

RESPONSE TO TIMOTHY R. AND SHAWNA SONGER GAINES’  
 “BEING THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD: IDENTITY, MISSION, AND MINISTRY”  
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Gaines and Songer Gaines’ paper offers a great deal of insight that can be helpful for our gathering this week. Perhaps the most striking insight is their refusal to appropriate popular notions of the church in exile that lament what seems to be the church’s decreasing political power and influence in the North American context. To do this, they call readers to reimagine the location of the church’s home as found in the particular body and life of Jesus Christ rather than a particular land or government office. In light of this, the church’s pilgrimage is not toward a new land or place of power, but toward an embodiment of Jesus’ way of being in the world. A second insightful move is their juxtaposition of the way of Babylon and the way of Jesus. In homiletical fashion, the authors lead readers toward a convicting comparison between Babylonian and Western norms and offer a compelling portrayal of Jesus as counter to much of what the church in North American contexts has found comfortable or even desirable. Any exile the church finds itself in began with embracing the desire for comfort with the way of Babylon. In other words, the current rejection the church feels in Western society may be an opportunity to move toward faithfulness. This is an excellent paper, and I am encouraged to know this notion of exile will be part of the conversation as we gather. In this brief paper, I will raise particular ways we can take the conversation further. More specifically, I will first discuss the limits of using the church’s desired ends as a way of describing the church and then the need for a pneumatological emphasis in the paper’s argument.

*Describing the Church with Integrity*

As I noted above, a major strength of Gaines and Songer Gaines’ paper is the acknowledgment that the church is on a journey toward faithfulness. Interestingly, however, the paper embraces the common practice in postliberal ecclesiological discourse that makes potentially inspirational claims about what the church *is* as if the church has arrived at its destination. For example, the authors write, “As the body of Christ in the world, the Church bears an open wound from which its life flows out. The Church does not seek to suture its wound, nor bind it up for the sake of its self-preservation...” (p. 8). This and other related declarations in the paper are inspiring, but they seem to oppose the basis for Gaines and Songer Gaines’ overall argument, which is that the church does not live this way. The church would not be in exile if it did live this way. I do recognize that there are important reasons for talking about the church in this manner, and I must admit that I, too, have made claims about the church as if it already is what it ought to be. Doing this acknowledges that the church is not merely a sociological group but a theologically defined peoplehood, and it has the hope to mitigating any attempt to make a distinction between a visible church (earthly / mixed with sinners) and invisible church (other-worldly / pure). However, if we are trying to discuss ways Christians have been embracing problematic North American frameworks and operating more as a voting bloc than a witness to the Kingdom, then we are already stating our need for sociological insight to be part of the conversation. And if such insight is not genuinely invited into ecclesiological discourse, we could very well be embracing a different version of the visible/invisible dichotomy—one that is only willing to see what the church ought to be and is unwilling to see all of what the church has been. If we are to take the church’s pilgrim identity seriously, we need to

develop ways of describing the church that can keep theological and sociological insight in dialogue. More specifically, we need to let our language display a recognition that a great deal of our ideological claims about the church are not exactly statements about what *the church is* but about what about what *the church is uniquely called, empowered, and expected to be*. Amending the quote above, we could say:

As the body of Christ in the world, the Church is [uniquely called, empowered, and expected to] bear an open wound from which its life flows out. The Church is [uniquely called, empowered, and expected to resist the temptation to] suture its wound or bind it up for the sake of self-preservation.

It is in shifting toward honest language that integrates theological and sociological insight that we can see the direction and need for moving forward in the pilgrimage out of exile toward faithfulness.

### *Emphasizing the Significance of the Spirit*

Another area in need of further conversation is found in the fact that the paper moves back and forth between Jesus' way and the Church's identity, mission, and ministry without displaying the way the Holy Spirit theologically binds the Jesus and church together. I recognize that only so much can fit into a short paper, but an emphasis on the Spirit can help give the claims of the paper a stronger footing and a tighter ecclesiological framework. I will highlight two areas where a pneumatological emphasis can be helpful—the call to live the way of Jesus and the call to view the gospel as the church's identity rather than an ideology to promote.

The call for the church to embrace the way of Jesus is not a new concept in the life of the church. However, what has been constantly debated is the claim that doing this is in fact possible. It may even be the case that certain Christian groups have reached for power in Babylon as a way of giving up on the call to embrace the way of Jesus and settling for what seems possible in the North American contexts. I appreciate how this paper highlights the way of Jesus rather than something more abstract, such as a set of principles or an undergirding ethic, but, without clarity that God is actively present and shaping the church to live faithfully, this move runs the risk of suggesting that the church is to merely try its best to mimic Jesus. It is important to note that the church is uniquely called, empowered, and expected to live the way of Jesus, because the Spirit that descended upon Jesus is the very Spirit that has descended upon the people of God to bring about the church and guide us toward faithfulness—holiness of heart and life (Luke 4:1-19; Acts 1:1-8; 2:1-14).

Gaines and Songer Gaines seek to explain a relationship between the gospel and the church that is more dynamic than an ideology the church promotes. They explain, "...the Church is gathered into the redemptive reality toward which the gospel points. The Church announces by its own life, patterned in the way of Jesus, that something of new creation is breaking into the midst of the old" (p. 9). They go on to say the gospel is "...the heartbeat of [the church's] identity" (p. 9). They are seeking to identify the church with the gospel, but there is a theological gap here. How is it that the Church is "gathered into the redemptive reality" of

the gospel? A pneumatological emphasis would help make the claim clearer by showing that one way this “gathering into” happens is narratively.

We have often talked about the gospel by first pointing out the reality of sin and the need for salvation, then explaining the necessity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and finally declaring the opportunity for human beings to experience salvation by accepting Jesus Christ’s lordship. In this narrative, the church is often understood as the collection of those who accept His lordship; the church is portrayed as the recipients and tellers of the gospel. In many ways, we can understand the Gaines paper as challenging this narrative as reductionist, as it is this narrative that easily reduces the gospel to an ideology and the church to the promoter of an ideology. This narrative fails to recognize how the church is part of the gospel story. The church was brought about as the fulfillment of God’s promise to cultivate Israel into a peoplehood that will be blessing to all nations (Genesis 22:18). Jesus took on the very identity of Israel and opened this peoplehood to all people of all nations, groups, and languages through his life, death, resurrection, and offering of the Holy Spirit. As theologian, Bryan P. Stone, notes in *Evangelism After Christendom*, “...the Spirit’s operation connects the story of Jesus with the story of Israel and with the story of the church, thereby making all three a single story.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the gospel story is not told in full until we tell about the church. In other words, the fulfillment of God’s promise to bring about a peoplehood that is uniquely called, empowered, and expected to live into the way of Jesus is part of the good news! This is why we can affirm with Gaines and Songer Gaines that the church announces the gospel “by its own life, patterned in the way of Jesus...” (p. 9).

### *Conclusion*

Gaines and Songer Gaines’ paper is an important contribution to our discourse as we seek to interpret the church’s current situation in North America and discern a way forward. If taken seriously, their paper calls for a major shift in the church’s practice and values in North America. I have highlighted two areas that to consider as we discuss their argument. I suggested we challenge the common trend of describing the church as if it has already arrived at its destination. Instead of saying that the church lives into the way of Jesus, I suggested that we talk about the church as uniquely called, empowered, and expected to live into the way of Jesus. Related to this, I explained that it is important for us emphasize the significance of the Holy Spirit in this conversation, as it the Spirit who makes it possible for us to live into the way of Jesus and provides the narrative theological tie between Jesus Christ and the church as the body of Christ. I offer these as suggestions in order to further Gaines and Songer Gaines’ argument and support a fruitful conversation. May we embrace the call to pilgrimage, and may we trust the Spirit to guide us toward faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 76.