

'Seek the welfare of the city': social ethics according to 1 Peter

Bruce Winter

We warmly welcome the new Warden of Tyndale House in Cambridge as a contributor to Themelios. In his article the Rev. Bruce Winter, who comes from Australia and who taught for some years in Singapore, addresses the continually important issue of the Christian's role in society through a careful study of 1 Peter in its historical context.

In Jeremiah 29:7 the Jews in exile in Babylon were exhorted to settle, marry and 'seek the welfare of the city' to which the Lord had carried them. They were to do this for 70 years and after that their homegoing to the Promised Land was guaranteed (Je. 29:4-14).

Likewise, 1 Peter 1:1 sees the Christians far removed from their ultimate homeland. Yet they too are assured that they will reach their promised destination (1:4-9). They are aptly called 'elect sojourners of the Dispersion'.¹ All these are appropriate terms to describe them in their present temporary earthly situation as the pilgrim people of God.²

How should the Christians in 1 Peter spend their days on earth? It is clear that as spiritual 'sojourners' and 'alien residents' they should withdraw from sin (2:11). They were not called upon to withdraw from society. They too should seek its welfare. In fact, from 2:12ff. they were shown how they should spend their days in their city by seeking the blessing of its inhabitants.

The second-century epistle to Diognetus succinctly meditates on the present activity and future hope of the Christian in language obviously dependent on 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11ff.

They find themselves in the flesh,
but do not live according to the flesh.
They reside in their respective countries,
but only as aliens, *paroikoi*,
they take part in everything as citizens, *politai*,
and put up with everything as foreigners, *zenoi*.
Every foreign land is their home
and every home a foreign land.³

I. The socially insecure

The ethical injunctions of 2:12ff. to relate positively to the city and its inhabitants are unexpected in view of the social insecure situation of these elect sojourners. There was discrimination against Christians, 'with sporadic outbursts of local suspicion, resentment, and hostility'.⁴

It was rumour-mongering which could result in public disorder, *stasis*, or litigation by an accuser against Christian before magistrates or governors. Other examples of *stasis* are to be found in Acts 19:16ff.; 16:19; 17:6; 18:12; 24:1. There were testings and trials in 1 Peter (1:6; 4:12) and allegation against Christians (2:15). Why then should they seek the welfare of a city whose inhabitants created such tension and uncertainty for them?

II. The spiritually secure

The social ethics of 1 Peter are even more intriguing in the light of the emphasis of the opening major section of 1 Peter 'The true grace of God' in which the Christian stand (mentioned in 5:12) has been the theme of the letter. 'Ever home (is) a foreign land', to cite again Diognetus, because of the unseen but certain inheritance reserved in heaven for God's people. There would be no unclaimed inheritance because they were being kept by the power of God to enjoy it (1:4-5). It was indeed the work of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit which secured such a salvation for the Christians (1:2-12).

This future hope and confidence was meant to occupy the horizon of Christians. They were commanded to fix their gaze on the future grace which was to be brought to them at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:13ff.). They were called upon to live a holy life in the light of personal accountability to the impartial Father who one day will scrutinize 'every man's works' (1:13-17).

If the Christians were to fix their hope perfectly on the coming grace to be revealed at the final revelation of Jesus

Christ and the accompanying assessment of their life, then how could the welfare of their present secular city possibly matter to them?

III. The three-fold call

There were three reasons given why the transient Christian should be concerned for the welfare of the hostile and ungrateful city. They are to be found in 1 Peter in the very calling of God's people — a theme elucidated in three places with the verb 'to call'. They were called upon 'to declare', 'to follow' and 'to bless'.

There was the fundamental purpose of the elect race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the formerly stateless group who were now the people of God. Their calling was to declare the virtues or characteristics of the One who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (2:9-10). The following verses indicate how this was to be done in terms of a compelling Christian lifestyle seen from their good works (2:11ff.). J. H. Elliott notes that 'this was manifested through a positive witness to all men'.⁵

Secondly, in the face of unjust treatment the Christian household servant was also called to follow the example of the patiently suffering Messiah. 'For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered on your behalf, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps' (2:21). They were to follow the calling of *imitatio Christi*.

Thirdly, discrimination might well reach flash-point in the wider society. The whole church was exhorted not to repay evil with evil, or abuse with abuse, but the exact opposite. They were to bestow the blessing of doing good 'because you were called for this very purpose that you should inherit a blessing' (3:9). God's calling demanded that they relate to others in the way he had related to them with his great blessings in Christ. The apt quotation from Psalm 34:12-16 in the following verses lays out what the blessed and blessing life was. It was 'doing good', not 'evil', it was 'seeking peace', not 'speaking evil'.

Here was the similar calling to God's exiled people in Jeremiah 29:7 to seek the welfare of the present city in which they dwelt, and to pray for its peace. Just as in the OT man was called upon to bless his fellow man, so too the Christians were called upon to do the same to others in their secular cities.⁶

IV. Before a watching world

It was intended that their good works should be observed (*epopteūō* — 2:11-12).⁷ They were commanded as sojourners and temporary residents to abstain from carnal conduct in order to present an attractive lifestyle (*anastrophē kalē* — 2:11). This Christian existence consisted not only of personal moral values, but also high-profile good works. The observation of these good works would not only be an eloquent defence against ill-founded allegations against Christians as evil doers, but also be the means by which critics became converts who glorified God 'in the day of visitation'.⁸ Their light was so to shine before men that they would see their good works and glorify their Father in heaven.

There were four areas of life where they were called upon to engage in this high-profile activity before the watching non-Christian world of their day. These were (a) in civic life,

(b) in the households as Christian servants, (c) in the marriage of a Christian to a non-Christian, and (d) in the flash-point situations where the Christian community appears to have been singled out for discriminatory treatment.

It is interesting to note that despite the complexity and far from ideal life situations of the Christians addressed in 1 Peter, there were no extenuating circumstances which exempted them from seeking the blessing of the city. In the face of difficulties they were simply to commit themselves to a faithful Creator by 'doing good' (4:19).

(a) In civic life

The Christian citizen's duties were not simply discharged by obedience to ordinances. The dual function of rulers is epitomized as punishing the law breakers and praising those who did good in the public arena (2:14).⁹ The latter referred to the important duty of the official recognition of a public benefactor.¹⁰ The cities of Anatolia and the other regions of the East had long been supported by public benefactors who saved the community from famine, deflated prices of essential commodities in time of scarcity, paid for the installation of water supplies, enhanced the life of the city with fountains, widened roads, erected theatres and public buildings, and provided for child allowances.¹¹ This method of providing for the needs of the city, which was well established in Greek times, was certainly continued during the early centuries of the Roman empire.¹²

In 2:14-15 Christians of substance were called upon to continue to observe it. Being a benefactor was declared to be 'the will of God' and public recognition by rulers the means of silencing the rumours of ill-informed men.

There was an established procedure by which the particular gift of a benefactor was recognized with the erection of an inscription commemorating the event, and by the public praising with words of commendation, by being crowned with a crown of gold, and by being allocated a permanent seat of honour in the theatre.¹³ The term 'benefactor' bestowed status in society.¹⁴ The public declaration that a Christian man was 'good and noble' (*kalos kai agathos*) would have recognized his benefaction and also silenced the ignorant charge of a malicious accuser that he was a doer of public evil and not good.¹⁵

(b) In the daily round

The slave was called upon to 'do good' in his household, the essential social unit in the city, regardless of the response of his master. The text recognizes that there were two types of master, and the far from ideal was to be given the due recognition of his authority role (2:18).

Seneca, in his dialogue 'On Anger', records the harsh actions which resulted from the emotional outbursts of ill-tempered masters.

Why do I have to punish my slave with a whipping or imprisonment if he gives me a cheeky answer or disrespectful look or mutters something which I cannot quite hear? . . . we send some wretched little slave off to the prison house. Why on earth are we so anxious to have them flogged immediately, to have their legs broken on the spot?¹⁶

The call was to continue to do good, even if one suffered harsh and undeserved treatment from an unreasonable and irrational master. To respond this way was to follow in the footsteps of the patient suffering of the Messiah (vv. 20-21). He committed himself to the One who judges justly and proceeded in his role as Messiah to bear our own sins in his body on the tree (vv. 23-24). The Christian servant was to follow in those blessed footsteps and in 4:19 likewise commits his soul to a faithful Creator by doing good.

(c) *In the difficult marriage*

The far from easy situation of a Christian wife married to a non-Christian husband was to be dealt with by means of personal piety, and not by preaching to her spouse (3:1-7). There was also the call to 'do good' and not to be intimidated by any threats obviously connected with the wife's Christian profession (v. 6).

The complexity of this issue is perhaps best explained by a few lines from the traditional *encomium* delivered at the nuptial bed of the young couple who were friends of the first-century AD writer, Plutarch.

The gods are the first and most important friends. Therefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all strange and outlandish superstitions.¹⁷

There must have been substantial pressure brought to bear upon a woman to renounce her Christian faith and submit herself to her husband by worshipping his gods. Here, as in the previous situation, the Christian is called upon to 'do good' even in the face of such difficult circumstances.

(d) *In the flash-point situations*

Finally, there was the message to the Christian community which might be under threat (3:8-16). They were reminded that they must bestow on others what had been bestowed on them, viz. a blessing (v. 9ff.). That blessing was not only the absence of malicious speech and evil actions, but also 'the doing of good' and 'the pursuit of peace' (v. 11). The use of this citation from Psalm 34:14 reflects the same theological and ethical framework of Jeremiah 29:7 where the exiles are to seek the welfare of the city and to pray for its peace.

The call is to be zealous for the good (deed, *to agathon*), to be able to give a ready answer for the Christian hope when asked by fellow inhabitants, and to accompany this with the witness of a good lifestyle (*agathē anastrophē*, vv. 13-16). Having Christians suffer for doing good is better than having them suffer for doing evil (v. 17).

V. Ethics and eschatology

The teaching about seeking the welfare of the city and its peace by the pilgrim people of God in 1 Peter holds together two crucial doctrines, eschatology and social ethics.

There is no sense in which the eschatology of 1 Peter provided the Anatolian Christians with the excuse to abstract themselves from society. Social ethics were clearly assumed as the norm for Christians in 1 Peter. What this general epistle dealt with was the difficulty of fulfilling that responsibility in the unsettled circumstances in which the churches found themselves. This was done within the crucial framework of their future hope.

Underlying the important place given to social ethics within eschatology is the biblical doctrine of the goodness of God. He showers his providential care upon a rebellious and ungrateful world which he knows is passing away. His children can do no other. He does good, because good needs to be done. So must his pilgrim church.

In 1 Peter the good works of Christians were clearly orientated towards the needs of others in the temporal cities in which they lived. Social ethics are thus discussed within the call to a singular focus on the Christian's eschatological hope. The epistle to Diognetus notes that this is 'a wonderful and confessedly strange characteristic of the constitution of the heavenly citizenship'.

This 'constitution' needs to be grasped afresh today in the discussion of social ethics. To stand in 'the true grace of God' demands a deep commitment to social ethics within the framework of a living eschatological hope. The latter without the former is a distortion of the true Christian framework. The latter enables the Christian to place his own agenda second to the needs of others. The former without the latter may not be a reflection of heavenly mindedness but of earthly mindedness. There is more than one reason for passing by on the other side opportunities to do good.

1 Peter shows how it is possible to be truly heavenly minded and of real earthly use to the welfare of the city.

¹ V. P. Furnish, 'Elect Sojourners in Christ: An Approach to the Theology of 1 Peter', *Perkins School of Theology Journal*, Vol. 28 (1975), pp. 1-11, and D. E. Hiebert, 'Designation of the Readers of 1 Peter 1:1-2', *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1980), pp. 65-67, both show that this phrase introduces a theological and not a sociological perception of the recipients.

² J. H. Elliott suggests the terms describe their legal status as two types of non-citizen in the cities of the Jewish Dispersion in Asia Minor. *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 24-49, esp. p. 47. It however *parepidemioi* = visiting strangers and *paroikoi* = resident aliens, why is the former greeted only in the opening of the letter and the latter group ignored until both words occur together in 2:11? See also J. W. Prior, 'First Peter and the New Covenant', *Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. XLV, No. 2 (1986), p. 45 for his arguments against Elliott's position. The terms appear together in the LXX in Gn. 23:3 - Abraham sought a burying place for Sarah because he was technically a stranger and a sojourner in the land, but in Ps. 39:12 the writer acknowledged that before God he was a spiritual stranger and sojourner on earth as were his fathers.

³ The Epistle to Diognetus, V:4-5, 8-9.

⁴ J. H. Elliott, 'Peter, Its situation and strategy: A Discussion with David Balch', *Perspectives on 1 Peter*, NABPR Special Studies Series No. 9, ed. C. H. Talbert (Macon, Georgia), 1986, p. 62. The word 'discrimination' has been used advisedly and not 'persecution' because there is no clear evidence in 1 Pet. that the imperial persecutions of the force of Nero's localized one in Rome or Domitian's or the later one of Diocletian were being suffered in 1 Pet. See also E. G. Selwyn, 'The Persecutions in 1 Peter', *NTS* Vol. 1 (1950), p. 44 for the same view and his comments in *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London, 1947), p. 55 that the trials were spasmodic, 'a matter of incidents rather than policy, at once ubiquitous and incalculable'.

⁵ J. H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy. An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4-10 and the Phrase basileion hierateuma*, *Nov.T. Sup.* 12 (Leiden, 1966), pp. 184-5, on the outward orientation to the world of the Christian as the meaning of 2:5,9. *contra* D. L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive; The Domestic Code of 1 Peter*, *SBL Mono* 26 (Chico, 1981), pp. 133-6 for an unconvincing attempt to refute Elliott's argument.

⁶ See C. W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK 'To Bless' in the Old Testament*, *SBL Dissertation Series* No. 95 (Atlanta, 1987), ch. 4.

⁷ *contra* 'Plainly their security as groups was felt to depend to a large extent on their activities escaping public attention', E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Early Christian Groups in the First Century* (London, 1960), p. 73.

⁸ The day of visitation has been taken to relate to personal salvation. *cf.* Lk. 1:68 where God visits and redeems his people and 19:44 where Jerusalem did not know the day of its visitation, *i.e.* salvation, and as a consequence suffered desolation. J. Ramsay Michaels, 'Eschatology in 1 Peter II:17', *NTS* (1966/7), p. 397 says it refers to the 'salvation of the heathen'; *contra* W. C. van Unnik, 'The Teaching of Good Works in 1 Peter', *NTS*, Vol. 1 (1954), pp. 104-5 where he argues from 1 Enoch that it refers to the day of doom and desolation.

⁹ For the literary evidence of this dual function of government see W. C. van Unnik, 'Lob und Strafe durch die Obrigkeit Hellenistisches zu Röm. 13:3-4', *Jesus und Paulus, Festschrift für Georg Kümmel zum 70 Geburtstag* (Göttingen, 1975), pp. 336-340.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this point and the epigraphic evidence to support it see the author's 'The Public Praising of Christian

Benefactors, Romans 13:3-4 and 1 Peter 2:14-15', forthcoming *JSNT* (1988).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² C. P. Jones, 'Benefactions', *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1978), ch. 12.

¹³ 'The Public Praising of Christian Benefactors', *loc. cit.*, for the evidence.

¹⁴ A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (London, 1968), p. 36: 'the very title . . . did not simply state a fact but conferred a status'.

¹⁵ For evidence of this public declaration see 'The Public Praising . . .', *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Seneca, *Dialogue 5 'On Anger'*, 3.24,32.

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom, Moralia 140D*, cited A. L. Balch, *op. cit.*, p. 85. See K. O. Wicker, 'A Comparative Study of the Household Codes and Plutarch's Conjugal Precepts', *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of J. L. McKenzie*, ed. J. W. Flanagan and A. W. Robinson (Claremont, 1975), pp. 141-153.