

BEING THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD: IDENTITY, MISSION, AND MINISTRY
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*“Our enemy, our captor is no pharaoh on the Nile
 Our toil is neither mud nor brick, nor sand.
 Our ankles bear no calluses from chains, yet Lord, we’re bound
 Imprisoned here, we dwell in our own land.”
 -Andrew Peterson, “Deliver Us”*

The common presupposition underlying much of the literature regarding the contemporary church and exile is that the church is being displaced and dislocated. The question that sets our trajectory now is, “From what is the church being exiled?” Unlike the historical people of Israel, the Church has no geographical homeland to call its own. In establishing catholicity as one of the distinctive *notae ecclesiae*, the Council of Nicaea has challenged the notion that the Church can find its identity in any particular geographical place. Rather than a place, the Church takes a person as the starting point of its identity. Patterning its life after the life of a first century wandering peasant Jew who was crucified and resurrected, the Church joins its life to Jesus; we also have no place to lay our head. The Church is a pilgrim people, a community of those who are “on the way,” rather than “established in place.” The “place” of salvation for the Church is not a particular piece of land, but the particular way of Jesus.

If the language of exile is not pointing to a geographical reality and expulsion from one’s homeland as it was for Israel, perhaps we are working with a metaphor. In the North American context, the most obvious use of exile as a metaphor may be that the Church is being displaced from its previously-held place of societal honor with its attendant economic, political, and power-dynamic privileges. Whispers of exile, particularly among American Protestants, are often accompanied by pained conversations concerning the multitude of ways in which the state is challenging the Church’s place in society, or the ways in which the Church is no longer cozily at home at the center of national life. If this is the sense in which we are using the term, there is good news for the Church: The present dislocation the Church is beginning to experience in North America may not be exile at all, but may be a hope-filled means of grace, which is making a way for us to embody our distinct identity, mission, and ministry as the people who call Jesus Lord.

Our claim today is that wherever the way of the Church has departed from the particular way of Jesus, there we are in exile. 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. Our purpose in this presentation, then, is to offer a juxtapositional analysis of two contrasted visions currently being presented to the Church: the way of Babylon, and the way of Jesus. Each of these ways is based in a specific and particular historical setting, though they each continue to present a characteristic pattern to the contemporary world. They each carry an internal logic, a set of hopes, dreams and teleological ends. A large part of our task here is to unveil those dynamics as a way of narrating the Church’s place in North America. Drawing upon the role Babylon plays in Israel’s exilic imagination, we will examine the pattern of Babylon’s way as it seeks to seduce a distinct people away from their identity. In the contrasting way of Jesus, we will examine the interplay between

Christian identity, mission, and ministry in the hopeful and salvific light of what we have seen in God's faithfulness to Israel as Babylon did its best to wipe away their distinctive identity by parading before their eyes the alluring offerings of the empire. Finally, we will suggest several constructive proposals for a Church seeking to live faithfully into the way of Jesus.

Indeed, we will, and we must, encounter an uncomfortable process of "stripping away" those things to which we have become accustomed and upon which we may have come to rely. That it is uncomfortable, however, does not make it bad news. The good news is that becoming displaced to those things will not displace us from God's faithfulness. The robust hope here is that God's salvation-rescue from captivity has the capacity to return us to our native way. "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling...come home."

The Way of Babylon

Babylon is many things in the imagination of the people of God. She is the ancient city of Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar, the mother of modern urban life. She is Jeremiah's golden cup in the hand of the Lord that made the whole world drunk. She is the captor of Psalm 137 who demanded a song from the weeping Israelites along the shores of the Euphrates. She is the whore of John's Revelation who is fallen before she was ever built, redeemed before she was ever fallen.

Though established in a particular historical setting, Babylon functions in an apocalyptically imaginative way as that overwhelming force capable of not only coercing and displacing a people, but also of capturing their hearts and minds. In this mode of apocalyptic imagination, Babylon takes on a character, identity, and *ethos* that cannot be ascribed exclusively to one city, empire, or story. Though Babylon was a particular city in a particular time, it functions as more than that, standing in and lending its name to the times and places when the particularity of God's people is seduced, co-opted, or carried away by a way of life that is out of step with God's life. Babylon represents *a way* of living and being in the world that stands cross-ways with God's way. Wherever God's people have abandoned the particular ways of the Lord, carried away by their own desires for the way of another people, there is Babylon.

As such, Babylonian forms of exile have presented different challenges to God's people at different points and in a variety of ways. We will focus our attention here on sketching one primary characteristic of Babylon's way, which is the consolidation of power at the expense of the vulnerable for the sake of the empire's own perpetuation.

Historian Paul Kriwaczek claims that the ancient people who came together to build what would become the famous and infamous city of Babylon shared one primary thing in common: an ideology of progress.¹ A diverse amalgamation of those from a variety of ethnicities, religions, and people groups left behind a way of living that revolved around hunting and gathering in which their livelihood and survival always depended on forces beyond their control, to create a new way of living in which a society could consolidate resources, becoming truly self-sufficient and self-reliant. The ancient and emerging practice of agriculture, Kriwaczek

¹ Paul Kriwaczek, *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilisation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 22 ff.

demonstrates, was deeply connected to a shift in Babylon's religious and political thinking. The fickle fortunes of gathering whatever food was to be found gradually came to be replaced by the acts of planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops. In Babylon's ability to build, harvest, and develop, the inscrutable and enchanted world of gods, spiritual forces, and powers eventually came to be understood in light of an emerging political reality in which kings were not bound by the whims of fortune.² Kingship, understood in light of and connected to human achievement, was a gift that had been given to Babylon by the gods, descended from heaven. Power could now be held in political hands.

As Babylonian society came to be more self-sufficient, it eventually began to consolidate its resources, signaling an emerging ability to locate power in the consolidation of self-produced resources. All of this was progress to the Babylonian mind, a powerful ideology that indicated "it was both possible and desirable continually to improve on what had gone before, that the future should be better – and bigger – than the past."³

While the progress of these earliest civilizations led to some of the great achievements of human history, it also opened a path for an alternative way of being in the world, marked by the consolidation of power, the dissolution of communal forms of social life, and the increasing social vulnerability of those who were left without power.⁴ Kriwaczek identifies several particular marks of the way of this new society in ancient Babylonia:

- Social and familial ties began to disappear
- Society became individualized and individuals became more isolated
- Marriages could be dissolved more quickly
- Promiscuous sexual practices were encouraged and ritualized
- Economic systems encouraged debt
- Debt was bought and sold (commodity futures)
- The gap between rich and poor grew wider
- Large percentages of the population were incarcerated

The familiarity of this list for modern (perhaps particularly, Western) readers speaks to the enduring spirit of Babylon and her way. While isolation, poverty gap and mass incarceration was certainly never the aim of an emerging Babylonian civilization, they became marks of a society that prioritized the consolidation of power, wealth, and self-sufficiency for the sake of the empire's longevity.

² See Francis Oakley, *Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). Kenneth Thompson similarly documents the link between political kingship and progress. See Kenneth Thompson, "Concepts of Progress in the Older Civilizations" in Kenneth Thompson, ed. *The Early Sociology of Culture: Culture and Progress, Vol. VIII* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

³ Kriwaczek, *Babylon*, 24.

⁴ See Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background* (Washington D.C.: The Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966), 45 ff.

The possession of power through the means of self-sufficiency was one of Babylon's primary political exports. The practices of exile in the Babylonian empire served to spread this way of living and being in the world through a combination of coercion and seduction. Babylon was not only capable of military victories over opposing armies, but was also capable of using exile as a campaign for the hearts and minds of those who the empire's army had carried into captivity to Babylon's way. The resistance of the young Israelite leaders described in the book of Daniel, for example, serves to illustrate Babylon's tactics of exile under Nebuchadnezzar; isolating the leaders of the foreign people, feeding them the rich foods of Babylon's (self-sufficient) table, teaching them the brilliant language of the Chaldeans, entertaining them with the beautiful music culled from the instruments of conquered nations, all served to create a new generation of good Babylonians, those who had not only come to appreciate the spoils of Babylon's bounty, but to come to love the very way that had produced such plentitude.

Lest we come to imagine that the people of Israel were adept at resisting the siren call of Babylon's way, we are reminded that significant segments of Israel's prophetic literature are dedicated to emphasizing that the people of Israel had been seduced by Babylon's way long before Nebuchadnezzar's chariots forcibly carried away a single Israelite.

The fifth chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy vividly has the prophet running through the streets of Jerusalem, the holy city, looking for even one person who lives justly and speaks truth. He is looking for a pilgrim on the way of the Lord. What he finds instead are scoundrels, adulterers, and prostitutes, a "people who have become fat and sleek... who do not promote the case of the fatherless [nor] defend the cause of the poor" (Jer. 5:28). They are those who have consolidated power against the weak and in their self-sufficiency have no need of the Lord. The people of Israel had become good Babylonians while they were living in the holy city.

At the end of chapter five, Jeremiah, speaking for the Lord, says, "My people love to have it so, but what will you do when it comes to an end?" (Jer. 5:31). Jeremiah's message is that in abandoning the particular way of Israel's life in favor of Babylon's seductive pattern of power consolidation at the expense of the vulnerable, the people of Israel were carried into exile long before they sat weeping along the rivers of Babylon. Exile began while they were safe in the holy city, living in the unholy way of Babylon. God's people may claim to hate Babylon when they are forced into exile, but they learned well to love her way while they were safe at home. Exile begins when the people of God fall in love with a way of living and being in the world that is contrary to the life of God, revealed to the Church in the life of Jesus.

It may be that the theme of this conference strikes such a lurid chord because we are beginning to notice that the social scenery is changing and that the Church may soon be displaced from its social place it has held in North American culture, and that the Church is alarmed at the prospect that we may soon find ourselves in exile. But to take the witness of Jeremiah seriously is to come to terms with the reality that exile happens in our hearts long before we hear the rumble of Babylonian chariots. When our desires become those of a power-consolidating people, bent on hopes of self-sufficiency and visions of self-perpetuation while forgetting the poor, captivity is only a formality of the exile that has already taken place.

Our exploration of Babylonian exile themes bring us to this point: As the people of God living in North America, we should not fear the social displacement that we are here calling

exile, for it is only symptomatic of the disease. Instead, we would do well to make Jeremiah's concerns our own, even in those places where we rest comfortably at home in the heart of the holy city. The people of God can continue to be the people of God with or without large amounts of social power. Our very identity is taken captive, however, when our hearts are made to pursue a Babylonian promise of self-sufficient perpetuation of our ideals for the sake of maintaining our place in the world.

Wherever we have been seduced by the offerings of Babylon's way, wherever we have accepted Babylon's favors of social power for the sake of social power, there we have become intoxicated at Babylon's cup. But just as God used captivity in Babylon to show Israel the way of the pilgrim people of God, there is abundant good news for the Church which will acknowledge those places where she has been seduced by Babylon's way, do the hard work of weeping alongside the banks of Babylon's rivers, and seek the way of Jesus that promises to change much more than the scenery of our exilic surroundings.

The Way of Jesus: The Identity, Mission, and Ministry of the Church

If the way of Babylon has to do with consolidating power for its own sake, that way stands in contrast to the way of Jesus, whose life and ministry are characterized by the giving of himself, the dispossession of his own life, for the sake of redemption. While there are many ways in which the way of Jesus can be specifically contrasted to the way of Babylon, space allows us to address at least two here. The first is a question of epistemology, and the second is a question of sociology. The epistemological question inquires into the way in which Jesus' way orients the pattern in which we know God, ourselves, our identity, and our mission. The sociological question probes one pressing reality confronting the Church in North America: immigration, race, and ethnicity as it relates to ecclesiological identity. Both of these points go to illustrate what we are proposing as the intersection of identity, mission, and ministry. Before we launch these lines of questioning, however, we must say more about the distinct way of Jesus as a means of contrasting the way of Babylon. It is the way of Jesus in which the Church finds its home.⁵ All other ways, no matter how compelling, seductive, or culturally lauded, will lead the Church into exile.

⁵ Space prohibits a detailed explanation of the way in which a historically contextualized person can be translated into contemporary contexts which are historically, socially, and culturally distant from the person of Jesus. Allen Verhey's notion of tradition is a helpful guide, however, as is Richard Hays' exegetical methodology in drawing together Christian scripture and contemporary ethics. Verhey argues that the Church "remembers" Jesus in its traditioned discourse. Hays sets out to inform the Church's reading of Scripture so that its life is shaped faithfully by the text, drawing primary attention to three "focal images" among the "looser unity" of the texts that comprise the New Testament: community, cross, and new creation. We join this approach, proposing more of an *ethos* than a 'code of ethics' distilled from the gospel accounts of Jesus. While Hays' project allows the space for more complete extrapolation of the ways in which each of the New Testament writers envisions faithfulness to the way of Jesus, we are here adopting his overarching hermeneutic: "The God of Israel, the creator of the world, has acted (astoundingly) to rescue a lost and broken world through the death and resurrection of Jesus." The Church acts as "a community of witnesses to this good news," and "is called to reenact the

As we discuss now the way of Jesus, we find the nexus of hope and possibility at the juncture of the Church's identity, mission, and ministry, all realities which are located in and marked by the way of Jesus. None of these aspects of the Church's life can be disconnected from one another, nor are any systematically or logically prior to the others. When we talk about the identity of the church, we are talking about the mission and ministry of the church. Mission and ministry are more than what the church does, as if the being or identity of the church can be understood apart from mission and ministry. For example, to be one of Jesus' first twelve disciples was precisely to follow him in his way and join him in his mission in the world; our very identity as Christians has everything to do with joining the mission and ministry which constitute Jesus' way.

Our identity, then, has primarily to do with the particular person of Jesus Christ, and the particularity of his way. Though we cannot develop an exhaustive account of Jesus' particularity here, we can look to some representative segments of the New Testament witness to Jesus' life and ministry which informs the dynamics of the Church's identity. All of the gospel accounts offer to us a distinctive take on Jesus' particularity, though John's gospel offers one which serves to illuminate our discussion of the way of Jesus well. For John, there cannot be a "way" in abstraction. Indeed, Jesus himself is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The particular way of Jesus illustrated in the fourth gospel closes off the possibility of using power to one's own consolidation of power, as we can see in what Jesus does as one under whose power the Father had placed all things (John 13:2-5). Self-reliance and self-glorification is another possibility closed off in a Jesus-shaped identity. For John's gospel, the continual motif of being "lifted up" or "glorified" reaches its climax as the crowds gathered at Golgotha look upon the broken body of Jesus, who had been finally "lifted up" as the fullest expression of what glorification looks like in Jesus' distinctive way.

John's resurrection account offers another remarkable facet of Jesus' way. In his resurrection, the wounds sustained in Jesus' crucifixion remain open to the witnesses of his resurrected body. Accompanied by Jesus' invitation to "Reach out your hand and put it into my side," the witness of the wounds tells a characteristic story about the way of Jesus: he does not act to consolidate or preserve his power as if his wounds should have been sutured and closed up for the sake of self-preservation, but remain open to the disciples for the sake of *their* life (John 20:27). Indeed, it was this wound from which water and blood, the fluids most essential to life, flowed out of Jesus body. That his wounds remain open in his resurrection (even open to the point of inviting Thomas' hand to enter!), signals to us that the resurrected body of Christ remains open to the world. Indeed, Thomas' question to Jesus is the question at the heart of this paper: "How can we know the way?" (John 14:5). Jesus' verbal response to Thomas, "I am the way..." in chapter 14, is fulfilled by Jesus' embodied invitation to Thomas in chapter 20, to place his hand into the wound from which life flowed, and in that moment to know "the truth and the life" by entering into belief through the wound in Jesus' side. The place from which the

loving obedience of Jesus Christ and thus to serve as a sign of God's redemptive purposes for the world." See Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996) and Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

fluids of life drained out of Jesus body now stands open as the place of welcome; the place from which the greatest cost was extracted from Jesus now stands open as the place of utmost hospitality. Jesus is no consolidator of power, for his way is that of dispossession, to be broken open for the life of the world, and to invite others into life through the place of his death.

As arresting as the exegetical possibilities are here for their own sake, we must not miss the possibilities they open for the Church. 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 to bind it up for the sake of its self-preservation, for this out-flowing brokenness speaks to the heart of the Church's identity, mission, and ministry. The Church's identity is as those who have come to belief through the hospitably open wound in Christ's resurrected body, and whose calling is to let blood and water to flow from its own body, to make the place where its life flows out the very same place of invitation into life. Mysteriously and wonderfully, the open wound in the body of Christ is the place from which the healing of salve-ation is offered to creation.

Water and blood are not only the fluids most necessary to biological life; they are the fluids of sacramental life. In baptism and Eucharist, water and blood spill once again from Christ's body, and the place from which they flow is also the place where the world is invited to enter into belief, to know the way, the truth, and the life. To be in the world as a body whose interests are in spilling out, rather than seeking self-preservation, not only speaks to the identity of the Church, but also its mission and ministry. A body broken open for the sake the world's life and salvation is our particular identity; 'ministry' is the name we give to our ongoing acts of being broken open for the world's salvation.

Of course, there are numerous other possibilities for the Church we could consider as we contrast the way of Jesus to the way of Babylon. For the sake of time, we will mention only two. We have chosen these two because of their pressing relationship to the Church's life in North America. The first is that the way of Jesus rescues the gospel from becoming more than an ideology. The second considers the possibilities for the Church's identity, mission, and ministry in the light of quickly shifting racial and demographic changes taking place in North America. Both of these also speak to the way in which Babylon tempts the Church toward its way of consolidating power to the detriment of the Church's identity and mission in the world.

The way of Jesus has an interesting way of knowing and being known. Very basically, the Christian confession that the Word of God became flesh and that we are known by God in that enfleshed encounter signals to us that Jesus offers to us a way to be followed, rather than an ideology to be defended. The gospel of Jesus functions as an announcement of a redemptive and in-breaking reality, but the gospel is not contained in the announcement itself. We can imagine that Jesus' first encounter with Peter would have been very different had his charge to the young fisherman been something like, "Peter, do you intellectually maintain all of the correct ideas and concepts about who I am?" and then left him to tend his nets. Rather, Jesus invites Peter to follow him, establishing Peter into the way of the gospel, and spending years working with Peter on how to walk in his way more faithfully.

The significant point here is that when the gospel is reduced to an ideology, it plays into Babylon's pattern of power consolidation. Ideologies are those sets of concepts around which power can be consolidated. Ideologies can be taken in hand and used by a movement,

organization, or empire for the sake of the empire's own perpetuation. In other words, ideologies serve the empire for the sake of the empire's ability to preserve and perpetuate itself.

This is not so with the way of Jesus or the Church that follows in his way. The gospel of Jesus does not serve the Church's hopes of self-perpetuation or power consolidation, but rather, 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. By the way the Church resists reducing the gospel of Jesus to an ideology and coalescing power around that ideology, the Church resists a type of epistemological exile to Babylon's way, which would have the Church believe that the gospel can be known as an ideology and used as a tool in its hand to carve out its place in the world, rather than as the heartbeat of its identity. An elusive, yet prevailing aspect of exile is the adoption of Babylonian epistemological modes in which the faith of the Church is reduced to a set of propositions and entered into the marketplace of ideologies to contend for its place among them for the sake of power consolidation. When our imaginations have been carried into exile, we come to believe that the gospel is an ideology to be defended by whatever means necessary. In fact, however, the gospel announces that a new way has been breathed into creation; the good news it tells is that the truth of the universe will not be decided by the most powerful of the warring ideological factions. "The old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

We raise this issue in light of what some Christians, particularly evangelicals, in North America may fear as an exilic loss of political power. And we raise the issue with this pastoral concern for the Church's identity, mission, and ministry: One of the surest ways for the Church to be carried into exile is to be seduced by Babylon's way of reducing the gospel to an ideology that can be employed in a quest for consolidating power. The Church moves toward captivity when we give over our identity as people in the way of Jesus to be known primarily as a voting bloc and enlisted in the politics of power consolidation. Exile is what happens when evangelicals are made to actually *desire* being known as a voting bloc for the sake of consolidating power. While the temptation of winning the ideological day is alluring, for the pilgrim people of God in the way of Jesus Christ, to pursue this way is to reach for the food offered to us at Babylon's table; it is to live more fully into exile. An exiled Church is a Church that has come to believe its life depends upon overcoming competing ideologies, and reduces the gospel of Jesus to yet another tool which can be used in the age-old fight of the old creation.

The identity of the Church as a pilgrim people, however, calls for the Church to announce that a new way has been opened to us in Jesus precisely as we walk in his way. Following after the way of an embodied, particular Lord offers this good news to the world: the way, the truth, and the life, is not found in overcoming unfavorable ideologies, but in joining our steps to the way of Jesus, who did not seek to contend among the ideologies, but to subvert the quarrel altogether, offering a radically different way, which is life-giving truth and truthful life. Our identity is in following a risen Lord in his way of self-giving dispossession for the sake of reconciliation, and that way is not threatened if we are not seated in the centers of social power or political influence. Simply put, *we don't need Babylon in order to be the Church.*

While we are discussing the contrasting differences between the way of Babylon and the way of the Church, we cannot ignore this Babylonian promise: homogenous groups are more effective at consolidating power. Part of Babylon's success of self-perpetuation has to do with

its ability to reduce and erase the differences of those whom they carried into exile. Israelite exiles, for example, were given new Babylonian names; they were made to be good Babylonians.

Though we don't have the time or space to speak exhaustively about this, we must say at least this much: the identity of the Church is not found in its homogeneity. In 2008, non-white minorities comprised one third of the U.S. population. Census projections indicate that by 2042, non-white minorities will become the majority population of the United States.⁶ For all that we hear about the church being behind the curve of change in society, when it comes to race, the church in the United States is actually ahead of the curve. An influx of non-European immigration has changed the face of the Church in North America, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

To adopt Babylon's way in the face of this reality would be to not only fear this sociological shift because of its potential to dislocate us from the seat of influence, but also to work against it. If an ideology has any hope of staying on top of the societal pecking order, it must either compete harder or eliminate the competition. The theological vision in front of the pilgrim people of God, however, views these shifts as an opportunity for the Church to live more fully into its identity.⁷

The ethnic and racial catholicity of the Church is not simply an accidental or secondary characteristic of the Church's life, but speaks to the very center of our identity and the hope of salvation in the way of Jesus: reconciliation among the nations is a possibility opened to us by God, and it is a possibility the Church lives eschatologically now in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Church in North America is not being exiled because the racial makeup of the body is becoming less homogenous. Rather, these realities are giving the Church an opportunity to live more deeply into its identity.

At the nexus of identity, mission, and ministry, we must recognize that our calling to each of these is to the particular and distinct way of Jesus. We must recognize that where the Church's identity, mission, and ministry have become reflective of some other way, there has the Church has lived into its own exile. And yet, there is much good news here: The Church's flourishing does not, nor has it ever depended upon the acquisition or consolidation of social placement, power, or influence. Its identity has never been rooted in its enshrinement in the halls of Western civilization. Its mission has never been connected to its ability to command respect. Its ministries have always been the embodied expression of living into the way of the resurrected Christ, who stands broken open before those who continue to ask, "How can we know your way?"

Our identity as the body of Christ is in the way of Jesus, who did not preserve his life or his body though any means necessary, but was lifted up on a cross, and whose life was broken open for the sake of others. Our mission is the activity of being broken open for the life of the

⁶ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 14.

⁷ John's vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation presents an image of a city centered on the praise of the slaughtered lamb, a kind of liturgical life which includes the nations in all of their splendor.

world. Our ministry is what brokenness in action looks like in the world. And in these acts, we are safe at home.

Constructive Proposals

We come now to some all-too-brief proposals which seek the Church's faithfulness in the face of the temptation to follow Babylon's way. The first is to engender a distinct identity through practices of Christian worship. The central practice of worship is where the Church learns its story, and where it practices the way of Jesus. In its gathering around the table of the Lord, it learns to be a body of sacrificial dispossession. In its prayers for the world it learns the vocabulary of being given for the world. In its preaching the Word it proclaims the particular way of the God who became flesh. In its passing of the peace to one another, it embodies the new reality of reconciliation that is being made through Jesus' way. In entering into the waters of baptism it announces that the essence of its life is dying to self and being resurrected with Christ. In all of this, the Church lives deeply into holiness, being ever transformed more fully into the image of Christ, by grace becoming holy as our Father is holy. This is our identity.

The second is to entrust the Church's future to God by enacting practices of dispossession. In seeking ways to be given away, the Church learns to be the holy people of a self-giving God. As we are gathered into this way, we are gathered into salvation. In our acts of breaking open, our brokenness is being healed, for in being joined to the way of Jesus, we are becoming more fully who God has called us to be. This is our mission. The particular acts associated with it are called ministry.

The third is to listen carefully to the stories, histories, and witnesses of exiled peoples. How have those peoples maintained a sense of identity in the midst of exile? What practices have sustained them? What practices have allowed them to remain faithful? There is a reason why so many of our biblical texts are written in the midst of exile. We suspect that the Church in the North American context may receive deep gifts of faithfulness by listening carefully once again to stories of exile, that we might understand more deeply the character of faithfulness.

In the midst of this brief comparison between the way of Babylon and the way of Jesus, we hope at least this has become hopefully clear: the Church does not need to fear exile from Babylon's way! Indeed, for the Church, this is no exile at all. Rather, the pattern that God has long extended to the people of God is yet again evident: displacement is being used for the sake of greater faithfulness to the distinctive way of God. If Jesus' way is a way that explodes the way of power consolidation by means of dispossession, the Church in North America seems poised to live more fully into its identity, mission, and ministry than at any other point in recent history. Of course, this hope is also accompanied by a pastoral and prophetic warning: do not be seduced by the way of Babylon, for there is exile, there is despair. The Church in the Lordship of Christ does not need to consolidate power for the righteous, for in Christ all the power of God has been broken open for the world. The way of Jesus' gospel, the way that is saving us to be who we are, is found coupled to Thomas' request to know the way, and they are the words of Jesus: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1). And the good news abounds all the more: believing *in* Jesus is not an ideological proposition, but a possibility opened to the Church precisely because of Jesus' own act of dispossession; his wound stands open, inviting us to believe *in* him.

Though we have said it before, it bears repeating: We don't need Babylon to be the Church. In the way of Jesus, the Church's identity, mission, and ministry are precisely those things which foreclose the possibility of becoming an institution in Babylon's way of power consolidation and self-possession. We are a people in the way of the One who gave himself away, a people who flourishes through dispossession, pilgrims in the way of a dispossessed Lord. In his way, our identity of dispossession becomes the very enactment of our life. In his way of breaking open and humble dispossession, we also hear Christ's speaking to us through the ages: "This is my way. Welcome home."