

TROUBLE & TREACHERY

NEHEMIAH 13:23-28 | In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. ²⁵ And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" ²⁸ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me.

Interfaith marriage is back. Ezra dealt with that virus some 30 years before (EZRA 9:1-15).

But now, a new and deadly strain is infecting the youth. Half the children born of mixed marriages can't even speak Hebrew, but only the language of their pagan mothers. With the mother tongue comes the mother's culture and the mother's gods. The next generation can neither read the Bible, nor participate in communal worship, nor pass the Jewish faith on to their descendants.

Nehemiah diagnoses interfaith marriage as a *great and evil act of treachery against God* (:27). The spiritual identity of Israel is being eroded from within at the deepest level. And at the highest too. The grandson and possible successor of Eliashib the high priest has married the daughter of Sanballat, Israel's worst enemy (13:28). Trouble and treachery!

Nehemiah is not only a pastor at heart. He is also a prophet. And never a Mr. Nice Guy! He doesn't care what people think about him. He has always put the glory of God

and the shalom of the community far above his own interests and reputation. But now, all the good he has done is in danger of being swept away by human acts of lust and folly. Nehemiah is outraged, as Jesus was when he cleansed the temple (JOHN 2:17). And as Paul was when he wished castration on the enemies of the Gospel (GAL 1:8-9; 5:12). In such situations, no true spiritual leader can afford to be Pastor Nice Guy. Too much is at stake.

Nehemiah cracks the whip. Not in an outburst of anger. But in a calculated response that is proportionate to the offense. His moral authority flows from his character. His judicial authority flows from his king. And his spiritual authority flows from his God—his personal and prayerful relationship with God. Where on earth do we find such leaders with both the impeccable authority and the moral fibre to mete out such discipline, even to the point of excommunicating deviant church leaders? Whither the Ancient Path?

WALL OF DUTY

■ Stand up for same-faith marriage. A recent study across four generations found that more than two-thirds of same-faith marriages produced children who kept the faith of their parents. Whereas less than one-fourth of interfaith marriages produced children who followed the faith of either parent. Same-faith marriage, therefore, is most likely to perpetuate the faith from generation to generation (VERN BENGTON). This confirms what Martin Luther recognised 500 years ago, that nothing rivals the authority of parents to determine and shape their children's faith: *Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children* (MARTIN LUTHER). For the sake of future generations, pray for families. That parents will recognise their God-given authority and lovingly exercise it to shape the faith of their children. Pray that our young will recognise and respect the sanctity and sanity of same-faith marriage. Pray that all of us, married

or not, will recognise and fulfil our responsibility to transmit the Christian faith to the next generation.

■ Stand up for Family and Home. *Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too* (D.A. ANDERSON). Pray for Christian families in your church. Pray especially for fathers. *The crucial factor in whether a child keeps the faith is the presence of a strong fatherly bond* (VERN BENGTON). Turn Scripture into intercession: *We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders. For he issued his laws to Jacob; he gave his instructions to Israel. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to their children, so the next generation might know them—even the children not yet born—and they in turn will teach their own children. So each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting his glorious miracles and obeying his commands* (PS 78:4-7 NLT).

■ Stand up for church discipline. Our bishops, pastors, and elders shoulder this unpleasant responsibility. When Ezra encountered interfaith marriage, he pulled out his hair (EZRA 9:3). When Nehemiah encounters it in the next generation, he pulls out the hair of the offenders. Recurring sin calls for an upscaling of discipline. Watch and pray. *For evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived* (2 TIM 3:13). May God give our leaders the priestly posture of Ezra as well as the prophetic zeal of Nehemiah. May they never turn a blind eye to corrupting influences in the flock. May they expose and evict every wolf in sheep's clothing. May they never lose heart when having to deal with recurring abuses on top of new ones that crop up out of nowhere. May they love God, fear God, and honour God above all else by reinforcing the wall of church discipline (MATT 18:15-18, ACTS 5:1-11, 1 COR 5:4-5, 2 COR 13:1-2, 1 THESS 5:14, 1 TIM 1:19-20, 1 TIM 5:20-21, TITUS 3:10).