

# Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 40 · Number 3 · July 2016

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# **An Exiled Community as a Missionary Community**

## **A Study based on 1 Peter 2:9, 10**

**Valdir R. Steuernagel**

### **I Introduction**

The first letter of Peter is an old friend of mine. I remember the church in which I served as a pastor where I became deeply involved in a series of sermons on the letter. University students with whom I had contact as an itinerant minister are also before my eyes at this very moment. With all of them I shared the challenge of living as Christians in society. In this case it was a capitalist society based on profit and consumption. 1 Peter invited us to understand life as a gift of grace and became prophetic by denouncing a style of living absolutely rooted in the idea of consumption. A pilgrim theology was an exciting challenge to live under God and for others in a dimension of witness and service in love. Why does 1 Peter speak so much to my heart and theology? it may be because the letter is so close to the life and struggle of the church in the challenged and suffering context of Latin America.

1 Peter is in fact a pastoral letter and it has to be understood as such. Christian people who were living in different regions of Asia Minor received this letter as claim for resistance in a context of suffering. They were invited

to remember from where they came, who they were and where they were going. Those Christians were called to affirm their community life but at the same time to go out and share with others, regardless of who they are, this marvellous gift of life.

1 Peter is a beautiful document that expresses the richness and struggles of the life of early Christianity. In an astonishing way the message of the Lord Jesus Christ spread out and penetrated the Greek world, without asking for permission. In a period of 30/40 years after all this began, the empire and the gentile people began to perceive that they had to deal with a new reality called 'Christians'. The letter of 1 Peter reflects this new reality and shows the basic struggle of the Christian communities in their context of life as well as the reaction of the non-Christian, the outsiders, because of this new being in the society.

The different opinions about the authorship of the letter are well known. My personal option would be to credit the authorship of this letter, if not to Peter himself, at least, to the Petrine community whose most well-known representatives are Silvanus and Mark (1 Pet 5:12, 14).

In some ways the Christians had become a big family, whose members are spread out through the Roman Empire. The consequence of this fact is both joy and suffering. Joy because the Christians can experience that they are members of a large family. They are not alone. People in other places are witnessing to the same faith. Suffering because the 'outsiders' are perceiving the presence of this strange family in the middle of their society, and are beginning to react.

William Barclay said that first letter of Peter was the result of the love a pastor had for his people and his desire to help them as they faced difficult times and would have to expect even more problems.<sup>1</sup> We could add that it expresses not only a pastor's love, but also the love of a community looking carefully to other communities in a time of suffering.

The letter is a well-elaborated document that, based on a true apostolic tradition, manifests solidarity with the 'exiles'—Christians in Asia Minor. Such solidarity is evidenced in a call to resistance, reminding them that they were ransomed through Christ. It is also an affirmation of their election, a challenge towards a witness to the outsiders and the necessity of maintaining a strong community life, because this is the time of the end: 'By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God; stand fast in it' (1 Pet 5:12).

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Daily Study Bible; original edition 1958) (The New Daily Bible Study, Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 160.

## II Examining the Text

'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.' (1 Pet 2:9–10).

### 1. The Text in the context

According to the structure of the letter it is possible to perceive that 1 Peter 2:9–10 is exactly at the end of the first segment (1 Pet 1:3–2:10). While in the following segment (1 Pet 2:11–4:11), the author will deal especially with the Christian's life in society as well as life in the Christian community, the former segment had established the basis for that more ethical and pastoral emphasis. Verses 9 and 10 are a kind of link between both sections or in general terms, between the theological and the ethical pastoral accent. The beginning of v.9 expresses again who these *oikos tou theou* are but the end of it says that what they are is a sign of mercy that has to be shared. It is fundamental to declare 'his marvellous light' to the outsiders because it is through this opportunity that they may also experience this mercy and become 'God's own people'. The manner in which the Christians will express this witness is, in some way, alluded to in the following segment. But the theological basis for doing it was given first.

1 Peter 2:4–10 is the specific pericope at which it is necessary to look carefully because it will help us to understand v.9–10. John Elliott considers it fully appreciated when vv.4–10 are

seen as the 'appropriate climax to the entire initial paraenetic section. For here', according to him,

the exhortation to holiness of living and brotherly love and thought of birth and nourishment from the Divine Word are gathered together and substantiated in a final pericope describing the electedness, holiness, and union of the believing community with the elected Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The central motif of 1 Peter 2:4–10 is the election theme. However, the election has to be understood through Jesus Christ, described as 'living stone', 'rejected by men' but 'chosen and precious in God's sight'. The so-called 'aliens and exiles' are also elected and named 'living stones'. But this is possible just because of 'Him'. Through 'Him' they will worship the one who has elected them. Hence, because of Jesus and through his election as the 'cornerstone' these Christians are considered and proclaimed the elected people of God. The interpretation of vv.9–10 is given through vv.4–5. These verses are, in fact, a basic statement developed in vv.6–8 and vv.9–10. As in vv.6–8 we meet Christ, the elect stone, in vv.9–10 we find the faithful community, the elect race.<sup>3</sup>

The whole pericope of vv.4–10 is strongly dependent on the old Testament even if it is interpreted in a christological perspective. Most scholars agree that the author assumed, at that point, some material from the Jewish

Christian tradition, that was already used in its proper context. Obviously this material was adapted to the letter's goal, namely, to a community the majority of which were gentile Christians. 1 Peter 2:4–10, said Elliott, 'is a particularly graphic illustration of

the manner in which sacred Israelite tradition had been appropriated to affirm the continuity and yet the novelty and unique identity and status of the eschatological people of God'.<sup>4</sup>

According to the purpose of this article, it is necessary to concentrate on vv.9–10 in order to know better this faithful community and elect race.

## 2. 'That you may declare'

It was already seen that 1 Peter 2:9–10 is on a point of transition between the affirmation of God's mercy, and the natural, unavoidable opportunity to share concerning this mercy. The mere existence of the people of God evidences God's mercy to themselves and to the outsiders. What is, in fact, the difference between the Christians—the insiders—and the non-Christians—the outsiders? Is there really such a big difference between them? Yes and no! Yes, the difference is between life and death. The insiders 'have been born anew ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1:3). They 'were ransomed from the futile way inherited from your fathers' (1:18). They were 'built into a spiritual house' through the precious cornerstone (2:5). On the other hand, there is not such a big difference be-

2 John H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy: An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4–10 And The Phrase: basileion ieráteuma* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 199.

3 Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy*, 146.

4 Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 226.

tween insiders and outsiders. Some years, months, maybe days ago they had been together in the same futile situation, 'inherited from your fathers'. The author of the letter reminds his 'beloved' Christian fellows that they lived in the darkness, without mercy, and were not people of God (2:9), like all others who are still outside. The only and big difference is God's mercy. The insiders do not have anything that is intrinsically better in relation to the outsiders, except God's decision in choosing them. However, God's mercy is not exclusive but inclusive. In order to demonstrate it to the outsiders it is so important that the Christians 'declare the wonderful deeds of him' to everyone. Therefore, the point of transition (2:9–10) has to be understood in a missiological perspective.

The author of the letter was really a courageous person. He went directly to the heart of the Old Testament and took the central concept of Israel's self-understanding and transferred it to the members of the communities to which he was addressing his letter: the idea of election. He became even more courageous when he applied all the tradition of being elected to people who are identified as aliens and exiles of the Dispersion (1:1–2:11).

What kind of people were they actually? Were they aliens because, as Christians, they were persecuted and had lost their roots in society? Should the word 'dispersion' be interpreted, as Cullmann said, in a 'Christian meaning: ... in the world Christians are foreigners; their true place is in heaven'?<sup>5</sup> It

is again Elliott who gives much attention to the so-called *paroikos*. His basic point is that the receivers of the letter were not *paroikos* because of their faith. In fact; they had been such before they became Christians. That was their social class. According to Elliott's interpretation it is not possible to find the meaning of *paroikos* by looking at the Church itself or by spiritualizing the concept, but by looking at the social and economic reality of that people at that time. The Christian communities were formed by people who had already been outsiders in a sociological understanding, by virtue of their own social class. The fact that they became Christians made the situation even worse. If they, as strangers, went to the Christian community in order to find a 'home', now they were strangers twice because of their social condition and because of their Christian faith.

The addressees of 1 Peter were people who, as members of a small but increasing Christian community, were being persecuted for the sake of their faith and therefore had become aliens in a society in which most of them were already social outsiders. However, this is not the whole picture. They were not losers. They were winners. Even if they were considered strangers by their neighbours, in fact they had found home in God. Being aliens and exiles in this world can receive a positive evaluation if it is seen from the perspective of the writer who sees in those Christians the real participants of the most important event in history. They were not among those who had rejected the 'cornerstone'; instead of this they were 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people ...' (2:9).

Every one of these concepts is very

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The New Testament: An Introduction for the General Reader* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 105.

rich in meaning to the Old Testament community. Indeed, the author of 1 Peter is using O.T. symbols in order to describe 'what it means to be church'. Therefore his use of the O.T. is very free. He chooses the concepts according to his understanding and applies them in conformity with his necessity. However, this procedure of the author 'does not play off the elect status of the Christians against Israel's rejection of the Gospel'.<sup>6</sup>

The author rejoices in the opportunity to look at the church of the Dispersion in Asia Minor and says to them that they are:

*A chosen race:* Their poor social condition will not determine their understanding of life anymore, even if they remain poor. They are people of a new race, directly chosen by God. The same God who had once elected Israel (Ex 9:6; Deut 7:6–8; Is. 43:20–21) is now electing these insignificant inhabitants of Asia Minor.

*A Royal priesthood:* Using Exodus 19:6 (LXX) the author is referring to those Christians in a very special way. They are participants of a community of priests that worship God, through Jesus Christ. This royal community is in direct relationship with God, and its existence is completely dependent on Christ.<sup>7</sup>

---

6 Donald Senior, C. P., *1 & 2 Peter*, New Testament Message, vol 20 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1980), 36–37.

7 Senior was probably right when he said that 'the epistle does not address the question of an ordained priesthood (36). Elliott also went in this direction when he said that 2:4–10 speaks neither for nor against a particular ministry or office in the church. However though the letter knows about different functions in the church

*A holy nation:* This community is characterized as a nation and a holy one. No more a geo-political nation but a nation of exiles of the dispersion. People from different places and statements are all together members of God's nation. And since it is his, it has to be holy: '... but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct' (1:15).

*God's own people:* This is the very reason for the existence of this new race, community of priests and special nation. They exist only because God has chosen them and made them his own people. The O.T. community was familiar with these expressions (Ex 19:6; Deut 7:6–8; Is 43:20,21), but it is a novelty that it was applied to another group people, a very special one, the people of Christ, the chosen cornerstone.

The author was not only courageous—he was moved, touched, excited. By using all this rich terminology he was going towards a climax: those aliens, the Christians, were 'God's own people'. What else could be said? As follows, the author moved his attention to the readers in order to transform them from being passive receivers to being active participants in that new story: 'that you may declare ...'. Such a profound experience and new understanding of life had to be announced.

The community of priests should express their gratitude in worship: 'to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (2:5). But they would also announce their discovery and share their experience with the outsiders, the persecutors included.

---

the idea of a priesthood leads the community in a nonhierarchist understanding of ministry.

The discovery was Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. He was the real and the only reason for all that profound change in history and life. However, by talking about him, they would share a personal experience of being 'ransomed from the futile ways', precisely with the 'precious blood of Christ' (1:18, 19). This is the experience of moving from darkness to the light.<sup>8</sup> From *not being* to *being* people of God, from being without mercy to living a merciful life.

The terminology used in v. 10 to express God's acceptance of those Christians as his people comes from Hosea, where 'God's relationship with Israel is expressed by a personal experience of rejection and acceptance of a woman and her children'.<sup>9</sup>

Here, according to 1 Peter, some Jews, but especially some gentiles, are accepted by God and transformed into an eschatological community through Jesus Christ. And this has to be announced.

Is it possible to put the nose outside the door, if the Christians are experiencing such a popular persecution and so strong a rejection by both Jews and gentiles? Hostility against the traitors to the imperial and common religions can be smelled in every place. Would it not be prudent to take care of the community itself during this time of difficulties? A case could be made that to answer this question is to touch at the secret of the life of the early Church.

1 Peter is not proposing a self-assured strategy. On the contrary, it is a challenge to the communities to go out and to share the gift of life.

In 1 Peter Christians are called to participate in and integrate the social order and to maintain exemplary conduct in society. By so doing the Christians will show that they are people, similar to others, who want to live in society and are concerned about their neighbours. The Christians will be able to do so even in relation to their persecutors, and even if they are misunderstood. In fact, they can do so because they are exiles of the Dispersion; they are free (1:1; 2:16). By being ransomed by Jesus Christ they became free—from themselves and from others. Whether they are accepted or rejected, continue to live or die, they are free. Free to be persecuted, to proclaim the wonderful deeds, to maintain good conduct, to 'honour all men, to love the brotherhood and to fear God' (2:17) in the name of Christ.

### III A Missiological Perspective

That the letter of 1 Peter has an undeniable missiological content has already been seen. At this point the goal will be to summarize the mission perspective in three points. It was Senior, in his commentary, who mentioned the missiological content of the letter:

One of the major contributions of 1 Peter is the robust sense of Christian mission he conveys. Even though these fragile communities are embedded in a hostile environment and suffering abuse, he does not prescribe reaction or caution. The Christians are not to flee the world but to participate in it (2:13).

<sup>8</sup> Goppelt pointed out that here we have a continuity from the O.T. Jewish tradition, used to refer to the fact of being called to faith as a move from the darkness to light.

<sup>9</sup> Goppelt, A Commentary on 1 Peter (ET, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1993), 151.



They are not to condemn or berate the world, but to treat it with respect, even gentleness, all with the hope that in its own time, the world will join the Christians in glorifying God'.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. Mission and identity

In affirming the missiological content of 1 Peter, the writer makes no attempt to hide the tension-filled life of the communities and the temptations to a 'ghettoization'. It is the letter's goal to avoid confinement and to direct the tension towards mission. The author does it by reminding them of the heart of their faith—Jesus Christ, calling them to faithfulness, recalling them to brotherhood and challenging them to mission, because they are the elected people of God. Therefore, the strong accent of the letter regarding the identity of the Christians is not in contradiction with the call to go out. They are in fact very inter-related because there is no mission without identity. The identity given to them by God transforms them into *oikos tou theou*, even if the outsiders call them aliens. As *oikos* they have found a meaning for their life, as well as a place in a brotherhood and a task for the whole life: 'to declare the wonderful deeds of him' (2:9).

### 2. Chosen but not exclusive

There is always a thin line between election and exclusion. An arrogant exclusiveness is almost the shadow of a healthy identity. However, a healthy identity is always an invitation for companionship. The history of Israel or

even of the church could be seen from the point of view of the tension between 'be a blessing to the nations' (Gen. 12:2) and being satisfied with itself and promoting confinement: 'We have Abraham as our father' (Lk. 2:8). This conflict is certainly also experienced by the communities to which 1 Peter was written. Fortunately the letter is a document that helps to get balance between identity and mission: chosen, yes, but not closed to outsiders. Chosen for witness, in word and deed.

Werner Bieder, in his article *Grund und Kraft der Mission nach dem 1 Petrusbrief*, calls attention to the fact that word and deed are both dimensions of Christian witness.<sup>11</sup>

(a) The ethical aspect is an important part of the Christian witness but neither the only one nor enough in itself.

(b) Christians want to tell the story to those who are still outside, who are living in the same situation in which they formerly lived and from whence they were redeemed. Based on their own experience Christians believe in the conversion from paganism to faith and want to be prepared to give reason for their faith.

### 3. Mission is an exercise of the community

The letter of 1 Peter is a strong community document. In the theological understanding the Christian faith is conceived and articulated in terms of *génos*, *ethnos*, *láo*s, *oikos tou theou*. In the pastoral dimension, the Christians

<sup>11</sup> Werner Bieder, *Grund u. Kraft der Mission nach dem 1 Petrusbrief*, Theologische Studien. 29 (Zuerich: Evarig. Verlag A. G. Zollikon), 6–9.



are reminded not only about the suffering in other places (5:9) but also that they have to stay together in difficult times (4:8–10). And last but not least, mission is also conceived of as a task to be exercised in a communitary dimension. In word and deed, in joy and suffering, it is the privilege of the community to 'declare the marvellous deeds of him' until he comes.<sup>12</sup>

This communitary dimension has already been mentioned. It would be important to discuss the relation between *paroikos*, *oikos tou theou* and the ethical household approach of the letter. At this point our purpose is to detach the corporate from the individual understanding of Christian life, a natural and corporate comprehension of mission from a specialized department-mentality as well as to call attention to the fact that the life of the community itself had a missionary dimension:

'The love and service that binds the Christians together as God's household are the most potent witness they can offer a world starved for meaning'.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV Conclusion

The pictures are mixed before my eyes. Chile, Peru, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia ... I feel as though a piece of me were in each place. The struggle for life in the Christian communities in Asia Minor, but also the starving of all the people of that world are brought to me by the

letter of 1 Peter. However, the picture of the 'favelas', 'barreados' or 'vilas miseria' in Latin America is much more fresh before my eyes. The cry of the Christians from the Presbyterian Church in Callqui, Peru, whose six young men were killed by soldiers of the Marines in front of the church, can still be heard. Would it not be the case that 1 Peter helps us to look to Latin American reality also, in order to ask about the Church's task in society, the identity of the Christian communities and the call to mission? What would be the secret of such a powerful letter that is able to be a sign of hope in spite of its old age? Could we not invite 1 Peter to visit Latin America in order to share its relevant understanding of life with a continent that is thirsty for meaning and hope? What would the author of the letter say to us?

In the north area of Peru called Ayacucho, the evangelical church has been facing serious problems and its life has been threatened. Ayacucho is a 'Departamento' occupied by the military because of the presence of the 'guerrilheiros del Sendero Luminoso'. Firstly the Christians had a privileged period: whoever had a church ID was left free by the military inspections. Many people learned that and went to church; some 'guerrilheiros' went too. Hence, when afterwards the military killed some people, 'guerrilheiros' or not, sometimes the IDs and those people's documents were found together. The Church got into difficulties: it was suspect now and began to be persecuted by the military. Then the church began to criticize the 'guerrilheiros' and they reacted saying that they would kill believers unless they stopped criticising them. What could the Church do? How

<sup>12</sup> It is important to remark that the strong eschatological expectation is not understood as a motif for indifference or escape from the world as it so often occurred in the history of the Church and in our days.

<sup>13</sup> Senior, *1 & 2 Peter*, 7.

might it exercise ministry? What does it mean to be a witness in such a context? Persecution and suffering are, at least, good words to describe their situation.

In Chile things are quite different. There the evangelical Church has been giving support to the military government during the last ten years. Presently, the economic, political and social situation is so bad that the people are not able to tolerate it anymore. The Catholic Church, perceiving this situation, is beginning to criticize the government. The official reaction refuses the Catholic Church's 'intervention', and is becoming more violent towards the whole society. Should Chile be a kind of Babylon in our days? What does it mean to be a Church with a prophetic role in such a context?

There is no claim for justice without persecution and suffering in a situation of oppression, violence and injustice. We cannot compare, in a simple way, the situation of the church in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia with that in Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua ... The suffering is quite different and the reaction against the Christian faith certainly comes from different segments of society, but the principal motif will be the same: witness produces reaction, discipleship calls down persecution, and persecution calls down suffering.

Probably 1 Peter would say to us that suffering is a common point between them and us. Even if the reason and expression of suffering is different, he would assure us that Christian witness produces reaction, discipleship calls down persecution, and persecution, in spite of suffering, is a sign of faithfulness and a reason for joy

because it is an opportunity to share Christ's sufferings.

*Persecution and suffering* are, in fact, symptoms of violence and injustice. However, Christians are not called to flee, but to participate in the world in order to offer a new system of values with a new message. This has to be expressed in the midst of society itself, exercised in the life of the Christian community, as a model and an invitation to be imitated. Thus, the new message will be proclaimed. Jesus Christ, the rejected stone, is the cornerstone to the *hope for the world*. There is hope because of his death and resurrection. There is hope because he will come again. While the Christians are waiting for his coming they are called to plant a seed of hope that may be irrigated with suffering and tears, but will certainly grow, because it was planted in the same soil that first received the blood of Christ. A small plant can be born from that seed, but it will be recognized as God's special bush of hope, as once the Christians in Asia Minor were declared the people of God. Therefore perhaps 1 Peter would say to us that we have to be ready to be small and weak, but strongly rooted in the experience of salvation. The same experience transformed the Christians once in *oikos tou theou*, although they were a persecuted minority.

The reality of being a spiritual house, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, will renew life constantly and challenge the Christian community to go out through the world with the message of Christ, with the hope that everyone in every place will 'offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (2:5). This would be the real and final fiesta.