

## **"Resident Aliens." No Eight**

Christian, the central character in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, leaves behind his family and the City of Destruction to set out on his great journey. He refuses to return back despite all the temptations, difficulties and dangers he encounters. Occasionally he is given glimpses of the glory to come in the Celestial City to which he is travelling. Christian, the solitary pilgrim, rejects this world as he travels toward his destination on the other side of the river of death. In other words, the Christian is a pilgrim merely on the way: his life passes through time and space, past death to what lies beyond.

The pilgrim image is deeply rooted in Scripture. We are not fugitives on the earth, but "resident aliens." This distinguishes us from unbelievers who treat this life as the sum and substance of everything. The patriarchs confess in Hebrews 11:13 that they were aliens and strangers on earth. They were looking for a country of their own. They were longing for a better - a heavenly one. God had prepared a city for them (Hebr. 1:14-16). Some believe the "resident alien" image gives the church a license to turn her back on society. They think that Bunyan's solitary pilgrim is so bound and determined to reach his destination that he has no desire to make a difference in this world. I also believe that Bunyan's view of the Christian life is not complete. We are still in our Father's world (John 17: 11). A "resident alien" lives in an inescapable tension with the powers of the world. His loyalty is to God and not Caesar. He receives his directions for living from heaven, the control centre of the universe. The early Christians, armed only with the Gospel and witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit, were perceived as people who "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). They didn't travel blindfolded to the Celestial City: they saw the needs of a broken world, had a Kingdom vision, and obeyed the Great Commission. Today's pilgrims are involved in missions and evangelism, build Christian schools, promote Christian labour associations and attempt to establish a Christian voice in politics. They work in the slums, feed the hungry and seek justice for the exploited. But they don't feel at home in this world. They have no intention of making this earth their permanent settlement. To conclude with Calvin:

By his word the Lord lays down this measure when he teaches that the present life is for his people as a pilgrimage on which they are hastening toward the Heavenly Kingdom. If we must simply pass through this world, there is no doubt we ought to use its good things in so far as they help rather than hinder and to buy goods with the same attitude as one sells them (1 Cor.7: 31-30) (Institutes.III, x, 1).