

Do you ever find it hard to make commitments? Fear of commitment has become an increasingly common phenomenon in recent decades. It was first especially noticeable among the people of my own Generation X, and has continued to cascade into succeeding generations.

Here are a few signs that might indicate an underlying fear of commitment. See if you can relate to any of these:

- When it comes to **speech patterns**, people who fear commitment tend to overuse non-committal terms like “Maybe”, “Probably”, or “We’ll see what happens.” And when it comes to relationships, they often shy away from using words that express commitment, like “love”, “girlfriend”, “boyfriend”, or “best friend”.
- There can also be a **reluctance to make firm and definite plans**. When someone finds it hard to nail down longer-term plans, or sometimes even short-term plans— like what they want to do on the weekend— it could be a sign of an underlying fear of commitment.
- Sometimes those who resist commitment **fear being trapped** by their decision, and may be driven by FOMO— the **fear of missing out** on other life experiences.

Whether you can personally relate to any of those signs or not, *commitment phobia*, as it’s sometimes called, is a very real thing in today’s society, affecting many.

It can also affect our spiritual lives. Nowadays, more and more people who identify as Christians find themselves reluctant to make important faith commitments such as baptism, becoming formal members of a local church, or serving in ministry on a consistent and dependable basis. And yet, to be an authentic Christian is to root your life in the most important commitment anyone can possibly make— the commitment to follow Jesus as Lord and Master. Doesn’t Jesus himself exhort us to seek first the kingdom of God, and all of the commitments that flow from that? ¹

In an era when so many struggle with commitment, what does it look like for us to grow as those who make allegiance to God our number one priority? What are the characteristics of authentic commitment to God? I raise such questions at the outset of this message because we have come to a place in our current sermon series in the book of Nehemiah where the people of Israel are renewing their commitment to God.

The broken walls and battered gates of Jerusalem have been rebuilt against all odds. As a testament to God’s amazing grace and the effectiveness of Nehemiah’s leadership, this massive project was completed in just 52 days. But as Pastor Andrew reminded us the other week, the book of Nehemiah is less about the completion of a construction project and more about the renewal of God’s people.

To that end, once the walls are complete, the whole assembly gathers for an extended time to hear the reading of scripture by Ezra and other priests. The text says that:

¹ Matthew 6:33

They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage. ²

Together, they immersed themselves in scripture, because a new era for God's people required a fresh alignment with God's word. Indeed, it had been their *misalignment* with God's word that resulted in their exile from their homeland and the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem in the first place.

As soon as the scriptures had been expounded, the people's first response was to rejoice and celebrate; God's word is life, and it was being restored in their very midst.

The people's second response was to confess their sins in prayer, because the reading of God's word revealed just how far they, and their ancestors before them, had strayed from God and his ways. As Pastor Jeremy said last Sunday, deep renewal requires honest confession.

After confession and repentance, the people's third response to God's word was this:

The people responded, "In view of all this, we are making a solemn promise and putting it in writing. On this sealed document are the names of our leaders and Levites and priests." ³

Here, the people are about to *pledge obedience* to God— to his word and to his ways.

God in his grace had brought them this far for the sake of their renewal as his people, and it was time to get serious about living as his people by putting his word into practice in their everyday lives. This was no time to say, "Maybe," "Probably," or "Let's wait and see what happens." This was a time for making a decisive *commitment* to God.

It all began with the leaders of God's people who, as we read a moment ago, made a solemn promise and put it in writing. In fact, the first section of Nehemiah chapter 10 consists of a list of no less than 57 leaders who signed this pledge of obedience, starting with Nehemiah himself. ⁴

There's an old saying that remains as true today as when it was first uttered: *Speed of the leader, speed of the team*. Our health, well-being and effectiveness in mission as a community of God's people must begin with those of us who have been entrusted with leadership. If you have leadership responsibilities at Cornerstone, are you leading out of a heart that is truly committed to God— truly committed to following the way of Jesus? Good Christian leadership can only ever flow when the leaders of God's people continuously renew their commitment to Jesus.

But the commitment God's people made in Nehemiah chapter 10 doesn't end with the leaders. In verse 28, it goes on to say that:

Then the rest of the people—the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, Temple servants, and all who had separated themselves from the pagan people of the land in order to obey the Law of God, together with their wives, sons, daughters, and all who were old enough to understand— joined their leaders and bound themselves with an oath. They swore a curse on themselves if

² Nehemiah 8:8 (NLT)

³ Nehemiah 9:38 (NLT)

⁴ Nehemiah 10:1-27

they failed to obey the Law of God as issued by his servant Moses. They solemnly promised to carefully follow all the commands, regulations, and decrees of the LORD our Lord: ⁵

So not just the leaders, but everyone, right down to the children who were old enough to understand, shared in this pledge of obedience, of commitment.

At this time, we're going to consider how their pledge points to **three characteristics of authentic commitment to God**. After we do so, we'll conclude the message by reflecting on how these characteristics of commitment are applicable to us today on both a personal and congregational level, especially as Cornerstone continues to discern the longer-term vision God has in mind for us as a local church.

Firstly, our text shows us that authentic commitment to God must be:

1. Consistent with our distinct identity as God's missionary people.

In Nehemiah 10, this is especially evident in one of the commitments the people make regarding marriage. Listen to what they pledged in verse 30:

“We promise not to let our daughters marry the pagan people of the land, and not to let our sons marry their daughters.” ⁶

This commitment stems back to a command God had given Israel generations earlier in the book of Exodus:

“You must not make a treaty of any kind with the people living in the land. They lust after their gods, offering sacrifices to them. They will invite you to join them in their sacrificial meals, and you will go with them. Then you will accept their daughters, who sacrifice to other gods, as wives for your sons. And they will seduce your sons to commit adultery against me by worshipping other gods.” ⁷

The people of Israel were situated in a region where they were constantly exposed to neighbouring religions. Although they were to worship only Yahweh— the one true God— and serve him exclusively, the pagan gods of the surrounding nations became a fascination for the people of Israel, and often enough, they would succumb to idolatrous practices. This was especially the case when they intermarried with pagan peoples.

The pagans themselves were usually cool with mixed-faith marriages. As far as they were concerned, the more gods that could be merged into a family unit, the better. But for an Israelite, to marry someone of another faith was a telltale sign of a heart that wasn't truly committed to God.

To be clear, the command not to intermarry with pagan people was not at all about excluding people of other nations and ethnicities. Indeed, people from other nations and ethnicities were welcome to embrace Israel's God as their own, and to become part of God's people. Many did so, and this came with

⁵ Nehemiah 10:28-29 (NLT)

⁶ Nehemiah 10:30-31a (NLT)

⁷ Exodus 34:15-16 (NLT)

both the right as well as the responsibility to marry within the community of God's people. If you know the story of Ruth in the Old Testament, she is a prime example of a foreigner who chose to abandon the gods of her former country, Moab, in order to worship the God of Israel. She married an Israelite named Boaz, and her name came to be listed in the genealogy of Jesus himself.

So, the commitment not to intermarry with pagans had nothing to do with *ethnic* exclusivity. Rather, it had everything to do with *worship* exclusivity. It had everything to do with the people's commitment to the one true God who leads off his "Top Ten" list of commandments by saying, "You must have no other gods before me."⁸

And here's the thing about that: *Exclusive devotion to God was and is essential for God's people to maintain an uncompromised testimony as a missionary people.* You see, Israel didn't exist for their own sake. God formed Israel to be a missionary people so that their distinct patterns of worship and living would reflect God's beauty, wisdom and glory, thereby attracting the surrounding nations to God. God had blessed Israel and gave them commandments to live by *so that* they could in turn be a blessing to the nations.⁹

Therefore, it was vital that their distinct witness as God's people did not become corrupted by the religious and moral compromises that inevitably followed when they intermarried with people who worshipped false gods. And so, in Nehemiah's day, they renewed their commitment to avoid such intermarrying.

For similar reasons, in the New Testament Paul teaches that if you're a Christian, and you choose to marry, you should marry a fellow believer who is solidly committed to Jesus.¹⁰ If you marry a partner who doesn't share your commitment to Christ, not only is your marriage likely be fraught with added difficulty, but your capacity to follow Jesus wholeheartedly will likely be compromised, along with your ability to live in a way that's consistent your distinct missionary identity as one of God's people.

Because in the New Testament, we learn that through Israel's Messiah—Jesus— God has now passed the mantle of being God's missionary people to the church— to those of us who follow Jesus. And like Old Testament Israel, the church doesn't exist for its own sake. The church— including any local church such as Cornerstone— exists for the sake of the world which God is working to redeem and restore through Jesus. Therefore, both personally, and as a congregation, it is vital for us to make commitments— whether in marriage or anything else— that are consistent with our distinct identity as God's missionary people.

Next, we see in our text that authentic commitment to God is:

2. Reflective of God's compassionate justice.

Indeed, reflecting God's compassionate justice is part and parcel of what it means to live into our identity as God's missionary people. In Nehemiah 10, this is evident in the commitment that the people make regarding the Sabbath:

⁸ Exodus 20:3

⁹ Genesis 12:1-3

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 7; 2 Corinthians 6:14a

We also promise that if the people of the land should bring any merchandise or grain to be sold on the Sabbath or on any other holy day, we will refuse to buy it. Every seventh year we will let our land rest, and we will cancel all debts owed to us. ¹¹

Long before this, God had given Israel a set of commandments related to the principle of Sabbath rest. The chief of these commandments was that each week, the seventh day would be a day of rest— a day dedicated to God.¹² This applied to all of the people, including servants, any foreigners living among them, and even livestock. For 24 hours, the people would stop their work, in order to rest, delight and worship.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was Sabbath-keeping that made Israel distinct from its pagan neighbours. The practice was a tangible and powerful reflection of the compassionate justice of God.

Generations before, God had liberated the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and the act of ceasing from their work one day a week served as a sign, not only to themselves, but also to the pagan nations around them, that the God of Israel is no slave driver; he's a compassionate and just liberator, who loves his people for who they are rather than for what they can produce.

But in Nehemiah's day, the people realized that they had not been observing the Sabbath as they should. Foreign traders would come to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, and the people would purchase goods from them. This was not true to the spirit of Sabbath that God had intended. And so, in Nehemiah 10, they promise to no longer buy from the traders on the Sabbath.

But their commitment goes further than this. They also pledge that:

Every seventh year we will let our land rest... ¹³

This is an expansion of the Sabbath command that goes back to Exodus 23:

“Plant and harvest your crops for six years, but let the land be renewed and lie uncultivated during the seventh year. Then let the poor among you harvest whatever grows on its own. Leave the rest for wild animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves. ¹⁴

In promising to let the land lie uncultivated every seventh year, the Israelites were renewing their commitment to reflect God's compassionate justice. When the fields were left fallow in the seventh year, a certain amount of produce would naturally re-seed, and in time the uncultivated fields would yield a modest harvest all on their own. God's word required landowners to reserve this seventh-year harvest for the poor in the local community. One Old Testament scholar explains that different farmers would reach their seventh year at different times, so in any locality, it was always likely that somewhere or other, there would be fallow fields, olive groves and vineyards available to provide food security for the poor.

¹¹ Nehemiah 10:31 (NLT)

¹² Deuteronomy 5:14-15 (NLT)

¹³ Nehemiah 10:31b (NLT)

¹⁴ Exodus 23:10-11 (NLT)

Letting the land rest one year in seven was also an expression of God's heart for environmental justice. It was an expression of the fact that the earth belongs to the Lord, and therefore, proper care of our environment is vital. Indeed, when the land is ruthlessly exploited for the sake of personal profit, the poor suffer most. By committing to care for the land, the people were further reflecting God's compassionate justice for the poor.

But in Nehemiah 10, they go even further, committing that:

Every seventh year... we will cancel all debts owed to us. ¹⁵

This goes back to another expansion of the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy which stipulates that every seventh year, Israelites were to cancel the debts of any fellow Israelites who owed them money. ¹⁶ God's people had clearly not been practicing this in Nehemiah's day, because back in chapter 5, Nehemiah had to address some serious problems of economic injustice that had arisen among the people. ¹⁷ There were poor people among them who actually had to sell their children into servitude in order to service the debt they owed to certain wealthy Israelite nobles.

By committing to cancel debts every seven years, God's people were expressing their intention to break such cycles of poverty, thereby reflecting God's compassionate justice.

Thirdly, and finally, authentic commitment to God is:

3. Supportive of the work of God's ministry.

The remainder of Nehemiah chapter 10 spells out the people's commitment to support the ministry of the Temple with their financial and material resources. Let me read some portions of their pledge:

"In addition, we promise to obey the command to pay the annual Temple tax of one-eighth of an ounce of silver for the care of the Temple of our God. This will provide for the Bread of the Presence; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, the new moon celebrations, and the annual festivals; for the holy offerings; and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel. It will provide for everything necessary for the work of the Temple of our God...

"We promise to bring the first part of every harvest to the Lord's Temple year after year— whether it be a crop from the soil or from our fruit trees... We will bring the best of our flour and other grain offerings, the best of our fruit, and the best of our new wine and olive oil. And we promise to bring to the Levites a tenth of everything our land produces, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our rural towns...

"We promise together not to neglect the Temple of our God." ¹⁸

¹⁵ Nehemiah 10:31b (NLT)

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 15:1-2

¹⁷ Nehemiah 5:1-19

¹⁸ Nehemiah 10:32-33, 35, 37b, 39b (NLT)

The Jerusalem temple stood at the heart of Israel's life of worship. It was God's home among his people, the centre of his presence and power, the place where heaven and earth met.

And the ministry of God's Temple required the support of God's people. Everyone benefitted from the ministry of the Temple, and so all God's people were called upon to support it in accordance with their means. Even the Levites—the worship ministers who were the recipients of the people's tithes— were required to give a tenth of what they received to the Temple treasury.

Supporting the work of God's ministry required financial and material sacrifice on the part of the people, and such sacrifice was a vital way of expressing their commitment to God— of expressing the fact that God came first in their lives.

The giving of the first portion of the harvest of their crops and orchards and flocks— known as the "firstfruits" was a vivid way of declaring of their faith that God is the ultimate owner and giver of all good things, that God could be counted on to provide for all their needs, and that God is worthy of the very best they could offer.

Conclusion

Today in Nehemiah chapter 10, we've seen three characteristics of authentic commitment to God: Authentic commitment to God is *consistent with our distinct identity as God's missionary people*, it is *reflective of God's compassionate justice*, and it is *supportive of the work of God's ministry*.

Obviously, the way we apply these principles in our context will look different that the way ancient Israel applied them, but the principles themselves remain timeless. Let's talk about some ways they apply to us, both as a church, and personally as followers of Jesus.

As a Church

As most of you know, Cornerstone has begun the process of seeking God's direction for our longer-term future. We're asking God what are the next major strategic moves he would have us commit to as a church. Whatever those moves may be, we know that they must be consistent with our distinct identity as God's missionary people, because God has placed us here and he's grown us as a congregation not merely for our own sake, but for the sake of the greater community, and the wider world.

And as we seek God for his longer-term direction for Cornerstone, we need to be open to ways he might call us to reflect his compassionate justice. Are there any justice-related causes that God is calling us to champion as a church for the sake God's kingdom? Are there any under-served people in our area that God would stir our hearts to help? One consultant we once worked with encouraged us to seek God for what he called a "heartburst"— for our hearts to explode with God's compassion for a particular marginalized people group such that we would be compelled to go all-in on serving their needs in Jesus' name. In discerning God's longer-term vision for Cornerstone, what "heartburst" would God give to us that we can commit to together in order to better reflect God's compassionate justice?

And along the way, we will all need to do our part in supporting the work of God's ministry in and through this church, whether it's the regular and systematic giving our tithes and offerings

to support Cornerstone's week-to-week ministries and operations, or whether it's contributing to a special ministry initiative or capital fundraising project that God might call us to so we can better serve the world around us for the sake of God's kingdom. Indeed, the faithful and sacrificial giving of God's people is how this building got built, and for almost 10 years now, this community centre style facility has served not only the needs of this congregation, but also those of our neighbours in the greater community, in Jesus' name. What is your commitment when it comes to supporting the work of God's ministry here at Cornerstone, through your financial giving, and through serving in ministry according to the gifts God has given you?

Personal Commitments (as the worship team comes back up)

Being a Christian is something more than giving our intellectual assent to a series of doctrinal propositions. It means committing ourselves to the way of life which Christ has determined and exemplified for us... in the Christian life and witness so much is lost, because we are indefinite. The devil is not worried by our pious aspirations. He is troubled when, in obedience to God, for the glory of Christ, and in the power of the spirit, we make firm, practical decisions to do specific things for the Lord.¹⁹

- Clear, definite, specific
 - Baptism: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism
 - Membership: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/membership
 - Sabbath-keeping worksheet: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/sabbath

¹⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Book of Nehemiah*, p. 175.