

Rebuilding and Reforming God's Temple

Psalm 69:8-9; Isaiah 56:6-7; Jeremiah 7:8-II; John 2:13-25 (text)

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Yesterday, many people celebrated a most unbiblical event, Halloween. It's not only unbiblical, but God calls it an abomination, since it glorifies evil spirits and demons. He forbids us from all kinds of divination, *"Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them"* (Lev 19:31; Acts 16:16).

But for most Reformed Christians, October 31 is better known as Reformation Day. Instead of celebrating evil spirits, we commemorate the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts of Martin Luther and many other Protestant Reformers, most of whom were persecuted and martyred by the Roman Catholic Church. They were not seeking to establish a new church, but to bring the Church back from its corrupted doctrine, worship and practices. The Reformers rejected the Mass, selling indulgences, the teaching of salvation by good works, relics, praying to the saints, and many other unbiblical doctrines and innovations.

In our study today, we find Jesus going to the Jerusalem temple during a Passover feast. And what does he do? He cleansed the temple of moneychangers and other merchants. He wanted the temple to be reformed back to its true function as a place of worship and prayer. His shocking action has generated reaction from many pastors and teachers. Some say the moral lessons from this story is controlling your anger, or allowing Jesus to disrupt your life of comfort. Liberals say Jesus is a revolutionary who questions tradition and establishment. Contemporary worship promoters say Jesus opens worship to allow non-traditional worship. But what was the real significance of this to John and the other three Gospel writers?

We must also note the most significant differences between John's narration and those of the other three Gospels. John places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while the other three places it at the end, just before he was arrested and crucified. Is this one more contradiction in the Bible that liberals gloat about? Some Bible scholars explain that Jesus did this action twice. But because of the similarities of the two cleansings, it is more likely that this was a single event. The difference in the timing in John may possibly be in John's arrangement of his gospel: it is a thematic, not chronological arrangement. John narrates Jesus' presence in Jewish institutions and feasts and then places Jesus' teachings about himself as the fulfillment of these Old Testament institutions and feasts. So in the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is teaching about his relationship to the Jewish temple. We see this teaching again in John 4 when he talks to the Samaritan woman at the well.

Today, we will study **"Rebuilding and Reforming God's Temple"** under three headings: first, **The Father's House Made Into a Market House**; second, **The Sign of Rebuilding the Temple**; and third, **False Belief Because of the Signs**.

The Father's House Made Into a Market House

First, a few things to clear up. Jesus was not a violent man. He did not hurt people, and probably did not hurt the animals either. He did not come charging into the temple's court of the Gentiles with a whip, but fashioned a whip out of cords he found in the court. He drove out the animals, overturned the tables, and poured out the coins. And the moneychangers and merchants selling oxen, sheep and pigeons were legal business authorized by the Jewish and temple authorities. But why was Jesus angered by this scene?

Jesus commanded the merchants, *"Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."* John uses word-play here. He uses the same word for "house," but contrasts his Father's house with a house of trade. The Greek word for "trade" is *emporion*, which means "market" or "business." But why was this business going on in the temple's Gentile court?

You see, during the annual Passover feast, pilgrims from all over Palestine traveled to Jerusalem and worshiped at the temple. Jesus was committed to attending the annual Jewish festivals. John mentions three Passovers in which Jesus was present, so we know that Jesus' ministry spanned over three years. We know from Exodus 12-13 that God commanded the Israelites who escaped from Egypt to commemorate Passover every year. On the night that the angel of death slew Egypt's firstborn children, the angel also spared or "passed over" the Israelites' homes marked by the blood of sacrificial lambs. In this commemoration, God commanded his people to offer animal sacrifices (Exo 12:3, 21; Luke 22:7).

The merchants and money-changers were rendering a service to the pilgrims so they can buy the animals right there instead of bringing them from far places. Also, all males over 20 years old were taxed. To ensure the purity and quality of the coins that the people were bringing, they had to exchange them with authorized coins. Money-changers made a profit out of this requirement. But as happens all too often, the law is abused by greedy merchants overpricing the animals and charging too much for exchanging money.

Jesus was not outraged not only because of greed or corruption, but that this business is even happening in the temple. It was not happening in the temple itself, but in the outer courts, including the court of the Gentiles. Still, the outer courts were a part of the temple, which in Jesus' words, was his Father's house and a house of prayer, a quotation from Isaiah 56:7. When his disciples saw what he did, they recalled Psalm 69:9, *"Zeal for your house will consume me."* In driving the merchants out of the temple courts, Jesus was driven by his zeal to defend and honor his Father's glory. His Father's name was being trampled and dishonored in his very own house. Jesus must have recalled the words of his ancestor King David, who lamented that his own brothers have rejected and scorned him (Psa 69:8-9). Jesus knew that it would not be long before he would suffer the same persecution as David, even death.

In the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, they also mentioned that Jesus said to the merchants about the temple, *"You have made it a den of robbers"* (Matt 21:13, Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). This is a quotation from Jeremiah 7, where the prophet condemns robbers, murderers,

adulterers, liars and idolaters who go to the temple and say, “*We are delivered!*” So the prophet says to them, “*Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?*” The word “den” also means “cave” or “hideout.” Jesus is saying that those crooked merchants use the temple courts as their hideout in planning their corrupt moneymaking schemes.

What does this remind us of today? We see all around us big churches, especially megachurches, turning their churches into business enterprises. I’m reminded of our former church, a big church in Walnut Creek, when they served coffee, donuts and other pastries after the service. However, later on, those things were not free anymore. And in many megachurch campuses today, there are Starbucks, McDonalds, and other concessionaires, plus bookshops and other stores. Are those things in their churches for the sole purpose of serving the people? Obviously not! They are there for making a profit. The house of worship and prayer has truly become a mall, even a hideout of merchants and robbers!

The Sign of Rebuilding the Temple

Only in the Gospel of John do we find an account of the first confrontation between Jesus and the Jews after this event. The Jews were astonished at what Jesus did. They might have remembered the prophet Malachi’s words about the Day of the Lord, “*And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple*” (3:1). Is he claiming to be the Lord, Adonai himself? So they asked Jesus, “*What sign do you show us for doing these things?*” Throughout his Gospel, John tells us that the Jews always asked him to show them a sign that he has authority from God to teach what he taught and to do what he did. For example, after Jesus fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, he taught them that God the Father has “set his seal” on the Son of Man who gives food for eternal life. It is astonishing that right after this miracle, the Jews again asked him for a sign that they might see and believe in him. And Jesus confounded them even more, saying he is the Bread who came down from heaven (John 6:27-33).

So here in John 2, the Jews asked Jesus on whose authority did he cleanse the temple, and what sign can he show them for doing such a thing. Jesus’ answer again confused them and his disciples, saying, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” The Jews then said, “*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?*” What arrogance! Is this man crazy? It has already taken *46 years* to build this temple, and you’re saying if this temple is destroyed, you can rebuild it in *three days*? You see, in 20 BC, about 27-30 years before Jesus did this action, Herod the Great started his massive temple rebuilding program. He wanted to please the Jews, so his temple would be more glorious and majestic than Solomon’s temple destroyed by the Babylonians. He employed 18,000 men and 1,000 priests. Some of the stones were massive, weighing 70 tons. Sadly, only six years after Herod’s temple was finished in AD 64, the Romans razed it to the ground. Jesus’ figurative statement became a literal fulfillment.

Thankfully, John gives an explanation of what Jesus meant in rebuilding the temple. He commented, “*But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*” He was talking about his atoning

sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection on the third day. So the “*third day*” at the beginning of John 2 has symbolic meaning. On that third day, Jesus will fulfill the Old Testament prophecies of a rebuilt temple in Malachi 3-4 and Ezekiel 40-48, a temple that will never be destroyed again. The Jews were looking forward to that day.

But when Jesus has fulfilled his temple restoration, there would be no more need for a physical temple, the priesthood, and the animal sacrifices. Jesus is now the new Temple, the great High Priest, and the once-for-all Passover Lamb of God. But no one, including his disciples, understood this until after his resurrection.

Note also that in our reading in Isaiah 56:6-7, foreigners will “*join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants.*” He says that they will be “*joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*” The new temple, the rebuilt temple of the Lord will not be a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, as most evangelicals think. But the rebuilt temple is the universal church composed of Jews and Gentiles like you who believe and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord who cleanses and purifies our idolatrous, immoral, corrupt and greedy hearts.

False Belief Because of the Signs

The Jews were outraged by Jesus' declaration of rebuilding the temple even more than his cleansing of the temple. This is why when he was being tried before the high priest, false witnesses testified, “*We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’*” (Mark 14:58). John's account of the confrontation was proven by Mark's account. The testimony was false because Jesus never said he would destroy the temple. Also, the witnesses at his trial is a strong argument that this event took place only once – shortly before his crucifixion.

After his resurrection, John writes, “*his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*” What Scripture did they recall? Again, these are from the psalms and prophets. David writes, “*For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption,*” a prophecy attributed by Paul to Jesus (Psa 16:10; Acts 13:35). Isaiah also prophesied that the Suffering Messiah will “*prolong his days,*” meaning he will have eternal life after his death (Isa 53:10).

What a contrast with those who believed only after they saw the signs he did! John says they “*believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.*” Is this true faith, assent to the Scripture's truths, and trust? These Jews were like the disciple Thomas, who only believed after he had seen the wounds of the resurrected Jesus. These people remind us of those today whose faith depends on all sorts of false signs, wonders, miracles, healings, and prophecies. They never read God's Word, so they are deceived by these false teachers.

This is why John says that Jesus “*did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people... he himself knew what was in man.*” He knew what was in man's heart and mind because he is

God. In the next two chapters, we will see that Jesus knew what was in the heart of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Knowing the evil in man's heart, Jesus knew that the faith of the Jews is not true saving faith.

Dear Friends: As we commemorate the Protestant Reformation this weekend, know that Jesus was zealous to rebuild and reform the temple. He started rebuilding it 2,000 years ago during his earthly ministry and after his resurrection. He is the new temple, and all those who believe in him are part of his temple. Every Christian is also indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and therefore a temple of God. And it is the Spirit who also enables each of you who believe to live a holy and righteous life before God. This is why Malachi wrote that when the Lord suddenly comes to his temple, *"he will purify the sons of Levi"* (Mal 3:1, 3). You are all royal priests to God, giving your lives as living sacrifices to him.

As zeal for God's house consumed our Lord, so also we are to be zealous for God's people, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind; and loving our brethren in the church with as much love as we love ourselves. We are to be zealous for the church's Lord's Day worship services, Bible studies, fellowship, and other God-glorifying church activities.

As a Reformed church and as Reformed Christians, our task is to help our evangelical brethren recover the thoroughly Biblical teachings of the 16th century Reformers. The 21st century church needs to repent of its worldly entertainment as worship, its rejection of doctrines, creeds and confessions, its man-centered preaching, and its bent on the false gospel of health and wealth. It needs to repent of its obsession with the new and improved, the spectacular, and the signs and wonders of false teachers. Most importantly, it needs to recover "the article by which the church stands or falls": that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone; and that our only authority of faith and practice is Scripture alone; and that our chief purpose in life is to glorify God alone.

And when Jesus returns one last time to gather his temple on earth, he will take you to heaven, where there is no temple, *"for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb"* (Rev 21:22). And because Jesus has cleansed you, his temple, from all sin, in that place, *"nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life"* (Rev 21:27). God's temple will finally be a pure house of worship and prayer.