

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITHIN

Nehemiah 5:1-19

By

Steven J. Cole

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Nehemiah Lesson 5

Resolving Conflicts Within Nehemiah 5:1-19

A man heard his daughter and some of her friends arguing loudly in the back yard. He went out and reprimanded her. "But Daddy," she protested, "we were just playing church."

Ouch! It's sad, but true, that the church of Jesus Christ has often been marked more by factions than by fellowship. There is even a book titled *Great Church Fights*. I haven't read it, but it sounds interesting. J. Vernon McGee (*Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther* [Thru the Bible Books], p. 117) observes, "In the history of the church we have seen that when the devil could not destroy the church by persecution, the next thing he did was to join it!" If you have been a Christian for very long, you have probably been in a church that went through a split.

In this fallen world, some splits are inevitable if we are committed to sound doctrine and godly standards. There have always been and always will be those who bring in destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1) and/or evil behavior (2 Pet. 2:13-14, 18-19). If church leaders are obedient to God, they must confront serious error and sinful behavior (Titus 1:9-16). But when they do so, even if they follow Scripture and act in love, there are always some who will react negatively and leave.

No matter what the cause of the disunity, we should work at resolving conflicts in the church in a biblical manner. Paul exhorts us to be diligent "to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). We should "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19). If we want God's blessing, Peter says that we "must seek peace and pursue it" (1 Pet. 3:11b). Passivity is not adequate. We must pursue peace in a godly manner without compromising truth or holiness.

As we saw last week, Nehemiah did not have smooth sailing in trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, as chapter 3 by itself might lead us to believe. Chapters 4 & 6 show how he had to face opposition *from without*. Chapter 5 shows how he had to deal with

conflict *from within*. Some scholars argue that these events must have taken place after the wall was completed, since Nehemiah would not have taken the time for an assembly of the whole populace (5:7) in the middle of the project. But my understanding is that he did have to take the time in the middle of the project to deal with this internal problem that threatened to sabotage the work.

The problem (5:1-5) centered on the complaints of the poorer Jews against the wealthy Jews who were either ignoring their desperate needs or were actually making those needs worse through exploiting them. Things were made worse by a famine, so that those who owned property were forced to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses in order to get food. Others had to borrow in order to pay the king's tax on their lands. Some were even forced to sell their children into slavery to their fellow Jews in order to pay their bills.

In disregard of the Mosaic law that forbade a Jew from loaning money at interest to a fellow Jew in need (Exod. 22:25; Deut. 23:19), the wealthier Jews were not only charging interest ("the hundredth part" [5:11] means 1% per month, or 12% per year), but also they were taking Jewish children as slaves as collateral for the loans. They were operating as heartless businessmen, putting their own financial gain as foremost, without regard for how it hurt their poorer brethren and their families. Nehemiah saw these problems as serious enough to stop the work on the wall long enough to get them resolved. The way he dealt with things and the people's response show us some biblical principles for resolving conflicts in the church.

In order to do the Lord's work, we must resolve
conflicts in the church in a biblical manner.

There are three principles here, two of which involve the people, and one that involves the leaders.

1. To resolve conflicts biblically, people must air complaints to the proper authorities.

We do not know whether the people who were being wronged had first gone to those exploiting them without getting things resolved. That is always the first step when you think that someone has wronged you, to go directly to the person and try to

get things resolved (Matt. 18:15). But at this point, they brought their complaint to Nehemiah, or at least he heard about it. There is a basic and yet often overlooked principle: *a leader cannot deal with problems that he is not aware of*. Sometimes he cannot deal with problems even when he is aware of them, of course. But without exception, it is impossible to deal with problems when you do not know about them.

I am amazed at how often people air their complaints to everyone *except* the leaders who could perhaps do something to help. They always have an excuse: "I just wanted to see if anyone else felt the same way that I feel." Or, "I just need to air my feelings." Or, "The pastor is too busy and he won't listen to you anyway!" So they circulate through the church, stirring up dissension and disunity, but the leaders don't even know that there is a problem.

Years ago, the wife of one of my elders called and asked, "Did you know that Miss Jones [an elderly woman in the church] is calling through the church directory asking people if they like our using guitars in our worship times?" I said, "No, I had no idea." So I went to visit Miss Jones. Her first words were, "So have you come to bawl me out?" I said, "No, I've come to talk with you and to explain why we have changed our music style. And, I've come to ask you not to stir up gossip and controversy by calling through our church directory." Clearly, she was very uncomfortable with such direct resolution of a problem!

But to talk to everyone in the church except those who can do something about the problem just stirs up dissension and spreads gossip. To resolve conflicts or problems biblically, go directly to the person responsible and talk about the problem. If someone comes to you with a complaint, ask if he has talked to one of the pastors or elders. If not, direct him to do so before he talks to anyone else. Many misunderstandings can be resolved at this level without causing larger problems in the church.

2. To resolve conflicts biblically, leaders must deal with complaints in a biblical manner.

Nehemiah is an example of godly leadership here. He could have told these people, "I'm busy on this wall. Come back in six weeks and we'll talk." But Nehemiah realized that the problems

were significant and the people were upset. So he interrupted his attention on the wall to listen and help resolve this matter. He did five things that leaders should do:

(1) He got righteously angry.

It may surprise some to read (5:6) that Nehemiah got very angry when he heard these complaints. There seem to be two extremes in Christian circles today. Some think that all anger is wrong. Sometimes Christians who think this deny their own anger, even when it is evident to everyone else. Others, buying into modern psychology, say that anger isn't right or wrong—it just *is*. They say that we should express it and own up to it.

The Bible clearly teaches that most anger is sinful, but that some anger is righteous (Eph. 4:26, 31). Jesus got angry at the hardness of heart of the Pharisees (Mark 3:5), but He did not sin. If our anger is directed against the sinful treatment of others and if we allow it to move us toward constructive means to try to resolve the problem, it may be righteous anger. If it involves some wrong committed against us, it may be righteous, but probably sinful selfishness and pride are mixed in with it, and so we should be very careful to examine our motives before God. It is right to get angry about sinful practices such as child abuse, pornography, abortion, racism, and the mistreatment of women. It would be sinful to respond with violence toward those who perpetrate such sins. We need to check ourselves to make sure that we direct our righteous anger righteously. That's what Nehemiah did.

(2) He exercised self-control.

Before Nehemiah contended with the ones guilty of exploiting the poor, he consulted with himself (5:7). That is significant! He didn't go off in a rage to blast those who were wrong. He stopped, cooled off, thought and prayed things through, and only then took action. Proverbs 16:32 says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city." We all, but especially leaders, need to exercise self-control when we get angry.

(3) He followed the principles of biblical confrontation.

It's easy to get angry but then to cool off and do nothing. After all, it is difficult and uncomfortable to confront those who are

causing a problem. It is especially difficult to confront those who happen to be rich and powerful, as these men were. What if they got defensive and withdrew their support of the project? What if they began to view Nehemiah as an enemy? They could use their clout to cause a lot more damage. Maybe Nehemiah should stall for time until the wall was finished. But he didn't do that.

First, he privately confronted those guilty of mistreating the poor (5:7). We do not know whether this involved a single meeting or a series of meetings, and whether Nehemiah was alone or whether he took some trusted leaders with him. But the biblical pattern for resolving conflict is, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you" (Matt. 18:15-16a). While Nehemiah did not have our Lord's teaching on this, he seems to have followed this pattern of private confrontation before any public confrontation.

Did Nehemiah succeed in private? We don't know for sure, but probably not. There is no recorded response from the nobles at this point (James Boice, *Nehemiah/Learning to Lead* [Revell], p. 94). So Nehemiah moved to public confrontation.

He called a great assembly and spelled out the problem. He rebuked the leaders (5:8) by pointing out how he and others had redeemed their Jewish brothers who had been sold to the nations, but now it was Jews themselves who were selling their brothers into slavery. They could not find a word to answer. He further stated that their behavior was not good in that their enemies would mock the Jews for their mistreatment of their own people (5:9).

Some think that Nehemiah (5:10) is admitting his own past failure in lending money at interest to his fellow Jews (based on the plural "let *us* leave off the usury"), but I think that he is just using the plural to identify with these men. Nehemiah had loaned money in accordance with the Law, without charging interest. He is appealing to these wealthy men to join him in doing the same. He asks them to give back to the poor their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, along with the interest that they had charged.

There are many Christian leaders who are afraid to confront sinners with their sin, whether in private or in public. This fear in-

creases when the person in sin is rich and powerful. But we must follow Nehemiah's example of confronting those who are in sin. Nehemiah exhibited proper righteous anger under control. His anger gave him the courage to confront those who were wrong.

(4) He set a personal example of godliness.

One reason that Christians hesitate to confront those in sin is the fear that the one confronted will point his finger back at the one doing the confronting, exposing areas where he is in sin. So they say, "Judge not, lest you be judged," and let things go.

Nehemiah shows us that leaders must be above reproach, proving to be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-4). He had spent his own money to redeem fellow Jews from slavery (5:8). He had loaned them money without interest (5:10). We don't know at what point Nehemiah had been appointed governor, whether before he went to Jerusalem the first time or some time after the wall was finished. But in 5:14-19, he adds his own example as governor over a 12-year period, not out of pride, but to give an example to other leaders to follow. His practices give us several important principles for leaders.

(a) He laid aside his rights and did not take advantage of his position and power (5:14-15).

He rightly could have demanded a food allowance as his predecessors had done by taxing the people and then sending their servants out to collect the tax with force. The governor had a right to such an allowance, and Nehemiah could have imposed it. After all, he had 150 Jews and officials at his table daily, besides those who came in from surrounding nations (5:17). To feed them required one ox, six choice sheep, plus poultry and wine every day (5:18). But Nehemiah set aside his right to the governor's food allowance and apparently bore these costs out of his own pocket.

Many Christian leaders fall into the trap of thinking that their position gives them certain rights and power. We should follow the example of the Lord Jesus, who laid aside His rights to take on the form of a servant and be obedient even to death on a cross.

(b) He feared God and cared about hurting people (5:15b, 18b).

Nehemiah gives two reasons why he bucked the trend of his predecessors and laid aside his rights: He feared God (5:15b), and he was concerned “because the servitude was heavy on this people” (5:18b). Every man in leadership must constantly remember that he is only a servant under God, and that he must answer to God someday. This is not “my” church; it is Christ’s church, and I am just His under-shepherd. Fearing God means that we should not do things as others, even other Christians, do them. We must fear God first and foremost. And, we must care about hurting people. To add to the burden of those who are already burdened would be insensitive and unloving.

I do not share this in any way to boast, but only, like Nehemiah, to give you an example. Years ago, I had a beautiful 1968 Mustang. My office was at home. One day I listened to a woman who had all sorts of problems. I offered some counsel and prayed with her. As she left, I was standing at the window and I watched as she backed her huge car into my nice Mustang. I saw the Mustang move when she hit it and I winced, but apparently she didn’t even feel it, because she drove off. I could have called her and asked that she submit the incident to her insurance, but I thought, “She’s got enough problems already.” I said, “Lord, she just hit Your car!” But the Lord said, “That’s okay. People matter more than cars do!” So I dropped it there and lived with the dent.

(c) He was generous and ready to share (5:17-18).

It cost him to feed everyone out of his own pocket, but he was willing to do it so that he didn’t have to impose a burden on these already burdened people. A leader must be an example of generosity.

(d) He was committed to the work (5:16).

Nehemiah reports that he applied himself (or “held fast”) to the work on the wall, and neither he nor his servants bought any land. Nehemiah and his servants probably knew in advance that real estate prices would shoot up once the wall was completed. They could have bought up land cheaply before announcing the project and then sold the land at a tidy profit. But the soldier in active service does not get entangled in everyday affairs, so that he

may please the one who enlisted him (2 Tim. 2:4). Nehemiah kept his focus on the work. So should we.

(e) He worked for God's approval (5:19).

Nehemiah was not working for man's applause, but for God's "well done." Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Scripture Truth Book Company], 2:1085) writes, "He mentions it to God in prayer not as if he thought he had hereby merited any favor from God, as a debt, but to show that he looked not for any recompense of his generosity from men, but depended upon God only to make up to him what he had lost and laid out for his honor; and he reckoned the favor of God enough." We all should labor for God's approval and reckon it enough, even if people do not say "thanks."

So, Nehemiah exercised righteous anger under control. He confronted those at fault biblically. He set a godly personal example. The remarkable thing is that when he confronted them with their wrong behavior, they agreed to give back the money and do as Nehemiah had requested (5:12). But Nehemiah didn't say, "That's wonderful, God bless you!" He did something else that leaders must do:

(5) He required accountability.

Nehemiah knew that human nature is full of good intentions that never make it into practice. So he made these rich men take a public oath before the priests, that they would follow through. Then, in the tradition of the prophets, he dramatically shook out his robe in front of them and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied" (5:13). That's making them sign on the dotted line! Surprisingly, no one said, "Don't you trust us?"

Leaders need to hold people accountable to their promises before God and others. If there has been marital unfaithfulness or financial misdeeds, the guilty party needs to reestablish trust. The only way to do that is through very close accountability.

Thus to resolve conflicts biblically, people must air complaints to the proper authorities. Leaders must deal with those complaints in a biblical manner. Finally,

3. To resolve conflicts biblically, people must be willing to submit to God, to His Word, and to godly leaders.

Sadly, when leaders confront people with wrongdoing, all too often the people either react with anger and defensiveness, or they just move on to another church or drop out of church altogether without dealing with their sin.

But thankfully, there are a few victories, such as we see here. These nobles and rulers accepted Nehemiah's rebuke without fighting back. They could see that their behavior disobeyed God's Word, it hurt their fellow Jews, and it gave their enemies cause to mock them and their God (5:9). They were willing to face up to their own greed and to pay back those whom they had taken advantage of. And, they were not only willing to be held accountable, but they did it with praise to God (5:13)! Wow! It's a wonder that Nehemiah didn't keel over with a heart attack!

From 25 years as a pastor, I can say that to see people respond that readily to correction is rare! But it shouldn't be. Hebrews 13:17 gives an exhortation that sounds strange in our day when people have no concept of being under spiritual authority: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

Conclusion

Some of what I've said has been addressed to those of you who are not leaders. Other things were addressed to those of us who lead in some capacity. It is human nature for the non-leaders to hear a message like this and think, "Yes, I wish our leaders would do what they're supposed to do!" And for the leaders to think, "If only our people responded to our leadership as these people did to Nehemiah!" But rather than pointing our finger at each other, each of us needs to obey what applies to us.

Someone has said that in a church quarrel, Satan remains neutral and supplies ammunition to both sides. That may not always be true, but he does like to divide God's people by getting them to wrong one another and then not to deal biblically with problems. We must be committed to resolve conflicts God's way. Then His work will go forward.

Discussion Questions

1. When does “sharing a concern” with someone cross the line into gossip? How can we avoid this?
2. How can we know when to drop a matter versus when to go to the person to try to get it resolved?
3. When is it right to leave a church? When is it wrong?
4. “Obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb. 13:17) frightens most of us. What limits apply to both leaders and people?

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