

Emigration and the Christian

The topic of emigration is a sad topic to deal with. None of us likes to lose loved ones, friends, family or precious brethren to other countries. We like things to stay the same; we like our churches to grow, but not deplete; we like our lives as they are. Nevertheless, emigration is a real phenomenon in South Africa, and will continue to be so. As a church we have lost two young couples to Australia and England respectively, and two families to Canada and Australia respectively. Most of us have known people who have emigrated at some point. Even if emigration is not something that is possible or desirable for you, it still touches your life in numerous ways, and we need a biblical perspective on it. There are some who will tell you that emigration is always wrong. Some champion the cause that emigration is the only option. What does the Bible say about this topic?

Let me start by defining what I do and do not mean by emigration. When talking about emigration, I am not including in my definition missionaries who are called back home or to another country. I am not including in my definition temporary workers from other countries who choose to return or go elsewhere. I am also not including people who must leave to meet a Biblical obligation. For example, if you are the only child or sibling able to financially support parents or a parent who is overseas and who has no means of support for themselves, you are obligated by the Bible to go to them and take care of that. Immediate family obligations are not what I mean when I speak of emigration.

By emigration I mean citizens or permanent residents, who by way of seeking and obtaining a job in another country, or by way of applying on the points scale of various nations, or by way of obtaining a foreign passport, leave South Africa to settle elsewhere.

Now let me begin by stating how I don't plan to approach this topic. I don't plan to try to list out all the pros and cons of the country, putting the advantages of South Africa on this side of the scale, and the disadvantages of South Africa on the other side of the scale – and then saying “Look, the pros, outweigh the cons, so stay!” or “Look, the disadvantages are greater than the advantages, so leave!” There are two reasons why that's unhelpful: Firstly, because such an approach can never be wholly accurate. There are just too many variables, too many factors, too many things about a country to make that kind of comparison fairly. I do not know everything about the nation, no one does. I might be having a very bad day, come out of three traffic jams due to load shedding, and my viewpoint will be very slanted. On the other hand, I may just have received a lump sum from the tax man and enjoyed a refreshing holiday with my family, and my viewpoint will be very different.

Secondly, the positives and negatives are not the only criteria that believers are to use in this kind of decision. Christians cannot make these sorts of decisions based on the same way the unbeliever evaluates things. The unbeliever is a citizen of this world. The unbeliever is not a pilgrim. He or she has tied themselves to this world and its fortunes. So for an unbeliever, it might be perfectly legitimate to draw up two columns – with advantages on the one side and disadvantages on the other. Since their reason for existence is to please themselves as much as possible as much of the time, it is only fitting that they should see if South Africa as a country is serving that purpose overall. But the Bible calls believers citizens of heaven (Eph 3:20). The Bible calls us strangers and pilgrims (I Peter 2). Therefore, our way of making this decision might include some of those things, but it will include things which unbelievers would never consider. Furthermore, it will exclude some things which might motivate unbelievers.

Both Scripture and church history have shown us that believers have fled the countries of their birth to settle elsewhere. When they have done so for the right reasons, God has actually blessed it, and has used them in the countries they came to. On the other hand, many have faded into obscurity because they left when they should have stayed. That's the irony of history, it doesn't record all those who wasted opportunities to be used of God.

So the approach that I want us to take is to firstly examine unbiblical reasons for leaving a country, and then examine biblical reasons for leaving a country. Knowing that, we'll briefly remind ourselves of Biblical decision making principles.

Let's begin with the unbiblical reasons to leave a country. By this we mean reasons for leaving that are wrong, and constitute sinful motives. Regardless of the interior state of a country, it is always wrong to leave a country for these reasons:

I. Unbiblical Reasons for Leaving a Country

1) Escaping Biblical obligations

The Bible places various obligations on various people. A man is required to take care of his household. If a man or woman's parents are at the age where they can no longer support themselves, and they do not have the adequate means to support themselves, the Bible says it falls upon the children to look after their parents (I Tim 5:4,8) If there are no other siblings able or present of willing to do so, this is an obligation.

Someone who leaves a country, blaming the situation within, while neglecting the task which God has given you, is sinning. The one does not justify the other. Now certainly many parents encourage their children to leave, but believing children should only consider this an option if it is clear that the parents that will remain behind will be taken care of physically. This applies equally to parents leaving children, divorced parents leaving, when they still owe maintenance money, or should be there to help with educational fees, and then leave the country to avoid those expenses.

It is equally wrong to flee a country because you are in **financial debt**. Whether it is bank loans, personal loans, or money owed to the taxman, leaving the country to avoid paying those debts is sinful

***Romans 13:7-8** Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. ⁸ ¶ Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

Equally, to flee a country because you are in **trouble with its law**, is wrong. If you have broken the law, you have an obligation to face the justice system of that country.

***Romans 13:1-4** Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*

Unless the circumstances are such that a false charge will likely result in a false trial and imprisonment, to leave to avoid facing the law of a country is sinful.

I will add one more obligation, and that is ministry responsibilities. If God has entrusted you with the care of others spiritually, you cannot simply drop those people without making sure they are adequately cared for spiritually in your absence. The same principle that applies to the physical applies to the spiritual – you are obliged to meet the needs of your spiritual children in the Lord, until it is clear that they can care for themselves or that someone else will care for them equally well or better. It is always wrong to leave a country to escape meeting biblical obligations.

2) Leaving Out of Self-protective Fear.

Now as we will see, believers can, out of a normal, healthy regard to their own safety, leave a

country out of conscience. But the Bible condemns believers leaving out of fear.

Jeremiah 42, 43

The application of this passage today is not to teach that Christians must stay in the land they are in at all times. The point is to illustrate a heart of unbelief. The people of Judah said they would follow regardless of whether he said stay or go. But when it came down to it, they were captive to their fear, and their unbelief. They did not believe God could protect them in the land, so they put words in God's mouth and did their own thing.

Of course, a certain kind of fear is natural. Some kind of self-protection is a God-given common grace. No one should despise the natural desire to keep self and loved one's out of harm's way. However, there is a kind of fear that grips and controls us, which becomes unbiblical and unbelieving.

It is one thing to flee out of conscience. It is another thing to flee out of unbelieving fear. The one says, God is in control, and I believe He wants us to move now. The other says, I had better make sure I am in a place where these things don't happen. The one knows that God can allow evil things to happen even in the land you are going to, but believes it is God's timing to go. The other believes that if you stay in a dangerous situation, bad luck will eventually come your way – your number will come up, and you will be a victim. In other words, one believes in God's sovereignty, and so trusts, the other doesn't and so fears.

Just as the ten spies acted in fear and brought judgement upon themselves, just as the people here acted in fear and brought judgement upon themselves, so it is never pleasing to God when you act as if He is not in control, and try to order your own life, protect yourself, provide for yourself without any submission or dependence.

3) Pursuing Covetousness

People talk about wanting a certain 'quality of life' or 'a certain standard of living'. There is a something to be said for wanting a decent life for yourself and your family. It is not wrong to seek better things for ourselves. It is not wrong to seek good things for ourselves. It is no sin to want nice shoes, a nice car. It is not wrong to want to move from your neighbourhood if your neighbourhood is crummy and dangerous. It is not wrong to want to renovate your house or even live in a better one. So on a certain level, if the general state of your country is poor, nothing in the Bible forbids you from seeking something better. Nothing in the Bible forbids us from seeking what is good.

But when seeking what is good from a material standpoint has overwhelmed all the other concerns and responsibilities of our lives, we have become materialists. We all know people who care about nothing more than their shoes, and their car, and their house. And we know that there's a natural love for good things turned into an idol.

The same applies to 'living standards' and 'quality of life'. If what you mean is that you want food and shelter and basic safety, that is not asking more than the Bible tells you to be content with. When people, out of conscience leave because they believe the situation in a country will deny them these things, their pursuit of 'a better life' is just another way of saying, they want to live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness (I Tim 2:2)

But a lot of people have very high expectations of what a quiet and peaceable life should be. In fact, when you examine it, they do not really want a simple life that enables godliness. They want the life which modern pop culture is selling in the advertisements. They want comfort; they want abundance; they want luxuries; they want smooth living. They want pleasure as the mainstay of their lives, and they want a country where they think it will happen. And make no mistake, certain countries are devoted to luxury, pleasure and extravagant living. In other words, they don't want the

life of Christian contentment; they want a life of privilege.

The problem is, when you have grown up with two or three fine cars, having one simple one seems like deprivation. When you have become accustomed to sirloin steak every other day, pasta and vegetables seems like you are roughing it. When you are used to friendly, satisfied civil servants and shop assistants and policeman who enjoy helping you, it seems like you are being robbed if you encounter rude and impatient ones.

My point is this – you have to know what the Bible means by a simple, quiet life, before you can judge if you are truly being denied that. In most cases, people who grew up with privileges do not see those things as privileges; they begin to regard them as rights. And they see their flight as simply pursuing they deserve.

Until we know what a simple life is, we might regard a materialistic one as simple. But the Bible tells us what the simple life is:

1 Timothy 6:7-8 *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*

If a simple life with contentment is no longer viable, you might be one of those who flees that in good conscience. But beware that you do not mistake privilege for the simple life.

4) Pressure from others

I suppose it goes without saying that one should not make any decision, let alone leaving a country, because others are pressuring you to do so. This might come in the form of parents nudging you to go, or from children, or from friends who are already overseas. It come can in the form of seeing other people leave, which places pressure on you – seeing so many go naturally makes you question whether or not you should stay. The media is a form of pressure. The media sells its wares by reporting the shocking, the scandalous, the outrageous, and the horrific. Therefore, have a steady diet of TV, Internet or newspaper journalism, and you will have a lot of internal pressure to leave the country.

The truth is it is never wise to base your decisions on the herd mentality. To do things because of the fear of man is to displease God, and usually, to miss out on His will for you. I could turn this around and say it applies equally to staying. Whether the media, or society, or your family, or loved ones are pushing you to stay or to leave, that in itself is not what you base your decision on.

But now let's turn it around ask what the Biblical reasons are for leaving a country.

I. Biblical reasons for leaving a country.

1) Fleeing persecution

We read in the book of Acts 8:1: “**Acts 8:1** *Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*”

Here you have persecution breaking out, and believers fleeing for their lives. Their action is not condemned, it is simply recorded. And, as we find out, the scattering of the believers led to the Gospel being preached wherever they went.

Church history supplies us with many examples of believers who fled persecution. The followers of John Hus, fled persecution and ended up on Nicolaus von Zinzendorf's land, because they were fleeing, and launched the Moravian missionary movement. The Inquisition caused whole

populations to migrate and flee Spain, and Portugal, leaving the Protestant movement almost non-existent in those countries. You might remember from school history that the French Hugenots fled France and settled in South Africa, America and Holland. Believers of the ages have known that unless God directs them otherwise in conscience, there is a time to flee persecution, to save their own lives, and to preserve a Gospel witness to others. So I will say something which I will say often in this message and come back in order to explain – fleeing a country due to persecution is a matter of conscience, and can be God's will for you.

2) Fleeing economic disaster

As early as the book of Genesis, we have examples of believers leaving Canaan due to a severe famine and going to a land where there was plenty. While there were times they were instructed to stay in the land, there were other times, such as when Jacob was told to go down and settle in Goshen, that God permits believers to flee because of economic disaster. Later, a famine in Israel caused Elimelech, the husband of Naomi to go into the land of Moab. Again, the Bible doesn't comment on these actions, it simply describes them.

Notice, a famine does not mean you're struggling to buy Woolworths desserts, it means the basic supplies to live on are running out – the shops don't have bread, water is in short supply. It doesn't mean that your currency limits you in your holiday in Monaco, it means the ability to feed and clothe yourself and your offspring is becoming extremely difficult. This seems to leave the door open for believers to seek employment overseas if they believe, in good conscience that this is what God wills for them.

Post World War I Germany was in economic disaster. Post World War 2 Japan was in economic disaster. Zimbabwe is in economic disaster. There seems to be grounds for fleeing economic impoverishment. In times of famine in Israel, some believers stayed, some fled. When the believers in Jerusalem were going through poverty, some probably left, but some clearly stayed. Leaving a country due to economic disaster is a matter of conscience.

3) Fleeing political revolution (Matthew 24:2, 14-16)

It is a fact of history recorded by Eusebius, that the Christian Jews fled Jerusalem four years before the final disaster in 70 A.D. The reason for this is that Christ had warned them of the coming disaster, and had told them to flee. He said to his disciples regarding the Temple:

*“**Matthew 24:2** not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” When they asked Him, “when shall these things be?” – He went on to describe the events that would tip believers off that a great time of tribulation had begun. He went on to say, “**Matthew 24:15-16** Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), ¹⁶ "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”*

In this case, believers were given specific commands to flee. Believers have fled political instability, such as when Babylon attacked Israel, or during successive periods of church history. On the other hand, believers have remained in countries when the Nazis took over, when the Communists took over, when military coups in Africa and South America took over. Again, leaving a country due to political revolution is a matter of conscience.

In other words, when you take the three cases we have just mentioned, they all imply that believers can be in the will of God while they seek their own safety. It is not necessarily wrong for God's people to move themselves out of harm's way. The book of Proverbs says in 22:3 and 27:12:

*“**Proverbs 22:3** A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, But the simple pass on and are punished. But the choice to seek your own safety is a choice made on conscience. I will come back to that point and dwell on it.*

So let me summarise where we are thus far: It is always wrong to leave any country to escape Biblical obligations, or because you are driven by unbelieving fear, or because you are pursuing a materialist's life of luxury, ease and comfort, or because others have simply pressured you to go. Positively, it is Biblically defensible to leave when you, in good conscience, choose to flee persecution, economic disaster, or political revolt, seeking a quiet and peaceable life elsewhere.

So it seems it comes down to a matter of conscience. Whether it is persecution, or economic hardship, or a life hostile to simplicity and godliness, we have to decide in our consciences whether that is so or not. That brings us to probably the point that everything hinges on – what does it mean to decide on conscience?

Conscience is a part of your soul. Conscience is like a judge who sits at the entrance and exit of your soul. Everything you think and do is judged by your conscience. We talked about the religious imagination a few weeks ago, and these two work together. Your mind pictures and tries to understand reality, so it informs, matures and actuates the conscience. Conscience then makes moral judgements. Now conscience can be seared by sin, warped by legalism. Conscience works properly when we are desiring to please God and not ourselves. Your conscience is as effective as your spirituality is mature (Heb 5:14)

Sometimes your conscience makes judgements with the aid of a clear-cut command- 'Do not commit adultery'. Sometimes, it does this with a principle, such as 'Do not give occasion to the flesh'. Sometimes, it must weigh up a decision based on various Biblical principles which could go either way. That's the whole point of Romans 14, regarding the observance of days, the eating of certain foods. Some things in life are not prohibited in Scripture, or even addressed by a principle. You have to weigh up all things and make a decision with your conscience.

Romans 14:5 *Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.*

Will you eat at a family restaurant owned by a strip club? Would you attend the wedding of a family member who is unequally yoked? Would you go to a beach where other people are dressed provocatively? Would you play a gambling game in your own home? Will you accept a gift of money from someone who is a known gambler? These are questions of conscience. That is not to say they don't matter. The fact that you could go either way doesn't mean the decision is meaningless. It means God wants you to work with the knowledge you have, lean on Him, and then obey that. In fact, once you make a decision based on your conscience, God holds you to that as the moral authority. That conscience is His authority in you for that matter on which He has not specifically spoken. , To go back on your moral judgement in such cases is sin. The Bible tells us that.

Romans 14:22-23 ²² *Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.* ²³ *But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.*

So first, your conscience would have to weigh up factors and decide if the legitimate reasons for leaving a country are true in South Africa. Secondly, you would have to judge if it is morally right to stay and face persecution, or to flee it, to stay and face economic hardship or to flee it; to stay and face political revolt or to flee. It is a matter of conscience.

John Bunyan said it this way: (I've updated some of the language)

If it is in thy heart to flee, flee: if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Anything but a denial of the truth. He that flees, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yes, the same man may both flee and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled (Exo 2:15), Moses stood (Heb 11:27). David fled (1 Sam 19:12), David stood (24:8). Jeremiah fled (Jer 37:11,12), Jeremiah stood (38:17). Christ withdrew himself (Luke 9:10), Christ stood (John 18:1-8). Paul fled (2 Cor 11:33), Paul stood (Acts 20:22,23).

There are therefore few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or flee. I [would hate to] to impose upon any man in these things; only, if you [flee] take two or three cautions with thee:-

(1.) Do not flee out of a slavish fear, but rather because fleeing is an ordinance of God, opening a door for the escape of some, which door is opened by God's providence, and the escape [accepted] by God's Word (Matt 10:23).

(2.) When you have fled, do as much good as you can in all [places that you come to], for therefore the door was opened to you, and you [sought to make your escape.](Acts 8:1-5).

(3.) Do not think yourself secure when you have fled; it was providence that opened the door, and the Word that did call you to escape: but where, and why, that you do not know yet. Uriah the prophet fled into Egypt, because there dwelt men that were to take him, that he might be brought again to Jerusalem to die there (Jer 26:21)...

(6.) But flee not, in fleeing, from religion; flee not, in fleeing, for the sake of a trade; flee not, in fleeing, that you may have ease for the flesh: this is wicked, and will yield neither peace nor profit to thy soul; neither now, nor at death, nor at the day of judgment.

Bunyan says – when you are trying to please God, let conscience guide you. Do what seems right to you. Do what you desire to do as God's free slave. Be bound by service to God, and do what you want. But Bunyan backs up what we have said – do not flee for merely material reasons, for the sake of the so-called better life.

Conscience must also make mature judgements in respect of questions like these:

- Is my ministry in South Africa complete as far as the Spirit of God has shown me?
- Has God made it possible? Or am I like Jonah at Joppa, finding 'an open door' to disobedience?
- Is there anything for me on the other side, spiritually speaking?

Another matter of conscience is whether or not you believe you have been called to stay to make a difference. Some Christians say that our mandate to be salt and light prevents us from leaving; they say we are abdicating responsibility if we leave. But you can't defend that position biblically. Christians have left countries and Christians have stayed to make a difference. Christians have left denominations going corrupt, and Christians have stayed to make a difference. Christians have left churches gone wrong, and Christians have stayed to make a difference. It becomes a question of what you believe God has called you to do at this time in your life. Perhaps the text of Esther is particularly appropriate for you:

“Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”(Esther 4:14).

On the other hand, your calling may be sending you elsewhere, to be a light over there. As Bunyan said, if you do get to move, then know that God opened the door, and you are to do as much good there as possible.

In other words, as a Christian seeking to be mature, you will be called upon to judge for yourself, and will be judged by your judgement.

What about pastors? Should pastors emigrate? In some ways pastors are like everybody else. They are under the same criteria positively and negatively. They are citizens of the country like everyone else, they are believers, like other believers but on some fronts they are also different. Paul compares the office of one who is full-time in the ministry to that of the Old Testament Levite (1 Cor 9:13-14). As you might recall, the Levite was different to his fellow Israelites in that he could not own land, because God was to be his portion and inheritance. Now the parallels are not exact,

because all believers are priests in our dispensation, but equally so, in a way, full-time ministers choose to give up a portion of this world in a similar way – tying their provision not to a local economy or to their own ingenuity, but by faith to the work of the ministry itself.

In some ways this makes a pastor less tied to the particular matters of this world, and more tied to his particular ministry. The result is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it means that if God calls him to another ministry, he is loosed from that particular place faster than the average person might pack up and go. On the other hand, he is also tied to that particular place more than anyone in his congregation.

As I mentioned earlier, a pastor has obligations to the people he leads and shepherds. To become the spiritual parent and nourishment for people who depend on you, and then to leave *merely* so that you can seek more money or a nicer job seems to bring the word 'hireling' to mind. Shepherds do not forsake sheep on a hillside because they hear of a better flock somewhere else. Now a shepherd might receive a legitimate call to another country. But if so, it will only be because the Great Shepherd is doing so. A responsible undershepherd will make sure the people he is leaving are protected, fed and cared for (Acts 20:17-36)

So let me try and summarise. If you are thinking of leaving to avoid some obligation in South Africa – you're wrong. If you are thinking of leaving only to pursue a life of privilege and luxury – you're wrong. If you are thinking of leaving because you fear what will happen to you – you're wrong. If you are thinking of leaving or staying purely because of the pressure or opinions of others – you're wrong.

Christians have left countries because of persecution, economic collapse or political revolt. Those are legitimate reasons for *believers* leaving a country. But Christians have also stayed in countries where there has been persecution, economic collapse or political revolt. So the rule here is as Augustine put it: Love God, and do as you please. Because when you love God, what you are pleased to do, is what He is pleased with. Or as Psalm 37:4 says,

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

If you are driven by selfishness, you will twist this message to make it say you can do whatever you want and it won't matter. If you are submitted to God, you will take very seriously the command to judge in your own conscience *if the legitimate reasons for believers* leaving a country are true of South Africa, and if so are they a call for *you to do the same, or a call for you to stand.*