

The New Church

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 4, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Ezra 6:13-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Did you ever start a project that took longer to finish than you had expected; maybe it was painting your house, or fixing the lawn mower? It happens all the time. Three months after the church burned people were asking me, "Why haven't we started to rebuild?" Two and half years after the fire we laid the foundations. One year after laying the foundations we're hoping to get back into the fellowship hall and administrative space. It's taken longer than many of us expected. But we need to see this in perspective.

Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 587 BC. Fifty years later they started to rebuild. The work was delayed for 16 years. Work resumed around 520 BC and was completed four years later, in 516 BC. All in all, it was seventy years from the destruction of the temple until the completion of the new temple.

We still have a long way to go before we finish. How're we going to do it? Listen again to verse 14 to see how the Old Testament people of God finished. "So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia."

First, "the Temple was brought to completion through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah." Now "prophesying" in this context simply means "preaching". After years of inaction, the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah brought a dead situation to life and the elders to faith and action. If we're going to finish our

church, we've got to have good preaching. The preaching of Haggai and Zechariah challenged and taunted the people of God out of their complacency and encouraged them to press on with the work and complete it.

Words are powerful, more powerful than deeds. Words create deeds. In the darkest days of WW2 in Great Britain, the words of Winston Churchill encouraged the British people and kept them from giving up. The words of Martin Luther King Jr empowered the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. We often hear that deeds speak more powerfully than words but in Biblical thinking the Word always comes before the deed. In the beginning was the Word.

If we want to finish our church we've got to have good preaching. One way to improve preaching is to listen to the sermon. One of the best ways to listen is to take notes. Taking notes on the sermon will immediately result in better preaching. Taking notes forces you to listen actively. Taking notes will help you to see the relationship between the written and preached Word of God. Then review your notes. Talk with others about your notes. Talk with me. Was what I said based on the written Word of God? Did it have application to your life? How will your life be changed? What are you being called upon to believe, to do? ^{Haggai challenged, graduated} ~~of Haggai?~~ Preaching isn't a religious form of entertainment. Sometimes preaching hurts. "The Temple was brought to completion through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah." There's good reason to believe that the better the preaching of the Word of God is, the sooner our church will be completed. People who come to church to hear and obey the Word of God accomplish amazing things. I expect all of you to take notes next week.

Secondly, the returned exiles "finished their building by command of the God of

Israel." In other words, they finished because they believed they were building in obedience to God. When people ask you, "Why are you Presbyterians building such a large church?" I hope that ~~you're~~ ^{you're} able to say, "Because God commanded us!" Now you shouldn't say that if you don't believe it. But I believe it! The needs of this town and congregation are so great and God's love for this town is so immense that God wants this church built. ^{God wants us to finish it,} I believe God has commanded us to build this church. It's not the church I would have built if I had been calling all the shots. It's probably not the church you would have built if you were giving the orders. God has commanded us to build it.

I know that sounds dogmatic, even dangerous, but let me suggest that unless we're building in obedience to the will of God we're fools and our plans are doomed to failure. Consider this: We've sought God's guidance in our planning. We've prayed. We had special prayer meetings at St. Christopher's church asking the Lord to guide us at critical times. We've had congregational meetings to ask you, the congregation, to confirm what the elders believed to be the command of God. Some of us need to stop second guessing what we should have done and how much money it should cost and go forward in confidence that we're building by command of the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't be ashamed to say it!

Third, "they finished their building ... by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia." Basically, what this means is that the temple was completed because pagan political leaders gave permission for the return of the exiles and for the rebuilding of the Temple. They granted them protection in rebuilding the Temple. They gave them material assistance. The writer of Ezra was grateful for how these heathen rulers, who didn't know the God of Israel, allowed the temple to be rebuilt.

God uses imperfect people, people who don't even believe in him to accomplish his purposes. Years ago I read something in Edward Gibbons, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. I've never forgotten it. He wrote that in the ancient world all religions were considered to be equally true by the people, equally false by the philosophers and equally useful by the politicians. In the ancient world, the political leaders used religion in order to support their regime. The Persian kings used religion by allowing the Jews to rebuild their temple in return for their support and allegiance. *If we let the people worship the way they want they would take for political freedom.* The Persian Kings neither believed in the God of Israel, nor were they concerned with promoting Biblical values. They were simply using religion for their own purposes. Politicians still find religion useful. Beware of both Democrats, Republicans and Independents who attempt to use religion and religious people in order to get votes.

But the Bible shows that God is above the politicians. Political leaders use religion but God uses political leaders, even without their knowledge and sometimes even against their will, to accomplish God's purposes.

Our church couldn't have been built without the cooperation of politicians and bureaucrats. I'm grateful to the members of the Oxford Borough who granted us variances with respect to parking requirements. They didn't have to. They permitted us to do some things and prohibited us from doing other things. I'm grateful that Labor and Industry in Harrisburg approved the working drawings. We had to conform to OSHA rules. We've gone through a necessary and time consuming process. God doesn't usually bypass the political process. As Christians, therefore, we pray for our leaders and, where we can, express gratitude for those things which they do which further justice and the rule of God in the world. And, unlike the Old Testament people of God, we become involved in

the political process ourselves by voting.

So, through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, and in obedience to God's command, and by the decree of the political rulers the people of God rebuilt the temple seventy long years after it had been destroyed. Things often take longer than expected.

This is as true in our individual lives as it was true of the rebuilding of the temple. God is building us up into a holy temple. God's will is to make something beautiful out of the lives of ordinary people. But God works so slowly in the lives of most of us. Most of us don't experience instant resolutions of problems in our lives. In fact, I'm suspicious of religious leaders who promise easy and instant answers to our problems. Most of us struggle throughout our live with besetting sins.

But there's a great promise in the New Testament that I hold on to when I feel that the work that God is accomplishing in my life is progressing slowly. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." That's a wonderful promise for us as we rebuild our church. It's a wonderful promise for all of us who struggle daily to obey God and follow Christ despite our failings, wandering, rebellion and unbelief.

And God brings his work in us to completion through the preaching of the Word of God; through the commandments he's given us to guide us in the way he wants us to go, and through imperfect people who encourage and empower us to keep on building on the foundation of Christ. It's our job to listen to the preached Word of God; to obey God's commandments even when the run counter to our own inclinations; and to be thankful for men and women, Christian and non-Christian, whom God uses to complete his work in us.

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.