

When the Authority of God Clashes with the Authority of Man

Ezra 5:3-17

May 6, 2012

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Whatever is done to reform and rebuild the new covenant temple and church of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is always a necessity to establish by whose authority we do what we do—by God’s authority or by man’s authority. For all lawful authority (which is simply the lawful right to command and to rule), all lawful authority originates with God (whose lawful authority and right to rule is absolute, since He alone is the everlasting God, the Creator, and the Sustainer of all things).

Dear ones, that which distinguishes a biblical reformation from a mere man-centered tradition within the church of Christ ultimately comes back to who has authorized this doctrine or practice within the church: God or man? If God by His authority has authorized it, then it is biblical reformation to re-establish it, teach it, and practice it; whereas if mere man by his authority has authorized it, then it is mere human tradition (and should be cast away). For if an alleged authority (whether it be church or state, minister or magistrate, pope or bishop) speaks not “to the law and testimony [that is found in the 66 canonical books of Holy Scripture—GLP], if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” Isaiah 8:20.

Beloved, biblical Christianity is not a religion of permissiveness, of lawlessness, and of license to do whatever each one thinks is right to do in his own eyes. Biblical Christianity is a religion of Christ’s right to authorize what is to be believed and what is to be practiced for the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And that is why biblical Christianity is hated so much by the world—Christ (to whom is given all authority in heaven and on earth according Matthew 28:18) calls for an unconditional surrender to His lawful right to rule as mediatorial King in all areas of life (family, church, and state). Whereas unregenerate man finds such a mighty Christ to be repugnant to his own sinful desire to be lord and master of his own life, regenerate man finds such a mighty Christ to be his only salvation from sin, Satan, and death.

This Lord’s Day we shall observe from our text a confrontation that occurred between the authority of God and the authority of man as God’s people resumed their work to rebuild the house of the Lord. May the Lord open our eyes to see how often we are daily confronted with the same battle in our own lives—whose right to rule am I truly pursuing in my family, in the church, and in the nation: the Lord’s lawful right or my own unlawful right? The main points from our text this Sabbath are the following: (1) The Authority of God Clashes with the Authority of Man (Ezra 5:3-4); (2) God Blesses Those Who in Faith Bow the Knee to His Authority (Ezra 5:5). Please note that Ezra 5:6-17 consists of the letter that Tatnai sent to King Darius, which I will use in various parts of the sermon to supply needed information. In other words, Ezra 5:3-5 gives us the actual confrontation between God’s people and Tatnai, the Persian governor; whereas Ezra 5:6-17 gives us the letter that Tatnai sent to King Darius detailing what the Jews told him, and asking the king to verify or deny what Zerubbabel and the elders of the Jews had told Tatnai.

I. The Authority of God Clashes with the Authority of Man (Ezra 5:3-4).

A. By way of review, you will recall from the previous sermon that the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem had ceased for a period of 16 years (with only the foundation of the temple laid). Why? Because there arose adversaries. Adversaries in the land (the Samaritans), who hired counselors to frustrate the purposes and plans of God’s people to persevere in doing the will of the Lord (according to Ezra 4:4-5), and adversaries within the very hearts of God’s people (complacency, lukewarmness, and procrastination) were

used by the devil to turn their hearts away from building God's house to merely building their own houses. This is a ploy often used by the devil—hinder, frustrate, delay, and prolong the good work of reformation in our lives, in our family, in the church, and in the nation, and soon God's people will become so discouraged as they seek to press forward without observable success, that they will then turn their attention from God's kingdom to their own mere kingdom wherein the devil will not oppose them. But as we saw in the previous sermon, the Lord stirred up the hearts of His people to resume the work of rebuilding the temple through the faithful prophesying and preaching of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2). The good work of reformation had begun afresh and anew with a holy zeal. God's people were clinging by faith to the promises of the Lord revealed to the Prophet Zechariah, who prophesied that Zerubbabel (the Jewish prince and governor of the province of Judea) would live and prosper to oversee and complete the rebuilding of the temple. But no sooner than God's people were shaken from their complacency, lukewarmness, and procrastination, and no sooner had they once again vigorously renewed the task of rebuilding and reforming the kingdom of the Lord, they were brought face to face with another obstacle that was intended to discourage them and to bring their godly efforts in reforming God's house to a halt. For we read in Ezra 5:3: "At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shethar-boznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?" Let us consider a few observations from this portion of the text.

1. Whereas Zerubbabel was governor of Judea, Tatnai was governor over all of the area west of the Euphrates River—an area encompassing Syria, Samaria, Phoenicia, and Judea. Tatnai was also accompanied by a number of fellow rulers of the Persian king ("Shethar-boznai, and their companions"), so that this confrontation was a most formidable one. This stately arrival of Tatnai and his fellow Persian rulers was intended to impress God's people with all of the royal fear that might be instilled in them. They didn't come to chat over tea, but came with the mission to frustrate once again the plans of God's people in rebuilding the temple. Dear ones, Satan is a foe that is relentless. Neither you nor I are able to withstand him in our own strength or in our own mere resolve. Had the Lord not given to the Jews at that time His promises and stirred up their hearts to persevere in the reformation begun, they would have quickly melted in fear before Tatnai and his mighty entourage of officers.

2. But why do I say that Tatnai and his fellow rulers came with the mission to frustrate God's people in their revived zeal to rebuild the temple? For two reasons primarily.

a. First, the timing of Tatnai's appearance. Note how Ezra 5:3 begins, "AT THE SAME TIME came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river" Ezra 5:3. In other words, it was precisely at the same time as the events recorded in Ezra 5:1-2 that Tatnai and his entourage appeared on the scene to contest the work of rebuilding the temple and to add yet another frustration in rebuilding and reforming the house of the Lord. For 16 years the work on the temple had ceased with only the foundation of the temple laid, and as long as the work on the temple did not continue, no governor (like Tatnai) bothered God's people. For 16 years the Jews had been discouraged by the Samaritans in rebuilding the temple, and no governor intimidated them. For some 16 years the Jews had merely focused on their own houses and their own kingdoms (rather than upon God's house and God's kingdom), and no governor sought to prevent them. But "at the same time" that the hearts of God's people were renewed to rebuild God's house, who shows up? Tatnai, the governor, appears (as it were) out of nowhere demanding to know who has commanded them to build the house of the Lord. This is not a mere coincidence, but is rather a design again to hinder God's people from the good work at hand. This seems to be the clear inference drawn from the text.

b. But there would seem to be a second reason that is inferred from the text that the mission of Tatnai was to frustrate God's people in their revived zeal to rebuild the temple: namely, that the Samaritan adversaries mentioned in the previous chapter (Ezra 4) continued their wicked work of frustrating God's people until the reign of Darius (the second year of Darius), which was the very time that Tatnai appeared (Ezra 4:4-5,24; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). It was most likely by way of the intelligence

received from the Samaritan adversaries and their counselors that Tatnai learned of the renewed zeal of God's people to continue in rebuilding the temple. It would appear that there was a conspiracy between the Samaritans and Tatnai to paralyze God's people with fear. Fear is a ploy of the devil when seeking to discourage Christians from a faithful work of reformation.

(1) If the devil can bring you to fear the consequences of good and righteous decisions to stand for the truth and cause of Christ (as the fear of losing a job, the fear of losing close fellowship with family or friends, the fear of losing prestige and honor in the eyes of others, the fear of being counted as disloyal to one's country, etc.), if Satan can instill that kind of fear in the heart of a Christian, he knows that many professing Christians will be stopped in their tracks and paralyzed in taking up their cross and following Christ. How many Christians make decisions by first considering the consequences of their decision (and what it will cost them) before considering and determining what God's revealed will from Scripture is in regard to their decision? Remember, dear ones, the duty is ours, the consequences are the Lord's.

(2) I was brought to shame (concerning my own fears) as I read about professing Christians in northern Nigeria who over the last year have been slain by the hundreds at the hands of a militant Islamic sect (Boko Haram). The very real threat of such deadly attacks in bombing the very buildings where they meet for worship, however, has not paralyzed them with fear from meeting together for worship. Dear ones, how often are we paralyzed by fear from taking up our cross and following Christ? God help us to stand courageously as He did with His people in Ezra 5.

d. You see, dear ones, the devil is happy to leave us alone as long as we are complacent and lukewarm when it comes to taking up our cross and following Christ in reforming our families, in reforming Christ's church, and in reforming this nation; but when God's people are shaken to their core by the Holy Spirit and awakened to their sinful backsliding so that they renew their trust in Christ, renew their hope in His promises, and renew their loving obedience to promote reformation in all of God's institutions, it is at that very point that they will face new attacks from Satan as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. You can count on it, and even expect it. And Satan's design is to so frustrate you or frighten you that you simply slide back into a comfortable, non-threatening, compromising Christian faith and practice. Dear ones, we are not in a fashion show in which we seek to impress our audience with the latest form of doctrine, worship, government, or lifestyle to the applause of the watching world. We are in a battle and in a war zone, in which we will face the severe opposition of the enemy (by way of adversaries, afflictions, trials, and temptations). The goal of the enemy is not necessarily to bring us to curse God and die. The goal of the enemy is simply to cause us to take the easy and broad road of comfort and compromise in which there is a mere outward form of godliness, but where the power of godliness is denied.

3. But now as we return to our text, I would have you observe what question was put the people of God in Ezra 5:3, "Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?"

a. This is a question from Tatnai, the Persian governor, who demands to know by what authority God's people were rebuilding the temple. In other words, "Who has given you the authority to rebuild the house of God?" Here is the clashing of God's authority with man's authority. There are times in which this question comes wickedly to discourage the work of biblical reformation (as in the case before us here in Ezra 5), but there are times in which this question comes righteously to encourage the work of biblical reformation.

(1) I submit that the question of authority here in Ezra 5:3 was not asked in order to promote biblical reformation, but rather was asked in order to hinder biblical reformation. Tatnai was not coming to the Jews wanting to be assured that they were following the revealed will of the Lord (from righteous motives). Tatnai (as we have already observed) was motivated by a desire to intimidate the Jews. So likewise when the Lord Jesus was consumed with zeal for God's house and chased out the moneychangers from the temple because they were merchandizing the house of God (with the consent of the religious leaders), Jesus was asked by the chief priests and the elders of the Sanhedrin in Matthew 21:23: "By what

authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" The Lord Jesus was challenged to identify by whose authority He had cleansed the temple. The religious rulers did not ask this question from a pure heart, so as to promote a biblical reformation, but rather asked from a wicked heart, so as to impede a biblical reformation.

(2) So likewise, dear ones, when we are summoned for jury duty, we may be asked (in so many words) by a judge to explain by what authority we refuse to swear an oath to uphold the federal or state constitution (and you cannot simply say it is wrong, but rather by the supreme authority of God, it is sinful). Or you may be asked at work by your employer (in so many words), by what authority you will not work on the Lord's Day (and you cannot simply say it is wrong, but rather by the authority of Christ, He declares it to be sinful). Or dear young people or single adults, you may be challenged by friends (in so many words) by what authority you will not engage in watching pornography, in all manner of sexual relationships, in getting drunk or getting high, or in dating, courting, and marrying a "nice" guy or girl (who does not share the same convictions in doctrine, worship, or government). In each of these instances, you cannot simply stand upon your own authority in declaring that you are not comfortable doing these things or you believe it is wrong to do these things as to your own personal convictions, but rather by the Divine and absolute authority of Christ, it is a violation of His commandments). Or dear Christian, you may be challenged by the devil within your own conscience to argue with him by what authority you (a sinner) have any right or reason to be called a child of God in light of your sinful rebellion and failure to love your wife as Christ loved the church, or your failure to submit to your husband as the church is to submit to Christ, or your failure to live an exemplary life before your family, or your failure to keep your heart, eyes, and behavior pure from lusts of the flesh, or your failure to restrain your sinful anger, your pride, your unbelief, your self-righteousness. Dear ones, you cannot defend yourself against the devil by appealing to your own self-righteousness, or pointing to your sincere motives. All such reasoning is appealing to your own mere authority (at which the devil laughs). The only authority to which you can appeal against the attacks of the devil is the Divine and supreme authority of Christ who has forgiven the believing sinner and has imputed to the believing sinner His own perfect righteousness and obedience. There are many, many adversaries to biblical reformation who will challenge you day in and day out to defend by what authority you promote and adhere to a biblical reformation in your own life, in your family, in the church, and in the state. And the only biblical response to such questions is by the authority of God as declared by God in His Holy Word.

b. The response of the Jews to the question put to them by Tatnai is not immediately given in the following verse, but is related in the letter which Tatnai sent to King Darius (in Ezra 5:11), "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth." In other words, as God's servants, our authority comes from the God who created and rules over heaven and earth. Dear ones, discussion with family and friend, foes and critics, always revolves around a matter of authority (Whose word is authoritative—God's or man's? And next, what does God say in His Word?). Dear ones, it is not our duty to change the heart of the adversary or the gain-sayer, it is our duty to give a faithful biblical answer for the reason of our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

B. Now after the rulers of the Jews tell Tatnai that their authority (as servants of the Lord) comes from the God of heaven and earth (Ezra 5:11), we come to Ezra 5:4, which might not be easily determined from the words of our English text who is actually speaking (whether Tatnai, or whether the rulers of the Jews). A more clear translation of the Hebrew text (in Ezra 5:4) would be the following: "Then we told them after this manner, what were the names of the men who were building this building." We can now clearly discern that it was the elders of the Jews that were speaking in Ezra 5:4, and they were responding to a question (which is found in the letter of Tatnai to King Darius) in Ezra 5:10: "We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them."

II. God Blesses Those Who in Faith Bow the Knee to His Authority (Ezra 5:5).

A. Here we see that the providential eye of the Lord is upon the elders of the Jews. I would submit that this is not the eye of general providence, by which the Lord governs both the wicked as well as the righteous, but is rather the eye of special providence that particularly governs and directs the steps of the righteous (Psalm 33:18; Psalm 34:15).

1. It was the eye of God's special providence that directed Joseph in being sold into slavery by his own brothers, and in being wondrously exalted to second in command in Egypt (Genesis 50:20). It was the eye of God's special providence that delivered David out of the hand of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:45-47). It was the eye of God's special providence that brought a hurricane-like storm upon a runaway prophet by the name of Jonah and brought him to repentance by means of a great fish that swallowed him, and sent him forth to preach to the Ninevites. And it was the eye of God's special providence that delivered the Lord Jesus to be crucified for the sins of His people, and brought Him forth the third day victoriously over sin, death, Satan, and hell.

2. Dear beleaguered, downtrodden, discouraged child of God, the eye of God's special providence, is not closed or shut to you. The eye of God's gracious providence has not fallen asleep in regard to your plight, your trial, your affliction, your marriage, your need of work or housing, your prodigal son/daughter, or your besetting sin. Just as the eye of God's good providence brought His people into another confrontation with adversaries from high places, so the loving and gracious eye of God's good providence has brought all of you who trust in Christ to confront your adversaries within and your adversaries without. And that same loving and merciful eye of God's good providence that gave His people the faith and courage not to stop their work of reformation in rebuilding the temple here in Ezra 5:5 will likewise grant to you the faith and courage not to quit, not to give up, but rather to persevere in hope of God's salvation.

B. For you see, dear ones, the loving and gracious eye of God's good providence was so upon God's people in Ezra 5:5 that the fear and intimidation of Tatnai "could not cause them to cease" their work in rebuilding the house of the Lord. Now what do you suppose the loving and gracious eye of God's good providence used to cause His people to persevere in reformation? Turn with me to Zechariah 4:6-10 where I believe we find the answer to this question. We looked briefly at this prophecy in the previous sermon, but let me bring it to bear upon the passage in Ezra 5:5.

1. Zechariah 4:6 is God's promise to Zerubbabel (the governor of Judah) at the very time in which Tatnai, the superior Persian governor, sought to use his authority to frustrate the rebuilding of the temple. It is the might and power of Persia that is specifically in view in Zechariah 4:6.

2. Zechariah 4:7 is God's promise that this great mountain (i.e. governor) of Persia will not stand in the way of Zerubbabel in rebuilding the house of God. But by God's superabundant grace shall the final piece of the temple structure (the headstone) be placed.

3. Zechariah 4:8-9 are very clear in declaring God's promise to Zerubbabel, that having laid the foundation of the temple, Zerubbabel will also live to complete it.

4. Zechariah 4:10 then concludes this section by posing a question in light of the promises made to Zerubbabel. In light of God's certain promise to see the temple completed, who has despised (or literally, trampled upon) the day of small things? The Lord of armies has certainly not despised the day of small things, for the eye of the Lord's good providence run to and fro throughout the earth to accomplish what the Lord has promised. And so, dear ones, that which the loving and gracious eye of the Lord's good providence used to cause Zerubbabel and the elders of the Jews to persevere were the promises of God. As long as Zerubbabel and God's people looked in faith and hope to the promises of God, Tatnai "could not cause them [the Jews] to cease". And so it is true of each of us.

5. I don't know your seemingly great mountain may be that has come as an adversary to

prevent you from working for daily reformation in building the kingdom of God in your own life, in your family, in the church, and in the state, but whatever it may be (whether trials, afflictions, temptations, besetting sins), God promises not only to flatten the mountain for Zerubbabel, but Christ (our greater Zerubbabel) has already legally flattened all those mountains of adversaries as demonstrated by His glorious resurrection. Now there is undying hope that because of Christ's resurrection that the Lord will complete the good work which He has begun in your life (Philippians 1:6). And there is undying hope that because of Christ's resurrection, "there hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted (or tried) above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Hope in the Lord completing His good work in the life of His people (His temple, His church) ever lives, because the resurrected Jesus ever lives at God's right hand to make intercession for us. And His prayers for us are always answered.

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