

The Foundation of a Biblical Reformation

Ezra 7:11-14; Zechariah 4:6

June 30, 2013

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The Book of Ezra is an inspired account of biblical reformation (with all of its ups and downs). Even though the Lord promises biblical reformation within the nations of this world (when all the nations of the world will serve Christ, the King of kings, according to Psalm 72:11), biblical reformation does not usually happen instantaneously and in one fell swoop. But rather, biblical reformation occurs usually over a period of time, amidst victories and defeats, joys and sorrows (as the Lord teaches His people that faith and hope must be in Him and in His promises each step of the way—not in ministers, magistrates, or earthly resources).

I submit, dear ones, that God has given to us the Book of Ezra in order to encourage our hearts that even though biblical reformation in church and state (in our time) seems so small and so despised, it is our Sovereign Christ, the King of kings, who will bring biblical reformation to the churches and nations of this world despite the Goliath-like enemies that we face. Our hope in biblical reformation depends not upon man and his resources, but upon the almighty power and faithfulness of our God who cannot be defeated and who cannot lie. Even as the Lord sounded forth to His people through the Prophet Zechariah in a time long ago, when it seemed that biblical reformation was so unlikely, so the Lord still sounds forth to us, His people, the same words of promise (Zechariah 4:6,10): “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts . . . For who hath despised the day of small things?”

This Lord’s Day we resume our study in the Book of Ezra, as we observe the path of biblical reformation by which the Lord took His people hundreds of years ago (and still takes His people). The main points of the sermon are the following: (1) A Brief Review of Reformation in the Book of Ezra; (2) True Reformation Must Be Biblical Reformation (Ezra 7:11-14).

I. A Brief Review of Reformation in the Book of Ezra.

A. Let us briefly review the Reformation (with its successes and failures) that has occurred in Israel prior to Chapter 7 (which is where we will pick up this Lord’s Day).

1. As a result of flagrant covenant-breaking, God brought the Assyrians against the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was led into captivity in 722 b.c. Likewise, due to Judah’s abominations in covenant-breaking, God brought Babylon against the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and led her into captivity in three stages: 606 b.c. (Daniel); 597 b.c. (Ezekiel); and 586 b.c. (at which time occurred the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem). God’s people remained in captivity for the prophesied period of 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10).

2. The Medes and the Persians (under Cyrus) defeated Babylon and assumed all of the territory previously occupied by Assyria and Babylon. Then seventy years after the first stage of Babylonian captivity in Judah (606 b.c.), God lead Cyrus to deliver God’s people out of captivity (536 b.c.), and furnished them with the means to begin reformation in Israel under Zerubbabel, the Governor, and Joshua, the High Priest (Ezra 1-2).

3. Within the first year of their return to Judah, the Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel, who is also called Sheshbazzar (the Prince) and Joshua (the High Priest) had rebuilt the altar of the temple and laid the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3). The younger people rejoiced at this initial stage of reformation; while others, who were old enough to remember the Temple built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians, wept at the very small beginnings of reformation.

4. It was at that time, just as reformation was being made, that Satan stirred up adversaries from within the land who sought to discourage and hinder the plans of the Jews in completing the temple and that Satan also stirred up adversaries from within the very hearts of God's people to turn their attention away from building God's house to building their own houses. Thus, God's people became apathetic and lukewarm to reformation and did not seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that the work of reformation came to a complete halt for 16 years, to the shame of God's people. Out of fear of enemies within the land and procrastination from within their own hearts to pursue reformation, Satan was successful in delaying and halting the work on the Temple (Ezra 4).

5. The Lord then raised up His faithful ministers, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who preached and wrote against the sinful lukewarmness of the Jews and who directed the hearts of God's people to trust in God's promises and in God's power to accomplish reformation in spite of their many weaknesses and failures. As a result of the work of God's Spirit in stirring up a renewed faith and faithfulness in God's people, by means of the preaching of His prophets, the work on the house of God and reformation were resumed with much vitality and holy zeal (Ezra 5:1-2).

6. But once again, just as the work in rebuilding the Temple and the work of reformation in Israel were making good progress, Satan stirred up adversaries. This time it was Tatnai, Governor of Persia in the provinces west of the Euphrates River, who was used by Satan to seek to hinder the work of reformation. However, God's people stood strong against the unlawful authority of this Prince, and rather stood upon the authority of the Lord who had commanded His people to rebuild the Temple and who had stirred the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to decree and supply provisions to rebuild the Temple. Tatnai then sent a letter to Darius, Emperor of Persia, requesting that search be made to confirm that the Jews were not lying about the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 5:3-17).

7. King Darius made a decree that search be made to find the decree of Cyrus that commanded the Jews to be set free, and that decreed the rebuilding of the temple. The decree of Cyrus was found, and the enemies that sought to thwart reformation in Israel were made to choke on their own pride and shame as King Darius decreed that these enemies (Tatnai, the Governor, and all those with him) must in no way hinder the reformation in Israel, and must speedily provide for God's people all the resources and materials needed to complete the Temple, which they soon completed (in 515 b.c.) with great joy and thanksgiving (Ezra 6). That brief review brings us to Ezra 7.

B. Beginning with Ezra 7, the Lord brings about a second return of God's people from captivity: this time under Ezra, the Priest and the Scribe (in 458 b.c.). A new period of reformation in Israel is highlighted in Ezra 7-10 (again with ups and downs, successes and failures).

1. Ezra is God's Minister that the Lord raises up at that time to promote a biblical reformation in Israel. Ezra, as God's Reformer, approaches King Artaxerxes (in Ezra 7:6) about a second return of God's people to Israel. The Lord moves the heart of King Artaxerxes (just as He had moved the heart of Cyrus and the heart of Darius and the heart of Ahasuerus) to grant the request of Ezra to continue the work of reformation in Israel ("The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" Proverbs 21:1).

2. The official, royal letter of King Artaxerxes in granting to Ezra all that he needed by way of resources and provisions begins in Ezra 7:11 (which we will consider in this sermon and in the sermon to follow). Let us now move from our first main point: a review of the reformation wrought by God in Israel (up to this point), and consider our second main point.

II. True Reformation Must Be Biblical Reformation (Ezra 7:11-14).

A. The Holy Spirit certifies that the letter we are about to read is not a figment of Ezra's

imagination, it is a copy of the actual royal decree of reformation that King Artaxerxes wrote to accompany Ezra on his journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (“Now this the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe” Ezra 7:11).

1. If anyone along the way (or anyone on the other side of the Euphrates River) should question Ezra’s claim to acquire provisions and resources for reformation in Israel, this letter would quickly bring an end to any red tape or delays. It was Ezra’s warrant from the King, who identifies himself as “king of kings” (Ezra 7:12). This title, “king of kings”, was used by the Persian monarchs to show forth their power over the empire that had swallowed up so many kings and nations at that time.

2. The title that is used here by King Artaxerxes (“king of kings”) was (as you may recall) the point of departure a number of months ago from our continuing through this letter of King Artaxerxes, and rather turning to the King of kings, Jesus Christ, who reigns over all kings of the earth (and not just some of the kings of the earth) according to Revelation 19:16.

3. It is the pride of man to exalt himself in the use of titles, power, and prerogatives above God Himself (even as he does the Papal Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:4—the Vicar of Christ, The Head of the Visible Church, Holy Father contrary to Matthew 23:9, which implies an absolute obedience and lordship over the conscience).

B. There are two points in the decree of King Artaxerxes that I would like to briefly address this Lord’s Day.

1. First, this second return of God’s people from captivity was a call to God’s people to offer themselves voluntarily to promote reformation in Israel.

a. The clause in Ezra 7:13 (“which are minded of their own freewill”) refers to volunteers, or those who offered themselves freely. What is a series of words in the English text is actually one word in Aramaic (the language of this royal letter). It refers to a freewill offering. Here (in Ezra 7:13) it is people who are the freewill offering, whereas in Ezra 7:15,16, the same word refers to possessions as a freewill offering.

b. What was a freewill offering? It was an offering presented to God without any stated obligation to do so within God’s Law—an offering made to the Lord out of mere love, joy, and gratitude to God for His many mercies (Exodus 36:3; Leviticus 22:21). Thus, King Artaxerxes does not compel any to return to Israel with Ezra in order to continue the reformation begun in Israel, but rather calls God’s people to willingly offer themselves as a freewill offering to God, for all the mercies they had received.

c. Why the emphasis here upon God’s people being a freewill offering?

(1) First, to point to Christ as God’s Freewill Offering for lost sinners who could not redeem themselves from sin, death, and hell. The Lord Jesus offered His life freely for His people. He told Peter when Peter wielded his sword to cut off the ear of the High Priest’s servant that he could call for twelve legions of angels to rescue Him (Matthew 26:53—a legion of soldiers was 6,000—thus twelve legions would be 72,000 angels). Dear ones, Christ did not suffer the bodily anguish of man’s wrath upon the cross or the spiritual torment of God’s wrath for ungodly and undeserving sinners like you and me because He was forced to do so against His will, but rather He suffered the anguish and shame of the cross and the wrath of God because He wanted to do so (as God’s freewill offering) for undeserving sinners loved and chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). The freewill offering first pointed to Christ.

(2) But second, the freewill offering pointed to God’s people, who have been freely redeemed by Christ and freely justified by faith alone. Because Christ has become the freewill offering to redeem them from their sin and the just punishment that their sin deserved in the everlasting torment of hell, they are to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to offer themselves as freewill offerings to God in loving and thankful service for all that Christ has given to them in the Gospel.

(a) Dear ones, we need to be reminded that our service to God is not only one of duty to God as our Sovereign Lord and Creator (which is true of all mankind), but our service to God is also and most importantly “a freewill offering” to the Lord that proceeds from love and thankfulness for all that Christ has freely sacrificially purchased for us. We can take no credit or glory to ourselves for offering ourselves as a freewill offering to the Lord according to Philippians 2:13.

(b) How do you know whether you are daily offering yourselves to the Lord as a freewill offering? Ask yourself the following questions. Is my obedience to Christ a mere duty and obligation because God is Sovereign, or is my obedience also a loving “thank-you note” to God as my own personal Redeemer and Savior? Do I obey the Lord merely because I have to, or because I also want to and delight to do so? Is my obedience to God merely that of a servant, or is it also that of a beloved child? Am I walking in the darkness of a vengeful Judge, or in the light of a Heavenly Father who rejoices in me (Zephaniah 3:17)? God does not want any of those adopted into His family through faith in Christ to be walking in the darkness of a vengeful Judge. God’s vengeance, wrath, and condemnation no longer rest upon one who trusts in Christ, for Christ bore forever that vengeance, wrath, and condemnation, never to lay it upon the head of God’s child again. That vengeance, wrath, and condemnation is paid in full for all who trust alone in Christ alone for their justification before God.

(c) Dear ones, do you want your children to obey you out of mere obligation, or do you also want your children to obey you out of love and gratitude to you? Where we do not offer ourselves as a freewill offering to God as an expression of our thankful hearts for what we have in Christ, there will be little or no joy of the Lord. God’s people were called by King Artaxerxes to first offer themselves as freewill offerings to God in bringing a lasting reformation in Israel and so must we if we would see a lasting reformation in church and state.

2. The second point about reformation from our text is that the commission to Ezra from King Artaxerxes and his seven counselors (the royal advisers) was to promote reformation in Israel on the basis of the Law of God (Ezra 7:14).

a. Dear ones, there is no true reformation that is not firmly founded upon the infallible standard of God’s Moral Law revealed in Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture is as necessary to reformation in a nation as it is within the family or church. It puzzles me how many who profess Christ and how many Christian Churches can so clearly understand what a Christian family is and how a Christian family is one that serves and follows Jesus Christ alone as revealed in Scripture (a Christian family doesn’t establish a religious polytheism where any and all religions are equally tolerated and promoted within it), but cannot see that a Christian nation is one that serves and follows Jesus Christ alone (a Christian nation doesn’t establish a religious polytheism where any and all religions are equally tolerated and promoted within it). I submit that it is not the Triune God of the Bible that commands a nation (enlightened by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture) to constitutionally establish religious polytheism over biblical Christianity as the religion of a nation. It is not the Triune God of the Bible that commands that authority to rule or to establish laws within a nation lies supremely with a man’s conscience, or with the will of the people collectively (contrary to the God’s supreme right to rule over and to establish His righteous laws within a nation).

b. Dear Christian, true reformation must be a biblical reformation—a reformation in which the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ converts the hearts of the people to Christ, a reformation in which the Moral Law of God (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) is the supreme law of the land (and not the man-made Federal Constitution), a reformation in which the Triune God of the Bible (and Jesus Christ as God’s anointed Prince) is officially kissed, honored, and worshipped alone, and a reformation in which the faithful and true Christian religion taught in Scripture (and summarized in faithful Confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith and summarized in faithful Covenants like the Solemn League and Covenant) is the established religion and none other. This alone is true reformation. True reformation will not be our lot if we have the view of so many Christians today: we simply need to get back to following the Constitution as the

“supreme law of the land” (which is what the Constitution claims itself to be). No, dear ones, that is the very reason that prevents biblical reformation in this nation.

c. Bible-believing Christians are aghast at the decision of the Supreme Court this past week to legitimize same-sex “marriages”. I submit that this is the natural consequence of a nation that will make the conscience of man, the will of the people, or the Federal Constitution to be the supreme authority or supreme law of the land, rather than the Triune God revealed in Scripture, who reveals His will for not only individual, families, and churches, but for nations in His Moral Law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments). When a nation will not establish the First Commandment (“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”), but will establish the First Amendment (in tolerating and promoting every god and religion as equal to the Triune God of the Bible and as equal to biblical Christianity), God will turn that nation over to its own sin and corruption (abortion and same-sex “marriage” and every other vile abomination). It is not departure from the Constitution as “supreme law of the land” that is the cause of such abominations, but rather departure from the Gospel of Jesus Christ and from the Moral Law of God (both of which are revealed in Holy Scripture). King Artaxerxes was moved by the Lord to authorize Ezra to promote and measure the reformation in Israel “according to the law of thy God” and so must we.

In conclusion, biblical reformation must begin with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can cause a people to present themselves as a freewill offering to God for all His love, mercy, and grace revealed to them in Scripture. And a biblical reformation must be founded upon what God has revealed in His Holy Word. Why do reformations in Scripture within church and state not last but for a few short years (whether the reformations under Hezekiah or Josiah or others) or reformations in history (like the First Reformation in Europe or the Second Reformation in England, Ireland, and Scotland)? I submit it is because the majority of people within those nations had a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof. The vast majority of people may outwardly submit in these past reformations to the Moral Law of God, but their hearts were not renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit in the faithful preaching of Jesus Christ, and thus the vast majority of people did not voluntarily presented themselves as a freewill offering to the Lord to serve Him out of love and thanksgiving for the Gospel blessings and benefits bestowed upon them. When this happens, there may be an outward reformation that conforms to God’s Law, but there will not be an inward biblical reformation that conforms to God’s Gospel and Law.

Dear ones, I want you to understand that a biblical reformation is one that is both inward and outward—one that changes our heart so that we want to please our God who has saved us and one that then changes our conduct so that it is growing in conformity to the Moral Law of God (that is in the hand of a Beloved Father and Gracious Mediator, rather than in the hand of a Vengeful God of wrath to the child of God). Thus, biblical reformation must begin in the heart of an individual, and in the hearts of family members, before it will ever bear fruit in church or state. It is so much easier for us to talk about reformation in church and state (and to leave it at that). But when we begin to address reformation in heart and family, it becomes very personal all of a sudden. Then the spotlight is turned upon us.

What can you do to promote reformation? Begin with reformation in your own life and in your own family. The Lord will bring a Third Reformation that will bring the nations of this world into the Visible Church of Christ, but a reformation that is to last for the entire millennium is a biblical reformation that changes the hearts of people and families through the power of the Gospel, a power which the Law of God (as essential as it is for reformation) cannot do. Dear ones, pray for the reformation of nations and churches, but present yourselves and your families as living sacrifices to God as freewill offerings out of love and thanksgiving for all that you have in Jesus Christ. A biblical reformation will not come to families, churches, or nations until people want to serve and obey God as freewill offerings out of love and gratitude to Christ, rather than having to

serve and obey God out of mere duty to God as Creator.

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