

Ezra 3 • Rebuilding the Temple

Introduction

There is a whole field of study called "Ecclesiology" which is devoted to articulating how a church or ministry is supposed to operate. Whereas the academic study of Ecclesiology was at one time fairly restricted to using the Bible as the sole source of reference, in these modern times many extra-biblical sources have been introduced, most notably psychology, marketing, and tools originally derived from running a modern business. In this chapter we have an example not only of what it takes to build a ministry or operate a church biblically, but the critical characteristics which accompany a true spiritual revival and return to the One True God.

¹Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. ²Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. ³So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings morning and evening.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is the first thing they did and why?

A: They first built the altar and began offering burnt offerings. Of all the things associated with the Temple this is probably the most important spiritually because this altar was at the center of Old Testament worship. Without such sacrifices they could not approach God or expect His blessing, much less address the issue of sin.

Application: *The altar is the Old Testament representation of the work of the cross. Every spiritual revival begins with a return to the cross.*

Q: What is the important distinction that is made about the way they restored the sacrifices?

A: They were done "as it is written in the law of Moses". (v.2) In other words, they were carried out in accordance with God's Word.

Application: *Every spiritual revival, along with sincere repentance and a return to the cross, is characterized by an exclusive return to God's Word and ways.*

Q: What was the biggest obstacle the people had to overcome?

A: "The peoples of the lands". (v.3) Both their spiritual and physical enemies were numerically superior.

Application: *Every spiritual revival begins with a small remnant in overwhelmingly hostile territory who must establish right worship and service in spite of the surroundings.*

⁴They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; ⁵and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.

[Read v.4-5]

Q: Of all the celebrations mandated in the Law, why did they start with the Feast of Booths?

A: According to v.1 this is the seventh month which coincides with the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles. Basically they were just picking up where they left off.

Q: What was the natural progression of the reestablishment of the Temple sacrifices?

A: First the burnt offerings (v.3), then the continual offerings (v.5), and finally the freewill offerings. (v.5) It is a picture of first earnestly repenting for sin before establishing the entire program of service and worship commanded in the Law.

Application: *The "things" of God are essentially meaningless if not pursued from the heart. Simply establishing a program or following rituals falls short of biblical worship and service if it does not come from a repentant and submissive heart.*

⁶From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. ⁷Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

⁸Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.

[Read v.6-7]

Q: Having established themselves spiritually, what is the next step taken?

A: They begin to organize and assemble the resources necessary to rebuild the Temple.

Application: Can you see why many times there is a basic problem with simply instituting a new program in a church? How might that not be addressing the more important issues of preparing the congregation spiritually?

[Read v.8-9]

Q: If they were keeping the Law again, what is implied about the work beginning in the second month of the year?

A: They would have celebrated Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Q: What does the initial step of laying the foundation most likely represent in a greater, spiritual sense?

A: Spiritually it is being established not just in the Person of Christ but in His teachings.

*Therefore thus says the Lord GOD,
"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone,
A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed.
He who believes in it will not be disturbed."
— Isaiah 28:16*

*"Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great."
— Luke 6:47–49*

*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 on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.
— Ephesians 2:19–22*

Application: True spiritual revivals and approaches to ministry are characterized as first and foremost establishing Christ and His Word in order to build something that truly lasts.

¹⁰Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of King David of Israel. ¹¹They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹²Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

[Read v.10-13]

Q: Who led the way in doing the work?

A: The Levites. In other words, the spiritual leaders. They worked side-by-side with everyone else.

Application: *Biblical spiritual leaders get their "hands dirty" because they do not lead from afar but right alongside everyone else.*

Q: What might be significant about the reference to re-establishing the role of the sons of Asaph "according to the directions of King David"?

A: They did not disturb the original order of things. In other words, first came the Law of Moses which they re-established first, then afterward came the directions for worship through David which they subsequently instituted. They built their ministry in the same sequential order established historically.

Q: What was the main subject of their praise?

A: God's grace. (v.11)

Q: What is the contrast of the reaction of the "old men" versus the rest?

A: One group were witnesses to the true cost and consequences of sin while the other were witnesses to something new God was doing in their lifetime. It reflects the difference in a revival between old sinners who return and the previously unsaved who are brought in anew.

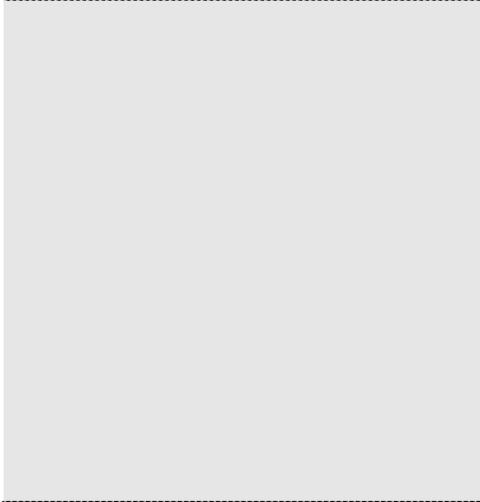
Q: Why might the dual response of the people actually be a healthy response overall?

A: It is the dual acknowledgment of the consequences of past sin in tandem with recognition of God's mercy and grace for the present and future.

Application: *Spiritual revivals acknowledge past sins in order to learn from them, but do not dwell on them to the exclusion of what God is now doing in spite of them. What begins with repentance of sin ends in praise for God's grace.*

Q: How might this emotional and very public display show that things have changed quite a bit from the situation first described in the opening of this chapter?

A: In v.3 it says "they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands" but having laid the proper foundation "the sound was heard far away". They are still numerically outmatched but no longer feeling inferior spiritually.



Overall Application

- *How does this biblical example of how to build a church compare and contrast to any of the modern methodologies employed today?*
- *Can you see how any approach which de-emphasizes or outright silences the work of the cross and God's Word cannot possibly be what God intends?*
- *How would you apply the structural elements provided in Ezra 3 to building a ministry?*
- *In our modern, corporate-driven world we are often presented with approaches to running a church or ministry similar to operating a corporation. How does what we have just studied contradict that in almost every way?*

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