

THE REFORM WE NEED

Restored ideas for
temples of the Holy Spirit



by Jeff Hopper



It might be unfair to start with a question as imposing as this one, but I'll assume you're reading alone. No one looking over your shoulder. No one monitoring your thoughts. So here goes: *Do you ever forget to follow Jesus?*

We might call this a "Christian question," of course, because the irreligious person, or the one who adheres to another faith, isn't ever purporting to follow Jesus. They don't forget because they don't ever think to do it—like a teetotaler "forgetting" to pick up the wine for dinner.

But if you say you're one of Jesus' people, you know you're supposed to be following him. More than that, you're making a regular effort to do so. You read Scripture to discover what Jesus himself was like and what he asked of his disciples (or followers), and then you set out to do those things. Except sometimes you forget.

It may be trite, but let me be the hospitable guy in the room: Welcome to the club!

If you've been stopped in your tracks by this big question, you may be considering the reasons why it even happens that we forget Jesus. Here are a few:

1

We are way too busy. We have so many things going on in our lives that Jesus doesn't so much get set aside as he never makes the agenda.

2

We aren't busy enough. That is, when we do make time to relax, it's about this thing we call *vegging*. We binge watch. Or nap. Or scroll our social media apps. We're mindless. We could call all this a sabbath rest, except that none of it is intentional. It's haphazard, like eating a whole slew of potato chips without ever noticing your hand go in the bag.

Even DiVinci's Last Supper,
even Michelangelo's Sistene Chapel ceiling,
have needed major renovation.

Perhaps we do, too.

3

We formalize our faith. We've been duped into thinking we can accomplish all the really important stuff during an episode we call "quality time," forgetting that if we would remember Jesus in the midst of all life's moments, it would all be quality time.

Gravely, faith not attended, faith not lived, dies out. This is a biblical principle. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote a sentence you almost certainly know: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17, NIV). Or, in the traditional shortened phrasing: "Faith without works is dead."

I don't know whether this occurs to you when you read this passage of Scripture, but death is a serious condition. It would be permanent without the hope of resurrection. Mercifully, we have been offered that in Christ. Resurrection. Death unto life.

The problem is that for many of us, we would say we already have that. We have given our hearts to Jesus and he has given us new life. And when this happened, we ate our meals (supped) with him, so to speak, and talked and laughed and were sorry every time life called us away from that.

And then we became church people and put our communion drink in little plastic cups and ate only thumb-sized wafers of the Bread of Life. And we did this once a month or so. And slowly but surely, the ongoing, life-giving communing hours we were meant to have

with Jesus petered out to become a special occasion that wasn't all that special.

Bored yet? You might be, just by the sound of that. That's because we aren't saved to sit around. After very carefully explaining to the Ephesians that salvation comes by grace seized through faith—and definitely not works!—Paul went on to say in the very next sentence: "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10).

Plainly, we are saved to do something. A lot of somethings, in fact. The consistent framing of Paul's letters is this: First, he tells us who and what we are—sons and daughters of God, saved by Christ through the grace of God. There is no work we can do to attain our own salvation. If there were, the death of Christ would have been unnecessary. But there are many things we can do in response to our salvation. We were designed—as "God's masterpiece"—to do these things. And yet we too often let the masterpiece that we are fall into disrepair. Even DiVinci's Last Supper, even Michelangelo's Sistene Chapel ceiling, have needed major renovation. Perhaps we do, too.

In another of his letters, this time to the Corinthians, Paul took up that matter of what we are and how this should dictate what we do and how we do it. Look at the first of these passages:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, NIV)

The specific context of the partner passage in 1 Corinthians 6 is sexu-

al purity, but here in 1 Corinthians 3, the context is more general. You likely know that all kinds of words have been written and videos have been produced about this passage in a health and fitness context. Some believers would point to this passage as the reason why we should not smoke; others would say it's a charge to eat right, even according to a vegetarian diet. For a long time, I had a neighbor in my office complex who was a Christian personal trainer. The name of her business? Temple Training. To her, this passage urged us toward exercise.

But I want to view this passage in a more biblical light. I want us to see what it means when the temple needs reform. Because I am the temple, and I have a great tendency to fall into disrepair.

Recently I was listening to two pastors talking on a podcast about how we as American Christians often lament the demise of morality in our nation over the past 50 years. We can't believe where Woodstock or Hollywood or the Gay Agenda or the Other Political Party or social media have taken us. We're plummeting into the abyss—and so, so fast.

But here is where I thought these pastors were very insightful: Over and over in the Old Testament, we watch Israel crumble in a single generation. A new king takes the throne, turns the nation toward idols, and in matter of weeks to months, the whole nation goes with him. What we are seeing in our culture is no new thing. But it is also no irreparable thing. When God ramps things up, he can do so in short order, too. And when we turn to a particular passage in the Old Testament, we see him do just that.

So we are now going look intently at that passage in 2 Chronicles 29. There are two reasons for this. The first is that in 2 Chronicles 29, we come across

one of two kings who initiated reforms among the people of Judah for the sake of the Lord's glory. These two kings were Hezekiah, whom we will study this morning, and the teenage king, Josiah.

The second reason 2 Chronicles 29 is helpful is because the reforms center around the temple. You see, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they themselves were each the temple of the Holy Spirit, this was no abstraction to his readers. They understood what temples were. The Jews had the temple in Jerusalem, but the Greeks—like the Corinthians—had their many temples, too—worshipping their pantheon of gods. In the mind of both Jew and Greek, a temple was an actual physical place set aside for worship. If a marauding king wanted to leave his victorious mark on an ancient nation, he would desecrate the temple.

What I would like to do, then, is use the reform of the temple and the practices of the temple as a guide for how we might reform our own temples for the work of God.

Now let's set the context. When earlier I noted three ways our temple—our spiritual self—might fall into disrepair, I left out one possibility. I said we may get busy, get lazy, or formalize our faith. We may also forsake our faith. With disregard for the Lord and his ways, we choose other loves and chase other dreams. We become our own kings and priests, worshipping what we want, how we want. This was a common trait of the kings of Israel and Judah. When they didn't want to follow what the Lord would have them do, they didn't seek the Lord at all. And this is what had happened with Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah and the king who preceded him. In 2 Chronicles 28:24, we read this:

The king took the various articles from the Temple of God and broke

them into pieces. He shut the doors of the LORD's Temple so that no one could worship there, and he set up altars to pagan gods in every corner of Jerusalem.

Ahaz had blatantly turned from God. But then came Hezekiah, and immediately we read of him: "He did what was pleasing in the LORD's sight" (2 Chronicles 29:2).

But what did Hezekiah do that was pleasing to God? When we answer this question, we find five principles that guide the reform we need for our own temples.



Surround yourself with godly leaders

First, Hezekiah called upon the priests and Levites to lead. Verses 4-5:

He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary."

And also verse 11:

"My sons, do not neglect your duties any longer! The LORD has chosen you to stand in his presence, to minister to him, and to lead the people in worship and present offerings to him."

Some of these men were as culpable as the rest of Judah in straying from God, but Hezekiah was compelling them to return to their called position, to take

spiritual responsibility for the nation and the temple.

When we let our temples fall into disrepair, we often separate ourselves from the spiritual leadership we need. We don't go to church, we don't focus on the words of the sermon, we don't listen to Christian teaching on the radio or read Christian books.

So principle number 1 is this: To reform your temple, surround yourself with godly leaders. We must give them the voice in our lives that God intended them to have.

2

Make a covenant with God

The next thing we read of Hezekiah is that he made a pact to do right. He was still addressing the priests in verse 8, when he began:

“The LORD’s anger has fallen upon Judah and Jerusalem. He has made them an object of dread, horror, and ridicule, as you can see with your own eyes. Because of this, our fathers have been killed in battle, and our sons and daughters and wives have been captured. But now I will make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us.” (2 Chronicles 29:8-10)

A covenant is a binding resolution. God made a one-sided covenant with Abraham that he would make of him a great nation. Through Christ, he has made a one-sided covenant with us: providing salvation for us by the death and resurrection of his Son, because we could not make salvation for ourselves. We may hesitate to make such covenants

ourselves, because we know we're weak and may not keep them. Yet, God wants resolution from us—not nominal faith. We don't have to employ over-the-top drama in this; simply, our *yes* should be our *yes* and our *no* should be our *no*. But if what we need to do today is resolve to reform this temple of our body, then that's what we should do. And we should do it before the Lord himself.

3

Take in the Word of God. Obey the Word of God.

Now let's talk about keeping that covenant. How do we know a person's word is true? They do what they say they will do. When we make a covenant with God, telling him we are ready to follow, that we're in it for the long haul, what we mean is that we are ready to do what he tells us.

Look now at verse 15, where we read about the work of the priests:

These men called together their fellow Levites, and they all purified themselves. Then they began to cleanse the Temple of the LORD, just as the king had commanded. They were careful to follow all the LORD's instructions in their work.

Other versions say it this way: “They followed the word of the LORD.”

If our temple has fallen into disrepair, not following the word of the Lord is what will have taken it this bad state. A man or woman who obeys God wholeheartedly doesn't crumble or fade or crack. Rather, they stand fast in the storms; they shine.

You can only follow the word of the Lord, though, if you know the word of the Lord. Reform comes when the word

of God takes root in us. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ,” Paul told the Romans. Are you hearing the word of Christ? Are you letting the words of Scripture have the place in your life that they should?

4

Assess the way you are following God, and give him all he requires

Now in 2 Chronicles 29, once the priests and the temple were consecrated—that is, prepared for the work of God to be done in and through them—then the temple practices were restored. The first of these was sacrifice. Look at verses 20-24:

Early the next morning King Hezekiah gathered the city officials and went to the Temple of the LORD. They brought seven bulls, seven rams, and seven male lambs as a burnt offering, together with seven male goats as a sin offering for the kingdom, for the Temple, and for Judah. The king commanded the priests, who were descendants of Aaron, to sacrifice the animals on the altar of the LORD.

It's hard to know quite what to make of the sacrifices looking at them so many centuries on. But here's what we know for sure. These were very serious business. They required a concession from the people and caution from the priests. We know that God rebuked Saul by telling him, “To obey is better than sacrifice,” yet the temple sacrifices required a strict form of obedience. Saul was taking the sacrifices lightly. It's kind of like going to the gym and saying you exercised, even though you did not do the

exercises in the way your trainer taught you.

In a way, the sacrifices were a test of the heart of God's people. Do we revere him enough to follow him to a T, or are we doing only the minimum? Is your heart in the work he has given you to do? We might do well to be reminded here of Colossians 3:22-23:

Serve them sincerely because of your reverent fear of the Lord. Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

Later, when Hezekiah called on the people to bring their personal sacrifices to God, we read, in verse 31, "So the people brought their sacrifices and thanksgiving offerings, and all whose hearts were willing brought burnt offerings, too." May the Lord give us willing hearts as we set out to work for him!

5

Make worshipful music to the Lord

This last principle may be the most surprising to you, though I can't understand why. I would say after a lifetime in the church (including many years of pastoring and preaching) that if God's people commonly do not understand one thing about the way we are to worship and serve God, it is this: the importance of music. Look at verses 25-30:

King Hezekiah then stationed the Levites at the Temple of the LORD with cymbals, lyres, and harps. He obeyed all the commands that the LORD had given to King David through Gad, the king's seer, and the prophet Nathan. The Levites then took their positions around the Temple with the instruments of David, and the priests took their positions with the trumpets.

Then Hezekiah ordered that the burnt offering be placed on the altar. As the burnt offering was presented, songs of praise to the LORD were begun, accompanied by the trumpets and other instruments of David, the former king of Israel. The entire assembly worshiped the LORD as the singers sang and the trumpets blew, until all the burnt offerings were finished. Then the king and everyone with him bowed down in worship. King Hezekiah and the officials ordered the Levites to praise the LORD with the psalms written by David and by Asaph the seer. So they offered joyous praise and bowed down in worship.

You simply cannot read this and say to yourself, "It's OK for me not to sing."

What's the logic in this? It's probably very simple. After you leave here today, it is pretty unlikely that you will find yourself repeating any of my words as you're doing the laundry or mowing the lawn this week. But it's quite likely that in those down times, when the last thing you're thinking is, Let's run

through some doctrine here, your mind will start replaying lines from the songs we have sung here this morning. God has prescribed music as a form of joyous praise and worship directed to him, but the wonderful by-product of that music is that we will by it be fed his truth again and again in our hearts, minds, and spirits.

Conclusion

In the end that gives us five specific principles for the reform we need. I would add one more in the general sense: Don't hold back. The closing verses of 2 Chronicles 29 tell us this:

There was an abundance of burnt offerings, along with the usual liquid offerings, and a great deal of fat from the many peace offerings.

So the Temple of the LORD was restored to service. And Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced because of what God had done for the people, for everything had been accomplished so quickly.

I love what we read here. The people brought *an abundance* of offerings. They did not hold back. Through this willing and generous expression, the effect was exactly as desired: the temple was restored to service. And finally, the people rejoiced. Why not? God had worked on their behalf, and he had done so quickly. Pray that he would do the same in your life as you commit to the reformation of your temple.

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