

RESPONSE TO TIMOTHY R. GAINES AND SHAWNA SONGER GANES'
 "BEING THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD: IDENTITY, MISSION, AND MINISTRY"
 Mark Quanstrom

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord. (**Jeremiah 29:4-9**)

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Timothy and Shawna Gaines want to invert the traditional way of understanding exile. They write in the last sentence of their second paragraph:

"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." (emphasis mine)

And they write in the first sentence of the third paragraph:

"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." (emphasis mine)

If I am understanding them correctly, the church should understand itself as truly exiled only when it has been co-opted by or conformed to cultures alien to Christianity. That's the true exile. The church is in exile when it is apostate from God's rule. In other words, and again, one is truly in exile then when one is very comfortably at home in this world.

I understand the potentially didactic value of this re-definition, as it would call the people of God to consider that they are not really in exile, even as they live in clear non-conformity to the predominant culture. It's an interesting move and I'm thinking that the intention in this redefinition is to either help the people of God to accommodate themselves to exile understood in the traditional sense, since it is very uncomfortable to be in exile, or the intention is to call the people of God to be faithful to the kingdom, knowing that the true exile is to be exiled from God. And yes, I would agree that being exiled from God is most definitely the true exile. With that acknowledgment however, I want to say that that is an innovative way to understand exile and I

want to also say, in the end, not very helpful. I'm also thinking that that is an acquiescence to the very desire to not be in exile, which desire I believe should be forsaken.

In other words, I believe that it would be more helpful if the people of God always understood themselves to always be in exile as "in exile" is the way it has to be and should be. The fact that the people of God have not always understood themselves that way is not to their/our credit after all. So yes, we can speak of being exiled from "the way of Jesus" or as being exiled from "the way of Babylon" and either way, the call would be to live separate and different from the predominant culture, which I believe is the point of the essay. I'm just not sure that re-naming who is actually exiled is that helpful and I believe it to be a bit problematic even in this essay, as they used exile in the traditional understanding of the concept, even while wanting to inversely define it. If all that is being said is, "to be in conformity with the world is to be exiled from God, and to be in conformity with God is to be exiled from the world," then we would of course agree. Understanding the incompatibility of "the way of Babylon" with "the way of Jesus" would be very helpful and in the North American context, a recognition perhaps too long in coming.

Timothy and Shawna then describe the "way of Babylon" and to be frank, I'm a little suspicious of the hermeneutic precisely because the description of Babylon in 7th century BCE is so remarkably like how one might describe North America in the 21st century CE. Granted, Babylon in the 7th century BCE may be very much like America in the 21st century CE. Perhaps there is nothing new under the sun, but that just seems a bit too convenient and I'm thinking that what we have here is not a little bit of projection for the sake of a specific argument.

Regardless, Timothy and Shawna remind us that "*the people of Israel had been seduced by Babylon's way long before Nebuchadnezzar's chariots forcibly carried away a single Israelite.*" They state that the reason for exile in Babylon in the first place was precisely because they had already embraced her. That's a worthy point for consideration, as we consider what it might mean to be culturally exiled in North America. However, since accommodation to Babylon was so much the case for Israel, exile to Babylon should not have been as problematic as it was, since they were already, in a sense, living there. And yet, interestingly enough, it was.

So we might conclude that the actual geographic dislocation served as a wake-up call to the children of Israel, revealing to them their sin of accommodation to Babylon prior to the exile. Exile therefore had a redemptive purpose and Timothy and Shawna correctly point that out. "*God used captivity in Babylon to show Israel the way of the pilgrim people of God.*" Actual exile then, over against nominal exile, was redemptive for the people of Israel, as it forcibly reminded them of the incompatibility of the way of Israel with the way of Babylon. Thus, the potential redemptive benefits of understanding the 21st century church as more and more exiled, and evidently as a consequence of the church being too conformed to "21st Babylon" as well.

This leads Timothy and Shawna to write that "*the Church may soon be displaced from its social place it has held in North American culture,*" and they note that "*the Church is alarmed at the prospect that we may soon find ourselves in exile.*" Yes, that certainly seems to be happening and many in the church are alarmed by that. They also then write "*as the people of God living in*

North America, we should not fear the social displacement that we are here calling exile... ” as “the people of God can continue to be the people of God with or without large amounts of social power.” And the reason the people of God living in North America do not need to fear is because God can use our captivity for redemptive purposes, *“just as God used captivity in Babylon to show Israel the way of the pilgrim people of God.”* Evidently God can use our social and cultural exile to show the church in North America the way of Jesus.

And this in my mind is where the analogy breaks down. Exile to Babylon in 7th century BCE was interpreted by the prophets as punishment for lack of faithfulness to the way of God. As Timothy and Shawna note, Israel had accommodated themselves to Babylon long before they were ever exiled to Babylon. God just gave them what they evidently wanted, only more so, and in that, He revealed their sin. In 7th century BCE, it was Israel that had metaphorically moved from the way of God, resulting in their geographic dislocation.

I’m not sure the church in North America finds itself in exile today because the church has metaphorically moved from the way of Jesus. Now, I’m certainly not arguing that the church has always been faithful to the way of Jesus. It hasn’t. But with that acknowledgement, I believe it just might be that the church finds itself in exile today because “Babylon” has moved and not the people of God. To say it another way, and a little more clearly, the people of God might find themselves in exile today, not because of unfaithfulness to the way of Jesus, but precisely because the people of God are remaining faithful in a culture that is less and less hospitable to the people of God. That is not to say that exile for that reason can’t be redemptive. I think it can be and while the people of God may not need to fear the social displacement and the concomitant loss of social power (although if we were living in the mid-east, under Islamic theocracy, we might think differently), it would be entirely appropriate to mourn that displacement, just as the Children of Israel did.

So, yes, the church is in exile and I believe it is helpful to understand the the church in that way. That was the presupposition of much of the New Testament after all. Of course, the question is how is the church to conduct itself while exiled. While I appreciate the call to dispossession, I’m not really sure what that looks like. Dispossession is what is inflicted on exiled people, by definition. (Again, see the mid-east.)

I find the instruction to the children of Israel from Jeremiah, in **Jeremiah 29**, which was so counter-intuitive and contrary to the false-prophet’s message, perhaps a little more helpful. It indicates much more than I can write here, but the least that can be said is this: *“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile”* might sound as strange to the people of God today in North America as it did to the Children of Israel twenty-eight centuries ago. But we might want to consider that those that do, that is, *seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which they were carried*, may be faithfully living as exiles as much as those who renounce the city to which they were carried.