



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

How To Have a Restoration

Nehemiah 8:13-18

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Introduction

1. It's a remarkable story of two small independent congregations of disciples, one in Rossett and the other in Mollington, Wales. Just a few miles apart, what connected them was the marriage and relocation from Rossett to Mollington of the son of one of their leaders.
 - a. Beginning their quest to be simply Christians in the 1790s, they would discover the New Testament's teaching on baptism and join together in being immersed in 1809, three years before Alexander Campbell would wrestle with and act on the teaching in America.¹
 - b. When the story of their little town was told by a local historian from outside the group, their congregation would be singled out as the birthplace of "the worldwide churches of Christ."²
2. When, 40 years after they made their decision to follow the New Testament and be simply Christians, they would discover that many others had made the same determination and shared their beliefs, they would describe their feelings with the word "ecstasy."
3. Their's is just one of many stories of people who have determined to be simply Christians, without denominational affiliation or rule.
 - a. People like the Friends of God in Bosnia, the Plymouth Brethren of England, and the Evangelical Christians of Russia—each "an effort in its own way to restore the Christianity of the first century."³
 - b. "History is replete with stories of courageous men and women, who, often in the face of intense persecution, have sought a return to the pure religion of Jesus Christ" (Hawley, 25).
4. Not all of these efforts have ended up in the same place.
 - a. Not all have emphasized the same parts of New Testament teaching.
 - b. Some have abandoned the quest, either because of the pressure brought to bear against them, or because later generations in their movements did not accept their ancestors' principles.

¹ Other points of comparison are also noteworthy. It was not until 1804 that Stone and company wrote their *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, and not until 1809 that Thomas Campbell penned his *Declaration and Address*.

² Points 1 and 2 are taken from Dr. Jerry Rushford's lecture on the "Heart and Mind of Restoration," presented at the Church Leaders Dinner during the Oklahoma Christian University Bible lectures in January 2005. A visit by Campbell in 1847 is mentioned in that town history, a reference that would go on to credit him with founding the "American counterpart" (!) of English churches of Christ.

³ Monroe E. Hawley, *Redigging the Wells: Seeking Undenominational Christianity*, 25.

5. Even with setbacks, the ideal of undenominational Christianity is thrilling. But, the struggle to realize it serves to caution us that it is not always easy to apply or maintain. We benefit from seeing a success story that shows what genuine restoration means, as in Nehemiah 8.

Body

I. Remembering Nehemiah's Story.

- A. The book of Nehemiah tells how its title character, a cupbearer for King Artaxerxes in Susa, heard of the distress of God's people and the need to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.
 - 1. After a period of deliberation, fasting and prayer, Nehemiah requested permission to return and rebuild the walls.
 - 2. He proved to be a decisive leader, sticking to his goal despite many obstacles.
 - 3. As a result, the wall was completed in just fifty-two days.
- B. All this is well known; it is also where many stop as they retell the story.
 - 1. In fact, that part of the story is completed by the end of chapter 6, not quite halfway through the book's thirteen chapters.
 - 2. We may have put so much emphasis on Nehemiah's work in rebuilding the walls that we have not given sufficient attention to his work in rebuilding the people.
 - 3. At the heart of their spiritual reconstruction is the restoration recorded in chapter 8.

II. A Study in Restoration.

- A. The chapter begins with the people reverently and patiently listening to Ezra read the Law on the first day of the seventh month (Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 8).
- B. The following day, the reading continued and led to a surprising discovery (8:13-18).
 - 1. It was in the seventh month that the Feast of Booths was to be observed (Leviticus 23:34ff.).
 - 2. The observance was to include a re-enactment of the wilderness dwelling in tents, highlighting God's protection of Israel during that period; it also served to celebrate God's blessings in the harvest (Deuteronomy 16:13-16).
 - 3. What the people discovered during Ezra's reading was that the feast had not been properly celebrated for about a thousand years.
 - a) The point is not that it had not been observed (cf. 2 Chronicles 8:13; 31:3; Ezra 3:4).⁴
 - b) Rather, it had not been observed in the way it was supposed to be.
- C. Some observations about their restoration.
 - 1. Sometime between Joshua and Nehemiah, they had moved away from the Law; the departure may not have been total, but there had been a departure.
 - 2. They discovered the failing through a reading and interpretation (cf. v 8) of God's word.
 - 3. Their discovery led them to give up their traditional practice and change their behavior.
 - 4. The restoration attitude we see here is one of submission to the truth they had learned.

III. The Lesson of Restoration.

- A. We learn the attitude that will motivate us to be serious about restoration.

⁴ D. Freeman notes that, "[a]s a feast, divinely instituted, it was never forgotten. It was observed in the time of Solomon (2 Ch. 8:13), Hezekiah (2 Ch. 31:3; cf. Dt. 16:16), and after the exile (Ezr. 3:4; Zc. 14:16, 18-19)." See his article "Tabernacles, Feast of," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 3:1511-1512. See also Mark A. Throntveit's comments in his *Ezra-Nehemiah*, (Interpretation Commentaries), 98-100.

1. Paul said some perished “because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10).
 2. Under Ezra’s leadership, the people in Nehemiah 8 were determined to act on the truth they learned from reading the Law.
 - a) They did not base their decision on what they had always done.
 - b) They did not refuse to change their practice because the change would be inconvenient; they clearly loved the truth enough to do what was necessary.
- B. We learn what it means to be committed to God’s word in restoration.
1. “The word” is the theme of the chapter (vv 1-3, 5, 8, 9, 13, 14, 18).
 - a) Having returned from the exile, it would have been easy to reason that they were better than their ancestors and not get carried away with details; they understood that God’s chastening called for complete compliance.
 - b) Their allegiance was not selective; rather, they were determined to follow the word wherever it took them.
 2. It is easier to agree with this commitment in theory than in practice.
 - a) We see this by what happened to Israel before the exile.
 - (1) Hosea 4:6 tells us that the people were “destroyed for lack of knowledge.”
 - (2) Verses 11-14 hint at what other writers tell us, namely that the people were practicing many things in the Law (cf. Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 1:11-15).
 - (3) They sought to follow the Law and the ways of their world (Hosea 4:12-14).
 - (4) Verses 4-6 show the deeper problem: the people were accountable, but they were also victims of priests and prophets who had failed to teach the Law.
 - b) It goes beyond the overt worship of idols; serious study suffers in the face of all the distractions in a world that makes God a part of life, but not first in life.
 3. To be slavishly committed to the word is not the easiest course, but it is the best.
 - a) It takes time to thoroughly examine the word (cf. Nehemiah 8:3, 18).
 - (1) It’s easier to master the “correct answers,” a list of “things we believe,” than to dig in and find out “what the Bible teaches.”
 - (2) It’s easier to assume that, since we settled a thing in our generation, the next generation[s] must know it; it takes time and effort to actually teach those things (especially if our students are impatient and / or “bored”).⁵
 - (3) It’s easier to ask teachers to just give us the “answers” (which hopefully they have studied and not just inherited) rather than work through the process of reaching those conclusions.
 - b) It takes courage to follow the word.
 - (1) It takes courage to leave ourselves open to the word’s intrusion (Hebrews 4:12).
 - (2) It also takes courage to question what people have long believed and “settled”; you quickly learn how dangerous it can be to go against the grain.
 - (a) I suspect too many would be comfortable with what an older Christian once said to me: “We may not have done everything exactly right, but it’s what got us where we are. We’re better off sticking with it.”

⁵ Douglas Gragg has made a valuable observation on this point: “Dry rehearsal of biblical facts is a poor approach to Christian nurture, but it represents only a problem of pedagogical deficiency. The solution is more thoughtful and creative teaching.” (Douglas L. Gragg, “What Do These Stones Mean?” *Passing on the Faith in Biblical Perspectives*, *Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 13.)

- (b) A better attitude is that of a preacher I know who, when asked if he taught the word, said, "Yes, even when it challenges what we believe and do."
- (3) Commitment to the word probably will find us pursuing things we had not expected to pursue and going in directions we had not expected to go (as happened in Nehemiah 8, and with the Campbells, Stone, *et. al.*).⁶
- c) Each must decide whether his/her commitment is to God or to something else (our family, our church, our teachers, etc.).

Conclusion

1. In 1842, the churches in Rossett and Mollington met in Edinburgh, Scotland with others who were likewise committed. They counted 50 churches and 1227 baptized believers in the British Isles.⁷
2. Fifty years later, in 1892, they met again and asked two of the leaders still alive from the 1842 meeting to join them. Neither could make the trip, but one of them, Peter Stephen, sent a written message that was read on his behalf. He closed that exhortation with a call on them to let God's "loving and abiding word" continue to guide them, to let it be "the foundation of our hope, the fountain of our joy, the charter of our liberty, and the law of our life in Christ" (taken from Rushford, "Heart and Mind").
3. How much do we love the truth? Enough to pursue its teaching for hours on end? Enough to see when what we've always done is not what God would have us do? Enough to change when we see the truth, no matter how difficult such change may be?
4. Nehemiah's generation found things written in the law they had not known before. They proclaimed it and then did what it taught. As the result, they restored a practice not observed correctly for ten centuries. God help us to love his word so much.
5. Today, our plea to you is what God intends: simply be a Christian, following Jesus and allowing him to transform you into his image.

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* Note: much of the above was originally presented as part of an article series entitled, "Simply Christians: Seeking God's Ideal Today," in *First Century Christian*. For the points included in this outline, see the second installment, published July 2001, pp. 1, 6-7.

⁶ Is this not what we ask of those we teach about salvation, to accept the word over what they've always been taught/heard?

⁷ Believing that they had probably not accounted for everyone, they rounded the latter number to 1300. In 1847, they counted 80 churches and 2300 members. As Rushford observes, they had probably not grown that much, but had not counted many in 1842.