

A Pure Temple  
Ezra 4:1-5

The people who had returned from Babylon to the Promised Land had a tremendous task before them. By the time of today's passage, they had been back less than a year, so there was probably still a lot of work each of them had to do around his own farm or household. And they had only laid the foundation of the Temple, so that project would require much more effort and expense. So why didn't they want any help from the people already living in the land? And why did they call them adversaries? Isn't that narrowminded, judgmental?

Well, who were these people of the land? The end of verse 2 tells us – years earlier, they had been brought into the area by the Assyrians. Now, we know that the Persians, who had conquered the Assyrians, had a policy of returning people to their native lands. So, what had the Assyrians done to make the Persian policy necessary?

II Kings 17 tells us: "And the king of Assyria brought *men* from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed *them* in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof." You see, just as the Assyrians had carried off the people of the northern kingdom of Israel and settled them in other parts of their empire, so they had done the same thing to all these other people – uprooting them from their homelands and taking them off to Israel to settle them. The Assyrians probably adopted this policy so that the people they had conquered would be so divided and discouraged that they would never threaten Assyrian dominance again.

Anyway, the upshot of the Assyrians' actions so many years before is that the people that Ezra 4 describes as "the people of the land" weren't Jews at all, but a mixed bag of folks from all over the Assyrian Empire. So, was that the problem? Were the Jewish people who had returned from Babylon being racist? Did they turn up their noses at help from other people just because they belonged to other ethnic groups?

Well, no, at least not in so many words. For we must remember that in the Ancient world, one's ethnic group and one's religion were usually bound up together – you worshipped the way your family did, and an ethnic group is really just an extended family.

But the Jews had always had a tradition of welcoming people from other ethnic groups into their religion, as long as they were willing to shift their allegiance and worship the God of the Jews – think about the mixed multitude which came out of Egypt during the Exodus, or Rahab the harlot who rescued the spies in Jericho, or Ruth the Moabitess who said that the God of Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law, would be Ruth's God as well. No, the problem with the people of the land wasn't their ethnicity, but their religion.

But wait. Didn't these people of the land claim to worship the true God just as the Jews did? Look at verse 2 – they even say they had been offering sacrifices to Him. So, what could be wrong about these people of the land helping the returning exiles to build the Temple?

Well, what did II Kings 17 tell us about how these people of the land worshipped? We know they started out as pagans, and pagans tended to believe that their gods were somehow rooted in a particular place. And after these pagans from other lands had been settled in the land of Israel they

started having troubles – a rash of lion attacks was their particular problem. So, their pagan logic dictated that they needed to appease the god of their new land, whoever he or she might be. So, they asked the Assyrian king to send them a priest of the God of Israel to teach them how to make the appropriate sacrifices so the lion attacks would stop.

So, what does all this tell us about the worship of the people of the land? Well, they had started worshipping the true God, perhaps even using some of the correct forms. But they were worshipping the right God for the wrong reasons. They were only using sacrifices and other rituals to try to manipulate God to do what they wanted Him to do. It was these sorts of people that the Bible calls “adversaries” of the people of God – people engaged in false, self-centered worship. And that’s one reason why the people of God didn’t want the people of the land to participate in building the Temple – they didn’t want God worshipped for the wrong reasons.

So much is clear, but before we go on bashing these pagans, we need to take a good, hard look in the mirror. Yes, we worship the One True God – that’s why we’re all here today. But do we ever catch ourselves worshipping Him in such a selfish sort of way? What I mean is, do we value God for Who He is, or only for what He can do for us?

Here’s a way we can put ourselves to the test – when we are disappointed in life, when things aren’t going the way we want, do we find ourselves neglecting prayer and Bible study? Do we pull away from God when He isn’t blessing us in the way we want? If so, are we putting the blessings we desire ahead of the Author of all those blessings? And if we do that, are we really worshipping God, or are we trying to use Him, to manipulate Him? Are we really that much different from the people of the land, who were not considered worthy to help build the Temple?

But that wasn’t the only reason that the people of God considered the people of the land to be adversaries. II Kings 17 tells us that when those pagans moved into the land of Israel, even though they adopted some of the worship practices prescribed in the Old Testament, they also kept making sacrifices to the gods of the lands where they had grown up. In short, they were polytheists, worshipping more than one God. And it turns out that polytheism actually lies close to the heart of paganism – since pagans worship in order to get things for themselves, why not worship whatever god is going to deliver the goods? Verse 33 summarizes it this way: “They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods.”

Now, some very modern people still think this way. Today they are called pluralists, but they still believe that different people’s different notions of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood can be equally valid.

But again, what’s wrong with pluralism? And why were God’s people so scandalized by it that they refused the pluralists’ help in building the Temple? Why couldn’t they all just get along?

Well, remember what we have already learned about the Temple, and why it had to be built in a certain place in a certain way, and why all the sacrifices had to be offered in just the right ways at just the right time – the whole Temple ritual was pointing forward in one way or another to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. That’s why the exiles had to come all the way back to Jerusalem to build the Temple – because that’s where Jesus would die and rise from the dead. That’s why bloody sacrifices were offered – because Jesus would one day spill His blood for the sins of the world. That’s why the Temple had a Table of Showbread – because Jesus is the Bread of Life. That’s why the Temple had

lampstands in it – because Jesus is the Light of the World. And on and on it goes – everything about the Temple was a foreshadowing of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Okay, would it really make sense for people to help build the Temple – which was after all a symbol, a sign pointing to Christ – if they actually thought there were lots of other ways that people could become acceptable to God? Or let's put the same question in modern terms: does it really make sense for anyone who calls himself a Christian to believe that God can save people in any other way?

For let's just suppose for the sake of argument that the pluralists are right. Let's say that trust in Christ really is optional. Let's say that all those gods of the Hindus are real, and you can avoid problems in this life by making the appropriate sacrifices and prayers to them. Or let's say that you really can achieve true spiritual enlightenment by following Buddha's Eightfold Path of righteous living. Or let's say that you really can become acceptable to God by studying the Scriptures according to the teaching of the Rabbis, and following the ethical commandments of the Law of Moses. Or let's say that you can achieve righteousness by observing the Five Pillars of Islam. Let's say that the Pluralists are right, and that all these are equally valid ways to God, that all religion is basically one grand plan of self-improvement and mutual help through individual effort, albeit in different ways.

Okay, so if the pagans and the pluralists are right, then why did God's Old Testament people need a Temple at all? Why was it necessary for blood to be shed in order for them to be forgiven? And why did Christ have to live through the bloody reality to which the Temple pointed? Why would God the Father ask God the Son to suffer and die if that suffering and death wasn't absolutely necessary to save sinners? If the pluralists are right, God the Father isn't loving and good – He's a child abuser. If the pluralists are right, Jesus wasn't our Savior – He was just a crazy masochist.

And so we see that the cross itself is the best answer to ancient pagans and modern pluralists. For the cross proves God's justice and righteousness by showing us the penalty that breaking the Law of Moses deserves. And the cross proves God's love and mercy by providing a sacrifice for us that we could never make. But the cross also proves that Christ alone must be the way of salvation, just as Peter told the religious leaders of his day about Jesus: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." In fact, the cross proves what Jesus said in our responsive reading: "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." For if the cross of Christ is not absolutely necessary, then the cross of Christ cannot save anyone.

And that exclusive belief, that claim that Christ is not a way to God but the only way to God – that idea was just as controversial in the days described in today's passage as it is today. For how did the people of the land react to being excluded from the true worship of God? How did they respond when they realized that their pagan, pluralistic ideas were not in fact compatible with the pure worship of the God of the Temple?

Well, they did the same sorts of things that pluralists still do to Christians today. Oh, make no mistake. Pluralists say they believe that all religions are equal, and that everyone has a right to believe whatever he wants to. But when a Christian baker doesn't want to bake a cake to celebrate a same-sex wedding, those who preach tolerance suddenly call for fines or imprisonment. Or when a Christian fire chief writes and publishes a defense of traditional marriage on his own time, those who preach pluralism and tolerance force him to step down. Because the Christian faith teaches that Christ is the only way, those who believe in pluralism have always done what they did to the returning exiles who

were trying to build the Temple – they try to weaken our hands. They trouble our attempts to spread the Gospel, to build up the Body of Christ.

Now, there was one other tactic the pluralists used on the people of God in today's passage: they hired counselors against them. That means they used the political machinery of the day to try to get the King to change his mind and to stop God's people from building the Temple. We'll look more closely at these sorts of tactics next week, and at how persistent the people of the land were in using them.

But before we do that, we need to remember that there's more than one way of being a pluralist, and even self-professed Christians are not immune from slipping into this kind of thinking. We've already seen that we can very easily worship the true God for selfish reasons. Well, it's just as possible for Christians to embrace an informal sort of pluralism in our own lives without even being aware of it.

We do this whenever we try to separate our lives into different compartments. For example, we might trust in Christ for our salvation, and rely on His Word for all the "Churchy" parts of our lives – to tell us about God's attributes and how He wants us to worship Him and all that. But where it comes to business matters, do we still look to God to tell us what is right and wrong, or do we rely on our own judgment or experience? Or where it comes to providing for our future, is our trust in the Lord, or do we rely on our pensions and savings to provide for us? Or when we are looking for meaning and purpose in life, do we rest in the love of Christ and the sacrifice He made for us? Or do we rely more on our family and friends, on our careers or our accomplishments? As we try to compartmentalize our lives, are we really considering other things or relationships to be just as worthy of our time and attention as God is? And if so, how is this really different than looking to different gods to give us different sorts of blessings?

So yes, it would be very easy for us to read this passage and encourage one another to stand strong against pagan and pluralist tendencies in the world around us, to proclaim the gospel in spite of increasing opposition to Christ and His Word. But unless we first root out the selfishness from our own worship, and unless we start looking to God alone for all the blessings in our lives, we'll find ourselves doing exactly what the people of God resisted so strongly in today's passage: building the Temple, the Body of Christ in an impure way. And why should we expect such an impure Temple, such an imperfect image of Christ to be compelling to anyone?