

1 and 2 Peter

What does it mean to be the church in the world around us? For the early church, this meant being faithful in a world where the church received no outside support. This is difficult for us to imagine because the church has been such a part of our society and has enjoyed a privileged place in the world around us. Our worldview simply assumes a role for the church that includes the world around us supporting the free exercise of our religion and respecting the church as an institution given authority and power in the public square. In some ways, we cannot imagine the church having a marginal and marginalized counter-cultural role with no authority and actual animosity from the surrounding culture. (Note well – the animosity that the churches often complain about today from the surrounding culture is about loss of perceived status and wanting to recover status, instead of coming from the place of no status.)

The letters that we find in the NT are written to early Christians trying to figure out how to be faithful not only within the confines of their community, but in a world that was set against them both subtly and overtly. Into that situation these letters speak words of encouragement, challenge and call. This is the context of 1 and 2 Peter which encourage local Christian communities to be faithful and live in such a way that points to Jesus, commending the faith to the world around them.

These letters were probably written before the end of the first century and before the beginning of the full-on persecution of the church. Thus, they imagine a world where Christians meant opposition to their lives, but not in the later way that is actually life-threatening. In this milieu, the writer of these letters urges a life lived out of baptismal vows where it would have been understood that the Christian had both left an old way of life to begin a new one and would be supported by God's grace in that new way of living. Baptism would have set apart the Christian and the community to be "... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)." This setting apart was not for privilege, but as the writer suggests that the community would be a witness to the light.

We began by noting that our context is completely different than the context of the early church to which these letters were written and the difficulty that raises for our understanding and interpretation. We simply do not live in a first-century world with its assumptions, and our world view is thousands of years different than the writers of these letters. Reading through the letters, you will find that they talk about slaves and wives in ways to suggest that they remain submissive, even to perhaps abusive "masters". These words do not literally make sense in our current context, so we do not apply them literally. Put pondering what those words meant to people trying to be faithful two thousand years ago in their particular context can help us imagine what it means to be faithful today. For instance, what would it mean to live in such a way that honored those around us?

Key text:

1 Peter 2:1-10 -Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen

