

The Bible and the Church

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Wallace Benn

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Some years ago the Watergate experience for the Americans brought down a President, shook the Government and caused consternation in America. This article is about a very different kind of Watergate.

We find this in Nehemiah 8 where God revives and re-constitutes the church and gathers it around his Word – a Water Gate experience which glorifies God, builds up the church and is infinitely for her good. The theme of Ezra and Nehemiah is the refounding of Israel as a nation family and as a nation church after the desolation of the Exile and the near century of unsuccessful attempts to set Jerusalem on its feet which preceded Nehemiah's governorship. But what the Israelites were learning as we read these marvellous chapters is that the walls which had been rebuilt were useless unless the Word of God was central to their life as the community of God. Their security was not in their physical walls, important and useful though they were, but in their covenant relationship with God and their obedience to his Word – his Word that had brought them into being in the first place, his Word of grace, his Word taking the initiative. As one commentator puts it 'Here is the Spirit of God, taking the word of God and (re-)creating the community of God'. Here is the covenant community of God's people grateful to a gracious God for all that he has done for them, gathered to hear the Word of God. It is a brilliant chapter (or so) as we see what went on. The Water Gate experience! An event it would seem (we are not told by the text) probably organised by Nehemiah, for we read at the end of chapter 7 that all the people, after the rebuilding of the walls and so on, were back in their own towns. It was a considerable risk whether just five days later they would all come back (on the first day of the seventh month), but come back they actually did for God was at work.

There are four key things about the church as seen in Nehemiah 8:

1 The Church, the ecclesia of God, the assembly of God, gathered around the Word of God and eager to hear the Word of God

Just as the church, the redeemed people of God, had gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, assembled there to hear the Word of God, the Law of God; just as the people of God assembled according to Deuteronomy 4:10 in Horeb to hear the Word of God; just as we, this side of Calvary and Easter morning (historical happenings), on our side of Pentecost, gather around the written Word of God to worship the living Word of God, the Lord Jesus, so the church, the ecclesia, gathered around the Word of God, eager to hear it. And if we look at Nehemiah 8 we see that the people have a unity around the Word of God, where their unity is focused and expressed. They gather together, we are told in verse 1, 'as one man', and in verse 3 they were attentive to the Word of God. Verse 5 (the thought goes through the whole chapter) demonstrates a deep reverence for the Word of God. They stand out of respect for what it is they are hearing – the very Word of God. The people of God need help with

understanding the Word of God (verse 7) and so the Levites translate and apply God's Word to them. And the people of God (verse 9) are responsive towards what God is saying to them. *This is the church as it is meant to be* – the ecclesia of God, the assembly of God, gathered around the Word of God and eager to hear the Word of God.

2 The church with the highest possible regard for Scripture

Verses 13-15 of chapter 8 show the people giving attention to the words of the Law. They find written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out unto the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths” – **as it is written**. A careful reading of chapters 8 and 9 will confirm that the hearers believe in a God who speaks and can be understood. God commanded his people through Moses (verse 14). Sometimes that becomes such a familiar thing to say we almost miss the wonder of it. If I had to say to my son, who is growing up, ‘You are my son, James, and I want you to wash!’ I think that I would not be pleased if he replied ‘Did you speak?’! What we are seeing here is a God who speaks and can be understood. The people of God here acknowledge that God has issued commandments, and though the human author is recognised (verse 14: ‘which the Lord had commanded through Moses’), the primary author of Scripture is acknowledged to be God. It is God who has spoken through Moses. What God said, furthermore, he says today unless it has been fulfilled in his developing revelation in Scripture. How should we apply that today? What God has said he still says unless it has been fulfilled for us in Christ. This is born out in Hebrews 3:7 where the writer quotes Psalm 95 saying ‘the Holy Spirit *says...*’.

Here we see a church believing that the ‘horizons’ can meet. It does not despair of the task of bringing two horizons together, but believes the horizon of God, speaking through Moses, clearly and in a way that could be understood hundreds of years earlier in a very different cultural situation, could actually speak directly to their situation as the people of God in the promised land.

It is also a church looking for ways to be obedient, rather than looking for ways out of obedience. What we see here is a thoroughgoing hermeneutic used, not to escape the disturbing and uncomfortable commands of the Word of God in their culture or their situation, but to bring them into more faithful obedience to his enduring Word.

Surely we need to be very careful that in our hermeneutical concerns, which are very, very important, we give thorough attention to what we see here. Our hermeneutical method ought to help us be, like the people of God here, more gladly obedient to God's Word rather than get us off the hook whenever God's Word says something uncomfortable to our generation. I love the phrase of Karl Rahner, the great Roman Catholic theologian, who says that Scripture is ‘*norma non normanda*’. It is a standard not subject to another standard. Rahner affirms that the proclamation of the church's faith must be grounded on Scripture as the basis and authority for faith and life; Scripture stands above tradition as the only *norma non normanda* and therefore nothing should be held and taught in the church that is not motivated and sanctioned by Scripture. Such a church has the highest possible regard for Scripture.

3 The church with a need for faithful preachers

Ezra the priest, the scholar and the teacher of the law, read the law of Moses and the Levites helped the people to understand it (verse 8). Quite what the mechanics of this were we do not know: perhaps the thirteen of them actually went round and created thirteen groups and explained the Word of God, or maybe it was that after Ezra read a section, one of them in turn explained it. But as you will see from the NIV footnote, what was happening here was a translation of the Word of God from Hebrew into the Aramaic spoken by the people, so that they could understand it. There was also application, the Levites helping the people to understand what it meant in practice to obey the Word of God in their day and generation. They did this because everyone needed to know God's revelation of his will and ways. The people needed help to understand fully what God had been saying. Indeed, it is worth recalling that the Reformers never held that the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture on essentials meant that the church could do without preachers or that the church could do without learning! The preacher's task is to explain what the Scriptures meant and what it means to obey the same principles now: faithful exegesis and theological exposition. This brings understanding the Bible 'from within', as it has been described, so that it may be carried out and worked out in life and lifestyle. The church then understands what can and must be done, and that the health of the church depends on it! The church always has a need for faithful preachers.

4 The Church discovering that obedience to God's Word brings joy

'The Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great' (v17). They put themselves out, they took seriously an old command, they went and gathered what they had been told and their joy was very great. To quote Jim Packer:

The root of spiritual revival both in individuals and in communities (individuals, that is, in the mass) was, is, and always will be vivid realisations of God's holiness, goodness and mercy, and the perversity, shamefulness, offensiveness and suicidal folly that he sees in our personal sins. (*A Passion for Faithfulness* Crossway Books 1995 p 155)

In Nehemiah 9 we see that the focus of everything is on God, a God who is 'a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love' (9:17); in verse 32 we read 'Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love'. The church discovers, as it focuses on God through his written Word and is obedient to it, that it experiences a new joy. In this marvellous chapter of renewal, revival and reformation in the church we see repentance leading to tears of sorrow and gladness (8:9). They weep as they listen to the words of the Law. When have we last seen our congregation, diocesan or deanery synod weeping before the truth of God's Word? I long for that for my church, and the Church of England which I love. I long for it more in the movement to which I am so proud to belong, the evangelical movement. The thrill of being moved so much by the Spirit of God, by the Word of God and by the goodness of God – repentance with tears of sorrow and gladness – obedience to God's Word bringing blessing and rejoicing. Nothing compares with knowing that you are doing God's will, as the Israelites discovered. They were also discovering that ignorance of the Word of God and just mirroring the best contemporary values mean that the church simply misses out. The church when it mirrors the best contemporary values, rather than God's truth, misses out not only on joy but on so much else! Here are people discovering that the joy of the Lord is their strength (8: 10)!

Obstacles to the ‘Water Gate experience’

When the church gathered in the square by the Water Gate, obstacles to the ‘Water Gate experience’ were much the same then as now. There are four to be considered.

The first obstacle is a lack of conviction about the complete trustworthiness of God’s Word written.

If the church of God in those days had believed that God had given his commands through Moses but that Moses had got it only partly right, and that his account was spotted with error, mistakes and confusion and was misleading, then it would have affected their willingness to be obedient to what God was saying to them in their own day. Furthermore, if they had looked back and seen only a series of different and even conflicting theologies in the first five books of Moses, would that not have affected their willingness to obey the Word of God as gladly as they did?

One of the delights of the last year or so has been getting to know Graham Cray as a friend and spending time with him discussing the evangelical doctrine of Scripture. It has been said that among the problems that exist between Evangelicals on this doctrine some are just matters of interpretation. We have discovered that there is more to it. There are problems on that side but there are also problems about our fundamental conviction concerning what the Scriptures actually are. Because we all come with presuppositions, predispositions and pre-understandings to Scripture, it is important that we come with sympathetic and believing ones. As we come to Scripture, what does it say about itself? What we believe about Scripture will affect how we will handle its interpretation and therefore our hermeneutic. This will be affected by our reverence before Scripture. One of the great joys for me was our ability to affirm together the complete trustworthiness of Holy Scripture; to be able to say too that when some Evangelicals say things like ‘Paul got it wrong and Jesus got it right’ that is no way for Evangelicals to approach the Word of God. For it undermines our basic doctrine of Scripture.

What we see here in Nehemiah 8 is a high view of Scripture, like that of our Lord. The same kind of attitude should be seen among us today. Is it still as true of us as it once was? – a belief in the complete trustworthiness of God’s Word written. I ask that question because I have been reading Dave Tomlinson’s new book *The Post-Evangelical*. It is interesting, very thought provoking, well written and worth reading. But I have to say (gently, but nonetheless clearly) that if you look at his chapter on Scripture you find that the ‘Post-Evangelical’ development, the moving on from the classical evangelical doctrine of Scripture in the direction he wants to move us, is, it seems to me, only a re-hashing of an old liberal position. I find this sad and inadequate.

In his article ‘Infallibility and Inerrancy of the Bible’ in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP 1988) Jim Packer says:

So the less reliability is ascribed to Scripture the less precise becomes its authority, the more pluralistic becomes Christian theology, the smudgier becomes the believer’s vision of Christ and the less certain his faith, and the more problematical becomes the

wisdom of God as communicator. Denying biblical infallibility thus exchanges manageable problems in the text for unmanageable perplexities in theology and spiritual life.

This is a most perceptive and helpful statement. It is very important that like the people of God here in Nehemiah 8 we have complete trust in God's Word written.

The second obstacle to the Water Gate experience is impatience with serious and diligent study.

In the first gathering at the beginning of Nehemiah 8, the people listened to the Word of God for five or six hours! Compare that with today's instant culture and the demands for instant access, instant knowledge all the time. They gave themselves to gaining a real understanding of the Word of God. Derek Kidner has commented:

The scattered regulations for the festival were all searched out and followed with a will. Verse 15 has taken up the instruction given in Leviticus 23:40ff to gather leafy branches; the last sentence of verse 17 chimes in with the note of *rejoicing* called for in Deuteronomy 16:13-15; and now [verse 18] we learn of the reading of *the law* prescribed in Deuteronomy 31:10-13 for every seventh year, and of the *solemn assembly* of Numbers 29:35. (*Ezra & Nehemiah* IVP 1979 p 109)

As you can see, they did their homework! They searched through all they had of God's Word to see what God was saying to them.

A real obstacle to our having the Water Gate experience is an impatience with serious and diligent study. I was at a ministers' fraternal where the minister leading the meeting said 'Has anyone got a word to share from Scripture [looking very bored], or [looking eager] has anyone got a word from the Lord?! Do you see what was being implied? That to study the Scriptures with the conviction that what God said in the pages of this book he still says – 'the Bible is God preaching' (to use Jim Packer's definition) – is somehow dull and boring. But to hear directly into our heads from God is very exciting! I think that is unworthy of us as Evangelicals. We need to take seriously the joyful conviction of the church here, that what God said he *says* by his Spirit.

The third obstacle to a Water Gate experience is an unwillingness to be holy, distinct and different as God's people.

The people here were willing to be distinct and different. They had to ask themselves whether they wanted to be well thought of by the Tobiahs of their world. Did they want to be well thought of by those who felt they had the right, from the outside, to tell the church what it ought to believe and to do? The church is always at its most relevant when it understands the challenges and problems of its own time, but humbly insists on being obedient to God by being obedient to his Word written. It has been well said:

For the members of an economically depressed community to forgo marrying foreign money and trading seven days a week, and to promise to pay redemption money for the firstborn (see Numbers 18: 14-16), to work a social system that had the rich in effect

giving substantially to the poor every seven years, and to tithe everything regularly for the temple was audacious, costly, and self-denying. But what it expressed in positive terms was a resolve to obey God at all costs, with no half measures, and to trust him totally to bestow shalom – peace, well-being, harmony, prosperity – on his faithful, loyal people. (*A Passion for Faithfulness* J I Packer Crossway Books 1995 p 162)

What they needed to be was God's faithful people. Here in Nehemiah we see God's people willing to obey God at whatever cost, and God bringing great blessing as the result.

The challenge to us as the people of God to be politically correct in today's world is no less pressing than the pressure from Tobiah in Nehemiah's day. We must not give in. We must understand the world in which we are living. We must understand the problems of unbelief and the heartaches of people with sympathy and empathy. We must get inside their reasons for unbelief, but the church is not called to tailor its Gospel or to tailor its obedience to God's Word so that it may be seen to be politically correct in its day and generation. The Bible is very clear about some of the issues facing the church today. Will we try to avoid its teaching and be fashionable, or will we be found, as in Nehemiah 8, God's humble, repentant and obedient people?

Evangelicals cannot afford 'two integrities' on fundamental issues, such as the uniqueness of Christ, now facing the church. Is it possible for a real evangelical Christian to say that Christ is the best way to God, rather than the only way? Surely not. Is it possible to have two integrities on the homosexual issue? I think not. To quote *The St Andrew's Day Statement* on the homosexual issue: 'There is no place for the church to confer legitimacy upon alternatives to these' (ie heterosexual marriage and singleness). There is no place for that, and a desire to be politically correct frequently involves disobedience to God's Word.

The fourth obstacle to a Water Gate experience is a hesitancy about letting the Word of God challenge our traditions and radically alter our practice.

Tradition and reason have a valuable part to play in understanding God's will, especially tradition seen as the inheritance of the church in its understanding and exposition of Scripture. Scripture will best be understood in a community of faith, where the Word of God is faithfully taught and where what God has done in previous generations is learned from and not dismissed. We need other Christians, past and present, to keep us from repeating foolish mistakes.

But, as Hooker and others would have us remember, Scripture is the final authority, and as we see here in Nehemiah 8 God's Word written must be listened to in each generation with fresh ears. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (the reformed church must always be being reformed [by the Word of God]). This is critical for us as Evangelicals. It is critical for us as the Church of England. Overall, we are not winning in the battle of capturing our nation for the Kingdom of God, despite many encouragements. We really need to mobilize many of our evangelical churches, not just 'other' churches, but evangelical churches, into serious, meaningful and loving care for a broken society, and meaningful evangelism in bringing the Good News to them. Nothing less will do than the letting go of some of our cherished traditions under the authority of God's Word, so that we can bring God's Word to a new generation. I say this with some feeling, for in Harold Wood four years ago we realised that though we thought we were being very evangelistic as a church, there was a whole section of

the community which we had totally missed and which was totally unchurched, the young people beyond our church organisations. We had to begin to re-think the use of our resources, and as a result started a whole new work. Indeed, a generation ago the Parochial Church Council did a survey of commuters and asked them 'What is it that keeps you from belief, and from coming to church?' They looked at the answers and got rid of all the things that they could that were non essential in the life of the church, in order to make the church's gospel more relevant and more accessible to unbelievers. You and I need to do that. As Evangelicals, we too have traditions. We need to bring all *our* traditions under the authority of God's Word.

Some have problems about the phrase 'under God's Word', but I want to hold on to it! While we affirm reason and tradition as being helpful, nonetheless God's Word written must remain the supreme authority before which we bow, and under which we stand.

In Isaiah 66:2 the Lord says, 'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word'. By God's grace, may our church and our evangelical movement be more like the Water Gate church of Nehemiah 8 to the glory of God and the good of his people!

WALLACE BENN is Suffragan Bishop of Lewes