

Corporate Covenant
Nehemiah 9:38-10:39
March 2, 2014

Introduction – Solidarity

There are times when the status quo just won't do. Change is inevitable. For most of the twentieth century, Poland was land of proud people, but hardly a nation. During WWI, the ethnic Poles did not possess their own land – it was split between Austro-Hungary, the German Empire and the Russians. Much of the warfare on the eastern front occurred where they lived. Their national borders after the First World War lasted only a short time as the Nazi's invaded in 1939. The end of WWII saw Poland become a Soviet satellite as they lived under the Communist boot for over forty years.

But everything changed in Poland – and the rest of the world – in the 1980's. Inspired by their native son, Pope John Paul II's nine-day visit to Poland in June of 1979, the people began to push back against their Communist oppressors. Against all odds, 17,000 workers seized control of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk on August 14, 1980. Soon, workers from other factories joined with them. In seventeen days, the oppressed workers secured the right to organize as a self-governing trade union. In the next year and a half the union grew to nine million members, one fourth of the country's population, before the Communist government declared martial law and outlawed it.

For nearly a decade the union and its charismatic leader, Lech Walesa, were bullied and harassed by Poland's Communist government. But with moral and financial pressure from the West, the government finally capitulated and allowed the union legal status and the ability to vote in a national election. In June of 1989, the people and their democratically elected leader, Walesa, controlled the government. Six months later, the Iron Curtin folded with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The world had dramatically changed.

The name of the union speaks of the power of people united together in agreement for a common cause: "Solidarity."

For nearly a century and a half after the fall of Jerusalem, the people who remained had lived in shame and oppression. Seventy years after the fall of the city, the first exiles had returned and begun work on rebuilding the Temple. But they were intimidated by their enemies and the project stopped for sixteen years. Even after the Temple was finally completed, the city still lived in shame as they had no protection with rubble for city walls. But during the time of Nehemiah, the people of Jerusalem had been a part of a God-empowered turn-around in just over two months. They had rebuilt the city's wall out of ruins of conquest amidst daunting threats from their enemies. They stood proud of their accomplishment but were brought to their knees in sorrow and repentance as they once again encountered the neglected Word of God. They

celebrated a traditional feast with great rejoicing and they recounted their history – both God’s faithfulness and their stubbornness. The nation was truly repentant and sorry for their sins. But sorrow and intention are not enough. In Chapter 10, they renew their covenant of obligation with God together – in solidarity.

Text – Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

“On the seals are the names of...the governor, ...the priests and the Levites...

“The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

“We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law. We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

The Nature of a Biblical Covenant

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of man who every week at prayer meeting would pray that God would “sweep out the cobwebs” in his soul. Week after week, he would repeat the same prayer but the people saw no change in his behavior. Finally, someone added, “...and while you’re at it, Lord, **please kill the spider!**”

Intentions are not enough. There has to be change in behavior. We have to “kill the spider.” That’s why the Scriptures emphasize repentance. It is a change in the way we live. The Jews had long lived without the Word of God. They had again been reminded of God’s faithfulness and their rebellion and they reacted with godly sorrow and confession. They had said “amen” to their long national confession. Now it was time to add feet to the fire that burned in their souls. They bound themselves by an oath to be obedient to God’s commands.

The principle here is so obvious that we are tempted to overlook it. God promised his people that if they lived within the covenant that they would be blessed. If they were disobedient and rebellious, they would have troubles. Their history demonstrated it. Psalm 1 explains it.

Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.
 He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
 that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
 In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
 for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

Notice that it is not what the man in Psalm 1 thinks or believes that determines his destiny. It is what he does. The power of ideas alone will not change us. It is the power of our belief in action – lived out with other believers that will change us and, in turn, will change the world.

The binding oath that the people make in Nehemiah 10 is not new. God made the covenant with his people centuries earlier at Mt. Sinai after they were delivered from Egypt. In Nehemiah, they were renewing the covenant - like a married couple renewing their vows in reconciliation after

affairs and a long season of neglect. In their renewal, they highlight three areas of particular concern which are symbolic of their promise to obey the entire covenant.

Mixed Marriages

The first area that they will correct is a critical concern. They had been marrying foreign women and giving their daughters to marry foreign men. God had specifically forbidden them from intermarriage in the Law. If you have a cross reference Bible, you'll find the prohibition in Exodus 34:16 and Deuteronomy 7:3. Just a generation earlier, the same problem had been addressed in the book of Ezra. And the problem won't go away. We'll address it again in the story in just a few weeks.

Why was intermarriage such a problem? Is God racist or xenophobic? Hear me on this. This is very important for us to understand. Let's put away our modern American viewpoint and values and understand what God was doing at this time in history.

God's mission has always been to redeem, restore, and save the world that he had made. In the early chapters of the Old Testament, he had called Abraham through whom he would raise a nation that would know him and serve him. Eventually, through this nation of Israel, God would bring a Messiah – Jesus Christ through whom he would redeem his creation. This people – this nation – were to be his people, called by his name. They would be distinct from the rest of the nations who did not know God or serve him. Because of God's plan through Israel, he forbade them to intermarry with other nations so that they would not be drawn away to the worship of pagan gods. The sad history of Israel is that they did turn to pagan gods, in large part because they intermarried with people who did not worship Yahweh. King Solomon was the worst offender and it is significant that during and after his reign, the nation slid into its worst rebellion and idolatry.

Why was intermarriage such a problem? Because the Scripture says that the two will become one flesh. That is not just a reference to physical union. It is the joining of two souls together. And when that happened with an idol worshipper, the obligation to love Yahweh exclusively was compromised. It was inevitable.

The principle has meaning for us today. Certainly, a believer should not marry an unbeliever for this very reason. Young people, hear me on this. Save yourself a lifetime of heartache. Do not marry someone who does not share your belief and love of God. Don't do it.

Racial intermarriage today is not an issue if the two are both believers. In Christ, the New Testament teaches, there is no Jew or Greek. Race in the family of God has no bearing whatsoever. The walls, the Apostle Paul says, have come down! But I believe the prohibition against intermarriage for the Jews in the Old Testament teaches us to avoid entanglements with

the world today. Do not give your heart to another. John tells us, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.” (I John 2:15-16)

What is your first love? Your work? Sports? The outdoors? Hobbies? Material things? If that is the case, you have become an idolater, just as the ancient Jews had done with their intermarriage. Repent and break the bonds, just as the Jews in our passage today did.

Sabbath

The second concern that the Jews mentioned was the observance of the Sabbath. There was no other nation in that day that observed a Sabbath – one day a week without work – set aside for rest and reflection. By observing a Sabbath, the Jews distinguished themselves from other nations. But years of neglect removed that distinction so that they were no longer a “peculiar people” distinguishing themselves as set apart for God. They became like everyone else and worked every day of the week. Their renewal promise to observe the Sabbath was significant because it would once again set them apart from the other nations.

Observing the Sabbath required faith, without which, the Bible tells us, we cannot please God. A day of rest is for our benefit, but it also requires that we live by faith. There is always more work to be done. (Am I right?) This is especially true for farmers, who were the economic backbone of Israel in that day. To take a day off from only the most necessary and minor tasks required faith in God that the work would get done on the other six days. But they took it even one step further. They also agreed to give their land rest from cultivation every seven years. They would take the land out of production. And the government wasn't paying them to do it! That took real faith! But the people had renewed their obligation to follow the law.

Observing the Sabbath has seemed to fall out of fashion lately. We elevate workaholicism to a place of virtue. We're fools. God instituted a day of rest for our benefit. It may or may not be Sunday. Sunday is certainly not a day of rest for me! I try and take Friday as a day that I don't do work. It doesn't always happen. But when you work every day of the week, you will eventually pay a price, including paradoxically, loss of productivity. Though we are not bound to a certain day of the week as our Sabbath, I encourage you not to ignore the Sabbath principle. Take one day a week for rest and reflection. That is the pathway to health that God has ordained for us.

Support for the House of God

Finally, the people agreed to support the Temple ministry. For the Jews, the Temple was the place where they encountered God. It was “the place where God's name dwelt.” The restoration of the Temple was a long process that began more than a hundred years before Nehemiah. The

people of the land were poor and living in shame. With the heavy tax burden from the Persian king, they had barely enough to make ends meet for their own family. The Temple ministry, therefore, had become neglected. The ministry of the prophet Malachi was during the same era. The restoration of giving and support for the Temple ministry was critical to the renewal that Ezra and Nehemiah had begun. Malachi's words are convicting:

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

Malachi 3:7-10

Let's not be naïve, friends. Giving to the ministry of the church that you attend is a critical part of discipleship. If you're not giving to the ministry, you're not fully following God. I can't be true to the Scriptures unless I say that. I don't say it to increase our bottom line. I say it for your sake. Test God in this and see if he won't open the windows of heaven and pour out his blessing on you. If you look at the passage in Nehemiah you'll see all kinds of mundane things: along with money, there is bread, grain, firstfruits, cattle, even wood! Friends, the tithes and offerings that you give to the church may seem to go to mundane things: salaries, utilities, paper, and so on. But your gifts also go to support other ministries as well as the less fortunate in our community.

Winston Churchill said, "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." Let's be like the people of Nehemiah and not neglect the house of our God.

Solidarity as the Covenant People of God

The leader of the Polish labor union, Lech Walesa, was a charismatic and committed leader. But he could not defeat the oppressive Communists by himself. Communism was overthrown by the people – united together in solidarity for a common cause.

Church, there is much work to be done. The oppression of sin and darkness hangs heavy over our land, our community and over many of our families. We need:

- People who are willing to give some of their own time in order to work with our children – teaching them and passing on a living Christian faith...
- People who will be hospitable and care for the infants who come to us...

- People who are willing to care for the neglected and shut-ins who just need love and touch from another person...
- People who are willing to step out of their comfortable schedule and give time and service to those who are in need in our community.
- People who are willing to give time to mentor a child...
- People who are bold in sharing their faith in both word and deed...

We are God's people. We have been given the charge to be the vanguard of his kingdom. But we don't do it alone. I can't. You can't. But we can change this corner of the world in Jesus name if we agree together and act in solidarity. That's what it means to live together as a covenant people. We agree together that we will follow Jesus. We agree together that we will say "yes" to him and be obedient. We agree that we will love each other and live as the Scriptures tell us to live. We have a task to do and it will only get done when we agree to act together:

We've a story to tell to the nations,
that shall turn their hearts to the right,
a story of truth and mercy,
a story of peace and light,

We've a song to be sung to the nations,
that shall lift their hearts to the Lord,
a song that shall conquer evil
and shatter the spear and sword,

We've a message to give to the nations,
that the Lord who reigneth above
hath sent us his Son to save us,
and show us that God is love,

For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
and the dawning to noonday bright;
and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
the kingdom of love and light.