

1 Peter continued: Relating to culture; Atonement and spiritual growth

1. Miroslav Volf writes the following regarding the attitude of 1 Peter toward non-Christians:

Celsus, the most significant critic of Christianity in the second century, wrote, 'If all men wanted to be Christians, the Christians would be no longer want them.' In fact he insisted that Christians were so fascinated with rejecting what is common to all people that they themselves would no longer want to be Christians if everyone decided to become one. In his views, the primary point of reference for Christian identity was the non-Christian world. Christian identity is established through the negative activity of setting oneself apart from others. Christian distance from society is a spiteful difference for the sake of difference, nourished by a deep-seated resentment against the dominant social order which rejected them. Is this what we find in 1 Peter?

There is no doubt that 1 Peter stresses the church's difference from its social environment. This is what the metaphor 'aliens' suggests and this is what surfaces repeatedly throughout the epistle. But what is the significance of this observation for the nature of Christian identity? I suggest that the crucial question is not to what degree one stresses difference, but rather on what basis Christian identity is established. Identity can be forged through two related but clearly distinct processes: either through a negative process of rejecting the beliefs and practices of others, or through a positive process of giving allegiance to something distinctive. It is significant that 1 Peter consistently establishes the difference positively, not negatively. There are no direct injunctions not to behave as non-Christians do. Rather, the exhortation to be difference centers primarily on the positive example of a holy God (1:15f) and of the suffering Christ (2:21ff). This is surprising, especially given the situation of social conflict in which the Petrine community was engaged. We expect injunctions to reject the ways of the world; instead we find admonitions to follow the path of Christ.

When we encounter negative examples of how Christians should not behave, then our attention is drawn not so much to the life-style of non-Christians as to 'the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul' (2:11). These are, as 1 Peter points out explicitly, the former desires of Christians themselves. The force of the injunction is not 'Do not be as your neighbors are!' but "Do not be as you were!" This fits with the observation that the new birth distances people first of all from their old culturally shaped self and in this way from the world. This is what the logic of the metaphor of new birth suggests, but this is also what 1 Peter explicitly states: 'you were ransomed from your futile ways inherited from your ancestors' (1:18). What permeates the epistle is not a fixation on distance from the world, but enthusiasm about the eschatological future.¹

Why would Peter take this approach?

¹ "Soft Difference," *Ex Auditu*, **10**, 15-30 (1994); see pp. 20-21. Volf does an excellent job identifying and articulating 1 Peter's strength in providing guidance for dealing with non-Christian world.

How do you think and talk of your distance from the surrounding, non-Christian culture?

How does the culture regard its distance from you? (And is it aware of its distance from you?)

2. "First Peter is dense with allusions to, and applications of, the atonement wrought by Jesus Christ. In fact, there are few books in the NT that are more intensely concerned with the atonement than 1 Peter. Yet the comments in this letter on the redemptive work of Christ | his suffering and death all take place in the context of ethical discussions about the behavior of servants, or the Christian response to undeserved suffering, or general exhortations regarding the Christian life. It is because the atonement has practical force in the believer's life that 1 Peter returns to this matter so frequently."²

In the following passages, who is saved, by whom, how, and what does that salvation consist of: 1 Peter 1:2; 1:18-19; 2:1-5; 2:21-25; 3:17-18?

3. "It is well known that 1 Peter develops more clearly than any other book of the NT the Suffering Servant of the Lord theme, quoting explicitly from Isa 53 and applying it to the suffering of Christ." The Servant of Yahweh is described in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah³:
 - The Servant is God's chosen (42:1; 49:1)
 - to bring justice (42:1, 1; 53:11)
 - and blessing (49:3-5; 53:10-12)
 - even to the Gentiles (42:1, 4; 49:6; 52:15).
 - He appears defeated because he does not speak out or quarrel (42:2-3; 50:5-7; 53:7)
 - and is mocked, despised and rejected (49:7; 50:6; 53:3)
 - but in the end is vindicated (42:4; 50:8-9; 53:10-12).⁴

The Servant imagery is used especially in 1 Peter 2:18-25, where Peter addresses slaves abused by pagan masters:

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

² Dan G. McCartney, *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles Hill and Frank James III (IVP, 2004).

³ Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 53:13-53:12.

⁴ Note: the Servant is equated with Israel at various points (44:1; 44:2; 49:3; 41:8-10; 45:4), but some of the verses seem to refer to an individual, not the Jews collectively, e.g. Isa 49:6 (how can Israel restore Israel?); "one who was abhorred and despised by the nation" (49:7); 50:4-9 (the mocking, beating, etc. most naturally apply to a person, not a nation); 53:4 (only a person fits the verses that speak of substitutionary sacrifice for the nation; see also vv. 5-6, 10-12); and, the "man of sorrows" and the servant's disfigurement are much more intelligible when taken of a specific individual within Israel (53:3; 53:8-9, 11).

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

In what ways does Peter instruct the reader to imitate Jesus?

4. A common reading of Paul produces this timeline for redemption of the believer:
 - *Salvation*, by Christ's atoning death (at conversion)
 - *Sanctification* due to the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit made possible by the atonement (during the believer's lifetime)
 - *Glorification*: God finishes our sanctification (in the world to come)

Peter's timeline of redemption, being based on imitation of the righteous Suffering Servant, is different:

- Jesus, as foretold by Isaiah, suffers in quiet obedience; "by his stripes we are healed" (1st cent. Palestine)
- We follow Jesus' path of suffering, and in imitation of his sacrificial love toward the world we participate in God's redemption of the world, and grow in our salvation into righteousness (during our lifetime)
- Jesus and his people are vindicated by "the one who judges justly" (2:23) (in the world to come)

In 4:1, Peter writes, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." That is, we grow in righteousness precisely by being willing to live sacrificial love. "The atonement, which Christ brings, is not simply passively received but actively realized." [McCartney, 184] In this way salvation isn't just something which happened at conversion, though that is certainly true (3:21). It is also something ongoing:

- 1:8-9: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."
- 1:22: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart."
- 2:2: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation..."

These two models of atonement lead to very different perspectives on Christ's death. In one case, the atonement, once apprehended, is no longer the focus. In the other case, we grow precisely by living out an imitation of the atonement.

The first model can be thought of like God distributing medicine to those who believe, curing their fatal illness. Once cured, the focus shifts to living a healthy life. In the second model, it's as if Jesus rescues his people from bondage in occupied territory, suffering wounds and deprivation along the way. He doesn't just airlift us out; he calls us to follow him on the dangerous and painful path to freedom. And, importantly, to return home we participate in the rest of his journey, helping others along the way, and suffering as we do so. Christ's sacrifice is *always* in view, since we are living it alongside him in imitation

of the Suffering Servant, and in the process participating not only in our salvation but in Jesus' mission to bless the world.

Christ too emphasized the suffering in the life of the believer, in the need to turn the other cheek, in his warning that the servant is not greater than the master, etc. How applicable is 1 Peter's model of salvation and spiritual growth in a culture where the price of believing is small?