

Culture Building

Nehemiah 8:1–12:7 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: What is Culture? Culture is a group's implied MEANING or VALUE attributed to various experiences. Culture is like water to a fish - it surrounds us, it's all we know. You are born INTO a culture, but you are not born WITH a culture. It is learned, adopted. It can be changed.

EXAMPLE:

- In **my family** timeliness was a huge value. We would sacrifice an enjoyable family experience in order to be on time. We arrived anywhere we were supposed to be at least 15 minutes early.
- Not so **in my wife's** family - they would loligag and meander until there was no possible way for them to be on time. They valued timeliness, but they valued the experience of personal freedom even more.
- My wife's family was a very **collective** family, therefore the family's timelines was only as good as the slowest member... they moved together.
- My family was **individualistic**, if you weren't on time, you would be left at home.

Those were CULTURE differences. That's a very simple example, but make no mistake - CULTURE is a VERY **POWERFUL** THING and it's a VERY **PERSONAL** THING.

Now when Julie and I got married, things got very interesting. We found ourselves in a battle for the culture of our new family unit. Would we arrive early? Or would we arrive when we arrive? *We are still trying to figure that one out.*

I would suggest to you, that the **information revolution** with the advent of the **internet** and **social media** has made a very BIG nation, relatively small. We wake up in the morning and we are confronted with situations experienced in LOUISVILLE, KY. We have to make a judgment call on Nancy Pelosi's choice of a hair salon. AND each one of us is interpreting those events based on the culture that is dominant in our life.

What happens when distinct cultures are slammed together in cyber space? How many of you have heard the term - **CANCEL CULTURE?** Today, online trolls can dig into your online past and find something you said that is OFFENSIVE to their culture and cause enough drama to get you cancelled, fired, or released from a team.

Thus we find ourselves in the midst of a national quagmire that is NOT primarily RACIAL, it is NOT primarily RELIGIOUS, it is primarily - cultural.

Various cultures jockeying for dominance and superiority, and the right to decide what the future of our civilization will look like.

It's not entirely unlike the first year of our marriage.

The book of Nehemiah chronicles the second wave of Jews returning to Israel from Persia. The deportation into Babylon, then into Persia had systematically erased the

ethnic and cultural distinctions that identified these people as Jews. Some were more Persian than Jewish, other's were more Samaritan than Jewish.

What difference does it make? It's make all the difference in the world if you are a leader. **Leadership** *is influencing people to do what the leader believes is best, because they want to do it.*

So you have to work WITH, not AGAINST your teams values, aspirations, and goals.

Nehemiah had successfully led them to build the wall in an unbelievable 52 days (I can't remodel a bathroom in 52 days). What Nehemiah does next is VERY important -

Now he isn't building the wall... now he's building the culture... which is far more difficult.

Before we get into the text let me say this -

- The success or failure of your family will depend heavily, NOT ON THE RULES YOU SET, but on the CULTURE YOU BUILD.
- The same is true for your business or your organization, the same is true for this church.

Culture always wins...

- If you have the absolute BEST PLAN, but a bad culture, culture will win.
- If you have the best TEAM MEMBER, but a toxic culture, culture will always win over TEAM.

So Nehemiah couldn't just build the wall - he had to build the culture.

CONTEXT: In Chapters 5-6 Nehemiah address conflicts among the Jews and the ongoing attacks of Sanballat and Tobiah. In Chapter 7 the wall is complete and Nehemiah gives us a list of all of the Jews who returned to the city... Then in chapter 8, Culture building begins.

1. Strategic Alliances -

A. Ezra the Priest

TEXT: Nehemiah 8

¹ And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.

So over 6 hours hours of teaching...and you think I'm long!

3b. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

That's the first step in culture building...

This amazing leader Nehemiah who had oversaw the effort of constructing the wall of Jerusalem has a massive tower built for a man to stand on and teach... but Nehemiah doesn't teach... he call for EZRA the priest to teach the people.

Nehemiah was the organizational leader, Nehemiah was the Politician... but he recognized that if the city was to flourish he had to strike strategic alliances with men who had gifts he did not posses.

That is exactly what many of you are doing by uniting with this Church. You know the Bible you understand the bible, but you want to have an alliance with someone who has given his life to studying and teaching the scriptures.

Many of you are far better leaders than I will ever be, but you need what I have if your family is going to stay on track, and I benefit daily from you as well.

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

How do you think it effected the teenage boy when Ezra read the word of God and his father said, "Amen!"

A verbal affirmation of God's truth will drive the truth deeper into the heart of your family than 10,000 lectures.

It may be as it is preached, it may be over lunch... but when you verbally confess that the word of God is true... it shapes the culture of your family.

b. A Like Minded Tribe

⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

This is something akin to our GROUPS at First Baptist. I meet with a group of 8 men every Monday at 7AM to study the Bible and hold one another accountable. We meet via Zoom. They are not Pastors, they are business men, doctors, some are retired, some are new believers... but here is what I have noticed. They see things in the

scripture I don't see anymore... when I look at a text my attention goes to the less obvious aspects. They see the obvious, and it speaks to them and changes them. It has been so refreshing to get their perspective. You get that every week through small groups, but I am working during that time.

Not only a strategic alliance...

2. Intentional Celebration

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; **do not mourn or weep.**" For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰

So apparently, when they considered the fact that God was a faithful God who kept his promises, he showed mercy and grace, he forgave and re-established his people.. they were broken hearted.

But notice...

Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, **for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**"

So there is many people's favorite verse but they don't know it's a quote from Nehemiah.... it was a verse of reproof to people who are crying when they should have laughing, celebrating...

This is what people who study leadership call - EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.

LEADER - are you able to sense the emotional climate of the people you lead? Are you able to change it?

LEADERS ARE THERMOSTATS NOT THERMOMETERS.

¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved."

Isn't that interesting? They equate Holiness with Happiness. This day is Holy DON'T GRIEVE.

Leaders - One of the key aspects of culture building is knowing WHAT to celebrate and HOW to celebrate.

Andy Stanley said, "What gets celebrated gets repeated."

ILLUSTRATION: You heard about the Catholic monk who cried out from deep in the basement of a roman monetary one day. His fellow monk ran in to see what all the fuss was about. The young monk had been checking copies of ancient texts against

the originals. The older monk said to the younger, "Dear brother what is all the fuss about?" the young monk held up one of the original copies and said, "The word was celebrate!"

Well the word today is CELEBRATE.... do you know how to celebrate well?

¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to **make great rejoicing**, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

They are about to have a sanctified party... Do you know that perhaps nothing declares your faith in the Gospel better than your ability to celebrate and rejoice?

ILLUSTRATION: I find it interesting that the first miracle Jesus ever did was at a party. I find it interesting that Jesus and his disciples were even invited. If Jesus were like most of us think he is... they would have said, "don't invite Jesus he will kill it".

Jesus got invited to hang out with tax collectors and sinners all the time! This man knew how to celebrate.

ILLUSTRATION: Back in Alabama I hunted with a guy named Brian - he knew a few of our families and they made a good impression... one day we were in a Duck blind waiting on the duck... I'll never forget something he said, "Zach, I don't go to church, but if I did, I would go to your church"

He had never heard a single sermon or had ZERO opinion about our worship....he entirely based his opinion of our church primarily on his next door neighbor, Daniel Kolenich and a few other guys he knew. He looked at them and said, "if Christianity is real, I would expect it to look like them".

Sometimes we get the idea that God is a cosmic killjoy looking around for someone having fun so he can put a stop to it. Do you see in this text God sees a group of people depressed and sad and he says... "cut that out!"

Joy is serious business to God.

Strategic Alliances, Intentional Celebration...

3. Story Telling

¹⁴ And they found it written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and

lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. **And there was very great rejoicing.**

So these booths were tents similar to what they people had lived in during the 40 years in the wilderness.

All Throughout chapter 9 the levites retell the story of who they are as a people.

Nehemiah 9:6–24 (ESV) They tell the story of creation, the call of Abram, the Exodus, the Giving of the law.

The stories we tell reveal and reinforce the culture we are seeking to establish. They unite us around a common narrative. We see our lives as a part of that story.

ILLUSTRATION: When I came to First Baptist, one of the first things they did was tell me a few stories.

- The miraculous way that we ended up with this property.
- The story of how this church reached this entire region through a television program.
- The stories of victories won at the downtown property.

Now, I see my contribution to this church family as a chapter in that unfolding story. One day these young families will look back at RIGHT NOW as the good old days.

They will tell the story of:

- When we bought an ultrasound machine for The Nest Women's Center.
- They will tell about how we stuck together through COVID19 and baptized record numbers in the midst of a global pandemic.

What about at home? What stories do you tell your kids? Those stories are shaping them, building a culture.

TRADITIONS: Back when all of our kids were little...As a Pastor's family we were in KY hundreds of miles away from grandparents on one particular Christmas. We were very busy with a Christmas eve service, we did a living Christmas tree... all these types of things.. by the time it came time for dinner, we had nothing prepared...we had totally forgot. So we went out to eat.... all that was open was the Chinese restaurant. You know what it was one of the best meals we have ever had as a family. So every year since then guess what we eat on Christmas eve?

We had so much fun... now every year at Christmas Eve, guess what we do? We eat Chinese food, and retell that story. It's special to us.

CELEBRATIONS - We celebrate big in our family! On each child's 10th birthday we go to New York City. We see shows, we hang out in time square, we eat like crazy! It is very expense and it is unforgettable. But it's a time for Julie and I to focus on each child and communicate to them how much they are loved.

PRACTICALLY EVERY SUNDAY SINCE THE DAY WE WERE MARRIED... we have been in the God's house, on the Lord's Day, with the God's People, in God's Word... now listen, that has cut a trench into the SOUL of my children.

I could have said, "honey, we're spiritual just not religious", but I have a feeling it would not have had the same effect.

LISTEN TO ME: If you will not intentionally:

- Strike Strategic Alliances with a Life Giving Church.
- Celebrate Intentionally the things you value.
- Tell Stories that make your children feel a part of something bigger than themselves...

Make no mistake - **the Enemy will do so for you.** Your kids will progressively feel more apart of the culture than adopts them than your own.

I have talked to grown men who find themselves in a way of life that is dangerous, harmful, and will one day kill them... but here is what I have discovered... they are typically a part of a group that has a very distinct culture. They Celebrate together, they have strategic alliances, they tell Stories and weave one another together.

I've had guys tell me - I HATE the way I'm living, but I can't get out of the culture.
CULTURE ALWAYS WINS. We have to do culture better than the enemy.

CLOSING/INVITATION: Would you like to be a part of something bigger than yourself?
Would you like to be a part of a family? **LET ME TELL YOU A STORY....**