

“Living the Resurrection”, A Strange Land
1 Thessalonians (selected)
5.19.19



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“How would you respond to the assessment of the place of the church in the culture by Stuart Murray at the beginning of the teaching?”

“Do you see any signs that the church’s reputation or level of acceptability is shifting in the present culture? Have you experienced any of those responses in your own relationships or other’s posture/approach toward you?”

“Why do you think that the theme of ‘exile’ has so frequently resonated with God’s people as they attempted to understand their position in the culture? Can you think of any other descriptions you would use to characterize the relationship of God’s people to the prevailing culture?”

“Why is ‘nostalgia’ a counter-productive response to exile? Have you ever referred to the church’s history as, ‘The Good Old Days’?”

“What are some opportunities for interaction with our culture in which we might be able to participate without compromising our biblical convictions? Have you ever had to decline an opportunity because you believed it violated a biblical value or ethic? Could you offer that to the group?”

Here are some extra biblical texts to concerning the idea of “remnant”: Isaiah 37:31-32; Micah 4:7 ; 7:18; Jeremiah 11:23 ; 50:20; Zephaniah 2:7-9; Ezra 9:13-15; Micah 7:18-20; ; Jeremiah 31:2; Zechariah 8:6

Teaching Notes...

“What the gospel needs most is saints who have taken up the way of the cross and in whose lives the gospel is visible, palpable, and true. It needs disciples who follow Jesus, with or without the support of their culture, and for whom the power of the gospel is demonstrated not through winning, but through obedience.”

Bryan Stone

[review] Christianity is offered to us as a “prophetic” faith, in that it always seeks to ‘engage’ rather than ‘escape’ the prevailing culture.

Prophetic: that we are speaking from another perspective---- God’s. We are not forecasting an unalterable future, but we are both announcing and embodying God’s word (words, will, desire) to our world in order that it might realize something better. “Glory”.

[from a previous teaching] Stuart Murray, in his book, *“Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World”*, discusses some transitions he observes: The church has moved...

→ From the center to margins: There’s no ‘social advantage’ to being a Christ-follower.

The early church was essentially a fringe, counter-cultural movement. They had clearly defined values that clashed with the Greco–Roman pursuits.

In the 4th century, Constantine made Christianity a state-sponsored religion. It was *“cool to be a Christian”*. In the process, resistance/conviction was unnecessary and the people became absorbed into the culture.

→ From control to witness: without the capacity of privilege to exert influence over a culture, we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.

→ From settlers to sojourners: from feeling at home in a culture which spoke their language and shared some familiarity with their story, to a place where we feel ‘unsettled’.

If you are over (35) and have been warmed in the incubator of the church, your CRG (Christian Response Guidebook) is providing you with cultural-maps that don’t accurately portray the context. As a result, we are unable to assist the very ones that we have been called to serve because we can’t place them on the cultural grid.

Historically, it has proven difficult for us to find some space between harsh judgmentalism and the casual acceptance.

Whatever ‘cachet’ the church had, it is rapidly diminishing, if not already dissipated. In the process, we feel caught somewhere between *“indiscriminate approval”* and *“ugly self-righteousness”*. Neither posture proves to be the best reflection of the gospel.

Peter employs the metaphor of **'exile' (1 Peter 2:4-12)** to encourage a group of Christ-followers who desired to be faithful to the gospel in their own "zip code".

Peter says, *"Given the nature of our present context, how do we remain actively present and involved, yet decidedly unwilling to adopt its values/ethics, as our own? How do we live as 'aliens' without alienating ourselves?"*

Exile: 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried thousands back to Babylon (Daniel and his (3) friends, being some of the more recognizable ones).

In the biblical narrative, "warnings" eventually become "explanations".

God never blamed the Babylonians for the exile. Israel, who had been chosen to be God's unique people, found themselves repeatedly in 'compromising' positions. For years, God has been making his appeal to them: 'return to me and my ways'; 'forsake all other loves'. Having ignored the warnings, they now became explanations for the consequences.

Exile is not only a geo-political reality, but a spiritual reality that has characterized God's people for the better part of their existence.

If you are a follower of Jesus in the prevailing culture, your experience is one of **"exile"**. It's the experience of feeling 'displaced'; 'alienated'; almost 'unwelcomed'. A stranger in a strange land.

Babylon was a highly progressive city which you might say was a 'tribute'/ 'monument' to human ingenuity and determination (e.g. Tower of Babel: Genesis 11).

"Babylon"- has served as an archetype of a (way of speaking about) culture being informed and formed independent of the biblical narrative.

Exile is where...

We experience the loss of all that seems familiar and coherent; there is an absence of encouragement and support. We don't 'speak the language'. We are unsettled.

We get 'nostalgic' (lit. 'homesick'). It's not simply content with celebrating the *"good ol' days,"* but seeks to restore/re-live them. With nostalgia, we are the last ones to notice our "irrelevance" [Ecclesiastes 7:10; Ezra 3:10-12].

Faith becomes de- centralized (not about the Temple/church).

We get re-oriented as a Storied people. We have to re-think and re-define what faith looks like in our present context.

There is the danger of segregation (escaping; all of our associations are with other Christians) or assimilation (acclimatized). We want to remain 'relevant', so, we

make adjustments (compromises) without being conscious of the ways in which our participation is eroding our souls and our witness.

We are the exiles, 'sitting by the river', wondering what went wrong?! *"How can we sing God-songs here? How can we worship here?"*

Our usefulness in our "calling" can only be realized in our difference: not a difference that distances us from the world, but one that certainly distinguishes us.

But, it's hard to maintain your distinctiveness without becoming distanced and self-righteous. It's hard to function in and amongst a culture which, in many ways, lives in direct conflict with Godly values and priorities, and not become cynical and uncaring. It's challenging to live amidst conflicting values without subtly assimilating some of those values and forfeiting our influence.

What I believe we see happening is not an 'abandonment of faith', but a discontentment with faith--- as it has been portrayed and offered.

The faith that we have too often offered is one that leaves people without any 'moorings' in a world that is morally and spiritually 'set adrift'.

The days of the church attempting to light a few candles, put up a black-backdrop, show some 'pop' movie clips, do some U2 songs during worship are 'over'. They have, in my estimation, failed miserably.

We have attempted to offer them meaning without the Story. Social justice without personal transformation. Life without death (to self). Self-expression (personal re-invention) without repentance. Hope without conversion.

"Belief-O-Matic" (from Beliefnet): Answer questions which help you discover which faith best suits your beliefs. **Warning:** *Belief-O-Matic accepts no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul.*

You don't get the Kingdom without orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right practices), surrender of the will, and submission to the King. You can't have Christianity without Jesus.

There are so many opportunities and promises before us, that we can no longer identify the "end of ourselves". It's kind of a 'gig spirituality'. There's 'goat yoga' or a 'spin class' or the culinary school.

The gospel will never be socially acceptable.

Followers of Jesus, historically, have functioned best from the margins. We, as followers of Jesus, will be viewed as partisan and rigid for a message that says, *"Repent, the Kingdom of God is available"* (Matthew 4:17).

It will always seem a “remnant” community. Not the tattered scraps/leftovers, but a **“faithful minority presence”**, whose influence is disproportionate to its ‘polling numbers’ (Who believe that the kingdom works its way into the culture like yeast into dough; like mustard seeds, Matthew 13).

Our mission, then, is neither to critique the culture nor mimic it, but to transform it (help it to become what it was meant to be) as we work among and alongside those with conflicting values and views.

Sometimes that means we are able to celebrate and participate in a variety of cultural practices. We can adapt without adopting cultural values.

At other times, we will be called upon to respectfully and humbly demonstrate “risky non-compliance”.