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Resilient Discipleship: A Review of Faith for Exiles

Abstract

"In the same way that Daniel remained faithful in the midst of pressing secular cultural influences, the church today needs to be self-aware and intentional about practicing real discipleship."

Posting about the book *Faith for Exiles* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/resilient-discipleship-a-review-of-faith-for-exiles/>

Keywords

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Comments

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June 25, 2020

Resilient Discipleship: A Review of *Faith for Exiles*

Derek Buteyn

Title: *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*

Author: David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, & Aly Hawkins

Publisher: Baker Books

Publishing Date: September 3, 2019

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Faith for Exiles examines data collected by the research group Barna and explores the way that young Millennials and Gen Z'ers engage with the church and live faithfully in an increasingly complex world. Based on their responses, the 18-29 year-olds surveyed were divided into four categories of "exiles," each having some connection (past, present, or otherwise) to the church:

- Prodigals (Ex-Christians) – 22%
- Nomads (Nominally Christian) – 30%
- Habitual Churchgoers – 38%
- Resilient Disciples – 10%

The authors give context to the book by drawing comparisons of today's church in its current cultural climate to the Old Testament Jews exiled in Babylon. In the same way that Daniel remained faithful in the midst of pressing secular cultural influences, the church today needs to be self-aware and intentional about practicing real discipleship. They term this cultural moment as *digital* Babylon, a "pagan-but-spiritual, hyper-stimulated, multicultural, imperial crossroads that is the virtual home of every person

with WiFi, a data plan—or both” (20). To frame their analysis, Kinnaman and Matlock pose the question, “How do we find the rabbit hole that leads to real, worthwhile wisdom for living well and following Jesus in an accelerated, complex culture?” (19).

Barna has published other books which explore the first three categories of exiles, but the bulk of *Faith for Exiles* is spent digging into the data on resilient disciples. The authors’ interpretation of the data describes and prescribes five crucial practices that identify the characteristics of resilient disciples and how they engage with the church. They describe these not as a 5-step checklist, but rather as “guidelines and guardrails for the formation of the soul... as the spiritual scaffolding around a young soul that enables the Holy Spirit to access the life inside” (34).

1. To form a resilient identity, **experience intimacy with Jesus.**
2. In a complex and anxious age, **develop the muscles of cultural discernment.**
3. When isolation and mistrust are the norms, **forge meaningful, intergenerational relationships.**
4. To ground and motivate an ambitious generation, **train for vocational discipleship.**
5. Curb entitlement and self-centered tendencies by **engaging in countercultural mission.**

The five practices are examined in each chapter alongside the survey results, which serve as qualifiers for each category of exile. For example, in the section on Cultural Discernment, respondents were surveyed about their relationship to the bible, how many hours of digital content they consume, their experiences at church, and their agreement with the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration story.

The five practices are presented against a backdrop of an increasingly complex culture shaped by virtual interactions—with our devices, with others, and with ourselves. There is unlimited access to any and all kinds of digital content, resulting in the hyperarousal of our individual and collective nervous systems, and an unhealthy, anxious self-preoccupation. As they state, we are increasingly “disciplined” by our devices. The answers for life’s tough questions can simply be Googled.

Combined with the older generation’s failure to model authentic discipleship, this has a significant impact on Gen Z’ers and young Millennials’ relationship with Jesus. They term a watered down, “BFF” version of Jesus as “Brand Jesus” who is adaptable as one’s social media profile: “Being a Christian is not meaningfully different from participating in the branded culture of our times—it is a transaction equivalent to following a band on Instagram, attending the concerts, and wearing the swag. Jesus is just a one more brand competing for our loyalty” (51).

However, the book does not exist only to call out the challenges of being a disciple in the tech age. The authors make the point that they are not anti-tech, but “dealing with [technological challenges] is critical to following Jesus in exile” (81). They communicate hope, pointing us in the direction of sincere and practical faith development, and inspiring us to build—as they describe—a framework on which the Spirit can do its work.

We are an unchangeably virtual society, but the call to live “in, but not of” (a theme they return to repeatedly) presents an invitation to live with wisdom in the midst today’s culture. And wisdom, as they describe, is “a practical understanding of how to live as God designed us” (84). Being “in” means more than just “existing in”; it’s an opportunity to create, reform, engage, transform, and participate, just as Daniel did in exile in Babylon.

I appreciate that they use the term “resilient” disciple, because resilience is not an innate characteristic. *It doesn’t just happen.* Work, struggle, and effort build resilience—and I believe that’s their point. Being a disciple of Jesus isn’t passive; it requires real, intentional effort, and lots of struggle—more than attending church once a week can provide. And there is blessing in the process. We become perceptive and mature, courageous and wise, and far more equipped to navigate the digital challenges of life. We grow our ability to live as wholehearted disciples of Christ.

Faith for Exiles lays the groundwork for establishing a generation of faithful disciples. It’s a call to action for each generation within the church—not only Millennials and Gen Z’ers—to acknowledge the practical realities of living in the 21st century, and to create and model formative practices which develop resilient disciples who live more like Jesus.