

A RESPONSE TO GREEN AND HAHN,  
 “PERIL AND PROMISE OF EXILE”  
 Stephen Green

The world is changing in ways that are terrifying to many people who live in North America. Many individuals interpret this rapid change as a form of displacement or a type of exile from the life that they remember or imagine. Working folks bemoan the fact that manufacturing jobs are locating in other parts of the world. *Truth* is not as easy to identify, as it once seemed. Disputes are not settled by debating from common agreed upon assumptions, but by overpowering the other with insults based upon social location and identity. Rage, exclusion and demonization fill the atmosphere in almost every form of media today.

Tim and Roger convey in the opening of their paper that lament reflects the tone of exile. Lament is a reaction to loss and displacement. In exile Israel lost her identity markers of temple, land and monarchy. The church is no stranger to loss and lamentation. She is losing membership, money and power. She often interprets this altered state-of-affairs as some form of banishment. Whether or not she wants to “make America great again”; she certainly wants to make the church great again. She, like her theological great grandparents of the faith, sings her song of despair on the banks of yesterday. The world is changing, and mourning is the natural response to this change. The question that begs to be answered in this conference is; is this cultural earthquake in North America best described by the metaphor of exile or something else?

Before saying a few words about this question, let me say a few things about Tim and Roger’s excellent paper. They give to us a great framework to begin our conversation. The observations by Tim that for ancient Israel Exile began in lamentation, but moved toward imagination and confession can help us as we look at the present situation of North American Evangelical Christianity. There is a great loss of something; therefore lament is a natural response to loss. Tim also made a very important assertion when he reminded us that exile was the result of God enacting judgment upon his people for their infidelity.

Roger’s part of the paper provides us with a first-rate resource to begin to think about what it means to be a marginalized group of people without power or influence. He makes it very clear that exile can be used only loosely in describing early Christians’ understanding of their place in the world. He reminds us of important work done by New Testament scholars, such as N. T. Wright, on the conviction that exile did not end until the Christ event. Roger points out that this would not place early Christians in a position to believe that they were living in exile as followers of the resurrected One. Jesus ended exile. It is important for us to remember that even though early Christians did not suffer the loss of the identity markers that Israel did in exile (temple, land and monarchy), they did struggle with identity issues in the alien host culture of the Greco-Roman world.

So what difference does this make as we attempt to think through the situation of the church in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in light of the metaphor of exile? If we truly believe that exile is an appropriate concept for describing the church in North America today, then exile means that God, not the Babylonians or Marduk crushed the people of God. Yahweh judged Israel, and by analogy the church, for her covenant unfaithfulness! This could mean that the church is in a

condition of judgment based upon her infidelity. The poets and storytellers of Israel did not allow her to believe that she needed a grand plan to escape Babylon, but through the gifts of imagination and confession she understood that Yahweh, who judged her, was her only hope of deliverance. Israel's mission in exile was not escape, but remembering who she was: born out of election, delivered out of slavery, and gifted with land and Torah, God's own people. Yahweh, who "visited" her with the result of judgment, is the God who will "visit" her in exile with the outcome of liberation.

One could also contend that the secular culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has marginalized the people of God in a way that bears a resemblance to the marginalization of early Christians. The cross in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not a means of grace, but the result of a nonconforming form-of-life. John's Gospel implies that the church exists in this world, yet is not established from this world (John 17:14-18). This suggests that the identity of God's people is of utmost importance. The questions that become paramount are: What does it mean to be the people of God in any century and how does this identity witness to the character and purpose of Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Again, imagination and confession become essential traits of the people of God. Only through "kingdom-imagination" and "truthful-confession" will the church be equipped to live as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Exile is a stimulating metaphor that the church may use to ponder loss as she sings the songs of lament *on the banks of yesterday*, but is the present stat-of-affairs exile? I would dare to say that the church is not experiencing exile in any way like ancient Israel or even early Christianity. Perhaps what we are experiencing in North America is "Post...something" I especially mean by this expression: post-modernity, post-colonialism, post-industrial and post-Christendom. These "post..." categories form the context for lamenting *on the banks of yesterday*. There is not space in this essay to describe these "post..." categories, but my intuition is that there are similarities that ancient Israel, the early church and the North American Church share. An imperative that all three share is a call to faithful communal identity. An example of how faithful identity looks is witnessed to in the book of Daniel.

It doesn't matter if one dates Daniel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as a historical narrative or in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century as a narrated metaphor, the stories witness to faithfulness in the experience of an alien culture. Israel and the early church preached what they practiced and practiced what they preached. These practices or techniques create a people able to resist conformity to the host culture that envelops them. God's people are in the world, yet they are not of the world.

How do these identity stories and practices relate to the church in North America? I am coming to believe that the church in North America is shaped in her identity by the modern project: with its absorption toward epistemological certainty, its attraction toward the mythic narrative of progress, and its captivation by disembodied individualism. I also have come to believe that Christendom has seduced the church in North America. I understand Christendom as the union of church and state in which civil power incorporates the church into the state. The dance between church and state is always seductive. The church desiring her values to be embodied by society, dances with the power of the state to transform the cultural values of society. The

problem with this seductive dance is that the church historically is seduced by the power and coercive techniques of the state.

So what is the answer to the loss that the church is experiencing as a participant in this displaced culture? Let's go back to the essay by Tim and Roger and remember the three key responses in exile: lament, imagination, and confession. If the church is lamenting the loss of a *Weltbild* "world-picture" then perhaps this loss is nothing less than the judgment of God upon her. The good news is that exile/judgment is not the final word, but it provides the occasion for redemption. By the practices of discernment and confession the church is graced with the capacity to decouple herself from techniques that shape her identity in syncretistic ways.

Decoupling or "non-conforming" as Paul writes in Romans 12:2, is not the ultimate purpose of the church. The church is to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." To use the language of Tim and Roger's paper, this transformation by the renewing of the mind is the practice of tethered imagination. And the ultimate purpose of this imagination is to reflect will and purpose of God.

Christians comprehend the will and purpose of God in the embodied life of Jesus the Messiah. This singular, non-substitutional, non-translatable life is witnessed to in the Gospels. It is Jesus who defines God, the new humanity, the church and the eschatological future of God. The need for imagination is not to imagine Jesus, the church has his grand narrative in the Gospels, but to imagine the life of God's people shaped by the identity of Jesus. What practices/techniques are needed to form a people who reflect the nature and purpose of Jesus? This will take imagination! What does the communal embodiment of Christ look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Again, this will take imagination! How does the church move forward in this "post-lamenting" "post..." world? Let us begin by looking at Jesus and then by looking at our life together, and let us confess the difference. Most merciful God, we confess...