

ENEMIES FROM WITHIN

We first went to Kuwait in 1995 to pastor the English speaking church. We were praying that the Arabic speaking church, would grow. This began to happen. In 1996 the church began to flourish. Wonderful things were happening and God was moving in amazing ways. It was at the height of this growth and excitement that a disagreement began amongst the Arabic church leadership. Over the next year this disagreement escalated until one Sunday there was a fist fight during one of the services and blood was spilled on the steps to the stage. Police were called, criminal charges were laid. Some of the leaders wanted the pastor removed so his office and house were broken into. False charges were put against him. In the years that followed the name of Jesus was dragged through the mud in Kuwait. The growth stopped and many from the church fell away. It was not enemies on the outside that destroyed the church – it was believers within the church.

During the Gulf War more people died of friendly fire than from enemy fire. In other words, more people died from the hands of their friends than their foes. Unfortunately the church can sometimes be like that. Very often the greatest resistance we have to building up the church is not from the outside but from the inside.

Today we are continuing in our series looking at the book of Nehemiah. Two weeks ago we saw that there was opposition from enemies outside of Jerusalem that had to be dealt with. Today we are talking about the fact that, whenever you seek to build, there can also be opposition from within.

Nehemiah 5:1 Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. 2 Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." 3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." 4 Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." 6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. 9 So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! 11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."

While the Israelites were facing pressure from the surrounding peoples they were also facing problems from within. The work of building the walls meant that the people had no time to produce food and feed themselves and their families. Some of those with more resources available to them were using this opportunity to "lend" food to others but at a high price. Many could not afford to pay and were having to sell their land and even children in order to survive. These problems were not the result of enemy attack but from people within the walls of the city they were helping to build.

In the church we also see that sometimes our greatest obstacles to building come from within the walls of the church.

People come from difficult weeks to the church and let their guard down only to be hurt from inside. Conflicts are inevitable in the church because the church is made up of sinners – just like you. The issue is not whether conflict will develop but how do we handle it and continue to build.

1. Remember you are Family (vs. 7) ... from your own countrymen

Nehemiah confronted the nobles with the fact that they were “exacting usury from your own countrymen”. It is not wrong to lend people money. That is not the issue. If you borrow money from someone you need to pay it back to them – if you don’t than you are just stealing. The issue here was that there was very high interest being charged. We saw this many times in Kuwait. People would need money so they would borrow it but then the interest was so high that they would be paying back for years and never touching the principle.

The issue here is that Jewish people were hurting other Jewish people. They were hurting family. When you hurt your family you are only hurting yourself in the long run. We need to remember that we are all part of the family of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We will be with each other for a very long time so had we had better learn to work on our differences now.

When we lived on the Doulos we learned that you had better settle issues with people quickly because there is no way to avoid them. On a small ship you are together all the time. You can’t run from your problems. You have to face them. We need to learn to be gracious and kind with one another. This is especially true of those in leadership.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

This verse does not mean that you should just blindly do whatever your pastor tells you to do. It does mean that you should not make their job harder than it already is, because that hurts everyone.

When I went to seminary and did my MDiv in Youth Ministry, I had a number of friends who went through the same classes I did. Many are not in ministry today because they had such a terrible time in ministry. They were ready to work with youth and teach the Bible – they were not ready for church politics. The stats for pastors leaving ministry is appalling. The reasons are clear. According to a recent statistic:

90% of pastors are overworked

70% of pastors are grossly underpaid

90% felt that they were inadequately trained to cope with the burdens of leadership

70% of pastors fight depression on a monthly basis

50% of pastors reported being so discouraged in ministry that they would leave tomorrow if possible

80% said that ministry negatively affected their families

70% said that they were lonely and did not have a single close friend they could confide in

40% reported a serious conflict with someone from the church at least once a month

50% of pastors who start out in ministry will not survive the first 5 years

Only 1 out of 10 will retire as a pastor

The next time you feel that you just need to give the pastor a piece of your mind, don’t. If you can’t say anything nice than don’t say anything at all.

2. Remember the Task (vs. 8) ... we bought back our brothers sold to the Gentiles

Nehemiah reminded the people of what they were doing. They were building the wall so that they would be free – but the nobles were enslaving the people! The nobles had lost sight of what it was that they were trying to accomplish. They were interested in making money while others were out doing the work that needed to be done. Nehemiah responded to the problems in the community by reminding them of what was really important.

Likewise in the church it is important to always keep before us our focus and vision. When we lose sight of what God is doing in and through us we can quickly turn our energies on one another and begin to have problems. Christians who lose sight of the task will quickly turn their attention inward towards other things. Issues of doctrine and worship become all important. When fishermen don't fish they fight. People who are busy rowing the boat do not have the time to rock it.

In Kuwait we had people from over 50 nations and every denomination imaginable. There was always huge potential for conflict due to cultural or denominational misunderstandings yet conflict in that church was very rare. Why? Because everyone understood the mission. Everyone knew that they were in hostile territory and that it was important to stick together.

The North American church exists in a consumer driven society. People come to church for what they can get – not give. It is like a religious smorgasbord – you take a bit from here and a bit from there. As long as I am happy and satisfied I will stay. As soon as I see something I don't like then I leave and try something else. This is the “church hopping” mentality.

I am not saying that you should never leave a church. I am also not saying that your needs are unimportant. I am saying that you go to church for what you can give, not what you can get. Ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for your church! Find a place where you can grow and serve. That means that you need to find a church that has a purpose and mission that you agree with and can get behind.

What I am saying is that if you leave it should be for the right reasons. Well, I came to church last week and one talked to me so I'm leaving! They didn't sing a single hymn last Sunday so I'm leaving. I didn't agree with the message that Pastor Steve gave last week so I am never going back to that church again! What is important is that you remember that God has a purpose for your life and that the way you live out what God has called you to is through the local church.

If you are looking for the perfect church I just want to tell you it does not exist! There will always be problems and conflicts even in the church because the church is made up of sinful people. Work through the issues and move forward. The vision and direction is the important thing – solve your differences and don't let them keep you from worship.

One of the things we are trying to do in this proposed building campaign is to not just build a building but remember our mission. Why are we wanting to build? Because having a welcoming environment to invite people into is important. Because youth ministry and children's ministry is important. Because reaching out to the community around us is important.

I just want to remind you that next Sunday is our next open forum meeting after the second service. If you would like to find out more or have any questions about the building campaign plan to be there.

3. Remember Others are Watching (vs. 10, 15-16)

As a leader it was essential that Nehemiah practiced what he preached. There was transparency. He did not expect something from the nobles which he himself was not willing to give. He was giving money to help the people. In addition he was not demanding anything of the people though he was the governor and was feeding people from his own table.

Nehemiah 5:15 The earlier governors -- those preceding me -- placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. 17 Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. 18 Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Before we point out the problems we need to offer to be part of the solution. Don't condemn in others what you are doing yourself. Remember, how we respond to conflicts in the church will be seen by others around us.

a. Conflict hurts our Reputation

Our actions are seen and evaluated by non-Christians. I started by talking about the Arabic church in Kuwait. The dispute over theology that developed in that one congregation spilled over and became a problem for EVERY congregation because it put a negative light on the gospel and the name of Jesus. Every time another church is split or a high profile Christian leader falls it is picked up by the media. Remember that the outside world is always watching.

b. Conflict hurts our Relationships

Our actions are seen by our children. This refers to both your physical and spiritual children. Kids watch us and imitate us. This can be a good thing and also a bad thing. In the area of conflict within the church, our negative actions can have lasting effects in the lives of those we love. Often churches that are born out of conflict seem to live in conflict. E.g. Philpott

c. Conflict hurts our Redeemer

Our actions are seen by God. Jesus prayed that we would be one on earth just as He and the Father are one in heaven. Conflict in the church hurts Christ. As a parent I do not like it when My children fight each other. God does not like it when His children fight either.

1Co 3:16-17 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?
17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

The context of this passage is unity. In verse 16 Paul says that the people (plural) were God's temple (singular). It is true that individually our bodies are temples of the Lord in that the Holy Spirit is living within each of us, but that is not what Paul is talking about here.

He is talking about the church, that it is the dwelling place of God. The strong warning is given that anyone who would seek to destroy the temple (the church) that God would destroy them. God loves His bride and will fight for her.

I am a peaceful person. If someone doesn't like me, that's OK. If someone were to swear at me or even strike me I would get over it. However, if anyone threatened my wife or children then the gloves would come off. The same is true of God. You can curse at Him, spit at Him, that is one thing. However, when you come against his bride (the church) or His children then the gloves come off.

10 Little Christians standing in line - 1 disliked the preacher, then there were 9
9 Little Christians stayed up very late - 1 overslept Sunday, then there were 8
8 Little Christians on their way to Heaven - 1 took the low road and then there were 7
7 Little Christians chirping like chicks - 1 disliked music, then there were 6
6 Little Christians seemed very much alive - but 1 lost his interest then there was 5
5 Little Christians pulling for Heaven's Shore - but 1 stopped to rest , then there were 4
4 Little Christians each busy as a bee - 1 got his feelings hurt, then there were 3
3 Little Christians knew not what to do - 1 joined a different crowd, then there were 2
2 Little Christians, our rhyme is nearly done - differed with each other, then there was 1
1 Little Christian can't do much 'tis true - brought his friend to bible study -- then there were 2
Earnest Christians, each won one more - that doubled the number, then there were 4
4 Sincere Christians worked early and late - each won another then there were 8
8 Splendid Christians if they doubled as before - in just so many Sundays, there'd be 1,024.
In this little jingle, there is a lesson true - you're either on the building, or to the wrecking crew!