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Reactive Discipline

Zechariah 5:1-4

There is no question from Scripture that God's will for any covenant body is its fidelity! When a church begins to struggle in its ministry, it is ironic that the first response so often is to ask: "What programs ought we to do in order to turn this ministry around?"

Biblically speaking, God doesn't need a program to grow a church; He could raise up sons of Abraham from the stones in the church parking lot (cf. Matthew 3:9)! In fact, rarely is it that a congregation doesn't have the right programs for growth. Most often, it is that there is compromise in the camp!

When Israel was defeated by Ai and Joshua sought the Lord, the answer was NOT that

- They were using the wrong technique in battle.
- They had ill-trained soldiers.
- Their weaponry was inferior.

The reason they failed was because, in the words of God, “Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them...” (Joshua 7:11)

Recall Christ’s message to the struggling church in Ephesus. It wasn’t “*Change your programs,*” but this:

Revelation 2:5, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place [meaning, the church is going to die, cf. Revelation 1:20]- unless you repent.”

Recall what happened on account of the unbelief of those Jews living in Nazareth.

Matthew 13:58, “And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.”

In other words, God’s kingdom fruit was radically limited on account of the people’s rebellion!

The prophecy before us constitutes a significant message from God as His people had entered into a brand-new era. Gone was the Theocracy. All that remained was a religious nation that was endeavoring to the serve the Lord in a difficult land.

Yet the initial two decades of this service were rough! And so, through the Prophet Zechariah, God gave His people a series of messages — eight different visions — to encourage them as a covenant community.

- The First Vision addressed the issue of “Our True Rest/Comfort” as a people of God (Zechariah 1:7-17).
- The Second Vision spoke of the “Imminency of Destruction” that was coming to this world (Zechariah 1:18-21).
- The Third Vision described the glorious “Consummation of God's Redemptive Plan” as it pertains to His people (Zechariah 2:1-13). We have a glorious future, brothers and sisters!
- The Fourth Vision detailed the “The Radical Grace of God” which assures God’s people that no matter how far they fall, they will always be the object of God’s love (Zechariah 3:1-10)!

- The Fifth Vision addressed the question of “What Constitutes Success as a Body of Christ in a Sinful World?” And what is the answer? Us clinging to Christ... abiding in Christ... whole-hearted reliance upon God (Zechariah 4:1-14)! Recall, it is NOT by might or power, BUT through relying upon the Spirit of God!

Wd transition to the Sixth Vision which, along with the Seventh Vision, takes up the issue of the maintenance of the body when it comes to their integrity as a people. Sinclair Ferguson, speaking of this text, said this:

The message is, that if God is going to rebuild His temple, His desire is that He should have a people who are purified for his name in that temple building... that God wants to employ clean hands and a pure heart. You remember Paul says to Timothy, ‘God does not use vessels of dishonor to bring them blessing and to bring others blessing. God is pleased to use vessels that are clean, and pure, and devoted to Him.’ And when He builds His temple as He doubtless will, He will build His temple thoroughly and He will build His temple righteously. (Ferguson, 2012)

That raises the question: In light of this, what is God’s program when it comes to His people and the presence of sin in the body? What must we do to maintain our useableness in God’s hands?

In answering this we begin with vision six, maintenance of the Covenant Community.

Zechariah 5:1, “Then I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, *there was a flying scroll.*”

As we begin this sixth vision, it is noteworthy that it is unique in how it begins. As we have seen, Zechariah’s visions typically begin by introducing the characters in the vision, such as (1) the horses in vision one or (2) the interpreting angel in many of the visions. Here the text begins simply with the word “again”. As a result, there is an element of rushing here. Having just described the blessings that would rest upon the Covenant Community as they relied upon Christ (Zechariah 4), God is quick to stress to His people the fragile nature of these blessings! God does NOT want His people to be complacent in the delusion that as a CORPORATE body, they now could do whatever they wanted, and God would bless them! It was this mentality that led to the exile! RATHER, God wants His people to be repentant, broken, ever and always suspicious of self, and therefore quick to depend upon God! George Klein wrote of this:

The vision of the flying scroll places conditions on the assurances of restoration in the previous visions- as in the vision of the surveyor (2:1–13)- cautioning the people that God’s blessing remains contingent on their own obedience to his law. (Klein, 2007, p. 169)

Accordingly, the focus in this sixth vision is on “a flying scroll”. That it is “flying”

indicates that it NOT only was NOT of human origin,^{1,2} BUT that it was available and open for all to read!³ That it is a “scroll” speaks of the covenant will of God which when given to His people in redemptive history almost always came by way of a scroll!⁴

Now this scroll was no ordinary scroll. Archaeological discoveries have produced many ancient Jewish scrolls which typically measured ten inches by twenty feet in length. In fact, one of the largest scrolls discovered to date was that of Isaiah at Qumran which measured twenty-four feet in length. The “flying scroll” of this vision dwarfs these scrolls.

- v. 2: “And he [the angel who accompanied Zechariah throughout these visions] said to me, ‘What do you see?’ And I answered, ‘I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits.’”- because we are given the exact size of this scroll indicates that this measurement is significant. Now, it is generally recognized that a cubit⁵ was equivalent to eighteen inches. Accordingly, the scroll here was 360 inches by 180 inches OR thirty feet by fifteen feet! The thing was massive... the size of billboards today! Now as I just referenced, the size of this scroll is significant. The measurement of thirty by fifteen feet corresponded to one thing in Judaism... the Temple porch⁶ from which God’s word or judgments were read to God’s people (2 Kings 23:1-3).^{7,8} As such, this area was associated with the holy demands of God upon His covenant people! Yet there is more. Notice what we learn about this scroll...
- v. 3a, c: “Then he said to me, ‘This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side.’” It is of note that the scroll had “writing on both sides”! This was NOT common in Bible times, BUT when it occurred the intended message was one of completeness. That it is written on the front in back indicate that there was nothing more to be added (cf. Ezekiel 2:8-3:2; Revelation 5:1-5).

Yet there is more here, for as this scroll represented the holy demands of God upon His covenant people, it is notable that the Ten Commandments also were written on both sides of a single tablet.

Exodus 32:15, “Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one *side* and the other.”

In the ancient world when a Suzerain entered into a covenant with another nation, two copies of the covenant agreement were made — one for the King and one for the vassal nation. That is what God did at Sinai!

Now, at first, we might think that it is coincidental that both the Scroll and the Ten

Commandments were written on both sides. Until we note that the writing on the Scroll included the Third Commandment on one side and the Eighth Commandment on the other. In fact, it is believed by most scholars that the reference to these two commandments were representative of the entire Ten Commandments. George Klein wrote this:

The two crimes Zechariah mentioned represent all of the commandments in each of the two tables of the Ten Commandments. The first table focuses on commandments that have special reference to the Israelites' relationship with God. The second table governs the people's relationships with one another. (Klein, 2007, p. 172)

In other words, this flying scroll contained a restating of the Ten Commandments as the basis upon which this Covenant Community would thrive! Insofar as the religious nation (the corporate body) conformed to this law, the religious nation would be blessed! That no doubt is why this vision corresponds with the blessing/curse formula that God used when He established the Theocracy. Speaking to the people of as they existed as a Corporate body, God said this:

Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15-18, "Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the Lord your God... [that is the first 5 Visions of Zechariah] But it shall come about, if you will not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses [the same word used in v. 3 in of this sixth vision] shall come upon you and overtake you. [that is the sixth vision of Zechariah]"

And so, whether it is the theocratic nation (established by God in Moses) or the religious nation (which remained intact following the exile), the well-being of any corporate people of God rests upon their fidelity to the will of God- here specified by the "Flying Scroll"! And so, it remains the case for us today. Recall Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:19-20, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of [here's the basis...] the apostles and prophets [In other words, the Old Testament and New Testament], Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*."

Did you get that? Just like in Zechariah's sixth vision, the religious nation we call the Church has as its foundation God's Word — summarized by Ten Commandments. This is our constitution as a body and the basis for all blessing and cursing as a corporate people of God!

This is why when a church struggles, the first thing we must consider is NOT our program, BUT our Covenant Fidelity to God as a corporate people!

What an important message God's people needed to hear in Zechariah's day and what an important message for us to hear as a church body! If as a church we prove to be unfaithful to the Lord — to His word, His ministry, His worship, the Community He Created at the Cross — If as a church, we...

- Endure sin.
- Compromise this pulpit.
- Play at our worship.
- Neglect those in this body who are hurting.
- Focus simply on our own walks, our own lives, and so our own well-being (being content to live in paneled houses).

The prescription will be that of a covenant curse in which God sends dryness to our walks, joyless Christianity, and tribulation and distress to the nation in which we live (cf. 2 Chronicles 7:14)! That is exactly what God's people in Zechariah's day were facing!

While this is heavy, there are things we can do as individuals to prevent "this curse" from coming upon Bethel.

God's Call to the Covenant Community, v. 3b.

Zechariah 5:3b, "Then he said to me, 'This is the curse⁹ that is going forth over the face of the whole land ['blessing' and 'cursing' is covenant language used to describe NOT God's wrath, BUT God's kingdom work in the life of a body. 'Blessing' references the production of Kingdom fruit. 'Curse' most often references the withholding of God's preserving grace with the result that the fallenness of this world is allowed to advance unimpeded (but only up to a certain point).¹⁰ As we saw just a bit ago, this is what God does when his corporate body proves unfaithful to the Lord! And so...]; surely everyone who steals¹¹ will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side.'"

The key word when it comes to our individual responsibility to the body of Christ is found in the word "purge" (נָקָה [naqah]). It literally means "to empty out" and so was used to convey the idea of cleaning something out, cleansing, or purifying. Here it speaks of the work of God by which He tempers and so removes the dross from His people. The ultimate extreme of this is the physical removal of a sinning individual through their death, as in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 11:29-30, "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to

himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”

This is an extreme example of God’s “purging”, but may very well be what God had in mind in Zechariah 5. That being said, the most common form of “purging” that God does in and amongst the members of a covenant community is “discipline.”

Hebrews 12:11-13, “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. [This is what is in mind when God speaks of ‘purging’ His people of their sin. And yet, would you notice... each of us have a role in this!...] Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”

We must take this exhortation both individually and corporately. Because God is all about cleansing us, it is our responsibility NOT ONLY to “look out for ourselves” BUT ALSO “for each other” when it comes to our fidelity as servants of Christ. That is why when we gather for worship, we are called to gather also to “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24-25)! Consider the exhortation of Paul in Galatians.

Galatians 6:1-2, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.”

Do you see it?! One of the primary reason’s God’s people went into exile — read the prophets — is because they had hurting people, struggling people, rebellious people in their midst, and no one said or did a thing! Lest the religious nation of Zechariah’s day repeat this error, God gave this sixth vision of the flying scroll! And yet, if redemptive history tells us anything, we know we are going to fail here- which brings us to the backstop and so the glorious provision of the Lord.

The Backstop and so the Glorious Provision of the Lord, v. 4.

Zechariah 5:4, “‘I will make it [the purging] go forth¹²,’ declares the Lord of hosts, ‘and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones.’”

The language here comes from the Exodus and the tenth plague in which the Angel of death “entered into the house” of the Egyptian and brought destruction (that is the idea behind this verse). The focus of this part of this sixth vision is the activeness of God who

most certainly will address the sin of His people. If we don't, He will! Notice the language:

“I will make it go forth,’ declares the Lord of hosts, ‘and it will enter the house...’:

The active agent here is God. Like with the tenth plague, God did NOT use secondary means, BUT the Lord entered Himself into the Egyptian home (as we know the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is Christ).

- It will spend the night¹³: keeping with the Tenth Plague, to “spend the night” speaks of an overnight stay — just as the Angel of the Lord did with the Egyptians!
- It will spend the night within that house¹⁴: the focus here is on thoroughness of God’s disciplining work. It is NOT confined to the doorway or outer extremes of the person’s home/person, BUT enters into the center and so the heart of the life of the home!
- Aand consume it: the Hebrew means “to bring a process to completion” which here is the disciplining hand of the Lord. God’s intended focus is NOT the venting of judgment on the individual child of God who remains in sin, BUT the complete cleansing, disciplining, and so tempering of him!
- With its timber and stones: while most take this in reference to the building materials of the house,¹⁵ Sinclair Ferguson made the excellent observation that the focus of this statement is on the substance of which idols were made: wood/timber and stone. In other words, God’s focus in His purging is the removing of the idols which compromise both our walks with God as well as the purity of the community (cf. Jonah 2:8)!

Combined, the promise is that regardless of the fidelity of the corporate people of God to each other, the Lord Himself makes this promise to you and me: If we choose to live in sin... if we allow sin to fester in this body, He will enter into our midst with His disciplining grace with a view towards the destruction of all idols unto our ultimate health and healing in Christ! That is how much He loves and cares for us! Paul put it this way:

Philippians 1:6, “*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*”

Lain Duguid wrote of this sixth vision:

The good news of the gospel is that when we become Christians God doesn’t just forgive us our past sins, through justification. He has also committed himself to deal with our present and ongoing sins, through sanctification. (Duguid, 2010, p. 114)

And that is the point here! Because of His love for us and His own name, God won't allow His people to live in sin... and neither should we!

What a sobering vision... and yet what a great message! God's blessing for any church body will be enjoyed as we prove faithful to the Lord and so strive...

- NOT ONLY to love, know, exalt, and depend upon Christ in and through all things.
- BUT ALSO as we live to ensure each one of us does the same.
- For most certainly, we don't want
 - Christ to be dishonored because of the sin of any in this body!
 - Jesus to do minimal work here because of unbelief!
 - A brother or sister falling away on account of our lack of care.

In light of this, it behooves each and every one of us to heed the exhortation given in Hebrews 3 (which in my mind is a wonderful summary of the "therefore" of this sixth vision):

Hebrews 3:12-13, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

References

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End Note(s)

¹ "Its location between heaven and earth suits a divine decree which has been sent forth and is now in the process of seeking out its target, like a heavenly 'smart bomb' launched from high altitude. You can run from such a mobile missile, but where would you hide?" (Duguid, 2010, p. 115)

² "Smith maintains that a flying scroll indicates that the message comes from God himself, not from any mere person... The flying scroll may also signify God's omniscience and omnipresence, representing 'a law in effect everywhere (see "over all the land").'" (Klein, 2007, p. 171)

³ "...'flying' suggests that someone had unrolled the scroll. As a result, the scroll lay open for all to read. God chose neither to conceal his message nor to disclose it only to a select few.

The scroll publicly proclaims the Lord's condemnation of the people's sin and his call for them to repent." (Klein, 2007, pp. 170-171)

⁴ "The word 'scroll' evoked strong biblical connotations as a frequent vehicle for communicating the divine message, while the size of the scroll emphasized its importance." (Klein, 2007, p. 170)

⁵ אַמָּה (*ammah*), used of the tip of the elbow to the middle finger, the forearm, cf. Isaiah 63:5.

⁶ "This area was bordered at its back by the opening to the holy place and at its front by the two pillars, Jachin and Boaz (1 Kings. 7:21). Although largely open on the pillar side, the space created a third section to the temple structure, adding to the holy place and most holy place which matched the tabernacle. Prophetic books depict licit and illicit worship activity taking place in the space 'between the porch and the altar' (Ezekiel 8:16; Joel 2:17)." (Boda, 2016, p. 330)

⁷ There was a second correspondence in Judaism which was the combined size of the Cherubim in the Holy of Holies, if they were placed side-by-side (1 Kings 6:23-26). As they in fact were not placed side by side, the space they used in the Holy of Holies would have been larger than 10 x 20 cubits.

⁸ "The connections between the scene in Zechariah 5 and the various items related to Israel's sanctuaries may provide the significance of these dimensions. Of these, the two strongest are the cherubim and the porch. Some have noted the cherubim, since they were the 'winged guardians of the Mosaic tablets' (cf. Exodus 25:16), that is, the basis for any curse that would come upon those who would break the covenant. In light of the presence of heavenly messengers throughout the vision reports, it would not be odd for there to be an allusion to the cherubim in the most holy place, where the ultimate judge resided and where the covenant basis for all legal decisions and the source of the curses written on the scroll were located. The porch is also a possibility because of the mention of a 'curse' (*'ālā*) being taken 'before your altar in this house' in the first scenario of prayer in Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the temple in 1 Kings 8:31-32. This area would have been very close to the porch (cf. 2 Chronicles 8:12; Ezekiel 8:16; Joel 2:17), possibly indicating that the porch was the place where justice was expected to be administered by the priests (cf. Zechariah 3:7). Additionally, Josiah's reading of the covenant document of the torah in the porch in 2 Kings 23 as a fulfillment of the call of Deuteronomy for the covenant torah to be read before the people (Deuteronomy 31:9-13), brings together the possible allusions to the cherubim and the porch." (Boda, 2016, pp. 330-331)

⁹ "The word 'curse' (*'ālāh*) occurs infrequently in the Old Testament, usually in the context of covenantal passages. For instance, Deuteronomy 29:10-21 establishes a clear link between covenant and cursing. Moreover, the word *'ālāh* (v. 3) has several uses in the Hebrew Bible. It may refer to an unknown perpetrator of a crime (Judges 17:2). The term may speak of the accused whose guilt cannot be proven (Numbers 5:21-28). Lastly, it may describe the terms of a covenantal arrangement between parties (Genesis 26:28). The latter two uses come into view in Zechariah 5:1-4 where the people bear guilt for breaking the covenant the Lord made with them." (Klein, 2007, p. 171)

¹⁰ "The curse in view in this passage relates to the oath that was taken in covenant or legal procedures. Such an oath would articulate the consequences that would befall the party which had violated the covenant agreement or legal norms." (Boda, 2016, p. 328)

¹¹ "The interconnectedness between these two infractions can be seen in Leviticus 19:11-18, which has vocabulary strikingly similar to that found in Zechariah 5:3-4. In this priestly passage, as in the Decalogue, the prohibition from stealing is followed immediately by a series of prohibitions regarding dealing falsely, lying, and swearing falsely by Yahweh's name, before returning to prohibitions regarding oppression, robbery, or abuse of the vulnerable (Leviticus 19:11-14). In Leviticus 19:15, the focus is on the legal courts, prohibiting injustice, which involves eschewing partiality and instead judging cases fairly. The interconnectedness between stealing, swearing falsely by Yahweh's name, and injustice confirms that the two laws written on the flying scroll in 5:1-4 are interlinked and related to the legal context. The scene 'is intended to convey a situation in which the normal systems of law that ensure order in a society have broken down, i.e., those who do wrong are not being punished for their crimes.'" (Boda, 2016, p. 336)

¹² “Zechariah saw the Lord’s curse flying throughout the land, entering the homes of those who bear guilt against God. Elsewhere the Old Testament personifies the word of God going forth to do the Lord’s bidding. Isaiah 55:11 declares, ‘My word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it’ (cf. Ps 147:15). This step of divine judgment and cleansing stands as a prerequisite to the restoration and other blessings the Lord holds for his people.” (Klein, 2007, p. 173)

¹³ “The verb here (*lûn*) refers to a temporary stay overnight at someone’s house (cf. Judges 19:13, 20). This verb brings into view the social context of ancient hospitality, as one invites the guest to come into the safety of one’s home and provides them with bed, food, and drink.” (Boda, 2016, p. 338)

¹⁴ “The use of the preposition *in the midst* (*betôk*) emphasizes that the curse is not merely confined to the doorway or outer extremes of the person’s home, but has been invited into the very center of the life of the home.” (Boda, 2016, p. 338)

¹⁵ “Timber (*’ēš*) and stone (*’ēben*) constitute the basic building materials used for houses in Israel, with stone used for foundation layers (at least) of walls and pillars, and wood for pillars, roofs, and doors. Reference to these two constituent materials is a reminder of the dismantling of the house which can occur due to the invasion of an army (cf. Ezekiel 26:12) or even mildew (Leviticus 14:45). This merism emphasizes the totality of destruction. The house here is symbolic of the entire lifestyle of the offender, which was built on theft from others within the covenant community.” (Boda, 2016, p. 339)