

Rebuilding the Temple

The Christian Churches of New Zealand Unified, to the Glory of God.

Ps. Nigel Irwin
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Tēnā koutou, e nga Rangatira o te Hāhi Karaitiana, o Aotearoa. Te aroha noa kia koutou, me te Rangimarie o Te Atua tō tātou Matua, me te Ariki o Ihu Karaiti.

Greetings to you, leaders of the Christian churches of New Zealand. Grace and peace to you all from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What I'm about to share with you will be hard to read, but I humbly ask you to bear with me. Please keep reading, because I believe that what follows is of great significance for the Church in our nation.

We are living and leading in extraordinary times! As we enter the fourth week of our Level 4, COVID-19 lockdown, we face many challenges to the way we function as the church in every town and city throughout our nation.

Over the last 4 weeks, I have heard many New Zealand church leaders talk about **2 Chronicles 7:14**. Firstly, in relation to the passing of the Abortion Reform legislation, and secondly, in relation to COVID-19.

In fact, this verse is one I've heard leaders talk about often over the years. It's one we seem to immediately think of whenever we face some kind of calamity – especially on a broad scale. So, it's not surprising that many are talking of this verse now, as we face extraordinary circumstances across this nation, and indeed around the world.

And I don't want to downplay the applicability of this verse to our current context. I believe it absolutely has significance right now – I do believe God is speaking to us through these words.

But I don't think it's new. I don't believe this verse is any more applicable now than it has been at any other time over the last several decades. I know of leaders who have carried this verse as a burden for our nation for many years.

As it happens, I distinctly recall God laying this verse on my heart around 8 years ago, just before we moved from Auckland to Whanganui, to begin leading a church here. I sensed at the time it was a verse for this city, but over the years I've realised it's a verse for our nation... and in fact, I think it's a verse for the global church, but perhaps especially for the church in the west.

This verse has been used to lament drought – such as earlier this year in Australia. It has been used to lament plague and pestilence – such as COVID-19, worldwide.

And the call has gone out to repent, so that God will make good on His promise to hear from heaven, forgive our sin, and heal our land.

But I have a question. What specifically are we repenting of? And perhaps more importantly, what are we NOT repenting of. Because I want to suggest today that there is a serious and highly destructive sin that we haven't yet fallen to our knees and repented of, here in New Zealand. It's a sin that primarily we church leaders are guilty of.

It's the sin of disunity. Division. The root of which is pride.

In fact, not only have we not repented of this despicable sin, I believe in some parts of the New Zealand church landscape, we're actually doubling down, building stronger denominational walls, and pulling back from praying, worshiping, and working with other churches in our towns and cities.

And I believe this is a greater impediment to God's healing of our nation than we've yet realised.

The context of **2 Chronicles 7** is really interesting. Solomon has just finished constructing the temple – this grand building that would house the Ark of the Covenant, and therefore the presence of God. Having dedicated the temple, Solomon rested. And during the night, God appeared to him and spoke.

We know what verse 14 says, but listen to verse 15. God said:

“Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.”

Interesting, huh!? Having just promised that if His people would humble themselves and pray, He would hear from heaven and heal their land, God then qualified that promise by defining its parameters. He expected that these humble prayers would be prayed in the temple... in the place where His presence would dwell.

That got me thinking. If we're going to apply **2 Chronicles 7:14** today, where are the eyes of the Lord open, and His ears attentive? In His temple.

And as we know from **1 Corinthians 3** and **1 Peter 2**, WE are that temple. God's dwelling place, through His Holy Spirit, is the church.

Listen to what Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:16**:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Now, I'm sure you've all preached this passage before, so you'll know that the word 'you' is plural and the word 'temple' is singular. In other words, to the whole church in Corinth, Paul said, "You are ALL... together... as one... the temple of God."

What makes this even more compelling is that Paul wrote these words in the context of the division that existed in the Corinthian church. Part of his corrective rebuke was to remind them that in God's eyes, they were one – the one dwelling place of God in that city!

Because the Corinthian church was fragmented and fractured. Some were following the teachings of Apollos, some of Paul. And Paul wrote that because of this, these Christians were not ready for solid food – they were still operating in the flesh.

Our disunity is fleshly! It's sub-spiritual and as Paul said, merely human. But here in New Zealand, we haven't woken up to this yet.

For one says, "I'm a proud Presbyterian" and another says, "I'm a proud Pentecostal". And in so doing, we are leading our people directly into disobedience.

For God's people in Israel, the temple was the place they were to bring their prayers of humble repentance. The one dwelling place of God.

Could it be, that although we've been talking of **2 Chronicles 7** for many years, because we've not yet approached this with unity, as the one temple of the living God, the Lord's eyes have not been open, and His ears not attentive?

This brings me to Haggai.

Three weeks ago, I felt the Lord put this passage of Scripture on my heart as a burden for our nation. **Haggai 1:1-11** is, I believe, a prophetic, gracious rebuke for the church leaders of Aotearoa, NZ in this season.

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest:² "Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord."³ Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet,⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"⁵ Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways.⁶ You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

⁷ "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways.⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.⁹ You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.¹¹ And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labours."

I've been leading our city pastors' and leaders' network for almost 5 years. In that time, I've heard leaders say, more often than I can recall, "I'd like to be more involved with unity, but I don't have time."

To me, that sounds quite similar to the leaders in Israel. "The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord."

Israel had just returned from 70 years in Babylon. They wasted no time in rebuilding their own houses – meanwhile, the House of the Lord lay in ruins.

On several occasions over the last few years, I've heard church leaders say, "Once I get my own congregation in order, maybe then I'll have the space to participate in city church unity." In fact, last year I heard one denominational leader say that his particular denomination was in crisis. He wasn't opposed to unity, just not now.

Can you hear the parallel? "I'm still working on my own panelled house. When I'm finished, maybe then I'll get to work on the temple."

The temple of God in Whanganui is His church. His ONE church. And it's the same for whichever city or town in which you lead. Could it be that while God has been waiting for us to build unity, we've been too preoccupied with our own congregations? Could it be that we've been too proud of our own houses, while the House of the Lord in our town or city lies in ruins?

And reading Haggai, we can hardly be mistaken as to the seriousness of this sin.

"You have sown much and harvested little." How many of us feel as though we have laboured and toiled and worked ourselves to exhaustion, but there's still no harvest? Could this be why?

"You eat but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill." Why does lasting spiritual food and drink seem so elusive and fleeting in our congregations? Why do we go through such dry spells, feeling undernourished and thirsty, despite all of our hard work? Could this be why?

"He who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes." I don't know too many churches that are flourishing financially, able to invest freely into the good things God is calling us to. Could this be why?

Perhaps you've noticed an interesting parallel between **Haggai 1** and **2 Chronicles 7**. In both places we read of drought and crop failure. Locusts, pestilence, and failure to produce.

And I'm sure many, if not most of us, have led our own churches in prayers of repentance. But we haven't yet done this together. We haven't yet joined with the other churches in our town or city, to pray, worship, and work together, to any significant degree.

Because we haven't yet repented of our disunity.

In **John 17:23**, Jesus prayed that His people would be one, so that the world would know that the Father sent Him. We know this prayer, we've probably all preached on it. But how hard have we worked to be the answer to it?

I am yet to speak to a single church leader who disagrees that unity is a good idea. But to be honest, the majority of leaders stop there. It's just a good idea. Ecumenism is not dead in New Zealand, but it is soft and ineffective... not much more than a friendly theory among leaders.

But do we really think Jesus prayed for theoretical unity? Do we really think John recorded this personal prayer of Jesus so that His church would agree in principle, but do nothing about it?

In my experience, our people love to be together for prayer, worship, and even collective action. It's we leaders who are reluctant and disinterested. We invest generously in the strength of our denominations, but we leave unity for that fictitious day in the future, when all of our denominational ducks are neatly lined up in a row.

Now, at this point I probably need to stress that I am not anti-denominations. The church will always be diverse and there is nothing inherently wrong with reflecting that in our denominational variations. But it's when we become preoccupied with them – it's when we see them as first-order priority at the expense of unity – that we begin to drift from Christ's desire for His church.

And when we actively refuse to associate with others because of secondary doctrinal differences, then I believe we are working in direct opposition to the Spirit of God.

I lead a Baptist church, but I'm not Baptist. I grew up Anglican, but I'm not Anglican either. As simplistic and trite as it may sound, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ and a son of God the Father, through His Spirit within me. Denominations are not our identity markers – they are families in which we live, pray, worship, and work.

And according to Ephesians 3:15, it is God the Father who gives every family in heaven and earth its name.

As a leader in the Baptist movement of churches, I hear quite frequently from those who say they're proud to be Baptist. I have to admit, I cringe when I hear this, because I sense Jesus' heart breaking. This wasn't His intention for us. Whenever we dwell with any pride-in, or preference-for, our denominational affiliation, we put another layer of paint on our panelled house, and the temple of God on earth remains in ruins.

Friends, we need to get over our pride! We need to stop being so proud of our denominations... and start boasting in the Christ of our unity. We need to stop pouring all of our time, energy, and resources into building strong, beautiful silos... while God's House lies unattended.

Now, more than ever before, we need to repent of our pride and begin working together to rebuild God's House. Our cities and towns need the unity of the Body of Christ to be more than just a theory! They need to see it in practice! And they need it for three reasons:

1. Our towns and cities need to see that there is active love among the brothers and sisters of Christ – from all denominations. **Because** according to **John 13:35**, this is how they will know that we belong to Jesus.
2. Our towns and cities need to see that there is genuine, practical unity among the brothers and sisters of Christ – from all denominations. **Because** according to **John 17:23**, this is how they will know that God the Father sent His Son.
3. And our towns and cities need to see the brothers and sisters of Christ working together side-by-side – from all denominations – collectively shining the ONE light of Christ through good works. **Because** according to **Matthew 5:16**, this is how they will come to glorify our Father who is in heaven.

President Harry S. Truman is reputed to have said that it's amazing what you can achieve if you don't care who gets the credit. In the Kingdom of God, I believe it will be astonishing what we WILL achieve if we work together in unity, and ONLY care that God gets all the glory!

As Pastor Tak Bhana says, “You can build God’s Kingdom, or your empire... but you can’t build both!”

We know the story of the Tower of Babel in **Genesis 11**. God had to intervene when the people hatched a selfish plan that didn’t fit with His will and purpose. And what was the one factor that God knew would ultimately lead to their success, if He didn’t intervene?

Unity.

In verse 6, God said:

“Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

God frustrated their unity then, because their motivation was not for His glory, but their own. Imagine what we will achieve if we are determined to work together, and if our motivation is for Him to receive all the glory.

As God said, nothing will be impossible for us.

And of course, as we know from Psalm 133, whenever God’s people choose to dwell together in unity, that’s where God commands the blessing. Could it be that the reason we see so little of God’s blessing on our well-intentioned endeavours is because we’re still trying to do it in our fragmented, fractured state?

Let’s come back to Haggai for a moment.

How did Zerubbabel and Joshua respond to this sharp rebuke?

Well, as we continue reading, we find that 3 weeks after Haggai’s word, they began to work on the house. And as they did that, God’s reassuring word came through Haggai, saying “I am with you.”

What’s interesting though is that His blessing didn’t come immediately. I wonder if this was God’s way of testing the repentance of the people. Was it genuine and would it last?

In Matthew 3:8, when John the Baptist saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptised, he told them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance”. In other words, they needed to practically demonstrate their repentance.

But it wasn’t to be a one-off – the tense in this verse is present-continuous. John told them to keep on bearing fruit, in keeping with repentance.

God’s blessing on Israel didn’t come for another 3 months after they began to rebuild the temple. But it did come. In **Haggai 2:18-19**, God said:

Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the LORD’s temple was laid, consider: “Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you.”

Friends, I believe God is calling us as leaders to repent of our pride, and to begin producing fruit in keeping with this repentance. I believe He is calling us to pay significant attention to rebuilding His temple in our towns and cities, by giving ourselves to the work of unity.

As we do that, we will have the spiritual credibility to lead our people in the kind of repentance God called for in **2 Chronicles 7**. It will be the repentance of God's people collectively - His new covenant dwelling place, where His eyes are open, and His ears are attentive.

I want to conclude by returning to the prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17.

This chapter is so precious because it gives us a rare glimpse into His prayer life. And right here, occupying significant space in the evangelist's gospel, we find an impassioned prayer for unity among His people.

Theoretical unity isn't much good to our towns and cities, and it's not the kind of unity Jesus prayed for. So as leaders in His church, let's consider His words in **Luke 6:46**. He said:

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I tell you?"

I think we need to let these words sit, as heavy as they might be. I believe we need to feel the weight of them.

As Jesus shared His final meal with the disciples, and just before He was arrested and led away to be crucified, what was on His mind? Well, among other things I'm sure, we know that the unity of His people was uppermost in His thoughts.

We all love the Lord. We all worship Him and we've given our lives to lead others to do the same. Isn't it time we got serious about being the answer to His heartfelt prayer for unity?

We have beautiful panelled houses. But let's be honest, the ONE temple of God on earth – the unity of His people in our towns and cities - is not far off being in ruins.

In our love for Jesus and in our deep desire to be obedient to Him, let's make unity our Kingdom priority.

So that our towns and cities will know that we belong to Him; so that they will know that the Father sent Him; and so that they will glorify our Father who is in heaven. Because after all, isn't that what we're all here for?

And as we commit ourselves to this, let's be prepared to be amazed at the powerful healing God will bring to our land – this land that we love so much, Aotearoa New Zealand.

He honore ki te Ariki ō Ihu Karaiti – all glory to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Kua mutu taku kōrero mō tenei wa.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tatou katoa.