

NEHEMIAH

BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP FOR TODAY

BASED ON FIVE SERMONS

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Introduction

Many churches in Britain are caught in a vicious circle. An unspiritual church gives us an unspiritual leadership and an unspiritual leadership gives us an unspiritual church. Faced with the perplexing choice of praying for revival among people or a renewal of leadership we take the usual road and elect to intercede for neither.

Background (Nehemiah 1:1-11)

Many people find the Old Testament rather difficult. In some ways this is quite understandable but means that some important parts of the Bible can easily be missed. One such book is Nehemiah, the last of the Old Testament historical books, set in the time of the ascendancy of the Persian Empire. Like the Babylonians before them, the Persians had used transportation (exile) as a means of oppression. Deportation from Jerusalem meant that only the weakest people were left behind. The rest were taken to distant parts of the empire, such as Susa (in the South of modern Iran) where Nehemiah served as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I (reigned from 464-424 BC).

In the Old Testament, Jerusalem and the Temple were a focus for the national and religious life of the people of God. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had destroyed the walls and gates of Jerusalem in 586 BC and left the city desolate, no doubt to prevent any future uprising. The Temple was also destroyed. The exile that followed was an inescapable consequence of the people's unfaithfulness to God. While the problems on the surface were physical, the underlying needs were spiritual. They needed a renewal of their national and spiritual life. However, as the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down for 140 years, it must have been easy to get used to it.

Some of the exiles had been allowed to return to Jerusalem but the news that reached Nehemiah in the royal palace was not good news. *"Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire"* (Nehemiah 1:3). Nehemiah was hurt to hear this. He made an immediate response; he wept. He made a continuous response; he mourned and fasted and prayed. Only then did Nehemiah rise to the opportunity of leading another return of the people of God to Jerusalem to rebuild, no doubt having to counter those who were quick to say that such efforts had been tried before.

In the New Testament we find that the idea of building for God continues. This time, not with stones as such, but with 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5), that is with Christian people. In other words, it is the church that the people of God must build but we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the church is primarily a building rather it is a people.

Nehemiah was burdened because of the news he heard. Christians regularly hear news of the church and, whether it is of numerical decline or other shortcomings, there is little doubt that we have become used to it. We tend to accept numerical decline and other problems as a sign of the times in which we live, but we are less ready to wonder whether it is also a sign of the judgment of God, upon his errant people. What would 'a Nehemiah' in our age and generation be doing? Would he or she be burdened about the state of the church, about its numerical collapse, about apathy, ignorance, prejudice and bitterness? Too many people content themselves with thinking that they are joggling along satisfactorily, or that their congregation is at least better than average. In short, though 'the church' is not doing very well, they are fine. This is not what Nehemiah did. Instead, just as the Lord Jesus would later do, he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed over Jerusalem.

All who love the Lord Jesus Christ must care deeply about the whole church, for which he died, and not just some small part of it. It is good to pray and plan for the revitalising of the church, but love for Jesus Christ and his church is not the same as keeping the wheels turning so the doors stay open. Instead the buildings, where Christians so often meet, and which take so much from us, must be places where the pure Word of God is preached, where the sacraments are faithfully administered and where, by the grace of God, new Christians are born.

Sir John Lawrence (a leading Anglican) contends that what the average church member wants is "A building that looks like a church ... services of the kind he's used to ... ministers who dress in a way he approves of ... and to be left alone." Without a doubt the nominal Christians of today beget the non-Christians of tomorrow. What would 'a Nehemiah' in our age and generation be doing? It is tempting, especially for activists like me, to say that he or she would be charging around doing all kinds of things. The truth of the matter is that Nehemiah exemplified obedience and prayer. Before doing anything else, he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. Why does God not just rubberstamp our plans with his blessing? Why are things in the church of 2002 not as they should be? Notice the order in which Nehemiah did things - he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed? The reason that we do not respond in the way that Nehemiah did is that *we have not got to the weeping yet.*

Renewal of vision (Nehemiah 2:1-20)

Under the authority of the Babylonian and later the Persian Empire, the citizens of Jerusalem had been deported, a period in the history of Israel known as the 'exile'. Though far from home, news from Jerusalem reached Nehemiah that though some exiles had returned to the city the walls were still broken down and the gates burned. Jerusalem was the focal point for the national and spiritual life of the people of God and, distressed by the news, Nehemiah wept, mourned fasted and prayed. The people of God in the age of Nehemiah needed a renewal of vision. There seems little doubt that the people of God, the church, need a renewal of vision today, so there is much to learn from Nehemiah.

At the prayer meeting of 2002 earnest Christians are locked in prayer, "*Oh Lord, please help the poor people in Jerusalem. Help them not to be discouraged because the walls have been broken down. Help them to believe that God is stronger, much stronger than their enemies.*" That sounds a lot like the kind of prayer that I might offer, but the prayers of Nehemiah (and nine of them are recorded in the book of Nehemiah) were not like that. His prayers were encounters with the living God, seeking after his will. They included adoration and confession and a sense of corporate responsibility. His forethought and planning took place in the presence of God. His prayers were steeped in scripture. He prayed in private. He prayed as he worked. When in danger, he prayed and posted a guard.

Constant prayer meant that Nehemiah's vision was always vision for God and did not drift into becoming selfish ambition. He concentrated on God, the creator, great and awesome, forgiving and compassionate, faithful and trustworthy. Through prayer, Nehemiah came closer to the heart of God over the situation.

It was when Nehemiah was confident of God's will and purpose that he began to act. If the plan is not of God in the first place, no amount of prayer will make it work. Like many motorists, I now have a diesel car and have to be careful at the pumps to put the right fuel in the tank. Spiritually speaking, too many Christians waste their time putting diesel into petrol engines. Christians are often very busy about nothing in particular. We seem to have devised rounds of pointless meetings (many of them committees) when we could be doing other really more important things, like sharing Jesus with others.

Over the centuries it seems as if God's will and purpose is made known to his people through scripture, through prayer, through fellowship and through preaching. In church history, people of vision have been people of prayer. We often make a false distinction between prayer and action when there should be a oneness about them. All prayer and no action is heavenly minded but no earthly use. All action but no prayer is the spiritual equivalent of running around like a headless chicken. Yet there is a very real danger to have both prayer and action but never let these two meet. Prayer then seems irrelevant (but we continue stoically, often at awkward times of the day) and action seems powerless (but we keep battling on anyway, making that into another virtue).

One of the most abused words in the church vocabulary is undoubtedly the word 'fellowship'. Much of what is on offer in the church is 'friendship' and I am not knocking friendship because we all need friends. A cup of tea and a really nice chocolate biscuit after the morning service may be very welcome, but the friendly conversation that takes place can hardly merit the description 'fellowship'. Fellowship is communal discipleship or, if that sounds very grand, following Jesus *together*. This cannot be something that we do on Sundays alone. If we are not in a midweek group for prayer and Bible study, supporting one another, then we are not really in fellowship. Christians must not be content simply to be friends with some of the other people at the Sunday services.

I think people who suggest that preaching is an outdated means of communication in a multi-media age are wrong. Preaching, from the scriptures, is the way that God chooses to excite us for worship, work and witness. In each of these, the church often asks God for help, but only in a formal way. Our asking God for help can often be like one of those vague invitations to 'drop in some time for tea'. If you are bold enough to accept, it can often seem awkward. Asking God to bless us with his presence sounds like a good thing to do. How can we legitimately ask God for help, if our commitment to do his will is conditional?

Renewal of action (Nehemiah 4:1-23; 6:15-16)

Jimmy, a five-year-old boy, was looking out of his bedroom window when he should have been in bed. Looking at the moon he announced, 'One day I am going to walk on it,' and 32 years later that is just what James Irwin did.

Hidden away in the Old Testament is the book of Nehemiah. Set in the time of the Persian Empire, the book is the story of the return of some dispersed exiles to Jerusalem who, under the leadership of Nehemiah, will rebuild the city. Just as the Lord Jesus would later do, Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed over Jerusalem for he realised that the condition of Jerusalem was a clear sign of the spiritual state of the people of God.

In the New Testament we learn that the people of God are living stones, making up the church. The church is not so much a building but a people. All who love the Lord Jesus Christ must care deeply about the whole church, for which he died. Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed and God responded giving him a renewal of vision, a renewal of action, a renewal of worship and a renewal of the covenant. This month I want to consider the renewal of action.

It is easy to make the mistake of dividing spiritual activities, like prayer and Bible study, from practical work, when in reality prayer and Bible study are very much part of the work. People who think that prayer and Bible study are meant to be undemanding are wrong. If we are busy doing things without prayer and Bible study then our goal can only be to do our best. Many of us are undoubtedly doing our best, but are we doing what God wants? Renewal of vision and renewal of action go together.

Nehemiah's work was the work of God. He could be confident of that because he had been through the weeping, mourning, fasting and praying. His forethought had come through prayer, he made a realistic survey of the situation and then he motivated and delegated. Isn't it the case that we are often unrealistic about the situation of the church and its needs (not necessarily limited to our own congregation) because we do not believe that God can meet them?

In 1967, 59% of Christians in Great Britain reported that they became Christians as teenagers. In 2002 we have very few teenagers in the church hearing the challenge to become Christians, so few that the number of them who will be Christians in the prime of life in 30 years time is very small indeed. My experience is that generally young people decide not to become Christians not because Christianity is too demanding but because the kind of life they see churchgoers leading is not different or demanding enough. Churchgoers are often experienced in church services, but have no clear theology, an easy credibility and gullibility that enable them to hold contrary

beliefs, a lack of spiritual discipline and a sentimental anti-intellectualism that prompts only emotionalism rather than genuine Christian faith and experience. At the other extreme is the arid intellectualism of those who seem intent on removing any supernatural content from the Christian faith. Genuine Christianity is a lively blend of the faith of mind and heart, just the thing that so many people are seeking but not finding in the church.

It is not seeing difficulties, which prevents action, but not seeing the resources. Ignoring problems does not make them go away, they are just allowed to grow bigger. When the vision is from God openings into the impossible suddenly become possible. A child taking on a big job can do it easily with his Father there to help. Nehemiah is practical, honest and persistent in the face of sarcasm, criticism, and attempts at blackmail and intimidation. Prayer and good common-sense decisions met all this opposition.

Nehemiah was the leader and his workers had clearly defined tasks. Isn't it so often the case in the church today that members want leaders who don't lead? Too much of what happens in the church seems to be tied up with people doing their own thing or preserving their own position. Nehemiah made some tough decisions. Those who did not share his vision had no legal/political/religious claim on the work. It is a mistake to think that the work of the church can be done by anyone or that we can achieve great things for God without a common vision from God.

The story of Nehemiah is not a recipe for instant success. The rebuilding process took about 100 years. However, as individuals and as a church, we are what we have been becoming. What had been burned and destroyed at Jerusalem took a long time to be restored. The work took place over three generations. It is surely a lesson for the church.

Renewal of worship (Nehemiah 9:1-2; 5b-38)

Have you ever had one of those presents where you have had to conclude that it's the thought that counts? I suppose we have all received such a gift but I must say that best of all I like the presents where I do not have to say 'it's the thought that counts' because the present was just what I wanted. It's so easy to buy a friend a present that turns out to be what we would like – but, of course, when you know someone well and are thinking of them then you want to concentrate on what they will like.

It seems to me that much of the contemporary debate about worship is missing the point. Whether it be the order of service (structured or free), the general context of worship (formal or informal) or the music in worship (traditional or contemporary) so many considerations seem to be about what we, the givers, like. As worship is an offering to God we would do far better if, instead of concentrating on our preferences, we concentrated more on him.

The books of the Old Testament are not arranged in the order that the events happened but more in terms of their type and contents. That means that it is easy to miss that Nehemiah, though it comes more or less in the middle of the Old Testament, is the last of the Old Testament historical books. Under King David, Israel had been greatly blessed but after the death of David's son, Solomon, the kingdom soon divided between the northern kingdom (retaining the name Israel) and the southern kingdom (adopting the name Judah). After a succession of unrighteous kings the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Judah in the south was inconsistent but eventually it and its capital, Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonians, the Temple was destroyed and the city walls broken down and the gates burned. Residents of Judah were dispersed and this period is known as the exile. One of the exiles, Nehemiah, was cupbearer to the King at the royal palace in Susa (the south of modern Iran).

Nehemiah lived in a difficult time for the people of God. Some of the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem but they needed spiritual renovation as much as the Temple and city walls at Jerusalem needed material rebuilding. By the grace of God, Nehemiah led the people into a renewal of vision, a renewal of action and a renewal of worship. We all have our own ideas about what 'renewal in worship' means. Nehemiah reminds us, as he did the returning exiles, that when considering renewal in worship, more than anything else we need to focus our attention on God. That will mean knowing him. Raymond Brown in his *Message of Nehemiah* (IVP/BST) highlights Nehemiah's doctrine of God and says, 'too much of what we do today is about how we feel, than about what God has declared.'

Prayers are an important part of the book of Nehemiah (e.g. Chapter 9). The people pray to God who is great, mighty and awesome, faithful to his covenant of love. They pray to God who is from everlasting to everlasting, glorious, exalted above all blessing and praise. They pray to God who is above the highest heavens, the life-giver, holy and righteous. They pray to

God who is compassionate and merciful. From this we learn that renewal in worship depends on knowing God so that worship will be in accord with his nature.

The later biblical writers reflect on what God has said and done in earlier days. It is clear from his many references to the law and the prophets that Nehemiah is steeped in his Scriptures. If, at the heart of worship, we focus our attention on the Scriptures, we are well on the way to offering what God desires of us, for we are concentrating on his Word and his divine revelation. In the Word of God, Christians have a record of God's self-revelation in person, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The response of the people to the reading of the Word of God in Nehemiah has a lot to teach us. They listened attentively, they knelt in worship, they understood, they were so moved that they began to cry, they were encouraged to go and share God's blessings with others and to rejoice (Chapter 8). Renewal in worship comes through renewal in preaching and teaching the Word of God, as we focus again on the great truths of our faith and not least the nature of God. Real renewal in Christian living (holiness) will come by the same route. Therefore, preaching and teaching the Word of God are fundamental to worship and not, as sincere but misguided people might imply, something to be endured before we return to more singing.

Renewal of the covenant (Nehemiah 8:1-10; 10:30-39; 11:1-2)

For all of my lifetime earnest Christians have been talking about revival, renewal or refreshing and singing the powerful hymn by William Booth, 'Thou Christ of burning, cleansing flame, send the fire!' (enjoying a new lease of life to a modern tune *Songs of Fellowship* 955; *Mission Praise Complete* 1004). Many Christians, especially those with a traditional emphasis, are still praying for an outpouring of God's blessing in revival, but what we do not always realise so readily is that renewing and cleansing come together.

Tucked away in the Old Testament is the book of Nehemiah. God's judgment had come upon his people and had resulted in the dispersion of the citizens of Judah to various parts of the Persian Empire. At the Emperor's winter palace at Susa, far away from his ancestral home, Nehemiah heard the news that some of the returning exiles were back in the province but that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down and the

gates burned. After a period of weeping, mourning, fasting and praying, Nehemiah led the people in a renewal of vision, a renewal of action, a renewal of worship and a renewal of the covenant. In this fifth study we are looking at the renewal of the covenant.

It is a relatively common complaint about Christian worship that it is dull. However, we must be very careful that we do not simply substitute a more appealing form of 'lively' service for what has become routine and dull but fail to recognise that it is no more 'spiritually renewed' than what we were doing before. In Nehemiah (8: 1-7) we find a section devoted to Ezra's reading of the law. It is a reminder that real renewal is coupled with real cleansing and these come by the Word of God. Ezra had a high wooden platform built for this occasion. I would have thought that a good word for 'high wooden platform' was 'pulpit'.

These days the whole idea of the pulpit is unfashionable. In the Free Churches, we cannot really miss the fact that today the worship band is often in the place where the pulpit, choir and organ were in bygone years. Using a worship band with a singing group is just a change of fashion but I rather regret the demise of the pulpit. People have a range of little jokes about the pulpit giving the preacher the elevated place of being six feet above contradiction. I don't believe that any preacher is above contradiction but I do stand by the Word of God as being above contradiction.

It seems to me that far too many people approach the Bible with the wrong attitude. They read the Bible and wonder what they are going to make of it, when it would be far better if we read the Bible being prepared to discover what the Bible made of us. When Ezra read the law the people listened attentively, bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Those of us who believe in the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and their God-given nature are not worshippers of the Bible, but in the Bible we do have God's revelation and the holy record of God's supreme self-revelation in Jesus.

Ezra instructed people in the Word of God, this was the book of the covenant or promises of God and the record of his faithful dealings with his people. Ezra made it clear and gave the meaning so that people could understand what was being read. When they heard the Word of God, the people wept. I wonder if what passes for preaching and Bible study today

does justice to the kind of preaching and teaching that we read about in scripture?

‘Come on and celebrate/celebrate and sing/celebrate and sing to the King’ is a popular worship song in many churches today. However, we should not forget that in scripture, especially in the Old Testament, celebration and thanksgiving were coupled with sacrifice and purification. In Nehemiah, those who were renewed were also party to the covenant seal (Nehemiah 9: 38). A seal is both a sign of ownership and a sign of genuineness.

Covenants in the Bible are extremely important. They are not deals that men and women strike with God (such deals would be contracts). The ordinary, every-day word for ‘covenant’ is ‘promise’. In this renewal the people of God claim afresh the promises of God. In Nehemiah, the gracious acts of God are recited and the requirement of the people to stand under the promises of God is to obey God’s Word. The people of God are called to make solemn vows, which carry both privileges and responsibilities. The people of God are to be holy, separate and different. This does mean that they were to be shut off from the world in a monastery or in a ‘monastery without walls’ as practiced by some sects who have little or no dealings with any other than those of their own persuasion. Rather this separation was to be shown by spiritual loyalty, doctrinal purity and ethical integrity.

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First published as five articles in the newspaper *Unity*