# Salvaging Exile

*Why did Christ heal the sick and suffering if he didn't consider such external conditions important? Why is the kingdom of God equated with the deaf hear, the blind see? . . . And where do we get the incredible presumption to spiritualize these things that Christ saw and did very concretely?*
*We must end this audacious, sanctimonious spiritualization of the gospel. Take it as it is, or hate it honestly!*

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer[1]

Exile, as we often hear it in the church, refers to a "spiritual" experience, our sense of being "strangers in a strange land" but not *actually* strangers in a strange land. In this book, I argue the theological language of exile is inescapably bound up with the fleshy language of being an exile. Theologically, exile is flesh *and* it is spirit. Exile, indeed, may signify a disruptive paradigm shift, or a felt anxiety, or the modern sense of "homelessness," the idea that, as George Steiner puts it, we are "monads haunted by communion."[2] While not denying the power of those understandings, when exile comes to signify such broad and diffuse notions of experience, it can happen that we lose sight of the actual exile. Exile may refer to more than the exile of the body, but we must always remember that it will never be less than the exile of the body: the body deported, the body put into shackles, the body bruised, the body profiled, the body tortured, the body crucified. This book takes the body, the flesh experience of exile, seriously, which is to say, this book takes it theologically. The phenomenon of exile poses not only a sociopolitical and economic crisis, but a contemporary ecclesiological crisis. This book takes that crisis seriously by joining communities that live,

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Lazarus and the Rich Man," in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Isabel Best and trans. Douglas W. Stott, Anne Schmidt-Lange, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 37.

2. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 140.

worship, and witness in the borderlands of the twenty-first century, exploring their missiological and ecclesiological responses to exilic realities. But it also takes exile seriously as a societal crisis. We need to take the flesh of exile seriously, as flesh, as a problem of the economic and political body, as it is, and not as a "window" to see something else.

By and large, we do not hear the language of exile this way, as flesh and blood reality, at least not often in church on Sunday morning. This is odd. When the church speaks of exile it often speaks of exile as if it were a spiritual phenomenon primarily, as if exiles today did not exist, this despite the fact that, according to the United Nation's International Migration Report (2005), the number of people living outside the country of their natal birth (the official definition of a migrant) increased from 120 million in 1990 to 191 million in 2005;[3] despite the fact that nearly 11 million undocumented people live in the United States;[4] despite the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's official mandate to deport undocumented peoples in the United States;[5] despite the claim that, according to legal scholar and activist Michelle Alexander, the U.S. judicial and criminal justice system is growing the ranks of African Americans who cannot get jobs, escape poverty, find affordable housing, or contribute to their communities through democratic processes;[6] and despite

3. See "Global Migrants Reach 191 Million," BBC News, June 7, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5054214.stm, cited by Gemma Tulud Cruz, "Expanding the Boundaries: Turning Borders into Spaces" in *Mission after Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony, and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

4. Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, "Population Estimates: Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010," Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2010.pdf.

5. The Immigration, Control, and Enforcement (ICE) website states the following as its mission: "To identify, arrest, and remove aliens who present a danger to national security or are a risk to public safety, as well as those who enter the United States illegally or otherwise undermine the integrity of our immigration laws and our border control efforts. ERO [Enforcement and Removal Operations] upholds America's immigration laws at, within and beyond our borders through efficient enforcement and removal operations." See ICE website at http://www.ice.gov/about/offices/enforcement-removal-operations/. At the time of my writing, the Department of Homeland Security enforces its right to deport selectively, for example targeting persons who have criminal records. Additionally, under the present administration, deportation is being delayed by two years for individuals (who meet certain criteria) who come forward. While selective deportation may be a positive development, especially if it signals progress toward legalization, by itself "selective" enforcement of deportation orders operates as an ever-present threat, the guillotine always just about to be dropped. See also Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Peutz, "Introduction," in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

the displacement of indigenous peoples within national boundaries and the exploitation of indigenous peoples and their natural resources by transnational corporations.[7]

Often, despite the long list of instances of actual exile, it exists outside the ecclesiological imagination. Churches may offer charity to exiles but do not forge their identity as an expression of the church's solidarity with the alien. As a consequence, the church may be therapeutic but not prophetic; it may bemoan its loss of institutional privilege but does not actively contribute to the formation of theologically and ecclesiologically meaningful alternatives to contemporary patterns of political, ethnic, and cultural displacement; it does not foster the new community of Christ. When churches fail to see the phenomenon of displacement as a formal feature of the global financial system, their members come to view contemporary experiences of exile as routine rather than tragic and unjust. As a result, the witness of the church falls silent and its worship, no matter how progressive or orthodox, rings false against the rising tide of multiple assaults on human dignity.

Of course, congregations often hear pastors invoke the figure of exilic experience. This, in itself, is no surprise: the sociopolitical experience of exile supplies the "signature" historical problem within much of the Old Testament whereas colonization (a form of displacement) appears in the context of the New Testament. Interpreters are confronted on either side of the biblical spine with some refraction of that theme. Beyond the text itself, in the past twenty years or so pastors have been shaped by scholarship dedicated to the exploration of the language and theology of exile. Theological titles abound with some reference to the church's experience of displacement in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Additionally, perhaps as a response to the Great Recession, pastors and congregations are talking more about the disenfranchised. LifeWay Research shows a significant increase among pastors who are willing to speak about the needs of the poor and who report that the congregations they serve had "mobilized its members to directly engage and care for the poor in their communities." According to the study, which was based on a survey of 1000 pastors, in 2009, just 76 percent of the pastors affirmed this statement; in 2010 that percentage increased to 85 percent; and in 2012, it increased to 90 percent.[8] This seems promising especially if those statistical

6. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

7. See for example the chapter entitled, "Robbing the Poor to Feed the Rich," in Charles Clover, *The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat* (New York: New Press, 2006), 41–53.

numbers get translated into more holistic expressions of mission, worship, and witness. Nevertheless, even with these promising developments, the language of exile often shows up in ways that are either skewed or, worse, falsifying of core identities that nurture the life of the church with authentic foretastes of the new creation inaugurated in Christ's resurrection.

Sometimes, for example, we hear the language of exile when pastors remind their flocks, "You had options today; you could have gone to the beach or spent your Sunday morning with a hot cup of coffee and the *New York Times*. But instead you came to church." This might mean, among other things, that the people of the church enjoy the luxury of options, and participating in worship is one of those options. Perhaps it means we function primarily as consumers and the church is, likewise, one product among other products on offer on a Sunday morning. It may also be a compliment to the gathered community: while they had a multitude of options, they nevertheless chose church. They are, in other words, discerning consumers. Going a little further with this message, perhaps the pastor would argue that, no, we are not consumers after all but instead the called, baptized people of God. Nevertheless, the consumerist figure for exile would be about as close to exilic reality as the congregation would ever get. Never mind that in order to be a consumer one needs an ample number of easily exploited, mostly invisible people—namely, migrants and the working poor.

This example is not far-fetched. Student preachers, not unlike their ordained counterparts, frequently invoke the language of exile as a figure for the consumer, in psychological or spiritual ways, or, quite often, to underscore the institutional church's loss of privilege or its minority status in a secular world. Preaching from Mark 1:21–28 (the story of Jesus healing the demoniac in the synagogue), one student relates an "outdoor" worship event in which someone (not a member of the church) yells aspersions during the sermon, as if to "drown out" the witness of the church. The "stage lights" were so bright that, according to the student, the voice seemed to come out of the darkness itself. In this sermon, the world and the church exist in separate and opposed universes. One community, the church, is washed in light while the other, captive to the powers of chaos and secularism, remains buried in darkness. The preacher seems to draw a clear line of demarcation between the holy and the unholy, between those who belong to God and those who clearly do not. This proves an ironic interpretation given Mark's juxtaposition of the demoniac *in* the synagogue, to

8. Ed Stetzer, "The World as God Intends" in *Sojourners* (September–October 2013): 31.

say nothing of the paradox of the reign of God drawing near to the synagogue by way of Christ's interaction with a demoniac, the very expression of exile.

A more complicated representation of exile shows up in a Lord's Day sermon based on Isa. 60:1–7, the Lord's promise to gather those who had been dispersed. Introducing the message, the preacher, a student, compares the experience of displaced people in the developing world as analogous to what the people of Israel experienced: crushed, without a national identity, longing to return home but perhaps too lost to know or remember the way. The preacher also qualifies the analogy, saying that many in the church do not have this experience. They do not "identify" with the experience of exile. Nevertheless, they do know something like exile: the experience of losing a job (fully anticipating regaining equal or even better employment), a diagnosis of cancer (adequate health care almost always assumed), or depression (usually solved with a good mixture of corporately produced medication). The experience of the majority culture frequently eclipses the actual experiences of a growing minority.

As it happens, the sermon on Isaiah 60 was shared in an urban, mostly White congregation, where a significant number of the members live outside the downtown area.[9] They "commute" to church on Sunday. They would not claim to know exile concretely, but they may identify with it figuratively, as the preacher guessed. However, this is also a church where First Nations[10] peoples worship; where first-generation immigrants, living in subsidized apartments a

9. Throughout this book, I use the term *White* to refer to Caucasian peoples in the United States. I will sometimes use "majority culture" as a loose synonym. Neither term is perfect. The term *White* points to the sense that whiteness in the United States is not simply an "ethnic" identity but also a cultural construct that introduces systemic forms of racism. More positively, in ordinary speech, it is common for minority ethnic groups to refer to Caucasians as "White people" rather than using "Anglo-Saxon" or "Euro-American"; in the context of this work I wanted to privilege the space and speech of exilic communities. When people of color casually invoke the term *White*, it refers not only to an ethnic group but also to a historical and political relationship. Among Native peoples, European colonialists were first White and then, secondarily, English or German or French. Colonialism and missions were "colored" White from the start. Nevertheless, as a term, it does have drawbacks: many Whites, especially the poor, are excluded as well as manipulated by middle-class assumptions built into whiteness. Moreover, those who self-identify as "mixed blood" (as I do) can never be completely comfortable with the determinism that frequently accompanies language about ethnicity in America. And not insignificantly, the skin of poverty—and its different hues—is an abased "ethnicity" in the United States. For this reason, I will sometimes use the term *majority culture* as I try to name the plight of those who "slip" through the cracks of ethnic determinisms.

10. In the United States, indigenous peoples are either Native Americans or Alaska Natives. The indigenous peoples of Canada use the term *First Nations*. I will use that latter term inclusively for all indigenous peoples in North America.

few blocks away, offer their tithes, pray, and sing; where a middle-aged woman shares her battle with meth addiction during congregational prayers; where a man with a felony sometimes worships; and where others work two and three jobs, at shifts throughout the day and night and at different sites across town, just so they can afford to pay for health care. It is also a place where undocumented persons (their legal status mostly unknown to the congregation) have sometimes shared their gifts and, at other times, sought out sanctuary and help in times of crisis (also mostly unknown to the congregation).

Additionally, like many congregations and their pastoral leaders, the question of how to "mobilize" and "care" for the disenfranchised in the surrounding community is a very real one for this congregation. Perhaps, however, the congregation views the concrete reality of the exile as mostly external to its primary identity, where the exile receives "help" but whose life and gifts remain separate and distinct from the church's self-understanding. I witnessed in an all too personal way how this division in the body gets reflected in ways that tear at the deepest fabric of being a human community. Each summer this same church hosts an "ice cream social" at an adjacent neighborhood park. Ostensibly, the "social" was designed to introduce the neighborhood to the church and the church members to the neighborhood. But in fact, the spirit of the social seemed more like a missional flash, without deeper purpose, to the surrounding neighborhood, a predominantly low-income and African American community.

I had come to help alongside other volunteers, but our children, like the children from the apartments, began to line up, one after another, for the ice cream. Soon, the children were coming back for seconds or perhaps thirds. Maybe the small group of volunteers was beginning to feel overwhelmed as the crowd of children grew. Whatever the reason, it wasn't long before a volunteer announced that if a child had already been through the line once, she, the volunteer, would mark the back of their hands with a marks-a-lot pen. In this way, she explained, we, the hosts, could exert some "crowd control" over the growing numbers of children. I guess it seemed reasonable enough at the time. What happened next was not intended to hurt anyone, of that I am sure. But as the children crowded around her, my heart began to sink. One after another, she swiped the pen across the backs of their hands. And then my daughter, too, offered her hand, just as the others had done. And when she did, the volunteer laughed, tousling her hair, saying, "I don't need to mark your hand. We know you!"

Was it just an accident that the volunteer marked only the hands of poor, African American children? Was it an insignificant thing, a minor mistake at

most? Or was it a microcosm of a certain mentality, the predictable outcome of a congregational mindset that "helps" the poor but does not ultimately understand its life as arising from the communion Christ keeps with the crucified, the outcast, and the deported? A congregation that would recognize its own reflection but does not recognize the thirsty Christ, the welfare Christ, the profiled Christ, the drug addled Christ, the mentally ill Christ, the Christ forlorn?

When experiences of actually displaced communities shape neither the sermon nor the imagination of the congregation, the whole body, its actual and natural body, suffers diminishment. If these examples of preaching and mission are indicative of a larger pattern of interpretation, churches may imagine exile as a biblical category but it does not exist as a real, material phenomenon in twenty-first-century communities. And to that extent, congregations show an underdeveloped knowledge of theologically robust expressions of community amid exilic realities. Congregations may well invest themselves in activities designed to "help" the disenfranchised, but in so doing they risk masking how they themselves play a part and are stakeholders in the perpetuation of such dehumanizing realties.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that we misconstrue the gospel if we spiritualize the things that Jesus himself took as concrete realities. Of course, the reign of God proclaimed gives a mad man his right mind; a crowd oppressed by hunger a feast; a captive freedom. God's reign, inaugurated in Christ's resurrection, is more real than these concrete things. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer would have us remember these things, their reality. Perhaps he spoke as strongly as he did because he understood that in spiritualizing such things we risk losing the gracious and earthy character of the community formed by Jesus Christ. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche (the Ark) communities, houses in which persons with disabilities share a common life with able-bodied sisters and brothers, provides a glimpse of what the church might look like were it to take the body of the displaced as basic to its expression of faithful Christian community:

> The point of fidelity which distinguishes [the church] from institutions and hospitals is the call to live with marginal, wounded, and handicapped people. This living together involves much more than coexisting under the same roof and eating at the same table. We discover that we are members one of another, that we share a mutual commitment and mutual concern.[11]

11. Jean Vanier, "Reflections on Christian Community" in *Sojourners* 6 (1 December 1977): 10.

Someone might say, well, this is true, this is something we should try to remember, but in fact the biblical text does not exclude a "spiritual" reading of this term. It is not always and everywhere a literal term. After all, the text asks its readers to listen for the Word of the Lord. In this sense, the interpretation of exile that is more symbolic than sociological or political is a legitimate interpretative move. The text invites listeners to be addressed by something more abiding than the world of politics, economics, and ethnicity; to view the present suffering as not worth comparing to the future promise of glory (Rom. 8:18); to recall that "for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12a). However, while it is true that the text is never reducible to actual exilic experiences as such, the text never introduces the promise of God without a vital connection to human history. Always the two interact, with the actions of God framing every other reaction (economic, political, and historical) as a response to God's first activity.

Jeremiah, for instance, speaks of historical exile: "the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile" (29:1b). The historicity of the exile is, in Jeremiah's account, not in dispute. Yet, with Jeremiah, the overarching assertion remains ultimately and decisively that the exile is the work of God: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom *I have sent into exile* from Jerusalem to Babylon" (4), and "But seek the welfare of the city where *I have sent you into exile*, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (7). The historical experience of exile within the text may be easy to detect, but the more radical and sustaining witness of Scripture is that God is the *agent of exile* and, amid its reality, the one who will effect the promised return. Thus, when Paul, in Acts 13:17–41, introduces his sermon in Antioch, he uses the memory of Israel's captivity in Egypt and the Mosaic law to set the context for Jesus Christ's gift of the forgiveness of sins (38, 39). The gift of salvation far outweighs the narrative of captivity. That gift reframes every exile, whether personal or political. Another example appears in the salutation of 1 Peter: "To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1:1). In a similar way, exilic identity, no matter how significant in terms of trials (6), is framed by the assurance that they have been "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood" (2). The sanctification and election they know through the triune God operates as a surpassing antidote to the exilic condition. The condition of exile itself will not define the community, but instead the community "live[s] in reverent fear [of God] during the time of your exile" (17).

Exile is real enough, but the promise and electing activity of God frames the exilic narrative with a theological rather than merely political and economic narrative. These texts practically invite a "spiritual" or at least analogical hearing of the history of exile and displacement. At the same time, if exilic spirituality and symbolic relationship is all we hear in these texts, then we have not heard nearly enough—these texts provide a language for twenty-first-century experiences of exile. *Crucially, these texts upend the notion that the church is swept up by exile: it is, in fact, sent by God into exile.* With that theological agency within and throughout the church's political and historical context, the church gains a profound and subtle narrative for its interpretation and embodiment of its vocation in the world. If it is God's exile and only penultimately Babylon's, then the exile we experience now is not merely exile but promise, not merely displacement but the intimation of promised return, not merely the loss of coherence but the drama of our own humanization.

If we fail to detect the catalytic potential of theologically framed exilic narratives in our own historical context, we cut away the transformative dynamic of the worship and witness of the church in the twenty-first century. The uncritical spiritualization of exile contributes to the shape of the church, to the sense that the church is more of a chaplaincy than a mission, a club of likenesses rather than an unlikely community forged by God's reconciling love. Members of the church increasingly believe that the church is a zone for spiritual nurture but not necessarily a space for alternative politics and economies. The tendency to imagine exile primarily through the lens of a middle-class experience contributes to the sense that exile as actual reality is more likely to be found on the news or in a refugee camp in the Sudan or on a short-term mission trip, rather than in the next pew. Yet, more and more often, that is precisely where the exile is to be found. When this happens, not surprisingly, congregations often don't know what to do or how to be the church.

Rev. Eric Garbison, a member of the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri, tells me that he sometimes gets phone calls from churches looking for help with a homeless person who has started worshipping in their church. The homeless often have needs, one of them being a place to stay, but even more they need a community of hospitality. Church leaders often call to ask if Cherith Brook, a community situated in an impoverished area of Kansas City, will provide shelter (and community) for their homeless visitor.

"Sure," Eric answers, "but there's a problem. If you send this person to us, he won't be able to worship in your community anymore since your church is on 119th Street and we're on 12th Street and that's about a thirty-minute drive."

Instead of sending him across town or "deporting" him to another part of town, depriving the congregation as well as their newfound friend of a meaningful communal life, Garbison suggests that someone in the church open up a room in his or her home or, alternatively, the church convert one of its spaces into a temporary room, what the Catholic Worker House calls a "Christ Room."

"Do you ever hear back from these churches?" I ask.

"No," he answers, "no one has ever called back."

What if that conversation were to continue, not only to meet the particular needs of the homeless, but also to probe for the image of the church as exile, among exiles, and as antidote to exile? What might happen if the church attempted to think and theologize alongside the bodies of the displaced, not only the figuratively "deported" but the *actually* deported? Many of the deported are, after all, baptized people, shaped in the church where "spiritually nomadic" people worship. What if the church were to attempt to do theology with the accent of the mulatto, the real hungers and longings of a person eking out a life in the narrow, often highly exposed places of the borderlands, charting a migrant's trail of mixed ancestries, lost tongues, and multiple allegiances? What if liturgies, instead of being read in sanctuaries of symbolic churchliness, were performed alongside and among the drifting populations of the poor in America's streets? What kind of church might be born out of a conversation like that? What might all of us, those who experience deportation as "playfully inexact" metaphor[12]and those who know it as bodily displacement, discover about the Christ who dwells with us, about our lives in communities that simultaneously gather and send?

I am writing to continue that conversation on behalf of pastors and students who ache for a church that lives, worships, and witnesses on the sidewalks and underpasses of American society. I am writing for those who, in one way or another, met God on the margins. They looked and they caught a glimpse of God, a figure more like shadow than light, moving with the hungry and the restive. They looked and they saw God as God should never have been seen: as flesh, meat on a cross; asleep on a sidewalk; with skin blistered by exposure; a refugee on the run from bloodthirsty powers.

12. Walter Brueggemann coins this phrase, defining exile as "not primarily geographical but liturgic and symbolic" (15). See Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

They looked and they saw not only God, but the church God created, growing in the place where, by all rights, it should never have grown: among the sick, the broken, the lost, those without hope.

Many of us, maybe all of us, were formed this way, sometimes without knowing it or without knowing it deeply, in the community of those who were once numbered among the lost, in the fellowship of those who were once numbered among the dead; many of us were sanctified by their prayers; many were blessed by those the world cursed, healed by those the world wounded; many became wise through the folly and scandal of the saints.

Maybe we wonder if this church still exists, or if it does exist, we imagine it only in the spirit but not in the flesh; perhaps we ache to imagine its shape, its body in the world of principalities and powers. Many of us long to see this thing, not only in theory but in spirit and flesh, just as the people who listened to Jesus yearned for the fullness of his appearing. This book shares in that longing but also attempts to evoke that appearing with glimpses of God in the spirit and flesh of Christ's body, the church.

This book has another purpose: I am writing so that what I believe I have seen may find some friends—friends who will not only read the stories of this book but also take them as invitations to create new stories, new ways of being the church in the borderlands of the twenty-first century.

I am writing so that the church may grow with Christ and in the pattern of Christ, flourishing where, according to worldly criteria, it ought not flourish: outside the gates of the city, among the downcast, the wounded, and the crucified.

I am writing for the church that gathers to worship as exile, among exiles, and as antidote to exile.