

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Alexander, Shane (2012) "'Do Not be Surprised": Rejection and the Christian Story," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss3/4>

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“Do Not Be Surprised”: Rejection and the Christian Story

SHANE ALEXANDER

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet 4.12).

Each time my congregation meets for worship on a Sunday morning, we do so in a spacious auditorium that confronts us with a reality we would rather ignore: we are only a glimpse of what we once were and we are nothing close to what we once believed we would become. Ours is one of the largest auditoriums of any kind in our lightly populated county, and our worship space is never full. Even on good days, four-fifths of it remains empty. No matter how vibrantly we sing or how powerfully I preach or how intimately the Lord’s Supper connects us to Christ and each other, our worship space makes a declarative statement to everyone who worships there: *this church is not what it once was.*

The emptiness is a reality that is impossible for us to escape. We could explain the decline by citing the change in our community’s demographics. We could blame the decline on the tide of cultural forces that have eroded church attendance across the country. We could even conclude that God is punishing us for backsliding on fundamentals or for failing to have enough faith. Whatever we diagnose as the cause, the reality is the same: rejection. Maybe you and your church know this kind of rejection too.

Rejection: reality regrets to inform you that your congregation holds little appeal for the children you raised there. Rejection: reality regrets to inform you that your style of worship, while meaningful to you, feels flat and lifeless to those on their way out the door. Rejection: reality regrets to inform you that your recent attempts to engage your community have alienated some of your longest tenured members, and they are now searching for more “faithful” congregations with which to worship. Rejection: reality regrets to inform you that if current demographic trends persist, your congregation will lose its position of prominence in your community within a generation...if it survives at all.

Rejection of every kind feels like defeat. It feels like failure. It feels like we must have been doing something wrong. Maybe we did. It is a possibility worth considering. There is value in critical self-reflection; we cannot learn from our mistakes until we have learned what our mistakes were. But one mistake—one I have made more than once—is to approach rejection (of any kind) as though it were an aberration. We do not expect rejection when we plant a church, unleash a new strategy for evangelism, revamp our worship service, or adopt a new approach for discipling our teens. On the contrary, we preach the importance of high expectations. We call this faith, but the faith we try to inspire amounts to nothing more than optimism. We expect optimism from ourselves and from those we lead. Expecting rejection smells like pessimism, and pessimism never accomplished a thing. Yet, our insistence upon optimism comes with a price. Rejection happens. Often. And our willful optimism fails to prepare us for how to manage it when it does.

When, not if, rejection happens, it can be helpful to consider how Christians elsewhere (and in the past) have coped when facing it. Over the centuries, one resource has helped scores of Christians cope whenever and wherever they experience rejection: 1 Peter. Peter’s wisdom is concise, to the point, and relevant to any

church struggling with rejection. Peter's initial audience faced a type of rejection that was more hostile than congregations like mine are experiencing, but Peter's prescription for how to cope with and respond to rejection applies to all forms of rejection, be it in the form of violent persecution or the slow decline of a once-vibrant congregation.

By the end of the first century, Christianity had spread through Asia Minor despite widespread resistance. Christians there and then faced hardship that is unfamiliar to most Christians here and now. They experienced ostracism and ridicule at the hands of their friends and family. Occasionally, they even suffered through violent episodes of persecution at the hands of the local governing authorities. Their everyday reality was one of rejection. Peter wrote to encourage these Christians and to offer them direction in the face of constant rejection. That much we would expect. Still, we might be surprised by a few things that Peter did not say. Judging by our own instincts (or at least mine), we might have expected Peter to (a) present them with a strategy by which they could turn the tide of rejection, and (b) issue a call for them to believe that God would bless their efforts with success.

Many ministers (and other church leaders) fancy themselves problem-solvers. Whenever we encounter problems in our churches, we aim to fix them. We strategize. We brainstorm with others. We enlist help from various opinion leaders in the church to implement our strategies. And then we go to work on the church's attitude. No problem-solving strategy can be successful unless the congregation believes it will be successful. Pessimism alone can kill a sound strategy. We fear pessimism. Our instincts, not to mention our experiences, tell us that pessimism will only speed destruction. Expecting (and preparing for) the worst never accomplished anything. We call our congregations to have faith, by which we usually mean optimism. Optimism may be a potent force, but it is not faith.

When our church building was constructed, it was built so that we would have plenty of room for future growth. If I had been preaching here then, I suspect that I would have called this choice a leap of faith. Was it? Leaps of faith require us to be prepared for disappointing outcomes too. A leap of optimism, by contrast, requires us only to prepare for the best. While we tend to equate optimism with faith, many forms of optimism are nothing more than carefully constructed fantasies meant to protect us from acknowledging the realities that call for a true leap of faith. Peter avoids this trap. Instead, Peter offered them advice that can be summed up in two simple sentences. (1) Manage your expectations for how others will react to you as a follower of Christ. And (2) focus your energy on matters you can control.

Managing Expectations

Peter warned the Christians of Asia Minor not to be surprised by the rejection of others, for Christ himself was the "living stone" who was "rejected by mortals" (1 Pet 2.4). Not only is Christ referred to as "the stone that the builders rejected" (2.7), but Peter repeatedly refers to Christ as one who was abused and who suffered (2.23; 3.18; 4.1) for their sake. If Christ was rejected, then his followers would face rejection as well. Peter wanted them to see that rejection was an expected development within the story that they had taken up as their own as a follower of Christ.

Furthermore, Peter's language of exile (e.g., 1.1, 2.11) reminded them that such rejection was consistent with an even older theme: the larger story of God's people. Though they were suffering their own distinct form of rejection, rejection itself was neither new nor surprising. To experience such rejection was part of what it meant to live life situated within the story of God's people. The people of God had long endured rejection as part of what it meant to be God's people. Furthermore, those that had endured these various forms of rejection had done so for a purpose: "It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you" (1.12). Christ suffered rejection for their sake. God's people from the past had suffered rejection for their sake. These are the stories in which their new identity was anchored. They were living proof that both Christ and their predecessors in faith had endured rejection for a purpose (them!). As such, they had reason to believe that they too were enduring rejection for a purpose. Without a story like this in which to anchor themselves, they could easily have tended toward optimistic expectations for their own experience as God's people. Only the story of Jesus (informed by the backstory of Israel) had the power to ground their expectations in reality.

Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (2.12). In other words, manage your expectations in light of the story that defines who you are as God's people. Rejection is not an aberration for people living in exile (1.17), who live holy lives (1.15–16), or who have been set apart from the world as a holy priesthood (2.9). Rejection comes with the territory. Resist the temptation to only take leaps of optimism. Be courageous enough to take a leap of faith—a leap that could well land you in a disappointing place.

A leap of faith requires letting go of our desire to control outcomes, especially outcomes that are dependent upon the reactions of others. No matter how well Christians position themselves for success, they will face rejection. The only thing these Christian exiles and aliens can do is focus on what they can control: themselves. For if rejection is a given, it is the Christian's responsibility to make certain that it is Christ that is being rejected and not them.

Focus on What You Can Control

In the case of these Christians, Peter instructed them to focus on themselves in two primary ways: holiness and submission. They were to be holy (1.15–16), to resist the temptations of the flesh, even when such sins were accepted by those around them (2.11). They were to do good so that non-Christians would "see [their] honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (2.12). Their holiness was to be their identity as a people set apart from those around them (2.9). Christ might still be rejected by many (even most) in their communities, but if Christians were living legitimately Christlike lives, then it would be Christ that was being rejected, not the Christians themselves.

Likewise, they were to submit to the existing authorities that were already present in their lives, whether it was the emperor, governors, slave-masters, or husbands (2.13—3.6). They were to accept the humility of their station and live out their witness within the parameters of that life (2.18—3.6). This instruction should not be used to suggest that Peter believed God endorsed the empire, the injustice of slavery, or even the patriarchal nature of first-century marriage. Rather, it demonstrated that Peter believed that Christians could be effective witnesses of the gospel regardless of how humble their station in life was. (Consider the boldness of suggesting in a patriarchal society that a wife might influence her husband for Christ!) Furthermore, the Christians' acceptance of their stations in life prevented outsiders from dismissing Christianity as a dangerous religion that promoted (what they would have seen as) immoral or subversive behavior.

Although Peter expected that if Christians would follow his advice outsiders would (at least frequently) react favorably (2.12, 15; 3.1), his call for holiness and submission was not (primarily) a strategy for influencing others. Peter believed that it mattered that Christians be who they were called to be. He was calling these particular Christian communities to take a leap of faith: to trust that obedience and humility were the only tools they needed in order to bear witness to Christ in their communities. They did not need research to tell them what outsiders thought of them before settling on an approach to reach them. They needed only to focus on what they could control: themselves.

Conclusion

The temptation for church leaders today is to concoct a two-pronged strategy for overcoming rejection that resembles what we might have expected Peter to suggest in his letter: (a) present our churches with strategies by which we can turn the tide of rejection, and (b) issue a call for them to believe that God will bless our efforts with success (i.e., optimism). Like Peter, we must resist this temptation. New strategies and calls for optimism often seem like they are all about hope, but more often they are reactions to our own fear and rejection-induced anxiety. When we face rejection of any type, we would do well to remember Peter's words about such fear and anxiety. Peter wrote, "Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you" (5.7). "Do not fear what they fear" (3.14). It is the Gentiles who fear rejection. They are not a part of our story. For them, rejection holds no meaning. For us, rejection reminds us that we are the people of God.

Peter's prescription does not call for strategic thinking or faith (at least not inasmuch as we equate faith with optimism). Instead, he reminds his audience that rejection is part of the experience they signed

up for as followers of Christ. Rejection should be one of the responses, perhaps even the dominant response, we expect when we take up the gospel story as our story, especially when we do so in the presence of those who are living out the conflicting stories of our culture. If the gospel story (that is, the one that reaches its climax with the cross) serves as our defining story, then rejection (even of the variety we do not see coming) should not surprise us. The role of the church is not to avoid rejection. The role of the church is to live out the gospel in such a way that, when it is rejected, it is rejected for legitimate reasons.

Peter's initial audience endured a more hostile form of rejection than declining churches like mine do, but Peter's advice is not dependent upon the form of rejection to be relevant. The prescription is the same. Manage your expectations for how others will react to you as a follower of Christ, and focus your constructive energy on matters you can control. Declining churches are better off focusing on how to manifest holiness in their lives (personally and communally) than they are trying capture the attention of the unchurched with clever slogans, peppier worship services, better sermon props, or whatever else they hope will appeal to outsiders. They are better off accepting their recent loss of prominence within their communities and the humble stations that go with that loss than they are trying to regain or hold on to the power they once wielded. Peter's message is clear. The gospel does not need better packaging. It does not need positions of power and influence. It only needs Christians who are willing to take a leap of faith and live it out...wherever that takes them.

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