

## Judicial Decisions

Ezra 10:7-17

A huge problem had come to Ezra's attention. You may remember when we studied chapters 2 and 8 seeing the lists of all the men who returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. We often assume that they brought their wives and families along, but that doesn't seem to have been the case for all of them. And we shouldn't be surprised that many of the returning exiles were single men – in the days when the frontier of this country was first being settled, the trappers and explorers who blazed the trails rarely carried their wives with them, either.

But a problem arose when many of these single settlers chose to marry "strange wives," which is the King James way of describing the women who were already in the land. These women were not Jews, and that meant they worshipped all sorts of pagan gods instead.

So, why was this a big deal? Well, way back before they were sent into exile, God had warned His people not to marry such pagans. He warned them that such mixed marriages would lead them astray, would attract them to join their wives in worshipping those false gods. And that is, of course, exactly what had happened, so Ezra and the people of his generation were determined not to go down that road again.

But over the last few weeks, we've already seen that this particular sin problem doesn't exactly apply to us anymore. While it's still important for Christians only to marry within the covenant community, after the coming of Christ that community is defined by faith, not in racial or ethnic terms. So, what can we modern American Christians learn from this passage about solving the problem of mixed marriages?

Well in the first place we can see something about how the church should make decisions. We've already seen in chapter 9 and the first part of chapter 10 that the people of Ezra's time had come to an understanding of their sin, and had expressed sorrow for their sin. But how did they decide to fix this problem? Well, their first impulse was congregational – to get everyone together so they could all decide what to do. Verse 7 tells us that the leaders and elders directed all the men to come to Jerusalem, whether they had married pagan wives or not. And so they all showed up in the ninth month, the month we call December.

But there are lots of problems when a whole congregation tries to make some kinds of decisions. Some of these problems are simply a matter of logistics. In this particular case, December happened to be part of the rainy season in the Middle East. And as we find out in the following book of Nehemiah, the wall around Jerusalem was still broken down, so it wasn't a particularly safe place to stay at night. Moreover, many of the houses of the city still hadn't been rebuilt, either, so it just wasn't possible for the entire male population to be accommodated until all the judicial work was done. In short, it just wasn't practical for all them to handle this problem as a large group, in what we would call a congregational way.

There are still lots of problems with what we call direct democracy, with its attempt to get a large number of people to make delicate decisions or render justice on the spot. Just recently we've seen the limitations of facebook posts and tweets in determining who was at fault for the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. Just so, when every problem in a church has to be handled by the whole group,

it's far too easy for minor disagreements to blow up into huge arguments, leading even to the division of a congregation.

That's why these ancient Jews decided to handle things in what we would call a Presbyterian way. Most of the people went home, but they set up appointments for each of the accused men to come before the elders and judges in their hometowns. This would allow each family to be investigated thoroughly, and thus make it harder for anyone to fall between the cracks. But on the other hand, it would also reduce the chance that anyone would be accused falsely. It was only after these preliminary investigations were complete that the local leaders would bring the necessary parties before the leaders of the whole assembly for judgment.

To put it in modern terms, they allowed local church sessions to examine the families under their care, determining which ones needed to be straightened out. They would then refer those cases to a higher governing body for corrective action. In such a way, by following the principles of representative decision-making at different levels of government, we can still ensure that both church and state are able to do justice decently and in order, instead of by the mob rule that seems to be increasingly popular.

But if we Presbyterians can pat ourselves on the back because this passage supports our understanding of church procedures, we might hesitate at following the example of how these people of God chose to use their judicial process. For here we see how important it is for the church to deal with the sin in its ranks, instead of just ignoring problems or sweeping them under the rug.

Now, it's easy enough for us to agree with this point when other denominations' problems are in view. You may remember when the whole world was scandalized by the Roman Catholic bishops who covered up the sexual misbehavior of so many priests. We know that delaying or denying justice to all those young boys brought shame on their whole denomination.

Well, the people of God in Ezra's time understood the same thing. They knew they couldn't be indifferent to the sin of others because they were all part of one covenant community, a community defined by its relationship to God. It was that understanding of connection that moved Ezra in chapter 9 to confess the sins of his people in first-person plural terms, talking about "our iniquities" and "our trespass," even though he himself hadn't married a pagan wife.

And the connection between God's people isn't just an Old Testament notion, is it? What did we read responsively this morning? Paul said that the different members of the Church are like different parts of one body. And Jesus prayed that we Christians would all be one so that the world would believe in Him. In other words, the success of our proclamation of the gospel is dependent on all of us consistently living the Christian life of love all the time. Just like in Ezra's time, the sin of one is a scandal on all, and even on Christ Himself.

But there's another reason why the people of Ezra's day were determined to set things right. For because they understood their covenantal connection to one another, they also understood that the judgment that fell on the guilty would fall on them as well. Look at verse 14 – they wanted justice to be done thoroughly and accurately so that the fierce wrath of God would be turned away from all of them, not just from the guilty individuals.

Now, I know we individualistic Americans balk at such an idea. We want to believe that everyone stands or falls on his own merits, right? We want to believe that everyone gets what is coming to him, right? Well, the problem with that individualistic understanding of justice is that sometimes, especially when sin is widespread throughout a culture, when sin becomes ingrained in the social system, everyone is swept up in the judgment of that sin, whether they've individually participated in it or not.

Ezra's people couldn't deny that – as they gathered in Jerusalem in December of that year, they were surrounded by evidence of exactly that sort of disaster. The reason there was no place for all the men to get in out of the rain was that the Babylonians had destroyed the whole city over 120 years earlier. And why had that happened? Because so many of the people of that previous generation had turned away from God, the rest of them had been caught up in the consequences of their sin. All of them had been carried away into exile, the innocent along with the guilty.

And we modern Mississippians ought to be able to understand this as well. Before the Civil War, about half of the families in Mississippi didn't own slaves, didn't profit from slave labor. But everyone was caught up in the terrible devastation of the war that destroyed slavery. And everyone, black and white, suffered from the 80 years of poverty that followed that war. And as we see from the marches and riots of these last few weeks, all of us are still suffering from the hatreds inspired by that war, whether we ourselves share those feelings or not.

Okay, so if we can understand the proper, Presbyterian way of making decisions, and if we understand this concept of connection, of involvement in the sins of the larger society, and if we understand the Biblical basis for an even greater, even more intimate sort of connection, of organic union with one another and with Christ in the covenant community of the Church, here's the question for us: how willing are we to put our connection into action? How willing are we to use our Presbyterian process to hold one another accountable for our sins?

Look again at what the people of Ezra's day did. When in verses 10 and 11 Ezra summarized the sin of the people, the sin they all admitted was a problem, they all said that something needed to be done about it. And in verse 14, they all agreed to submit their family arrangements to the authority first of their local elders, and ultimately of the judges of the whole nation. And verse 15 is especially striking – out of all those thousands of people there were only four soreheads who were "employed about" this, which is the King James way of saying they opposed the idea. And even then we can't be sure that they were trying to avoid justice – they may have just been congregationalists. They may have agreed with the need for judicial proceedings but simply wanted everyone to go ahead and handle things right then in the December rain.

Well, Presbyterians, what about us? According to our Reformed theology, we all believe that we are sinners in need of a savior – we have to confess our sinfulness before we can join the church. We all say we believe that sin tends to blind us to our own faults, making it hard for us to see when we need to make changes in our lives. And we have the privilege of electing ruling elders, men and women we select because we trust their Biblical knowledge and good judgment, to perform precisely this function, to let us know when our lives are out of Biblical balance, to hold us accountable to our professed desire to follow Christ.

So are we really interested in having such spiritual leaders? Are we willing to let them speak the truth into our lives? Are we willing to let them encourage us to greater holiness? And if not, why not? Could it be that we deny we have any sin we can't see? Or do we imagine ourselves to be somehow better than those who might be able to see our sin more clearly than we can?

Or could it be that we resist spiritual authority because, deep down, we don't think sin is really that big of a problem? Even though we've seen the cross, and we know the tremendous pain our sin causes God the Father and God the Son, could it be that we give ourselves a pass where our pet sins are concerned? Could it be that we don't mind bumping along in a state of arrested spiritual development, presuming upon God's grace, confident that God will keep on forgiving us for the same things over and over?

If so, we need to take a look at how seriously the people of Ezra's time took their sin problem. For they didn't just come to an academic understanding of their sin. They didn't just confess their sin. They didn't even just resolve to do something about it. No, they did it – they put away their pagan wives so that, as verse 11 says, they could separate themselves from the people of the land.

And I suppose that's really the bottom line for all of us – how serious are we about separating ourselves from sin? How serious are we about putting away the things in our lives that are displeasing to God? That's a question each of us must ask and answer for ourselves. All Ezra could do for his people was to preach the truth to them, and then set an example for them in confession and mourning for sin – the rest of it was up to them. They had to decide to confess, to repent, and to follow their spiritual leaders in pursuit of a life of greater holiness. Will we do that?