

1 Peter: Strategies for Counseling Individuals on the Way to a New Heritage

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Introduction

The pastoral counselor, as I understand the vocation, differs from the secular analyst in that he or she draws upon the resources of Christian spirituality, and, in particular, the resources of Scripture as a means of facilitating the healing and wholeness of the client. It is out of this conviction that a seminary will require the pastoral counselor, like the pastor-in-training, to take courses in Hermeneutics, Old Testament Introduction, and New Testament Introduction, and to be exposed, at least in a preliminary way, to the art of exegesis. The close, careful investigation of Scripture proves to be most fruitful to the counselor's task, if he or she pursues it with rigor, applying the tools she or he learns in those foundational courses and continuing to seek out books that open up Scripture from those angles. On the one hand, the counselor can then identify and deconstruct unhealthy applications of Scripture in the counsellee's situation or background — misreadings that conduce to psychic disease rather than wholeness. On the other hand, she or he is less likely to use Scripture in a superficial and inauthentic manner. Instead, the counselor who "does his or her homework," as it were, in Biblical study as well as the study of psychological and relational dysfunctions and their treatment will be able skillfully to identify metaphors and images from the Scriptures that will be healthful for clients and redemptive for their situations. The purpose of this article is to provide some indication of the fruitfulness of deep exegetical study of one particular text, 1 Peter, for the counselor's task, and thus to motivate the counselor to integrate ever more completely the study of Scripture with the study of souls.

Setting of 1 Peter

The Greco-Roman world was filled with temples, shrines, and altars to various divinities. Piety was a primary component of the virtue of "justice," and people sought to give the gods their due in order to sustain divine favor toward their family, city and empire. Religion was not compartmentalized in this world, but entered into political meetings, convocations of trade guilds, private dinner parties, public festivals, and family meals. It sheltered all aspects of life like a great canopy. Participation in these religious rituals was a sign of

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solidarity with one's fellows, a token of one's commitment to do one's part for the well-being of the group and to sustain the domestic and public order, the stability of which was regarded as a necessary good for a tranquil and well-ordered life together. Those who did not even believe in the gods nevertheless worshiped them and stood by their fellow-citizens or family members in domestic and public rites, recognizing the social importance of these observances.

Conversion to Christianity, like conversion to its parent religion, Judaism, meant abandoning participation in the worship of all gods other than the One God of whom no image could be fashioned. Avoiding all idolatrous cult was not merely a religious choice, but had profound reverberations in one's domestic and social life. Shunning the worship of all gods save the One tended to isolate the Christians from their former networks of patrons, friends and associates, as well as from non-Christian members of their household (unless, of course, the male head of the household, the *paterfamilias*, was himself a Christian, since the household was expected to worship of the gods of the *paterfamilias*). Absence at public occasions of worship and festivities would also come to be noticed.

Christianity would be seen from outside as an infectious superstition that turned solid citizens of the Roman world and reliable friends and members of one's own household into an unreliable and rebellious lot. Separation from idols meant separation from idolaters on many occasions, hence the Christians would begin to look like a faction, a divisive element within society. Separation from idols often meant refusing to worship the gods of the head of the household, hence the Christian wife or slave would appear to rebel against the domestic order, perhaps even to seek to subvert it. Separation from idols also meant refusal of participation in the cult of the emperor, which was a prominent expression of loyalty and gratitude to the fount of aid in time of need — hence a blot on the city should the emperor's local representatives take notice. Like its parent religion, Christianity called its adherents to a strict moral code. While the high-minded philosophers Epictetus and Musonius Rufus might have adhered to similar standards, many in the Greco-Roman world would at least have regarded some license in drinking and the occasional sexual indiscretion as welcome diversions. Avoiding the activities and company of those with whom the believers used to carouse would be received as implicit censure and reinforced the widening rift between converts and their former associates.

The Christians living in the five provinces addressed by 1 Peter — the Roman provinces of Asia, Bithynia, Pontus, Galatia, and Cappadocia, which occupy most of what is now called Turkey — had so “distinguished” themselves in the eyes of their non-Christian neighbors. These neighbors were

indeed “surprised” that the Christians “no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation,” as the author colorfully describes Gentile life, particularly in “lawless idolatry” (1 Pet 4:3-4). The result is that the non-Christians have been applying the basic kinds of pressure that groups tend always to apply on deviants to get them to conform to the norms of the larger group. They have subjected the Christians to slander, insult, and, where possible, physical abuse (2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:14-16; 5:9) in an attempt to “rehabilitate” their neighbors, that is, to bring them back to their old way of life and cause them to stop challenging that way of life by their withdrawal from it. It is particularly the converted slaves who appear to have been subject to beatings for their disobedience, that is, their refusal to participate in domestic rituals involving idolatrous rites (2:18-21), though dark alleys also provide opportunities for free persons also to experience physical abuse at the hands of their disapproving neighbors.

1 Peter is written quite specifically to assist the Christians come to terms with, and respond nobly to, this situation. First, the author seeks to insulate the Christians against viewing these experiences as negative reflections on their own honor and their commitment to follow Jesus. He is concerned to defuse the power that such censure and abuse might have to make the believers withdraw back into the life they chose to leave behind at their conversion. Second, the author directs the hearers to orient themselves toward each other in ways that will build up the bonds within the Christian community. Mutual love, encouragement, and help is to offset the erosion from outside and to enable each individual's perseverance in a way of life they have adopted as true and life-giving. Third, the author leads his addressees to make a response to their detractors that is in keeping with the way of life they have learned from Jesus, namely to bless those who curse and do good to those who harm. By studiously avoiding all actions that would confirm their neighbors' suspicions that Christianity leads one to criminal or subversive activity, the author hopes that the unbelievers will themselves come to realize the error of opposing a noble way of life.

1. Parting with a futile inheritance

The author develops a dominant image for the significance of the pilgrimage the Christians have made as they moved away from deep involvement in the idolatry of the Greco-Roman world, namely the image of a new birth. The Christians had previously been in bondage on account of the “futile ways inherited from [their] ancestors” (1:18). The heritage of this natural birth — the birth effected through “perishable seed” (1:23) — meant, according to the author, a sentence to an inauthentic life. The addressees had already spent many years worshiping gods that were no gods, engaging in

social relations that merely counterfeited intimacy and fellowship and were not conducive to the formation of a centered, whole person: “You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry” (4:3).

The message about Jesus changed their perception about this way of life, opening them up to an alternative that they recognized as more authentic, full of promise for deep human relationships built upon a stronger foundation of truth and mutual commitment. The author calls this conversion “a new birth into a living hope ... and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1:3-4). The believers have been granted the privilege of a renewed beginning, and so are called “like newborn babies” to “desire the pure spiritual milk” rather than sour that milk by allowing “malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander” to intrude upon their relationships with each other (2:1). “Like obedient children,” upon whom the patterns of the parents are imprinted, the believers are to imitate their new Father (1:14-16), who sired them with the “imperishable seed” of the Word of the gospel (1:23-25). They are called to grow into holiness, rather than to continue in those patterns learned from their families of origin and the unbelieving society into which they were socialized (1:14, 18). A certain obligation attaches to persevering in this new birth, new identity, and new patterning, since the transition from their pre-Christian lives to their birth into God’s household was effected only at great cost, namely the self-surrender of Jesus (1:18-21; 2:24-25; 3:18).

This image certainly advanced the author’s primary goal for the addressees, namely to insulate them from the social pressures they were experiencing. The image vividly reminded the hearers of the distance that existed now between them and the way of life they had chosen to leave behind in search of one that led them to a deeper communion with God and with each other. It reminded them, as well, of the undesirability of allowing those who still labored in slavery to that old way of life to pull those who had been liberated back into bondage. Finally, the image calls the hearers to persevere in living out that life for which they had been ransomed, growing into that person that their new birth enabled them to become.

The author’s image remains a powerful resource for assisting Christians to reflect upon the implications of discipleship, and it is a particularly potent resource for those on a counseling journey in particular. A great deal of attention is given in pastoral counseling to discerning the ways in which a person continues to be bound by defense mechanisms and dysfunctional patterns of behavior written deep into that person’s relational instincts by years of training in “futile ways inherited from one’s ancestors.” The metaphor proclaims the real possibility of a decisive break with, and

exodus from, that heritage, offering hope to those discouraged by the awesomeness of the journey they are attempting to make. As elements of that baggage are uncovered, the model also identifies those values, relational premises, and almost automatic reactions as elements of the “me” that the counselee is free no longer to be, as excluded from the “me” that the counselee is free to become.

This dissociative aspect of the metaphor of “new birth, new hope, new inheritance” is equally vital for all seeking to grow in discipleship. We are continually confronted in our reading of Scripture, our life of prayer, and in our hearing of the proclaimed word with the incompatibility of particular aspects of the way of life learned in our “primary socialization” (whether in our homes of origin, our formal education, or our observation and experience of “the way of the world”) and the way of life that reflects the holiness of God.

Within 1 Peter, several premises that remain fundamental to human relations are overturned. The first of these concerns the “get even” mentality, declaring the desire to return harm for harm (or at least to withhold good from those who have done us harm) to be part of this futile inheritance, which is corrected by the example of Jesus: “‘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” (2:22-23). In keeping with Jesus’ teaching about what it meant to live as “children of the Father who is in heaven” (see Mt 5:44-48), the author of 1 Peter instructs the believers born into God’s family not to “repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called — that you might inherit a blessing” (3:9).

A second example can be found in the author’s instructions to women (specifically to wives, but this one point can be broadened): “Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight” (3:3-4). As with so many portions of the New Testament, these verses have been applied in literalistic, legalistic, restrictive ways. Taken rightly, however, the author offers a word of liberation from bondage to seeking approval and self-esteem based on one’s physical appeal (as well as the corollary, namely the tendency of men to measure women in this way). The author seeks to move the hearers toward more authentic interaction with and valuing of one another, receiving and giving affirmation based on the qualities of the soul rather than the appeal of the body (the latter being inevitably tied to sexual motivations, the former to harmony and partnership of the inner persons).

The image of leaving behind the values and relational patterns learned apart from God in favor of growing into the new person birth into God’s family

makes a possibility can thus continually hold before believers the challenge of “unlearning” and abandoning those premises and patterns that hinder the formation of Christ in us. The result of leaving behind a way of life that alienates one from God and from authentic and full relationships with other people means relief from the internal battle, from “the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul” (2:11). The author shares with Paul the basic dualistic understanding of the human person (see Gal 5:16-25): as one indulges the passions of the flesh one harms one’s own soul. This understanding does not seek to destroy or suppress physical pleasure, but all those forces that contribute to inauthentic or hurtful or dysfunctional relationships, as the list of “passions” in Gal 5:19-21 makes clear.

The call to holiness (1:14-16) is a call to integrity, to commit wholly¹ to *one* set of values and way of life rather than limping between several mutually antagonistic ways of life. The author’s direction to set all one’s hope on the favor that comes with the establishing of God’s kingdom serves to sustain this commitment and to sustain a single-hearted focus rather than allowing divergent hopes and ambitions to rob us of the integrity of living wholly in God’s light and in response to God’s call. The “ransom” provided by Jesus’ giving of himself does not merely effect freedom “from” a destructive way of life but also freedom “for” a new life. Obedience to God’s leading — discipline with regard to the temptations to return to the well-known ways learned from childhood — is essential for finding integrity and wholeness in the new person that Jesus enables the believer to become. With healing comes a new purpose, with freedom from dysfunctional and restrictive patterns and impulses comes a new direction for life (1:2; 2:9; 2:24; 3:10-12).

2. *1 Peter and Suffering*

Perhaps no New Testament book is as dedicated to helping believers come to terms with, and respond to, suffering as 1 Peter. We must be very

¹The homophony of “wholeness” and “holiness” is more than a serendipitous pun. Defilement and uncleanness in the Jewish purity codes were often directly related to lack of wholeness (= holiness) of the skin, the bodily orifices, and other representations of boundaries. On this topic, see further Mary Douglas, “Atonement in Leviticus,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993/94) 109-130.; J. H. Neyrey, “Body Language in 1 Corinthians: The Use of Anthropological Models for Understanding Paul and His Opponents,” *Semeia* 35 (1986) 129-170. Readers may also wish to consult chapter 4 of D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

clear here about the precise *kind* of suffering about which the author speaks, or else we will come to misapply this resource. The author addresses people who have encountered resistance, insult, censure, and even physical abuse because of their commitment to respond to Christ and to do what God commands. It is their obedience to the commandment to avoid worship of other gods that, in the main, has led to the pressures being brought to bear on them in the household (in the case of wives and slaves) and in the street. The author is *not* speaking about suffering in general, encompassing all disease, chronic illness, domestic abuse, or political oppression in his statements about suffering.

I must especially stress that domestic violence and abusive marriages are not “sanctioned” in some way by this text. The proximity of instructions to wives in 3:1-6 and discussions of suffering abuse (2:18-25; 3:13-17) has led to such problematic applications, with the result that some pastors or other Christian friends will advise a spouse to remain in an abusive relationship because this is God’s will (3:17; 4:19). Physical abuse between spouses, however, was not sanctioned even by Greco-Roman statutes, and so persevering in an abusive relationship cannot have been an aspect of the witness to the unbelieving spouse encouraged in 3:1-6. Rather, the author is speaking very specifically about suffering endured for “doing what is right” (2:20; 3:14), for “doing good” (3:17), “for the name of Christ” (4:14), and for “bearing the name” of “a Christian” (4:16). Suffering “in line with God’s will” (4:19) is quite explicitly limited by this author to suffering encountered because obedience to Jesus’ call, teaching, and example has brought one to that point of conflict with those who resist God’s vision for human relationships.

This is the condition of a considerable portion of the global family of God. I have found a general reluctance among Christians in the West to learn about and speak of the persecution encountered by sisters and brothers abroad, although I would not presume to diagnose the causes for this silence. Nevertheless, a part of the Body of Christ is subjected still to censure, discrimination, disprivilege, and even imprisonment and death on account of its confession of faith. It is also the lot of many who stand up for God’s vision of a just society, who take the lead against systems that guard the privilege of one group at the expense of the well-being of another group. One need only remember the resistance to, and suffering endured by, those who were “eager to do what was good” in recent history — Martin Luther King, Jr. and pastors and laity who sought to advance Civil Rights, Nelson Mandela and Allan Boesak, jailed for their witness in South Africa, and the confessors and martyrs of the Russian churches whose stories have become known since the dissolution of the Soviet Union are but a few examples. If “suffering for doing what is right” or for the sake of the name of Christ seem remote, it may be a sign that we have retreated far from those areas where the message of God

would have us challenge the structures and practices by which our own land sustains its status quo.

1 Peter speaks to all who encounter resistance and suffering because they are going where God leads them, speaking up for God's truth, searching for a new model for human relationships built on a stronger foundation than individual or systemic defense mechanisms. The author's desire is that the believer not be defeated or intimidated by such resistance (3:14), but rather be faithful to God's leading whatever the cost. He seeks to embolden believers to heed God's leading wherever that would take them: if it takes them into places where they will encounter the resistance of family, friends, or those who have power over life and freedom itself, it still has not taken them out of God's favor nor deprived them of the honor in which God holds them (4:14-16). At many points in this letter, the author specifically speaks of the honor — the dignity — that these marginalized believers have by virtue of their place in God's family (2:4-5, 9-10; 4:14-16). He also encourages them in the midst of their trials that honor will be the outcome of their perseverance (1:7; 2:6-8;² 5:6). These passages are resources for the encouragement of all who must persevere in the face of hostility if they are to arrive at the growth that God desires for them.

As 1 Peter gives us a window into the experiences of rejection and "rehabilitation" suffered by Christians at the hands of their non-Christian neighbors, it also connects with the experiences of many who, whether deepening in their discipleship or pursuing the healing of a counseling journey, encounter resistance from their natural families or circles of associates. When one member of a co-dependent team reaches for a more authentic existence, the other member is likely to respond negatively, to exert whatever pressure possible to maintain the relational patterns that, though mutually harmful, are controllable, known, and safe. When one member of a family ceases to play the

²1 Pet 2:6-8 is one place where close attention to the Greek text is more helpful than most available English translations. These latter rather consistently mistranslate 2:7 as "to you then who believe, he is precious" (NRSV; see also the NASV, JB, RSV, and NIV), as if the author were still speaking about the believers' perception of Jesus, the cornerstone. The Greek has not the adjective "precious" (*timios*), however, but the related noun, "honor" (*timē*): "Honor, then, is for you who believe." The author is developing a projection of the consequences of trusting Jesus introduced in the Psalm text quoted in 2:6, which promises that "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." The Christians will come to honor for their commitment, while their detractors will come to shame (they will "stumble" and "fall").

games endemic to a dysfunctional family, the other members are likely to endeavor to pressure that individual to resume the role assigned him or her. Why? One member of the system may be ready to call those games into question, to set them aside, and discover a new and more authentic way of relating, but the others may not respond kindly to having those games, forged and perfected through years of practice and maintained by the weight of strong defense mechanisms, critically examined and threatened. This can be observed on the societal level as well: when beloved systems or values, however evil and hurtful to human relationships, are called into question rather than sustained through quiet participation, those who depend on those systems or values respond violently. These dynamics were very much on the surface as apartheid in South Africa or segregation in America were challenged from within; they were equally on the surface as Roman imperial ideology was challenged by Christian prophets in the late-first/early-second centuries.

The author's words to people facing this kind of pressure from those who embraced the life they left behind may still prove helpful when counseling or encouraging fellow-believers facing similar pressures today. First, he reminds them of the undesirability of returning to that way of life (1:18; 4:1-5). There were strong reasons for leaving it in favor of a new one, and those reasons urge perseverance in the way to life. Though resuming society's or one's family's dysfunctional games and values would bring relief from tension on some fronts, it would also bring the greater tension of having exchanged the hope of freedom for a return to slavery. Second, he instructs them to show their detractors that the way of life they have found is a good one, one productive of what is noble, kind, and beneficent. The author trusts that the quiet display of virtue and authenticity has its own power of persuasion (2:12, 15; 3:1-2). Third, he urges them to be directed by God and by the example of Christ in all their dealings with other people. The laws of retaliation, of acting toward others as they act, inflict their own slavery upon the human soul.

The author is concerned that believers respond to those who have grieved them in such a way as reflects God's kindness rather than the hostile society's malice. Not returning ill for ill, but extending blessing remains the hallmark of Christian response. The Christian response to hostility is not to accept that the hostile ones have become a "them" divided from some "us." We are not free to hate those who hate us, nor to curse those who injure us. The task of pastoral counseling is not completed until the patient so experiences God's love that he or she can see that love extending to the other members of a dysfunctional, hurtful household (even if he or she will not be the one to take that love there). The persecuted one who learns to hate the persecutor has lost the best part of his or her faith, namely the love that is more valuable than martyrdom (to borrow from 1 Cor 13:3).

3. *The Church as Household of God*

In light of the numerous and variegated struggles encountered by individuals and groups as they follow the leading of God's Spirit — whether that leading invites them on journeys toward inner healing and the resistance one can encounter on such journeys, or compels them to take a stand against prevailing social norms, marking them as targets for those who have much invested in the status quo — it is not surprising to find most New Testament authors emphasizing the importance of the community of faith as a resource for the individual believer.

1 Peter opens by giving voice to, and legitimating, that sense of not belonging yet yearning for belonging. He calls the hearers “exiles of the Diaspora” (1:1), applying to these (mostly) Gentile Christians titles taken from Israel's experience of being removed from their homeland and being scattered amongst the Gentile nations. As he continues, he gives instructions for their conduct “during the time of your exile” (1:17) and acknowledges their lack of place “as aliens and exiles” (2:11). It has been suggested that the terms “resident alien” and “sojourner” speak of the legal, non-citizen status of the Christians in Asia Minor: lacking a real place in their cities, these people were drawn to the Christian movement as a place where they could “belong.” Others have taken issue with this reading, viewing the terms as more metaphorical, speaking of their lack of citizenship on earth because they now are citizens of heaven.³ The former position suffers from the fact that there is no way to prove that the author uses these terms in a legal, non-figurative sense (especially when other early Christian writers do employ the language metaphorically), but the latter position also suffers from not reckoning with the difficult social and economic circumstances that many early Christians faced.

I would suggest that, prior to their conversion, the addressees were very much “at home” with their neighbors and in their cities. They have, however, suffered a serious loss of place and loss of any sense of belonging as a result of their conversion, their withdrawal from so much of the way of life that formerly connected them with their neighbors (4:3-4). They have become outcasts in their own city. 1 Peter stresses, however, that they have also at the same time “come home.” They have returned to their home in God's love (“you were wandering like sheep, but you have returned to the Shepherd and

³J. H. Elliott (*A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation, and Strategy* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981]) pioneered the former hypothesis; Troy Martin (*Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter* [SBLDS 131; Atlanta: Scholars, Press, 1992]) has more recently criticized it in favor of a metaphorical interpretation.

Guardian of your souls,” 2:25; 3:18) and in the love of the community of sisters and brothers in Christ (1:22; 3:8; 4:8-10). The community of Christians must function as a place of belonging during the time of exile — an exile that ends only with this mortal life. Each member is brought, as it were, to a construction site where God is fitting them together into a “spiritual house” (2:4-5), an honored household serving the One God as priests.

The ethos of the local church can be much informed and formed by some words from Philo of Alexandria, perhaps the most famous first-century Jewish philosopher. Articulating the obligation laid upon Jews to welcome converts from the Gentiles, he writes:

Having given equal rank and honour to all those who come over, and having granted to them the same favours that were bestowed on those born Jews, Moses recommends those who are ennobled by truth not only to treat the converts with respect, but even with special friendship and excessive benevolence.... Those people who have left their country, and their friends, and their relations for the sake of virtue and holiness, ought not to be left destitute of other cities, and houses, and friends, but there ought to be places of refuge always ready for those who come over to religion (*The Special Laws* 1.52).

Philo recognized that the Jewish community needed to compensate the loss suffered by Gentiles leaving behind all the associations built around idolatry with their own acceptance, support, love, and friendship. Jesus no doubt had a similar vision in mind when he assured those who had left family and house for his sake that they would find a much larger family and many houses open to them in the movement they were starting (Mark 10:28-30). Individual perseverance would depend in large measure upon the acceptance and attachments each found within this new family.

Realizing the importance of building up this network of support, the author of 1 Peter also urges the local congregations he addresses to work toward being the “household of God” one to another: “now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart” (1:22). The word translated “mutual love” in the NRSV actually connotes “the love of siblings toward one another” (*philadelphia*). The author taps into the ethics of kinship to fill out his vision for life as a church. The love of siblings expressed itself in considering property to be held in common for the good of all, in cooperating rather than competing in endeavors, and in preserving unity and harmony within the group. Siblings, ideally, operated with complete honesty and trust toward one another. Several of the author’s exhortations capture aspects of this

ethic quite explicitly:

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander (2:1).

Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind (3:8).

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies (4:8-11).

The early Christian leaders sought to form this ethos within the church empire-wide, which had become a single family related in fact by blood, but now the blood of Jesus.

In countries where converts to Christianity face the same loss of family and other support networks on account of their confession, the author's words continue to be vital instructions for the survival of personal faith. Western churches, however, also need ever to strive at becoming well-functioning, supportive, caring families both to enable individuals' perseverance and growth in discipleship and to enable the healing of those whose natural kinship groups are the source of psychological or physical injury. Congregations can become the most important partners to the pastoral counselor in the healing of the emotionally and psychologically wounded, as the latter find in a church not merely "nice people" but people willing to take on the roles of sisters and brothers, providing friendship, listening ears, open homes.

Hospitality was essential to the success of the early church since teachers and messengers of the churches relied on willing believers to open their homes to them, but hospitality was also the visible sign that the believer had joined a global family. Wherever he or she went, he or she would not be without the ties of mutual affection and help that came from devotion to the One Lord. The reality of the family of God continues to come to expression when believers open their homes to a wife who needs to distance herself from an abusive husband, to Christians from abroad sojourning here (whether as students or as refugees), to the youth of the church as a place for mentoring and fellowship, and the like. "Show hospitality without grumbling" (4:9): take the family of God into your natural family domicile.

Churches are filled with gifted people. Some have an abundance of money and goods to share; others have compassionate hearts for listening and visiting; others have the gift of being spiritually centered people able to lead

others to that same centeredness. Whatever the gifts, the author avers that God has planted them in each of us for the building up of one another. His directions in 4:8-11 especially lead us to continue to ask ourselves and our churches what these gifts are and how they can be used for God's family locally and globally. The most important vehicle for God's healing, deliverance, and transformation is the local congregation, and 1 Peter invites each congregation to set aside every distraction and focus completely on sustaining one another — the habitual church member, the counsellor who comes for the first time at the suggestion of a pastoral counselor, and the family in Indonesia that has had its house burned to the ground in an anti-Christian terrorist act — on the journey to the imperishable inheritance that God would bestow on each of us. Pastoral counselors, pastors or missionaries from abroad, and local congregations and their pastors would do well to dialog with one another concerning how a local congregation can best serve as an agent of healing and support for the whole family of God.

4. *The Natural (Christian) Household*

1 Peter, like Ephesians and Colossians, includes codes for conduct within the household. Unlike Ephesians and Colossians, which give reciprocal instructions to all three sets of relationships in the typical household (master and slaves, husbands and wives, parents and children), 1 Peter only addresses slaves, wives, and, most briefly, husbands. Since it is often the case that more fundamentalist groups will teach that these rules are still binding upon wives and husbands, it would be fitting to consider their significance and purpose so as to forestall (or remedy) unhealthful applications of these passages.

The author's instructions to women bear a marked resemblance to the picture of the ideal wife in the writings of Greek and Latin ethicists, as well as to Hellenistic Jewish authors.⁴ Submission to the husband's authority, modesty, and quietness were the major components of this portrait. This submission did not include, however, acceptance of domestic violence, which was actionable then as now as a category of assault. Nor was submissiveness meant to limit or downplay the contributions of the wife in a household. Xenophon, for example, regarded men and women as differently and complementarily gifted for the effective management of a household and rearing of children, each contributing essential strengths not possessed by the other. Neither did

⁴For a more thorough introduction to this topic, please see "Management of, and Behavior within, the Household" in chapter 3 of D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

submissiveness mean doing everything the husband said: the believing wife was certainly obliged to disobey an unbelieving husband's urging to return to the worship of his gods. The wife is called by the author to "do what is good" and not to yield to intimidation (3:6).

We must also reckon with the agenda behind the author's instructions. It was critical for him that unbelievers should understand that Christians did not seek to subvert the domestic and social order, one of the primary suspicions cast upon them. Their refusal of certain obligations (mostly those that included some idolatrous component) did not mean that they sought to bring unrest to homes and cities everywhere. Seeking to appear not to subvert these domestic norms is a very different goal from seeking indefinitely to perpetuate them. Those who read such passages as 3:1-6 as a template for husband-wife relationships as God meant them to be enacted through all time fail to take into account the author's very specific and culture-bound purposes in giving these instructions. Positively, the author wants unbelievers to see that responding to this Jesus resulted in the formation of many of the virtues prized by the dominant culture as well. This would, he hoped, make their neighbors revise their opinion of the Christian group and perhaps grow to accept it, if not join it.

The most important safeguards against applying the instructions to wives in a manner that acts to suppress a wife's growth, harm her self-esteem, or undervalue her contributions to home, church, and world, are the instructions to husbands. Where these are taken seriously, it is less likely that the instructions to wives will be applied in ways that appeal to the carnal mind — that mind shaped in us not by God but by the "futile ways inherited from our ancestors." I cannot help but recall here the ugliness of a man who rejoiced to share with me how submissive his wife was, how women were in their "proper place" in their church (i.e., veiled and in the back), and so forth. Such emphasis on domestic hierarchies and the reinforcement of the female's second-class status in the spatial arrangements of the church are far from the author's vision of a Christian marriage.

The English translations tend to skew the Greek text once again (as at 2:7). Consider, for example, the NRSV of 3:7: "Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life — so that nothing may hinder your prayers." This translation obscures the motive clauses given by the author for each action, namely "showing consideration" and "paying honor." A better rendering would read: "in your living together, show consideration for your wives as to the weaker sex, offering honor to the woman as also to joint heirs of the gracious gift of life." Greco-Roman authors also held that the physical vulnerability of the female

ought to provoke gentleness and consideration from the husband, tempering rather than inviting any domineering spirit. 1 Peter, however, goes further than this by drawing attention to the Christian wife's status as a co-heir of that gift toward which all Christians' hope is directed. This status must result in the husband honoring the wife as one favored and honored by God, and to filter all his words, attitudes, and actions toward her through this lens. Any attempt to apply 3:1-6 in a way that violates the wife's honor as co-heir of God's kingdom must therefore be ruled out-of-bounds.

The author offers a second safeguard in his concluding summary exhortations in 3:8, which functions here much as Eph 5:21 does for that household code: "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another [specifically, again, love for one another as that between siblings], a tender heart, and a humble mind." The fact that Christian couples are also children of the same Heavenly Parent, that is, sister and brother, overlays another code of ethics upon the typical patterns of marital roles. The ethic of siblings promotes the quest for harmony and concord — agreement rather than suppression of one voice in favor of another's voice, cooperation for the good of the whole family rather than competition for power and precedence (such as lurks not far beneath the surface of many attempts to revive the patriarchal models of the first century in twentieth and twenty-first century homes). Sympathy, tenderness, and, especially, humility, are antithetical to forcing one's way on another or attempting to assert dominance over another. Perhaps it is here, in the example of Jesus the humble one, that one finds the most powerful, yet overlooked, death-blow to hierarchical and authoritarian arrangements of the Christian household.

Counselors and pastors need especially to be aware of the way the household codes in the New Testament have been used in the lives of their charges (not to mention be cautious about their own application of them to family life). The very Scriptures that can heal are frequently used as weapons of ideological warfare in power struggles and other divisive and hurtful games, and it is sorrowful that the Scriptures are frequently invoked to demean those very daughters God seeks to elevate.

5. Where is God in the midst of Suffering?

In a letter so focused on the problem of suffering, it is natural to inquire into what this author may contribute to finding God and encountering God's sustaining strength in the midst of suffering. First, it is imperative to remember that 1 Peter does not address suffering in general, such that his remarks on suffering can be applied to the experience of disease or violent crime or mental anguish. Rather, as we have already discussed, the author speaks to the situation of suffering for the sake of doing what is just and for the

sake of being associated with Jesus and his challenge to the world.

The author assures Christians facing such trials that God is present with them in the midst of suffering. It was important to help the believers understand that the resistance they encountered and losses they endured were *not* a sign that they were out of favor with God, but rather assured them that they were moving in precisely the direction that God was leading. First, it was God who provided for their redemption from a futile way of life, dissociation from which is the cause of their present suffering (1:19). God set them on the journey they have begun, and the believers remain “protected by the power of God ... for a deliverance about to be revealed” (1:5) in the midst of their trials. In the midst of the censure and insult they endure, God associates God’s own Spirit with them personally: “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (4:14). Far from separating them from God, their endurance of trials confirms their intimacy with God.

Moreover, the author assures them that God is intensely concerned about each believer in the midst of trial. Quoting Psalm 34:15, he writes: “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.” This he turns into a reassuring exhortation in 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” As did Jesus, Paul, the author of Hebrews and as would John, this author also calls the Christians to take hold of prayer as a powerful resource by which to counter anxiety and fear and to find the strength to persevere. He fully expects that God will intervene to “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” those who have endured suffering for righteousness’ sake (5:10). God is also present to help in the community of faith: “Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies” (4:11). Words of encouragement and direction, acts of love and service, are all signs of God’s power at work to sustain God’s sons and daughters.

As Jesus himself had “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (2:23), so Christians who encounter undeserved resistance and deviancy-control measures are called to “entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good” (4:19). Vindication may not come in this life, but the vindication of Jesus’ honor at his resurrection continues to provide the assurance for believers that their dignity and worth, too, will be vindicated by God — on that Day when their present perseverance in suffering will be awarded its due “praise and glory and honor” (1:7).

I Peter’s assurances about God’s presence and aid in the midst of suffering still offer words of encouragement and strategies for perseverance in cases where the search for light — whether that light means the discovery and relinquishing of dysfunctional relational habits or the exodus from societal

values in favor of God's vision for humanity — results in the experience of hostility, censure, and even violence. It is important to emphasize for such people where God is *not*: God is not in the reproaches and abuse of the unbelievers punishing the sufferers, but *with* the believers in the midst of their experiences of hostility and resistance.

That these believers are “suffering in accordance with God's will” means that their obedience to God's will and alignment with God's cause has resulted in suffering, not that God delights in abusing God's faithful ones nor that God seeks to make life difficult for those who seek to leave behind death-dealing and inauthentic ways of life. Early Christians spoke of sufferings being endured in accordance with God's will as a way of expressing the conviction that the experience of persecution for righteousness' sake was not something beyond God's power, nor did it place one beyond God's favor and help. It also expressed the conviction that the experience of resistance and suffering provided the fire by which the human soul was rendered workable by God, like gold or silver in the smith's oven (see 1:6-7).

Such a view of God's place in the sufferings of the believers ultimately was intended to assist the believers to withstand the pressures that weighed upon them from without, to empower them to remain true to their own choices and to the vision they had accepted for themselves. It also sought to redeem those very experiences by calling attention to the good purposes God could achieve in the believer's life and in the shape of the believer's character by means of the crucible of suffering: the Christian was able to focus thus not on being victimized by unbelievers, but to search out the ways in which his or her virtue, character, and inner strength was being refined. These formulations resulted, of course, in a theological problem with no solution in sight — but it may help to keep pushing past the problematic formulations and inquiring into the pastoral goals that gave rise to them in the first place.⁵

6. *A Word to Elders from an Elder*

The author, “a fellow elder,” gives some directions to “the elders” among the many Christians communities in the five provinces he addresses (5:1). One difficulty in knowing how to take his directions is our lack of clarity concerning the organization of the church in the first century. “Elder,” “overseer,” and “deacon” all appear to have been “offices” by the end of the

⁵Perhaps no better formulation has been made than Gen 50:20, in which God's ability to redeem and use even that which humans enact with harmful intent comes to powerful expression: “you intended to do harm to me, but God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.”

first century, the latter two receiving much attention in the Pastoral Epistles with regard to qualifications for serving in these capacities. By “elder,” did the author have in mind people named to an appointed office or simply those who, by reason of their seniority in the community, were the “natural” leaders within a particular Christian community? The contrast between the “elders” addressed in 5:1-4 and the “younger ones” in 5:5 suggests that seniority and leadership were closely linked in the early church, as would be expected in the Mediterranean cultures where age, wisdom, and authority were regarded as natural counterparts. The possibility of exercising oversight “under compulsion” (5:2), however, suggests that congregations called upon some of their senior members to look after the local Christian community. We might expect these duties to have included aspects of pastoral care, orchestrating relief within the local church, and presiding over assemblies (not necessarily doing all the teaching or praying or the like, for several local Christians would be regarded as spiritually gifted in such areas).

We should not merely apply the author’s exhortations to “elders” here to “paid staff” (e.g., pastors), although as representatives of the general ministry of the whole church it must apply to them as well. The exhortations need to be extended, however, to all the “natural” leaders in a congregation. Many churches suffer from a lack of indigenous, “natural leadership,” whether because responsibility is deferred to the “paid staff,” because the “elders” in a church are overlooked when responsibilities are delegated, or because those with experience and giftedness nevertheless avoid responsibility within the church. The other side of the spectrum is just as problematic, where a few “elders” attempt to control the congregation. 1 Peter calls for leadership that is both healthy and strong, challenging the elders in churches at both ends of this spectrum.

Caring for one another in the family of faith is no less an obligation than caring for one another in a natural family. Just as the well-functioning natural family exercises this care in diligent and healthful ways, so the well-functioning family of God does the same. Where we err either to the side of neglecting the care of the family or to the side of using care as a means of control, we move toward a dysfunctional family. Lay leadership within the church, whether in administrative capacities, in pastoral care ministries (like the *Stephen Ministries*), or in outreach or education is essential to the growth and health of the family of God. Being nominated to a committee or asked to teach the Senior High can be approached as an unwanted burden or an opportunity to “exercise the oversight” for the good of the family of God. The author clearly hopes that such leaders will adopt the latter approach, understanding that God equips and strengthens those whom God calls out in such ways (4:11). He urges lay leaders (and today we must include paid staff) to understand their

work as an invitation to work with God to strengthen and build the church, and thus to give specific expression to the general obligation to show love for their sisters and brothers.

What motivates these leaders? The author excludes two possible motives immediately, namely material gain and the enjoyment of power over others. In the first century, local leaders would not have been paid but still would have had opportunity to use their position to increase their wealth. Being in charge of relief funds, for example, might have made it tempting to skim off an administrative or handling fee. They might have thought to extort gifts, services, and favors from their sisters and brothers, presenting requests for such goods and services as the suitable “return” for their own generosity and service. Reciprocity was a core value in the Greco-Roman world of patrons, friends, and clients, and could be exploited. This remains a danger facing leaders in the church. Giving of oneself to the young, the homeless, the shut-ins, the unchurched is not to be approached as an opportunity for worldly gains, whether community prestige or networking for one’s business, or the like. Moreover, some of the most important work we will ever do in this life is the work for which there is no paycheck. Many are losing sight of this as they shy away from making commitments to services and responsibilities apart from their “paying” jobs.

“Elders” are not to be drawn into the trap of working for money or seeking other temporal compensations for their labors in the family of God. Their reward is imperishable, namely unfading honor in Christ’s kingdom: to set one’s mind to calculating how to wrangle material or temporal rewards alongside this shows a small spirit. Since many churches have moved to a situation in which some of its leadership is salaried — that is, since the apostolic situation no longer holds — application of the author’s words to paid pastors and other staff must take this shift into account. In this regard, pastors are reminded that they went into the work of full-time ministry not for the money but in response to God’s call. Salaried church leaders cannot forget this. It does happen from time to time that ministers and their families are unable to meet their necessary expenses because of inadequate compensation. In such cases, ministers need to be honest with their congregations about their needs and congregations need to respond as God (not fiscal conservatism) leads. It is also the case, however, that American culture approaches money and material possessions from the standpoint of “more” rather than “enough.” Part of being “examples to the flock” includes modeling some very un-American values, such as discerning when a salary, however small in comparison with many professionals’ salaries, is “enough,” and understanding that “more” is not necessarily “better.” Compensation for one’s labor and a benefits package are not the same thing, at least where one takes the promise of 5:4 seriously: “when

the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of honor.”

Healthful leadership also resists the temptation to dominate, and it is a powerful temptation to resist. An “elder” in a local church might regard his recompense for good and faithful service to be the unspoken “right” to have things go his way, both within and beyond his sphere of immediate involvement. A pastor or counselor might forget the healing arts as she seeks to “dominate” the patient in her role as “expert” in a theological disagreement. Whatever the scenario, good shepherding requires the dismissal of every inner drive to dominate. The hierarchy described by the author of 1 Peter is helpful in this regard: there is one chief shepherd. To all other shepherds belongs neither the flock nor the turf, but only the opportunity and obligation to tend what is another’s.

Those who are able to lead without concern for gain or self-assertion are indeed powerful examples to the flock, living parables of Jesus’ own leadership style. There are other ways in which Christians “elders” and other leaders can distinguish themselves for Christ as they distinguish themselves from Western styles and expectations of leaders. One of these involves modeling transparency and vulnerability, refusing to perpetuate the widespread conspiracy of hiding one’s brokenness under a thin veneer of cheerful appearances for fear of non-acceptance. Avoidance of self-disclosure out of this fear is a basic dysfunction in human relationships, although it is often perceived as “strength” in a leader. Within the context of the church, however, any such strategies that limit knowledge of and care for one another — in short, limit opportunities for God’s healing power to be at work — should be rejected.

If leaders are to devote themselves to the care of the family of God, the reciprocal responsibility is clear. Those who benefit from the self-giving of others ought not to make the faithful exercise of vigilant oversight any more difficult than it needs to be: “in the same way, you who are their juniors must submit yourselves to the elders” (5:5). Humility (acting with respect for the honor and contributions of the other) in all our dealings with one another is again the key to the well-functioning church family.