

The journey ahead of us: Some thoughts from an evangelical remaining in the PC(USA)

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The Presbyterian Outlook

Our first night at General Assembly, I struck up a conversation with a 20-something-year-old who was working in a store. I asked her what she did when she wasn't working there and she gleefully told me about the new business she and her husband were starting in Midtown Detroit. "Really?" I said. "Oh yeah," she replied, "I'm a native of this area, and Detroit is FILLED with opportunities these days."

Thank God for her and for people like her! As we had driven into Detroit earlier that day, my initial reaction to a city I once knew and loved was not to see the "opportunities." I saw decay and ruin, the result of corporate greed, political corruption and botched urban renewal. It wasn't until I looked past the landmarks that I saw the amazing kindness resilience, and determination of the people of Detroit. It's interesting to me how that one cashier's perspective began to change mine.

I've also realized that my response to her was not that different from the reactions I get from many theological conservatives when I say (with comparable conviction) that this is a great time to be an evangelical in the PC(USA). "Really???"

I'm neither naïve nor delusional. I'm fully aware of the challenges we face in preserving an evangelical witness in a denomination that is faltering in so many ways. But the opportunities I see have as little to do with recovering the "former glory" of the PC(USA) as the business those two young Detroiters are starting has to do with refurbishing the Motor City skyline. The evangelical opportunities I see are related to people. For me and for the organizations I shepherd, they include helping followers of Jesus (myself included) understand and embrace deep and important aspects of God's grace and provision that can only be experienced during a time of exile.

Now it's the theological progressives' turn to respond: "Exile? Really???"

While "exile" usually congers up images of nations carted off into slavery, religious leaders banished or ousted dictators fleeing a revolution, there are more subtle forms, and evangelicals in the PC(USA) are deep in the throes of exile right now. If you're feeling disoriented, theologically starved, weary, lonely and even a little queasy, it's probably because you grasp this reality. You're not alone.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting this exile happened because of one vote or even a series of votes over the last several assemblies, and it is not totally defined by differing views of sexuality and marriage. Exile for evangelicals in the PC(USA) has been gradual and, unfortunately, I believe it is only the tip of the iceberg of what the broader church will continue to experience in the accelerating decay of Christendom. But that's another article.

I also want to be clear that I am in no way condoning or affirming the actions of this Assembly on several issues, nor do I need to in order to remain part of the PC(USA). Particularly on gay marriage, traditional evangelicals have lost an important battle—but the larger war is still going on. And traditionalists and progressives alike must now get over ourselves and focus on other issues coming at us on which we can and must agree if we are to be a living, vibrant expression of the gospel in the contemporary world. This is an opportunity.

Before we can do that, however, we need to accept that this experience of denominational exile for evangelicals is disorienting. There are many landmarks that look the same but, as the 221st GA proved, most of the presenting issues and priorities have become increasingly foreign. We now live in the shadow of something we once loved—among frequent reminders of a different time, when a different understanding of God and God’s plan shaped hearts and lives. This is unbelievably difficult on many levels.

So, why do we continue to exist in this exile? Some will choose not to. Exodus from downtown Detroit is possible. The bridge to Canada and expressways leading to suburbs in every direction are right there. Countless thousands of people have said, “No thanks...” and moved away from the city. Exodus from the PC(USA) is also possible. Entire congregations will continue to leave, but the quiet dissipation of individuals and families from congregations that remain will be the far more painful reality.

To remain is to be confronted with frequent reminders of what once was and is no more. To remain is to be a minority voice in many (but not all) conversations. To remain is to be the family living in the cottage on the estate that our ancestors owned, and we won’t like some of the parties they have at the manor house.

But the way we embody the good news of Jesus Christ during this time of exile will speak volumes about the reality and resilience of our faith. I am choosing to remain because, for me, departure would be too easy. At age 57, I could find a theologically comfortable place to exist from which I could coast into retirement. Yet, as I survey the mission field all around us, I realize God did not call me into ministry to coast. Nor do I belittle or distance myself from the faithful decisions of others who leave. I, and others like me, will need the spiritual companionship of friends who have moved on to help us navigate our mission challenges—just as they continue to need relationships with us.

As I continue to contemplate my own understanding of this season of exile, the opening words of Richard Halverson’s famous benediction haunt me:

“You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you there. Wherever you are, God has put you there. He has a purpose in your being there.”

We who remain in the PC(USA) don’t have to experience this particular form of denominational exile. We can embrace the progressive direction of the PC(USA) anytime we choose, provided we are willing to compromise some of our core biblical beliefs. I’m not. In much the same way, the larger church can appease the surrounding culture simply by choosing to conform. We, progressives and conservatives together, dare not. As Mark Labberton reminded us at the PFR/Fellowship breakfast in Detroit, the biblical accounts of exile are some of the “fault lines” in the biblical narrative that define God’s relationship with Israel and with the church today. “Americans are always ready for the Promised Land,” he said, “but we have far less readiness to face the more ambiguous and demanding life of exile.” (For more of Mark Labberton’s thoughts on this topic, see [“The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice,”](#) IVP, 2007.)

Labberton explained that what Israel had to learn to do in exile was to “...work out what it meant to dwell in a foreign land and yet live like those who belong to Yahweh.” That is the challenge all of God’s people are facing in the 21st century. Christendom is gone. The cultural props are being kicked out. For now, the progressive voice has won the day in our own denomination. But, “We are not here by accident... God has a purpose for us being [here].”

For me, part of that purpose is to learn more of what it is to live like a child of God. I for one know that I’m not truly living as one who belongs to Yahweh—I haven’t had to. For most of my life, I could claim the “group identity” of my Presbyterian and Reformed heritage, my local congregation and my privileged position as a white male in a dominant Western (Christendom) culture. No more. I need to learn how to

dwell in a foreign land and yet live like one who belongs to God. I choose to do this remaining in the “city” of the PC(USA) where I know the “pattern of the streets,” remember the former days, and can leverage that knowledge to grow in my personal discipleship and help others face this ambiguous and demanding life of the larger cultural exile. If this sounds basic that’s because it is, but in this time of exile, God’s people will need to practice basic spiritual skills if we are to remain faithful to our Savior amid all the “mesmerizing patterns of compromise.”

As the people of God—apprentices of Christ, traditionalists and progressives alike are equally out of practice when it comes to the rigors of a resilient spiritual life. We have defaulted to a self-sustained, Americanized discipleship which can quickly fade under the slightest challenge. We need to identify the common core of faith and practice and build a community of accountability and nurture that will challenge us to live differently. We need to remain unflinchingly clear about the beliefs and practices that define theological and biblical integrity—something evangelicals are free to do in the PC(USA). We need to learn how to not compromise that integrity. Then, we who claim to understand the transforming power of the good news, need to reach as far as we can into the culture around us with the grace and love of Jesus Christ that we not only believe but embody.

Evangelicals remaining in the PC(USA)? Oh yeah! We’re natives of this denomination! Look beyond the landmarks to the people we can impact by being resilient, and hope-filled apprentices of Jesus— theological entrepreneurs. Perhaps this one person’s perspective might begin to change yours?

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