

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

Peter wrote those words of affirmation to the early church. Why did Peter write such words of affirmation? More than likely this letter was written around 80 AD, although we are not absolutely sure of that. At that time the Christian faith was widespread in Asia Minor, although they were a minority. We do not know how many Christians there were. One historian believes that at the close of the first century there were about 40,000 believers in an empire of 70 million, thus a very small minority. The label Christian could occasion a negative response. Late in the letter Peter writes “if any of you suffers as a Christian.” The early church was countercultural and that is the context of Peter’s letter. That the Christians of Asia Minor were facing persecution is quite clear from the letter. There were some small areas where Christians were being persecuted, but there is no evidence that an official Roman persecution is underway. Empire-wide decrees against Christians did not begin until about 249 AD. More than likely First Peter reflects the kind of persecution inflicted by the citizenry, not the government, persecution that involved social ostracism and verbal abuse. Our church today finds itself to be countercultural.

Two theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, published a book nearly thirty years ago titled, *Resident Aliens*. These two leading Christian thinkers explore the “alien” status of Christians in American society today. One author shares his perspective of when the alien status of Christians began in our nation. By alien, he means when the church began to become countercultural, of when the church was no longer a partner, if you will, of American culture. In 1963, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state’s blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on a Sunday night. Seven

regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox. The author wrote, “On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world—served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church, no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the worldview for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.” The church was beginning to see the end of its place of privilege in American society. The secularizing of American society would now compete with the church and Christians would begin to feel that they were being more and more different, more and more countercultural.

Our secular society can make it more difficult for us to practice our faith. I shared in detail before about a teenage girl who informs her coach that she cannot make a rather important game because of a church event. The coach informed her that if she did not show up for the game, she would no longer be on the team. After a lot of tears and conversations with her parents, she decides to go to the church event. One young family who had been active in a church. Their young children got involved in all kinds of sports such as little league. Many of the games were scheduled on Sunday mornings, something you would not have even thought about back in the 50s and 60s. The family began to miss church frequently, and eventually the family simply dropped out of church. They got out of the habit. People and families find it difficult to practice their faith because of sports. It is not limited to sports. There is retail shopping and many other

activities. It is no longer churches competing for church members, but churches competing with a secular society.

The church is also ostracized for its ministry. Some years ago Glenn Beck advised people that if they saw the words “social justice” or “economic justice” on their church websites, to run as fast as they can. When some churches began to integrate, many left the church. What the church considers mission is not always accepted by our secular society.

There are two points, two takeaways I want to make. First of all, to obey and follow Christ who was persecuted on the cross is to share in his suffering. I do not mean to make light of the persecution the church was experiencing in the later part of the first century. Practicing our faith today is countercultural to our society. We are called to serve, and not be served; to be compassionate, and not unfeeling; to share, and not to hoard; to live a life of humility and not lord it over others; to seek the common good and not just our own concerns. This is a message radically different from what is usually preached about the consequences of being a follower of Christ. For many, being a disciple is not a life of suffering, but one of worldly rewards. Again, I am not saying our suffering is the equivalent of the suffering of those in the days of Peter’s letter. But it is clear that being a disciple does not bring worldly rewards. Prosperity theology, the assumption that Christians are blessed with material rewards and good health, contradicts what the author of 1 Peter sets out to be the norm for Christians, it is not an easy life. At the least it will be countercultural. It is not going to be easy.

Which leads to the second point, we need the church. That is something else that is counter cultural. We live in a time when many feel they do not need any kind of

community of faith to practice their faith. They do not need the church to be disciples of Christ. The church is our support group for living counter culturally. Nothing the gospel asks us to do, to serve others, to share, to live with humility, to seek the common good, to be compassionate, can be done as loners, We need each other.

One pastor shares the story of preaching at a friends' church. It is entirely black people who live in the tenement houses in that part of the city. Worship began at 11:00 a.m. He did not rise to preach until 12:30! Church was not out until 1:15. Two hours and fifteen minutes for worship! At lunch he asked his friend, "Why do black people stay in church so long? Our services usually last only a little over an hour?"

The black preacher replied, "Unemployment in this community runs about 50%. It is worse for our youth. So during the week all our people hear is 'You are a failure. You are nobody. You are nothing because you do not have a good job, you do not have a fine car, you have no money.' So I must gather them here once a week, to help them get their heads straight. I get them together in the church, and through hymns, prayers, the preaching say, 'That is a lie. You are somebody. You are royalty. God has bought you with a price and loves you as his Chosen People. 'It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them so terribly."

The world does pervert us as we seek to live as disciples. While our society tells us that we are odd, we need to hear that we "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

Blessed be the Lord, who has given us
a new birth into a living hope,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.