

The Reformation of Worship Founded Upon God's Word

Ezra 3:8-13

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In the previous sermon (from Ezra 3:1-7), we noted that reformation of the church of the Jews in Israel after their return from Babylonian captivity did not come in one day, but was rather a reformation that came in stages. **First**, there was the coming together in unity to promote the one true religion by way of Jeshua (or Joshua), the high priest, along with his fellow priests and Levites (as representatives of the church), and by way of Zerubbabel, the prince, along with the judges and other civil rulers (as representatives of the state). **Second**, there was the rebuilding of the brazen altar upon its original base (upon which it had stood when originally built at the time of Solomon), and re-establishing bloody sacrifices as pointing to the person and work of Jesus Christ to come (the only Mediator between God and man). And **third**, there was the keeping of those holy days (as times of worship) which the Lord had specifically appointed in His Word. Reformation proceeded in Israel at that time in stages, and reformation was regulated by the written Word of God ("as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God" Ezra 3:2).

I would like to apply what we have noted above about the stages of reformation that occurred in ancient Israel after their deliverance from Babylonian captivity to the stages of reformation that occurred when the Lord delivered His people from the spiritual Babylonian captivity of the Romish Church under the rule of the papal antichrist during the First Reformation. Martin Luther identified the Church of Rome with that spiritual or mystery Babylon (spoken of in Revelation 17), and identified the pope as the man of sin and antichrist (referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2) in his treatise entitled, *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the*

Church (1520). One of the aspects of reformation that the reformers saw as needed was to address not only the reformed ministers of the gospel, but also to address the civil magistrates as bearing important roles in promoting reformation (as did both Joshua and Zerubbabel in rebuilding and reforming the one true religion of God in Israel after their return from Babylonian captivity). Thus, we see that Luther addressed civil magistrates and their role in promoting reformation in his tract entitled, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520). Likewise, John Calvin included a “Prefatory Address to King Francis of France” at the very beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and specifically addressed and presented to the emperor, Charles V, his discourse entitled, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544). John Knox likewise wrote to the Scottish nobility and rulers a letter entitled, *The Appellation from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy—Addressed to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland* (in 1558), wherein he defends the cause of the Protestant Reformation and describes the duty of lesser magistrates to restrain the tyranny (even in the matter of religion) of greater magistrates. In the treatises of these Reformers, they built their case that reformation required that the pure gospel of Jesus Christ and justification by faith alone be faithfully preached in the pulpits of these nations (which corresponds to the rebuilding of the altar in Ezra 3), and that pure worship (which is according to God’s Word) be administered and practiced within the churches of these nations as well (which corresponds to the re-establishment of the holy days specifically appointed by the Lord and the heart and form of worship appointed in Ezra 3).

Dear ones, our reformed forefathers understood that in order for reformation to proceed in Gentile nations, it must continue according to the pattern that we have seen in the reformation promoted by Joshua the high priest (who represents the church) and by Zerubbabel the prince

(who represents the state) within Israel (even if it is only realized in stages). For all reformation is for naught or nothing, if it is not a reformation that is founded upon Christ (our Prophet, Priest, and King to whom Joshua the high priest, Zerubbabel the prince, and the prophets pointed), founded upon the free gospel of Jesus Christ and the whole counsel of God's Word (rather than upon what gives men a thrill or pleasure), founded upon the free justification of unworthy sinners by faith alone, and founded upon the pure worship of the Lord appointed by the Lord in His Word—a worship of the one, true, living God that is offered to the Lord “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). Beloved ones of the Lord, I want you to see and understand that what we are considering here from the inspired Book of Ezra is not dull, meaningless history, but is rather prophetic as to what the Lord has caused by His great power to be realized in past reformations of the pure Christian religion, and what He will cause to be realized in that glorious reformation of the pure Christian religion in the nations of this world (along with Israel) at the time of the blessed millennium, which Christ will bring to pass when He powerfully causes the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Revelation 11:15).

This Lord's Day let us continue our study of the reformation (which occurred in stages) of the one true religion revealed in Scripture by considering the following main points from our text in Ezra 3:8-13: (1) Reformation Continues as the Foundation of the Temple is Laid (Ezra 3:8-10a); (2) Reformation of Worship Continues according to the Regulation of Scripture (Ezra 3:10b-11); and (3) The Reaction of the People to Reformation Considered (Ezra 3:12-13).

I. Reformation Continues as the Foundation of the Temple is Laid (Ezra 3:8-10a).

A. As we come to the next major stage of reformation (namely, the laying of the foundation of the temple), we see that we have now arrived at the second year and second month in Judah, which is calculated from the first year and first month at which time the people of God left their Babylonian captivity. You will recall from previous sermons that God's people arrived in Judah the fourth month of the first year, and rebuilt the altar and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles the seventh month of the first year. The reformation in Israel now continues with the laying of the foundation in the second month of the second year (approximately seven months after the brazen altar was rebuilt). During this seven-month period, no doubt, the ministry, magistracy, and people were busy making preparations (likely preparing the plot of land and locating and gathering the large foundation stones necessary for the actual laying of the foundation).

1. Dear ones, biblical reformation to the family, church, and state requires time to prepare. Preparation time to those who earnestly desire, hope, study, and pray for reformation is not wasted time. It may be difficult to be patient while we wait to see some actual, observable results. We are tempted to grow weary, to give up hope, and to join the rest of the world in pursuing our own mere interests and our own kingdom. But we are promised that we shall reap if we faint not (Galatians 6:9). During times of preparation (while we wait for the Lord to reform a husband, a wife, a child, the church, the state), we must occupy ourselves in being and becoming one who will be ready to be used of the Lord when He calls us to fulfill a task or to be used in promoting reformation. The Lord will not use us to bring reformation to others if we are not being reformed and sanctified by the renewing of our minds and offering our lives as living sacrifices unto Him.

2. Joseph was unjustly in bondage for years in the house of Potiphar and in prison waiting and preparing to be used by the Lord when the time came. Dear ones, those whom the Lord uses so often to bring

reformation in the family, church, or state are those who have endured great trials, learned and grown in the Lord through what they have experienced, and have patiently waited upon the Lord to use them to bringing reformation. How are you using the preparation time in which you find yourself? Are you wasting the time, or redeeming the time? Even the sinless Lord Jesus Christ learned obedience through that which He suffered in His life (Hebrews 5:8). Although being the Son of God, He submitted to sinful, though godly parents, suffered the taunts and ridicule of sinners (even family members), was tempted as no human being has ever been tempted by the devil, was hated, despised, persecuted, and suffered agony like no other human being during his time of preparation. Why did He endure all of this? He suffered in order to show forth His unspeakable and unfathomable love for unworthy sinners and in order to bear the guilt and condemnation for His people. But the Lord Jesus also suffered in order to learn obedience as a man so as to be a sympathetic high priest to whom you might flee at all times in which you suffer in body and soul in your times of preparation. You will reap, dear child of God, if you faint not along the way, if you persevere by trusting in the God who works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

B. Once again (as we have noted in previous sermons in the Book of Ezra), we see how the rebuilding of the temple was not a work of only the ministry (the priests and Levites), but was the work of the civil rulers, and the work of all the people as well (Ezra 3:8-9). By way of observation, the Jeshua mentioned in Ezra 3:9 is not Jeshua the high priest (who is joined with Zerubbabel in Ezra 3:8), but is rather one of the leading Levites who with his family is especially noted for his taking such an active work in promoting the work in laying the foundation of the temple (Ezra 2:40). They stood “together” literally in the Hebrew text “as one”. They had the same heart to pursue reformation without rivalry (not

worrying who would get the credit), without contention or division in doctrine, worship, or government. They were of one mind. Great things will be accomplished by the few (whether in the family, church, or state) who work “as one” in pure doctrine and self-sacrificial love. But nothing will be accomplished (except contention and schism) by the many who work for themselves and their own glory and honor.

C. We know that the work in actually laying the foundation of the temple began in the second month of the second year, but we are not told how long it actually took to complete the job. The stones that formed the foundation of the temple were huge, immense stones that determined the stability and the precise balance and level of the whole structure. If the foundation of the temple was not secure, or if it was not truly level, the likelihood of it falling to the ground (sooner or later) was almost certain.

D. And if that was true of the physical building of the temple in Jerusalem as we see here in Ezra 3, how much more it is true of the spiritual building of the temple and church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Dear ones, the one and only foundation of the New Covenant temple that is secure enough to hold and keep the church from being totally destroyed is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). No pope, no bishop, no priest, no apostle, or no minister is able to make the church safe and secure. Christ alone is the head of the Church and is the foundation of the church, although the foundation is laid by the apostles and prophets of Christ in their inspired preaching, teaching, and writing found in Holy Scripture. Dear ones, the only reason there is hope for reformation of the church (rather than absolute destruction of the church) is because Jesus Christ is our foundation upon which we as living stones are built, and He has promised to build it and complete it (Matthew 16:18).

II. Reformation of Worship Continues According to the Regulation of Scripture (Ezra 3:10b-11).

A. When the foundation of the temple was laid, a time of worship and praise was appointed to give thanks to the Lord for His goodness in blessing all their efforts. They did not wait until the temple was completed to praise the Lord, but stopped after this stage to give thanks to the Lord for His tender mercies. Now the people of God might have found reason to complain about their present circumstances, for there were enemies set about them, they were under the thumb of Persian kings, and only a fraction of the work in rebuilding the temple was actually completed (namely, the altar was set up and the foundation was laid).

1. But beloved, thankful hearts will always find something for which to praise the Lord regardless of the circumstances. And without a thankful heart to the Lord for all His undeserved mercies, there will not be worship coming from the heart that the Lord will find acceptable. Praise to the Lord for who He is and what He has accomplished as a merciful heavenly Father is set before us at the very beginning of prayer in that model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father which art in heaven").

2. All the right words and all the right forms of prayer might be used, but without a heart of faith in Christ as our only righteousness in being acceptable before God, and without a heart of loving thankfulness to Christ for all of His undeserved mercies (both spiritual and material), we will not worship the Lord "in spirit" (as Christ requires of true worshippers in John 4:23-24). True worship begins not with outward forms, but with inward grace and mercy from the Lord humbling us as sinners before the Lord and granting to us faith in the righteousness of Christ alone for our acceptance before Him. Dear ones, pride, self-

righteousness, and ingratitude are as contrary to pure worship as are idols and graven images used in worship before the Lord (cp. the healing of the ten lepers, but only one returned to give thanks as evidence of a genuine faith in Jesus Christ). David made this clear in Psalm 51:16-17 (even appointed outward forms of worship are not of the essence of worship). To worship the Lord with a right spirit, with a whole heart, with a thankful soul for His innumerable mercies freely bestowed upon you is a necessary aspect of pure worship offered to the Lord. Yes, our hearts may be overcome with grief and sorrow over our sin, over concern for our children, over the uncertainty of the future, over many afflictions and trials that God has brought into our lives, but pure worship begins with praise and thanksgiving offered to the Lord for His many undeserved mercies freely granted to us. Such praise and thanksgiving will not necessarily remove all grief and sorrow, concerns, afflictions, or trials. However, it will fill you with a hope and courage in Christ as you face your grief and sorrow, afflictions and trials that you are not alone and that the mercy of the Lord will never fail you, because your God is good and can only do that which is good for you.

B. The second step of pure worship is to worship the Lord in truth (not only in spirit, but also in truth according to Christ in John 4:23-24).

1. Here we find that the priests took up their trumpets while the Levites took up their cymbals, and they sang praise to the Lord in the words of Psalm 118:1-2: "O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever." Now what is significant about these acts of worship? It is specifically stated that all this was done "after the ordinance of David king of Israel" (Ezra 3:10). This is worshipping the Lord according to His will and pleasure when we worship Him according to the words of His inspired prophets, rather than worshipping the Lord according to our own will and pleasure.

2. But how do we know whether the Lord is pleased with the worship which we offer to Him? We can only know if He tells us He is pleased. And He tells us with what worship He is pleased in His Holy Word. This we call the Regulative Principle of Worship. For it is worship regulated by God in the Scripture. Whereas worship that we offer to the Lord which is not found in His Word (or worship that has ceased to be offered to the Lord with the priesthood and the temple) is worship according to the will of man (that which the apostle Paul calls “will worship” in Colossians 2:23).

3. When Abel offered a blood sacrifice to the Lord by faith in what God had revealed and appointed, his worship was acceptable to the Lord. When Cain, however, offered a bloodless sacrifice of fruits and vegetables to the Lord according to his own will (even if God had not explicitly forbidden such a sacrifice), his worship was unacceptable to the Lord (Hebrews 11:4). What God appoints in Scripture is required of us in worship. What God does not appoint in Scripture is forbidden to us in worship. When the Church of Rome sets up images of Christ, the apostles, and the saints for one to look upon as he/she worships, it is an abomination against the Lord (Deuteronomy 5:8-10—an idol is something invented or created by man to worship or to aid in man’s worship). This is the moral standard for our pure worship in truth: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it” Deuteronomy 12:32.

4. Thus, all religious acts of worship offered to the Lord must be regulated by what He, the Lord alone, appoints in His Word. This was the standard that was used by the priests and the Levites in Ezra 3:2 (“and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God”) and Ezra 3:10 (“to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel”).

a. Thus, when we are asked why we do not use musical instruments in worship offered to the Lord, we explain that musical

instruments were as priestly and levitical in nature as was offering incense at the altar, or as was bringing sacrifices to the temple, or as was wearing priestly robes. Just as only the priests and Levites were authorized to serve in special capacities related to the temple, so only the priests and Levites were authorized to play musical instruments in formal worship offered to the Lord (1 Chronicles 16:1-6; 2 Chronicles 29:25-30). When Christ died, He abolished all the ceremonial law associated with the priesthood and the temple according to Ephesians 2:15 (which included the use of priestly and levitical instruments in worship specifically offered to the Lord).

b. And when we are asked why we continue to sing only the Psalms of David found in the 150 Psalms of the Psalter, we explain that we are certain that God has approved of these inspired songs to be used in the formal worship we offer to the Lord, as we see were sung here in Ezra 3:11 (2 Chronicles 29:30), and as are likewise authorized in the New Covenant age as well, in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, where Paul (an inspired apostle of the Lord) authorizes the use of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in worship offered to the Lord. Have you ever wondered why there was no special gift to compose worship songs listed among the various gifts of the New Testament? Have you even wondered why we have no worship songs composed by Christ or the apostles (even though Christ and the apostles left us 27 inspired books of revelation in the New Testament)? The answer is because there was already an inspired hymn book authorized by the Lord for His people to use in worship (the 150 Psalms of the Psalter). In fact, these three words used by Paul, “psalms”, “hymns”, and “songs” are all used repeatedly in the Greek translation of the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which is what Greek-speaking Jews outside Palestine and Greek-speaking Gentile converts would be most familiar with (and therefore the very reason Paul did not need to explain what were the differences between “psalms”, hymns”, and “songs” was

because each of these terms referred to the Psalter, as was typical of Hebrew parallelism, as in Matthew 22:37 “heart”, “soul” and “mind”, or in Ephesians 1:21). The word “spiritual” (“spiritual songs”) is intended by Paul to make clear that he is referring to “psalms”, “hymns”, and “songs” that are spiritual in nature (i.e. that are inspired by the Holy Spirit, similar to the use of “spiritual” in 1 Corinthians 2:13 and Romans 7:14 in reference to God’s Word). The 150 Psalms alone have the specific authorization of God to be used when we formally offer our worship to the Lord (cp. also 1 Corinthians 14:26 and James 5:13).

c. And when we are asked why we don’t observe any other regular occurring holy days than the Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day), we likewise respond that the Jewish holy days of the Old Testament were abolished with the various ceremonial ordinances of the Old Testament, and only the Lord’s Day (the first day of the week) is authorized for Christian worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

d. And when we are asked why we do not have choirs, images, incense, or any other bells or whistles when we offer our worship to the Lord, it is because they are not appointed by the Lord for New Covenant worship among God’s people in the various nations of the earth. They may have been appointed by the Lord for Old Testament worship while the priesthood and temple were yet standing, but the Lord has now abolished all such ceremonial worship of the Old Testament in the death of Christ (Ephesians 2:15). Dear ones, all these aforementioned human additions to worship were initially promoted by Rome and received (to varying degrees) in Protestant churches as they drank from the cup of her abominations.

C. Dear ones, the only way that there will ever be a reformation of worship in the church of Christ among the nations of this world is by

regulating our worship according to the authorization of God's Word, rather than by the silence of God's Word.

III. The Reaction of the People to Reformation Considered (Ezra 3:12-13).

A. The first reaction was that of a loud shout of joy on the part of those who were not old enough to have seen the glory of the former temple built by Solomon. These were looking in hope to the future. These were not allowing the small beginnings of reformation, the trials and afflictions they faced, or the concerns they had about enemies hinder their joy in the Lord. They had a present joy in the mercies of God in what the Lord had already accomplished for them (in delivering them from Babylonian captivity, in preserving them, in stirring them up to rebuild the altar, in laying the foundation of the temple, and in re-instituting the pure worship of the Lord), and they had a future hope in the Lord as to what He would yet bring to pass (having brought them this far in laying the foundation of the temple, He would complete the work He had begun according to His promise).

B. The second reaction was that of a loud weeping of sorrow on the part of those who were old enough to have seen the glory of the former temple built by Solomon. These were looking backward in sorrow to the past. These were allowing the small beginnings of reformation and the comparative outward glory of Solomon's temple to that of the mere laying of the foundation of the second temple to hinder their joy and thanksgiving in the mercies which the Lord had already performed and to hinder their hope in a rebuilt temple. Their eyes were fixed upon that which they could see with their natural eyes, and they were thus filled with grief and sorrow. Dear ones, when we walk by sight rather than by faith and by hope in the promises of God, we will likewise be more

consumed by grief and sorrow than by joy in the grace and mercy of the Lord. In fact, the prophet Haggai (who prophesied at this very time) spoke of a greater glory to come to this temple than had ever come to the temple of Solomon (in Haggai 2:2-9). The second temple was greater in glory than Solomon's temple because Jesus Christ walked in it, taught in it, and cleansed it. So likewise will the glory of the church of Christ be most conspicuous, not when she is adorned with wealth and riches, pomp and ceremony, but when Jesus Christ freely walks in her, instructs her, and cleanses and reforms her from her pride, unbelief, ingratitude, heresy, and idolatry. The glory of the church is Jesus Christ.

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