

“Fear, Honor, and Endurance”

When we started our journey through the books of the Bible roughly eighteen months ago I really wasn't sure when we would get to 1st Peter. What with special liturgical seasons and vacations, study leaves, and just the unpredictable nature of events that alter our plans, who would have thought that we would be exploring the themes of this letter a little more than a week before an important national election? It hadn't crossed my mind, but I suspect it crossed God's mind. And I further suspect that that is because it is very important to God that we get our relationship with our government right. In order to do that, we don't have to be political science majors, but neither are we given free-rein to imagine that biblical theology has nothing to say about worldly politics. So while (as I've said before) I will never presume it to be my business to infantilize you by telling you for whom to vote, I will insist that Christians carry a God-ordained burden to wield their power as voting citizens with a biblically-formed conscience and a determination to take up our responsibility to be salt and light in the country in which God has placed us. I am saying

that it may be useless to expect our next president to move us in this or that direction, if we don't do our job of living by Kingdom values and bearing witness to the truth of Jesus Christ and his profoundly personal solution to the problems that beset every country and culture. This first letter from Peter makes it very clear that we have our work to do, and maybe in the largest sense, it won't matter who we elect, if the church in America declines to pay the part we've been called to play.

And I just want to underscore (once again) what I said in our October newsletter, the idea that the church must beware of becoming the property of a political party. I don't think I am being cynical when I say that both major political parties would love to have the church in their pocket. Both the Republicans and the Democrats would happily co-opt the person who votes with a Christ-formed conscience to serve the needs of their party. And we become little more than the "prayer wing" of any political party, when we elevate a party platform to the level of God's Kingdom agenda. When C.S. Lewis (who was a military veteran) was addressing British Christians in World War II, he wrote, "He who surrenders himself without reservation to the

temporal claims of a nation, a party, or a class is rendering to Ceasar that which, of all things, most emphatically belongs to God; (which is) himself". We render unto Ceasar that which belongs to Ceasar. And we render unto God that which only belongs to God.

How do we make the distinction? That is where Peter helps us to sort things out. Listen again, closely, to what he says in verses 13 through 17 and then we'll try to unpack what it is we hear him saying. Beginning at verse 13: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

So what are some of the "big-picture" principles that Peter lays out in these verses? First fo all I think he wants us to remember that God is

intrinsically a God of order, not chaos. In the same way that God rendered order out of chaos in the creation, God also sets in place a structure of authority in what might otherwise be the formless mass of human societies, with a view to bringing about a functional and human infrastructure for our daily living. In short, God puts governments in place for our good. Without some sort of functioning system of governmental authority, it is hard to imagine how we could have a consistent standard of monetary exchange, the maintenance of roads and highways, a legal system that could be fairly applied to all citizens, a regulation of goods and commerce, and some structure of police or military authorized to keep bad or dangerous behavior in check. If we didn't have any of those kinds of authorities and structures in place, we would notice it instantly, and we wouldn't waste any time trying to put some such structures in place. Law and order might sound repressive to some people, but that hardly makes a good case for lawlessness and disorder. Imagine trying to get home after today's service if all the traffic lights were out and all the rules of the road were suspended. God puts governmental authorities in place because he means to protect human life and to enhance the conditions that make fruitful and peaceful human community

possible. And therefore, the thought here is, that ordinarily, Christians should strive to “submit to all legitimate authorities, whether or not the persons exercising authority are believers. The recognition of properly constituted authority is necessary for the greatest good of the largest number of people, and it is necessary to best fulfill the will of God in the world.” (So says the study notes of the N.I.V. Study Bible.) “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.” So the sense here is that if God set up governments and authorities to serve the best ends of human communities, then when we disobey them, we might well find ourselves militating against the purposes and plans of God. So Christians most generally strive to observe and keep all laws, not first because they fear punishment, but because they reverence God.

Now we may rightly object that that is all well and fine unless you’re living in Nazi, Germany. Then to cooperate with such an evil regime is to disobey the laws of God and common decency. And we would be right. Biblically right. We think of the Hebrew mid-wives who disobeyed Pharaoh’s command that they kill any male children born to Hebrew slaves. And God blessed them for their disobedience. And

we honor the memory of Corrie ten Boom and her family who broke the law by harboring Jewish citizen, and paid for their “disobedience” with their lives. I hope we would have done the same. But keep in mind, Peter wrote these words, when Nero was the Emperor – and Nero was responsible for the worst atrocities perpetrated against Christians in the early church. So, the word here seems to be that while our obedience to the government must never be in violation of the laws of God, we must, as far as it is possible in good conscience, render willing obedience to the authorities set over us. I would call it, obedience within limits. What we must not co-operate with, would roughly fall under the categories of whatever is, unjust, inhumane, and indecent.

So why cooperate at all? We do it, Peter says, to silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. There were people then as there are people now who wanted to claim that Christians were the worst kind of citizens. There were people in Nero’s day who wanted to spread the idea that Christians were insurrectionists, cannibals, and atheists; insurrectionists because they followed a leader executed for sedition; cannibals because they said they ate flesh and drank blood in one of

their rituals, and atheists because they only believed in one God – which meant not believing in thousands of other gods. Today it’s easier. Today they just follow a line of logic that goes: Christians are intolerant, intolerant people are fundamentalists, fundamentalists are terrorists; therefore, every Christian is at heart a terrorist, and how good of a citizen could you be if you ‘re the type that bombs clinics and flies planes into buildings? Peter’s right: that’s foolish talk from ignorant people. But how do you contradict that? You don’t do it by getting red in the face and demoralizing your critics. You contradict the ridiculous by being the best neighbor and citizen you know how to be. You chose, in your God-given freedom, to be consistently humane, and honest, and peaceable, and trustworthy, fair-minded, forgiving and graceful. It is pretty hard to make a case that that kind of person is a potential terrorist or a rotten citizen.

And then notice how Peter summarizes our way of interacting with the world in verse 17. Verse 17 says, “Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.” So how are you and I to treat the world? Well, we start by showing proper respect to everyone. Christians should be known for how well they

treat everyone: their waitress with a broken-accent, their atheist boss, their Muslim next door neighbor, their homosexual medical professional, their Marxist professor, and their Mormon real estate agent. If each of these people could say, “The people who consistently treat me with humanity and respect are the Christians,” we’d have a lot more people wanting to explore what Christianity is all about. The trouble is that far too many of us save our courtesy and best behavior for fellow Christians. I have Christian in-laws who are completely unembarrassed about showing dis-respect to non-Christians. They brag about telling others off. And they don’t see the contradiction. Secondly, Peter says, love the brotherhood of believers. The issue here isn’t about being perfect. It is about making a commitment and disciplining our self to only and always interact with fellow Christians as those whom we have been commanded by Jesus to love. I will never understand how or why we give ourselves permission to behave toward another brother or sister in Christ in an unloving manner. We have never, ever, ever had Jesus’ permission to do that but you know and I know that some people can’t seem to get through a Sunday morning without giving someone some grief. I’ll never understand it. To me, it’s the most depressing part for the

pastorate. And I love the pastorate. But folks, if we can show respect to everyone because we recognize that all people have been made in the image of God, how much more should we discipline ourselves to behave in a loving manner toward those with whom we have been made family forever? I'm not talking about a generally nice idea. We are talking about a committed stance we must take, or brace ourselves to hear Jesus saying on the last day, "I never knew you." I have been told by one of my relatives that one of our presidential candidates is the antichrist. You know who the antichrist is? It is anyone who knows what Jesus said to do, and doesn't do it. So that includes me. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another".

Thirdly, Peter concludes verse 17, by saying "fear God, honor the king." My observation would be that when we get goofed up on this one, it is because we do the opposite of what he says. Too many Christians down throughout history have tended to honor God and fear the king. That is to say, we know how to show God a general courtesy, respect or honor. If we are Protestants we know when to stand and sit or be silent in God's presence. If we're Catholics we

know when to kneel, or say “thanks be to God” or make the sign of the cross. We know to take our hats off when we pray. It’s a gesture of respect. A sign that we extend to God the courtesy of showing public tokens of piety and honor toward God. That’s not bad. Not bad at all. But the problem comes when we save our fear for the state, the government, people who hold civil power over us. We may not get too worked up about a page from the Scriptures, but a single form letter from the I.R.S. can keep us awake all night. We might, as Thomas Moore said of the bishops of England, have slept through the Sermon on the Mount, but notice how we sit up and take notice when we get a friendly war-time greeting from Uncle Sam. It may not trouble our sleep tonight to know we broke at least one of the Ten Commandments today, but just let me see those flashing red lights show up in my rear view mirror on the way home, and you will have my adrenaline flowing in buckets. For some reason we are more afraid of being audited by the government than by God. We honor God, but we fear the government.

And Peter says, it needs to be the other way around. And maybe Peter knew that from his own and most painful experience. Maybe he

could never forget the horrible truth that when push came to show, literally, he may have thought he honored God, but he feared the government. And in the spell of that fear he betrayed Jesus three times. In fact, when the authorities showed up that night, every apostle ran into the dark to save his own skin. And if we are not careful, we could betray Jesus for far less dramatic reasons. Maybe we just want to keep a good job or get a raise. So we go along to get along,. Maybe we laugh at a racist joke, more afraid of appearing stuffy, than of showing disrespect for one for whom Christ died. We may speak well of God, but we save our fear for the people and agencies that have authority over us in a more immediate sense. And Peter pleads with us to get it right. Fear God, honor the king. The good news is, Peter learned. By God's grace, he was given the chance to try it again. And this time he got it right. This time, he said, "We must obey God rather than man." And when Rome wanted to crucify him he only asked that they crucify him upside down because he did not feel worthy to die like Jesus. Brothers and sisters in Christ, "Show proper respect to everyone: Love brotherhood of believers, fear God, and honor the king." Those are our orders. Amen? Amen.

