



## STEPPING UP AND STEPPING IN Nehemiah 10

### I. INTRO

- A. One-year anniversary of the shut-down. A year ago, today we held our Journey Wall Summit, which was a last large group gathering...
- B. Here are two questions to consider as we begin our look at Neh 10 today:
  - 1. Have you ever been truly unified with a group of people?
  - 2. What does true unity look like?
- C. Here are three observations to help us think about unity.
  - 1. Disunity in the Church breeds atheism in our culture.
  - 2. We make a mistake when we try to make unity a goal because unity is a fruit, not a goal.
  - 3. Unity is the fruit of people moving together toward the same goal. When visionary servant-leadership is carried out, unity is the natural, harmonic, and organic fruit.
- D. This is what we see culminating in Nehemiah, chapters 8-10. We see a **clear and compelling vision** that builds into a **spiritual renewal** of people that have suffered through some VERY difficult times.
- E. Unity is a major sub-theme in the Nehemiah narrative. Another connected sub-theme is servant-leadership. We don't know if Nehemiah was a natural born leader or if his passion for God and people **propelled him** into a leadership role?? (We know he was a capable manager from his role at the palace...)
- F. Let's quickly review the chapters and examine how **strong servant-leadership** facilitated **unity** that resulted in **spiritual renewal**: (Short course in effective leadership...)
  - 1. **Unity begins with one person's passion for God and people.** We see this throughout the book, but we see it birthed in Neh 1.

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2. **Unity begins to build by truly embracing our current reality with repentance, fasting and prayer, and planning.** (Often times this involves fund raising as well—even the king was willing to invest.) We see this in the second half of Neh 1.
  3. **Unity continues to build as prayer and planning yield a focused vision and strategy. We see this in chap 2 where Neh shares his vision in a winsome way and the people get on board.** (Top-down or collaborative?)
  4. **Unity continues to build as people are trained, empowered, and released to serve, which begins to create a self-sustaining momentum.** We see this in Neh 3.
  5. **To continue the building of unity, obstacles will always need to be overcome through continued prayer, planning, and various acts of courage.** We see this in Neh 4.
  6. **Unity continues to build as systems and strategies are revised and updated in accordance with the present needs.** We see this in Neh 5.
  7. **Unity continues to build as short-term wins are celebrated.** We see this at the end of Neh 6 (when the wall was completed).
  8. **Unity continues to build as metrics are recorded and utilized to adjust the course.** We see this in Neh 7.
  9. **In chapters 8, 9, and 10 we see unity blossoming into a full-blown renewal** where a safe environment has been created and instead of one person repenting, praying, fasting, and planning – the whole group is intently focused on the vision as well as the strategy.
- G. The scene in **Nehemiah 10** is really beautiful. The wall around the city has been rebuilt in record time, the people are caught-up in spiritual renewal. They are repentant, humble, prayerful, anxious to learn and grow. **They are united.** They are acknowledging God’s faithfulness and mercy and their intention is to fully reengage and recommit to their covenant with God – **in writing!**
- H. After Ezra’s prayer was read, Neh 9 concludes with a declaration of this intention. 9:38: *“Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.”*
- I. As we move into chapter 10, here is an outline of the chapter...

1. Vs. 1-27 lists the names of about 80 leaders who signed the covenant.

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2. Vs. 28-29 identify the general obligations of the covenant and I'd like to read those as our primary passage for today...
  - a. *“Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the [non-Jewish] peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding,<sup>29</sup> are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes”* [pray]
  - b. V. 29 speaks about taking on a curse and I'm thinking we should unpack that... In making this covenant, **they agreed to accept a curse from God if they did not keep the covenant and obey God’s Law.** (Not a good idea!) We spoke a few weeks ago about **imprecatory prayers**, or prayers that curse God’s enemies, so what they are doing with this covenant is inviting God’s curse to come upon them in order to bring them back into a place of obedience. So, it’s a good hearted and sincere desire...
3. Vs. 10:30-39 are an agreement not to give their children in marriage to outsiders (10:30); to keep the Sabbath (10:31); and to provide for the ongoing maintenance of temple worship (10:32-39).

J. So, we'll take a closer look at vs. 30-39 in a moment but to summarize, the humility, prayer and fasting, planning, hard work, enduring threats, flexibility, and high-quality servant leadership did lead to unity and spiritual renewal – and the people, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, obtained a genuine desire to serve and honor God with fresh sincerity and zeal. BUT, as we'll see in the next few chapters, this passion is short lived...

K. Here are the **specifics** of the Neh 10 covenant:

1. V. 30: **They recommit to being faithful to God when it comes to their romantic relationships.**
  - a. This was one of our main points from chap 9 last week. The NT equivalent is found in 2 Cor 6:14-15: *“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness...what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?”*

- b. And while we're at it, let's unpack the word **lawlessness** because what Paul is saying is that an unbeliever is "lawless," which could be pretty offensive to an unchurched unbeliever.
- 1) There's a theological phrase that's used mostly in reformed circles that identifies the human condition as "Total Depravity."
  - 2) Again, this can be confusing and can spark reactivity. The idea of Total Depravity, or being lawless, is NOT that we are as depraved or as lawless as we COULD be, it's that we are incapable of maintaining a perfect moral standing on our own.
  - 3) We could say we've been infected with a virus of depravity or lawlessness. It's IN us and it weakens our resolve. And this virus, called a sin nature, is more deadly than COVID because we're born with it.
  - 4) And we could liken salvation to a vaccine, which trains our immune systems to create proteins that fight disease, known as 'antibodies.'
  - 5) When we surrender our life to Jesus Christ, we receive the vaccine of Christ's righteousness (not our righteousness, but His) and this righteousness redeems us and begins to fight our sin disease from the inside out.
2. **V. 31: They recommit to being faithful to God when it comes to doing business.**
  3. **Vs. 32-39: They recommit to being faithful to God when it comes to supporting God's work with their resources.** [Again, the elders and staff would want to say a huge "Thank You" for your faithfulness of this last year. I would only add that we were a few thousand dollars behind budget last month, so if you need to catch-up or begin supporting God's work here at CCC, that would be awesome.]

## II. BODY

- A. The end Nehemiah 9 and Neh 10 open the door for us to consider what it means to covenant with a group of people in a healthy and holy way.
- B. Back in the Fall of 2019 VitalChurch Ministry, after an extensive online survey and many individual interviews provided us with a report Recommendation #5, was Reconsider a formal Membership Covenant as a congregation and leadership.

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C. So, for the next few minutes I'd like to pivot and ask, and try to answer three questions:

1. **What is a church?**
2. **What does it mean to be a church member?**
3. **What is a church membership covenant?**

D. Let's look at them one at a time...

1. **What is a church?**

a. The church is not a building, but a covenant people.

1) This means that we each have responded to Jesus Christ with true repentance and faith and are coming to see ourselves as He sees us... *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”*—Ephesians 2:10

2) A church is about actively and intentionally turning from a self-orientation to God-orientation. We have trusted in the provision of Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation. We have been united (or unified) to Christ by faith in Him.

b. To “be the Church” means we have also identified ourselves with other Christians through baptism. Becoming part of the Church through faith in Jesus and identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism introduces us into a new life. We begin to arrange our lives in light of this new reality of who we are and to Whom we belong.

c. To “be the Church” means we are regularly joining with other believers in worship.

1) This means that we are active in the lives of other believers, encouraging them, speaking the truth to them, listening to their exhortation and hearing the truth from them.

2) It means that we are identifying and using our spiritual gifts to build up the church.” The question is not **if** I'm called to serve, but how and to whom have I been called to serve?

3) One of the best definitions of worship is: Worship is our whole life response to God for His greatness and His empowering grace.

d. To “be the Church” means that we are engaged with other believers in living on mission in this world.

- 1) We are seeking to lovingly and prayerfully making the Person and work of Jesus Christ known to our unchurched co-workers, friends, neighbors, and family.
- 2) This means that we are actively sharing the message of Christ and showing the mercy of Christ to the people to whom God calls us (oikos).
- 3) This means that we each move from being an observer to a participant and from a consumer to a contributor, using our gifts, resources, time and energy to advance God’s purposes in the world with other believers.

**2. What does it mean to be a Church member?**

a. To be a member of a church means that we officially and willingly belong to a group of people with...

- 1) Shared Beliefs (i.e., the gospel is the primary message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and we never outgrow our need for gospel revitalization)
- 2) Shared Sacraments/Ordinances (believer’s baptism and communion)
- 3) Shared Practices (living with an ethical vision of our Kingdom of God citizenship under the Lordship of Jesus)
- 4) Shared Leadership (a rotating plurality of elders). CCC is elder led and staff driven. The Elders delegate all oversight for staff and operations to the Lead Pastor and hold him accountable.
- 5) Shared Purpose (carrying out the mission of Jesus).

**3. What is a membership covenant?** A membership covenant with a local church is a promise that a Christian makes with God, that particular local church, its members, and its leadership to meaningfully participate in the life and mission of the church.

**III. CONCLUSION**

A. So, as we close, what’s the difference between an OT covenant and a NT covenant?

1. Both Covenants are rooted in grace. God chose Abram and Sarah to launch the nation of Israel because Abram believed God and was credited with righteousness (Rom 4:3)
  2. In the Old Covenant/Testament the forgiveness of sins was temporary. God appointed Levites/Priests and set-up ceremonial laws to regularly participate in where their sins were forgiven.
  3. With the New Covenant/Testament, Jesus has fulfilled the entire law, knowing that no other human could live their entire life in perfect obedience to the Law of God.
  4. Here is something interesting about the Old Covenant...In Nehemiah 9:38, when they endeavor to renew the covenant, the literal translation is to "cut a covenant." Covenants in the OT were cut because there was (almost) always an animal sacrificed as part of the covenant.
  5. A covenant always costs something. The New Covenant cost Jesus His life. The NT refers to Him as, *"The [sacrificial] Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn 1:29, 36).
- B. When all is said and done, the Bible (both O and N Testaments) is a messy narrative, filled with longing, loss, joys, victories, and defeats. And we can learn a lot about wisdom, leadership, how to handle grief and loss, God's lovingkindness and mercy. We can also learn a lot about what NOT to do...
- C. But in the fulness of time Jesus left the comfort and perfection of heaven to come down into our brokenness to live the life of perfection that we couldn't live and to die the death we should have died.
- D. It's been said that while salvation is free it will cost us everything -- the self-life, comfort, preferences, ease, and some of the passing pleasures of this world. It could also cost us a calling or a preferred vocation. We must count the cost.
- E. Where do take your stand today?