



FELLOWSHIP

EXILIC DISCIPLESHIP

The vast history depicted in the Bible ultimately culminates in the redemptive work of Christ, and this history is long and rich. The Old Testament tells the story of how God chose one man, Abraham, to become the father of a great nation, Israel. As Israel's history ebbed and flowed, there were dramatic turning points including great acts of salvation like the exodus, as well as great acts of judgment like the exile. This rich history not only helps us understand God's plan of salvation, but it also helps position where we are in this grand salvific narrative. One particular theme that helps us understand our modern context is this period of exile.

The exilic period can provide helpful models and perspectives that shape how we approach ministry. For example, churches can consciously or subconsciously operate out one of two different perspectives, which I will label as 1) Jerusalem perspective or 2) exilic perspective. These two perspectives arise from the two different eras of Israel's history. The "Jerusalem perspective" refers to the golden age of the Solomonic monarchy when nations came to Jerusalem to marvel at her beauty and splendor (e.g. Queen of Sheba – 1 Kings 10). During his reign, there was an unparalleled sense of flourishing, national identity, and security; however, within one generation, this golden age of prosperity and shalom led to civil war and subsequent exile for both the northern and southern kingdoms.

The second "exilic perspective" arises out of the exile of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Both nations were forcibly removed from their homelands to live as aliens and strangers in a foreign and hostile kingdom. It was into this challenging situation that God gave His people the difficult command to seek the prosperity of a city that represented cruel brutality (Jer 29:7). The Israelites were to be a sustained blessing to the opposing powers, building houses and planting vineyards.

These two dramatically differing periods of Israel's history present two distinctive visions of how God's people related with the world around them. The golden age of Jerusalem and the exilic contexts provide a helpful contrast in understanding the assumptions that many Christians have when it comes to engaging with the outside world. Let me briefly attempt to describe some of these differences.

The Jerusalem perspective can have as its implicit goal the building of its own institutional security and identity apart from the surrounding cultures—to build a kingdom within a kingdom. The "Jerusalem church" strives for the world to come to her—to admire and conform to her values, culture, and worship. In contrast the "exilic church" recognizes that it is living in a foreign power without the security and comforts of Jerusalem. Jerusalem churches with established cultic practices expect people to come to them, while exilic churches expect to go out into the world while internally retaining their sense of identity and purpose. The expectations of life and worship and identity that come out of these two different perspectives are quite different. There is comfort and security in Jerusalem, discomfort and insecurity in exile. In Jerusalem, you are the dominant culture and your sense

of identity is constantly reinforced by the surroundings so much so that your identity can be taken for granted. In exile, you are the minority culture in a foreign world and there is a constant awareness that you do not fit in; yet, at the same time you are called to seek the common good of the kingdom that can be quite hostile to you. These two differing historical perspectives can offer a lens through which we can understand how Christians approach their context. This does beg the question of whether one perspective is “more correct” than the other with respect to how we should view our current situation. Should the Jerusalem or the exilic context be a controlling perspective for us today?

As we turn to the New Testament, there is a clear identification of God’s people being “exiles” (1 Peter 1:1, 17) and “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11) in this world—citizens of a heavenly kingdom (Phil 3:20) and a heavenly city (Heb 13:14). There is continuity with the Old Testament exiles, as the church waits to return home, which will only come in its fullness with the return of Christ. Until then, the consistent parallel drawn in the New Testament of the church is the paradigm of exile and not of Solomon’s Jerusalem. The New Testament church saw themselves as citizens of a different kingdom, sojourners, exiles, aliens and strangers awaiting the New Jerusalem to come; however, this exilic perspective was not just the forced result of living under Roman occupation. In the New Testament, God’s people volunteered to go into exile for the sake of the gospel (cf. Heb 13:11-16). The citizens of God’s Kingdom willingly put themselves in “exile” living in a foreign world for the sake of witnessing the hope of Christ to the world around them. Given the many metaphors for God’s people in the New Testament, it is clear that Christians today should approach the world around them from this exilic perspective and not a Jerusalem perspective.

The exilic perspective can provide important clarity and distinction to how we can mentor and shape disciples of Christ in our city context. I will outline a few of these distinctions:

- The exilic perspective reinforces an outward rather than an inward orientation, assuming certain difficulties and challenges to be part and parcel of our earthly calling rather than pursuing the elimination of these discomforts as our goal.
- The exilic perspective reminds us that our calling extends beyond personal piety (without overlooking the importance of it). It leads us to understand the importance of our context, contextualizing our discipleship beyond merely inward, therapeutic, self-improvement tendencies.
- The exilic perspective pushes back against a triumphalistic approach to the culture around us and reminds us that we are called to distinctly work and serve the world as God’s people. Our home is not here but awaits us in the future with the return of Christ.
- The exilic perspective reshapes our understanding of discipleship and the kind of disciples we are to nurture. We help train “Exilic disciples” (as opposed to “Jerusalem disciples”) who are trained to enter into the world with a developed sense of public engagement—both vocationally as well as in seeking the common good.
- The exilic perspective shapes the way we spend our marginal time. We want to encourage our people to engage our neighbors and our world, rather than spending all of our free time in church programs.
- The exilic perspective should not neglect the critical importance of evangelism; rather, it lays a meaningful context and the plausibility structures for evangelism in fostering a common love for the city and desire to see it flourish.
- Exilic discipleship, particularly in the New York City context should possess the following characteristics to adapt to a particular growing demographic:
 - Substantive content and intellectual depth
 - Flexible discipleship to accommodate unpredictable work schedules
 - An integrative approach weaving theology, community and spiritual formation to maximize the likelihood of life-integration

I want to note that this concept articulated here is not new in church history. It was the orientation for the early church and was later more robustly articulated in Augustine’s City of God. In more recent times, people like John Stott (“double identity”¹), James Hunter (“faithful presence”²), and Tim Keller (“center church”³), among others, have continued to champion this kind of outward orientation in defining the mission of the church. To this mix, I believe the rich historical and theological context associated with the exile can provide additional insight and depth.

Overview

Jerusalem	Exile
dominant culture	minority culture
building a kingdom within a kingdom	seeking the prosperity of an alien kingdom
expectations of comfort & security	expectations of discomfort & insecurity
identity taken for granted	identity challenged
inward orientation	outward orientation
triumphalistic attitude towards surrounding cultures	servant attitude towards surrounding cultures

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¹ John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (IVP Books, 2011).

² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010).

³ Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Zondervan, 2012).