

Advancing in Exile

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Concurrently, the power and influence the church once enjoyed in society is diminishing.

For example, as our US culture is becoming increasingly secular, the laws reflect less of a scriptural ethic, the entertainment in our nation has less of a Christian moral base, and what used to be a respect for a Sabbath has been replaced by self-pursuits like sports and leisure. As a result, the church is experiencing an ever-increasing push towards the margins of our society.

For anyone unfamiliar with the idea of social marginalization, it refers to a person or group being treated as insignificant or peripheral. This push has been happening slowly, over decades, but since March of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this trend dramatically. Because we've been pushed to the margins, we feel powerless. We've been labeled as non-essential, and we don't like it.

We all now feel a need for action, and most churches have one of several responses.

One response is to fight back through the media and courts, contending that the church has rights and privileges in our society that should be protected.

Another response is to completely follow the new guidelines in an effort to help keep both people and the church safe, from both the pandemic and from lawsuits.

Another response is to defy the guidelines, but in secret so as to not be noticed. No posting to Facebook.

One thing is for certain, pastors are stressed, anxious, and frustrated, and the church is fractured. We are having a difficult time trying to ascertain which response is right.

Here, in Amador County, the pastors are not in agreement; we are all divided on what to do. We love one another enough not to criticize what each church chooses to do, but we are not unified. Our best position is to coalesce under one voice, one understanding of a proper, biblical response.

But if church history is any indication of church future, the church having one voice about a way forward may take a miracle. However, what we may be able to agree on, to some degree, is a biblical basis for our response. Our search for a response must be grounded in scripture. What biblical texts, teachings, or experiences should inform our decisions during this time?

One of the texts popular early on in the pandemic was Paul's instruction to yield to our God-appointed authorities.

Romans 13:1- 7 was an often referred to text to give people a biblical mandate to comply with the governmental strictures to help stem the spread of COVID-19.

However, as the pandemic grew and the closures and mandated operational modifications lasted much longer than initially hoped, compliance became less favorable and this text fell out of favor by many. We then sought out a new scriptural metaphor, one that favored defiance.

One popular text in this regard is the narrative of the first half of Acts where the apostles defied governmental mandates to not preach the gospel. In this narrative, the apostles defied the mandate to not preach despite the threats of the religious leaders.

God protected them, and the church grew.

But a problem exists with both of these references in that the cultural issues of that time do not resonate strongly with the church's current context—a slide towards marginalization. Throughout the New Testament, the church was increasing in power and influence, not decreasing. The government and ruling Jewish religious leadership were scared of the rising influence of this new religious sect.

They were attempting to limit the church's actions because of jealousy and fear. The church's persecution by the religious Jews and the Roman government was to hold the Christians at bay. This is just the opposite of today. Today the church is not being persecuted, it is being marginalized. They are not scared of what we might become, they are indifferent to what we have become, or been reduced to.

Therefore, I believe we must look elsewhere to find a more appropriate biblical theology that fits better with our current church context amid the culture shift now highlighted by the COVID-19 virus.

We need to reach back to when the people of God were losing influence and power. The Jewish Exile best addresses our current church context.

EXILE: A Biblical Theology for This Time

Around 598-580 BCE, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar besieged the nation of Judah. The invasion was brutal and thorough. Jerusalem was sacked, the walls torn down, the temple ransacked and demolished. All of the leadership, artisans, anyone with influence or power, wealth or wisdom, were deported to Babylon.

Those who remained in Jerusalem were left to try and make a living among the ruins. This period in time when the Jews were deported to Babylon is known as the Exile. In a literal sense, exile is forced, unwelcome, punitive physical displacement.

Exile implies much more than simple geographical dislocation; it can be a cultural and spiritual condition as well. As a metaphor for a spiritual condition, exile is used to describe the condition where a person or groups exists within and stand apart from the prevailing culture around them.

Exile is the idea of living away from the home we grew up in, were formed in; the home and culture that shaped our early identity, values, and purpose.

Exile evokes feelings of displacement, disorientation, and disillusionment. It speaks to the frustration of having to adjust life around the dictates of a host culture.

But this is not how the exile metaphor is currently being used within the church at large.

Many scholars, pastors and theologians are beginning to use the exile metaphor not to describe the process or journey of change, but the place the church increasingly finds itself as the culture-at-large changes around it.

Thus, exile is actually the best, most appropriate metaphor to describe the context in which the 2020 church finds itself.

The 2020 Church's Parallels to Exile

Similar to where the US church finds itself today, those who were taken into exile were forced to live life in a foreign culture, one that was evil and anti-God.

In fact, Babylon was so wicked that the book of Revelation cites it as an example of wickedness and judgment. Think about how disorienting it would be to suddenly be forced to live in a culture so contrary to that of the kingdom of God. The principles that govern your life no longer tie to God, his love, his purpose, or his values.

But regardless of how fast or slow the people of God find themselves in exile, there are parallels between the exile of the Jews in the Old Testament, and the US church in today's increasingly secular culture.

For example, children in Babylon were taught the Babylonian creation story. The Jewish children, in an effort to counter this Babylonian influence, were taught the biblical creation story.

This sounds a little like the evolution/creation debates that have been happening a while here in the US. Other examples of exilic experiences in our US culture include LGBTQ advances into marriage and civil rights laws, abortion laws and practices, and sexual permissiveness.

The church, now more than ever, is living in an increasingly Babylonian culture.

In addition both the Jews in exile and the 2020 US church experienced great loss.

Here are six significant losses experienced by both the Jews in exile and the US church in 2020:

1) A loss of control. This is the inability to influence people about how life is lived in community, especially the ability to curb or promote particular behaviors.

For the Jews, they lost their ability to make decisions about the culture-at-large within which they reside. Rules and regulations were imposed by Babylon and its culture.

For the 2020 church, we have lost some control as well. For example, Sundays are no longer Sabbaths. Litigation imposes insurance limits on what we can do. We have been labeled as non-essential, and have no control to change that label.

2) A loss of power. This is the loss of the ability to get things done, the inability to make things happen through money, position, or other influence.

For the Jews, their loss of power was both institutional and personal. The rich were no longer rich. The leaders no longer led. The priests no longer atoned. The

military no longer defended. With their cities in ruin, especially Jerusalem, their wealth confiscated, and their best leaders deported, they were barely able to make ends meet. The power they once had as a united kingdom under kings David and Solomon was fully and completely diminished. They were a poor, vassal nation, under the power and control of others. They did not get their sovereign power back until after World War II.

For the 2020 church, the power we once carried within the political and governing spheres of our society have also virtually disappeared. The independence the church once enjoyed is now subservient to the rules, regulations, ordinances, and policies of an increasingly secular bureaucracy.

3) A loss of place. This is the loss of physical space or the loss of a particular position, like losing one's place at the table or place in line.

For the Jews, the loss of place was literally land, homes, and the feeling of security Jerusalem, its walls, and the temple brought.

For the 2020 church, we have lost our place at the leadership table, especially during this pandemic. Historically, the church has played an important role during pandemics and epidemics as they exhibited an ability to cope, be compassionate, and care for the suffering. It was our engagement in society during the pandemics that helped Christianity expand in the world.

But this is not how it is working in 2020 for a church in exile. Instead of looking to the church for direction and comfort, US citizens are looking to the government and the healthcare sector to bring aid, comfort, help, and answers. The church has not only lost its place, it has been uninvited from having a seat at the table.

4) A loss of identity. This is like an identity crisis.

For the Jews, this identity crisis was felt most by those exported to Babylon who were given new Babylonian names, taught the Babylonian language, culture, laws, and expected to integrate into Babylonian society.

Finding ways to maintain their Jewish heritage would be challenging.

For the 2020 church, we have lost a sense of identity as well. For example, the city of Galt was established around four churches established in four corners of the city grid. The city, like many cities in the US, was actually built around the church.

In virtually every US city, the church is no longer a central key player in the life of the city. Pastors are no longer key citizens. We've been feeling the slide for a while, but the COVID-19 pandemic has now made it official. The church is non-essential. We have lost our preferential place of honor and esteem we once held.

5) A loss of life/people. This is the loss in terms of real people.

For the Jews, the invasion of Judah by the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters.

For the 2020 church, the loss in lives is twofold.

First, there are the real lives lost in the pandemic.

Second, this loss of people is felt by those who are dropping away from the church with no plan to return. According to the Barna Research Group, one in three practicing church attenders has stopped attending the church.

6) A loss of temple. This is the loss of the primary structure for worship, especially corporate worship.

For the Jews, this was a loss of their ancient custom of worship and atonement dating back to Moses. The loss of the temple also represented the loss of God's presence among his people (Ezek 10). This was a deep loss for the Jews.

For the 2020 church, the restrictions COVID-19 has placed on the church's in-person gatherings is similar to the loss of the temple.

The 2020 Church's Response to Exile

One necessary decision for a church struggling with exile is to determine their primary response to the governing authorities of the exile.

This was as true for the Jews in exile as it is for the church today. Do we resist? Do we fight back? Do we defy what we are told to do and how to do it? Or do we comply with governmental mandates? Do we go along with the thinking of the prevailing culture, even though we do not agree with it?

In short, the primary decision is whether or not to defy or comply with ruling authorities.

The biblical literature on exile can inform the 2020 church on the answer to this question, especially the books of Daniel and Jeremiah.

The book of Daniel begins with the best of the deported Israelites left to serve in the Babylonian king's palace and eat the king's food. They would be given new Babylonian names, and for three years be taught Babylonian language and literature. Daniel apparently complied with all of these changes except for one, the food he ate. He considered the Babylonian food as unclean, something that would defile him and be unhealthy for him.

However, because of Daniel's compliance in every other area, God caused the official in charge of Daniel's training to show favor and compassion on Daniel. So instead of defying the official, Daniel was able to negotiate a ten-day dietary test. At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his Jewish cohorts did indeed appear healthier. In fact, we are told that, "In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole kingdom" (Dan 1:20).

This story represents the ability of those in exile to continue to negotiate some level of control over their lives. This is not defiance. It is a negotiated arrangement with the ruling authorities to proceed in a course of action beneficial to both parties.

Another important text in the book of Daniel is the story of Daniel in the lion's den in chapter 6. This story helps us understand that even though Daniel complies with the Babylonian authorities, the trials caused by others does not mean one can then become defiant. When the jealous administrators convinced king Darius to issue the edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human other than the king for thirty days should be thrown into the lion's den,

Daniel does not change his spiritual practices. In fact, when he learns of the decree, he goes home to pray. He maintains the spiritual practices that help guide him during the exile. He prays trusting that God is able to rescue him from the trial he may face. Sure enough, when King Darius finds out about Daniel, he has no choice but to put Daniel into the lion's den. But he isn't happy about it. Hurting Daniel was never the king's intent. Quite the opposite. When he learned of Daniel's plight, scripture tells us that King Darius was "greatly distressed."

Since Daniel did not violate the king's true wishes, he was never truly in defiance. The decree was instigated to personally hurt Daniel, not by the government, but by individuals.

This is not what's happening when states ask the US church to curtail Sunday in-person gatherings and certain practices during in-person gatherings.

What they are doing is not a personal vendetta. In fact, the US church is not being asked to curtail a spiritual practice, but merely adapt our practices for the sake of the health and lives of those we worship with. The government is more akin to king Darius than the wicked administrators trying to eliminate Daniel.

A third informative text in the book of Daniel is the story of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In this story, King Nebuchadnezzar built an enormous image of himself. A public decree was issued that everyone was to bow and worship this image when the music began to play. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, even after a special audience with the king to make certain they understood the consequences of their action, refused to bow, for to bow would be in direct violation of the first two of God's primary rules for life that state:

- (1) God is the one who gave us life, so love, obey, and worship only him; and
- (2) images are not alive; only worship the living God.

We learn that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose to take a stand and not bow, knowing they could trust God to be present with them as they endured the consequence of their decision to defy.

There is a place where we as a church may need to draw a line and defy. When we are told to directly violate one of the primary rules of life, we can be sure it is time to take a stand and defy, knowing God's promise and protection are with us as we do.

In our 2020 exilic experience, we are not there yet. No government official has suggested we violate the primary commandments of God. Just the opposite. This is a time to live out the commands to love God and love people.

A final informative text is found in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29. Jeremiah was a prophet living in Jerusalem at the time of the exile. God directed him to send a letter to the exiles to help them know how to respond during the exile.

The list begins in verse five:

"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" (Jer 29:5, 6).

These instructions, from God to the exiles through Jeremiah, are to comply, at least to the extent that they are not fighting the Babylonians, but establishing themselves within the Babylonian culture, laws, and customs. And just in case any of the Jews missed the heart of what God was implying in this letter, he spells out his desire for compliance even more clearly.

“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” (Jer 29:7).

Seeking the peace and prosperity of the evil, wicked host culture sounds counter-intuitive to the God of Joshua, but this is a different time and place. God is not just asking for minimum compliance, but cooperation that actually allows the evil, wicked host culture to prosper. However, Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet instructing the people of God. There were others who were telling the Jews to defy the Babylonians.

This is what God, through Jeremiah, said about them. “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” (Jer 29:8, 9).

In other words, those who would preach, and demand defiance are false prophets. They are not being attentive to God's voice. They are leading you down the wrong path.

The right path? Comply. Not just comply, work for the blessing of all.

The exilic literature gives us the answer to the defy or comply question.

Unless we come to the point of being forced to bow to and worship something other than our triune God, we comply. The benefit of compliance is that once we do comply, we can begin to focus on the work God wants done in exile.

Not just the work of compliance and blessing, but work that innovates, work that creates something new that moves the people of God into alternate, adaptive, healthy directions.

The first significant work to come out of exile was the compilation, editing, and canonization of the Jewish scriptures. This was crucial work. Ignoring the law of God had brought them to exile. Putting the scriptures together so they could be studied and followed would help the Jews avoid such great sin in the future.

What they could not have known is that the Jewish scriptures would be instrumental to the writers of the New Testament many years later as they sought to tell the final revelation of God through his Son Jesus Christ in the context of the entire story of God and his people. But God knew—it was a work of his Spirit.

The second significant work to come out of exile was the innovation and propagation of the synagogue system. Since the days of Moses at Mount Sinai, the tabernacle/temple had been the way the Jews worshiped God in community.

During the exile, with the temple demolished, the Jews needed to find a new way to worship God in community. The synagogue, where the reading and study of the scriptures takes place, was that new way. When scriptures and synagogues were implemented within Jewish society, they were uncertain how long these new structures would be needed or utilized.

The work of exile is the work of God, a work of the Spirit. This is as true in today's US context as it was then.

There is a work to do in our exile.

Perhaps the work for us at present is less about how to get people back into the church once the pandemic is over, and more about innovating and figuring out something new, whatever that may be. There is work to be done. I am certain of this. I'm not sure if this work is structural, spiritual, revival, ... that I simply do not know. What I do believe is that we need to exercise our creativity, listen closely to the voice of the Spirit, follow the Spirit, and dream big.

We should throw out convention and allow God to help us do the work that, very possibly, may be instrumental to the church until Jesus returns.