

ESCHATOLOGICAL TRAVELERS

Dan Boone

Introduction

Knowing where you are is an essential part of getting to where you want to go. Technology has made it so much easier. Give permission to your iPhone to use your current location and you will find a red pin marking the exact spot where you are. From there, technology can get you to restaurants, shopping malls, churches, or any address listed. A satellite high above finds you and directs you.

It was not always that easy. My ancestor, Daniel Boone, was once asked if he had ever been lost. “No”, he replied, “but I was once bewildered for 3 days”.

That may be the reality for the church of Jesus today – not exactly lost, but bewildered. We are trying to navigate the terrain of a new world. It was much easier for Daniel Boone because he travelled alone or with a few friends. This limited the complexity significantly. Travelling singly from new birth into the eschaton may be easier than with 3 million Nazarenes. We speak different languages, experience differing socio-economic status, and live under differing governments. Some of us are beheaded as others are getting hooded. We are quite liberal and quite conservative. Some of us prefer worship that burns calories while others of us prefer worship that bathes our brains. We lean Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, and Anglican. If the Nazarenes ceased to exist, the exodus would head in lots of directions because we are an oddly differentiated people.

It is helpful to recall how people are usually constituted in our world. The leading methods are self-assertion, territorial dominance, conquest, take-over, and might. These same people have learned to preserve their constituted identity by walls, weapons, and war. Yet here we are, oddballs whose constitution has nothing to do with taking and protecting turf (unless we go back to the OT conquest of the land and a Davidic kingship as our model). Our constitution is on behalf of the neighbor, loving rather than conquering, being graciously hospitable rather than defensive.

Our oddness in North America is growing, or should be. For decades now, we have been captive to the moral majority. We have tended to advance our mission through political action and ideology. Now that we can no longer expect to find support for our standards and beliefs outside the church, we become strangers in the world. Our ways are, or should be, different than the ways of the dark powers. This makes us a threat. So we find ourselves here at NTS using language like strangers, aliens, and exiles to speak of our existence in the world. But do we really know where we are?

I Peter: A Text to Locate Us

It is always helpful to ask the question, “When have God’s people been here before?” Until recently, I’ve answered that question with Isaiah 40-55, the Babylonian exile.¹ But over this past year, I have experienced a Biblical *deja vu* in the pastoral epistle I Peter. From its opening address to the dispersed exiles, to its closing greeting from the sister church in Babylon, it seems to reflect where we are living. Let me touch on a few of the primary themes.

The controlling metaphor of the letter is diaspora with its Jewish interest in traveling between two points. Similar to the Exodus journey, the letter imagines us en route toward a future moment of glory, based on a call and a promise. We are people with a past beginning and a future destination; thus the paper title, *eschatological travelers*. The language of our past beginning is peppered throughout the letter: co-elect, called, redeemed, given new birth, chosen race, royal priesthood. In the same way, our future is imagined with words like inheritance, revelation of glory, exaltation, and establishment. We are people on a journey.

While on this eschatological journey, we are being formed as the household of God. The *oikos* image identifies us as obedient children, being conformed to the nature of the parent. “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (I Peter 1:14-16 NRSV). *Oikos* language continues with images of newborn babies, brotherly love, and the family of believers. It contains instructions to wives and husbands, and also addresses to the younger leaders regarding the authority of the elders. If we view ourselves as members of a household, we may be less likely to defect on the journey.

While on this journey, dissonance is possible. Many will defect and not complete the journey. Therefore, identity reinforcement is essential. The writer reminds these eschatological travelers that they were once *x* but now they are *y*², they were once pagans but now they are a holy people. He writes about hope in the face of hardship. He offers a sober assessment of the temptations they will face. He calls for alertness in response to the presence of a roaring lion.

Hardship most often comes from the ruling powers. Whether we are resident aliens or, as some have suggested, alien visitors, either way, we are non-citizens. Yet we are mysteriously free. As declared in 2:16-17, “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”(NRSV) Freedom seems to suggest communal responsibility, respecting the rights of all rather than fighting tooth and nail to get our way. It seems to call for granting others more freedom, quite different than the culture war championed by many within the walls of our church.

Another significant theme is suffering. I Peter draws on the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 40-55. But even more, he connects their experience of dissonance in their culture to the suffering

¹ I have written about this in a little eBook titled *The Church in Exile: Interpreting Where We Are*.

² See this pattern in multiple texts: 1:14-16; 1:18-19; 2:10; 3:1-7; 4:3-6.

of Christ. Their suffering belongs to the suffering of Jesus in a way that makes them characters and chapters in the same story. And because from where they are they can see the eschaton, they are called to rejoice in their suffering rather than whining or being surprised by it. This renders them eligible to receive a crown of life when the chief shepherd appears. We hear the familiar Christological pattern of humiliation that ends in exaltation.

Troy Martin summarizes the letter in this succinct closing.

I Peter recognizes that the Diaspora is often a dangerous and hostile place where God's people suffer and conceives of his readers as sufferers in the Diaspora. The eschatological journey upon which his readers have embarked entails opposition, affliction, and suffering. In order to present the appropriate conduct expected of his readers on this journey and to discourage them from losing heart and defecting, the author describes his readers as righteous sufferers and as partners in the sufferings and glory of Christ. He exhorts them to suffer righteously that they might receive the benefits of such suffering, especially vindication at the last judgment. He exhorts them to suffer as partners in the sufferings of Christ so that they might share in his future glory. . . .he does not discuss the ramifications of defection but instead emphasizes the positive benefits accruing from their continued loyalty and adherence to the faith.³

As a caution in using I Peter as our template for cultural location, I would note that it lacks two common denominators – a robust kingdom theology of social justice and a careful theology of worship for the gathered people of God. Cultural transformation is easier to imagine when power is in our grasp. There isn't a lot of social justice, liberation of the down-trodden, and equality for all in the letter. Maybe from where they were, this is not imaginable. They are called to live uncomplainingly in the existing social structures, neither critiquing them publicly nor challenging them aggressively. Rather the community is to focus on its own distinctive difference as a household of travelers. This is similar to the current suggestion that we learn from the Benedictine communities and withdraw a bit from the center of power to address the quality of our own witness. As we reform our practices, then we will have a radical alternative to offer a dying culture.

Whichever way we chose to go, prophetically critiquing culture or wisely co-existing in it, this will be a hard journey...but not for the reasons we might think. Our problem is that we have now tasted the fine wine of cultural power and have drunked ourselves drunk. To now turn and be humble in reforming our anemic communities will feel as awkward as, well, being in exile. I will suggest 4 common experiences of eschatological travelers in exile and how theological practice might address these.

Oppression.

The reality of exile is that we have little cultural or political power. Sometimes we had it and lost it, like the Babylonian exile. Sometimes, we never had it to begin with, like the church of I Peter. And we feel oppressed.

³ Troy W. Martin, *Metaphor and Composition in I Peter*. SBL Dissertation Series 131. (Scholars Press: Atlanta, GA, 1992), 265-266.

In Isaiah's Babylon, we were force-marched 500 miles from our sacred Jerusalem to a place we did not want to be. We went to bed one night in Jerusalem with our Jewish temple and our Jewish laws and our Jewish holidays and our Jewish songs and king and army and walls and texts. Then we woke up in exile to gods with strange names, songs we'd never heard, languages we didn't know, and a culture that felt foreign. We lost control of the politic that reinforced our beliefs and now we had no voice in how the world operated. We wanted to go home, back to yesteryear. And we begged God to take us back. In the words of a TV personality, make us great again. And God said no.

*It is too small a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
Isaiah 49:6 (NRSV)*

In other words, God's plans for our future are not to get us back to yesteryear where we are in charge. Another OT prophet tells them to stop whining about going home, settle in, build houses, plant vineyards, and be the people of God where they are. God's plan is that we embrace our calling to be a holy people in exile.

The NT community of Peter experienced much the same. Reading between the lines, they were taking it on the chin from the dark powers that ran their world. Here are two samples:

*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal
that is taking place among you to test you,
as though something strange were happening to you.
But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings,
so that you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.
If you are reviled for the name of Christ,
you are blessed,
because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God,
is resting on you.”
(I Peter 4: 12-14, NRSV).*

*“Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles,
so that, though they malign you as evildoers,
they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.
For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution,
whether the emperor as supreme, or of governors,
as sent by him to punish those who do wrong
and to praise those who do right.
For it is God's will that by doing right
you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.”
(I Peter 2:12-15, NRSV).*

Exiles live under forms of oppression. We may be headed there. The American church tends to view our current exile as the loss of privilege and power in the public square. We were once a moral majority. We once occupied the dominant seat at the table and in the voting booth. Now the government is defining the marriages we perform, questioning our tax-free status, making us clock in as hourly workers, and telling us who can use which bathrooms. We are punching bags in the press, in social media, and in the news. Christians are the jokes of TV sitcoms, caricatured in unfriendly ways. When is the last time you saw a Christian on a sitcom that looked anything like Jesus?

And we call this oppression, and it is... a little. But I Peter is careful to distinguish between the suffering that comes from being like Jesus and the suffering that comes because we have not participated rightly in the community. He tells them there is no glory in being persecuted for doing what is wrong.

So maybe it is time for confession to begin in the house of the Lord. We deserve some of the current persecution we are facing. We failed to support just treatment of minorities. We demanded a government that prioritized our interests. We crawled into bed with a political party. We told gay jokes, even from our pulpits. We talked about real persons as if they were not even present. We failed to stand with the suicidal transgendered person. We left the inner cities for safer suburbs. We remained a white majority church in a changing demographic. We enjoyed our upward mobility and became affluent. We divorced our spouses at the national average. We built mega churches and idolized personalities. We ran good old boy networks while mouthing women clergy. We manipulated the poor for personal gain by selling religious snake oil. The church of Jesus Christ in America has failed to offer a radical gospel that redeems culture.

And now that cultural power has flipped, they are angry at us. We seem to be the lowest hanging fruit for attack. Can we receive their anger without retaliation? Can we sit at the table in humility? Can we confess our failure out loud for a world to hear? Can we enter the public conversation without a spirit of entitlement? Can we be hospitable to those who detest us?

We're lousy at this. As people accustomed to living in the most powerful nation on the earth with the biggest military and the most bombs and the greatest wealth, suffering feels unnatural to us. When suffering comes our way, we have a three-step reaction:

- 1) pray that it stop,
- 2) if it doesn't, we vomit all over Facebook, and
- 3) if that doesn't do it, we call a lawyer and sue.

We don't know how to suffer. I Peter has a suggestion. Did you hear it earlier?

*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal
that is taking place among you to test you,
as though something strange were happening to you.
But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings,
so that you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.*

*If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed,
because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God,
is resting on you.”
(I Peter 4: 12-14, NRSV).*

As eschatological travelers, they are called to rejoice in their suffering rather than whining or being surprised by it.

*“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while
you have had to suffer various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith...
may be found to result in praise and glory and honor
when Jesus Christ is revealed.”
(I Peter 1: 6-7, NRSV)*

This renders them eligible to receive a crown of life when the chief shepherd appears.

We need to rethink suffering in terms of the coming eschaton. Jesus says point blank that the world will hate us. We are eschatological travelers not cultural settlers. The reaction of the world will be heightened opposition, not glad embrace. I'm not talking about the kind of suffering we invite by our own arrogance or stupidity but the kind of suffering that comes when we love as Jesus loves. Suffering love is the way of God in the world. There is hope and rejoicing in this suffering, not just grouchy acceptance. Our journey as eschatological travelers will end some day when the kingdom of God breaks in upon all of creation. All things will be made new. We are called to live creatively into that newness now and invite others to join us.

Our response to the experience of oppression in exile is to ground ourselves in a Biblical theology of suffering. In Isaiah we see a figure called the suffering servant of God. The pattern of the servant is humiliation followed by exaltation. What is interesting is that when we get to I Peter, this suffering servant of Isaiah is fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Peter draws on this figure out of the Babylonian exile to describe the suffering role of Jesus.

*For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God,
you endure pain while suffering unjustly.
If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong,
what credit is that?
But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it,
you have God's approval.
For to this you have been called,
because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example,
so that you should follow in his steps.
He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.
When he was abused, he did not return abuse;
when he suffered, he did not threaten;
but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.*

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,
so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;
by his wounds you have been healed.*

I Peter 2:19-24 NRSV

*And after you have suffered for a little while,
the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ,
will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.*

I Peter 5:10

So, enough whining about the government. Enough sermons about what the Supreme Court decided. Enough blaming Obama. Enough fear-mongering and grousing and longing for yesteryear. Enough tales of what the Big Bad Wolf is up to. Enough cowering in congregation. Enough crawling into bed with angry politicians. Enough culture war. Enough enemy-centered rhetoric. Enough believing the kingdom of God will arrive in a presidential election. Enough weekly gripe sessions called Sunday School where we bemoan the sad state of current affairs. Enough already!

The world does not buy our agenda nor believe our gospel. Get over it. And when you suffer, rejoice! You are in cahoots with Jesus and a coming kingdom. Let the church rejoice rather than shake a fist or shrink wrap. Our response to oppression is a rich theology of joyful suffering. It is the way of God in the world.

Marginalization

In exile we are being moved to the fringes, marginalized, and dismissed as irrelevant. I'm sure this is how the exiles of Babylon and the exiled church of Peter's day felt. They were "those strange people over there that just don't fit in, those resident aliens, those folk with odd ways."

I recently heard someone say, "I just want all **those Christians** to go away and leave us alone". Who are "**those Christians**"? I think I know. They discriminate. They file for Title IX exemptions. They won't bake wedding cakes for gay couples. They oppose a woman's right to do with her fetus as she pleases. They don't drink. They don't pay taxes on their church property. They even get a tax deduction for their religious contributions. They refuse to provide abortifacients as part of their health insurance plans. They hate immigrants and Muslims and gays and Democrats and the Supreme Court. They shop Hobby Lobby and eat at Chic Filet. They won't go to the bathroom in Target. They think sex outside of marriage is wrong. They want prayer back in the schools. They are the problem with America. "**Those Christians.**" So let's push them to the outer fringe of society and hit them with a gag order. They don't belong at the table that decides how our community will be run.

This is marginalization. And it is slowly happening to the American church in exile. We are being dismissed as important voices in the public square. And we are being caricatured by the worst among us. So what do we do? Peter writes this:

*Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?
 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.
 Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.
 Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you
 an accounting for the hope that is in you;
 yet do it with gentleness and reverence.
 Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned,
 those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.
 I Peter 3:13-16*

*“As servants of God, live as free people,
 yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.
 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers.
 Fear God. Honor the emperor.”
 (I Peter 2:16-17, NRSV)*

Our freedom in Christ seems to suggest communal responsibility, respecting the rights of all rather than fighting tooth and nail to get our way. It seems to call for granting others their freedom. This is radically different from the current culture war championed by many within our camp. He keeps telling them to do good, respect authority, contribute. Similarly, in the OT Babylonian exile, the prophet tells the people to settle down, build homes, and seek the welfare of the city.

So how do we do that? I think it calls for a theology of creation that connects our work to our witness. We come out of the margins of society when we participate meaningfully in the workforce. In the words of past politicians, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Our world revolves around goods and services, production and livelihood. This is where our shoulder to shoulder presence can make the strongest impact. When Christians do their work as a holy calling, a sacred vocation, they will not be marginalized. God calls us to daily work. What if, realizing that we are in exile, we stopped fighting a culture war and showed up at work every day in a way that improves our community.

We have done a lousy job at connecting Sunday to Monday. I know I did as a pastor. I spent most of my time trying to get people to volunteer their last 10 tired hours a week to run the church programs and then go invade the world on a social justice mission. It was only after I left the sacred confines of pastoral ministry for the dark side of a Monday-Friday job that I began to see it. If I ever pastor again, I will stop making my people feel like Sunday is the big day and everything else is getting ready for it.

Our people are tired of running the programs of an attractional church for the people who still demand a religious show, and then heading out in mission to a needy world. And pastors are really tired of trying to get volunteers to cover all that stuff. Our pastors and congregants are frayed at the edges. The crisis of volunteerism has reached the tipping point. We are now hiring staff pastors to do nothing but recruit and organize volunteers. My daughter holds one of these

staff roles. The pressure comes from trying to be both an attractional church that puts on great religious worship events and programs, while also being a missional church that organizes our people to go into the highways to do social justice. Could it be that people are attending fewer services a month in an attempt at sanity?

So how might we shift our focus? As a pastor, I failed to imagine the kingdom of God breaking into our town through the daily work of the people. I invested too little in helping them understand how the kingdom comes through the first 40-50 hours of their work week. I think the church in exile will confront marginalization by the way we work.

It dawned on me one day that the place in the Bible where we find our richest theology of the creative work of God is Isaiah 40-55, the Babylonian exile. God as creator is all over those texts. What is the prophet saying to the exiles? **Your God works.** God measures water in the hollow of a hand, scoops mountains, makes straight paths, carries lambs, cues the stars every night, makes the desert bloom, opens blind eyes, counsels, instructs. It goes on and on. Our God is a vocational God who creates and sustains.

Even in the NT exile of the Roman Empire, the workplace becomes central. The issues are meats sacrificed to idols, honoring the trade gods, belonging to the trade guilds, and participating in the cultic rituals. The people were revealed to be Christian by their labor practices.

If we wish to get out of the margins and into the center of public life, we will work like God works, labor faithfully like God labors, create and heal and teach and serve in the trenches of the daily grind. Bi-vocational pastors, you need to explain to the rest of us how fixated we are on the narrow life of the church and how mindless we are of the working world.

Take the woman who spends 40 hours a week at a Publix cash register. What if we helped her understand how the kingdom of God might become palpable in her 4 foot square? We might be a better church than the one that consumes her last 10 tired hours redecorating the church bathroom.

So how do we deal with the experience of being marginalized, pushed to the irrelevant fringe of society? We recover our callings in the vocations and jobs that we do every day. We become essential to the communities we live in because we are the hands and feet of a creative God who still clocks in on behalf of a broken world.

1. We are oppressed, so we embrace a theology of suffering that joyfully participates in the suffering of Christ.
2. We are marginalized, so we embrace a theology of creation that goes to work for the common good in the trenches of human labor.

Defection

The third experience of exile is defection. And here's where I'm preaching to the choir. When people feel oppressed and marginalized, they usually bail. It happened in Babylon and Peter's

community. People jumped ship, went over to the dark side, joined more popular religions, found easier discipleships. It's why Peter says things like this to them:

*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God,
so that he may exalt you in due time.
Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.
Discipline yourselves, keep alert.
Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around,
looking for someone to devour.
I Peter 5:6-8*

We hear a lot of 'hang in there, stay alert, be disciplined, don't stray, stand firm'. Why? Because they are defecting right and left. We're seeing this in our churches.

- Generational Defection. The old folk are leaving because they don't like the volume, the music, the coffee in the sanctuary, the jeans, the shirt tail out, the women preachers, the refusal to blast the Democrats. The young are leaving because we're not relevant, our wireless signal is weak, we won't talk about tough issues; and they really don't care about the music that everybody is fighting about, they just don't want any more fighting; and they are upset that we won't blast the Republicans.
- Theological Defection. My Nazarene-raised cousins in MS are all going to a Baptist church. Given me a break. It doesn't seem to matter much what theological brand is being served up in the congregations they are headed to. Staunch Nazarenes attending mega churches that preach against the ordination of women - mercy me, what has this world come to?
- Financial Defection. The tithe has gotten thin.
- Attendance Defection. You have to serve 25% more people today to average what you did 10 years ago.
- Volunteer Defection. I did my time. Sounds like a completed prison sentence.

Anybody seeing any of this stuff in your church? So what do we learn from our exile friends in Babylon and I Peter about defection? We learn that identity formation and identity reinforcement is essential. I love how I Peter does this. He reminds them who they are by using the metaphor of the household, oikos. He talks about belonging to a family. If we view ourselves as family, we are less likely to defect.

The oikos metaphor of I Peter suggests that identity needs a place to happen. While this is certainly the role of the church gathered in worship, it is also a household function. An hour a week is not enough to cement Christian identity in persons. I don't see people returning in mass to Sunday night and Wednesday night services or crafting significant spare time for Bible study. In exile, a reconsidered family may be our best hope of identity formation.

The unravelling of relationships is creating a void of belonging. The hospitality of the people of God may become a radical witness in the face of what sin is doing to isolate and detach humans from primary supportive relationships. C. S. Lewis described hell as a flat gray infinite plain with

humans forever moving away from one another. In a world of technology, where incarnate humans are digitized, the illusion of connection is shattered by the reality of distance. We are distinctive web addresses more than flesh and blood brothers and sisters. Social bonds are evaporating.

My experience at Trevecca in welcoming 50 undocumented students has taught me fresh lessons about Biblical hospitality. We have forgotten what it is like to be excluded by the power of shame or rejection, disconnected from society by rhetoric and law. We are now in an odd place – privileged people with resources who are no longer empowered to pull the levers of cultural acceptance. Maybe the right move is to take people into our families and homes.

I am thinking here of more than a defense of marriage and the nuclear family. Like it or not, humans are living together in all kinds of arrangements. People are lonely. The hospitality of the people of God may become a radical witness in the face of this human isolation. Maybe the way we form Christian identity is to take people into our homes with unprecedented Biblical hospitality.

- Our welcoming response to unwanted children will do much more than political opposition to abortion. Our foster homes and adoptions will change the trajectory of persons without grounding.
- There is a new growth phase called pre-adulthood which goes up to age 28. Our homes can help this most-likely-to-defect-Christianity group develop stability during a turbulent stage of life. Denise and I have had 27 people or families live with us for 3 months or longer in our 43 years of marriage. Two recently graduated college students are in our house right now. It amazes me the formative influence that happens in households that are hospitable.
- The undocumented refugee, the transgendered person, and the extended family member long for family as a place of identity and belonging. Rather than having opinions about them, we might offer our roof.
- I long to see households composed of celibate single adults who thrive in communities of joyful belonging and service.
- Our homes can become extended care for the elderly. The multi-generational home is becoming commonplace.
- Our homes can serve as houses of refuge for those being violated.

Just as the household of the New Testament was an extended family of kin, slave, traveler, and others, maybe exiles like us can rethink family. This might lead us away from the megachurch toward the house church, but more likely it will call the existing church to pay more careful attention to the formation of families in a hospitable model. People are dying to figure out family. If the people of God can become colonies of the church in their neighborhoods and apartment complexes, we may be able to keep our own from defecting. Who doesn't defect? The person whose very identity is formed and sustained in a household of faith. If the church can empower obedience in the two arenas where we spend the bulk of our time – work and family - we may be able to thrive in exile.

1. We are oppressed, so we embrace a theology of suffering that joyfully participates in the suffering of Christ.
2. We are marginalized, so we embrace a theology of creation that goes to work for the common good in the trenches of human labor.
3. We are defecting, so we embrace a theology of hospitality that makes our homes formative places for identity and belonging.

Assimilation.

In exile, the goal of the dark powers is to assimilate us. Any Star Trek fans here? Remember The Borg? They were these part human/part machine creatures who possessed a common consciousness. They were made out of conquered peoples. And what was their mantra? Resistance is futile, you will be assimilated.

The Babylonians were the Borg of their day, the best in the business. They captured people, hauled them into exile, and slowly assimilated them into their way of life. Rome was not far behind. The message was relentless. “Resistance is futile, you will be assimilated”. I feel the power of that voice when I resist the dominating cultural pressure of our world. It is a downward pull of epic proportions.

How do we function as the people of God being slowly assimilated? I would suggest a theology of sin humbly spoken. We need to rethink how we talk about sin. Some of us denounce **sin** with self-righteous condemnation. The Western church has drunk from the cup of dominance for so long that while we were sleeping it off, the world changed; and in our stupor we find ourselves yelling at the world like people with a bad hangover. When we wage cultural war, the neighbor becomes our enemy. We sound like Oscar the Sanctified grouch.

On the other hand, some of us have stopped saying the word sin altogether because it offends people. It discomforts folk. Can I read to you a bit from David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the New York Times? He sounds like a holiness preacher in a secular newspaper. This is from his book **The Road to Character**.

Today, the word sin has lost its power and awesome intensity. It’s used most frequently in the context of fattening desserts. Most people in daily conversation don’t talk much about individual sin. If they talk about human evil at all, that evil is most often located in the structures of society – in inequality, oppression, racism, and so on – not in the human breast.

We’ve abandoned the concept of sin, first, because we’ve left behind the depraved view of human nature.... Second, in many times and many places, the word sin was used to declare war on pleasure, even on the healthy pleasures of sex and entertainment. Sin was used as a pretext to live joylessly and censoriously. Sin was used to suppress the pleasures of the body, to terrify teenagers about the perils of masturbation. Furthermore, the word sin was abused by the self-righteous, by dry-hearted souls who seemed alarmed by the possibility that someone somewhere might be enjoying himself....

But in truth, sin is one of those words that is impossible to do without. Sin is a necessary piece of our furniture because it reminds us that life is a moral affair. Sin is baked into our nature and is handed down through the generations. We are all sinners together. ...Sin, when it is committed over and over again, hardens into loyalty to a lower love.⁴

That's a New York Times columnist, not a holiness preacher. If we intend to keep our people from being assimilated and defecting, we must analyze and critique the devastation that sin brings into the lives of people that we love. I'm suggesting that we recover the language of sin but with a tone that is humble.

A lot of good people are writing about this. It has to do with the way we are present in the world, the way we tell our story. Dallas Willard calls it apologetic gentleness. Richard Mouw calls it uncommon decency. David Brooks calls it civility. I have called it charitable discourse.

This theology of sin humbly spoken has implications for preaching. Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

In a postmodern age, the language of sin and salvation will only communicate with the disillusioned if it is absolutely truthful about the realities of their lives, and if it supports them to name those realities for themselves. The days are long gone when most preachers can stand up in pulpits and name people's sins for them. They do not have that authority anymore. What they *can* do, I believe, is to describe the experience of sin and its aftermath so vividly that people can identify its presence in their own lives, not as a chronic source of guilt, nor as sure proof that they are inherently bad, but as the part of their individual and corporate lives that is crying out for change.⁵

She goes on later in the same book to observe that liberal Christianity views sin medically as an affliction that can be helped or cured, while conservative Christianity tends to view sin that as a crime to be punished. (We have noted similar about the definition of sin coming from the Eastern and Western church.) She concludes,

My concern is that neither the language of medicine nor the language of law is an adequate substitute for the language of theology, which has more room in it for paradox than either of the other two. ...However we run into it, we run into it as wrecked relationship: with God, with one another, with the whole created order. Sometimes we cause the wreckage and sometimes we are simply trapped in it, but either way we are not doomed.

...sin is our only hope, because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked.⁶

⁴ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (Random House: New York, 2015), 53-55.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 2000), 29.

⁶ Taylor, p. 57-59.

I find myself listening to many sermons today through the ears of pagans. Few of them convince me to be converted because they fail to help me confess what I most deeply know about myself, that I am broken in a way that cannot be restored by this world. Or, in the opposite direction, these sermons try my behavior in a court of pulpit judgment, causing me to rise to my own defense.

I am suggesting that we recover a theology of sin humbly spoken. The modern way was to engage in ideas about right and wrong, good and evil. The new way is shame, determining who is in and who is out. Where the axis used to be right and wrong, now it is inclusion and exclusion.

This is how shame-based societies work. Jesus lived in one that used Jewish purity laws to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion. Scribes, Pharisees, priestly kinfolk - inside. Tax collectors, Roman soldiers, bleeding women - outside.

We are there again. Whether you are one side of an issue or another, the way you fight is to push people outside the circle of your opinion and label them in shame. Many Christians have done just this with LGBTQ persons and many LGBTQ persons have done this with Christians. And as long as this is the game, there will be no community, no grace, no conversation, no transformation, no neighbor, and no friendship.

In the shame game, the easiest way to survive is to have a mushy core and a mushy edge – soft at the center, soft on the edges. Welcome all people and embrace their ideas. Like a soft pillow conforming itself to our heads, just fully accept one another without judgment or critique. Avoid sin language altogether. Soft center, soft edges.

A lot of angry Christians that I know have neither soft center nor soft edges. They have a hard center and hard edges. They do not let you in until they discern that you agree with them and meet their standard. And if you don't, they hand out shame at the front door of the relationship. Their opinions are rigid, set in stone, not open for discussion. They are not interested in a conversation with you. They are only interested in categorizing you as sinful for the purpose of exclusion or righteous for the purpose of inclusion. I'm sure none of those folk attend your church.

Jesus was neither soft-soft, nor hard-hard. As I understand Jesus, he is hard at the center, and soft at the edges. At the core, Jesus embodies the kingdom of God, a particular way of life that causes humans to thrive, a resistance to evil, and a passion for loving justice and mercy. Jesus is stubborn at the core. It resides, as viewed in I Peter, in his identity as the living stone upon which we are built, as the one whose sprinkled blood sanctifies, as the suffering example we are to emulate, and as the chief cornerstone over which many stumble. He is rock solid.

But on the edge, Jesus is soft. We see him welcoming tax collectors, prostitutes, drunkards, and common sinners into his fellowship. He talks with them and eats with them. That's why people like you and me got in. There is no person, no orientation, no history, no political affiliation that

is not welcome in the presence of Jesus. He affirms the dignity of all humans. He does not dish out shame at the front door of a relationship. Jesus has this soft, hospitable edge. Our culture suggests that we follow Jesus in this regard and stop being so judgmental. Well, yes and no. Yes, we can be more loving, but no, we cannot forsake the language of sin and still be Christlike. Jesus comes to deal with our sin. He does not leave us where he finds us.

The recovery of a theology of sin humbly spoken is necessary for redeeming the world but it is also needed if we are to keep our people from defecting to a dying culture. In the metaphor of I Peter, as travelers prone to defect, we must know the cost of forsaking our identity, our family, and our calling. Sin is utterly destructive of all that is good. And there is a better way.

*“Like obedient children, do not be conformed
to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.
Instead, as he who called you is holy,
be holy yourselves in all your conduct;
for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”
(1 Peter 1:14-16, NRSV)*

I Peter oozes holiness. He writes about the sanctifying blood, purifying our souls through obedience, loving one another deeply from the heart, new born babes growing up, being a holy nation and a royal priesthood, conduct that bears a convincing witness, unity of spirit, the tender heart and the humble mind, sanctifying Christ as Lord in our hearts, having a clear conscience, clothing ourselves with humility, and receiving the crown of life. There is holiness language all over this little letter to exiles.

One of the better books I’ve read recently is Ross Douthat’s *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. He is explaining how Christianity got off track. I’ll spare you the first 291 pages of the book and go to the final page. He suggests that if the American church is to have a future, we must give the world one thing – saints. He writes,

The future of American religion depends on believers who can demonstrate, in word and deed alike, that the possibilities of the Christian life are not exhausted by TV preachers and self-help gurus, utopians, and demagogues. It depends on public examples of holiness, and public demonstrations of what the imitation of Christ can mean for a fallen world. We are waiting, not for another political savior or television personality, but for a Dominic or a Francis, an Ignatius or a Wesley, a Wilberforce or a Newman, a Bonhoeffer or a Solzhenitsyn. Only sanctity can justify Christianity’s existence; only sanctity can make the case for faith; only sanctity, or the hope thereof, can ultimately redeem the world.⁷

Something is bothering me about the way we are practicing holiness. We sound like mad Baptists. Reformed theology is based in authority, proposition, doctrinal defense, and proving

⁷ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, New York, 2012), 292.

things by quoting scriptures. The attempt is to out-argue your opponent. We have taken a page from the Reformed play-book, wedded it to a culture war, and added a dash of shame.

When we do this, the practices of a holy people become weapons against outsiders and burdens to insiders. We are defending rather than inviting. Our holy habits can be winsome, mysterious, and compelling if they are lived out as a joyful calling. We are called to holiness, not bludgeoned into it. Enough with our posturing and blathering. Perfect love looks better in a body than in a blog. Let's become living invitations to experience the holy God. Let's joyfully practice the holy habits. Let's stop fear-mongering and live hopefully. Let's stop whining and complaining that the world isn't doing it our way. We are coming across as Oscar the Sanctified Grouch. The world prefers to see Jesus.

Rather than bludgeoning people into alcohol abstinence as a ticket to running for the board, let's call them to a radical expression of loving the neighbor. Rather than whomping up a really strong stewardship sermon, let's be ecstatic in generosity. Rather than blasting the whole government, let's find a Christian politician who is doing good and go help. Rather than attacking homosexuality, let's offer a single adult a place in our family. Let's practice Sabbath and hospitality and justice and tithing and reading the Bible in ways that invite others to join us. And for Christ's sake, let's be glad people.

1. We are oppressed, so we embrace a theology of suffering that joyfully participates in the suffering of Christ.
2. We are marginalized, so we embrace a theology of creation that goes to work for the common good in the trenches of human labor.
3. We are defecting, so we embrace a theology of hospitality that makes our homes formative places for identity and belonging.
4. We are being assimilated, so we recover a theology of sin humbly spoken and a theology of holiness winsomely lived.

Conclusion

Being eschatological travelers, exiles and aliens, does not make us other-worldly. It just means that our participation in the world is from a different narrative. We are from the future. As we imagine God, we see our living arrangements, our work, and our suffering from a different vantage point. We speak of sin and holiness from a theology of hope. And we rejoice in our suffering because we are vulnerable with the vulnerability of Christ.

We're in exile. And God is here with us. All is not lost. Newness is springing up. These can be remarkable days for the church if we can recover our theological integrity – joyful suffering, vocational calling, household hospitality, identity formation, a theology of sin humbly spoken, and a theology of holiness winsomely lived.