

USA-Canada Regional Theology Conference

“The Pilgrim People of God, Living in Exile”

Kansas City, MO – September 28-30, 2016

Report by Rev. Dr. Doug Herbert

It was my privilege to attend this conference as a representative of the Canada field, and I would like to express my profound thanks to the Church of the Nazarene Canada for supporting me financially in order to make my attendance possible. The conference was an excellent time of biblical/theological reflection and discussion, as participants reflected at length upon the biblical story of Israel’s Babylonian exile and sought to view this major chapter of our Scriptural story as a lens through which to understand the church’s present cultural context on the USA-Canada region.

The conference was book-ended with worship services featuring Dr. Scott Daniels as the preacher in the opening service, and NTS President Dr. Carla Sunberg preaching in the final service which also included a service of Holy Communion, presided over by GS David Graves. In between these services, the conference included six sessions. There were five major paper presentations, each of which was followed up by a panel discussion between the paper presenter(s) and four or five others who had written brief 2-4 page responses to the paper. These discussions then led into opportunities for questions and observations from the audience, presented via roving microphone or submitted on Twitter. At the penultimate session of the conference, just before the closing worship, there was a panel discussion among the presenters of the major papers.

The conference theme was chosen mostly in response to the preaching of Scott Daniels at the M15 Conference and again at the Estes Park Consultation in June 2015. On both of these occasions, Daniels had presented rich and thought-provoking messages in which the metaphor of exile featured prominently, as Daniels sought to chart a path forward for the Church of the Nazarene on this region in the coming years. However, as he himself ruefully observed in the introduction of his sermon at the conference, the pre-conference discussion on social media and elsewhere had already quite thoroughly critiqued exile as the wrong image to use for our present cultural context. He found himself needing to defend the subject of the conference from its initial session – and did so by noting that while exile is indeed a limited metaphor for us, it has nonetheless stimulated a very helpful set of conversations. Daniels preached a powerful sermon which took the OT story of Jonah for a text, and showed how the Southern Kingdom of Judah used this story of a reluctant Northern Kingdom prophet as a parable for its own experience of exile – and return.

The opening paper, co-written by Tim Green and Roger Hahn, was entitled “Peril and Promise of Exile: Biblical Narrative Speaking To Us Today.” The authors each discussed briefly the idea of exile as presented in one of the testaments of our Scriptures. In Green’s reflection on the OT, he dwelt upon three aspects of Israel’s response to exile: lamentation, imagination and confession. He showed that deep and genuine lamentation was a primary, initial response to the catastrophe of exile; but also how exile stimulated Israel to engage in new acts of theological imagination: 1) Reimagining Formative

Communal Narratives and Practices; 2) Reimagining a Divinely-Called Community; and 3) Reimagining Divine Presence. In each case, Green demonstrated how the church in North America can, should and must do likewise. Finally, he reminded us that if exile is indeed a metaphor that has something to teach us, then we must ask the same question that Israel had to ask: Why are we here? And like Israel, we must confess that we are here in exile, not merely because of changing cultural or political circumstances, but because we have been unfaithful to our God.

It was Roger Hahn's relatively brief contribution to this paper that probably did more than any other factor to create doubt about the validity of exile as a metaphor for the church's cultural context. Hahn showed, first, that the word "exile" appears very infrequently in the New Testament. Furthermore, though, he went on to show that, whereas the Jewish people of Jesus' day regarded the exile as an ongoing reality, Jesus came to announce and bring about its end! "This suggests one of the perils of the contemporary interest in the exile metaphor lies in locating ourselves in a place that Jesus came to end. To the degree the church embraces the metaphor of exile to explain our present situation, to that degree we abandon the 'already' character of the kingdom in favor of the 'not yet'" (16). Part of Hahn's conclusion was the following: "To the degree that the North American church today embraces the language of exile as a way of lamenting our loss of prestige, respect, and political power, we are out of sync with the New Testament church" (19).

These thoughts, published by one of our denomination's leading New Testament scholars and read by conference participants before the conference began, certainly had a significant shaping impact upon the conference. There was general agreement, with no significant dissent expressed, toward Hahn's insights, which led us to hold the metaphor of exile somewhat loosely and to seek for other, more accurate and adequate images for where we as the Church presently sit vis-à-vis our culture. Of course, the conference had to go on, and other paper presenters had done their preparations without benefit of Hahn's incisive critique of the language of exile. This led to an interesting, fruitful and somewhat playful dynamic as together we wrestled with language and sought God's wisdom on how to understand our situation and the best ways to pursue ministry in this time and place.

The second paper was presented by Professor Kathy Mowry, who teaches at Trevecca in the areas of mission and Christian education. Her paper was entitled "Only One Foot in Exile: Marginalization Without Dispossession in North American Congregations." Mowry showed that in specific and important ways, the experience of North American congregations is quite different from that of ancient Israel and Judah. Whereas exile for them meant *marginalization* and *dispossession*, for us it has (to this point) only involved a degree of marginalization, and no true dispossession. Living "within hands' reach of our properties, memories, preferences, and unacknowledged idols, we tend to gravitate towards passionate griping and fierce gripping onto things we don't want to lose" (2). Congregations hold on for dear life to old, established ways of doing things and to the buildings that we have invested in, while passionately fearing for our own survival. "Our internal and numerical-growth-oriented focus has led us to value possession and achievement and to lose any place in our ecclesiology for dispossession. *We cling to our holy places without clinging to the neighborhoods they inhabit*" (3, emphasis added).

In response to these realities, Mowry called for the church to develop a better theology of place and commit to a parish model of ministry; to develop greater eschatological imagination which will enable us to see the Reign of God breaking through in new and unexpected ways; and to find ways of practicing voluntary dispossession. This means giving up the determination to survive at all costs, and choosing instead to give ourselves and our possessions away in accordance with the shape of our Defining Story, “offering the very life of the congregation up in doxology and the hope of resurrection” (10).

The third paper was written and presented by Tim Gaines (TNU professor of theology) and Shawna Songer Gaines (TNU Chaplain). It was entitled “Being the Pilgrim People of God: Identity, Mission, and Ministry.” Here Tim and Shawna chose to take a slightly different tack on the metaphor of exile, opening with the question, “From what are we being exiled?” They continued, “Our claim today is that wherever the way of the Church has departed from the particular way of Jesus, there we are in exile” (1). This led into a detailed contrast between “the way of Babylon” and “the way of Jesus.” Babylon in Scripture, they wrote, represents self-sufficiency, consolidation of power, practices of social oppression and the dissolution of family ties as well as other forms of communal, social life. Israel and Judah were seduced by the ways of Babylon long before they ever set foot on the path to a physical exile. Likewise, for the contemporary church: “When our desires become those of a power-consolidating people, bent on hopes of self-sufficiency and visions of self-perpetuation while forgetting the poor, captivity is only a formality of the exile that has already taken place” (4).

The way of Jesus, in stark contrast, is the way of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The authors mined several texts from the Gospel of John in sketching out their description of this way – showing how Jesus allowed Himself to be literally “broken open” upon the cross in order that water and blood, the fluids of biological life as well as of sacramental life, may flow out for the life of the world. This is the way to which the church is called. The proposals for action with which the authors concluded their paper are: 1) to engender a distinct identity through practices of Christian worship; 2) to entrust the Church’s future to God by enacting practices of dispossession, allowing ourselves to be broken open in the way of Jesus; and 3) to listen carefully to the stories, histories, and witnesses of exiled peoples (10). They closed with the reassurance that if the church is being pushed away from the levers of power in our culture, this is not to be feared: “displacement is being used for the sake of greater faithfulness to the distinctive way of God” (10).

The fourth paper was written by TNU President Dan Boone, and was entitled “Eschatological Travellers.” In his typical, lively style, Boone presented a long but eminently readable essay using the First Epistle of Peter as a conversation partner. Boone does not spend any time on the question of whether or not it is proper to say that the church is in exile (First Peter, alone in the NT, uses the language of exiles in describing its readers and their situation). Boone summarizes his thoughts as follows:

1. We are oppressed, so we embrace a theology of suffering that joyfully participates in the suffering of Christ.
2. We are marginalized, so we embrace a theology of creation that goes to work for the common

good in the trenches of human labor.

3. We are defecting, so we embrace a theology of hospitality that makes our homes formative places for identity and belonging.

4. We are being assimilated, so we recover a theology of sin humbly spoken and a theology of holiness winsomely lived.

In summary, then, Boone presents a theology of hope as the antidote for our situation of exile.

The fifth and final paper, presented by Ambrose President Gordon Smith, was entitled “Formation for Ministry in A Secular Age: Equipping Clergy and Lay Leadership for the Church in Exile.” It brought the discussions and reflections of the conference around to an appropriate practical focus upon preparation of leaders for the church in this cultural context. Smith chooses the term “post-Christendom,” resulting from “the rise of secularism” to describe our present situation, and he traces this rise much further back than others typically do: to cultural shifts that took place in the mid-19th century. We may bemoan our losses, he wrote, but that will not change the truth that “the sensibility of our age is no longer merely dismissive of Christianity but as often as not rather ignorant of it” (1). Smith suggests that in the search for wisdom in how to respond, our ministerial preparation should look to several specific sources: 1) the prophetic witness. Seminary education should give greater voice to the writings of those who spoke to God’s people during the years of the exile. Also, we should look to 2) the pre-Christendom church which lived and worked and witnessed in a context more like ours than the Christendom church; 3) historic minority churches such as those in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and India – who have had to deal at times with great pressure and sometimes persecution that sought to silence their witness; 4) current secular settings such as Central and Western Europe, where secularization has developed more fully than it has here on our region.

Smith goes on to name a series of four ministerial practices or skills which are essential for church leadership in this context:

1. Preaching for Monday morning: preaching that has a strong connection to the world, and that prepares the people of God to be agents of peace in that world, as they take their place in it throughout the week.
2. Advocacy for and skill in fostering just communities: “Preaching that is blind to the fundamentals of the economy is naïve at best,” and at worst, possibly even complicit in perpetuating systems of injustice (9).
3. Peace-making, perhaps the particular calling of the church in a post-Christian society.
4. “Liturgical leadership that is not escapist. Pastors need to know how to bring the pain of the world into the heart of our worship” (9).

NTS President Dr. Carla Sunberg brought the conference to a conclusion with her sermon, which picked up on the phrase “the pilgrim people of God” from the conference title, and sent us forth with strong challenges to be faithful presences in our neighborhoods and communities, to “seek the peace of the city” where we find ourselves living for a time.

Overall, the conference was a powerfully positive experience, with great quantities of rich theological food to chew upon and digest, as well as opportunities for fellowship with the people of

God. I want to say again how grateful I am to have been given the opportunity to attend, and I pray that with God's help I will find that the conference has been both bread and compass for the journey ahead.

I would encourage readers of this brief summary to read the papers themselves, and also to peruse the valuable response papers which I have not taken time to discuss. All of these materials are available free of charge, at <http://didache.nazarene.org/>

In addition, the Center for Pastoral Leadership at NTS will shortly be making available, on their website, video recordings of all of the conference sessions, which involved plenty of discussion and lively dialogue. The CPL is a membership-based site, requiring payment of an annual fee; but it is well worth the cost. It contains a wealth of excellent materials for Life Long Learning for Nazarene clergy; in fact, already at present there are enough recorded webinars, conference sessions, and other materials to provide a Nazarene clergyperson with six years' worth of LLL credits! All this and more can be accessed at <https://cpl.nts.edu/>