



Swept Away

Making Room for the Spirit

Jonathan Goforth, missionary to China, was depressed about the “cold and fruitless” condition of his mission stations in the fall of 1906. As he was preparing to go on a tour to try to revive them, he felt that there was a matter between him and the Lord that needed to be settled.

The issue was his attitude toward another missionary. He kept telling the Lord that the fault was the other man’s. After all, this brother had come to Goforth’s study in tears to confess his fault. Therefore, the matter was settled, Goforth reasoned.

But the Spirit of God would not let him rest. “You still aren’t loving each other as brothers as I commanded,” the Lord seemed to say. Goforth resisted and felt there was nothing more to do about the situation. Finally, he said, the Lord told him that His presence would not go with him on the trip and that his efforts would fail—a thought that humbled and troubled the missionary.

The night before leaving, Goforth led a prayer meeting for the Chinese Christians at his home station church while still feeling the pressure of the unresolved situation. About halfway through his talk, the burden became unbearable. Silently in his heart, he prayed. “Lord, as soon as this meeting is over, I’ll go and make it right.”

Though no one in the church could tell what was going on inside him, Goforth said the entire atmosphere shifted. A previously stiff and unresponsive congregation seemed to instantly become engaged and attentive. When the talk ended and the meeting went into a time of prayer, people rose to their feet and broke down weeping as they prayed. He had been working for years in that area and had yet to see a single tear of repentance. But after his inward resolution to make things right with a brother, the tears rolled and lives were transformed.

Goforth left the next morning for his tour, and the results far exceeded his highest hopes. In every congregation he visited, confessions were made and relationships were restored. Over the next year, each station increased dramatically in numbers—more than double in one case.

How did one silent confession—later verbalized in private—change the spiritual atmosphere of several churches? Goforth believed that the Holy Spirit would not work freely until sin, especially among a church's key leaders, was swept out of the way, and he saw evidence of that principle throughout his ministry. When one or two people confessed and repented for some transgression—sometimes privately, but especially publicly—the Spirit seemed to dramatically fill the room and spark revival. Where churches and regions had been cold and stagnant, the Spirit would cause them to suddenly flourish. Christians would begin to grow, and the unsaved would begin to accept Christ in high numbers.

When we long for spiritual breakthroughs and grow tired of waiting, we may want to consider whether unresolved anger or resentment may be in the way. When we confess and repent of the attitudes that weigh us down, God always forgives us and His Spirit flows more freely through us. We become clean vessels prepared for His use.