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Holy Engagement: "Doing Good" as a Missional Response in 1 Peter

DOUGLAS HOLM

Responding to ridicule for misunderstood beliefs has challenged the Christian movement from the earliest times. In 1857, an archaeological dig in Rome near Palatine Hill uncovered an inscription on the side of a building that depicts a crucified man with the head of a donkey. Beside the crucified donkey-man stands another figure, possibly a soldier, with one hand raised. The crude Greek script reads: "Alexamenos worships (his) god."¹ The Alexamenos graffito most likely represents a mocking lampoon of the crucifixion of Christ and the early Christians who worshipped him. Apparently, a legend circulated during this period that the god of the Jewish people took the form of a donkey. Thus, some reasoned that this god's son the Christians worshipped must have resembled a donkey-man. Tertullian, an early Church Father, wrote to refute the erroneous allegations that the god of the Christians appeared as a man with a donkey's head around the end of the second century CE (*Nat.* 1.11; 1.14). Even earlier in the first century CE, as the Christian movement began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, misunderstandings of this *superstitio* (a religious sect not possessing legal status in the Roman Empire), as well as the relentless suspicion of what was "new" in the ancient world, resulted in believers facing verbal abuse, ostracism, prejudice, legal trials and even physical violence.

In such a volatile environment, 1 Peter addresses Christian communities "scattered" throughout five Roman provinces located in the eastern part of modern-day Turkey who endured trials and suffering on account of their newfound faith. An example of Christian paraenesis, or exhortation, the letter encourages the believers to greater commitment and subsequent action so that they will continue and not abandon their faith. As the communities lived out their new identity as Christ-followers, their new way of believing and behaving brought them into conflict with their neighbors as they sought to "not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God" (4.2). This behavioral change entailed abandoning certain practices in their society (e.g., idolatry, sexual immorality and drunkenness), and adopting new practices (e.g., worship of an invisible God, sexual purity and sobriety).² As a result, some looked upon the believers with suspicion that grew at times into localized and sporadic outbreaks of persecution characterized by verbal abuse and harassment.³ Even more, interpersonal conflicts between Christians and outsiders could quickly escalate into believers being dragged before local authorities and accused of wrongdoing (cf. Acts 17.1–13; 19.23–41).

Central to the discussion in Petrine studies during recent decades is the debate over whether 1 Peter encourages the recipients to withdraw from a hostile society or to assimilate to the culture in order to lessen social

1. Another translation of the cryptic writing understands the verb as an imperative: "Alexamenos, worship (your) god!" The inscription dates back to the first–third century CE. For a helpful introduction, cf. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 596–597.

2. Accusations that may have been brought against the Christians include: atheism for not worshipping the pantheon of gods, social dereliction for not participating in activities such as celebrations in temple banquet halls, and political subversion for not burning incense to the emperor.

3. Though most evidence in the letter points to verbal abuse (1 Pet 2.12; 3.9, 16; 4.4, 14), physical abuse is also present (2.14, 20).

pressure. Though proposals have arisen to redirect this debate, few have taken into account the presence of mission toward outsiders as an element that informs the author's strategy.⁴ First Peter advocates holy engagement through good works as a missional response for those living as "exiles" in a precarious situation. Holy engagement is grounded in the Christians' identity as God's holy people who are to separate themselves from evil while engaging in doing good (1.15–16). When directed toward outsiders, good works in 1 Peter perform three interrelated functions: they affirm the identity of the believers, provide an apologetic against criticism and advance missional purposes.⁵ In this paper, I will observe the function and result of good works in five passages that address the good works motif directed toward outsiders (2.12, 14–15, 18; 3.1–2, 14–16). From these findings, I will suggest that holy engagement through missional good works both strengthens group identity and brings transformation in society. In the final section, I will offer some suggestions for how holy engagement may serve as a response for Christians today.

In the honor and shame-based Greco-Roman culture, 1 Peter reinterprets the shame believers suffer as outcasts from society in terms of divine honor by reframing their social dilemma in theological terms.⁶ In the salutation of the letter in 1.1, the author greets the communities as God's "elect" (*eklektos*). Following the pattern of Christ's life, the believers receive divine honor from God's election of them even though society has rejected them (cf. 2.4, 6, 9). Not only are the believers chosen by God, but their social dislocation is acknowledged and reinterpreted as 1 Peter addresses them as "exiles and aliens" (*paroikoi kai parepidēmoi*), framing the situation and identity of the readers in terms of the history of Israel, especially as descendants of Abraham and in the imagery of living in exile (Gen 23.4; 1 Pet 2.11).

In addition to reinterpreting the believers' social status theologically, in 1 Peter 2.9–10 the author further establishes their identity by applying the titles of Israel to them as the people of God whose purpose is to proclaim God's "mighty acts" (*aretas*) in worship and witness. These epithets serve as intertextual markers that reflect major Old Testament themes to frame the deliverance of the believers as a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" in terms of both the exodus from Egypt and the "second exodus" from Babylonian exile (Exod 19.5–6; Isa 43.20–21). As a "royal priesthood" the Christians constitute a temple for God ("spiritual house") and perform "spiritual sacrifices" to God on behalf of others (2.5). Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria during the first century CE, describes Israel's role as a corporate priesthood in *Abr.* 98 as "an entire nation—the most God-loving of all nations—and one which appears to me to have received the offices of priesthood and prophecy on behalf of the whole human race." Just as Israel was to minister before God and mediate between the nations and God, the Christ-followers now join this role as a "holy priesthood" whose purpose is to make known the "mighty deeds" of God to the nations. The content of these "mighty deeds" is identified at the end of verse 9 as God's calling of the believers to conversion.⁷ Thus, the readers are now the holy and priestly people of God whose purpose is to publically declare in worship and witness the narrative of their conversion and journey towards eschatological salvation. Still, as they lived out this identity and purpose, how were these estranged Christians to engage society?

4. Though definitions of mission vary, my working definition from the evidence in 1 Peter is: *the activities engaged in by adherents of a religious faith that may influence outsiders toward conversion, whether it is the primary intention of the activity or not.* This broader definition of mission is an adaptation from John P. Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent, and Background of Early Christian Mission* (WUNT 159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 10.

5. Since the Reformation the discussion of "works" and "good works" has mainly centered around soteriological concerns such as justification by faith and works of the law in Paul (cf. Gal 2–3; Rom 3–4). First Peter focuses on "good works" with an ecclesiological concern as post-conversion obedience of the Christians to the will of God.

6. "On the other hand, the letter also illustrates how honor and shame provided the idiom for conceptualizing the relationship of the social and the sacred, the experiencing of the countervailing grace or honor conferred by God in the face of social disgrace and shame." John H. Elliott, "Disgraced Yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1995): 174.

7. The verb "call" (*kaleō*) with God as either the explicit or implied subject refers to God's salvific election (1 Pet 1.15; 2.21; 3.9; 5.10). The light/darkness imagery in verse 9 is possibly an echo from Isaiah 9.1–2 that relates the deliverance of the northern kingdom from Assyrian domination. The initiation of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matt 4.15–16) is couched in the language of light (deliverance) and darkness (oppression) at the coming of the Davidic king taken from Isaiah 9.2–7.

Holy Engagement by Doing Good

The call to holiness is integral to the stated purpose of 1 Peter for the believers to “stand firm” in “the true grace of God” as they endure persecution while awaiting eschatological deliverance (5.12). In 1.15–16, God’s holiness is the basis for the believers’ holy identity made effective through the call to new birth.⁸ While the believers’ holiness refers to being set apart to God from that which is impure, it also speaks to their behavior toward others in “living according to the revealed character of God.”⁹ With regards to separation, the readers are warned in 1.14 not to return to living by their “evil desires” as they had before their conversion. Moreover, the Christians are to demonstrate holiness in all of their “conduct” (*anastrophē*). Since conduct in verse 15 refers to their way of life, the call to holy conduct encompasses their behavior both towards those in the community as well as those outside. Holy engagement, then, involves a lifestyle that navigates the dual qualities of separation from evil while simultaneously displaying God’s holy character resulting in a “transformative impact upon the ignorance of the nonbelievers.”¹⁰

Good works and related terms in the letter reveal one of the main strategies of holy engagement towards outsiders. Broadly speaking, good works can be summed up as all of the positive ethical instructions in 1 Peter. The good works/doing good motif in the letter represents the use of the terms: “good works” (*kala/agatha erga*), “conduct” (*anastrophē* modified by *kalē* and other adjectives as well as the verbal form) and “doing good” (*agathopoieō* and cognates including *poieō agathon*).¹¹ Although some good works are performed towards those who are a part of the Christian community (cf. 1 Pet 1.22; 3.8; 4.7–11; 5.1–5), our focus is upon those good works directed towards those outside of the community. While good works in Greco-Roman culture focused on public displays of virtue such as benefaction and in the Jewish culture on acts of charity,¹² good works in 1 Peter are broadly characterized as the obedient response to the will of God displayed in action (4.2). Many times the precise nature of the ethical behavior prescribed in a passage is ambiguous, while at other times it is stated.¹³ Still, outsiders do not always respond positively to the good works of believers. In fact, the Christians at times suffer because of the backlash their good works provoke, suggesting that the Christian concept of good works did not always overlap with Hellenistic moral values (cf. 1 Pet 2.20; 3.13, 17).

Doing Good as a Missional Response

Beginning in the second main section of the letter (2.11—4.11) and most prominently in the household code from 2.18—3.7,¹⁴ we find the greatest concentration of references to the good works motif. Following the pattern in the letter of alternating segments of ethics and theology, 1 Peter 2.11–12 functions as a “hinge” from the teaching on the identity of the Christians (2.4–10) to instructions to various groups within the household on how to live out their identity as “aliens and exiles.” In 2.11–12, holy engagement involves abstaining from

8. The command to be holy is taken from the Holiness Code in Leviticus, which describes how the behavior of the people of Israel was to set them apart from the surrounding nations (cf. Lev 11.44–45; 19.2; 20.7).

9. For example, just as God acts with compassion and mercy towards people, the believers are to act with compassion and mercy toward others. Morna D. Hooker and Frances M. Young, *Holiness and Mission: Learning from the Early Church about Mission in the City* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 5.

10. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 434.

11. The good works motif occurs seventeen times in the letter with eleven occurrences in the household code and the second main section of the letter (2.11—4.11). Cf. 1 Pet 1.15, 17, 18; 2.12, 14, 15, 20; 3.1, 2, 6, 11, 13, 16, 17; 4.19.

12. For a discussion of good works in Jewish (e.g., *Tosefta Peah* 4, 19; *Tobit* 12.13) and Greco-Roman literature, see W. C. van Unnik, “The Teaching of Good Works in 1 Peter,” *NTS* 1 (1955): 88–91.

13. Good works directed towards outsiders include: submitting to authority (1 Pet 2.13–14, 18; 3.1), honoring the emperor and everyone (2.17), showing respect (3.2, 7), living morally pure (3.2), blessing instead of retaliating (3.9–11), seeking peace with persecutors (3.11) and responding in a gentle and respectful manner to accusers (3.15).

14. New Testament household codes adapt a familiar Greco-Roman style to instruct Christians in correct doctrine and behavior while living in the social structures of their day. For other examples of household codes in the New Testament, cf. Ephesians 5.21—6.9; Colossians 3.18–25; Titus 2.1–10.

“sinful desires” and responding to slanderous accusations with observable good “deeds” (*erga*) and honorable “conduct” (*anastrophē*) so that their opponents “glorify God on the day of visitation.” The phrase “day of visitation,” found in the LXX only in Isaiah 10.3, refers to a time of final judgment, an expression equivalent to the “day of the Lord” (cf. Jer 6.15; 10.15; Isa 23.17).¹⁵ Given the fact that glorifying and giving glory to God in the scriptures is done by those who already profess to follow God (cf. 1 Pet 4.11, 16) and, in a few cases, by those who have sinned at a critical moment of judgment and repentance (cf. Josh 7.19; 1 Sam 6.5), the phrase suggests the salvation of the accusers and not just the vindication of the believers at the final judgment. Since these opponents eventually “glorify God” as a result of observing the good works and conduct of the believers, it follows that these Gentiles would convert sometime before the day of final judgment. Given this likely interpretation, good works have a clear missionary function.

As the exhortation continues with social relationships, beginning with governing authorities (2.13–17), the believers’ expected submission to authorities provides a defense against the accusations that Christians attempted to subvert the social order. Nevertheless, the motivation for submission to authorities is not out of fear of imperial officials, but as the response of obedient “slaves” (*doulos*) to their “Lord” (2.13, 15). Likewise, God’s will is the impetus for holy engagement by “doing good” (*agathopoiountos*) before governing authorities (2.15). In this case, the expected outcome of doing good is the silencing of accusers who oppose not only the believers, but God.

Bruce Winter proposes that “doing good” in 2.14–15 refers to civic benefaction that would be seen as laudable in the eyes of society and therefore would help alleviate criticism. Winter argues that government officials would be obligated to “praise those who do right” (2.14) when Christians performed civic benefaction on account of the patronage system of the Roman Empire.¹⁶ Though civic benefaction should be included in “doing good” here, the good works should not be limited to the donating of resources for enormous public works, like the construction of a water system for a city, since these types of projects required that the benefactor possess significant wealth. Since slaves and wives, most of whom would not have the resources to finance such massive public works,¹⁷ are also exhorted to “do good” (*agathapoiēō*), the exhortation to do good in 2.15 is probably broader than civic benefaction. An alternative explanation is that the Christians are to participate in activities that promoted the public good as their capacity allowed in a manner similar to the exiles in Babylon who were exhorted to “seek the welfare of the city” in which they lived (Jer 29.7).¹⁸

At the beginning of the household code, Peter instructs vulnerable slaves to “do good” even when they suffer unjustly at the hands of “harsh” masters, following Christ’s pattern in his passion of non-retaliation and righteous behavior. The fact that Peter begins by addressing slaves raises their dignity and breaks with traditional Greco-Roman household codes that typically address the head of the household (*paterfamilias*) exclusively.¹⁹ Though “harsh” masters may punish slaves for spurious reasons, it is more likely these masters object to certain good deeds of the slaves that are according to God’s moral will.²⁰ In this case, the suffering of the slaves for “doing good” (*agathopoiountes*) is an example of the negative reaction to good works by outsiders. Nevertheless, the admonition against “doing wrong” (i.e., behavior that was morally reprehensible both to God and the masters) would

15. In the New Testament, the “day of visitation” also appears in Luke 19.44 to refer to the grace of God for salvation displayed in the advent of Christ.

16. Bruce W. Winter, “The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors: Romans 13:3–4 and 1 Peter 2:14–15,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (1988): 92–95.

17. For a helpful discussion of the socioeconomic makeup of the congregations in 1 Peter, cf. David G. Horrell, “Aliens and Strangers? The Socioeconomic Location of the Addressees of 1 Peter,” in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 176–202.

18. I owe this connection to Winter, “The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors,” 97.

19. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 190–192.

20. For example, a female slave may “do good” according to God’s will by resisting the sexual advances of her master. On the perilous existence of female slaves in the ancient world, see the discussion in Carolyn Osiek, “Female Slaves, *Porneia*, and the Limits of Obedience,” in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 255–276.

serve an apologetic function as it parallels the Greco-Roman social order of slaves obeying their masters (2.20). As these Christian slaves, as well as all Christians who suffer as outcasts, follow the model of Christ for suffering unjustly in doing good and not retaliating, they bear witness to Christ before their masters and society.

Following the instructions to the slaves, Christian wives are "likewise" instructed to submit to their unbelieving husbands, a common expectation in Greco-Roman households that served as an apologetic towards accusations of subversive behavior. Contrary to Hellenistic domestic codes, however, 1 Peter does not suggest that these wives continue to follow the societal expectations of joining in the worship of the household gods, but instead avers that "by the behavior of the wives" (*anastrophēs*) pagan husbands "will be won" without persuasive arguments. Thus, a missionary purpose is given to the wives' morally pure and reverent conduct (*anastrophēn*). By "doing good" (*agathopoiousai*) and not fearing the reprisals of their husbands or society (3.6) these women further become identified with the holy women of the Hebrew people such as Sarah. The conversion of the husbands without verbal witness ("without words") probably has its background in both Hellenistic and Jewish thought that lauded a wife with a "gentle and quiet spirit" (Isa 66.2; *Pss. Sol.* 12.5; Sir 26.14; Plutarch, *Advice*, 19 [Mor. 140D]). Although the passage suggests the husbands may convert through the witness of their wives' behavior, the construction does not prohibit verbal witness. Jeannine Brown deliberates over the ethical tension between the "silent witness" of the wives against the "verbal witness" that is required of all believers in 1 Peter 3.15. She concludes that "in a cultural context where rejection of the gods of one's husband is socially unacceptable, silent rather than verbal witness is one way to minimize accusations against the gospel and the church while remaining true to the purpose of winning the unbeliever."²¹ Thus, the Christian wives serve as a model of all believers who through their good conduct witness to the gospel, but due to the possibility of a hostile response may limit their verbal witness accordingly.

When inquiries are made into the nature of the practices of the Christians, whether before the court of human opinion in daily life or before the authorities, the believers are commanded not to fear their accusers (3.14). Instead, in holy engagement they acknowledge the lordship of Christ ("sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts") and give a prepared verbal defense of the hope of their faith (3.15).²² Once again, the suffering the Christians face is "on account of righteousness" and their good conduct is a result of their being "in Christ," instead of aligning their conduct to Greco-Roman mores. Contrary to the outcome of their opponents "glorifying God" in 2.12, verbal witness accompanied by "good works" and "good conduct" in 3.16 results in the shaming of their opponents. The "shame" of the slanderers is the loss of status due to public disgrace in a culture of honor and shame.²³ Thus, this shaming occurs in the present due to the verbal response and non-retaliatory posture of the Christians which reveals the error of the defamatory statements (cf. also 3.10–11). Finally, the integrity ("keeping a clear conscience") of their verbal response originates in their holy identity and joins with their good conduct to witness to the hope of their salvation as well as curtailing accusations.

From this brief survey in 1 Peter, we have seen that holy engagement enabled the Christians in Asia Minor both to maintain their Christian identity in society and to engage culture through good works that functioned to deflect criticism, influence outsiders towards conversion and reaffirm their identity as the people of God. Though at times outsiders rejected the good works of the believers, this rejection strengthened group identity as the communities placed obedience to God as primary. At other times, however, witness through good works brought transformation to those outside the faith, a missional outcome in a climate of misunderstanding.

21. Jeannine K. Brown, "Silent Wives, Verbal Believers: Ethical and Hermeneutical Considerations in 1 Peter 3:1–6 and Its Context," *Word & World* 24, no. 4 (2004): 402.

22. The phrase "asks you to give an account" (*aiteō tina logon*) resembles courtroom language that means "to demand an accounting from someone," W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30. However, the audience who hears this defense is "everyone" (*tina*), and the word "defense" (*apologia*) is also used in the NT to refer to an informal defense (cf. 1 Cor 9.3; 2 Cor 7.11; Phil 1.7, 16). Thus, the setting is likely informal questioning instead of a legal trial, though the latter is not excluded. Plato gives an example of this phrase used in informal questioning in *Politicus* 285E.

23. Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker Academic & Brazos Press, 2005), 231.

Holy Engagement as a Missional Response for the Church Today

Holy engagement is a posture that Christian communities today can assume in order to navigate the complexities in interaction with contemporary culture. The temptation to err on one extreme or the other is the church's constant challenge: too much separateness results in virtually abandoning society, and too much accommodation to culture results in a weakened witness. Miroslav Volf describes the missional posture of the Petrine communities as a fearless "soft difference" that engages culture on a variety of levels:

She [the Petrine communities] refused to operate within the alternative "affirmation of the world" versus "denial of the world," but surprised people with strange combinations of difference and acculturation. She was sure of her mission to proclaim the mighty deeds of God for the salvation of the world, but refused to use either pressure or manipulation. Rather, she lived fearlessly her soft difference. She was not surprised by the various reactions of individuals and communities among whom she lived because she was aware of the bewildering complexity of social worlds in which values are partly the same, partly different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory.²⁴

In today's pluralistic and constantly changing technological society, the church requires an approach like "soft difference" to faithfully apply the biblical message to address politically and emotionally charged issues such as abortion and economic inequality. Instead of just siding with those who share a similar background or perspective as ours, "the call is to embody the gospel whatever the cost, and being holy involves not just separation from the world or individual salvation but active presence engaging with the world's needs and problems."²⁵

Though a missional ecclesiology has made a resurgence in recent times, often the Christian community spends much of its energy and time on programs and events that do a lot of good, but benefit mainly those already inside the community. Of course, the church is called to focus on worship, edification and sacraments as a corporate body, but greater balance with external matters is needed at times. Some externally-focused believers have asked the provocative question, "If the doors of your church closed tomorrow, would your community miss it?" The Christian community must realize that an internally-focused church results in the mission of the church sliding towards irrelevance in the eyes of society. As inflammatory rhetoric in the media and skepticism towards organized expressions of the Christian faith grow, congregations must turn their focus outward, not just in evangelistic campaigns and the practice of personal piety before a watching world, but also to "seek the welfare of the city" by uniting together through compassionate good works to provide a Christian response to larger societal issues that concern the average citizen.

Finally, in the West, suffering as a Christian typically takes the form of name-calling, the perpetuation of stereotypes and minor forms of discrimination. Though the seriousness of these attacks should not be minimized, we must continually be mindful of Christian brothers and sisters around the world who suffer more severe abuse, some to the point of physical violence and even death, for their commitment to Christ. Recently, a woman from the Middle East gave her testimony to the members of a suburban congregation about the martyrdom of her husband, a pastor, by a radical group in her country. Through tears she shared how she now lives as a refugee in a foreign country separated from her family and friends on account of the danger she would face if she returned. Christians in the West must continue to stand in solidarity with believers like this woman who suffer in the global South and East where Christianity is growing most rapidly. This solidarity involves "doing good" that will assist the plight of these believers through influencing decision-makers to crack down on religious persecution, giving of

24. Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 27.

25. Hooker and Young, *Holiness and Mission*, 2.

resources towards those already involved in helping, and keeping the plight of the suffering church visible. By looking to the model of the non-retaliatory and righteous response of Christ to guide us, the global Christian church, similar to the Petrine communities, provides a “home for the homeless,”²⁶ nurturing those in the household and inviting those outside to enter.

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26. John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy: With a New Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).