love also helps lead courageous church leaders to discover exactly why He’s disciplining their dysfunctional church bodies. His direction always ends the cycle of pain and heals them, even from the most sordid corporate past.

Though mysterious, principles govern the “man-with-a-maid” relationship Christ has with His Bride. However, He demonstrates this love for His church and Christian organizations<sup>5</sup> differently from the way He shows His love for us as individuals. I write this book to document some of what I have learned in order to help pastors, missionaries, parachurch leaders, and board members to look at their churches and ministries as a corporate body, to grasp the importance of their ministry’s history and Christ’s disciplinary message in their pain. This equips them to lead their ministries through a journey of discovery of “the ways of Christ” with their own ministry. How does He use pain to get their attention, direct them to a deep corporate cleansing, and then “to return” to the fullness of His blessing?

I will share the stories of churches who graciously allowed me to take this journey with them. They took steps to end their cycle of pain. They’ve permitted me to tell their story to instruct and help other churches who may also be under God’s loving discipline. These histories were gathered as group efforts on retreats for that purpose.

Several from each church read and corrected my retelling, but there is always a risk in sharing a corporate history. Simply put, someone may see parts of the story differently. History is not science, but God knew we learn from history so He filled the Scriptures with it. I am not trying to redact anything. I believe one finds power in the transparent truth of exactly what happened because we see God’s works in it and learn how He might be working among us.

Therefore I labor to be as accurate as possible in the storytelling, but the point of this book is not to delve into details, so forgive me beforehand if I miss one. Rather I urge the reader to embrace this truth: The totality of the details is not as important as the overall patterns, or what I term “body aches.” No one will deny the waves of pain these churches went through as they experienced God’s love expressed through His corporate discipline. Concentrate on the big picture and the divine causality found there and do not get bogged down in details.

Also, rather than overwhelm the book with names of people from these histories, I will only mention the pastor or point-person at the time I worked with the church and maybe one or two others. However, since pastors change churches and people move, the individuals I mention may not be there at the time the reader reads the book. The church members who read it will probably recognize themselves in some stories and may hear themselves quoted. They will have to settle for “That was ME!”

The reader will learn through the courageous transparency of these churches and leaders as they share their painful journeys and how Christ healed them. You will see how His redemptive love shown through corporate discipline deeply cleansed each local church and transformed this modern “Gomer.” Hopefully it will equip the reader to see his/her own context with fresh eyes.

May this process result in the loving Lord of the Church gaining His rightful glory.

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# PART 1

## THE PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATE DIVINE DISCIPLINE

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*Therefore remember from where you (singular) have fallen,  
and repent and do the deeds you (singular) did at first;  
or else I am coming to you (singular)  
and will remove your (singular) lampstand out of its place –  
unless you (singular) repent.*

*– Spoken to the whole local church of Ephesus  
Revelation 2: 5*

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# CHAPTER 1

## Individual Believers vs. Corporate Body

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*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So (you – singular) be earnest, and repent.*

*Spoken to the whole local church in Laodecia, Revelation 3:19*

No believer walks too far along the narrowing path of discipleship without discovering experientially why “disciple” and “discipline” come from the same root. To grow spiritually and stay spiritually healthy, one must adhere regularly to a set of practices called “disciplines.” “Spiritual disciplines” are the subject of many popular books and studies. They include such things as Bible study, prayer, meditation, fasting, silence, etc. They primarily focus on individual habits. Their heroes are often the desert fathers and monastics, men like Athanasius and women like Teresa of Aquila.

However, quite a difference exists between a self-imposed “spiritual discipline” and the experience of Divinely-imposed discipline. We associate Divine discipline with painful experiences, trials, and challenges, usually corrective in nature. The writer of Hebrews says “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful” (Heb. 12:11). Yet Hebrews also makes clear that this discipline expresses God’s fatherly love for His children. “You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the LORD, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for those whom the LORD loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom he receives.’” (Hebrews 12:5-6 NAS).

God crafts such individual divine discipline to help us grow and keep us on track spiritually. He wants us to share in His holiness. If we allow it to train us, it yields for us the “peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

### Churches in the woodshed

In my work as a consultant to churches experiencing cycles of pain or “body aches,” I’ve come to believe that God also disciplines local churches as a single entity. The godliness of individuals leading the church does not factor into this corporate discipline except in how they direct a corporate response. They receive their individual rewards, like those in Sardis who have not defiled their garments (Rev. 3:4), but the ministry continues unabated under God’s discipline until there is a *corporate* response. These principles of Divine discipline at the church level differ significantly from how we experience His discipline as individual believers.

When I speak on the subject of corporate Divine discipline, most pastors, church members and students start by looking at me blankly. Someone may raise their hand and ask “Do you mean like ‘church discipline’ of someone sinning in the church?”

“No,” I answer. “I mean the way God disciplines your church as a corporate body.”

That leads to puzzlement. They have never thought of the concept. They have no frame of reference upon which to hang such ideas.

We lack that frame of reference for a number of reasons. First, in North America, we have been steeped in the philosophies of individualism going all the way back to the Greeks. From birth we have worked on the level of “I, me, my and mine.” We find “us” and “we” much more difficult concepts, especially when relating to God. We thus fail to understand the significance of being the “body” of Christ with its many implications for behavior and corporate pain. The Apostle Paul said such lack of discernment lands us in a heap of trouble (1 Cor. 11:29).<sup>7</sup>

I confront a crucial second reason for the inability to grasp these principles: Pastors and lay leaders, much less congregations, have little grasp of the significance of their corporate history – their local church’s spiritual journey – to tell them anything about what God seeks to teach them. They don’t know how to listen to a corporate history the same way they do an individual’s history. This is true, despite the fact that corporate spiritual history makes up close to one third of the Scriptures, a history from which God expects us to draw and apply lessons. The biblical story of God leading His people is filled with principles by which He speaks to us and we learn His ways. But this also accurately describes the story of your local church and His people within it which God has likewise led.

Failing to grasp these fundamental truths, church leaders arm themselves instead with fleshly weaponry to deal with spiritual issues. We lean on our management acumen and experience, our intuition and education. We attend “equipping” conferences where attendees gobble up principles of leadership straight from business or the military with a dash of Bible verses. Following those “road maps,” we “sit at the well,” determine and articulate a visionary direction, set management goals and objectives for our year, work to influence the influencers and get the slow adopters on board for our strategy.

Following the “dark side” of the same maps, churches also fire pastors and staff members, give Boards votes of “No Confidence,” pass petitions, foment rebellions and splits against spiritual authority, and operate continually with mistrust or distrust of congregation toward leadership, leadership toward congregation, or both. Paul rightly calls this “mere men” stuff (1 Cor. 3:1-3). We do this as if such actions and feelings are normal in the entity of which Jesus said: “By this all men will know you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Evangelist Steve Pettit said it best: “A sure sign you’re using weapons of the flesh instead of weapons of the Spirit is that you’re getting short term gains, but long term losses.”<sup>8</sup> That describes the exact impact of human thinking on the disciplinary body aches God sends. We keep trying to fix these problems using human thinking and techniques. God, in His love, keeps sending us escalating problems! Sooner or later we have to recognize that this shouldn’t happen in the one place on earth to be marked by His love, peace, unity and presence.

I remember a young mom in a church which just split saying to me, “I have been in this church since I was eight years old, and this is the fourth split I’ve seen. And each one has been worse than the one before.” We know those splits were human attempts to “fix” something wrong, people banding together to leave a church where they could not get their way, whatever that “way” entails. All they did though was set the table for more (and worse) splits.

I also recall sitting next to a man at breakfast where I led a retreat to unpack his church’s spiritual journey in an attempt to heal its many years of painful dysfunction. He started the conversation by taking a bite of sausage while looking down at his plate and saying curtly, “I read your book.”

I waited for more, but that’s all he said. “Okay,” I offered.

“Interesting,” he said next, never looking up.

“Okay, good.” I figured I’d play along in the brevity department.

“Just have one thing to say,” he said and continued chewing his sausage.

“I’m listening.”

He stopped chewing, looked me right in the eye, pointed the tine end of his fork at me, and said: “If this weekend retreat does not result in our getting rid of our pastor, it is a total waste of our time!”

Getting rid of their pastor may provide them a short-term gain, but I can guarantee it would produce a long-term loss because they’d make that decision without discerning the nature of their “body.” Moreover, failing to learn what God’s corporate discipline sought to teach them, God would have to discipline them yet again, probably with their next pastor, increasing the frequency and the amplitude of the corporate pain to both get their attention and get them to take seriously His message to them.

You commonly find such pain patterns in churches. However, we have lost what these things mean and how God communicates through them. Jesus said of the religious leaders of His day, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3). We have similar predictive skills in things that don’t matter much, but miss what limits or kills our ministries.

Though we are “New Testament believers,” to learn these skills we must examine the Old Testament with fresh eyes. God told us as Church Age believers that “what happened to them stands as examples for us” (1 Cor. 10:6,11).

### **Old Testament, New Testament and the people of God**

One of the great ongoing theological debates revolves around Israel and the Church. Evangelical Christianity has divided itself into two large camps, one equating Israel with the Church (Amillennial) and one separating Israel and her future from the Church (Premillennial).

In relation to corporate discipline, I find little difference between Israel and the Church, though theologically I fall into the second category of seeing a distinction between them and their futures. As the people of God and a “covenant community,” God disciplines churches (again, not individuals) much as He did

Israel, and we understand God's discipline when we examine His ways with Israel and her leaders. Deuteronomy 28 describes the manner of God's corporate discipline under the old covenant. This extended passage is worth a read:

<sup>15</sup> However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: <sup>16</sup> You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. <sup>17</sup> Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. <sup>18</sup> The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. <sup>19</sup> You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. <sup>20</sup> The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him.

As Christians, we balk at the thought of "curses" applying to us since Jesus bore The Curse on the cross. But God speaks of "these curses," not The Curse of Genesis 3. "These curses" include painful experiences, particularly as it relates to the things for which we work, the "fruit" of our labor. The principle of sowing and reaping does still apply to believers (Gal. 6:7-8). Moses goes on:

<sup>21</sup> The LORD will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. <sup>22</sup> The LORD will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. <sup>23</sup> The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. <sup>24</sup> The LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.

<sup>25</sup> The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth. <sup>26</sup> Your carcasses will be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away.

<sup>27</sup> The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured.

These "diseases of Egypt" were things from which God promised to protect the community as they obeyed Him. God provided this protection through the laws of purity/sanitation and quarantine which He gave them in Leviticus. The Israelites did not know there were germs, bacteria, and viruses which caused

these diseases, but God did and gave them directions on how to avoid them. Analogously, there are relational diseases from which God's presence and work among us now protects His people when they listen to Him and do what He says. In other words, Christians should have fewer divorces than non-Christians, should not experience splits, suspicion, ongoing conflicts, anger and hatred. They were created in Christ to experience agape love and the joy of the Holy Spirit. But when God disciplines them, they experience the stuff of "mere men." Moses continues in Deuteronomy 28:

<sup>36</sup> The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. <sup>37</sup> You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you.

<sup>38</sup> You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. <sup>39</sup> You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. <sup>40</sup> You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off. <sup>41</sup> You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity. <sup>42</sup> Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land. <sup>43</sup> The alien who lives among you will rise above you higher and higher, but you will sink lower and lower. <sup>44</sup> He will lend to you, but you will not lend to him. He will be the head, but you will be the tail. <sup>45</sup> All these curses will come upon you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the LORD your God and observe the commands and decrees he gave you. <sup>46</sup> they will be a sign and a wonder to you and your descendants forever.

**<sup>47</sup> Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, <sup>48</sup> therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.**

Because the church is not a geographic nation, these things stand as analogies to us. Jesus uses this exact analogy to describe the condition of the Laodicean church (Rev. 3:17-19)

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put

on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

The Laodiceans did not walk around physically naked and were not monetarily poor, indeed just the opposite. Yet poor and naked describes their *spiritual* condition *exactly*. More to the point, Jesus states that *this dire spiritual situation is His loving discipline upon them!*

He allows His people to become an object of scorn amidst the cultures surrounding them. Those cultures “ascend” while His people sink lower and lower. They are supposed to be special, God’s favored ones, and look at the mess they’ve become! God also repeatedly describes how He will make their endeavors fruitless. All their work to produce fruit comes to little or nothing, certainly not the “much fruit” Jesus promises for those who abide in Him and He in them (John 15:5,16).

<sup>49</sup> The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, <sup>50</sup> a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. <sup>51</sup> They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed. They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs of your flocks until you are ruined. <sup>52</sup> They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>53</sup> Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the LORD your God has given you. <sup>54</sup> Even the most gentle and sensitive man among you will have no compassion on his own brother or the wife he loves or his surviving children, <sup>55</sup> and he will not give to one of them any of the flesh of his children that he is eating. It will be all he has left because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege of all your cities. <sup>56</sup> The most gentle and sensitive woman among you – so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot – will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter <sup>57</sup> the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears. For she intends to eat them secretly during the siege and in the distress that your enemy will inflict on you in your cities. (Deut. 28)

You might wonder if a “church analogy” exists for this graphic depiction of cannibalism when a city comes under siege. It gets ugly in churches, but I have yet to see literal cannibalism.<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul describes it happening in his day among the legalistic Galatians. Galatians 5:14-15 says: “For the whole Law is

fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

In sharp contrast to God-taught agape love which should mark Christian congregations, situations arise analogous to cannibalism. I have watched Christians bite and devour each other with gossip, suspicion, and bitterness in just that way. I have also seen them destroy each other and their church’s testimony for Christ in conflict, anger and bitterness. Moses continues:

<sup>58</sup> If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name – the LORD your God – <sup>59</sup> the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. <sup>60</sup> He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you. <sup>61</sup> The LORD will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster not recorded in this Book of the Law, until you are destroyed. <sup>62</sup> You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God. <sup>63</sup> Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.

Church history proves that this analogy still occurs. We need only look at the church in Europe, in places like Germany or England, from those times a couple of centuries ago when the Gospel swept through them and people were converted by the hundreds of thousands, filling the churches of these lands. Christians were once as “numerous as the stars” in these places, but now are few in number.

We see that same historical arc occurring in North America. I ministered in Canada for thirteen years and know that they are further along this arc than the United States is. Only about five percent of the population is evangelical. It’s sad because believers in Canada still want to believe they are a missionary-sending country, but they have become a mission field. Moses isn’t finished:

<sup>64</sup> Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods – gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. <sup>65</sup> Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. <sup>66</sup> You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. <sup>67</sup> In the morning you will say, “If only it were evening!” and in

the evening, "If only it were morning!" – because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. <sup>68</sup> The LORD will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again.

This final statement stands as the saddest analogy of all: the people of a church can, at the last, return to the slavery in which they started. Again, individual believers do not lose their salvation, but the supernatural entity Christ created there, though it may have a sign depicting a Cross and call itself a church, basically becomes a "non-Christian" institution. No one gets freed from their sin in that place any more because the Gospel no longer gets preached and biblical values according to the Word of God no longer operate.

In the biblical history of the Old Testament, one can track exactly how and when God brought these things upon the Israelites. Israel's covenant made them a nation and gave them a land. God's disciplines in Deuteronomy 28 were appropriate to a people living in a God-given land with national boundaries. They experience drought, invasion, disease, sieges, and numerous other disasters, all within their national boundaries. The New Covenant, ratified in the death and resurrection of Christ and remembered at the Lord's Table, does not give His Church national boundaries. It actually tears down national boundaries and makes diverse ethnicities and cultures one in Christ (see Eph. 2:11-19). Much interpretive confusion exists when believers try to read in or apply Deuteronomy's message to the political boundaries of their country.

Paul taught the Corinthian church to learn from these disciplines upon national Israel so that the same kinds of things will not happen to them in the church:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food; <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY."

<sup>8</sup> Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. <sup>9</sup> Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed

by the serpents.<sup>10</sup> Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

<sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:1-11)

Analogies thus exist in the church for all the “national” disciplines on Israel. If a church wanted to, its leaders could look at its history and then put its story through the grid of Deuteronomy 28 to assess honestly whether they too have corporately experienced analogies of God’s discipline.<sup>10</sup>

### **Removing the lampstand**

Divine corporate discipline can ultimately “put out the light” of a local church, much as God set aside national Israel when He turned to the Church to reach the world. Though I hold to eternal security for the individual believer, I do not hold to eternal security for a local church. Jesus warned the Ephesian church that He’d remove their lampstand unless they repented. Looking at Ephesus today, we can agree that this happened! No eternal guarantees exist for local churches.

That reality tells us that God deals with local churches – with corporate bodies of believers – differently than He deals with individuals. He never leaves nor forsakes a person who has put his or her trust in and received the benefits from Christ’s sacrificial atonement, no matter what. But He will leave and forsake a local church, departing from it much as He did from the temple in Israel (see Ezekiel 10). That in no way means the so-called church stops meeting – it may continue for centuries! It just means that it no longer is a church as God intended and it no longer is being built “into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Some believers may still be present and He dwells in them, but no longer does a “community of faith” exist with Christ as its Lord. The local church ceases to exist as a *Bride*, a *Temple* or a *Body*, the unique corporate entity God created to impact its world.

Before that happens though, before God’s Presence departs from a local church, He works with her, disciplining her to correct her and get her back in a right relationship with Him and doing what He wants. He gives her a number of “body aches” over the course of years. That’s what may be in your church’s history which you probably don’t realize. The same thing seems to have happened to Gomer.

### **The local church and Gomer**

The message of Hosea revolves around the graphic illustration of his marriage to the unfaithful Gomer. She keeps behaving in self-destructive and painful ways until finally Hosea's continued love breaks through and he redeems her. Hosea 3 tells this story:

The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you." For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days. (Hosea 3:1-5)

What went through poor Hosea's mind as he sought out his wife to purchase her either from the slave market or from the OT equivalent of her pimp? He paid a steep price. Clearly God intends Hosea's experience to parallel exactly the pain He feels with unfaithful Israel.

Once more we have an analogy. During the hardest days at my church when I wanted to quit being a pastor and do something/anything else, I never connected my experience with God's experience. I believe now that's exactly what God ordained. He intended to share His pain with me. Only experiencing this pain could equip me to know how to respond, how to recognize the call to "take-up-the-cross-to-follow" Christ in my ministry path. This is no martyr's complex, but a genuine understanding of what God planned, recognizing a deeper "fellowship of His sufferings" into which He invited me.

I needed to take a larger view of things, of the "ways" of my church which made His discipline necessary. I also realized that He worked on my heart and the hurt I carried from my personal background (just as He did with Moses and Elijah) at the same time He worked on my church's heart and the hurt they carried from their history. He sought to heal us both. Who could do all this but God?

I see another thing in Hosea – the level to which God requires that Hosea commit himself to her despite her past and the uncertainty of her future. The church's disobedience and/or insensitivity to Christ's Lordship may cause a pastor and/or

its lay leaders great pain, but while God disciplines her, Christ seeks the same fidelity and love for the church that He has, the same willingness to take her back into our hearts to “live for many days.” Pastors make a grave mistake, analogous to Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it, if they lash out in anger and leave the church.

Pastors and church leaders need equipment to assess their situations with spiritual clarity. Then they also need to know how corporately to respond to the Lord of their church and to repair and restore what Christ’s discipline has brought. You will find that equipment in the chapters ahead.<sup>11</sup>