

EXILES IN AUTHORITY: A BIBLICAL PATTERN FOR FAITH IN GOVERNMENT

Just a few centuries ago, the West was enveloped in a phenomenon known as Christendom. Virtually the whole of Europe was ostensibly Christian, and it went without saying that Christians were to rule. The nature of that rule varied, but there was widespread agreement that rule had to be demonstrably *Christian*.

Whatever your view of the future with regard to the success or failure of the gospel to bring discipleship to the nations, it can be generally agreed by Christians that at least in the West, the faithful are something like exiles in most nations. It is not the Church nor the Bible that leads the way in setting cultural standards, much less governmental ones. “Separation of Church and State” is as much an article of faith as it is a misunderstood doctrine; indeed, even many Christians themselves have bought in.

The Decline of Christendom

The fall of the Christian hegemony occurred over a period of a great deal of time, and for a great deal of reasons. One of these reasons is simply that over the course of time a great segment of the Church in the West failed to maintain disciples over the course of generations. Included in this failure was a failure to effectively counteract the unbelieving doctrines of the Enlightenment, which increasingly infiltrated many churches. Over the course of time, Enlightenment-influenced churches grew less and less likely to be distinctively Christian even in their theology, still less in their politics. The result was that Christendom was no longer seen as desirable, even if possible.

The reactionary movement against this, ironically, contributed further to the decline of Christendom in the West, particularly in North America. In the nineteenth century, dispensationalism took root, and from early on the particular brand of evangelicalism it engendered began to edge away from politics. Many saw politics as dirty. But even those who did not nonetheless adopted a view of the future which affirmed that the world was getting worse and worse, and since this was all according to prophecy, nothing better could be expected.

Not surprisingly, for many this meant that nothing better was to be attempted. “There’s no point polishing brass on a sinking ship!”

This development in evangelicalism became especially pronounced after the failed efforts of Prohibition and the anti-evolution campaigns of the early twentieth century. Disillusioned, and armed with a theology that accorded well with that disillusionment, more and more evangelicals withdrew from the public sphere. And not surprisingly, the public sphere continued to resemble Christendom less and less.

Despite a spate of activity here and a minor effort there, the exile had begun in earnest.

Living in Between Times

It could be argued that “exile” is a biblical norm for the age of the Church. After all, all orthodox believers anticipate a future unlike the present in some very fundamental ways. Whatever the difference between the various views among the faithful, they do agree on that. There is a coming future kingdom: *that* is our true home, and not the present age, which is temporary.

While that agreement could become a rationale for passivism and acquiescence, the biblical precedent indicates that is the wrong response.

Seek the Peace of the City

When God promised Abraham a future, He promised not only descendants but also a *land* - the “land of promise,” Canaan. This was “home” for the children of Abraham. To be outside of the land was to be outside the norm; it was to be in a place of transition that (whatever the reason for the absence) was always in some sense less than desirable. And this abnormality reached its height when Israel was cast from the land into exile in Babylon at the turn of the sixth century B.C. Abraham’s children lost their self-determination and were absorbed in a very rich and powerful nation which had become a virtual melting pot due to conquering a wide variety of nations and people groups.

What is instructive for our purposes is that when the first wave of captives were taken into Babylonian exile, God instructed them, not only that they would be away from their homeland

for some time, but also that they were to seek the welfare of the nation to which they would be taken. Rather than acquiesce and accept some notion that things would inevitably be terrible and hopeless, Israel was to thrive and be active culturally in their new context:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29.4-7)

Even though Israel was to retain the hope of return to Canaan, they were not to be careless about Babylon; still less were they to live hopelessly or - worse - as disturbers of the peace. *They were to promote Babylon's good.*

This is why we find that men like Daniel and his companions were promoted in Babylon. They genuinely sought its welfare. They applied their great heritage of wisdom, which had been passed down to them in the Scriptures and in the teaching of the Levites, to their new cultural situation, and that application of wisdom resulted in blessing for the nation which served as their temporary home.

Similarly, later on Mordecai sought the peace of Persia (which became heir to Babylon's holdings by way of conquest) by being sufficiently alert to avert a plot against the king. Like Daniel before him, he came to exercise a great deal of political clout in his "home away from home" - as no doubt did his niece Esther, who as queen surely had a marked measure of governing influence.

Making the Connections

For me, what is particularly compelling about these narratives is that the situation in view is so very like our own. Unlike the earliest times of the Christian Church, believers in much of the West do retain some opportunity to be involved in politics. And unlike ancient Israel living in Canaan, believers are not in their homeland. We are exiles with opportunities.

I think there is a certain sense in which we can say that this is the state of normalcy for the Church. I am not one of those who denies the legitimacy of Christendom outright; I simply note that the sort of Christendom available to the Church is not exactly parallel to the sort of life Israel was granted in Canaan. (One reason among several why the so-called “theonomic” or “Reconstructionist” movement of the 1980s and 1990s was misguided.)

Rather, by the nature of the case, in this age the Church is in a transitional place. Whether we relate this place to the wilderness or to Babylon (I think both analogies are valid), we are aware there is a destination to this journey, and we have not arrived at it. Not until the return of the Messiah.

But nothing in that assessment is inherently pessimistic with regard to the impact the gospel can have upon the culture at large. Nebuchadnezzar converted, and Daniel was his right hand man. You can be sure that such leadership had momentous effects upon both the public policy and the population of Babylon. (Nor is it particularly cogent to argue that Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion didn’t accomplish much or wasn’t sincere, since within a couple generations Babylon was as pagan as ever, as witnessed by the idolatry of King Belshazzar on the night his empire fell to the Persians. After all, something similar could be said about the best of the kings of Israel and Judah, such as David, Hezekiah, and Josiah.)

Points to Ponder

This little piece is not intended as a manual for how to take the reins of power. I would simply like to leave us with a few reflection points.

1. The authority which God’s people came to exercise in Babylon came to them along the pathway of *service*. It was precisely people who were obeying God’s command to seek the peace and welfare of Babylon who ended up being granted opportunity to advise kings and act as governors. Genuine service has authority attached to it, and that sort of authority is an attractive thing. It is also real kingdom work, no matter what else may happen; it is therefore never wasted.
2. The authority which Daniel and others exercised was God-given, not wrested through violence or manipulation. No matter what prime ministers and presidents,

parliamentarians or senators may say, Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, and it is God who is the ultimate delegator of power - which is why in Romans 13 Paul describes governing authorities as God's "ministers" (servants).

3. The authority which Daniel and others exercised was not attained or maintained by compromising core principles and practices. Indeed, Daniel maintained even so much as his specific devotional habits in the face of a royal decree. Although there are ways in which Christians ought to be flexible and willing to bend, real authority can only be exercised when it is done so with consistency and with integrity.

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