

COMMENTARY

I. GREETING: 1 PETER 1:1-2

1 PETER

1:1-2

BEHIND THE TEXT

Three names are associated with the Apostle Peter: Simon, **Peter**, and Cephias. *Simon* was undoubtedly the Jewish name given him at birth. **Peter/Cephias** was the nickname Jesus gave him at Caesarea Philippi when he confessed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (see Matt 16:13-16; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-20; John 1:42). **Peter** is adapted from the Greek word *Petros*; *Cephias* transliterates the Aramaic. Both names mean “rock.”

In the earliest NT writings, Peter was consistently named *Cephias* (Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5). But as the church became increasingly Greek-speaking, *Cephias* was displaced by the Greek name **Peter**. All four Gospels refer to him as either *Peter* or *Simon Peter*. All three names of the apostle are given in John 1:42, “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephias’ (which, when translated, is Peter).” The use of **Peter** in this letter probably reflects the Gentile background of his audience.

IN THE TEXT

■ **I** Peter begins his letter in the basic pattern customary of all ancient Greek letters: “A to B, greetings.” Here, the name **Peter** is qualified by a short description of his office: **an apostle of Jesus Christ**.

Apostle means *one who is sent out*—a “messenger” or “envoy” of another (BDAG, 122). In the NT, the word always signifies that the person “is sent, and sent with full authority” (Rengstorf 1964a, 421). Despite variation in the use of the term in the NT, one common feature stands out: The person designated an **apostle** was always an eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus and was personally commissioned by him (Rengstorf 1964a, 431).

Peter qualifies easily as an **apostle**. Peter not only was sent out with authority to preach and heal (see Mark 6:7; Matt 10:1; Luke 9:1-2) but also was one of the first witnesses of the risen Christ. He was personally commissioned by Jesus to spread the gospel (see John 21:15-19; Matt 28:16-20). Unlike Paul, Peter’s authority as an apostle was never challenged.

Peter’s authority was derived from and commissioned by **Jesus Christ** himself. Peter was “a messenger of Christ sent into the world with authority to carry out the will of the one who sent him” (Davids 1990, 45-46). **An apostle of Jesus Christ** expresses the nature of Peter’s authority as not inherent but borrowed. His authority was derived from Christ himself. His letter carries a message and an authority that supersedes the mere words or message of a man named Peter. They portray the message and authority of Christ himself.

In contrast to the concise depiction of the author, the identification of the audience is expansive. Peter calls them **God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout** several Roman provinces in Asia Minor. Although **God’s** is not in the Greek text, the NIV appropriately adds it for clarity.

Election

The term **elect** (*eklektois*) has often been mistakenly interpreted to mean privilege without responsibility. This is certainly not the way the word was intended or used by biblical authors.

The Bible does not normally use “election” in an individualistic sense. Apart from kings, it is rare for the divine choices to refer to individuals in the OT (Quell 1967, 152). **Elect** (or **chosen**) was regularly used by the people of Israel to express their conviction that they were God’s special people, singled out from among the nations (see Deut 4:37; 7:6; 14:2; Ps 105:6; Isa 45:4; Kelly 1969, 40).

Furthermore, election does not necessarily imply “the rejection of what is not chosen, but giving favor to the chosen subject, keeping in view a relationship to be established between the one choosing and the object chosen” (Zodhiates 1992, 544). The purpose of the choice is almost always determined by some kind

of commission (e.g., 2 Sam 21:6; Ps 105:43; Isa 42:1; 65:22 LXX). “Such election can only meaningfully retain its validity in the fulfillment of that service” (Verbrugge 2000, 174).

As a result, the underlying idea of election in the OT expresses both privilege and responsibility. The prophets insist that responsibility always accompanies election (see Amos 7:10-15; Jer 7:22-26; 28; 37—38). Ultimately, election as responsibility develops into the concept of election as mission. “This development of the belief in election into the concept of witness to the truth of God is to be regarded as the consummation of the OT message of salvation” (Quell 1967, 168). Thus, the nation of Israel is God’s elect, but they are elected for a special purpose; namely, to be witnesses to the nations that Yahweh is God (see Isa 42:1; 43:10).

Significantly, in the OT divine election was understood to be a unique characteristic of the people of Israel. But in the NT divine election applied to all faithful persons (i.e., the church) who had placed their faith in Jesus Christ (see Mark 13:20; Luke 18:7; 1 Cor 1:27-30; Jas 2:5; 2 John 1). “All the privileges which had once belonged to Israel now belong to the Christian Church” (Barclay 1960, 196).

This idea is expressed strongly in 1 Peter. Peter transfers to Gentile believers “the hallowed language appropriate to God’s own people” (Kelly 1969, 40). The faithful recipients of Peter’s letter are referred to as **God’s elect** (1:1). They are linked to the Choice Stone (i.e., Christ) as a chosen community (2:4-5); they are called a “chosen people” (*genos eklekton*; 2:9).

The broadened application of the notion of **God’s elect** in the NT to include the church is characterized by three qualifications, summarized by Schrenk:

- The NT finds the basis of election in Christ and has in view a universal community, not just a single nation.
- It discerns in election the eternal basis of salvation that is never separated from responsibility and decision.
- Far from viewing election as preferential treatment, the NT relates it strictly to mission in service to the divine purposes for the universe. (Quoted in Quell 1967, 192)

The terms **God’s elect** (*eklektois*), **strangers in the world** (*parepidēmois*), and **scattered** (*diasporas*) are typically reserved exclusively for the people of Israel. But Peter assigns Gentile believers the same divine privileges and prerogatives Israel enjoyed. It is not that Christian believers have replaced Israel as the “true” people of God, as some suggest (see Ball 1966, 249). Rather, the identity of God’s chosen people has been expanded to include Christian believers, regardless of their ethnic heritage.

God’s elect and **strangers in the world** are closely associated in this passage. The terms portray a vivid contrast in both relationship and status. “One expresses a relationship to God, the other a relationship to human society. One denotes a privileged group (before God), the other a disadvantaged group (in society)” (Michaels 1988, 6). Peter’s depiction of his audience as **God’s**

elect must have been encouraging. Although scattered like exiles, they were, in fact, God's favored, select people.

Parepidēmois, **strangers in the world** or *sojourners*, describes Peter's audience as people who are "staying for a while in a strange or foreign place, *sojourning, residing temporarily*" (BDAG, 775). Used rarely in the Bible (NT: 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11; Heb 11:13; LXX: Gen 23:4; Ps 38:13), the term "connotes one who is merely passing through a territory, with no intention of permanent residence" (Kelly 1969, 41). Some interpreters take **strangers** in a sociological sense, identifying Peter's audience as immigrants in Asia Minor (see Elliott 1981). Most, however, take this figuratively. They were spiritual sojourners in the world. As **strangers**, they were temporary residents of this world. They had "a deeper attachment and a higher allegiance in another sphere" (Beare 1961, 49).

Achtemeier proposes another explanation for **strangers** deserving consideration:

Used of Christians, it describes the fact that because of their unwillingness to adopt the mores of their surrounding society, they can expect the disdainful treatment often accorded exiles (e.g., 1 Pet 4:3–4). It refers for that reason less to the notion of Christians disdaining the temporal because of their longing for their eternal, heavenly home, with its implications of withdrawal from secular society, than to the notion that despite such treatment, they must nevertheless continue to practice their faith in the midst of those who abuse them (e.g., 2:12; 3:9, 15b–16; 4:19). (1996, 81)

Epistle to Diognetus

An anonymous letter to Diognetus from the second century A.D. eloquently describes Christians as temporary residents of this world:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either country, speech, or customs; . . . Yet while they . . . conform to the customs of the country in dress, food, and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary. They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. . . . They find themselves in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven. (Kleist 1957, 138-39)

Peter's audience consisted of people who were elect, strangers, and scattered (*diasporas*). *Diaspora*, like *eklektos*, normally referred to Jews living outside the land of Israel. It is so used twelve times in the LXX, and only twice in the NT outside 1 Peter (John 7:35 and Jas 1:1). It typically describes the

scattering of Israel among the Gentiles, which came as punishment from God (e.g., Deut 28:25; Jer 13:13-14; 34:17-22; Dan 12:2). In 1 Peter the notion of divine punishment is completely absent. Peter uses this term to describe all Christians who, like exiled Israel, lived as aliens in their surrounding culture.

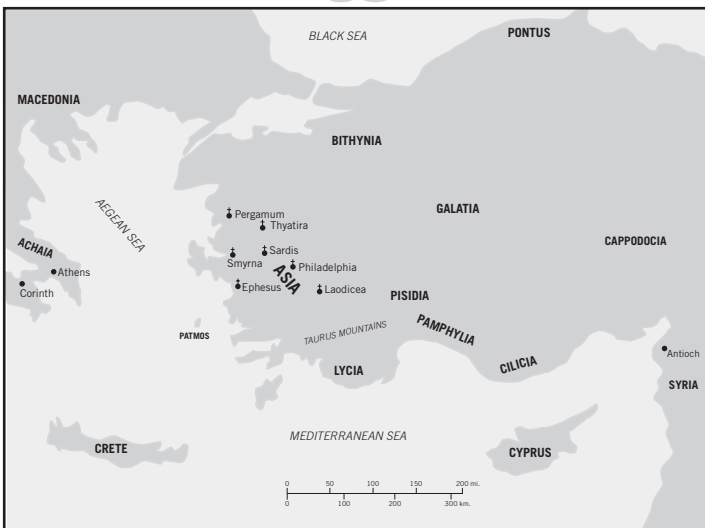
As **scattered exiles**, however, members of the *Diaspora* cherished the hope that “they [would] eventually come to their true home, the heavenly Jerusalem” (see Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20; Heb 11:13; 13:14; Best 1971, 70). The term **scattered** is closely associated with **strangers**. But the focus of each word can be differentiated: “The one word looks to the land in which the recipients were strangers, the other to the land which is their true home” (Schmidt 1985, 157).

The juxtaposition of the three words—**elect**, **strangers**, and **scattered**—is striking. Nowhere else in Christian or Jewish literature are these descriptions connected. Perhaps their new status as **scattered** and **strangers** was directly related to their election. As **God’s elect**, Christian believers were called away from their former way of life and allegiances. First Peter is “an epistle from the homeless to the homeless” (Michaels 1988, 9). Regardless of their geographical location, these Christian believers had no earthly home. Their election set them apart. The letter specifically addressed believers who temporarily resided in **Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia**.

Pontus is a Greek word meaning “sea.” It could refer to the Black Sea. In the NT, Pontus indicates a province of Asia Minor along the southern shore of the Black Sea from Bithynia to Armenia. Luke mentioned inhabitants from Pontus as being present at the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers (Acts 2:9).

1 PETER
1:1

Map of Asia Minor



Galatia was located in north central Asia Minor. It was named for its dominant ethnic group, the Gauls. They were a Celtic tribe from Western Europe that migrated to Asia Minor during the third century B.C. Galatia can refer to the Celtic territory to the north or to the Roman province, which included non-Gauls living further south. Scholars disagree as to the identity of the “Galatians” addressed in Paul’s Epistle (see Mitchell 1992, 871). In 1 Peter, **Galatia** undoubtedly refers to the Roman province.

Cappadocia is an isolated interior region of eastern Asia Minor north of the Taurus Mountains, east of Lake Tatta, south of Pontus, and west of the Euphrates River. Cappadocia became a Roman province in the first century A.D. Acts 2:9 mentions Jewish pilgrims from Cappadocia and Asia at the first Christian Pentecost.

Asia sometimes refers to the Old Persian Empire. But by NT times, **Asia** usually indicated the Seleucid kingdoms, whose rulers were called “the kings of Asia” (see 1 Macc 8:6). The last Seleucid ruler willed his kingdom to Rome, which called this new province **Asia**. Asia was early evangelized by Christian missionaries (see Acts 19–20).

Bithynia is a Roman province in northwest Asia Minor. Bithynia is bordered to the east by Pontus and to the north by the Black Sea. The NT mentions no Christian missionary activity in Bithynia, despite Paul’s efforts (Acts 16:7).

Scholars speculate as to the why these regions are mentioned in this order, especially since Pontus and Bithynia were considered a single Roman province after 64 B.C. Most believe the order reflects the travel itinerary of the one who would deliver the letter (see Introduction).

■ **2** Three prepositional phrases emphasize how the readers have become what they are. Each phrase includes the work and agency of a different person of the triune God: God the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ. As Howe observes:

The Trinitarian framework here is obvious. The providential plan of God the Father, the setting apart or sanctifying work of the Spirit, and the death of Jesus Christ (represented by the sprinkling of the blood) are equally descriptive of God’s provision for believers as “chosen sojourners.” The three phrases are closely related. (2000b, 191)

All three prepositional descriptions in v 2 relate to the “elect” in v 1, the “apostle” in v 1, or both. Verse 2 begins with the prepositional phrase **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father**. Since the apostolic status of Peter is not in question, it seems more natural that the triad of prepositional phrases describes his audience (the “elect”). This solution is even more probable because the divine election of scattered and alienated Christians is one of

the main issues of the letter. Peter encourages his readers with this threefold reminder of God's salvific activity in their lives.

First, they **have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father**. **Foreknowledge** (*prognōsin*) is found only here and in Acts 2:23 where Peter explains Christ's death in his Pentecost sermon as being according to the "foreknowledge of God" (NRSV). Divine **foreknowledge** does not emphasize God's ability to know things in advance. Instead, it emphasizes that what occurs happens **according to** (*kata*) his plan.

Divine **foreknowledge** does not imply a lack of personal responsibility on the part of believers. On the contrary, Peter reminds them that God's provision for them should enable their **obedience to Jesus Christ**. He says "nothing . . . about the certainty that they will be brought from their present exile to the New Jerusalem" (Best 1971, 71). In fact, in 4:15-19 and 5:9-12 Peter implies that their ultimate salvation depends upon their response to their present predicament.

The reminder that they **have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father** underscores three important truths:

First, their salvation has been made possible by divine initiative. God is consistently portrayed in the Bible as the Author of salvation. It was always God's plan, even "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4 NRSV; 2 Thess 2:13-14), to provide salvation to humanity through Christ's death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit's conviction and cleansing. The church's "origin lies, not in the will of the flesh, in the idealism of men, in human aspirations and plans, but in the eternal purpose of God. . . . To remember this has always a steadying and strengthening effect" (Cranfield 1960, 30).

Second, their present predicament is not by accident or divine oversight. In fact, it is because they were chosen by God that they are now **strangers** . . . **scattered** (v 1) throughout Asia Minor. Their struggles and trials have not surprised or stymied God. On the contrary, what they are facing fits within the foreknowledge and eternal purposes of God.

Third, God is their **Father**. God is the Father of Jesus in the Trinitarian formula of v 2. But as the source of the "new birth" in v 3, he is also the Father of Christians. God is intimately and caringly involved in their lives. In the midst of their suffering, they are objects of God's loving, fatherly concern.

The second prepositional phrase of v 2 emphasizes the means by which God works in believers' lives. Their election and ultimate salvation take place **through the sanctifying work** (*hagiasmōi*) **of the Spirit**. *Hagiasmos*, a noun of action, carries a twofold connotation: consecration and cleansing. It is difficult to distinguish the two. By setting believers apart for God's use, the Spirit

transforms their lives morally. Here and in 1:15-16, “Peter declares holiness of heart and life to be God’s criterion for His people” (Ball 1966, 250).

This **sanctifying work** is performed through the agency of the Holy Spirit (a subjective genitive). That is, the Spirit sanctifies believers. But this sanctification requires human cooperation. Sanctification “is, on the one hand, a divine act (see 1 Cor 1:30), practically synonymous with the call itself, and, on the other, a moral implication of that call and (in part at least) a human responsibility” (Michaels 1988, 11).

The Spirit set believers apart as God’s chosen people. As a result, they are forgiven of their past sins and transgressions. But the Spirit continues his sanctifying work, cleansing their lives and making them holy.

The purpose (*eis, for*) of the divine Spirit’s activities is **for obedience** (*hypakoēn*) to **Jesus Christ**. *Hypakoē* “conveys the picture of listening and submitting to that which is heard” (Hiebert 1984c, 39). In 1 Peter, **obedience** (1:2, 14, 22) repeatedly reminds believers of their own role in their election and sanctification.

The Greek of v 2 does not specify to whom or what obedience is required. The NIV, along with the NASB and the NRSV, connects the genitive **Jesus Christ** (*Iēsou Christou*) to **obedience** as well as to **sprinkling by his blood**. Thus, they translate the phrase as **obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood**. But this implies that *Iēsou Christou* is an objective genitive—believers obey **Christ**. This may be true, but the more natural sense in Greek is to connect **Jesus Christ** to **sprinkling** and not to **obedience**.

Peter’s reference to “obedience to the truth” (NRSV) in 1:22 is significant here. **Obedience** as “obeying the truth” invites believers to submit to the saving grace of God and the sanctifying work of the Spirit made possible by Christ’s death. That is, they should obey because of all God has done to save them. The promise of salvation requires a response of obedience.

“Obedience to the truth” (NRSV) requires more than mental assent to what God says. It calls for conformity of one’s conduct to God’s commands. Obedience to God’s initiative requires believers to turn away from their former way of life opposed to his will and purposes. They submit themselves to the eternal plan of God by trusting Jesus Christ. Such obedience not only is a change of attitude toward God but also requires a decisive change of action and behavior. This change is made possible by the triune God: the Father’s foreknowledge, the Spirit’s sanctifying work, and the Son’s atoning death. But the possibility becomes a reality only as believers accept and obey God.

The third prepositional phrase of v 2 speaks of **sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ**. This imagery is derived from the OT. In Exod 24, God confirms the covenant between himself and Israel. After Moses reads from the

Book of the Covenant, the people respond, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (v 7). In response, Moses takes half of the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkles it on the altar. Then he sprinkles the other half on the people. Moses explains, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (v 8).

Peter does not explicitly refer to “covenant” here. But the obvious parallels with Exod 24 suggest that he had covenant in mind. Whereas the old covenant was ratified by the sprinkling of the blood of bulls, the new covenant is ratified by the *sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ*. The violent death of Christ on behalf of sinners offers saving benefits to all who will receive them. Undoubtedly, Gentile believers are included among God’s chosen people.

Peter emphasizes both human responsibility (**obedience**) and divine provision (*the sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ*). Clearly, obedience is essential for human salvation. “To belong to God is to obey Jesus Christ” (Moffatt 1928, 91). True believers are revealed, not through their philosophical declaration of trust and ultimate security, but by their willingness to follow and obey the Savior’s call and commands.

The emphasis on **obedience** is balanced by the assurance of divine enablement. The word order—first **obedience**, then **sprinkling**—may suggest the continuing availability of Christ’s atonement. If so, **obedience . . . and sprinkling** implies “that God’s plan for them is not obedience marred by unforgiven sin but obedience whose failings are cleansed by the blood of Christ” (Grudem 1988, 54).

The letter’s salutation appears in the final clause of v 2: **Grace and peace be yours in abundance**. The typical Greek greeting in most ancient letters was *chairein*, which means “*welcome, good day, hail (to you),*” or “*greetings*” (BDAG, 1075; see Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:1). Like Paul, Peter substitutes the word *charis* (**grace**), which is derived from the same root as *chairein*. This wordplay extends not only greetings to his audience, but more importantly, God’s **grace**. In the NT **grace** signifies the undeserved, loving favor of God for sinners supremely revealed through Jesus Christ.

Peace (*eirēnē*) is derived from the customary Hebrew greeting *shalom*. *Shalom* is much richer in its content than the English or Greek words for **peace**. Both “peace” and *eirēnē* convey the notions of tranquillity due to the absence of war and dissension. *Shalom*, however, also conveys the “sense of well-being and salvation” (Foerster 1964, 411).

Peter’s greeting includes the full range of the blessings of God. **Grace** in the NT refers to all of God’s blessings available to believers through Christ. **Peace** in the OT refers to all God’s blessings to Israel. This Christian greeting

prays that both gifts—**grace and peace**—may be enjoyed by the audience, and **in abundance** (*plēthyntheîē*; “*in ever greater measure*,” BDAG, 826).

FROM THE TEXT

Proto-Trinitarian Theology. The NT does not teach a specific doctrine of the Trinity. The ecumenical consensus developed over several centuries. Nonetheless, the foundation of Trinitarian theology is embedded in the language and thought of the NT. This is clearly illustrated in the opening verses of 1 Peter. Peter reflects upon his readers’ salvation, assured by the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Hunter writes:

This is as yet “the trinity of experience,” out of which sprang the later dogma. The early Christians found by experience that they could not express all that they meant by the word “God” till they had said, “Father, Son, and Spirit.” (1957, 90)

Other NT passages similarly anticipate the later doctrine of the Trinity (e.g., Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 4:4-6; Jude 20-21). But 1 Pet 1:2 is unique. Not only are the three persons of the Godhead mentioned, but each is recognized as playing an equally important role in salvation.

The Expanded People of God. Peter freely applies terms and descriptions to Gentile Christians typically reserved for Israel alone. He describes them as **God’s elect** and **scattered** (*diasporas*) people. But he also borrows language and imagery from God’s covenant with Israel to describe the reality of Christians’ relationship with God (**sprinkling**).

Yet, if Peter perceives Gentile Christians as replacing Israel as God’s chosen people, he gives no indication of it. Rather, without any explanation or reserve, he simply equates the experience of the Christian believers with their Jewish counterparts “as if they were a strange new kind of Jew” (Michaels 1988, 13). This message for disenfranchised and pressured Christians of every ethnic group in any era inspires encouragement. The history of God’s saving activities on behalf of his chosen people is the heritage of every Christian believer through Christ.

Resident Aliens. Peter writes to Christian believers who are **scattered strangers in the world**. The reality of this kind of existence seems to go back to Jesus’ prayer that his followers would not be “of the world” even though they are “in the world” (John 17:13, 14, emphasis added). But what does it mean practically to be “resident aliens” in the world? The forms of application of this concept may vary within different cultural, social, and historical eras. Peter’s words would seem to call Western believers, who enjoy a greater amount of religious freedom, to live in a uniquely Christian way.

The faith in Christ of the original readers of this Epistle had already led to their estrangement from their society and culture. This often led to their public and programmatic persecution. For embattled and oppressed believers of every era, Peter's letter offers encouragement and hope in the face of persistent opposition.

Sanctification. Peter refers specifically to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the lives of all believers. He considers sanctification a normal part of believers' experience, which goes hand in hand with God's eternal plan for their salvation and the atoning death of Jesus Christ for sinners.

The word that Peter uses for sanctification (*hagiasmos*) "refers not only to the activity of the Holy Spirit in setting man apart unto salvation and transferring him into the ranks of the redeemed, but also to enabling him to be holy even as God is holy" (Zodhiates 1992, 70). It has always been God's purpose, through Jesus Christ, not only to redeem sinful humanity but also to transform the lives of sinful people into his likeness (see 2:21).

The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is both a finished result and an ongoing process. The Spirit sets believers apart for God and also cleanses and purifies their character to conform to God's purpose and will. The inherent elements of this sanctifying are twofold. Sanctification is a work the Spirit does *in* believers, cleansing them from moral evil. But it is also a work he does *through* them, enabling them to live daily in holiness and obedience to the will of God.

Believers should resist a reading of the Bible or a theology that insinuates that a person is "saved in principle but not in fact" (Wynkoop 1972, 56). This is why John Wesley insisted that sanctification is found in the intersection of being "renewed in the image of God 'in righteousness and holiness'" as well as "loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul" (1966, 41). Not only is God's plan of salvation through Christ realized through the Spirit's work of setting believers apart for heaven, but equally important is the Spirit's work of making earthbound believers holy here and now, demonstrated by their obedience to God.

