

***Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah***  
**Part 5: A Reformed Generation | Ezra 9-10**  
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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

## **Introduction**

Today's sermon is from Ezra 9-10 and is titled "A Reformed Generation."

There's a popular saying among reformed Christians that goes something like this: "The church is always reforming." Actually, the full quote is this: "The church is Reformed and always in need of being reformed according to the Word of God."

So to step back a bit, to be a "reformed" church simply means that it links itself to the tradition within Christianity that arose out of the historical event called *the* Reformation. To explain it very simply (although it's a complex story), the Reformation was a movement that protested the abuses and shortcomings of the Western church and was committed to going back to the original sources (the Scriptures) to define the key points of their faith. It was a *reforming* of what we understood our Christian faith to be.

HMCC is a reformed church in that we hold to the truths that God's Word alone is our authority and that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone for God's glory alone. To always be reforming doesn't mean that each generation must figure it all out again! Rather, it means that we must look backwards (as in look back into the original sources directly- back into God's Word!) in order to move properly forward. In this way, we are always being reformed!

This was the calling of Ezra as well: he was saying to *his generation* of post-exiled Jews to look backwards at what God's Word says in order to move properly forward as God's people now resettled into the Promised Land again. This specific part of Ezra's book in chapters 9-10 was the process of bringing the people of Israel back to YHWH- to reform them by God's Word to be people who live by faith in the Lord's covenant by reconsecrating themselves and repenting of their sins to him.

## **Proposition**

Here's the "one thing" from Ezra 9-10- not just for YHWH's post-exilic people but also for us as the 21<sup>st</sup> century church:

***Be constantly reformed, living by faith  
in the Lord's covenant with us.***

## **Organizational Statement**

I'll have four lessons from the four parts to my sermon on Ezra 9-10- the four "C's" to be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us: first, CHECK the situation (9:1-4); second, CONFESS sins (9:5-15); third, CATALYZE repentance (10:1-5); and fourth, COMMIT to change (10:6-44).

## **Scripture Reading**

We'll go through this long passage of Scripture in pieces as we go through the four "C's."

Transition: Here's the first "C." Let's...

## Sermon Outline

### I. See Ezra 9:1-5: CHECK the Situation.

A. In this first part of the passage, Ezra received the reports that the people of Israel in the city of Jerusalem and the province of Judah were not living wholly devoted to YHWH.

1. [Here's the first lesson to *be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us...*] Lesson #1: Look carefully at your situations and what God's Word says about it.
  - a) We know that about four months had passed since Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem (according to 10:9). During this time, he had to visit the governors of the various areas to deliver the work orders from King Artaxerxes (according to 8:35-36). Now Ezra got to focus his attention on the original reason why he came. Let's read...
    - o Ezra 9:1-2 (ESV): *1 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost."*
  - b) The officials approached Ezra with direct reports about the batch of Jews who had resettled in the city of Jerusalem and the province of Judah 57 years before. They didn't "separate themselves" from the people groups that also lived there. Instead, they "took" the daughters of these pagan people groups to be their wives. Now don't think this was a racist thing (that Jews were not allowed to marry people from other races). The issue was *spiritual*- the temptation to become "unequally yoked" together with people who were not worshipers of YHWH *always* included their idolatry and immorality as well. A counter example of this was the famous case of Boaz marrying Ruth, a Moabite woman. But Ruth had vowed to her mother-in-law, "Your God will be my God." She joined the covenant community and her marriage with Boaz was blessed.
  - c) Furthermore, the words used here for "wives" (in verse 2) is not the same word as the normal, marriage covenant between one man and one woman that was taught in the Law. It was something "extra" or "looser" (if you know what I mean). The officials also reported that the worst violators of this sin were the leaders of the people- the officials and the chief men of the people! The word that is used to describe this is "faithlessness," which is repeated several times in chapters 9-10. It is a very strong expression for the abandonment of their faith and the rejections of their covenant with YHWH...yet again.
  - d) So after just maybe two generations, God's people had already virtually abandoned him and his covenant with them. Ezra knew of this before- it was rumors of this that led him to pursue going to Jerusalem. He had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, so he knew what was at stake; he had been there four months and was probably also teaching God's Law to his fellow Jews during that time. And as he heard this official report of the sins of his people, he was appalled and grieved over their sins, tearing his clothes and pulling out the hair from his head and beard (v. 3)! And as Ezra and some of the people whom Ezra had taught God's Law also trembled with fear and gathered around Ezra. This was the beginning of the Holy Spirit bringing about a reformation of his people's hearts; it started with Ezra checking the situation and seeing what God's words said about it.

2. [So let's look at this first lesson again...] Lesson #1: Look carefully at your situations and what God's Word says about it.
- a) Context: People in the marketplace will identify the "situations" doing a "SWOT analysis" looking at as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for their organizations. I think we can broaden this to be the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in all the areas of our lives: in your family (with your parents or with your kids); in your marriage or dating relationship; in your work, office, or business; in our society as a whole; and definitely also in the church. I think this is what churches have had to do in light of heightened racial tensions; I think this is what many churches have had to do in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. What situations in your life come to mind that demand your attention now?
  - b) Context: It's really important to look carefully at our situations and what God's Word says about it. Most likely these situations did not just sprout up overnight; and most likely the solutions to them will be complicated and take time to sort out. Remember that Ezra took four months to really check his situation! The path he took to solve the problem also took months! Take time to assess your situation correctly: examine your attitude and behaviors that came out; be in the Scriptures to help guide your thinking (from intentional study or just what the Lord brings across you); identify possible areas of faithlessness in yourself or others; and grieve, pray, and fast before the Lord over things.
  - c) Context: I've had to do this (this past week!) in specific conflicts that arose. We've had to do this throughout the pandemic, but specifically after my family returned from the U.S. and we'd experienced the delta-variant second wave here in Indonesia. We had to check how our church members were doing and if they were connected with each other; how LIFE groups were going; how our Sunday Celebrations were going over Zoom, etc. We had to think about it biblically: Are we committed to still meet together? Are we making disciples who follow Christ? Are we equipping people to make more disciples? This was our SWOT analysis, so to speak.

**Transition:** The first "C" was to CHECK the situation. Second, let's...

## II. See Ezra 9:6-15: CONFESS Sins.

- A. In this second part of the passage, Ezra responded to the situation by honestly and humbly praying, recalling YHWH's grace and confessing the sins of the people of Israel.
1. [Here's the second lesson to *be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us...*] Lesson #2: Confess the sins of your own heart and of the church as the Bible instructs.
    - a) Ezra's prayer of confession is a great biblical model for us. Let's read part of it here.
      - o Ezra 9:9-12 (ESV): "9 For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem. 10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. 12 Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.'"
    - b) The first thing I observe here is that Ezra clearly understood the sin and guilt of his people (among a lot here). But what's notable here is that Ezra says "our iniquities" and

“our guilt.” He did not just lay the blame on the others and excuse himself (he didn’t say “their iniquities” or “their” guilt); he identified *personally* with the sins of his people! He confessed to the Lord on behalf of his people, Israel. He wasn’t judgmental; but he also did not ignore or take lightly their offenses before the Lord. And I think because he *loved* his people, he didn’t condemn them and distance himself from them.

- c) The second thing that I observe here is that Ezra acknowledged that they were slaves still- they were not yet free from their captors. For a “brief moment” Israel had experienced God’s favor as the exiles returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the temple- the “remnant” did this. YHWH had given light to their eyes and life in their souls and they had done this, but it was temporary. But even though they had rebuilt the temple, Ezra knew that they were still slaves under Persian rule. Even deeper, in verse 10, Ezra acknowledged that they were also still slaves to sin.
  - d) What he’s referring to as God’s commandments (that they couldn’t help but forsake) were from Deuteronomy 7:1-5; they disobeyed the Lord’s command to not intermarry with these other people groups. And what verse 12 says is super-important: these marriages with other people groups came from the heart desire of wanting their apparent so-called “peace” and “prosperity” (in verse 12). God’s people were led into the idolatry and immorality of their pagan neighbors because they desired in their hearts to gain “peace” and “prosperity.” Ezra didn’t make any excuses for this; he didn’t try to justify or minimize *their* evil deeds and wickedness; they were slaves to sin and in need of the King that YHWH promised to send to deliver them.
2. [So let’s look at this second lesson again...] Lesson #2: Confess the sins of your own heart and of the church as the Bible instructs.
- a) Context: The idea of owning and confessing our corporate sin is strange for us, isn’t it? We tend to distance ourselves from others sins (like, it’s *their* sin, but not *mine*; it’s *their* problem, but not *mine*). We tend to be judgmental and condemning towards the sins of others in our church (like, they deserve what they get; I’m glad I didn’t do that). But the example of Ezra was that he confessed the sins of his people! Can we own and confess the sins of our church?
  - b) Let me share this quote to explain what I mean:
    - o “This isn’t *Murder on the Orient Express*, where we all individually wielded the knife. It more envisions a Zeitgeist or atmosphere of wrongdoing, like how 2 Corinthians 4:4 describes the “god of this age” blinding minds to God’s truth. It asks us to think of ourselves as part of sinning community- a nation, culture, or institution- and confess accordingly.” – Bonnie Kristian

It’s like with my kids: I see their sins- but I don’t judge or condemn them. No, I love them and it kills me to see their sin; so I pray for them like it’s my own sin! Corporate confession of the sins of our church happens this way when we think of ourselves as part of the sinning community in this way! We *so love* and are *so connected* with that community that we can’t help but try to take it up for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ!
  - c) Context: Second (and thus related), I want us to honestly think about how we actually *do* desire in our hearts to gain the “peace” and “prosperity” in the world too. It doesn’t cause us to bow down to physical idols, but we do bow down to the spiritual idols of our age too, doesn’t it? It includes the “gods of this age” too: idols of success, sex, significance, security, safety, and on and on. In that sense, we *are also* undoubtedly entangled in the “gods of this age” too. We must know that *we all* are slaves to sin and are in need of God’s promised King to deliver us!

**Transition:** The first “C” was to CHECK the situation, the second “C” was to CONFESS sins. Third, let’s...

### III. See Ezra 10:1-5: CATALYZE Repentance

A. In this third part of the passage, Ezra didn't force people to repent, but initiated it and God moved those assembled to repent and make an oath to forsake their sin.

1. [Here's the third lesson to *be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us...*] Lesson #3: We can facilitate- but not force- each other towards repentance.

a) Let's read what happened next, as Ezra fasted and prayed in the temple.

- o Ezra 10:1-4 (ESV): *1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. 4 Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it."*

Verse 1 describes this move of the Holy Spirit: as Ezra confessed the sins of his people, some of the people of Judah joined him- men, women, and children- to also grieve over their sins and their people's sins. They agreed with Ezra's assessment of their great sin and faithlessness against God and gathered around him- I believe- to join him in confession and prayer. This is what we'd call today the beginnings of a *revival!*

b) Then in verses 2-4, God used this man named Shecaniah- not mentioned before and not ever mentioned again- to articulate their sin and the biblical solution. He reminded Ezra that there was still hope in spite of their grievous sin! Shecaniah said something like this: "Ezra, let's make a covenant with YHWH again. We will put away our foreign wives. Just align us back with the Law of the Lord, Ezra!" Maybe Shecaniah reminded Ezra that even though they had violated the Law (that was from Deuteronomy 7:1-5), YHWH is also the faithful God who keeps his covenant and steadfast love for his people for a *thousand* generations (as it is said in Deuteronomy 7:9).

c) Ezra knew that the primary purposes of the Law was not as a measure of their holiness; it was to reveal the infinite holiness of God and the sinfulness of human beings. Shecaniah further reminded Ezra what he also already knew from the Word of God; they needed to depend on the mercy and grace of God, confess their sins, and repent- that is, turn from their sinful ways and turn back to the Lord. And Shecaniah encouraged Ezra to be strong and carry out the task of catalyzing this repentance to *all* the people of Judah.

d) Ezra's leadership here was exceptional here, wasn't it? He had been checking the situation and teaching the Scriptures to Judah for the previous four months. He took ownership of his people's sins in his confession of sins. A critical mass of people gathered around him as they looked at his example. The Holy Spirit began to convict those people of their sins and they began to confess their sins. He didn't *force* them to repent; he facilitated this by his Word ministry and his example of corporate confession. Shecaniah helped Ezra to see the hope that they had in YHWH's steadfast love. Now Ezra was to execute a plan for repentance and change for the people of Judah.

2. [So let's look at this third lesson again...] Lesson #3: We can facilitate- but not force- each other towards repentance.

a) Context: Church, let's follow the example of Ezra- along with Shecaniah in the covenant community- of facilitating each other towards repentance! How often do we make the

mistake of forcing people to do stuff that they are not convinced in their hearts to do? I have to admit that I've done this, instead of just "setting the table" with the Word of God and trusting that the Holy Spirit will do his work in leading his people towards repentance. This is a key discipleship principle as well: we teach people to listen to the Word and to the Holy Spirit in leading them through confession and repentance.

- b) Context: Here's what our Word ministry to each other can do. As we study or discuss the Scriptures, it points out our sin or our fallen condition. And what happens is that the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins (as John 16:8 says). The Scriptures also point us to God who is gracious and his solution for our sin problem, Christ Jesus. As we see that our sins are great and that we are slaves to sin, we also see that God's grace is greater and Christ is the King who delivers us from our sin! This is how the apostle Paul describes God's deliverance in...
- o Titus 3:3-5 (ESV): *3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit...*

Jesus died on the cross as the substitute sacrifice for our sins- for our personal and corporate sin; for the sins of our actions and the sins of our hearts.

- c) Context: While God can use extraordinary means of grace (like revivals) to help people see their great sin and the great sacrifice of Christ, God can also use what's called "ordinary means of grace." This means the normal stuff that we do that puts us in a place to understand the offense of our sin before a holy God and to be blown away by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross: Christ-centered preaching and worship services, Bible studies and LIFE groups, or baptism and communion. Through these means, God uses the church community (like you and me!) to facilitate each other towards repentance!

**Transition:** The first "C" was to CHECK the situation, the second "C" was to CONFESS sins, the third "C" was to CATALYZE repentance. Fourth, let's...

## IV. See Ezra 10:6-44: COMMIT to the Process

- A. In this final part of the passage, Ezra confronted the people regarding their sins and they agreed to the long process of reconsecrating themselves under YHWH's covenant.
1. [Here's the fourth lesson to *be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us...*] Lesson #4: The church commits itself collectively to this process of heart reformation.
    - a) So Ezra followed up by issuing a proclamation. All returned exiles living in the province of Judah were to assemble at Jerusalem within the next three days (so essentially he called everyone to make an emergency pilgrimage to Jerusalem). If they didn't show up, they would face two punishments: forfeiture of their property and banishment from the congregation of the returned exiles. Here's what happened next in...
      - o Ezra 10:9-11 (ESV): *9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. 11 Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."*

- b) This was around December, the rainy season in Judah. All the men of Judah and Benjamin (the only two tribes that composed of the former southern kingdom) assembled. They were trembling because they understood *this matter* of their sin before YHWH and because it was raining heavily. But they still gathered in the open square in the temple, sitting and waiting for Ezra's words. In verses 10-11, Ezra presented the charges that they had *broken faith and married foreign women*. He told them that they had a decision to make to confess their sins to YHWH and to take the steps consistent with repentance, namely to separate from their foreign wives and from their unequal yoking with their neighboring people groups.
- c) In verses 12-17, the people admitted their sin and proposed a plan to root this out systematically. It was a great transgression and needed time to address the heart issues and to make the proper changes in people's lives. Remember, the word that was used for "marriage" here was not the proper covenant of marriage presented in the Law, but something improper and immoral. Thus, this example didn't promote divorce, but instead the ending of improper and immoral relationships. The thing to really notice is that to do this right it took some *thought* and also *time* to make happen.
- d) So lastly in verses 16-44, the specific list of people- sorted from among the priests, Levites, and eleven other families from Judah- who were guilty of intermarriage were listed specifically by name. Just as it was important that the individuals and families that returned to Jerusalem, it was also important that those individuals and families that had sinned were held to account here- corporate sin *and* corporate sin were accounted for. It took the people of Judah three months to finish this, but by God's grace they did it! That generation of God's people experienced a profound reformation that was started being brought back to the Word of God, led to confession of sins and appealing to the covenant love of God by faith, and taking steps of change and obedience! Praise the Lord for this!
2. [So let's look at this final lesson again...] Lesson #4: The church commits itself collectively to this process of heart reformation.
- a) Context: We check our situations and what the Word of God says about it. We confess both the sins of our own hearts and the church (we own the sin we see in ourselves and in the congregation). We facilitate- not force- each other towards repentance through the ministry of the Word and the Holy Spirit. The Word and the Spirit, by God's grace, convicts us of sin and points us to Christ Jesus, our King and our Deliverer from our sins. The whole idea of a church- the collection of sinners saved by the grace of God- is that we commit ourselves collectively to this process of heart reformation. We commit ourselves to the Lord Jesus because we know he wants us to be more and more wholly devoted to him. We commit ourselves to our brothers and sisters in Christ, because we know he wants *us all* to be more and more wholly devoted to him.
- b) Context: Think about those things that anger you, frustrate you, hurt you, or disappoint you from people in the church or from the church as a whole. Think about those flaws or sins in individuals or in the church as a whole that you tend to look down on, compare yourself to, or even judge. Be honest here! Those things negatively affect you and others sometimes. Let's not minimize the sins: these are offenses against a holy and righteous God; these are acts of faithlessness against God who has dealt with us with patience and love. Let's bring them to Christ in our prayers: asking God to help us see and love them as fellow brothers and sisters and to see our own sins of the heart; asking for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin and to lead them into repentance. When we have opportunity, let's encourage, correct, support, and walk with people through the process of heart reformation! This seems like a really lofty goal, but with Christ as our head, it's possible!
- c) Context: I really see this as also a way that we can minister to others in our lives as well. As a church, we also apply this kind of commitment to people in our families or work or even in broader society. There is a great need in our world- in our homes, workplaces,

and city- for a biblical understanding of our sin and God's holiness. There is a great need in our world for prayers- heartfelt confession and intercession. God will give us opportunities to encourage, correct, support, and walk through with people in our lives through the process of heart reformation that is found in Christ!

**Transition:** First, CHECK the situation; second, CONFESS sins; third, CATALYZE repentance; and fourth, COMMIT to the process. Let's move on to the....

## Conclusion

### V. Life Application

- A. Here are the next steps that we can take to *be constantly reformed, living by faith in the Lord's covenant with us.*
1. How can you immerse yourself into the process of being constantly reformed by God's Word and Spirit (check the situation, confess sins, catalyze repentance, or commit to the process)?
    - a) This isn't a four-step process that you plug into and expect to see automatic results. This is living by faith in the covenant relationship that we have with God- trusting in the Father's everlasting love and grace, trusting in the Son's redeeming and restoring work on the cross, and trusting in the Spirit's guidance and leadership through the cycles of this in our lives- and not just for us, but for our church and for others in your lives!

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