

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

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People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Text
Nehemiah 10

Topic
The Jews put their seal on a pledge to obey the Word of God
and they promise to never neglect the house of God

Title
The God Housekeeping Seal of Approval

Nehemiah 10:1 Now those who placed *their seal on the document were:*
Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,
Nehemiah 10:2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,
Nehemiah 10:3 Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah,
Nehemiah 10:4 Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
Nehemiah 10:5 Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,
Nehemiah 10:6 Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,
Nehemiah 10:7 Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,
Nehemiah 10:8 Maaziah, Bilgai, and Shemaiah. These were the priests.
Nehemiah 10:9 The Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of
Henadad, and Kadmiel.
Nehemiah 10:10 Their brethren: Shebaniah, Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan,
Nehemiah 10:11 Micha, Rehob, Hashabiah,
Nehemiah 10:12 Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,
Nehemiah 10:13 Hodijah, Bani, and Beninu.
Nehemiah 10:14 The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu,
Bani,
Nehemiah 10:15 Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,
Nehemiah 10:16 Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,
Nehemiah 10:17 Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur,
Nehemiah 10:18 Hodijah, Hashum, Bezai,
Nehemiah 10:19 Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,
Nehemiah 10:20 Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,
Nehemiah 10:21 Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua,
Nehemiah 10:22 Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah,
Nehemiah 10:23 Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub,
Nehemiah 10:24 Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,
Nehemiah 10:25 Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,

Nehemiah 10:26 Ahijah, Hanan, Anan,
Nehemiah 10:27 Malluch, Harim, and Baanah.
Nehemiah 10:28 Now the rest of the people - the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding -
Nehemiah 10:29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:
Nehemiah 10:30 We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;
Nehemiah 10:31 if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt.
Nehemiah 10:32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:
Nehemiah 10:33 for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.
Nehemiah 10:34 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the Law.
Nehemiah 10:35 And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD;
Nehemiah 10:36 to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God;
Nehemiah 10:37 to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities.
Nehemiah 10:38 And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse.
Nehemiah 10:39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.

Introduction

Every few years, a new book about how to live the Christian life enjoys enormous popularity:

1. *The Prayer of Jabez*, published back in 2000 by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, has sold more than 9-million copies to date. It spent time as the number one book on both the *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestsellers Lists. The book was so popular it spawned an entire industry of additional books and merchandise – including a version just for women and three versions for kids.
2. *The Prayer of Jabez* was succeeded in popularity by *The Purpose Driven Life* and the *Purpose Driven Church*, both written by Pastor Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Life* has been at the top of both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* Bestseller lists. Churches and Christians all over the country, and in other countries, annually implement and follow the *40-Days of Purpose* program outlined by the author.

The popularity of these books tells us that the followers of Jesus have a sincere and commendable desire to know what they should be doing to live the Christian life.

You've probably noticed that we do not ever get involved in these (and other) popular programs. It's because we believe that God, in His Word, already gives you clear and concise instructions about what you should be doing.

The eleventh chapter of Nehemiah is just such a passage. God's people sign a pledge to obey His Word; the manuscript they sign goes point-by-point telling them exactly what to do.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Sign-On As God's Housekeeper, and #2 Step-Up To God Housekeeping.

#1 Sign-On As God's Housekeeper (v1-31)

The words **house** or **house of the Lord** or **house of God** are used about ten times in this chapter. The **house of God** was the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem. The Temple was the center of Jewish religious belief and social life. It was the earthly dwelling place for the glory of God. Thus their 'housekeeping' with regard to God's Temple said a lot about where the Jews were at spiritually.

In our New Testament times the **house of God** on earth is anywhere believers gather together as the Church. Our 'housekeeping' in the Church says a lot about our spirituality.

Where do you begin if you want to practice God-housekeeping in the Church? We can get our answer from the Jews in our passage. They began by making a pledge to both obey the Word of God and to never neglect the house of God. The leaders placed their seal on it – meaning they signed it. The rest of the people verbally acknowledged their acceptance of it.

In the history of the Church, there have been famous confessions of faith that believers have signed. Some Churches still require you sign something in order to become a full-fledged member.

If you are a Christian, you are already a member of the Church. I can't see anywhere in the New Testament where we are told to literally sign a pledge or a membership list to be considered a member of a local Church. What we mean by 'signing-on' is something personal - something that takes place in your heart in your relationship with the Lord.

The first twenty-eight verses are mostly names, but there is at least one insight we can glean from them. The Jews saw themselves as separate from all other people on the earth; they saw themselves as connected in community with one another; they had a definite structure of leadership and lay-people who worked together for God; and they understood that God's Word was their only charter.

That sounds like four insights, not one! It is four things that describe one important insight: They were the unique people of God on earth.

So are we! Those same four things should describe us as God's unique earthly people: We are to be a separated people, connected in community with one another, with a definite structure of leadership and lay-people, with God's Word as our only charter.

Those four things take place in the life of the local Church. You should be heavily involved in the life of your local Church.

Jesus loves His Church. He is building it; He is adding to it; He is preparing it to present to His Father in Heaven.

Gauge your own involvement in this Church. Maybe you are as involved as you can be. **That's fine!** No one will pressure you to do more. But maybe you're not so involved. Why not? Sign-on. It's a prerequisite.

Next there were two specific things that these fifth century Jews signed-on to obey in God's Word that would keep them a separated people and a connected community: Marriage and the Sabbath.

Nehemiah 10:30 *We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;*
Nehemiah 10:31 *if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt.*

Let's talk first about their marriages. God is not a racist; He's not prejudiced. He wanted Jews to only marry Jews in order to protect them. You see, the other peoples of the earth were pagan idolaters. They were worshipping demons. Their religious practices were perverted at best, depraved at worst. Mixed-marriages always led the Jews away from God and His blessings into idolatry. Idolatry led to slavery.

Marriage is in trouble today. According to the US Census Bureau, traditional marriage has ceased to be the preferred living arrangement in the majority of US households.

There are a lot of other trends and statistics we could cite. Instead of looking at others... *Let's look at ourselves as Christians!* Let's decide that we will uphold God's standards for marriage and family in our own homes:

1. Pledge that you will not divorce without biblical grounds.
2. Pledge that you will model for your kids the sanctity of marriage and teach them to only marry other believers.
3. Pledge that you will practice the tough spiritual discipline of looking beyond your spouse to the Lord and live obediently so as to please Him in your marriages.

The Jews returned to a strict Sabbath keeping. They committed to keeping it by no longer trading with foreign merchants from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. It, too, would be a powerful witness of their remaining separated from the rest of the world and connected with one another as God's earthly people, following His Word.

What about us and the Sabbath? We've established in many previous studies through the years that New Testament believers are under no obligation to literally keep the Sabbath Day by ceasing from work. For example: It was not something that was required of Gentile Christians by the Church Council at Jerusalem in the Book of Acts. The Sabbath was a type, a shadow, of the spiritual rest we should enjoy everyday as believers.

The application for us is to sign-on to the understanding that life is more than physical; more than business and busy-ness. It is to see our interactions with unbelievers as opportunities to show them how a Christians conducts him- or herself. It is to live at rest - at peace with God and having the peace of God.

Sign-on. Get involved in the Church. Stay committed to the success of your marriage and of marriage as an institution. Experience the rest of God, and express it as a testimony in your day-to-day business.

#2 Step-Up To God-Housekeeping (v32-39)

The **house of God** becomes prominent in these verses. Even though it refers to the literal Temple, the specific things they pledged have more to do with spiritual service and, thus, we can make application to ourselves.

Most of their pledging involves some aspect of **giving**. These verses are, in fact, a great teaching on giving to God.

Nehemiah 10:32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:
Nehemiah 10:33 for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

The Law of Moses prescribed an annual half-shekel tax be paid in order to fund the Temple and its services. Scholars are in disagreement as to whether this **one-third shekel** tax was in addition to that half-shekel, or a reduction of it, because the people were poor.

Either way, they exacted it as a tax. It gives us a first principle for giving to God: You are **obligated** to give to the Lord's Church.

Some Churches still do something like this. Their leaders visit you and ask you what your earnings will be for the year, then send you a bill for 10%. While I disagree strongly with their methods, the principal it's based on *is* biblical. We are all obligated to give financially to the Church.

Next you see that your giving should be **regular**:

Nehemiah 10:34 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for *bringing* the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as *it is* written in the Law.

Sacrificial offerings were at the heart of the Jewish Temple. A lot of wood was needed to keep the fires burning. The people committed

to regular, and I would add faithful, giving of wood **at the appointed times.**

Once you understand that you are obligated to give, then it's up to you to do so regularly – so that God's work will not grow cold.

Next you see that your giving should be **sacrificial:**

Nehemiah 10:35 *And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD;*
Nehemiah 10:36 *to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God,*
to the priests who minister in the house of our God;
Nehemiah 10:37 *to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God...*

To clarify: *The Jews did not sacrifice their sons!* They paid a price to the Temple to redeem them. It was a way of reminding them that their children were the Lord's.

Firstfruits of your **ground**, **flocks**, and **herds** were extremely valuable. To give them to the Lord was a real sacrifice. But it also showed real faith because you were trusting Him to give you a further harvest.

God knows that giving to Him is a sacrifice. He set it up that way so He could grow your faith. He wants to remind you that everything you have is from Him to begin with.

Next you see that your giving should be **prescribed:**

Nehemiah 10:37 ...for the Levites should receive the **tithes** in all our farming communities.

Tithe means 10%. It was a specific, prescribed portion. Note that it was in addition to the **one-third shekel** Temple tax. They supported the Temple, *and* they gave an additional 10% on top of that.

Are New Testament Christians obligated to give 10%? Let's apply what we've learned thus far. You are obligated to give; you should give regularly; and it should be prescribed. Whether 10% as a

prescribed amount is sacrificial or not is an important question. For you, 5% might be a total sacrifice. *Or it might take 15% or more to get you in the sacrificial zone!*

Next you see that your giving should be **organized**:

Nehemiah 10:38 And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse.

Nehemiah 10:39 For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.

Their leaders handled the **tithes** and the **offerings** in an organized manner, with integrity and accountability. Their **tithes** and **offerings** funded the ministry of the **priests**, the **gatekeepers**, and the **singers**.

It's the same today. Your financial gifts are handled in an organized manner, with integrity and accountability. They fund the ministry you enjoy here at Calvary Hanford.

Through their giving, they did **not neglect the house of... God**. They stepped-up to God-housekeeping. Jews and Gentile converts could come during any time the Temple was open and offer their sacrifices. They could dialogue with the priests and Levites; or just find a quiet spot to meditate on God and His Word. They could worship together at the place God's glory was revealed.

Applying the Word...

Christians really do have a sincere desire to know what they should be doing. Popular books and the programs they suggest are an attempt to get Christians on-task.

I say we don't need them! We need instead to sign-on and step-up to what we already know to be our way of life as Christians:

1. We are the beloved Church of Jesus Christ. We are to be a separated people, connected in community with one another, with a definite structure of leadership and lay-people, having

- God's Word as our only charter. In the Church on earth, we are to be an example to the unsaved world by maintaining our marriages; and we are to experience a spiritual rest in our lives that makes unbelievers thirst for Jesus.
2. We are obligated to give to the work of God. Our giving should be regular, prescribed, and sacrificial giving that is handled in an organized manner in order to support the spiritual work of the ministry.

When these simple, but powerful, things truly describe us... we have the God-Housekeeping Seal.



