

For God's Sake, Submit!

[1 Peter 2:13-17]



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1 Peter 2 contains some of the most challenging teachings in the New Testament. When we encounter issues like submission to governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13-17), questions immediately abound. What if it is a corrupt government? What if the government commands us to do un-Christian things? How can Peter tell us to submit when he once told the authorities that he would continue preaching the Gospel even if ordered to stop?

In our current COVID-19 context, many of us struggle with the Circuit Breaker and wonder: what could Peter's instructions on submission to the governing authorities possibly have to say about my current situation?

In verses 11-12, Peter is urging the recipients of his letter to abstain from indulging the passions and to do good. The first two rules that John Wesley gave to members of the General Societies of the Methodist Church are first, do no harm, and second, do good. Wesley's rules for Methodists are in line with the general ethic that Peter expects from the "sojourners and exiles" he was writing to. We are pilgrims on the way to the Heavenly City of God, and there is a distinctively Christian ethic that guides our conduct.

In part, this Christian ethic is submission. What Peter says in 1 Peter 2:12, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that... they may see your good deeds" is given concrete expression in 1 Peter 2:13 – 3:7. He unpacks what it means to submit using 3 examples. The first is the subject we are focusing on today: the relationship between Christians and the authorities. [2:13: "Be subject [submit] for the Lord's sake to every human institution."] The second is from 1 Peter 2:18-25: the relationship between slaves and masters. The third is from 1 Peter 3:1-7: the relationship between wives and husbands. The idea of submission appears in the opening verse of each example of relationships.

To many, submission sounds like coerced subjugation. When we hear Peter telling us to submit to political

authority, slaves to submit to masters, and wives to husbands, we instinctively think that this means the removal of our freedom. It suggests quashing our individuality. However, the word should not be taken as the opposite of 'rebel'; instead, it means the opposite of withdrawal. Finding and responsibly occupying one's place in society is more to the point.¹ Peter is saying, engage with these human institutions. Do not withdraw from society. The early Christians were not to be sectarian. Engage responsibly as a member of the polis where God has placed you.

This point explains why, although Holy Communion is a sacrament – perhaps the ritual summit of our corporate worship – the Methodist Church in Singapore has opted to continue the suspension of our services, in compliance with the Government's rulings. We may be sojourners and exiles, but we are not exempt from engaging with God's world. The old refrain "this world is not my home; I'm just passing through" should not result in an ethic of isolation and abandonment. Rather, Peter makes clear: submit to authority! Do not withdraw; engage responsibly. A large part of this engagement necessitates submission to the ruling authorities.

What is the nature of the submission Peter wants? The backdrop of Peter's portrayal of Christian life is the Exodus. Deuteronomy 7:6 explains why Israel was elected and why God saved them out of Egypt. God's liberation of Israel was for service: "Let my people go, so that they may serve me in the wilderness" (Exodus 7:16). The point of Exodus is not freedom for self-determination, but for service to the loving, redeeming, and delivering God of Israel, rather than to the proud Egyptian state and king.²

According to Peter, liberation was from their inherited futile ways (1:18), from those "passions of your former ignorance" (1:14). The picture Peter paints is that of a power at work to enslave, and wars against our souls (2:11). In its stead, another power is at work: the call to holiness and virtue made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are set free for divine

¹ Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 73.

² Jon Douglas Levenson, "Exodus and Liberation", *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 (1991): 134-74 (pg. 152).

purposes. In 1 Peter 2:15, Christians, “as free people” who are “slaves of God,” can subordinate ourselves to human institutions. Submission is an expression of freedom, not of coercion. In 1 Peter 2:15-16, God’s will is that Christians freely do good even in pagan societies. By this, Christians silence slander about Christianity; more so, if the authorities recognize their good works that benefit their city. In this regard, recent efforts by churches – including a good number of our sister Methodist churches – to help with the homeless and with affected migrant workers is very much in the spirit of positive engagement and doing good in our city.

Peter’s exhortation that his readers be subject to “every human institution because of the Lord” is not an invitation to human slavery. On the contrary, Peter declares them to be free people. They were free to choose to be slaves of God. Christian freedom rests not on escape from service but on a change of master.

Remember the night of Jesus’s betrayal in Gethsemane? Peter had brought his sword that night. He stood up to be counted for his Lord, cutting off the ear of one who had come to arrest Jesus. But now, decades later, as an older and wiser man, Peter had put the sword away. For Peter, preaching the Gospel was enough. The Gospel of the Resurrected One would cut to the depths of both prince and pauper. Peter learnt his lesson. He was now free to submit. With this lesson learnt, he could issue forth the summons we hear today: to obey God’s will and submit to political authority.

The Emperor in Peter’s day was Nero. Nero was the Roman ruler who led a great persecution against the Christians in the first century. It was under Nero that Peter was martyred. Other authorities of this time included governors Pontius Pilate and Felix. Pilate handed Jesus over to death while Peter stood off in the shadows. Felix used his political power in Paul’s case. All three of these authorities were hardly friends of Christians; they made cruel rulings against them. Yet Peter tells his readers to submit, explicitly naming the Emperor and his subsidiaries (2:13-14). Why? Beginning from Genesis, the Bible consistently tells us that God wants the world to be well-structured. The harmony of all its parts enables the flourishing of all creation. God intends for the world to be orderly and will make it so at the end of time. However, He does not prescribe chaos between now and the end of time, so He uses human authorities to bring a measure of His order. Since this responsibility can tempt authorities to create a future that only God can bring about, God’s people have the vital vocation of speaking the truth to authorities, calling them to account – anticipating God’s final judgment.

We must learn to cultivate political pursuits and discourse that deal with genuine issues of justice and the common good. That is what responsible citizenship as a Christian means. Like Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate, the church must learn to speak truth *to* power rather than *for* power or merely *against* power. When authorities fall afoul of their divine mandate to establish justice and to promote the common good, it is our Christian responsibility to speak truth to them. Civil disobedience should not be our first response. The answer to evil governance is not no governance; Christians are not political anarchists. We submit, speak truth to power, and point earthly politics to its final end in God, for the sake of Christ.

And this leads me to the crux of why Peter instructs Christian submission to authorities: Be subject, *for the Lord’s sake*. (2:13)

When Peter instructs us to be subject to authorities for the Lord’s sake, he actually limits the power of the Emperor and the authorities. By referring to the Lord, Peter was telling the readers of his letter that despite his present overwhelming power, there can only be one ultimate Lord. If Jesus is Lord, *Caesar* is not. Submission can never be to anyone whom Christ does not will.

Peter summons us to obedience to the Prince of Peace. For Him alone do Christian men and women joyfully choose the garments of submission. We operate not out of blind adherence to a rigid principle, but out of love for the one with whom we have a relationship. Christians willingly submit to authorities because we desire our lives to be pleasing to some One, not something.

Peter’s instruction is about how our relationship with Jesus Christ must reconfigure our perspective on life, our attitude towards the world, and our ethics. We should develop a way of living that is consonant with *who* you are in relationship with: Jesus Christ. We are chosen by God: a holy priesthood, strangers, and aliens in this world. Our citizenship is in heaven, and *who we truly* are is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). We do not live for what we will obtain in this world, but for the glory of God.

Let this passage take us to Jesus, to His submission to the earthly authorities. Let it take us to Him, who has now “gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1 Peter 3:22). Let this shape us, so we can stand before any human authority and say by faith: I am a free Christian man. I am a free Christian woman.

And for God’s sake, I submit.

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