



Transcriptions

Needs, Nehemiah and Nonsense

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Annotation: *Talbot Theological Seminary, November 5, 1980.* Affirming the value of valid content, Ted Ward tackles the tension between content on the one hand and the reality of people on the other. He asserts that teachers and preachers will make a great leap forward when they recognize that content that does not connect with people's needs is largely ignored.



The topic for our lecture today perhaps would make for a better sermon. And, again, it would please our Presbyterian colleagues who love three points and a poem: Needs, Nehemiah, and Nonsense, carefully constructed to deal with the three N's. I want you to be sure to notice that. As a matter of fact, it is a fairly serious kind of a consideration, and I hope that we can share together some observations and some concerns. I want you to think with me about the ways that we relate to human beings when we are in a position as either teachers, preachers, or knowledgeable parents or whatever when we have access to a content that we respect and value, and which we would want to share with other people.

One of the great problems in both education (teaching) and pastoring (read preaching), is that there is a tendency for us to see content as being the transcendently important feature of what it is that we are about and, indeed, there is value in having clarified worthy content. And no matter what else I may say in this hour, please understand that that was the first thing that I said; that there is value in valid content.

From a communication point of view and from a human development point of view, there is a tension between the *content* on the one hand and the *reality* of the people on the other hand. Now that abstraction, the reality of the people, I'm going to shorten into needs. One of the things, I think, that makes for the first great leap forward as a teacher becomes a quality teacher and as a preacher becomes a quality preacher is when that teacher or preacher becomes alert to the fact that content that does not connect with people's needs is largely ignored. And once we get that one down straight, we tend to make a great leap forward in effectiveness whether we are a teacher or a preacher.

There is a great weakness, including our primary emphasis, on content. Now that's the first of many threatening things that I will say. Please go back and remember what I said first: there is importance, virtually prime importance, in valid content. But, when as a communicator, preacher, teacher, or whatever we put our primary emphasis on content, one of the things that quite often happens is that the *purpose of that content becomes obscured* or eclipsed. It becomes a matter of content for content's own sake. Knowledge for knowledge's sake. Information for information's sake. And we tend to put such emphasis there that we're not really any longer asking the important questions, why is that content important to people?

Further, there's a tendency to make knowing about something a major criterion of our concern as teachers and preachers. And I submit that there is a difference between *knowing* something and *knowing about* something, and, at another stage or another level, another depth, the having that *knowing affect* our being. And of those three, the knowing about is the most trite. And, yet, that is what much of formal education is dedicated to—facilitating a *knowing about*.

Which then leads us to the third big problem. The first was *ignoring* the *purpose* of the *content*, the second was making the *knowing about* a major criterion, and the third is seeing the *verbal learning* as the major reason for being. And I submit to you, on this third point, that we live in an era and in a culture that has taken the substantive life-transforming reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ and converted it into a series of verbal propositions about which we debate to the great weakening of the cause of Christ and to the great decay of the church in North America. That tendency to make things a matter of verbal learning so that people sound like Christians. So that people can decide if a given reading is or isn't hewing the line of an inerrancy position on a evangelical posture or whatever, and this tendency to preoccupy ourselves with the verbal and to ignore the life-changing substantive reality of the living gospel of Jesus Christ. Never forget that the imagery that was given associated with our Lord Jesus Christ was that the Word was made flesh. The crucial reality in the delivery of God to us of a full, fulfilled, redemptive plan was not a series of verbal propositions. It was a living person and it communicates to us far more than things we need to know about and things we need to learn as verbal truth.

But there is even a fourth great danger and it exists and thrives in formal education: it *makes testing too easy and too irrelevant*. It is so easy to test whether or not people have learned about. Do you follow me? And so hard to test whether or not people have been transformed by what they know. So what do we do in formal education? We do exactly what the early Greeks did before the time of Christ to their own decay: we fix our attention on the knowledge and then make the blithe assumption that somehow the knowledge will find itself a way into practice. And that is the deep decay of the Greek culture, and I submit that that form of Hellenism is an infection in the church in North America today.

Now content is important for several reasons. First of all, content, especially when we have any kind of grasp on objective truth is a reliable base for understanding experience and without some way of getting a presuppositional base, girded in truth, founded in truth then, indeed, we are in no position to evaluate experience itself. And I submit that there is among us today a religious extremism known as experience-based religion that tends to downgrade the importance of the truth base and presume that somehow the experience generates its own sense of truth.

I began yesterday with you trying to be faithful to the very things that I am espousing, namely that we must examine our presuppositions and assess them for their truth base. And then we are in a position to get on with thought processes and get on with study and understanding. Truth, as in reliable demonstrable truth, is valuable as basis for understanding experience.

Secondly, content, in that sense, is an important alternative to what otherwise is a very human tendency: the human tendency to take all things in relatives; or if you please to see things relativistically. Something is better than something else, but neither are really good; or everything is good, but some things are more gooder than others. And that tendency to see things, not in absolutes, but in relatives is a very common problem in human thought and in human and humanistic philosophical systems. So, for example, we find in our time tremendous emphasis on value education, even in the secular sector, but both in the religious sector and the secular sector we find, particularly through tactics such as values clarification, a secondary message being taught. The primary message values and value choices are an important thing to deal with in life—you've got to come to cope with it; but the secondary message is there really aren't any clear-cut rights and wrongs. You need to be able to process so that you see relative gain or loss from different choices. In other words, everything boils down to a relativism—all statements are relative, except this one.

The third facet of importance in content can be best understood in theological perspective and I submit that we have not yet found good ways to communicate that very effectively to God's people: that the truth that is important, that the content that is important is the content and truth of a lifestyle, a walk, a person. You see, to walk in a lifestyle of truth involves not only the *propositional* truth that we can condense into verbal statements, but involves the *action* truth that is the necessary other part of a sincere concern for what God is doing in the person where the person's core is a spirit being in communing with God.

There is a tendency, you see, if we do not see content in its right perspective for content to become that which influences only one aspect of the various aspects of human personhood. It influences the intellectual, but it makes relatively low contact through the intellectual, even into the very core of the spiritual being.

I mentioned at the beginning that a needs orientation is sort of a threshold for educators, pastors, communicators, in general. And when we come to grips with the fact that the human being is a need-fulfilling creature, we begin to communicate far more effectively. Here, then, is the importance of needs, and for these again, I'll identify four.

First, that the human being is, in fact, a need-fulfilling creature. And one of the strongest dependable motivations that you can find in people with whom you're relating, to whom you're communicating is that those persons are predictably need-seeking. They are motivated by the needs that have arisen within their own conscious program of concerns. And that makes for a great leap forward, but it also makes for a rather important and insidious trap. It tends to make the person—

once they become aware of how important it is to fix attention on the needs of people—it tends to make us jump into a kind of a short-circuit in which the getting to know the needs of people is an all-consuming passion, and tends to produce a kind of a Cyclops mentality in us in which we say, I don't want to know anything, except what your needs are. And we probe and plumb and spend all our time trying to dig out the needs of other people as if until I know your needs, I can't relate to you, and that produces another kind of very bad relationship.

One of the beautiful things about being human is that people can identify their own needs. They don't depend on preachers and teachers to identify them for them. Now, indeed, this is a touchy point because it's important for us to be sensitive to the needs of others, to have some insight into what those needs are. But the danger is becoming so preoccupied that we spend all our time focusing as if my learning your needs is the content that I need; and, again, I've fallen into a trap of content emphasis. So on the one hand it's a great release and represents a great threshold when people finally come to grips with the fact that you can't communicate content effectively until that and unless that content is relating to the needs of people. But then we fall into the second trap which is preoccupation with the needs of people causing you to spend most of your time in a kind of probing inquiry feeding your understanding and not necessarily responding effectively to the needs of people.

Quite often people have observed in the life of Jesus Christ and in his public ministry that he seemed to have things to say no matter what people were doing and saying. He had no trouble speaking to large groups. He lectured. How could he have known their needs? Well, one of the interesting things about Jesus in almost all of his public sermons, as we have them recorded, is that they tend to be very broadband messages—having something in there for everybody; whereas his individual private and small group communications tend to be very focused on narrow concept of needs. But if you look in almost every case, you can find that that concept of needs comes out from the statements of the person. A rich young ruler says, I'm into the law. Jesus says, okay, let's talk law. The capacity to get on the wavelength quickly of where the preoccupations of other people are is a very clear and easy strategy and does not require this over-preoccupation with trying to understand the needs of the people we're ministering to.

Secondly, the needs orientation is important because there are inherent motivations in persons that, in fact, are the dominant motivations. And when we say, well, my big problem is to motivate people. What you're really saying is, since I can't give other people motivation, I must somehow connect with the motivation that is there. A person who is effective in motivating others is a person who is able to detect the concerns, and the needs, and the preoccupations of people, and relate to the meeting of those needs. That person can motivate people like mad because what we're doing is getting on the wavelength of the people we're relating to. So that inherent motivation is coming out of needs, and since we're all concerned about motivating people then, in fact, we are destined to do it well or do it badly. And if we do it well, it'll be because we have connected with inherent and intrinsic motivations within persons.

Now that's where this handout begins to be of some value to you because there are certain kinds of things that emerge in a fairly predictable kind of a pattern in terms of things that the human being, as the human being develops, are getting into. And, for example, if you take the Ages of Man issues of Erik Erikson [here he describes a handout, presumably Erikson's stages—a handout that is unavailable; but Erikson's stages can be found in many other sources) we see that there are various kinds of dilemma paradox conflicts that are dealt with at various stages of life. And Erik Erikson's

work is probably, as far as I'm concerned, one of the very few things to come out of psychoanalytic theory that has validity and survival capability beyond the memory of Freud. That was a negative remark. But Erik Erikson, Freudian though he is, I think has unlocked a great chain of paradox dilemmas that the human being wrestles with. And if you're really interested in relating to people, you will probably be well advised to try to relate to people in terms of this succession of tasks that they come into as life unfolds for them.

The third facet of the importance of needs has to do with the attention to needs being a Christian way to relate to people. We see this in the experiences of our Lord. He was extremely sensitive to the needs of people. He was rarely turning off people simply because their needs didn't relate to his sermon theme at the moment. In fact, I see some of the encounters that he had with various sorts of people, who had very specific needs, as being somewhat off the track of the things that he was preoccupied about at the time; but that didn't stop him from relating to those needs.

There's something about us that tends to make our agenda so blooming important that we sometimes become insensitive to the needs of other people, and as kind of an instinct reaction we say, well, I'll get at that later, but first let me get on with my agenda. Let me get on with the things that I think are important. Let me get off with my needs, then we'll maybe get around to working on yours. I am impressed that the Lord Jesus Christ allowed people to define their own needs, and he always responded in terms of dealing with that need.

By the way, footnote: some of you will come up with the observation later—and don't bother me with it because I've heard it before—that in the case of the man let down from the roof, the man didn't say what his needs were and that was one case when Jesus said, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee," as if somehow ignoring the healing problem. Well, I submit that that neither proves nor disproves the generalization because, as a matter of fact, we didn't hear from that man and we don't know his view of his needs. And I have to believe that Jesus saw right through what the friends thought was the need and came right through to the basic needs that that man perceived, which was a sin problem. Now I can't prove that but you can't prove the alternative either, so let's don't bother with it.

As a matter of fact, when people came to him and said, I'm blind, I find Jesus behaving like this. Now listen closely. When a man came to Jesus and said of Jesus, I'm blind. I can't see. Jesus said: Well, let me tell you, man, that is not the most serious problem. The most serious problem in the world is a spiritual problem. We'll work on the spiritual problem and then we'll get back to the blindness problem. Is that the way Jesus behaved? I asked you to listen closely. You find me the Scripture where Jesus converted a person's view of needs into Jesus' view of needs in order to deal with it. Jesus was capable of dealing with people in terms of their view of needs and then going on from there. Somehow we need to have that kind of a frame of reference in our dealings with people.

The attention to needs is Christian. Take Jesus' specific teachings, not just his example. Take his specific teachings. What was his definition of a neighbor? A neighbor, as in the Good Samaritan illustration, is somebody who isn't even from your culture. It's interesting. The man in need was not even from the same culture. He was from an alien sub-cultural group. He was a Samaritan. And the man meeting that person's need didn't even know him and never really got acquainted with him, according to the story. But that's the way Jesus defined neighbor for the Christian perspective. He says: It's a matter of meeting people who have needs and relating to those needs; that's your neighbor. That's a Christian teaching.

Now no matter what you do in eschatological perspective with reference to Matthew chapter 25, let me warn you that the division of sheep and goats tells us something about the ethical system of God. Now you can argue that “least of these my brothers” refers to Israel. You can regard it as something totally alien from the judgments on the church. I don’t care what you do with it, but I still maintain that God is a God of truth and it tells us something about his ethical system. And his ethical system in Matthew chapter 25 comes down to this: if you have done these things in response to need, whether or not you were preoccupied about doing them for Jesus, you were, in fact, fulfilling as the transformed person who does things of good because it is in the transformed nature to do that. The people on that side, the sheep, said: Are you sure you got us on the right side? Do you remember that? You read it again closely. They’re saying incredulously: Yeah, we hear your criterion, but we didn’t remember seeing you hungry, thirsty, and so forth. He said, “When you were doing it to one of the least of these, you were doing it to me.”

But the people on the other side sounded an awful lot more like evangelical Christians. And, by the way, this is an excellent proof text to illustrate that there aren’t any evangelicals going to heaven. If you’re into proof texting, you know, write this one down. Because how did they react? They reacted like an awful lot of what I hear around me as I deal with evangelical leadership. They were saying: Well, you know, if we could of done it for Jesus, we would of done it. If we could of put on the side of our truck for our medical relief team, ‘We’re doing this for Jesus’, we’d of done it. That’s what they said: When did we see you hungry and thirsty? We were willing, but we weren’t able to do it for you and, therefore, we didn’t do it. I submit that regardless of how you take that in its larger eschatological perspective about that particular judgment of the sheep and goats, the judgment of the nations, you still have to come to grips with the fact that it is in the value system of heaven to be concerned about God’s faithful people being about the ministering to needs; not as strategic preoccupation about getting in your licks for Jesus. Maybe if we can give them a little bit a goodwill then we can preach at them. There’s nothing wrong with a holistic ministry that is concerned with the verbal gospel. I’m not suggesting that for a moment. But I am saying that there are people in situations of need where the heart of transformed Christendom ought to be the heart of the transformed person able, as the person meeting on the side, the Samaritan meeting the man of need and ministering to that need. Well, maybe we’ll get into that later. So, that’s an inflammatory one. I guess you’ll just have to take that in stride.

Fourth facet of the importance of needs is that insight into personhood comes from an awareness of needs. And as you become more aware of the needs of humanity, as you become more able to see yourself and see others in terms of these stages of development, you become more aware of the magnificence of personhood. And I submit that’s where an awful lot of pastors, particularly, and teachers, too, who occasionally fall very short because they really have a shallow perception of human personhood. They may be fixed on the person of Jesus Christ, but I submit that, even there, they have a shallow perception because if Jesus Christ was the Word of God made incarnate in flesh, we understand Christ more fully as we understand human development, human nature more fully. What is your view of the incarnation? Is the incarnation simply something that happened in history or is it something that is a representation of an ongoing way that God deals with his people? We need to understand persons in order to more fully appreciate Christ.

Now let me conclude all of this set of concerns by saying that if we do ignore either content or needs, we have committed a travesty. The issue is not Needs versus Content. That is one of the forms of nonsense that I wanted to identify with you today. Both needs and content are important

and, in fact, both are always present in any context. Christ responded to human needs as defined by persons and in doing so he related a content of truth: personal *being* truth and *verbal* truth.

Now in our time of technology, there's a tendency for us somehow to get everything down to pat formulas and to linear models. A linear model is when you say, okay, I'm here and I want to get there and I guess the best way to get there is a straight line. By the way, don't ever engage in mountain climbing with linear models. No, the truth is that in the real world linear models don't very often work, but they make great flow charts. Linear models are a kind of technological assumption that we can be efficient. There's a great efficiency ethic among us, you know, be efficient. Bat your head against the wall until you can get the concrete wall open. Never walk three steps to the side to go through a door. A linear approach is going to be more efficient because it'll take you fewer steps—never mind the bruises on the head.

We put pat formulas and linear models out as *the* way to go, and we do planning on this sort of a ground. We tend to oversimplify the relationships between ends and means. We get oversimplified views of purposes themselves. For example, in evangelism we oversimplify evangelism to a matter of personal decisions. I submit that that's a part of it, but it's not the whole of it. And that evangelism that, in fact, is a fulfillment of the commission that we refer to as the Great Commission of our Lord's departure message. We have far more than just the matter of personal decisions.

Let me give you some illustrations of these oversimplified views that grow out of a kind of a cultural tendency to look for linear models and pat formulas. Out-of-context evangelism is evangelism that is ignoring of the situation in which the people to whom we're ministering exist. Now out-of-context evangelism accounts for or is a category that I would put an awful lot of radio evangelism into and the current version of television evangelism. Now, please understand, I'm not suggesting that it is without its fruit. God is able to use all sorts of ridiculous things and, as a matter of fact, some people are called to all sorts of far-fetched ministries and I have perfect ease in working with such people, even when sometimes I have to chuckle periodically about how far-fetched it is.

Out-of-context evangelism is evangelism that does not relate itself to where people are seeing themselves and to the sensitive concerns that they've got. Instead, it tends to run over those as if somehow those aren't important. Now God can use it somehow, but I don't think that Jesus Christ demonstrated it. And, as a matter of fact, I don't think that Paul demonstrated it, and I don't think that even the prophets in the Old Testament demonstrated it. I think what we see in God's approach to evangelism is an approach to evangelism that goes right down to the base needs of people as they're perceiving them at the moment and works from there outward.

More about that in a moment as we come back and put this in positive. But oversimplified views of ends, purposes, in the work of Christ can lead us to another excess which I call the children first phenomenon. You know, like in the lifeboat ethic you have women and children first. In the Christian ethic, I think it's children first. Much of Christian education is keyed to a phrase or a section—a very brief section, and one that is given to us in a much larger context but is yanked out of context. Deuteronomy 6, chapter 6 verses 6 and 7 which say that the responsibility for the development of children is in the home, in the family, and the spiritual nurturance of children is a matter for the parents. Most Christian education textbooks say that. In fact, they build either the first or the second chapter around it and tell you how terribly important it is that we understand

that, and then they spend the next 30 or 40 chapters telling you how to yank it out of the home and put it in the church. And I think that's one reason we're in trouble today because we have a children first ethic, or mentality, and it partly comes out of the Sunday school movement.

Now I'm not out here to destroy the Sunday school, but to put it in perspective. The Sunday school movement is only 200 years old. That's one of the important things about 1980 is to understand it's only 200 years old and it was not born on the ark. It's a very modern technological phenomenon. As a matter of fact, it's a response of godly people to the concerns that they have for a society that is ignoring children. Now I submit that that's not quite the same situation we have in our time. Our ignoring of children today has an altogether different route, but still we persist as if the main function of education in the church is for children. It's a kind of a children first mentality and as a matter of whole observation of the Scripture, I believe that the issue is, in fact, as in Deuteronomy 6 and 7, that the responsibilities for children are primarily vested in families and that, therefore, the community, as the whole community of God, stands in support of those families. And the resources of the house of God ought to be focused on the preparation and the support of those families to do an adequate job with their children which suggests that we may be coming out of, God bless us, 200 years of eclipse in which we get away from this children first phenomenon and begin working on families first. Now, unfortunately, we are in a time when a lot of families are already gone into one sort or another of difficulty and it's a very hard time to get that restorative put into place, but the linear model's children first thing has got to be re-examined.

Now good works as a means to an end is the third of these oversimplified views of ends that I would like to speak to. I have already hinted in Matthew 25—and I guess I did more than hint. I got my foot in up to my knee—that when we take good works as simply a tactic by which we gain entrance and gain opportunity to make a verbal appeal, we are missing the point, ethically, that our responsibility as transformed people is to be sensitive to the needs of people, and period, right there—to minister to the needs of people, period. But so much of the good works that goes on within evangelical Christianity is what I call *tactical* good works. You do the good works in order that you can get the toe in the door, as if somehow the good works in themselves have no particular value. We need to take a hard look at that. We need to ask ourselves, why was it that Jesus let so many people go away after he had dealt with their physical needs? And he did. He did not insist that everybody sign up for the study course. His ministry was a ministry to the wholeness of persons and he could not ignore the physical condition.

Now I tell you, from experiences working in hardship areas in this world, that one of the absolute necessities of many missionaries and of many of the leadership people in the national churches in many parts of the world is an absolute necessity to confront the hard realities of people. You don't do that, you lose your credibility. You have absolutely no ground on which to relate to people. If you cannot relate to first-level needs—and that's when our character Nehemiah comes in because, as a matter of fact, Nehemiah, although we use him quite often as an example of effective planning but quite often we ignore a very crucial thing about Nehemiah. Nehemiah—and I would urge you in the next day or two to recapitulate much of what I'm going to say by examining for yourself the first 9 chapters of Nehemiah, and some things may pop out at you that you've never seen before in the strength of what I'm driving at this morning. The basic stratagem of North American Christianity and the assumption that we make, even in missions, is that when you go out and reach people, what is the first area of need that you deal with? God always begins by meeting spiritual needs. That's our linear formula and I submit that it is nonsense.

Now God can work that way and does work that way. We have a degraded situation in Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem are in bad straits. Nehemiah is over in the other kingdom and he has a high responsibility. In fact, he's sensitive to the fact that he has a high responsibility. He's a man of God and he wants to use that high responsibility to do for God's people in need. And one of the things that you find in a careful sequential study of the material in the first 9 chapters of Nehemiah is that Nehemiah was a person who carried an emotional concern for God's people.

Secondly, he's a person that listened closely when he got data about the needs of people. Chapter 1 opens with Nehemiah encountering people who had seen it recently and he's eager and gets data. From that point, he goes into prayer and fasting, and he takes his concern in the light of the data and deepens it so that it becomes for him a compulsive source of strategies and insights. In verse 11, we have a funny little phrase after he's doing all this praying and reflecting and all this business of letting his consciousness deepen he says, "For I was the king's cup bearer." I know who I am. I know where I am. I know what resources I have at my hand. And he went to the secular resources and said, "God has laid on my heart."

Now he did this with a very clever approach. You can think of it as clever or you can think of it as Spirit-led, whatever, but it still comes out clever. The king had never seen him before looking blue and, as a matter of fact, he let the king see him looking blue. Then the king said, "Tell me about your need." Nehemiah was needs oriented from start to finish with himself, with Jerusalem, with the king, with everything and he'll look at that in terms of how Nehemiah keyed in to other people's need and let his needs show and how God used all that.

Now when he finally taps the secular resources and gets all the secular resources that God's going to need—and, by the way, I wish more people in evangelical Christianity could understand that God can use secular resources. The whole of the universe is God's. The kingdom is not yet fulfilled, but God lays claim through his people to all kinds of resources. Let's not take our separatism to the point of starving ourselves. Nehemiah then moves through a series of processes in which he puts himself in Jerusalem. And when he gets there the first thing he does is to re-encounter the situation. He hasn't seen it for himself. He's heard about it. He re-encounters it in reality. But he is so concerned about the needs of those people that he knows that one of their needs is a very deep safety and security problem and a whole lot of basic trust and mistrust. By the way, I'm just scanning down on my list right here and you can see him relating to some of these Erikson-stated needs. And he knows that if he goes out there and says hey, I want to see the walls. I want to see what bad shape we're in. Come on, let's go out and look. They're going to be embarrassed as all get out because they haven't lifted a finger to do anything about it.

So when does he go out? Do you ever notice that little detail? When does he go out to survey the walls? At night. Isn't that beautiful? At night. What a time to make a survey trip. It must have presented some real handicaps. In fact, he tells you that. He says, "In one place I couldn't even get the horse through." Lot of handicaps in doing it that way. But he was very concerned about not creating the pompous man from elsewhere coming in saying, oh, folks, I see you've got some real problems here. Instead he is very gentle. He's very concerned. He's very aware of what their needs are, and he begins moving by saying, folks, I've looked at the wall. I know you've got a problem and now we have, at the heart of it all, a basic spiritual problem because you people really don't have a vision for God or you would have been doing something about this long ago. Right? Wrong.

There's apparently some kind of a dialogue that goes on because when you finally hear Nehemiah talking about what he views as the situation, you hear it in verse 17, Then I said to them, you see, not I see, you see the distress that you are in. No, that *we're* in. You see the distress that we're in. He was capable of meeting their needs by relating to them and becoming part of them. He became part of them, "We have a problem."

Now his magnificent organization follows from all of that where he is tuning into needs, but the interesting thing is that he takes their preoccupation with safety and security way ahead of any other concerns because that was their preoccupation. You will notice, if you analyze this carefully, that the first thing he concerns himself with, in fact, are safety and security needs; and if he was a Maslow student he would probably have started with their hunger problem which is a physiological need. We know they have one because it emerges later.

It's nonsense to take any formula, including Erikson's or Maslow's, and turn it into a standard prescription. That's the nonsense we're talking about today. It is not a question of substituting one sequence for another sequence. It's a matter of getting in tune because despite the fact that Maslow says, more often than not the physiological needs will block out anything else until you deal with them. In Jerusalem, the security needs were blocking out everything else including the hunger needs and Nehemiah was sensitive to that.

In chapter 5, we find after the work on the wall has gotten to the point where Jerusalem was beginning to become more secure, the next set of needs begins to be verbalized by the people; not by Nehemiah, but by the people and they say, we got a hunger problem. And you know how he dealt with that? He said, let's look at the context in which that exists; and he was able, with the people, to engage in a dialogue where the hunger problem was identified as part of a problem of human injustice. And those of you who are afraid of liberation theology, as is coming out of Latin America, haven't read Nehemiah. Because in chapter 5, the hunger problem is inextricably identified as a problem of human justice and Nehemiah invokes the Year of Jubilee. One of the few cases in the history of God's people where the Year of Jubilee was invoked and landownership went back to the original. Boy, that doesn't set too well with mercantile America, but it is God's Word.

Then, interestingly enough, after that problem begins to be dealt with the people have a need, at that point, that they identified and say, what has God said? and they begin to listen to the Word of God. That's in the Word. First the wall, then the hunger, then they said, let's hear what God's got to say. And in our pat formula-izing of mission strategy, we always insist that that's not God's way. Now I'm not suggesting that Nehemiah's formula is the be-all and end-all that God always uses. That's nonsense. In that situation, it was. The key bottom-line for all of this is that God is able to use the person who *listens* far more than he can use the person who *talks*.

We need to understand, first of all, that the content of verbal Christianity is inadequate to communicate Christ. It takes a living presence to communicate Christ, and part of that living presence has to be a sensitive awareness of the needs of people.

Secondly, when we crave for standard approaches, even when we exalt them and say that somehow God's way must be reducible to a formula, we commit a grave error. God's way is built upon very situation-specific conditions, and God's truth is a truth that is adequate to meet needs in situation. The bottom-line: needs is a basic component of understanding of a situation. Nehemiah, a person that God shows us was very sensitive to the way people define their needs and was able to

move, first of all, through physical tasks such as wall-building into physiological tasks and social issues such as hunger and bad use of landownership; through that into a celebration with people around the Word of God. And then, in chapter 9, a culmination—interestingly enough, in what we tend to always put first—the theme word in chapter 9 at the end of this whole need-meeting process was the people of Jerusalem *repented*.

Take a hard look at those first 9 chapters for yourself and I think that you may be willing to conclude with me that effective communication always begins with careful listening.

Let's pray:

Father, we thank you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the data and information we have all around us from your Word, from your Creation, and from the interactions that we see between your chosen people and the situations in which needy people find themselves. May we, Father, be delivered from the nonsense of seeking formulas and seeking straight-line answers. May we be responsive people able to move with the Spirit of God in response to the needs of people. And may we, Father, through this willingness and prayerful concern, better come to appreciate what our Lord was all about because it's in his name we pray. Amen.