

**Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 16**  
**Urban and Missional (Nehemiah 11:1–36)**

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*And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.*  
— Nehemiah 11:2

After lying in ruins for 141 years, the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt in fifty-two short days. Shortly thereafter, the city was revisited by roughly fifty thousand people. These people then gathered for a church service; God's Word was taught, the people repented of their sins, and revival broke out. Following that revival, the people responded by renewing their covenant with God to live in obedience to His Word in all areas of their life. This week we witness the outworking of their urban missional strategy to bring the good news of the God of the Bible to every area in their city by sending people as missionaries to repopulate the various neighborhoods in their city.

***The Leaders in Jerusalem***

*11:1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. 2 And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.*

*3 These are the chiefs of the province who lived in Jerusalem; but in the towns of Judah everyone lived on his property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon's servants. 4 And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin. Of the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziah, son of Zechariah, son of Amariah, son of Shephatiah, son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; 5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, son of Col-hozeh, son of Hazaiah, son of Adaiyah, son of Joiarib, son of Zechariah, son of the Shilonite. 6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 valiant men.*

*7 And these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, son of Joed, son of Pedaiah, son of Kolaiah, son of Maaseiah, son of Ithiel, son of Jeshaiyah, 8 and his brothers, men of valor, 928. 9 Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer; and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second over the city.*

*10 Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, 11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, son of Meshullam, son of Zadok, son of Meraioth, son of Ahitub, ruler of the house of God, 12 and their brothers who did the work of the house, 822; and Adaiyah the son of Jeroham, son of Pelaliah, son of Amzi, son of Zechariah, son of Pashhur, son of Malchijah, 13 and his brothers, heads of fathers' houses, 242; and Amashsai, the son of Azarel, son of Ahzai, son of Meshillemoth, son of Immer, 14 and their brothers, mighty men of valor, 128; their overseer was Zabdiel the son of Haggadolim.*

*15 And of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, son of Azrikam, son of Hashabiah, son of Bunni; 16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the chiefs of the Levites, who were over the outside work of the house of God; 17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, son of Zabdi, son of Asaph, who was the leader of the praise, who gave thanks, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brothers; and Abda the*

son of Shammua, son of Galal, son of Jeduthun. <sup>18</sup> All the Levites in the holy city were 284.

<sup>19</sup> The gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon and their brothers, who kept watch at the gates, were 172. <sup>20</sup> And the rest of Israel, and of the priests and the Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, every one in his inheritance. <sup>21</sup> But the temple servants lived on Ophel; and Ziha and Gishpa were over the temple servants.

<sup>22</sup> The overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, son of Hashabiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the work of the house of God. <sup>23</sup> For there was a command from the king concerning them, and a fixed provision for the singers, as every day required. <sup>24</sup> And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was at the king's side in all matters concerning the people.

### ***Villages Outside Jerusalem***

<sup>25</sup> And as for the villages, with their fields, some of the people of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its villages, and in Dibon and its villages, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, <sup>26</sup> and in Jeshua and in Moladah and Beth-pelet, <sup>27</sup> in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its villages, <sup>28</sup> in Ziklag, in Meconah and its villages, <sup>29</sup> in En-rimmon, in Zorah, in Jarmuth, <sup>30</sup> Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, and Azekah and its villages. So they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom. <sup>31</sup> The people of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Michmash, Aija, Bethel and its villages, <sup>32</sup> Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, <sup>33</sup> Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, <sup>34</sup> Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, <sup>35</sup> Lod, and Ono, the valley of craftsmen. <sup>36</sup> And certain divisions of the Levites in Judah were assigned to Benjamin.

To appreciate the central themes guiding this urban ministry project, it is vital that we examine six great truths regarding urban ministry:

#### **1. Cities are strategic to God's plan for the world.**

While we believe there must be faithful churches wherever there are people, we also believe that cities (like Seattle) and their surrounding areas (like the Puget Sound) are of strategic importance. This is because, as sociologists such as James Davison Hunter have shown, culture flows downstream from urban areas where government, education, healthcare, information, entertainment, trade, travel, and industry are concentrated. An urban area is marked by density and diversity. For the first time in the world's history, roughly half of the world's population is urban. According to some estimates, that number was only 2.5 percent of the world's population only two hundred years ago, and is expected to swell to 60 percent by the year 2030.

The Bible actually opens with a garden and the cultural mandate to build a city. The Bible ends with the unveiling of the heavenly city, an urban paradise for God's people (Revelation 21–22). In fact, Christianity began as an urban movement led by Paul, whose itinerant church planting ministry was almost exclusively urban. He moved from city to city and bypassed the rural areas. By AD 300, roughly 50 percent of the urban population in the Roman Empire was Christian, whereas 90 percent of the countryside was still pagan (the word *pagan* simply means "one who lives in the country").

This does not mean that ministry should not be focused on suburban and rural areas. But it does mean that cities are more strategic; from a city, a church or ministry can spread the news of Jesus to the surrounding suburban and rural areas, as well as other cities around the world. This is similar to what Microsoft, Starbucks, Boeing, and Amazon.com have done from the greater Seattle area.

## **2. Some Christians should intentionally live in major cities.**

Because of the strategic importance of cities, some Christians should move to and remain in major cities. This is exactly what happened in Nehemiah's day. Roughly 10 percent of the people were chosen by the casting of lots so that God could providentially determine who should relocate to the city for the purpose of mission. Furthermore, those who moved to the city relocated to the neighborhoods where their families had resided in previous generations. In our day, this would be akin to various families of Mars Hill taking the responsibility upon themselves to be missionaries to their neighborhood and maintaining that ministry from one generation to the next. Some urban churches have actually formally organized themselves so that they have church members living on every block of the urban core of the city, doing ministry for that block as their self-appointed mission field. On this point, theologian Ronald J. Sider has written, "Evangelicals must reverse the continuing evangelical flight from the cities . . . If one percent of evangelicals living outside the inner city had the faith and courage to move in town, evangelicals would fundamentally alter the history of urban America."

## **3. Christians living in cities should love the whole city and serve the common good as a demonstration of the gospel they proclaim.**

Christians living in cities must be wise in how they organize and conduct themselves. Only by sticking close to Jesus and speaking and serving like Him can urban Christians avoid the various pitfalls that await them on both the religious right and left. Therefore, Christians living in city must NOT:

- Despise the city and live as a fortress in the city providing a place of refuge for fearful, self-righteous, pessimistic, and culturally detached Christians, as is so common with fundamentalism.
- Use the city and live as a parasite that has no heart for the well-being of the whole city, but only exists to take various resources from the city without seeking to serve the common good and make the city the best possible city for Christians and non-Christians alike, as is so common with some forms of evangelicalism.
- Mimic the city by living as little more than a mirror of the fallen culture rather than a mirror of the kingdom of God, as is so common with liberalism.

Therefore, Christians and churches in cities are to live as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:14, as a city within the city whose beliefs and behaviors are countercultural to the city; they must also love the city so that the Kingdom of Jesus can be seen by the city as the model for what a truly great city could look like by the power of the gospel. This happens when our beliefs and behaviors are guided by Scripture so

that we do gender, sex, work, money, power, family, and pleasure in a manner that is different, or holy.

My friend Dr. Tim Keller, who pastors a church in New York City, has been very insightful on all of this for me personally. As we have discussed this matter of urban ministry over the years, he continually refers back to Jeremiah 29:4–7, which captures it well: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

#### **4. Christians living in cities must pay a price to do so.**

Living in a city does, admittedly, require Christians and Christian churches to pay various prices. The following are only some of those prices:

- Cities statistically tend to be non-Christian and are also filled with people who are vocally not Christian; therefore, opposition and criticism can be expected.
- Cities tend to zone out larger churches, making it very difficult to exist as a larger church.
- Sin tends to be concentrated in cities because of the anonymity they provide.
- Cities are expensive and *Forbes* named Seattle America's most overpriced city two years in a row, which means we must take care of one another.
- Cities tend to be less charitable, and Seattle is among America's least charitable cities (1.9 percent of gross income), which means that every Christian must be a generous giver to the cause of Jesus.

#### **5. Cities are worth the effort to reach because they are ripe for the gospel.**

Despite the obvious difficulties of doing urban ministries such as occurred in the days of Nehemiah, there are many reasons why cities are worth the effort:

- Jesus said that the harvest is ripe but the workers are few, and that is especially true of cities.
- Because the city has a higher concentration of sin, it is exactly the kind of place where the gospel of forgiveness is most easily understood.
- Because the city is more open to change than more established, traditional areas, people are more open to changes such as converting to Jesus.
- Because cities make it difficult for large churches, the opportunity to be a multiple campus and church planting church that sends congregations out to various parts of the city is God's way of forcing Christians to be sent out on mission, just like in the days of Nehemiah.
- Because cities are expensive and less charitable, the generosity of faithful Christians is a very visible demonstration of their true priorities and love for both Jesus and the whole city.

- The outlying areas and even the world can be reached from the city.
- The high concentration of innovators, emerging leaders, and highly creative people in the cities means that their conversion results in the ongoing reformation of the church for good.

## 6. Jesus Himself relocated from heaven to demonstrate for us how to be missionaries in our city.

In John's gospel alone, Jesus tells us no less than thirty-nine times that he was a missionary from heaven who came to minister incarnationally (literally God "in flesh") in an earthly culture.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Jesus also commands us to be missionaries in culture as he was: "As you *sent* me into the world, so I have *sent* them into the world."<sup>2</sup> He also said, "As the Father has *sent* me, even so I am sending you."<sup>3</sup>

In closing, I want to share with you an example from history of what happens when the principles of Nehemiah are practically applied to a church planting church in a city. (The following section is taken from a forthcoming book that I contributed to, along with John Piper, David Wells, D. A. Carson, and Voddie Baucham, based on the [2006 Desiring God Conference](#) that we spoke at.) I will illustrate how the trend toward urban ministry is all very cutting edge—the cutting edge of the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1550s, John Calvin saw the population of his city of Geneva double as Christians fled there from persecution. One of those refugees was the Englishman John Bale, who wrote: "Geneva seems to me to be the wonderful miracle of the whole world. For so many from all countries come here, as it were, to a sanctuary. Is it not wonderful that Spaniards, Italians, Scots, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, disagreeing in manners, speech, and apparel, should live so lovingly and friendly, and dwell together like a . . . Christian congregation?"<sup>5</sup>

In His loving providence, God forced Geneva to become a short-term training ground in missions. Christians from varying cultures lived together there under the teaching of John Calvin and they had to determine what to receive, reject, and redeem from their culture in order to effectively contextualize the gospel and do evangelism.

After they had such wonderful theological training and missiological experience, many of the Christians returned to their cultures once persecution subsided. The result was an explosion of contending, contextualizing, and church planting. There were only five underground Protestant Churches in France alone in 1555, but by 1562, 2,150 churches were planted, totaling some three million

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:34; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36, 37, 38; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7:16, 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21

<sup>2</sup> John 17:18

<sup>3</sup> John 20:21

<sup>4</sup> Lester Dekoster, *Light for the City: Calvin's Preaching, Source of Life and Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004); Frank A. James III, "Calvin the Evangelist," *Reformed Quarterly* 19, no. 2/3 (Fall 2001), <http://www.rts.edu/quarterly/fall01/james.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Frank A. James III, "Calvin the Evangelist," *Reformed Quarterly* 19, no. 2/3 (Fall 2001), <http://www.rts.edu/quarterly/fall01/james.html>.

people. Furthermore, some of the churches were megachurches, with anywhere from four thousand to nine thousand people in attendance.

Additionally, church planting missionaries were sent by Calvin to Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, and the free imperial city-states in Rhineland. The Atlantic Ocean was even crossed by church planting missionaries Calvin sent to South America and what is Brazil today.

Because he was like Jesus and Nehemiah not merely in his doctrine but also his practice, John Calvin rightly understood that God has both predestined the elect to be saved and predestined the church to be instruments of His election by contending and contextualizing in culture. He did this all for the sake of the gospel and was able to share in its blessings, including many people being saved and many churches being planted

**Next week:** Titus 1:1–9