

## The Christian and Social Order, Part 1: Submission to Authority 1 Peter 2:13-17

1. **Context:** Implications of ethical behavior in specific life settings – i.e., how the main imperatives in 2:11-12 – moral purity (11) and exemplary goodness (12) – apply to specific life contexts (2:13-3:12)
  - It is in the ancient literary form of a *household code* that was used by the moral philosophers of that time to give instruction in role-related behaviors (cf. Eph. 5:22 – 6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1)
  - **Note:** 2:13 contains the general behavioral principle: “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.*” (See comments on submission below). The Christians had been given an exalted status in God’s plan (2:9-10). Lest his readers be tempted to use this status as an excuse to disregard all externally imposed human authority, he reminds them that they represent his interests more effectively through submission, e.g. 2:16, “live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.” The behavioral guidelines that follow in this context are *implications of a fundamental posture of submission.*
2. Two important terms in this passage:

**Submit** – Comes from the Greek term, *hupotassein*, “to order oneself under.” A good definition in this context is “placing yourself under the social order of the day” (2:13, 2:18, 3:1). *It is a posture of seeking the welfare of others, even the entire society, over one’s own well-being.* This means not only submitting to authority, but also exercising great care in wielding authority, whether as husbands (3:7) or elders (5:1-5). Submission not only appears significantly in 1 Peter, but is also a recurring theme in early Christian instruction (cf. Rom. 13.1, 2, 5; 1 Cor. 16:16; Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21).

Ancient Romans looked upon early Christians in much the same way we do cults today. They were accused of being socially disorderly, and that culture prized social order. What the Roman historian Tacitus said of Jews was likely carried over to Christians: “*First thing they teach their converts is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers of little account.*”<sup>1</sup> This perception led to resentment and mistreatment, especially for wives married to unbelieving husbands, as it was considered disgraceful for wives to not follow the religion of their husbands. Tertullian comments on how pagan husbands treated their Christian wives: “*If a vigil has to be attended, the husband, the first thing in the morning, makes her an appointment for the baths; if it is a fast day, he holds a banquet on that very day; if she has to go out, household affairs and urgency at once come in the way.*”<sup>2</sup> For them, as well as all Christians of this time, the posture of submission was a challenging aspect of Christian witness.

**Freedom** (2:16) – Their redemption from the previous “empty way of life” (1:18) brought questions of whether they must maintain their obligations to the various relationships and structures of society. Some among the government (2:13-17), masters (2:18-25), husbands (3:1-6) wondered whether Christianity would threaten the stability of important social institutions. Even local festivals were affected by the noticeable absence of the Christians (4:3-4). Peter reminds them that their freedom did not release them from the need to “do right” by fulfilling their obligations to others.

3. Behavioral guidelines in specific life settings:
  - Citizens *submitting* to government (2:13-17)
  - Slaves *submitting* to masters (2:18-25)
  - Wives *submitting* to husbands (3:1-6)
  - Husbands *submitting* to (honoring and living considerately with) wives (3:7)

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, Book V, Chapter 5. Written 100-110 AD, covering the period 66-96, directly after Nero’s reign (54-68), which was the likely period in which 1 Peter was written. Online translations of Tacitus include the collection by the University of Chicago ([https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A*.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Uxorem* (To My Wife), Book II, section iv. Written circa 207 AD. Online translations are hard to find, but the quote appears in Adolf Harnack, *Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, “Methods of the Mission: Catechizing and Baptism, The Invasion of Domestic Life,” <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/harnack/mission.v.iii.html>.

- Brothers and sisters *submitting* to one another (3:8)
  - Christians *submitting* to the hostile culture (3:9, bless when reviled, seek peace)
4. Two key points regarding governmental authority affirmed by Peter:
    - A. Human institutions of government are a necessary part of God’s social order to encourage that which is good for human flourishing and keep evil in check (1 Peter 2:13-14; cf. Romans 13:1).
    - B. Exemplary goodness, in all its forms, is our chief means of cooperating with God’s work of building ordered human community (1 Peter 2:15-17).

But this relationship is complex and messy!

### Thoughts to consider<sup>3</sup>

Christians throughout the centuries have struggled to understand how the church should interact with the broader culture and government in particular. On one end is the “take it over” approach that seeks to reshape society according to Christian values, whether in terms of Christian Nationalism<sup>4</sup>, the Catholic-Protestant visions of social justice, or the liberation theologians’ mandate to overthrow all oppressive cultural powers. On the other end is the response of holy distinctiveness, “a definite Christian community living in contradistinction to the rest of society and thus offering the beneficial example and influence of an alternative way of life.” (6) This separatist view has been favored by many with Anabaptist heritage, including David Lipscomb. It also finds strong acceptance among many mainline Protestants under the influence of Duke professor, Stanley Hauerwas.

The reality is, however, that many of these solutions are on a macro level that exceeds most of our capacities for influence. True, among many affluent Churches of Christ there are persons who navigate these issues on the larger stage. For most of us, however, our lived experience is on a micro level of day to day decisions. We may have our visions of how Christians should influence the greater society, and even be activists for our beliefs, but our daily existence plays out on a different frequency. Regardless of our political visions, we live out God’s transcendent vision of what it means to be a holy, exemplary representative of Christian faith. We simply *persist* as faithfully as we can to live out Christian mission and meaningful vocation.

The world is fallen, and we who are fallen live in it to be a sign, foretaste and instrument of the coming kingdom. But we will never do this perfectly. As the parable of the wheat and tares shows us, the world is mixed and we have to co-exist. Along the way, we will not always get what we hope. There is sin and graft, ambivalence and compromise, and partial truths among whole lies. So, we cannot hold out for all-or-nothing results.

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal once observed that “man is neither angel nor beast, and unhappily whoever wants to act the angel, acts the beast.” The Christian faith gets this. We know that humans were created in the image of God, but that we are deeply flawed by sin. Thus, for Christians, human flourishing will never be accomplished by mere human effort. Because of our deep-seated sinfulness, even with God’s help, the world will never achieve anything like lasting progress. We will always be subject to futility, injustice, war, disease, and failure. We have stained the image of God in ourselves, so we are not capable of perfection with the world as it is. Although we are to “set an example by doing what is good” (Titus 2:7), perfection must wait as we wait for God to resurrect all things good at the return of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

So, we go about, seeking faithfully to follow the three major biblical commands:

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<sup>3</sup>Much of this section adapts an excellent work by John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Numbers in parentheses reference direct quotes from Stackhouse.

<sup>4</sup>For a good definition of Christian Nationalism, see Paul D. Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism,” *Christianity Today*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html> (accessed 2023-10-18).

<sup>5</sup>David Young, *Resilient: Standing Firm in a Hostile World* (Renew.org, 2023), 40.

- *The Great Creation Mandate*: Cultivate the earth in all forms of human flourishing through meaningful vocation (Genesis 1-4).
- *The Great Commandments*: Love God, love others (Matthew 22:24-40), and love each other in the church (John 13:34-35) in the pursuit of meaningful community with God and one another.
- *The Great Commission*: Make disciples of all nations in the exercises of Christian redemptive mission (Matthew 28:18-20)

As Stackhouse describes: “Our vocations become a divine calling to be Christian in every mode of life, public as well as private, religious as well as secular, adult as well as juvenile, corporate as well as individual, female as well as male. To be a Christian in every mode of life is to show something of what it means to be a redeemed and renewed human being.” (222) And it is part of God’s good creation to do this in all human endeavors – art, music, education, politics, building, technology, etc.

And in our goings about in a fallen, messy world, most of the time, it will be clear what is right, and we must simply do it.

“Sometimes, however, the politician has to hold his nose and make a deal. The chaplain has to encourage his fellow soldiers in a war he deeply regrets. The professor has to teach fairly a theory or philosophy she doesn’t think is true. The police officer has to subdue a criminal with deadly force. We are on a slippery slope indeed — and one shrouded in darkness, with the ground not only slippery but shifting under our feet. So we hold on to God’s hand, and each other’s, and make the best of it.” (288)

Practicing goodness in this world is at times quite complex.

“We choose never to do something prohibited in the Bible or we do whatever will be truest to the revelation of the will of God, taken as a whole, recognizing that in a topsy-turvy world sometimes one must do what one would never do in Eden or in the New Jerusalem, something that is objectively impure but that nonetheless is the best of the available options and will produce the most of God’s shalom in the situation.” (275)

This does not minimize the fact that in our time, this is done in an increasingly hostile environment, just as it was for Peter’s original recipients. It simply acknowledges the struggle many of us feel in submitting to a social order wherein we feel like *aliens* and *strangers* (1 Peter 2.11).

## Discussion

1. Where do you feel the greatest struggle in living out Peter’s instructions to submit?
2. Where do you experience ambivalence in feeling complicit in matters over which you have no control (e.g., governmental regulations, cultural currents)?
3. What principles and practices do you find helpful as you seek to be a genuine Christian witness in situations characterized by the “wheat and the tares” (i.e., the close co-existence of evil and good)?