

Motivating the Local Church to be Missional
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Introduction

15 years ago, as a young pastor in my first church, in my quest to grow as a Christian leader so that I could in turn develop leaders among my members, I turned to the book of Nehemiah for help. I was amazed how much material on leadership one could learn from the book of Nehemiah. 5 years later, my interest in the book of Nehemiah was once again rekindled, and this time for a different reason – because of what it informs us on the subject of missions. As I have studied this book over the years, I have been amazed at how much it teaches us on missions. How much it motivates us to be missional and transformative in our own various contexts of ministry.

We all know that the foundation of any endeavour, whether secular or religious, human or divine, is bound up in the purpose given to that endeavour by its creator. No place is that more evident than in the eternal purpose God established for His creation. Discerning God's global agenda as revealed in Scripture depends upon and commences with a true understanding of God Himself. Beginning with the genesis of human history and God's self-revelation, the very essence and being of God's nature displays the reality and foundation of His mission. When the risen Lord, having been given all authority in heaven and on earth, spoke the words of **Matthew 28:19** and **20** to the eleven disciples, He did not address them as some separate little group, but as a part of the church He was establishing. And therefore, the work given to them is a work committed to the whole Christian church, considered both as a unit and as the individual members which compose it.

Collectively and individually, obeying the Great Commission ought to be an instinctive duty of every Christian. It should be in the DNA of Christ's disciples. But sadly, there are churches that do not reach out to their own communities. They are like a closed corporation, a social club with a limited membership. They not only do not go out, but dislike and are afraid of doing so. How can they be motivated to be and become and do what every local church exists for?

Well, that's why I have thought of taking us to the book of Nehemiah and draw our motivation from there.

The book of Nehemiah begins with an oppressed people who have suffered defeat and subjugation by two large empires - Babylon and Persia. The people are in a desperate situation and in great disgrace (**1:3**). Their capital city lay in ruins, their religious life was severely disrupted, their economy was in shambles, and shame was written all over their faces. The divinely elected nation which was to be a light to the other nations, a nation in which righteousness was to reign, a nation in which priests were to direct the worship of God, a nation in which the faithful prophets were to teach the word of God, this nation had become corrupted, its collective behaviour, had become shattered with the approach of the indomitable army from Babylon. The people refused to follow the admonitions of the prophets and so suffered the defeat and slavery predicted by the prophets. And spent 70+ years in captivity.

And now the people of Judah have returned to their homeland, but with utopian aspirations of creating a just society, and worshipping God as their forefathers did. But that righteous life did not readily materialize and soon many returnees were caught up in the old system of exploitation. Their idealism drifted into disillusionment and apathy (cf. Amos, Haggai). Many of the wealthy and priestly classes established a comfortable relationship with their foreign oppressors and sought to maintain their privileged status. Others clung tenaciously to their hope of a better society and a return to the "law of Moses." So how will they influence for good, the nations around them? They needed a push from somewhere. They needed something and someone to galvanise them into action. And that person was Nehemiah.

How can we motivate the local to be missional?

1. By encouraging an establishment of a biblical, vibrant, and faithful leadership over God's people

A delegation from Jerusalem, who had perhaps targeted Nehemiah as a potential leader for the people's cause, stopped by the royal palace in Susa and left Nehemiah with a graphic and sad description of their

present predicament. The people were in great economic distress and ethnic disgrace living in a dilapidated city with a broken wall and burned gates (1:3). This robbed them of their confidence, and probably even robbed them of faith in their God. They must have identified their problem – leadership.

And that is where the book begins. Nehemiah begins with hurting people who have become disillusioned and apathetic from the oppression of powerful elites, the dominance of other ethnic groups, or the sheer inability to cope with change.

Hurting people living in a fragmented culture and environment, weak, fragile and dying churches are in need of God-called, Spirit-filled, creative persons to envision and inspire a bigger effective ministry of the church; a leadership that enables the local church to transcend the despair of the present and that offers realistic expectations for God to use them for His glory.

Are we preparing such leadership in our theological colleges? Can the local church feel encouraged to look to us for such leadership?

2. By Embracing with Passion the Call of God upon our Lives

Nehemiah seemed to be unable to shake that pathetic mental image of those “broken walls and burned gates.” It forced him to rethink the whole plight of his displaced people, their distorted and dysfunctional life, and their shattered religious identity. The people, like the walls, were broken and there seemed to be little hope of any immediate change or improvement. The story relates Nehemiah’s intense anguish in the simple phrase — “I wept” (1:4). He mourned for days. Nehemiah’s is depicted in his mental and spiritual anguish: he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. This depth of human involvement is suggestive of the intensity and totality of the change that occurred within Nehemiah. A dynamic and revolutionary change was taking place in Nehemiah that drove him out of his shell of complacency, comfort and affluence and opened up his life to a new level of spiritual reality.

How passionate are we about the state of the world? How broken are we by the godlessness in our societies? Do we embrace our calling with vigour and intense involvement? (Jer. 20:9; Rom. 9:1-4)

3. By Prayer-driven Vision of Building God’s People for Mission

Nehemiah’s was a vision born out of the burden of an important cause and born out of the realization of the necessity of that cause. Nehemiah began with prolonged prayer (v. 6). The prayer can be outlined as follows:

- (a) Invocation to God;
- (b) Confession of sins;
- (c) Plea to the Lord to remember His covenant promise (v. 8).
- (d) Plea for success in the “sight of this man.”

In chapters 1–2, we can see the process of birthing his vision. The vision to rebuild the wall and the gates of Jerusalem arose from deep concern for God’s people and the burden that Nehemiah felt when he was in Susa. In this confessional prayer, we can discern a faithful servant-leader who cared not only for the external and internal structural building of Jerusalem, but also for his people’s spiritual wellness and unity— seeking harmony between the Word of God and the people of God. It is self-evident that Nehemiah was called to serve and lead at such a time as this. He humbly confessed not only his own and his family’s sins, but also the sins of his fellow Israelites. Nehemiah was an exemplary leader who sees the rhyme and reason of the destruction of Jerusalem. For him, it was not only the wall and the gates of Jerusalem that were destroyed; it was also the collective spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing of his people. It meant that the word of God was neglected and that the community of faith was tarnished and had to be restored through deep repentance, as well as careful and precise planning, including taking risks for such a cause as rebuilding the community of God’s people.

Any biblical mission endeavour must be undertaken with prayer and dependence on the grace of God and power of God (4:4-5, 9). The global mission field is complex and requires us, like Nehemiah, to be equipped with prayers for our mission. We need deep-level, scripture-driven, world-embracing, Christ-exalting prayers.

4. By Embracing the Risks involved in Missions

Sometimes the mission task can seem impossible, especially when the hindrances are great and the risk zones we are entering seem to be overwhelming. God's mission may expose you to diverse risks, depending on the context into which you will venture. As in Nehemiah's time, a variety of oppositions may attempt to hinder God's work. Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer of king Artaxerxes' took a big risk when, after four months of preparation in prayers and fasting and careful planning for the appropriate time, he decided to show his emotions to the king. Nehemiah was aware that he "was exposing himself to considerable danger," because the king's decree in Ezra 4:20– 21 prohibited anyone from rebuilding Jerusalem. Furthermore, "a gloomy appearance, as well as lack of courtesy, might well be interpreted as evidence of plotting against the king."

In parts of chapters 4-6, we find foreign opposition, internal factionalism, and personal attacks. They are ridiculed for their numbers, and poverty of their resources (4:1-3). There was a military siege that surrounded and isolated them (4:8). There was a plot to infiltrate the ranks of the workers and then at a given signal to uncover their weapons and to slaughter the defenseless workers (4:11, 15). Their enemies devised a tactic to isolate Jerusalem from the rural residents in the immediate area (4:12). In each incident, Nehemiah studied his opposition, adapted to the problem, and continued with the project. During each attack, Nehemiah sidestepped the assault and "smashed" the opposition's plan.

5. By Setting before the Church your own example of Selfless Involvement in Missions

There are two important personal considerations in chapter 4. Nehemiah's level of participation and involvement:

- 1) First, he participated with the people: "we built," "we watched," "we prayed," "we laboured," and "we did not take off our clothes."
- 2) Second, he not only worked with the people, he also shared in their dangers and risks. In the event of any surprise attack, Nehemiah instructed the people to rush to the site of the sound of the trumpet and that is where Nehemiah could be found — in both the construction zone and the war zone.

Are our courses, programmes and curricula for missions practical enough? Do they engage the students in the work of missions? Do we practically demonstrate to them how much it matters? The churches from which these students come, should be able to see and appreciate the degree of our practical involvement in missions.

6. By Teaching and Reminding the Church of the Sovereignty of God

We are not only theologians whose task begins and ends in the classroom. We are, I believe, actively involved in one way or another, in the life of the local church. When Nehemiah tells us, after his prayer, that he "was a cupbearer to the king" (v. 11b), he is acknowledging God's providence in placing him in such a position. And throughout the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, he makes it clear to his people that the task could only be done with the help of the God who is sovereign (cf. 4:14; 19-20). If there is one thing that the history of missions displays, it is that God's design to save a people is something that would require a greater power than mere humans could muster. The church must be motivated with this truth that Christian Mission is founded upon the utter sovereignty of God; It is God sovereignly directing his witnesses, protecting and sustaining them through impossible opposition, and opening the blind and hardened hearts of those who hear the gospel.

When the rebuilding of the wall was eventually completed in 52 days, the opposition withdrew in humiliation, respect, and fear, acknowledging that "this work had been accomplished with the help of our God (6:16). The shame and disgrace of Judah was replaced with self-confidence and hope. Will we trust God enough to venture from our comfort zones to speak for the Saviour? Trusting in God's sovereignty and not our own resources, and trusting in Christ's sufficiency and not our own wisdom?

Conclusion

Let me leave you with some practical exhortations:

1. Let us feed the local church with well-trained and well-formed men and women for the work of missions. And to do that, we ourselves must have the right personnel resource and right curricula to be able to feed the church with such men and women.
2. Let us partner with local churches in providing opportunities for internships. These internships must be carefully planned and worked out in order to benefit both the student and the local church:
 - (1) EXPOSE the intern to missionary life and ministry.
 - (2) EDUCATE the intern to missiological principles and practices.
 - (3) ENABLE the intern to experience and apply what they have learned in mission studies.
 - (4) EQUIP the intern with missionary tools and resources for ministry.
 - (5) EMPOWER the intern to participate and partner in fulfilling the Great Commission.
 - (6) ENCOURAGE the intern toward a life-time of service and involvement in missions.
3. Let us emphasise the place of the local church in the student's all round spiritual formation, realisation and actualization of their calling.