

# Attractively Different in a Hostile World

Martin Williams

## Introduction: The Post-Christian West

I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. (1 Peter 5:12)

- **John Stott:**

Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value-systems. (*Sermon on the Mount*, 52)

- **Post-Christian:**

“Post-Christian,” as it applies to the West, describes a society that is historically based on Christian ideas and follows basic Christian values, but has abandoned the Christian worldview and does not consider it the basis of either its ethics or its culture

Concepts such as relativism, subjectivism, secularism, emotivism, and expressive individualism describe our post-Christian culture.

→ **See:** Gene Veith: *Post-Christian: A Guide To Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway 2020).

- **Phillip Rieff (1922-2006):**

- **Sacred Order/Social Order**

- **Vol 1:** *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (2006)

- **Vol 2:** *Sacred Order/Social Order: The Crisis of the Officer Class: The Decline of the Tragic* (2008)

- **Vol 3:** *Sacred Order/Social Order: The Jew of Culture: Freud, Moses, and Modernity* (2008)

- **Modern West = A Third-World Culture**

- **(1)** First-world cultures are those that built their moral orders on the basis of notions of fate or the gods.

- **(2)** Second-world cultures are those where the law has authority because it reflects the character of God.

- **(3)** Third-world cultures are those that have moved on to a completely secular way of thinking. (**See:** Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 74-7).

# 1. “Elect Exiles” (1:1)

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are *elect exiles* of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

(1 Peter 1:1)

- The Greek word translated “**exiles**” (*parepidēmois*) in the ESV refers to “a person who for a period of time lives in a place which is not his normal residence,” and can be translated as “alien, stranger, or temporary resident.”<sup>1</sup>
- The Greek word means “**travelling strangers**”: people who are taking up temporary residence away from their homeland.<sup>2</sup>
- **1 Peter 2:11**: “**resident aliens and visiting strangers**” (*paroikous kai parepidēmous*; my translation).
  - ➔ These terms refer to temporary residents in a foreign place: people who have permanently settled in a country but were still regarded and treated as outsiders by those who are citizens.<sup>3</sup>
  - ➔ **See**: John Elliott: *A Home For The Homeless: A Social Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, It's Situation and Strategy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 21-58.
- **Note**: Peter’s readers were not merely metaphorical outsiders because they were now citizens of heaven on their way to the Celestial City—though that is an important biblical truth (e.g., Phil 3:15)—but were also social outsiders in a very real and sometimes dangerous way.
- **Emperor Nero** (Reigned: 13 October 54-9 June 68):
  - ❑ The persecution of Christians under the emperor Nero following the Great Fire of July 64 in was confined to Rome.
  - ❑ While this policy of persecution did not directly shape policy in the provinces such as those in Asia Minor (to which Peter is writing), imperial precedent did offer incentive and implicit permission to act accordingly in the provinces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 11.27.

<sup>2</sup> See John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 312.

<sup>3</sup> BDAG, 778: *παροικος* (*paroikos*) **pertaining to being a resident foreigner, strange**, in our literature almost always substantive. *ὁ παροικος*, **stranger, alien**, one who lives in a place that is not one’s home.”

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in Travis Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualising Early Christian Suffering* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 303-16.

## 2. “Stand Firm” (1:1)

I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. (1 Peter 5:12)

- **Matthew Henry:**

This seems to be his principal intention; for he has something to this purport in every chapter, and does, by a great variety of arguments, encourage them to patience and perseverance in the faith, lest the persecutions and sad calamities that were coming upon them should prevail with them to apostatize from Christ and the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

- **1 Peter 4:12:**

Beloved, do not be surprised at the *fiery trial* when it comes upon you to test you, as though something *strange* were happening to you.

Before their conversion, these Gentile believers probably did not experience any form of religious persecution or marginalisation in their tolerant Hellenistic context. But now, having accepted the message of the gospel, they were experiencing persecution and hostility (See: **1 Peter 4:3-4**).

- **Edward Selwyn:**

The question [of Christian suffering] is...of importance because some of the deepest teaching of the Epistle is bound up with the trials through which its readers were passing.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. “Various Trials” (1:6)

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by *various trials*. (1 Peter 1:6)

- **“Various Trials” (1:6):** The Greek word translated “various” (*poikilos*) in the ESV means “pertaining to existence in various kinds or modes” and can be translated “various, diversified, or manifold.”<sup>7</sup>
- **Note:** This ought to encourage the interpreter to both be open to broad range of possible forms of persecution that were being experienced by, or at least were threatening the letter’s recipients, and to apply 1 Peter to a broad range of suffering in their own context.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2421.

<sup>6</sup> Selwyn, *First Epistle of St. Peter*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> See BDAG, 842; LN, 1:590; LSJ, 1430.

# Six Forms of Persecution

## (from the probable to the possible)

### 1. Verbal Assault

- **John Elliott:**

The cause of this suffering is clearly indicated: persistent slander and verbal abuse from non-believing outsiders aimed at demeaning, shaming, and discrediting the Christians in the court of public opinion.<sup>8</sup>

- **Note the variety of expressions that Peter uses:**

- ❑ “they *speak* against you as evil doers” (2:12)
- ❑ “do not repay *reviling* for reviling” (3:9)
- ❑ “you are *slandered*” (3:16a)
- ❑ “those who *revile* your good behaviour” (3:16b)
- ❑ “they *malign* you” (4:4)
- ❑ “you are *insulted* for the name of Christ” (4:14)

- **Alexamenos Graffito:**

- ❑ A crude graffiti cartoon, probably dating from the early second century (and preserved for us in the Palatine Museum in Rome), portrays a young man worshipping a donkey-headed figure on a cross. It obviously mocks a Christian, suggesting that his worship is ill-founded.
- ❑ The Greek caption scratched into the stone under the caricature mocks: “**ALEXAMENOS SEBETE THEON**” (tr. “Alexamenos worship[s his] god”). Though dating from the early second century, this graffiti brings to the surface general attitudes and practices of harassment from earlier times.
- ❑ This interpretation is strengthened by another graffiti found in a neighbouring building of the same complex, which reads: “**ALEXAMENOS FIDELIS**” (tr. “Alexamenos is faithful [is a Christian]”).
- ❑ It is not difficult to reconstruct a plausible relationship between the two graffiti:
  - A pagan guard in the imperial palace first sought to denounce a Christian comrade by writing on the wall “**Alexamenos is a Christian.**”
  - When this did not produce the desired result, he sketched a caricature of **Alexamenos** as the devotee of a crucified god.

<sup>8</sup> John Elliott, *1 Peter*, 100.

## 2. Physical Abuse

- **1 Peter 2:18-20:**

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? **But** if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

- Peter assumed that some who were slaves within the congregations to which he is writing would be subject to the violent treatment of their unbelieving masters because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ as indicated by the words “**when you do good and suffer.**”
- **Note the parallel clauses here:**
  - ❑ “when you sin and are beaten for it you endure”
  - ❑ “when you do good and suffer for it you endure”
    - ➔ The expression “**doing good**” in 1 Peter refers to distinctively Christian conduct (2:20; 3:16) which finds favour with God (2:20; 3:14;17).
- For those slaves within Peter’s congregations, their conversion to Christianity could have created serious problems for them, especially considering that slaves were expected to adopt the religion of their masters.

## 3. Legal Persecution

- **1 Peter 2:12-14:**

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

- While there was probably no *official* proscription of Christianity or any other *government-sponsored program* of persecution against Christians in Asia Minor,<sup>9</sup> it is also important to point out that during this period believers could be accused by private citizens, brought to trial before a Roman governor, and face significant, and even fatal consequences simply because of their Christian identity.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Elliott, *1 Peter*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96; *Mart. Pol.* 12; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.32–35.

- **Note the parallel clauses here:**

- “Gentiles...when they speak against you as **evildoers**”
- “Governors as sent...to punish **those who do evil**”

➔ It is probable that Peter is here describing a situation in which Christians were being maligned and verbally assaulted by their opponents, and that those accusations being made against them were of a criminal nature, ones that would require swift recompense by public authorities.<sup>11</sup>

- **Travis Williams:**

The step from general harassment to legal prosecution would be easily crossed. As we see from the letters of Pliny (*Ep.* 10.96), all it would require is a hostile populace and a willing administrator.<sup>12</sup>

- **Luke 21:12:**

They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake.

- **1 Peter 4:16:**

Yet if anyone **suffers as a Christian**, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God **in that name**.

- **Acts 11:26**

And in Antioch the disciples were first called **Christians**.

- It is probable that the designation **Χριστιανός (“Christian”)** is a stigmatised label used by outsiders.<sup>13</sup>
  - **A Pompeii graffito** dated between **AD 62 and 79** uses the name ***Christianos*** in a derogatory way to ridicule Christians.<sup>14</sup>
  - The Roman historian and senator **Tacitus** (c. 56-120 AD) refers (116-17 AD) to them as “a class hated for their abominations, ***called Christians by the populace***.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Travis Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 307.

<sup>12</sup> Travis Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 307.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 286. See also Keener, *1 Peter*, 343-46.

<sup>14</sup> See Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Crosses of Pompeii: The Crosses of Pompeii: Jesus Devotion in a Vesuvian Town* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 153-66. See also C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume 1, chapters 1-14*, The International Critical Commentary., (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 556-57.

<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.44.

## 3.4. Domestic Harassment

- **1 Peter 3:1-6**

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

- **“Mixed” Marriages:**

- ❑ Here Peter envisages a situation where the wife has converted to Christianity apart from the consent of her husband and the difficulties that such a “mixed” marriage could create.
- ❑ According to literary sources of the Greco-Roman world, the wife ought to worship the gods of her husband. The Greek historian and philosopher **Plutarch** (c. 46-119 AD) in his *Advice to the Bride and Groom* **writes:**

It is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband reveres, and to close the door upon strange cults and foreign superstitions.<sup>16</sup>

- **Possible Outcomes:**

- ❑ Divorce/ Loss “custody” of her children.<sup>17</sup>
- ❑ General resistance/harsh treatment from her husband.

- **Encouragement:**

You are children of Sarah, if you do good **and do not fear anything that is frightening.** (1 Peter 3:6)

**See: 1 Peter 1:17** (“conduct yourself with fear [of God = v 17a]) **and 2:17** (“Fear God”). **See:** Michael Horton, *Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us.*

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch, *Conj. praec.* 19 (Mor. 140D).

<sup>17</sup> Keith R. Bradley, “Dislocation in the Roman Family,” *HR/RH* 14 (1987) 33–62. Cf. Susan Treggiari, “Divorce roman style: how easy and how frequent was it?” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (ed. B. Rawson; oxford: oxford University press, 1991) 31–46 (39–40).

## 3.5. Economic Oppression

- **Impact of persecution Christians in the workplace:**
  - ❑ Traders, artisans, and various skilled and unskilled workers who would have managed to procure a meagre and unstable income from their labours would have experienced a downturn in their financial situations due to the animosity of former friends and alliances.
  - ❑ Regular business from previously loyal customers could have turned into boycott. “**Cancel Culture**” is not a new thing!
  - ❑ Employees may have had their workload (and their pay) *decreased* or even *terminated* leaving them in *an extremely unstable financial situation* (from dangerous to life-threatening).<sup>18</sup>

## 3.6. Social Ostracism

- **Eusebius of Caesarea** (Christian historian, c. 260-340) preserved the following letter written by the churches of Lugdunum and Vienna to the Christians in Asia and Phrygia (ca. 177 Ce):

For with all his might the adversary attacked us, foreshadowing his coming which is shortly to be, and tried everything, practicing his adherents and training them against the servants of God, so that we were not merely excluded from houses and baths and markets, but we were even forbidden to be seen at all in any place whatever.<sup>19</sup>

- **Results of social exclusion:**
  - ❑ emotional pain
  - ❑ economic pain
  - ❑ difference between life and death!

## 4. Cultural Non-Participation

- **4.1. Voluntary Associations**
- **4.2. The Imperial Cult**

<sup>18</sup> See Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter*, 322-23.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.5.



## 5. Becoming an Attractively Different and Intriguingly Distinct Christian (1 Peter 1:11-12)

### 5.1. Maintain the Tension!

We must learn and apply the proper dispositions of a church on mission, living as strangers and aliens in our own land. We need to embrace the reality that we are strangers and aliens, but strangers and aliens on a mission.

- **We need:**
  - ❑ (1) a clear **boundary** between the church and the world
  - ❑ (2) and yet that boundary must be **permeable**
- **We need:**
  - ❑ (1) a clear and distinctive **identity** as the church
  - ❑ (2) and an ongoing **accessibility** to the world
- **1 Peter 2:9:**
  - ❑ **IDENTITY** (v 9a): But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,
  - ❑ **MISSION** (v 9b): that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.
- **Here Peter brings into sharp focus:**
  - ❑ **Our distinctiveness from the world:** “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’ own possession” and
  - ❑ **Our mission to the world:** “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”
- **Conflict can be good!**
  - ❑ Conflict can provide the impetus to set up clear boundaries between the church and the world, to reaffirm our unique identity as the people of God in the midst of a godless culture.
  - ❑ Conflict with the surrounding culture can bring into sharp relief the distinctiveness of the church and just how attractive its difference is.

- **See:**
  - ❑ Tim MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles: Preaching the New Testament as Minority-Group Rhetoric in a Post-Christendom World*, pp. 14-41.
  - ❑ See pages 45-56 for his discussion on 1 Peter.

- **1 Peter 1:11-12:**

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 1:11-12)

- **(1) Salt/Good Works (Matt 5:13):** “You are the salt of the earth.”

Being salt means mixing into the world like salt into the meat: Don't hold back! Mix in! Be involved! Participate! Help to prevent the world from going rotten.

- **(2) Light/Abstain From (Matt 5:14-16):** “You are the light of the world.”

Being the light means being set apart from the world, as light is different from darkness, showing the way to a darkened world. Verses 14-16, it's about being different, it's about being distinctive, and doing it with distinction.

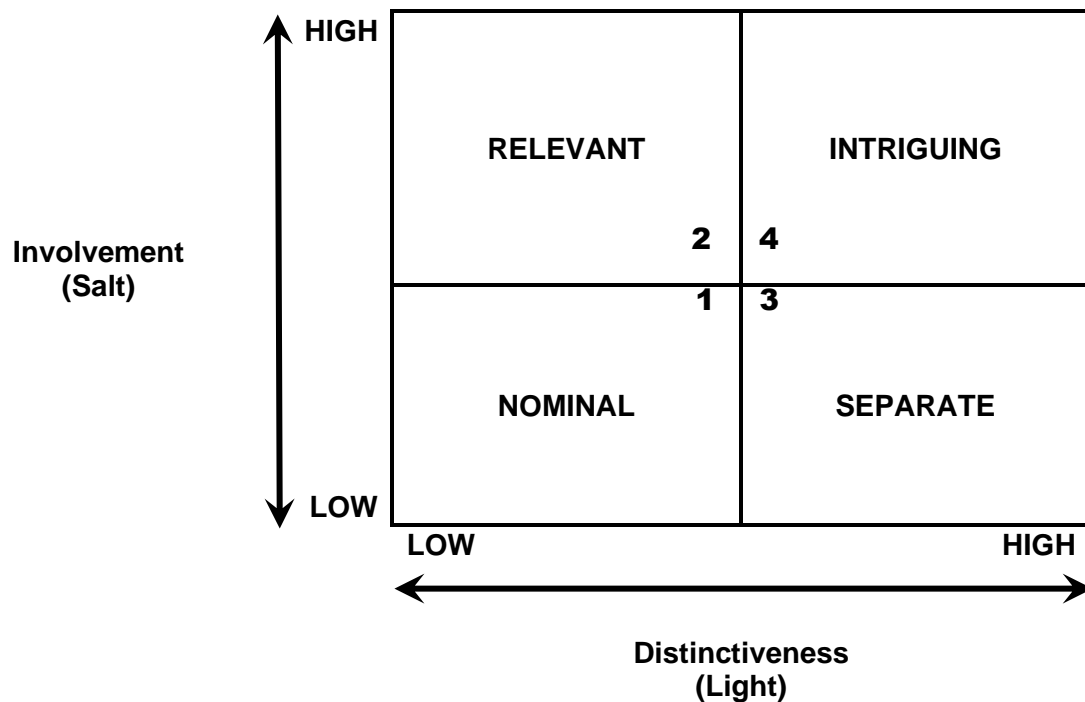
- **There is a tension we need to keep alive!**

- ❑ **Salt:** pushes us to be involved in the world, mixing in, being incarnate.
- ❑ **Light:** pulls us back, to be separate from the world, holding back, holy.

- **We must maintain healthy tension:**

- ❑ **Too much salt** and we confront the danger of **relevance**
- ❑ **Too much light** and we confront the danger of **irrelevance**

## 5.2. Relevance Chart<sup>20</sup>



- **Two Axes:**

- ❑ **Vertical Axis:** Low involvement = low salt content. High involvement = high salt content.
- ❑ **Horizontal Axis:** Low distinctiveness = low light. High distinctiveness = high light.

➔ **Involvement and distinctiveness**—and so you get the idea the way this describes the tension that's there.

- **Four Quadrants:**

- ❑ **(1)** Nominal
- ❑ **(2)** Relevant
- ❑ **(3)** Separate
- ❑ **(4)** Intriguing

<sup>20</sup> I owe this and some of the discussion around it to my preaching instructor, Paul Windsor, from my theological college in New Zealand.

- **Your Ministry/Church's Ministry:**

- ❑ Where is it at the moment on this graph?
- ❑ Which quadrant is it in?
- ❑ How can we move it into quadrant (4)?
- ❑ What can we do to get it into quadrant (4)?
  - ➔ Involved...yet separate and distinct!
  - ➔ We need to be inhabiting quadrant (4).
  - ➔ We need to be *Intriguing Christians!*

- **Stephen McAlpine:**

We show undeserved forgiveness in “cancel culture,” in which every indiscretion—past or present—is pounced upon, and in which careers and friendships are ended because of the tweet; when we show costly generosity in a greedy culture; when we fail to take advantage of people when an every-person-for-themselves culture; when we esteem others as greater than ourselves in a self-promoting culture—we are sending powerful signals to those who would otherwise reject us for our views on sex.

It's first of all **confusing** (“How can they be so loving when they reject the idea that love is love?”); then it's **intriguing** (“I don't agree with how intolerant they are supposed to be, but they welcomed me in”); next, it's **attractive** (“It looks and feels and sounds better than what I'm currently doing”); and finally, it's **compelling** (“I think that this might be just what true life is found”).

Confusing, intriguing, attractive, compelling. Can our Christian communities be these things to those who are desperately seeking their authentic selves?<sup>21</sup>

- **Question:** What do intriguing Christians produce?
- **Answer:** They produce intrigued and inquiring non-Christians!

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence **to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you;** yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:13-16)

<sup>21</sup> Stephen McAlpine, *Being the Bad Guys: How to Live for Jesus in a World that Says You Shouldn't*, 91.