

The Christian Faith in the 21st Century: Christians in Exile: Part 2

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 11, 1998. Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7.

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

Christians are living in a time of cultural exile. Last week I outlined how the Christian faith has been disestablished in the United States and how we are entering a time of cultural exile. I explained what I meant by the word *disestablishment* by explaining what the word *establishment* means. For example, In Scotland the Presbyterian church is legally established by the government. The Presbyterian Church enjoys privileges in Scotland that other denominations and religions do not enjoy. But, in the United States, **the Christian church has been legally disestablished**. The United States Constitution forbids any legal establishment of religion. No church or religion enjoys a privilege in the U.S. The last state church in the United States, the Congregational church in Massachusetts, was legal disestablished by 1836. But even though the Christian faith was legally disestablished, the Protestant church was cultural and socially established until the middle of the twentieth century. For many years you couldn't be considered a good American unless you were a Protestant. **But by the 1950s the social and cultural establishment of the Protestant churches came to an end**. Will Herberg wrote a modern classic around 1950 entitled *Protestant, Catholic, and Jew*. In that book he argued that a Catholic or a Jew could be every bit as good an American as a Protestant. In 1960 he was proven correct by the election of the first Roman Catholic president in the history of the U.S.A. **But in the 1960s a new thing began to happen. The Christian faith began to lose its privileged voice in the United States**. Government sponsored prayers in school were ruled unconstitutional. The reading of the Bible as a corporate worship exercise was ruled unconstitutional. Nativity scenes were banned from government property. The Christian church has been losing its privileged voice in American society.

In many ways **Christians are experiencing, in a small degree, what God's people experienced in exile in Babylon**. Before the fall of Jerusalem, the government of Judea supported the faith of the God of Abraham. The government funded the building and upkeep of

the temple. The laws of the state sanctioned the law of God even though the law of God was rarely enforced. But all that changed when Babylon conquered Judah and destroyed the temple and deposed the king. The leading citizens of Judah were exiled to a foreign land with foreign gods and foreign customs. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had to compete in an open market with the many gods of Babylon. They were thrown into a pluralistic society of many gods and many religions and yet the Jews survived. In exile they came to discover who they were.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon; to the elders, to the priests, to the prophets, and to all the people of God in exile. He told them to **be prepared for a long exile.** And I might say, in the way of application, that we Christians should not expect our cultural exile to change. We will never see the day that the Christian church is favored in the United States the way it was 50 years ago and we should be thankful for that. We will see increasing pluralism. More and more we will come into first hand contact with non Christians religions as well as totally secular people who have no religious faith. We Christians should not expect the clock to be turned back to the good old days. Christians should not engage in futile efforts to re-establish the Christian faith or scapegoat non-Christians.

The advice the prophet Jeremiah gave to God's people living in Babylonian exile will serve us well today. Jeremiah urged the exiles to **seek the welfare of pagan Babylon.** That was a radical piece of advice. It must have deeply offended the holy people of God. "What! Seek the welfare of a pagan king? Seek the welfare of a pagan empire? Better to undermine it. Better to launch terrorist attacks on its leaders. But pray for the welfare of this pagan empire? No way!" But it was God's way. "**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.**"

Seek the welfare of Oxford. Do not seek to recapture the lost glory of the Oxford Presbyterian Church. We will never again enjoy the prestige we once had 50 or 100 years ago. Rather seek the welfare of Oxford. Find needs and fill them. Actually, our church continues a rich legacy of seeking the welfare of Oxford. If all of a sudden Oxford Presbyterian Church and

its members were to disappear off the face of the earth Oxford would be a far worse place to live. We have sought and we continue to seek the welfare of Oxford: by serving on the public school board, by serving on the borough council, by teaching in the schools, by running honest businesses, by caring for the elderly and sick, by a rich legacy of volunteers on the Chamber of Commerce and boards of the YMCA and the hospital, by serving the less fortunate through the Neighborhood Services Center and the CROP walk. Did you know that the Session recently authorized the lease of several rooms in our building to Head Start and to the Early Intervention program of Chester County? Head Start is a pre-school program for children of working parents who often can't afford a private pre-school. Early Intervention is a program that ministers to children with various kinds of challenges or handicaps open to children of parents of all income levels.

One of the most important ways of seeking the welfare of the city is through our concern for its relationship to God. Christians believe that God desires life, eternal life, for all people and this eternal life is found in our being rooted in God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. We must seek the welfare of Oxford through evangelism. We must find ways to go into the highways and byways to tell men and women and children about Jesus Christ and his claim on our lives. Next month the session has commissioned four members of our church to attend an evangelism seminar in Cincinnati, Ohio: Judi Jefferis, June Hoffman, Liz Abel and Carol Warner. I have great hopes that they will return, filled with the Spirit, and ready to challenge us to take the kinds of risks we need to take and to make the kinds of changes we need to make in order to make Christ known to everybody in Oxford.

I have just returned from a week long retreat at the Loyola Retreat House in Morristown, NJ, a retreat house run by Jesuit priests of the Roman Catholic church. I went on the retreat because I have been feeling spiritually uprooted and dying. I need to spend time praying and seeking to renew my spiritual life. I spend time reading Scripture aloud and listening for God to speak to me through His Word. I prayed. I met daily with Father Ed Nagel a wonderful and spiritual, yet spiritually worldly man of God. And I was honored by being invited to participate

daily in the eucharist service of Holy Communion. Part of my time was spent exercising and walking. I walked and jog about 4 or 5 miles a day through a wooded park. And as I walked and jogged I enjoyed the beauty of the autumn leaves and the trees. Trees provide fresh air as well as beauty. They provide homes for birds and other wildlife. But what struck me was that these tall trees were deeply rooted in the ground. Their roots reached down into an invisible realm that I couldn't see but I know is there. Unless the trees are rooted they will do us no good.

That came to be for me a parable. If we are to do any good for God or for the church or for Oxford or the world **we must be rooted in God**. There is a visible world and there is an invisible world. We must take time daily to see in God's presence, to allow God to speak to us, and we to God if we are going to do him or our world any good in the long run.

Seek the welfare of Oxford. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare we will find our welfare. But if we as a church simply try to survive or recapture the past we will die. We must lose ourselves in the service of others and in the service of the Gospel. Amen.