

The Call to Return

INTRODUCTION: There are four books written by **David F. Wells** that have impacted my ministry more than any other books I've read ...

1. Those books are:
 - a) *No Place for Truth (or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?)* (Prolegomena)
 - b) *God In the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Theology Proper)
 - c) *Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Anthropology)
 - d) *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Post-modern World* (Christology)
 - e) They are all about historic Christianity overcoming the obstacles and forces of a godless postmodernity.
2. Wells contends that the American Evangelical Church has become *Worldly* and unwittingly assumed the values, virtues and vision of our postmodern (i.e., post-truth) society.
3. In his second book *God in the Wasteland*, **David F. Wells** writes this (p. 29):

There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and an incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the past few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the 'self' movement, a psychologizing of the faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a therapeutic culture. Distracted by the blandishments of modern culture, we have lost our focus on transcendent biblical truth. We have been beguiled by the efficiency of our culture's technique, the sheer effectiveness of its strategies, and we have begun to play by these rules. We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of worldliness into the church.

4. In other words, when Evangelicals try to be "cool," "trendy," "contemporary," "practical," "relevant" and "successful" we fall into the old category of *Worldliness*. Defined by **Wells** thusly:

Modernity presents an interlocking system of values that has invaded and settled within the psyche of every person. Modernity is simply unprecedented in its power to remake human appetites, thinking processes and values. It is, to put it in Biblical terms, the worldliness of Our Times. For worldliness is that system of values and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any given culture, that have at their center the fallen human being and that relegate to the periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal and righteousness seem odd. Modernity is worldliness, and it has conceded its values so adroitly in the abundance, the comfort and the wizardry of our age that even those who call themselves the People of God seldom recognize them for what they are.

5. And we are *guaranteed* to fail in the mission Christ gave to us as His church **and** to actually fail in the very *methods* we've employed to complete that mission!

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:19-20)

6. **Mark Dever** explains how this happens (*The Message of the Old Testament*, pp. 387-388)

- a) *There are countless problems with this situation. For one, let’s just admit the world does worldliness better than the church does, no matter how hard we try. If we want to please the world by being like the world, we lose. So as the church’s distinctive mission fades, membership numbers fall. Why do people keep publishing stories about declining church numbers as if this is a surprise?*
- b) Proof: In the past 50 years ...
 - (1) Lutherans have declined 27%
 - (2) Episcopalians have declined by 49%
 - (3) Methodists by 33%
 - (4) Presbyterians (PCUSA), 47%
 - (5) Congregationalists (UCC), 52%
 - (6) Reformed Church in America, 62%
 - (7) Christian Church Disciples of Christ, 67%
- c) And in the past 20 years Evangelical denominations have begun to decline, as they follow the Liberal Churches drift into *worldliness*.
- d) Their losses simply become the “Nones” (no religious preference or practice), about 23% of Americans.

7. What is the Church to do ...

- a) Stop the flow of people leaving the church?
- b) Recover the “Nones” to active faith?
- c) Grow again, by reaching the unconverted?

8. The importance of that question besets us all. And the answer must be found in the Scriptures, for the saints of old faced the same issues.

- a) Namely: *living for God in a godless world and a culture hostile to our Faith*
- b) Their *stories* are in the OT, recorded for our benefit.
- c) *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor. 10:11)*

9. The three historical books of post-exilic Israel are *Ezra*, *Nehemiah* and *Esther* ...

- a) about Israel’s return to Judea from Babylonian Exile (captivity)
- b) Time frame: 539 BC – 420 BC
- c) a century of *Rebuilding* their Monotheistic way of life

- (1) *Rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem*
- (2) *Rebuilding the City of Jerusalem*
- (3) *Rebuilding the Spiritual Foundations of Faith*
- (4) *Surviving as the People of God in a Hostile Society*

d) **Restoring God-Fearing Community**

- 10. This year, as we focus on being a more *Gospel-centered Church*, we will look at
 - a) Romans in the mornings: *Becoming a Gracious People*.
 - b) Ezra-Nehemiah-Esther: *Restoring God-Fearing Community*
- 11. Let's begin our evening study by looking at **Ezra 1:1-2:70**, the *Call to Return* to the Promised Land, after 70 years in Babylonians exile.
 - a) The Decree of Cyrus (1:1-11)
 - b) The First Wave of Returnees (2:1-17)
 - c) *long passages, but historical narrative, able to be covered in a normal length of time*

I. THE DECREE OF KING CYRUS OF PERSIA (Ezra 1:1-11)

- 1. King Cyrus made a decree, in 539 BC, that exiles in the Babylonian kingdom could return to their homelands, rebuild their cities, and renew their religious practices. This included *Israel*.
 - a) *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:*
“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:1-4)
 - b) let's review OT history to this point.
- 2. After Solomon died, Israel divided into two competing kingdoms
 - a) Ten Tribes became *Israel (Ephraim)*: Northern Kingdom
 - b) Two Tribes around Jerusalem became *Judah and Benjamin*: Southern Kingdom
 - c) Both spiritually, morally, culturally and politically declined due to idolatry. Both were judged by God.
 - (1) In 722 BC *Assyria* carried off the 10 Northern Tribes and scattered them throughout their empire (*diaspora*: dispersion)
 - (2) In 605 BC *Babylon* captured Judah, the Southern Tribes and took some Jews (Daniel) into 70 years of exile in Babylon.

- (3) Again in 595 BC Judah rebelled; a second wave of exiles (Ezekiel)
- (4) Finally, a third rebellion in 586 BC led to the destruction of both the City of Jerusalem and the Temple.

d) This has been foretold by God through the prophets:

- (1) *“Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (Jeremiah 25:8-11)*
- (2) *Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:4-7)*

e) But God also prophesied that Israel would be returned to their land, after 70 years of exile –

- (1) *Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.” (Jer. 25:12-14)*
- (2) i.e., Persia would conquer Babylon
- (3) Israel would be allowed to return to Palestine:

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jer. 29:10-14)

f) And Isaiah even foretold who would decree that Israel return to Jerusalem: **Cyrus of Persia**

(1) *Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
 who formed you from the womb:
 “I am the Lord, who made all things,
 who alone stretched out the heavens,
 who spread out the earth by myself,
 who frustrates the signs of liars
 and makes fools of diviners,
 who turns wise men back
 and makes their knowledge foolish,
 who confirms the word of his servant
 and fulfills the counsel of his messengers,
 who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited,’
 and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built,
 and I will raise up their ruins’;
 who says to the deep, ‘Be dry;
 I will dry up your rivers’;
 who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
 and he shall fulfill all my purpose’;
 saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’
 and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’” (Isa. 44:24-28)*

(2) *Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
 whose right hand I have grasped,
 to subdue nations before him
 and to loose the belts of kings,
 to open doors before him
 that gates may not be closed:
 “I will go before you
 and level the exalted places,
 I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
 and cut through the bars of iron,
 I will give you the treasures of darkness
 and the hoards in secret places,
 that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name. (Isa. 45:1-3)*

3. All this came to pass, **exactly** as God had promised, in 539 BC

- a) Cyrus attacked Babylon, Besieged the City, and crept into Babylon’s capital one night, while the co-ruler **Belshazzar** partied –
- b) *King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They*

drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed. (Daniel 5:1-9)

- c) *Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. (Daniel 5:13-14)*
 - d) *Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5:17, 25-28)*
 - e) *That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old. (Daniel 5:30-31)*
4. *Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.'"* (2 Chron. 36:22-23)
5. A group of Jews decide to return to Judea, rebuild the Temple, repair the City, and re-inhabit the land.
- a) mainly from the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
 - (1) the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin
 - (2) *Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:5)*
 - b) The mission to return was voluntary, and no one was forced to leave Babylon
 - c) God seems to have called certain ones to return ...
 - (1) *"everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem (v. 5)*

(2) and **not** a very large number either

d) But others, who stayed in Babylon, helped them by contributing things to the Temple enterprise

(1) *And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. (Ezra 1:6)*

(2) note: “all that was freely offered”

e) Cyrus even released to them the remaining sacred vessels of Solomon’s Temple

(1) which Nebuchadnezzar carried off in 586 BC

(2) Belshazzar defiled in 539 BC

(3) *Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:7-11)*

6. **Note this:** The promises of God were all fulfilled in sequence and in time: Fall of Jerusalem, Exile, destruction of City and Temple, 70 years of captivity, fall of Babylon, Cyrus’ decree, the return of Israel to the Promised Land.

II. THE RETURN OF THE FIRST WAVE OF EXILES (Ezra 2:1- 70)

1. This is a long chapter, listing the heads of households which returned to Judea in 539-538 BC

a) a total of 110 names! I will *summarize* for us.

b) First: a list of the 12 leaders of the Jewish community

(1) *Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. (Ezra 2:1-2)*

(2) **Note:** *Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah*

(3) a royal prince, a descendant of Judah’s last king *Zedekiah*

(4) *and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, (Matthew 1:11-12)*

2. Ezra, the *scribe*, records for us the groups that returned in 539-538 BC

a) The heads of households of Israelites (2:3-39)

b) The Priests: 4 families (4,289)

The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. 37 The sons of Immer, 1,052. The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. The sons of Harim, 1,017. (Ezra 2:36-39)

c) The Levites (341)

The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139. (Ezra 2:40-42)

d) The Temple Servants and Royal Servants (392)

All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. (Ezra 2:58)

e) And a great number whose genealogical records were destroyed in the Temple fires, and were lost to recovery.

The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, 652. Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim. (Ezra 2:59-63)

f) A grand total of 49,897 people

(1) *The whole assembly together was 42,360, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720. (Ezra 2:64-67)*

(2) roughly 50,000 people in all

(3) same “head count” as Nehemiah 7

3. The **vast majority** of Jews remained in the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian territories where they had been taken into exile –

- a) some had been exiles for 183 years
- b) most Jews alive in 539 BC were 3rd or 4th generation exiles.
- c) *They were more Persian, Babylonian, Assyrian than they were Jewish* – gentile names, shops and businesses established in gentile towns and cities, even employed by gentile governments.
- d) Which means this: **The vast majority of Jews were more like Mordecai and Esther than like Ezra and Nehemiah.**
- e) But ... all the Jews had great sympathy for the returning exiles, the restoring of Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Temple.

- f) *And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. (Ezra 1:6)*
- g) *Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments. (Ezra 2:68-69)*

- 4. The people of God were organized and energized to **return** to the Land of Promise, their Covenant with God, and to a New Phase of redemptive history known simply as *The Restoration*.
- 5. And there are lessons for us to learn from Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

Conclusion: Five Key Lessons from Ezra 1 and 2 ...

1. **First:** King Cyrus was the agent of God in a surprising manner.

- a) His decree is the capstone of the promise of God to this generation of Israelites.
- b) All the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Habakkuk, Amos, Zephaniah are fulfilled.

*Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord,
 "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper
 and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
 the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
 and all the hills shall flow with it.
 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
 and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
 they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
 and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
 I will plant them on their land,
 and they shall never again be uprooted
 out of the land that I have given them,"
 says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:13-15)*

- c) And God used a *politician*, King Cyrus, to help Him restore the fortunes of Israel.
- d) Prophecy and Politics – the right and left hand of God!
- e) In fact, 5 Persian Kings would impact the history of Israel in the Restoration
 - (1) **Cyrus the Great** (559-530 BC): He would issue the Decree for Israel to return, rebuild and restore their Jewish way of life.
 - (2) **Cambyses** (530-533): Under his administration the Temple building project would be stopped (Ezra 4)
 - (3) **Darius Hystaspes I** (522-486): Under his rule the temple would be finished (516 BC), and Haggai and Zechariah would preach.
 - (4) **Xerxes** (486-465 BC): Also known as **Ahasuerus**: This was Esther's husband and the King in the Book of Esther.

(5) **Artaxerxes Longimanus** (465-425 BC): During these years both Ezra and Nehemiah would lead the second and third waves of returning exiles back to Judea. Malachi would prophesy in these years.

f) **Note:** What makes the study of Ezra-Nehemiah difficult is to understand the *chronology* of the two books (and Esther)

(1) In the Hebrew Bible Ezra-Nehemiah is one book.

(2) Esther falls midway through these two books chronologically

(3) I will preach through the 3 books *chronologically*, in order to fit the story together more sensibly.

g) **Robert Fyall:** *Ezra and Haggai: BST; p. 32*

Both prophecy and politics are part of the total picture. The hand of the Lord is at work and what the politicians devise for their own purposes are used by God as he carries out his plans. For Cyrus this was simply another subject people allowed to return to their own land, rebuild their temple and worship in their own way. For God this is part of the great story which began with the creation of heaven and earth and will culminate in a new heaven and new earth. We need to view our Christian work in that light and not be overwhelmed if the establishment try to suppress the church nor overexcited if the establishment favours it. Both are phases through which God's purpose will be worked out.

h) Bottom line: *God works through unlikely leaders – Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump (?) to accomplish His will for the Church: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

2. **Second:** The call to return to a God-centered life is always taken up by a minority at first, while the majority remain in a worldly way of life.

a) **John F. MacArthur:** *Rebuilding God's City (Study Notes); p. 11*

The problem was that God did not intend for them to make their home in Persia; their home was in Jerusalem, and He did not want them to put down roots elsewhere. God's temple was in ruins and Judah's walls lay in rubble, and the Lord grieved over that situation. He wanted His people to share those priorities and to long to return to their proper land to worship and serve God as He had ordained for them. The world in which they'd grown content was not their home.

b) One would think that of the hundreds of thousands who were in exile in Babylon or the millions of people scattered in the *diaspora*, the vast majority would desire to come home! Not so!

c) Two, three, even four generations were settled in their pagan lands, living out their lives in synagogues and neighborhoods.

d) **Robert Fyall:** *Ezra and Haggai: BST; p. 37*

We must look at an important issue here of the priorities of those who returned. It is easy to imagine that exile was virtually synonymous with enslavement and that the whole exiled

community in Babylonia were desperate to return home. However, there are indications that for many at least, that was not the case. Moreover, at least two generations would have grown up in Babylonia who had no personal experience of their former homeland. People with young families and elderly people would be reluctant to face the rigors of a long journey and the return to a broken-down city without amenities and infrastructure. Only a real sense of spiritual priority would have moved even some of the people to return.

- e) **Today:** The PCA is a *remnant* of Presbyterians seeking to restore “Presbyterianism” and the Reformed Faith from out of its worldly captivity in Liberalism.
- f) God *always* begins a great work of revival with a small remnant.
- g) While the PCUSA has shrunk 42%, the young PCA has grown 79% - *mainly through churches leaving the PCUSA to join the PCA, transfer of other Christians from dying liberal churches and converts from our church plants.*
- h) Our day of “small things” may well be a prelude to some great awakening in the future.
- i) **John F. MacArthur:** *Rebuilding God’s City; p. 11*

This is equally true for Christians today. This world is not our home! It is not wrong to pursue a career or to establish a home, but the Lord does not want His people to lose their eternal focus. He wants them to remember that the things of eternity are what matter most, not the things of this world.

3. **Third:** The Restoration of Israel is similar to a New Exodus

- a) people coming out of bondage into the freedom of God in the Promised Land
- b) That restoration from exile would happen in 3 waves
 - (1) Wave #1 under **Zerubbabel**: rebuilding the Temple
 - (2) Wave #2 under **Ezra**: rebuilding the Community of Faith
 - (3) Wave #3 under **Nehemiah**: rebuilding the City Wall.
- c) God’s work of revival, reformation, restoration usually comes in three “waves”
 - (1) The **Revival** of individuals and congregations.
 - (2) The **Reformation** of the Church in Biblical Christianity.
 - (3) The **Restoration** of the Culture via a Great Awakening.
- d) We cannot hurry up the process by skipping phases.
- e) **Robert Fyall:** *Ezra and Haggai: BST; p. 53*

All this is most relevant to the church in the West today. In spite of confident prophecies of revival and triumphalist hymnody we are not seeing Zion restored. We face loss of nerve, sheer weariness and the mockery or indifference of the establishment. What are we to do at a time like this? Ezra would say to us that we need to keep on building the temple of God by proclaiming his word so that unbelievers become part of that temple and that those already in it keep on growing; and we need to back that by prayer.

4. **Fourth:** We see the importance of the genealogies in the Book of Ezra. Boring but strategically significant. Why?

- a) Chapter 2 of Ezra is full of genealogical information.
- b) **Mervin Breneman** tells us why this is so (*Ezra-Nehemiah-Esther: NAC*; p. 86)

Although modern Western culture places considerably less emphasis on genealogy, it was very important to the community restored in Judah. God had founded Israel as an ethnic as well as a spiritual entity. The renewal of God's plan of redemption depended on the reestablishment of that entity on the land God had given them.

- c) We renew our faith, revive our churches, reform the Faith and restore our national soul by building our faith into our children upon the foundation of our parents.
- d) **Please note:** *In the history of the Church youth movements have not been used by God to bring revival, in most cases. The Welsh revival was an exception, but it soon faded away.*
- e) America's Youth-Church phenomenon (like *Elevation*) is not what God desires or what God will use for Revival and Reformation and Restoration.
- f) God's massive use of *genealogies* in both OT and NT tell us an important fact –
- g) **God's way of renewal** *is to build our children's Faith and future on the spiritual shoulders of their grandparents, so that 3 and 4 generations of believers worship, work and witness together presenting the culture with a faith that has a multi-generational staying power and appeal.*
- h) **Hence:** Christ Covenant's purposeful emphasis on "Generations in Community"
- i) **Robert Fyall:** *Ezra and Haggai: BST*; p. 56

Looking at Ezra 2 we can see that it is far more than a list of names. Here we see the community, conscious of a commitment to their roots, yet beginning a new and significant stage in their discipleship.

5. **Fifth:** Israel's focus on rebuilding the Temple first was of significance both for them and for us.

- a) The Temple was God's ordained manner for Him to dwell with His people (Israel)

(1) Both in the Tabernacle ...

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40:34-38)

(2) And in the Temple ...

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in

Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 8:1, 6, 9-11)

(3) The Temple became *The House of the Lord* in Israel.

- b) Israel's desire to rebuild the temple was their heart-longing for God to dwell at the **center** of their lives, their community, their society, their world.
- c) Israel was seeking a *God-centered* life once again.
- d) Although God would never again indwell the *Second Temple* with His *Shekinah Glory* ...
- e) ... nevertheless it was a memorial to a way of life.
- f) **Robert Fyall:** *"Thus here the rebuilding of the Temple is a demonstration of how serious the people are to have the Lord living among them."* (p. 35)
- g) There is a **direct link** to the New Testament Church: The "Temple of the Holy Spirit" among us –

- (1) **First:** each one of us is a living temple of the Holy Spirit ("you" is here in the singular; individual)

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

- (2) **Second:** The local Church is also a temple of the Holy Spirit ("you" is here in the plural; congregation)

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:16-17)

- (3) *As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:*

*"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."*

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

*"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,"
and*

*“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-10)

- h) **Hence:** The priority of a holy, healthy, happy Church in which the Spirit of the Lord is free to live among us!
- i) This is how we see the *Shekinah Glory* of God among us!

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:17-18)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor. 4:3-4)

- 6. So, we will discover these books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther along with the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi –

- a) this grand, even if confusing, era of time, known as the **Restoration** ...
- b) ... carries great and encouraging lessons about Restoration

(1) Becoming a gracious people (congregation)

(2) *Restoring a God-fearing Community* (America)

- 7. One last word from commentator **Robert Fyall** ... (pp. 55-56)

Ezra and Nehemiah tell us of the return to the homeland and the world of the temple, religious observance and the re-establishing of a lifestyle which will glorify God. Haggai and Zechariah show us the kind of preaching which inspired the returned exiles. Sadly, the words of Malachi show that a generation later much had been lost, and we already noticed his denunciation of unworthy offerings and false teaching. The book of Esther tells what on the surface is a story of Gods people who remained in Persia and appeared to have no wish to identify with the community in Jerusalem. Yet on closer inspection Esther and Ezra/Nehemiah are not as far apart as they might seem. Esther, no less than Ezra, bears witness to the sovereign God who, working through flawed humans, brings about his purposes, and pointing to the time when the earth will be filled with the glory of God.

- 8. **Restoring the God-Fearing Community** begins with the individuals and the congregations of local churches living out faithful lives engaging in good works, returning to “old paths,” experiencing the presence of God once again ...

- a) *Set up road markers for yourself;
make yourself guideposts;
consider well the highway,*

*the road by which you went.
Return, O virgin Israel,
return to these your cities. (Jeremiah 31:21)*

- b) *Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:27-28)*
- c) *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:11-13)*

9. And these promises to God's OT Israel become *principles* for His NT Church!

*Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation. (Ps. 85:6-7)*

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.
Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
Yes, the Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way. (Ps. 85:8-13)*