

Advice for Aliens

sermon digest

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1 Peter 2:11-17

larry dipboye

Obviously Independence Day is a national, not a Christian holiday. Although we are celebrating with a July 4th church picnic at the Eyman's Watts Bar cottage, I seriously doubt that this national holiday will inspire many church picnics in England.

Fred Craddock calls into question the tendency to celebrate national holidays like Thanksgiving and Independence Day in American churches with three similar passages from New Testament Epistles calling for Christians to pray for kings, submit to authority, and to honor the Emperor (1 Timothy 2:1-4, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:11-17). We often bring these scriptures into our situation as if they were written yesterday with a call to be good, law-abiding U.S. citizens. Occasionally someone actually reads Romans 13 and dares to question any attempt to carry the teaching into our situation without serious concern. When Paul advises Roman Christians to be subject to governing authorities because they are ordained by God and suggests that resistance to the Emperor flies in the face of God, he does not describe the Roman authorities that later Christians described as evil incarnate. In the recent past, for example, we have applied this to the U.S. but questioned its application for China or Russia. To be accurate, first century Rome was closer to the Russian and Chinese socio-political situation than our own.

Advice for Christians living in the pagan Roman world seemed to acknowledge the importance of being good neighbors and of establishing a Christian reputation as people of honesty and decency, but Paul's claim that Roman authority is ordained of God, in some sense a holy government, is out of touch with actual experience. No one in Christian circles advocated for the title of *Saint Nero* for the Emperor of the first persecution of the church in 64 CE. Emperors claiming the place of God did not fit very well into the theology or worship of the early church. By the end of the first century, Revelation associated Roman government with Babylon and a monster rising from the sea.

The author of 1 Peter may have been familiar with Paul's previous praise for government authority, but he suggested a slightly different view. While calling for good behavior in the world and even submission to authority, 1 Peter draws a line of distinction between *loving* fellow Christians, *fearing* God, and *honoring* the Emperor. In fact, the honor due the Emperor is the same that one should pay to every person, "honor everyone." There is nothing here about government being ordained of God or emperors serving the divine purpose. Although the letter appears to have been written from Rome, it appears that the flow of Christian experience with Roman government has called for an adjustment in policy and advice.

Alien status can be the effect of Christian values. The address in 1 Peter 1:1 states, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion." This is one of seven catholic epistles addressed to the whole Christian community of the late first century in Asia Minor. That they could be called "aliens and exiles" speaks volumes about both the identity of the early Christians and their social status in the Roman Empire. John Gager (*The Catacombs and the Colosseum*, p.99) reported that most of the early Christian population "came from lower classes—slaves, freedmen, freeborn Roman citizens of low rank, and non-Romans of various nationalities." As displaced Jews driven out of Palestine after the revolution and destruction of Jerusalem of 70 CE, they may have been caught up in the scattered Jewish population. As people from the lower classes of society, the Christian self image was always identified with people on the fringe, "aliens and exiles." *Aliens* were permanent residents of a foreign place. *Exiles* were sojourners, pilgrims passing through. To be Christian in that world was to be a displaced person.

Although taken by modern readers of 1 Peter as a metaphor, the first recipients of this letter were literally slaves, outcasts, and aliens.

Christians may always feel like the song, "This world is not my home. I'm just a-passin' through"; but Christians of the late first century resembled the lyrics. They lived in a hostile environment. Christianity stood apart from other religions in the Empire because Christians reached down to the bottom of the social ladder that other religions chose to ignore. A second century pagan philosopher Celsus accused Christianity of being a low class religion because it appealed to slaves and outcasts. The church Father Origen refuted the charge, not by denial, but by welcome. The Christian faith like

the love of God reaches to the very bottom of society. The pagan criticism was right on target. Christians were proud to be called poor, low down, social trash. They had found that the love of God that flowed through the peasant rabbi from Nazareth did not recognize the social boundaries of the Roman world.

If you are keeping up with national news, you are aware of the surge of illegal immigrants crossing the Rio Grande River from Mexico and Central America. The immigrant processing station in McAllen, Texas, has seen a jump from fifty to three hundred a day in the past six months. The shocking difference is in the number of children, an estimated 47,000 in the last eight months. It seems that word has spread among the poor and oppressed people of Latin America that illegal children might be permitted to stay. Immigration patrols report hearing the same plea, that the refugees are trying to escape the violence of gangs in their home communities. Facilities are overrun with children, many who are sick; and anxiety is rising over unsanitary conditions and fear of epidemic, in addition to the inhumane living conditions in holding facilities.

The loose immigration policy in this nation before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has produced a reaction of fear and anger toward all outsiders who aspire to live in the U.S. and has been the direct cause of hostile policies and social prejudice. Christians have lost sight of our origins.

I have never known a day in my life of real hunger or serious rejection. As a white U.S. citizen from a working class family, I have had opportunities in education, travel, and employment that my Christian forebears would never have dreamed possible. In times past, I have been party to an attitude that I have found to be out of touch with the roots of my Christian faith. I have assumed that in some measure I have gained rights and privileges because of my citizenship in this country that are available to anyone who has the intelligence and energy to strive for the top. That is patently false! I happened to be in the right place at the right time in life, but opportunities available to me were not open to my parents. They were not open to people of color in my generation. And it appears that they may not be open to my grandchildren.

We need to remember who we are. Christians who are tempted to assume rights and privileges of social status based on divine right or national citizenship need to remember who we are and where we came from. If you reach back far enough in your family history, you will either find roots that identify you with immigrants from other countries or with Native Americans displaced by the settlement of this country. A large portion of our citizenship came here through the African slave trade, which is a blight on both the economic and social history of our country. If you keep on reading the advice to aliens in 1 Peter 2: 18-25, you will find a message directed to the behavior of slaves in the Roman household that our forebears took as justification for slavery.

My Baptist heritage connects to a people who were aliens and exiles in England, constant victims of harassment and imprisonment, who came here in search of religious liberty only to find new religious establishments and religious persecution in the Colonies. Who would have dreamed that one group of Baptists would one day claim privilege as the largest Protestant denomination in America or that they would one day be willing to toss out the separation of church and state. W. A. Criswell said in a 1984 televised statement: "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination."

Very few of us can claim aristocracy or royalty in our lineage. Although most of us feel that we have worked for what we have and who we are, we cannot in honesty claim that our place in life today is more deserved than the place of the rejected children crossing our borders every day. Most of us cannot begin to understand from experience the mentality of aliens and exiles in this country, but all who bear the name of Christ are called to identify with them.

Someone needs to speak for Aliens and Exiles. No one misses the point in reading the Gospels that Jesus was a peasant carpenter from Nazareth. His parents represented Jewish poverty that had come on the heels of Roman occupation. Like the Prophets of the Old Testament, the Gospels side with the impoverished classes, the poor, the hungry, the oppressed. No stretch of the imagination can place the appeal of the Christian Gospels on the side of the upper crust of any society. The word to the top one per cent is RESPONSIBILITY. The word to the aliens and exiles is JUSTICE.

Marian Wright Edelman (Child-Watch Column, June 6) recounts the message of Georgia Congressman John

Lewis to the college student leaders of Freedom Schools. He was an advocate for “necessary trouble” as he called for their place in working for justice in the generation to come. Lewis described the advice of his parents in his childhood much like the advice of my parents and the advice of early Christian leaders for people living in an unjust society. The word was “keep your head down.” To be fair, it was about good behavior, persuasion by compassion rather than force. We have to keep in mind, that people in first century Rome as well as in post WWII Georgia did not have a platform from which to speak for justice. Rocking the boat meant persecution and even death.

But Lewis called his audience to get into “necessary trouble.” He said, “Be brave. Be courageous, Speak up. Speak out.” Someone has to speak for the aliens of this place where we live. If not you, who? If not now, when?