

Finding Courage to Unite - Nehemiah 8-10

Andrew Ogea

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Good morning. It is good to see you all. For those of you here or joining us online that do not know me, I am Andrew Ogea, pastor of worship and discipleship here at Northshore. I am grateful as always to have the chance to preach God's Word. Pastor Larry took a little time off to celebrate his 40th wedding anniversary. So, Happy Anniversary to him and Mrs. Debbie.

The last time I preached was in early February I believe, and quite a bit has happened in our world since then, mainly the Coronavirus Pandemic. I just want to say how thankful I am to you and your faithfulness and commitment to our church family during this time. I hope we will soon return to meeting together with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are not able to join us in person.

Today, I want to challenge us to find the courage to unite. Show of hands, how many of you believe that our nation is united? We are certainly divided. Race relations - black lives matter, all lives matter, police lives matter, cancel culture, stand, kneel. Coronavirus response - the reliability of data, quarantines, stay at home orders, mask mandates, reopening the economy, reopening schools.

Republicans. Democrats. Conservative. Liberal. Trump. Biden. LGBTQ+. Gun Control. Climate change. Foreign policy. Wars. Endless wars. Police the World? Immigration. The wall. DACA. Education - Common Core, public, charter, virtual learning, homeschool. Etc, etc, etc. Our country is divided.

Show of hands, how many of you believe that Jesus Christ's church is united? Many of the issues that were just mentioned are also those that the church wrestles with and cause division.

In a recent article in the Christian magazine, crosswalk.com, they listed the top 8 controversial issues: gay marriage; abortion; women in leadership; type of worship music; spiritual gifts and the use of the gifts; baptism - infant, immersion, sprinkle; politics from the pulpit; and alcohol. The church is divided.

The message today will not directly explain how our country can be united over these issues. Nor will I go into detail about each of the controversial issues that divide churches. Lots of people have opinions on what can be done to bring about solutions. Others would say that it will never happen. You see, there is even division on that.

The reality is that true change in our communities, our region, and our nation will not happen unless the church unites and returns to the Lord. It's as if we have an expectation that our nation should think, behave, and make decisions like Christians. But how can we expect that when it is full of lost people who have no relationship with God in Jesus Christ?

Our nation doesn't need a behavior change. It needs a character change. A heart change. But true change like that cannot happen apart from the Gospel, the good news of Jesus. And the Gospel isn't heard and seen unless there is light, love, and truth coming from the church.

If we are church divided, then what hope does our nation have? But, I have hope that we can be unified! But it will take courage. And today we will learn of the courageous steps that the nation of Israel took to reunite under God. His chosen people, Israel, was obliterated by foreign nations and they were exiled for years in the wake of the destruction. They were the epitome of disunity.

I would like to give you a brief history lesson of the events that lead up to this moment. I hope it will give you a greater understanding of the context of the passages that we are going to study today.

The Destruction and Restoration of Israel Timeline

722 BC - Assyria destroys Israel leaving Judah as a remnant of David's kingdom

606 BC - God gives Judah a final warning to repent; Jeremiah prophesies the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, and also a 70 year exile. (Jer. 25:8-11).

Jer. 25:8 Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, 9 I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the Lord, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations.

I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. 10 I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp.

11 This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

605 BC - King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians conquer Judah. 70 year exile begins (2 Kings 24)

586 BC - Babylonians destroy the temple in Jerusalem (2 Kings 25)

539 BC - Cyrus, king of Persia, captures Babylon

538 BC - Cyrus issues a proclamation freeing Jewish exiles to return to Israel - a fulfillment of one of Isaiah's prophecies (Ezra 1:1-4; Is. 44:26-28)

In 539 BC, Cyrus led the Persians in conquering the Babylonians. And in this shift of world power, something monumental happens. In 538 BC, the Lord stirs up the spirit of the Cyrus, calling him to issue this incredible proclamation recorded in Ezra 1:2-4

Ezra 1:2 “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.

3 Any of his people among you [exiled Jews] may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.

4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

So Cyrus ends the exile, and commits to rebuilding the temple with the Persian’s money! This is incredible. What is even more astounding is that the name of Cyrus was prophesied by Isaiah 250 years before it actually happened.

Isaiah 44:26 [God] who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be rebuilt,’ and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them,’

27 who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,’ **28** who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.”’

536 BC - First wave of exiles return to Jerusalem (50,000); Temple rebuilding begins; 70 year prophecy of exile is fulfilled.

516 BC - The temple construction is completed (Ezra 6:15)

458 BC - Second wave of 5,000 exiles return with Ezra the priest

445 BC - Nehemiah, a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes and future Governor of Judah, makes a request of the king and is granted permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, once again at Persia’s expense! (Neh. 2:1-8); Third and final wave of about 45,000 exiles return with Nehemiah.

June, 445 BC - Construction of the city walls are completed in only 52 days! (Neh. 6:15)

July, 445 BC - The people of Israel gather to unite under God (Feast of Booths; Neh. 8-10)

Now that all of the physical and material elements of the rebuild of Israel have taken place (the Temple and the Wall), the most important element has yet to be accomplished - the reuniting of the people of God.

And the reuniting begins in Nehemiah, chapters 8-10 with a great worship festival with roughly 50,000 people - a good ole revival in the Old Testament. We are going to be after-the-fact witnesses to the work of God and the bold steps taken by these leaders, priests, heads of

households, and the entire group to reunite under his authority, leadership, and blessing once again.

And my prayer is that we will learn lessons from them, and find the courage to take similar steps to unite as the church in Christ. Let's look at Nehemiah 8:1.

Neh. 8:1 And all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.

6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

So, through this incredible revival worship gathering, we see the first important step in finding the courage to unite.

A. Bold Devotion to the Word of God

The first step is bold devotion to the Word of God. I use the word "bold" purposefully. Devotion to the Word of God is bold because we are placing our confidence in someone other than ourselves. That takes courage because we really like being in control of our own lives, don't we?

Another reason this is bold is because it is risky. Not because it isn't true, but because God's word will sometimes conflict with what may feel natural to us. You see, there is an ever-increasing tendency to adopt our own opinions and our feelings as the truth rather than the truth of God.

When that happens, it naturally affects our view of who God is, our choices, lifestyles, and relationships. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "yeah I know what God's Word says, but I feel like this other way is the right choice for me." The pursuit of holiness and living a Godly life doesn't work that way.

Or I've heard others say this about various issues, "I know it says that a few times in the Bible, but Jesus never said anything about it, so it must not have mattered to him." Really?! is Jesus not a member of the Trinity? Is he in conflict with God the Father in the Old Testament?

Or what if Jesus never mentions something, but his apostles bring warnings about it, condemn something as sinful, or judge a matter in the other books of the Bible, does that mean we then disregard what is written? Are they not his apostles? Were they not given authority to write the Scriptures by Jesus and empowered by His Spirit, the other member of the God-head?

I believe that the lack of bold devotion to the word of God is One of the most severe causes of disunity in our churches today. It is a slippery slope that is getting more slippery every year that I've been in ministry. But, the word is and should be totally sufficient for us. The Lord says in 2 Timothy 3 that,

2 Tim. 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

For far too long, Israel reaped the destruction of their disobedience to God's Word. Now, their hearts were devoted to the Word and that is what unified them. The same must be true of the church, for we will experience unity only when we devote ourselves to the Word of God. But, what does bold devotion look like? What are the characteristics of bold devotion?

1. Yearning (8:1)

First, bold devotion to the word of God involves yearning. In verse 1, we read that the people prompted Ezra to Bring the Word. They wanted it. They needed it. They sought it out. We too, as the church, should have a deep desire and yearning for the Word of God.

Is it something you seek? Is it something you want to know more about? Do you desire his Word during the day? Do you come to worship on Sundays or to your Small Group with an excitement and longing to hear the Word of God? Bold devotion involves a yearning for his word. You have to want it.

2. Attentiveness (8:3)

Secondly, bold devotion involves attentiveness. In verse 3, we read that “the ears of the people were attentive to the Word of God.” It is one thing to have a yearning for it. It is another thing to be attentive when it is given.

Who in here struggles with a short attention span? I sometimes have a short attention span. I can start a project and before I know it I am working on three other projects because I saw something along the way that needed to be taken care of.

But, I don't want that to be the case with the word of God. But sometimes I struggle with it and I've spoken with some of you that struggle with it too. But I really believe that it is a heart issue that needs to be changed in us.

Many of us would say that we desire the Word of God, but then why is it that we often approach his word without the expectation and an eagerness that God has a message for us within his Word. We may desire to get into his word, but we aren't attentive to let his word get into us.

So if you struggle with attentiveness issues like me, I want to encourage you to join me in praying this prayer each time before we hear God's Word.

“Lord, I don't want to just hear, speak your message right to my heart. Your servant is attentive.”

When you come to worship. When you read your Bible in the morning. When you go to your small group, say “Lord, I don't want to just hear, speak your message right to my heart. Your servant is attentive.”

3. Reverence (8:5-6)

Bold devotion to the word involves reverence. Verse 5 says, as Ezra, the priest, opened it, all the people stood. Shouted Amen, Amen, lifted their hands, and then they bowed and worshiped.

In view of God's word, we should maintain an attitude of reverence and worship, for God and his Word are inseparable. When we approach his Word, it should be done with great respect and honor because we are approaching him.

This word worship comes from two words, “worth,” and “ship” meaning one worthy of reverence and honor. So when we approach God's word with reverence, we are then able to see his majesty, splendor, holiness, love, goodness, and justice.

Do you approach God's Word with reverence? How much is God worth to you? When you sing songs of his truth, give your tithes and offerings, pray, or hear his word, does your heart, your mouth, your expressions reflect that he is worth everything to you?

4. Understanding (8:8)

Bold Devotion to God's Word is yearning, attentiveness, reverence, but also understanding. In verse 8, we read that the priests and teachers read the law, and they "gave the meaning" of the Scriptures. There was teaching, and the people devoted themselves to understanding it.

I've had a few people tell me in the past: "I don't read the Bible because I don't understand it." Well, I believe that is an excuse that can and should be overcome. I want to encourage you to get yourself in different environments to understand God's Word.

Our Sunday morning messages are devoted to teaching and explaining, but it is also important to get together in small groups where you can learn more about God's word to understand it. We have some great leaders and folks in groups that are learning and growing in understanding that can help you too.

Perhaps you need to buy a Bible that's easier to read like the New Living Translation. If you can't afford one, let me know after and I'll get one for you. A characteristic of bold devotion is understanding and we are here to help you.

5. Strong Spiritual Leadership (8:13)

One final characteristic of Bold Devotion to the Word of God is strong spiritual leadership. Verse 13 says,

13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.

Strong spiritual leadership is critical for unity in the church. We need strong leaders, but don't be mistaken, a huge part of that leadership is established in the home. It said, "the heads of all the families", and the leaders gave their attention to God's word. This is so critical.

Husbands, fathers, hear the word of the Lord today. You have a critical responsibility to study the Word of God so that you can lead your family spiritually.

Obviously, moms share in this responsibility as well, especially when there is no father present. And, leaders in the church should share the responsibility in helping to teach the word in these circumstances. But, a central ingredient for a unified church is when husbands and fathers, heads of households, are boldly devoted to the word of God. Pastor Tony Evans writes,

"The single greatest reason why we are losing a generation is because the home is no longer the place of the transference of the faith. We live in a day of 'outsourcing'...Today, we have a generation of people that outsource their kids."

Our desire for revival in our church this year began with that very commitment for God to be our one priority. We gave opportunities for teaching in the home through our F260 devotionals. You can still pick one up in the lobby. We are starting the New Testament in a couple of weeks. Perfect timing.

We are halfway through the year, in the middle of a very trying and unique time in our lives. And, I am still praying for revival to break out in our church and community, but we cannot forget that we must have a bold devotion to the Word of God or it won't happen. It is the first step to unity.

B. Bold Repentance

The second step is bold repentance. Let's move over to chapter 9:1-3,

Neh. 9:1 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.

2 Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

3 They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God.'

So what is the process of repentance? At this worship gathering, the people show us that there are two main parts: Confession, and Resolution.

Process of Repentance

- 1. Confession**
- 2. Resolution**

Let's look at confession. Verse 2 said the people stood in their place and "confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors." What is confession? - an acknowledgement from our heart and mouths that we have sinned against God. But, confession also includes worship. In verse 3, they spent a quarter of the day in the word, and another quarter in confession and worship.

There is a connection. When you confess your sins to God, you also affirm that he is a God of forgiveness and mercy. You are recognizing that God is patient and good. In your Bible reading this week you will read the Israelites entire confession in Chapter 9:6-37. And I want to challenge you to highlight / underline the number of times they worship in the midst of their confession of sin.

Just one example of this connection between confession and worship is in verse 17.

Neh. 9:17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery.

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them.

Do you see it? Confession. Worship. They are connected. Another part of confession is that it involves the individual. The people confessed their own sin as individuals first. In the presence of God and others each person mourned over their sin. They owned their part of the problem.

Now, there is certainly temporary discomfort in confession. It isn't easy. That is one of the reasons repentance is bold. But, In James 5:16, the Lord tells us,

James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Perhaps there are some sins that you are wrestling over today that are affecting the unity of our church. I want to urge you to consider confessing your sin before God and the appropriate people. Go to the one you have wronged. Talk to a small group leader. Talk to a trusted brother or sister in Christ.

If you don't know where to start, come to one of the staff. It may seem scary, but confession will bring healing in your life. And if the rest of the congregation is devoted to the Word, you will also experience forgiveness and grace. The Apostle Paul tells the church this in Ephesians 4:32, to...

Eph. 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

So, hear this today: there will never be progress toward unity as a nation under God if there isn't unity in the church. And there will never be unity in the church unless we first as individuals, recognize and own our sin through confession with the rest of the body forgiving as God has forgiven us in Christ.

So, we see that confession of sins goes hand-in-hand with worship. It starts with the individual, but we also see here that confession is corporate. Verse 2 also says they confessed the sins of their ancestors.

One Bible scholar I read this week said that this does not mean that they shift the blame or that they are making excuses for their sin. But they had this corporate identity which is much different from us today. They didn't consider themselves from only an individual standpoint.

They understood they were connected to a larger community. What happened to one was considered to some extent to have happened to all, and what one person did was considered to have consequences, either positive or negative, for all.

This corporate identity is something that we need to reclaim. We are in this together as a church. And confession is one way to bring unity in the church which will in turn affect our community and nation. Once again, I urge you to read the entire confession in the rest of chapter 9. You will see what I mean.

But, let me give you a more modern example of how this is true. It involves something that happened 25 years ago regarding racial reconciliation, which is still a very sensitive issue today.

In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention, of which our church is associated, crafted a confession of sin and the sins of our ancestors regarding racism, slavery, and racial reconciliation. I have included a link in the sermon notes if you want to go and read the whole thing.

<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention>

The first part is a confession of how the Southern Baptist Convention's relationship with African-Americans has been hindered from the beginning by the role that slavery played in the formation of the convention in 1845.

It confesses that people in the convention defended the right to own slaves, and either participated in, supported, or were silent regarding the inhumane nature of American slavery.

It also confesses that in later years Southern Baptists failed, in many cases, to support, and in some cases opposed, legitimate initiatives to secure civil rights for African Americans. But then there is a transition from the sins of the ancestors to a confession of this sin's consequences in the present. Let me read this part to you:

Racism has divided the body of Christ and Southern Baptists in particular, and separated us from our African-American brothers and sisters; and many of our congregations have intentionally and/or unintentionally excluded African-Americans from worship, membership, and leadership;

And, Racism profoundly distorts our understanding of Christian morality, leading some Southern Baptists to believe that racial prejudice and discrimination are compatible with the Gospel. And Jesus performed the ministry of reconciliation to restore sinners to a right relationship with the Heavenly Father, and to establish right relations among all human beings, especially within the family of faith.

As you can see the process of repentance begins with confession. It is connected with worship, it starts with the individual, but we cannot be unified as a church unless we own our sins collectively as well. We are in this together.

Process of Repentance

- 1. Confession**
- 2. Resolution**

But it can't just end there either. The second part of the repentance process is resolution. At the end of chapter 9 and through chapter 10, the people make a covenant together in view of their confession. In chapter 9:38:

Neh. 9:38 "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."

Neh. 10:28 "The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—

29 all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath 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.

The rest of chapter 10 gives the specifics of their covenant on how they will carefully obey all the commands of the Lord. I encourage you to read it and underline the things they agreed to do.

These specifics are their resolutions. What this means is that repentance doesn't stop at confession. There must be resolution - a serious commitment which involves actions that show that our words which prove confession isn't meaningless.

Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers in history, said

Repentance is a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it. It is, in fact, a change of mind of a very deep and practical character, which makes the man love what once he hated [God], and hate what once he loved [sin].

In 1995, the Southern Baptists didn't just confess, they made a resolution, a covenant with God and each other to walk differently in the future. Listen to part of their resolution:

Therefore, be it RESOLVED, That we, The Southern Baptist Convention unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we affirm the Bible's teaching that every human life is sacred, and is of equal and immeasurable worth, made in God's image, regardless of race or ethnicity (Genesis 1:27), and that, with respect to salvation through Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28); and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake; and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we hereby commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry.

Even though our church wasn't yet formed when this resolution was passed in 1995, I know that our leadership, staff, and church acknowledge this confession and resolution as our own. And we pray that our church will continue to grow and be proponents of healing.

We desire for our congregation to reflect diversity, one that would mirror the assembly of the Saints in Heaven. And this is just one of many important issues that requires bold repentance in order for us to be unified as the church and bridge the gaps that exist between the church and our nation as a whole.

Spiritual unity requires two bold steps for the church, devotion to God's Word, and repentance of sin. I wish I could say the Israelites got it right after this point. Toward the end of the book of Nehemiah they are already having problems again. In fact, for the next four hundred years, this is the nation of Israel that will usher in the Messiah.

They were unable to Keep the Law. And so are we. In this way, we all are exiles, separated from God because of our sin. It doesn't matter what color we are, how we look, how we feel, how we think things ought to be. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But that is why Jesus came - to usher in a new covenant, not one established by following the Law, but through a relationship with God through faith in Christ Jesus. If unity requires bold devotion to God's Word, we have to start there. For the Lord says,

Galatians 3:23 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,

20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

As the church united under Christ our Lord, may we continue to rise in holiness to be a beacon of light and a pillar of truth to our world. May we be boldly devoted to the word of God and resolute to walk in repentance.

In doing so, I pray that we become a church united, and that our unity will spark a revival in our nation, not just a change in behavior, but a character change that reflects the heart of God. The Lord says in 1 Chronicles 7:14

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

May it begin in us first.