

## *1<sup>st</sup> Peter: Homes for the Homeless: In Search of the Church*

This letter was written during the later part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and was for the churches in Asia Minor. At this time, Christians comprised less than 1% of the population in the area. The focus of this letter was towards groups of displaced persons—aliens living in the area or strangers who were visiting. Regardless of their origins, these folks were, for the most part, displaced. Though they were Christians, they had no acceptance or place of belonging within the larger community. When you are without a home, what does it mean to be a Christian in a non-Christian culture? As outsiders, they were often the subject of attacks and discrimination within the culture. The primary image we get from 1 Peter is of the church as a “household for the displaced.” For folks in this situation, Peter is giving them words about their “mission and future.”

For Peter, it is important that these isolated Christians receive “encouragement and exhortation, consolation and confirmation.” Certainly many questions were going through the minds of these Christians. Some of them were:

- Did their conversion make any difference in their lives?
- Was their isolation and alien status any different now than before?
- Where was that accepting community they longed for?
- Why hadn't they experienced God's grace and a certainty of their salvation more powerfully?

In response to those concerns, Peter sought to 1) emphasize that Christians had a distinctive identity; 2) reinforce the power of this identity within the Christian community; 3) explain their afflictions. This letter asks the recipients to prayerfully struggle to “make homes for themselves and one another...to engage in the creation and sustaining of homes for the homeless.”

Peter speaks first to their discouragement by reminding them of the identity and status in Christ. They are chosen and marked as Christ's own forever and they should focus on that identity. In spite of being displaced, they were “an elect and holy people.”

*<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

*<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NRSV)*

Throughout, Peter seeks to reinforce this truth for the minority Christians. In the larger society, they may be one thing but within the body of Christ they are royalty.

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It was also important for them to maintain a cohesive community not conforming to the values of the larger society and culture. A great deal of the letter encourages them to “preserve the distinctiveness and solidarity of the household.”

*1 Peter 2:12, 15-17 (NRSV) <sup>12</sup> Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. <sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. <sup>16</sup> As servants of God, live as free people; yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

The strength of the community living “holy lives” has a power to silence the folks who might be hostile towards them. Furthermore the encouragement from within the community for its members strengthens the individual members.

*<sup>8</sup> Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*

*<sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called--that you might inherit a blessing. 1 Peter 3:8-9 (NRSV)*

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Finally, Peter seeks to help them to make sense of their suffering by and through their faith. Not only did suffering allow them to identify with Christ in his suffering, but it also meant that they were being faithful to Christ. In their suffering, this group truly began to realize their identity as Christ's presence to and for each other and the larger

community. In their suffering, Peter assures them they lose their “displaced” status and become set apart (sanctified) for Christ.

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### *1<sup>st</sup> Peter’s implications for us: How we understand evangelism*

Remembering that this community had no real identity prior to their becoming Christians, we see that it is through the church that these displaced persons gain an identity. As we have said often in this study, these new Christians began to see themselves as an alternative community to the mainstream culture around them. Something was happening that we are sometimes afraid to name: conversion. They had experienced a bit of the new life offered through Christ and sought more of that at a deeper level. They wanted a change—a conversion. They began living this new life in the larger community and realized people were attracted to it.

In an almost unintentional way, these new Christians began to attract non-believers because of their “alternative lifestyle”. Later, Tertullian, an early Christian leader, remarked that non Christians said, “Look, they say, ‘how they love one another’ (for they themselves hate one another); ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they themselves are readier to kill each other). Off course, to live in this manner required a commitment and was demanding, but through these demands came the conversion.

As we struggle to make budgets and attract new members, it is worth asking ourselves where the place of conversion is in our congregation. Is there a great tension between the culture of the church and the larger community? Are our values different from Wall Street? From Madison Ave.? From television and the media? Where there is no tension, we often have trouble with evangelism.

With 1<sup>st</sup> Peter as our model, we should look at evangelism differently. For that community, the church’s purpose was to build a different community thereby being an alternative to the dominant culture. This community was so compelling and vibrant that others were drawn to it. In order to grow, we need to “rediscover the urgency and meaning that separates being Christian from being American, successful and privileged.” The church is not supposed to be like “the country club, fraternal order or PTA.” “Is not the vision of love and reconciliation at the heart of the Christian community distinctly different from the values currently put forward by anyone else in this society?” We can only engage in evangelism as we are able to stand back from society and determine what the church has to offer in return. Do we have an alternative identity?

Our 1<sup>st</sup> step is through regaining a sense of community in the church. Do we offer services but don’t expect commitment? It isn’t services that we should offer but a new life and a new identity. As we seek to understand and live life from the perspective of Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection, we begin to offer community with a new way of living. To those of us who are searching and struggling, this is a home. If we become that place, we will grow.

- What expectations of love and forgiveness exist in our church?
- What does evangelism mean to you? How can our message be different?
- What is the primary image of Good Shepherd? Can or should it be changed?