

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

Ezra Nehemiah Esther

People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Ezra

Chapter Eight

"Never Let Them See You Sweat"

Introduction

A nationwide survey released by Barna Research in 2002 asked a sample of people who do not consider themselves to be Christian to rank their impressions of various groups. "Evangelicals" rated tenth out of the eleven groups they were asked to evaluate - just ahead of prostitutes!

Set the Barna study aside. Do your own unscientific study, right now. Think about Christians and their Christianity. If you're honest, you'll have to admit that far too many believers poorly represent Jesus Christ.

Ezra was concerned about how he and those traveling with him would represent the Lord. Look again with me at verse twenty-two:

Ezra 8:22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him."

Ezra did not want to give Artaxerxes the impression that God was unable to guard them and get them to Jerusalem. He prayed and fasted that he would be enabled to represent God **the right way** to those unbelievers who were watching.

I suggest to you that we represent to others our own reverence for God. For example: If I revere God as I would a tough taskmaster, then that is how I will represent Him. If instead I revere God as I would a forgiving Father, then that is how I will represent Him.

Our text in Ezra provides lessons in reverencing God the right way, and in representing Him the right way. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 There Is A Right Way For You To Reverence God, and #2 There Is A Right Way For You To Represent God.

#1 There Is A Right Way
For You To Reverence God
(v1-20 & 24-36)

Showing proper reverence for God is a hot topic right now among Christians. Many well-known and influential evangelical leaders are trying to call the Church back from what they believe to be an irreverent worship of God because it has become, in their estimation, overly casual.

Reverencing God is never a matter of outward decorum, but of inward devotion. I am not necessarily more reverent of God if I am hushed and quiet and observe age-old traditions; nor am I necessarily irreverent if I prefer a more laid-back, contemporary style.

Ezra was certainly a reverent man. Let's see how he thought you ought to reverence God.

First, let me give you a little historical background. It was the year 458BC and Artaxerxes the First was King of Persia. Nearly sixty years had passed since the completion of the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jewish remnant was having a tough time. God raised up Ezra to lead a second group of refugees from Babylon to Judah to bring financial and spiritual support to the work and to help rebuild the city. Ezra gathered eighteen men who were the heads of Jewish families, knowing that they could influence their relatives, and the result was a total of one-thousand five hundred fifteen men, plus women and children, who agreed to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. The total number may have been about five thousand people.

The first thing we encounter is the list of names, in verse one through fourteen. It alerts you that the right way for you to reverence God begins at home.

God intended your home to be the primary school of His Spirit. It's the place you and your family practice grace and produce the fruit of the Spirit:

1. It's where husbands revere God by loving their wives as Christ loved the Church.
2. It's where wives revere God by submitting to their husbands as unto the Lord.
3. It's where children revere God by obeying their parents, and parents by not provoking their children to wrath.

I simultaneously love and loathe reality shows that film people going about their daily lives at home. I can't believe people act that way – knowing they are being videotaped!

How would you fare on videotape? We could call it, *Disciples Disclosed*, or *Evangelicals Exposed*, and show clips each Sunday. You get the idea. Look within your own home and be sure you are reverencing God the right way.

The next thing you see about how to reverence God the right way is in verses fifteen through twenty:

Ezra 8:15 Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there.

Ezra 8:16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leaders; also for Joiarib and Elnathan, men of understanding.

Ezra 8:17 And I gave them a command for Iddo the chief man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say to Iddo *and* his brethren the Nethinim at the place Casiphia - that they should bring us servants for the house of our God.

Ezra 8:18 Then, by the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, with his sons and brothers, eighteen men;

Ezra 8:19 and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty men;

Ezra 8:20 also of the Nethinim, whom David and the leaders had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinim. All of them were designated by name.

The returnees were a small group of campers living in community with one another on their way home. **So are we** as we journey through life. We are pilgrims on this earth, citizens of Heaven in a foreign land, looking forward to going home to our nearly completed mansions in the city whose builder and maker is God.

Ezra noticed there were no **Levites** among them. Levites were men who assisted the priests in the service of God's Temple. The Levites were at **Casiphia** Chapel - which seems to have been a kind of school or seminary for training them to serve. When asked, some responded willingly.

Did you notice that a lot of the **Nethinim** also responded? The Nethinim were descendants of a group of people (the Gibeonites) who had been assigned to serve the Levites. More of the Nethinim responded than did Levites – *and they weren't really asked!*

The right way to revere God is not just to serve Him; it is to serve Him willingly, and (better yet) without being exhorted or even asked. It's all too possible to serve God grudgingly. It is refreshing to see someone serving Him joyfully and by God's leading, rather than by coercion or manipulation.

Churches must avoid coercion and manipulation. The end does not justify the means. We ought to teach and talk about Jesus and then trust the love of God to motivate believers, rather than the fleshly techniques of man.

Drop down now to verses twenty-four through thirty:

Ezra 8:24 And I separated twelve of the leaders of the priests - Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them -

Ezra 8:25 and weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the articles, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel *who were* present, had offered.

Ezra 8:26 I weighed into their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, silver articles *weighing* one hundred talents, one hundred talents of gold,

Ezra 8:27 twenty gold basins *worth* a thousand drachmas, and two vessels of fine polished bronze, precious as gold.

Ezra 8:28 And I said to them, "You *are* holy to the LORD; the articles *are* holy also; and the silver and the gold *are* a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.

Ezra 8:29 Watch and keep *them* until you weigh *them* before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and heads of the fathers' *houses* of Israel in Jerusalem, *in* the chambers of the house of the LORD."

Ezra 8:30 So the priests and the Levites received the silver and the gold and the articles by weight, to bring *them* to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

These men were in charge of a great treasure, and would be held accountable for it when they arrived at their destination.

You are in charge of a *greater* treasure – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You will be called upon to give an account one day, when you reach your heavenly destination. It is for the purpose of rewarding you in eternity.

The right way for you to reverence God is to live forward, for the future, in the certain hope of seeing Jesus at any moment.

Everything about you ought to promote your other-worldly goals, rather than any attachment to this world.

Ezra makes one final point about reverencing God:

Ezra 8:31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth *day* of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

Ezra 8:32 So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.

Ezra 8:33 Now on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the articles were weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui,

Ezra 8:34 with the number *and* weight of everything. All the weight was written down at that time.

Ezra 8:35 The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. All *this* was a burnt offering to the LORD.

Ezra 8:36 And they delivered the king's orders to the king's satraps and the governors *in the region* beyond the River. So they gave support to the people and the house of God.

The thing I want to note is their faithfulness:

1. They were faithful to keep everything committed to their care.

2. They were faithful to encourage their fellow Jews by worshipping with them.
3. They were faithful to deliver [the king's orders](#) to the unbelievers surrounding them.

Faithfulness is a true measure of reverence. Not achieving greatness; not having lofty goals; but faithfulness.

In the end, whether I chant in Church, or chuckle, is not a true measure of my reverence. I measure my reverence by my true home life; by my willing and joyful service; by my faithfulness; and by my hope in the future return of Jesus.

Those things translate into how I will represent God to an unbelieving, but watching, world.

#2 There Is A Right Way For You To Represent God (v21-23)

The verses we skipped emphasize the further awareness that unbelievers are watching us. We are the 'Jesus' they see; we are the Bible they read. Each of us is a living letter, communicating the nature and character of God as they examine our lives. Each of us is a representation of Jesus Christ to them.

Ezra thus reminds us to represent God [the right way](#).

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions.

Ezra 8:22 For I was ashamed to request of the king an escort of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the road, because we had spoken to the king, saying, "The hand of our God *is* upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath *are* against all those who forsake Him."

Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.

Here were several thousand Jews, inexperienced in travel and warfare, carrying a fortune in gold and silver, led by a scholar, not a soldier, and planning to travel through dangerous territory that was

infested with thieves - **and yet their leader didn't want an army to protect them!**

Ezra could have asked for an armed escort, but he felt that a request for protection would misrepresent the Lord in the eyes of the pagan king. He had already told Artaxerxes that God's good hand was upon him and the Jews, so how could he then ask for human help?

If those traveling with Ezra had questioned his decision, what might he have said to them? There are a number of non-biblical expressions he might have used: *Don't let them see you sweat... Man up!... Suck it up!... Act like a man! ...*

Before you come to the conclusion that I am just being my normal, insensitive self... Let me point out that there are similar statements in the Bible. The apostle Paul once said to the Church at Corinth, **Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong** (1 Corinthians 16:13).

Here it is slightly more expressively, in the New American Standard Bible:

1 Corinthians 16:13 Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, **act like men**, be strong.

Then there is this verse, from the Book of Hebrews:

Hebrews 12:4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

Think you've got it tough? *You haven't bled yet! No one has martyred you!* Those are strong exhortations – not at all what you normally expect.

Think of it this way. Let's say you're having trouble at work, with your boss or fellow employees. Maybe you're even genuinely being mistreated. It becomes a greater and greater spiritual struggle. You decide to come in for counseling. You relate to me some of the specifics... Then wait for some words of encouragement.

I look at you and say, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin! Stand firm in your faith and act like a man!"

Do you receive that? *Or do you look for additional counseling to undo the emotional damage I've just caused you!*

I'm having a little fun with this... But Ezra was serious. He was more concerned about misrepresenting God to unbelievers than he was about their personal safety.

Let's say you receive this, and you want to represent God the right way. Take your cues from Ezra. He did at least four things:

1. First, he **fasted**. Whether you literally fast from food or not, the mention of fasting is a reminder that there is a battle going on with the enemy within – our flesh. We must deny our flesh, and walk in the Spirit.
2. Second, Ezra and his group **humbled themselves before God**. This could mean a lot of things; you'll need to meditate further upon it. One thing it means is that they trusted God to be Sovereign in whatever situation they were in. Let's go back to our previous example, of trouble at work. God knows about it; He is allowing it; so humble yourself and use it as a teaching experience to build Christian character and produce a testimony about Jesus to those oppressing you and those watching you.
3. Third, Ezra was **ashamed** to ask for help from the world. I remember a time when I first went into full-time ministry. I was leaving a lucrative career and had agreed to a salary that was less than half what I'd been earning. That was fine – *until the salary was cut by one-fourth again!* By that time I'd already given notice to my employer that I was going into the ministry to serve God. Was there still time to get my old job back? Yes; but Pam pointed out that it would bring shame upon the Lord.
4. Fourth, **Ezra entreated... God**. We might say that he prayed, but the word is richer and fuller than prayer alone. It means to search God out, by *any* biblical method, including worship and prayer and study. For us it means we should put more value upon spiritual resources and spiritual disciplines than even the armies of the world.

The result was a representation of God as good; as great; as gracious; and as glorious.

Applying the Word

If you are a Christian, “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin! Stand firm in your faith and act like a man!”

If you are not saved, not a believer, not yet born-again... Get past any and all misrepresentation you’ve seen of Jesus Christ. The Lord Himself is good... great... gracious... and glorious.

