

RESPONSE TO DAN BOONE'S "ESCHATOLOGICAL TRAVELERS"

Brannon Hancock

Casting us, the pilgrim people of God, as "eschatological travelers" – people "from the future" – Dr. Boone has, in conversation with the First Epistle of Peter, helped us navigate the practices of identity formation that can sustain us on our journey. Crucially, we have been reminded that "God's plans for our future are not to get us back to yesteryear where we are in charge" but to "embrace our calling to be a holy people in exile."¹ My concern is that when most hear this refrain of "living in exile," we understand it to mean something like: Christians used to have power and influence...our culture used to honor our holy days and loosely follow the rhythms of our work, Sabbath, and worship... our leaders and our sacred texts were once held in high regard... but now that ship has sailed. The scenery is the same, but now we've become Hollywood's favorite hypocrites, caricatured sometimes as the villain, or more often as the punch line to a joke. (At least the *Babylon Bee* is reminding us of the value of laughing at ourselves from time to time.) So we hold theology conferences to figure out how to adjust to this "new normal."

But if we want to use the exile metaphor, we must recognize that exile – to be displaced or banished from one's true and rightful homeland – is imposed. It is thrust upon us. If we are in exile, we must ask, who has exiled us? (And from where, and for what purpose?) What if this experience we're calling exile is not a demotion handed down by our "secular" society, but precisely how God intends us to exist in the time that remains between Eden and eschaton? What if God is inviting us to lay down our weapons, give up our rights, and empty ourselves of power? To make ourselves nothing, and become servants (*doulos*; Phil 2:7), like the One whose name we claim?

When I read Peter's Epistle to the exiles, I am struck by another image – that of a stone. Peter exposes the paradox of Christ, who is both cornerstone and *skandalon*, a "rock of offense." Paul uses similar language when he remarks that proclaiming the crucified Messiah is a *skandalon* to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23)... an offense, a big boulder in the road that trips them up. This Messiah, who inaugurates the Kingdom in his death and resurrection, is simultaneously the stabilizing cornerstone and a destabilizing stumbling block. And the exiles to whom Peter is writing are then told that, like Christ, *they* are "living stones" who are being "built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5).

When it comes to building houses, a solid foundation is essential. Before I bought my 120-year-old house in Marion, Indiana, I wanted the home inspector to assure me that there were no problems with the stones that had been used to lay the foundation. But these dispersed exiles, like the crucified and risen Christ they embody, are stones of a different sort. They are scattered stones. The Kingdom will be built not upon static stones stuck in the ground, but on Spirit-filled, living stones strewn across all the lands of the earth. Men may look upon them and think, "Nothing worthwhile could ever be built on that! Impossible!" But with God...

¹ Dan Boone, "Eschatological Travelers." *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 16:2 (Fall/Winter 2016)

So we have a picture of a people who, in spite of, or perhaps precisely *in* their scattered state, *are* the Body of Christ in the world – an *oikos pneumatikos* within which the fullness of God is pleased to dwell (*katoikesai*; Col. 1:19). These people who were not a people have been made into God’s own people (1 Peter 2:10). But God’s own people, like the God who was incarnate in Christ, are not established by power or place or property, because the Kingdom has come, and all the earth and all the power belongs to God. These exiles are being told, wherever you are, you are home, because to be invited back “home” and out of exile is to be scattered to be witnesses (*martyres*) in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria (and Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia...) and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

We are home because God is with us, and has gone before us in Christ Jesus, who, in the words of one liturgy, “broke the bonds of evil and set your people free to be his Body in the world.”² To live out the Kingdom is to be instantiated wherever we are, in all times and places, as the Body of Christ in the world, moving in a destabilizing rhythm of gathering for worship and scattering for mission. Spirit-life is breathed into the Church as our sacramental practices of centered around the font, the word, and the table bring us together only to fling us far and wide. These corporate actions – baptism, preaching, and eucharist – embody the theological virtues Dr. Boone emphasized: joyful suffering, stewardship of creation, gracious hospitality, confession of sin, and lives of holiness.

Perhaps we are the pilgrim people of God living in exile... but perhaps we might also see ourselves as the missionary people of God living out the Kingdom. As His Body in the world, wherever we are – the Church gathered and the Church scattered³ – the Kingdom is breaking in. It may feel like exile at times, but we are home because the presence of Christ dwells among us and within us.

² From the eucharistic prayer of the 1982 liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

³ Cf. Hugh Halter and matt Smay, *And: The Gathered and Scattered Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.