

# Christians in Exile

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[ 0 : 00 ] How should we vote in the upcoming presidential election? Should pastors or churches publicly endorse certain candidates? Should Christians engage in political activism and go to protest marches?

Should we send our kids to public school or private school? Or should all Christians be homeschooling at this point? Should Christians watch violent or sexually explicit movies or shows like Game of Thrones?

Or should we avoid those things? Should churches partner with interfaith coalitions or secular groups in the name of social justice? Should something like racial justice be a part of a church's mission?

Should overturning Roe v. Wade be part of a church's mission? The way that you answer these questions reflects some of the underlying assumptions that you probably hold about how Christians should think about and engage with culture.

And we can be very different in what our assumptions are. Last week we started a series looking at the relationship between Christianity and culture. And this morning we're going to be looking at one of the most important passages to help us understand this topic.

[ 1 : 13 ] Help us think biblically about how to engage with culture. And that passage is 1 Peter 2, 9-12. Because here we find a core concept that shows how we should be thinking about our role in the culture and the society that God has put us in.

Because this is the place where Peter says that all Christians are exiles in the world. Christians are exiles. And so basically what we're going to see is that it is only when we embrace our status as Christian exiles that we can begin to formulate a vision for how to engage the culture around us. And so we're going to see two things this morning about Christian exile. First, what does it mean? And then second, what does it mean for us? Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.

And we pray that as we open your word, that through the power of your Holy Spirit, you would illuminate these words for us and speak to us in the ways that we need to hear from you this morning.

It's our desire to meet you face to face in your word, Lord. And we pray that you would meet us where we are. In your Son's name, Amen. So first of all, what does Christian exile mean?

[ 2 : 30 ] How do we understand that term? In 1 Peter, Peter's writing to a very diverse array of people. We have Jews and Gentiles, and they're part of the diaspora. They're spread all around the region.

And all of these people have one thing in common, and that is that they have all been converted to Christianity. They've all become followers of Jesus. And because of that, because of their conversion, Peter says that they're now exiles in the world.

Now, these are not people who have relocated geographically. They're still living in their homeland. But Peter says that because of their conversion, they're now exiles in the world. So he's saying when you become a Christian, you become an exile.

Now, what does he mean by this? It's really common these days to hear conservative Christians talk about the secularization of the United States. And they will lament how we've gone from being a Christian nation with Judeo-Christian values held by most everybody to being a secularized society that has abandoned those values.

And in this context, people will say that Christians are now exiles in our own country. Now, that is not what Peter has in mind when he talks about Christian exile.

[ 3 : 43 ] Peter's making a very specific reference to a time in Israel's history right around the 6th century BC, a time when the Babylonians conquered God's people and took them into exile.

And the Babylonians didn't want to do this through violence. They didn't want to wipe everybody out. Their hope was to assimilate Israel, this kind of peaceful conquest where after a generation or two, Israel would start to blend in with the Babylonian culture, take on the beliefs and the values and worship the gods of Babylon.

And in a couple of generations, there would be no more Israel. They would become fully Babylonian. And so you have this community of Israelites that are living as exiles in Babylon, and they're divided over how they should respond to their exile.

They're asking this basic question. How do we relate to this foreign culture around us? How do we engage this culture? And some said, well, we need to hunker down and we need to keep ourselves completely separate from the culture, and we need to wait for God to deliver us and bring us home again.

And then you had other people that said, I think we just need to give up, and we need to allow ourselves to be assimilated because there's no hope. God has abandoned us.

[ 4 : 59 ] And then God sends into the midst of this, God sends the prophet Jeremiah with a very clear and striking message, which you see beginning in Jeremiah chapter 29.

Here's what Jeremiah says essentially. He says, on the one hand, don't remain separate. I want you to go into Babylon. I want you to build houses there. I want you to plant gardens there.

I want you to let your kids get married and let them have kids. And you need to understand that you're going to be here for a long time. So sign a long-term lease. Buy a house if you can. Get a job.

Root down in this society. On the one hand, don't be separate. But then he says, on the other hand, do not allow yourselves to be assimilated. Stay faithful to me as my chosen people.

Don't worship the gods, the idols of Babylon. Stay distinct. Stay faithful to the covenant that we share. And so this is a much harder path.

[ 5 : 55 ] It's harder than remaining separate. It's harder than being assimilated. It's a sort of both and neither nor approach. He's saying, I want you to be in Babylon, but not of Babylon.

And we ask, well, what's the reason for all of this? Well, we see in Jeremiah 29 that God actually has a purpose behind sending his people into exile. This is not just punitive.

It's not just God giving up on his people. It says in verse 7 that he wants his people as exiles to seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.

And pray to the Lord on its behalf. Pray to Yahweh on its behalf. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. So God purposefully sends his people into exile because he desires to bless Babylon through their presence there.

His desire is to bless and bring shalom, bring peace and blessing to Babylon through the exiles and their presence in that society.

[ 6 : 57 ] So this is, I think, what Peter has in mind when he says that every single Christian is living as an exile in the world. On the one hand, this is saying that as a Christian, you are a citizen of the kingdom of God.

As Peter says, you're a chosen race. Now, he's talking to people of different races, but he says now you're a chosen race. You're all one chosen race. These are people from different socioeconomic classes. But he says you're all royalty now.

You're all a royal priesthood. And these are people from different nations. But he says now you're all of one nation. You are all citizens of the kingdom of God. So their citizenship is in the kingdom of God.

And that means that this world, if you're a Christian, this world is not your home. This is not your home. You're a citizen of the heavenly kingdom.

The world that will one day be. On the other hand, though, what Peter is saying about Christians is that God desires to bless this world through his people and their presence here.

[ 8 : 02 ] So Peter says we are called as exiles to proclaim God's excellence to the world. We're called to do that in word, but also in deed. We're called to live our lives in such honorable ways that even when people speak evil against us, they're so compelled by what they see that they eventually come to worship and glorify the name of the Lord.

So for all of us who are Christians living in the U.S., this is the beginning of how we need to think about the culture around us. If we want to go back to what we said a little while ago, certainly things in our culture have changed.

And certainly the secularization of our culture is pretty clear. But what we need to be clear on is how we interpret and make meaning of that.

The U.S. was never a Christian nation. And if what Peter is saying is true, Christians will always be exiles no matter when or where we live.

And so the thing that has changed, the real difference, is that it used to be easy for Christians to live in the United States and to forget that we're exiles.

[ 9 : 18 ] It used to be easy to live here and to feel right at home in this world. And what has changed is that now we live in a society that reminds us on an almost daily basis that we're exiles.

We're reminded on an almost daily basis that this world is not our home, right? So we used to be able to assume that most people around us shared our worldview. But now we encounter people every single day who have a completely different view of reality itself.

We used to be able to assume that we could rely on our schools and other institutions for the moral, the character formation of our children. But now we are solely responsible to form the characters of our children.

That responsibility sits squarely on us and on the church. We used to be able to call ourselves Christians without having to articulate what we believe or why. And so we had lots of Christians really who had no idea why they believe what they believe.

And that used to be possible. You could get away with it. But now we have to be ready, always ready, to give a reason for the faith that we have.

[ 10 : 28 ] Because we will constantly be challenged in our faith. And people will even speak evil of us as Christians. Another thing that has changed is church involvement used to feel unnecessary.

Because there was a kind of cultural Christianity, at least where I grew up, that made church involvement sort of optional. But now church involvement is not optional.

In fact, it never was. But I think that what we're aware of now in a way that we may not have been half a century ago is that our faith will not survive apart from the support of a church community.

You cannot survive in this society as a lone wolf Christian. You need the church. You need people in your life. And so living faithfully as Christians has become much, much harder.

Where we're reminded much more frequently that we are, in fact, exiles and that this world is not our home. But I actually believe that this is good for us. I think it's really good for us. And I think that we're actually going to be stronger as a result.

[ 11 : 28 ] And I believe that God has a similar purpose for us in our society as he did for the exiles that we read about in Jeremiah. I think our role is very much the same. It's to pray for our society.

It's to seek the welfare of our society. And it's to do this to glorify God and to proclaim his excellence. So now I want to ask, what does this mean for us in our church and how we think about the culture and society around us?

If you look at the history of the engagement that the church has had with the culture in our country, you see three basic postures that the church has adopted toward culture.

And this comes from a paper written by a friend of mine, Pastor Greg Thompson, and his work with James D. Hunter, who's a sociologist at UVA. But essentially you see three postures that the church has historically taken in our society toward culture.

And they're the postures of fortification, accommodation, or domination. Or as I like to think of it, the postures of keep out, blend in, or take over.

[ 12 : 34 ] So I just want to say a brief word about each of these. Christians that may have grown up in a kind of keep out posture or denomination or church, this posture is essentially one of withdrawal.

So these churches view the outside culture as being evil. And the main concern of the church is to keep the evil from corrupting the church, to keep the evils of the culture from seeping in to the church community.

And so the belief is that we need to have our own separate culture, our distinctly Christian culture, and our own separate institutions. And there's a very strong emphasis on keeping the church pure and undefiled from the outside culture.

So that's the keep out posture. Then there are the churches that adopt more of a blend in posture toward culture. This posture says that the thing that really matters and what Jesus really cares about is working for social justice and reform in our society.

And there's typically not much emphasis on doctrine because people in this tradition tend to see doctrine as problematic. Doctrine is the thing that divides us and keeps us from working together. [13:44] And so there's a strong tendency in churches and traditions like this to focus on activism, but not a lot of emphasis on personal holiness. And so what you see with churches like this is that they tend to adopt over time the beliefs and the values of the surrounding culture until they become largely indistinguishable from it.

And then the third posture is the kind of take over the culture posture. And this is essentially the culture warrior posture. These are the churches that focus on extending Christian values into the world.

There's an emphasis on fighting and overcoming the cultural enemies of Christianity and attempting to re-Christianize the United States as best we can.

And so there's a strong emphasis on gaining political power and cultural influence and getting as many Christians into public office as we can. So these three postures, just to say them again, the keep out, the blend in, and the take over approaches, most churches and actually most individuals sort of roughly fit into one or two of these categories, depending, I think, largely on disposition, depending on upbringing, depending on when and how you came to faith, depending on where you grew up.

Was it rural or urban? All of these factors, I think, play a part. And the thing that we need to understand is, despite the labels and whether or not they sound negative, each of these approaches actually has a legitimate theological starting point.

[15:20] They each have a kind of core of truth to them, but they all ultimately fall short in one way or another, because Christians who want to keep the culture out can become totally disconnected from the needs around them.

Christians who want to blend in with culture can lose their prophetic voice and become exactly like the surrounding culture, so they really no longer have anything of value to offer.

And then Christians who want to take over the culture can end up getting hijacked by partisan politics and the corrupting influence of power. So then we ask, well, what is the answer to all of this? What is the answer, and how do we make sense of what 1 Peter 2 calls us to? How do we embrace our calling as Christian exiles? How do we seek the welfare of the society where we are while remaining faithful to God and proclaiming His excellence?

How do we walk that line? And I think that the answer is this. I think that each of the three postures that I just described on its own is inadequate and insufficient.

[16:27] It's skewed too much in one direction or another. But what I actually think that we need is all three of these postures working together, counterbalancing one another, making up for one another's weaknesses, and maximizing one another's strengths.

And so that means a couple of things. Number one, it means we need lots of different kinds of churches with different emphases, with different strengths and weaknesses. And one of the great things about being Anglican is that we focus a lot on the Catholicity, small c, Catholicity of the church.

And we talk about how no one church can be all things, that every church has strengths and weaknesses, but the body of Christ, all of the churches working together, that's where we begin to see the kind of holistic ministry that the church is called to in the world.

So that's the first thing. But the second thing is, I think that Church of the Advent is very unique in the sense that I think when I look at these three postures, I think that we have all three kinds of people in our church, in our congregation.

And one of the ways I know this is because often the reason that people get frustrated in our church is because more people don't think like they do about culture.

[17:42] And that creates dissonance. That creates some conflict. But I actually think that this is a really good thing if we understand it correctly. Instead of getting frustrated and then looking for a church full of people who think exactly like you do, I think we need to recognize that we all actually need each other.

That depending on what kind of church background you have, depending on when you came to faith, depending on your personality, you're going to fall into one or another of these categories. But you actually need people who think differently about culture than you do, speaking into your life.

And they need you to speak into theirs. As Paul says, the church is one body, but it's made up of many different parts. And no one should aspire to have a body made up of all the same body part. That wouldn't work. It would be a monstrosity. And so I want to say a word to each group briefly as we come to a close. First, I want to talk to those Christians who might identify as the kind of keep out or fortification Christians, people who are concerned about keeping the culture from infecting the church.

And I want to say this, we really need you. If that's your wiring and that's where your heart is, we really need you in our church. We need you to be like the Bereans in Acts chapter 17, who when they hear the teaching, they immediately go to the scripture and they want to check everything they're hearing against scripture.

[ 19 : 09 ] We need people who are doing that in our church. We need people who are very concerned about making sure that we are forming ourselves and our children in countercultural kingdom centered ways.

We need people who are doing that. And so at your best, if you're this kind of person, you serve the church by being a guardian and ensuring that our life and doctrine align with the gospel and align with what God has revealed in scripture.

So we need guardians in the church. But there are some things that you're going to need to realize and some ways that you're going to need to flex. You're going to need to realize that Christians cannot simply disengage completely from the needs of the world around us.

We are called to seek the welfare of the city. And that includes doing the work of justice and mercy whenever and wherever we can. And you're going to need to resist your need for doctrinal certainty on every issue.

Because there are some doctrines that are very clear in scripture and they are essential for Christian faith. There are doctrines like the fallen nature that humans have and the sinfulness that we have and our need for salvation by Jesus Christ and his grace that we receive through faith.

[ 20 : 30 ] The belief in the authority and the inspiration of the holy scriptures. The belief in the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. These are the things that we need to agree on.

They're salvific issues. But there are many other issues where the scripture is less clear. And as the saying goes, in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things, and this is the key, charity.

Charity of spirit. And so I urge you to be a guardian in our church, but I urge you to balance your convictions with a posture of charity toward those with whom you disagree.

So that's the first group. If you're the kind of person who identifies more with the kind of blend in or accommodationist approach to culture, we need you as well.

We need you to help build bridges and find common ground with other institutions and organizations. We need you to help us find opportunities for collaboration.

[ 21 : 31 ] We need you to lead the way in caring for the poor and the marginalized in our midst. And at your best, you serve the church as activists. You inspire us to do justice and to love mercy, to not only preach the gospel in word, but to also demonstrate the gospel in how we love and care for our neighbors.

But there are some things that you're going to need to work on as well. I strongly encourage you to realize that we cannot separate our actions from our beliefs.

And our mission is not just to do justice. It's actually to share the gospel. It's to evangelize and to see people come into the kingdom. And the truth is, God doesn't need us to solve the problems of the world.

Only Jesus can do that. And any approach to justice that does not have Jesus at the center of it will not last. It will not last. And so our job is to proclaim God's excellence.

And that's only possible if our lives are distinct and not conformed to the patterns of the world, but to the person of Jesus Christ. And then lastly, the third group I'll talk to is some of you may have come from a more culture warrior tradition.

[ 22 : 49 ] And it's very important for you, for Christians, to take a strong public stand for their faith. And I'll tell you this. We need you. We need you in our church.

We need you to set an example in showing us what it looks like to have a bold public faith. We need you to help us see the value in Christians serving in every sector of society and gaining cultural influence wherever we can, that there's a tremendous value in that.

And at your best, you serve the church as champions who set an example of courage and boldness and public faith. But you need to recognize that power, political power or other kinds of power, is extremely dangerous.

And if you look at the history of the church, power has led the church astray again and again and again. And if we're being honest, the culture war is all about power and control.

And Christians are not always meant to have power in society. In 1 Peter, in the verses that follow the passage that we're looking at, there's an extended section where Peter talks all about the Christian witness and how it is displayed through our submission to authorities that are over us.

[ 24 : 09 ] And that sounds counterintuitive, but this is the primary way that Peter intends for his original hearers to have a witness. Through the way that they submit to their Lord by submitting to the authorities and institutions in their life.

And he's saying this because his hearers had almost no cultural power at all. And yet, this is the generation that brought about one of the greatest religious transformations in any society in history, the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

And when Christians do find ourselves with power, our goal should not be to control or dominate the culture around us.

Rather, I think the distinctly Christian way of utilizing power is that we look at the agency and we look at the power that God has given us, and we ask, how can I use this to create a more just society for everybody?

So this is how I believe Church of the Advent can embrace this call to be Christian exiles. We do it together.

[ 25 : 15 ] Number one, we recognize that we are one of many churches throughout this city, all of whom have different strengths and weaknesses. And we ask, what are our strengths?

How has God blessed us? How is God working through us? And we give thanks for that. And we don't try to drop everything and to become all things in our church.

We rest in the ways that God uses our church, and we give thanks to that. And then we look to other churches to do things better than we can. And then together, the small-c Catholic Church embodies this Christian exile witness that we're called to have.

So that's the first thing. And then the second thing is, I think that we look within our own community and recognize that we have different people with different sets of assumptions about culture, and we all need each other.

And of course, at the very center of all of this is Jesus Christ himself. As we think about exiles, there's no one who knows what it means to be in exile more than Jesus Christ.

[ 26 : 15 ] Jesus is the one who left his father's side, gave up his place of honor in the kingdom, and he became the ultimate exile. He was cast out of heaven and allowed himself to be tortured and executed like a common criminal and rebel.

And he did this so that we who were the exiles cast out of Eden might be welcomed in and become citizens of the kingdom of God. And so we need to remember at all times, this is his mission.

This is his mission and not ours. And so we play our part, but we trust in Jesus Christ for the victory. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we pray that you would speak to us this morning by illuminating for us the ways that you have gifted and wired us to serve your church.

And we pray that you would inspire us by reminding us that we are a small part of a very great body that is in the world. And through this body, through your church, you are accomplishing all that you've set out to accomplish in this world, even if it doesn't feel like it, even if it doesn't look like it. Lord, it is in your hope and in your name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.