

From the Pulpit of



Comfort to Conviction

No. 7

Ezra 8:1-20

July 10, 2016

Series: Ezra

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David Platt, the author of *Radical*, also has another book entitled *Counter Culture*. It's a call to 'conviction, compassion and courage,' to speak with the Gospel to a variety of pressing issues of our day. The areas he has in mind are: poverty, racism, immigration, orphans, persecution, sex slavery, abortion, same-sex marriage and pornography. His concern is to have a church that has convictions, compassion and courage in each of these areas. What's he's afraid of is that we pick and choose which issues we will "contest and which we'll concede. And our picking and choosing normally revolves around what is most comfortable – and least costly – for us in our culture."

You may be passionate about rescuing those involved in sex-trafficking or helping alleviate poverty. You will likely be applauded, but when it comes to issues of homosexuality or abortion you are content to be quiet and say nothing. Still others in here are not ashamed to speak the truth on abortion or God's design for sex, but on issues of racism or immigration you are content to be quiet and say nothing. Platt's point is that Christ's call is not for "comfort in our culture...but to counter our culture."¹ But often we are comfort seekers rather than truth seekers. We would rather pursue our comfortable lives rather than be a people with conviction, compassion and courage. In fact, staying quiet is not only comfortable, but often looks like humility. You think you appear humble in not telling people about Jesus or saying that pornography is wrong or God created people male and female. But you must remember that God calls us to a Humble Orthodoxy. You can't leave out the orthodoxy piece (beliefs aligned with the Bible). Your call is to bring the truth of God's Word to bear upon our world.

The temptation to pursue comfort is nothing new and you will find it throughout the Bible. People will have an opportunity to speak up and take a risk of faith but they take the easy way out. As we come to Ezra chapter 8 we will see that in the midst of those returning from Babylon to Jerusalem there seems to be a lack of truth speakers. There is a missing group of spiritual leaders who chose comfort over conviction. This is a big deal because God didn't just call His people back to the land but also back to His Word. If true renewal is going to happen, the people of God must be grounded in the Word of God. Let's look at story of a group moving from comfort to conviction and find ourselves doing the same.

¹ David Platt, *Counter Culture*, page xiv.

Context: If you remember, the book of Ezra documents the second Exodus. The first Exodus was when God led his people out of Egypt under Moses. The third Exodus was when Jesus led His people out of sin throughout His perfect life, atoning death and victorious resurrection. But the book of Ezra focuses on the second Exodus in which God led His people from their exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. This second Exodus started 100 years before Ezra was involved (Ezra 1-6 – 100 years, Ezra 7-10 – Timeline of 1 year). Chapter 8 describes a portion of Ezra's journey along with those who went with him and the discovery of those lacking to help bring the Word.

Look at a snapshot of some of the returnees in Ezra 8:1-14. Verse 1-2: "These are the heads of their fathers' houses (heads of households), and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king: Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush." Ezra is letting us know that priests are in the traveling party who descended from the original priest Aaron. There are two lines of priests from Aaron, one is 'of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom' (this line comes from Aaron's son Eleazor who was Phinehas' dad and of which Ezra was a part) and the other line 'of the sons is Ithamar, Daniel' (Ithamar was Aaron's other son). These priests have come to root people in the Word of God. In addition, "Huttish" comes from the Davidic line from which Jesus, the Messiah, will also come.

The remaining list contains heads of households, which shows once again that God had sustained His people in exile. Verses 3-14: "Of the sons of Shecaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered 150 men. Of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him 200 men. Of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah the son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men. Of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men. Of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. Of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him 80 men. Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men. Of the sons of Bani, Shelomith the son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men. Of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah, the son of Bebai, and with him 28 men. Of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men. Of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men. Of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them 70 men." This is a good remnant returning as people are taking a step of faith. They are leaving their comfortable life behind in Babylon, making the long journey back to an uncertain and difficult future in Jerusalem.

Yet there is a group of missing people as we see in verse 15: "I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi." The 'sons of Levi' are called the Levites and they are missing. Where are the Levites? They are the temple servants who not only help the priests with the menial work but they were also involved with teaching the people the Word of God. They had a history of training Israel in the Law. During the reforms of Josiah it was said of the Levites that they 'taught all Israel and were Holy to the Lord' (2 Chronicles 35:3). They were set apart for instructing God's people in the Word of God. Yet, during the first wave of returnees about 100 years earlier we saw that there was a low number of Levites (Ezra 2:40) and now during this second wave of returnees the Levites seem to be absent altogether. Where are the Levites?

Most commentators believe that the Levites were too comfortable in Babylon to return. I'm calling them "The Lounging Levites." They were settled into their homes and families and things were going well. Why would they want to leave comfort and then travel back to

Jerusalem where they would have to do the menial tasks for temple work and teach the law with conviction and courage? It was much more comfortable in Babylon. No need to get stirred up and stir things up. But they weren't always "The Lounging Levites." There is a legend that tells of the Levites who were carted off into exile to Babylon. While they were in Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar commanded that they sing the songs of Zion, 'they refused and bit off the ends of their fingers, so they could not play the harps.'² That's serious commitment to the Lord. They don't want to play songs of worship before a mocking King, so they bite off the ends of their fingers. But many years later they seemed to have moved from conviction to comfort.

I've seen this movement from conviction to comfort in my life and maybe you have seen it in yours. Maybe you can reflect on a time in which you were eager to share the Gospel with the people you knew and even those who didn't. Perhaps you stood strong in your convictions on the Word of God and acted like it in your personal holiness and public actions. Maybe you even had pushback, but it didn't bother you. But now, you are comfortable in graduate school, maybe as you raise your family, making ends meet and saving for retirement. Your zeal has left you and rather than being a person of conviction you have become a person of comfort. Have you moved from conviction to comfort? This can even happen corporately as we will see in the coming weeks in Ezra as the people get lax on holiness. The church can get lax as well and seek to entertain, tickle ears and avoid bringing the whole Word of God. Ed Stetzer says you can see it in churches that have settled for comfort because there is 'spiritual lethargy, Gospel indifference and missional paralysis.' He says, "Jesus has been relegated to a Captain America-type Savior who came and died to save us from Hell rather than a King who came to save us in order to reign in and through us." Have we moved from conviction to comfort?

Something must be done to alleviate this problem and Ezra goes into action as we see in verses 16-17: "Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God." Ezra calls for a delegation of 'leading men' and 'men of insight.' He sends them to 'Iddo, the leading man' of the 'temple servants' with a message, 'send us ministers for the house of our God.' The urgent call goes back to Babylon to rally people to come back to serve the Temple and Teach the Torah.

This seems unrealistic. Ezra is with the multitudes already along the journey out in the middle of nowhere, headed to Jerusalem. He notices that there are no Levites to serve at the temple and to teach the Word so he sends a delegation back to Iddo to somehow hurry up and send a group of temple workers. Who's going to want to go? What's going to motivate them to finally be stirred from their life of comfort and set out on a life of conviction? God's going to have to stir people up and He does indeed as we see in verse 18: "And by the good hand of our God on us..." God is moving and acting for the benefit of His people. The Lord cares about truth and His people walking in His Word. He will provide teachers to instruct His people so he stirs them up. I believe this stirring up by God among us happens when we see the power in the Gospel. Ed Stetzer says, "The gospel should be the sun around which the planets of our lives orbit. Everything we do—personally, emotionally, relationally, maritally, parentally, socially, culturally, vocationally, etc.—should revolve around the good news that Jesus Christ has saved us, redeemed us, and made us a part of His glorious kingdom. Being gospel-centered means that

² *The NIV Study Bible*, page 883.

we constantly ask ourselves the following question: Is my life bringing glory to King Jesus?" That's the question: "Is my life bringing glory to the King?"

Verse 18: "And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18;" God stirred up 'a man of discretion' named 'Sherebiah with his sons and kinsemen, 18.' There's more in verses 19-20: "also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name." God also stirred up 'Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah.' Here is an additional 240 workers bringing our total to about 260 people ready to roll back to Jerusalem. This is astounding as we see from the timeline that this turnaround probably happened over a seven-day period (7:9; 8:15, 31).³ In about a seven-day period 260 are stirred by God to leave their comfort behind and head out on the road of conviction.

This move from comfort to conviction happens as you embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord and head out on mission. You have not been called to be a "Lounging Levite" but a person on mission. You have been saved from your Sins so that you would serve Him as Lord and be on mission. A great New Testament verse that summarizes this mission piece comes from I Peter 3:15: "...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." You want to respond to people with Humble Orthodoxy. You give them the truth of the Gospel and you do it with humility. This is possible when you do the first part of the verse, 'but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.' People are not Lord; Christ is Lord. Your heart must honor Him as Lord. As you set out on mission and engage others with truth and humility, do it with a disposition that seeks to honor Christ as Lord.

Conclusion: May we be a people who move from comfort to conviction by embracing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and following Jesus as Lord. True renewal will not happen in your life, your family or your church unless we have truth speakers instead of comfort seekers. May you realize you have been saved and sent on mission to follow Jesus as Lord.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Evanston Bible Fellowship, Evanston, Illinois, by Pastor Jason Lancaster on Sunday, July 10, 2016. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. Evanston Bible Fellowship is a community of sojourners empowering one another to cultivate Gospel transformation.

³ James Hamilton, Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah*, page 75.