



The Rise of Exiles

by [David Kinnaman](#)

Over the last five years, the [Barna Group](#) researched the faith journeys of teenagers and young adults. Based on that study, the new book, [You Lost Me](#), describes three ways people get “lost” on the journey of faith:

- Prodigals disavow their faith entirely, ripping up their faith roots to become ex-Christians
- Nomads wander from the institutional church and put all of their church connections and relationships on ice.
- Exiles feel that their faith does not fit in the world they inhabit. They feel stuck between the comfortable, predictable world of faith and the culture that they hope to influence.

Think of it this way: Children disavow their parents’ faith, becoming prodigals. Or, they follow a circuitous path to spiritual maturity, the pattern of nomads. Throughout history, many have had these experiences. C.S. Lewis, for example, went through a period of spiritual disconnection from his upbringing and eventually returned to faith later in life. He was a nomad turned prodigal who became the preeminent Christian apologist of the 20th century. If prodigals and nomads are just a “dose of normal,” then I believe that exiles are distinct.

[Watch my Q Portland Talk, [Prodigals, Nomads and Exiles](#) for more on these three categories.]

After nearly five years of study on the subject, I’ve come to see that prodigals and nomads are on spiritual journeys that occur during every generation and in every type of civilization. But exiles are very different. They appear only in certain periods of time and only within specific contexts. Exiles live in times that are discontinuously different than their predecessors. **In other words, the exiles’ spiritual journeys only happen in the midst of profound cultural change.** Because of the profound social, technological, and spiritual conditions in our culture today, it is clear to me that the modern-day exiles will be the ones who significantly shape the future and experience of Christianity. We must recognize the signs of the times.

EXILES ARE DIFFERENT

In the stories of Scripture, exiles like Esther, Daniel, and Jeremiah are significant because they were faithful during a period of tumultuous cultural change for the Hebrew people. In the case of these biblical examples, the people of God were taken from a relatively homogenous cultural setting into the cosmopolitan world of Babylon and forced to make sense of that world in faithfulness to their God.

Today's exiles are not the same as the political refugees who lived more than two thousand years ago. Modern-day exiles work in the fields of fashion, journalism, media, academia, education, technology, science, government, science, the arts, and more. In these industries and beyond, we interviewed young people who felt an extreme tension between their faith and their vocation or calling. Executives at Abercrombie and Fitch. filmmakers in Los Angeles, journalists at major media outlets, performers and artists in New York City, mainstream musicians, young scientists and technologists, political mavens in the nation's capital, you get the idea. Many of the exiles we interviewed are young cultural creatives—members of what Richard Florida describes as the creative class—as well as young science-minded, left-brained geeks. This feeling of exile also extends to many church and faith leaders who feel “stuck” between the expectations of their traditions and denominations, and the congregations they hope to build.

All young people who are torn between the Christianity of their upbringing and the complexities of the world they are seeking to influence are exiles. Think of exiles like second-generation immigrants, trying to be conversant in two languages. Or, as my friend Mike Metzger says, exiles often find *The New York Times* to be more useful and interesting than they do the Bible, but this fact irritates them.

So while exiles are highly concentrated among today's young adults, it is certainly not exclusively a young adult phenomenon. Many older adults resonate with the feeling of being stuck between two worlds, as well. To understand the lives and influence of exiles, we must view them against the backdrop of technological, social, and spiritual change.

CULTURE IS DIFFERENT

Some might question the depth of cultural differences: What makes today's young adults eligible to be described as exiles? Are the changes in culture actually *that* profound??

To answer those questions, remember that much of this change has occurred over the last hundred years, including the invention of mass transportation, rising urbanization, the profound shift to mass production/mass consumption, and the pervasiveness of mass communication technologies. Many of the social and spiritual changes in behaviors and attitudes have taken root over the last fifty years, from changing sexual habits to the differences in women's roles. Being as close as we are to these changes, it can be difficult to see how profoundly the technological, social, and spiritual alterations have reshaped what we expect out of this thing called human life.

Exiles are an increasing phenomenon because the pace of cultural change is accelerating. Using the biblical themes of Babylon (described, for instance, in the book of Daniel) as a reference point, at least three parallel forces exist. These are the trends creating the rise of modern-day exiles:??

**Exiles have greater access to centers of cultural influence due to new technology and closer proximity.*

Because of his exile, Daniel had more access to the centers of cultural and political power than his parents or grandparents. Today's young people have greater entrée to ideas, worldviews, content, relationships, and much more—everything is virtually available at the

swipe of a finger. In creating the conditions for exiles, we should not underestimate the influence of technological change over the last 100 years, and particularly that of interactive, digital technology over the last 20.

**Exiles experience alienation from institutions and “normal” life gets reinvented.*

Daniel and his peers were lifted from the safe, predictable social setting of Judea to the diverse, pulsating, and accelerated life in the world’s leading city, Babylon. Similarly, today’s younger generations have experienced dramatic shifts in attitudes and practices related to sexuality, marriage, divorce and parenting. Consider this: fifty years ago, the vast majority of twenty-somethings were defined as married families, already having given birth to at least one child. Now, most twenty-somethings are unmarried, and either childless or raising children as single parents. In a scant five decades, the default for young adults has moved from conventional family units to [urban, digitally interconnected tribes](#). These changes have been compounded by the significant alienation that young people feel toward institutions like media, religion, business, and politics. Just ask the Occupy Wall Street movement if they feel alienated.

**Exiles reside in a society more skeptical of sources of authority.*

Babylon was an empire rife with religious perspectives and competing narratives about the nature of reality. Nebuchadnezzar might have even qualified for the contemporary label of “spiritual, but not religious.” Today’s younger generations are growing up in a culture increasingly skeptical of authority: institutional, moral, and religious. Younger Americans are more skeptical about things like the Bible, church and Christianity as sources of authority in their lives. There are more questions about who to believe and why—more advertisers, more messages, more sermons—than perhaps any human civilization has ever experienced. One of the signs of being in exile is this multiplicity of voices and competing ideas of whom to trust.

THE PARADOX OF EXILES

For most prodigals and nomads, faith and faithfulness are genuinely lost. For exiles, however, there is the paradox of both losing *and* finding.

Again, consider the biblical story of Daniel. He certainly lost his sheltered, standard Hebrew way of life; yet, he also gained something: he became a guide to the sovereignty of God in a foreign culture.

Here is the point: I think the rise of exiles is, generally speaking, a good thing.

And this is why: we all want to see youth and young adults flourishing as human beings (whether we are young people ourselves, or if we are their parents, educators, pastors, priests, or employers). The backdrop of this generation’s development, however, is vastly different than anything we have seen before within the U.S. context.

The problem for us is that we fail to recognize the profound cultural shifts taking place and what they mean for developing young people into flourishing humans.

Yet, exiles often recognize the implications of these cultural changes before the rest of us

do. Our society, schools, families and churches require a different set of tools—a whole new mindset—to effectively develop the ethical, vocational, personal and spiritual dimensions of this emerging generation. Like Daniel, exiles may help churches, businesses and non-profits navigate faith and faithfulness in the complexity of contemporary, cosmopolitan life.

Assisting exiles will not be easy. Young exiles need to understand the necessity of deep, meaningful relationships in order to counteract the trend toward alienation that surrounds them. They need to learn their God-given sense of vocation in order to properly steward the access they have. They will need to acquire an utter dependence on God's voice and biblical wisdom to direct them in the face of relentless skepticism and cynicism.

We should never ignore the prodigals and nomads we encounter. But we should certainly pay close attention to the rise of the exiles.