



A new vision for
Christian engagement
in a post-Christian culture

SKYE JETHANI

THE VOTING BOOTH

*A new vision for Christian engagement
in a post-Christian culture*

SKYEJETHANI

2016 © Skye Jethani

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Election Day	3
Act 1: Exodus	6
Act 2: Exile	16
Act 3: Incarnation	32
Appendix: A Summary of the Three Paths	59

PROLOGUE

Election Day

Christian usually knows which candidate will receive his vote long before arriving at his neighborhood polling station. This time was different. He was genuinely undecided. He stood before the three election judges still wondering if he should just go home. The first judge found his name in the huge binder. By the time the second judge handed him a ballot, Christian figured it was too late to back out. *Why did I bother to come?*

Despite months of debates, rallies, and millions of dollars' worth of ads exaggerating one candidate's virtues and another's vices, Christian still lacked clarity. His neighbors, however, arrived at the voting station eager to cast their ballots. Most displayed yard signs months ago declaring their loyalties. He understood the candidates and their visions for the country well enough. What he did not understand was himself. What future did he want? What future *should* he want? How was he supposed to live and vote in a culture that was increasingly post-Christian?

Given his confusion, Christian originally intended to stay home and literally sit out the election on his sofa with a good book; but something compelled him to show up anyway. Was it guilt? A sense of patriotic duty? No, it was something more hopeful. *Maybe*, he thought, *if I genuinely intended to care about the future of my culture, God will show me how to care.*

The third election judge led him to a vacant voting booth. Chris-

tian entered and silently prayed— *God, give me the grace to see my culture as you see it.* He reached for the privacy curtain, but his hand seemed to grasp more than mere cloth. As he pulled it closed, the voting station disappeared from his sight; as did the cramped booth. Instead, as if Christian had pulled back the curtain on some celestial stage, he suddenly found himself standing in a cavernous hall so immense that the walls and ceiling could not be seen. It was a dark, hallowed space.

Before Christian were three figures illuminated by a light from a source he could not detect. The person on the left sat in a cushioned recliner with feet comfortably aloft. The figure on the right sat in a tall, leather swivel chair—the sort that belonged behind a mahogany desk with a blotter and phone. The one in the middle sat on a wooden arm chair with spindle legs.

Christian: Where am I?

Figure on Left: We are here to answer many questions, but that is not one of them.

Christian: Who are you?

Figure on Left: (Rising from his recliner) That is one I may answer. I am the Spirit of Exodus. I will show you how to see your culture and escape its many dangers.

Figure on Right: (Also rising from his leather desk chair) And I am the Spirit of Exile. I have led God's people to effectively engage their cultures for millennia, and I will lead you as well.

Exodus: Don't believe him. His way ends only in struggle and ruin. I will protect you. I have kept God's people safe since the beginning of recorded history.

Election Day

Exile: Safe? Ha! History has shown that the best defense is a strong offense. Go back to your recliner, Exodus, your age has passed.

Christian: (Pointing to the figure seated in the central wooden arm-chair) And who are you?

Figure in Center: (Silence)

Exodus: Do not be offended by his silence. We are much older and more favored by the people than he is. His silence is out of respect for us, not disrespect for you. As I am the eldest, I shall address your question first.
(Exile returns to his chair)

Christian: What question?

Exodus: You are perplexed by your culture and how to live faithfully in it, and so you do not know how to vote. Did you not pray for grace as you entered the voting booth; for help regarding how to think about your culture?

Christian: Yes.

Exodus: We are the answer to that prayer. We will reveal the paths that lay before you; the ways taken by the faithful in the past, and the wisdom of Scripture that illuminates each. Which path to take, however, is for you to decide.

Let's begin.

ACT 1

Exodus

Exodus: I have a simple question. Is your culture safe?

Christian: Safe? Of course it isn't safe.

Exodus: Ah, good. This is going to be easier than most cases. Some facing your dilemma are more eager to maintain the illusion of their safety, which requires me to do the unpleasant work of revealing their true peril.

How exactly are you unsafe in your culture?

Christian: I suppose it depends. There are all kinds of dangers—mass shootings, lead poisoning, terrorism, viruses, teenagers texting while driving...

Exodus: (Interrupting) Yes, indeed, there are all kinds of dangers. But let's focus on the dangers specific to you, Christian. How is it becoming unsafe for you to live out your faith?

Christian: Well, that is a different matter. I'm not sure I would say it is "unsafe" for me to live out my faith, but it's certainly becoming more uncomfortable. I recognize there are other places in the world where Christians are persecuted and killed. I don't fear that.

Exodus: Perhaps not yet, dear Christian, but a loss of safety begins with a loss of comfort.

Exile: Here it comes. The “Slippery Slope” argument. It’s one of his favorites.

Exodus: No interruptions. You will have your turn.

My point remains valid despite Exile’s mocking. In fact, he mocks it because my point is valid. You must not dismiss the discomforts you are experiencing, Christian. They are the first signs, the early birth pangs of the persecution that is gestating in your culture. So then, tell me what discomforts and challenges your faith now faces.

Christian: Our church has coordinated the tutoring program at the local elementary school for years. The parents and teachers have appreciated our service and welcomed our partnership, but not anymore. Our church has been labeled an “extremist group” because of our beliefs about marriage. We can no longer sponsor any school programs.

At the office, I used to read my Bible during lunch in the cafeteria. Apparently it made others uncomfortable. My boss said it’s fine for me to be a Christian, but to please keep my beliefs private. They don’t want to see my Bible at work anymore. I feel like my faith is being pushed out of the public square; like I am wrong or should be ashamed to express my Christian identity outside of my home and my church.

Exodus: Excellent examples— one can only imagine where this trend will lead in the future and what sort of persecution may arise for those who refuse to hide their faith. My con-

cern is not merely for you, Christian, but for your children and grandchildren. How much more unsafe will the culture be for the generations still to come?

Christian: I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. When I was growing up almost everyone went to church. Everyone celebrated Christmas. No one protested if there was a nativity scene in front of City Hall, and everyone agreed—or at least pretended to agree—about what was right and wrong. Now I feel like I have to talk quietly about spiritual issues at the coffee shop with a friend because someone might overhear us and be offended. If things have changed so rapidly since I was young, I wonder how much worse things will be in another 20 years?

Exodus: Precisely. You are far from the first to wrestle with these questions. Let me tell you about my origins and how your desire for safety can be achieved.

As I stated earlier, I am the oldest spirit before you today. Long before you wrestled with issues of religious liberty or the separation of church and state, I was showing God's people how to be safe in a pagan land. You may remember in Genesis that a terrible famine arose in the land of Canaan, which caused Jacob and his family to flee to Egypt where his long-lost son Joseph had been given charge over the land by Pharaoh. Joseph protected his family, and the descendants of Jacob flourished in Egypt for hundreds of years.

But then a new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph, and he felt threatened by the growing number of Hebrews in his land. Slowly, life for the descendants of Jacob became harder in Egypt. Their privileges were stripped. Their

homes and their wealth taken away. Their dignity and authority diminished. I trust you can see the parallels to your situation, Christian.

Christian: Yes. It feels like a Pharaoh, who does not know Jesus, has arisen in our culture. The benefits of being a Christian are being stripped away.

Exodus: Eventually, the Hebrews were made slaves in Egypt. They were forced to build Pharaoh's palaces and his cities. In other words, they were required to serve the immoral glory and false gods of Egypt rather than the true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were the slaves of an evil, pagan empire.

When the empire began killing their children, the cries of God's people reached his ear. He sent them a deliverer and called them to leave Egypt. They were to distance themselves from that evil empire, its tyrannical Pharaoh, and its immoral idolatry. The Lord led his people out of that land with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Then he gave them laws to ensure they would never fall prey to such evil again.

The Hebrews were to be set apart, distinct, and utterly different from the pagan cultures surrounding them. Their laws were different, their leadership was different, their rituals and sacrifices were different, even their diet was different. Egypt was an evil empire, but this was to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

Christian: I know the story of Moses, the plagues, and the Ten Commandments. I know how the Lord led his people out of Egypt—I had to watch the Charlton Heston movie every

Easter growing up. What has that got to do with me? I am a twenty-first century Christian, not a Bronze Age Hebrew.

Exodus: A fair question. Let me answer by telling you a more recent story from your own culture.

About a century ago, there were many new ideas assaulting your culture. Darwin's theory of evolution was gaining popularity. Communism was spreading along with atheism. There was growing skepticism about miracles and the supernatural claims in Scripture. Some Christians believed these new ideas should be accommodated. They advocated abandoning the traditions and doctrines of Christian faith in favor of more modern ideas. They were called the Modernists.

Those on the opposing side who believed there should be no accommodation to new ideas and who held firmly to the fundamental teachings of the faith were known as the Fundamentalists.

The tipping point came in 1925 when John Thomas Scopes, a high school teacher in Tennessee, was arrested for teaching evolution to his students. The Scopes Monkey Trial brought the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy into the courtroom as the entire country watched. Scopes was eventually found guilty. The Fundamentalists won that battle, but they lost the war. It became clear that the culture was moving toward embracing the values of science and abandoning the values of Christ. The Modernists were the real winners.

So, after the Scopes trial, Christians who opposed accommodation to modern ideas did what the Hebrews did thousands of years earlier. To remain faithful and untainted by a

pagan culture, they separated themselves into safe enclaves of decency. They withdrew from the power centers of the culture so they could practice and teach their faith without compromise until the glorious return of the Lord.

Christian: And you believe that is what we should do again?

Exodus: Consider the benefits you have received because the Fundamentalists escaped from the culture. You can thank them for the existence of the immense Christian subculture you know today. Why do you think there are so many Christian colleges and publishers, Christian movies and music, Christian amusement parks and conferences? Even the youth group that was so instrumental in the development of your own faith was an outgrowth of the Fundamentalist's desire to establish a safe, alternative youth culture for their children.

Throughout the centuries, when cultures declined and civilizations succumbed to evil, Christians have looked to me, the Spirit of Exodus, to find refuge and preserve their faith. Do you know the story of Saint Benedict?

Christian: No, but I like his eggs.

Exodus: (Unamused) Benedict of Nursia was born in the fifth century and witnessed the fall of the Roman Empire. He became so appalled by the empire's decadence and depravity that he left the city to live as a hermit. In time, a community of other cultural refugees joined Benedict and they formed monasteries.

Throughout the Middle Ages, it was Benedictine monks who preserved classical culture and advanced the Chris-

tian faith. They carried the gospel into barbarian lands, and their monasteries protected the art and literature of the ancient world that could have been easily lost in those dark times. By withdrawing from the culture, Benedict managed to save the culture.

Christian: I cannot argue with your historical examples. Clearly there have been times when separating from the culture resulted in good, just as a quarantine may stop the spread of a disease. Withdrawal, separation, exodus—whatever you wish to call it—clearly has its benefits, and if this is the approach I am to take with my own culture, centuries from now we may see a harvest of righteousness. But how am I to know? What help is escape to my friends and neighbors living now? If every Christian withdraws from the culture, won't that only accelerate its decline into depravity?

Exodus: Perhaps, but wouldn't that also be merciful? Why keep a terminal patient suffering? If this culture is destined for the flames, why delay the inevitable?

Christian: Well, aren't you a party pooper? Where's the hope in such a call? Aren't we supposed to be a people of redemption, of resurrection, and second chances?

Exodus: Indeed you are called to hope, but hope for those who belong to Christ, not for the kingdoms of this world that have set themselves against him. It is not your task to save the culture, Christian, but to rescue those who are in danger of sinking with it.

In 1953, Theodore Wedel, a reverend from your country, wrote a parable that I became very fond of. He compared the church to a life saving station on a treacherous coast-

line. The small hut had just one boat, but the members of the life saving station were vigilant. They kept constant watch over the sea, day and night searching for sinking ships and lost sailors. The life saving station was effective because it was on the shore, separated and safe from the ships on the dangerous sea.

Of course you want to rescue your friends and neighbors, but the best way to do that is by saving yourself and your family first. You must get yourself off the sinking ship and safely to shore. Only then can you rescue others.

Christian: You sound like a flight attendant.

Exodus: I'm not following you.

Christian: The safety instructions the flight attendant gives before takeoff? You know, "If there's a loss in cabin pressure an oxygen mask will drop from the overhead compartment. Be sure to secure your own mask first before helping others."

Exodus: I am a spirit. We don't fly commercial.

Christian: No matter. What I hear you saying is that I must secure my own safety before trying to help others. By putting myself first I'm actually putting others first.

Exodus: Exactly. That is an idea that should make perfect sense to an American like yourself.

Christian: So, the best way to help my culture is to remove myself from it.

Exodus: No, it's the only way to help your culture.

Christian: That raises another question for me. Is it even possible? In the Old Testament, the Hebrews could walk out of Egypt. And in the Middle Ages, Benedict could leave Rome. But how am I supposed to separate myself from a globalized, digital culture? Do I have to get offline, avoid shopping malls, and live some kind of agrarian, Amish existence?

Exodus: My friend, you must not allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good. A perfect separation from the culture would be ideal, but even the Amish have not accomplished that, nor did the Hebrews. After leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land, they still had pagan neighbors with ungodly values. They took measures to prevent being influenced by them. For example, God's people refused to share a table or marriage bed with non-Hebrews.

Similarly, there are practical steps you can take to minimize the influence of your culture. Sometimes that may mean disconnecting from popular media, and sending your children to Christian schools or educating them at home. Consider relocating to a neighborhood or community with like-minded Christians, and pursue a vocation that minimizes your need to relate with those outside the church.

Christian: And what about my decision today? If I agree with your path of separation, how should I vote?

Exodus: Let the Egyptians choose their Pharaoh. Have no part in their civil religion.

I will end with these words of the Lord that no one may refute:

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

‘I will make my dwelling among them

and walk among them,

and I will be their God,

and they shall be my people.

Therefore go out from their midst,

and be separate from them, says the Lord,

and touch no unclean thing;

then I will welcome you,

and I will be a father to you,

and you shall be sons and daughters to me,

says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

ACT 2

Exile

Exile: Exodus, you are an old and crafty spirit. No one may refute the words of the Lord, but I will certainly refute your use of them. Did not even our enemy quote Scripture when tempting the Lord in the wilderness? You are using God's words to lead our guest where God does not want him to go. Return to your comfortable chair and your story books where the present won't interfere with your impractical ideas, and let Christian talk with someone who understands his dilemma.

Exodus: (Returns to his chair.)

Exile: Young Christian, do not fall for the hollow arguments of my brother. They may have the appearance of wisdom, but it is only a facade. Indeed, the word of God does call you to be holy and separate from the ways of the world, but holiness is a matter of *distinction* not distance.

I knew you would choose my path the moment you questioned the practicality of escape. You are right. You cannot isolate yourself from your culture. It is easier to escape the bonds of gravity than the bonds of culture. That is why my brother's path is the way of fools. Exodus was necessary in

his time, but that time passed away with the pharaohs. He belongs in the history books he is so fond of reading.

I can tell that you are a smart one. You are not easily deceived. That is why you will quickly grasp the superiority of my way.

Christian: Do you plan to convince me with compliments?

Exile: Of course not. In fact, I may not have to convince you at all. The very fact that you are here rather than sitting on your sofa reading a book is proof that you already agree with me. If Exodus is the proper path, why trouble yourself with voting? Why did you come here today?

Christian: I suppose it was a sense of duty. I've always felt it was my responsibility to vote; to participate.

Exile: And where does that sense of duty come from?

Christian: I've never thought about it.

Exile: There are two answers which are, when closely examined, the same answer. First, your sense of duty is evidence of the Holy Spirit within you. You feel a sense of obligation for this world, your neighbors, and yourself. That is the very echo of Eden in your soul now being amplified by God's Spirit. Remember, in the beginning God commanded the man and woman to fill the earth and subdue it. They were called to make something of this world, not abandon it. As their descendant, you carry the same calling. You were made to contribute, and today your contribution is to vote.

Your sense of duty also comes from your cultural heritage.

Unlike so many cultures of the past and some today, your culture allows and even expects you to contribute to the common good. You have a voice in deciding who will lead and what laws will govern. You can shape your local community as well as international engagements. That is a remarkable responsibility for someone who is not royalty or aristocracy. Your culture has survived for hundreds of years only because ordinary people took this responsibility seriously, and that value has been transmitted down to you in a million imperceptible ways.

Christian: As you're speaking, I can sense that you're right.

Exile: Did I not say you would need no convincing, and that you would quickly see the wisdom of my ways?

Christian: You also said the two sources for my sense of duty were the same.

Exile: Indeed. Just as your calling to contribute to the world comes from God's Spirit, so has your culture's commitment to human dignity. The value placed on every person to contribute to the common good was carried to your land by people deeply committed to the Lord and His word. Although many have abandoned this Christian heritage, they unknowingly continue to benefit from it. Your culture is reaping the good fruit of righteous seeds planted centuries ago.

Christian: I assume you are referring to the Puritans.

Exile: Yes, but not only them. There were many others committed to God and their neighbors who came to your shores.

Christian: But they came here to flee the tyranny of kings and despots. They were looking to escape their cultures and build new, righteous ones. That sounds like an argument for Exodus.

Exile: Dear Christian, do you not remember your own words? Exodus was a possibility in ages past, and you have benefited from the godly people who chose that path. Today, however, that way has been closed off. The Puritans crossed the Atlantic to escape the corruption of Europe. Where will you go? The moon? Let's not waste more time on such nonsense.

My point is to show that you carry a sense of responsibility for your culture, and this sense comes from God; directly through the abiding presence of his Spirit within you, and indirectly through his orchestration of history. That is why you got off the sofa and came here today, and it is why you will not abandon your culture as my older brother foolishly advised.

Christian: You may be right, but we have already established that my culture is not safe. In fact, it is growing increasingly hostile to the Christian values that you believe compelled me to get off the sofa today. If I should not and cannot separate myself from this toxic culture, what am I to do?

Exile: Toxic, you say? That is a fitting description of your culture, but there is more than one way to combat a toxic element. Exodus would have you believe avoiding exposure is your only hope. Since we already agreed that is not possible, let's turn our attention to another way.

When a dangerous element enters your body, it triggers a defensive response designed to keep you safe. You automatically produce antibodies that hunt down and destroy the

toxin. They cleanse your body to ensure that you remain healthy, and if you do become ill they restore your health in time.

You, Christian, are called to be an antibody within your culture by protecting what is good and combating what is evil.

This is why Jesus called his followers the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Light is the antidote to darkness and salt was used as a preservative for meat. It protected what was good and prevented the spread of rot and decay. All of these metaphors—salt, light, and antibodies—share one essential trait. To accomplish their purposes, they must *engage* what they were intended to prevent.

Christian: You want me to combat what is wrong in my culture?

Exile: Not just combat what is wrong, but also preserve what is good. That is the only way to protect yourself, your family, and those of your faith from the toxic influences of this age. You must remove the poison—not yourself—from your culture.

Christian: There are so many challenges; so many thing wrong in my culture. The thought of fighting them all is exhausting. It makes me feel like going back to my sofa. Surely you can't be serious about fixing *all* of them.

Exile: I am serious. Some fights are difficult, but that does not mean they are not worth fighting. It only means they will require a strength beyond your own. Let me tell you my story. In it you may begin to see your way forward.

Centuries after the escape from Egypt that my brother told

you about, God's people found themselves once again in a distant land ruled by a pagan people. The armies of Babylon invaded their land and conquered Jerusalem. The Babylonians, utterly devastated the city, plundered its riches and left the temple in ruins. But they took something more precious than gold back to Babylon. They took God's people.

They became exiles in that foreign land. Babylon was a kingdom of idols and ungodliness. The Babylonians did not know the ways of the Lord, and they did not keep his commandments. In his mercy, the Lord promised that someday he would allow his people to return to their own land. Until that time, they had to find a way to preserve their identity and devotion to God while surrounded by the toxic influence of Babylon.

Christian: I know this story as well, although there were no Charlton Heston movies about it. Daniel was one of the people carried into exile, but he refused to worship idols or eat the foods of the Babylonians.

Exile: That's right. The stories about Daniel are legendary. They are among the first taught to children because they demonstrate the sort of courage and faithfulness needed by those seeking to follow God in a dark, unbelieving culture. Children remember how Daniel survived in the lion's den, but they usually forget about the power and influence he attained in Babylon. He became a trusted advisor to pagan kings and was able to ensure protection for God's people in that dark culture.

He was not alone. The scriptures also tell of Esther's remarkable influence in Babylon. She became queen and used that position to protect her people from the plots of

evil men seeking their destruction. Both Esther and Daniel showed what it means to be a godly person living in exile. They did not flee but instead sought to control and use the structures of power to ensure the protection and preservation of God's people until he called them home.

Christian: So, rather than seeking safety through escape I am supposed to seek safety through power?

Exile: That is one way to see it, but I can tell by your tone that you find the idea distasteful.

Christian: A bit, yes. We have a saying in my culture, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." We generally distrust those who seek power. It is viewed as a vice and not a virtue.

Exile: And for good reason. Exodus told you what Pharaoh did with his power. He cast infants into the mouths of crocodiles and tortured God's people like beasts. In the hands of the unrighteous, power is a terrible thing. Power bestowed upon the righteous, however, is to be celebrated. Doesn't your culture also say, "With great power comes great responsibility?"

Christian: Yes, if you consider Spider-Man a source of wisdom.

Exile: If the Lord can choose to speak his wisdom to Balaam through an ass, do not dismiss his ability to speak to your culture through a comic book.

My point is that power is not inherently wicked. It is merely a tool directed toward good or evil by the hand that wields it. Those exiled in a pagan culture must seek control over

the levers of power and direct them for the protection and advancement of God's people. This is the good you are called to pursue. When God's people abandon this calling, it leads only to greater suffering.

Christian: Not according to Exodus. He showed me how much I have benefited from the decision of Fundamentalists to escape the culture a century ago. Because they abandoned their pursuit of cultural power, they were able to create the Christian subculture that has been so influential in shaping my faith and that of many others.

Exile: Indeed, but at what cost? Exodus only told you half the story of the Fundamentalists. He hid the unintended consequences of their escape. Did I not tell you he was an old and crafty spirit? He did not want you to know the whole truth. He would have you believe that escape will save you from the depravity of your culture, when it was the escape of Christians that created the depravity to begin with.

Christian: How can that be?

Exile: Following the Scopes Monkey Trial, the Fundamentalists *did* withdraw from the culture into safe enclaves of holiness, but this meant many Christians also withdrew from positions of cultural power. They retreated from the academy, the government, the arts and popular entertainment. The very institutions that shape and steer the culture were handed over to those with no commitment to God or his ways. Imagine what would have happened to God's people if Daniel had abandoned his position of advisor to the king, or if Esther has chosen not to intervene as queen? By withdrawing from the culture, the Fundamentalists essentially handed it to the Babylonians.

It is no coincidence that a generation after this retreat, your culture witnessed a “sexual revolution.” By the 1960s, long-held values that had been rooted in Christian faith were being abandoned and depravity was being celebrated. By the 1970s, just fifty years after Scopes, these ungodly ideas became codified into law by your Supreme Court when it legalized abortion and made getting a divorce easier than acquiring a bank loan. So much of what you lament today, including the growing hostility toward Christian faith, can be traced back to the era when Christians withdrew from the halls of power.

Christian: I do not disagree. Those things did happen and we are still feeling the effects of them, but you are also over-simplifying your history. You are ignoring the positive changes that also occurred in those tumultuous years. That was also when my culture began to undo longstanding evils like racial segregation.

Exile: Excellent point, Christian, and one that only makes my argument stronger. The civil rights movement brought many positive changes to your culture, but it did so by *engaging* the halls of power not by escaping them. Civil rights leaders and volunteers moved courts and presidents to pass laws and integrate schools. When these levers of power were unavailable, they organized marches and protests to motivate those with power to act.

And we must not forget who led those efforts. The civil rights movement was largely organized and led by *Christians*. Churches served as bases and pastors were generals. Unlike most white Fundamentalists, African-American Christians did not see their communities as safe enclaves

to escape a wicked culture. They embraced their calling from God to transform the culture. At the same time that the Fundamentalists retreated from the halls of power, African-American Christians began to engage them more directly. The outcomes speak for themselves.

Christian: I will accept your point but I'm also learning you are just as crafty as Exodus. Because you are not telling the whole story either. History did not end in 1975, and the heirs of Fundamentalism did not remain distant and silent as the culture marched away from faith and decency. Those under the age of 45, like me, have no memory of the world you are describing in which most white Christians were disengaged from the halls of power. We grew up in the era of the Religious Right, the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, church voter guides, and politicians invoking the name of God to gain support among Christians.

Exile: Do not equate me with my irrelevant older sibling. I have hidden nothing from you. If I have not told you the entire story, it is only because you have not yet allowed me.

I don't disagree with you. After watching the culture slouch toward Gomorrah, many Christians did come to see the folly of Exodus and they repented. The illusion of safety created by retreating from the culture was shattered as the toxins of immorality began to infect their churches and families. It took them decades to discover what you already know—there is no escape from culture. By the late 1970s, they came rushing back from the cultural wilderness to save what remained of their Christian heritage. They were finally ready to mount an offensive, but the enemy was already inside the gates.

I only wonder what your culture would look like today if they had taken my path earlier. How much pain could have been avoided, and how much power would now be in the hands of godly people? Oh, Exodus, how the weeds multiplied while your gardeners slept. I will not lie. The task you face is much more difficult now because those who came before you chose the path of Exodus rather than Exile.

Christian:

That may be, but it has now been *forty* years since they re-engaged. They may have been late to your path, but they've now been walking it for decades. Certainly by now we should see more progress; more movement of the culture toward righteous values. Instead it appears that things have only gotten worse since those former-Fundamentalists returned from the cultural wilderness.

What battles have they won? What power have they gained and used for good? Abortion is still legal, more marriages end in divorce than not, and we've now entered a new world of sexual fluidity and embraced a new vision of marriage as a contract between any two individuals rather than as a covenant defined and sustained by God. And my greatest concerns aren't about sexual ethics. The entire culture has coarsened. Our public discourse has deteriorated into screaming on cable news. Businesses tolerate and even promote corruption that exploits the poor and threatens to destroy the global economy. Even our entertainment objectifies women and glorifies violence with casual regularity.

We were told that if we just elected the right leaders, if we voted for the right party, and if we fought the right battles from the school board to the Supreme Court that we'd make our land righteous again. But it hasn't worked. None of it. After forty years of fighting things have only gotten worse. How do you explain that?

Exile: I understand your frustration. I share it. The lack of progress shows how devastating following the path of Exodus truly was. It may take a century to undo the damage my brother...

Christian: Enough about your brother! You cannot blame every failure on Exodus. Yes, his way produced bitter fruit, but so has yours! I have tasted it myself. Your brother's errors are in the past, but I see yours every day.

At worst, previous generations of Christians who escaped from the culture were called irrelevant or odd. Today we are called extremists. The moment a person discovers that I affirm Christianity they immediately assume I am aggressively political, homophobic, and judgmental. I can see it in their eyes—the discomfort and disdain. And heaven forbid I try to talk with a friend or coworker about the my faith in any persuasive manner. In their minds, such aggression puts me just one category away from a terrorist.

Where did they get those ideas about Christians? These accusations were not made against us fifty years ago when many Christians were disengaged from the culture and took the path of Exodus. Why do they assume I hate gay people or only vote Republican? It can't be based on anything *I've* said or done, so why am I labeled as an extremist and a threat to the harmony of our pluralistic society?

I'll tell you why. It's because of people who have been listening to *you*—the culture warriors and holy crusaders fighting every political and social battle in the name of God. They have destroyed the reputation of the church by dragging all of us into the mud as they grasp at power by destroying those they label as enemies. There is a reason

so many young people are abandoning the church and the faith—they've come to believe it is more focused on dominating the culture than loving the people within it.

Exile: You must collect yourself, young Christian. Your anger is making you blind. You are reaching the wrong conclusions.

Christian: I *am* angry. Because I have already taken your path and it is full of battles but no victories, it is littered with casualties but no consolation. Exodus may have been a frying pan, but Exile is the fire.

Exile: I realize things are more difficult than ever for you, and that many in your culture now view God's people as extreme or even dangerous. They malign your beliefs and exclude you from privileges once granted to people of faith. Rather than seeing this as a mark of shame or failure, you ought to accept it as a badge of honor.

Did not our Lord promise that the world would hate you because it first hated him? And are not all who seek righteousness certain to face trials of many kinds including persecution? Even Daniel was despised for his devotion to God. That is why he was thrown to the lions. Exile is not without its dangers and sacrifices.

Christian: Daniel was thrown to the lions because of jealousy. The king's other advisors envied Daniel's position and plotted to kill him. He suffered for doing what was good and right. If we suffer for doing what is right, the Apostle Peter told us we are blessed because that is also why Jesus suffered.

But Christians in my culture are not suffering because of jealousy or righteousness. We suffer because we are per-

ceived as intolerant bigots. Yes, some are maligned and mistreated because of their love. I have friends who are despised because they show compassion to immigrants and refugees which is unpopular in some places today. I do not believe, however, that the widely-held perception of Christians as homophobic, belligerent, and judgmental is the product of our loving obedience to God. This negative perception has been *earned* by Christians seeking to take control of the culture, particularly those in the halls of power with platforms of influence. Too many are driven by anger, fear, aggression, and hatred.

You have taught us those things. You have convinced us that our only path to safety is by fighting against our neighbors and those who do not share our values. You have told us to use the ways of the world to overcome the world. We are not like Daniel. We are not suffering because we have done what is *right*, but because we have done what is *worldly*. We have fought fire with fire and we have gotten burned.

Exile: You are mistaken. My message is not one of *warfare* but *welfare*. When the Lord sent his people to Babylon, he told them to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7). The same call applies to you, young Christian. You are to pursue what is good for your culture so that God’s people within it can be safe and secure.

Christian: But who defines what is good? Isn’t that the problem? My culture disagrees about what it means to pursue the welfare of our land. Many Christians believe what is good for the country is prayer in schools, the Ten Commandments displayed in courtrooms, outlawing abortion, and holding

to traditional definitions of marriage. Many others believe what is best is a strictly secular society where any religious ideas remain outside the public square. They affirm the value of self-actualization and self-definition.

When there is no shared understanding of what is good, telling Christians to pursue the “welfare of the city” can become a license for all kinds of aggression. It will be interpreted as a call to cultural imperialism—a mission to impose our “good” values on those who oppose them.

Exile: I am beginning to question my decision to call you “smart” earlier. You are clearly allowing your heart to trump your head. The path of Exile does not lead to aggression! It leads to the welfare of God’s people. It leads to safety.

Christian: Maybe you are right. This debate is tiring me. My mind is spinning. I feel like I am in a hall of mirrors where every path appears open but is actually a dead end. I know that Exodus offers only the illusion of hope, but I am unconvinced that Exile will lead there either. It is a road to more conflict; more destruction. You have not presented me with a choice between good and bad, but between bad and worse.

Perhaps I have set my expectations too high. I may not discover what path to travel, so I will be content to know what single step to take. Tell me, Exile, how should I vote today?

Exile: Cast your ballot for the Daniels in your government; for those committed to God and the protection of his people above all else. You must seek the welfare of the church with your vote. That is your duty.

ACT 2 | *Exile*

Christian: So, with my vote I must continue the battle between us and them? Between the church and the culture? Between our welfare and their welfare?

Exile: Doing what is best for the church is what's best for your culture.

Christian: Your brother told me something very similar. It's another version of the flight attendant's safety instructions. Doing what is best for me or the church still sounds very self-serving, and that's how it will be interpreted by my neighbors.

Exile: But you will be casting your vote with good intentions not selfish ones.

Christian: Good intentions, you say? Perhaps, but the road to hell is paved with them. And whether I choose Exodus or Exile I feel that is where both paths will lead me. I am more disillusioned now than when I first entered the voting booth.

Exile: (Returns to his chair.)

Figure in Center: (Stands and approaches.) Come, Christian, sit in my chair and rest. I will show you a more excellent way.

ACT 3

Incarnation

Christian: (Sitting in center chair.) Why have you been silent this whole time?

Figure in Center: There is no reason to speak if you cannot be heard. When you first arrived, you were not ready to hear me. Now you are.

Christian: Who are you?

Figure in Center: I am the youngest of the messengers sent to you. I am the Spirit of Incarnation.

Christian: Why was I not ready to hear from you earlier?

Incarnation: For the same reason a mother bird does not push a new hatchling from the nest—you weren't ready yet. A young bird needs time to grow its feathers.

You had to hear from Exodus and Exile first. You had to come to the realization that their paths were obstructed before you would be receptive to mine. From listening to your conversation, I suspect your feathers have grown. I think you are ready to leave the nest.

ACT 3 | *Incarnation*

Christian: And it's your job to push me out?

Incarnation: (Laughing.) No. I'm not here to push you out. I'm here to convince you that you can fly. Whether or not you choose to leave the nest is up to you.

Christian: I will listen to your case, but if it's another version of Exodus' or Exile's don't bother. I'm in no mood for more arguing. I am too tired for it. Just release me now so I may return to my sofa.

Incarnation: Very well. If I cannot convince you that my path is altogether different from theirs, and quickly, you may go. We came here at your request, and we will leave at your request as well.

Christian: Fair enough.

Incarnation: (Quickly draws a pistol and points it at Christian in a threatening manner.)

Christian: (Screams and recoils in the chair.) What are you doing!?

Incarnation: (Calmly.) Tell me, how does this make you feel?

Christian: (Panicked.) Are you crazy? Is that real?

Incarnation: (Points the gun upward and fires a shot overhead then points it back at Christian.)

Christian: (Screams again.)

Incarnation: Please answer the question. How does this make you feel?

ACT 3 | *Incarnation*

Christian: Afraid! I feel afraid!

Incarnation: Very good. (Approaches Christian and places the pistol into his hand. Christian points the gun at Incarnation.)

Now, how do you feel? Are you still afraid?

Christian: A bit, yes.

Incarnation: But not as much as before?

Christian: No.

Incarnation: Why not?

Christian: (Gaining confidence) Because I'm holding the gun. I'm in control.

Incarnation: Fire the pistol. I know you want to. It will make you feel better. Then you will have total control. Pull the trigger. Do it.

Christian: (Very hesitant and conflicted.)

Incarnation: I appreciate that you don't want to shoot an unarmed person. But am I unarmed? How can you know? Did you see the pistol before I aimed it at you? I could still have any manner of weapon. I could finish you off in the blink of an eye.

Good. I can see your fear growing. Go ahead. Fire the pistol. Protect yourself. It's the only way to ensure your safety. Do it!

ACT 3 | *Incarnation*

Christian: (Pulls the trigger. A small flag emerges from the barrel of the pistol with “BANG!” written on it.)

Incarnation: (Approaches and takes the pistol from Christian’s hand.)
Control is an illusion.

Christian: I don’t understand.

Incarnation: What Exodus and Exile have offered you is not real. First they convinced you to be afraid, and then they offered you the illusion of control. My way is different. It’s not rooted in fear and it doesn’t offer you control because you never had it and you never will.

Now, would you like to hear more or go home to your sofa?

Christian: You might be crazy, but you are definitely different. If I stay, will there be more guns?

Incarnation: No.

Christian: Knives? Bombs? Weapons of any kind?

Incarnation: (Laughing) No. But I make no promises of comfort. Unlike Exodus in his soft recliner, my path is not easy.

Christian: I’ve been wondering about that. Why do you have different chairs?

Incarnation: Have you not figured that out yet? Where a spirit sits represents his point of view; the way he sees the world and what he desires from it. Exodus desires comfort. He wants to escape the struggle of living in a culture that

disagrees with him. He would rather be cushioned and insulated from the mess. He values the *feeling* of his recliner.

Exile seeks control. He wants to take charge and be respected. His chair is about authority and power. He values the *image* his chair projects to others.

Christian: (Christian looks at the chair he is sitting in.) And what about your chair? After the stunt with the gun, I'm surprised you don't have an electric chair. Thankfully, this one is only wood.

Incarnation: My chair is simple, sturdy, and strong—a seat to endure through the centuries. One that thousands of guests can occupy. I wanted a chair that could serve the needs of others, not myself. It is a seat of compassion for weary souls, which is why you are sitting in it rather than me. I value that chair because of the many saints who have sat in it before you, and because of the one who made it.

Christian: I can already tell that you're not like the other spirits. You are less predictable.

Incarnation: Indeed and that is why I am less popular. Predictability, like the gun you held, provides a false sense of control and comfort. My way is not predictable, but it is good. Now, let me show it to you.

During the incident with the pistol, what did you feel?

Christian: You mean other than the need to change my pants? I felt scared. And angry.

ACT 3 | *Incarnation*

Incarnation: Right. You felt something common to all flesh. You felt threatened. Any organism facing a threat—whether real or perceived—will respond in one of two ways.

Christian: Fight or flight.

Incarnation: That's right. When I pointed the pistol at you, you felt afraid. You wanted to flee. When I gave you the gun you still felt threatened by me, but realizing that you now had more power you tried to fight. You pulled the trigger. Both fight and flight are ways of seeking control over a dangerous circumstance. Flight seeks control by fleeing the threat. Fight seeks control by overpowering the threat. They are two sides of the same coin.

Christian: I took high school biology. What does any of this have to do with my culture?

Incarnation: What my fellow spirits have offered you are two ways of seeking control over what you perceive to be a hostile and dangerous culture. Exodus told you to flee; to run away from the culture-gun for safety. Exile told you to fight; to use the culture-gun to protect yourself.

You should see by now that their paths are predicated on fear and control. To choose one of their paths, you must first believe that you are in real danger and that fighting or fleeing are the only ways to overcome it. I am here to tell you they are wrong on both counts. Both the danger you feel and the control they are promising are false.

Christian: False?

Incarnation: Yes. Despite what you may perceive or feel, you are, in

fact, perfectly safe. Ultimately, your culture can do no more harm to you than this toy pistol.

Christian: Now I know you are crazy. How can you possibly say that my culture is safe?

Incarnation: I did *not* say your culture was safe. I said *you* are safe. It can do you no ultimate harm. You are a child of God, are you not? Redeemed by Christ and seated with him in the heavens? What, then, have you to fear? Is it written, “Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

These words were written to Christians facing far greater struggles than yours. The Apostle was not minimizing or denying the dangers in their culture—he knew them better than most. Instead, he was helping them see their culture through the truth of God’s redeeming love. He was helping them see that fear is an illegitimate motive for those who belong to God, no matter how vexing their culture may be.

Christian: But everything Exodus and Exile told me was rooted in fear. It was all about escaping the dangers of the culture or fighting back against them.

Incarnation: Precisely. And that is why they are now silent.

(Christian notices for the first time that Exodus and Exile have disappeared. Their chairs have receded into the darkness. Only Incarnation is illuminated.)

Perfect love drives away all fear. They can say no more to you now that I am speaking.

Christian: But there was real wisdom in their words, wasn't there? I didn't agree with everything they said, but surely the stories of God calling his people out of Egypt, and his instructions to them in Babylon have something to say to me. Are Exodus and Exile truly useless?

Incarnation: Not at all. There *is* great wisdom to be learned from those stories. By all means, you should study the examples of Moses and Daniel, and the greatest wisdom is to be found in the character of God who sustained his people through those trials. But you are not called to walk those paths again.

Christian: But didn't the Apostle Peter call us aliens and exiles in the world?

Incarnation: Indeed he did. He also called you to be a holy nation, set apart for God just as the Lord had told the Israelites during their journey out of Egypt. The New Testament writers often used the words and ideas of the Old Testament for instruction and illumination. That does not mean you are to walk the same path as ancient Israel or in the same manner.

With the arrival of Jesus, many things changed. You no longer worship at a temple with blood sacrifices like ancient Israel, nor do you hold to Israel's food restrictions or feasts. These things were shadows of what was to come, and in Christ a new way has been opened to you.

Exodus and Exile where the right paths in their times because they protected and sustained God's people until they could finally reach my time. When the new has come the old can pass away. Tell me, how did you travel to the polling station today?

Christian: I drove my car. If the weather had been nicer I could have walked.

Incarnation: Why didn't you ride a horse or carriage?

Christian: Because it is the twenty-first century.

Incarnation: That's right. The time of the horse and carriage has passed. You may find them in parks or in parades, but they are a novelty; a bit of nostalgia surpassed by better modes of transportation. That does not mean horses and carriages are wrong or evil. In fact, your automobile only exists because earlier generations first perfected the wheel, roads, and industrialization which were all made possible because of the horse and carriage.

So it is with Exodus and Exile. They were necessary and I am only here because they faithfully completed their work, but taking their paths today would be as foolish for God's people as employing a horse and carriage on the interstate. I am not here to disparage Exodus and Exile. I have the utmost respect for what they accomplished.

Christian: But you said their ways were built on fear and control which are illusions. You said fear was an illegitimate motive for God's people.

Incarnation: While slaves in Egypt and exiles in Babylon, God's people *were* afraid. Their fear made them cry out to the Lord for deliverance and protection, and he heard their prayers. But fear did not transform their view of their Egyptian or Babylonian neighbors. It did not change the way they saw the cultures of their captivities. Fear only leads to more fear. It never gives birth to love.

Christian: And your path is paved with love?

Incarnation: Yes. The way of Incarnation is not rooted in the old covenant stories of God's people escaping Egypt or enduring the shame of Babylon. My path is illuminated by the Christ from whom you received your name and in whose steps you are called to follow. Now, let me show you my path, and why walking a road paved with love rather than fear makes all the difference.

The first thing you must understand is that my way is a choice and not a reaction to a circumstance.

Christian: I don't understand. Exodus and Exile were also a choice.

Incarnation: Let me explain. Both Exodus and Exile began as responses to undesirable circumstances that God's people found themselves in against their will. They did not *choose* enslavement in Egypt or exile in Babylon. Therefore, the paths offered to you by Exodus and Exile were originally responses to unwanted cultures. Exodus said the best response was to escape, and Exile said the best response was to fight.

Christian: To be fair, Exile did say he was more interested in welfare than warfare.

Incarnation: That may be, but that does not change my point. God's people did not *choose* to be in Babylon. They wanted to go home. Exile was simply telling them to make lemonade out of their lemons. The important point is that Exodus and Exile were *responses* to unwanted circumstances.

My origins, however, are very different. Jesus embraced the way of Incarnation because he *wanted* to come and dwell among his people. He *chose* to leave the glory of his Father's presence, empty himself, take on the form of a servant, and make his dwelling among sinful people. He was not responding to some unfortunate circumstance. He took the way of Incarnation intentionally and proactively. It was his *choice*.

Christian: That is well and good, but I am not Jesus in heaven. I am Christian in America. I don't see how this applies to me.

Incarnation: Like Jesus, if you are to walk my path of love you must choose your culture.

Christian: *Choose* my culture? That is absurd. How can I choose my culture? I am not divine. I did not determine the time and place of my birth. And if I had, I certainly would not have chosen this time or this place. Are you suggesting that I move to some other culture I am willing to embrace?

Incarnation: No, not at all. Imagine for a moment that your culture is your child. Many of your child's traits, in fact most of them, were beyond your choosing—her gender, eye color, stature, personality, and proclivities all came hard-wired from birth. Many of them remain unchangeable.

If you are honest, you will admit there are things about your child you appreciate and even some qualities you do not.

The path of Exodus would say, if your child's negative qualities become unbearable you should abandon her, or at the very least keep your distance and remind her regularly of her failures and shortcomings. The path of Exile would say, do all you can to change and improve the child, which on the surface appears admirable unless the qualities you wish to change are immutable. This path is also very shaming as the child is constantly reminded of her present unacceptability and your dissatisfaction with her.

Thankfully, there is a third way. You may *choose* your child as she is. You can embrace and love her even though you did not select her. This does not mean denying what is deficient about your child, nor does it only value her future potential. Instead, it calls you to commit yourself unconditionally to her, communicate your unwavering love for her, and seek her flourishing.

Christian: You want me to love and commit myself to my culture the way I have chosen to love and care for my daughter?

Incarnation: In a sense, yes. Remember, this is only a metaphor but a useful one. Consider the messages your culture frequently hears from God's people. Some Christians complain regularly about "how good things used to be." They romanticize the past and condemn the present. Other Christians speak rapturously about the age to come and that is appropriate, but their hope is laced with disdain and judgment toward the culture they currently inhabit.

Is it any wonder why so many view Christians as judgmental? The message they hear from you is one of rejection rather than love.

Christian: But we cannot love what is evil and unjust.

Incarnation: No, you cannot, just as you cannot love what is destructive to your daughter precisely because you love her. If your daughter liked playing in traffic, you would hate that about her because you know how dangerous it is to her wellbeing. Likewise, there are things you will still find intolerable about your culture, but not because they are harmful to *you* but because they are harmful to your *neighbors*.

Here is what you must understand, Christian, I am not calling you to *endorse* your culture. I am inviting you to *embrace* your culture. Rather than seeing it as an undesirable circumstance, learn to choose it as the time and place where God has called you for a reason. That is how to break the grip of fear and begin to love like Jesus.

Christian: (Silence)

I've never thought of the culture the way I think about my daughter. I've framed the culture as a battle, or a toxin, or an enemy—never as part of *me*. I did not choose my daughter. She was given to me, but I am called to love her. That is a choice I have made, although I don't recall making it.

Incarnation: Do you ever regret that choice?

Christian: Never. Don't get me wrong, being a parent is the hardest

thing I have ever done. There is pain and sacrifice, but there is so much joy.

Incarnation: I think you are beginning to understand my path. Do you recall the story of Simon of Cyrene?

Christian: There are so many Simons in the Bible. Which one is he?

Incarnation: He was the bystander forced by the Romans to help Jesus carry his cross. Simon did not *want* to carry that cross. He was forced to do it by the soldiers against his will. Tradition tells us, however, that Simon and his family later became Christians and were known to the early church.

You are like Simon. You did not select your culture. By age and ancestry, you find yourself carrying a burden you did not want and facing challenges you did not choose. You can complain and lament your culture as Exodus and Exile advise, or you can learn to choose it. You can accept this time and this place as what God has assigned to you for a reason. You can embrace the heavy beam of your culture and under its weight find a blessing you did not expect. True joy comes when we learn to choose what we did not choose.

Christian: If I choose my culture, I cannot continue complaining about everything that's wrong with it. I can't keep blaming everyone else for its failures or blindness.

Incarnation: It is easy to complain about *their* failures, and to condemn *their* sin. When it becomes *our* failures and *our* sin, however, we are more likely to care rather than condemn. When you choose to identify with your culture

the way Jesus chose to identify with the world, love rather than contempt will begin to empower your actions.

Christian: Making that choice is something I have to consider. To be honest, I don't know if I can abandon my old ways of thinking so quickly. You said viewing the culture as a choice rather than a circumstance was the first way your path was different. What is the next?

Incarnation: We have already addressed it to some extent. It should be apparent to you that the way of Incarnation is traveled for the sake of others rather than yourself.

Recall your conversations with Exodus and Exile. Why did Exodus tell you to separate from your culture?

Christian: To protect myself.

Incarnation: Precisely. The Israelites were called out of Egypt for their sake, not for the benefit of the Egyptians. In fact, by leaving they were causing great hardship to Egypt which is why Pharaoh was so reluctant to let them go. And what about Exile? Why did he tell you to engage your culture?

Christian: He said that in pursuing my culture's welfare I would secure my own welfare, and that the best defense is a strong offense.

Incarnation: I trust that you can see that self-interest is central to his path as well. The Israelites were called to seek the welfare of Babylon *not* out of love or concern for their Babylonian neighbors, but to ensure their own survival and well-being.

My path is not traveled by those who are seeking their own welfare, but by those who want to bless others more than themselves. Remember, Jesus came into the world not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He came to lay down his life for his sheep. The way of Incarnation is the very definition of love. It seeks what is best for others rather than one's self.

Christian:

I can't dispute the example of Jesus, but you make it sound like self-interest has no place at all in my life. Jesus told stories about people finding buried treasure and selling their possessions to buy the land where the treasure was hidden. That sounds a lot like self-interest to me.

Incarnation:

Of course self-interest is a factor in every Christian's life, and Jesus does appeal to it when teaching about the unparalleled value of his kingdom. The issue is not whether you should care for your own interests, but how are your interests satisfied and what will you do once they are?

Your interests, Christian, are fully met in God and his kingdom. With him, as we've already discussed, you are perfectly safe and your future is unalterably secure. You have already bought the field. You already possess the treasure. Because your interests are fully secured, you are now set free to invest your time, energy, and treasure seeking the interests of others rather than yourself.

This is exactly why the Apostle Paul could declare from his prison cell, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Death would release him into the arms of his treasure—that is God himself. But while his life on

earth endured, Paul was to use it—like Jesus—for the sake of others. In life we give ourselves away like Christ. In death we entrust ourselves entirely to God.

Christian: I see how that model makes sense for Jesus or Paul, but it doesn't seem to work as well with other celebrated saints. I spoke with Exile about Martin Luther King Jr. Surely the civil rights movement and its leaders were not unchristian because they sought freedom for themselves?

Incarnation: Your understanding of King is correct, but only partially. Of course he worked tirelessly, and even sacrificed his life to rescue his own community from the oppression of racism. In doing this he wasn't seeking his own well-being, but the wellbeing of millions of others. He also hoped that his self-sacrifice would benefit future generations. In his most famous speech he spoke about the dream he carried for his children.

A particularly cynical person will still say that although King worked for the benefit of others, those others were limited to his own community. In a way, therefore, it was just another form of self-interest that motivated him. Anyone making that argument, however, is ignorant of King's fuller vision. He saw that segregation not only hurt black people, but it also warped the souls of white people. Racism enslaved the whites who practiced it, and King wanted to secure their deliverance from its evil as well.

Early in the civil rights movement, King's home in Montgomery, Alabama, was firebombed. A large, angry mob of African-Americans gathered around the house with

weapons preparing to riot in response to the attack. Dr. King spoke to them from the porch of his burning house. He told them to put away their weapons and to love their enemies, “And let them know that you love them,” he said. Many white lives were spared that night because he led with love rather than fear.

Christian: It’s all very inspiring, but how do I do it? How do I actually love my enemies? All my life I’ve been told who to fear in my culture, who is against my values, and who is opposed to God’s kingdom. Now you’re telling me to love those people and seek what is in their best interests. How do I make that kind of shift?

Incarnation: I told you my path was not easy. In fact, it is impossible.

Christian: Then what is the point? Who can possibly walk it?

Incarnation: Nothing is impossible for God. He can travel my path and did travel it. That means you can only travel it *with* him. That’s what gave Martin Luther King Jr. the strength to love his enemies even as they burned down his home. Three nights before that attack, while he was alone in his kitchen praying over a cup of coffee and sitting in a chair very much like yours, King had a strange and profound encounter with God. The Lord called him to not be afraid, and he promised to never leave King alone. It was the assurance of God’s presence that empowered him to walk my path.

Christian: But isn’t God necessary no matter what path I choose?

Incarnation: You might think so, but he’s not. It is entirely possible to walk the paths of Exodus or Exile without God, but you cannot walk their paths without a devil.

Christian: What on earth does that mean?

Incarnation: Exodus and Exile are motivated by fear, as we've already established. Their paths require you to clearly identify the enemy you are fleeing or fighting. In fact, those who've dedicated themselves to one of those paths will often fixate far more on their cultural enemies than on Jesus Christ. They will define themselves and their communities by what or who they are against. That is why I say they must have a devil, but the presence of God on their paths is entirely optional and often ignored.

My path, however, can only be journeyed by the grace and power of God. You will need him to fill you with the love necessary to serve and bless your neighbors and your enemies. This is not a naturally occurring quality. It is granted only to those on whom God pours out his grace, as King discovered that night over his cup of coffee. If you are not committed to a deep communion with Christ, I would advise against my path. Without him on my path, you will find only frustration and misery. If, however, you fix your eyes on Christ, you will discover my path to be far straighter than either Exodus' or Exile's.

Christian: So, based on what you've said so far, you want me to choose my culture even though I didn't really choose it, and you want me to sacrifice my interests for the benefit of others even if they would rather do me harm. Is that right?

Incarnation: Yes. I'd say you've got it.

Christian: I can't wait to hear your third point.

Incarnation: The final one isn't nearly as difficult to grasp, but it is no less important. While Exodus and Exile are devoted to survival, the way of Incarnation is committed to *flourishing*.

Christian: It sounds like you are changing your tune. All this time you have spoken about self-sacrifice and serving others. Now you're telling me your path is about *flourishing*? How can I flourish if I'm supposed to deny myself every step of the way.

Incarnation: Oh, my path isn't just about your flourishing; it's about everyone and everything reaching its fullest, God-intended potential. That's what I mean by *flourishing*. Remember, the other paths were reactions to undesirable circumstances. Exodus and Exile told you to flee or fight for survival. The goal of their paths is for you to make it through this world with all of your bits and pieces in place. That's their definition of success.

Jesus took the path of Incarnation for a very different reason. He did not say that he came to help you muddle through the world, or even survive all in one piece. No. He said that he came, "That they may have life and have it in *abundance*" (John 10:10). That word, *abundant*, is often misunderstood in your consumer culture, but that isn't a good enough reason to ignore it either. Everywhere Jesus went, he didn't just make things a little better; he didn't make diseased people a little less diseased or blind people a little less blind. He didn't just help people get by or survive another day. Jesus didn't bring moderate improvements. *He brought flourishing!*

When crowds were hungry, he provided more food than

they could possibly eat. When his disciples' fishing nets were empty, he filled them until the boat almost cap-sized. When the wine ran out at the wedding, he produced cisterns full of the best wine anyone had ever tasted. The stories go on and on. They were all signs of the flourishing that was prophesied to happen when God's kingdom came near.

Christian: When I read those stories in the Gospels, it makes me think Jesus was restoring the world to the way it used to be. It makes me think about how good they had it in the Garden of Eden.

Incarnation: No! That is exactly what you should not think.

Christian: Why not? Shouldn't we be seeking the restoration of all things; putting the pieces back together in a world broken by evil?

Incarnation: No, you should not. The path of Incarnation does not lead *backward*. It only marches *forward*. This is not a call to *restoration* but a call to *redemption*.

Some time ago, Christians in your culture acquired the silly notion that the Christian faith is a journey back to Eden; that it's about God taking the sin out of the world so things can return to the way they were in the beginning. Even a basic reading of the Scriptures reveals that to be rubbish. Maybe if you spent more time teaching children the New Testament rather than surrounding them with playful cartoon depictions of trees and animals and boats from the Old Testament they wouldn't carry such silly ideas into their adult faith.

God is not interested in taking his world back to the garden. He is driving the world forward to his glorious city. A flourishing metropolis of people from every race and language living in harmony with God and one another. History is not returning to Eden, it is advancing to a future that has already taken root and is growing in your midst.

Christian: So I'm not just supposed to fix what's broken, I'm supposed to actually make the world *better* than it was before?

Incarnation: Yes! Stop looking backwards and allow God's Spirit to open your eyes to what is ahead. The wine Jesus produced at the end of the wedding wasn't equal to the wine at the start; it was far better. The best they had ever tasted. That isn't just surviving, that isn't restoring; that's flourishing.

Now you, as part of his people, are called to do the same. Did he not say that his followers would do works like his? And didn't the early church see poverty banished, diseases healed, and miraculous reconciliation between races, genders, and classes? What you see in the early church isn't a return to the garden in Genesis; it's a foretaste of the city in Revelation.

Christian: So I'm supposed to be looking forward rather than backward.

Incarnation: Exactly. That's what his first followers did and it resulted in flourishing.

Christian: It also brought persecution and martyrdom.

Incarnation: Yes, and Jesus said it would. Remember, the world hated him and so it will also hate you. Again, Paul's words are important to recall. "To live is Christ. To die is gain." I am not presenting to you the easiest path—just the right one, and it isn't traveled for your sake but for the sake of others.

Christian: Now that you have presented your way, let's return to my original question. If I walk your path of Incarnation, how should I vote today?

Incarnation: Most importantly, your vote should not be cast in fear. A fearful vote will lead to harm in two ways. First, it will ensure that your vote is made selfishly; from a desire to protect yourself and your interests rather than a desire to serve and bless others.

Second, a fearful vote is usually won by a candidate that employed fear to gain support. Where the fires of fear are stoked, the warm glow of Christian love will not long endure. Those who think making people afraid will result in flourishing are deluded. They are not on a path paved by Christ that leads toward his kingdom, no matter how many Bibles they display or Christian endorsements they secure. A fearful vote is a vote for demagoguery not divinity.

Christian: Well, you've just eliminated most of the politicians in the country. Fear is the currency of modern politics—if you don't count actual currency, of course. Everyone is telling voters who to fear, who is to blame, and what terrible downfall awaits us if the other party wins.

Incarnation: Yes, I realize the popularity of fear. It is often the easi-

est way to motivate the masses. It is also why so many of God's people uncritically succumb to the messages of Exile and Exodus.

I did not tell you this earlier, Christian, but you are an unusual person. I get to speak with very few of the guests who have visited us in this sacred hall.

Christian: What do you mean?

Incarnation: The sad truth is that most who are brought here resonate so strongly with either Exodus or Exile, and these days it is mostly Exile, that they rarely stay long enough to hear my path. That is why I don't even bother to speak until I know a guest truly wants to hear me. I became weary of trying to win the ear of people who simply weren't ready to let go of their fear.

Christian: You mean most Christians don't even know the way of Incarnation is an option? They've never heard about it?

Incarnation: That's right. It's almost never taught and even less often modeled for them. So, if you choose my way you are likely to face strong resistance from other Christians who are committed to the paths of Exodus and Exile. They won't just disagree with you. They will likely despise you.

Christian: *Despise me?* That seems like an overreaction.

Incarnation: You must understand, if they are full of fear and anger toward the culture and you are not, they will either dismiss you as too stupid to recognize the great threats in front of you, or they will despise you as complicit in the depravity of the culture they are trying to flee or fight.

You must understand, they want the paths they've chosen to be validated by everyone else in the community sharing their dread. If you do not, you will find participating in their communities difficult. Far too many Christians find unity in their fears rather than in their faith in Christ.

Christian: So, now I won't only feel like an outsider in the wider culture, I'm also going to be an outsider within the Christian community?

Incarnation: Sadly, that is sometimes the cost of following in the steps of Jesus.

Christian: Maybe I can persuade some to join me on your path. There must be others like me who aren't content with either Exodus or Exile.

Incarnation: Yes, there are many and their numbers are increasing every day. Nonetheless, do not underestimate their devotion to fear and their dependence upon the anger it produces. Your entire culture is addicted to outrage, including those within the church. Anger has become the acceptable, and even expected, sign of one's commitment to any cause.

I have learned that if someone walking my path fails to show sufficient outrage, she will be rebuked by fellow Christians who are angered by her lack of anger. Over time, they may even begin to question her faith altogether. In some Christian communities anger is so celebrated one would think it is a fruit of the Spirit.

Christian: Anger can do some good, can't it? There are so many

evils and injustices in the world that we *should* be angry about. Can't that anger lead to change and flourishing. Even Jesus got angry sometimes.

Incarnation: Indeed he did. There is such a thing as righteous anger. It is a holy and pure anger that sees all things perfectly, and can therefore employ itself with precision, like a surgeon's knife, to cut away evil and injustice. I trust the Lord to use anger redemptively, but I trust very few others—and you should not trust yourself with it. Therefore, remember that anything you can achieve using anger can likely be achieved better without it.

Come, it is time for you to return.

Christian: (Stands to give Incarnation his chair.) I'm still not entirely sure who to vote for.

Incarnation: The Lord did not bring you here to tell you how to vote, but to show you how to walk. The most important thing is not what you decide inside the voting booth, but how you love your neighbors once you leave it.

(Incarnation raises his hand in a posture of blessing.)

Now, dear Christian, as you begin to walk the path of love, and service, and flourishing, may the grace of God the Father go before you, may the blood of God the Son cover you, and may the power of God the Spirit fill you. Amen.

Incarnation suddenly receded into darkness. Christian could not determine if he was being pulled away from the hallowed hall, or if the hall was somehow retreating away from him. In the blink of an eye, he was back in the voting

booth—his hand still grasping the curtain as if not a moment has passed. He quickly opened and closed it repeatedly to ensure the polling station was indeed on the other side and would remain there.

As Christian left the polling station he was approached by a young woman with a clipboard.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said, “We are conducting exit polling for the newspaper. Can you tell me who you chose today?” Christian pointed to his neighbors waiting in line to vote.

“Yes. I chose them.”

APPENDIX

A Summary of the Three Paths

	EXODUS	EXILE	INCARNATION
Believes you are...	In danger	Under attack	Perfectly safe
Fueled by...	Fear	Fear	Love
Sees the culture as...	An undesirable circumstance		The place God has called you to choose
Motivated by...	Self-Interest	Self-Interest	Self-Sacrifice
Control is...	Achieved by fleeing the culture	Achieved by fighting the culture	An illusion that provides a false sense of safety
Focuses upon...	How bad things are	How good things used to be	How God is presently at work redeeming all things
Requires...	A devil (emphasizes and defines enemies)		God (his presence and power with us)
The goal is...	Survival	Survival	Flourishing
Non-Christians are...	Oppressors to be avoided	Enemies to be defeated	Neighbors to be embraced
Anger is...	Acceptable	Encouraged	Unnecessary

SUBSCRIBE TO WITH GOD DAILY



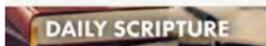
LOVE NOT LABELS
November 8, 2013

Writing to his secret audience in Rome, the Apostle Paul made it clear the heavenly carrying the external mark of circumcision did not make someone part of God's people. After all, what good is having a symbol of God's Law if you did not obey his Law? The Love, said Paul, is far more important in the context of our hearts as revealed by our actions than the external symbols displayed on our bodies.

Living in a consumer-obsessed society, we also construct and consume our identity with external marks. For example, Americans spend nearly \$2 billion a year on Christian merchandise. That's a lot of Jesus t-shirts and bible covers. But if all the "Jesus stuff" were taken away, how would anyone know you belong to Christ? Jesus said the world would know us by the disciples by our love, not by our "surfer" stickers.

Margaret Robinson has observed, "The word 'Christian' has been used to identify an ethnic, and more so identifying a demographic," in other words, being a Christian is not something to make about what you buy and how you dress, rather than how you love for people. Rather than identifying the world, our faith through our merchandise or good signs, what if we showed them our faith through our speech? What if our definition of Christ was essential to our character and not merely our consumption?

External marks—whether circumcision in the first century or a WWWJD bracelet in the twenty-first century—ARE NOT wrong to have, but ultimately they are meaningless. For us to love God and our neighbors, to please and glorify heavenly Father how you can show your talking to him today through love. Why love you help today? And consider what external marks of identity you can put aside.



Revelation 2:28-33
John 13:36-38
1 Samuel 18:7



from Thomas Merton
(1915 - 1968)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the best that I can do is just follow you with all my heart because that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Whenever I read your stories, though I may seem to be far away in the stretches of death I will not fear, for you are close with me and you will never walk me to leave my part alone.

Amen.

A LIFE WITH GOD

I created my daily devotional because I was thirsty for a life with God and not merely one for Him.

With God Daily gives you the opportunity to start each day with God, helping you learn how to best love and live in the culture around you; How to reach non-believers or how to address the trials and tribulations happening around you -- even in your own church.

A full subscription to my daily devo costs about 6 cents per day. For just \$1.99 per month, you'll get a new devotional in your inbox every morning.

Try it **free for 7 days** and see how starting each day with God will change the way you view the world.

[START YOUR TRIAL NOW](#)

MORE BOOKS FROM SKYE



WITH

By exploring the biblical narrative alongside stories of faithful men and women throughout history, *WITH* demonstrates how we can stop living our life for God and start living in communion with Him.

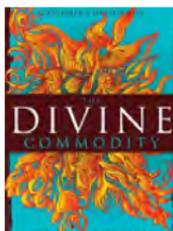
[ORDER NOW](#)



FUTUREVILLE

In *Futureville*, Skye Jethani offers us a vision-shifting glimpse of the world of tomorrow described in Scripture. He reveals how a biblical vision of the future can transform every person's work with a sense of purpose and dignity today.

[ORDER NOW](#)



THE DIVINE COMMODITY

The Divine Commodity explores spiritual practices that liberate our imaginations to live as Christ's people in a consumer culture opposed to the values of his kingdom. It will open your eyes to how consumerism has distorted our faith and equip you to live differently, articulating what so many have been feeling and offers hope for the future of a post-consumer Christianity.

[ORDER NOW](#)