

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES

But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.

--Hosea 12:6

What does the Bible say about solemn assemblies?

How have solemn assemblies been thought of in the past?

In order to prepare for the ways in which God desires to renew your assembled people, it helps to know a little about how this has happened in the past. This article offers biblical word studies of the tricky terms pertaining to solemn assemblies before summarizing what the Old Testament and New Testament tell us about solemn assemblies. There is then a brief review of what solemn assemblies have consisted of throughout history.

BIBLICAL WORDS FOR SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES

The Bible has a few words that refer to different worship assemblies that are considered solemn occasions. These words are interwoven with other pertinent themes in the Bible, so we will touch on some of those as well.

- The precise Hebrew word for solemn assembly (**'ăsar**) indicates “a day of restraint” [from work]. The root of the word, however, connotes the keeping of tradition. The image associated with the word is that of keeping something restrained or held fast (like a child holds a favorite stuffed animal close to his heart). The word **'ăsar** occurs in the following verses:

Lev. 23:36 *Seven days you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire; on the eighth day [of the Feast of Tabernacles or Festival of Booths] you shall observe a holy convocation and present the Lord's offerings by fire; it is a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations.*

Numbers 29:35 *On the eighth day [of the Festival of Booths] you shall have a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations.*

Deut. 16:8 *For six days [of Passover] you shall continue to eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly for the Lord your God, when you shall do no work.*

II Kings 10:20 Jehu decreed, "Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal." So they proclaimed it.

II Chronicles 7:9 On the eighth day [of the festivities surrounding the dedication of Solomon's Temple] they held a solemn assembly; for they had observed the dedication of the altar seven days and the festival seven days.

Nehemiah 8:18 And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival [of Booths] seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

Isaiah 1:13 . . . bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Jeremiah 9:2 (used sarcastically) O that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a "solemn assembly" of traitors.

Joel 1:14 Sanctify a fast, call 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.

Joel 2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly.

Amos 5:21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies [because their society and everyday dealings are not ordered in accord with God's Way of justice and righteousness]



- The word ***môw'éd*** is also used for a solemn assembly, denoting a special, appointed time set apart for liturgical purposes. It occurs with the connotation of a solemn assembly on one of the high holy days in the following scriptures:

Numbers 10:10 Also on your days of rejoicing, at your appointed festivals, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your sacrifices of well-being; they shall serve as a reminder on your behalf before the Lord your God: I am the Lord your God.

Numbers 15:2-5 When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, and you make an offering by fire to the Lord from the herd or from the flock—whether a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed festivals—to make a pleasing odor for the Lord, then whoever presents such an offering to the Lord shall present also a grain offering, one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour, mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil. Moreover, you shall offer one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering with the burnt offering or the sacrifice, for each lamb.

Deuteronomy 31:10-13 *Moses commanded them: "Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the Festival of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law, and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess."*

Isaiah 33:20 *Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken.*

Lamentations 1:4, 15 *The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the appointed feasts; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter. . . . The Lord has rejected all my warriors in the midst of me; he proclaimed an appointed assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter Judah.*

Lamentations 2:22 *You invited my enemies from all around as if for a day of festival; and on the day of the anger of the Lord no one escaped or survived; those whom I bore and reared my enemy has destroyed.*

Ezekiel 36:38 *Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed festivals, so shall the ruined towns be filled with flocks of people. Then they shall know that I am the Lord.*

Ezekiel 44:24 *In a controversy they [the Levitical priests] shall act as judges, and they shall decide it according to my judgments. They shall keep my laws and my statutes regarding all my appointed festivals, and they shall keep my sabbaths holy.*

Ezekiel 45:17 *But this shall be the obligation of the prince regarding the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the festivals, the new moons, and the sabbaths, all the appointed festivals of the house of Israel: he shall provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, the burnt offerings, and the offerings of well-being, to make atonement for the house of Israel.*

Ezekiel 46:9-11 *When the people of the land come before the Lord at the appointed festivals, whoever enters by the north gate to worship shall go out by the south gate; and whoever enters by the south gate shall go out by the north gate: they shall not return by way of the gate by which they entered, but shall go out straight ahead. When they come in, the prince shall come in with them; and when they go out, he shall go out. At the festivals and the appointed seasons the grain offering with a young bull shall be an ephah, and with a ram an ephah, and with the lambs as much as one wishes to give, together with a hin of oil to an ephah.*

Hosea 2:11 *I will put an end to all her [Hosea's unfaithful wife, who is emblematic of Israel] mirth, her festivals, her new moons, her sabbaths, and all her appointed festivals.*

Hosea 9:5 *What will you do on the day of appointed festival, and on the day of the festival of the Lord?*

Hosea 12:9 *I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of the appointed festival.*

Zephaniah 3:17-18 *The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*



- The other times we see the English word *solemn* in the Old Testament is in the translation of the word ***shaba'*** which involves the making of solemn oaths or vows to God. This word occurs countless times in the Old Testament with God also making solemn oaths. These oaths are considered eternally sacred vows that are taken with life-or death consequences. The seriousness of these vows can be seen when Moses carries Joseph's bones out of Egypt to the promised land (**Exodus 13:19**) because Joseph had made his sons swear a solemn oath that this would be done. Though generations had passed, the oath was still in effect.

Covenant renewal ceremonies during which people take solemn vows before God are thus also solemn assemblies, as we see in Ezra and Nehemiah, which was also a time of liturgical renewal. One of the most important covenant-renewal assemblies is described in **Deuteronomy 29**, where Moses addresses the people of God as they prepare to enter the promised land:

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God--the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water-- to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, sworn by an oath, which the LORD your God is making with you today; in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today.

. . . When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends

of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back.

. . . Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. . . .

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 29:10-15; 30:1b-4, 6, 15-20)

SO WHAT WAS A SOLEMN ASSEMBLY?

From these word studies we can conclude that a solemn assembly is an appointed day of restraint from work like the Sabbath. It is a term that denotes the whole community gathered for a special worship occasion, either as a fast or a feast day. A solemn assembly most often refers to the feast day at the end of Passover and the day after the Feast of the Tabernacles (See Leviticus 23:36, Numbers 29:35, and Deuteronomy 16:8 above).

These special solemn days are related to the Sabbath in that like the Sabbath, they, too, are days of “solemn rest,” as Exodus 16:23, 31:15, and 35:2 calls the Sabbath. As indicated by the inclusion of the Sabbath at the beginning of the list of holy convocations in Leviticus 23, solemn assemblies are integrally related to the Sabbath worship of the people of God. Even though they may be distinct assemblies for particular purposes, they are part of the whole of life lived in communion with the Holy One.

However, a solemn assembly can also be called for an extraordinary occasion of crisis or celebration, such as that of extreme famine found in Joel, the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, the moving into the promised land, or during the rebuilding of the second Temple. On each of these occasions, it was not uncommon for the people of God to take solemn vows to renew their covenant with the Lord. Though certain solemn assemblies were mandated by God to be executed by the priests, as time progressed, it seems that the royal family had more leadership in the festivals than in earlier times, as Ezekiel 45 indicates. Gathered in times of special assemblies, covenant renewal

ceremonies marked times of national social reforms with a call to repent and renew commitments unto the Lord, as we see in the time of :

- Samuel (I Samuel 7:5-6)
- David (II Samuel 6:14 and I Chronicles 13-18)
- Asa (II Chronicles 15:9-15)
- Jehoshaphat (II Chronicles 20:3-13)
- Hezekiah (II Chronicles 29:5ff)
- Josiah (II Chronicles 34:31-33)
- Ezra (Ezra 6:16-22, 8:21-23, 9:5-15)
- Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8:1ff)

Other occasions for solemn assemblies emerged out of some critical moment or crisis in the life of the people of God. Joel 2 represents one of the clearest pictures we have of a solemn assembly called for the express purpose of seeking God's aid in a dire situation. "Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly," Joel cries. "Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord" (Joel 1:14). The participants are asked to fast and gather to pray together for a divine blessing:

"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:12-17)

From Joel we have a clear indication that a solemn assembly is called during times of crisis when people become aware that without God's mercy we shall surely perish. It seems that the Israelites had been going through the worship motions, but God wanted them to rend their hearts, not just tear their garments in ritual lament with all its accompanying weeping and fasting and mourning. The people of God have done ordinary worship; now extraordinary prayer is required. Thus, everyone is called to an inter-generational assembly. Nursing infants are called, and the elderly are helped to the assembly first, like passengers board today's commercial flights. No one is exempt from attending—not even couples in the process of consummating their wedding vows (yes, that's really what the Hebrew says)—because that's how urgent and necessary the solemn assembly is for the survival of the people of God. The word *sanctify* in verse 15 means that the blowing trumpets indicate that everyone is to complete their preparations for the fasting required as part of the assembly. Since the assembly itself is a day of Sabbath rest, a solemn assembly requires extensive preparations. But an earnest, heart-felt turning toward God is the most important element in a solemn assembly, or it is just empty ritual.

The Bible doesn't whitewash the fact that solemn assemblies can be called for impure reasons. In fact, they can be used for murderous purposes, as we see in II Kings where King Jehu calls a solemn assembly unto Baal for the purpose of killing all the Baal worshippers gathered therein (II Kings 10:20). Evidently, solemn assemblies can be for the worship of various gods, not just the Holy One. Though II Kings depicts Jehu as being as zealous for the Lord as Elijah (compare I Kings 18:40 and II Kings 10:15), Hosea condemns Jehu's bloody murders (Hos. 1:4-5).

Hosea also offers something unique for those interested in spiritual renewal, as can be seen through the prophet's repetition of the word *môw'éd*, which, when linked with the imagery of the larger book, gives us a picture of worship assemblies being part of an intimate relationship with God. Hosea condemns Israel for not being faithful, saying God has withdrawn from Israel's liturgical celebrations that signify communing with the Lord because Israel has chosen instead to cavort with Baal at his feasts. Thus, Israel's ritual offerings to God will only satisfy physical hunger and be of no spiritual effect, making their festivals empty rituals (Hosea 9). Though God, agonizing over her apostasy, continues to love the faithless Israel, Israel refuses to repent, asserting instead, "Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offense has been found in me that would be sin" (12:9). It is then that God determines to throw Israel out of the house, so to speak, making her live in the wilderness "as in the days of the appointed festival," meaning the Feast of Booths, during which Israel remembers what it was like to live in tents as they wandered in the wilderness before entering the promised land.

Ezekiel 16:18 adds another dimension to the Biblical theme of being God's bride by weaving it with the solemn oaths taken at a covenantal ceremony: "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine." From a young woman's point of view, this text could be quite disturbing. Indeed, this text is rather uncomfortable to our modern sensibilities because it makes it seem as if God has a rather prurient interest in Israel. But God does not ravage Israel, as no doubt often happened to women in Ezekiel's age. Instead, the image is of God's lusty (not lustful) desire for Israel that weds the divine life with his bride Israel.

What these passages indicate is that the liturgy of the solemn assemblies is to be related to all of life lived in intimate faithfulness with God. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that God loathes our solemn assemblies when we do not live in accord with God's Law/Way of justice in our everyday lives. The prophets are particularly descriptive on this, saying God takes no delight in solemn assemblies because "even though you make many prayers . . . your hands are full of blood (Isaiah 1:15). Jeremiah uses the term solemn assembly sarcastically in Jeremiah 9:2 to refer to a people who are anything but a sacred assembly, yet who nonetheless may be calling themselves that. They are, according to Jeremiah, an assembly of traitors. But it is Amos who offers the clarion caution to any worship gathering that calls itself a solemn assembly without attending to issues of social justice, as God exclaims:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

THE SOLEMN ASSEMBLY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

All of the direct references we have to the solemn assembly are from the Old Testament. In fact, most of the citations we have to solemn assemblies are from the priestly source, the tradition most concerned with ritual purity as a mark of Israel's identity as God's holy people. Second Temple Judaism mandated such purity in order to distinguish their national identity over against the cultures of its various occupying forces. As we see in the Gospels, Jesus took issue with the purity mandates of Second Temple Judaism that excluded certain people from gaining access to God's sovereign presence. In fact, it was his challenge to the religious purity practices that helped get him crucified.

It is interesting that the word solemn does not appear in the New Testament Greek. Although Weymouth translates Jesus' "*amen, amen*" as, "in most solemn truth," this is a unique translation, though insightful. Most translations are "truly, truly" or the old "verily, verily," but the original *amen, amen* does have a solemn oath-like quality sworn by Jesus, the Great I AM, the covenantal Way/Law, Truth, and Life. (After all, Jesus, as God, can only swear by himself.) Similarly, I Thessalonians 4:6 has the overtone of a solemn charge such as that given by a judge when Paul, recalling the testimony of his life lived among them, "solemnly forewarns" the Thessalonians to live a holy life with God and one another. In Acts 22-23, "solemn" oaths are seen in a negative light when the chief priests and elders of Jerusalem take a solemn oath not to eat anything until they have seen Paul put to death. Thus, the New Testament references to anything solemn are couched in legal testimonial imagery.

Does this mean that a solemn assembly is not appropriate for Christians? Of course not. The primary reason why we do not see solemn assemblies in the New Testament is because the church believes that the promise of Joel's sacred assembly has come to pass. The Word became flesh to dwell (literally: tabernacle) among us, and we have beheld its glory in Jesus the Christ. After his death as the sacrificial Passover Lamb of God and his resurrection, the Spirit that indwelt Jesus was breathed onto his disciples by the risen Lord (John 20:22). Every time, then, that two or three are gathered in Christ's name (Matthew 18:20), we have a sacred assembly.

Referencing Joel 2, Acts 2 identifies the gift of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire images, hearkening back to the Old Testament motifs of creation and liberation. The breath (or wind) of God's Word called forth creation, and the cloud of fire marked God's presence with the people in the wilderness—the history celebrated in the Feast of the Tabernacles. In Acts, the mighty wind and tongues of fire are an indication that God's Spirit now comes to all people, not just the chosen few. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells his followers who now live in anticipation of the day when the narrative of God's presence surrounding the ritual Feast of Tabernacles will at last be complete: "*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home [Greek: tabernacle] of God is among mortals. He will dwell [Greek: tabernacle] with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them'*" (Rev. 21:3).

So we continue to live in Christ's Holy Spirit. However, the Spirit doesn't indwell us so completely that we cease to sin. We continue to call upon the Holy Spirit who draws near to us when we seek holy wisdom. There are times in the Christian life when renewal services, such as a solemn

assembly, are warranted, which is how Ash Wednesday and baptismal renewal liturgies on the Baptism of the Lord Sunday were added to the church year. This is also why we have national and international days of prayer. In truth, we are to live in continual prayer seeking God's will not only for our individual lives, but for our collective ecclesial and societal ones as well.

HISTORICAL PRACTICES

Solemn Assemblies and Sacramentalism

As Christians shaped by the sacramental rituals that mark our identity, we see overtones of baptism and Eucharist in the Old Testament materials related to solemn assemblies since our sacramental practices allude to themes surrounding Passover and the Feast of the Tabernacles. In baptism we rise from our immersion in a life doomed to slavery unto sin's oppression into new life in Christ's freedom, passing through the waters like the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. We celebrate Christ our Passover Lamb sacrificed for us and are passed over by death because we are marked with his blood, which we symbolically drink to course through our veins in a life lived in communion with God. Anointed with Holy Spirit in baptism, we call out for God's Spirit to dwell with us in our holy feasting like the tabernacling presence of God in a fiery cloud of glory that accompanied the people of God in the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

Historical Promises and Abuses

Throughout Christian history, Christ's followers have gathered for the purpose of seeking God's face in prayer, whether this was called a solemn assembly or not. Worship on each Lord's Day was considered a time of solemn assembly. Daily prayers with others are holy convocations. Nonetheless, there have been times in history when the church has witnessed phenomenal periods of renewal that started with earnest prayer. Various monastic orders began out of intense prayer, resulting in many works of charity. The Reformation began with the prayerful study of scripture. Building upon the practices of others in the Netherlands, Philipp Spener gathered believers in private assemblies in his own house for scripture reading and mutual edification in the seventeenth century, which resulted in the pietist movement that renewed a church moribund by Protestant scholasticism. In England, seventeenth-century Puritans had a plethora of solemn assemblies. Basically, these were fast days that consisted of day-long worship services, which involved prayers, a series of sermons, and psalm-singing, ending with a simple communal meal at the end of the day.¹ All of these European assemblies shaped the religion that moved to the New World, resulting in the Great Awakenings that have contributed to the vitality of religion in America.

The great revivals that have shaped American Christianity grew out of the need to prepare ourselves for the taking of communion, which the PC (USA) *Book of Order* still mandates: "The congregation should prepare themselves to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper" (W-

¹ Susan Doran, Christopher Durston, *Princes, Pastors and People: The Church and Religion in England, 1500 – 1700*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 99.

3.3609). In former days, there were communal sacramental preparatory services held throughout the week before the celebration of communion on Sunday. People actually had to have a token or ticket granted by their pastor saying they were ready to take communion. We abolished this practice since we believe that Christ alone is Lord of our conscience and that we have no priest but Christ who bids all who would follow him to come. Priestly abuses aside, these extended preparatory meetings served as the foundation for the great revivals that have swept across the history of the United States. Even those who were not behind revivalism because of its emotional excesses and emphasis on the individual nonetheless sought the spiritual revitalization of the church through liturgical renewal. The Mercersburg theology movement, for example, promoted a heightened awareness of our mystical union with Christ through enlightened participation in the sacraments and worship of the church. And lest we forget, the Great Awakenings were often prompted by prayer for dire social problems caused by rampant alcoholism and frontier lawlessness that the church wanted to address in the power of Holy Spirit.

There is such potential power in solemn assemblies that it should come as no surprise that politicians have sought to call them for their own ends. Concerned about the loss of Edessa to the Muslims, Pope Eugnius IV and King Louis VII of France enjoined Bernard de Clairvaux to preach at a sacred assembly outside Vezelay, France, on Easter Sunday in 1146. The emotions of that assembly stirred up a volunteer army that marched to the Holy Land to begin the Second Crusades.² Geoffrey of Monmouth, a British historian (of sorts), wrote of King Arthur calling a solemn assembly for the express purpose of crowing him King of England.³ British politicians called for solemn assemblies of Puritans to pray during Parliamentary meetings in hopes it would help their political cause. Sermons and speeches given during eighteenth-century solemn assemblies abound as part of national fast and thanksgiving days, which were common solemn assembly times. As Peter van Rooden notes, "About three hundred Fast and Thanksgiving Day sermons were printed in America before 1790, something between five and ten percent of all sermons published there,"⁴ and such titles as *A Discourse, Addressed to the Sons of Liberty, near the Liberty Tree, in Boston*, indicate that what was presented during these solemn assemblies did not simply pertain to spiritual affairs.⁵ Indeed, solemn assemblies were called for a variety of reasons in addition to the seeking of the divine presence. One of these reasons was for the purpose of establishing orthodoxy. The Synod of Dort

² Odo of Deuil, *The Crusade of Louis VII*, 1, *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Paul Halsall, ed., Forham University Center for Medieval Studies, accessed September 10, 2008, online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/odo-deuil.html>.

³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Aaron Thompson, trans., John Giles, rev, Medieval Latin Series, (Cambridge, Ontario: In parenthesis Publications, 1999), 161. Scholars speculate that Geoffrey embellished much of his history since there is no definitive proof that King Arthur ever existed, at least not as we know him through the various medieval stories that proliferated about him and his reign. It is nonetheless telling that Geoffrey sees no problem with a king calling a solemn assembly for a coronation.

⁴ Peter van Rooden, "Public Orders into Moral Communities: Eighteenth-Century Fast and Thanksgiving Day Sermons in the Dutch Republic and New England," in *Retribution, Reconciliation and Repentance*, Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds., *Studies in Church History*, 40, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 218-239, 219.

⁵ *A Discourse, Addressed to the Sons of Liberty, near the Liberty Tree, in Boston*, Februray 14, 1766 (Providence, RI: 1766).

and the Westminster Assembly that drafted the Westminster Confession were both called solemn assemblies for this purpose.

Because of myriad motives for solemn assemblies in the past, those who call for a solemn assembly today need to first of all examine themselves and their perceptions of the need for such a convocation in order to discern whether their motives are pure, as determined by whether they are compatible with the aims of God's sovereign rule. They also need to understand why, given past abuses, some people might be suspicious of a call for solemn assemblies and work with respect for their concerns while overcoming such resistance with love that flows from a pure heart diligently seeking the divine will for the good of all.

Historical aberrations aside, solemn assemblies are for the purpose of spiritual renewal. They are convocations of the church with the intent of (1) turning more fully to God's grace offered to us in Christ through repentance and confession; (2) laying ourselves bare before the Holy One in prayer; AND (3) listening for the Spirit's still small voice through scripture and preaching. Like psalms of lament, solemn assemblies often end in confident praise of God's mercy, whether or not anything perceptible happened. It is thus most appropriate that a solemn assembly end around the Lord's Table.

AN INVITATION

"So the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let those who hear say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty can come, and whoever wishes can partake of the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). At Christ's call, we the church, as the bride of Christ, respond to our Lord's invitation for a sacred convocation. Living the baptismal life, we continually set aside our own dirty and worn clothes, allow ourselves to be bathed in the cleansing water of life, and put on the glorious new festal garment of Christ's righteousness that he provides for us. Out of our love for the Beloved, we are groomed with the most holy beauty we can muster to offer ourselves unto the Lord. Christ's righteousness covers us in covenant communion, drawing us into his tent of love where a wedding feast awaits us. Immersed in Christ's love, we live all of life under the cloud of God's Spirit that tabernacles among us, full of grace and truth, with gratitude that in Christ, we are God's chosen, holy and beloved, called to attract others to God's redemptive activity in the world.

So we respond to the call for a solemn assembly, inviting others to join us along the Way.

