

A New Community!
Nehemiah chapter 11
Building for God's Glory!
May 5th 2024
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Last week someone said to me, after the sermon on Nehemiah chapter 10, "Do we have to read out all those hard-to-pronounce Jewish names on a Sunday morning?"

My response is three-fold:

- 1) The apostle Paul says "All Scripture (which includes this list of names) is God-breathed" and "is profitable", which means God has placed they names here for a purpose.
- 2) In the second place, if we were Chinese or Russian speakers, a long list of English surnames such as Bonneville, Dankworth, Loughty, Nithercott and McQuoid would sound just as discordant to the ear, so let's learn to be globally considerate!
- 3) But most of all, each one of those names represent a real person, a life lived with all its joys and sorrows, and most important of all, a member of God's Old Covenant people who came to settle in Jerusalem to form a new community.

The list in chapter 11 is in fact the crescendo of the book of Nehemiah!

The completion of the walls, back in chapter 3 is not the pinnacle of the book; the creation of a new community in chapter 11 is!

What God is doing throughout the Bible, his big plan, his saving plan, is to gather a group of people together under his name, for his glory!

Not drawing this person to himself over here and another one over there, you in your small corner and I in mine, no, but gathering them together into a new, unique, loving, diverse community! That is what God is doing in the Old Testament:

"I will make you into a great nation" God said to Abraham in Genesis 12

And that is what God is doing in the New Testament:

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9)

When Paul went around preaching the Gospel his aim was to gather the converts into little communities called churches, here and there and everywhere. Not to see them converted to Christ but having no connection one to the other, she working in a bakery over here, he working in the fields over there; but to gather brothers and sisters together into holy communities called churches!

Nehemiah chapter 12 lists all the people who moved into Jerusalem to form a brand new living community of God’s people! That’s the meaning and the teaching of this chapter.

And we are to glean from this chapter of sacred Scripture at least four lessons for every New Testament gathering of God’s people, for each local church:

- The church is a unique community!
- The church is an Bible community!
- The church is a diverse community!
- The church is a loving community!

But first let’s remind ourselves of the story.

- God’s people had wandered away from him centuries before and so God had lovingly chastised them at the hands of the Babylonians who burnt their city and took their people into exile.
- But because the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love; because he does not harbour his anger forever” (Psalm 103) he promised to restore them in 70 years
- And sure enough, they were allowed to return; with God’s help they rebuilt the temple (that’s in the book of Ezra) and then the walls of Jerusalem (we’ve seen that in Nehemiah)

But the city of Jerusalem was virtually empty—most of the 42,360 people (chapter 7) who had returned from exile had settled in the towns and villages surrounding Jerusalem!

“Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it and the houses had not yet been rebuilt...” (chapter 7:4)

The whole point of rebuilding the walls was to provide for and protect a new community living within the walls. The bricks and mortar weren't the end product, a vibrant new community living within the walls was!

And the repopulating of the city of Jerusalem described in Nehemiah 11 is here to teach us lessons about the church, the gathered people of God, wherever they meet.

I. The Church is a Unique Community!

The people gathered, Jerusalem were the only people on the face of the earth who could call themselves the people of God. The surrounding nations were not God's people, the Persian Empire did not belong to God, only the people of Israel, now being gathered to live in Jerusalem could call themselves God's people! And so it is with the church! church is a totally unique community of people. The only group of people who can call themselves God's people!

It's a simple first lesson, the church, every true gathering of Christian people is unique; *“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God”* (1 Peter 2:10)

This can't be said of any of the other communities you and I belong to—the LinkedIn community, the global Facebook community, your favourite sports club, the local dog-walking group, the girl guides, our flesh and blood families, boy scouts or Women's Institute! Only the church community are God's people!

What a privilege to belong to the church! Do we value and rejoice in that privilege? Perhaps you are asking, How do I join this new community? You must repent of our sins and believe the Good News of Jesus Christ. That's it!

II. The Church is a Bible community

We've seen that in chapter 8 where Ezra read the Bible, in chapter 9 where the people wept over their neglect of the Bible and in chapter 10 where they bound themselves with a vow: *"to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord."* (10:29)

The whole life of this community flowed out of the Bible. They were Bible people, a Bible community.

True Christian churches are Bible communities who gather around God's Word to read it, to study it and seek to obey it.

"Let the word of Christ (that is the Scriptures) dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." (Colossians 3:16)

As our cultures drifts further and further away from God's Word and as many of the historic church denominations turn their back on God's Word, may the Lord keep us faithful.

What follows isn't my personal analysis, I can't remember who I got it from, but I have found it very helpful. Stay with me.

In the first few centuries of the church the Bible battle was **Christology**, who is Jesus Christ? Is he just a man or is he man and God? The truth of Scripture won out—Jesus is both man and God, two natures combined in One Person.

In the 1300, 1400s, 1500s, the Bible battle was **soteriology**, long word for salvation—how do we get right with God, through our good works or through faith in Christ. Truth won out—we are saved by faith in Christ alone.

In the 20th-21st century, the Bible battle is **anthropology**, what is mankind? There are four worldly influences upon the church today trying to lead us away from a Biblical view of mankind:

- A **species war**, are human beings just another animal, or will Bible truth win out—that they are unique, towering above the animal world, made in the image and

glory of God?

- A **gender war**, are human beings born with a spectrum of genders from male to female, or will Bible truth win out, that we are born either male or female?
- A **sexuality war**, is sex permissible in any human setting, or will Bible truth win out that the only righteous sex is within the setting of one married man and woman.
- And a **gender/role** war, are men and women free to take any role they chose, or will Bible truth win out, that while men and women are created equal in the church, there is a clear difference in role between them, which must be seen in the church and in the home.

Our battle is not Christology or Soteriology but Anthropology. And we must remain firm in the truth, because churches all around us are drifting.

BTW have you ever wondered why men lead our worship services here on a Sunday? Why only men preach in mixed gatherings? Why men serve as elders and pastors? Is it because we are sexist? Because we think men are somehow better or higher than women? Because we are biased against our much loved and honoured sisters? Not at all. The only reason is that the Scriptures demand that men lead and teach the church.

III. The Church is a diverse community

The people who came to live in Jerusalem came from many different walks of life: Provincial leaders, Priests, Levites, Temple servants, Chief officers & Supervisors.

And from many different places: From the towns of Judah and the towns of Benjamin. From the north and from as far south as Beer-sheba!

The population of the city, this new community, was made up of a wide range of people!

When we come into the New Testament that diversity explodes! Because the new community of God now embraces people from every nation in the world and from every class and every group in the world! (The people who made up the inhabitants of Jerusalem were all from just one nation, Israel).

*“Therefore go and make disciples of **all nations**” (Matthew 28)*

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” (Galatians 3:28)

Can I say this? There is something wrong with a church if everyone is from: the same social background, the same ethnic background, the same age-group, the same educational background, the same gender, the same class.

I heard of a recent situation in a famous London Church which is filled with just young people. Well when one of these young couples had a child they found the church was not welcoming anymore. No understanding or provision was made for yuppies with kids!

Diversity is all the rage today, but the Gospel was in there first! Christian churches were the pioneer communities to practice true diversity, where repentant people from every background join in Christ to become one. *“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”* (Revelation 7)

Let’s make sure in our coffee hall that we look out for and chat to people who are different from ourselves. Perhaps make that your aim today. Out there in the world “birds of a feather flock together” but in the church birds of all feathers mingle in loving community.

IV. The Church is a loving community

When God’s people returned from exile, most of them settled in the villages and towns around Jerusalem where they had built homes, cultivated fields and raised livestock - out there in the countryside. The leaders lived in Jerusalem, *“Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem”* (verse 1)

But how did the ordinary folks commit? Some people just volunteered—and everyone cheered them on, *“The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.”* (verse 2)

But others were chosen by lot, can you imagine 10 straws, only one of them is short? Ten families randomly picked a straw and the family with the short straw brought their family to the city, *“the rest of the people cast lots to bring one in every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns.”* (verse 2). With around 42000 people in all, that means over 4000 people moved home!

Here’s the point—both groups, those who came voluntarily and those who picked the short straws made tremendous personal sacrifices to join the new community and live in the city.

They sold their countryside homes and fields, they left what was known and comfortable to them and moved into a new and unknown urban environment and way of living. (They say that moving house ranks way up there as one of the most stressful events in life. Some of you know all about that!) Well these people made that sacrifice to become part of God’s new community!

Love lies behind all true sacrifice. These people loved this new community of God’s people, that’s why they moved.

And love, brothers and sisters, ought to characterise every true Christian community!

Many people comment on how loving this community at Manor Park Church is. If that is so, it’s got nothing to do with us, and everything to do with the God who has poured out his love in our hearts by his Spirit. To him alone be the glory! Let’s not this love for granted, but be active in our love for one another: *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”* (1 John 4:7)

Summary

God is in the business of creating his new community of people, the Church Global, stretching across time and place, and churches local. Whenever we find a true church we have found a unique group of people, a people who submit to God’s Word, who come from every sort of background and who are bound together with a sacrificial love that comes from God. *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us... This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* (1 John)