

SERIES: Great Church Fights

SERMON: Operation Intimidation: Dealing with the Hard Core Antagonist

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 6:1-19

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A stunning article appeared in the St. Louis Post Dispatch several years ago following up on the story of 15-year-old Kip Kinkel, a young man in Springfield, Oregon, who killed both of his parents and then shot up his school cafeteria, killing two students and wounding 22 others. The 4-column headline read, “‘Evil exists,’ experts say of school shootings.” As if he had just made a startling discovery but could hardly believe it himself, Dr. Shawn Johnston, a forensic psychologist from Sacramento, CA said, “I do believe there is a small percentage of people who are determined to be bad, who enjoy doing bad things.” Later he confesses, “I guess the bottom line for me is that evil exists.”

Hello! Two thousand years ago the Apostle Paul wrote a description of humanity which for decades has been categorically rejected by our modern humanistic, relativistic society:

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one. (Romans 3:10-12)*

Theologians refer to Paul’s view of human nature expressed here as the doctrine of Total Depravity. That doesn’t mean everyone is as bad as he can get nor that everyone has committed every sin, but it does mean, among other things, that we shouldn’t be shocked when human beings do unconscionable things. Even in church.

Believe it or not, it is possible for religious people to be hateful, obnoxious, and abusive. I hope that doesn’t disillusion you and cause you to leave this morning before you even hear the sermon. But there are hard-core antagonists who work to undermine God’s work and God’s servants. There are even some hard-core antagonists among the clergy.

So far in our series on Great Church Fights we have examined one case of negative conflict in which divisive politics nearly destroyed a church. Then we looked at a case of positive conflict, in which we learned that there are times when it is necessary to pick a fight, particularly when the truth of the Gospel is at stake. We have also looked at several cases of neutral conflict. We learned that while differences of personality and perspective are inevitable, we need to be careful not to blow such differences out of proportion. There may be times when two believers need to stay out of each other’s way, but they don’t have to demonize one another.

Today I want us to turn our attention to another example of negative conflict, but one that is

qualitatively different from the political shenanigans that were going on in Corinth. Technically speaking, this is not even a church fight because it comes from the OT, and in my theological view the church didn't begin until the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Furthermore, the conflict we're going to explore comes from outside rather than inside. But if we can stretch our concept of "church" to include the people of God in the OT, and if we can grasp that this kind of opposition can come from within or without, then we will find one of the clearest examples of really negative conflict in the book of Nehemiah. I'm talking hard-core antagonism here.

First, a bit of historical background. The golden age of Israel was during the reigns of David and Solomon, about 1000 B.C. After Solomon the kingdom was divided into two parts, with ten tribes forming the nation of Israel and two tribes forming the nation of Judah. The Northern Kingdom lasted only a little over two centuries, at which time it was defeated by Assyria and became known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. They were lost because they were totally assimilated into Assyrian culture. No Jewish person today can trace his lineage to one of these ten tribes. This was God's judgment upon the nation because of rampant sin and disobedience.

The Southern Kingdom sinned too, but they did experience several revivals, and God allowed them to survive until 586 B.C., when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the great Solomon's temple, and took most of its inhabitants into captivity in Babylon. The Babylonian Captivity lasted 70 years, after which Cyrus the Persian allowed a remnant of Jews to return and rebuild the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This temple was a sorry replica of Solomon's temple (you will recall that the old-timers who had seen Solomon's temple cried when they saw the exilic temple), but it did provide a spiritual home for the beleaguered Jews. Surrounded by enemies and plagued by internal strife, they barely survived over the next several generations.

Finally in 444 B.C. God raised up a man named Nehemiah, who was a Jewish exile and cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. God moved in the heart of the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls so the people there could enjoy peace and security. This project was met with vigorous opposition from some of the neighboring people, particularly the Samaritans, who had a vested interest in keeping the Jews weak and helpless.

Let's begin our reading, then, in Nehemiah 4:1.

"When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?'"

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, 'What they are building--if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!'"

(Then Nehemiah prays in verse 4,) Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." Skip down to chapter 6:1-16.

"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono."

But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."

I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you."

But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me. So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God." This is the Word of the Lord!

When Nehemiah succeeded in building the wall of Jerusalem up to half its height, his enemies—Sanballat and his co-conspirators—decide it's time for a change in tactics. Up until now they have ridiculed and insulted the workers and the work, but now they decide to attack Nehemiah personally. They stop being mere trouble-makers and become what I would call hard-core antagonists. This chapter offers us examples of several common tactics that are frequently used by antagonists in the church. The antagonist intimidates by feigning friendship, by inciting

slander, and by using holy means for an unholy end.

I want to repeat something I said in our introductory message on *Great Church Fights*. Antagonists are not common in the church. I have known only a few of them in 33 years of pastoral ministry, and we don't have anyone here at First Free that I would identify as such. But someday we may have, and we need to know how to deal with him or her. Without a doubt some of you are facing an antagonist right now—at work or in the neighborhood, or perhaps even in your home. My prayer is that Nehemiah's example will give you encouragement.

The antagonist intimidates by feigning friendship. (1-4)

There is an important principle to see here in the very first verse of chapter 6, and that is that the antagonist's opposition is often generated by a leader's success rather than his failure. This is an important point, because sometimes the godly leader assumes he is to blame when destructive conflict occurs. He is inclined to think, "There must be something wrong with my leadership if so-and-so is angry and trying to force me out." Perhaps, but not necessarily.

Here it is Nehemiah's very success that provokes his enemies to mount their vicious campaign of intimidation. Had he been like the governors who preceded him—feathering his own nest while leaving the city unprotected—he would have never earned the level of animosity that Sanballat and Tobiah throw at him. But because he is accomplishing something significant for God and because he is doing it with integrity, destructive conflict is generated.

But be careful here, for one cannot necessarily turn this argument around. It is not necessarily true that the presence of opposition in your life is proof that you are doing something significant for God or doing it with integrity. But if you *are* being successful for God you can almost *count* on the fact that antagonists from within or without will try to intimidate you.

1. The antagonist's attack often begins very subtly and hypocritically. Nehemiah's enemies send a message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." Reading between the lines, I suspect the message is something like this: "Nehemiah, let's bury the hatchet. We're all reasonable people and we can find a way of preserving the interests of all concerned. Let's have a summit conference. Let's dialogue." Sometimes dialogue is good, but sometimes it is a trap. Here they are just trying to get him to lower his defenses. We don't want to become paranoid, but we must certainly be cautious when a proven enemy suddenly appears with "an olive branch" in his hand.

Well, what is the best defense against an antagonist who feigns friendship?

2. The best defense is discernment, clear priorities, and perseverance. Somehow Nehemiah discerns that his enemies are scheming to harm him. They say, "Let's meet on the plains of Ono," and he responds, "Oh no." He perceives correctly that they are trying to lure him away from the safety of Jerusalem in order to kill him. But having discerned their true motive, he doesn't get involved in a verbal battle with them; he simply declares his priorities: "I am carrying on a great

project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

Sometimes an antagonist will try hard to draw us into battle, requesting endless meetings so he can spill his venom. At such times the best approach may be to simply say that our priorities and schedule don't allow for any more meetings. But it will take perseverance. Sanballat and Tobiah send the same message five times, but Nehemiah sticks to his decision. He knows there is a great difference between being available and being a puppet of people. Every leader must learn when to say no.

Unfortunately, Nehemiah has won only a battle, not the war, for his antagonists move in verse 5 from intimidation by feigning friendship to intimidation by inciting slander.

The antagonist intimidates by inciting slander. (5-9)

Notice in verse 5 that Nehemiah says, "Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter . . ." We see here a very common tactic of the antagonist:

1. He employs leaks, undeclared sources, distortions, and exaggerations. The fact that this letter is unsealed is not incidental or accidental. It was customary in ancient times to roll a letter into a little scroll, put hot wax on the outside, and press one's personal seal into the wax to assure the reader that the letter has not been tampered with. By leaving it purposely unsealed Sanballat is inviting everyone in the post office to read it. He wants the contents leaked because his whole purpose is to incite slander. He is clever enough to realize that even if the scurrilous charges in the letter are blatantly false, they can never be wholly retrieved, and perhaps the resulting questions will be sufficient to impugn Nehemiah's motives, cast aspersions on his integrity, and undermine his influence.

But not only does the antagonist employ leaks; he also uses undeclared sources. Notice the opening line of the unsealed letter: "it is reported among the nations." One of the common characteristics of an antagonist is to use unnamed sources: "Many people have shared with me such-and-such, but they have asked me to keep their names confidential." Kenneth Haugk writes in his book, *Antagonists in the Church*,
"When someone offers you a word of criticism . . . and adds, 'There are X number of other people who feel the same way,' chances are excellent that you are talking with an antagonist. These 'others' may be phantoms of the antagonist's imagination, invented to validate his or her own feelings and to threaten you. Or they may be followers of the antagonist. Whether they exist or not is immaterial, because individuals who are not antagonistic don't need to talk about 'all the others' who feel the same way; they simply express their own thoughts and feelings. The litmus test to determine whether someone is or is not an antagonist in this situation is to respond casually, 'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Who are these other people?' If the person lists a few names, you are probably not faced with an antagonist. An antagonist is more likely to answer: 'They came to me in the strictest of confidence.'"

But look also at the content of this letter—it contains severe distortions and exaggerations of the truth. Nehemiah wasn't building the wall of Jerusalem as a prelude to a revolt against King Artaxerxes, and he had no ambitions to be king.¹ Every successful leader has at some time or another been accused of stepping beyond the bounds of his authority and seeking to build a personal empire. Leaders are automatically vulnerable to such charges, and of course a few are guilty of empire building. But even if an effort is made to delegate responsibility and share authority, there will always be those who maliciously question, "What is *he* getting out of it? He's not doing all this for nothing! There must be a personal angle to it somewhere." And sometimes the antagonist is successful with his leaks, undeclared sources, distortions, and exaggerations.

Why? Because he relies on the inclination of many people to relish rumor and to believe the worst. That's human nature. We naturally gravitate to bad news—if that weren't so, the networks and all the TV news magazines would go out of business overnight.

How do we defend ourselves against intimidation through slander?

2. The best defense is often open denial of the falsehood and prayer for strength. Verse 8: "I sent him this reply: 'Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.'" A number of years ago a woman in my church in St. Louis came up to me and said, "I've been gone a couple of weeks and when I returned today I was shocked to hear about what the Elders have been up to." I had this funny feeling I was going to be shocked too, so I asked her what she had heard. She said another person in the church had told her that the Elders had lied about a family, treated them despicably, and forced them out of the church. I flatly denied that anything even remotely like that had ever happened. I urged her to talk to several other Elders to confirm my denial, and then to go back to the person who was her source and urge her to talk to the Elders. The originator of the rumor never came to us, so I assume it was all a lie.

But there's something even more important that Nehemiah does than to deny the accusations. Notice verse 9: "They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, 'Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.'" But I prayed, 'Now strengthen my hands.'" When slander and gossip and rumor abound it is very difficult to deal with emotionally. We can deny the falsehoods, but we cannot control what others believe. We tend to get discouraged and want to throw in the towel. But not Nehemiah; he prays for strength. He knows that in the final analysis it is what God thinks of him that really matters. Therefore, he maintains his emotional stability and is able to continue with the construction and leave to the Lord the vindication of his character.

I like Nehemiah's bullet prayers. They're short, to the point, and fired off at a moment of crisis. That's a lot better than shooting our mouth off or melting into a pile of anxiety.

Nehemiah's antagonists have tried to intimidate him by feigning friendship and by inciting slander. They now go one step further and try intimidation by using holy means for an unholy end.

The antagonist intimidates by using holy means for an unholy end. (10-14)

In verse 10 we find that Shemaiah the priest appeals to Nehemiah to come and visit him because he's a shut-in. When Nehemiah arrives Shemaiah urges him to go to the temple for protection because he claims there's a contract out on his life. There's a contract out, alright, only the contract is between Shemaiah and Nehemiah's enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah. They have paid this traitorous priest to lure Nehemiah to the temple so his reputation would be destroyed. Their hope is that the fear such an action would reveal on Nehemiah's part, would be contagious. If the people see their leader on the run they, too, would cut and run.

They have used holy means—the counsel of a trusted clergyman and the natural reaction of self-defense—to try to achieve an unholy end—the destruction of Nehemiah and his influence.

Now in this willingness to do almost anything to achieve his purposes . . .

1. He is almost always motivated by personal gain. Shemaiah becomes Nehemiah's enemy for money. Sanballat and Tobiah are motivated by power. Other antagonists are motivated by jealousy, loss of influence, injured feelings, pride, you name it. Often the antagonist is insecure and believes he can build himself up by tearing others down. He is the opposite of a servant leader, though he may appear to be very solicitous of other people, for that is how he manipulates them into following him.¹¹

And what is the best defense?

2. The best defense is good character, discernment, and (once again) prayer. Look at verse 11: "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" He knew who he was and he saw that cowardice would be a tragic blight on all he had purposed to do and be; so he refused.

But discernment is also evident again. Verse 12: "I realized that God had not sent him." How did he know this? God helped him discern the times so he could see beyond the surface. Some people think of discernment as simply a gift—either you have it or you don't. But there are plenty of Scriptures that indicate that discernment is also a product of spending time with God in His word and in prayer. The better we come to know God, the better we'll be able to discern that which is opposed to God. The better the Federal agent knows the real \$100 bill the more readily they can spot the counterfeit.

And once again we find Nehemiah resorting to prayer. "Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me." Nehemiah is not only opposed by Sanballat and Tobiah; there are also some pretty influential Jews lined up against him. He can't fight them alone, but he knows that any believer plus God is a majority, so he prays for God's justice in the lives of his enemies. Our story concludes with this message:

The Servant-Leader faces intimidation without coming unglued. (15-19)

Look at verse 15: "So the wall was completed on the 25th of Elul, in 52 days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God." What an amazing accomplishment, perhaps unparalleled in history! By the way, the walls of Jerusalem are incredible to behold. While most of the walls there today were built by the Turks, and perhaps only some of the foundation stones were laid by Nehemiah, one can still get a hint regarding the magnitude of this accomplishment.

1. He achieves his goal, causing his enemies to be afraid and lose self-confidence. When our enemies see that our dependence upon God is unshakable and our commitment to the task He has called us to is unwavering, the fear they are trying to foist on us will come back on their own heads and they will lose their self-confidence. There's nothing like the continued blessing of God to silence critics. Second, Nehemiah . . .

2. He gives the credit to God. At the end of verse 16 we read these words: "this work had been done with the help of our God." Many leaders would not be satisfied if they got no credit. But Nehemiah is willing to give all the credit to God.

3. He perseveres even while the intimidation continues. The last paragraph of chapter 6 is not what we might expect. It tells us that some of the nobles of Judah were related to Tobiah and constantly sent letters back and forth to him. They kept telling Nehemiah what a good guy Tobiah was and never failed to report to Tobiah what Nehemiah said. And Tobiah sent ore letters directly to Nehemiah to intimidate him.

Now please note this is after Nehemiah has demonstrated incredible fortitude in the face of vicious attack and after the wall has been completed. You'd think he deserved a period of peace from the antagonists who have made life so miserable for him. But no, the intimidation continues. Friends, that's how it is sometimes. The Bible never sugar-coats anything. It never says, "Do these three things and you'll live happily ever after." It tells us how to respond to destructive conflict but it never suggests that conflict will vanish. What God calls us to is perseverance in right conduct.

Conclusion: Nehemiah succeeded in building the wall of a city and restoring the national dignity of a despised people because he had an unshakable conviction that what he was doing was what God wanted done. His confidence in the Lord released him from the pressure of being "a success" or of "needing to keep everyone happy." His confidence enabled him to rise above the storms of adversity, to cope with antagonists, and to inspire others to give their best.

May our confidence likewise always be in the Lord. He gave everything to us that we might have life and serve Him faithfully.

Now let me conclude with a word about the Peacemaker Conference coming up this weekend, sponsored by First Free and Westlink Christian. This is a unique opportunity for us to learn practical principles of biblical peacemaking. What you will hear will not be repetitive to this series of sermons but complementary. I have no doubt that every single person here, no matter what your age or station in life or marital status or job could profit from this conference. If you want to sign up, you can do so at the Welcome Center this morning.

i. But usually there is a kernel of truth in every lie—that's what makes it believable. Undoubtedly there were prophets in Judah who were speaking about a king. But those prophets would have been speaking of the coming Messiah, not Nehemiah, who was anything but power hungry.

ii. Several years ago I was taking a course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and one of my friends who is a Free Church pastor from the Denver area told me a story that Nehemiah could really relate to. He said there was a time about ten years ago when he was under strong pressure from a few dissidents to leave the church, but a certain deacon and his wife came up and expressed to him that they were praying for him. He really appreciated that and it was instrumental in his decision to stay. Furthermore, every Sunday for ten years, he said, this woman would come up to him, often give him a peck on the cheek, and say, "I'm praying for you."

Then this couple suddenly quit the church. He called but they wouldn't talk to him. So he contacted an Elder who was their best friend and what he learned amazed him. The Elder told him that this couple had been praying for ten years that he would leave the church, and when they finally realized that he wasn't going anywhere, they decided to quit. All this time he thought they were praying for him when they were actually praying against him! Fortunately, this story has a happy ending, for even more amazingly, this couple came back, apologized for their attitude, and said they wanted to start over.