Seminex Exile—Love It. Don't Leave It

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"Exile": the NT term for such as us

Many of us in Seminex have had to learn that the exilic tradition is a New Testament tradition, albeit a rather thin one. So it is not surprising that we continue to have trouble with it. The Old Testament context for the notion dominates. We cannot easily get it out of our heads that the term is retrospective, that it points back to the homeland from which we departed. Therefore we wish to be done with exile. "Enough of this looking back over our shoulder to the flesh-pots of Egypt," we say. "Away with words that pull us to the past, for God calls us—and all his disciples—into his future. Forgetting what lies behind, let us appropriate the apostolic counsel and strain forward to what lies ahead. We press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus!" Fine. Now what would be a good Biblically-rooted word to put that self-perception right up front out in the open?

Guess what? The word is "exile." Exile is the New Testament word for just such a time as this. Listen to Hebrews 11:13ff. "These all (sc. the great cloud of witnesses) died in faith…and confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For the people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

Exile, a thin tradition

The exile tradition in the New Testament is thin, but it is not a phantom. Besides the Hebrews passage there are only two other references to the technical term "exile." Both are in I Peter. All three references portray the same scenario. The exiles are separated from the homeland, but the homeland is not the one left behind. It is up front. Homeland is not where they used to be; it is where they have never yet been. That is what they "make clear" as they "confess" their exilic existence: they are not seeking "that land from which they had gone out," but a "homeland" (in the words of C. S. Lewis) "further up and further in.

The exile tradition is thin, but not absent in post-New Testament Christian history. Luther latches onto it in his hymn text: "Now let us pray to God the Holy Ghost….as from exile home we are wending. *Kyrieleis*." The medieval advent text sings:"Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel to ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice!" In other worship texts as well the exile tradition is preserved.

The thin tradition sprouting today

Jumping centuries we find in these last days that God's gospel *Platzregen* (passing rain shower), as Luther called it, is bringing the exile tradition to bud and blossom again. Stringfellow writes a book for exiles and aliens in a strange land. Neuhaus **in Time Toward Home** sets Christian exile existence as the *cantus firmus* of his orchestration for Christian presence in America. One chapter title reads, "Returning to Where We Have

Never Been.” Fortress Press announces a book on exile theology. And in that current weather map of God’s passing showers there has been this “who would have guessed it” cloudburst in St. Louis, namely, us.

Seminex as palpable *Platzregen*

How to avoid *hybris* when talking about one’s own Christian existence? One way is to let others do the talking for you. Bob Bertram reports from Munich that Wolfhart Pannenberg talks with delight about the promising future of exile theology in the USA because there is now the publicly visible and publicly designated community, Concordia Seminary In Exile, on the scene here. Most of what has appeared in the exile-theology *Platzregen* has been books. In St. Louis God has brought an exile community up out of the ground! “*Wunderbar*!” says Wolfhart, which being translated is, “Special treats!

Another way to avoid *hybris* when talking about the great things God has done with us is to let the word of God do the talking. The words of the Hebrews text are resources for seeing ourselves so that we can understand ourselves and thereby be able to talk about ourselves.

Confessed that they were exiles

“Confessed Exiles.” In Christian experience confession arises as phase two of a previously-initiated sequence. Confession is responding to a word that has been previously addressed to us. The Greek term in the New Testament says it literally. *Homology* is same-saying, that is, repeating, giving back the same words that the conversation-initiator said to you. Confessors same-say what God has first said to them. If the notion that they are exiles is a Christian notion that has gotten into their head,

then it got there because God say to them: you are exiles—as in Christ he does. And if in addition he provides them (as he has us) with the historical scenario, the *de facto* sign of homelessness, how can they avoid confessing about themselves the very words of the Hebrews text? We are exiles. Homeland is up ahead. We are gifted with the "realized ecclesiology" of an exile community.

To whom do such confessors make this same-saying speech? To three audiences. First of all to God, the speech-initiator, who likes to hear his own words coming back to him from people who believe them. Every tongue confessing this gives glory to God the Father.

Secondly they need to say it to themselves, criss-crossing the repetition back and forth to one another in the exilic community. Their temptation is constant—to leave exile with its theology of the cross and settle down for the several varieties of permanence that beckon from theologies of glory. So when the future is impenetrable, or the thin string of promise is fraying and tempers are too, they practice ping-pong homology: bouncing back and forth to each other the confession that this side of the parousia, exile is our permanent condition and that is God's good news.

Finally they do their confessing to the folks outside. For us at this moment that includes the folks who don't understand the last line of the previous paragraph—the pre-parousia permanence of exile as God's good news. Most often these folks are our friends. They are in the movement with us, but they do not always have a clear and specific perception of what Christian non-permanence in "permanent" exile is. So they need to have us samesay it over to them from God.

Making it clear

“Making it Clear.” Simplify, clarify, specify. With these three words Werner Elert (an unwitting Seminex founder) described the task of Christian theology in our increasingly non-Christian society. We may never be able to make it “perfectly” clear, but we owe it to the sisters and brothers in our movement to make it specific and clear enough, so they can see that the theology of the cross and the ecclesiology of exile spring from the same words of God. Especially when they urge us to get away from our exile hang-up, they must be helped to see that exile is part of the hang-up of the cross. Abandoning one is abandoning both.

God has given us an indigenous community of exile. We need to work out the indigenous ecclesiology of exile and theology of cross to go along with it. Here (as often in Bible and church history) God’s actions precede the theological legitimation thereof (cf. Acts 10). But confessors follow up the action with the appropriate Word that came to expression in it.

Had opportunity to return

The opportunity to leave exile persists. The big temptation is not to go back to 801, however. It is instead to go toward a future that is itself non-exilic, to find some homeland on a current map—geographical, denominational, institutional. We are, as John Groh likes to say, charting a course through a minefield. But the miens most likely to destroy us are not labelled Preus, Dallas Nine, or Shrinking Placement Possibilities in LC-MS. They are rather the mines of mesmerizing self-chosen futures; of financial and organizational links that will “guarantee” our existence; of phobias about our exposed flanks—in the courts, before our critics, and in the ecumenical world.

What does God want for his exiles? He wants them to make decisions (as they surely will have to) **not** thereby simply to select a future, but so that as many futures as possible are left open for tomorrow's move "further up and further in." As we move through the minefield we do not yet see which side of that field God has marked as our destination. And if in leading us he should suddenly reverse his direction, we need to hear (so that we may same-say it—that he was not above doing that to his ancient chosen people as well.

That is discombobulating, but it is not disorder. It is a different order, the new order of new creation. What it means concretely, we are just beginning to learn, but to learn it and concretize it is exactly our exilic desire.

Desiring a better country

"Desiring a Better Country." What could be better than the AELC? Denominationally, probably nothing. Yet it changes not one significant item of our life in exile. The landscape of AELC is indeed much more pleasant—no question about that—but it is not the homeland. Nor is it the "desire" for which evangelical Christians long.

Lest that sound like ingratitude let it be said again: AELC has the promise of being the best that any denomination could ever be for its own members and for the world those members desire to serve. But it is not that homeland for which exiles are bound. No one would say that exiles in movement through a land had ceased to be exiles just because they found an oasis of refreshment along the way. Isn't that precisely the selfunderstanding that AELC has built into its constitution? AELC and Seminex both acknowledge that the movement of exile Christians is more than the oasis; our destination is more than where we are up till this moment. Exiles have the audacity to

desire a better country, a better future, bigger than any moment or aggregate of moments in their present or past. Dare we say that without shame?

Not ashamed to be called the exiles' God

"Not ashamed." We do stick out like a misfit in the so-called normal landscape of churchly America. Wouldn't it be wise to cover that embarrassment, that "shame," by efforts to become normal and regular, to fit into the pattern of seminary securities: constituencies, finances, recruitment, curriculum, placement, faculty normalities? Nevertheless, when God sends exiles trouble, their first call is to not let the trouble go to waste. That entails not being ashamed of the trouble, for God is not ashamed to be the God of troubled folks. Fact is, he revels in it. Since he is not ashamed to stand with us in our darkness, at times illuminating only a small spot of it, then we can be of good courage too, like the Arch-exile of Hebrews who "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." That's how to handle such shame. Well then, how does such shame-less behavior end? It ends where the Arch-exile ended: "now seated at the right hand of the throne of God," i.e., at the "city he has prepared for them.

… He has prepared for them a city

"Our God-Prepared City." The writer to the Hebrews works with the conviction that the brash behavior he proposes is realistic. How often haven't we said and heard those words this past year: Be realistic! But what is realism? Theology of glory and theology of the cross each has its own realism. Theologians of glory, says Luther in the Heidelberg theses, call good evil and

evil good, but the theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. Considering the Realities involved (note the capital “R”), what is realism?

Are these five Realistic?

1) Our exilic existence and our exilic name are God-prepared realities. We have no grounds for being ashamed of them.

2) As the Constantinian glue between church and empire becomes more and more unstuck, our exilic community is no less than God at work lightening the darkness of our denominational and established churchly world for benefit to others. We are not our own.

3) Concretized homelessness is indeed bearable. It makes faith in the promise a daily community occasion—not just when the balance of mind and of bank account gets fragile.

4) Suppose we were to be threatened with a lawsuit, with a potential judgment against us that could kill us. What then? Let us model our decisions on the New Testament texts of such great witnesses as John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and protomartyr Stephen in their brushes with the law. Like the great cloud of other witnesses, our Seminex too will someday die. Surely the paradigm of trial and death verdict comes on rather high recommendation as one faith-full way to go. Is that morbid or capital-R-realistic?

5) Pressure from others in the movement to be rid of the exile notion should certainly be received with grace. But it should also be countered with our confession that we are taking signals from the Arch-exile up front on our precarious ledge, beckoning us on with the four words he addressed to Jairus. “Fear not; only believe.” No, we are not content with exile. Exile is not home. But with him up front it is the next best thing. It is not

the valley of the shadow of death. Once more in the words of C. S. Lewis, it is the valley of the shadow of Life. And the message comes bouncing back down the valley walls from somewhere up front: “Exile. Love it. Don’t leave it.”

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Exile–LoveIt (PDF)