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It is not often that we publish a "Special Edition" of this bulletin. However, this article is very timely and challenging so we will consider this a "Special Edition". We suggest all read and carefully consider the thoughts brought forth in this lengthy article.

Restoring True Religion

By Don McClain

In 539 BC. Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. In his first year as ruler, he issued an edict emancipating the Jews, fulfilling the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, (Jeremiah 29:10; Isaiah 45:1-4, *Isaiah mentions Cyrus by name nearly two-hundred years earlier*). The book of Ezra opens with the acknowledgement of this Persian king, containing his decree that the temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt, (Ezra 1:1-4; cf. 2 Chronicles 36:22,23; Proverbs 21:1).

Led by Zerubbabel, about 42,000 Jews returned to Palestine, taking contributions from Babylon, and from Cyrus himself, (1:7-11; 2:2). The country was lying in waste from the havoc of the Chaldean wars. The Arabs had moved in and controlled the region in the Jews absence. With the imperial edict in hand, these Arabic tribes could do little to stop the Jews. After two years of labor, there was a great celebration in Jerusalem, for the emigrants had rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation of the temple, (Ezra 3:8-13). The restoration of Jerusalem was under way. (***Restoration of the house of God is a noble cause***)

After the death of Cyrus, the Arabic tribes seized the opportunity to slander the Jews and their efforts, and by letter,

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presented their case before Ahasuerus, (*probably Cambyses II, the son of Cyrus*), (4:6-16). They were temporarily successful in putting a halt to the Jews progress and for some sixteen years "the work of the house of God ceased." (4:17-24). (***Restoration has its enemies***)

The result – apathy! Haggai and Zechariah scolded the Jews for "living in their houses while the house of God lay in ruins," (Haggai 1:4). The rebukes produced their desired results, (5:1,2), and the work resumed but not without resistance, (5:3-17). Tattenai wrote a letter to king Darius I in an attempt to prove false the Jews claim of the earlier decree by Cyrus. A record of the original decree was found, and Darius decreed that the work continue "diligently." (6:1-12). Over twenty years after the decree by Cyrus was given, the temple was finally finished. (***Restoration takes effort and determination***)

The task of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem proceeded slowly, and about 445 BC, Nehemiah, the cupbearer of Artaxerxes I, (Nehemiah 2:1), was given permission to direct the reconstruction. During this same period, Ezra was also allowed to return to Jerusalem to institute religious restoration. (***It is one thing to restore a building or a city, it is quite another to restore true worship***)

Ezra was a man equipped to lead the cause for restoration in that he "had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." (7:10). Before Ezra set out for Jerusalem with the full backing of king Artaxerxes, (7:12-26), he set in order the servants for the temple, (8:15-20), proclaimed a fast, (21-23), and gathered valuables for the temple, (8:24-30). When Ezra and his entourage arrived in Jerusalem, he presented the gifts for the temple, (8:32-34), and offered sacrifices, (8:35), and informed the governors of the region of king Artaxerxes orders, (8:36). (***Restoration succeeds under qualified leadership***)

Nehemiah contains a more detailed account of the restoration efforts under the direction of Ezra than the concluding chapters of

the book that bears the scribes name. (Nehemiah 8-13). There are some profitable lessons for us as well!

The Need To Restore Worship:

The feast days were again established according to the “prescribed manner,” which was found in the Law. The Jews restored their practices in areas that had not been observed since the days of Joshua, when the people first entered the land of promise, (Nehemiah 8:17,18; Leviticus 23:34,40,42). Restoration means that something is restored to its original condition. The restoration movement of our day is the appeal to return to the New Testament pattern in every applicable way, to worship God as the first century Christians worshipped Him. Their worship was simple, consisting of prayer, singing, partaking of the Lord’s-supper, and studying God’s word. The desire to do things according to the prescribed manner is an attitude God not only approves of, but rewards and demands, (Ezra 8:31; Nehemiah 13:14,22,31; Acts 2:42; 20:7).

The Need To Restore Respect For The House of God:

Nehemiah records an incident that took place in the temple – where Eliashib the priest prepared a large room for Tobiah. When Nehemiah learned of the “misuse” of the house of God, he immediately through Tobiah out, along with his household goods, (13:1-13). Many today have brought their own “Tobiahs” and “household goods” into the church, (*the present day house of God, 1 Timothy 3:15*). They have turned the house of God into a den of thieves, (Matthew 21:12,13), a place for secular education, material distribution, entertainment, and recreation. We need more Nehemiah’s who are willing to “cleanse the rooms;” of God’s house and put “back into them the articles of the house of God,” (Nehemiah 13:8,9), which is the original spiritual worship and work described in the New Testament. – (Acts 2:42; Acts 4:31; Acts 20:7; Acts 11:27-30; Acts 13:1-3).

The Need To Restore Dedication and Service To God:

Nehemiah forbade the buying and selling of things on the Sabbath. He commanded that the gates be closed and that no commerce could be engaged in with those who came to Jerusalem to sell their goods on the Sabbath, (13:15-22). Although we are no longer under obligation to keep the Sabbath today, (Colossians 2:14-16), there is a principle here that should be observed. How many today are forsaking the assembly of the saints on account of business? How many trade spiritual gain, (*found only in worship and service rendered to God*), for monetary gain? **Some need to close their gates!** (Hebrews 10:24,25).

The Need To Restore Purity:

Nehemiah scolded the people because half their children “spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah.” Why? They had intermarried with the pagans, (Nehemiah 13:23-31; Ezra 9,10). Intermingling with the worldly is a dangerous and forbidden thing, (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). Not that it is sinful per-se to marry a non-Christian, (1 Corinthians 7:12-16), but it is wrong to be “unequally yoked” with the world. Such is done when we go along with, and partake in their worldly deeds, (Ephesians 5:8-14). Many professed Christians talk and act like the world – Why? To much association with the world? To much Television? To many politically correct, sociably agreeable magazines? Others have assimilated the language of denominationalism, “*Youth ministers, Christian schools, Children’s worship, Contemporary Worship*” etc. The exhortation of the apostle Peter is just as important now as when first written – “If anyone speaks, *let him speak as the oracles of God*, (1 Peter 4:11).

The Need To Restore Allegiance To God in Repentance and Obedience:

Finally, Ezra commanded that they put away their unlawful marriages, (Ezra 10:10-13). Some of these marriages even involved children, (10:44), but they still “put away their wives,” (10:12,19). Despite the teachings of some

in our brotherhood, adulterous marriages must be dissolved in order for one to be pleasing to the Lord. The consequences of sin are often emotionally traumatic! - Sin hurts, and repentance hurts. As the drug addict gives up his drugs, the drunkard cast away his bottle, and the fornicator says no to their partner in sin – repentance is often a painful experience! No wonder so many reject the command of our Lord, “Repent, or you will all likewise perish,” (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30). However - Sin will hurt MUCH more if it is not repented of, (*Hell will be painful!*).

Repentance precedes baptism, which is a command of the Lord, (Acts 2:38; 10:47,48). Saul was told to arise and be baptized, “washing away your sins,” (Acts 22:16). Only those having been baptized into Christ have put on Christ and are children of God by faith. (Galatians 3:26,27). If one is to be right with God, he must repent – i.e. turn from his sins, and obey the Lord, that he may be forgiven of his sins, (Isaiah 59:1,2; Ezekiel 18:20-32; Acts 2:38).

Conclusion:

Restoration is not an easy process – many are too lazy, and apathetic for such commitment and dedication. Others will stand in opposition to restoration because the Lord’s prescribed manner of work and worship differs from theirs. Human wisdom and a lust for recreation and entertainment, have the eyes of many blinded to the need for restoration. Many are too enamored with “things” to give the Lord their whole-hearted devotion – so they resist the idea of restoration. The love many have for sin will keep them from purging it from their lives, thus preventing their restoration to a right relationship with God.

The restoration movement is much more than an ideology espoused by gospel preachers within the last two hundred years. It is the restoration of a relationship severed by sin. It is a choice that we make to allow God, through His Word, to guide us back into this right relationship with Him on His terms. Having this relationship restored demands our

complete and total submission to His Divine authority. Do you believe that it is important to do all things as God has prescribed? – Ezra and Nehemiah did! – They were true restorationists! Are you?