

**THE GRACE OF EXILE: Living as Resident Aliens in the Academic World**  
**A reflection and discussion guide for I PETER**  
Mid–West Faculty Conference, Cedar Campus  
June 20–26, 2009

I. Sunday: **An overview study of the *First Letter of Peter*.**

Most of the recipients of this letter would have first heard it read aloud at a gathering of the Christian communities mentioned in v. 1: 2. The majority would probably have been illiterate Gentile converts in the very earliest days of the new Jesus movement. While we cannot replicate their experience, given our distance in time and culture from those days, it will serve our understanding to gain a perspective on the whole of this great apostolic letter. That will be our purpose in this first reflection exercise and discussion.

1. Read the entire letter. As you read, note three reactions to the text. What passages strike you as particularly and importantly true? What passages seem difficult or obscure and require close re-reading and interpretation? What themes do you hear repeated?
2. Why did the important and true passages seem so striking? Why are they important to you? Pause now to offer a prayer of thanksgiving or praise to our God in the light of these passages.
3. What passages did you find obscure or difficult? Why are they in this category for you? Does dealing with the obscurity or difficulty seem important for understanding the message of the letter? Do other passages in the letter seem to bring clarity to your obscurity? Pause and ask the Lord to give you clarity of understanding of what He wants to teach us in these days.
4. What are some repeated themes in the letter? How do these themes seem relevant to your life as a faculty member? How are they foreign to your life as a faculty member?
5. In the light of these questions and your reading of the whole letter, what would you say is the central theme of I Peter? What was the author trying to accomplish for his addressees in writing the letter? Think about how the answers to these questions tend to direct your interpretation of the letter. How can you avoid letting these first impressions become a strait jacket for understanding the letter?
6. Now, focus closely on 1: 1–2, the conventional “greeting” for an ancient letter. What do you learn about the author? What do you learn about the recipients? What is the tension in the phrase “elect sojourners of the Diaspora,” and why is it important for the letter? What do you learn about God from this greeting?
7. Finally, look at the close of the letter in 5: 10–13.
  - Vv. 10–12 are the concluding statement in the body of the letter. It is a brief doxology. For what does Peter praise God as he concludes his letter? How does this statement summarize aspects of the letter?
  - It would have been characteristic of ancient epistolary practice for the author to take pen in hand and add a short “autograph” to confirm the authenticity of a letter dictated to a secretary. What does this short ending add to the initial greeting? What themes from the greeting does it echo?
8. We attached a short article about the central message of I Peter written by Brian Winter in the student theological journal *Themelios*. If you have the occasion in your free time, you might want to read and interact with it as background to our study of I Peter.

## II. Monday: I Peter 1: 3 – 2:10: “Foundations for Christian living as a resident alien”

1. Share the passages you found that struck you as strikingly important and true. Why were they important to you?
2. What passages did you find obscure or difficult? Why were they in this category for you? Does dealing with the difficulty seem important for understanding the message of the letter? Do other passages in the letter seem to promise clarity to the obscurity? Offer short prayers of thanksgiving or praise to our God in the light of these passages, asking the Lord to give you clarity of understanding of what He wants to teach us in these days.
3. What repeated themes did you notice? How do these themes seem relevant to your life as a faculty member? How are they foreign to your life as a faculty member?
4. In the light of these questions and your reading of the whole letter, what would you say is the central theme of I Peter? How do the theme and the author’s purposes for his addressees tend to direct your interpretation of the letter? How can you avoid letting these first impressions become a strait jacket for understanding the letter?
5. Bruce Winter suggests that the following statement, written in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century by an anonymous Christian, succinctly captures both the language and central message of I Peter, especially 1: 1 and 2: 11–12:

They find themselves in the flesh,  
but do not live in the flesh.  
They reside in their respective countries,  
but only as aliens (*paraoikoi*),  
they take part in everything as citizens (*politai*),  
and put up with everything as foreigners (*zenoi*).  
Every foreign land is their home  
and every home a foreign land.  
*(Epistle to Diognetus, V: 4–5, 8–9)*

Thinking of the university as our “respective country,” how does this summary connect with your experience as a faculty member? Does the academy feel alternately as both “home” and “a foreign land?” In what specific ways is this so? How do you feel like an “alien” in the academy? How do you “take part in everything as a citizen?” What do you “put up with as a foreigner?”

6. I Peter 1: 3 – 2:10 forms the preface to Peter’s direction about how to live in a hostile environment. It affords us with foundations for faithful Christian engagement in culture and society. Focus first on 1: 3 – 12, reading it aloud in your discussion group.
  - How would you describe the “tone” of these paragraphs?
  - What is the dominant theme or thrust of this section?
  - What gifts has the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ given us for faithful living? How do those gifts equip us as those who “suffer grief in all kinds of trials?”
  - Pay close attention to the description of the recipients’ relationship to Jesus in vv. 8–9. What are the characteristics of their relationship to the Lord? What do you find most challenging in this description? What is most encouraging to you? How might you take on board this challenge and this encouragement more deeply?

7. To what does I Peter 1: 13–21 call us?

- What motivation does it offer for heeding this calling and for taking this calling to heart?
- How does Peter instruct us in the fulfilling of this calling?
- In the past many Christians were quite pre-occupied with this call to holy living. But attention to this calling has been muted in more recent times in many places. Why do you reckon this is so? Why is this calling of particular significance for Christian faculty in our corner of the world? How does it bear on such diverse matters as tenure review, research, collegiality, mentoring?

8. I Peter 1: 22 – 2: 10 discusses the importance of Christian community for faithful Christian living.

- What are the root metaphors or images of Christian community that are used by Peter in this passage?
- What theological truths are connected to each of these metaphors?
- What practices or attitudes and actions are mentioned as being associated with each metaphor? Which of these seems most challenging to you? How have you received from the Lord through folk who have been faithful in these practices?
- In the InterVarsity Faculty Ministry we have been committed to forming Christian communities of faculty as a central missional thrust. But this is also among the most difficult aspects of our work. Why do you think this is so? In your experience as a faculty member, what expressions of Christian community have been most critical and helpful to you? How would you encourage Christian colleagues to engage in Christian community in your campus setting? What kind of relationships among Christian faculty should we be seeking to form?
- How might this passage challenge and direct your practice of Christian community in the academic setting?

### III. Tuesday: **I Peter 2: 11 – 3:12 “A strategy for Christian engagement”**

1. Read 2: 11–13 aloud and ponder it carefully. (Your author thinks an excellent case can be made for this being a “thesis” statement for the entire letter.)

- How does Peter address his readers? Why do we need both kinds of address?
- To what actions does he urge us? Why is it a struggle to hold these exhortations together?
- What teaching of Jesus is echoed in v. 12?
- What are the qualities of the “good deeds” to which Peter urges us? Share specific examples of this kind of good deed that you have seen in your part of the academic world? Are Christian women and men notable in doing these kinds of good deeds? Why or why not?
- What is the meaning of “the day when he [God] visits us?”
- Does your community of Christian faculty ponder what kind of “good deeds” you should do in your campus world? If so, what could you share about your community’s conversations to encourage others? If not, why not?

2. I Peter 2:13 – 3: 7 considers various sectors of life in a hostile setting where Peter is particularly concerned for faithful Christian living. Read the entire section aloud in your discussion group.

- What are the particular areas of life Peter addresses?
- What repetitions to do note in his exhortations?
- This passage fairly bristles with expressions that are deeply offensive to

contemporary American sensibilities. What aspects of this passage do you find yourself resisting, even wishing it were not a part of Holy Scripture? Are there any aspects of the passage that you find attractive; challenging; important spiritually and ethically?

3. Most interpreters of I Peter view 2:13a as a title or initial statement of principle for the following section of the letter. Every word of the Greek text (and nearly every word of English translations) is of critical importance. And the translation of one word is quite controversial, namely, the final word of the NIV translation, “Submit yourself for the Lord’s sake to every human *authority*.” The Greek word here is *ktisei*, a rarely used word, literally “creature,” and in no other use of the word in the New Testament does it mean “authority.” Indeed, NT Greek has a fairly rich vocabulary for “authority,” and could have supplied other terms that convey the sense of “authority” more clearly.

- Why would translators have preferred to translate *ktisei* as “authority” in this context?
- What other statements in the context incline you to translate it as “creature?”
- What happens to the meaning of the command under each translation?
- What does the example of the Lord Jesus suggest the correct interpretation might be?
- If you were doing a translation of this passage, knowing what you now know, how would you translate? And what difference might it make?

4. “Submit yourself ...” is a theme that runs through the whole passage.

- Survey the passage and seek to determine what “submit” means. Develop a brief definition.
- “Submit” here is a verb. What is its mood? Why is that significant?
- What does “yourself” add to the command?
- Why do we instinctively shrink from this verb? What is legitimate in our reluctance to embrace this command? What is illegitimate?
- Read I Peter 3:8–12 as a summary of what is entailed in submission, as Peter understands it. What are the character traits he mentions? What does it mean in practice? By what authority does Peter call us to this way of life?

5. Peter speaks to three areas of life in his call to submission: public, political life; slavery and the life of the households of the wealthy; and marriage. Each of these dimensions of life is ordered by the example of Jesus and the command of God. And in all of them are vast differences between our culture and the culture of Biblical times. Think about this matter of cultural distance.

- What translations in context do we normally make to apply these passages to our time and social context?
- Why do some effortlessly apply what is said about the emperor and slaves to our context of democratic politics and employment, but refuse to make comparable translations with respect to the hierarchical view of marriage?
- How might we practice this calling to “submit yourself to every human creature on account of the Lord” as faculty in the context of the contemporary academy?

6. One dimension of our mission and our effort to help Christian faculty flourish and be a redeeming influence in the academic world is to help faculty seek “*balanced excellence* in life, research, teaching, ESN, mentoring, and service, for the Glory of God.” How does this passage speak to this aspiration?

#### IV. Wednesday: I Peter 3:13 – 4: 11 “Suffering for faithful Christian resident aliens, Part 1”

In the world to which Peter speaks suffering was most often a part of following the Lord Jesus. It is worth observing that this suffering at the hands of the authorities of the empire was not systematic and universal. Rather it was sporadic and episodic and unpredictable. So fear of suffering was a common and significant issue. And while there were notable examples of martyrdom, more common by far was insult and exclusion and unjust imprisonment and exile for openly being a Christian. The idea and theme of suffering appears earlier in the letter, but in these paragraphs we have perhaps the most thorough and extended and theologically reasoned discussion of suffering in the NT.

1. What causes and kinds of suffering does Peter refer to in this passage? What indication do you see in this passage that at least some of this kind of suffering awaits all who would follow the Lord Jesus? Can you share instances of suffering with which you are acquainted from the academic context?

2. These verses bristle with difficult sayings. Spend some time noting the difficult or confusing verses in the passage.

- Why do you find each of your noted verses difficult?
- How should we respond as we come to difficult to understand passages in reading the Bible?
- Turn to II Peter 3: 15–16, where Peter reflects on Paul’s “hard to understand” letters. What does this short comment have to offer to our response to unclear passages in Scripture?
- Note that we will come back to the hard passages as we work our way through the text and can address them more fully in context.

3. In 3:13–22 Peter addresses the fears of his readers.

- What antidotes to fear does he prescribe?
- How is Jesus, the Lord Christ, at the center of Peter’s teaching about dealing with fear in these verses?
- Focus attention on vv. 18–22, one of the most difficult passages in the NT. It probably showed up on your lists of trouble passages above.
  - o How is this passage connected with the theme of dealing with fear?
  - o Make a list of all the statements about what Christ has done that are clear and unambiguous, especially in vv. 18–19 and v. 22. These could easily be cast into a prayer of praise to God the Father for the ministry and work of God the Son. As you work on this passage in your personal Bible reading, write your own prayer of praise based on the clear teaching in our passage and share it with your discussion group, as you feel led.
  - o Notice the two uses of the verb, “to go” in v. 19 (NIV “went”) and v. 22 (“has gone”). To what event do these verbs refer? Does that help further clarify when Jesus made his “proclamation to the imprisoned spirits?”
  - o To whom did Jesus make this proclamation and what did he proclaim to them? [*Note: the verb “to proclaim” is not the verb “to proclaim the Gospel,” but a more generic word for making an authoritative announcement. And the words “spirits” is never used to refer to humans beings, but frequently used to refer to “angelic beings.”*]
  - o How does Peter get into this statement about baptism? What does he say about baptism? What makes baptism an effective spiritual practice?
  - o How does all of this teaching exalt the Lord Jesus Christ? How does it provide an antidote to our fears of suffering?

4. What is the “same attitude” found in Christ’s suffering with which we are to arm ourselves in 4:1–6?
- v. 4:1b is another hard to interpret saying. In the light of vv. 2–5 and what we know about the universal presence of sin in human beings, what is the most likely meaning of this saying?
  - v. 6 is another difficult saying. The NIV adds the word “now” to bring clarity, but the word is not in the original text.
    - o What considerations might lead you to view this as a legitimate paraphrase of the text?
    - o In this light how is this saying a part of the “attitude of Christ” that arms us to face suffering?
    - o Some folk have attempted to link v. 6 with 3: 19–20 to argue for a universal access to post-mortem evangelism. What factors in the text make this seem plausible or implausible?
5. Our passage concludes with a paragraph about life in the Christian community, vv. 7–11.
- How is this paragraph connected to the theme of suffering, a theme which continues in 4:12f?
  - What dimensions of community life does Peter mention?
  - Which of these dimensions is a meaningful part of your experience? Can you share a specific story about how your involvement in community has been a blessing to you and to others and has led to the praise of God?
  - Which of these dimensions is a missing (or weak) aspect of your involvement in Christian community? How might you explore involvement in the future?
  - How have you seen these exhortations fulfilled in your experience of Christian community among faculty at your campus? How might they guide your involvement in the future?
  - We have attached a short article by Gilbert Meilaender, “On bringing one’s life to a point,” which first appeared in *First Things*. It describes one particularly significant and poignant experience of suffering on account of being a Christian that occurred Meilaender’s life as a faculty member and the way the Lord used that suffering for good. If you can manage to read it before your discussion group meets to think through this passage or the next, it will enrich your conversation and appreciation of I Peter.

V. Thursday: **I Peter 4:12 – 5:13 “Suffering for faithful Christian resident aliens, Part 2”**

Peter addresses his readers directly and personally in vv. 2:11 and 4: 12, marking major divisions of his letter. But he continues to address the theme of suffering in this concluding section, deepening and extending what he has already said earlier.

1. What two reactions to suffering does Peter contrast in vv. 4:12 – 13? Which is more characteristic of your own responses to suffering?
2. What grounds for “rejoicing” in the face of suffering does Peter put before us? What does suffering accomplish by God’s design, so that we can authentically view ourselves as “blessed” as we suffer? Can you share any situations where you have seen this sort of blessing through suffering to encourage one another to believe what the Lord is saying here?

3. v. 19 stands as a summary of Peter's teaching about suffering. Savor each of its phrases as you consider the ways in which it gathers the teaching and exhortations of 3: 13 – 4: 19. We thought earlier in the week about "Creation." How does this add to your understanding of what it means to call our God, "the Maker of heaven and earth?"

4. Peter again returns to consider the place of the Christian community for resident aliens and faithful sufferers in 5: 1–7.

- What indications do we find in the passage that he has not shifted away from the theme of suffering in this paragraph?
- What virtue or quality of character dominates this discussion of leading and following in the church? What is "humility?" Why is it such a difficult virtue to practice?"
- This paragraph is full of wonderful promises. Note all of them. How should they affect our life in community as faculty members? How might they shape our prayers? Take a few moments now to pray for the Christian faculty community on your campus and for your home churches in the light of these promises.

5. In vv. 8–9 Peter pulls back just a bit the veil that obscures invisible spiritual realities that cause suffering in God's good creation. Earlier (3:22) he had spoken of "angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him [the Lord Jesus]."

- How does he describe this invisible malign power? What harm does he do [or] is done to believers? This account of our "enemy" is tantalizingly brief. Why do you suppose he gives so little space to this cause of suffering?
- How are we called to respond to this threat? How do we "resist him?"
- The call to "be alert and of sober mind" has been sounded earlier in I Peter. See 1: 13 and 4: 7 in their contexts. Think the passages together into a view of what these characteristics look like in Peter's mind. How could you practice alertness and sobriety in your life as a faculty member?

6. We have already looked at least briefly at the conclusion of the letter in 5: 10–13. How does this passage form an *inclusio* with 1:2?

- Why is it important that grace and peace are the first and the last words of this letter?
- How are this grace and peace related to the Lord Jesus Christ in these verses? In the rest of the letter?
- Spend a few moments in prayer together, thanking the Lord for what he has shown you from his word and praying for one another as seems appropriate to your time together this week.
- Then, read aloud in unison v. 10–11 and v. 14b as a concluding benediction for the members of your discussion group.