

Already Free as Slaves of God
A Sermon on 1 Peter 2:11-25
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2017

Introduction

How should Christians respond to governmental authority? What is the Christian's place in the social structure? These are the questions that Peter poses today and in next week's text.

We face the same questions today. How do we respond as Christians to a polarized politics that we feel alienated from? What is our place in a secular world whose values we reject?

Peter gives general instructions to all the new Christians on these questions. Then he gives specific instructions to two groups, household slaves and women. He closes with more general instruction about the inevitable suffering that takes place with a clash in values and the joy that comes with suffering for Christ. Mary will talk about women and suffering next week. Today we will look at governmental authorities and slaves.

First Move: Be Subordinate to Human Created Structures

Peter addresses the new Christians in Asia Minor as resident aliens and sojourners. Resident aliens is a translation of *πάροικος*, someone who is away from home. Sojourners is a translation of *παρεπίδημος*, someone who is walking through a strange land. The Greco-Roman world is no longer their home. Their rebirth in Christ means they have left behind the cultural values of their old way of living and taken on a new identity. The government embodies and promotes the cultural values that the Christians are leaving behind. So Christians feel alienated from the government and the culture.

Peter exhorts all new Christians to abstain from fleshly desires that wage war against the soul. Flesh means the human ego and its pursuit of its own gratification. When we put ourselves first, we will fight to gratify our own needs. Desires of the flesh result in violence. Flesh is contrasted with the soul, which seeks the things of God and extends beyond itself toward meeting the needs of others. The soul is the spiritual and self-transcendent potential of human life that is animated by grace. We find our souls when we put God's desires ahead of the desires of our flesh. Centering

our lives on the gospel results in inner freedom from destructive desires or values. For Peter, the self-centered behavior of Gentiles, their culture, and their government is what Christians have left behind.

Peter also exhorts all new Christians to hold their conduct fast to the good when they are among non-believers. Christians are not to separate from the world but to engage the world and make their good conduct transparent for the world to see. This is a different perspective from the Book of Revelation, which condemns Rome as demonic and urges Christians in Asia Minor to separate from the world. The New Testament does not speak with one voice. It reflects different perspectives on what the Christ event means in the lives of Christians. Revelation reflects a Jewish-Christian perspective that was bitter toward Rome for destroying the Temple. 1 Peter reflects a Gentile perspective that was less bitter toward Rome. When we talk about going back to the first century and restoring the primitive church, we need to recognize that there were diverse Christians and diverse Christianities from the beginning.

“The Gentiles speak against you as evil doers.” Peter addresses persecution that the new Christians face—it comes not from the government but from family members, friends and employers. The Christians are probably being slandered because of their refusal to participate in societal customs and beliefs.

“When they observe your good deeds, they will praise God on the day of visitation.” Peter does not assume that Gentiles will be impressed by the honorable behavior of the Christians. Rather, at history’s end, when God comes to visit, the Gentiles will behold the good deeds of the faithful, then they will glorify God. The deeds cause the Gentiles to praise God not the doer. This is the same thought as in the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore let your light shine before men so that they may see your noble deeds and glorify your father in the heavens.”

Peter makes no suggestion that the day of visitation will mean wrath and vengeance for the Gentiles. Instead, he says that the Gentiles will be transformed by observing the good deeds and give glory to God. Peter’s hope is that the new Christians will live a life that honors God. Again, notice how different 1 Peter is from Revelation. They are both apocalyptic, but they have different images of God and of God’s attitude toward non-Christians.

As for Christians’ attitude specifically toward government, Peter says, “Be subordinate to all human created structures for the sake of the Lord.” Peter here differs from Paul. Paul says in Romans 13 that governments are ordained by God. Peter calls the government one of the human created structures. It is created by humans not God. Human structures are changeable and impermanent. There is no

ideal form of government. God does not ordain any one style of government or economic system. That will surprise modern-day Christians who advocate Western-style democracy and industrial capitalism as the ideal that should be evangelized to the rest of the world. All social orders are unjust to a greater or lesser degree. A social order is unjust when it arbitrarily privileges one group over another, like Caucasians over African-Americans or men over women.

God *does* put value in order. God fashions order out of chaos in the Genesis creation story. Subordination means finding and exercising one's proper role within a social order. Subordinate means to find order under.

Order is essential to complex systems, such as governments. Order provides the control and efficiency that makes it possible for hundreds of people to drive on the same highway at the same time. Order means the congregation stops talking while the minister delivers a sermon. Order is perhaps the most important value that Mary teaches the children in Mother's Day Out. She teaches the children to walk in a straight line whenever they leave the classroom. You can see the children walking in straight lines all around the church. She teaches them not to talk when the teacher is talking. They learn to talk one at a time and not to talk over each other.

Being subordinate to means that Christians are willing to work within the existing social order, however flawed or impermanent or unjust it is.

Human created structures do some good. Peter says that governmental authorities punish evil doers and praise those who do good. Reward and punishment traditionally was considered an essential characteristic of government.

That does not mean that Peter condones Rome. He sharply criticizes false values of the dominant culture while exhorting the community to respect political authorities and do good in public.

Peter encourages Christians to support the social order because they want to silence their detractors and protect the Christian community from slander. Doing good will silence the ignorance of mindless men. The Gentile detractors are mindless because they know nothing of spiritual ways. They have no spiritual insight.

Peter reminds the Christians that they are already free. By God's grace they have been liberated from the violence and self-interest of the culture and its government. That does not give them license to do as they wish. They have been liberated to be slaves of God.

Peter closes his general instruction with a series of staccato imperatives: "Honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king." Again, notice how different from Revelation this is. Honor everyone. Each person is a child of God and worthy of respect. No beasts or dragons here. The commands are even stronger for

conduct within the community: love the brotherhood. That is one thing that all the earliest Christian communities agree on. The Christian community is marked by love toward one another as sisters and brothers. Fear God could also be translated as revere God. Look at God with awe and wonder. Peter puts the emperor in his place with an anti-climax: respect the emperor or the king. The emperor is entitled to the same respect that Christians show everyone else in civil society and not the reverence that is owed to God.

Second Move: Be Subordinate to Human Masters

Peter then directs his teaching to household slaves. He has no instruction for the masters. This sets the Christian household codes apart from the household codes that had circulated in Greco-Roman culture since the time of Aristotle, which were directed to masters and not slaves.

Peters urges the household slaves to be subordinate to their masters, even if they are crooked. Liberals have rejected these texts because they have been used to condone slavery. They call them a later development in the tradition that tones down the gospel. Conservatives over the centuries have applied the texts literally. Slave masters used this text against African-American slaves during the Civil War. Conservative Christians today still embrace the household codes for wives. They have been used to silence women in church and deny them a place in leadership.

Can we still hear a word of good news in the household codes? I believe so. I also believe that they are consistent with the ethics of the gospels and not a later development.

Peter singles out slaves and wives, who were the most vulnerable Christians living in Roman society. They had to endure the greatest conflict between faithfulness to Christian values and efforts to conform to societal expectations. Peter is speaking to Christian slaves of non-Christian masters and Christian wives of non-Christian husbands. The sense of freedom and dignity intrinsic to the gospel message created a deep tension in Christians trapped in slavery.

We have to distinguish Roman slavery from African-American slavery in American history. People became slaves in Roman times because they were sold into debt or because they were captured as prisoners of war. This was slavery for a term of years until the debt was paid. It was not lifelong or generational slavery. It was not slavery inflicted upon an entire race of people. Many slaves had managerial positions and were better educated than their masters. Many slaves who were prisoners of war were given citizenship after their term of years was completed. Citizenship was

a great privilege and allowed some former slaves to become wealthy. Former slaves who became wealthy were benefactors of the Christian community.

This text is good news because it is about liberation not slavery. To know that you are a child of God is liberating. The chains fall off the spirit. The life of the Christian is determined by God and not in reaction to the actions of others. Peter tells the slaves not to let the actions of the masters determine their attitude. Slaves in 1 Peter are not passive or submissive; they are called to action—not revolution, not revenge, not submission, but doing good. The exhortation is to hold fast in doing good even when you are mistreated by a crooked master. It gives slaves something to do that is within their power.

Slaves do not endure suffering as a strategy. They suffer, just as Jesus suffered. Christ identifies with slaves in the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, which is a foundational text for early Christians.

Christ Jesus was in the form of a god but did not regard to be equal with a god as booty [to be seized], but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient until death, even death by a cross.

Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a slave. He stood in solidarity with people who were forced to endure unjust suffering because they were powerless and vulnerable.

Peter compares Jesus to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Peter quotes from Isaiah 53 when he says that Jesus was reviled but he did not revile in return, he did not commit sin nor was deceit found in his mouth, by his wounds, you were healed. Like the suffering servant, Jesus responded non-violently when his own life was threatened. Jesus responded with silence when he was questioned, or slandered, by Pilate and the high priest. He felt abandoned by God on the cross, just as powerless people feel abandoned by God when they suffer from injustice.

The Christ event reveals God's character. God suffered from grief as Christ hung on the cross. Unjust suffering is the nature of God. If God is love, then God suffers when people that God loves suffer. A love that does not retaliate but breaks the spiral of violence is the ultimate nature of things.

Peter tells the household slaves that for them to endure unjust suffering for the sake of Christ is a grace. It is participation in God's nature.

Peter honors the slaves by holding them up as symbols for the church as a whole. The early church called its leaders deacons, which means table servants. Or, in Peter's words, household slaves. They served others in the most menial tasks. All

the new Christians are to be subordinate, just as the household slaves are subordinate. Being subordinate is good news to the extent that it shares in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Third Move: Revolutionary Subordination

The Messianic Revolution is brought about by subordinating yourself. This is the shocking, liberating word of today's text. It creates an alternate vision of reality among the oppressive structures and powers of society.

Jesus did not take the form of a slave as a means to a revolution or so that he might be exalted. Becoming a slave *is* the Messiah's revolution. The Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, in his book *The Politics of Jesus*, calls it Revolutionary Subordination.

Revolutionary Subordination seeks only the good of what exists and does so by doing the good as revealed by the Lord. It rules out any form of dominance, oppression, cruelty or violence. Messianic revolutionaries already live as free persons with respect to all existing systems.

The true revolutionary power of the church is not in transforming society or attaining political power but in uniting with and imitating the Messiah. Christ has already wrought the decisive revolution by taking the violence of the system into his own body instead of by escalating the violence. Christ brought a revolution by serving every human creature instead of exercising political power over them.

Karl Barth, a German theologian of the early 20th century, says that there can be no more devastating undermining of the existing order than to recognize it as an illusion. Revolutionary power does not set what exists against what exists. It does not replace one human created structure with another, such as republican democracy or democratic socialism. All existing social systems are always systems of relative justice and injustice. None of them represent the arrival of the new creation. History has shown that the struggle for justice is not only the child but also the mother of further injustice. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

So how do the good folks of Edmond Trinity become Messianic Revolutionaries?

First, we recognize that we are already free as slaves of God. God has touched us by grace and let us know that we are accepted. We have taken the public stand of becoming open and affirming to let LGBT folks, especially those who have been wounded, know that they are accepted, that their sexuality is a gift of God, that they are welcome to participate in the full life of the church without abandoning their sexuality. We celebrate the good news that all people are daughters and sons of God.

All people have inherent dignity. We do not need to turn to society to affirm our dignity. God has already done that, and that is enough.

God liberates us from the fleshly desires of materialism, individualism and violence that wage war against the soul. The culture embraces these fleshly desires and tempts us with them. The government, whether Republican or Democrat, tells us that the engine of economic growth is consumer spending, buying more stuff. The gospel gives us the strength to resist. It tells us that we can live more with less. The gospel gives us a new identity. We see ourselves as resident aliens; we seek to feed the soul instead of gratifying the flesh.

God sent us an apostle of nonviolence last week. John Dear spoke pure gospel at the dinner for the Coalition Against the Death Penalty and at his talk here on the Beatitudes. His nonviolent life is a model for us. The nonviolent life has three aspects: being nonviolent toward ourselves, being nonviolent toward the people closest to us, and being nonviolent toward all people by participating in the grass roots movement for peace and nonviolence. It takes a lot of spiritual discipline to do that, and we are here to help each other stay on the path.

As resident aliens, we reject violence in all its forms. We reject the death penalty. We reject mass incarceration. We reject racism. We reject the exploitation of poor people through payday loans. We reject violence against the earth and all other creatures.

The good news that Peter brings us today is that we don't have to create a movement for peace and nonviolence. We can join a movement that began 2,000 years ago. We participate in that movement by being subordinate to.

We are subordinate to human created structures. Peter mentions three structures, or three types of human relationships: your relationship with the king, your relationship with your master, and your relationship with your spouse.

It almost makes me choke to say, be subordinate to the President. I am not aware of any Christian values that he embodies. I do think you can respect the office, even if you reject his values. Same with the governor. Same with the mayor. The mayor is easier. Peter says, Honor them. Honor the authority of the office. He doesn't say you have to agree with their policies or their values. Peter exhorts us to hold our conduct fast to the good. Remain true to Christian values of nonviolence and the dignity of all people in your dealings with government.

Slaves be subordinate to masters has given way to employees be subordinate to your employers. The employer provides the employee with work and wages. Honor the employer for that. Hold fast to the good in your conduct, even if the employer is crooked. Minister to people whatever your job is. Self-employed people can be

subordinate to their clients. Put their interests ahead of yours. We can take Christian values of humility and empathy into the workplace.

Husbands and wives, or better, spouses, be subordinate to your spouse. That is a minefield that I will let Mary navigate next week.

These human created structures provide order, not a divine order, but order that makes a higher level of complexity and harmony possible.

We honor these structures, but we revere Jesus, just as we revere God. To Jesus, we are not just subordinate, we are obedient. We follow in his steps and embrace his ministry of healing and reconciliation. We suffer as he did with the most vulnerable people in society. Today, that is the prisoner, the refugee, the immigrant, people of color, people in poverty. People will stop saying evil things about the church if they see people imitating Christ instead of imitating worldly values. Secular government will not undergo a Messianic Revolution, we will not see the kingdom of God, until the hearts and minds of people are transformed, until all people imitate Christ. That Revolution begins with each of us.

Conclusion

We were sheep who were led astray but by God's grace we have been turned back to the shepherd. Now our wounds are healed and we can live for righteousness, even within human created structures that are flawed and impermanent and unjust. We can glorify God with our good deeds.

The Messianic Revolution has begun. Will you join it?

Copyright Donald F. Heath, Jr. 2017