

The Sovereign and the Church

Ezra 7:11-28

What can we possibly learn from this passage? Except for the last two verses, obviously penned by Ezra, it wasn't written by a man of God, but by a Persian king. It wasn't even written in Hebrew, for the international and thus the diplomatic language of the time was Aramaic. In short, this passage is an ancient government document. Since when do we go to the Congressional Record or the Code of the State of Mississippi for devotional reading? Oh, and to make matters worse, the author, King Artaxerxes, was not a Jew at all. He was a pagan, a believer in lots of different gods.

Because of this, his motives were almost certainly more calculating than they were pious. You see, it was in Artaxerxes' interest to make sure that the local laws were followed in all of his provinces, no matter what the source of those laws might have been. We know, for example, that Darius, a previous Persian king, had sent an Egyptian priest back to his homeland to do the same sort of thing Ezra would later do in Israel, teaching the local religious practices and encouraging people to obey whatever gods they happened to worship. So, I suppose it really is no wonder that Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission to go to Jerusalem and inquire into the people's spiritual condition – it was the Persian way of encouraging law and order.

But however calculating the Persian king might have been, he certainly wasn't stingy. His grandfather Darius had given funds for the completion of the temple, but also so that sacrifices might be offered in Jerusalem along with prayers for the Persian "king and his sons." Artaxerxes followed this example and likely for the same reasons – after all, pagans have no problem in covering all their bases, worshipping lots of different gods in the hope that some of those gods would help them out sometime. Oh, and just a few years before he wrote this letter, Artaxerxes had also had to deal with a significant rebellion in Egypt, during which the Egyptians teamed up with the Athenian navy. It is thus very likely that he was inclined to be generous to the Jewish leaders, giving them direct contributions as well as tax-exempt status, simply in order to insure their loyalty, and thus to prevent yet another problem in a strategically important part of his empire.

So much is clear, but what can we possibly learn from this rather cynical sort of political posturing? Well, we might be tempted to draw a comparison with our own government. We might want to point out that if a pagan Persian king could show such favor to God's people, how much more should the leaders of a country that every honest historian will admit was founded on Christian principles? In short, we might want to justify what the Founding Fathers called "established religion," a state sponsored church.

And to justify state support of the church we could make the same sort of purely practical arguments that probably motivated Artaxerxes. Modern governments are, of course, no less interested in law and order than he was, so wouldn't it make sense for the state to encourage Christian ethics? I mean, wouldn't there be less crime if more people understood the nature of sin and feared God's judgment? Specifically, the Bible teaches that we should honor those in authority, that we should respect other people's lives and property, that we should work hard and be content with what we have – wouldn't all of that contribute to peace and prosperity?

But let's go a bit further, for many if not most of our current social ills spring in one way or another from the breakdown of the family. Our jails are full and our classrooms are in chaos in large measure because too many boys are being raised without fathers. So, wouldn't it be in the government's interest to encourage people to believe in a religion that frowns on adultery and encourages marital fidelity?

Sure, we could make all those arguments, and even some non-Christian historians have done so throughout the years. It's hard to argue that when lots of people in a country become Christians, they tend to build both social and economic capital in all sorts of ways. Christians have prosperous habits like modesty, hard work and thrift, and the social trust that exists across Christian societies encourages the sort of cooperation that allows large businesses to flourish. At the same time, by helping the poor and by establishing institutions like schools and hospitals, Christians also tend to mitigate the worst of the problems in society, even those that tend to be associated with the more aggressive forms of capitalism.

Yes, we know even more clearly than Artaxerxes did that a vigorous, faithful Church tends to be good for the state. But that doesn't mean that the Federal Government should follow his example, because the state has not always been good for the church. For let's face it – a government strong enough to build a temple is strong enough to tear it down – which is exactly what the Babylonians had done not too many years before. And Nebuchadnezzar was no fluke: throughout human history, and especially in Islamic and Communist countries today, the church continues to face state-sponsored persecution.

But if persecution is an obvious problem for God's people, state support of the Church can be equally dangerous. For however welcome Artaxerxes' financial assistance may have been to those returning exiles, a state-supported church hasn't usually worked out, at least not in the long run.

The examples are legion. We could talk about how the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, leading to all the worldliness and corruption to which Luther and the Reformers protested so vigorously. We could, in turn, show how the Reformers' willingness to have their own governments sponsor Protestant churches led to a similar decline into nominalism. The fact is that, in one way or another, governments built church buildings all over Europe, the continent which used to be called Christendom. And most of those buildings are now empty of worshippers. And no amount of tax money can fill them up.

But we Americans tried the same thing, and with largely the same results. From its earliest days, New England was a self-conscious experiment in the union of church and state. In fact, if you weren't a member of the state-sponsored church, you weren't allowed to vote, at least in the early colonial period. But by the early 1800's, the state-supported clergy were abandoning orthodoxy, openly denying the divinity of Christ, and embracing Unitarianism. Today, New England is one of the least-evangelized places in the country. No, if we Americans were to draw the conclusion from today's passage that what the church needs is state support, we will have learned the wrong lesson.

But let's push this point a little further, for the unique thing about our American government is where the sovereignty, the real power lies. Oh yes, today most people think the President is the most powerful figure in the world, but the only reason he has that job is because he was elected by us. Sure, Congress passes all sorts of laws that complicate our lives, but they are only in Washington because we sent them there. So, if we want to draw conclusions about what the king, the sovereign should do for

the church, that means we Americans have to take a good long look in the mirror – for in this country, the sovereignty lies with the voters, with us.

So here's the bottom line: this passage describes a sovereign supporting the church financially. Well, sovereign electorate, how are each of us doing? Are each of us Christians as individually generous as that pagan king was? In verse 20, he promised to give whatever was needful, whatever was necessary. What about us? Do we Christians invest as much of our time, talents and treasure in promoting the worship of God as Artaxerxes did? Or do we put all sorts of other priorities ahead of worshipping God? And if we aren't all that interested in worship, why should we expect the state to help out? Why should we be surprised that others aren't interested in joining us?

Or think about Artaxerxes' interest in law and order, in having people follow the Law of God. Well, what about us? Do we study the Bible to determine how God wants us to treat each other? Are we really trying to follow His perfect law of love for one another? Or do we just do whatever makes sense to us, whatever feels right at the time? If we aren't making the effort to obey God, why should we expect the state to adopt priorities we don't have? And why are we so surprised that all the non-Christians around us are doing the same thing?

But let's push this even further. Remember, Artaxerxes sent Ezra not only to teach the law, but render judgment on the people. Well, we Presbyterians elect ruling elders to do the same sort of thing, to inquire into our spiritual condition, to teach us God's Law and to hold us accountable when we falter, so that we might grow in grace. Are we willing to let them do their jobs? Are we even interested in spiritual accountability at all? And if not, why should we be surprised when so many of the non-Christians around us live the way they do?

So sure, it's easy for the church to want the state to solve all our problems – to give us money and make everyone else behave. But we already have the freedom to do for ourselves everything that Artaxerxes did for God's people in Ezra's day. So if we're not doing it, if we're not really that interested in encouraging the worship of God and following his Law of love, we shouldn't be surprised when our elected officials share our priorities. And we shouldn't be surprised when those outside the Church follow our example.

So, given our own shortcomings, what can we learn from this passage? Well, instead of looking at what we think the sovereign should be doing for the church, maybe we'd better look instead at the real Sovereign in this passage. Maybe we'd better think about what this passage tells us about God.

For let's take another look at Artaxerxes. Yes, he was a pagan, a worshipper of all sorts of gods. Yes, he was shrewd and calculating man whose motives were mixed at best and downright selfish at worst. But the good news is that our sovereign God chose a guy like him to accomplish His will. So, however cold our hearts, however divided or distracted our minds may be, why couldn't God use us? God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick.

And the reason that God can do that is something else we can learn from this passage, something that should make us want to give up our diversions and distractions, and give our hearts completely to Him, and that is this: God is completely in charge of all the events of history.

Look, it's obvious from reading his letter that Artaxerxes was pretty proud of his grand gesture. He probably thought he was pretty clever to come up with a way of currying favor with some of his

people and getting them to pray for him in the bargain. But look at what Ezra says in verse 27 – it was God who put this big plan into the heart of the king. In verse 28, Ezra adds that even though he was standing before the Persian king and his counselors, it was really God who showed mercy to him. It was because the hand of God was upon him that he was able to accomplish God's will. It was God Who was really responsible for all these good things that the state did.

Now, all this is not to say that we American Christians shouldn't pay attention to what our elected officials do – they work for us, so we need to supervise their activities. It is not to say that we shouldn't pray for our elected officials – they need God's wisdom just as much as we do, and the decisions they make affect all of us. The world would be better off with more generous leaders like Artaxerxes and less selfish jerks like, um, so many other politicians we can all name.

But it is to say that instead of looking to the state to solve all our social ills, maybe we Christians need to be more faithful stewards of the freedom we already enjoy, and of the time, talent, and treasure we already have. And maybe instead of focusing so much time and attention on the failures and foibles of our elected officials, we should spend more time in prayer, seeking the face of our sovereign God, the One Who really is in charge of our world, of our culture, and of each one of our lives.