

The Christian Faith in the 21st Century: Christians in Exile

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 4, 1998. Scripture lesson: Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The year is 587 B.C. The place - the Middle East. If there had been newspapers in those days, the headlines would read, "Judah has gone into exile... .. her priests groan... her foes have become the masters." A Jewish folk singer in those days sang, "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land." After 400 years of independence, Judah had gone into exile.

The American church has also entered a time of exile. Not geographical exile, but cultural exile. What do I mean? I mean the Christian church doesn't have the clout it use to have in America. For example, when I was a boy in public school in Delaware the school day began with the reading of Scripture and a recitation of the Lord's prayer. We read from the Protestant Bible, the King James Version. When I was in sixth grade we had one Jewish girl named Ruth as a classmate. She was different. She was excused one day to participate in a Jewish holiday. Mrs. Raymond, my sixth grade teacher, explained why Ruth was absent. "Ruth is a Jew. We must be kind to Jews. Jesus was a Jew. Jews don't realize their Messiah has come. We Christians know that Jesus is the Messiah." I can't imagine a teacher getting away with that today. The assumption was that we're all Christians except a few Jews and some reprobate hold outs. Today the cultural landscape has changed dramatically. The Christian church in America has entered into cultural exile.

In a message given to Presbyterian ministers, Dr. Thomas Gillespie, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, outlined the process by which our cultural exile took place. The American Church has experienced 3 *disestablishments*. Let me first explain what I mean by *establishment*. In much of Europe, the Christian Church is legally established. For example, the Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church, has a special legal status in Scotland. The law

requires that space be set aside for the Kirk whenever a new housing development goes up. Other denominations and other religions are free to worship but the Presbyterian Church has a privileged place. The Church of Scotland is an established church.

From our beginning Americans decided against the legal establishment of the church. The Constitution states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Actually, several churches were established in the United States for awhile, the Congregational church in Connecticut and Massachusetts. You couldn't vote or be a citizen unless you were a member of the Congregational church. State taxes supported the church. The Episcopalian church was established in Virginia. Presbyterians in the Middle States would have established the Presbyterian church if we could have gotten away with it. Not until 1836 were the last of these state churches disestablished. So, *the first disestablishment of the Christian faith was the legal disestablishment.*

Even though the Christian church wasn't established legally, the Protestant church was established culturally. Everybody knew the United States was not only a Christian nation but a Protestant nation. The first two Roman Catholic priests that got off the ship in Baltimore got thrown into the harbor. America was a Protestant land. The Protestant church was the moral watchdog of society. We set the theological tone of the country. We shaped the country morally, ethically, and intellectually for the first 100 years. The Presbyterian church led the way. Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary was the religious equivalent of E.F. Hutton today. When he spoke, the nation listened. For nearly a hundred years after Oxford was settled the Presbyterian Church was the only religious show in town except for a few Quakers the Presbyterian church tolerated. The Protestant church was not *legally* established but we were *socially and culturally* established.

Then came *the second disestablishment, the disestablishment of the Protestant church.* It happened slowly and not without a struggle. In the 1800s emigrants from Ireland, Poland and Italy streamed into the country by the thousands, mostly Jews and Catholics. Unfortunately, they met with persecution at the hands of us Protestants. Jewish students had to endure readings in

from the New Testament in the public schools. Catholics could not use their Rheims-Douay version of the Bible in the public schools. It had to be King James. But things changed as more and more Jews and Catholics came to America and had children. Around 1950 Will Herberg wrote a book entitled, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. He argued that you could be a Roman Catholic or a Jew and still be a good American. You didn't have to be a Protestant. He was proved right in 1960 when we elected our first Roman Catholic President despite warnings by Protestant ministers like Norman Vincent Peale who preached over the radio against the election of a Roman Catholic President. By the 1950s the Protestant church had become disestablished socially and culturally.

But now a *third disestablishment has taken place. Christianity has become culturally disestablished in America.* We began to notice what was happening in the 60s. Government sponsored prayer in school was ruled unconstitutional. Christmas Nativity scenes were no longer permitted on government property. Public schools stopped celebrating Christmas and Easter and began celebrating the Winter and Spring holidays. Some of us began to notice the names of our doctors sounded strangely foreign - meaning Oriental and Asian. Today there are more Moslems in the United States than Presbyterians. Hinduism is growing. The Presbyterian church is shrinking. And we hear more and more about New Age religions, Heaven's Gate, Transcendental Meditation, Wicca, and Native American religions. The Christian Church in America has entered into a time of cultural exile.

"How shall we sing the Lord's song" in a time of exile? Do we try to turn back the clock? Do we redouble efforts to get prayer back in schools? Do we try to test the Constitution by posting the Ten Commandments in court rooms? Do we join the Christian Coalition and demand a more prominent place for the Christian Church? Do we scapegoat Moslems and New Age religions and blame them for all the problems in America?

We American Christians can learn important lessons from Israel in their Babylonian exile. During their exile the Jews discovered who they were. They discovered they could be who God called them to be without the support of the law or of the culture. They held on to their

faith in a foreign land. Never again did they flirt with idolatry. They lived in the midst of a country with many competing religions - yet they resisted syncretism. In a land of many, many gods and religions they came to an unshakable faith in one God, the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Like Meshech, Shadrach and Abednego, their faith was refined in the fiery furnace of Babylon and they survived and triumphed. They were swallowed up, like Jonah, by the Babylonian Leviathan but they came out more convinced than ever of God's authority over all nations. Like Daniel in the lion's den, they stood firm in the face of bitter persecution and came out stronger than ever without any help from the government or the culture. The Babylonian gods are dead and gone, but Israel's faith lives on.

We live in an exciting time. We should not lament our cultural and social exile. We *should* recognize our changed status and stop pretending like nothing has changed. We *should not* and *can not* turn the clock back. God has privileged us to live in, perhaps, the most exciting time in the history of the Christian church since the establishment of the Christian faith in the Roman Empire by the Roman Emperor Constantine in AD 325. Next week I want to continue where I leave off this morning. I want to share with you what I believe we need to do, what we *must* do, as a Church in Oxford as we enter the 21st century.

Let us pray: Almighty and ever-living God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this congregation. May we boldly proclaim the good news, by the words of our mouths and the deeds of our lives, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.