

## COMMIT OUR WAYS TO THE LORD

Nehemiah 10:28-39

What does it mean to most people to be a Christian? If George Barna were to conduct a survey and ask random people on the street how they would describe Christians, what do you think people would say? We would probably be shocked with the range of answers we would get from such a survey. In today's environment, we may get a lot of negative descriptions because of the secular humanism campaign to ridicule and lessen the influence of Christ in the world. If we could go to an earlier time in history of say fifty years ago, what would people say? It is likely that most of the answers would be related to various behaviors of what people would ideally think Christians should do. Hopefully, we would hear such things as honesty, believe in God, good citizens, trustworthy, those who support the church, good neighbors, those who go to church regularly, helpful, generous, don't gamble, drink, smoke or run around with wild women. Would such descriptions be in agreement with what the Bible says would be characteristics of those who follow Christ? If we focus on the positives and eliminate the negatives, then such descriptions would definitely be in agreement with God's word.

Now let's go back to 444 BC and ask a similar question. "What did it mean to most people to be a Jew?" What kind of answers do you think would make up that list? It would be a mixed bag of negatives and positives. The negatives might be more in line with actual practices that were going on at that time and the positives would be in alignment with God's principles and commandments. Obviously, they didn't have the benefit of a Barna Survey. The thing that happened during this time of spiritual renewal was what we might call a personal inventory. To conduct a personal inventory a person would ask himself a question such as the following. "What does the Bible say about being truthful?" That would be followed by another question such as "What am I doing in my life with regard to being truthful, being honest, having integrity, etc."

Apparently, when these Jews started asking such questions, they weren't satisfied with the comparison and that dissatisfaction is the essence of conviction. The post-exile Jews found that they had fallen into practices that were contrary to the word of God. Part of the problem was that they really weren't familiar with what God's requirements were and they had probably thought that what they knew of the Law didn't really apply to them. When Ezra brought the words of the Law to the people they were convicted in their hearts and they entered into a process of repentance and confession. This process was followed by their making a solemn pledge for a more godly lifestyle. This covenant was not something they were doing just for appearance sake but was a genuine commitment to live their lives according to the Word of God.

### Commitment Made – 10:28-29

<sup>28</sup> Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants 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, all those who had knowledge and understanding, <sup>29</sup> are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; Nehemiah 10:28-29 (NASB95)

To put these verses into context we would need to look back to the end of chapter nine where we would see that the people came to the realization that things were not like they should be for those who were God's people. They found themselves essentially in slavery and under the domination of a foreign government to which they had to pay taxes and had no voice in what

could be done to them. As they stated in their prayer to God (9:37), “we are in great distress.” They had figured out that the reason for the mess that they were in was because they had failed to follow the commandments, precepts and statutes of God. Their response was to have those in positions of leadership put their commitment to obey God in the form of a contract and sign it. (This would be like having people of influence today taking an oath of office.)

The covenant was put in writing and the leaders signed the document. It is not certain that the rest of the people actually signed the document but they did agree (commit) to the provisions of the covenant. The participants in the oath ranged from the governor to the janitor and their family members were included also. This inclusion of individual family members was somewhat of a change for the Jewish society. Prior to this, the patriarchs of the family units would have decided for their family and would have been the only ones included. This change represents the realization that each one of us is responsible before God. We are not a Christian just because we were born in America, or just because our parents were believers.

The oath that the people took was far-reaching in that they committed themselves to “observe” and “do” ALL the commandments of the Lord. That word “observe” means to pay attention to or honor what God commanded them to do. In other words, they had committed themselves to pay attention to the laws, judgments and statutes of God. In order to do that, it was necessary to know what the law said.

It is equally important for us to study the Word of God and to be familiar with what it says; however, just knowing is not enough but we must be able to apply it to the situations of life – to “notice” how the Word of God applies to life. In honoring the commandments, we must be able to agree with the law and not rationalize away its effectiveness. Finally, we must be bold enough to “do” what the Word of God says to do. This process applies to ALL the commandments. We have a tendency to approach the Bible “cafeteria style” in that we pick and choose what parts we want to obey. That approach is not acceptable.

Is such a practice of having a covenant and getting all the members to sign it something we ought to be doing in the churches today? We could guess that the answers to such a question would range from “absolutely yes” to “absolutely no.” It is not hard to imagine that both sides could present convincing arguments to support their respective opinions on this question.

While we are thinking about the various reasons to do or not to do this, let’s consider the incentives that were associated with the covenant these post-exile Jews signed. A positive consideration for making such an agreement was that they wanted to enjoy God’s blessings and they did not want to repeat the mistakes of the past that had resulted in all the terrible consequence of their defeat at the hands of Assyria and Babylon, the exile and their ongoing lack of national autonomy in being in subjection to the Persian Empire. They then added on a harsh negative incentive of undergoing a “curse” if they failed to be obedient. It is not clear exactly what the “curse” would be other than they might have to experience what had happened to their ancestors centuries ago.

It would seem that they had given serious consideration of the causes of the failures of the past that had lead to their unfaithfulness to God that took the form of idol worship and not showing proper respect to God.

### Holiness Sought – 10:30

<sup>30</sup>and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. Nehemiah 10:30 (NASB95)

While they had made a covenant to observe all the commandments, ordinances, and statutes, they specifically mentioned three particular areas that could be associated with what

caused their past failures. The first of these three was to not intermarry with pagans. Intermarriage had been practiced by some of the people after their return to Israel. It was one of the more difficult situations to correct in that it caused a lot of emotional pain in dissolving marriages and disrupting families. The people, having just come through this were particularly sensitive to this situation.

These Jews were surrounded by idolatrous Gentiles. It was the ministry of the priests to teach the people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean. When their forefathers first came into the Promised Land, they failed to get rid of all the Canaanite people and these pagans and their practices influenced the Jews. The influence was unavoidable if there were marriages between the Jews and the pagans. We find warnings about this in Deuteronomy 7 where the concern was that the pagan spouse would influence the Jewish spouse to commit spiritual adultery by honoring the false gods of the Gentiles.

With perfect 20/20 hindsight, these Jews could clearly see the wisdom in that principle given through Moses, and so they committed themselves to not intermarry. We might wonder about those instances where non-Israelites women did marry Israelites and things worked out quite well, such as with Rahab from Jericho and Ruth of Moab. In both these cases, these women had committed themselves to the Lord, the God of Israel before marriage. The concern was not genetic but rather spiritual.

The objective of such an exclusion was to have a people who were separated from the world and separated unto God. The definition of holiness is separation and total exclusive devotion to God. This does not mean isolation from others but we do need to have a healthy balance of being able to interact with the world without becoming like the world.

The second area was related to the Sabbath observances. The seventh day was to be set apart and not treated as just any other day. Likewise the seventh year was to be observed.

### Honoring God – 10:31

<sup>31</sup> As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. Nehemiah 10:31-33 (NASB95)

Let go back our hypothetical Barna Survey and ask the “man on the street” why it is a good idea to have a “day of rest” every seven days. Most likely the reasons would be related to our mental and physical health. Some would see a benefit to having quality family time and a chance to visit with friends and relatives. A few might see this as an opportunity to do what relaxes them such as camping trips or taking care of hobbies that they would otherwise not have time to do. Have you noticed anything missing from this list? So far, we haven’t mentioned anything about how we relate to God.

In a very real sense, observance of a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year of rest is a testimony of our faith in God to provide for all our needs. It was also a testimony of our agreement with the Biblical account of Creation. God rested on the seventh day following the six days of Creation. By ignoring the Sabbath, we are giving another testimony that says we are not in agreement with what the Sabbath observance means regarding trusting God and the implications related to creation.

We have drifted away from the point where everything was closed on Sundays to the kind of situation where many businesses are “open for business” in much the same way as any other day. We have not totally abandoned the observance of the Sabbath but have moved away from the purity that we once had. We have not ever (in our society) practiced observing the

seventh year in which the land would not be planted but would be given a rest and whatever grew on its own was for the benefit of the poor and needy. Also, during this seventh year all debts were canceled.

If we will honor God by observing the Sabbath, then there are beneficial consequences of showing Him such respect. The benefits are that people are refreshed and renewed by letting their bodies and minds rest. In the agricultural economy of that day, even the animals used for plowing and other things needed a time of rest. The land itself would benefit from lying fallow for a period of time. The lesson that we can take from this is that whatever we do to honor God actually works out for our ultimate benefit. This is in agreement with what Jesus said in Mark 2:27 “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”

Where does this leave us? Are we not back to the basic question of “why do we do what we do?” Is our motivation “fear” of the consequences of disobedience? Is our motivation a “desire” to enjoy the benefits of blessings as a consequence of obedience? The higher calling would be that we love the Lord and honor Him in all that we do. The consequences then take care of themselves.

The third area of specific commitment was associated with the activities that were outward expressions of worship as given in the Law of Moses.

#### Pledge to Support Worship – 10:32-39

<sup>32</sup> We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: <sup>33</sup> for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. <sup>34</sup> Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood *among* the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers’ households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law; <sup>35</sup> and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually, <sup>36</sup> and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. <sup>37</sup> We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithes of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns. <sup>38</sup> The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. <sup>39</sup> For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God. Nehemiah 10:32-39 (NASB95)

Another area addressed specifically was that of support for the temple, the priest and the Levites. There is a tendency to neglect that which we do not have to do. A higher percentage of citizens pay their taxes than the percentage of church members who tithe. It takes a real commitment to faithfully give and to support the work of the Lord. The economic structure of that day was mainly agriculturally based and the support that the people provided was in terms of their crops and cattle.

The law of that day attempted to prevent giving that which was of no value in an attempt to make a good show by calling for the first fruits and the firstborn. We can learn from this requirement of the first fruits in the giving of things other than money to the work of the Lord. One of the most valuable contributions we can make to the Kingdom is our time and talent. There is a real tendency to give the leftovers to the church and use the prime time for our own pleasure. When we do that, the work and results of the church suffer and the benefits that could result from the influence of the Kingdom of God in our society are lessened. If we devoted the first fruits of our time and talent to the church, we would see much greater results in our

community and around the world.

So, where do we wind up in the question of having a “church covenant” that members should sign? The Jews of Nehemiah’s time thought that they needed some incentive such as a contract with implied penalties to keep them on the right track. We know from the subsequent history of these people and their descendants that this approach was not successful. What they really needed was a change of heart that could only come about by something beyond “restoration.” They literally needed a new birth. Old things (approaches and methods and ideas) needed to pass away and all things needed to become new. Instead, they just tried harder and become legalists. The legalists want to live by rules, but that approach to life only keeps us immature and dependent on our spiritual leaders. The only way to grow in a balanced life is to give ourselves totally to God and follow Him by faith that is motivated by love that flows from being transformed into the image of Christ.