

RESPONSE TIMOTHY R. AND SHAWNA SONGER GAINS'
"BEING THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD: IDENTITY, MISSION AND MINISTRY"

Diane Leclerc

Tim and Shawna Gains have provided us with a paper that is theologically and practically incisive. They begin by asking the provocative question, "From what is the Church being exiled?" This question is pregnant with possibilities; they ask it in order to point out that unlike later Israel, we are a nomad people as the Church, indeed pilgrim people on the way who experience a "homeland", or literal space, only as a future reality. Other answers to the question are perhaps offered in other papers. I do believe it is crucial to probe exactly what the Church has lost, as North America now follows our European brothers and sisters into the post-Christian age, if for no other reason than to understand ourselves at least historically, if not ecclesiastically.

What immediately strikes me is that our authors have changed the definition of at least some understandings of exile. While others have defined **exile** as a crisis of the Church's identity due primarily to the shifting of societal norms—once religious, even Christian norms--the authors define exile in the following way: "Wherever the way of the Church has departed from the particular way of Jesus, there is exile." They continue: "For Christians, displacement from positions of economic power and societal management is no exile at all; indeed these very positions may be the very vehicle by which we have been carried into exile." If I understand them correctly, they have subverted the more common meanings, and more importantly, the commonly held reasons for exile (that might lead to ecclesiastical lament); they have replaced them with a new construct, which is clearly (whether intentional or not), a critique of any syncretism between America and Christianity. Besides raising the question of whether non-syncretistic Christianity has ever been a reality, I will point out that their definition of exile lends itself nicely to a negative appraisal of where the Church has been in the late 20th century. The implication is clear: we have been carried off into an exile in Babylon, because we have shared the priorities of the Babylonians—based on self-reliance and preservation—through the methods of wealth, power, and overly organized religion, if you will. We deserve where we are, because we have abandoned the way of Jesus, a way marked by self-denial and dispossession. Our uncomfortable feelings can discipline us back to our appropriate identity and should be seen as a "means of grace". While I do not believe they are guilty of blaming the victim per se, an impatience with exilic disorientation, bewilderment, and all levels of mourning can be detected in the clear lines they draw between Babylon and true faith. Their critique of our cooperation with mechanisms of power, and of our tendency to be co-opted by the sirens of society that allure us, is absolutely warranted. I wholeheartedly agree that we must return to the way of Jesus, if we are ever to realize our eschatological hope, for instance, of lion and lamb reclining together in peace.

All of this depends, of course, on the subversive nature of Jesus and God's kingdom. It depends on the paradoxical reality that life is found in death, that salve-(ation) is found in

Christ's broken body, and that the Church is to continually break its wounds open for the healing of the world. In other words, the Church only finds its identity in the mimesis of Christ's dispossession. This brings me to what I want to push on in the paper. While the authors clearly have deep understanding of the implications of the way of Jesus for societal and political issues of our day (they name race/ethnicity as an example), the paper makes an odd assumption. It assumes that all persons in the kingdom, indeed in the Church, find themselves in positions of power of which they need to be dispossessed. And yet, surely there are persons, indeed, even sectors of the Church, who do not operate from positions of power to begin with. Again, if Christ crucified challenges our self-reliance and power plays—which of course he does—we will welcome the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant because we will have given up our possessiveness of place and privilege. But I do not believe we can assume that all North American Christians have place and privilege to give up! There are some in exile, who are there not of their own doing. Or, I'll put it this way, by quoting myself:

Although countered by the early Holiness Movement's emphasis on empowering the powerless, today we often call persons to self-denial before they have experienced a self to deny. Whether it be political oppression, social structures, cultural norms, family dysfunction, even covert abuse, or innumerable other reasons, there are countless human beings [including Christians] who have been severely disempowered, split off from any sense of personhood... Too many persons have been oppressed in the name of Christianity. By way of analogy, to tell a slave—who has no freedom—to choose to live as a slave is non-sensical. Or similarly, to tell the poor to give up their over-abundance of wealth also makes no sense. In the same way, to tell persons who have no sense of selfhood [or power] to deny themselves is as existentially mystifying as it is implicitly cruel... [Alternatively], the biblical messages of Resurrection, restoration in the Image of God, empowerment for life and service, new birth, new creation, and especially holiness and sanctification all point to the power of God released into the life of the Christian.¹

There is, therefore, an absolutely necessary prior movement of grace in *new creation* (which the authors do mention), before kenosis can be seen as both appropriate and possible. Yes, wrong forms of power must be denounced. Idolatrous desire must be challenged. The way of Jesus is the way of suffering. But we must simultaneously offer a prophetic proclamation of empowerment for Christians who remain oppressed, a clear Christian message that desire itself is not inherently evil, and a hope of possession-ization for those previously dispossessed against their will.

¹ Diane Leclerc, *Discovering Christian Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010), 241-242.