

'In the World' But 'Not *Of* the World': Holiness, Citizenship and the Theme of 'Exile'

To be 'in the world' but not 'of the world' is a well-known phrase drawn from the final discourse of Jesus in John 17. It captures most fittingly the tension that Christians experience between the call to discipleship and the norms and pressures of the day-to-day world in which that discipleship must be lived out.

Seeking to be 'in sync' with the 'not of the world' call of Jesus, Evangelicals of an era not-too-long ago were especially concerned with certain activities which were considered to betray 'personal holiness' such as smoking, drinking any alcohol, dancing, watching particular kinds of movies—or *any* movies—and, of course, sexual promiscuity. These prohibited activities ranged from those clearly proscribed by the Bible to those that to fellow Evangelicals seemed rather arbitrary. Be that as it may, the thing which linked all these was the concern with *personal* morality.

Those activities which were more controversial in their prohibition carried an air of being 'out of the world'. Interestingly, when many Evangelicals 'rediscovered' that public life was a worthwhile site of engagement, their new enthusiasm for being 'in the world' was often not matched with the scruples concerning its 'worldly' character that they had displayed concerning personal holiness. Involvement of Christians in politics was, on a very important level, indistinguishable from the involvement of others.

Sure enough, Christians often represented stances on particular issues—notably on sexuality and bioethical issues—that were distinct in that they were out-of-step with where many in wider society were going. On the other hand, on some matters where, given a close reading of the Gospels, one might have expected a distinctive Christian voice, there was little to be heard. Is it any surprise that those matters were the exercise of power and questions of violence? After all, what is wrong with a bit of political head-kicking when I can get a bill through to further 'Christian interests'...? Hmm...

There is no question that Christians have a part to play—actually, a range of parts—in public life. But do we naïvely assume that grasping the reigns of power or voting in our preferred candidate is the ultimate political aspiration?

If we were to remove politics from the Bible, it would be a *holey* Bible indeed. The story of Israel and its covenant relationship with our Creator is nothing if not political. It is to that story we are often drawn (occasionally forgetting the Messiah may have something distinctive to say about 'politics'). And furthermore, despite the warnings of God through the prophet Samuel, we are frequently attracted to the power politics of the monarchy for our political model. Yet the 'height' of Israel under Solomon, the son of David, is full of corruption and the 'rot' has set in. This is a story which is told from the point of view of *exile*. Power politics and the quest for military might is not a 'success story'.

Neither is a story with which we may be more familiar, the rise and fading of Christendom. Along with many positive influences which came out of the infusing of the Bible in Western culture were many distortions of the gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly in relation to power, coercion and violence in order to further 'Christian' ends. No longer representing culture as a

whole, no longer at the centre of power, Christians can rightly learn from the Jewish experience of Exile and Diaspora.

The prophet Jeremiah sent word to leaders, elders, prophets and priests, and all the people of God in exile to “build houses”, “plant gardens”, marry and multiply. As they did so, they were further told by God, “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 29:1-7). ‘Welfare’ is *shalom*: peace, harmony, prosperity, justice. Exile is transformed by grace from a place of despair to a new site and base for mission. Indeed the New Testament celebrates both our ‘return from Exile’ in terms of our reconciliation to and participation in the promised kingdom of God and also our continuance in an ‘Exilic’ mode of existence and mission.

We can expect too much from the ‘seat of power’ and in doing so expect too little of ourselves until some hoped-for ‘day of power’ returns. *What if that is not what we are to be hoping for?* What if in fact the ‘politics of exile’, of being trained as an exemplary minority with an alternative politics of genuine servanthood (and not a trendy version of ‘servant leadership’), is the order of the day? What if Christian community is meant to be a genuine witness to God’s purpose for the world? What if Christians scattered in workplaces and households and neighbourhoods, living out their vocation of discipleship critically and constructively through their roles are the real hope of politics.

Herbert McCabe once said, “The relevance of Christianity to human behaviour is primarily a matter of politics...” I think he could well be right. But *what kind* of politics? Thinking beyond ‘party politics’ or ‘power politics’, might our primary political focus include the following:

1. Christians as a gathered community—a city on a hill, a light to the world—must inculcate a culture among themselves particularly committed to the transforming initiatives of the Sermon on the Mount and “teaching everything [Jesus has] commanded” (see Matthew 28:18-20)
2. Christians need to be involved in forming or perpetuating non-government social movements and ‘ministries’ dedicated to implementing restorative justice practices.
3. Christians in their various social roles should look for opportunities to contribute to the transformation of their institutions through analysis, critique, imagination, example and advocacy.

There are inevitable tensions between citizenship and discipleship yet discipleship is a non-negotiable calling. Civic responsibility does not trump Christian faithfulness. Yet, as a Christian ‘social philosophy’, citizenship should be recognised as a relative good which may be able to further the cause of Christ-inspired restorative justice.

Be ‘in the world’ but ‘not of the world’.

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