

ELECT EXILES

Part 3: "How Christians Engage Culture"

1 Peter 1:22-2:10

Sunday, May 17, 2020 (Easter Season)

By David A. Ritchie

Scripture Reading

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 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 1:22–2:10, ESV).

Almighty and Everlasting God, when the world around us feels uncertain, we are thankful for the everlasting rock of your word. As we study these Scriptures, may your Holy Spirit shine the light of your truth in our darkness, so that, in turn, we might shine like beacons of hope unto our neighbors and the nations. In the mighty name of Jesus, I pray. AMEN.

Introduction – Mistakes in Cultural Engagement

1 Peter is a letter written by the Apostle Peter, who was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Writing to the churches of Asia Minor (which is located in modern-day Turkey), Peter is teaching Christians how to live as God's people in a

culture that is growing increasingly hostile to the gospel.¹ I believe the message of 1 Peter is important for Christians today because many Christians in modern-day America are finding themselves living in a culture in which Christianity is often misunderstood and mistrusted. Just a few weeks ago, I mentioned a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, which seemed to make a scapegoat of Evangelical Christians in regards to the Coronavirus (**Road to Coronavirus Hell**).

In this place of social estrangement, Peter encourages his readers by reminding them that they are to see themselves as "*elect exiles*" (1 Pt. 1:1). As God's "elect," they are to rejoice that they have been chosen and loved by God as his holy people. Nevertheless, as "exiles," they are to live as God's holy people in a world that is not their own. Peter has reminded them of the hope that they have in the gospel and the holy calling that flows from that hope. Now, he is going to show them how to engage the culture that they live in.

When it comes to Christians engaging culture, I think there are two major mistakes that we can make. The first mistake is an attempt to *conquer culture* by forcing people to obey the gospel by whatever means necessary. In the Middle Ages, this was done by converting people literally at the point of a sword through holy war. But in the modern era, it more often takes the form of a culture war. We stage protests, sign petitions, lobby for policy, and post angry social media statuses. While we should always try persuasively to contend for a just society, we must realize that the power of force will never transform the *hearts* of people in our culture.

The second mistake is the exact opposite of the first. Instead of trying to conquer culture, many Christians and Christian denominations allow themselves to be *conquered by culture*. You see this when you see the church bows itself to the preferences of broader culture by recasting a version of "Jesus" that they think culture is willing to accept. Like a new version of the golden calf, this essentially amounts to deifying culture by placing Jesus's name on it.

But the New Testament offers an altogether different strategy for cultural engagement. What is that strategy? That strategy is the *local church* itself. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in their book *Resident Aliens*: "**The church doesn't have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy.**"²

Essentially, the church itself is designed to engage broader culture by embodying a foretaste, a sample, and a living example of the kingdom of God that is purposefully different from the surrounding culture. Essentially, the church is most culturally effective when the church is most faithfully representing the kingdom of God.

Exposition – How God's People Must Engage Culture

¹ D.A. Carson and Douglass J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 2005), 639.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for a People Who Know Something is Wrong*. (Nashville: Abington: 1989), 43.

In our passage today, I believe that we see three postures that the church must embrace in order to faithfully represent the kingdom of God and effectively engage culture. We are to embrace: *1.) A Pure Love, 2) A Prophetic Identity, and 3.) A Priestly Mission.*

1.) A Pure Love.

Let's take a look at the command in verse 22: *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Pt. 1:22).*

Peter is reminding Christians that in order to engage culture, we must create within the church a culture of *"sincere brotherly love"* that flows from a *"pure heart."*

How might we define this "sincere love from a pure heart"? A pure heart desires the highest good of another, instead of being motivated by self-interest. And a sincere love from a pure heart is willing to put action to that desire.

I want us to consider some ways that love might be put into action in this season.

We are in a moment in which our society is attempting to get back to normal. We are attempting to re-open businesses and re-start the economic engine. But we are still technically inside of a pandemic. We are still studying this disease, looking for effective treatments, and developing vaccines.

So, our federal, state, and local leaders and medical professionals have asked us observe practices like washing our hands, wearing masks, and maintaining appropriate distance from one another. In some places, these practices are requirements. In some places, they are simply recommendations.

But how might Christians understand this situation? If our highest good in life is nothing more than personal freedom, extra requirements and recommendations seem like an inconvenience and an imposition on our sense of independence. But if our highest good in life is to love our God and love our neighbor, then we can look at this moment as a time to display a sincere gospel-love that flows from a pure heart.

If observing extra health measures helps serve my neighbors, if it helps them go back to *work*, if it helps them be able to shop with less fear, if it helps them worship without distraction, if it helps keep them healthy, then I should be willing to endure inconvenience for the sake my neighbors.

Loving my neighbor is not an act of political preference, but of Christian practice.

And where does this love come from? Peter says, if you are a Christian, you love *"...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord*

remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you. " (1 Pt. 1:23-25).

According to Peter, pure love does not come from us simply trying hard to be nice people by virtue of our own will-power. No, our pure derives from the living and abiding word of God, which is the good news of Jesus Christ. Simply said, Christians love one another because we understand that God has first loved us in Christ (1 Jn 4:19).

Likewise, we love because God's word is eternal, whereas our preferences are not. God's word makes us into eternal beings. And, specifically, when Christians are relating with fellow Christians, we must understand that we are relating with eternal beings with whom we will share eternal life because of the eternal work of Christ.

So how does this change the way we live? It mean we must, "*...put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander" (1 Pt. 2:1).*

A sincere love from a pure heart means putting away five vices: malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. Let's unpack each of these for a moment, because I think there is a lot of temptation to these exact vices in our cultural moment.

"Malice" refers to a mean-spirited, combative, or vicious attitude. It is a disposition toward conflict that presumes other people are foes to contend with, instead of neighbors to love.

"Deceit" is to speak words that are untrue. Sometimes we say untrue things intentionally. But in a season like this, people often unintentionally say or *share* untrue things because it confirms an already established bias of what they either want or fear to be true. We must be discerning and say "no" to this temptation.

"Hypocrisy" means to wear a mask. Hypocrisy is when there is a disconnect between what we say we believe and what our actions convey. Hypocrisy is when people see in the lives of Christians the same outrage, fear, and divisiveness that drives the world.

"Envy" refers to judgmental comparison and jealousy. It is the refusal the celebrate the good of another's life because you feel that another's good is a diminishment of you. It is bitter an attitude of entitlement and resentment that robs us of the capacity to experience joy.

"Slander" is the practice of speaking ill about one another. Slander assumes the worst about another person's motives and then convinces others to do the same through defamation, evil words, and gossip. Our world is filled with slanderous words right now.

These five vices must be actively banished and "put away" from the people of God. Instead, the church should be defined by service, sincerity, sacrifice, encouragement, honesty, and rejoicing in one another.

In the church, Christians get the opportunity to practice how to love one another, so that we might truly love even our enemies when the time comes. Think of the radical display of love that the Mother Emmanuel AME Church (show 2Mother Emmanuel) in Charleston, South Carolina, displayed to the world when they publicly forgave the man who walked into one of their meetings and murdered their members. That type of love doesn't come easy. And it doesn't come without practice.

Without love, Christians are simply pretenders. We cannot wear the mask of Christ, but be no different than the world underneath. Love is the truest mark of being a disciple of Jesus. As Jesus himself said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (Jn. 13:34-35).

Through true, earnest, loving community, we offer to the world a taste of the kingdom of God. And *the New Testament's vision for a church of loving community is a refreshing alternative to the shallowness of rampant individualism in modern society.*³ As Dr. Russell Moore has written: *"The church is a signpost of God's coming kingdom, a preview to the watching world of what the reign of God in Christ is to look like, a colony of the kingdom coming."*⁴

2.) A Prophetic Identity.

Peter wants Christians to embrace their prophetic identity as God's people. Now, what do I mean by that?

Unfortunately, many people misunderstand and incorrectly define the term "prophetic" by thinking "prophetic" means making predictions about the future. That is not what the term means in the Bible. In the Old Testament, a prophet was merely a person who was commissioned by God to speak his word. In other words, a prophet was a type of ambassador who represented God to kings and nations.

In this way, the nation of Israel itself was meant to play a *prophetic* role among the nations of the world. They – by their very existence – were meant to declare and display the truth of their God to the surrounding world.

We see this clearly in Isaiah. God says through Isaiah, *"...It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth"* (Isaiah 49:6, ESV).

And the Apostle Peter is saying to Christians, "This is how you are to see your identity and role in this world! You are to be a prophetic people!"

³ Wayne A Grudem. *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Vol. 17). Ed. Leon Morris. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 97.

⁴ Russell D Moore. *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*. (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 59.

When we look at some of the language Peter uses in chapter 2 of our text; he describes Christians as those who are invited to "come" to God (1 Pt. 2:4). They are "living stones" (1 Pt. 2:4) of God's "spiritual house" (1 Pt. 2:5). They are "chosen" and "precious" (1 Pt. 2:4). They are a "royal priesthood," a "holy nation," and the "possession" of God Almighty (1 Pt. 2:9). Shockingly, these are the categories of ancient Israel, now applied to all believers – even non-Jewish believers.⁵

But while the ancient prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah had the immense privilege of representing God, they were also often rejected and alienated by the people they were sent to serve. Even Christ endured this rejection.

Likewise, even though Christians are immensely valuable in the sight of God, they have been, and they will be rejected by many in society. We must set our expectations accordingly. Our expectations should be that we will be "rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious" (1 Pt. 2:4). Thus, we must shift from viewing ourselves as a moral majority that deserves power and privilege to viewing ourselves as a "prophetic minority" that influences society from the margins.⁶

We should not expect society to reward us for being good Christians. In fact, to live for Christ will cost us something. As verse 5 says, to be a follower of Jesus entails the offering of "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pt. 2:5). In the New Testament, sacrifices include service, financial giving to support the ministry of the gospel, the singing praise, and even suffering rejection for one's faith. And rejection is a big deal because many in our society measure their worth on whether or not other people think highly of them.

But by embracing a prophetic identity, we can endure temporary shame from society, resting in the eternal honor that belongs to those who believe.

I once attended a lecture by a pastor named J.R. Vassar, who planted a church in New York City. He talked about how he was trying to equip his congregation to engage the predominantly secular culture around them. He said this statement, and I have found it very helpful: "Honor or shame. You get one now and the other later, but the one you choose for later is yours forever."⁷

If we choose shame for now, we will receive the honor of Christ for eternity. Our ultimate sense of worth must derive not from how our society values us, but rather how Christ will vindicate us.

3.) A Priestly Mission.

Let's take a closer look at verse 9. Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pt. 2:9).

⁵ Carson, 650.

⁶ Moore, 45-46.

⁷ Vassar, J.R. Acts 29 West Texas Area Quarterly. Redeemer Church. Lubbock, Texas. 13 Oct. 2013.

Peter is saying that Christians should see their mission through the lens of "priesthood." Now in the Old Testament, a priest was someone who mediated a relationship between God and man. Thus, priests had to have a *dual ministry*. Priests were to be engaged in the world in which they lived, but they were also set apart unto God.

As an ancient priest represented man to God, Christians are to actively be engaged in praying for those who are suffering in the world. We should pray for justice, where there is injustice. We should pray for peace where there is war. We should pray for healing where there is sickness. We should pray for integrity, where there is corruption. We should even pray for the salvation of those who desire our destruction.

But priests also represented God to man. This means Christians must always seek to provide a haven of health and healing for those who have been wounded by the power of sin in the world.

Our job really isn't to condemn or shame the world. Our job is to give witness to the goodness of God's kingdom. The world is weary of hypocritical Christians who make hateful moral judgments, but it is aching to feel the healing touch of Jesus through his church.⁸ This doesn't mean that Christians should shy away from the truth of God. But what it does mean is that our truth-telling words should always be saturated with radical love.

To put some skin on this: if we are to be a truly priestly church, we must not simply oppose abortion. We must *also* tangibly love and provide for single moms, as well advocate for the adoption and fostering of children. We must create a culture within the church that values the image of God as it is reflected in all human life, from womb to tomb.

Similarly, we must not only teach about the biblical ethics regarding sexuality and marriage. We must also love those who have been abused, suffered divorce, and wounded by sexual sin. We must counsel wounded marriages and equip people for marriage. And above all, we must sanctify our own marriages, so that they reflect the gospel to a watching world.

Likewise, we can't just talk about racism and division being a sin. We must tangibly contend for racial reconciliation by displaying what it means for Christians of diverse backgrounds to be united in Christ.

For Christians are now a part of a new kingdom. We are now allegiant to a new race united not by the blood of our ancestors, but united by the blood of Christ.⁹ As Peter says, "*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 Pt. 2:10).

⁸ 71, Hauerwas.

⁹ Clowney, Edmund. *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross. The Bible Speaks Today series.* New Testament Ed. John R.W. Stott. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 94.

As God redeemed Israel from slavery to Egypt, God has redeemed all who believe in Jesus from the slavery of sin. And as a people who have been redeemed by grace, we are to live lives that give glory to our Redeemer.

The church of the New Testament is seen as the continuation and expansion of the people of God. And Jesus taught us: *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:14–16, ESV).

In other words, what we believe to be true about God *must* be reflected in our lives before the watching world.

Christians commend and give credibility to the gospel when our lives line up with the gospel. But likewise, when we live lives of compromise and hypocrisy, we dishonor the gospel truth we claim to believe.

You might say, "But the Bible says the gospel is offensive, and that Jesus is a stumbling block to unbelievers." That is true. But I simply want to point out there is a very real and important distinction between the truth of gospel causing an offense and the hypocrisy of Christians causing an offense.

We are to be a distinct and holy people that show the world a way of life that is only possible if the resurrection of Jesus is true. In the midst of an age of anxiety and darkness, we are to "shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have written: *"Christianity is an invitation to be a part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ."*¹⁰

Conclusion– Christ's Cultural Engagement

We effectively engage culture by being a church with a pure love, a prophetic identity, and a priestly mission. But Peter isn't offering a radical new strategy. He is simply describing what he personally witnessed in the life of Jesus. The church is, after all, the body of Christ filled with the Spirit of Christ, called to continue the mission of Christ.

If you think about it, Jesus Christ is the ultimate form of cultural engagement. He is the one who loved us with a true and pure love, even unto death on a Cross. He was the prophetic stone rejected by men, but by the power of resurrection has been made the ultimate living stone of God's true and better Temple.¹¹ He is the perfect priest, who not only spoke the truth of God's word, but also shared the compassion of God's love by

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. (Nashville: Abington: 1989), 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and befriending the rejected. When Jesus was ministering on earth, many people thought what Jesus was doing and saying didn't matter. But as it turns out, he was so effective at engaging culture that he split human history into two pieces. And when he returns, he will make all things new.

Redeemer Christian Church, may we display Jesus's coming kingdom by being a people who love one another sincerely with a pure heart. May we rest that while we may at times be rejected for our faith, we are chosen and precious in the sight of God. And may we embrace our priestly mission, that we may display the excellencies of our great High Priest! AMEN.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we continue to pray for our city, our nation, and our world.

Our nation has been afflicted by a sickness of both bodies and souls for so long

So, in this season, we continue to offer up our priestly ministry of intercessory prayer. We pray for the sick. We pray for our doctors. We pray for our leaders. We pray for our workers and businesses and families as we try to navigate through these perilous waters.

But we also pray for our own souls. In a culture that is prone to anger, distrust, division, and a disregard for the image of God in one another may your Spirit empower us to love one another and to love even our enemies in a way that radiates the marvelous light of Christ into this present darkness. And may we not grow weary in doing good.

May our lives bear forth the fruit of your Holy Spirit. And may we show the culture around us a way of life that is only possible through the resurrection of your Son Jesus. It is in his mighty name we pray.

AMEN.

Gospel Community Discussion Starters:

- 1) *Read 1 Peter 1:22-2:10. Summarize some of the big ideas of this passage in your own words.*
- 2) *Much of this passage deals with how Christians are to engage the broader culture. What are some ineffective ways that you have seen Christians engage broader culture? Why do you think the New Testament portrays local church itself is such an important strategy for cultural engagement?*
- 3) *Why do you think Christians loving other Christians is so essential to effective cultural engagement?*
- 4) *What does it look like to put away malice, deceit, hypocrisy, and slander (1 Pt 2:1)? Why are these such strong temptations?*
- 5) *How should Christians seek to be priests to broader culture (see 1 Pt. 2:9)?*

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