

The Future of the Church in North America
Our Unexpected Future Part 1: Resident Aliens

Jeremiah 29:1-7

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1955 was a great year to be a Presbyterian in America! Millions of GIs returned home from World War II, married their sweethearts, had children, moved to the suburbs, and started going to church. In droves. Presbyterian Church membership swelled so quickly that the denomination could barely keep up with the demand to build new churches. Churches were packed on Sunday morning; Sunday schools were booming.

So many people were coming to *this* church by the mid 1950's that a second worship service was added, a second minister was needed, and new teachers were being trained to serve the 350 children who filled the classrooms of this building each Sunday morning. Those were the days!

Presbyterians were important on the American landscape. In 1955, 95 members of the U.S. Congress were Presbyterian, the largest Protestant tradition represented in the House and Senate. Ten days before he was inaugurated as President in 1953, Dwight Eisenhower was baptized and received into membership at National Presbyterian Church in Washington DC. And three justices on the U.S. Supreme Court, including Chief Justice Earl Warren, claimed the Presbyterian faith as their own. Presbyterians, it seemed, ruled the world.

We Presbyterians ordained our first female pastor, Margaret Towner, in Milwaukee in 1954. It instantly became a national news story and commanded a five-page spread in America's favorite periodical, *LIFE* magazine. Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church through the 1950's and early 60's was a towering figure in American Protestantism and appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine.

It was a fabulous time to be a Presbyterian, don't you think? There are some of us old timers who remember well those halcyon days. And then something happened in the late 1960's. It goes by various names—a cataclysmic cultural earthquake, the great unraveling of mainline Protestant hegemony in American life.

The Christian story just couldn't hold the imagination or desire of post-war generations, so the 60s exploded like a socio-cultural-religious Mt. St. Helens. As church historian Hugh McCloud observes, “In the religious history of the west these years may come to be seen as marking a rupture so profound as that brought about by the Reformation.”¹

Throughout North America we witnessed the Baby Boom, rising economic possibilities for huge swaths of the public, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Sexual Revolution, the emergence of the self as the central source of meaning.

Along with those came the Human Potential Movement, the Women's Movement, a shrinking world with expanded religious options, the expansion of higher education from elites to the middle class, and the proliferation of new media.

The changes went on and on, and their impact was overwhelming, unexpected, and resulted in massive dislocation. We Protestants were thrown into a world we did not recognize, and for which we were unprepared.

¹ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960's* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1-3.

In the ensuing decades, Christians, and especially mainline Protestants, have only continued to lose our place in the emerging cultural milieu. If anything, the pace of change has only picked up.

In 1955 stores and restaurants were closed on Sunday morning as people flocked to church. Today, the best time to go shopping, or see a movie, or eat at a restaurant, or sleep in late, is on Sunday, as tens of millions of people now do.

In 1955, if you were in high school, the best place to be on Sunday was hanging out with your friends at church youth group. Today, soccer games are scheduled on Sunday mornings, high school band practice may happen in the evening. Today, the public school and its myriad activities completely overshadow any possibility of youth ministry in the traditional, 1955 sense. Just ask the exhausted parents of those kids, who now spend their evenings and weekends chauffeuring them from one event to another.

The Bible reminds us that massive dislocation is nothing new for people of faith. When the Babylonian army swept down on Jerusalem 600 hundred years before Christ walked the earth, when invading soldiers carted away ten to twenty thousand men, women, and children, including the very best artisans and craftsmen, the most influential prophets and priests, and the royal court itself: things got pretty grim on the streets of Jerusalem. The city had been leveled; the remaining population was mostly poor. Destitution had come upon one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, and utter despair had swept over the new exiles in Babylon.

There were some Israelites who questioned whether the exile was God's idea. After all, the Hebrew God was a God of restoration, a God of new beginnings. Surely, the Holy One wouldn't shake things up in such a radical way. So, it wasn't long after the Babylonian army had left Jerusalem that certain prophets began running around predicting a quick turnaround.

"Don't worry, this exile thing isn't God's fault," they said. "*This* is a historical hiccup. It's an aberration. "Don't worry," these prophets declared, "God is going to break the back of Babylon, bring back our exiles and return us to the glory days gone by."

Meanwhile, the exile community in Babylon, anxious about its own future, faced two great temptations. One was to turn in on itself, isolate itself from the surrounding culture as best it could, preserve the purity of the faith, protect what faith it had saved. Exile was only temporary, after all, and God would surely free us and return us to Jerusalem.

It's not unlike the response of many American Christians stretching from the late 1960's until today. 1955 will surely return, right? The last 60 years have been an historical hiccup. Let's circle the wagons, turn in on ourselves, protect our faith from the sinful influences of this alien culture.

And that's in fact what some in the Christian family have done. The Roman Catholic Church is the best example of this fortress mentality. Over the last century it has created a massive structure of parochial schools and institutions to protect and preserve "Catholic culture" as an enclave in American culture. On the Protestant side this has been story of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, and several other traditions. "Let's not allow our clergy to participate in interfaith events. Let's exclude other Christians from the Lord's Table. Let's preserve and protect the purity of our faith which is at odds with this alien culture, which includes other Christians." That's the kind of circle-the wagons faith they practice.

Has this fortress mentality brought back the glory days of 1955? The simple answer is no. The Catholic Church has experienced the same numerical declines as the Protestants. Two years ago, on the front page of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, Catholic Bishop Donald Hying announced that 135 Catholic parishes in southwest Wisconsin would be consolidated into 30 because of

dramatic membership decline. Bishop Hying said the post-Christian, alien culture of Madison was to blame. And Wisconsin Synod Lutherans? They have experienced the same numerical declines as the rest of us.

These resident aliens, the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, faced another temptation that was even more seductive. Let's adopt the ways of sophisticated, urbane Babylon and make the best of our situation. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the Israelites are tempted to follow other Gods. Exile in Babylon presented yet another opportunity.

This, too, has been the response of some of our fellow Christians. Let's harness the most powerful forces in American culture to bring back 1955. And so, in the late 60's some in the Christian family turned to market capitalism for answers on how the church could return to the glory days of the 1950's.

What must we do to attract more newcomers to our churches? Sophisticated cultural analyses about what contemporary Americans want, and need were conducted, and over time these churches used market surveys to determine what the church should look like to attract more customers. Just like Target or McDonalds would do. Over the last six decades these churches began to look like any other business looking for a new customer base. The business model became the paradigm for a return to 1955.

Religious symbolism was removed from their sanctuaries, the communion table disappeared, along with other unfamiliar things like pulpit robes and the Lord's Supper. These churches turned off their organs playing Christian hymns and developed a new genre of Christian music called "praise music." Using instruments more familiar to American culture than the organ, the piano, guitars, and drum sets became the staple of worship life, with congregations singing simple, memorable music that resembled what one might hear on the radio these days. In order to attract new customers, the church needed to look and sound and feel more like the surrounding culture.

On the outside these churches appeared to have enormous success. Through the 70s, 80s and 90s, their congregations grew, sometimes dramatically. But despite claims that these churches had found the secret sauce of success in taking us back to 1955, there is now sufficient evidence that the primary reason these churches grew was because of defections from mainline churches like ours. The truth is, these protestant churches have experienced their own unraveling tsunami, just a little later than us mainline Protestants. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, is now declining at roughly the same rate as the Presbyterian Church.

What then are anxious resident aliens like us to do? If the fortress mentality doesn't work in bringing back 1955, and the American business model doesn't work, what then is God calling us to be and do in this new cultural context?

Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon, our text today, with a shocking answer: 1955 is not coming back. You better get used to being resident aliens, because your exile is going to last a long time. If you let your 1955 nostalgia rule your hearts, if you hope against hope that God is going to rescue us from one of the greatest challenges we have faced since the Reformation, if you keep believing that those Sunday school rooms downstairs will be full again, and those elusive young families missing from the church these days will once again stream through our front door, you are setting yourself up for lots of grief, despair, and a sense of failure. 1955 is not coming back.

So, what is Jeremiah's advice? Get used to being resident aliens: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.”

He encourages the exiles to begin establishing roots and work towards building a possible life in community, a ‘home away from home’—in a distant place, a foreign culture. For the time being, they needed to accept that the places where they were settled within Babylon were home; they needed to stop living out of their suitcases, give up false hope, begin establishing roots, affirm, maintain, and continue ties of family and faith. There is life to be found, even joy to be had in exile.

And then Jeremiah issues a command that the Israelites had never heard before: seek the welfare of the city, the shalom of the city, the wholeness, the well-being 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.

The revolutionary message of Jeremiah is that God’s work is no longer limited to a place, back home in Jerusalem. God is also present and at work even in Babylon, this foreign city where you are exiled, even in this culture you don’t understand. You have work to do in exile, work towards peace—shalom-- and community building in your own neighborhoods. For Jeremiah, the key to survival and hope lay in joining God in the “creation of a just and compassionate counterculture, a place of social alternatives where violence, exploitation and idolatry do not reign,”² and the welfare of the city in which we reside become becomes our new mission.

And how do we fulfill this new mission in a foreign culture? How do we even begin to do this kind of work as resident aliens in a culture that is increasingly unrecognizable? Next week I will turn to the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus for answers to that critical question.

Amen.

² Stulman, Louis and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You are my People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010)