

Concordia Theological Monthly



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HOMILETICS

EISENACH OLD TESTAMENT SELECTIONS

Aug. 5	11 S. a. Tr.	Dan. 9:15-18	(God's Mercy Our Sole Support)
Aug. 12	12 S. a. Tr.	Is. 29:18-21	(The Glory of the Gospel)
Aug. 19	13 S. a. Tr.	Zech. 7:4-10	(God Fits Us for Work in His Service)
Aug. 26	14 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 50:14-23	(The Fruits of the Spirit in Worship and Behavior)

Sermon Study on Zech. 7:4-10 for the Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity

A complacent acceptance of religious truths and a smug performance of religious ritual — this is the spiritual malady probed by the Savior in the Gospel selection for the 13th Sunday after Trinity. The Epistle plainly declares that ceremony is meaningless unless the Spirit of God motivates the participant. In Zech. 7:4-10 these thoughts are brought together in a narrow compass, against the backdrop of a complex historical situation, in such a way that the man of God has an opportunity to preach a timely sermon on the dangers of ritualism, with an appeal for a Spirit-filled expression of all that is finest in the liturgical and doctrinal heritage of the organized Church of Jesus Christ.

The Prophet Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, according to Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. The latter prophesied from August 29 to December 18, 520 B. C. Zechariah came on the scene in November of the same year (Zech. 1:1). He continued his mission in the middle of February, 519 B. C. (1:7) and delivered the text under treatment on December 7, 518 B. C. (7:1), in the 4th year of the reign of Darius Hystaspis (521—486 B. C.).

It will be recalled that in 538 B. C. Cyrus had ordered a return of the captive population after his capture of Babylon. Ezra records the details. In 536 B. C. Cyrus granted permission to rebuild the Temple. Because of intertribal jealousy (Ezra 5:1-6) the work was suspended until Darius gave directions to proceed in 520 B. C., after a successful search for the original decree of Cyrus had been

made (Ezra 6:1 ff.). According to Ezra 6:15, the structure was finally completed in 516 B. C.

It was in connection with this building program that the Prophets Zechariah and Haggai uttered their oracles (Ezra 5:1 and 6:14). Haggai (1:2 ff.) suggests that the people needed much prodding and encouragement to proceed with the work. Their religious affections were buried in the rubble of a Temple whose material glory was gone forever, Ezra 3:12; Zech. 4:10 (in the reference to "the day of small things"). They had slight enthusiasm for the "small" task at hand. They saw little of the hand of God in the enterprises of the moment.

During the past decades they had not, indeed, been found wanting in the observance of religious festivals. Faithfully they had been observing four special periods of fasting:

1. In memory of the destruction of Jerusalem, on the 7th or 10th day of the 5th month (Zech. 7:3; see also 2 Kings 25:8 f.; Jer. 52:12).

2. In memory of the day that the Babylonians had broken through the walls of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:19, the 4th month; on the 9th day, Jer. 39:2).

3. In memory of Gedaliah's assassination, on the 3d or 24th day of the 7th month. (Zech. 7:5; 8:19; see also 2 Kings 25:25; Jer. 41:1 ff.)

4. In memory of the day that marked the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, on the 10th day of the 10th month (Zech. 8:19; see 2 Kings 25:1).

Despite the people's careful observance of these days of national mourning, Yahweh appeared to evidence little concern for the community, and Zechariah's glowing accounts of the glory of the Messianic age (chapters 1—6) remained disappointingly unfulfilled.

To express their disappointment, the people dispatched a deputation to the priests and prophets (Zech. 7:3), disguising their complaint against Yahweh in the form of a question: "Shall we continue to observe the anniversary of Jerusalem's destruction?" (Cp. Is. 58:3 for a similar instance.)

THE TEXT IN DETAIL

V. 4. It is significant that a Prophet of Yahweh, not the priests, answers the question. As the context indicates, the priests are incapable of analyzing Judah's fundamental problem, since they themselves are partially responsible for her spiritual disease. Moreover, since it is a problem embracing a frustration of the Spirit's will to work in people, Yahweh must give the answer Himself. The people have faulted Yahweh. Yahweh, from His transcendent vantage point, states the truth of the matter — Yahweh has a case against *them*. The self-deceptive nature of sin necessitates an *inspired* word.

Yahweh tells the Prophet to speak to "*all the people of the land and to the priests.*" The fact that He includes the priests implies that they, as the spiritual leaders of the people, have failed in their mission to interpret correctly the mind of Yahweh. The people, on the other hand, have suffered it to be so (cp. Jer. 5:31, and see the numerous references to the people's guilt under the word "people" in the concordances, with special reference to Isaiah and Jeremiah). There has been a steady spiritual decline, and both laity and ministry are faulted.

The precise nature of this decline is expressed in vv. 5 b and 6. The people have asked one question. Yahweh counters with two. The first (v. 5) expresses the major deficiency in their religious observance. The second (v. 6) states the actual facts in the case. The contrasting emphasis in the pronouns of the phrase: "Did ye at all fast unto *Me*, even to *Me*?" and those of the concluding words: "Did not *ye* eat and (*ye*) * drink?" bears out the nature of Yahweh's complaint. In effect, Yahweh is asking the people and the priests: "In all this ritual were you keeping *Me* in mind? Were you aiming at a more complete fulfillment of *My* will? Were you at all concerned that in these disasters you were commemorating *I* might have had reason to express *My* dissatisfaction with *you*? Was your fasting designed to catch *My* signals?" Then with the other question Yahweh answers: "Was not your eating and drinking merely the observance of your mealtimes?" The rhetorical device

* Literally: "Are not *ye* the eaters and *ye* the drinkers?" The A. V. expresses the emphasis correctly through the reflexive pronouns.

employed carries the full weight of devastating irony. Despite the fact that the words contain no mention of fasting, but of feasting, it is precisely the fasting that Yahweh criticizes. In effect He says: "Just as little as you can call the interval between your breakfast and your lunch a time of fasting, so little can you call this ritualistic fasting a religious observance" (cp. 1 Cor. 8:8).

The Prophet aims to point out, then, that the people and the priests, through their rituals, had made a pretense of a union between themselves and Yahweh, though there was no evidence of God's Holy Spirit at work in their lives. Their religious forms were ritualistic double talk, an ecclesiastical smoke screen sent up by the priests to conceal unsundered hearts (cp. Zeph. 3:13, "a deceitful tongue"). Worldliness, materialism — that was their malady (cp. Hag. 1:4, 9). And with a materialistic worship Israel and Judah had sought to conceal their materialistic living. So worldly were they that Amos, in a scathing indictment, points out that they could scarcely wait for the festival day to end so that they could pursue their material concerns (Amos 8:5).

In v. 7 the Prophet proceeds to offer a solution. It lies imbedded in the message of the "*former Prophets.*" Among them would be numbered such notables as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Zephaniah.

Zechariah hints that by listening to the "former Prophets" Jerusalem might have remained inhabited. It is not necessary to read at length in the "former Prophets" to determine that their message consisted primarily in a denunciation of ritualism. (See, e. g., Is. 1: 11 ff.; Jer. 6:19-20; Amos 5:21 ff.) This ritualism reached a height in the time of the prosperity mentioned in v. 7, as the rapid succession of Prophets indicates.

The period of struggle, which witnessed the harnessing of great spiritual forces to effect the stabilization of Israel as a nation in Palestine, was climaxed with a period of restful security (cp. 1 Kings 4:20). This incidental reference in the First Book of Kings marks the turning point in Israel's history and in Judah's destiny. Within a few chapters Solomon's sterling prayer and his notorious mixed marriages are recorded (1 Kings 8 and 11). From then on it is decline. The spiritual forces which made material

achievements possible were deemed unnecessary or at best unimportant. The struggle for national recognition, which makes men brothers whether they would or not, is superseded by a culture of individual concern. Hence the repeated references to injustice, oppression, and lack of mercy in the former Prophets, as in the 9th verse of the text under treatment.

With slight expenditure of mental effort the road to ecclesiastical snobbery, separatism, and unbearable legalism could easily be traced. Religion consists finally in social respectability. The young lawyer confronted by Christ was certainly a product of his nation's century-old decline into ritualism, for he thought that a complacent recitation of "Thou shalt love the Lord, Thy God . . ." implied spiritual success.

Ritualism, or the equation of ritual observance with *moral* achievement, ultimately induces reaction in either of two directions. The one leads to pietism, the other toward liberalism, with a total disgust for the ancient creeds and their archaic expression. The baby is usually thrown out with the bath in contemporary haste. Or, in a last ditch defense, the old ritualism may take to itself "seven worse devils," and then a Christ is crucified. On the surface the problem poses a dilemma, for both pietism and liberalism lead their devotees to a subtler ritualism. The solution lies in the message of the "former Prophets."

The Prophet Zechariah is admittedly conservative. He recognizes the inadequacy of current religious life, but he does not fault the creed of Judaism for the lack of deeds. Rather he bids the priests reappraise their techniques in diagnosing and prescribing spiritual cures. Man's external environment may change, but, whatever form it takes, it substantially represents the sum total of all the spiritual resources or lack of spiritual resources of the individuals embraced in that culture. The root of man's problem is always sin—man out of contact with the living God, but the form it takes and the capacity for camouflaging vary with the particular culture involved. And for the solution of the problem the answer is perennially the same—the atonement wrought by Jesus Christ, whereby the life of the Spirit is channeled through the individual into his environment. Contemporary culture, therefore, does not

need new creeds, but it does need to remove the debris of ritualistic intellectualism associated with such cardinal doctrines as the Virgin Birth, the Inspiration of Holy Scripture, the Deity and Humanity of Christ, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Coming Judgment. Zechariah indicates that the former Prophets must be consulted to determine the vital significance of these and other doctrines in the life of the individual. In short, the ritual and doctrine of the Church must be viewed as springboards for action, not as the terminal point.

Vv. 9 and 10 express the objectives that ought to be attained through religious doctrine and ritual. The lack of these virtues would correspondingly indicate that ritual has declined into ritualism. It is to be noted that these words are the express will of Yahweh (v. 8). Mitchell, in the *I. C. C.* series, supposes an interpolation here. The point, however, is that the following words do not only express the mind of the "former Prophets," but the plan and purpose of Yahweh in choosing Judah as His people, as is indicated by the fact that expressions such as "judgment" and "mercy" involve *covenant* considerations. It is not mere social theory, then, that the Prophets propounded; for it is Yahweh, who speaks to His people, and *Yahweh is the God of the covenant*. Judah has cut herself off from the life of the Spirit by forgetting the significance of the covenant. Peter attacks a similar problem in the Christian community (1 Pet. 1:22). We might paraphrase what he says: "Remember, you have become believers to express an unfeigned love toward one another. Do not fail, then, to express it." And then the Apostle adds an exhortation to an earnest scrutiny of the Word of God, the converse of a ritualistic use of the same.

The *religious* nature of the call to a sense of social responsibility is clearly indicated, as already noted, in the three technical terms used by the Prophet. They are advocated on the basis of an assumption that Judah has learned to know her saving God. Hence in the homiletical treatment of these verses the atonement of Jesus Christ must motivate the practical considerations. Liberalism, with its denial of the blood atonement, is unable to give this motivation. Hence the abortive attempts in Reformed theology to legislate society into the Kingdom of God. The Prophet, were he alive

today, would consider the covenant relationship as a trigger which, when pulled, would release the full power of religious charity.

"Execute true judgment," or "judge a judgment of truth." The relation of the word "judgment" to Judah's social responsibilities is rooted in an understanding of God's dealings with His people. Yahweh's *mishpat* (judgment) is not merely a surface distinction between good and evil. His wrath at sin is linked with a love for the sinner. In Is. 30:18 ff. this connection between judgment and grace is clearly indicated. Hence what *God does* is His *mishpat*. Primary in His activity or *mishpat* is His elevation of the humble and resistance to the proud (cp. Job 5:11). Hence God shows *mishpat* especially to the oppressed, in that He champions their cause (see Deut. 10:18; Is. 1:17; 10:2; Amos 5:11, 15; 8:4 ff.; Jer. 5:28; 21:12; Ezek. 22:29). But God does *mishpat* and helps the oppressed so that man will also do *mishpat* (cf. Jer. 9:23-24). If a man does *mishpat*, then he shows that he understands and knows Yahweh (cf. Jer. 22:16). Without this practice his religion is merely intellectual and therefore ritualistic. In short, since God shows His *mishpat* especially in His treatment of widows and orphans and the oppressed in general, the believer must demonstrate the same consideration toward the poor and oppressed and socially inferior as toward his political, economic, and social equals. Justice and respect of persons are incompatible (see James 2:1 ff.; Acts 10:34).

But this still covers only one side of the motivation, the vertical relationship. God's *mishpat* involved the bringing together of a covenant *people*, and His *mishpat* can be trusted, for Yahweh is faithful (cp. Gen. 32:10: "truth," *'emet*). Then those who compose the believing community must manifest right relationships with one another, relationships of mutual truth, or trust, for now they are brothers and sisters in a horizontal relationship. This means, to make the transfer to Christian terminology, that a Negro believer in Jesus is a brother and the white Christians must "judge a judgment of truth" by not making him sit in a rear pew or otherwise feel unwelcome. A Christian advertiser must state the facts of his product and refrain from appeals to fear and greed and lust. Merchants shall not "up" prices unnecessarily, and the buyer shall not patronize black markets. Judges shall show neither fear

nor favor, and citizens shall not bribe their officials or expect preferential treatment. The waitress and the society matron will be treated with equal politeness.

The word "mercy," *chesed*, is already involved in the term *mishpat*. But whereas *mishpat* suggests fair treatment, regardless of social position, *chesed* implies a readiness to extend help. Since those who enjoy the covenant relationship or membership in the communion of saints have experienced God's saving help, they are to recognize one another as brothers. Such knowledge of salvation is compounded of hope and confidence. Christianity's big word is *faith*. Hence Christian brothers and sisters are to have faith in one another. Faith in God means that we know He will respond to our needs. Therefore I must respond to the need of a brother who has a right to trust me for such help. But since God is ready to extend help to those outside the covenant or the Church, the Christian must show *chesed* not only to those within his religious sphere, but also to those who are without, as the Good Samaritan did. (On the close relationship between mercy and a covenant see 1 Sam. 20:8. On the close relationship of *chesed* with *mishpat* see Hos. 12:7; Jer. 9:23; Micah 6:8; Ps. 101:1.) This *chesed* will therefore extend to "the stranger" (v. 10). The D. P. population in America has witnessed this *chesed*. Pastors living in Army camp areas will have further opportunity to stress the importance of Christian hospitality, inasmuch as reports indicate that many soldiers and their brides are being charged outrageous rents for two-by-four apartments. Christian apartment owners might also be asked to re-examine their attitudes toward folks with children. Congregations, both in rural and in urban areas, should be encouraged to extend a more ready welcome to new families entering the community and the church.

The word "compassions," *rachamim*, concludes this study. Note the plural. *Rachamim* describes the strong feeling existing between parents and children, husband and wife, and between brothers (see Is. 63:15 f.; Hos. 2:19; Amos 1:11). *Mishpat* and *chesed* naturally lead to *rachamim*. Compassion is a necessary element in the life of one who is a member of the covenant family or of the Church. Compassion takes a person further even than *chesed*. The Good Samaritan showed *mishpat* in that he disregarded nationality,

and *chesed* when he stopped to relieve the beaten man. But he showed compassion in that he saw him through his trouble, to the extent of paying his hotel and hospital expenses; for the Samaritan realized that the man had been robbed. Similarly, one would display *mishpat* by extending the widow as fair a treatment as that accorded the most influential citizen; one would manifest *chesed* by giving her an opportunity to pay her debts through an extension of time rather than resort to foreclosure; but one would display compassion if one would determine the nature of her larder and the extent of her children's wardrobe. In Hos. 2:23 the verb is used, which the LXX in some MSS. renders with *agapao* (LXX 2:25). A compassion that is sensitive to the mental and spiritual effects of poverty, loneliness, sickness, and any other trouble—that is *agape*. Not a perfunctory ritualistic charity, but a love that is considerate, helpful, humbly recognizing God's great love through the atonement in Christ Jesus.

The extent of this brotherly affection is underscored in v. 10 b: "and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart." Again the thought of the covenant relationship in the word "brother." Again the Prophet has in mind the larger reality: God has only good thoughts toward His people, and the covenant people will prove their understanding of this fact by displaying similar interior attitudes toward one another. Oppressions have their root in such wrong attitudes as greed and envy. Thoughts of love and a profounder understanding of the doctrine of the communion of saints will promote a deeper appreciation of the Christian's communal responsibility. But, as always, the remembrance of God's covenant promises in the Christ are the source not only of the changed attitude, but also of the believer's action. The Christian's realization of what he is finds fortification in the Sacraments. Through them he is reminded, and sincere remembrance is the Holy Spirit's opportunity. Thus the rituals and forms of worship and doctrinal expressions of the church achieve their goal.

HOMILETICAL TREATMENT

The fundamental thought of the text is simple enough: Religious observance means nothing unless God's objective of a Spirit-filled life is kept constantly in mind.

The element of formalism will certainly receive extensive treatment, but the sermon must concentrate on the contemporary scene, especially the signs of ritualism in the local congregation and the worship of the individual. Such signs are not lacking. One has only to note the slogan "Work for the Church" and the accompanying dissatisfaction with those who "do not work for the church" — the thought of *working for and with God* is too often lacking; or the reluctance to adopt new forms or practices, such as the use of the individual Communion cup; or pride in meeting a local or synodical budget while luxury and competitive buying continues and larger areas of stewardship remain unexplored; or pride in a cavernous church structure while the Sunday school meets in the air raid shelter; or in the inability to pray without set forms or to speak of the faith that is within one; or in the psychological responses of the individual to unpleasant circumstances so that a feeling of guilt initiates interior pain, indicating a circuitous road to atonement; or etc., etc.

Since the local problem demands close attention, it is advisable to omit all reference to Roman Catholic formalism so as not to divert the hearers from self-examination. However, the approach must be evangelical. One must assume that the hearer desires to know what he can do about this tendency toward ritualism. The covenant terms in the 9th verse assist in this respect, because they lead naturally to a treatment of the Christian's rescue from the death of sin and therefore from vain traditions, through the Atonement, and thence to the purpose of God in redeeming him. The covenant, in turn, involved circumcision. This rite, together with the emphasis on "the Word of the Lord" and the message of the "former Prophets," suggests the importance of the Word and Sacraments as resources to achieve the Spirit-filled life.

The following titles and parts suggest timely presentations:

SUGGESTED OUTLINES

Don't Short-Change God

1. There is a temptation to make ritual an end in itself.
2. Let your religious observance motivate your whole life.

The Parable of the Two Congregations

They both had sound doctrine, but

1. The one was dead in formalism.
2. The other was alive in the Spirit.

Ritualism Can Kill a Church

1. The nature of ritualism.
2. The causes of ritualism (optional).
3. The fruits of ritualism.
4. The cure of ritualism.

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