

How Do We Restore A Weak Congregation?

By Joe R Wheeler

Nehemiah 1:3-11 *And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. 4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, 5 And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: 6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. 8 Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: 9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. 10 Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. 11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.*

Introduction

In the passage above, Nehemiah has just become aware of the condition of the city of Jerusalem. In the Book of Ezra, we learn that a few captives were allowed to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the city. Although the work had begun, it had been stopped and never resumed. When Nehemiah learns the condition of his brethren and that they hadn't done what they had been sent to do, he is heartbroken. After considering their plight, he goes to God in prayer. In the prayer of Nehemiah, we see his genuine concern and sorrow for not only his brethren, but the state of Jerusalem as well.

We can look at the state many congregations of the church today, and see similarities with the time of Nehemiah.

Like Nehemiah, we see congregations that have been broken down and weakened over time and now stand in serious need of repair.

Like Nehemiah, we are all responsible for the present state of the church...*both I and my father's house have sinned*. We have a great work that needs to be performed.

Like Nehemiah, we need to begin by acknowledging our own failure to act to God, and praying to Him for help to finish what was begun.

We know of the Restoration of the first century church that was begun not so long ago. We also should see that what we started to do, we failed to continue in and as a result the church as a whole has failed to live up to what it is supposed to be.

We each bear some measure of the guilt, although some have tried harder than others along the way. We need to prayerfully reapply ourselves to this work...we have no other purpose in this life. We have been redeemed by Christ, and we are His body. We must do what He has commanded us to do or we will become just another church of man.

The Book of Nehemiah is an excellent source of guidance for those who are attempting to build, or rebuild, a local congregation of the church.

It is full of examples of how to work for the Lord, and it shows us some of the difficulties we can expect to encounter as we attempt to do the Lord's work.

Approximately 2500 years ago, Zerubbabal and Ezra had begun to rebuild Jerusalem, but despite their

efforts, the work had never been completed. Nehemiah decided that he would pick up where they had left off.

The church today also was partially restored, but many congregations never finished the work and consequently, the walls are fallen and the gate is burned and there is no protection for the individuals within. We should follow the example of Nehemiah and first decide that WE will take the responsibility to act for the Lord. We will put our efforts to use for God, not sit by and hope someone else will do it all for us.

I. Recognizing A Need For Action...

A. Nehemiah Afflicted His Heart...

Nehemiah did not return to a compliant state. He was afflicted in his heart by what he knew and he remained afflicted until he could act to remedy the situation.

Nehemiah 1:4-11...And also

Nehemiah 2:1-3 *And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been formerly sad in his presence.*

2 Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,

3 And said unto the king, Let the king live forever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchers, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?

We also should apply ourselves to putting the work ahead of us at the forefront of our lives. Even though we may have to perform other duties as well, we will continue to occupy our thoughts with the work we must do for God. We must do the work the way God intends us to do it. We must work according to scripture. Adherence to God's Word requires discipline and commitment. We need to begin by learning for ourselves what the Bible says, and prayerfully applying it to ourselves first, then teaching it to others.

B. Nehemiah Committed Himself To Act...

Nehemiah left his place to go where the work was. He made an effort that required leaving his home and employment to do a greater work. He didn't just afflict himself...he acted.

Nehemiah 2:4-9 *Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchers, that I may build it. 6 And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. 7 Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; 8 And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me. 9 Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.*

We also must apply ourselves to acting on what we have thought about. Nehemiah prayed to God for help...but then he acted. We must also act, even if it means going from where we are to where the work is to be done. How many missionary's would convert souls if they refused to leave their homes and travel to where the souls live? We must remember that we are EMPLOYED by God to work in the harvest fields.

We must go where we are needed. Churches that have followed the Word of God are already built up and strong. We must introduce sound doctrine and serious study of God's Word to those congregations that have fallen away from the truth.

II. A Course Of Action Begun...

A. Nehemiah's Work Becomes Known...

Nehemiah now has become a target for standing up for the Lord. He has come forward to do good, but there are those who will oppose him.

Nehemiah 2:10 *When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.*

This is true today as well. Those who desire the Church to remain weak will be upset when a restoration of the teachings of scripture is introduced. The church of Christ is only strong while it remains in adherence to His Word. The first thing a false teacher does is twist the scripture to his own advantage. Over time the Word of God is emphasized less and less until it finally is replaced by the teachings of men. When someone comes along who knows the Bible and tells other the truth, false brethren know that they are going to have to get rid of them if they want to remain in control of the church. They don't want the congregation to go back to the Lord, they want it to keep following their teachings and looking to them for the answers. These false brethren will oppose any who stand for sound doctrine in order to protect what they have gained for themselves.

B. Nehemiah Considers The Current State Of Affairs...

Nehemiah sets about to find the problems...and to find the source of the problems. The leaders of the people had not led them to build. The walls had been neglected because the men who should have seen the necessity of them had refused to see the importance of building up what had been torn down. Everyone was content to be weak and unsafe.

Nehemiah 2:11-18 *So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days. 12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. 13 And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. 14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. 15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. 16 And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work. 17 Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. 18 Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.*

The first thing we must do to fix the problem is to identify it. Like Nehemiah, we must observe the way things are presently. He went about doing this secretly so as to get a clear picture of what was really happening. To often, we can find that the real underlying problems in a weak congregation are hidden. Although the long time members may know the truth, they will try to cover it and get newcomers to focus elsewhere. We need to observe and assess, then pray to God, and then begin to act. Sometimes, the elders of the church will act if they are made to see an error...going to them should be the first course. Once we see a problem with the resolve of the elders we can bring it to the knowledge of the congregation if that is the appropriate thing to do.

C. Nehemiah Faces Direct Opposition...

1.Nehemiah was openly ridiculed and accused of evil intent because he wanted to build the wall to protect the people.

Nehemiah 2:19 *But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?*

Those who want the Church to be conformed to popular opinion and the will of man, rather than the Will of God will be as Sanballat and his friends in Nehemiah 2:19, they will move from initially being upset to mocking those who want to restore the Church. They will twist scripture to ridicule those who are trying to work in order to discourage them. If they succeed, the restoration of the Church will stop before any real work has begun. Accusations against the restorers will begin about the same time.

2.Nehemiah was faced with constant harassment and distraction to slow him down.

Nehemiah 6:1-9 *Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had built the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;) 2 That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do*

me mischief. 3 And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? 4 Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner. 5 Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand; 6 Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. 7 And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together. 8 Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart. 9 For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.

Those attempting to restore a weak congregation will likely face open hostility from the ones who made it weak. They will be targeted for every type of deceitful practice, all in an attempt to slow down or halt the work. Like Nehemiah, we must not allow ourselves to be led away from the true task at hand.

D. Nehemiah Faces Indirect Opposition...

1. Nehemiah was not supported by those who refused to see the need to improve what was existing.

Nehemiah 3:5 And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord.

Those who are enjoying their present status in the congregation have no interest in helping to focus the attention of the congregation back on to Jesus. They have nothing personally to gain from an effort like this, and everything to lose. They are in danger of becoming one of the congregation instead of the head of it.

2. Nehemiah was approached by those with false motives to lead him away from the work.

Nehemiah 6:10-13 Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee. 11 And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in. 12 And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

Those who have ties to the powerful within the congregation will act to protect their power. They will act out of loyalty to men, not to Christ. There is often chaff mixed in with the wheat. Almost every congregation will have these "wolves in sheep's clothing", especially in a congregation that has been wayward from Christ. These individuals will go out of their way to earn the trust of those trying to save the church, but they want to obstruct the work of restoration.

III. A Course Of Action Completed...

A. Nehemiah Stands Up For The Lord And Opposes The Opposer's...

Nehemiah didn't pretend that these were good men that were confused, he flatly pronounced them as what they were...enemies of the Lord.

Nehemiah 2:20 Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.

We should do as Nehemiah does beginning with Nehemiah 2:20, note carefully that those who oppose God's Will for the pattern of His Church, have no part in it. They have fallen because of disobedience to His Will. To often we try to show respect for those who have obviously been leading a congregation astray. We want to believe that they are sincere... only ignorant of the truth. Whether or not that is true will show itself as the work of restoration continues. If they were ignorant, they will acknowledge the truth and repent. If they were intent on leading the congregation astray, they will soon act against the restoration process.

B. Nehemiah Organized The People, And Put Them To Work...

Nehemiah organized the people, and the people went to work rebuilding.

Nehemiah 3:1 Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they built the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel...

In all of Nehemiah 3, we see that those who wanted to restore the walls went to the work. Often, we talk about building the Church, but we don't ever get started. The people here in Nehemiah 3 showed themselves to be sincere by their work, as it says in James, "faith without works is dead". Note that everyone participated in some fashion. In a congregation that is weak, there has to be some who want to restore the congregation to the Lord. In a congregation where no one wants to participate, no work can be done. Imagine if Nehemiah had tried to rebuild the walls and set up the gates by himself...while all of the people just sat and watched! Unfortunately, not every congregation CAN be restored...it takes a desire and the willingness to work.

C. Nehemiah Organized The People To Defend The Work...

Nehemiah defended the work by getting the people prepared to fight while they worked.

Nehemiah 4:13-14 Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14 And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.

We must defend the work as those in Nehemiah 4 did, but we must not allow the defense to hinder the work of restoration. We can be distracted from what is important if we get to caught up in fighting those who would hinder us. Also note in the entire book of Nehemiah, that prayer to God is always part of the work and the defense of the work. Those who oppose restoration will attack the individuals involved in the work. If they can discourage enough of them, they will cause the work to cease. We must defend the each other, not leave each other unguarded to fend for ourselves alone!

D. Nehemiah Addressed Problems As They Came To Light, Without Stopping The Work...

Nehemiah 5:1-8 And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews. 2 For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live. 3 Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth. 4 There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards. 5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards. 6 And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words. 7 Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. 8 And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.

In Nehemiah 5, the work is continuing, but the sins of the people are coming to light. They were treating their brothers wrongfully and as the work continues, they must be made to stop sinning. We must repent from sin if we will restore the Church, as it comes to light it must be dealt with immediately. In Nehemiah 5:13, Nehemiah prays that God will cut-off any who will not repent. We must be willing to use discipline to remove sin from our midst. The work of restoration will bring about many surprises for those who have been listening to men instead of God. Often unknown sins will come to light, and the members of the congregation will react with shame and sorrow as they learn the truth. What was once taught as being acceptable to God, will be shown to be unacceptable by a reading and understanding of His Word. False teachers always allow men freedom where God doesn't allow freedom, and restriction where God does not restrict!

E. Nehemiah Continues The Work, Even After It Appears To Be Completed...

Nehemiah 7:1-4 *Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed, 2 That I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many. 3 And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; and while they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them: and appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house. 4 Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not built.*

In Nehemiah 7 the walls are built, but, enemies are still coming into the city. The restored Church will probably still have false brethren who remain. They will quietly bide their time and look for an opportunity to lead astray the flock.

Conclusion

The next few chapters show that the walls being restored, the teaching and laws of God are now fully made known to the people. If we do not put the Word in the hearts of those who have repented, then soon something other than the Word will take root in the Church. Nehemiah was diligent to teach the truth, but first he made sure that there was a wall in place to protect the people from their enemies. In Nehemiah chapters 8,9 the people are taught from the Word and they repent. If you will read chapter 13, you will see that over time, people can slip back into bad practices. Restoration then, is a continuing work.

Nehemiah finished a work that had begun with Zerubbabal nearly a hundred years earlier. God had rejected the people for their sins and removed them to Babylon. After seventy years had passed, the people slowly started to return. The Israelites are now referred to simply as the Jews. The northern tribes never returned to their homeland and the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with a few Levites are all that remained of the once mighty nation of Israel. The lesson they learned was a hard one and we should gain by reading the records of what happened to them. All scripture is inspired and profitable for our learning and instruction, and we should use the book of Nehemiah as instruction from God. We must restore the New Testament Church to what God originally intended it to be. Churches of Christ that do not use the pattern of scripture are no different from any other man-made church, they are not Christ's Church.

When we try to return a congregation that has become a man-made church back to the church of Christ, we will likely face opposition exactly like Nehemiah faced. The restoration had been attempted by others before him, but those opposed to the work had managed to stop it. Unfortunately, not every church can be restored. If the individual members don't see a need they will only react with anger when the truth is taught. The church as a whole is weak because the individual members refuse to hear, read, study, or in any way learn the will of God.

God's Word is our guide to entering the Lord's Church, organizing the Lord's Church, and remaining as the Lord's Church. We should read Nehemiah often to be reminded of what is involved in building the Church and maintaining it properly, and following all of the will of God.