

3-1-2010

X-ile

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Recommended Citation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

X-ile

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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ALBUQUERQUE, NM

MARCH 2010

DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE


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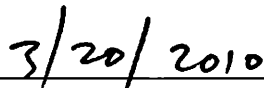
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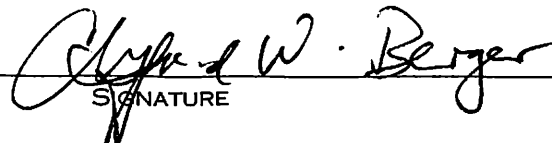
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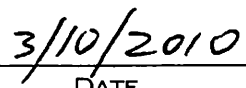
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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to everyone who helped this project come to fruition. It all started with the man in the truck that gave me a ride when I ran out of gas near the volcanoes in New Mexico. I have had tons of support starting with Tracy Cross and the amazing UMC congregations in Fabens and Clint, Texas. I saw an increasing need for this kind of church and had amazing dreams about it with Gary Ritchey. As my journey progressed I began to serve St. John's UMC in Albuquerque, NM, where I continued to receive a great deal of support and encouragement. I would like to thank all three of these churches from the bottom of my heart. You are a large part of my past and present... and you will always affect my future.

The next major group that deserves my deepest gratitude is all of the people that have been a part of the *X-ile* community. All of you are the reason for this as well as the means that make it possible. You are a very special part of my life and I am confident that God will continue to work in us and through us as a community to do God's work in the world. Your discontent is truly a tool of the Divine. I look forward to our future together in many different places. I especially would like to express my appreciation to Jim Hering who has helped make this dream a reality. He is a great friend and I look forward to the journey of fighting the system that we have ahead of us. On that note I would also like to thank "the man" for keeping us down. You have provided the inspiration and motivation for us to do better and to be better.

Len Sweet, Loren Kerns, Frank Green, David McDonald and all of my SFS (LEC) 6 classmates have earned my deepest respect. I have grown because of all of you and I will never be the same after encountering you. Finally, thanks to Alec Seelau, Jason Murphy and Kathy Kuenzer for sharing your writing prowess with me and Dirk Frew, Ricky Solis, and Joshua White for your internet knowledge and generous hearts. It takes a village and this is my village!

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Glossary

Reconciliation: a just and graceful effort to heal the relationships between humanity, God, and creation.

Sin: an immediate severing or systemic erosion of the relationships between humanity and God as well as God's creation.

ABSTRACT

The negative perceptions that those outside of Christianity have toward those who pride themselves as carriers of the Good News make it evident that many of these relationships are broken, perhaps even beyond repair. Is there hope? Reconciliation, defined as a just and graceful effort to heal the relationships between humanity, God, and creation is the essential process—the core—of the Gospel as we know it. A theology for reconciliation provides a radical shift in focus from personal holiness to relational healing. In order to heal these relationships churches have tried seeker-sensitive services, alternative styles of worship, and organic types of church that may look different from what people expect. However, the majority of these churches fail to place the people they serve above the locations in which the churches gather. This study suggests that the Israelite Exile of 586 BCE is a powerful image that can serve to inspire an environment of reconciliation in today's American Church. This written statement will develop such a theology and apply it to the broken relationships left behind by those who don't subscribe to a shared worldview.

At the height of Israelite idolatry, the Babylonians conquered Israel in 586 BCE and destroyed their temple, which was the center of their worship. After many of the Israelites were exiled into Babylon, they had to find different ways to worship God. Worship began to be centered on the idea that God was with them wherever they were. In the current United States culture, we find ourselves in a similar position. Surrounded by people that have a very different worldview, Christ's followers must adapt to this situation rather than acting as if Christians are the majority. The Israelite Exile is an effective model for church today because it links people with those in the community in a meaningful way. In order to adapt the exilic church to the present, the purpose of this study is to design *X-ile*, a decentralized church that is missional,

relational and incarnational.¹ *X-ile* will not meet privately in its own building, but will instead meet in public places while embracing the idea that the fate of the surrounding community directly affects the fate of the church. The artifact portion of this dissertation will be a network of websites designed to connect people within the reconciling environment of *X-ile*.

¹ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009).

SECTION 1 – THE PROBLEM

Nirvana's insightfully irreverent song, "Territorial Pissings," begins with an off-key, reiteration of the Youngbloods' peace song, "Come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together and try to love one another, right now!" The vocals are full of a desperate pleading that portrays their yearning for reconciliation, like creating peace and struggling against racism and sexism, but recognizing that it is an agonizing journey that often results in feelings of failure. The chorus of the song moves us with Kurt Cobain wailing, "Gotta find a way, a better way, when I'm there!"

Reconciliation has been a shared value among many people throughout history and it is easy to get frustrated when other people don't seem share this value. The whole of humanity must continue to find better ways to live, work, and play together. In addition to popular rock music, the theme of healing relationships is prevalent throughout history as is exemplified in Gandhi's "passive resistance," Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, and Isaiah speaking about turning "swords into plowshares."¹ Furthermore, it is clear that reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel and in response to this, the church must be in the relationship healing business. If this issue is so important culturally, as well as theologically, it should be examined and defined in a way that is constructive and formative.

Many theologians have developed theologies of reconciliation, but the results don't necessarily lead to the desired action of healing relationships. Perhaps this is because they revolve around the *principles and ideas* regarding reconciliation instead of its *practice*. Harold Wells takes this idea to the next level, suggesting that we should construct "a theology *for*

¹ Isaiah 2:4

reconciliation” rather than a theology *of* reconciliation.² Theology that makes no practical difference in real life isn’t true theology, but is mere philosophy about God in vain. Theology *for* reconciliation must be judged on its results rather than merely the ideas behind it. With this in mind, this section will first help to define reconciliation as well as develop a working theology that leads to the healing of broken relationships, and then will assess how well the mainstream American church is acting as God’s reconciling presence in the world.

There is a great deal of connotation surrounding both the term and the concept of reconciliation. For sake of clarity, reconciliation can be described as a just and graceful effort to heal the relationships that humanity has with one another, with God, and God’s creation. This definition is supported by that of the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*. It claims that reconciliation “call(s) back together’ the estranged. Broad usage recognizes reconciling as the establishment of harmony with one’s world, one’s destiny, or oneself.”³ I am assuming that the “world” in this definition contains all of God’s creation, including but not limited to: other people, animals, and nature. The main focus of this paper will be on the “other people” piece of creation, but its other tenants will be consistent with the other pieces of creation as well. The reconciliation of one’s self will be based on the assumption that we have a “true self” or identity that God created in us. Thomas Merton calls this “vocation.” He describes this concept beautifully when he writes,

Beauty and necessity (for me) of a solitary life—apparent in the sparks of truth, small recurring flashes of a reality that is *beyond doubt*, momentarily appearing leading me further on my way. Things that need no explanation and perhaps have none but that say: “Here! This way!” And with final authority...! They lead me further and further in that direction that has been shown me and to which I am called.⁴

² Harold Wells, "Theology for Reconciliation: Biblical Perspectives on Forgiveness and Grace," in *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches*, ed. Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 2.

³ *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, s.v. "Reconciliation."

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton* (New York: Merton Legacy Trust, 1998), 272-273.

The above dictionary definition continues to specify important details of reconciliation, “Reconciling operates through both forgiveness and discipline: forgiveness, which restores relationships through proclamation, confession-absolution, and the like, and discipline, which reviews behavior and places persons in situations that can lead to restored relationships.”⁵ Forgiveness and discipline are the primary means that lead to reconciliation, so they will be important aspects in the following discussion.

Creative Juices

One’s approach to theology begins in the “creation narratives” contained within the book of Genesis and sets the stage for the rest of the process to unfold. Walter Brueggemann points out that the main theme of Genesis is that “God and God’s creation are bound together in a distinctive and delicate way.”⁶ This idea leads the reader through the rest of the Biblical narrative of God’s specific relationship with humanity. Brueggemann identifies the importance of this issue in Genesis when he writes that this is the “presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible.”⁷ From the moment of creation, God’s relationship with humanity is “not one of coercion,” but one of “free gracious commitment and invitation.”⁸ This is important because it paints the picture of God’s intention for humanity as both free and relational. We are created to be in relation with creation and with God by our own free will. Communion and free will are the two main aspects of our very existence. Scot McKnight summarizes this idea well when he

⁵ s.v.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, ed. James L. Mays, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, vol. 1 (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 22.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

writes that the Bible “begins with humans in union with God and communion with others and the world.”⁹

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am deeply concerned with understanding His teachings—particularly those concerning the kingdom of God. When we think about the kingdom of God, we must think about it in the terms of creation. This is the best reference point we have because God created humanity in this kingdom and has been calling us back into it ever since. One way Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God or kingdom of Heaven is by a variety of similes like “[t]he kingdom of God is like a mustard seed,”¹⁰ “[t]he kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field,”¹¹ and “[f]or the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.”¹² These similes contrast how God’s kingdom is different from the kingdoms of this world. One of the aspects about this kingdom that made it unique at the time, as well as very special in the present time, is the issue of power. When examining earthly kingdoms, particularly those of the Ancient Near Eastern world, one can see that they are authoritarian in nature. Richard Middleton explains that “whereas power in Babylonian and Assyrian Empires was concentrated in the hands of a few, power in Genesis 1 is diffused or shared.”¹³ This is an amazing observation. It actually challenges the main theme and message of the creation story. J. Richard Middleton writes, “The democratization of the *Imago Dei* in Genesis 1 thus constitutes an implicit de-legitimization of the entire ruling and priestly structures of Mesopotamian society.... The democratization of the

⁹ Scot McKnight, *Embracing Grace: A Gospel for All of Us* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁰ Matthew 13:31, NIV. Other references that illustrate this include but are not limited to: Luke 7:28, Luke 8:10, Luke 17:21, Luke 18:23-25, and John 3:3.

¹¹ Matthew 13:24, NIV.

¹² Matthew 20:1, NIV.

¹³ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 26.

image in this text thus suggests an egalitarian conception of the exercise of power.”¹⁴ God, in an unprecedented move, creates a kingdom that shares power rather than hoarding and abusing it. This idea of God sharing power is very important, and it will be a recurring theme when working for reconciliation.

It is important to remember that the first chapter of Genesis contains the first of two creation stories in Genesis. In this creation story, male and female are created at the same time in the image of God. It is also worth noting that, in this part of the story, God refers to God’s self in the plural. Genesis 1:26-27 reads,

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.¹⁵

God that exists in relationship creates humanity in relationship to God and to creation.

Genesis chapter 2 contains the second creation story in the Bible, which also makes the point that humanity is created to be relational. It depicts God creating the male person first and then saying outright that it isn’t good for him to be alone (Gen. 2:18). After creating all of the animals, the man is still incomplete until he has a partner, or until he is in community. Steven Bouma-Prediger explains:

If being in-relation is the nature of things, then to be human is to exist in relationships.... We are not autonomous selves, floating free in a world of atomistic individuals, as many would have us believe. Rather we are persons related to much more than meets the eye. Created by God, we are dependent upon God and made to be in a loving relationship with God. But we are also created to exist among and live in communion with other humans.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV.

¹⁶ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 122.

Just as the concept of reconciliation needed to be broadened, so too does the concept of sin. If God created humanity to be in community and to share power with God, rather than have power held over it, the idea of sin needs to be given further consideration. Why does eating the “forbidden fruit” sever the relationship? What is the nature of sin?

The “S” Word

Sin enters the world right after the creation narratives in the third chapter of Genesis. God has informed Adam that he is to properly utilize all of creation but he is not to eat from one tree. It is worth mentioning that God calls this tree “The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” Adam and Eve eat from the tree, and it distorts the very nature of their relationship with God as well as their relationship with all of creation, including one another. They respond to their actions by hiding. *The New Interpreters Bible* points out that the Hebrew word for “know,” which is *yada*, “occurs twice elsewhere, specifying those too old or too young to decide for themselves what serves their own best interests.”¹⁷ Adam and Eve’s new-found knowledge has given them something to fear. Before this, they didn’t know that they should be afraid of anything, like children. The important relationship between faith and fear will be discussed later, but Stanley Grenz enlightens us on this reaction of humanity. He writes that Adam and Eve’s “pristine fellowship with the Creator is broken.”¹⁸ Adam and Eve cover themselves after they eat from the tree, which reveals that “their sense of guilt and shame has marred their former sense of human community.”¹⁹ Notice these negative emotions that develop because of their new found knowledge: fear, guilt and shame. Grenz continues, “through their act, the first humans lose the

¹⁷ “The Book of Genesis,” in *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 351.

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 192.

¹⁹ Ibid.

primordial harmony with creation” and “in this manner introduced enmity into creation itself.”²⁰ Notice also that sin is harmful to Adam and Eve’s relationship with one another as well as humanity’s relationship to the Creator.

Traditionally, the rebellion part of the story is singled out as the primary focus of sin’s nature. However, healing broken relationships is a complex process which requires more than a lack of rebellion. Marjorie Suchocki works to expand this traditional definition of sin. She writes, “the concept of sin as rebellion against God tends to cast the primary function of God as the moral lawgiver who establishes the boundaries of acceptable human conduct.”²¹ This is a very limited view of God, and expanding the idea of sin helps to expand the image of God. She goes on to say that simply referring to sin as “rebellion against God” in effect, levels all sin out and protects conduct such as torture, war, oppression, and child abuse under the general “umbrella of rebellion against God.” Can you imagine telling an abusive father, “It’s ok, nobody’s perfect... we all sin?” Furthermore, she reports that it is confusing in a largely secular society and that “one must do mental gymnastics with the concept of rebellion against God to apply it to most of the deeds of ill-doing in the world today.”²²

An example of this is that sin such as racism, or even hatred in general, is often not simply based on rebellious choices. Most people that are racist or that participate in racist systems don’t see themselves as racist at all. If someone is self-aware enough to know that he or she is being hateful and he or she acknowledges that this is incompatible with God, they are then being rebellious against God. However, if racism is inherent in a certain system or lifestyle, most people in that context don’t realize it and participating in that sin is just a normal part of life to

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 17.

²² Ibid., 18.

them. They are not rebelling against God because they don't see that what they are doing is at all in contrast to God's essence. The same can be said about sexism and even many types of violence. Many violent people are convinced that they are doing what is a part of God's will, whether they are teaching someone a lesson or punishing someone for something that they did wrong. Rebellion indicates that there is some sort of knowledge or acknowledgement that what a person is doing is incompatible with God. This is certainly the case at times, but there are far too many cases of people being ignorant to their sin or even justifying their sin as right, for rebellion to be the sole basis for its definition. It seems clear that there is more to the concept of sin. Our understanding of sin can be broadened by discovering what it means in terms of how it affects our relationships with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

McKnight is helpful here as he defines sin as "anything that breaks union with God or communion with others, anything that is unloving, and anything that wants to establish any of these breaks of union as an earthly system."²³ This gets us closer to a working definition of sin in a theology for reconciliation. For the purposes of this study I will define sin as **an immediate severing or systemic erosion of the relationships between humanity and God as well as God's creation**. Sin is more complex than merely human actions because it is also the system of sin that creates these actions. The damage in the Genesis story is not simply caused by rebellion, but with the effect of breaking of the union and communion with God and each other. Steven Bouma-Prediger puts it well:

In [Genesis] 3 we learn that Adam and Eve desire to transcend their creaturely finitude and become, like God, omniscient. But in this attempt they fail to trust in God and thus become estranged. Their relationship with God is broken. They become estranged with each other.... They lose touch with their own true and best self... and they become out of joint with the earth. In these four ways they and we are alienated. In short, our lives are

²³McKnight, 50-51.

interwoven with a contagion called sin, which we knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate.²⁴

The sin that Adam and Eve committed was the abuse of power that God shared with them. God is completely open and honest with humanity from the beginning, making a part of God's own essence—the knowledge of good and evil—available to them. God prohibits the first man and woman from eating of the tree, not because God wants to control Adam and Eve, but because God knows that humanity was not created with the capability to handle knowing what is good and what is evil. The New Interpreters Bible states that “God knows good and evil, and human beings attain that godlike knowledge upon eating of the tree, though it is a knowledge with which they cannot live very well.”²⁵ Remember that the nature of God's kingdom is that God shares God's power with humanity. Adam and Eve have the power to eat from the tree but know they shouldn't. They don't use this power to constructively “tend and till”; they use it to attempt to gratify themselves instead. Their abuse of power severely damaged the relationship they had with God and one another. From the beginning, God is informing and persuading humanity to do what is best and it is up to people to either listen to this advice or not. God has humanity's best interest at heart, especially in terms of relationships.

Prophet Margin

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible talk at length about the importance of reconciliation.

A beautiful passage from Isaiah represents the reconciliation idea well. Isaiah 11:6-8 reads,

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The

²⁴ Bouma-Prediger, 147.

²⁵ "The Book of Genesis," 350.

nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.²⁶

This passage provides several illustrations of relationships that are normally thought of as unusual or even contrary. Instead of being in danger, the vulnerable are safe with their predators. This is an ideal image of reconciled relationships. Isaiah shows that God's desire is for people to be in this kind of relationship with one another as well as with God. The only way to work toward this kind of extreme reconciliation is to actively pursue it rather than passively ignoring problems or differences.

According to Jochen Motte and Thomas Sandner, a popular mistake is to misuse the term reconciliation to mean "forgive and forget and avoid talking about the wounds of the past."²⁷ It is often more difficult and more painful to reconcile a situation than either ignoring it or lashing out violently. It is an active venture that requires one to explore the issues that have led to the broken relationship and doing what it takes to get past them. Reconciliation may seem difficult but it is the response God desires for humanity as they cooperate with God to restore creation. It requires a great deal of emotional work that is full of mercy and grace, but is the only lasting solution to broken relationships.

Efforts toward reconciliation aren't always a smooth process, nor are they always effective. Motte and Sandner write, "justice and reconciliation cannot be separated. The Biblical concept of justice and reconciliation is not meant to appease people but might, in fact, lead to conflict. Reconciliation is a process and needs sensitivity and patience."²⁸ A common understanding and effort towards justice is the process through which reconciliation occurs. Justice is when ego is put aside, and all parties do what is best for everyone involved. The

²⁶ NRSV

²⁷ Jochen Motte and Thomas Sandner, *Justice and Reconciliation: Contributions to a Workshop on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation* (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 2000), 11.

²⁸ Ibid.

prophets dealt with this issue at length, and prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible is clear about its importance. The prophet Amos takes a strong stand about justice, saying,

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”²⁹

This passage shows how those in power often treat others unjustly and this greatly damages the relationships they have with one another, and with God as well. Power must be used responsibly to help relationships grow and to aid in reconciliation. The abuse of power erodes and destroys relationships. Justice is at the crux of this issue.

...and Justice for All

The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary defines “liberation theology” as: “The theology of liberation, a movement that originated in Latin America in the 1960’s, predominantly but not exclusively in Roman Catholic contexts, defin[ing] itself as reflection arising from the ‘praxis’ (activity, practice) of the people of God in the process of liberation.”³⁰ Some common theological stances assert that the main purpose of Christians is to get as many people to heaven as possible. While this is a noble and important task God also calls us to lift up the downtrodden and pursue justice here in this present life. This is the focus of liberation theology. Edward Lynch says that liberation theologians “reject, with disdain, the notion that getting people to heaven is more important than getting them tolerable living conditions. Liberation theology is an

²⁹ Amos 8:4-7, NRSV.

³⁰ *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Liberation Theology."

attempt to change people's minds about what is most decisive and significant in their lives."³¹ As followers of Christ, our involvement is necessary and we shirk this responsibility when we act as though God's justice will only come after death, not requiring any effort from us now in our daily living. It is easy to put off difficult pursuits such as justice and reconciliation, so we must be intentional about them. Liberation theology focuses on the importance of working toward justice in the present and gives us motivation to work towards reconciliation while we are on earth.

The idea of justice is about making a wrong situation right. Often, it is understood as punitive, meaning that it is focused on righting a situation by punishing the guilty. John DeGruchy explains that we should see reconciliation as restorative justice, "a form of justice that has to do with healing relationships, whether they be personal or political."³² This means that justice is making a wrong situation right by healing the relationships that are broken. Punishment rarely, if ever, heals a relationship. It may satisfy one's desire for vengeance, but it does nothing to bring two parties together. Restorative justice changes the scorecard, making healthy relationships the determining factor of whether justice exists.

God desires reconciliation. We are not to wait for it; we are to work for it. Our relationship with God is connected to our relationships with other people. This is why Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor, love our enemy, and to pray for the people that persecute us.³³ The pages of the Gospel narrative are filled with Jesus calling for people to care for one another and this leads to reconciliation. John Wesley also makes this connection between how we relate to God and how we relate to creation. John Gooch asks the troubling questions, "Can I be holy if

³¹ Edward Lynch, "The Retreat of Liberation Theology", Catholic Polls, Inc.
<http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=643> (accessed 10/13 2007).

³² John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 2.

³³ Matthew 5:44, NRSV.

my brother or sister is hungry, or homeless, or in prison, or sick, or a slave? Can I be holy if I do not do everything in my power to change the situation in which my brother or sister finds himself or herself? While Wesley did not use that language, he lived it out.”³⁴

Amazing Grace

John Wesley’s theology gives us tremendous insight into how to achieve the reconciliation that is essential to our faith journey. He talks about God’s grace taking three forms: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is what we receive from God that lets us know of God’s presence to begin with. It is the grace that precedes our knowledge or understanding of grace. We receive this grace when we are born and it is the very element that allows us to get back on track when we forget or overlook God and God’s grace. It is always there for us as a free and generous gift from God. This is why we don’t have to understand God in order for God to work in our lives. God works in us and through us regardless of our choices or knowledge. This is the common stream that pulses through everyone and enables us to be unified if we only would choose to be so. This prevenient grace allows us to even have the opportunity to choose to know God and expand our relationship with God. God is always present, reaching out to us, comforting us, and wanting to have a closer relationship with us. As we follow God, we are called to extend this grace upon others as well. This means that we treat strangers with love and grace and reach out to people, even those who are different or strange to us. It also means that we are to continue to reach out to people even if they don’t reach back. We have choices to accept God’s grace at certain points in our lives, and action is required at these moments. This point of required action exemplifies justifying grace.

³⁴ John O. Gooch, *John Wesley for the 21st Century* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 44.

Wesley's idea of "justifying grace" is the process of our accepting the grace that God extends to us. We are justified by our decision to repent of our sin and make God the center and priority in our lives. Wells writes that justification is "a reconciling doctrine...to be justified is to be acquitted as innocent, put straight, set in right relation to God."³⁵ Until we realize and acknowledge that we don't deserve God's grace and that there is nothing we can do to deserve it, we cannot dwell in a proper and healthy relationship with God because we are seeing ourselves as something we are not and in turn seeing God as something God is not. In any relationship we must know both ourselves and the other party in order to honestly be able to relate in a genuine way. God is genuine and real and cannot relate to us in any other way, so if we refuse to accept this reality we cannot connect on this level with God. Similarly, we cannot relate to other people in a healthy way if we refuse to make a decision to begin a relationship with them. We can follow God by opening ourselves to others and when they choose to do so, we accept them as they are. Acknowledging and accepting that both human parties are going to fall short of one another's expectations at times and being willing to forgive is how we engage a justified relationship with other people.

"Sanctifying grace" is God allowing us to do what John Wesley called "striving towards perfection. He understood this as the basic process of spiritual formation. We are justified because of our acceptance of the reality of Christ's sacrifice for us and the cleansing of our sin, but after that we must continue to grow in our relationship to God. Obviously, we cannot do this on our own. God is infinite and mysterious in many ways so we are dependent upon God's grace. This sanctifying grace differs from the other types of grace because it is dependent on who we are and where we are. It looks different as we progress in our journey towards God and as our relationship grows and changes. As we get to know ourselves better and we get to know God

³⁵ Wells, 13.

better, we are sanctified in our relationship with God. We are sanctified in our relationship with others in the very same way. The relationship grows by spending time with one another and getting to know each other better. As with any relationship, the more time and effort invested into the relationship, the more it grows.

These forms of grace are relational and apply to our fellowship with God as well as with other people. They are important to a theology for reconciliation because they show how God forgives as well as allow us to respond to the process of our relationship. The third form of grace, sanctifying grace, is involved with justice. As our relationship with God develops, as well as our relationship with other people, we are asked to model the behavior of God in the creation narratives and share our power. Joseph Liechty informs us of just how sanctifying grace works towards reconciliation, it “is achieved when perpetrators have repented and the victims have forgiven.”³⁶ I contend that repentance is not necessary for us to forgive, but it is necessary for reconciliation. Such a powerful avenue toward reconciliation, sanctifying grace consists of a pattern of repenting and forgiving, often at the same time, because that is what brings people closer together. We learn more about people when we see what they are struggling with and learn to respect them when they can admit their mistakes and turn away from them. Likewise, when someone else forgives us for our wrongdoings, we trust them more and feel more comfortable to take risks and be ourselves around them.

The relationships we have with other people are different from our relationship with God because we are not peers with God. God is greater than us and this changes the way we relate to God. Because God doesn't sin, God forgives and humanity repents. In human relationships, continued and simultaneous repentance and forgiveness is necessary for reconciliation. It is not

³⁶ Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in It's Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation," in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions for Theology*, ed. Joseph Liechty and David Tombs (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 60.

only the “other” that needs to repent; it is we who are called to live lifestyles of repentance. If the people who have strong relationships with God treat others with mercy and love, these relationships will grow. Our relationship with God is what inspires us to make the first move toward reconciliation.

Among all of the examples that show Jesus’ idea of grace as well as His focus on reconciliation, one powerful illustration stands out. In Matthew 25 Jesus describes the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner and says that what people did for the “least of these brothers of mine, [they] did for me.”³⁷ This illustration draws a connection between humanity’s relationship with creation and the Creator. How we treat one another is directly connected to how we treat God. Michael Wittmer points this out as he ties the Gospel story to the creation narratives. He writes, “The gospel story of redemption represents God’s restoration of creation. God refuses to allow our fall to ultimately destroy his good creation, and he graciously comes to earth to put away sin and restore the world to its original goodness.”³⁸

The Space Between

So before you point your fingers/ Make sure your hands are clean!
– Bob Marley, in “Judge Not”

It is clear that reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel and in response to this the church must be in the reconciliation business. In the United States, there is currently a trend of broken relationships between many Christians and those who do not subscribe to Christianity. A sign that these relationships are broken is the size and scope of the criticisms non-Christians have of Christians. In the book *Unchristian*, Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons examine the

³⁷ Matthew 25:40, NIV.

³⁸ Michael Eugene Wittmer, *Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Zondervan, 2004), 57.

perceptions that 18 to 30 year olds have of Christianity and shed some light on the nature of these broken relationships. I grant that it is not the goal of Christianity to have a positive perception among everyone, nor should it be. However, if people's assumptions and stereotypes are barriers to having healthy relationships with others, those barriers must be examined. One of the central goals of the church is to provide an environment of reconciliation so the church must make a serious and intentional effort towards reconciliation wherever it can, and this is one arena where there is tremendous opportunity.

I will focus largely on young adults' perceptions of Christianity due to the strong impact they have on the church's future. Operating under the assumption that one generation affects subsequent generations, if today's young people have negative perceptions of Christianity, future generations are likely to hold similar notions. It is important to look at the trend that begins with the younger generations, because it contains insight about future relations between the church and society. Reggie McNeal reports that "the further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each succeeding generation reports going to church. The drop is from the 52 percent of builders (those born before 1946) and seniors to only 36 percent of gen Xers."³⁹ This suggests a rapidly deteriorating relationship between the church and American society.

One argument against this way of thinking holds that the negative perception of Christianity is unique to these younger generations. One might argue that once these young people grow up, their perceptions will change. While this may be true to some extent, there are plenty of negative perceptions, albeit not as extreme, at other generational levels. McNeal informs his readers, "A 2001 survey reported in the *Christian Science Monitor* reveals that the number of Americans who have 'no religious preference' has doubled from 1990 to 2001,

³⁹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 3.

reaching 14 percent of the population.... George Barna reports that the unchurched population has grown from 24 to 34 percent in just one decade!”⁴⁰ This point of view is neither unique to younger generations nor something that can be assumed they are just going to “grow out of.” Kinnaman writes, “Those who think that in due time Mosaics and Busters will ‘grow up’ and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.”⁴¹

According to Kinneman and Lyons, currently in the United States, “many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders.”⁴² This lack of trust directly affects the current and future relationships between Christian individuals and non-Christians. Relationships are built on trust and when there is a lack of trust concerning an entire group of people, it strains the potential for healthy relationships. For example, when I meet someone new and they find out I am a Christian and even a pastor, I immediately have hurdles to overcome in order to form a relationship with him or her. The same is true with relationships that already exist. If a friend experiences Christianity in a negative way, he or she regularly comes to me with similar accusations. Our relationships are strained because of the perceptions my friends have of Christianity. In no way am I claiming that we should hide who we are or pretend to be someone we are not. However, the church must engage in an intentional effort to lead Christians toward reconciliation with non-Christians in order for these relationships to blossom.

Pilgrim’s Pride

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 11.

⁴² Ibid.

While it is extremely important for Christians to heal relationships with non-Christians, it is also important for them not to compromise who they are. Just as in any broken relationship, pretending to be someone you aren't doesn't lead to healing of that relationship. It merely results in the relationship being based on false premises and this is clearly not what reconciliation is about. However, both Christians and non-Christians make mistakes that harm their relationships. Because the church is made up of many Christians in community, we must work toward reconciliation, even if we weren't personally the one that harmed the relationship. One of the main reasons that many Christians neglect this responsibility is that they take great pride in being separate from the world. Romans 12:2 reads, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."⁴³ The idea of Christians reconciling with non-Christians is seen by some as being "conformed to the world;" they are afraid that it would mean they are compromising their Christian identity. However, reconciliation is not about "conforming" as much as it is about the two parties beginning to gain the mutual respect that lays the foundation of a healthy relationship. In fact, as I previously noted, compromising one's identity is really not reconciliation at all. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some."⁴⁴ This counters the idea that we are to completely separate ourselves from the world or refuse to interact with it. A healthy relationship with the world looks like a good relationship between two people. There is healthy dialogue, mutual assistance, mutual respect, and both parties wishing joy and peace upon the other. Paul portrays how common ground is an important basis for the rest of these healthy traits.

⁴³ NRSV

⁴⁴ NRSV

An important distinction between conformity and reconciliation exists. Reconciliation has its focus on a relationship between two entities. Conformity is one entity giving up its identity and acting like the other. Conforming is certainly problematic because it is not authentic, nor does it result in healing. Jesus teaches this idea in Matthew 5:13 where he says, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”⁴⁵ It is crucial to draw a contrast between these two ideas because they are very different. When this distinction is ignored, it is easy for Christians to “throw the baby out with the bath water” and advocate, whether implicitly or explicitly, an elitist attitude toward the world. Paul continues to address this issue in the tenth chapter of 1 Corinthians when he writes, “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.”⁴⁶ The contrast between the 1 Corinthians passages and the Romans passage distinguishes between the two ideas of reconciliation and conformation, exhorting a balance between the two.

Andrew Walls names these two ideas the Indigenous Principle and the Pilgrim Principle.⁴⁷ The Indigenous Principle asserts that the Gospel should fit into the culture and have a place in the world. This principle stresses the great importance of reconciling the church and the world. The Pilgrim Principle is the idea that the Gospel needs to stand outside of culture so it can critique and assist it in a prophetic way. A healthy mix of these two principles is the ideal goal. The church must have its own identity and not become something else, by conforming to external influences, but it must also have a working relationship with the world in order to affect it in a positive way.

⁴⁵ NIV

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:32-33, NRSV.

⁴⁷ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 7-9.

The harmonizing of Walls' two principles has not been the strong suit of the American church. The Pilgrim Principle has seemed to become the sole focus of many American churches and so the failure to strike an adequate balance is a cause of these churches' degrading relationship with the surrounding culture. Restoring a harmony, with the church expressing itself more in accordance with the Indigenous Principle, is imperative to the future success of the church and its mission.

The change that occurs in the lives and relationships of Christians is a good example of how lopsided the American church is regarding the Pilgrim Principle. Dan Kimball elaborates, "The longer we are Christians, the fewer the number of friends we have who are not Christians. Even though Christians work alongside non-Christians or have non-Christian neighbors or sit next to non-believing students in class, we generally tend not to actually befriend them, or pray regularly for them, or get involved in their lives so they trust us and we can be the salt and light of Jesus to them."⁴⁸ The Pilgrim Principle is a large contributor to this phenomenon. This alienation of non-Christians understandably leads to deterioration in the relationship between those "inside" the church and those "outside."

First Impressions

Vince Antonucci grew up outside of the church. His parents never took him to church and the first time he heard about Jesus was on a Sunday morning in college while he was getting ready to go to lunch. In his dorm room, Vince flipped through the three channels he had on his television and "each one featured a dumb religious show."⁴⁹ He thought one particular show

⁴⁸ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 43.

⁴⁹ Vince Antonucci, *I Became a Christian and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 11.

looked “potentially comical,”⁵⁰ so instead of turning off the television he began to watch it. His initial reaction exemplifies the perception many people have of Christianity. He remembers, “An old man sat, or sunk really, into a big red-leather chair. Questions flooded my mind: How old is this guy? Is he going to live through this program? Has he become physically incapable of getting out of that chair? Shouldn’t someone help him?”⁵¹ This old man is the way many people view Christianity and why they don’t take it seriously.

The story continues with the man talking about whether something happened on Tuesday or Wednesday of Jesus’ last week. This was one of Vince’s very first exposures to Christianity, and to him, it was a seemingly pointless subject. His response portrays how different his perception of Christianity was from what was meaningful to him. Vince reports, “I mulled this over for some time. Finally I decided: yes, this was the stupidest thing I had ever heard. I didn’t know a thing about Jesus, but Tuesday or Wednesday? About something that happened thousands of years ago? If it happened at all? C’mon! I turned off the TV in disgust.”⁵² Turning off the church in disgust seems to be increasingly commonplace in the United States today. This is the story of one man, but it is representative of countless encounters between Americans and Christianity. Because of the lack of common ground, many people fail to even take Christianity seriously.

Popular theologian Leonard Sweet experienced the cultural divide within Christianity itself. While Dr. Sweet was being considered for the E. Stanley Jones Chair of Evangelism at Drew University School of Theology, an issue arose surrounding the word “evangelism.” Some of the members of the Board of Trustees were very troubled by this word and “all that this word came to stand for. It was felt that evangelism really meant ‘cultural imperialism,’ a religious

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

excuse to mow down adherents of other religions in the name of the Lord.”⁵³ Many Christians know that divisiveness is being taught and acted upon within their own religion. This perception of evangelism is an acknowledgment that unproductive divisions are perpetuated within American Christianity. This is a big reason that non-religious people hold unfavorable views toward what they perceive to be a divisive and hypocritical religion.

The church’s manner of teaching on evangelism damages the relationship between the church and society. Sweet writes,

The church has taught evangelism as a meeting of two antagonists—one righteous and right, the other dead wrong. The point of evangelism, according to this school of thought is to win an argument. Evangelism also has been taught as a spiritual sales pitch, more nuanced perhaps than a religious argument but still relying on high pressure and ultimately committed to closing the deal. And if not an argument or a sales pitch, the gospel is neutered and reduced to an objective, nonrelational exercise in logic. The strategy is to convince others, not appeal to them.”⁵⁴

The very process that has been used to teach evangelism to the church has caused an unnatural and unnecessary split between the church and the culture. Even people who consider themselves under the umbrella of Christianity are uncomfortable with this split and the difficulties inherent in it. The major problem with this situation is that the idea of evangelism is fundamental to the Christian church, yet it has been ingrained in such a way that divides people rather than reconciles them with others and with God.

A third example comes from someone who grew up in the Christian church, but practices ministry outside of the traditional church setting. Shane Claiborne lives with homeless people in Philadelphia, helping the poor in many ways. He writes in his book *The Irresistible Revolution* the way he felt about the church as he grew up in it. He remembers that there were “plenty of folks talking about the gospel and writing books about it, but as far as I could tell, living out the

⁵³ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2007), 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

gospel had yet to be tried in recent days.”⁵⁵ Shane makes an important distinction between talking about the gospel and living it. His impression is that the church is not living out the gospel, and this deficiency causes people to have negative feelings towards the church. He continues, “So the youth group got a little old—the songs got boring, the games grew stale, and I found other places to meet fine women. I wasn’t sure that church had much to offer.”⁵⁶ Shane grew up in the church, yet he developed an attitude towards the church similar to that of Vince, who did not know the church from his youth.

The uninterested attitude of Christians points to the conclusion that it is not the message that is the problem: it is the carriers of the message. Even though Shane didn’t feel that church had “much to offer,” he continued to go. He reports, “Of course I didn’t dare stop going to church, convinced that ‘going to church’ is what good people do, and I didn’t want to become like ‘those people’ who ‘don’t go to church.’ So Shane “sucked it up and went every week, often cynical, usually bored, but always smiling.”⁵⁷ Shane’s reaction shows his dissatisfaction with the church but also reiterates the very important point of the church’s indoctrinating the idea of separation between “good” and “bad” people. This not only stifles reconciliation, it is an effort that goes directly against it. In this case, the church is not only working against reconciliation, but it becomes full of bored and apathetic people who stand against others for seemingly arbitrary reasons. Because the church represents God in society, it doesn’t take long for people to cross-apply these feelings to God. That means that this broken relationship isn’t just hurting the perception of the church, but it is harming the way people think of God. Shane recalls thinking “that if God was as boring as Sunday morning, I wasn’t sure I wanted anything to do with him.”

⁵⁵ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 42.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

He remembers “joking with friends that if someone had a heart attack on Sunday morning, the paramedics would have to take the pulse of half the congregation before they would find the dead person”⁵⁸ Bearing that image in mind, one need only examine the correlating opinion of the masses.

Known by the Negative

The negative perspectives toward church demonstrated above, which come from three very different sources, are corroborated by the populace at large. The main reason that the relationship between the church and society is unhealthy is not because the church is too righteous and people like to sin, it is that there are not enough churches that are working to intentionally create reconciling environments. Although reconciling environments don't *guarantee* reconciliation, they are the key to moving towards it. The general perception of the church is that it cares more about what people aren't than who they are, and reconciling environments are places where this myth can be debunked. Kinnaman reported that one crucial insight kept popping up in their exploration. “In studying thousands of outsiders' impressions, it is clear that Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. *We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for.*”⁵⁹ This shows how necessary reconciliation is, not just theologically, but also practically.

Our primary role as Christ's church is to broker relational healing. We need to be involved in healing relationships between ourselves and God as well as between ourselves and the rest of God's creation. Because we have neglected our role as relational healers—because we have neglected the process of reconciliation, given to us by God our Creator—the church has

⁵⁸ Kinnaman and Lyons, 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

rendered itself ineffective and irrelevant. Kinnaman illustrates this saying, “One outsider put it this way: ‘Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.’”⁶⁰ This kind of response clearly exemplifies a broken relationship that needs healing.

Reconciliation is a just and graceful effort to heal the relationships that humanity has with God and creation. A theology for reconciliation contains elements of Process Theology, Liberation Theology, and Wesleyan Theology. It seeks to bring the kingdom of God to earth by striving to restore the relationships we were created to have. We must be true to ourselves in order to achieve any of this. By applying these ideas, the process of reconciliation will transform the cultural landscape of the church and the world. Reconciliation must be a main focus of the church, especially in a time and place where relationships between it and the outside world are strained, at best. If we continue to turn a blind eye to this problem, not only is the future of the American church bleak, but we are compromising the very foundation of our religion.

⁶⁰ Kinnaman and Lyons., 26.

SECTION 2 – OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

There are several groups of people that have tried to create reconciling environments between Christians and non-Christians. These attempts look quite different from one another, but the goals are very similar. In this section, a few of the popular techniques designed to bring people from outside the church together with the church will be demonstrated.

1. *Seeker sensitive model.* One attempt to bridge the gap between church and society is the “seeker sensitive” model. It usually manifests itself in worship services, attempting to help people who are “seeking” a church feel comfortable and welcome. Churches have been using this practice for a long time. George Hunter points out, “many Protestant churches and traditions offered worship services targeting (and tailored for) pre-Christians for over 150 years. They were called ‘Gospel Services,’ or ‘Evangelistic Services,’ or simply the ‘Sunday Evening Service.’ The social contract was once clear to everyone: the Sunday morning service was primarily for Christians, the Sunday evening service was primarily for pre-Christian people.”¹ This method was successful for quite a while, but eventually it stopped being an effective evangelism tool.

Hunter points out that the problem in this system was that it didn’t keep up with the culture. He writes that “the culture around the church changed, but the Sunday evening liturgy, language, and music did not.”² It seems that churches seemed to forget who the target was and these services began to serve the people already inside the church. Hunter confirms this when he writes, “Once the evening service’s target audience had been pre-Christian unchurched people. Now

¹ George G. Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 69.
² Ibid.

the target audience became the members, and the de facto goal now was to preach and pray Christians into a deeper commitment and spiritual life.”³ When the church begins to look inward, it becomes paralyzed if the people they are trying to reach are outside. Because it becomes so difficult to shift the paradigm, the church often gives up on this kind of evangelism, or possibly forgets about evangelism altogether. It is easy to see why this happens. The people inside the church are the ones that show up and who pay the bills, so they are the ones who expect to be the center of the focus. I heard a story once that illustrates the problem with this dilemma. A man went to an amusement park with his family. He had his three young children and his wife with him. They set a time and place to meet at the end of the day and when it came time for them to meet up, only his wife and two of his children were at the rendezvous point. After waiting for five or ten minutes, the man finally said, “Ok, I guess we should just go ahead and go home.” His wife and kids were horrified and asked if they shouldn’t try to find the other child first. The man responded, “Well, you are the ones that showed up, so you are the ones I’m going to cater to.” This sounds ridiculous, but it is exactly what many churches do and how they think on a regular basis.

After the failure of the seeker movement, it was revisited in a fresh way by Robert Shuler. Hunter outlines his formula which is: “The unchurched people’s needs will determine our programs. The unchurched people’s hang-ups will determine our strategy. The unchurched people’s culture will determine our style. The unchurched population will determine our growth goals.”⁴ This strategy

³ Ibid., 70.

⁴ Ibid., 71.

works to minister to the pre-Christian audience because it attempts to put them first and to develop ministry around them. Many churches today follow this model. In my opinion, this strategy is lacking for many current pre-Christians in that it attempts to copy the culture inside the church, when going into a church is not part of their culture. In fact, going to church is often opposed to their culture. The system works for people who are at least somewhat pre-disposed to the church, which is important. If the number of people who are not pre-disposed to the church is growing however, something needs to be in place to engage those people.

Contemporary versions of this kind of church include Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California and Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois. Saddleback has worship services with a band and the pastor, Rick Warren, wears casual clothing. The feel of the service is very informal and Hunter says it is “primarily for pre-Christians and somewhat secondary for Christians.”⁵ Willow Creek has a similar motivation. They have a similar kind of service with a band instead of an organ or choir and they offer Christianity 101 classes to introduce people to the idea of Christianity in a comfortable and appealing way. Both of these churches are good examples of communities of faith making an intentional effort to motivate non-Christians to desire reconciliation.

2. *Leaders out of the building.* Rev. Adam Hamilton, the pastor of the Church of the Resurrection, has been very successful in reaching beyond the walls of the church to make a difference in the life of the community of Kansas City, Missouri. Their

⁵ Ibid., 72.

method of engaging with people outside of the church begins with the leadership. Hamilton writes, “This is a key of the church leader. We are to develop relationships with sheep, both those in our flock and those who are lost. We are to go where they live, where they work, where they are.”⁶ In addition to keeping “seekers” in mind during worship, the idea of the leaders of the church being actively involved in the community is very important. This is taking the seeker idea to the next level, not only keeping pre-Christians in mind when they are seeking the church, but actively seeking them out where they are as well. The type of leadership that is involved in the community can look very diverse. Hamilton explains, “For some this may mean joining a civic group, or volunteering in the schools, or serving on a board or agency that is not related to the church. For some it will be volunteering in inner-city ministries or working in the prisons.”⁷ The people in this church have become seekers themselves, not just sitting around waiting for the people that are seeking them.

Dan Kimball exhibits another good example of this type of leadership. He points out one of the problems that the church has connecting to people. He writes, “Before I was on a church staff, I worked in an office with all non-Christians. Working with non-Christians made it easy to have friendships that provided opportunities to hear the hearts, beliefs, and opinions of non-Christians, and I would share my views and beliefs with them, since we were friends.”⁸ After he started working with adults as a pastor, Kimball “subtly got sucked into spending all of my time in meetings and leading a ministry that catered to those

⁶Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 17.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kimball, 39.

who were already Christians. [He] lost contact with those outside the church who weren't Christians."⁹ This resonates with my experience as well. In response to this dilemma, Kimball changed his schedule to make sure he was out of the building on Wednesdays and Thursdays. He would work on his sermon at a local coffeehouse with his "Bible and commentaries open in full view."¹⁰ This is another way church leaders are getting out of their church buildings to work toward reconciliation with the surrounding culture.

3. *Organic Church.* Another major movement of churches that is engaging pre-Christians is the Organic Church movement. Organic churches can be defined in different ways, but Neil Cole started some organic churches and he has a good description that helps to define them. He writes,

Because we were approaching church as a living entity, organic in essence, we followed certain natural phases of development. The result was reproduction at all levels of church life: disciples, leaders, churches, and ultimately movements. In all of life, reproduction begins at the cellular level and eventually multiplies and morphs into more complex living entities.¹¹

The organic church is unique in that it doesn't try to make things happen, but rather it seeks to create a healthy environment and lets things grow and develop within it. It grows naturally and is very different from a top-down institution. Organic churches use many different ideas to reach out to pre-Christian people, but they do it by creating situations that will provide that connection.

Bob Whitesel outlines twelve organic churches and they each have different and unique ideas on how to connect new people to the church and the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Neil Cole, *Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 24.

idea of church. St. Thomas Church in Sheffield, England, and “the sol café” in Alberta, Canada use various rhythms and icons to help produce such an environment. “The Bridge” in Tempe, Arizona and the “Scum of the Earth Church” in Denver, Colorado feed people and use the idea of mission to bridge the gap between their churches and the people who surround them. The Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington uses an “ancient-future” model to connect to a very diverse group of people. “One Place” in Phoenix, Arizona makes use of different stations to help connect people’s experiences with God’s love and grace.¹² These are all manifestations of the church working and growing in an organic fashion. There are countless examples and attempts to solve the problem of the church being disconnected from society. These organic examples show that different communities will have to respond in a variety of ways in order to be successful. There is no one-size-fits-all answer.

The people outside of the church are increasing in numbers. We must be compelled to try many different approaches in order to connect to different parts of this demographic. Attempts can be successful in different ways and the best thing that can happen is for lots of different people to keep trying a variety of approaches. Seeker sensitive churches, leadership working outside of the church building, organic churches will all have different approaches and even ask questions different from other churches within their own genre. We must allow ourselves and others to address diverse issues as well as address the same issues in different ways. It is wonderful that there are so many churches working towards reconciliation with non-Christians. We must continue this important venture in creative and effective ways.

¹² Bob Whitesel, *Inside the Organic Church: Learning from 12 Emerging Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

SECTION 3 – THESIS

From the time of the creation narrative, it is clear that God wants to be in a healthy relationship with human beings. When that relationship is strained, God seeks to heal it by eliminating whatever obstacles are causing the strain. This is especially evident in the Israelite exile around 586 BCE. This period has traditionally been thought of as a time when God was punishing the Israelites for their idolatry, as they were valuing other gods above Yahweh. However, this time of “punishment” resulted in reconciliation between the Israelites and God, as well as at other times of hardship. This Israelite exile also exemplifies God’s interest in reconciliation with humanity. Just as God worked through the unease and distress of the Israelite exile, God is working for reconciliation in the Church today. The exile is a powerful image that can serve to inspire an environment of reconciliation in today’s American Church.

God’s Pattern of Reconciliation for Humanity

The reconciliation that occurred during and after the exile is not a unique act of God, but a pattern in which God worked repeatedly throughout scripture to foster the healing of relationships. The pattern is that when people put a process, creation, or institution above God, God worked to separate the people from that obstacle in some way in order to mend the relationship. Sometimes, that separation seemed harsh, even draconian, but the resulting reconciliation was just and full of grace.

Trying to discover one’s identity has always been a difficult and important quest. People have used numerous methods to accomplish this. Several of the stories leading up to the exile narrative embody this need for people to know just who they are. Rather than finding their value and sense of worth in and through God’s love, they searched for it in knowledge, national identity and a human leader. We can identify with these various stories of people trying to define

themselves and searching for the security that brings. I will explore some of these stories and explore how God leads people away from the situation they are in and reminds them of the reconciling love that really allows them to fulfill their who they were created to be. It is a common tendency for people to attempt to control their own identity. However, this control neglects the idea of God's creative role. The events leading up to the exile illustrate this well.

God's pattern of reconciliation is evident from the beginning of the Biblical narrative with Adam and Eve. In this creation story, God set up the first two humans in perfect community with one another and with God. Genesis 2:15–18 reads, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”¹ Walter Brueggemann contends that the substance of this scripture is to show what humanity looks like in perfect community with God and one another. He writes, “These three verses together provide a remarkable statement of anthropology. Human beings before God are characterized by vocation, permission, and prohibition.”² God put Adam in the garden to “work it and take care of it,” and that was his vocation. It was what he was meant to do. The next sentence gives Adam permission to exercise freedom by eating from “any tree in the garden,” and places a prohibition on him not to “eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The balance of these three parts of life is the key to our relationship with God and one another. Brueggemann continues, “The primary human task is to find a way to hold the three facets of divine purpose together. Any two of them without the third is surely to pervert life.”³ When any three of these elements cease to exist,

¹ NIV

² Brueggemann, 46.

³ Ibid.

reconciliation is needed. These elements will serve as a litmus test throughout this study, showing where and why reconciliation is needed and how God works to create it.

First Things First

The aspects of vocation, freedom and prohibition are at the heart of God's action throughout scripture. They are also elements of human identity: what we are called to do, what we do and what we don't do. These elements of creation will be explored as they are contained in the rest of this creation story and up through the Israelite exile of 586 BCE. As the narrative continues, Genesis 3: 2 – 6 tells of the woman saying to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" The first humans had knowledge of good from the beginning because they were in communion with God. The story progresses with the serpent's response:

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.⁴

When Adam and Eve separated themselves from God, they acquired the knowledge of evil as well. The evil was not in the fruit, but in trying to satisfy their sense of self and pursue their identity with knowledge instead of with obedience to God. Fretheim explains, "The text defines who finally decides what is in the best interests of the human. The tree and the command together define the limits of creatureliness; to transgress these limits entails deciding about one's

⁴ NIV

own best interests, to become autonomous, independent of the will of God for one's life."⁵ Our limitations are part of who we are and when we reject these prohibitive standards, we lose our connection to God, one another, and even our own identity. The evil was discovered in their disobedience, which caused an imbalance in the facets of humanity.

God's reaction is written in Genesis 3:21–24 where

[T]he LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.⁶

It is important and notable that God's first action after expressing disappointment to the couple was motivated by protection and care. God's grace is evident even in this initial story about the first people in the Bible. Adam and Eve disturbed the relationship between themselves and God by doing what God prohibited. They could not be trusted to keep a healthy relationship with a sovereign God on their own terms, so God removed them from the opportunity to further damage the relationship. Here we see the pattern emerge: God acts in a way that is, in a sense, punishment, but where the end goal is reconciliation. By removing Adam and Eve from the garden a situation was actually created wherein God began to reestablish the trust that was broken. A similar, obvious example might be how a good parent raises a child. If a child is trying to touch an electrical outlet, a good parent doesn't just tell them "no" but also covers up the outlet or moves the child to another room. If a parent merely tells the child not to touch it, but takes no action, the behavior will most likely continue and the child will be harmed. When the child is removed from the dangerous situation, the cycle of trust can begin again in a safer

⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 351.

⁶ NIV

environment. It appears to the child that he or she is being punished, but the parent is actually accomplishing much more. Perhaps with our cultural connotation, the word “punishment” isn’t even accurate. It is probably helpful to use the word *correction* instead. If God corrects us, we may not like it, but it doesn’t have the negative thrust behind it, as if God were trying to hurt us to teach us a lesson. God’s lessons are intended to restore what is missing from the human condition and from our relationship with God. It is dangerous and unhealthy for one of the three aspects of humanity mentioned to be out of balance, and God is correcting Adam and Eve in this story in order to reconcile God’s relationship with them. It is in this way that the creation story illustrates how God acts in response to humanity’s embrace of what God prohibits.

God’s response to humanity’s rejecting their vocation is found later in the narrative with the Tower of Babel story. We should remember in the previous story, that God gave Adam the vocation to “work and take care of”⁷ creation. Another way to think about this is that Adam was to conserve and conceive. In addition, Fretheim adds to this understanding of vocation in the creation story of Genesis 3. He writes that humanity “gives responsibility to the human being, not simply for maintenance and preservation, but for intra-creational development, bringing the world along toward its fullest possible potential.”⁸ God is the connection between humanity and the world’s “fullest possible potential,” so humanity is working with God in this endeavor. When people act during a time when their relationship with God is confused and convoluted, their idea of what is best for creation will be confused and convoluted as well. An omnipotent and omnipresent God must play a role in our vocation. With the Babel narrative however, the people wanted to build a tower to suit their own purposes. The words of the people in Genesis 11:4 reveal this reasoning. They say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to

⁷ Genesis 2:15

⁸ Fretheim, 350.

the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”⁹ What could seem like a healthy sense of unity becomes something much more harmful. Brueggemann writes, “This text suggests a different kind of unity sought by fearful humanity organized against the purposes of God. This unity attempts to establish a cultural, human oneness without reference to the threats, promises, or mandates of God.”¹⁰ This speaks to vocation, because our vocation to work and take care of God’s creation must include God and God’s will. This story is a great example of what happens when we stray from our vocation.

In verses 5–9 we find God’s response to the building of the tower:

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.¹¹

God scatters the people in response to their neglect of the three tenets of humanity found in the creation story. This obviously does not mean that unity is problematic, nor is it a statement against the importance of community. What was uniting them was not healthy. Unity and community must include God. Brueggemann points this out when he says, “This is a self-made unity in which humanity has a “fortress mentality.” It seeks to survive by its own resources. It seeks to construct a world free of danger of the holy and immune from the terrors of God in history. It is a unity grounded in fear and characterized by coercion. A human unity without the vision of God’s will is likely to be ordered in oppressive conformity.”¹² When our purpose or our vocation doesn’t include God, we’ve isolated ourselves, calling for reconciliation.

⁹ NIV

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 100.

¹¹ NIV

¹² Brueggemann, 100.

As the story continues towards 586 BCE and the exile, God continues to help humanity balance vocation, freedom, and prohibition. The enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians clearly limits freedom, and God frees the people from this oppression. God's concern for the people's freedom is found in Exodus 3:7-10, which reads,

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."¹³

In contrast to the creation story, where God sends Adam and Eve away from what was prohibited, here God brings the people out of slavery and into freedom. The "driving the man out" idea of Genesis 3 and the "scattering" idea in Genesis 11 contrast with the "bringing" language of this passage.

As Israel grew, it required greater levels of organization. Exodus 18:25–26 tells about Moses instituting Judges to help create and keep order: "He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves."¹⁴ The Israelites depended for some time on these judges, who filled the need for order in their society. Carol Meyers points this out to us when she writes, "For nearly a century at the beginning of the Iron II period (ca. 1025–586 BCE), most of Palestine was organized as a national state with a dynastic figure—a king at its head. During the preceding two centuries, coinciding with the emergence of loosely connected Israelite tribal

¹³ NIV

¹⁴ NIV

groups; people had lived mainly in small cities in the lowlands and valleys.”¹⁵ The Israelites were organized in small tribal groups because they didn’t reside in a large centralized area, but also because they had Yahweh as their leader, instead of a king.

A system of judges was put in place to maintain order in the land. In 1 Samuel 8:1–9, the story unfolds:

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”¹⁶

These reactions are understandable because like any human leaders the judges were capable of corruption. The problem they faced is that they were looking for a problem with the system of judges, and when you look for a problem you will always find one. It was easy to blame the system rather than the people. Instead of trusting God, the people once again thought they had a better idea. This elicited a negative response from Samuel as the story continues:

But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.”¹⁷

God points out the real problem. The people have rejected God as their king, so they wanted a king like the other nations have. God consented, but warned them about how it will turn out and attempted to persuade them away from their own demise. From a historical perspective Meyers says that:

¹⁵ Carol Meyers, “Kinship and Kingship,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 221.

¹⁶ NIV

¹⁷ NIV

[T]he story in scripture explains the transition. Then with startling rapidity, a centralized state was formed late in the eleventh century. By the middle of the tenth century, according to the biblical narrative, this state reached near-imperial proportions, complete with a capital city, complex regional centers, a royal court, luxury goods, and other social, economic, and political features associated with the concentration of power in a monarchy. The changes it wrought in the structure of society and the accompanying cultural expressions rank among the most important in ancient Israel's history.¹⁸

God was trying to set the Israelites apart, but they wanted the security that the kings of other lands brought to their citizens. They adapted quickly to the culture of the surrounding kingships, but it was only a matter of time before things started to fall apart.

Meyers describes this transition as one that goes from “kinship to kingship.” She explains the implications of this, saying, “Closely linked to the concentration of power across kinship lines is the personality of the individual who wields power over the population comprising the State.”¹⁹ People had more control, and personality mattered much more in a system of judges rather than in a system of kings. Kings are more separated from the people they rule and have a much greater potential for corruption. The situation of corruption that upset the Israelites is greatly magnified with a king. Having a king over a nation also takes away the freedom of the people from their own identity. The king largely determines what the nation is. Meyers writes that “(t)he king not only stands at the apex of centralized power of a state but also becomes its chief symbol; his personal and political successes and failures are intimately and inextricably linked to the fortunes of the kingdom.”²⁰ The people were working against their own freedom and again neglecting some of the elements of their humanity.

Like the judges, the kings also became corrupt and the Israelites were drawn away from God. There were certainly some righteous kings, but they seemed to get more and more corrupt. The kings eventually became so unscrupulous that the Book of the Law was even forgotten about

¹⁸ Meyers, 221.

¹⁹ Ibid., 221.

²⁰ Ibid., 224.

and lost. Shortly before the destruction of the Temple, a king named Josiah discovered the Holy Book and shared it with the people. Second Kings 22:8, 11-13 reads,

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.... When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Acbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."²¹

While the kings were in power, the Israelites fall so far away from God that they don't even have the Book of the Law, nor are they aware of its contents. Once again, God responds to the people that have rejected an important piece of their humanity. Charles Foster Kent says that "[i]n July, 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell for the last time before the Babylonian conquerors."²² This marked another period of God's deconstruction, one that is very significant in the history of Israel. Solomon Grayzel summarizes this period of deconstruction very well. He writes, "By all human calculations there was no hope that the Judean nation or people would ever be restored. So the Judeans themselves thought, but also those who started out on the long road of exile and those who remained behind in the desolated land. But this was not the end. Due to a combination of circumstances, it was really the beginning of a more meaningful life."²³

What is commonly seen as a punishment is once again God acting in a way that brings the Israelites towards the freedom that is foundational to humanity. As it will be shown, independence from the king and the religious and political institutions can be seen as God's reconciling action. Graysel says,

²¹ NIV

²² Charles Foster Kent, *The Kings and Prophets of Israel and Judah* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 301.

²³ Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 286.

Chief among these circumstances was the fact that some Judeans regarded their people, not as a nation whose destiny could be decided on the field of battle, but as an instrument used by God in a great human experiment. Inspired by this idea, the leaders of the defeated nation found means for keeping the spirit of the people alive. They refashioned their old institutions; they selected and reinterpreted their already old literature; above all, they kept their flagging hopes from dying.²⁴

Even though the Israelite people were undoubtedly discouraged and disheartened, God was using this situation to bolster the relationship that God had with them. For the people in exile, it certainly seemed like God was punishing them for their idolatry and other bad deeds, but it is certainly possible to view this as God's corrective action, separating them from poisonous influences as well as reconciling their relationships with God and one another.

What is Exile?

Just as God's corrective actions can be seen as more than the one-dimensional idea of punishment, the exile is a complex issue that can be interpreted on different levels. The word "exile" is generally defined as "anyone separated from his or her country or home voluntarily or by force of circumstances."²⁵ However, the idea of exile is far richer. In his book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, Rob Bell makes the claim that we are presently in a time of exile in the United States. He writes,

At the height of their power, Israel misconstrued God's blessings as favoritism and entitlement. They became indifferent to God and to their priestly calling to bring liberation to others. There is a word for this. A word for what happens when you still have the power and the wealth and the influence, and yet in some profound way you've blown it because you've forgotten why you were given it in the first place. The word is exile. Exile is when you forget your story. Exile isn't just about location; exile is about the state of your soul. Exile is when you fail to convert your blessings into blessings for others. Exile is when you find yourself a stranger to the purposes of God.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 286.

²⁵ *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*, s.v. "Exile."

²⁶ Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 44.

According to Bell, we are going into exile, and it would serve us well to take some notes from our ancestors. There is more at stake with regard to the Israelite exile, than a mere history lesson. It can be a symbol and an image for us to embrace as we move into a new age as the Church in the United States.

The ideas that surround the exile specifically are troubling at best. It is very difficult to come to terms with the idea of God handing Israel to the Babylonians, as if God is abandoning His chosen people and letting some pagan nation conquer them. Stanley Frost addresses this tension when he writes,

The question of the day was whether Israel's faith in Yahweh and in her own distinctive future had been shown by the destruction of the Judean state to be a delusion, or whether it was possible to interpret that disaster in such a way that it could be recognized as Yahweh's deed, a severe disciplining in order to purify Israel for her renewed role in the days to come. The last was the prophetic interpretation of Israel's experience.²⁷

With Israel's understanding of their exile as being a purifying punishment, it is difficult to look beyond that to see God's loving act of reconciliation. This was Israel's perception of what God was doing; our perceptions of God don't always tell the entire story.

The way the people reacted to this tragic event teaches us a great deal about the character of God and the true nature of obedience. Throughout this disaster, the people had a prophet, Jeremiah, looking after them and giving them advice. As always, some people listened and some did not. Karl Budde points out that

[T]his picture of the average religious position of the people is by no means a product of the imagination, nor based on simple conjecture. Every trait is assured and guaranteed by the indisputable testimony of the faithful prophet who lived through this whole time, in the very midst of its critical events, and contemplated them from a superior height; I mean, of course, the prophet Jeremiah.²⁸

²⁷ Stanley Frost, "The Book of Jeremiah," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 373.

²⁸ Karl Budde, *Religion of Israel to the Exile* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1899), 186.

As important as Jeremiah is to our understanding of the exilic period, some of the language that we use can be a bit misleading. W.F. Lofthouse helps to clear this up when he writes,

[T]he word “exile” is misleading.... It was the transportation of a whole society—men, women and children—so that they could begin something of their old life elsewhere. All classes were represented, priests, merchants, artisans, and craftsmen. They could organize both their worship and their business. The only thing impossible for them was political self-government, and even thus they were not necessarily much worse off than their new neighbors.²⁹

While not being as bad as it could be, this was not initially a very pleasant situation.

Zedekiah was the king in 586 BCE when Jerusalem was captured and the Temple destroyed. Jeremiah had some words for him that came from God. Jeremiah 38:17-18 reads,

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from their hands.’”³⁰

In all of the stories that have been discussed, elements of fear, shame, and guilt appear to be present. Zedekiah seemed to have these elements present in him when he acted as well. This response is completely understandable, as are many of the things that people do to separate themselves from God. To Zedekiah, the Babylonians were an evil enemy. It was very difficult for Jeremiah to convince him that God would use these evil people to do God’s will. Perhaps God was merely working through the circumstances and directing the Israelites toward the path of reconciliation. Despite the difficulty of the message, Jeremiah was directing the people to act out of faith and not to fight back against the Babylonians. Maybe God is foretelling the future in some way, or maybe what the prophet is suggesting here is simply, “Be smart.” Wisdom dictates

²⁹ W.F. Lofthouse, *Israel after the Exile* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1957), 1.

³⁰ NIV

that under circumstances like these, the lesser of bad choices is to not fight back and live to see another day. God is clear about what decision is best; however, the fear was too much for Zedekiah. Charles Kent points out that “[m]any of the Hebrews acted on Jeremiah’s advice and surrendered to the enemy. Zedekiah himself would have been glad to have followed the counsel of the prophet, but he did not dare and the nobles who persisted in continuing the resistance were apparently as lacking in ability and courage as they were in moral character.”³¹

The Israelites were isolated, separated, and scattered as a result of the Babylonians’ capturing Jerusalem. Giuseppe Ricciotti puts it this way:

The tempest which had uprooted Israel from the land of its fathers struck it three main blows. The first, by way of warning, was the deportation of the year 597 BCE; the second, the destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of the year 586, caused the principal damage; the third, completing the destruction, as it swept away the turbulent remains and dispersed them in the deportation of the year 582.³²

Many different kinds of people were now in many different places because the exile was not one big event, but three. In addition, not everyone was even deported. Ricciotti says, “Many who were supposed to go escaped the deportation; many of the lower classes, especially the peasants and shepherds scattered about the countryside or the steppes, were of little concern to the Chaldeans as possible political agitators.”³³ This means that the exilic situation is extremely complex, and it is impossible to make too many generalizations. However, one thing that is certain is that none of the Israelites had a temple in which to worship.

Location was at the heart of religious life during the time of the exile. It was commonly understood that gods dwelled in certain places and that those places were necessary to worship. To worship God in a place other than the Temple in Jerusalem caused many problems for the

³¹ Kent, 301.

³² Giuseppe Ricciotti, *The History of Israel*, Second ed., vol. II (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), 55.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

Israelites. According to Elias Bickerman, “A deity was inseparable from his or her abode. The god of the new temple, perhaps, was a double of but not identical with the god of the mother-country.”³⁴ Because, in Judah, the people had gone so far astray and could barely recognize God anymore, this exilic period was a chance for people to connect to God as individuals. They did not even know what it meant to worship God now and in many ways had to start from scratch. Bickerman continues, “Accordingly, the true zealots of the ancestral deity were reluctant to transfer their homage to another idol of the same name.”³⁵ To prevent the very idolatry that had led to the exile meant that the understanding of the nature of God and the paradigm of worship had to shift. The circumstances of the Israelites changed, so their understanding of God and worship had to adapt accordingly. Budde says, “Further, the way was thereby paved for another and more important step, that from a national to an individual religion, a step which Jeremiah himself took, although unconsciously.”³⁶ God didn’t stop being the God of the nation of Israel, but the individual component was added to the communal experience of God. The Temple wasn’t a negative part of the faith, but when the Israelites didn’t have the Temple, their circumstances taught them more about God. The faith and worship of God was getting deeper through the shared experience of the Exile.³⁷

Jeremiah was not the only prophet that helped the Israelites take this step in their faith. Many scholars agree that Ezekiel was with the first group of exiles in 597 BCE. He talked a great deal about why the Israelites were in such a dim situation, but also spoke of this shift in theology. Charles Whitley writes,

³⁴ Elias Bickerman, “The Babylonian Captivity,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. W. D. Davis and Louis Finkelstein (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984), 353.

³⁵ Ibid., 353.

³⁶ Budde, 196.

³⁷ Budde.

In the homeland of Judah it was believed that Yahweh was only concerned with the nation and the community, but in Babylon the exiles would come to know that Yahweh was a God who could be approached individually and with whom personal communions could be made. Accordingly, Ezekiel was determined to teach the exiles a new value of the individual and, consequently, a new conception of God.... The old Israel had come to an end, and the new era of the individual was about to be inaugurated.³⁸

The communal aspect of faith doesn't diminish, but the additional idea that individuals have their own personal relationship with God began to form. Jesus continues to develop this idea in the Gospels.

The Jewish people, God's chosen people, are now in a very difficult situation. The ones that listened to God through Jeremiah were left alive, but what kind of life were they living? This is hard to know, and what we do know is secondary, coming from the prophets. Bickerman says, "The internal life of Babylonian Jewry, however, remains completely closed to us. What we know comes from the prophets of the exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, and their data, chronologically and psychologically, bear on particular situations."³⁹ The prophets illuminated the issues of the people as they sought to bring hope and purpose to a community that was scattered and discouraged. The first advice Jeremiah gave on how to handle the Babylonian attack was to be obedient to God and to surrender.⁴⁰ As difficult as this was to do, it taught the Israelites, and teaches us, that God is at work and in control. According to Budde, "Israel now recognized that the enemy had not conquered them against Yahweh's will, but had only carried out His purpose. Yahweh was again not the vanquished, but the victor."⁴¹

This lesson that God taught was not, and still is not, easily swallowed. Bickerman again portrays how the Jewish people must have been feeling:

³⁸ Charles Francis Whitley, *The Exilic Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 99.

³⁹ Bickerman, 350.

⁴⁰ Jeremiah 21:8-10

⁴¹ Budde, 192.

Consider now the situation of Babylonian Jewry. They were not emigrants, but captives forsaken by their own deity, because of their sins. They believed that God had rejected both Israel and Judah. Accordingly these outcasts, almost 50 years after the fall of their city, were still scorned by the nations. Their fate blackened the reputation of their God, Who was unable to rescue His city.⁴²

People were feeling very negatively about themselves as well as God; at the same time, the new people who surrounded them were also thinking negatively of both them and their God. These concerns were based on the assumption that each nation had its own God and that each God was the God of one specific nation. The idea of Yahweh being a national God rather than a personal God was already changing, but Yahweh's being unique to the Israelites was beginning to change as well. Whitley observes,

The solution which Ezekiel offers to this pressing problem arises out of his conception of being and the nature of God. Unlike his contemporaries in exile he conceived of Yahweh as a God who was infinitely more than the national God of Israel. The exiles thought that because they were in exile they were abandoned by Yahweh to an indifferent fate; but Ezekiel was concerned to demonstrate that Yahweh's influence extended to all known lands and people.⁴³

This is another idea that is revealed further through Jesus in the New Testament, but it seems that as the people's freedom was placed into proper balance, they understood that God was larger than what they had initially believed. Perhaps the idea was just beginning to take shape that Yahweh was more than just *their* God.

Another characteristic that displays the tremendous growth of the exiled people was that they were surprisingly monotheistic. Taking into account how immersed they were in idol worship preceding the exile, any amount of increased monotheism is surprising. Being in a new place around new people and possibly feeling forsaken by God, they were greatly tempted to adapt to the foreign gods. Bickerman warns that we should not "underestimate this temptation. These idols were revered with fervor and with great magnificence. The believers lavished on

⁴² Bickerman, 351.

⁴³ Whitley, 100-101.

them praise which used the same expressions as the Hebrew Psalms and prayers.”⁴⁴ So with the idols being so handy and attractive, how could they stay faithful to Yahweh? Bickerman continues by pointing out that it was important for the priests to speak against the other Babylonian gods at the beginning of the exilic period, but “when the Jews had become immunized against this danger, the rabbis disdained such argumentation. For them there was not the slightest need to argue and to preach against idolatry.”⁴⁵ It is interesting that the priests noticed that idolatry seemed to be diminishing during the exilic period, even though it was rampant in the time leading up to the exile.

Another way to tell of the decreased idolatry that took place during the exile is to listen to the prophets. There are three groups of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, those that lived before the exile, during the exile and after the exile. Their messages tell the tale of what the biggest transgressions were at the time. Comparing these prophets’ main messages can help to illuminate this transformation. Amos and Hosea are two of the prophets that lived before the exile.⁴⁶ In addition to the previously mentioned historical data from the Biblical text, these two prophets make it clear that idolatry was a major problem in pre-exilic Israel. The Interpreters Commentary reports “Amos’ purpose was to penetrate the veneer of self-satisfied complacency to the rotten core of the religious and social life of the leaders of Israel who proudly assumed their prosperity to be evidence of the effectiveness of their cultic observances. They had been ungratefully false to the faith of their fathers by syncretistic, if not pagan, Baalized ritual practices.”⁴⁷ Hosea’s message was about the “failure of leadership. Priests and cult prophets were worse than useless, and the monarchy itself was an affront to the real kingship of Yahweh. But the basic problem

⁴⁴ Bickerman, 354.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 355.

⁴⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Prophecy."

⁴⁷ Charles F. Kraft, "The Book of Amos," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 465.

was the cultural and religious sellout of the national life to Baalism, both by Baal worship and by paganization of the worship of Yahweh until the two were indistinguishable.”⁴⁸ It is clear that there was a great amount of idolatry going on before the exile, the prophets that lived during and after the exile help to illustrate the decrease in idolatry after the exile.

The prophets that were speaking during the exile were Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah while Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi lived after the exile.⁴⁹ Ezekiel shifts his focus after the exile occurs. Before the temple was destroyed, “Ezekiel revered the temple and was concerned for the ‘holy things’ of the sanctuary. He insisted that all offerings should be presented to Yahweh alone and urged obedience to the priestly traditions.”⁵⁰ As I previously mentioned, during the exile “Ezekiel is well known as a prophet of individualism. He was also a herald of divine love for each person. His message was that God loves the sinner and for this reason warns him though the prophet.”⁵¹ This message of love and hope was prevalent for the other exilic and post-exilic prophets as well. Ezekiel lived during the beginning of the exile and his prophecy contains many references to idolatry. William Brownlee says:

According to the superscription (1:1-3) and scattered notes (3:15; 11:24-25; 40:1-2) Ezekiel was among the first body of exiles taken to Babylon along with king Jehoiachin in the spring of 597. It is thus from ‘Chaldea,’ i.e. Babylonia that he is represented as predicting ruin for Judah until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 (chs. 1-24) and thereafter the doom of Judah’s neighbors (chs. 25-32) and the restoration of Israel (chs. 34-48).⁵²

The New International Version of the Bible contains 52 references to idolatry in the book of Ezekiel. Of these 52 references, 43 of them occur in chapters 1-24, before the Temple was destroyed and the major part of the exile occurred in 586. We see that idolatry seemed to much

⁴⁸ Charles F. Kraft, "The Book of Hosea," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 451.

⁴⁹ s.v. "Prophecy."

⁵⁰ William Hugh Brownlee, "The Book of Ezekiel," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 412.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 411.

more of a major issue before 586. Of the remaining 9 references, some of them refer to the idolatry of other nations and others speak about the time before the exile, reminding the Israelites why the exile happened. The shift within Ezekiel's own writing shows the decreasing severity regarding the issue of idolatry at the time of the exile.

The second part of Isaiah, which is thought to have been written during and after the exile, also has a message of hope for the future. "The prophet of the Exile stands out as one who most fully appreciated what the OT repeatedly emphasizes, that 'man's extremity is God's opportunity.'"⁵³ Haggai's central message is, "'Build the temple!' That the house of God has been in ruins while men have comfortable homes and spiritual depression of the struggling community"⁵⁴ This is a major departure from the previous message of the spiritual problems being caused by idolatry. It seems that while there were some positive outcomes to the exile, there were understandably some different problems that having no temple caused. This is why the post-exilic church ideally exists with the temple, not as opposed to it. Malachi's message is that "True religion produces morality. All that the prophet has to say hinges on his conviction that the day is coming when God will act for his people."⁵⁵

The scattering of the Israelites seemed to strengthen the relationship that people had with God, even though it caused them hardships and may have hurt them in other ways. A telling example of the Jewish faithfulness to God is in their names. Names were commonly changed for religious reasons, so you could tell the gods the people served by their names. In 538 BCE, two out of six people around Israel had pagan names; but, says Bickerman, "[T]wo generations later,

⁵³ Peter R. Ackroyd, "The Book of Isaiah," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 332.

⁵⁴ Roger N. Carstensen, "The Book of Haggai," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 501.

⁵⁵ Roger N. Carstensen, "The Book of Malachi," in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 511.

in 458 BCE, not even one among the companions of Ezra bore a pagan theophoric name.”⁵⁶ This means that there was a tremendous surge against the temptation of idols from the beginning of the exile and as time went on, idolatry began to fade.

Not only can the exile be thought of as an act of God’s love and grace, but it actually pulled the Israelites closer to God. When the people were shielded by the institution of the Temple, idolatry was much more prevalent than when that structure was removed. Any positive outcomes of this experience had largely to do with the person that God was using to show love and grace to the Israelites as well as give them direction, namely Jeremiah. Kent writes, “Even though he was despised by his generation and his counsels were almost universally rejected, through all this critical period he kept the true conception of Jehovah and the highest ideals of religion ever before his race, and prepared it unconsciously for the supreme crisis which came during the Babylonian exile.”⁵⁷ God used Jeremiah to work with grace and justice, towards healing the damaged relationship between God and the Israelites.

The Israelites had many mixed feelings about what was happening. They were strangers in a strange land and they dealt with this situation in various ways. Many false prophets were telling people what they wanted to hear, and Jeremiah was giving the people some very different advice. Jeremiah 28: 4-9 reads,

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage

⁵⁶ Bickerman, 356.

⁵⁷ Kent, 305.

them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.⁵⁸

Instead of telling the dispersed Israelites just to wait out the punishment or look to the future, God told them to make themselves at home and to live in the present. In response to their separation from the Temple, they were to integrate with their culture and develop relationships with the new places and people surrounding them. This is a very different approach than what might seem natural or what one might think he or she should do. It is also one major example of how the exile resulted in reconciliation.

In response to Jeremiah, one way that the Israelites dealt with being displaced and without a temple was to gather regularly. Since everyone was scattered, the people in each area began to get together with other Israelites and engage in religious practice. Ricciotti claims that these gatherings were “the beginnings of a system which was to create during the *diaspora*, or dispersal, a genuine ‘synagogue.’”⁵⁹ The term *synagogue* may have not been around yet, but this is where the idea started, that decentralized the Israelite religion from a temple religion to a synagogue religion. The temple could not be the center of worship anymore, and the people were forming groups and reclaiming themselves and their relationship with God and one another as the true center of worship. They were surrounded by people who were different from them in many ways, but this seemed to push them even closer to Yahweh. Whitley points out that “after the restlessness of the first few years the Jews seemed to have followed the advice of Jeremiah and settled down to life in the exile.... Ceramic evidence found within a radius of some miles north and east of the site also suggests that Jewish people continued to live within the vicinity until the final destruction of the town in about A.D. 900.”⁶⁰ The Jewish faith had shifted so much

⁵⁸ NIV

⁵⁹ Ricciotti, 67.

⁶⁰ Whitley, 70.

for some of the people that the exilic period lasted almost 1500 years, and they stayed in Babylon until Babylon was no more. Even after there was an opportunity to return to Israel and to the Temple, many people didn't place as much importance on it after their transformation during the exile. This time period had a dramatically positive effect on the nation of Israel, and Werner Foerster concludes this well, saying, "Thus with the exiles in Babylon there began a new chapter in the history of Israel. It is the greatest example in all history of the rebirth of a nation from within. In exile Israel was delivered from the evil impulse to idolatry, says a later rabbinic pronouncement."⁶¹

Balancing the Israelites' freedom appears to have helped them see God more clearly and moved them in the direction of reconciliation. Things were far from perfect, as Jesus was often quite critical of what the religion had become, but amidst great tragedy they were able to become more connected to God and one another, moving in the right direction.

As the Biblical narrative continues, we see Jesus and His disciples teaching about the same issues of vocation, freedom, and prohibition. The religious leaders at that time limited freedom and vocation. The disciples understood their vocation when Jesus taught them in Matthew 28:19-20, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁶² Jesus taught about how important freedom is when His disciples were picking heads of grain on the Sabbath and were ridiculed by the Pharisees. Mark 2:25-27, tells the story of Jesus' answering them,

"Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his

⁶¹ Werner Foerster, *From the Exile to Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 13.

⁶² NIV

companions.” Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”⁶³

And finally Jesus revealed God’s prohibition when He “cleanse(s) the Temple”⁶⁴ and tells the woman caught in adultery to “Go now and leave your life of sin.”⁶⁵ There were certainly acts that Jesus speaks against, but the religious culture at the time was very rule-based. There were so many rules that prohibition became the focus of Judaism at that time. For this reason, Jesus presented prohibition in a way that elicited a positive response from His followers. This response to Jesus’ teachings is evident in the beginning of the Christian Church after Pentecost in Acts 2:46–47, where it reads, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”⁶⁶ The temple was an important part of their worship experience, but they also met in their homes so God was the center of worship, not the temple. God is not only in the temple, but also elsewhere, the same lesson that was practiced during the Israelite exile.

The Christian Church began about 500 years after the Israelite exile and seems to fit a pattern of change in which we currently find ourselves. Phyllis Tickle writes, “About every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur. When that mighty upheaval happens, history shows us, there are always at least three consistent results or corollary events.”⁶⁷ Examples of this begin with Jesus, then Constantine around 500 BCE, the Great Schism around 1000 BCE, and the Protestant

⁶³ NIV

⁶⁴ John 2:14-22

⁶⁵ John 8:1-11

⁶⁶ NIV

⁶⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 16.

Reformation around 1500 BCE. Tickle is speaking of the Christian Church after Jesus but I would contend that God was acting in the very same way 500–600 years before Christianity, during the exile. It is easy to see how this time was part of the same pattern when Tickle shares the events that go along with the upheaval. She writes,

First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge. Second, the organized expression of Christianity which up until then had been the dominant one is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self.... The third result is of equal, if not greater, significance, though. That is, every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread—and has been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.⁶⁸

Just as God worked through the “unease and distress” of the Israelite exile, God is working for reconciliation in the Church today.

Our humanity is out of balance. We lean heavily on prohibition or ignore it completely; we restrict freedom and have lost sight of our vocation. However, on the other side of exile is hope. Rob Bell writes that Judah

turned their pain into poetry.... They hung up their harps.... The harp was a sound you heard when life was good. But the Israelites are not in Jerusalem anymore; they’re in Babylon. Where they hang up their harps. And they weep. They cry out. In Babylon. And what happens when people cry out? In Egypt, the cry kick-started redemption. In Egypt they cried out in their slavery, and God heard their cry and did something about it. Because God always hears the cry of the oppressed. When the system works for us, when we have the power and choice, when we’re ruling from Jerusalem, when we have no needs to speak of, who needs to cry out? Crying out reminds us of our dependence. Weeping leads us to reconnect with God.⁶⁹

If we listen to Tickle, Bell, or various other current theologians, we recognize that the Church is currently in a great period of change. God’s deconstruction of idols and institutions has led to growth and reconciliation throughout history. When the focus is taken off of God, this kind of deconstruction must take place in order for reconciliation to occur. The Garden of Eden and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁹ Bell, 53.

Tower of Babel stories that precede the exile are good examples of this. In these stories, God deconstructs the barriers that are interfering in humanity's relationship with God. The exile is the epitome of this deconstruction, and it resulted in many benefits regarding the Israelite nation and its relationship with God. The exile ironically seemed to decrease idolatry, had a theological impact by making faith deeper and more complex, and brought about reconciliation between people who otherwise would have been enemies. Lack of idolatry, stronger faith, and reconciliation are common themes that God works for throughout scripture. In his book *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Brueggemann teaches that "[G]rief should permit newness, holiness should give hope, and memory should allow possibility. All three affirmations argue that life comes out of death.... The experience of Israel is about brokenness and surprise, which comes to be the shape of the Jesus story. Indeed, the New Testament portrayal of Jesus is surely the rereading of the experience of Israel."⁷⁰

I believe that we have a great deal in common with the Israelites in 586 BCE, and that we are in the midst of tremendous opportunity. Rob Bell gives us the hope that we need to face the current exile, just as our ancestors did 2500 years ago. I will conclude with his hopeful and inspirational words:

Take away the comforts of the kingdom, deprive a person of the structures and institutions of empire, and they just might find the spine to envision a new tomorrow. Push a person to the limits of suffering, and they just might become revolutionary. And that is what happened in exile. Prophets rose up in the midst of all the despair and hanging of harps and proclaimed not the end but the beginning of something new. On the heels of colossal failure, the Jewish prophets imagined the greatest picture of hope and the future anybody's ever thought of anywhere. Something new for them, something new for all of humanity, something new for all of creation.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 132.

⁷¹ Bell, 54-55.

SECTION 4 – THE ARTIFACT

Project: *X-ile*, A Post-Exilic Community of Faith

Experimental groups seeking to engage the Christian faith in a postmodern context will often lack the resources, profile or success record of the Boomer congregations. By definition, they are new, untried, relatively disorganized and fearful of self-promotion. They reject the corporate model of their Boomer forebears, and thus do not appear, according to existing paradigms, to be significant. But don't be fooled. Somewhere in the genesis and genius of these diverse groups is hidden the future of Western Christianity. To dismiss them is to throw away the seed of our survival.

—Gerard Kelly, *RetroFuture* (as quoted in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, page x)

The claymation classic “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” depicts two very different communities. The first is the mainstream reindeer community composed of Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, etc. The other is Rudolph and the “Island of Misfit Toys.” Santa loves Rudolph, but doesn't know what to do with him because he is so different. The fact is that many (I would even say *most*) people in American culture identify with Rudolph and his friends much more than with the mainstream group. Whatever it is that makes us different, many times makes us feel cast out. The fact is, in American Society, we have many churches that focus on the mainstream “Dasher” group, fewer that are focusing on those that wish to become part of this group (often called seekers), but very few that focus on this “Rudolph” group of outcasts. The current system is meeting the needs of those with a positive opinion of the church and to a lesser extent those who are ambivalent. There is a large and growing population that is not only apathetic towards church, but is actually against church because of painful experiences they have had or perceptions they have picked up from various places. I will call this the “anti-church” community. Because people have been hurt by the church, a place of healing must exist to reconcile these people into the church as well as repair the perception that many people have of the church. *X-ile* will be this environment.

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MRI Church

Dr. Leonard Sweet points out that it may be the very structures and systems of the current institutional church in the United States that is preventing them from being a reconciling environment in the world. In his book, *So Beautiful*, Sweet describes many of the mainstream American churches as “APC” churches. APC stands for “Attractional,” “Propositional,” and “Colonial.” He claims that this is not a healthy system and that the culture is moving further away from the church so that “[I]f you are reading these words, you are likely the last generation to be familiar with the Christian story and for whom churches have cultural significance. And you will die, leaving behind a culture for whom the Christian story will be completely unknown.”¹ We are going to have to change the system of the Church if we are to reconcile the relationship between it and the surrounding culture.

The reason that the church must change is that the culture is changing all around it. If the culture changes at a different rate than the church, the connection between the two is strained at the very least and that makes a graceful and just healing of relationships difficult. The magnitude of change going on in American culture right now has not been as great “since the fourth century (the Constantinian captivity), since the eleventh century (when East and West split), or at the very latest since the sixteenth century (when the West split into Protestant and Catholic).”² We are in the midst of a tremendous transition that provides a great opportunity to go back and use ancient ideas in the current context. Sweet continues, “It is time to push the reset button on Christianity—the original operating system—*not* just back to Acts 2 which was another

¹ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 20.

² Ibid.

rebooting accomplished by the incarnation, but back to the original Genesis 1 and 2 operating system.”³

Sweet’s solution is not to merely do different things as the church, but to transition from our current APC systems back to the ancient model of the “MRI” church. Sweet writes,

The cutting edge of what the Spirit is up to is not mortar-happy churches, or megahappy churches, or emergent-happy churches, or revolution-happy churches, or bigger and better mousetrap churches. It is MRI churches. Not come-gather churches, but as-you-go-scatter churches. Not an “in here” church, but an “out there” church.” MRI stands for “Missional,” “Relational,” and “Incarnational.”⁴

This is an alternative to the APC idea in that a church should be missional instead of attractional, relational instead of propositional and incarnational instead of colonial. Sweet’s suggestion plays a large role in the philosophy of *X-ile*.

Unchurched Non-Christians

In the book, *Church for the Unchurched*, George Hunter talks about churches that target four types of people: “Churched Christians,” “Churched Non-Christians,” “Unchurched Christians,” and “Unchurched Non-christians.” Hunter writes, “Churches differ in which of those populations they ‘target.’ Many growing churches effectively target unchurched Christians—people who believe but do not belong.”⁵ This is constructive as it adds community to their belief systems. Other churches “show less ‘numerical growth’ than ‘kingdom growth’ because they target churched non-Christians—helping nominal church members experience reconciliation with God and become genuine disciples. Some churches even target churched Christians from other churches!”⁶ *X-ile* is a church that targets the last group, the unchurched non-Christians.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Hunter, 26.

⁶ Ibid.

While I understand the difficulty of such a venture (kind of like starting a steakhouse for vegetarians), it is a worthwhile and important endeavor because it will work towards the gracious and just healing of the broken relationships between Christians and non-Christians. Hunter claims that churches which are successful in this goal believe that they are “‘sent out’ by God to reach one or more distinct populations;” “adapt to the language, music, style, and forms of their target population’s culture;” and that have “theology and message center upon the gospel of early apostolic Christianity.”⁷ *X-ile* strives to reach unchurched pre-Christians, is intentional about its focus on the early church and the Israelite exile of 586 BCE, and uses the environment and language of the surrounding culture to create a community of faith that is scattered and in touch with those around it.

Third-Culture Church

The culture of the church is discussed in comparison with or in contrast to the culture of the world. While these cultures can be very different, the Christian mission is not to convert people to our culture, though that is what seems to happen quite often. I believe that there is a healthier way to perceive this distinction in a way that leads to reconciliation. Dave Gibbons refers to this idea by thinking of it as a “third culture.” He writes, “Third culture is a term used by sociologists and by foreign-service workers whose children are immersed in foreign cultures because of their parents work. Sociologists observe that children in such circumstances feel compelled to come to terms with their indigenous culture but also must assimilate into the new culture their parents have plunged them into.”⁸ In order for the church to be effective in engaging “unchurched pre-Christians” we must be in this third culture. The culture of the world is what we

⁷ Ibid., 151-152.

⁸ Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 20.

all have in common so we must be comfortable there as well as within a culture that a faith community provides.

There are a tremendous number of obstacles created when Christians go to a location where one type of culture exists and try to bring people to a different place where another type of culture exists. Unless they are comfortable with third-culture thinking, this former kind of evangelism often pushes people away. Despite this dilemma, this seems to be a very common evangelism technique for United States churches. If people are used to church culture and comfortable in it, this can work. However, for people who come from a different culture it can be shocking and even disturbing. For this expanding group of people that *X-ile* is trying to be in community with, this type of evangelism doesn't work. *X-ile* is a third-culture church because the people that it is trying to reach determine the location where it gathers. Gibbons points out that in order to be a third-culture church, "church and ministry in the 21st Century" should primarily "be about people, not a place" and "to be a playground where everybody plays."⁹ In addition to valuing people and relationships over having a static location, *X-ile* will address the top-down clericalism of the institutional church. Gibbons introduces this idea when he writes that "our ideas about who's qualified to lead in our churches and ministries and how they can participate has created a barrier for us in today's culture."¹⁰

Decentralized Organization

If Jesus is the leader of the church, then perhaps the church can act without a certain person being the leader. In fact, the church is able to act with no static leader who is always in charge. As we will see, leadership always exists, it just doesn't have to be constantly coming

⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰ Ibid.

from the same place nor does it have to be an “expert.” The story of Cortes coming to conquer the New World illustrates how this type of organization operates. In 1519 CE, Cortes found the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. He “expected to see savages, but instead he encountered a civilization with a population of more than 15 million, its own language, an advanced calendar, and a central government.”¹¹ The Aztecs were extremely centralized and had a very beautiful capital city with beautiful temples and pyramids. They were built around their beauty just like many beautiful church sanctuaries today.

The centralized organization of the Aztecs eventually led to its demise. After Cortes killed the leader, Montezuma,

chaos ensued. Cortes and his army surrounded Tenochtitlan. They barricaded the roads, preventing any food from entering the city, and they blocked off the aqueducts. Within eighty days, 240,000 inhabitants of the city starved to death. By 1521, just two years after Cortes first laid eyes on Tenochtitlan, the entire Aztec empire—a civilization that traced its roots to centuries before the time of Christ—had collapsed. The Aztecs weren’t alone. A similar fate befell the Incas.¹²

The centralization of the tribes is what made it so easy for Cortes to defeat them. Clearly there are benefits to these types of organizations, but so much of the organizations fate is tied up in the quality and existence of its leaders. When the leaders fail, or die, the entire entity is at risk. We all know countless examples of church leaders failing and their ministries dying because of it, and that’s just since the 1980’s. Perhaps the problem begins when it becomes someone’s ministry instead of God’s ministry. The church is more able to embrace this other type of leaderless model than any other organization because its leadership doesn’t lie in a person at all, it lies in God.

¹¹ Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2006),

16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

The Spanish discovered the power of the decentralized organization a short while after these major conquests. Brafman and Beckstrom write, “These monumental events eventually gave the Spanish control of the continent. By the 1680’s, the Spanish forces seemed unstoppable. With the winds of victory at their backs, they headed north and encountered the Apaches.... The Spanish lost. They lost to a people who at first seemed primitive. Unlike the Aztecs and the Incas, the Apaches hadn’t put up a single pyramid, paved a single highway, or even built a town to speak of.”¹³ Not only did the Apaches defeat the Spanish, they took over some of what they had previously conquered and “continued to hold off the Spanish for another two centuries. It wasn’t that the Apaches had some secret weapon that was unknown to the Incas and Aztecs. Nor had the Spanish army lost its might. No, the Apache defeat of the Spanish was all about the way the Apaches were organized as a society.... They distributed political power and had very little centralization. The Apaches persevered because they were decentralized.”¹⁴

The marks of a decentralized system are: flexibility, shared power, and ambiguity. This idea is foreign to many of us because it seems that without a set autocratic leader, there would be chaos. This is because most of us are used to having this type of leader and in a system set up for the power to be with one individual or a group of individuals, there would be chaos without a leader. However, in a system set up with the power being well distributed, it works differently. Brafman and Beckstrom point out that in this kind of system, “everyone is entitled to make their own decisions. This doesn’t mean that a decentralized system is the same as anarchy. There are rules and norms, but these aren’t enforced by any one person. Rather, the power is distributed

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

among all the people and across geographic regions. Basically, there's no Tenochtitlan, and no Montezuma."¹⁵

The story of God in the Bible is a story about groups of people like the Israelites and the Apostles following God to the best of their abilities. They weren't always involved in a strict organization, although at times they were, and they made mistakes often not know what they were doing. The times that they followed God with less structure were especially evident during times like the Israelite exile of 586 BCE. Leadership looks different in a system that is not organized like we are used to seeing. Because the Apaches also lived in this kind of system they exemplify this kind of leadership. Brafman and Beckstrom illustrate:

Instead of a chief, the Apaches had a Nant'an—a spiritual and cultural leader. The Nant'an led by example and held no coercive power. Tribe members followed the Nant'an because they wanted to, not because they had to. One of the most famous Nant'ans in history was Geronimo, who defended his people against the American forces for decades. Geronimo never commanded an army. Rather, he himself started fighting, and everyone around him joined in. The idea was, 'If Geronimo is taking arms, maybe it's a good idea. Geronimo's been right in the past, so it makes sense to fight alongside him.' You wanted to follow Geronimo? You followed Geronimo. You didn't want to follow him? Then you didn't. The power lay with each individual—you were free to do what you wanted. The phrase 'you should' doesn't even exist in the Apache language. Coercion is a foreign concept.¹⁶

The absence of coercion is consistent with the Gospel message in several ways. Just as the Apache model of leadership did not come from coercion Jesus also advocated leadership apart from coercion. He takes coercion head on in Matthew 5:39-41 when He says, "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."¹⁷ In this passage, Jesus was not talking directly about leadership, but the principles certainly apply to it. Jesus didn't teach the

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ NIV

disciples to live one way and then lead another. These ideas are consistent to both a way of life and leadership. In Matthew 15:1-11 the Pharisees tried to get Jesus to coerce His disciples to wash their hands before they ate, Jesus rebuked them and then taught a lesson saying, “Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”¹⁸ One final example is when Caiaphas, the high priest, *asked* Jesus for coercion when Jesus’ very life was at stake.

Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”¹⁹

Even when it was a matter of life and death Jesus refused to coerce people into doing what He wanted them to. Coercion wasn’t what He taught or practiced and for this reason this leadership model seems to fit very well with the church.

Not only does this lack of coercion assist in creating and maintaining a decentralized organization, it also is the very fiber that makes it effective. The Apaches portray how the lack of structure can contribute to success. Brafman and Beckstrom write,

Because there was no capital and no central command post, Apache decisions were made all over the place. A raid on a Spanish settlement, for example, could be conceived in one place, organized in another, and carried out in yet another. You never knew where the Apaches would be coming from. In one sense, there was no place where important decisions were made, and in another sense, decisions were made by everybody everywhere. On first impression, it may sound like the Apaches were loosey-goosey and disorganized. In reality, however, they were an advanced and sophisticated society—it’s just that a decentralized organization is a completely different creature.²⁰

A decentralized community has to be flexible enough to adapt to the circumstances that surround it. This is especially important in a culture that is extremely diverse and changing very

¹⁸ Matthew 15:10-11, NIV.

¹⁹ Matthew 26:62-64, NIV.

²⁰ Brafman and Beckstrom., 21.

rapidly. Sharing power in this kind of system allows no one person to dictate what the community is or what they do. It also places the whole community above any one leader, so if something were to happen to a leader, the community wouldn't crumble. It also provides an opportunity for a greater number of leaders and more diversity. In an ambiguous system, it is much more difficult to exclude or marginalize anyone because there is diversity built into the system itself. There is less concrete doctrine or dogma to push people away or to make. These aspects of the Apache culture "made the Apaches immune to attacks that would have destroyed a centralized society."²¹

The reason this worked was because when one leader was killed off a new one would emerge. The same tactics won't work to fight against this kind of system. "No one person was essential to the overall well-being of Apache society."²² Not only does this kind of system survive traditional attacks, but it actually seems to thrive because of them. In an age where everybody seems to know every mistake a leader makes, we need a system where the power and authority aren't in one person, especially in the church. The Apaches make a great model and example for the church in our current climate. Brafman and Beckstrom conclude with a major principle of decentralization when they write, "When the Spanish attacked them, the Apaches became even more decentralized and even more difficult to conquer. When the Spanish destroyed their villages, the Apaches might have surrendered if the villages had been crucial to their society. But they weren't. Instead, the Apaches abandoned their old houses and became nomads."²³

The Apaches were proficient at being a decentralized organization because it was inherent in their culture. We are attempting to create this kind of culture, so steps must be made

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

to transition from the current church culture to these ideals. *X-ile* won't look like any of these systems right away. It will take time for both the "churched" culture and the very centralized Western culture to embrace these ways of being. We have to start where we are in order to become what we want to become and what I believe God wants us to become. Learning from the great wisdom of these four ideas, *X-ile* will be Missional, Relational, and Incarnational; target unchurched pre-Christians; a third culture movement; and it will move toward being a decentralized organization.

Don't Hate me Because I'm Beautiful! - *X-ile*'s Church Model

A Church Without a Building

X-ile will be modeled after the "post-exilic" church as a church without a building. Church buildings are symbolic in several ways. To people who like church, they symbolize good things, while to the anti-church people they represent pain and oppression. It stands to reason that people who are in church value the building (temple) but those who are outside, may not. If we are going to target anti-church people it makes sense that we would not use a building because of the baggage this symbolism may contain. Additionally, we acknowledge and embody a shift from being colonial to incarnational by not being bound to a church building and being active and involved in the community. Instead of inviting people to come into existing churches, *X-ile* will go out to where people already are. This church will meet in houses, parks, the mountains, the mesas, coffee shops, bars, bowling alleys, movie theaters, and anywhere else that anti-church people congregate. As one of its main intentions, the ministry will work hard to be a blessing to the community that surrounds it. In fact, since there is no staff and no expenses, all of the money donated to *X-ile* will go to bless the community that surrounds it. The people in *X-ile*

will see themselves as sent to the community they are a part of, and will be missional and apostolic in this way.

Communities

Relationships will be the basis for *X-ile*. The best way (and possibly the only way) to create a reconciling environment is to improve and foster relationships. To make the previously mentioned shift from a propositional church to a relational church, people need to first know and then deeply care for one another. One good way to foster such relationships is to utilize small groups, which we will call communities. This idea resonates with a scene in the movie *Mallrats*. In the movie, when someone refers to the pretzel stand as “the Food Court” Brody explains the difference by referring to the pretzel stand as an “autonomous unit for mid-mall snacking.” If current institutional temples are like the Food Court, *X-ile* communities are autonomous units for mid-mall snacking.

In each of these communities, people can share and know people without the pressure of one-on-one and without the anonymity of a large group. Getting to know people on this level will also lead to a third-culture church. Relationships are the key to all of this. For this reason, communities will be part of the DNA of *X-ile* and will be one of the basic building blocks inherent in the church. As the communities grow, they will split to remain small enough to foster good relationships, provide more diversity in times and places the branches meet, and keep *X-ile* decentralized. People who want to form a new community will be encouraged to do so when one approaches 20 people or so, depending on the individual context. If anyone wants to start a new community at other times, they will be able to do that as well. Since these communities will form from other ones, the connection between them will be based on the relationships between the

people from the first community who are active in the new one. This is in contrast to any governing body holding communities accountable.

The Artifact: Website

A great tool for connecting the people and communities of *X-ile* as well as informing new people will be the website (www.x-ile.net). The website will give general information, link to each of the groups informational sites, as well as link to many different social networking opportunities such as Facebook, Twitter (<http://twitter.com/XileABQ>), a blog (<http://x-ile.com>), and an *X-ile* Ning site (<http://x-ilechurch.ning.com/>). The website will use a number of mainstream social networking sources—and not reinvent the wheel—to provide the greatest capability for social networking. The goal of this website is to work in conjunction with the *X-ile* community itself to get people together in as many ways as possible. This connects more people to an intentionally reconciling environment so that broken relationships can be healed in a graceful and just process.

The beauty of the website is that each group site as well as the main site is menu based so it is easily updatable by many different people, without anyone having to learn code. This may compromise the aesthetic a bit, but it is consistent with *X-ile*'s values by: not having a hired hand create or maintain a website, spreading out power and responsibility for the flow of information, and embracing open-source creativity. The sites are expandable and can link to Wordpress sites and other future growth opportunities. There is also an intranet included so that all leaders can communicate through the site privately if they wish, including through a chat room. The website and server space is donated by Professional Innovations Inc. and is guaranteed for as long as *X-ile* is in existence.

Who We Are - *X-ile*'s Personality

1. *X-ile* will grow and establish leaders who understand the common discontent with the church.
2. *X-ile* will provide an environment of reconciliation between Church and the anti-church culture.
3. *X-ile* will be made up of small groups as a necessary piece of the model.
4. *X-ile* will be intentionally Missional, Relational, and Incarnational.
5. *X-ile* will be a “third-culture” church.
6. *X-ile* will be decentralized, meaning it is flexible, ambiguous, and has shared power.
7. *X-ile* will not own any property.
8. *X-ile* will be a blessing to its surrounding community and 100% of the money donated to it will go to serve the people in the community around it.
9. *X-ile* will multiply as groups grow so that it doesn't grow by addition, but by multiplication.
10. *X-ile* communities will be completely autonomous outside of these guidelines that illustrate the personality of the larger community.

Conclusion

X-ile will be a church for people who are disenfranchised, cast out, or just plain tired of traditional church. It can be a place for people who have left the church (anti-church population), as well as a safe environment for those who have never even been in a church (unchurched pre-Christians). It will be an MRI church that will provide a sharp contrast to APC churches. It will be a decentralized, third-culture church that learns lessons from the people that lived through the Israelite exile as well as from people like the Apaches. Finally, *X-ile* will be apostolic in the

sense that it will be a people sent to be a blessing to others that are in and surrounding each tribe. The communities will grow and split to maximize and multiply these blessings.

SECTION 5 – ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION SHEET

Goals and Strategies

- The main goal for the www.x-ile.net is to provide easy access to all of the various social networking sites that serve to inform and connect people interested in X-ile.
- The current X-ile participants will use the site and provide feedback on the functionality and ease of use of the website.
- Success will be measured by the ability of the website to bring the people interested in X-ile together physically.
- The website has menu-based functionality and will be updated by people involved in the various communities of X-ile.

Audience

- The intended audience is a person already involved with X-ile as well as someone who wishes to become involved.
- The audience should discover some information regarding the purpose of X-ile as well as how to participate.
- The audience will be attempting to discover what X-ile is or wanting to connect to an X-ile community.

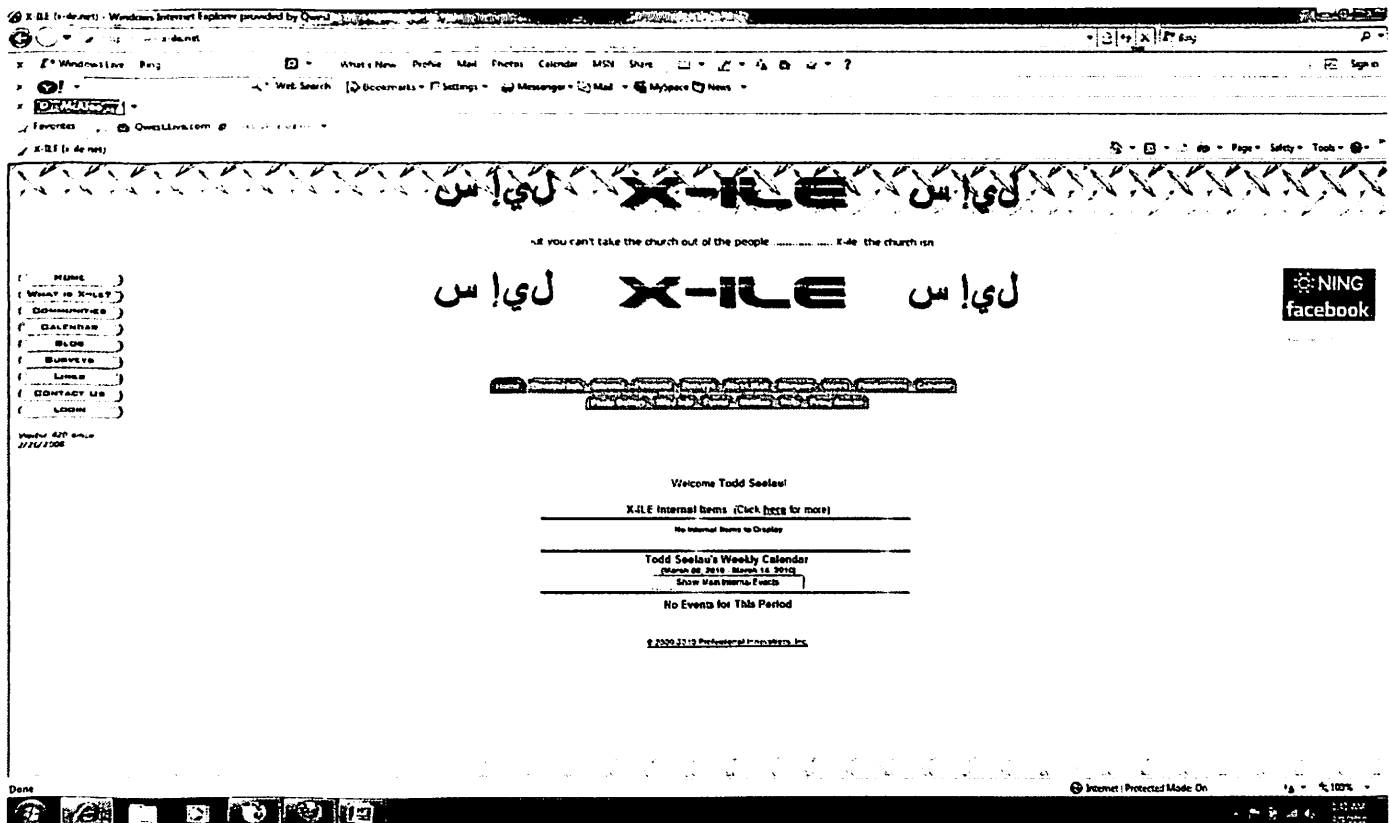
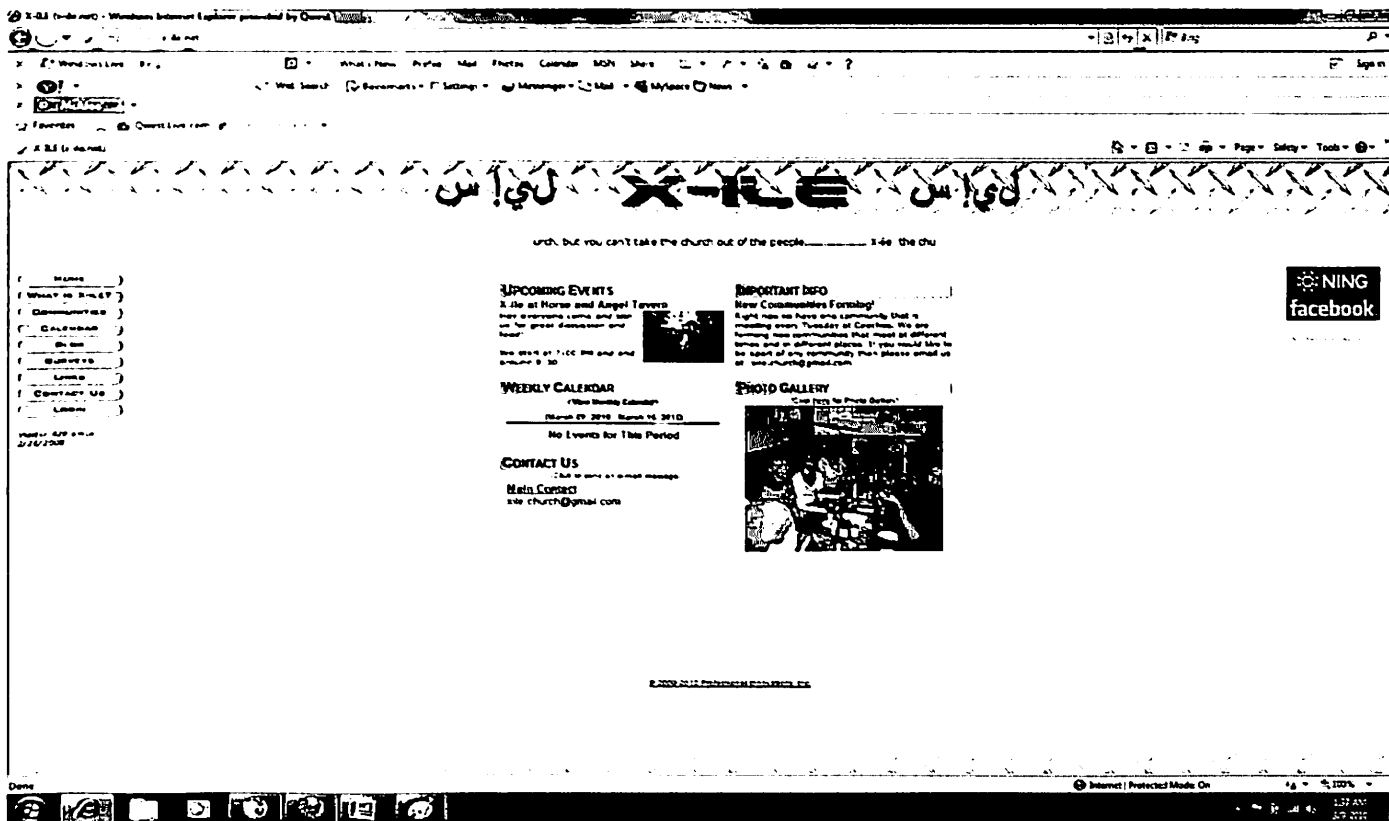
Budget

- The domain names and websites are all either done on free sites or donated by private individuals. The updating and support will be able to be done easily by most anybody involved in X-ile with basic computer knowledge.
- Professional Innovations Inc. provided all software and hardware necessary to set up the website. Any reasonably contemporary computer is sufficient to view and update the website.

Promotion

- The project will be marketed by business cards, stickers, t-shirts, flyers, postcards, links around the world wide web, word of mouth, and any other viral communication ideas we can think of in the future.
- The marketing strategy is consistent with the viral, grassroots, and organic nature of X-ile itself. Information will be given about the website and the marketing will be fueled by the curiosity and interest of people that hear about it.

SECTION 6 – POSTSCRIPT



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