

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

Theme: The church of Jesus Christ is like an effective team that works enthusiastically together, each one making a contribution to accomplish a great mission.

Texts: Nehemiah 3; I Corinthians 12:4-12

Open the pew bibles, if you would, to page 752 or your bibles to Nehemiah 3. Now let your eyes wander through the first few verses. At first glance this is not the most inspiring text of Scripture. Frankly, when I first read the list of names and places, it had all the appeal of reading the phone book. I thought this would be good fodder for a filibuster in the United States Senate. Thanks a lot, Dan Meyer for leaving me this text! Dan's excuse was that he had accepted speaking engagement two years ago from a former church he had served, and this so just happened, so he said, that this is where it came up on the preaching schedule. I am being a little melodramatic.

Yet once you penetrate the veneer and initial impression, this chapter is not just a dull list of forgotten names and strange places. Nehemiah is recounting all those who took their place on the wall of Jerusalem in the great task of reparation. Nehemiah could have easily shortened this chapter by saying "a whole bunch of people made repairs to the wall." Instead he moves section by section counterclockwise around the perimeter, identifying the names of those who led the team at that section. Though the names mean little to us now, they have been commemorated before God because they took part in this great enterprise. This week we received a mailing from Christ Church with a brochure entitled *A Firm Foundation*. On the inside flap we are reminded that in the late 60's there were 82 families who contributed \$217,000 to provide the initial capital necessary to build this sanctuary. If you were to go back to the very beginnings of this church, we could list the names of the 5 or 6 core families who along with Art DeKruyter had a dream of a church in Oak Brook. I have read our history, and the names of the people. I read how they sacrificed to finance the first couple of years of this ministry by taking out second mortgages on their homes. Frankly, the names mean very little because I don't know them personally, yet God knows them and finds it important, even here, to list those who made a significant contribution. We always need to be reminded that what we have today is the result of the sacrifice of people yesterday.

Nehemiah 3 is a picture of a great leader executing a plan to rebuild the temple. In last week's *Seeds* notes Pastor Meyer quoted the British historian, Arnold Toynbee. He wrote, "Apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: First, an idea which takes the imagination by storm; and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that idea into practice." Nehemiah had both. He was a great vision and he had an intelligible plan. His vision was to repair the walls of the city of God, Jerusalem.

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

For 140 years, since King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had razed both the temple and walls of the dwelling place of God in 586 BC to 444BC, Jerusalem lay in ruin. By Nehemiah's day there were gaping holes in walls that were supposed to provide protection; dirt had accumulated on the rubble of discarded stone, there was unruly weed growth over top. Jerusalem must have looked like an abandoned slum. Nehemiah could not stand the disgrace that this had brought on the name of God. Yet Nehemiah was not just a coach who was only able to give a stirring pre-game speech to fire up his players, he also had a well-thought out game plan.

What I love in Nehemiah is the balance between the spiritual and the practical. In the church we tend to fall off the balance beam in one of two directions. Some over-spiritualize. You would think that the answer to all life's problems is—if we would just pray about it, God will bring the solution. Planning, organizing, goals and objectives are met with skepticism. Yet on the other end of the spectrum, we over-organize. Here I am pointing a finger at myself. We love plans, objectives, goals, and strategies, then when we have completed our design, we say as an afterthought, *"Oh, Lord, bless all this work we have done."* In contrast, Nehemiah's passion grew out of prayer as we saw in Nehemiah 1, but so did his plans. By the time Nehemiah goes before King Artaxerxes, he knew what he needed to complete what God had put in his heart.

The picture that unfolds in Nehemiah 3 is Nehemiah's gift of leadership and administration at work. This chapter is carefully structured around each gate of entrance into the walled city of Jerusalem and the section of the wall connected that gate. Toward the end of chapter, we read of those who made repairs on the walls near or in front of their homes. Nehemiah meticulously laid out section by section who should be on what wall, made sure they had the materials and supplies necessary so that they could lay *"the beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place."* (Neh. 3:3).

What can we learn from Nehemiah's administrative skill? What I see in this chapter is a picture of the church functioning as the body of Christ. One of the images for the church is team. ***Great teams are a group of people called together by God who use their gifts to accomplish a great mission.*** The apostle Paul has given us a picture of the church as team in I Corinthians 12:4-12. I will attempt to weave together the description of the church with the characteristics of a team that we see in Nehemiah 3.

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

Read I Corinthians 12:4-12

1. The leaders of great teams are in partnership with the people and set the pace for the players.

It is not a coincidence that Nehemiah mentions the high priest and fellow priests as the first ones on the job. "Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananei." (Nehemiah 3:1) The priests were probably not trained in construction, but they were going to set the pace as examples for the importance of the work. Their gate and section of the wall was appropriate to their calling as religious leaders. The Sheep Gate was so named because it was through this entrance that the sheep were brought that were destined for sacrifice in the temple. It would be the priests who offered these sacrifices on behalf of the sins of the people. They repaired the Sheep Gate and the section of the wall to the west of this entrance.

This raises the question: What is the relationship to be between pastor and people; what role should the religious professionals have within the church? What is their place on the team? For literally hundreds of years the church, in my opinion, has suffered under a model of ministry that has equated ministry with what the paid professionals provide. To carry on with our image of team or sports analogy, it has been said that the church is much like a football game. The church is a happening where thousands of people in the stands in desperate need of exercise watch 22 people on the field in desperate need of rest. The people in the church cheer on the work of their pastors. "Look at the pastor go. There is he in the hospital available in times of needs; there is he in the counseling room with the grieving and hurting...go, pastor, go...there is he offering a teaching and sermon...there is he inspiring people to give..." We cheer them on to exhaustion, telling wonderful stories of the heroic efforts they make on our behalf.

The trouble is we pastors buy into the adulation and don't want to disappoint you. We take more on ourselves than we should, in response to the applause of an adoring church. As many of you know before coming here to serve at Christ Church, I was the Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, CA. Part of my role there was working with the final projects as students concluded the doctoral work. I received the following letter from a Seventh Day Adventist pastor, which captures well the pastoral tendency to try to do it all. I will warn you that this letter to me is rather self-serving because it mentions a book that I have written called *The New Reformation* now out under the title of *Unfinished Business*.

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

"Dear Dr. Ogden, In 1998 I submitted my proposal [for his final project] and it was approved. You wrote to me at that time that I needed to add your book to my bibliography. [Director's privilege, I guess] In my excitement I went out and purchased your book that same day. However, when I understood where you were coming from my excitement turned to disappointment. I wanted to write my thesis about the 'omni-competent' pastor and your book with its radical idea stood in the way of that. So I just quit, and didn't do anything during the next year.

I was working 80 hours a week at the time, doing absolutely everything within my abilities in order to be a successful pastor. Yet my church wasn't growing, as a matter of fact it was losing membership and finances.

In December of 1999 I was on my knees asking the Lord to transfer me to another church, but He did not. After my prayer that night I went to my basement to light up the furnace, and there on the top of furnace was your book. How it got there I have not a clue. That night I read the whole thing, anger burning within me because you were tearing down everything I believed was Biblical about the pastoral ministry. During the next 6 days I read it 4 times and each time I felt better and better about the message.

For a year and half now I have been applying your book to my ministry. People in the church are more relaxed. At this time we have 26 church members directly doing ministry that only a year ago would have been strictly my domain. Our attendance has gone from 70 to 180. This year alone we have had 21 baptisms. Our finances are better than ever, and I am not praying to God anymore to move me."

What is this pastor teaching us is the relationship between pastor and people on the team? What was it that Eliashib, the high priest and his fellow priest modeled? The mission is for all of us to do in partnership between pastor and people. Whose ministry is it? The picture Paul paints in I Corinthians 12 is that there is only one ministry, the ministry of the whole body of Christ. The is not a clergy ministry and a laity ministry. The ministry is distributed through the spiritual gifts to the whole body. In Cor. 12:5 Paul says, "There are different kinds of service (ministries), but the same Lord." The image I like to use for pastors today is a athletic team image; our role is to be coaches. Even better, player-coaches, shoulder to shoulder with you on the wall, enthusiastically setting the pace, but doing it with you, not to you or for you but with you. This is our mission together.

The first characteristic of great teams is a partnership between the leaders and the people—all sharing the load.

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

2. Great teams are united around a common mission.

As Nehemiah 3 unfolds and each gate and section of the wall is manned by a team, you get the sense of shoulder to shoulder partnership in order to accomplish a shared mission. The mission was to repair the wall, to bring it to functioning order and restore the dignity to the city of God. Over 40 times throughout this chapter we read phrases like "next to him"; "next to them", "repaired the next section"; "beside him"; "beside them". Let's get a feel for the sense that side by side all the positions on the walls were manned simultaneously by reading v. 2-5 of Nehemiah 3.

As I visualize the scene, everyone was at their post on their assigned section of the wall working simultaneously. What would it have been like to be Nehemiah surveying the work that was being completed all around the city! It is happening, he must have thought. What God had shown me to do is taking place! This is what I saw. Can you imagine the energy that was unleashed in that short period of time? They drafted off of each other. It must have been a contagious enthusiasm. No one wanted to be left out of that historic moment. Everyone wanted to have a story to tell of what they were doing and the way they contributed to the completion of the mission.

Yet this mission of repairing the walls of Jerusalem is not even worth comparing to the mission of the church. After all, the temple and the city walls were destroyed again in AD 70 when the Roman General Titus fulfilled Jesus' prediction that there would not be one stone left upon another. The church, on the other hand, is the only divine human institution that will last forever. We are literally the body of Christ, the extension of Jesus' on earth. The picture Paul paints of the church as the body is not just a nice word picture or metaphor, but the place where Christ dwells and is the new humanity that He is creating on earth. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ" (I Cor. 12:12). This is the way late pastor Ray Stedman describes the church as the body of Christ, "The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church." If you want to be a part of a team that has a mission that lasts forever, find a place on this team.

This lead us to the third characteristic of great teams.

3. Great teams value the contribution of every member.

In Paul's picture of the church, we read in I Cor. 12:7,11 "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good..." And then referring to the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, etc. Paul says, "And these are

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

the work one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines." No one is left out. God has assigned us each a part. We each have been given ministry gifts to be used for the common good. Paul uses the word "manifestation" in I Cor. 12:7 to describe our contribution to the church. The word means to "make visible or observable." Our gifts are the tangible way we make our contribution and sense our value. I believe we all have a built-in longing to make a difference. We want to give to something bigger than ourselves. We get to contribute to the church, which is God's chosen vehicle to make the good news of Jesus Christ known to this world.

When we return to the effort to rebuild the wall in Nehemiah, it is startling to see that even those who had no training or aptitude to be builders wanted to make their contribution. A variety of unlikely people are mentioned in this text. There were "goldsmiths" who were used to meticulous work with their hands, as well as "perfume-makers", who took their place on the wall. In v. 8 we read, "Uzziel son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, repaired the next section; and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers, made repairs next to that." In v. 12 we read that the women wanted to be involved, "Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of the half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters." Then there was businessmen that were used to buying and selling goods, called "merchants" in v. 32, who made their contribution. Even those with soft hands who had not formed calluses from hard work, wanted to be a part of this venture. The point is that no matter the background, training, or even aptitude, each person made a valued contribution to the whole.

Have you questioned, what do I have to offer? More than you think. Make yourself available and the Lord will use you.

4. Finally, great teams are marked by unselfishness.

Paul tells us that one of the synonyms for gifts in I Cor. 12:5 is service. "There are different kinds of service." The word service comes from the word *diakonia*. You might recognize that we get the word *deacon* from this Greek word. It describes the manner in which we give ourselves. Paul says that the gifts are given for the common good or with a view to mutual profit. In other words, the gifts are not given for our own edification but are community property. Gifts are only useful as they are given away for the benefit of others. In our high school ministry, there is a servant team in the Mosaic community appropriately named, "Get over yourself." It is not about you!

We see this servant spirit in the people who have come from the neighboring communities some 15 to 20 miles away to take their place on the wall. Eight different locations outside of Jerusalem are mentioned: Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Zanoah, Beth Hakkerem, Beth Zur, and Keilah. We have to ask, what

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

was the benefit to them of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem? After all they had their own fields to cultivate, and workshops to maintain. In order to be on the wall, they put their own livelihood on hold in order to participate in this vision. This was a volunteer effort. No one was getting paid. If they were in Jerusalem, something was not getting done at home.

The other evidence of unselfishness comes in the form of the energy put into the project. To return to I Cor. 12 for a moment, another of the synonyms for gifts Paul uses is found in Cor. 12:6, **"There are different kinds of working..."** This is not an easy word to translate for it comes from a root word meaning *energy*. A literal translation is that there are a variety of "motivations or *energizings*." When we are serving in accord with our gifts, there is a release of energy. We see this in Nehemiah 3. There were many who went above and beyond the call of duty. They did more than simply their assigned part. In v. 4 we read of **"Meremoth, the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkaz, repaired the next section"**, but then his name shows up again in v. 21, **"Next to him, Meremoth, the son of Uriah, repaired another section..."** Not to be outdone in v. 5 **"Meshullan son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs"**, but he too wasn't done...v. 30, **"Meshullam son of Berekiah made repairs opposite his living quarters."** He could have said, **"I finished my assigned work...I am going to kick back for awhile."** In v. 5 we read, **"The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa..."** but then we read in v. 27, **"the men of Tekoa repaired another section."**

The impression you get is that they are living off the adrenalin of this mission. The energy of service, the motivation of giving had become intoxicating. When they completed their task they went back to Nehemiah and said, **"What else can I do?"**

We have all heard the expression, "many hands make for light work." How true! How long did this all take to complete the mission of repairing the walls? Imagine, a 140 years of accumulated rubble. Stones had to be retrieved by hand, cleaned and fitted. Ten gates or entry points in the city are mentioned for repairs. Forty four sections of the wall had to be restored. They **"laid its beams, and put the doors and bolts and bars in place."** And in a short 52 days, the entire work was completed.

What did it take to make this happen? Teamwork. 1. The religious leaders put their shoulders next to all in partnership and set the pace. 2. All of the people got caught in a share mission. They said, "Let us start rebuilding." 3. Everyone felt like a valued contributor to something greater than themselves. 4. And it all worked because they set aside their own ego, glad to be of service. How true is the maxim, **"How much could be done for the kingdom of God if we didn't worry about who got the credit."**

Builders of Eternity: Doing Church As Team

Can you imagine the energy that could be released at Christ Church, if everyone of us were seeking to know our place on the wall? What if each of us sensed our value to completion of the mission of "going into all the world as witnesses of the life-changing love of Jesus Christ, making communities of disciples who worship, grow and serve?" What if we had the attitude, let me do my part? Teamwork.

I conclude this morning with some lessons from nature. Dr. Robert McNeish, a science teacher in Baltimore, MD, had for years been an observer of geese. He wrote a piece for a sermon back in 1972 that has been much copied, called "Lessons from the Geese." We hardly need a visual reminder of geese in Chicago.

Geese fly in a V-formation, because the updraft from each of those in front increases their flying range by 71%.

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance going it alone, and quickly gets back into formation.

When the lead goose tires, he rotates back and another flies point.

The geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. Who is honking for you?

Finally, when a goose gets sick or is wounded and must fall out, two geese fall out of formation and follow him down to protect him. They stay with him until recovery or death, then launch out again.

The creator who made these geese calls us to serve Him in the same way. Teamwork.