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PICTURES OF THE CHURCH IN I PETER

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The word ekklēsia is not used in the Greek text of the Epistle of I Peter. Because of this many have thought the epistle to be rather devoid of instruction and doctrine regarding the church. On the contrary, this epistle is literally permeated with church truth, and such a fact is obvious to the reader who recognizes that the New Testament concept of "church" was a concept of people rather than of an organization. It was the ministry of the Apostle Paul to proclaim basic tenets of church organization and to develop the bulk of New Testament ecclesiology. Peter, on the other hand, is writing to the church as a group of God's people. His concern is their lives and behavior in the midst of a wicked and perverse world, a world in which they are finding and will continue to find testings and sufferings to be their common lot.

Some, like Kelly, have argued vehemently that this epistle is directed only to Christian Jews, and indeed much of the language and style parallel the books of Hebrews and James. However, if we assume the writing to be in the seventh decade of the first century, it is probably more correct to visualize the congregations in Northern Asia Minor to which Peter is writing as heterogeneous groups of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Selwyn points out:

It is doubtful, indeed, whether there were many Churches in the first century outside Palestine, at any rate in the larger centres of population, of which the members were wholly Jewish or wholly Gentile, though in most of them Jews were probably in the majority; and we know that in parts of Asia Minor there had been a syncretism of Jewish and pagan cults which in some cases may have provided the spiritual background of those who afterwards became Christians.¹

Peter's doctrine of the church is inseparably connected with other basic themes developed in the epistle. Primarily in connection with his Christology and his doctrine of the Christian life. The theology of the apostle is above all things Christo-centric. He begins with Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and then proceeds to develop an elaborate doctrine of the Christian life based on the person and work of Christ. His doctrine of the church then is the next step in the structure. He reasons from Christ to Christian behavior to the life of the Christian community. The elements of the primitive kērugma are abundant in I Peter and literally form his Christology. He speaks of prophesied salvation in 1:9-12; of blood redemption in 1:3, 21; of the ascension in 3:22; of judgment in 4:17; and of Christ's return in 1:7, 13.

This particular treatment of the ecclesiology of 1 Peter centers on a consideration of the word pictures of the apostle. Such a treatment is self limiting, therefore omitting a number of aspects of church doctrine which are important in the total structure of the epistle. For example, one could discuss church organization from 5:1-4 or baptism from a number of passages throughout the epistle. The matter of charismata (spiritual gifts) is dealt with in chapter 4, verses 10 and 11--the only non-Pauline treatment of that subject in the New Testament. The concept of the church as "mission" appears throughout the epistle since Peter is so concerned with the believer's relationship to the world. All of these are important, but none of them taken separately forms as complete a picture of Petrine ecclesiology as the treatment of this subject through the apostle's use of "word pictures."

If one excludes the agapētoi sections in 2:11 and 4:12, and the oikon tou theou (the house of God) in 4:17, there are ten major word pictures which point one to the church in this epistle. Interestingly enough, five of them are similes and five are metaphors. They are divided, therefore, into two groups in that order.

PETRINE SIMILES FOR THE CHURCH

A simile is a word picture which lays a comparison between the subject at hand and something to which it is thought similar by the writer. The common English words used in a simile are "like" or "as." Peter's characteristic word is hōs which is most commonly translated by the English word "as." The Greek word hōs allows for two possible meanings depending on the context and the usage by a given writer. It could possibly mean "as if you were but really aren't" or it could mean "as the people you really are." Peter's usage seems best to fit the latter since he builds on each of his similes a doctrine which assumes that his readers indeed occupy the position to which he likens them.

I. "As Pilgrims and Strangers" hōs paroikous kai parepidēmous (1:1; 2:11)

Peter's readers are "pilgrims and strangers" in the world. In the first verse of the epistle, he uses the word parepidēmois which the AV renders as "strangers." Parepidēmois appears with paroikous in 2:11 and is used by itself in 1:17 to refer to the life of the believer during his "residence" on the earth. Barclay points out that "in classical Greek, parepidēmos was the word for a person who had settled temporarily in a place without making it a permanent place of residence."² Of paroikous, Barclay says:

It describes what was known as a "resident alien." The resident alien was a man who came to stay in a place without being naturalized. He paid an alien tax; he was a licensed sojourner. He stayed in some place, but he had never given up citizenship of the place to which he truly belonged.³

In a very real sense, Peter gives us here a picture of the church as "the new Israel." God had set Israel aside for a season (Romans 9-11) in order to offer Gentiles a place in his total plan of redemption. The diasporas mentioned right at the beginning of the epistle, is a technical term which in literal usage applies to the children of Israel scattered abroad from

their homeland. Peter undoubtedly uses it to lay a groundwork for his doctrine of paroikous. God's people as strangers in the world really belong to a heavenly homeland. This is a theme also well developed by the Apostle Paul in such passages as Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:11-19.

The only other New Testament usage of parepidēmous is in Hebrews 11:13, where it is set in a characteristic reference to the Old Testament saints, particularly the patriarchs. Here, however, the author of Hebrews takes it out of the old geographical context and lays a groundwork between an earthly city and a heavenly city. The Septuagint frequently used this word in the sense of the English word "stranger" in such passages as Genesis 23:4; Psalm 39:12; 119:19.

Peter's emphasis in this simile is to show why worldly lusts should not be dear to God's people. The things of the flesh belong to the kosmos and God's people are citizens of another country. Perhaps Peter is thinking here of our Lord's teaching regarding the alien relationship between the Christian and the world (John 15) and is explaining by such usage why his readers should expect persecution and how they should act in the midst of persecution. This concept of the Christian as a pilgrim in the kosmos was a very important one in literature of the early church.

II. "As New Born Babies" hōs artigennēta brephē (2:2)

The creative act of God in bringing about new life for the Christian is a favorite theme of the Apostle Peter. One cannot argue that the new birth is a Johannine concept after carefully reading this epistle. The word brephē is used here, of course, in its metaphorical sense. In his Gospel (2:16), Luke uses it in a literal sense. It is possible that Peter is borrowing the idea from Isaiah 28:9, "Whom will he teach knowledge? Them that are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breast." Doubtless many of Peter's readers are new Christians, recently come into the community of the people of God. These are to turn aside from things which characterized their former life and now "as new born babes, desire the genuine spiritual milk." The use of gala here is different from the use which other New Testament writers make of the word. It is almost always used in contrast to more solid food with the suggestion that Christians ought to be putting aside the elementary things and studying more serious doctrine. Such is its usage in Hebrews 5:11-14 and I Corinthians 3:1-3. Peter makes no such comparison but simply desires his readers to fill themselves with the "unadulterated word--milk" so that they might thrive and be nurtured in their Christian lives.

It is quite possible that in these early verses of chapter 2, Peter is referring the use of logos back to his use of that word in the latter verses of chapter 1. We must not read into the text here a fully developed logos Christology such as that which is found in the Gospel of John but rather take the idea as referring to the total Word of God which undoubtedly centers in Jesus Christ, of whom these new Christians have already tasted. Peter's purpose in depicting the church as new born babies undoubtedly is the laying of a groundwork for the following section on Christian behavior. One is first of all born and then one grows; and as one grows one must give concern to his behavior and manner of life. It is this comprehensive subject which occupies the apostle's pen throughout most of the epistle, but particularly in chapter 2.

III. "As Obedient Children" hōs tekna hupakoēs (1:14)

The root idea of "the children of obedience" lies in a Semitism of the Old Testament. As we encounter it in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we refer to it as Septuagintalism. In Hosea 10:9, for example, we read of "children of iniquity" and Isaiah 57:4 of "children of transgression." The "obedience" idea in 1 Peter seems to be almost a synonym for "faith." In the passage before us, Peter instructs his readers to conduct themselves on the basis of the salvation which they have; in other words, to bring their state up to their standing. He says, "Wherefore having gathered up to the waist the robes of your mind, and being serious, perfectly hope upon the grace being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As children of obedience, not putting on a mask of the desires in your former ignorance, but according to the pattern of the one who called you, (he is) holy, also become holy yourselves in all behavior" (original translation). Peter's motive in this particular word picture is obvious from the text itself. He is introducing his readers to a life of holiness patterned after the nature of the God whom they serve. This holiness must be based upon obedience to Christ and to the Word of God in general.

The apostle may be introducing here the entire hupotassō section which appears in chapter 2. The "children of obedience" are to be in submission or subjection to authority. As in many other New Testament passages, this submission is discussed by Peter as relating to specific realms of human activity; namely, citizens to a state, servants to masters, wives to husbands, and all men to God. The church is to be composed of people who are obedient to the will of their God.

IV. "As Free Slaves of God" hōs theou douloi (2:16)

The meaning of doulos in the New Testament is largely determined by its use in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul makes much of this concept of the "bond-slave" in his determination to show the Christian's subservience to Jesus Christ. The image is one of a slave who, having been redeemed out of the slave market and set free by his master, then in gratitude for his freedom commits himself completely to that master for a life of service. So, says Peter, are those who are a part of the church. The verse reads like this: "As free men and not those who have their freedom as a cover of wickedness, but as servants of God."

This passage is in the heart of the first hupotassō section. Christians are not technically in subjection to the powers of this world because they are citizens of a heavenly city. On the other hand, because they are living in the kosmos they are to submit themselves to "every human regulation for the sake of the Lord" (v. 13). Kings and governors rule by the will of God, and it is God's will that the church be subservient to the civil authorities. The righteous behavior of the members of the church will serve to silence "the ignorance of unthinking men" (v. 15). Perhaps this use of doulos in verse 16 is also a foreview of what Peter is going to say shortly in verses 18-25, where he shows that Christ is an example of submission in suffering for the slaves to follow.

V. "As Living Stones" hōs lithoi zōntes (2:5)

The oikos concept in chapter 2 is one of the most well-developed word pictures in the entire epistle. It is what the Germans would call a "Stichwort" passage because it develops instruction on the basis of a "catch word." It may be helpful to reproduce here a translation of the entire section beginning at verse 4 where Peter introduces Christ.

As a living stone, indeed rejected by men, but by God, chosen (and) honorable. And you as living stones are being built up a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices accepted by God through Jesus Christ. Because it is contained in Scripture, "behold I place in Zion an elect stone, an honorable cornerstone; and the one who believes in him shall not be ashamed. Therefore to you who are believers he is the preciousness; but to unbelievers, the stone which the builders rejected, this became the head of the corner (I Pet. 2:4-7).

The Old Testament passages from which Peter develops this stone concept are Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16, and Isaiah 8:14. However, he may very well be depending upon Christ's own application of these passages as recorded in the Gospels. Paul also develops the oikos image in Romans 9:33. The idea is that the church is a spiritual house. The apostles and prophets may very well be part of the foundation but Christ himself is the chief cornerstone. The idea of zōntes with lithoi demonstrates that the life which this stone (or these stones) have is the life of God. The contrast is with the Greek word bios which refers to mere organic life. Peter's objective in the oikos concept is actually two-fold; first, to show the preeminence of Christ in the spiritual building which is the church, and secondly, to show the close relationship that the believers have to the Lord; as he is the stone, so his people are the stones.

PETRINE METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH

I. "An Elect Race" genos eklekton (2:9)

Peter's concept of the elect people of God may be the most highly developed ecclesiology of the entire epistle. The word eklekton comes from the verb kaleō which means "to call." Elect ones are "called out." And the "called out ones" exist in a community of "called out ones" which is the ekklēsia.

The word has definite overtones regarding the transfer of God's choice from Israel to the Church. It appears right at the beginning of the epistle as the fourth word, defining the strangers of the dispersion. The word also appears in 4:10 and 5:13 showing that the stream of God's chosen people runs throughout the entirety of the epistle. In the verse under consideration at the present time, we are confronted with one of the primary sections of the entire epistle. People of the church are an elect race. In verses 6-8, Christ is the subject of the discussion; and in verses 9 and 10, Peter changes the focus to the readers.

II. "A Royal Household of Priests" basileion hierateuma (2:9)

This unusual concept cannot properly be understood apart from Exodus 19:3-6. Here the Hebrew refers to a "kingdom of priests" and the LXX changes the metaphor to "royal priesthood." At the time of the writing of the Septuagint, the priesthood in the synagogues was considerably more relevant to the spiritual life of the people than the monarchial idea. The Old Testament reference is a picture of Israel serving as a community of priests in the world. The doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers is an important one to evangelicals and in this verse we have the locus classicus of this doctrine.

Like the reference to Israel, the reference to the church depicts this community in its relationship to the world around. Verses 9 and 10 of chapter 2 conclude the dynamic indicative section of the book. Verses 1-3 deal with Christian growth and holiness; verses 4-8 deal with Christian edification built upon Christ; and verses 9-10 show how the Christian community is built upon the promises of God.

III. "A Holy Nation" ethnos hagion (2:9)

Again we are dependent here upon Exodus 19, this time particularly upon verse 6 which reads in the AV, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel." The idea of a "holy nation" is almost a paradox in Biblical language. The word ethnos in its various forms is used to speak of the heathen and the Gentiles, but the word hagios is extremely important in the New Testament to speak of God's separation of persons or things unto his own distinctive use, and such is its meaning here. It is one of the key words of I Peter used with particular force in Chapter 1, verses 15 and 16.

Here again we have a contrast and a comparison. The contrast is between the believers who are the church and the world; and the comparison is between a holy God and His holy people.

IV. "God's Own Possession" laos eis peripoiēsin (2:9)

Because of the fact that he has chosen them and redeemed them, God's people are his own private property. The proper understanding of the phrase above must be seen in the light of verse 10 where Peter tells his readers, "Once you were no people, now you are God's people." The relationship to God is the only thing that really means anything to the church in the final analysis. Laos eis peripoiēsin might very well be literally translated "a people made for a possession." God is a spirit but he manifests himself through the lives and bodies of his people. They belong to no one else, yea, not even to themselves for through this relationship they are now God's own possession.

V. "The Flock of God" poinnion tou theou (5:2)

This phrase appears in the middle of the passage which is probably the closest Peter ever comes in this epistle to technical ecclesiology. He speaks here to the elders exhorting them to "feed the flock of God." One cannot read these words without serious consideration of

the historical event recorded in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. As Peter was commanded to be a shepherd of Christ's sheep, so now he charges other leaders in the church to do the same. The picture of God's people as sheep and their leaders as shepherds is not an uncommon one in the New Testament. Paul uses it in I Corinthians 9, and it appears again in this epistle in the 25th verse of chapter 2. In this last mentioned passage, we have a familiar Petrine comparison again as the writer thinks of Christ as a sacrificial lamb (Isa. 53:6) and then suggests that his people are also sheep formerly straying but now returned to their shepherd.

Wuest points out the "churchiness" of this idea as he says, "The word 'feed' is the translation of a Greek word which literally means 'to shepherd,' and includes the duties of a shepherd, tending, feeding, guiding, and guarding the flock of God. The noun form of the word is translated 'pastors' in Eph. 4:11."⁴

In conclusion, two things might be noted. First of all, seven of the above ten word pictures were taken from the first ten verses of the second chapter, leading us to recognize this section as the most important ecclesiological unit in this epistle. Secondly, there is a heavy communal emphasis on Peter's concept of the church. Certainly the church is composed of individuals, but Peter recognizes that it is the church in community life and behavior which affects the world for good or for bad.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Edward Gordon Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1964), p. 44.
2. William Barclay, A New Testament Word Book (New York: Harper & Bros., n.d.), p. 122.
3. Ibid., p. 124.
4. Kenneth S. Wuest, First Peter and the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 124.