

Returning From Exile

Dr. Raydel J. Riquelme



MINISTRY COACHING NETWORK
Caribbean/Latin America

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By Dr. Raydel

[Dr. Raydel is a surgeon from Cuba and is currently living in Dominican Republic. He serves the Church there and Latin America as a teacher and leadership mobilizer. He first was in contact with ICM's ministry in Cuba and his ministry is now part of ICM's Intl Ministry Coaching Network.]

A mentor and friend whom God has used for many years to help me understand the times, made a commentary on "exile" as God's method of disciplining, teaching, and purifying His People. I confess that for a long time it was an idea that I could not visualize in my mind for the Christian church. I often wondered, "What would the scene of the Church of Christ in exile look like?" I kept repeating to myself, trying to get convinced of something that deep in my heart I feared, seeing the precarious condition and the progressive worsening of the Church's spiritual health at this time, "that will not happen to God's people nowadays!"

These last three months have been a great challenge for my refusal to accept exile as a method of God for His people in these times. After several months without the usual meetings of Christian churches everywhere on the planet, the question rumbled more strongly in my head: "The Church, the assembly of believers GATHERED in the name of Jesus to share food, word, prayers, edify one another with their spiritual gifts, and share bread and wine in memory of its Lord (Acts 2:42-47), thus proclaiming to the world His return, has it indeed been sent into exile?"

That body, that united and well-coordinated community, grows to the stature of the fullness of Christ by the action of each particular member (Ephesians 4:11-16). That body seems to have entered a kind of "induced coma" (medical expression for a deep state of unconsciousness and inactivity, caused by a controlled dose of a drug). The organs in the body have been isolated with surgical precision so that they keep working for themselves, but are not working for others (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Thank God the world of technology has allowed us to pay attention individually to each "organ" and ensure that the body is kept "alive." The "Zoom-gregating", "the Youtube-sermons" and the "WhatsApp-devotionals" have provided the minimum nutritional requirements for the patient to stay alive, thank God for these tools! But is that what being the Church and living like the Church is?

I have always believed that the Church is not the building to which we go but the group of believers redeemed by God; called to be a people of priests and proclaim the virtues of the one who called them from darkness to his glorious light (1 Peter 2:9-10). My central confession in ecclesiological issues years ago has been: "We do not go to the Church, but we are the Church," but now it has become a question: Are we being the Church lately?

The only answer that manages to harmonize in my understanding of what the Church is with what is happening is: Yes, we definitely CONTINUE TO BE THE Church of Christ! The body of Christ still is on earth; if we believers have not been taken away by the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17), then the Church is still in this world. I have no doubt about this. So, what has happened?

The other part of the answer is that we simply have NOT LIVED LIKE the church of Christ! In the last few months, there has been no communion (as defined by Bible, not by Zoom), no bread has been shared, and no wine has been given, sharing them in memory of the Lord. There has been no congregational singing, there has been no mutual building (as the Word defines it, not as YouTube defines it) we have not encouraged, motivated, advised each other (not as WhatsApp defines counseling but as the New Testament describes it), not to mention preaching in empty buildings in front of a camera among other desperate solutions that the "doctors of the body" have devised with the best intentions, trying to keep our coma patient in good health.

That is why the idea of the People of God in exile – being the faithful remnant, but unable to live the way God designed – is the only biblical example that I can use to explain what happened in the first 6 months of 2020. The exile where Adam and Eve remained the creatures of God who had received the promise of a special family for God (Genesis 3:15), but without enjoying the special place created for them to grow and multiply. Or that of Israel who for 70 years lived as God's people without being able to worship in the place and manner God had commanded. Among many other examples, exile has been a useful and often used tool by God to, among other things, discipline, teach, and purify His People. The common essence of periods of exile for the people of God in the Old Testament is an unusual theme, where the People of God remained The People of God, without serving God in the place and the way God had determined for their everyday life.

What will happen to the Church? Although I would not dare to predict the details, I am convinced by the scriptures that we will see the Church return to its normal life. The book of Revelation clearly shows us the Church enjoying the final victory of our Lord Jesus Christ in the end of time, Glory to God who in his mercy has revealed to us the end of time! There, will be the Church worshipping the One and True Lord of this world (Revelation 5:9). I don't have any doubts here, I can say as Paul "I know who I have believed in".

But at the end of the quarantine days by Covid 19, at the end of the "exile of the church," when our patient leaves the induced coma, What will happen? As I said, I would not dare predict what scenario awaits us for the rest of the year. But we know that many stories in the Old Testament are there for us to learn from them (Roman 15:14 and 1 Corinthians 10 11). If we study the exiles of the nation of Israel, if we examine how the "return" of God's people in the Old Testament and the restoration of worship and sacrifices have been, we will find much light and many divine (biblical) principles for what the coming months hold for us. I believe that if we give a reading or re-examine books like Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi; we will find in them a lot of useful information for the arduous task of "reconstruction" that we have ahead of us.

There are many questions that we are asking ourselves these days: Will it be difficult to return? Will all or some prefer the comfort of their new environments? Will our meetings and life of worship be the same as before? Will we continue with the same ministerial practices as before or will we learn some lessons from the situations that led us into exile? What about the spiritual health, spirit, and faith of those who return? Will it be necessary for us to renew our vows of fidelity to God's Word and mission?

At the moment I stand by, hoping with great expectation that our patient will wake up and pray for the Church as Paul did in Ephesians 3:20-21 "And to him who is powerful to do all things much more abundantly than we ask or understand, according to the power that acts in us, to Him be glory in the church in Christ Jesus for all ages, forever and ever. Amen"