

Foreigners and Exiles

Reflecting on the nature of the Church as a Diaspora Community and some implications for Mission and Discipleship

by **David Ball**

The nature of the Church in 1 Peter

In his first letter, Peter writes ‘God’s elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia’ (1 Peter 1:1). As we read what follows, we can easily begin to build a theology of the church (ecclesiology):

... chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood (v.2)

Later, Peter identifies the church as ‘chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession’ (2:9). These are categories that we are happy to use to define the church throughout history. However, immediately after this, Peter also identifies the believers as ‘foreigners and exiles’ (2:11). It is easy for us to miss the significance in Peter’s epistle of the fact that the church to which he writes are primarily ‘foreigners and exiles’ and ‘scattered’.

Of course, Peter was writing to a specific context in which the believers were dispersed, either as part of the general Jewish diaspora (note the overlap in this list with those who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost – Acts 2:9,10) or as part of the more specific Christian diaspora. It may be that they were scattered because of persecution (e.g. Acts 8:1; 18:2) or it may be that they were scattered because of business, or perhaps even because they were those who heard the Gospel at Pentecost and returned home. For whatever reason, it seems clear that Peter sees their scattered nature not just as a matter of chance history but as an essential part of their theological identity. As Christians, they are necessarily ‘foreigners and exiles’.

The church, for Peter, is not just a chosen people and a royal priesthood, it is also a dispersed community that is not at home in this world. And it is because they are not at home in this world, that they are to live such different lives ‘among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us’ (2:12). 1 Peter 2:9-12 forms the basis for the ethical instructions that Peter gives in the following sections of his epistle about relationships with government (2:13-17), relationships with employers (2:18-25), relationships in the family (3:1-7), relationships in the church (3:8-12) and relationships with society (3:13-17). It is the nature of the church as both a holy and a scattered, diaspora community which leads to the missional ethics where the Christians are to live such good lives among their hosts (the pagans or nations) that, though they are accused of doing wrong, they are to bring glory to God.

If we are to take Peter's message seriously, that as the church we are essentially aliens and strangers, scattered throughout the world in order to live good lives amongst the nations, this must make a difference to our attitude towards migrants and refugees in our world today. Our mission to disciple all nations (Matt 28:19,20) begins, as at Pentecost, with the nations that have come to our doorstep and who see the work of the Holy Spirit emboldening his people to proclaim the mighty works of God in the languages of the diaspora (Acts 2:8-11).

The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) and of Cornelius the Centurion (Acts 10) show how from the earliest times, God used the diaspora to bring the Gospel to the nations.

The Diaspora in the 21st Century

As we are all aware, migration is happening in our world as never before. According to statistics from the International Organization for Migration in 2015 (<http://www.iom.int/world-migration>), 3.3% of the world's population (244,000,000 people) lived outside their country of origin. For example in 2015, 1.17% of all citizens of India (15,573,953 people) and 5.41% of all citizens of Nepal (1,629,306 people) lived outside their country of origin. In addition, wars across the world, notably in Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan have created refugee crises as people seek to escape the horrors of war. The UNHCR Global Trends report finds that 65.3 million people, or one person in 113, were displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution in 2015.

There are, for example, 74,904 Nepalis in the US, 54,695 in the UK, 3,924 in Germany, 43,809 in UAE, 542,947 in India, 39,059 in Bangladesh, 205,021 in Malaysia, and 32,872 in Australia.

Implications for mission, ministry and discipleship today

As we have already seen, Peter's view of the church outlined above must have implications for how we respond to the diaspora communities in the world today and particularly how we identify with those who, like us as Christians, are not at home in the countries where they live.

At an Increase Association (increaseassociation.org) conference entitled 'Exploring New Horizons' in Kuala Lumpur in April 2015, Zafar Ismail presented a significant, unpublished paper which used Pakistan as an example of how God has used (and continues to use) the diaspora for mission in 3 significant ways:

1. mission to the diaspora – here deliberate attempts are made by churches, organisations and individuals in host countries to reach out to diaspora communities with the love of Christ;
2. mission in the diaspora – here diaspora Christians are able to share the love of Christ with members of their own communities in the diaspora.
3. mission by the diaspora – here believers return to their countries of origin to share the love of Christ in a way that foreign missionaries could never do. Often those who have come to know the Lord Jesus in their host country are motivated to return to share their new-found faith with those in their country of origin.

To these examples from Pakistan, Zafar Ismail added a fourth significant example of:

4. mission beyond the diaspora – mission done by displaced people cross-culturally, evangelizing members of the host society and other ethnic groups in the context where they have been displaced.

More material may be found in the Diaspora section of the Increase New Horizons conference proceedings, downloadable from <https://increaseassociation.org/library>

According to Zafar Ismail:

What is happening today, regarding the diasporas, is greater, larger, and without precedence in the history of mankind due to the trend of globalization, urbanization, demographic shift of labour forces and immigration (from the East to the West, South to the North) and Christian gravity (from global North to global South). “Diaspora missions” is the practicing of Christian missions in the 21st Century creatively in accordance to the socio-cultural changes (of globalization, urbanization and demographic shift) by missions to the diasporas and through the diasporas to accomplish the Great Commission.

Summary of conference proceedings, p.68

If we recognise the nature of the church as a ‘diaspora’ community, as foreigners and exiles, as migrants and refugees, we necessarily become part of this global phenomenon, not just as outsiders, showing pity to others, but as insiders, people who by our very theological identity can and must identify with those who are scattered in this world. The Great Commission of Jesus is not (and never has been) only accomplished by sending missionaries elsewhere but also by living as God’s scattered people in this world.

The challenge then is how we can disciple and train and motivate the church to be involved in all these forms of diaspora mission. One possibility is through church-based training programmes such as Theological Education by Extension (TEE). Since TEE and other church-based discipleship materials are now available in so many countries around the world and in so many languages, there are more and more tools available to equip and empower local churches to disciple the diaspora in their midst.

The Example of SEAN International

Particularly powerful is the example of SEAN International (www.seaninternational.com). SEAN started as a small, local attempt to equip the church in Argentina with leaders who had been disciplined to know their scriptures thoroughly and apply them to their daily life and ministry. These courses were designed with the three key features that characterise TEE:

- Personal study through carefully designed workbooks;

- group study in a local church setting; and,
- application to life and ministry.

The courses were translated from Spanish into English and then into other languages so that today SEAN courses are now widely used in around 100 countries of the world and are available in more than 70 languages. SEAN itself never sought to promote expansion around the world. SEAN has simply responded to requests whenever these arise from different countries. With the increase of migration around the world, SEAN's partners are now in a unique position to share SEAN's discipleship and leadership training materials with one another to enable local churches to equip believers in languages from all over the world. In order to meet the needs of growing communities of diaspora believers around the world:

- i. SEAN encourages its partners to make courses translated into any language available to those who want to use them to disciple and train believers from that language community anywhere in the world.
- ii. SEAN encourages its partners to work together to make course materials translated and developed by one partner available to other active SEAN partners for use in a local or national setting.

As a result, there are examples of Nepalis being disciplined in their own language in India, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and the USA. There are Chinese Christians being disciplined in Chinese in China, Myanmar, and the United Kingdom. Tamil Christians are being disciplined in Malaysia, the Gulf, and so the list goes on. In Turkey, a Russian pastor is able to equip migrant workers from countries of the former Soviet Union in Russian. In Reunion, off the coast of Africa, Chinese missionaries are able to equip local believers in French. In the Philippines, Korean diaspora believers, trained and equipped by TEE, now reach out to local pastors. One elder, Park Jin-Ho and his wife are currently training 50 Filipino pastors using SEAN materials. 10 of those pastors have graduated and, through their ministry, 175 new believers were baptized on Oct 2nd, 2016.

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Living as a diaspora people to serve the diaspora peoples

This paper has sought to explore how Peter's teaching on the church as a diaspora community might help us reflect on discipleship amongst diaspora groups in the 21st Century. Recognising the nature of the church as a diaspora people means that we can identify with refugees and migrants and seek to respond to diaspora communities in the same way as the church did on the day of Pentecost, telling the mighty works of God in their own tongues. The examples from Zafar Ismail show how God has continued to use migration to bring the Gospel to the world which he loves. The example of SEAN International shows how God is using tools developed on one continent and translated across the world to disciple believers worldwide. The Increase Association is seeking to respond to this issue by encouraging its members to serve diaspora peoples across Asia and beyond. This is an exciting task, responding to Jesus' great commission by seeking to disciple people from all nations and looking forward to that day when we will join

with people from every tribe, language and nation in glorifying God in a loud voice, saying “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb” (Rev.7.10).

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