

*With this essay the Institute resumes a series of posts it initiated last fall, with contributions from members of the Company of Teachers designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce these pieces and cite them as you see fit.*

## In Lonely Exile Here

At this writing, it is near to the second Sunday of Advent when the appointed scripture text from Isaiah offers words of comfort to a people in exile, rootless and driven from their homes. In 2006, more than a decade ago, the UN high commissioner of refugees affirmed that the movement of people and their "forced displacement for political, economic and environmental reasons" will be one of the 21st century's biggest problems. And now, day by day, that story continues in the unrelenting stream of pictures and stories about people from country after country fleeing for their survival to somewhere else, anywhere else.

On our own shores, we seem to be living in a time that has reclaimed the abhorrent notion that the poor somehow deserve their economic status, that they have frittered away opportunities to gain wealth, that they have wasted their opportunity to save by spending on things destructive or frivolous. Arguments against immigrants are the same as they have been since days of the early Republic: "they" don't speak the language, will no doubt have limited working skills, will have a different religion, will carry disease, will refuse to assimilate, will only be a drain on limited resources.

We have spent the last year studying the Protestant Reformation, marked by Luther's 95 Theses posted some 500 years ago. Brad Gregory, in his most recent works, has written about the unintended secularizing results of the many Reformations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Part of his story describes the movement of peoples throughout Europe ahead of religious persecution – whole communities fleeing their homes or trying to get back to them.

The historian Heiko Oberman suggests that we view the Reformation outside Germany as a "reformation of the refugees," since so many leading figures had to flee from persecution. John Calvin himself left France in 1534 during an early crackdown against French Protestants. And, just to be clear, in this time period, "crackdown" didn't mean executive orders and more paperwork. It meant barbaric torture and executions.

The slaughter of Huguenots by Catholics in 1562 occurred at the beginning of more than thirty years of religious strife between French Protestants and Catholics, with killing and torture perpetrated by both sides. During this time, as many as 400,000 French Protestants fled France for other parts of Europe and America.

Many of the British North American colonies that eventually formed the United States were settled in the seventeenth century by men and women, who, in the face of European persecution, refused to compromise passionately held religious convictions and fled Europe.

And well beyond the immediate period of the Reformation, in 1731, the Catholic ruler of Salzburg, Austria, issued an edict expelling as many as 20,000 Lutherans from his principality. Many propertyless Lutherans, given only eight days to leave their homes, froze to death as they drifted through the winter seeking sanctuary.

Yet, Calvin did not, in his turn, seek to create more exiles. French oppression drove many Protestants into Geneva. In his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, which dealt with some aspects of social policy, Calvin said that, for the poor and disabled, widow, and orphan: "It would be good, not only for the poor of the hospital [that is, a place of shelter and hospitality], but also for those of the city who cannot help themselves, that they have a doctor and a surgeon of their own..." About the refugee, he said, the hospital for those passing through must be maintained, along with lodging. Central to Calvin's policies was an intense devotion to the less fortunate in society. Whether as orphans or widows or refugees, Calvin believed that he had a God-given duty to care for them. This was rooted in his ideas about common grace: "every man [has] within himself undoubted evidence of heavenly grace by which he lives, moves, and has being". We are taught, he said, "that all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on the condition that they be distributed for our neighbor's benefit." (*Institutes*, III.7.5)

The stories of inhospitality last, of course, well into the present time. During World War II, nearly a thousand, mostly Jewish, refugees fled aboard the Hamburg-American ship *St. Louis*, seeking protection in Havana. Over 700 of them had applied for American visas and had letters of support. But Cuban immigration practice prevented their landing, even to wait their turn to enter the United States. It became clear that no effort would be made by the US government to admit them, and informal efforts at persuasion by American diplomats failed to sway the Cuban government. The ship had nowhere to go but back to Hamburg. Even arguments made on behalf of the refugee children met with positive publicity in the United States...and nothing else. Anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-Semitism won the day. The wife of the immigration commissioner offered her own reservations on any bill to allow additional numbers of refugees, even children: those "20,000 charming children would all too soon grow into 20,000 ugly adults." While some passengers were able to settle in other European countries, estimates are that a quarter of them died in German death camps.

While partisan politics divide many people from tolerance and hospitality, it is important to remind ourselves that all who claim the Reformed commitment to scripture know that commands insisting on care and gracious tolerance for the poor and for the aliens in the land exist throughout the Hebrew Bible. And in this season of the year, Christians may remember that, as a baby, Jesus was marked for death by a despotic ruler. He and his parents escaped the slaughter only by becoming refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East to seek safety in a foreign country.

What should be our response when the immigration rhetoric is ratcheted up to the level of a scream? How much genius and talent and simple human gifts are lost because exile and rootlessness are associated with ignorance and worthlessness? Inheritors of the tradition founded by that French refugee in Geneva, how will we work to share the community of hope with all?

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