

FIRST PETER



A Home Away from Home

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by John C. Purdy

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Printed in the United States of America

This book is part of the Men's Bible Study series produced through the Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Curriculum Publishing
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon Street Louisville, KY 40202-1396 1-800-524-2612
Orders: Option 1
Curriculum Helpline: Option 3 FAX: 502-569-8263

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Introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G.14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leaders

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and

moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the topic that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? and (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

First Peter

INTRODUCTION

A Study of First Peter

Any time of day or night you can walk downtown in our city and see homeless persons. You may meet them in the city library, where they come to use the public restroom. You may see them sunning themselves on the benches in the central plaza. They may accost you and ask for money. The man who stands in the middle of the street across from our church, selling the Albuquerque Journal, tells me he cannot afford to live under a roof!

Nothing seems to us more pathetic than a person with no home. There is a lost, forsaken look in the eyes of the homeless that makes us want to turn away. We can imagine homelessness only as a dull ache, a throbbing pain in the soul.

Not at Home in the World

It is quite possible that the First Letter of Peter was written to Christians suffering from homelessness. They were not at home in the world. The church was for them "a home away from home."

A great deal of scholarship has been expended on the identity of the author of the letter. Was it or was it not the Peter we read about in the Gospels? Was it or was it not the fisherman whom Jesus called away from his boats and nets—and who denied his Master while the rooster crowed three times? It seems likely from the internal evidence in the letter that the author was not that Peter. For example, the letter quite clearly was written to a mostly Gentile-Christian audience, whereas the Peter of the Acts of the Apostles had a ministry to Jewish-Christians. Also, the settled state of the congregations in Pontus, Galatia, and the other provinces of Asia Minor suggests that the letter was written during the last quarter of the first century, when Peter was presumably gone from the scene.

For the purposes of this study, it seems more important to get a fix on the audience of the letter rather than on the author, because we want to put ourselves—if we can—in the place of its first readers. That's how Peter—be he the Apostle or someone writing in his name—can best speak to us.

From what we can deduce from the text of the letter, it was written to folk who did not feel at home in this world. Call them "homeless," if it will help. There could be several reasons for their apparent homelessness:

1. One scholar, John Elliott, makes a plausible case that many of the readers of this letter were literally "resident aliens" in their towns and cities. The Roman Empire—and the Hellenistic culture on which it was based—was highly stratified. It was very difficult to climb up the social ladder, even as much as one rung. The apostle Paul could well boast that he was a Roman citizen; citizens had rights and privileges not accorded to everyone. There were slaves and there were freedmen and freedwomen (former slaves); there were also "resident aliens"—people who were not necessarily immigrants from other countries, but who still were not accorded full citizenship and full social acceptance. Elliott thinks that many of the Christians to whom First Peter was written may well have been drawn from such marginalized folks. The references to the readers as "exiles of the Dispersion" (ch. 1:1) and "aliens and exiles" (ch. 2:11) could indicate their social status.

This, says Elliott, might well account for the many references in the letter to suffering, public ridicule, and persecution.¹

If there is a contemporary analogy to this "resident alien" status, it is probably the status of Black people in the United States before the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. Here were people born in this country, who worked and paid taxes and obeyed its laws—yet who were not considered by the majority of citizens to be fully equal and acceptable.

2. There is considerable evidence in the letter that the congregations in Asia Minor were undergoing some kind of persecution. It seems unlikely that it was the organized persecution of Christians that took place later in the Roman Empire, but evidently Christians were not popular among their Gentile neighbors. Elliott argues that the term "Christian" for the readers of the letter was not unlike epithets of "nigger" and "darker" directed against Black persons. "Christ-lackeys" is the way Elliott refers to the epithets directed against the followers of Jesus. That's a bit like "holy roller" as a term of derision.

Being treated as a suspected sect could, of course, make people feel unwelcome in their neighborhoods and thus unwelcome in the world.

¹See John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 37.

3. One could argue that Christians did not have to be drawn from marginalized people to feel a certain "homelessness." Ever since Abraham was called to go from his home and homeland to a place that God would show him, God's people have known that they have no abiding place on earth. In the words of the Book of Hebrews, "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (ch. 11:16a). And First Peter is not lacking in references to that kind of homelessness.

For some, if not all, of these reasons, it seems fruitful to describe the readers of First Peter as experiencing powerful feelings of homelessness. That is why this study of the letter is called "A Home Away from Home." It was written to the homesick.

Homesickness

Homesickness—whether for a future country that God will provide, or for fuller acceptance in one's present society, or for a world where one can feel truly at home—is something we can all understand. We have all had experiences of what it means to be a "resident alien": leaving home for the armed services; going away to college; moving to a new city; perhaps living for a time in a foreign country; coming to the United States as immigrants; being rejected and despised and discriminated against for our views, our color, our accent, or our origins.

Words of Encouragement

To the pain and anxiety generated by such experiences is First Peter addressed. It delivers words of encouragement to those who are tempted to compromise their faith and practice in order to be accepted. It seeks to answer the question, "Why should the grace of God mean disgrace in the world?" It was written to assure believers in Christ, "You have a home away from home. You are members of the household of God."

What would you want to tell people who suffered from homesickness, who were not wanted in their neighborhoods, who cringed at the names they were called? The author of First Peter has a whole bag full of encouragements: Rejoice in your salvation! Be holy as God is holy! Live honorably! Imitate Christ's sufferings!

At the time of this writing, I am making a collection of zingy "one-liners" for a contest the Presbyterian Writers Guild is having. My current list includes:

PAIN IS INEVITABLE; SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL.

IF IT'S FREE, IT FITS.

A CHURCH WITHOUT A HELL ISN'T WORTH A DAMN.

SENTIMENT WITHOUT ACTION IS THE RUINATION OF THE SOUL.

One-liners are a mixture of truth and fancy—like medicine with a sweet taste; a cherry with a pit; a bullet

that ricochets off someone else and hits you. The encouragements that First Peter directs to its readers might be boiled down into the following one-liners:

Chapter 1:1–12: IT'S BETTER TO BE SAVED THAN TO SAVE.

Chapter 1:13–2:10: GOD IS HOLY; BE WHOLLY GOD'S.

Chapter 2:11–3:12: HIS HONOR WANTS YOUR HONOR.

Chapter 3:13–4:6: YOU CAN'T CHEAT AN HONEST MAN.

Chapter 4:7–11: A GOOD STEWARD IS HARD TO FIND.

Chapter 4:12–19: PLEASE, CHRISTIANS—DON'T COP PLEAS.

Chapter 5:1–14: GRASS ROOTS MAKE GOOD PASTURE.

Other Things To Look For

- First Peter is one of several so-called "General Epistles." Like James and Hebrews, it was written not to a specific congregation but to several. So it may more accurately reflect the situation of Christians in the latter part of the first century than, say, Philippians or Galatians.

- First Peter is the only biblical book that speaks of the three days during which Jesus was in the state of the dead, when—according to the Creed—"he descended into hell." The notion that during that time Jesus went to preach to those who died before his advent is based on ch. 3:19–20.

- If it were known for nothing else, First Peter would be remarkable for the string of metaphors for the church in ch. 2:1–10:

- a spiritual house
- a holy priesthood
- a holy nation
- a royal priesthood
- a chosen race.

- As already noted, the letter addresses itself to a question similar to that raised by Job in the Hebrew Bible: "Why should the grace of God mean disgrace in the world?"

The Bottom Line

What is most important about First Peter, however, is what it says about the church. The church in our own time is looking in the mirror and not altogether liking what it sees. It wrestles with its relationship to the larger society: Should we be more like a religious sect and less like a volunteer civic organization? Should we try to be more spiritual and less worldly? The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), like other "mainline" denominations, feels itself less and less at home in the world. It could be argued that the culture of the United States owes

as much or more to the Calvinistic—Reformed—
Presbyterian tradition than to any other. But that tradition
seems to be thinning out, disappearing, fading into the
woodwork. Should we work to reinforce that tradition, at
least among ourselves, so that the church is more and
more our "home away from home"? Those are some of the
concerns that may surface as your groups discuss First
Peter.

To the leader(s): If this is the first time the men have been together as a group, take a few minutes to allow each man to give his name and to make a one-sentence statement about his expectations for this series.

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The First Letter of Peter is a pastoral exhortation from an elder in Rome. . . . It was written to those having oversight of churches in Asia Minor. . . .

The sociological setting of the communities assumes that their members are Gentiles, resident aliens and household slaves in rural Asia Minor. Outsiders recognize the Christian "name" as offensive . . . and Christians must expect to endure persecution as well as milder forms of social ostracism and "name-calling" as a result of that identification. Christianity is not struggling to define itself in relationship to Jewish traditions. The letter assumes that the church is the true heir of the covenant. . . . Christians must show by their lives that they reject the religious and moral ethos of a pagan culture to which they no longer belong.'

There are some obvious points of contact between ourselves and this early Christian text:

Every Sunday we go to church and listen to "a pastoral exhortation" from one sometimes called "A Teaching Elder." We are gentile Christians; we never were Jews, although we believe we are the true descendants of Abraham through faith. And we believe that being a Christian means some kind of separation from the culture that surrounds us. We do not think it is right simply to conform to what the neighbors expect of us—or even what our local, state, and national governments expect of us! Some of us even know what it is to be treated with contempt, humor, or disdain because we speak the name of Jesus Christ with respect and reverence.

And yet we have to admit that there is a "credibility gap" between us and the words of First Peter—a gap created by time, geography, language, experience. We want to hear; we want to understand; we want to believe; we may even want to obey. But that is going to take some effort and some mutual help.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, The First Letter of Peter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 337 (NT).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

To the leader(s): Most of your time together will be spent raising and answering questions. Sometimes you will provide answers; more often you will redirect questions to other members of the group to see how they answer.

Discussion questions fall into three categories, and it is very helpful for leaders to be familiar with these: There are questions about the mind of the writer—"What does this text say to us?" There are questions about the intention of the writer—"What do these words mean to us?" There are questions about the ethics of the writer—"What do these words matter to us?"

Ask the men to read 1 Peter 1:1-13.

Then list on newsprint or chalkboard any initial questions that arise from this reading. To the list of questions suggested by the group, add any of the following that were not brought forward:

—To whom was the letter written? Why? When?

—How can we unpack the "God-talk" so that we can understand what the letter is about?

—What do these verses tell us about the major theme of the letter? Is it going to be mostly about suffering? hope? regeneration (being born again)? rejoicing? values?

Invite members of the group to select any or all of these questions for general discussion. Let the conversation flow.

Present, Past, & Future

Suggest that participants read ch. 1:1–13 and write answers to these questions:

What had happened before this letter was written?

What was presently happening to the readers of the letter?

To what future events does the author refer?

Invite members of the group to share their findings with the total group.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Two questions of considerable importance are raised in ch. 1:1–13: What does it mean to be 'born again' (v. 3)? Does God allow us to suffer in order to test our faith (v. 7)? Invite members to share ideas, experiences, and stories that relate to those two questions. To prime the pump, the leader may want to ask:

—Have you met persons who say that they are "born-again Christians"? What do you understand that to mean?

—Have you met persons who regard illnesses, auto accidents, loss of job, or other misfortunes as "tests" of character or faith? How do you respond to such attitudes? Do you share them?

Author, Audience, Purpose

The introduction to this session identifies the author, audience, and purpose of First Peter in general terms. There are scholars who have quite specific views on authorship, audience, and purpose. If the group is inclined to be interested in such matters, share with them some of these various opinions. In each case be sure to ask, How might it affect our understanding and appreciation of the letter if this opinion were in fact the truth?

—Until recently, the prevailing view was that the letter was written by Peter, one of the original twelve disciples.

—The letter is addressed to recent converts from paganism.

—The letter was written early in the second century, during the reign of Roman Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98–117), the occasion being an Empire-wide persecution of Christians.

—The congregations to whom the letter was written were literally "resident aliens"—people native to Asia Minor but lacking full citizenship and high social status. In other words, a despised minority group.

As resident aliens and transient strangers they [the addressees of First Peter] shared the same vulnerable condition of the many thousands of Jewish and other ethnic paroikoi of Asia Minor and throughout the Roman empire. Legally their status within the empire ... involved restrictions concerning intermarriage and commerce . . . , succession of property and land tenure, participation in public assembly and voting, taxes and tribute, the founding of associations . . . and susceptibility to severer forms of civil and criminal punishment.²

—The Christians to whom this letter was addressed were not rural people, but city folks.

[W]ithin a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement.... The movement had crossed the most fundamental division in the society of the Roman Empire, that between rural people and city dwellers, and the results were to prove momentous.³

²Elliott, p. 37.

³Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 11.

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): Keep an eye on the clock and allow at least five minutes for bringing the session to a satisfactory close. There are several things you may want to do in these final few minutes:

1. If the discussion has generated more heat than light, you may want to write on newsprint or the chalkboard several of the questions or issues that never got resolved. Promise to take these matters up in subsequent sessions.
2. If the discussion has lagged, ask participants to suggest how the next session could be more lively, more interesting to them.
3. Point to the section called Afterword. Tell participants that it presents items for them to think about between now and the next session.
4. Close the session with prayer. This may be a spontaneous prayer of your own, a written prayer that you have brought with you, or the Lord's Prayer, repeated together by the group.

Afterword

"When people ask me if I've been born again as a Christian," declares Theodore Anton Filipi, "my answer is always, 'Of course not! I've always been!'"⁴

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.⁵

The sentence of death which I bear in my own soul as I stand before the Cross is at the same time God's creative word by which new life is born, a new life which is not of the will of the flesh but of God. He loved me and gave Himself up for me. This worthless traitor soul was counted of more value than His own, and so He put Himself in my place and me in His; crossed the unbridgeable chasm and stood on my side and in my place as a sinner, that I might stand in His place as a child of God. I live because He gave His life for me; how, then, can I not live?⁶

Toward the end of his book, Jonathan Kozol describes attending worship in a church of African Americans and Hispanics, and hearing a sermon in which the preacher tells mothers whose children face terrors every moment of every day and night: "Your children may be drowning in despair today but they will rise in glory!" How "rise in glory"? Because the God of the Bible is faithful and keeps promises to such outcasts as the "unwed mother" Hagar.⁷

Sometimes I go about pitying myself,
and all the time
I am being carried on great winds
across the sky.⁸

"My grandmother was a Bible woman, a first-generation Christian who became a very serious worker in the church. Mission work flourished in Korea during a time of great uncertainty—politically, economically and in terms of relationships with its neighbors. That shifting and changing situation was chaotic, but within those chaotic situations the people were looking for the new wine and that's how Christianity began to put its roots in. From the early stages, one's own personal salvation through God's grace in spiritual terms, and what it means to maintain one's own identity as a Korean people—socially, politically, nationally—were not separable. It was like the people of Israel in the land of Egypt struggling for freedom and identity. So, the spiritual nature and the social nature of the gospel were always together. There was a time when the persecutions under Japanese occupation became so severe that the only thing one could hope for was life after death. The strong belief in life after death was not escapism; it was the assurance that even though they may kill my body, they cannot kill my soul. It wasn't escaping from the world but was conquering the world through strong belief in God and the hope of eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ."⁹

People who see their lives as irremediably spoiled cannot find a worthwhile purpose in self-advancement. The prospect of an individual career cannot stir them to a mighty effort, nor can it evoke in them faith and a single-minded dedication. They look on self-interest as on something tainted and evil; something unclean and

⁴ Vic Jameson, *Dear Hearts: Conversations with Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1994), p. 12.

⁵ "How Firm a Foundation," from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), No. 361. Used by permission.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 130.

⁷ From a review of *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 4, 1996, p. 16.

⁸ Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade, eds., *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, "Sometimes I Go About Pitying Myself (Chippewa Music)," (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 496.

⁹ From an interview with The Rev. Syngman Rhee, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 4, 1996, p. 7.

unlucky. Anything undertaken under the auspices of the self seems to them doomed. Nothing that has its roots and reasons in the self can be good and noble. Their innermost craving is for a new life—a rebirth—or, failing this, a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause.¹⁰

Without sorrows no one becomes a saint.
—Ancient Chinese proverb

Though good and bad men suffer alike, we must not suppose that there is no difference between the men themselves, because there is no difference in what they both suffer. For even in the likeness of the sufferings, there remains an unlikeness in the sufferers; and though exposed to the same anguish, virtue and vice are not the same thing. For as the same fire causes gold to flow brightly, and chaff to smoke; and under the same flail the straw is beaten small, while the grain is cleansed; and as the lees are not mixed with the oil, though squeezed out of the vat by the same pressure, so the same violence of affliction proves, purges, clarifies the good, but damns, ruins, exterminates the wicked. And thus it is that in the same affliction the wicked detest God and blaspheme, while the good pray and praise. So material a difference does it make, not what ills are suffered, but what kind of man suffers them.¹¹

"I have come to the realization that I will almost certainly die of AIDS. I have wavered on that point. When the disease was first diagnosed in early 1991, I was sure I would die—and soon. I was facing brain surgery; the surgeons discovered an infection often fatal in four months. I would shortly develop pneumonia, then blood clots. I was hospitalized four times over five months. But by the end of that year, I thought differently. My health rebounded, almost certainly because of AZT. I was doing so well; I really might beat it.

"Now, it is clear I will not. You can beat the statistics only so long. My T—cell count, which was only 2 when I got my diagnosis, has never gone above 30—a dangerously low level. I have lived longer than the median survival time by 10 months. The treatments simply are not there. They are not even in the pipeline. A miracle is possible, of course. And for a long time, I thought one would happen. But let's face it, a miracle isn't going to happen. One day soon I will simply become one of the 90 people in America to die that day of AIDS. It's like knowing I will be killed by a speeding car, but not knowing when or where."¹²

¹⁰ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 21.

¹² Jeffrey Schmalz, "Whatever Happened to AIDS?", in *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 28, 1993.

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God*, as cited in *The Christian Reader*, Stanley Irving Stuber, ed. (New York: Association Press, 1952), p. 76.

two

An Appeal for **NONCONFORMITY** 1 Peter 1:13—2:10

To the leader(s): There is a great deal of emphasis in this guide on raising and answering questions. You will be tempted to measure your own success by how well you field questions—as you should. Keep in mind, however, that the best answers are to be sought and found in the biblical text. You will never go wrong by responding to any question with this counter-question: "What do you think the Bible says about this?"

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

This session is about churchmanship: What is required of those who join the church; what is required of those who already belong; and what images is the church to have of itself?

For the harassed Christian movement in Asia Minor to survive and grow, isolated pockets of believers throughout the provinces required a sense of the ties which bound them in a common cause. If Christians were to resist external pressures and by mutually supportive, a high degree of group consciousness was essential. One means employed by First Peter for the "raising of group consciousness," to borrow a contemporary expression, was the stress upon the community into which the believers had been gathered. The prominence of the collective terms and images used to depict the addressees is one of the most distinguishing features of First Peter. The readers are characterized collectively as a "Spirit-filled house(hold)" . . . or "the house(hold) of God" . . . an "elect race" . . . a "royal residence" . . . a "holy body of priests" . . . "a holy nation" . . . a "people for (God's own) possession" . . . a "brotherhood" . . . and "the flock of God." . . . These collective terms state explicitly what other metaphors for the act of salvation and its community-creating effect imply: God's activity of building . . . sanctifying . . . electing . . . fathering . . . or (pro)creating . . . and gathering. . .¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the men to read individually 1 Peter 1:13—2:10. Some scholars think that most of First Peter was originally a sermon, preached to new converts at the time of their baptism. Ask members to identify five phrases in ch. 1:13—2:10 that might be most appropriate for use in a baptismal service for an adult, such as, "Love one another deeply from the heart."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Share results with the group. Ask for volunteers to explain why these particular phrases are especially appropriate for your congregation.

Successful New Member Training

Call attention to the assertion in the Afterword by Jeff Woods that "Congregations with successful new member training programs have begun to treat newcomers like immigrants...."

What do the men know about the new member training in your congregation?

¹ Elliott, p. 133.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Draw on newsprint or chalkboard the following diagram:

1 Peter 1:13-16 Holiness
1 Peter 1:17-21 Trust/Faith
1 Peter 1:22—2:2 Love

With help from the biblical text, seek to discover how holiness, faith, and love are related to being "born anew" (ch. 1:23). The following questions may help:

—Why should Christians want to be "holy"? Doesn't that kind of attitude cut us off from fellow human beings?

—What has God done to prove himself trustworthy? How do we know God can be trusted?

—What has the truth—knowledge of God—got to do with love? Don't we usually think that love proves itself in action, not in ideas or theories?

Who are the Newborn Infants?

Discuss these figures of speech: "like obedient children" . . . "born anew" . . . "like newborn infants" . . . "long for the pure, spiritual milk."

Are these most likely references to new converts to the faith? Or are they more likely references to the new life we all experience in Jesus Christ?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

First Peter is best known for the metaphors used in ch. 2:4—10 to identify the body of Christians:

a spiritual house
a holy priesthood
a chosen race
a royal priesthood
a holy nation
God's own people

Discuss the impact of this piling up of figures of speech. What do all these figures add up to? Do some seem to contradict others? Are some outdated? Why? Which seem most accurate in describing the church as members know it?

Compare and Contrast Images of the Church

Invite participants, working individually, to compile lists of various ways in which the church is pictured to them and for them today. For instance, the church is often represented to us as an organization—with mission objectives, programs, roles and responsibilities, etc. What other ways are we led to think of the church?

Make a composite list on newsprint or chalkboard of the various pictures or images of the church suggested by members. Then compare and contrast that list with the list of images from First Peter. What do you discover when you attempt this exercise? Are you willing to settle for one list over the other? Why or why not?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Before the end of the session, spend a few minutes discussing the question: Can you be a Christian all by yourself? We tend to think of the church as a forest, made up of many separate trees. But is the notion of the separate, freestanding Christian not misleading? Can members find any justification for that notion in First Peter? Is the "you" to whom the letter is addressed always to be understood in the plural?

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): One of the responsibilities of leaders is to see that everyone gets a chance to participate. Some discussion leaders never let a session end without a "round robin" going around the circle and naming each man and asking him if he has anything to add to what has already been said.

Before the closing prayer, take a quick look at the Afterword section of the prior session. See if it has been helpful for the men to have something to think about after the discussion has ended.

Afterword

Due to the potential diversity among people joining a local church, congregations need to presume no previous Christian knowledge on the part of the new member. Many parishioners still expect new members to possess a working knowledge of their denomination, their church history, their distinctives, and their doctrine. The fact is, more and more people are joining congregations with little or no previous denominational or scriptural knowledge. Congregations with successful new member training programs have begun to treat newcomers like immigrants rather than members of their particular denominational "tribe" who have just reached the required age for initiation.²

The discarded and rejected are often the raw material of a nation's future. The stone the builders reject becomes the cornerstone of a new world. A nation without dregs and malcontents is orderly, decent, peaceful and pleasant, but perhaps without the seed of things to come. It was not the irony of history that the undesired in the countries of Europe should have crossed an ocean to build a new world on this continent. Only they could do it.³

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear, I
cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.⁴

¹ C. Jeff Woods, *Inside Information* (Alban Institute, 1995), p. 4.

² Hoffer, p. 30.

³ George Herbert, "Love," in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, John Tobin, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 178.

Christianity is more than a matter of a new understanding. Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ. Right living is more the challenge than right thinking. The challenge is not the intellectual one but the political one—the creation of a new people who have aligned themselves with the seismic shift that has occurred in the world since Christ.⁵

Nor are we only kings and the freest of all men, but also priests for ever, a dignity higher than kingship, because by that priesthood we are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another mutually the things which are of God.⁶

Leaving Seventh Platoon in order to return to the intelligence officer's job was a considerable wrench. The two months I had spent with the platoon seemed like a lifetime. Although I knew very little of the past lives and inner beings of those thirty men, I had been more firmly bound to them than many a man is to his own blood brothers, and yet, sadly, it was not a lasting tie. I would not have believed it possible, but I was to discover that after a brief separation they would become almost as irrelevant to my continuing existence as if I had known them only in some distant moment of illusion.

This was a disturbing discovery, and for a time I thought it must indicate a singular lack of emotional depth in me. I was deluded by the conventional wisdom which maintains that it is personal linkages that give a group its unity. I was slow to comprehend the truth; that comrades-in-arms unconsciously create from their particulate selves an imponderable entity which goes its own way and has its own existence, regardless of the comings and goings of the individuals who are its constituent parts. Individuals are of no more import to it than they were in the days of our beginnings when the band, the tribe, was the vehicle of human survival. Once out of it, it ceases to exist for you—and you for it.⁷

Honest Judge
Lean Clerks . . .
Powerful God
Fat Priests⁸

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 24.

⁶ Martin Luther, in *The Christian Reader*, p. 216.

⁷ Farley Mowat, *And No Birds Sang* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), pp. 123-24.

⁸ *Chinese Proverbs from Olden Times* (Mt. Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1956),

... [L]ocal church Christianity isn't working, according to its own treasured understanding of itself. Local church Christianity has not read this dirty suspicion in the newspapers; it arises within local church Christianity as a suspicion about itself. The facts are also that local church Christianity is dangerously near idolatry when it says God has chosen it exclusively to get the divine job done in the world. According to its own scriptures the Christian church has plenty of reason to be worried about idolatry. The God of scriptures did, of course, ordain the church to be his missionary agent in the world. No doubt about that. But the same God of those same scriptures still has some decency about him and might reject the church if it were to faithlessly pursue its own ends instead of his. In that the possibility of idolatry arises. It never occurs to local church Christianity that God might reject it for unfaithfulness. What does occur to it is that if there is any unfaithfulness to be noted, it would more likely be God's than the church's.⁹

It used to be straightforward. Immigrants arrived. They were poor. They worked hard. They became assimilated, both culturally and economically. The adoption of American ways went along with upward economic mobility. But today, for many immigrant families and their children . . . the reverse is true. The families that succeed economically are those that manage to draw on what America has to offer without abandoning their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. Families that adopt American manners too readily seem to lose the motivation they arrived with and slide gradually into poverty. . . . The longer children have lived in America, the less homework they do, the worse their performance in school and the lower their academic aspirations.¹⁰

⁹ John Fry, *The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 109.

¹⁰ *The Economist* (Feb. 17, 1996), as quoted in *Christian Century* (April 10, 1996), p. 389.

three

Living HONORABLY 1 Peter 2:11—3:12

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Like any immigrant group, the Christians wanted to be seen as leading a "quiet life," causing no trouble and needing nothing, in short, "behaving decently toward the outsiders" (1 Thess. 4:11—12) . . . That means, of course, that the moral norms of the Christians cannot be so very different from those of the outsiders.

That is not surprising. The urban household, after all, was the microcosm of the city in the ideals of pagan morality . . . And that same urban household has been called "the basic cell" of the early Christian movement . . . The formulas of [Christian] baptismal ritual proclaimed that they had taken off their "old human" and put on "the new," that the old connections had been replaced by a new family of the children of God, brothers and sisters, a family in which there was no longer "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" (Gal. 3:28). But life in the house continued. Christian brothers and sisters still had siblings of blood who might or might not also be Christians. Christian slaves had masters and Christian wives had husbands, and a householder incurred obligations to his or her patrons and clients and equals in the social network of the city . . . Soon Paul's disciples and other leaders as well would be repeating the old rules of Greek household management, "Slaves, be submissive in all fear to your masters . . . ; Likewise wives, be submissive to your own husbands . . .," and so on (1 Peter 2:18—3:7).¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

To the leader(s): Learning procedures quickly become routine—and boring. Try a new way of reading the Scripture lesson: Ask one member to read 1 Peter 2:11—3:12 aloud while the rest imagine how the original letter might have sounded to persons in subordinate positions: women, slaves, servants.

After the group has read the Scripture lesson, ask the men to go through 1 Peter 2:11—3:12 and write down the various reasons given for honorable and obedient conduct. Look for phrases beginning with:

"For _____"

"So that _____"

"Since _____"

Share individual discoveries with the total group. Then discuss this question: Which is of greater significance: the conduct demanded or the reasons for the conduct?

See how many men can remember taking the following pledges:

"On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country, and obey the scout law."

Then the minister, calling the many by his Christian name, shall say:

" . . . wilt thou have this woman to be thy wife, and wilt thou pledge thy troth to her, in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her, and to cherish her, according to the ordinances of God, in the holy bond of marriage?" The man shall answer: I will.

Note in these pledges the linkage between honor and duty. What do men understand by "honor" and "duty"? Do they regard them as Christian values? Why? Why not?

¹Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 49-50.

Remembering the '60s

It may be useful to recall the social upheavals of the 1960s. Some Christians felt honor-bound to register for the draft and serve in the armed forces; other Christians felt honor-bound to resist the draft and to engage in other forms of social protest.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How do members of the group reconcile First Peter 2:11—3:12 with the notion that Christians are supposed to challenge the status quo—not conserve it? What are we dealing with in this text—absolute moral values or rather a strategy of survival in a hostile world?

Honoring the Emperor

Men who are of Korean ancestry may know about the 'Shrine Controversy' of the 1920s and 1930s. School children in Korea were required by the Japanese government to go to shrines and venerate the memory of distinguished ancestors. What were the leaders of Christian schools to do? In the Afterword is a description of several different courses of action. What do honor and duty mean in such a context?

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): Have in mind several different ways of winding up the session.

1. If there has been serious and deep disagreement, it might be good to close with a prayer for understanding, tolerance, and humility.
2. If there has been obvious reluctance to open up difficult issues, pray for courage to risk disagreement.
3. If the discussion has wandered all over the map, you may want to pray for the guidance and direction of the Spirit!
4. The following prayer, attributed to Reinhold Neibuhr, may seem appropriate:
"O Lord, give us the courage to change the things that can be changed, the patience to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen."

Afterword

The scene and the encounter were arresting.

Face to face stood Mohandas K. Gandhi and a group of American Negro pilgrims. Gandhi regarded his Negro visitors with interest. He had a deep and emphatic interest in the American Negro. Many years before this meeting, in 1929, he had sent a message of greeting to the Negroes of America:

Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is no dishonour in being slaves. There is dishonour in being slave-owners. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past. Let us realize that the future is with those who would be truthful, pure and loving. For, as the old wise men have said, truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble.

Since the publication of this message in the July, 1929, *Crisis*, scores of Negro Americans had made pilgrimages to Gandhi's home. Now, in 1935, he was being honored by the presence of another admiring group. For several minutes, Gandhi and his guests discussed Christianity, oppression, and love. Then, unexpectedly, Gandhi asked the American Negroes to sing one of his favorite songs, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" The old sad words rose and swelled like a benediction, like a curse, like a prayer, the more terrible, the more poignant perhaps for the strange setting . . .

When, at last, the words were done, Gandhi sat for a moment, silent. Then he said: "Perhaps it will be through the Negro that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."²

For God to heal, however, men must take charge. In *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, popular Promise Keepers speaker Tony Evans offers a strategy for accomplishing this: "The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: 'Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading the family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.' Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back. I'm urging you to take it back. If you simply ask for it back, your wife is likely to simply [refuse]."³

[T]he Presbyterian missions from the United States and Australia [in Korea] refused to acquiesce in the demands of the Japanese Government regarding compulsory obeisance at Shinto shrines and consequently withdrew from all educational work . . .

² Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), pp. 1-2.

³ John D. Spalding, "Bonding in the Bleachers: A Visit to the Promise Keepers," in *Christian Century* (March 6, 1996), p. 262.

The Methodists, on the other hand, accepted the official interpretation of the Government that obeisance at the shrines was not worship but a gesture of patriotism, and their educational work was maintained with little difficulty over the question . . . The minor Protestant missions were conducting little in the way of educational activities and therefore were not required to make a definite decision on the question with its tremendous implications . . . The Anglican Church in Korea made no official pronouncement... .

There remains only to mention the attitude of the Roman Catholic Mission. They naturally enough followed the lead of the Roman Missions in Japan and never even considered not conforming... .

The tension which had been created within the framework of the Presbyterian U.S.A. Mission over the Shrine question was by no means ended by the withdrawal of the mission or even by the complete cessation of Mission labor which was brought about as a result of the events at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.⁴

Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind (1 Peter 3:8).

St. Peter's tender heart and humble mind had little or no influence over the development of faith among 18th century Presbyterian Americans. For example, there was nothing meek or submissive about Francis Alison and Gilbert Tennent, major figures in the struggle to build a strong Presbyterian presence in the colonies.

The struggle was not against hostile cultures such as Presbyterians had faced in the Old World. Here the problem was indifference. Colonists were too busy wrestling a livelihood out of the New World's virgin land . . . A new Presbyterian Church hardly seemed to have any priority.

No. The fight was an internal one over who would set the course and direction of the infant Presbyterian Church in the American colonies. Would it be minister-educator Francis Alison? . . . Or would it be Gilbert Tennent, the pre-eminent Presbyterian evangelist?

Over a 17-year period the tension between these two leaders broke into open verbal warfare that at times was bitterly scathing and caustic . . .

Fortunately, the Presbyterian system brought them together . . . Governing bodies planned to have Alison and Tennent present at their meetings. Despite their reluctance, these two men by necessity heard each other, and eventually learned from one another.

Francis Allison, who had a tough mind about the need for sound learning, and the need for more grammar schools and college, finally understood that more attention to his faith would help him avoid the self-righteousness that often goes with learning.

Then Gilbert Tennent, remarkably becoming an enlightened evangelist late in his career, surprised his foe by helping to found the College of New Jersey (which later became Princeton University) in 1756.⁵

⁴ Sung C. Chun, *Schism and Unity in the Protestant Churches of Korea* (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1979), pp. 226-28.

⁵ Richard Firth Sr., "Hearts Hard or Tender, Minds Tough or Humble," in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (Feb. 12, 1996), p. 10.

four

Sharing Christ's SUFFERINGS

1 Peter 3:13—4:6

To the leader(s): This fourth session marks the midpoint in your study. In such a series, the middle session is usually the most difficult: the initial enthusiasm has worn off; familiarity has begun to breed contempt; unanswered questions and unresolved conflicts have begun to pile up like dirty clothes. This is a good time for the men to spend a few minutes reviewing the unspoken contract with which the study began. What were the expectations with which they began the study? Have these been met? If not, what might be done to keep the group on track?

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The danger from without involved the problem of the relation of Christians to non-Christians, of Christianity to Roman society and to the Roman Empire. The church as a self-conscious movement tried to find a place within the world. It was threatened not only by forces from within but also by forces from without, which would finally attempt to crush it. The clash was created by the problem of allegiance to a national structure, and by the misunderstandings that were involved in it. In this period, however, no official persecutions occurred. The word "official" should be stressed. We must avoid quick generalizations about the persecutions. The first official persecutions did not take place until the middle of the third century, in the time of the Emperors Decius (249–51) and Diocletian (284–305).

To be sure, persecutions did occur before this, but they were local in character and were not organized on an Empire-wide basis. They arose because of public pressure and hatred against the movement, and because of the lack of legal status for the church. So long as the Christians were regarded as a "sect," *a halakah*, or "way," within Judaism, they shared the privileges granted to Judaism by the Roman Empire. But after Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome in connection with the fire, and especially after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, it became increasingly clear that Christianity was a new religion, endangering the security of the state by refusing to pay divine honors to the emperor. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing about A.D. 110, spoke of the Christians as "the hated of the human race."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Before asking the men to read 1 Peter 3:13—4:6, draw on newsprint or chalkboard the outline of a human head.



After members have read the text, suggest that they build a profile of the enemy of what is "good" and "right." The text itself provides certain clues, just as a police artist is given clues by witnesses at a crime. Who might be those "who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good"? Who might make the readers of the letter "suffer for what is right"?

After members have created an imaginary profile of the typical enemy of the readers of the letter, ask the following: Do you know people like this? Where and how have you met them? Encourage personal accounts, anecdotes, experiences.

Then discuss the treatment of Jesus at the hands of his enemies. How are we reminded by the author of First Peter about:

- How Jesus suffered?
- Why Jesus suffered?
- To what end or purpose was his suffering?

¹ Christiaan Beker, *The Church Faces the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 18-19.

The Harrowing of Hell

Some members of the group may be fascinated by the implications of chs. 3:19—20 and 4:6 that Christ went to the realm of the dead and preached the gospel to the spirits living there. This is the source of the notion of The Harrowing of Hell, which was a very popular doctrine during the Middle Ages. (See the comments in the Afterword.) There is no mention of this teaching in the various confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The central question for reflection and discussion in this session is surely the following: How are the sufferings of Christ related to the sufferings of Christian believers? In opening up that question for discussion, ask the men to take a few minutes to consider the following statements and to circle A for Agree or D for Disagree.

Jesus was crucified because he threatened the stability of the social and political order. A D

Jesus was crucified because God needed a perfect sacrifice for the sins of humankind. AD

Jesus was crucified because he defied and disregarded the Law of God. AD

Jesus was crucified because he was "set up" by his enemies. AD

Jesus was crucified because an evil world cannot tolerate a truly good man. AD

Jesus' crucifixion serves as a warning to what happens to people who refuse to protect themselves against their enemies. AD

Jesus was crucified because he would not let his followers fight to defend him. AD

Jesus was crucified so as to evoke our pity, love, and admiration.

AD

After members have shared their opinions, ask:

- Where do we have the most agreement?
- Where do we have the most disagreement?
- How does the text of 1 Peter 3:13—4:6 speak to our areas of disagreement?

What About Baptism?

Members may be interested in discussing what the author of First Peter suggests about their baptism. (See 3:21—23.)

1. What does the story of Noah have to do with baptism?
2. Since most of us were baptized as infants, what can baptism have to do with a good conscience?
3. Why, in speaking of baptism, does the author refer to the resurrection of Jesus Christ rather than to his death?

Concluding the Session

If the discussion in this session has been particularly intense and personal, it may be most useful for the members simply to read together, aloud, the "Request for Two Graces" by Francis of Assisi, which is printed in the Afterword.

Afterword

Request for Two Graces

O my Lord Jesus Christ, two graces do I pray Thee to grant unto me ere I die: the first, that while I live I may feel in my body and in my soul, so far as is possible, that sorrow, sweet Lord, that Thou didst suffer in the hour of Thy bitterest Passion; the second is, that I may feel in my heart, so far as may be possible, that exceeding love wherewith, O Son of God, Thou wast enkindled to endure willingly for us sinners agony so great.

—Francis of Assisi

The overriding political task of the church is to be the community of the cross.²

² Hauerwas and Willimon, p. 47.

The Christian Bible, considered as a narrative, has for its hero the Messiah, who emerges, as frequently happens in romances, with his own name and identity only near the end. Being the Word of God that spoke all things into being, he is the creator of Genesis, and the secret presence in Old Testament history—the rock that followed the Israelites with water, as Paul says in ... I Corinthians 10:4... He enters the physical world at his Incarnation, achieves his conquest of death and hell in the lower world after his death on the cross, and, according to later legend, "harrows hell," extracting from limbo the souls destined to be saved, from Adam and Eve through to John the Baptist. Then ... he reappears in the physical world at his Resurrection and goes back into the sky with Ascension ...

The New Testament evidence for the descent into hell is weak, and the "harrowing of hell," though extremely popular in the Middle Ages, is purely apocryphal, deriving from a work known as the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Acts of Pilate.³

[C]onflict between God's will and cultural values goes to the very heart of the Christian faith, as is indicated in the New Testament . . . It was that unwillingness to bow to cultural pressures that involved the Christian community in endless vilification and persecution during the early centuries of its existence. Yet this conflict between God's will and cultural values penetrates even beyond the earliest Christian witness to the core event of the Christian faith itself. Jesus himself was nailed to the cross precisely because of his unwillingness to accept the cultural values of the society around him, even when sincere and loving people insisted those values were in conformity with God's will. The Christian community is called to remain faithful to God's Word incarnate in Jesus Christ and witnessed to in its founding traditions, or it ceases to be the body of Christ.⁴

... [T]he person truly living an integral life must be willing to say that he or she is acting consistently with what he or she has decided is right. When the statements of a person's integrity are the result of discernment, of hard thought, we treat them as reliable, even then they are indicators of the future—"You've got the job" or "Till death do us part." But forthrightness also matters because people of integrity are willing to tell us why they are doing what they are doing. It does not promote integrity for one to cheat on taxes out of greed but to claim to be doing it as a protest; indeed, it does not promote integrity to do it as a protest unless one says openly (and to the Internal Revenue Service) that that is what one is doing. It does not promote integrity to ignore or cover up wrongdoing by a co-worker or family member. And it does not promote integrity to claim to be doing the will of God when one is actually doing what one's political agenda demands.. .

Integrity does not always require following the rules. Sometimes—as in the civil rights movement—integrity requires breaking the rules. But it also requires that one be open and public about both the fact of one's dissent and the reasons for it.⁵

Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, the Denver Nuggets star who has refused to stand during the national anthem this season because of his Islamic beliefs, was suspended without pay on Tuesday by the NBA ...

"My beliefs are more important than anything," Abdul-Rauf said. "If I have to give up basketball, I will."

Calling the American flag "a symbol of oppression, of tyranny," Abdul-Rauf said: "This country has a long history of that. I don't think you can argue the facts. You can't be for God and for oppression. It's clear in the Koran, Islam is the only way. I don't criticize those who stand, so don't criticize me for sitting down. I won't waver from my decision.".. .

"I wish those of us who are Christians were as dedicated to our religion as he is to his," LaPhonso Ellis said. "I admire the guy for his perseverance."⁶

³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 174-75.

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Outlook Forum," in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (January 15, 1966), p. 11.

⁵ Stephen L. Carter, "Becoming People of Integrity," in *Christian Century* (March 13, 1996), pp. 299-301.

⁶ "NBA Won't Stand for Abdul-Rauf Not Standing for Anthem," in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* (March 13, 1996), p. D1.

five

Sober Stewards OF GOD'S GIFTS 1 Peter 4:7—11

To the leader(s): It was pointed out earlier that there are three kinds of questions that help a group to explore a biblical text: (1) questions about what the text says; (2) questions about what those words mean; and (3) questions about what all of that matters.

When the text for discussion is relatively brief, you can afford the time to pay closer attention to what the text actually says. For example, the author of First Peter describes his readers as "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (ch. 4:10). The word "steward" in the Greek means literally "one who has responsibility for planning and administering the affairs of a household." "House" is a crucial word in First Peter: The author calls his readers "resident aliens," literally "those living away from home." The author refers to the church as "a spiritual house" (ch. 2:5). And many scholars treat chs. 2:18—3:6 as a typical "household code"—the extended household rather than the nuclear family being the essential social building block of society in the first and second centuries A.D. So the use of "steward" in 4:10 is very suggestive.

Also, the word "love" needs careful attention. It is a coin that has been devalued by careless use.

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Love must be the finally normative term in all thought about the Church, for love alone belongs to the last things which abide after all else is dissolved. It is true that we do not yet know much about love in its fullness. We see through a glass darkly. But we know that love is the supreme . . . foretaste of God's eternal life, the first and greatest gift of the Spirit.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the men to read 1 Peter 4:7—11. Then point out that this short section suggests these four important themes for reflection and discussion:

The Primacy of Love The End of All Things Hospitality as a Virtue The Stewardship of Gifts

Write these on newsprint or chalkboard and take a straw vote to see which seems most challenging. Begin with the theme that gets the most votes.

The Primacy of Love

The author of First Peter says, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another." Ask the men if they recall similar statements by Paul, John, and Jesus himself. (If no one can remember, suggest that they look at these texts: Romans 13:8—10; 1 John 3:11—14; Mark 12:28—31.) Then discuss these questions:

1. Is the love commanded by Peter an attitude toward all human beings, or is it directed primarily to fellow church members? Are you offended by the notion that church members have a special claim on our love? Why or why not?
2. What could First Peter possibly mean by "love covers a multitude of sins"? (Compare this text with Prov. 10:12, Luke 7:47, and 1 Cor. 13:7.)

The End of All Things

Nothing quite excites discussion and argument as the New Testament teaching that the end of the world as we know it is close at hand! Here are some questions for the group to consider:

1. If it is true that the first Christians expected the immediate return of Jesus—and this did not in fact happen—what are we to believe today?
2. What is the relation between the end of all things—whether imminent or not—and sobriety, discipline, prayers?

¹ Newbigin, pp. 145-6.

Hospitality As a Virtue

According to conventional wisdom, "There is no such thing as a free lunch." And yet the author of First Peter expects that Christians will provide food and lodging for Christian travelers. What about that?

1. What has hospitality got to do with faith, hope, and love? Shouldn't people expect to pay their own way?
2. Does this exhortation to show hospitality hark back to a time when the Jesus Movement depended on free meals and housing for missionaries? Should ministers and missionaries today expect to "live off the land" so to speak? Why or why not?

The Stewardship of Gifts

See what participants know about the role of the steward in the ancient world. Jesus made extensive use of the steward in his parables. (See the Afterword for a description of the steward in biblical literature).

1. Why have we limited the use of the "stewardship" concept to financial matters? Does the author of First Peter mention the stewardship of money? What is the "speaking" to which the author refers? the service?
2. Are all Christians to think of themselves as stewards? What has been given to us all? What has been given to each?

A Final Charge

It is customary in many services of worship just before the benediction for the pastor to give to the congregation a final "charge." The men may be interested in discussing the usefulness of 1 Peter 4:7–11 for this purpose.

The first question in our Shorter Catechism is: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." What might be the usefulness of reminding persons at the close of worship to act "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11)? What does it mean "to glorify God"?

Concluding the Session

First Peter 4:7–11, with these slight modifications, might be used as a closing unison prayer:

You whose promised kingdom is near:
Help us to be serious and disciplined, especially in our prayer.

Grant us a constant love for one another.
As you have welcomed us into your family, may we show hospitality to one another.

Seeing that you have given each of us good gifts, may we use them in your service, for your people, to your glory.

We pray in Jesus' name—to whom belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Afterword

"In '63, when the March on Washington occurred, there were black families passing through. We put some of them up in a spare room in our house. My parents were pretty skeptical about these people. That's what's so funny about it (laughs). They put 'em up because they were good Christian people. You always welcome strangers at the back door, take 'em in, and give 'em a warm meal, that kind of thing. My father was a deacon in the Baptist church. My mother bakes sacrament bread every month, on the first Sunday."²

Liberty can exist without equality, and equality without liberty. Liberty, in isolation, makes inequalities more profound and provokes tyrannies; equality oppresses liberty and in the end destroys it. But fraternity is the nexus that connects them, the virtue that humanizes and harmonizes them. Its other name is solidarity, a living heritage of Christianity, a modern version of the venerable word charity. Which was known to neither the Greeks nor the Romans, who were enamored of liberty but unaware of true compassion. Given the natural differences between human beings, equality is an ethical aspiration that cannot be realized without recourse either to despotism or to an act of fraternity. My liberty fatally comes face-to-face with the liberty of the other and seeks to destroy it. The one and only bridge that can reconcile these two brothers continually at sword's point with each other—a bridge made of interlinked arms—is fraternity. In the days to come, a new political philosophy could be founded on this humble, simple, evident truth. Only fraternity can dispel the circular nightmare of the market.³

²Clarence Page, as told to Studs Terkel, in *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 266.

³Octavio Paz, *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), pp. 148-149.

The atom bomb is today the greatest of all menaces to the future of mankind. In the past there have been imaginative notions of the world's end; its imminent expectation for their generation was the ethically and religiously effective error of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the first Christians. But now we must face the real possibility of such an end. The possible reality which we must henceforth reckon with—and reckon with, at increasing pace of developments in the near future—is no longer a fictitious end of the world. It is no world's end at all, but the extinction of life on the surface of the planet.⁴

There are some 26 direct references to "steward" and "stewardship" in the Bible as a whole . . . The steward in this literature is a servant—but not an ordinary servant, who simply takes orders and does the bidding of others . . . [T]he steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another . . .

[T]he word regularly translated as steward in most English versions of the Scriptures is *oikonomos*; hence stewardship is *oikonomia*. The *oikonomos* has responsibility for the planning and administering . . . the affairs of a household (*oikos*). Not only does this suggest that "economics" (*oikonomia*) is a significant part of Christian stewardship; it means that what we call "economics" is more than that term usually connotes today. Reflecting upon the word pictures as such, we might say that stewardship has not only to do with money, budgeting, and finances but with the whole ordering of our life, our corporate deployment of God's "varied grace" in the life of the world.⁵

[Steve Young] was graduated from Mississippi State University with a degree in chemical engineering, and soon afterward he had a job with a computer consulting firm. But neither of those vocations really satisfied him. So in 1991 he left his job to take his risks at doing what he had wanted to do all along: "to devote my time to songwriting." . . .

Steve observes that "I probably do too much" as a member of Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, where he is an elder, heads the nurture (education) committee, sings in the choir, and was a youth advisor until he was elected to the session.

His devotion to music led him to Nashville. He had worked and lived in Dallas, New York City, and San Antonio, but wanted to be in the mecca of country music and asked for a transfer to the Tennessee city. Later he decided that "you can't have a career in the corporate world and be a songwriter, both," so, in his late twenties, he resigned. To help pay the bills while breaking into the music field, he took a job selling shoes—later changing jobs to become a fund raiser for the nonprofit Junior Achievement program—so that "I can have more free time."⁶

During my 45 years of life in these United States I have moved 20 times to different towns and cities in various regions of the country. That meant connecting in some fashion with at least 20 different church families. For a layperson, a visitor, it doesn't take long to tell where the ancient Christian practice of welcome is practiced—and where it isn't . . . If I thought it was sometimes hard for my family and me to become part of a church family, I have observed that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for persons with mental disabilities to find a church where they are accepted and welcomed, and where they can serve and be served.

Welcome and acceptance are the two things that persons with mental disabilities do not find—not in the church, not in the community, and not, many times, even in their own families.⁷

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 4.

⁵ Douglas J. Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (New York: Friendship Press, 1982), pp. 17, 23.

⁶ Jameson, pp. 9-10.

⁷ Peggy Stoll Schave, "Be a Welcoming Church," in *Monday Morning* (May 6, 1996), p. 19.

six

“Suffering”

POSITIVELY INTERPRETED

1 Peter 4:12–19

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

If fidelity to the gospel and the will of God and the endurance of unjust suffering distinguish the Christian from the Gentile, they are also an important bond which unites the faithful. Suffering "as a Christian" forges solidarity with the suffering Christ (4:13), with God who is glorified by such a name (4:16), and with the worldwide suffering brotherhood (5:9). As the sense and original forces of the opprobrious label "Christian" ("Christ-lackeys") are transformed into a sign of unity and blessing, so by the same principle of inversion the "problem" of suffering is transformed into an occasion of joy (4:13; cf. 1:6,8). Or to put it another way, suffering, positively interpreted, is used as a rationale for reinforcing distinctive status with God and group cohesion. In continuity with an earlier Jewish and Christian tradition which emphasized "joy in suffering," Christian suffering is here hailed as a sign of the end time, of the vindication of the righteous and of their union with God.¹

Share findings in the total group. Then discuss this concern: How do you defend the author of First Peter against the charge of encouraging masochism—that is, seeking pleasure from pain?

First, identify those aspects of the passage that lay the author open to this charge. Then see if you can devise a refutation of the charge.

(Note to leader(s): Some groups respond well to role playing—a situation acted out just to the point where the plot brings to the surface a conflict of ideas or values. At that point the role playing is cut off and the group discusses the issue or issues raised. You might set up the following situation for role playing: A man is brought before a justice of the peace and charged with yelling obscenities at worshipers as they leave a church service on Sunday morning. Two elders from the congregation ask that the charges be dropped, on the grounds that Christians do not object to being verbally abused for their faith.

One member of the group can play the justice, who asks the man why he verbally abused the Christians. The man may speak in his own defense; the elders may state their case.)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

After the men have read 1 Peter 4:12–19, ask them to compare and contrast this passage with two previous passages that dealt with a similar subject: chs. 1:3–9 and 3:1–4:6. Then ask the following:

In ch. 4:12–19, which is a recapitulation of previous exhortations, has any new note been sounded? If so, what? List words or phrases that would seem to be adding something fresh and new to a subject that has already been treated twice earlier in the letter:

Learning to Pray

The author of this series was once asked by a ten-year-old member of his Sunday school class: "When I am praying the Lord's Prayer, what am I supposed to think about?" First Peter 4:12–19 suggests what we might think about when we pray that prayer. Encourage the men to suggest new meanings that this passage provides for each of these six petitions. This may be done as a group exercise, or each man could work by himself and then share results.

¹Elliott, p. 142.

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done.

Give us our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts.

Deliver us from evil.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Verses 12 and 19 bring up an issue that surely is as old as the church itself: Why should we not think it strange that God's chosen should suffer? How can we entrust ourselves to a faithful Creator who allows the righteous to suffer for doing God's will?

What does God's faithfulness mean if not that we can count on God to take care of us if we take care to do what is right?

How are we to interpret the phrase in v. 19, "suffering in accordance with God's will"? Does that mean that God wants us to suffer? allows us to suffer? orders us to suffer?

Concluding the Session

If the group has had time to do the suggested exercise involving the Lord's Prayer, it would be very appropriate to close by asking members to say that prayer together. If there has not been an opportunity for this exercise, the leader(s) may want to be prepared to suggest some new meanings and then lead the men in saying the Lord's Prayer.

Afterword

Islam forbids suicide and inveighs against killing civilians. But in lengthy study sessions, bomber recruits focus on all the verses referring to the glory of dying for God in the Koran and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed that form the basis of Islamic law.

The Koranic verse that is perhaps the most popular with them reads: "Think not of those who are slain in God's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord."

The religion emphasizes that life on earth is a transition. The next life is the real one. Scriptures and sermons idealize the afterlife as a carefree garden replete with gold palaces, scrumptious food and scores of even-tempered women.

A suicide bomber's death is described by Muslim militants as "the martyr's wedding," an occasion of joy and celebration.²

God has not destined us to be rich, diseaseless, and deathless, but has given us trials, in the form of poverty, disease, the death of our friends and of ourselves—for the very purpose of teaching us to center our lives not in wealth, health, and this temporary existence, but in serving Him. And He has given us foes not in order that we should desire their ruin, but that we should learn to overcome them by love. He has given us a law of such a nature that it is always well with us if we fulfil it.³

Helpful Reflection

A good way to forget today's sorrows
Is by thinking hard about tomorrow's.⁴

² "Garden of God Awaits the Martyr," in *The New York Times* (March 18, 1996), p. A5.

³ Leo Tolstoy, in *The Christian Reader*, p. 469.

⁴ Ogden Nash, "Helpful Reflection," in *Hard Lines* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), p. 92.

Unfortunately (laughs), America has got religion in a way that it hasn't had before. When I started the religious beat, mainline churches were out in the forefront. Now they're battered and exhausted, losing numbers, and don't seem to know what they're doing. In a way, they're the religious reflection of liberals generally. Out of focus and out of gas.

Other people are moving in to fill the gap, especially the fundamentalists. There is an upsurge.

Shrewd political people have recognized the potential of grabbing hold of the religious constituency. They sense the possibilities of glomming onto this vast market. Then there's the sheer technocracy of it all. Television is here. These people have mastered it. The mainliners are so scrupulous, they don't know how to use it. The others have no scruples at all, so they use it well.

Their basic appeal is to people who feel left out. Marginalized people, who have an emotional hunger. W. H. Auden has a line about the wild prayers of the longing. For ten, fifteen years, we've had these wild prayers of longing. In a world that's in chaos, fundamentalist religion provides you with a very well ordered world, an architectonic world. It helps you get through.

These programs have a lot of appeal to people without a sense of history. You don't have to learn anything before you listen to these television programs. You do not have to have mastered the liturgy. It's fast food. It's just there, it's bland, it's inoffensive, it fills you up for a while. And it helps. Sadly. You're given answers. You're not presented with problems. The idea is not to reflect, because that's disturbing. What the television preachers do not do is challenge you, challenge your existing way of looking at things. They reinforce it. Rilke says when you look at a great piece of art, it tells you, you must change your life. Television preachers say, What you're doing is right. It just reinforces a deadly, stale conventionalism.⁵

Do not desire crosses, unless you have borne those already laid upon you well; it is an abuse to long after martyrdom while unable to bear an insult patiently.⁶

Richard Rubenstein visited the Rev. Dean Heinrich Gruber in 1961. Rubenstein is an American Jewish theologian. Gruber was a Protestant churchman who had actively contested the Nazi "final solution." For his witness he was interned in a concentration camp and treated like a Jew. He was no ordinary German Christian. That is why Rubenstein sought an interview; he wanted to talk to so loving a churchman. Rubenstein asked him, "Was it God's will that Hitler destroyed the Jews? Is that what you believe concerning the events through which you have lived?"

Gruber responded with scripture, a portion of Psalm 44:22: ". . . for thy sake we are slaughtered every day. . ." He didn't like the slur on God's majestic love that Rubenstein's question seemed to contain. God's love can handle death, can demand it. Gruber continued into a personal reflection:

"When God desires my death, I give it to him!
... When I started my work against the Nazis I knew that I would be killed or go to the concentration camp. Eichmann asked me, 'Why do you help these Jews? They will not thank you.' I had my family; they were my wife and three children. Yet I said, 'Your will be done even if You ask my death.' For some reason, it was part of God's plan that the Jews died. God demands our death daily. He is the Lord, He is the Master, all is in His keeping and ordering.

"At different times . . . God uses different peoples as his whip against his own people, the Jews, but those whom he uses will be punished far worse than the people of the Lord. You see it today here in Berlin. We are now in the same situation as the Jews. My church is in the East Sector. Last Sunday I preached on Hosea 6:1 ("Come, and let us return to the Lord: For He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind up.") God has beaten us for our terrible sins; I told our people in East Berlin that they must not lose faith that He will reunify us."⁷

⁵ Terkel, pp. 210-11.

⁷ Fry, pp. 134-35.

⁶ Francis de Sales, in *The Christian Reader*, p. 250.

Luther's return from the cloister to the world was the worst blow the world had suffered since the days of early Christianity. The renunciation he had made when he became a monk was child's play compared with that which he had to make when he returned to the world. Now came the frontal assault. The only way to follow Jesus was by living in the world. Hitherto the Christian life had been the achievement of a few choice spirits under the exceptionally favourable conditions of monasticism; now it is a duty laid on every Christian living in the world. The commandment of Jesus must be accorded perfect obedience in daily life and work. The conflict between the life of the Christian and the life of the world was thus thrown into the sharpest possible relief. It was a hand-to-hand conflict between the Christian and the world.⁸

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia urged Christians at a prayer breakfast to stand up for their beliefs, even when the "worldly wise" dismiss them as simpletons. In unusually candid remarks about religion by a member of the court, Scalia told the audience that the word *cretin*, or fool, is derived from the French word for Christian, the Associated Press reported. "To be honest about it, that is the view of Christians taken by modern society," he told about 650 people at the First Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi.⁹

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 42.

⁹ "Justice Scalia Encourages Christians," in *Christian Century* (April 24, 1996), p. 448.

seven

Assessing OUR POLITY

1 Peter 5:1—11

As a way of introducing the session, ask the men to read the following description of the office of elder from the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament Church provided persons with particular gifts to share in governing and ministry.

Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the Church at large, including ecumenical relationships. They shall serve faithfully as members of the session. . . . When elected commissioners to higher governing bodies, elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office.

Elders should be persons of faith, dedication, and good judgment. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel, both within the Church and in the world . . .

It is the duty of elders, individually and jointly, to strengthen and nurture the faith and life of the congregation committed to their charge. Together with the pastor, they should encourage the people in the worship and service of God, equip and renew them for their tasks within the church and for their mission in the world, visit and comfort and care for the people, with special attention to the poor, the sick, the lonely, and those who are oppressed. They should inform the pastor and the session of those persons and structures which may need special attention. They should cultivate their ability to teach the Bible and may be authorized to supply places which are without the regular ministry of the Word and Sacrament. In specific circumstances and with proper instruction, specific elders may be authorized by the presbytery to administer the Lord's Supper . . . Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are especially incumbent upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Before asking the men to read 1 Peter 5:1-11, point out that the word "elder" is the translation of the Greek word *presbuteros* from which we get the name "Presbyterian."

After participants have read ch. 5:1-11, suggest that vs. 1—5 are of special concern to Presbyterians. Why? Because our peculiar way of governing ourselves rests upon the office of the ruling elder. It is the one thing, above all else, that makes us different from Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and other denominations. (Also before starting the general discussion, see by a show of hands how many men in your group are ordained elders.)

On chalkboard or newsprint, write down a list of questions that the men may have about Presbyterian polity, using these for openers:

1. What qualities of leadership should the congregation look for in electing elders?
2. How can authority be exercised by elders without it becoming arbitrary and abrasive?
3. How can generational differences be recognized and managed so that they do not create unnecessary tension?

After the list has been compiled, search 1 Peter 5:1—5 for appropriate responses to the questions.

The Office of Pastor

It should be obvious that 1 Peter 5:1—5 employs the term "elder" to refer in a general way to church officials who have pastoral and administrative responsibilities. It does not distinguish, as our Form of Government does, between pastors and ruling elders. It refers to the church as "the flock of God," to Jesus as "the chief shepherd"—implying that the pastoral (shepherding) responsibility falls on all church leaders.

¹ *Book of Order*, copyright ©1994 by the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), G-6.0301-6.0303.

What do members of your group make of that? Doesn't that seem to diminish the office of the pastor? Why or why not?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the men to look again at 1 Peter 5:6–11. Although it is linked to vs. 1–5 by the theme of "humility," a separate major concern emerges: the power and threat of the adversary, the devil, whom Jesus refers to in the final petition of the Lord's Prayer as "the evil one" (See Matt. 6:13.)

Ask: What do you make of biblical references to the devil? How can a flock of sheep (1 Peter 5:2) hope to survive the hunger and attacks of "a roaring lion" (v. 8)? The odds look to be quite uneven!

Concluding the Session

For some groups, this will be the last meeting. The men contracted for a seven-session study—that's all. It's important to recognize that they kept their end of the bargain: They attended, they participated, they shared their insights. If there is to be another seven-session study, they need to be offered a chance to sign on.

But even for ongoing groups, it's healthy to mark a break in their work.

Look back at some of the intentions and expectations that were recorded in the first session. Ask participants to say frankly and openly what they liked best—and liked least—about the study. After all, it was their study.

Plan a brief exercise for sharing these statements—either a "round robin," in which each man gets a few minutes to have his say, or a written questionnaire, in which participants rate the study by writing D for disagree, A for agree, or N for no comment to such statements as these:

There was ample opportunity for me to share my opinions.

DAN

The leader(s) did everything possible to encourage group participation.

DAN

The study shed light on the present situation and challenge of the church.

DAN

The study helped me to understand the challenges of first-century Christians.

DAN

Our pastor should be encouraged to preach a series of sermons on First Peter.

DAN

Afterword

From a letter written by a father to his oldest son on the occasion of his confirmation:

You are reminded of temptations from three sources: from the evil customs and opinions of the people who surround you; from lawless indulgence of bodily cravings and desires; and from the spirit of evil, whispering pride and scorn and jealousy and hatred into your inner self. The means given you for turning all temptations into occasions of firmer and riper life is the recollection, Whose you are and Whom you serve, and entire grasping at His love and help in prayer.²

The memory of Kagawa [world-famous Japanese Christian] that stands out in my mind is the one in which, when he was supposed to be making a speech to a gathering of distinguished Christian leaders, he was found in the men's restroom picking up paper towels that others had carelessly thrown to the floor. He practiced the kind of humility that characterized the life of our Lord.³

²A. F. Hort, *Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1896), pp. 272-74.

³Martin Pike, "What Are You Practicing?" in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (March 4, 1996), p. 14.

To succeed, consult three old people.⁴

One day, when I had been walking solitary abroad, and was come home, I was taken up in the love of God, so that I could not but admire the greatness of his love; and while I was in that condition, it was opened unto me by the Eternal Light and Power, and I therein clearly saw that all was done, and to be done, in and by Christ, and how he conquers and destroys this tempter, the devil, and all his works, and is atop of him; and that all these troubles were good for me, and temptations for the trial of my faith, which Christ has given me. The Lord opened me that I saw through all these troubles and temptations. My living faith was raised, that I saw all was done by Christ the Life, and my belief was in Him.⁵

Old Men

People expect old men to die, They
do not really mourn old men.
Old men are different. People look
At them with eyes that wonder when . . .
People watch with unshocked eyes . . .
But the old men know when an old man dies.⁶

Everybody an elder! Is that to be the formula for Presbyterian congregations? Few things seem clearer than the general decline in the status of elders—one, if not the most significant, characteristic of the Presbyterian tradition. No one should attempt to make a case for many sessions of older days when there was too often a solid front of aging, tradition-bound men, chosen with full consideration of their financial and business standing in the community. In many—many—cases there were elders who took their election and ordination so seriously that they dedicated themselves to their calling, became well informed in and able contributors to the work of the judicatories and enjoyed due respect and honor within their congregations and beyond. That we are seeing a significant change in what tends more and more to become a shared routine for everybody in turn is not to argue for the return of lifetime elders who were able to keep a hammerlock on pastors or congregations. It is to stimulate thought about what has historically been and should be a distinctive and honorable opportunity for service and who should be elders.⁷

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.⁸

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One [evil]."

We deal here with the great temptation. It is a question not only of evil but of the Evil One. There are some minor temptations, sins that do not lead unto death . . . which God sends us daily and which vary according to our age . . . God visits them upon us because they are necessary to us. They are temptations that we can resist . . . We must not ask to be spared at any cost from those temptations, from those evils . . .

There is, nevertheless, the great temptation, the eschatological temptations, which may, of course, be manifested in a minor temptation, but which is intrinsically something else; it is the work of the Evil One. Moral and physical trials may, in fact, be identified with it; they may be the expressions of its deadly action. However, one must distinguish between the two, for here it is not a matter of an ordinary threat which may be clearly perceived and resisted. It is rather a question of the infinite menace of the nothingness that is opposed to God himself . . . This is the supreme temptation. In it there is nothing good, nothing that can be of any use to us . . . There is an intolerable, unendurable evil that in no way competes with the good. This threat exists; it manifests its presence. This supreme and infinite evil does not belong to creation . . . This absolute evil imposes itself upon creation in the form that we all recognize, namely, sin and death . . . Wherever God is absent, wherever he is not the master, it is the other one who dominates. There is no alternative.⁹

⁴ *Chinese Proverbs from Olden Times.*

⁵ George Fox, in *The Christian Reader*, p. 272.

⁶ "Old Men," in Nash, p. 99.

⁷ Aubrey Brown, "Koinonia," in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (March 18-25, 1996), p. 7.

⁸ "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, No. 260. Used by permission.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Prayer*, Second Edition, Don E. Saliers, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 81-2.

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