

# ONECRY

CHURCH REVIVAL JOURNEY

*Evaluation Tool*



This evaluation tool is provided as a resource to help you as a pastor evaluate the church God has entrusted to you.

As you read through this material, consider talking and praying with a select group of leaders in your church to identify the heart barriers to God's manifest presence. You may even consider scheduling a retreat with other key leaders to identify the primary spiritual and methodological barriers to revival in your ministry. What needs to be emphasized? What needs to change?

Our prayer is that, as God leads you to identify barriers to His presence, you will seek to move forward on your revival journey by addressing those areas with grace and truth.

It's also our prayer that you will have vibrant times of worship and ministry in the days ahead—times when God's manifest presence will seem to “settle down” on your ministries. It is God's heart for His church to be revived and to continually exhibit the love and power of Christ.

The *OneCry* Team

*OneCry* is grateful to Bill Elloff and TruthInk Publications for allowing us to share this chapter from the book *The Presence-Centered Church* (Bill Elloff, copyright © 2015, TruthInk Publications, 6600 Crystal Hill Road, North Little Rock, AR).

Additional chapters offer practical steps toward building a presence-centered church. They include: Create Environments, Experience Deeply, Equip Intentionally, Engage Passionately, Pray Unceasingly, and more.

*The Presence-Centered Church* can be purchased at [OneCry.com](http://OneCry.com) and on Kindle.

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# Remove Barriers

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*“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”*

*– President Ronald Reagan*

*(Spoken before the Brandenburg Gate in 1987 at the wall that had divided East and West Berlin for 26 years and was a symbol of Communist oppression.*

*The gate was opened 29 months later.)*

Bunker buster bombs were created in World War II by British designer Barnes Wallis. They were designed to be dropped from almost four miles in the air, reaching velocities in excess of the speed of sound. These powerful bombs were developed not to penetrate the underground bunker, but to go through the earth beside it and create a mini-earthquake, exploding the bunker's foundation and creating a massive hole below the fortification. The stronghold would instantly collapse into the hole.

During the invasion of Iraq in Desert Storm, similar bombs were needed, but none were available. A stopgap measure was created in twenty-eight days with bombs that were laser-guided. They were so effective that after a few weeks, all the Iraqi bunkers were destroyed, and the American forces marched in with little opposition.

## **THE CHURCH'S GREAT ENEMY**

Satan is not ignorant. One of his greatest tactics is to develop spiritual and structural bunkers inside the church to oppose the movement of God's Spirit. If unnoticed, these strongholds can become mighty barriers to the activity and presence of God in the lives of His people. These bunkers are not hard to create, given the threefold attack by the world and its philosophies, the flesh and its weaknesses, and the devil and his schemes.

The rapid decline of many churches indicates that these bunkers are present and well fortified. But they are no match for God's people when they follow His initiation in the power of His Spirit.

Still, if we are interested in building a church where God's presence is manifested, we must not be naïve. We must accurately assess the true condition of our church. Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we will discover we are dealing with long-standing, deeply entrenched strongholds. Once we detect them, we must rely on God's means to remove every barrier to His presence.

## HEART BARRIERS

There are no sinless people or churches. Every Christian wrestles with temptation and failure. But often, sin in the lives of God's people has gone undetected or unchallenged—and created massive bunkers.

In the first church, Ananias and Sapphira were gripped by a materialism that caused them to deceive others and exaggerate their claims of giving. God was so concerned for His fledgling model, He used Peter to instantly identify and correct this hypocrisy. The result led to greater awe and surrender to Christ (Acts 5:1–11).

But in many churches, such sins have festered for years. The greatest loss is the absence of God's presence in the midst of His people. Sin is accepted and embraced. Strongholds develop. The result is a church with a shell of religion, but no reality.

My wife and I traveled for several years with *Life Action*. This wonderful ministry focuses on doing everything possible to help churches experience genuine revival.<sup>1</sup> We would bring a team to a church for two weeks to teach revival truths. Our first job was to find the bunkers. With experience, these are easy to detect.

Sometimes a church is filled with pride: pride in their history, their accomplishments, their buildings or programs, their music, even their tolerance of sin. The tragedy is that God opposes the proud. If we walk in pride, we can expect not His enabling grace but His resistance (James 4:6). One great evidence of pride in a church or an individual is prayerlessness. If a church is weak in prayer, they believe they can do just fine without God.

When Christ addressed the churches in John's revelation, He pointed out several bunkers. One church had lost its first love. They were doctrinally sound, but their passion for Christ was gone. Another was dreadfully lukewarm, while another was filled with idolatry.

If Christ were to write a letter to your church, what would He point to? Is there:

- Humility or pride?
- Generosity or materialism?
- Brokenness or stubbornness?
- Free-flowing forgiveness or judgmental unforgiveness?
- Holiness or immorality?
- Surrendered, willing service or selfishness?
- Authenticity and transparency or hypocrisy and covering?
- Edifying words or gossip and slander?
- Unconditional acceptance of others or proud prejudice?
- A burden for the lost or self-absorbed inwardness?
- Courage to follow Christ at any cost or fearfulness and timidity?
- A God-pleasing passion or a man-fearing spirit?

The greatest question is: Do you know where the bunkers are? Have you taken the time to prayerfully evaluate your church—not in nit-picking, Pharisaic introspection, but with a genuine desire to see God’s glory unleashed?

If you are oblivious to your church’s true spiritual state, you will discover that the strongholds keep growing. I have noticed that many pastors discover these bunkers within the first eighteen months of their tenure. Often, they simply do not know what to do. Sometimes they fear taking the necessary steps, so they leave. This is one reason nine out of ten seminary graduates do not retire in vocational ministry. Many become so overwhelmed with the challenge of moving a church to health, they drop out of ministry. Sadly, other pastors are intimidated by the status quo and never address the issues that abort the presence of God.

If the spiritual leaders of a church—through ignorance, discouragement, or fear—do not address the real issues, these can become even more entrenched, making the next leader’s task even greater. So what can we do?

## **ASSESS ACCURATELY**

Spend time asking God for His assessment of the spiritual condition of your church. Hear His answer on your knees. If there are spiritual bunkers, ask Him to open your eyes and others’ eyes to see the real issues.

Gather key leaders to do honest assessment of the church’s spiritual health. Pray through the next steps of addressing these issues. Take time to do some spiritual inventories. Each year we do a S.W.O.T. analysis. We gather the key leaders (at multiple levels) with a whiteboard and look honestly at the church’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities (areas that could yield increased fruit), and Threats (areas that could torpedo the ministry). Done with prayer and openness, this can be a church-changing exercise.

Bring in wise, godly leaders from the outside to help you see the real state of the church, if needed. Humbly listen to their counsel. Often, fresh eyes can see what you cannot.

## **PRAY FERVENTLY**

I once pastored a church that had some major bunkers. We tried everything to turn the ship, with little results. We became desperate and knew that only God could do what was necessary.

I invited all those willing to meet every morning at 6:30 to pray for forty days. A wonderful group of twenty-five to forty gathered daily. After several weeks, we entered into some of the most powerful praying I’ve ever experienced. God’s presence was so thick, the forty days came and went, and we continued that prayer meeting five days a week for eighteen months!

And God moved—not in the way I expected, but in the way He had planned. Dramatic, powerful change was accomplished through the persevering prayers of God’s people.

## **PREACH WITH TRUTH AND GRACE**

God says His Word is like the hammer that shatters the rock (Jeremiah 23:29). The inspired writer of Hebrews described it like this:

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (4:12–13).

We must trust God and His Word. Our job is not to convince and persuade, but to rightly divide the Word of truth. Lovingly but boldly proclaimed, it will cut through hearts like a sword and distinguish what is soulish and carnal from what is spiritual. It will even reveal our thoughts, intentions, and motivations.

Never underestimate the power of persistent preaching filled with grace and truth. I can tell the spiritual condition of the churches I’ve pastored by reviewing the topics or books of the Bible the Lord led me to preach. God longs to speak to His people to help them grow to maturity and experience His presence. If you are a pastor, take your preaching seriously and approach it prayerfully. God knows what the people need. Let Him say what He desires.

## **DISCIPLE THE WILLING**

Every church has people who long to experience God. Find these people and build around them. Help them grow. Give them opportunities for service and leadership. If you lack godly leaders, ask God to send some ready-made leaders to the church. Don’t let evil, controlling men determine the church’s destiny. Don’t give so much attention to their brush fires that it diverts you from discipling the leaders who will move the church forward.

Raise up a band of godly believers and watch them gradually move into rightful places of influence. Reach and disciple new people, and let God’s growth outweigh those unwilling to surrender to His control. Pay particular attention to developing the men of your church into godly, humble, Spirit-filled leaders.

Flood your small group curriculum and every venue with materials that deal with key heart issues. Do anything and everything to pour biblical truth into willing hearts.

## ADDRESS THE ISSUES

Sometimes, you must confront strongholds head-on. Every pastor has faced these battles. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves avoiding these conflicts. But if they come, realize: God is at work. He is performing the essential tasks to blast away whatever is aborting His presence and power in the church. It is hard work, but necessary. Don't run, and don't quit. These are the seasons that most need prayerful, persevering leadership. What are we doing as spiritual leaders if we don't give our all to see the church's heart brought to full surrender?

If you are tempted to give up, encourage yourself with this question: What is more important than God's presence? It is worth every sacrifice to open a highway for God!

Also be encouraged by this reality: We have mighty weapons to pull down barriers. We may not be using them, but they are available. The apostle Paul modeled this for us:

For though I do still live the life of a physical human creature, I am not waging this war in accordance with physical human standards, for the weapons used in my warfare are not mere human ones, but through my God are mighty for demolishing fortresses. For I am demolishing arguments and every barrier that is raised against the genuine knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:3–5 WILLIAMS).

It's a noble task to seek to rebuild a church for whom Christ died—worth our very lives. So don't give up. Get counsel from seasoned pastors who have engaged in similar battles.

I've written a book specifically addressing these issues, drawing from my experiences and those of others. If you face tough issues, you may be helped by reading *Whitewater: Navigating the Rapids of Church Conflict*.<sup>2</sup>

## STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Sometimes the barriers that obstruct the flow of God's presence are issues of structure and methodology. I consulted for a church that had dwindled to a third of its previous size. Once vibrant, it had lost its way. Though the pastor had left, a leadership team of eight strong men longed to see their church revived. They asked me to come help them.

In one retreat session, I realized part of the problem were the wineskins of the church. (Wineskins are simply the things churches develop to hold and release the life of Christ. Wineskins could be programs, ministries, personnel, systems, buildings, structure: they are the way the church does things.)

I asked them to list all their ministries. At the time, the church had approximately 300 people attending. Half were adults, with a core of about seventy-five people serving in volunteer positions.

To their amazement, they discovered they were trying to maintain more than sixty active ministries! Most were relics that had long since outlived their usefulness. Their wineskins weren't working. The people were worn out, and the ministries were ineffective.

Tragically, their busyness made no room for the church's most essential work. They were not using God's means of grace to open the door for the presence of Christ.

Jesus had a strong word about this:

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins (Luke 5:37–38).

Every church needs new wine (the presence of Christ) and new wineskins (ways to hold and release the wine). If you have wineskins without wine, it's simply a shell. If you have new wine without proper wineskins, a rupture will occur.

The people Jesus was addressing understood this picture. Everyone in Jesus' day knew that once grapes had been crushed, the juice was placed in fresh wineskins for aging and eventual use. They knew that wineskins must be flexible, functional, filled, and flowing.

## **FLEXIBLE**

New wine must be put into new wineskins to allow for fermenting and expansion. If the skins are not supple, they will burst, wasting both the wineskin and the wine.

Jesus is telling us the wineskins used in a church must be able to adapt and move to allow for growth. In the New Testament, God seldom defines the wineskins of the church. He simply illustrates the church's purposes (worship, community, spiritual growth, ministry, missions, stewardship) and the means of grace He prescribes (preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, giving, discipling, etc.). But He gives few instructions about the forms or methods to carry out these purposes. This indicates His desire for adaptability in methods so His purposes can be accomplished in different times and cultures.

One core value of a church should be willingness to change—to adapt, to be flexible, to be open to the Spirit's initiation about any program or ministry. This may mean deleting a ministry that has outlived its effectiveness, or beginning something new. Wineskins are not sacred. Wine is.

### **Wineskin Question 1**

Is there anything in my life or our church that I am unwilling to change so that Christ's presence may be experienced more fully?



## **FUNCTIONAL**

There is only one purpose for a wineskin: to hold and release the wine! It's simply a tool. This is how we must see every system and ministry in our church. Every year, evaluate every wineskin's effectiveness and value. Is it still accomplishing its purpose? Are there better ways to do that? Any wise vineyard owner regularly checks his wineskins, then replaces or repairs any ineffective ones. He understands the value of the wine.

### **Wineskin Question 2**

Are all our wineskins effective? Are they doing what God intended when they were first developed?

## **FILLED**

Wineskins are worthless until filled. In Jesus' day they were usually created from a goatskin. What a sad waste for a goat to give its life, only to have its skin placed on a shelf and never filled with wine!

A church program or ministry is designed to be filled with the life of God. Without God's presence and power, it's worse than useless, because it diverts time, energy, and focus from what really matters.

It could be that God has no interest in inhabiting that wineskin. Or something could be hindering God's presence in a potentially good ministry.

### **Wineskin Question 3**

Is each of our current wineskins filled with the life of God? Is the wineskin itself aborting God's presence, or is something wrong with it that prevents the presence of Christ? What change is needed?

## **FLOWING**

Imagine this scene. A farmer has gone to incredible lengths to plow the ground, plant grapevines, then water, fertilize, and wait several years for the vines to produce. He tends the vines to maximize the harvest. When the grapes are harvested, he takes them to the facility he has built. Through a series of vats and sieves, he crushes and purifies the wine.

At the same time, he has raised and butchered some goats to create fresh wineskins (no easy process, especially for the goat!). He takes the new wine, pours it into the fresh wineskins, then sits back to enjoy what he has produced.

A weary traveler comes to his door and asks, “Do you have anything to drink?”

“Yes,” says the farmer. “I have many wonderful goatskins filled with wine. They are laid up in my barn. Come and see!”

The traveler eyes the array of full wineskins. “May I have a drink?”

“Oh, no!” says the farmer. “I produced these so I could keep them in my barn. Every day, I go out and look at them. I have more wineskins than any of my neighbors. I have the best wine and wineskins in the country. But I don’t plan to drink the wine.”

In Jesus’ day, wine was produced to quench the thirst of the weary. The entire purpose of a wineskin was to hold and release its wine.

Many churches love to sit and enjoy their wineskins. They have created bigger and better programs, buildings, and resources. They take pride in what they’ve developed.

But who is receiving the wine? Is the life of God flowing through those containers to help weary people? If not, something is dreadfully wrong.

## **Wineskin Question 4**

Is the life of Christ flowing through the wineskins of our church? Are people inside and outside the church encountering the presence of Christ? Do we see lives changed by the power of God?

Assessment is hard; change is even harder. But we must deal, in God’s time and way, with the barriers that abort His presence. If you are tempted to ignore the truths of this chapter, ask yourself two questions:

- What good is a church that isn’t filled and flowing with the presence of Christ?
- What will you do about what God has shown you?

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about *Life Action*, go to [www.LifeAction.org](http://www.LifeAction.org).

<sup>2</sup> Bill Elliff, *Whitewater: Navigating the Rapids of Church Conflict* (Little Rock, AR: TruthInk Publications, 2009).

# Discussion Questions

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1. Do you take time regularly to evaluate where the spiritual bunkers are in your church? If not, what steps can you take to go there?
2. What are the “heart barriers” in your church? (Think deeply about this question; much depends on seeing and addressing these bunkers.)
3. Are you discipling the willing people in your church?
4. Are you willing to confront, as God directs, the issues that are hindering the life of your church?
5. Where are the structural or methodological bunkers in your church?
6. Honestly think through and discuss the four wineskin questions:
  - a. Is there anything in my life or our church that I am unwilling to change so that Christ’s presence may be experienced more fully?
  - b. Are all of our wineskins effective? Are they doing what God intended when they were first developed?
  - c. Is each of our current wineskins filled with the life of God? Is the wineskin itself aborting God’s presence, or is something wrong with it that prevents the presence of Christ? What change is needed?
  - d. Is the life of Christ flowing through the wineskins of our church? Are people inside and outside the church encountering the presence of Christ? Do we see lives changed by the power of God?