

A Church for the Rest of Us

Jeremiah 29:4-7; Daniel 1:4

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We're on the thirty-year tail end of a revolution—the revolution that began with the advent of the MacIntosh. In fact, you have that revolution in your pocket. If you'd pull it out, I'm going to ask you to do a favor. How many of you have a smartphone or iPhone? Just hold it up. Feel free to turn it on. We're going to do something contrary. We're going to do a George Costanza. Do the opposite this morning. Turn your phone on, and leave it on your lap. That will be important as we close our time.

This is how the revolution began. It was initially called a computer for the rest of us. It's actually become a style for most of us. Now, the reason it was a computer for the rest of us is—I was raised in a family where my father was on the leading edge of the mainframe computer revolution. And so first with General Motors and then with DOW Chemical, he would take me to the international headquarters, and there would be this room about this size with giant IBMs. The room was 55 degrees. It's set four feet up, chillers underneath. You're smiling. There are big tapes whirling round and round. And he said, "Isn't it wonderful?" And I had no idea what he was talking about. And so he tried to sit down with me over the dinner table and explain Fortran, Cobalt. He even bought a little toy computer, like tinkertoys, that I could put together. And he said, "If you put this together and simply punch these cards, you'll learn great things." I learned nothing. I went through cemetery—I'm sorry, seminary—on a Brother typewriter. And then this came out, and it was a computer for the rest of us.

I want to talk to you today about a church for the rest of us. You see, there's nothing wrong with the computers that my father was using, the IBMs. Because at their base, IBM and Mac are built upon a binary system, ones and zeroes. Now, they express themselves in different ways. Images and icons and menus just made sense to me. And yes, like many of you gasp, I too gasp, because here's my former friend back here today. Hello, friend. And I had one of these.

I think we're in a world today where we are in another revolution, another transformation. And that transformation is in the rapidly expanding percentage of the U.S. population that is so over Jesus. And for all the good that is done here on Sunday morning, it is highly unlikely they will ever darken the doors of this church. And I would like you to consider what it would be like to have a church for the rest of us. And this is what I mean.

Many cultural analysts say that we are—the church today is what's considered an outsider, or what the Bible calls "in exile." I was a pastor for eight years. I could give the opening prayer in the Senate, but when they got down to business, I was politely asked to leave. We live in a world today where the church is considered an outsider. Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab probably isn't saying, "Let's call up Columbia Presbyterian to find out how business ought to be." We are considered like smoking: fine to do in private, rude to do in public. We are in exile.

There is a precedent for this time. The Babylon exile of 2,500 years ago. For hundreds of years, God told the Judeans, "I love your neighbors, the Babylonians, amongst others. But you are having no influence with them. You are becoming outsiders. You were supposed to be a blessing to the world." And finally, to teach them how far they were outside the sphere of influence, God, over three deportations, shipped them to Babylon. I don't believe that we have been physically shifted, but spiritually we are now in exile. And I think that the Babylonian exile offers us some suggestions and ideas of what it would look like to be a church that would be taken seriously by the Babylonians. And so this morning I'm just going to touch upon what the prophet Jeremiah, writing from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylonia, had to say, as well as Daniel, also a book written during the Babylonian exile. And I'm going to simply suggest three ideas for a church for the rest of us. And this is in no way a superior church; it's simply a different church.

So here's the first one. I think a church for the rest of us will recognize reality. What do I mean by that? Well, Max Dupree, a famous business consultant who ran Herman Miller at one time, said, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality." Now, interestingly enough, in Jeremiah we read this—and notice carefully the recurring of the word exile:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [...] Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. [ESV]

Now, rumor has it the Bible says every fact is confirmed by two witnesses. So here is God saying something and then supplying two more witnesses. Exile, exile, exile. You are in exile. Have you ever read how the majority of the Judeans responded? Na-na-na-na-na-na. We're not in exile. One of the prophets said, "Listen, it's not that bad. Two years from now, we'll be back home in Jerusalem. This isn't going to last long. We can't be in exile. We can't be that bad." They were in exile.

What does it mean to recognize reality in a church for the rest of us? Let me give you a little taste of reality. Fifteen years ago, demographers began to notice the rise of a group called religious nones. Any of you heard of them? Okay, that's telling right there, because these are people when they go to college, for example, or they give a survey that says, "Check a box. Are you Christian, atheist, agnostic, Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Svengali?" And they go, "None of the above. None." Now, by the way, they're very much into God and spirituality. So don't think, "Oh, yeah, it's my neighbor, that guy." No, these are people who have not written off God—they've written off us. For them, we are been-there-done-that.

They are now, in just fifteen years, 26% of the U.S. population. In fourteen years, in 2030, it is projected they will be perhaps 50% of the U.S. population. And they're not coming here. They're really not going to any church. They're called religious nones. Let me give you an idea of how large a population that is. All of you from here, stand up. Go ahead. It's all right. Nothing up my sleeve here. In 2030, here's Howard County. Here's half of Howard County. But it gets even more startling. Thank you. Have a seat. Whoever is the most responsive today wins this at the end of this message.

Second, demographers have also been tracking the rapid rise of what are called exiles. Careful here. These are Christians who no longer go to church. They are now projected within fourteen years to be 25% of the U.S. population. Both of these populations, by the way, tend to be younger, millennial, and in roughly about 500 zip codes in the United States, of which you sit in the epicenter between New York and Washington. You're in the motherload. In other words, by 2030, this will be three-quarters of Howard County. All of you, all of you, and all of you, and all of you, stand up. Exiles know Christ but don't want to go to church. Nones want God, can't imagine a church. Welcome to Howard County 2030. Have a seat. Especially that enthusiastic person right over there.

Third, evangelicals—of which I am proudly one—as a percentage of the population, we are shrinking. Recognize reality. As a friend of mine put it, who's name is Randy Lovelace, "Every program and initiative designed to engage people who are not here this morning has reached about every white, middle class, Howard County resident probably likely to be touched in the next few years." Only the sons of Judah in the Babylonian exile recognized reality. Only they smelled Babylonian bacon in the morning, heard Babylonian music, and they alone were the ones who said, "We are outsiders," in a city that had 1,197 temples, and perhaps that many religions. Everybody was into spirituality. Nobody was into one, true God. And to those who recognized reality, God said, "Get into the warp and whoof of Babylonian society. Plant gardens. Sell produce. Raise families.

But there's more to come. So the first thing the church for the rest of us: recognize reality. By the way, if you think, "Why is this so hard to recognize reality?" Google the gorilla video. How many know the gorilla video? So researchers ten years ago had subjects come in to watch a video, and they say, "Count the number of times the ball is kicked around this room." What they didn't tell them is halfway through

the video, a gorilla walks through—a man in a gorilla suit. At the end of the time, they asked the participants, “And what did you make of the gorilla?” Over 50% said, “What gorilla?” We see what we’re programmed to see, quite often. A church for the rest of us sees reality.

Here’s the second: redefine success. What do I mean by that? In Jeremiah 29:7, God flips the equation for success, and he says, “Seek the welfare of the city,” that’s *shalom*, “where I’ve sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord. For as the Babylonians flourish, so shall you.” Let me put this in very basic terms. A church for the rest of us defines flourishing or wellbeing or success in this way. As Wells Fargo flourishes in this county and takes the gospel seriously, Columbia Presbyterian flourishes.

Now, as I said, I was a pastor for eight years. I was a preacher for eight years like Randy. The definition of a preacher is someone who talks in other peoples’ sleeves. So I know that this might be something that just goes, “I don’t get it, and I don’t care to get it.” But the fact of the matter is, most churches define success by what elders call the ABC’s: attendance, building, and cash. In fact, if you ever want to read an intriguing story, read in Luke 17 when the disciples come to Jesus and say, “We want to grow in our faith.” By the way, is that a good question? Not a trick question. It’s a good one, isn’t it? Raise your right hand. Interesting, Jesus makes nothing of that statement. He goes, “Little bit of faith, you can move a mountain.”

I got a story for you. How many of you, if you’re running a farm and your farm workers come in and say, “Feed me,” you say, “Sure, sit down. Stuff your face.” A metaphor for growing your faith in the Bible is being fed. And Jesus says, “Wouldn’t you have it this way instead? I am the master of this farm; you feed me. As I have filled, so shall you eat.” It’s right there in Luke 17. In other words, the great commandment is what? Love God and love our neighbors. What the Judeans have forgotten is why would God say—I’ll put it in contemporary language—why would God say, “I am going to bless Columbia Pres. It’s going to flourish, even though Howard County is not.” They can define success by the number of people they have in small groups—which there’s nothing wrong with that. But a church for the rest of us, if someone came and said, “Hey, I want to grow in my faith,” we’d say, “Great. Where do you work?” “Well, I work here for Johns Hopkins.” “Great. Let’s seek the flourishing of Johns Hopkins.” Because as the Babylonians flourish, so shall your faith.

Here’s the third: reframe the faith. So a church for the rest of us recognizes reality, redefines success, and, third, translates the faith. What do I mean by that? Well, if you look in the Book of Daniel, you’ll see only the sons of Judah, so the ones who recognize reality and did want to redefine success, were selected by Nebuchadnezzar—yes, the king—and brought into his courts, and for the next three years “they learned the language and literature of Babylon.” Why? The Babylonians didn’t speak Hebrew.

When missionaries go overseas, what’s the first thing they do? This isn’t rocket science. If the church is in exile, the first thing we have to learn is the language and literature of business. I’ll give you an example. I was retained by a company in Kansas City ten or twelve years ago, and the CEO was a Christian. And he said, “I understand the gospel as four great themes: creation, fall, redemption, and the final restoration.” The Apostle’s Creed, Nicene Creed, God Creator, we have fallen, Christ’s redemption, resurrection, and the final restoration into eternity. That’s pretty familiar here, I would imagine. And my friend Dave the CEO said, “I love that, but that’s not the language of business. I have people working here who are Muslim, atheist, agnostic, gay, straight—can you translate the faith?”

And I walked the shop floor for a few weeks and discovered: it’s ought, is, can, will. Because everyone is created in the image of God, everyone imagines the way the world *ought* to be. Right or wrong? Because of the fall, we recognize it’s not what it ought to be. Because redemption *is* what God could do and did, everyone imagines or does something. They think about what they *can* do to make the world a better place. And because God has put eternity in our hearts, we imagine what *will* be. You say, “Mike, prove that.” Sure. Who drove here today? You, fine sir. Where’s your car right now?

[Audience Member:] Out in the parking lot.

[Mike Metzger:] You don't know that for a fact, do you? You imagine it ought to be out there. You live by faith. By the way, right now you have about a thousand things in your mind that you imagine where it ought to be. Your 401K, your kids, your spouse, so on and so forth. So you go outside and your car is gone. You're going to feel? Don't talk like a Christian right now; talk like an average person.

[Audience Member:] Mad.

[Mike Metzger:] There you go! So he'd be shocked. Why would you be mad? Because it ought to be out there. It is not. Then what would you do?

[Audience Member:] Call the police.

[Mike Metzger:] Call the police. That's what he can do. And after you call, it's all done, right? Do you hope you will get the car back?

[Audience Member:] Sure.

[Mike Metzger:] Yeah, unless it's a clunker—then you want a check. Ought, is, can, will. I've done this with over 400 firms and organizations from Africa to China doing exercises. Every group I've been with discovers this very same behavioral baseline. Why? Because if you can't get your foot in the door and a place at the table like the sons of Judah did, you can't have the gospel bring the flourishing of the Babylonians. Ought, is, can, will.

This is an interesting description of the first century Christians who translated the faith. This is the letter to Diogenes. Here's an excerpt. Wouldn't this be great? This is how a church for the rest of us, the Christians, would be described. "For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech." Where's your iPhone? You see, the computer for the rest of us, as well as phones, have now really become the computer for most of us. Even the PC is operated a great deal by the systems and expressions that were formed out of this. I know Randy's heart. I've met with the leadership here. I know the heart of this leadership. And in 2030, three-quarters of the population of this county, for as good as this is, will have no touch-points with us anymore, and they might be looking for a church for the rest of us. Let's pray.

Father, we don't know exactly all that the future holds, but you do teach us, like the sons of Issachar, to be people who understood the times so they knew what to do. Might we become a church that understands the times, so that we, too, might know what to do, so that we can bring love, your love, and flourishing to all—not to just a select few. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.