

The Pilgrim Church

9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. 11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, 12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1Pe 2:9-12)

After some recent court decisions, some Christians are beginning to wake up to the fact that there is a widening chasm between true Christians and the surrounding culture. There may have been a time when the wider culture embraced Christian ideas and values, but that time is mostly over. Many people are talking of our era as the post-Christian era, when nations and societies that once embraced Christianity have now thrown it off, and are forging ahead with values, morals, ideas, practices that are non-Christian and even anti-Christian.

So how is the church to respond when it finds itself on the outside of mainstream opinion and mainstream culture-makers, and the mainstream of what is popular and acceptable. How should the church act towards the surrounding culture? This has always been a hard question to answer because as Christians we are faced with several tensions:

We are in the world. There is no escaping it, unless you embrace true monasticism. We have to earn our living in the world. There is much in the world which is good, and to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. But within this same world that we are to enjoy and from which we must make our living, there are deadly threats to our soul. We are firmly warned not to befriend the world, not to love the world, not to be conformed to the world. And then again, we are told to make disciples of unbelievers, we are to love our neighbours, we are to be instruments of mercy in the world. We are to love our neighbours, but we are not to become unequally yoked with them. So how do we resolve these tensions? There have been a few approaches, which are wrong or naïve.

Some people tell us that we need to be like it to win it. They say that if Christians are to remain relevant, then they need to embrace much of the surrounding culture. Often called the missional movement, this idea is that we need to learn the language of the locals, and if that means becoming like the world so as to win the world, that's the approach we should take. Jesus ate and drank with sinners, didn't He?, they ask. If Jesus came down and lived among people, then we, too, need to be among them as one of them.

Similar to this approach is the idea that we should try to transform the culture. So we take whatever the world is doing, imitate it, but we do it for Jesus. We 'redeem' the culture, by using their entertainments, their media, their systems, and we inject the Gospel into it. We do not cultivate and transmit our own things, we take over whatever we find in the world.

On the other end of the spectrum are the Christians who believe we should just get away from the world as much as possible. They believe in total separation from the world, and simply announcing to the world that there is an Ark departing soon, and people should get into it if they want to. If they could have their way, they would set up a Christian community high in the mountains, and have no contact whatsoever with the world.

Now what we decide about this isn't irrelevant. What we decide about how to relate to the surrounding culture will have massive effect on how we live the Christian life, how we worship, how we work, how we spend, how we relate to one another. And it will fundamentally affect how we proclaim the Gospel to unbelievers.

I believe Scripture has not left us in the dark as to what approach we should take. In many Scriptures we find it explained, but here in 1 Peter it is put crisply and plainly. We can call it simply The Pilgrim Attitude. The church is to be a pilgrim church. What does that mean? Here Peter is going to do two things. He is going to show us the identity or nature of the pilgrim church. Then, he is going to tell us of the actions of the pilgrim church.

I. The Nature of the Pilgrim Church

11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims,

Peter explicitly calls Christians sojourners and pilgrims. The word *sojourner* is the word for foreigner, stranger. It means a resident alien, who lives among people without being a citizen. The word *pilgrim* also refers to a non-citizen, an exile who is not part of the country he is in.

Now think about that image for a moment. What does a foreigner, stranger, pilgrim do? He is in the same place as the residents, but he is not one of them. He may be able to speak their language, and understand them, but he has not identified with them. He has not sworn allegiance to their flag, adopted their customs. He would not call them his people, or their cities his home. He has to be there, for various reasons. But he is not calling that place home because he does not regard those people to be his people.

Now in what way are Christians, and the church as a group foreigners, exiles, non-citizens? What country, or land, or people-group are we in, but not of? Now we might quickly answer, 'this world'. But what do we mean when we say, 'this world'?

Well, you need to know that the Bible uses the word *world* in three ways.

The first way is when the Bible is speaking about the created order, the earth.

Acts 17:24 "God, who made the world and everything in it,..."

The world is God's creation. This world is not evil, and it is not something to be shunned.

1 Timothy 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;

We are not pilgrims through this Earth. As we saw in our series on Heaven, this Earth is our home. Heaven will be a place on the New Earth, and the Earth and all its fullness will be the inheritance of believers. This is why Paul says of us *"Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come-- all are yours. (1Co 3:21-22)*

So when we say, the world is not our home, we shouldn't mean this Earth is not our home, because it is.

The second way the word *world* is used is to refer to humanity in general. Well-known John 3:16 says

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The world also means the world of people. Now when we say that we are strangers and pilgrims, we

can't mean that we are strangers and pilgrims from humanity. No, we are part of humanity. We love our neighbours as ourselves. We live in families, in communities, in societies made up of people whom we are to love.

But there is a third way that *world* is used in the Bible, which suggests something in opposition to God and to His people. It is this sense of world that John tells believers not to love. Consider some verses in 1 John.

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world-- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life-- is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1Jo 2:15-17)

1 John 3:1 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

1 John 3:13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.

1 John 4:5 They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

1 John 5:4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

1 John 5:19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

Now here the world is not the Earth, it is not mankind, but it is a system of thinking and acting which unbelievers set up on the Earth. The world is a way of life, a way of living that unbelievers practice. This way of life, the beliefs, the attitudes, the desires come from the Evil One, and from his children.

This system of meaning, this culture, this way of life is what Christians are foreigners to. This is what we are exiles from. This is what we have no citizenship in. This is what we cannot call our home.

The Pilgrim Church sees itself as alien to the world system. We see ourselves as having to deal with it, having to be near it, but we do not identify with it. We do not embrace its ambitions, goals, priorities, desires, aims, wishes. We have a fundamentally different vision of what life is about, what the good life is, what is true, what is good, what is beautiful. So while we love the Earth and the many good gifts of creation, and while we love our unbelieving neighbour, we do not always love his way of life, his entertainments, his use of money, his approach to work, and leisure, and relationships. These we often find hostile to God, enemies of God's Word, offensive to God's holiness, injurious to the soul, debasing to the image-bearers of God.

Now if there was any doubt that this is how Peter wants us to think of ourselves as the church, look at his list of descriptors in verse 9:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Each of these titles carries the idea of a people separated from the rest. If Peter meant to tell us that the church should be just like the world system so as to win the world system, he could have used very different descriptors. He could have called us secret agents, as undercover cops, as invisible viruses, as camouflaged invaders, Trojan horses.

But the words here carry the very same idea of sojourners and pilgrims.

Chosen generation (*genos eklekton*) means a selected family, a kindred or ethnic unit which has been specifically selected out of the mass. The church is a family selected out of the human family, no longer identified with those who reject God.

Royal priesthood – a kingly priesthood. We remember the priests were chosen out of the people to be mediators between God and man. In fact, God said of the whole nation of Israel : “ *Exodus 19:6* ‘And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ I.” (*Exo 19:6*) The church is a kingly order of mediators, which means we cannot be defiled with the world system.

There those words *holy nation* , make the next title Peter gives us. Holy means set apart, unique and free from defilement. We are a nation, an *ethnos* that is to be set apart, unlike the defilement around us, pure from the wickedness of the world system and useful to God.

His own special people – this translates a very interesting Greek word which means preserving something for your own use. The church is a people that God saves out of the mass, and He does so for His special, treasured purposes. We are His people, not Satan's, not the world's, and not our own.

We also read in verse 9 that God *called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*. We were a people living in darkness. That describes the world system. But now we have been called out of that deception, out of that evil, out of that wickedness, to walk openly in the light of truth and the light of holiness. We were not a people, but we are now a people. We had not obtained mercy, but we now have.

We are different, we are new creations, we are called-out ones. So stop for a moment and consider what these titles do to the idea of the church becoming like the world, or of taking over the world, or of adopting what the world does and redeeming it for Jesus? They clearly don't seem to fit.

So what then are the actions of the pilgrim church? Once we understand that we are not loyal citizens of this world system, that we are exiles to the unbelieving culture, how do we act?

II. The Actions of the Pilgrim Church

*11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,
12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

Peter here gives us a negative and a positive. The Pilgrim Church must avoid and abstain from certain things, and the Pilgrim Church must do certain things. In part of the world, you have another ethnic community settling in a foreign land. But even though they are in that land, they do not quickly assimilate. They keep their practices, their language, sometimes their dress, their calendar, their approach to life. They consciously avoid copying the practices of the surrounding nation, because they wish to preserve their own.

Christians are to do that. As a pilgrim church, there are practices we avoid, and things we do. What do we avoid? Peter tells us:
abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,

Fleshly lusts refers to desires, or loves that come from the flesh. The selfish, Adamic nature that

wishes to live in rebellion to God, or live in independence of God has certain desires or loves. John gets more descriptive of these in 1 John 2:15-17

The lust of the flesh. *Lust* refers to strong desires.

Food and drink are gifts of God, but the flesh turns them into idols. The flesh turns eating and drinking eating gluttony and drunkenness. Sex within marriage is a gift of God, but the flesh perverts it in numerous ways.

Rest and relaxation are gifts of God, but the flesh perverts those things into lazy self-indulgence.

And again, you can see the way the world idolises luxury holidays, getaways, holiday homes, early retirement.

Wealth is a good thing, but is also a dangerous thing. The flesh thinks wealth is an unqualified good and goes after it.

The lust of the eyes becomes a little more subtle. The eyes obviously refer to what can be seen, and so this becomes a strong craving to appear a certain way, to be seen a certain way. This is the world's strong craving for the appearance of looking rich, or beautiful or wealthy, or powerful, or popular. It's that attitude that judges by appearances, that is mesmerised by the outward show. It loves the pomp and splendour. Witness the TV programs that transform the plain looking person into the fabulous looking model. Look at the ads which insinuate that you will be embarrassed if all you have is your current wardrobe, or cellphone, or car. See the effect of such programs which show us the luxurious lives of the rich and famous.

If the lust of the flesh is worldliness of the body, and lust of the eyes is worldliness of the soul, then pride of life is worldliness of the spirit. Here is the deepest, and most sinful heart of worldliness. It is the desire to be glorified and worshipped by others. It is the desire to be known, respected, cheered, loved, envied and honoured.

The Pilgrim church is going to resist all those attitudes, ways, actions, habits, practices, amusements that feed and strengthen any of these fleshly desires. We are in the world, we are around unbelievers but we will examine everything in the culture and ask, does this feed a fleshly love? These desires war against the soul – they destroy our faith, they oppose God. Does this strengthen desires that defy God? Worldliness is a system of Satan. It shapes us, not always at the level of thought, but even at the level of habit, of attitude, expectations. It is dangerous because it is very often invisible to us, it is simply the way everyone does things, and we come to regard that as normal.

Consider then the positive actions of the Pilgrim Church.

having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Peter says that the Pilgrim Church is to live a life of honest godliness. Our conduct, our way of life is to be good, pleasing to God, beautiful in God's eyes. Another way of saying this is from verse 9: we live to the praise of Him who called us. Our lives reflect God, and show forth His beauty, His glory, the winsomeness and attractiveness of Christ.

Now, I like to think of the church's life in terms of a few “ships”: worship, fellowship, discipleship, leadership, and stewardship. And do you know that the world system has its own version of each of those. It has things it worships, and it has ways it worships them. We have our worship of our God in a Christian way. Our worship is to be different. Our conduct here before them must be good. The world has fellowship. It has things which it shares and has in common, which form friendships, bonds, societies, communities. We as Christians fellowship around something different. And when

we do so, the way we fellowship is different.

The world has a kind of discipleship. They have a way of life that they follow, authorities they look to which shape their habits, actions, routines, attitudes. And they seek to make disciples of their system through their media, through their schools, through their politics. We have a different discipleship, different authority and so a different way of life.

The world has their view of leadership. They choose their leaders a certain way, admire certain things and, expect certain traits in them. We have a different view and standard of leadership.

The world has a completely different idea of stewardship. Their view of the body, of money, of time, of nature is not ours. We see these things completely differently, we see how these are to be used differently.

And what we will do over the next few weeks is consider, what does this good conduct look like? What is pilgrim worship, pilgrim fellowship, pilgrim discipleship, pilgrim leadership, and pilgrim stewardship? What do we abstain from, and what do we do instead?

Now notice what will happen. Peter does not say, "When you do this, unbelievers will feel so at home in your churches that they will join you." Peter does not say, "Live in such a way that unbelievers feel that everything you do is so familiar to them that they fit right in." He doesn't say, "When you live like this, the world is going to invite you onto their talk shows, and put you on their billboards, and celebrate how relevant and down-to-earth you are." No, what does Peter say they will do?

He says they will speak against us as evildoers. They will slander us. They will call our holiness hypocrisy. They will call our preaching hate-speech. They will call our exclusive Gospel intolerant. They will call our standards prudery and puritanical. They will call us cult-like and brainwashed. They will call us deceived fools. The Pilgrim Church, when it lives consistent Christianity in among unbelievers, will not be praised, admired, or celebrated. A widely popular Christianity is almost always a questionable Christianity.

The Pilgrim Church is not trying to take over the world, or win a popularity contest, or become an incredibly marketable product. We are seeking to transmit Christianity faithfully to our own, and welcoming anyone from the world who wishes to become a fellow pilgrim.

However, here is the consolation. They will be observing genuine good works. They will be observing a Christian culture alive and well within their culture. One day, Peter says, at the day of judgement, they will glorify God by admitting the wisdom and the goodness and the beauty of the Christians who lived among them. The preacher Alexander McClaren said that unbelievers read us a lot more than they read our Bible.

When we read of court decisions, growing wickedness in the media, a deepening sickness in the world culture, we do not despair. The world system is not our home. We have to live in it. We have to pass through it. But while we do so, we worship, fellowship, disciple, lead and live as a chosen race, a holy nation, and people called out of darkness and into light.