

Construction Sites & Church Cafeterias

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part VII

Nehemiah 3

Introduction

I have been collecting, for some time now, different stories and clippings related to the subject of reading the directions first or simply following directions. I will admit, though, that I have been collecting things that justify the fact that I do not need to read the directions first. I do not do that. Even though, my family still loves to laugh at the time, several Christmases ago, when I put my daughter's tricycle together. I told my wife, a number of times, that I could do it without the directions. Then I came to the final step, of attaching the seat, and discovered that I had put the thing together upside down! Where did I throw those directions?!

Now, I did read these directions, recently, when my oldest daughter purchased a new straightening iron for her hair. Among the directions were these helpful suggestions: "do not use while in the shower, do not drop this into water, do not let heated surfaces touch your eyes." Here is one I really found helpful – "never use while sleeping." Now that explains those bad hair days – you fixed your hair while you were asleep!

Here are some other brilliant directions that were sent to me by a member of our church:

- On Tesco's Tiramisu dessert – "Do not turn upside down." And where do you think this was written? On the bottom – too late!
- On Marks & Spencer Bread Pudding – "Product will be hot after heating."

- On a bottle of Boot's children's cough medicine – "Do not drive a car after taking this medication."
- On Nytol Sleep Aid – "Warning: May cause drowsiness."
- On a child's Superman costume – "Wearing of this garment does not enable one to fly." Now that one I can understand!

Here is a true story that John MacArther told, on his radio program, that was also printed in a journal called, *Feathers*.

Evidently the British needed to more carefully read the directions on the use of a special gun that NASA simply calls the "Chicken Gun." This gun has been specifically built to launch a dead chicken at maximum velocity directly onto the windshields of airliners, military jets, and even the space shuttle. The idea is to simulate the frequent incidents of collisions with airborne fowl to test the strength of the windshield materials and construction.

British engineers heard about the gun and wanted to use it to test the windshield of their newest high-speed train. Arrangements were made, and a gun was sent to the British engineers. The testing site was arranged and the gun was loaded with a dead chicken. When the gun was fired, the engineers stood shocked as the chicken hurtled out of the barrel, smashed through the shatterproof windshield, blasted through the control console, broke the engineer's backrest in two,

and embedded itself in the back wall of the cabin. The horrified British sent NASA the disastrous results of the experiment, explaining what they had done, along with the designs of the windshield, and then, asked for further suggestions. NASA responded with a one-line instruction: "Next time, thaw the chicken."

I think that most of us would agree that, when it comes to testing windshields, or taking medicine, or using new equipment, following the directions, silly as some of them may sound, is an important thing to do.

This past week, and any given week, more than seventy or more churches in America closed their doors and went out of business. While I am sure there are a host of reasons behind that tragic statistic, I am convinced that, for the most part, people failed to read the directions. While most people would follow the directions on how to use that new lawnmower, many Christians believe that a church somehow operates on its own – without any divine direction. Ladies and gentlemen, a growing, reaching, impacting church does not just happen.

Certainly, any church, including this one, has, at times, blasted a frozen chicken or two into the air. But the church that honors God never does it on its own – it builds by the directions of God's blueprint, called His Word.

Building the Body

By the way, what is a church? The word church is "ekklesia". It comes from the verb "kalew," which means, "to call." The prefix "ek" further defines the word "ekklesia" to mean, "called out ones."

1. A church is called out from the world.

They are a separated group of people who have been redeemed by the grace of God. Like shipwrecked and drowning people in the ocean, we have been rescued on the lifeboat called Calvary. We have been rescued by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the church is not just called out from the world.

2. It is also commissioned to go back into the world.

The called out ones band together and pool their resources and then go back to the site of the shipwreck and pull as many people into their boat as they possibly can.

But how do you use this thing called the church? How does it operate? What do the directions say?

Well, if you turn in your set of blueprints to I Corinthians, chapter 12, you discover that the church is not only called out of the world and commissioned to go back into the world, but also,

3. It is compared to a living, human body.

I Corinthians 12

Look at I Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 14 through 18.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

The manual on operating the church looks more like an anatomy chart than an organizational chart. Every person has a role to play in the body. We have people who make up the hands and feet and mouth and brain, Lord willing. Everyone operates according to that gift, or gifts, that God has given him and then, he becomes the gift of God to other parts.

D. L. Moody, who, over one hundred years ago, founded a church, a school, a publishing house, and more, said,

A great many people have got a false idea about the church. They have an idea that the church is a place to simply rest in . . . to get into a nicely cushioned pew, and contribute to the charities, listen to the minister, and do their share to keep the church out of bankruptcy, is all they want. The idea of work for them – actual work in the church – never enters their minds.

We are not reading the directions!

Ephesians 4

Look at the directions in Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 11 through 13.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of

the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith . . .

By the way, “the unity of faith” is a key phrase to understand. We are attempting to attain to the unity of the faith. When the word faith is preceded by the article “the,” it is referring to a body of truth, doctrinal truth, that forms the foundation of our faith.

Jude, in chapter 1, verse 3, wrote about,

. . . the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

In Acts, chapter 6, verse 7, we read,

And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Paul said of himself, in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 23, that,

. . . He who once persecuted us [the church] is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.

Our unity is always built upon our body of truth, frequently called, the faith. And I say all of this simply because the church in America, and many of those churches who close their doors, have failed to read this in their Book of directions.

Unity is not derived from everybody thinking alike, or everybody liking the same kind of music, or everybody eating the same kind of food. Praise God. Our unity is not based on personality, or appearance, or social standing. Our unity is based on our collective commitment to the faith; the truth of Holy Scripture.

Paul goes on, in verses 14 through 16 of Ephesians, chapter 4, to say,

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Benefits of Body Building

Paul tells us that two things happen when the body grows like it should.

1. We are rescued from spiritual deception.

When you build up the body of Christ (verse 12), by attaining to the unity of the faith (verse 13), you are mature enough to keep from falling into spiritual deception (verse 14).

One of the characteristics of children is gullibility. I have fun teasing my children by trying to fool them in some way. I remember telling my youngest girl something at the dinner table when she was five, and then laughing, along with the family, because of the way she had been fooled.

I said, “Honey, it’s okay, Daddy’s just pulling your leg.”

She immediately looked under the table at her legs and said, “No you’re not, Daddy.”

This is the same girl who, a few years ago, thought we were actually putting juice into our gas tanks because we would say, “We need to stop here and get some juice . . . we’re almost out of juice.”

For all she knew, Texaco was the great dispenser of apple juice!

Tell a child anything, and he may believe you. Part of growing up, as a body of believers, is that, together, we avoid the deception of false teachers.

2. Another benefit of building the body is, not only are we rescued from spiritual deception, but also from spiritual disability.

Again, in verse 16, there is the analogy of the human body.

. . . the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, [tendon and ligament and nerve and blood vessel] according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body . . .

The question you never ask is whether or not someone else is supplying his part for the functioning of the body, but rather, whether or not you are supplying your part to the building up of the body in love. When every joint of the body does its job, the body is not disabled, but coordinated. That is true with a physical body and that is true with a spiritual body, called the local church.

Everyone contributes to the process by virtue of his spiritual gifting from God. Everyone rolls up his sleeves; everyone supplies a little elbow grease;

everyone in the church functions for the benefit of the church. That keeps us from spiritual deception and spiritual disability.

I have developed a scenario that I use in our new member class to illustrate the operation of the church. It is a scene, taken from a cafeteria, where a woman has tripped and fallen and spilled her bowl of soup. If we were all there using our gifts for the benefit of not only this woman, but also the entire church family, we, the body of believers, would operate like this:

- The person, in our midst, who is a gifted pastor or shepherd would immediately form a line and guide people around the woman so they do not slip on the spilled soup or trip over the woman.
- The person with the gift of mercy would immediately go and sit down with the woman on the cafeteria floor and whisper, “I know how you must feel. Here, let me wipe some of this soup off your clothing.”
- The gifted teacher, among us, would stand and say, “May I have your attention please. This dear woman has fallen and spilled her soup. You could translate the word spill, ‘to tip out, or to tilt in an extreme direction.’ There are reasons why she spilled her soup – actually, there are three reasons – so get ready to take notes so you will not spill your soup either.”
- The person with the gift of giving has already gone back and purchased another bowl of soup and is on his way to give the woman another bowl.
- After the woman has been seated at a table, the gifted exhorter leads everyone in the cafeteria in a round of three cheers for the woman who was willing to get back up on her feet.
- And then, the gifted servants arrive with a mop and pail to clean everything up and put the cafeteria back in order.

Finding your place in the church cafeteria is not rocketry science, but it does not just happen either. It is birthed by a willingness to supply whatever you can provide. And, you discover that, when you do, just as Paul said it in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 16b,

... [it] causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Now, if I asked you to provide an illustration of a group of people acting like the church is supposed to act, where in all of the Bible would you turn? To Nehemiah, chapter 3, of course.

Lessons From An Old Testament Construction Site

In Nehemiah, chapter 3, you discover lessons from an Old Testament construction site.

Nehemiah planned to rebuild and repair the wall in Jerusalem. His plan could be summarized with the phrase, “divide and conquer,” for that is exactly what he did.

About forty names are given of those who headed the many task forces. He had carefully planned his work and now, he works his plan.

The first lesson that Nehemiah provides the New Testament church is this:

All of the people willing to work . . .

1. All of the people, who were willing to work, were given the opportunity.

Whether priests or professionals; noble born or common stock; single men or women, both are mentioned in the work; professionals or politicians; native residents or outsiders; craftsmen or artists, they were all given opportunity to work.

Some of them would repair the wall closest to their homes. Others were commuters and were given various locations. Some repaired existing walls, while others started from scratch, using the blocks that had since been broken. Some of them worked on the different gates, with their massive hinges and bolts, while others picked up rubble and carted trash away.

I find it interesting that the very first group of workers Nehemiah mentioned was led by the High Priest. In chapter 3, verse 1, we read,

Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel.

These towers were on the westward side of the Sheep Gate. It is significant that Nehemiah gave the priests this particular location, as nearby the sheep and lambs, that were brought to the temple for sacrifice, would enter the Sheep Gate. This was holy ground to them.

They could not possibly know that approximately four hundred years later, Jesus Christ himself, the Lamb of God, would walk through that reconstructed gate to go and pray in a garden nearby called Gethsemane. And then, no doubt, was brought back through that same gate by the soldiers who arrested Him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. He was, indeed, the final lamb led to the slaughter, as Isaiah tells us, in chapter 53, verse 7.

But, priests do not work with stone and hammer. They did here. And, they set the example for the rest of the people. Anyone who was willing to work on the wall, did!

That leads me to the second lesson.

Some of the people did not necessarily know . . .

2. Some of the people did not necessarily know how to do the work.

You will notice in verses 8 and 9 that,

. . . Uzziel the son of Harhaiah of the goldsmiths made repairs. And next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. And next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs.

Imagine a politician, a goldsmith, and a perfume maker laying brick. What did they know about building walls and restoring breaches? It did not matter. Evidently, Nehemiah provided them with additional workers who could show them how.

The person who says he cannot because he does not know how, should learn a lesson from a perfume maker who is hauling rock and working with a trowel.

Some of the people were able to do . . .

3. Some of the people were able to do more work than others.

In verses 11, 19, 21, 24, 27, and 30 you have the interesting phrase repeated, that they,

. . . repaired another section . . .

In other words, they did the job they were asked to do, and then, they did more.

What a tremendous testimony of people who went the extra mile.

Some of the people were willing to work in

more . . .

4. The fourth characteristic of a good church is found in that some of the people were willing to work in more difficult places than others.

Look at verse 14 and you will notice a man named,

. . . Malchijah the son of Rechab, the official of the district of Beth-haccherem who repaired the Refuse Gate . . .

That term “Refuse Gate” can be translated “Dung Gate”. Basically, it was the gate through which all the garbage and filth was taken. Here is a member of the royal caste willingly working in a terrible place where the stench from the valley of Hinnom below, where the garbage was dumped, wafted up to him throughout the day.

Compare his working conditions with the location mentioned in the next verse.

Shallum the son of Col-hozeh, the official of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate. He built it, covered it, and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah at the king’s garden as far as the steps that descend from the city of David.

In other words, you have one official who willingly works near the garbage dump and another who gets to work by the pool near the king’s flower gardens.

Some of the people were willing to work in more difficult places than others.

Some of the people were willing to work . . .

5. Some of the people were willing to work harder than others.

Even among all those who willingly worked, one man shone above all the others. He is mentioned in verse 20.

After him Baruch the son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.

This is the only person whose attitude or spirit Nehemiah mentions anything about. The Hebrew word translated “zealously,” comes from a word that means, “to burn or to glow.”

Just because you work willingly, does not mean you work with a glow. Right? Baruch represents those who work – and smile while they work. They

show up at their posts with cheer and kind words. They are a pleasure to serve with and around. May the tribe of Baruch increase in the church today.

Some of the people able to work . . .

6. Some of the people, who were able to work, would not.

One author makes the comment that Nehemiah not only mentioned the workers, but also the shirkers.

In verse 5,

Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.

We are not told why, but are just informed, by Nehemiah, that there were some who refused to help. It is interesting that the nobles would not work, but the commoners would.

Even today, in the church, the ranks are filled with common people much more so than the world's influential. As I Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 26, says,

. . . not many mighty, not many noble . . .

All the people who worked with their hands revealed the condition . . .

7. All the people who worked with their hands revealed the condition of their hearts.

If you skip ahead to chapter 4, you discover a wonderful description of these workers, which we would long to be true of us today. Look at verse 6.

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

This literally means that their hearts were in their work. They put their hearts into the work.

A Question You Need to Answer For Yourself

Soon, many things will change about our church. We are going to leave this warm, comfortable

auditorium. We will leave this intimate space designed for four hundred, although we have found a way to pack more than six hundred in here. We will go to a new space designed to seat 1,600. That will be so different. It will feel differently and will require adjustment and flexibility.

In our staff and elder meetings, we have spent time talking about what will happen when space limitations are lifted. Most of us expect about five hundred to a thousand new people to come during our first twelve months. For you old-timers, you may remember that, in this facility, we had five hundred to come in the first year. I expect the same will occur in the new building. That is a lot of people. Many of them will be curious. All of them will have needs.

Who will feed them? Who will disciple them? Who will pray with them? Who will teach their children? Who will wipe their tears away – children and adults? Who will challenge them? Who will love them? Who will direct their cars to parking spaces? Who will change their babies' diapers? Who will teach them stories? Who will sing in the choir and lead us in worship? Who will dust their instruments and play them?

My place at the wall -

Where, at the wall, will you roll up your sleeves? Where, in the cafeteria, will you serve another? I promise, there will be spilled soup. Do you just attend church, or is your heart in the work that God is doing in the body of believers?

Construction sites and cafeterias are not necessarily glamorous places to work, but they are godly and God honoring places where the work is never done in vain. In fact, the results will last forever, because we are building people – and people last forever.

Remember Paul's challenge in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 16,

. . . every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causing the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/2/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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