

Right Priorities – Right Building

Ezra 9 & 10, Nehemiah 12 & Zechariah 14:20-21

Any study of the exile and restoration of the people of Israel needs to focus on obedience. As we see the parallels with the purpose of our Father in restoring the Church, we find the same emphasis coming on our own lives, especially in relation to our involvement in the work of building and restoring. Yes, this is of prime interest to leaders, but each one of us needs to be involved as well, as the lessons of these passages underline for us.

In ***Ezra 9***, Ezra himself acknowledges the disobedience and impurity of the people and accepts that he is part of it. He sees the result – defeat, death, captivity and dishonour (**v.7**). He also sees the brief moment of opportunity that the LORD has given them – a small remnant, there in the right place, with the possibility of enlightenment and reawakening (**v.8 & v.13**), and looks to the LORD to help them take hold of the moment.

To derive maximum practical benefit from studies of the restoration of Israel at this time in history, we need to see that it mirrors our Father's purpose in building and re-establishing the Church. Like Ezra, we need to acknowledge that the Church is marked by defeat, death, captivity and dishonour and confess our own guilt in the disobedience that has caused it.

How have we been disobedient? In very much the same way as God's people in ***Haggai 1*** – by disregarding the Lord's priorities and concentrating on our own plans and programmes. We sometimes think that their main failure was their materialism. In fact, the LORD points straight to their misplaced priorities – they were getting on with their own houses instead of concentrating on his! Yes, they had come out of captivity; yes, they were in the right place; yes, the foundation of the LORD's house had been laid – but what were they actually building? Not his house but their own!

Can we see the parallels in our own approach to Church life? Do we dare to ask the Lord to show us what he really wants, instead of

assuming that our own plans and programmes are exactly what he has in mind? Perhaps we should start by asking him to help us understand what the Church is, **from his point of view!** The usual objection is, “But what can we do about the situation? Nothing we can do will make any difference to the fragmentation of the Body of Christ.”

We have it back to front! **Haggai 1** shows us that our lack of fruitful effectiveness is caused by our lack of attention to the Lord’s priorities, and here in **Ezra 9**, Ezra’s confession shows us the way back.

“But what difference can my personal confession and repentance make?” Or leaders might ask, “If we take a fresh stand on building the Church as the Lord wants it (and not just as own little ‘pet project’), what effect can that have on the all the other Christians?”

Ezra 10 points to the answer. As Ezra confessed and humbled himself before the LORD, others joined in. Men, women and children; civic and religious leaders – the whole community of God’s people!

We have seen one aspect of the disobedience which brought Ezra and all the people to repentance – neglecting the LORD’s priorities. The other side of it was the blatant impurity of the ‘bloodline’ of God’s people – they had mixed and intermarried with the local non-Jewish inhabitants – and the leaders seem to have been most to blame!

Even then, this was not about immorality or other sexual sin. The LORD was concerned to preserve the purity of the race, the children of Israel, his chosen people. In our position, involved in the building of the Church, the Lord has nothing to say about racial purity, but much about the pollution of his work with the world system.

In the supposed interests of ‘greater relevance’ or some similar excuse, we have compromised the purity of the Church. Instead of emphasising the demands of Christian discipleship, we have reduced true Christianity to a ‘one-off experience’ followed by years of routine. We have introduced slick presentation and ‘services’ in place of the work of the Holy Spirit and genuine fellowship.

Not that all our efforts to communicate more effectively are wrong – on the contrary! Not that **everything** we do is polluted in this way;

that would be too simplistic. No, just that too often we have allowed the world's ways of doing things to be our main guidelines as we have looked at building the Church, and have relied too much on our latest projects and programmes to deliver results.

We have also forgotten to go on asking the question: "What is the Church?" – and the next question, "Who is in it?" These are really two ways of asking the same question. I believe the Bible clearly teaches that the Church consists of all those, and only those, whose lives are joined to the Lord Jesus Christ by a response of faith. Instead of concentrating on seeing the Church built in our locality, we have aimed at seeing our church built, trying to convince ourselves that we will see the whole Church built by building 'our bit'. Rather like the people in **Haggai 1** again!

Like them, we have convinced ourselves that 'this is not the right time' to see the Church built as Jesus intended. Like them too, we suffer unfruitfulness and wasted work. Like them, we need to see that our ineffectiveness is a direct result of our disobedience and neglect of the Lord's priorities – and repent, as Ezra did!

Nehemiah 12 tells of the dedication of the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem and the celebrations of the priests, Levites, singers and all the people – again including the women and children. "God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar" (**v.43**). And this was just for a wall!

Zechariah 14:20-21 may seem a little obscure, but it takes the process further with a prophetic glimpse into the future, when even the most mundane and utilitarian items are as dedicated to the LORD as the special vessels in the temple. The whole chapter looks forward to events which lay in the future for the people of the time, and also lie in our future. **Verse 9** gives the clue: "And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and his name the only one." We have not yet seen that day, but **it is certainly coming!** (See **Revelation 11:15**)

We all need some vision of the future. Without it, we relapse into the daily routine and begin to accept the fatalistic 'mantra' of the world around us: "all continues just as it was from the beginning of

creation” (**2 Peter 3:4**). We stop believing (at least in practice) that anything can ever change. As we get older, perhaps we find that we have lost some of the radical zeal we had as young believers. Have we stopped believing that the Lord has a purpose for his Church?

In **Haggai 2**, some amazing prophetic forecasts are made which can only apply to the Church, and which lie in our future. Again, they speak of the overthrow of the authorities and kingdoms set up under the world system, and the rule of God in the world, BUT they also speak of the pivotal role of God’s people and God’s house – the Church, you and me!

In **verse 23**, the LORD says that Zerubbabel will be like a signet ring, a seal of authority – a picture of the coming authority of the Church.

Several times in this chapter, the LORD speaks of ‘shaking the heavens and the earth’. In the context of the time, the people had neglected their own needs to concentrate on rebuilding the temple, and their resources were at a dangerously low level. The LORD promised to bring in the wealth of the nations for them, and did so.

In **Hebrews 12:26**, this promise of ‘shaking’ is quoted, and reminds us that the events in the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah and Haggai are directly related to us in the Church. Here the shaking relates not merely to the release of wealth from the nations, but to the removal of everything man-made, so that ‘those things which cannot be shaken may remain’. (The word often wrongly translated as ‘created’ in **v.27** is just the simple word for ‘made’.)

In other words, the natural, man-made methods that we use and the natural ‘world-system’ way of looking at things are doomed to be shaken away by God’s judgement. They are out of place and always have been; that day will reveal their true qualities.

The foundation has been laid. “But each man must be careful how he builds on it.” (**1 Corinthians 3:10**)

“ . . . we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken . . . ”

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