

Nehemiah

The Secret of Urban Renewal

On December 23, 1972, the Central American capital city of Managua, Nicaragua, was devastated by a terrible earthquake. At twenty-five minutes past midnight, three awesome tremors struck the city. The first two sent vertical vibrations through the buildings, tearing everything loose. The third tremor seemed to move in a horizontal direction, knocking down buildings like a giant bowling ball. Within three minutes, a city of four hundred thousand inhabitants was destroyed.

The president of the Nicaraguan Red Cross, George Cardenas, gave this account of what took place during the days immediately following the devastating earthquake: "The Red Cross used bulldozers to dig one large, common grave which would hold several thousand bodies. People pulled their dead loved ones from the rubble and carried their bodies to the grave site on doors taken from the ruins. They deposited the doors along with the bodies in the common grave."

Precisely how many people were killed on that night of terror no one knows. The Red Cross estimates that between six thousand and eight thousand died, with an additional forty thousand injured. Some people simply disappeared and no one knows what became of them. Parents searched in vain for children who may have been rescued and taken to orphanages, in some cases in foreign countries where they would never be heard from again.

For the residents of Managua, the night of the earthquake was a taste of doomsday, and the spiritual needs of many hearts were

brought to light. Managuans had never been known for their interest in religion. A large Roman Catholic cathedral stood in the center of the city, but the vast majority of the population seldom attended its services. Protestant churches were scattered throughout the municipal area, but most Managuans ignored them. On the night of the earthquake, the downtown area, which was the hardest hit by the tremors, was crowded with party-goers. Restaurants and nightclubs were filled, for it was the height of the Christmas season. Managuans were in a festive mood, and very few had any thoughts about God.

But the earthquake changed all that. When the first quake hit the city, the largest downtown Protestant church was severely damaged but remained standing. Huge cracks ran up and down its stately walls and it seemed that at any moment the roof would collapse. Still it remained standing, and hundreds of people tried to press through its doors. Church officials did their best to keep the people out, for they feared what might happen should another tremor strike. At last they succeeded in shutting the doors, and the pastor pleaded with the terrified people in the street not to attempt to push the doors open. But hundreds insisted that if they had to die they wanted to die in a church, even a Protestant church. The building, they reasoned, stood for God and the way to heaven, and they wanted desperately to get in. From the crowded entrance came the cry, "*Déjanos entrar, déjanos entrar*" ("Let us in, let us in").

One of the most moving scenes on that terrible night was that of people kneeling in the streets praying to God as they had never prayed before. Their homes were gone, their possessions lost, and some of their loved ones trapped beneath the rubble. Many thought that the end of the world had come, and in a city in which 95 percent of the population had had no connection with gospel-preaching churches and only a few had shown an interest in religion at all, more praying took place that night than the city had ever seen before.

Relief agencies, both secular and religious, responded to the Managua tragedy. Money, medicine, and food poured into the city. Temporary living quarters were erected, tons of food distributed, and the rebuilding of an entire metropolitan area undertaken. The renewal and rebuilding of the city continues to this day, and it will be years before all the effects of the earthquake are

gone. Thousands of Managuans will carry to their graves the scars, both physical and mental, which resulted from that terrible night.

Beyond offering material relief, food for the starving, blankets for the shivering, medicine for the sick, and houses for the destitute, how do Christians respond to the needs of a devastated city? Certainly there is more to rebuilding a city than merely erecting new buildings and filling them with people. Cities need something which technology cannot provide and urban demographers cannot describe. Cities, good cities, require spiritual foundations, and for that they need a word from the Lord. At the heart of the Christian religion lies the assumption that lives, homes, and cities must be built on the foundation of the Word of God, or sooner or later, they will lie as devastated as Managua on the morning after the earthquake. Real urban renewal involves rejection of evil, commitment to good, obedience to God, and hearing God's Word. Ezra and Nehemiah knew that, and on that basis they set to work.

The Reading of the Law and the Renewal of the City

The eighth chapter of Nehemiah's prophecy recounts the returned exiles from Babylon gathered at the Water Gate of the temple in Jerusalem. They were celebrating the Feast of Trumpets, a sacred festival that God had ordained as an annual celebration on the first day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:23-25). It was a "day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blasts of trumpets, a holy convocation."

Nehemiah, the architect of Jerusalem's urban renewal, had something very special in mind for this day. He had put forward every effort to inspire the people to rebuild the ruined city. They had cleared away the rubble, erected the walls, and built new houses. It had been a tremendous undertaking, and Nehemiah was proud of the people's accomplishments. But something more was needed. Nehemiah realized that moral and religious reforms had to be made to give the nation a spiritual foundation that would set it apart from other nations and prevent the kind of decay that had precipitated its former destruction. For social and political reforms to take hold in a way that would please God and preserve the people, spiritual renewal must occur. This could

happen only if God's Word was known, understood, and obeyed.

The public reading of the Scripture every seven years was required by the law of Moses (Deut. 31:9-13). But during the Babylonian captivity this practice, like many others, had not been followed. Before the exile, the religious sensitivities of the people had progressively deteriorated until they were not interested in what the law of God had to say. During the exile, circumstances had not permitted such a religious assembly and the feasts prescribed by Moses could not be held. But now the exiles had returned to their own city, and a chastened people was ready to listen. The returning exiles sincerely desired to hear what God's law had to say.

So it was that Ezra the priest was asked to bring out the law of Moses and read it before the assembly at Jerusalem. Ezra at this time was devoting the major part of his energy to the compilation of a complete edition of the canonical Scriptures, and the opportunity to read them publicly at the Feast of Trumpets filled him with delight. On a wooden platform erected for the occasion, Ezra and thirteen other priests stood like trumpeters before the people. When Ezra grew weary in this Scripture-reading marathon, the other priests would help him. Besides the priests, thirteen Levites were there to help the people understand. As Ezra opened the book, the people rose to their feet as an act of reverence for the Word of God. It was a solemn moment, a turning point in Israel's history. From that day onward, Jerusalem and Israel would never be the same, for the city's renewal acquired a distinctively religious dimension. The ruined city was not only rebuilt, but also reconstituted. "The joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off," reported Nehemiah, and that joy, he well knew, was God's gift to a renewed and obedient people who had heard God's Word and had submitted their lives in conformity to it (Neh. 12:43-47).

Lessons from Scripture for Urban Renewal

Modern apostles to the city can learn valuable lessons from this ancient Scripture. The first is that *the Word of God is never outdated*. It was a long road from rural Sinai, where Moses heard the law, to the postexile city of Jerusalem. The law of Moses was already an

old document when Ezra mounted the wooden pulpit and began reading to the people. But the document was not outdated. It spoke to the people and it met their needs. It was relevant, and it accomplished God's purpose in renewing the life of Israel.

The Bible is always relevant, and it speaks to us in our time as powerfully as it did to people centuries ago. There are sound reasons for this. Nobody at any time in history has had to face a truly unique problem. The human race is one race, and men of all ages and nationalities are human beings made by God in his image. God is still the same God; man's sin is still the problem underlying all human disorders, hostilities, and conflicts. Although human problems may come in different sizes and shapes from one generation to another, they are fundamentally the same. It is to this basic and universal sinful human condition that the Bible speaks its message of judgment and redemption. The doctrines that Moses gave to ancient Israel, which the prophets preached to their contemporaries, and which Jesus and the apostles proclaimed in the days of the New Testament, are the doctrines that can bring comfort and hope to modern urbanites. There is no other message worth bringing.

Second, *God's written Word is translatable into every language and culture of mankind*. The word must be spoken and communicated in the languages of the heart, so that its full impact may be felt and understood.

Upon examining Nehemiah 8:1-12, we see that Bible exposition accompanied Bible reading, with the intent that the lay men and women of Israel would understand the law of God. Not only was the Bible *read* clearly and intelligibly, but its message was *explained* by the Levites as the reading went along.

Besides the reading of God's law and the explanation of its meaning, *translation* probably took place as well, for the postexile Jews knew Chaldee, the vernacular dialect used in Babylon, better than they knew pure Hebrew. Likely, some of the Levites gave a running translation of the law, sentence by sentence, so that the people might hear it in Chaldee, the language they knew best.

There is an important principle involved here for urban apostolate in our day. People need to hear God's Word in the language they know best and in the cultural context in which they feel most at home. The Wycliffe Bible Translators, the largest nondenomi-

national missionary organization in the world, accepts this as the basic principle of their entire strategy. Applied to a remote Indian tribe in Latin America, it means that translators must learn the language, translate the Scriptures into that language, and communicate the truth of God's Word through the culture and language of the people. This holds true also in urban centers, which are vast mosaics of human cultures, languages, and characteristics.

In his book *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald A. McGavran says that in some circumstances the key to successful urban apostolate is the multiplication of tribe, caste, and language churches in the metropolitan center. In a few cases, says Dr. McGavran, the melting-pot aspect of cities causes a situation in which large numbers of people from separate tribes, castes, and language groups truly want to leave their past and join together in one language, culture, and congregation. Under such circumstances, united churches representing many different ethnic groups are highly desirable and will promote the gospel. But in situations where the melting-pot aspect of cities has not developed this far, it is a mistake to try to press together into a single congregation people who do not feel at home in such a situation and who will not be able to comprehend the message which they hear because of language and cultural barriers. It is the *understanding* of the Word of God and its application to all of life which must be emphasized. The word-not-understood accomplishes little. The chief business of the church is not to seek to fuse the various elements found in the urban population into one people, but to communicate God's Word in the language and in the cultural forms the people know best. If anyone disagrees with this principle, let him worship with a congregation of whose services he understands only one word in three, and then ask himself how much encouragement and direction from God's Word he received!

Imagine for a moment that you and your companions have spent the night in a remote Indian village high in the mountains of central Mexico. You have come to this village to preach the Word of God. Last night as you lay in your sleeping bag you watched the stars through the cracks in the roof of the dilapidated house in which you are staying. As you lay there listening to the howling of dogs, you wondered about the religion of these Indian

people. What a strange combination it is of traditional Catholicism and ancient paganism. And now, in this village, there are the beginnings of true evangelical faith.

Just down the hill stands a magnificent old church which was built in 1742 by Spanish priests using the forced labor of the Indians. It is a Protestant church now, because some years ago the villagers decided to chase out the priest and adopt the teachings and practices of an English missionary who, at the risk of his life, had brought them the gospel. This morning you rose early to conduct your private devotions and prepare your message for the day. You walked down the hill and found the mammoth baptismal font that once had stood inside the church entrance. In their enthusiasm for the new faith and resentment toward the priests who had exploited them, the villagers had destroyed the church's images and rolled the baptismal font out the door and down the hill. Part of it broke off, and now it makes a comfortable chair. You prepared your message this morning sitting in the old baptismal font on the side of the hill.

It is a beautiful day and the people have gathered on the hill just outside the town to listen to you preach. Some of them have come from other villages and walked for several hours over narrow mountain trails. Whole families have come. The women are down in front, while the men, wearing their big sombreros, are farther up the hill. Babies are being nursed and children move to and fro among the women, and you know that you will have to speak as loudly as you can to reach this audience.

The villagers are in for a special treat this morning, for your companion is a Wycliffe Bible translator, and he has brought with him a draft copy of the translation of the New Testament which he has spent twelve years preparing. He is the only white man in the world who speaks the particular dialect of these people. Until now, all the religious instruction they have ever received has been in Spanish, which they understand only in part. Many of them think that God speaks and understands only Spanish.

After a few hymns have been sung with the peculiar lilt which the Indians give to Spanish tunes, your companion stands up and opens his notebook. His voice is not very loud and you wonder how the people in the back are going to hear him. He begins reading from one of Paul's epistles. The language he is using is Mazahuatl. There is a look of astonishment on the faces

of the women in the front. A small boy who has run up to his mother demanding something from her is suddenly seized by the shoulder, and the mother clamps her hand tightly over his mouth to keep him quiet. Women quickly press their infants to their breasts to still their whimpering. Heads lean forward. All the way to the back there is almost absolute silence. Calmly the translator reads the Scriptures in Mazahuatl, and the villagers drink in every word as though God were speaking to them directly from heaven. Some begin to weep quietly as God's Word in Mazahuatl sinks into their soul. "Now I know God understands us," an aged grandmother tells you later. "I often wondered if he did." When, after three hours, the service ends, there is a sense of joy, almost exhilaration, as the people cluster around your companion, the Bible translator, and inquire more about God. They have heard God's Word today in their own language, and they have understood its meaning.

"And they read from the book, from the law of God, *clearly*; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. . . . And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great *rejoicing*, because they had *understood* the words that were declared to them" (Neh. 8:8, 12, RSV, italics mine). To bring about the urban renewal that he intended, Nehemiah made sure the people *understood* God's Word and its message for their lives. In the vast mosaic of human population which is the city, the same thing must occur today. There is tremendous human diversity within the city, and this diversity must be recognized and accounted for in the communication of God's Word. Every citizen of metropolis needs to hear the gospel in the language he knows best and in a cultural context he understands. Unless this is done, there will not occur that repentant weeping and joyful celebration over the Word of God that are prerequisites of urban renewal.

Issues of the Heart and Society

The third observation on the basis of Nehemiah's strategy for the moral and religious reform of Jerusalem is that *the Word of God speaks to the issues of the heart and society*. When people understand what God's Word is really saying to them, when they repent on account of its judgments and take heed to its precepts, then endless possibilities open up for the establishment of a society

which pleases God and satisfies human needs.

Nehemiah 8:9, 10, says that the Levites "taught the people . . . and all the people wept when they heard the words of the law." They wept because they had sinned. They had broken God's law repeatedly before the exile and had been cut off from its public proclamation in Babylon. Now as they heard it afresh in the gate of the city, it touched their hearts and exposed their shortcomings as never before. The Feast of Trumpets became a day of mourning and public display of repentance. That is precisely what Nehemiah had intended, for the basis of his strategy for urban renewal lay in religious and moral reformation brought about by the exposition of God's Word.

The largest and most modern Protestant church in Mexico is found in the rapidly growing city of Guadalajara, in the hard-core Roman Catholic state of Jalisco. In his book *Church Growth in Mexico*, Donald A. McGavran placed Guadalajara at the top of the list of "conservative cities" in Mexico, and by this he meant cities that for historic, geographic, social, and political reasons had shown themselves unresponsive to the gospel. The church to which I am referring is the "mother church" of the indigenous *Luz del Mundo* movement, sometimes called the "Jesus Only" movement, which was begun around 1940 by a Mexican layman by the name of Joaquin. Joaquin testified that God had changed his name to Aaron and had given him a special revelation to the effect that he was to preach the gospel and place the Scriptures in the hands of the common people.

The mother church in Guadalajara has an auditorium that seats approximately three thousand people, and it was erected without the need for foreign subsidy. The members by and large are humble people—common artisans and factory workers. For the most part they live together in one corner of the city of Guadalajara, and there they put their religion into practice in a most remarkable way. Their emphasis upon the Bible is phenomenal. It is the only book which the ordinary members are permitted to use besides a hymnal. The memorization of Bible texts is the hallmark of every part of their religious activity, and from the smallest child to the oldest grandparent, everyone seems intent upon memorizing and reciting the Bible. In talking with them, one is struck by the fact that "because the Holy Scriptures teach us," is a standard preface to every answer they give concerning their doctrine and life.

Daily Bible instruction is given to all school-age children of the *Luz del Mundo* zone of the city. Even though the Mexican constitution prohibits religious instruction in elementary schools, so influential has this tightly controlled religious community become that special arrangements between the church and local government officials allow the children to be released from the government school for an hour each day to attend Bible classes in the church. Illiteracy is one of the things which the movement despises most, for an illiterate person cannot read the Bible. So emphatic are they about the importance of Bible reading, that theirs is the only municipal district in the state of Jalisco that has no illiterates. In order to honor the people of the area for this singular accomplishment, the government has awarded them a white flag, symbol of total literacy. This flag is proudly displayed in the park near the church.

Worship services are held at the central church seven days a week, and the Sunday services range from two to three hours in length. A distinctive feature of these services is the degree of audience participation, especially through the recitation of Scripture. So schooled are these people in the Scriptures that as soon as the speaker on the platform begins to quote a Bible verse, the whole audience breaks out in unison and helps him finish it. Preaching takes on an antiphonal quality with the audience very much involved in the proclamation. The overall effect is awesome. Again we see the important role which the Bible plays in the *Luz del Mundo* movement, as the members seek to remain true to Joaquin's original vision. Without the emphasis upon daily Scripture memorization from childhood to old age, this kind of group participation in formal worship would be impossible.

The reason I mention the *Luz del Mundo* movement in our study of Nehemiah 8 is because these people have achieved a remarkably high standard of urban life on the basis of their single-minded adherence to the moral and religious precepts of the Bible. Any taxicab driver in the city of Guadalajara will testify to the moral difference between the area of the city occupied by the "Jesus people" and the rest of the urban center. There are no taverns, saloons, or houses of prostitution in their area. Brawling, fighting between families, and drunkenness are virtually unknown. The streets are safe, clean, and tranquil. The women are dressed modestly and the children are well behaved. The men

are known for industriousness and honesty in their work. Even their severest critics admit that these people put religion into practice.

The teaching of the Bible is the key factor in the movement, but to complete the picture we must take this one step further. *The Bible in the hands of laymen* expresses more completely the source of the movement's strength. The movement has put the Bible into the hands of the laity and it has turned the laity loose to teach one another, edify one another, and witness to the world. The emphasis in all the services, in the children's classes, and in the discussions is on the meaning and practical application of the plain teaching of Scripture. It is this kind of biblical exposition—sometimes erroneous, often simplistic, and yet dynamic in its practical effect—which has made the qualitative difference in the area of the city where the *Luz del Mundo* people live.

This is essentially what Ezra and Nehemiah were seeking to accomplish in the life of restored Jerusalem. Their goal was the total reformation of Jewish society according to the Word of God. The renewal of urban life and the society of the nation were to be accomplished through the Scriptures read, explained, understood, and applied. The social reforms that Nehemiah describes in the rest of the book would not have occurred without the Law being read and explained. Whereas Jerusalem's pre-exile false prophets were largely responsible for the spiritual decay of the nation (Jer. 23:15), the purpose of Nehemiah and those with him was to disseminate the true knowledge of God's law. For when the people understood the full message of that law, they would tremble, rejoice, and be renewed.

Celebration in the City

Upon hearing the law of God, the people were moved to worship and celebration. Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said:

"... This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. . . . Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:9, 10, RSV).

When they heard this, the people ate and drank, and sent portions to the needy. There was great rejoicing because "they had understood the words that were declared to them" (v. 12).

The joy of the Lord comes to those who know God's Word and understand it, and it then becomes their strength to undertake great things. The Word slays and also restores. We rise from our knees to lives of noble service.

The renewal of the city and reformation of urban life wait for the regeneration of human hearts through the Word of God. Here is found the vital significance of urban pulpits, which can accomplish more toward the renewal of urban life through the faithful exposition of God's Word than any other instrument or platform. Here is also the clue to dynamic urban mission, which depends upon the heralding of "Thus saith the Lord," and the communication of God's Word to the city.

The New York International Bible Society sponsors the "Bible Brigades." From New York City's red-light district to affluent New Jersey suburbs, these "Bible Brigades" distribute the printed Scriptures door-to-door. Armed with Scripture portions and printed invitations to attend nearby sponsoring churches, Christian volunteers enter both X-rated hotels and plush residential areas, testifying to God's transforming power in their lives and inviting others to read the Scriptures and follow the Lord. In the past twenty years, this program has distributed more than 5 million Scripture portions to homes housing some 20 million people.

The coordinator of this Scripture distribution program, Bruno A. Militano, says that their focus is on the family and their aim is to plant the Scriptures in the place where the family has its center, the individual home. This family-centered program began in 1950 as an experiment in fourteen Harlem neighborhoods which were pinpointed by the police as breeding grounds for gang warfare. The New York International Bible Society invited local churches to provide volunteers to work with Society agents in taking Spanish and English language Scripture booklets to every home in the beleaguered neighborhoods. To encourage fellowship and follow-up, each Scripture packet carried a message inviting the recipients to attend a nearby church.

The program was begun as an experiment in some of New York City's most difficult areas, and it proved so successful that it has

spread to other urban communities in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and even to the city of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. Militano estimates that seventeen hundred churches have participated in the program, sending out some twelve thousand volunteers of all ages. Scriptures have been distributed in a variety of languages ranging from Yiddish to Japanese, and the results have been encouraging.

The joy of salvation has become a reality in the lives of hundreds of individuals and their families through the work of these "foot soldiers" of the Lord. A Baptist church in the infamous Brownsville section of Brooklyn reported some time ago that forty adults joined the church following a family-to-family campaign in their area and one hundred children were added to the Sunday school. A Spanish Pentecostal church in Brooklyn, and a Baptist church in Spanish Harlem baptized twenty-four adults at the conclusion of a Bible distribution campaign.

The manager of an Eighth Avenue hotel tells of two prostitutes who were residents in his hotel and whom he could not evict because they regularly paid their rent. When family-to-family volunteers visited the hotel the women received the gospel message from the lips of the volunteers, read the Scriptures privately, were converted, and subsequently gave up their immoral profession. The hotel owner, though not converted himself, was pleased that at last the women had left his hotel and was awed by the obvious change in their lives. He observed: "That book certainly did something to them that I couldn't do."

What renewal in the city there would be if Christians by the tens of thousands, with ministers of the gospel in the lead, would fan out across the neighborhoods and barrios, towering apartments and seething slums, distributing God's Word, explaining its contents, translating its message into the languages and cultures of urban people, and making themselves instruments of God for the salvation of souls and the transformation of urban life.

back to Antioch where, Luke affectionately records, "they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26, RSV). When the missionaries arrived, "they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27, RSV). Luke says that they stayed "no little time" with the believers in Antioch, and the "home service" ministry of the apostles must have been a great blessing to the church. It is still true that when a church adds an international dimension to its ministry by sending and supporting overseas workers, the spiritual growth, joy, and vitality of the church's own life are greatly enriched.

Antioch left an indelible mark on first-century Christianity. It was there that Barnabas and Paul gained experience in urban ministry. The city of Antioch was a microcosm of everything the two apostles later confronted on their missionary journeys. The church that was founded in Antioch was a model that served them well as they traveled from city to city, preaching the gospel and establishing believers in the faith.

The experience in cross-cultural evangelism, the multi-racial face of the Antiochan church, the concern of believers for suffering brethren in other places, and above all their single-minded devotion to Christ and his service, demonstrated what God's grace could do in a highly urban and pagan environment. To the leaders of such a church the Spirit spoke, commanding them to set apart two of their own number to perform a special work for God in distant places. Through this gateway the gospel went forth to other cities, where the struggles and victories of Antioch were repeated over and over again.