

RESPONSE TO TIMOTHY R. AND SHAWNA SONGER GAINES’
 “BEING THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD—IDENTITY, MISSION, AND MINISTRY”
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Before I consider the implications of what it means to say that the Church is being displaced and dislocated, I must first say, that as I remember fondly Tim and Shawna—two of the most promising Seminary students of mine—and consider how they embody the Gospel in faith and witness, I am struck by the irony of their thesis that “the Church is being exiled.” That is to say, Tim and Shawna’s “light” and “grace” threatens to dispel the validity of their thesis. . . . When I am around Shawna and Tim, I don’t feel like I am in an exiled Church. I feel as if I am already witnessing the fruits of New Creation. Truly, they are the living embodied signs of the Spirit giving to the Church what she needs, in order to be the Church, for the life of the world. Shawna and Tim, you guys are a gift to the Church! And when I see the gifts the Spirit has given to us in you two,—my dynamic duo—I see hope, and real belonging, and yes, even “place” in Christ’s Body—the Church.

My response to the thesis of this paper is less of a formal theological critique to the question: “From what is the Church being exiled?” Instead, what I intend to offer is more of a way of speaking into the Church, to expand the conversation for what it means to be a pilgrim people living in the “Way” of Christ and His Gospel. Actually, for the most part, I share the “metaphorical” sentiments expressed in this paper that the Church is being “displaced and dislocated.” I am somewhat persuaded by the arguments of many (Karen Armstrong, Diana Butler Bass, Stanley Hauerwas, Brian McClaren, Barbara Brown Taylor, Phyllis Tickle, Chris Wiman, et.al) that a new Reformation is underway in the Church, and that it may take longer to emerge than most of us in this conference will live to see. At times, I am even in sympathy with Stanley Hauerwas and his claim that the Spirit is letting the Church implode so that something new may faithfully begin again in the Church. Regardless, of how we may want to parse these times and forecast the different trajectories of the Church that is being renewed in the hidden work of God, I am convinced that the Church of North America is “spiritually sick,” and in need of the medicines of grace that the Spirit gives for the continued healing and renewing of Christ’s Body—the Church.

I begin, then, by offering a few theological tweaks to the ecclesial problem of consolidated power and the particular framework for the trajectory of the Church being exiled. First, if we are speaking metaphorically about the Church in exile, in a time of displacement and dislocation with the corrective to break up the centralizing of power in the Church, we are on the same page. The metaphor then makes sense to me as it follows the path and patterns, in the long evolutionary haul of the Church to “correct and fulfill” what God is doing in the Church for the life of the world. What strikes me as theologically problematic, however, is a metaphor of the Church being exiled as wandering without “place” or “land.” Since the Church takes the person of Jesus as the starting point of identity, and from there follows in the Way of Jesus, why frame the metaphor of the Church being exiled as the pilgrim people living in the Way of Jesus without a particular piece of land, or established in place? After all, Jesus is the One who is the Word made flesh, the very Word that spoke creation and land into place. He is the Word that has come to dwell with us in this place, and in this Way, to reconcile all creation back into fellowship with God who always comes to us in the land, the place of the Triune Creator’s making and dwelling. In other words, “identity, mission, and ministry” seems to fall apart and get “displaced and dislocated” if there is

no land and place, that is central to the Church's call and mission to be a pilgrim people living in the Way of Jesus for the life of the world. I will say more about this nagging problem of the language of "no land and place" in a moment.

In the meantime, let me be clear, I truly understand the constant pull of power, and thus, the ongoing need for the Church to constantly "correct and fulfill," or to be the "*ecclesia semper reformanda*"—the Church constantly reforming. The Cross is God's answer to consolidated power. The power of the Church living in the Way of Jesus is the power of the Cross. And in this Way, the Church trusts in the Spirit to fulfill God's promise of resurrection. That is to say, in the same Way that Jesus faced the Cross, and trusted the Spirit to raise Him from the grave, the Church must depend on the Spirit to bring the future promise of resurrection and New Creation. The power of the Church is found in the Way of the Cross, living in the hope of resurrection. The only "true" power that the Church has comes from the Way of the Cross, that is grounded in hope and promise, and certainly, not in a "place" of "consolidated power." Hence, the faithful posture of the Church must always be one of trust and openness to a future that is in the Spirit's making. Trusting in the promise of a future, in the hope of resurrection is the best corrective and antidote to idolatrous consolidated power.

And so, when the Church begins to follow in a different way, that is, in the same worn path of institutions and empires, and nation-states, the Church begins to consolidate power, by eclipsing the openness of the future to make for herself a permanent place in history. When this happens, the Spirit is faithful to ensure that the gates of hell will not prevail by dispersing and displacing the Church's consolidated (Babel-like) power. Now, if we envision the Church in exile, as the hidden work of God in the Church for the life of the world, then perhaps we can hope and trust that these times are indeed signs that the Spirit is making a faithful path and trajectories in the Church. As the Church moves away from living in the Way of God's mission into the world to become an institution with consolidated power, the Spirit will faithfully blow the Church "out" from the sheltered places of consolidated power in the "nation-state" to the margins of society, to the disenfranchised, the widow and orphan, the meek and lowly, the poor and the powerless. The power of the Cross is the power of God's love that always determines the kind of power the Church has been given, which ironically is the kind of power that cannot be possessed or consolidated. The power of God's self-giving, self-emptying love is always given away for the life of the world. So when the institutional Church consolidates power, the Spirit will displace and even dislocate that power because it keeps the Church from being the truly powerful life giving body and blood of Christ for the redemption of the world.

Now, allow me to return to my nagging problem with the language of "no land and place." I don't want to leave the impression that I think this paper has proposed that a pilgrim people living in the Way of Jesus is a Way that is "really" without land and place. Tim and Shawna are clear that "the Church is a pilgrim people 'on the way,' rather than 'established in place.'" Make no mistake, "consolidated power" is the problem that keeps the Church from being a faithful pilgrim people living in the Way of Jesus, and "displacement and dislocation" are the necessary correctives to renewing the Church in her call and mission for the life of the world. Their objections are clear to me: the way of idolatry in the world is not the way of Christ and His Church for the life of the world. When the Church consolidates power by making a particular place, or a particular piece of land the true identity of the Church, then the Church with all of her idolatrous ways will be exiled

from that particular piece of land or particular place. Whenever we make Rome, Constantinople, Canterbury, or even Kansas City, the “true” place/land of God’s dwelling, we restrict the freedom of the Spirit with our idolatry. Thankfully, the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills, and the Spirit of Pentecost will continue to conform the Church to the Way of Christ and His Gospel. Whether we recognize it or not, the Church that is being exiled is the hidden work of God in the renewal of the Church to be the redeeming life of God for the whole world—in land and place.

I have long been shaped and mentored by St. Irenaeus, that 2nd century apologist and Bishop of Lyons. He captured the heart of the incarnation with his metaphor “the two hands of God”—Christ and the Spirit—and set forth the Trinitarian outline of the Church’s Faith. The first article of the Church’s Faith confesses that Triune Creator as the maker of heaven and earth. The background of that first article for Irenaeus was his pushback against the gnostics who wanted to dismiss the necessity of place and land in God’s economy of salvation. For Irenaeus, not only was creation a necessary place of God’s making for us to know and love God, it was the place of God’s making for God to be in relation to us. All this was captured in the Nicene Creed’s little phrase: “for us and our salvation.” What is often overlooked in Irenaeus is that God creates a world to be the kind of God that God is “for us and our salvation.” Now, the point of this excursus and my whining about the language of “no land and place” is that whenever much of the evangelical Church in North America thinks about the Church and her mission, she notoriously follows the same path of the gnostics. She ignores the unconditional necessity of place, and space, and land, and material, and flesh, in order to be faithful followers of Christ and His Gospel. I can hear the caution of Irenaeus against the heresy of gnosticism proclaim to the Church: It takes a creation with land and place to know and love God and follow in the Way of Christ and the Spirit. God spoke the Word by the breath of God’s mouth and the world came into existence. And the very Word that creates all things, is the Word that became flesh. The God who creates is the God who redeems. This is the Way God has determined to be the kind of God, that God is “for us and our salvation.” And so, however we want to speak of the Church being exiled, and displaced and dislocated because of our idolatries, let us remember, that our mission is to live in the hope of God’s New Creation, which always requires “land and place.” To be sure, land and space, or even creation itself, cannot and will not connect us to God. But God has created land and space and all of creation as the necessary means of grace—gifts of God for the people of God—where God and all of God’s glory are revealed and known. Where else would we find God?

Admittedly, I have presented a few theological tweaks that addresses, mostly, my own *anfechtung*, in hopes that this will extend and expand the conversation about the deeper work of God renewing the Church for the life of the world. To conclude, I affirm with a resounding AMEN!, their moves and insights expressed in the “identity, mission and ministry” of the Church being exiled. It is always refreshing to listen and learn how the different practices and habits of the Church are being used for the healing and renewal of the Church that has been called to be a sacrament of new and unending life for the world.