



Religion That Makes A Difference

The president of Oakwood College is preaching this sermon on grace and power across America.

by Benjamin Reaves

Skyrocketing prices;
foreclosing creditors;
taxes that pamper the rich
and penalize the poor;
corrupt politicians;
exploited, oppressed people;
hunger;
deprivation;
anger;
pain.

In that fifth verse of Nehemiah 5 we read, “We are their brothers, and our children are just like theirs,” the people protested. ‘Yet we must sell our children into slavery to get enough money to live. We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless to redeem them, for our fields, too, are mortgaged to these men.’”

Scriptures with a curiously contemporary ring. Though pictures from the past, they paint a startling portrait of the present. Instead of the Old Testament times, it sounds like *The New York Times*, and that should come as no surprise, for the Bible is a book

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of life and its message spans the ages. It speaks pointedly and penetratingly to us and to our day. It speaks to us corporately and it speaks to us personally. It speaks in commanding tones and it speaks in disturbing words, as it reveals—in the experience of Nehemiah—religion that makes a difference. *Religion* that makes a *difference*.

Nehemiah was under conviction to restore the temple and the waste places of his homeland, and it wasn't long before he was painfully aware that the real desolation was not in broken-down walls and crumbling buildings; the real desolation was in the shattered lives, the crushed hopes, and the broken spirits of his people—debts, taxes, mortgages, lost property, children sold into slavery, daughters sold into prostitution. And his response to the wretched affair leaps out of the passage, when he says, “And I was *very* angry when I heard their cry and these words,”* or, as another version puts it, “I was very *angry* when I heard this.”

But in this passage there was more than just anger. There was *action*. For the chapter records that Nehemiah took a decided stand for justice. He confronted the power elite of his day. Publicly he condemned them. Publicly he pressed for specific reforms. And because of his action, Nehemiah made a difference, for in the 12th verse of the fifth chapter,

he says, "So they agreed to do it"—to stop lending money at high interest, to stop oppressing the people. "They said that they would assist their brothers without requiring them to mortgage their lands and sell them their children."

Nehemiah, and Nehemiah's experience, clearly demonstrate that religion that makes a difference is responsive to the crying needs of humanity. And there are so many crying needs—

from families without love
and people without homes,
to children without a chance.

But I am also keenly aware that, for all of us, there is another need that is deep and pervasive. For there is a current that is running through this country and this society of which we are all aware. Across the peoplescope of this country like a red stain runs the river of violence and hate and prejudice. And what was once felt to be a diminishing current flows with renewed and rapid force. Even a passing glance at recent headlines speaks pointedly to this fact. Every week brings a fresh reminder that the battle of a divided national self rages on.

Television documentaries and news clips bring to our consciousness the regrettable anger and pain of Crown Heights,
the clear erosion of hard-won gains in civil rights,
the spiraling incidences of religious and racial intolerance.

Other similar events and tensions signal the rising tide of bigotry, of social and religious prejudice.

It was of interest to me that a recent issue of *Newsweek* indicated that race fatigue grips America. People are tired of it. Exhaustion seems to have set in, even among those who were once supportive of efforts for equity, and so neighborhoods that were once reservoirs of good will have now become cesspools of suspicion. Cumulative alienation, once bubbling beneath the surface, has now *openly* surfaced—even in the ranks and the institutions of the church.

Now when we hear, when we *see* this, as human beings we should be disturbed, but as Christians we should be *distraught*. For in a painful sense we should be haunted by the words of Jesus: "By this shall all men *know* that ye are my disciples, *if ye have love one to another.*"

Now, I know, I *know* that there is nothing more worthy or inspiring or easier to talk about than love. I also know that there is nothing that we do less about *than love*. For, unfortunately, love's life translation has been watered down; waylaid, if you will, on the Jericho road of life; robbed of its concern, stripped of its justice and involvement . . . and left half alive as a pious cliché. We might as well be honest about that.

I think we need the very bare and open honesty, the honesty of the little girl who was listening with rapt attention to the story about the Good Samaritan and how he ministered to the man who had been attacked. As the teacher was describing the story in vivid detail, suddenly he turned and pointed right at the little girl and he said, "What would you do, if you walked up on a man and he was down in the gutter, bleeding, dirty, battered? What would you do?" And the girl said, "I, I, I'd probably throw up."

Well, we need a kind of a "throw up" honesty today. We need to look into our own hearts as we look outward at the church and the world about us, for it is a shamefully sad fact that too often the church and Christians have been slow—glacially slow—to transform noble affirmations and pious pronouncements into practical acts of mercy. Unlike Nehemiah, we have not made a difference. And I'm convinced that God has placed us here—has placed *you there*; has placed this church, at this point and time, in this neighborhood—to make a difference in the quality of life here and to lift up the hope of life hereafter.

And if that's true, then anything that demeans or abuses God's creation—anything that segregates or sets apart—must be confronted by the gospel. Love *demand*s that I confront it, and love also determines *how* I will confront it.

The fact is, if my religion is so theoretical, so abstract, that it does not involve my life and my energy, and it closes my eyes to the suffering around me and closes my ears to the deep cries of the distressed, then my religion has made me what Norman Cousins calls a "prisoner of context." I'm so wrapped up in my own interests, the interests of my kind, the interests of my community, that I've lost touch with humanity—and I've lost touch with heaven. Religion that makes a difference *must be* responsive to the crying needs of our society.

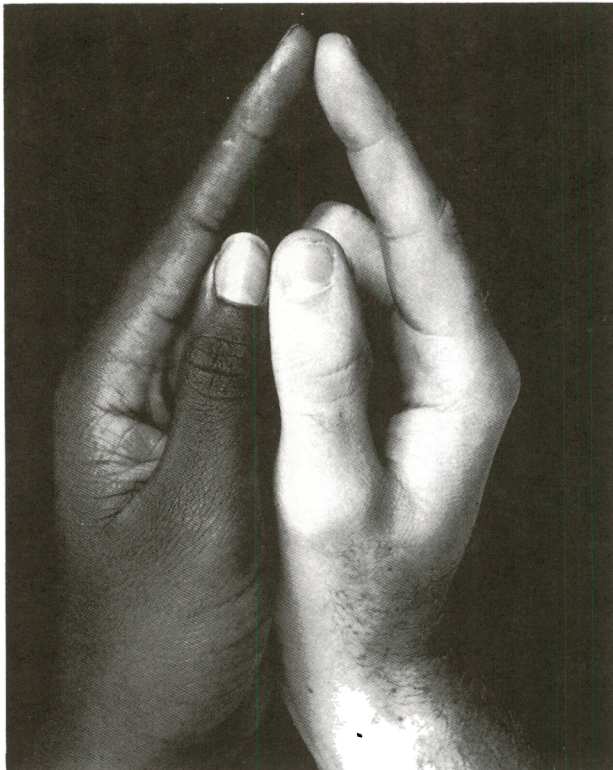
But notice, further in that fifth chapter, verses 14 and 15: "I would like to mention that for the entire

twelve years”—Nehemiah writes—“that I was governor of Judah—from the twentieth until the thirty-second year of the reign of King Artaxerxes—my aides and I accepted no salaries or other assistance from the people of Israel. This was quite a contrast to the former governors who had demanded food and wine and \$100 a day in cash, and had put the population at the mercy of their aides, who tyrannized them; but *I obeyed God* and did not act *that way*.”

Political practices that are not unfamiliar to you, because you read about them *every day*:
 the abuse of power,
 questionable ethics,
 kickbacks,
 outright stealing.

All of that was going on in Nehemiah’s day, and Nehemiah’s example was, “I did not act that way”—“So did not I.” The Hebrew noun there is emphatic; it contrasts Nehemiah’s example with the acts of his predecessors—those cruel birds of prey who feathered their nests at the expense of the people.

Nehemiah might have settled for the excuse, Everybody’s doing it. He could have come up with the alibi, Well, the best way to get along is to go along. He might even have fallen back on, After all,



it does save a lot of bother if, when you are in Rome, you . . .

But instead, “*So did not I.*”

Religion that makes a difference is not only responsive to the needs in society; religion that makes a difference first makes a difference *in me*. See, Nehemiah had the precedent and the power to do what his predecessors had done. But he refused to do it. He refused to live his life by majority rule or opinion. He refused to capitulate to unjust standards and distorted values. You see, there comes a time when, in an individual way, *you have to take a stand*.

There comes a time when bigotry must be confronted, when you must speak out on injustice, even if your voice is the lone exception.

There comes a time when you must refuse to be the caboose on the train of consensus.

There comes a time when you must take the *Holy Place* into the *marketplace*. And then love is no longer abstract; it must be *active*,
 and it must find its way into privileged circles,
 and into boardrooms,
 and into committee rooms,
 and into private conversation,
and love must make its integrity known.

I love the story of Lillian Heller, who was called to appear before a government subcommittee, and they wanted her to say certain things. And her response was this: “I refuse to cut the cloth of my conscience to fit this year’s fashion.” I love that. “I refuse to cut the cloth of my conscience to fit this year’s fashion.”

Now the truth is that we are moved by something like that, but we need to understand that it is not easy to hear and to march to the beat of a different drummer. There is a price that will be paid. Of course, I’m sure that all of us at least would appear to be outraged at immorality, and hate, and racist actions and words, whether they come from white mouths or black mouths. But there’s a question that comes to my mind every so often.

A few years ago I was living up in Michigan—I was teaching at Andrews University—and it was not very late but I had turned in early, and all of a sudden I thought I heard my dog barking, and then I thought I heard a car pull in the driveway. As I thought to myself that I would have to get up, I heard the car back out again, so I thought that someone was at the

wrong address. Not long after, the phone rang. When I picked up the phone, I heard a voice that I thought I recognized, but the voice sounded a little anxious. Then I heard the person say, "Listen, do you live on Hillcrest?" I said yes, and then I recognized the voice. I said, "Oh, it's you. Was that you that pulled in the driveway?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I heard you pull out." He said, "Yes, Sharon pulled out." I said, "Sharon pulled out? Where were you?" He said, "I was on the roof of the car." And I said, "What were you doing on the roof of the car?"

He said, "Do you have a dog?"

"That dog wouldn't have bitten you," I told him. And his answer was, "He would have if he could have." He *would* have if he *could* have.

Now you know that I'm not talking about dogs. You understand that I'm wondering if some of us are in that same category—that on the surface it appears we have made a decision for justice and brotherhood and fellowship, when in truth it could be said,

If he had the power;
If circumstances were not in her way;
If there'd be no repercussions;
If there were no danger of video cameras;
If no one would know. . . .

In other words, what's the real difference between you and me and a David Duke or an Abdul Muhammad? Is our commitment to the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man—or is it the restraint of circumstances? the chain of possible consequences?

Religion that makes a difference hinges on a conviction that I must do the right even though I have the power and the opportunity *and the privacy* to do wrong. And whether that puts me in the crowd or I stand out there alone *is irrelevant*. Religion that makes a difference in society first makes a difference *in me*.

But what kind of religion *is that*?

Now I'm sure that the people of Nehemiah's day, some prominent people, asked the same question. After all, you remember that they were in the same church; they lagged behind in no sacrifices or rituals. Who could be more religious than they? But this fanatic Nehemiah! What kind of religion was that?

And in verse 15 it reads, as Nehemiah responds: "So

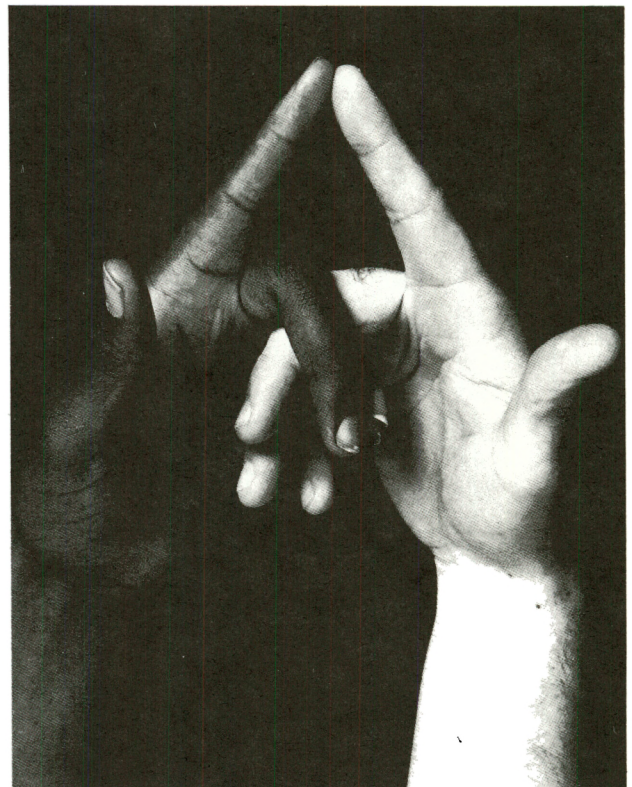
did not I, because of the fear of God." Because of the fear of God.

Sociologists have classified religion into two categories—secular and supernatural. They describe Christianity as supernatural, because, they say, "it has its source in, and is judged by, that which transcends the empirically known world." Well, in my language, what that means is religion that makes a difference operates inside but is anchored outside human experience.

"So did not I, because of the fear of God."

Of course someone is already thinking, "Well, who wants a religion that is based on fear?" Remember, fear of God in the Old Testament is equivalent to the love of God in the New Testament. So Nehemiah was acting out of a loving awareness of what was appropriate for one who worshiped God. I find this to be an incredible, incredibly powerful thought. That is, religion that makes a difference *operates* inside, but is *anchored outside* of human experience. That means that despite what goes on in or out of the church, despite the inconsistencies of human example, I am assured of a divine Pattern: Jesus Christ, my loving Lord.

But I am assured of more than just a divine pattern.



A pattern is good, but a pattern is not enough, because you know as well as I do that our problem is not in understanding; our problem is not confusion about what to do. We know which stand to take, which issue to address, what actions to reject, what practices to challenge. Our problem is not in understanding, it's in *doing*.

It's sort of like the little boy who came home with his report card, and he didn't want to show it, but finally his mother got it from him, and when she looked at it she ran down the list of grades and she said, "What is this? A 'D' in conduct? What in the world are you doing getting a 'D' in conduct?"

He looked her right in the eye and said, "Well, conduct is my hardest subject."

Loving, human relationships—that's our hardest subject. And that's our most important subject. That's why Jesus, in 1 John 3:14, made it clear to us, that "We know we have passed out of death into life . . ." How, Jesus? "Because we love the brethren." Now believe me, to say that the evidence of having passed from death to life is because we love the brethren puts all of us between a rock and a hard place.

But, thank God, religion that makes a difference not only gives me a pattern, it also gives me power. It gives me the power of the marvelous grace of

God—grace that will steady me in my uncertainty, grace that strengthens me in my disappointment, that calms me in my fear, that comforts me in sorrow. It gives me *grace*.

And the truth is, my brother and my sister, his grace is sufficient *for you*. Even though you look at a long history of abuse and pain,

his grace is sufficient.

Even though you are thinking to yourself, "Well, why should I be blamed for things that happened before I was born?"

His grace is sufficient.

Even though you're thinking to yourself, "I've been shaped by the patterns and practices of my past,"

his grace is sufficient.

Even if you understand that it may mean that you will have to make the first move, and you feel as if that will make you like a fool . . .

his grace—

the grace that brought you out of sin,

the grace that gives you victory over immorality and stealing and lying,

that same grace is sufficient *for you*.

And the truth is, to as many as received him, to them—to them—gave he power to love, power to become, power to overcome, power *to make a difference*.

* Emphasis supplied in this and following references.