

BACK TO THE BIBLE

By Roelf L. Ruffner

“And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:5-6).

Ezra was a “ready scribe” (Ezra 7:6) and Levite who helped restore the temple worship of Jehovah to Jerusalem after returning from Babylonian Exile. He faced a daunting task. Just when things were going well he found that many of the Jewish men had violated the Law of Moses by marrying non-Jews. He was overwhelmed with grief. At his urging the people repented and turned to God. They went “back to the Bible” and repented of their sin by divorcing their foreign wives. Because of the efforts of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerrubabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi and many others God’s people and religion continued on for the next four hundred years until the coming of the Blessed One.

What about God’s people today – the churches of Christ? Liberalism, apostasy and worldliness have decimated the church of our Lord. Membership and attendance are declining in many congregations. Once faithful congregations of Christ’s brethren have “Church of Christ” on their signs but in reality they are “Church of Christ” in name only. They have become virtually indistinguishable from the denominations around them. Others have swelled with unbelievers and have become “mega-churches.” Tolerance of sin and compromise of the Truth have left many in the brotherhood “gutless wonders;” unable and unwilling to defend and promote it. What must we do? We must go back to the Bible.

Like the early church of Christ, 21st Century Christians must restore, if necessary, the role of prayer in our lives and worship of God. “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Brethren, how are your prayers? The prophet Daniel knelt down and prayed to God three times a day (Dan. 6:10). Our Lord prayed all night on occasion (Luke 6:12). How often do you and I pray privately? Do we entreat the God of Heaven to grant us the opportunity to teach the gospel to our neighbor? I recall

when the Wednesday evening assembly was referred to as “prayer meeting.” Why not devote a Wednesday evening (or Sunday evening) to public prayer interspersed with readings from the Scriptures? Let the men of the congregation pray fervently for the sick (physically and spiritually), God’s increase in their number (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6), our young men and women at war, our nation and its leaders, forgiveness, apostate brethren, our lost friends and relatives, missionaries, the financial needs of the church, thanksgiving, etc. Perhaps those public prayers could be uttered on bended knees like Ezra (I am not advocating any prayer posture.)

Ezra also tried to refocus his people on the word of God. Their ancestors’ seventy year captivity in Babylon (modern day Iraq) was due to their refusal to hear and obey the word from the prophets (Isa. 6:9, 10). On at least two occasions he had the people of Jerusalem stand before him as he read to them the Law of Moses and they listened attentively (Neh. 8 & 9).

Likewise the church should strive to focus more people on the word of God. Our society is filled with scripturally illiterate folk who know nothing about the Bible. Visitors to our assembly need to hear the Bible. Sermons should be filled with more of God’s word rather than the speaker’s thoughts. Bible classes could be lengthened from thirty minutes to forty-five minutes or more. In our public worship we often have a brother read a Bible passage before the sermon. Why not expand upon that and have him read an entire chapter or more from the Bible, encouraging the audience to follow along in their Bibles. He should be prepared for his assignment having practiced pronouncing names and difficult words found in the text. The early church often read God’s word aloud in their assemblies, as had the Jewish synagogue worship (Luke 4:16-19, Acts 13:14, 15; 15:21, Col. 4:16, 1 The. 5:27, 1 Tim. 4:13). The Bible was written to be heard as well as read. “O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord” (Jer. 22:29).

Brethren, these are just suggestions, not dictates from on high. Yet my hope is that we will all work to strengthen the church and further the boundaries of Christ’s Kingdom. Let us not give up but daily work to build up one another. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).