I’m a big picture guy. I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out the future—complex things like trends in higher education and publishing, national economic growth, and the plausibility of faith in our culture. I want to see the interconnectedness of things and for that grand unified picture of the universe, if you will, to shape my imagination and open up pathways for faith to reveal reality.

All of us want to understand the significance of the details, the economies of our lives. To do that well, I’ve come to see that the church—in all walks of life—needs a wider perspective on what it means to be “in” the world but not “of” it. We need more than a worldview; we need a new world picture, a reshaped imagination, which will lead to a whole new set of behaviors and postures toward the world.

Since we are frequently diverted from oikonomia—that is, God’s vision for the purpose and direction of all things—our actions often lack a corresponding sense of purpose and ultimate direction. Yet we need to know that we’ve been called to live faithfully in “Babylon.” This faithful living is a preeminent issue of our time. Living faithfully in exile and seeking the shalom of our cities are two big ideas that the church needs to embrace in order to recover a robust “in-but-not-of” theology of culture.
Exile

God’s people have always been—and are now—living in a permanent state of “in between.” The prophet Jeremiah gives us the essence of living faithfully in this state: “To seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jer. 29:4-7). In City of God, Augustine builds on this exilic theology. His metaphor of the city of God and the city of man with their different loves and orientations is the archetypal expression of the tension and anxiety that characterizes our “in between” existence.

Being in “exile” means that God’s people live somewhere other than their true home. For example, God’s people were in “exile” when they were banished from the Garden, lived as slaves in Egypt, and were carted off to Babylon. Similarly, after the resurrection of Christ, God’s people were scattered throughout the world to live as “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11). So, too, for Christians today.

At its core, it means living missionally and intentionally in light of God’s economy of all things.

Living in “exile” doesn’t fundamentally mean living simply, being organic, living counterculturally, being radical, or abandoning suburbia for city living. At its core, it means living missionally and intentionally in light of God’s economy of all things. The heart of this missional perspective is perhaps articulated the clearest in the Letter to Diognetus (c. second century), where the author employs a sticky analogy that encapsulates the essence of an “in-but-not-of” theology of culture—namely, as the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. “The soul,” the author writes, “is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world.”

Everything, of course, hinges on what it means “to belong” to culture and community. At minimum, belonging means living faithfully in all the spaces to which God calls us and avoiding a posture of hiding, fighting, or assimilating into a world that is not our home.

Shalom

If exile is about living somewhere other than our true home, shalom concerns the business of what we are doing with our lives—that is, what
we are trying to bring about in our daily work. As the Lord told Jeremiah, “Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom*, you will find your *shalom*” (Jer. 29:7).

Yes, we are looking for *shalom*—a comprehensive sense of well-being and wholeness—but a big purpose for our being scattered in the world is so that we can spread *shalom* and flourishing to our “Babylonian” neighbors. We don’t just exist for ourselves; we exist to bring life to the world. But how does our gift-giving lead to flourishing?

Living in the land according to God’s law leads to flourishing for everyone. When we live as God wants us to live—as a light to the nations—we flourish in every imaginable way, and that flourishing spreads around the communities to which we belong. In other words, living according to God’s big-picture, *oikonomic* purpose for the world illumines and applies *shalom* in all of the economies of life—family, work, governing institutions, education, the arts, and so on.

We are made in God’s image, called to be gift-givers of the Gift-giver. If we pour out our lives, using our gifts to bless others, we will—in turn—be blessed. This communal blessing produces abundance and flourishing. It has a certain economic logic to it.

And this point brings us back to the big picture. It’s all interconnected. Things operate out of sense of purpose and toward a specific end in God’s economy.

*Stephen Grabill is the director of programs and a senior research scholar in theology at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

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