

# Explore the Bible: Commit Your Way to the Lord

February 6, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 22 focuses on Nehemiah 10:28-39*

A few weeks ago, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Missions Council met in Atlanta with a monumental task before them. The global missions enterprise has undergone rapid change in the past few decades, and it had become evident that the Fellowship needed to learn to think anew about the structure of global missions, funding and church engagement.

With 117 field personnel committed to being the presence of Christ around the world, an escalating number of individuals and churches involved personally through short-term mission trips and projects, and the new climate of globalism and secularism, it becomes necessary to examine the best way to participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation in this rapidly changing context.

## **What it means to be faithful**

The people who returned from exile faced a similar dilemma—discerning what it means to be faithful to God in their present context. In a striking show of solidarity, all of the people entered together into a firm agreement to submit to the authority of God's word. With the support of the community, the people committed to live out the commands in the book of the law.

They bound themselves "with a curse and an oath" (10:29). While this language may seem strange to modern ears, it was common in the Old Testament for covenants to have curses associated with them (for one example, see Deuteronomy 28:22). The people accepted an accountability

not only to live in obedience, but also to suffer punishment if they failed to do so.

After establishing their commitment to follow God's law, the people desired to set themselves apart as holy and spiritually pure (10:30). In a vastly different cultural setting, this verse can be troublesome for those seeking to apply it today. In that context, as is still the custom in many places in the world today, parents arranged marriages for their children.

### **A marriage problem**

It is quite possible the majority of those who returned from exile were male, and it was likely difficult to find a wife from among the fellow Jews. However, the people around them worshiped foreign gods, and intermarriages were likely to result in a dilution of their beliefs. As polytheistic mothers raised their children according to their own beliefs, the pure spiritual heritage of Israel was in danger. It was not a racial or cultural issue but a religious one (compare Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-28).

The rest of the chapter addresses worship practices. It was important to those returning to protect the day of worship and provide for temple operations, but they needed to interpret worship laws for their new setting. For example, the Ten Commandments prohibit work on the Sabbath, which would have implied selling goods they had produced (Exodus 20:8-10; Deuteronomy 8:5).

However, even if the Jews refrained from selling, the "people from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah" (Nehemiah 13:16). In this pluralistic society, apparently they needed to specify that if others were selling, buying also was prohibited (Nehemiah 10:30).

### **Updated instructions**

The provisions included in these verses apply the law of Moses to the issues and crises of Nehemiah's day. These updated instructions dealt with indebtedness, financing the temple service, furnishing wood to burn the sacrifices and providing for the temple personnel. To avoid the dangers of syncretism, the Jews returning from exile sought to follow the letter of the law, and even interpreted it more stringently whenever their new life setting went beyond what the law addressed. In a newly reestablished community, it was necessary to discern the principles of God's law and determine how to live faithfully within God's law in their new context.

This challenge is not unique to those returning from exile. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 addressed the question of whether Gentiles who converted to Christianity should be circumcised. In seeking to apply the law to this new situation, the Pharisees thought the new Christians should keep the law of Moses.

Peter responds: "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:10-11). After quoting Amos, a prophet contemporary with Nehemiah, James concludes, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19).

### **God's word does not change**

God's people from then until now must seek to apply God's word within their own particular life setting. God's word does not change, but the world around us does. Biblical standards remain authoritative, but we must seek to reinterpret those standards for our situation. Nehemiah's community chose a legalistic interpretation; the early church chose to reflect God's grace shown to them in Christ Jesus.

Not surprisingly, earnest students of the Bible today interpret God's word very differently. Not unlike the Jews, we find ourselves in an increasingly pluralistic society. As we seek to apply the Bible in this setting, we often quarrel over politics, women in ministry, issues of sexuality and much more.

To that end, a quote often attributed to Augustine gives wisdom in how to be gracious towards others who are seeking a faithful approach to interpreting Scripture: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The one thing that should set Christians apart is that we have been saved by grace. So, may we extend that same grace to one another.