

The Church Is Not Reformed In a Day

Ezra 3:1-7

March 11, 2012

Rev. Greg L. Price

It has been said, "Rome was not built in a day." That is to say, that projects that we undertake to accomplish usually take time to complete, especially big projects. Besides simply the sheer enormity of time that is needed to accomplish big projects, there are usually unforeseen circumstances that hinder the progress and slow down the process of completing projects according to our own perceived schedules. Now although the expression ("Rome was not built in a day") is not a biblical proverb, nevertheless, it does communicate an idea that we as Christians often forget: The growth of the kingdom of God and the reformation of the church of Christ is a slow, gradual process, like leaven that works by degrees until the whole lump is leavened or until the whole world is brought into the visible church of Christ through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the sermon this Lord's Day, we shall be brought face to face with the biblical truth that Christ builds His Church and reforms His Church, but He does not accomplish it in a day. The Lord accomplishes His work of building and reforming His church throughout history in stages. Just as sanctification in the life of a Christian is a gradual process in growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ (along with occasions of backsliding) until entire sanctification is realized at the second coming of Christ, so likewise sanctification within the church of Christ is a gradual process in growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ (along with occasions and periods of backsliding) until full sanctification is realized at the second coming of Christ. Dear ones, although the process of our own personal sanctification is gradual (as is the corporate sanctification of Christ's church); nevertheless, the end is absolutely certain ("Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" Philippians 1:6; cp. Ephesians 5:25-27).

From our text this Lord's Day, let us consider the following main points: (1) Biblical Reformation Promoted by Godly Leaders (Ezra 3:1-2a); (2) Biblical Reformation Promoted by the Gospel (Ezra 3:2b); and (3) Biblical Reformation Promoted by Degrees (Ezra 3:3).

I. **Biblical Reformation Promoted by Godly Leaders (Ezra 3:1-2a).**

A. As our text from Ezra 3 begins, those who were set free from Babylonian captivity and who returned to Judah have now come to the 7th month of the Jewish calendar (*tishri*). If God's people left Babylon the first month of that year and traveled for four months from Babylon to Judah (according to the time indicated in Ezra 7:9), they then had approximately two months to settle in to some degree in their new lodgings before the 7th month arrived. That's not very much time to settle in to their new life in a homeland with which many (if not most) of the people were altogether unfamiliar (in as much as 70 years had elapsed since the first group of God's people had been led captive from Judah into Babylon in approximately 606 b.c.). Having so soon arrived in Judah, no doubt there was much work to occupy God's people in providing for the necessities of life (by way of water, food, and shelter), and yet they stopped even these necessary duties and gathered to Jerusalem "as one man", in order to begin the pure reformation of God's true religion, which as to its outward and public administration had fallen into disrepair for the past 50 years (computing from the time that the temple was destroyed in 586 b.c., when the third group of God's people were led into Babylonian captivity, to the year that God's people were released from Babylonian captivity in 536 b.c.).

1. Dear ones, by application, here we see what God works within His people if there is to be the pure reformation of the true religion of the Lord. The Lord not only raises up the heart of His people to

flee their Babylonian captivity (according to Ezra 1:5), wherein God’s people have been in the midst of idolatry, but the Lord also causes the hearts of His people to come together in order to re-establish and reform the outward administration of Christ’s pure religion. We do not see (here in Ezra 3 in the reformation of the one true religion revealed in Scripture) a coming together in diversity of doctrine, worship, and government, but rather a coming together in uniformity of doctrine, worship, and government (they gathered “as one man”, which primarily refers to the one mind, one judgment, and one voice with which they gathered in unity, cp. Romans 15:5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10). For, dear ones, a mere growth in numbers within many different churches and denominations in the same nation (while these same churches and denominations maintain a diversity and disunity between themselves in doctrine, worship, and government) is not biblical reformation, but is rather a confusion, a dissension, and a schism within the body of Christ (which Paul calls a “work of the flesh”, and not of the Spirit in Galatians 5:19,20: “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these . . . seditions [i.e. dissensions or divisions]”). This is what our covenanted forefathers in England, Ireland, and Scotland confessed as a grievous sin when they covenanted before God and one another in *The Solemn League and Covenant* (1643) to uproot the following:

II. That we shall, in like manner, without respect of persons, endeavour the extirpation [uprooting—GLP] of Popery, Prelacy (that is, Church government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors and commissioners, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and all other ecclesiastical officers depending on that hierarchy), superstition, heresy, **schism**, profaneness, **and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of Godliness**; lest we partake in other men's sins, and thereby be in danger to receive of their plagues; and that the Lord may be one, and his name one, in the three kingdoms.

2. Dear ones, if you are to endeavor such unity in Christ’s church, what about unity in your family and marriage (not only in doctrine, worship, and government, but also in the power of godliness, in love serving one another)? For a lack of love, an angry tongue, and a proud and self-centered heart (which manifest the power of ungodliness), bring about division and schism within the family or within the church as much as unsound doctrine and corrupt worship. Dear ones, it is not only doctrine that evidences unity, but also the bonds of self-sacrificial love. To hold the same doctrine while being cold or even lukewarm in your love for Christ, for the brethren, or for your spouse is to promote division and schism. Are we too busy or even indifferent to encourage a brother or sister who repents of sin, or who carries a heavy burden and needs us to stand alongside them in prayer as they face what appear to be giants in their lives? Do we care? Are we so caught up in our own world that a lack of love for the brethren has divided us and separated us from our brothers and sisters in affection, in encouragement, and in consolation? Dear ones, where love, encouragement, and consolation is lacking (whether in the home or in the church), it will be much easier for brothers and sisters to fall away from us into error and unsound doctrine. And where the sweet graces of the Holy Spirit are present in our relationships with one another, it will be more difficult to fall away into error and unsound doctrine due to that strong bond of love that unites our hearts together in brotherly affection. May God examine us for any manifestation of schism and division within our heart, our speech, or our conduct, and may He grant us a holy hatred for these sins, and forgiveness wherein we have contributed to schism and division within our families or within the church of Christ.

3. By way of another application, dear ones, we ought to follow the example of God’s people in Ezra 3:1 in that they neither ignored nor neglected their duties to promote a covenanted reformation of the one true religion, even when they were seeking to provide their families with food, clothing, and shelter. The point here is not that we should forsake providing for our families in order to promote the reformation of God’s religion, for that would be to violate 1 Timothy 5:8: “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

However, it is also true that we each one must consciously use the gifts, graces, and substance that God has graciously given to us in order to advance the kingdom of Christ and the reformation of the one true religion of Christ (found in Scripture). That is in part what we pray for in the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). We pray that God would advance His kingdom here on earth, and use us as individuals, as families, and as His church to do so. Dear ones, it is **not** an *either/or* proposition (*either* I provide for my family *or* I provide for the growth of Christ's kingdom), but rather it is a *both/and* proposition (I *both* provide for my family *and* for the growth of Christ's kingdom). Beloved, biblical reformation will come as God stirs up the hearts of His people with an unquenchable thirst and with fervent prayer to advance Christ's kingdom and to reform Christ's church. Is that the earnest desire of your heart, and is it the passionate prayer that you daily offer to Christ—your Prophet, Priest, and King?

B. But we also note in Ezra 3:2 that God caused godly leaders to courageously stand up in the church (Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest and his fellow priests and Levites), and godly leaders to courageously stand up in the state (Zerubbabel, the prince and governor of Judah, along with his fellow rulers): "Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren . . ."

1. Here we see clearly that the separation of church and state is a biblical distinction to make (when properly understood). For according to Scripture, God as Creator has immediately instituted civil government and the civil magistrate to be a minister of God for the moral good of the people within his kingdom (Romans 13:4), whereas Christ as Mediator has immediately instituted church government and the church officer to be a minister of Christ for the moral and spiritual good of the people within Christ's church. Just as God has not given the keys of the kingdom to the civil magistrate, so also Christ has not given the power of the sword to the minister of the gospel. Civil government, as instituted by God, is to rule in such a way as to benefit the one true church of Christ within that nation; just as church government, as instituted by Christ, is to benefit the civil government of that nation by way of the gospel and word of God faithfully preached and sinners brought into the visible church of Christ in order to be faithful followers of Christ in the family, and in the nation. There are clear lines instituted by the Lord between church and state, but they both are intended by God to be mutually profitable to one another (rather than bitter rivals to one another). That working together (hand in hand) between godly magistrates and godly ministers is what we see exemplified here in Ezra 3:2.

2. And lest it be contended that such mutual benefit (between the officers of church and state) was only intended for Israel (as a theocracy), or that Gentile civil rulers are not intended by God to promote or assist in promoting the reformation of the church, let it not be forgotten that it is the duty of even Gentile magistrates (in their official capacities) to kiss (in loyalty, worship, and subjection) Jesus Christ, as God's Mediator (according to Psalm 2), and that Gentile magistrates (in their official capacity as rulers of nations) are prophesied to worship before the Lord and serve Him (Psalm 72:11; Psalm 102:15; Psalm 138:4), and that Gentile nations (in their national capacities) are prophesied to covenant to be the Lord's people (Isaiah 19:18-25; Zechariah 2:11). When Gentile kings and nations worship and serve the Lord publicly in their official capacities, they surely benefit the one true church of Jesus Christ within that Gentile nation (rather than supporting a religious pluralism and a religious polytheism within that nation).

3. Dear ones, that is why we must fervently pray (and daily pour out our hearts to the Lord) to bring about the realization and fulfillment of such prophecies and promises in this world, and that is why we as fathers and grandfathers must "stand up" (like Joshua and Zerubbabel) as godly examples of leadership before our sons in the way we lovingly lead our wives, our sons, and our daughters. Men, it is easy "to sit" on our hands among the many Christian fathers who do little or nothing to courageously and lovingly lead their families in doctrine and life. But to "stand up" and be counted as those who will by God's grace in both word and deed (and in both doctrine and life) call forth such godly leadership in our sons that they may

become the kind of men that God will use **as** godly and loving heads of households, **as** faithful elders, ministers, and deacons, and **as** lawful magistrates (when the nation is reformed), that requires that we men stand up and be reformers in our families (like Joshua and Zerubbabel did within the church and the state). Reformation of the church begins with reformation in our families. Your work as godly fathers is working toward the reformation of the church of Jesus Christ.

II. Biblical Reformation Promoted by the Gospel (Ezra 3:2b).

A. That which Joshua and Zerubbabel (i.e. the officers in both church and state) first rebuilt was the brazen altar, where upon blood sacrifices were offered as an outward sign pointing to Christ, our sacrifice for sin: “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour” (Ephesians 5:2). Joshua and Zerubbabel did not begin by rebuilding the temple proper, or by rebuilding the palace, but they began by rebuilding the altar and setting it upon its original base, from which it had been broken and destroyed. The altar of the Lord signified the place where the justice and the mercy of God kissed. For there at the altar a substitute was slain to signify that God’s wrath must be borne by Christ on behalf of the sinner in order that the sinner might be freely justified and forgiven of his sin. Reformation among God’s people began by pointing to their need of Christ for their justification, forgiveness, and sanctification. The law and commandments of the Lord (in the hands of their Mediator, Jesus Christ) would direct them in the paths of rebuilding and reforming the church in Judah, but if they set out to reform according to the good laws of God without the gospel, their reformation would be in vain, for it would focus on mere outward uniformity without the power of the gospel reforming their hearts, their thoughts, and their affections. Mere outward reformation is what is produced by the Covenant of Works, whereas inward reformation that issues forth in outward reformation is what is produced by the Covenant of Grace.

1. Dear ones, a reformation without the pure gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully preached and received by faith alone is not a biblical reformation, but is rather a mere social reformation founded upon a social gospel.

2. Before Israel as a nation shall be converted and reformed in the future (at the time of that glorious millennium), she will look in faith upon Christ and weep with grief and sorrow over her role in Christ’s crucifixion, and for her hatred and her rejection of Christ, the Savior (Zechariah 12:10). And this shall be the pattern of national salvation and reformation of all Gentile nations that shall come to Christ (at the time of the millennium).

B. Dear ones, I cannot emphasize enough that biblical reformation must be established upon the gospel of free justification and forgiveness through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Only when people are converted will they be ready and willing to submit to the good, moral commandments found in God’s law (a law in the hands of the Mediator). This is likewise the biblical pattern that we see in the conversion and reformation that the Lord accomplished within the Gentile city of Nineveh (Jonah 3), which we observed in our series through the Book of Jonah. Jonah preached; Nineveh believed in the Lord and repented; and the religious steps taken by this Gentile king in using his civil authority to promote reformation in the Gentile city of Nineveh received not the condemnation of the Lord, but rather received the approbation and approval of the Lord (“and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not” Jonah 3:10).

C. The altar (and pure gospel) having been re-established, the reformation among God’s people began by the celebration of holy days specifically appointed by the Lord in His word (the Feast of Tabernacles, which pointed to God’s provision for all their needs in their wilderness wanderings, is that one which is specifically noted in Ezra 3:4ff). It is not walking in the paths of reformation to celebrate or participate in holy

days that have not been specifically appointed by the Lord in His word (such as Christmas, Lent, Good Friday, or Easter). For we only have warrant from God to worship Him and to offer to Him holy days which He has appointed in Scripture. Dear ones, we only know our worship is acceptable to the Lord because He has appointed and instituted it in the revelation of His will in Scripture. If there is no such warrant for what we do in worship or in the celebration of holy days, then we are practicing what Paul calls “will worship” (in Colossians 2:23), a worshipping of God by the will of man, rather than by the will of God. One’s intentions in worshipping the Lord by means of these man-appointed holy days (which neither Christ nor the apostles appointed or celebrated) may be sincere, but dear ones, we are to offer to the Lord in worship that alone which He has commanded and told us is good, not that about which He is silent and we think is good. The celebration of holy days is one of the ways in which the Church of Rome has caused Protestant churches to drink of the cup of her abominations. Reformation begins with the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, and it proceeds according to the revealed will of Jesus Christ as found in the written word of God (“as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God” Ezra 3:2). The holy day which God has appointed for us to keep is the Lord’s Day (or Christian Sabbath). Each Lord’s Day we worship our God and praise Him for the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming of the Lord.

III. Biblical Reformation Promoted by Degrees (Ezra 3:3).

A. At this point, let me briefly add that the reformation of the church of the Jews after their release from Babylonian captivity was a slow, gradual process. They began by rebuilding the altar (in pointing to Christ and the gospel). They then re-established (according to God’s written word) those parts of worship within the church of the Jews in which that they could offer to the Lord (His appointed sacrifices upon the altar and His appointed holy days). They fully intended to lay the foundation of the temple, to rebuild the temple, to refurbish the temple with the furniture which the Lord had authorized, but this was not to come to pass in the same day. It took many years in which God’s people faced hardships, trials, backslidings, defections, and enemies in the land and enemies in high places that halted reformation at times and that slowed down reformation to a snail’s pace at times. But reformation began, and it continued by God’s grace. And so reformation will come to Christ’s church and to the nations of this world in the future—but reformation will come (even if slowly and imperceptibly like leaven that slowly spreads throughout the dough until the whole lump is leavened) just as God has promised at that time when “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15).

B. Because reformation is slow and gradual, painful and costly, we may be tempted to cast aside our former good profession and to go another path where things happen more quickly, where it seems Rome is indeed built in a day, where we are not required to take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Christ down paths that cost us relationships with family members and friends. Our sinful nature wants reformation to come quickly wherein we can see with our natural eyes the progress that is being made for the better. And when that does not happen, we become frustrated and look to quick changes, we grow weary in well-doing, we question whether we are on the right path to reformation, we wonder whether the sacrifices we have made for a biblical and covenanted reformation are really worth it. Dear ones, this is not only true in regard to reformation in the church, but is also true in regard to reformation in our lives, wherein we grow weary and frustrated in well-doing because we are not promoted at work or do not have the job that we want, because we do not see the reformation in our spouses or our children that we desire, or because we do not see the lightning speed reformation that we desire in our own lives in overcoming sin and warring against the lusts of the flesh. Dear ones, part of the work of sanctification and reformation in our lives is trusting the Lord, waiting upon the Lord, and committing all things to Him who is never late and is always accomplishing something good in reforming and sanctifying us, in we confidently trusting Him, in patiently waiting upon Him, and in

contentedly committing all things unto Him as our sovereign Lord and loving Father who knows what is best for us. Dear ones, we all know what change it is in our lives, in our families, and in our world that we want in a hurry. Remember change is not necessarily good. Barack Obama ran on the political slogan in 2008, "Change you can believe in." However, the wisdom of the Lord is given to us in 1 Corinthians 7:24: "Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God." Abide with the Lord in confidence, in patience, and in submission wherever you may be. Don't become frustrated and look for change simply because the path of righteousness and truth is hard and costly. Reformation will come (however gradual and slow God deems is right and best, but it will come) in your life, in your family, in the church, and in this nation as you trust and hope in Christ and His promises, as you patiently wait upon the Lord, and as you commit everything to the Lord. I leave with you this word of admonition from the God who withheld not His own Son, but freely offered Him up to purchase you unto Himself: "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:35-36).

Copyright 2012 Greg L. Price.