

“How the Church Fights Back”

Sixth in a series on Peter's First Letter

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1st Peter 2:11-17

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My beloved ones, I beg you – foreigners and exiles as you are – to hold back from the desires driven by the flesh that wage war against your true selves. Keep up good conduct among the Gentiles, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they will observe your good deeds and praise God on the day of his royal arrival.

Be subject to every institution humans have created, for the sake of the Lord: whether to the emperor as supreme, or to governors sent by him to punish evildoers and praise those who do good. For God's will is that by behaving well, you will silence the ignorance of foolish people. As God's slaves, live as free people, but don't use your freedom as a cover for evil. Honour everyone, love the family of believers, revere God, and honour the emperor.

My translation, using N. T. Wright's *Kingdom New Testament* and various commentaries.

How the church fights back . . .

It was a year ago. George Floyd was murdered. People took to the streets, insisting that Black Lives Matter, and our society and its institutions better start acting like it. Christians join that call to change how things are. Should we? The Scripture says, “*Be subject to every human-made institution*”¹

A half-hour drive from here, Trinity Bible Chapel refused to follow government Covid restrictions, and continued gathering for worship. Its pastor says they're doing it to be obedient to God.² But what about, “*Be subject to every human-made institution?*”

Professor Karl Barth preached at a church in Berlin, in 1933 He spoke passionately about how Christians and Jews are “*united as 'children of the living God.'*” Much of the

¹ In most translations of 2:13, *anthropine ktisei* is translated as “human institution.” I was intrigued to realize that *ktisis* means “creation,” and in the New Testament always refers to God's creation or creature. Translating it as “human-made institution” underlines the fact that the organizations and systems Peter is talking about are created by us; they are not divine!

² Pastor Jacob Reaume, quoted in Luke Schulz, “Trinity Bible Chapel pastor has 'had enough' of government's 'ridiculous policies,’” *Kitchener Today* (April 27, 2021).

congregation walked out. After, Barth folded his sermon into an envelope, and mailed it to Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Had this great theologian not heard that we are to *“Be subject to every human-made institution?”*

Peter, whose letter this comes from, was executed on government orders. Was he having second thoughts about what he wrote? *“Be subject . . . to the emperor as supreme and governors sent by him.”*

Pontius Pilate was one of those governors. He commanded that Jesus' tomb be secured shut. God broke that court order, and broke the tomb open.

There have been, are, and will always be authorities, institutions, systems, and laws that are murderous, tyrannical, or with which we disagree deeply. Do we fight back? Fight back, when are told to *“be subject”* to them?

II

We can vote, write letters, support parties, put up signs, get in arguments online. We can run for office. Yes, things should be more democratic, more transparent, more equitable, more honest. We assume it should be better.

What we assume, Peter never even imagined. Nor had anyone he was writing to.

Nero ruled the empire from Rome. He was quite popular, especially with working people, and especially in the empire's eastern provinces. In places like what is now Turkey, where Peter is writing to, emperors were worshipped as divine. You offered sacrifices, said prayers, and went to festivals to the emperor. Everyone did.³ It was about loyalty, keeping the peace, and the welfare of the empire.

But these Christ-people? “Christ” means king, and they're not talking about Caesar. Their “King Jesus” was a nobody who was executed by one of Caesar's governors. Many of these new “Christ-ians” are our friends, neighbours, family. They did worship and were loyal to Caesar Nero. Now, no! It's Jesus! Crazy! Treason?

These Christians are under a lot of pressure, suspected of disloyalty, undermining

³ Jews were, of course, an exception. Their refusal to worship the emperor led to conflicts with the authorities. Generally, however, a compromise held, and Jews were allowed to offer sacrifices and prayers to God *for* the emperor, not to the emperor himself. When the Christian movement was largely a Jewish group, this compromise held. However, when Gentiles started becoming Christians, they were not covered by this exception and conflict ensued.

community and family values, subverting the institutions that keep society stable and safe.

The empire is striking. Does the church strike back?

III

Peter starts with this: steer clear of “fleshy desires.”

I hear “flesh,” and I think of “birds and bees” stuff. Flesh — the Greek word is *sarx* — it basically means our physical selves and our human nature. Our *sarx* selves are weak, perishing, and corruptible. So we get trouble, in all sorts of ways. But nothing Peter says here suggests the things that worked up the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live.⁴

Remember, Peter is talking about when following Jesus puts us in conflict with authorities, institutions, systems. If you're being mistreated, scorned, and persecuted . . . when there is injustice . . . what fleshy desires would tempt you?

Get back at them. Fight fire with fire. Throw accusations to bat back theirs. Insult. Dehumanize. Mock. Meet unjust violence with righteous violence. Try to destroy my opponents, if not their lives then their reputations. Live out my revulsion by being revolting. Tell lies to serve a greater truth.

Tempting? But what *they're* doing, how wrong *they are*, how evil! Yes, they might be. Those fleshy desires, though, they grow in me.⁵

How do you react inside, when you see a politician you dislike? Yah, even *that* one.

Because we belong to Jesus, we will do politics differently. Stay clear of fleshy desires.

IV

Then Peter says to them, “*Be subject to every human-made institution.*” He singles out the emperor and his governors in particular.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Church_Lady

⁵ Douglas Harink writes: “The people of God are called to abstain from the desires of the flesh that found the politics of violence. They are also called to resist *their own* temptation to vengeance when they are mistreated, scorned, and persecuted. Despite their being wrongly maligned as evildoers, they are nonetheless called not to mount a revolt in kind against the enemy, nor to repay evil for evil, but rather to enact a wholly other politics, the politics of the good (a ‘good way of life’ and ‘good works’; 2:13) rooted in an generated by the goodness and power of God.” 1 & 2 Peter, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2009), 74.

Of course, they already are. They are subject to the emperor. Peter is not telling them something new. But how should they live this "subject status" while belonging to Jesus?

Worship the emperor? Nope! Nero is not divine. Only God is worth worshipping. They can "honour the emperor" and should. We must "honour everyone." Everyone has value. Treat them well, including the emperor.

Peter wants them to show their neighbours and rulers that they are not traitors or subversive.⁶ Accusations will still come, but make sure your actions make them untrue.

We are not much different from them. *We are subject* to governments and laws. So, *be subject*. Authorities are important. They protect the weak against the powerful, guide (and sometimes enforce) how we live together. At least, they should.

What about when they do not?

"Being subject" does not mean total loyalty, nor silence in the face of injustice.⁷

∨

Peter says something else. I almost missed it.

*As God's slaves, live as free people,
but don't use your freedom as a cover for evil.*

These people knew about slavery. Some of them were enslaved. (We'll get into that next week.) Whether they are slaves, free, or citizens however, they now belong to God because of Jesus Christ. When we belong to God, who is so perfectly good, we are truly free to live as God's people in this world.

We honour the authorities, as we honour everyone. We pray for them: for their success and well-being, for wisdom, careful stewardship of the powers they hold, and that their actions will mesh with God's shalom-peace, a society where everyone flourishes.

We act well in our communities. We follow laws in their spirit as well as their letter,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Elliott writes that, "in regard to the civil realm, urging subordination is hardly a call to 'loyalty' . . . In this context being subordinate to the emperor and his governors is to respect his authority and show him the honor due all persons (v.17) — nothing more and nothing less." Quoted in Dennis R. Edwards, 1 Peter, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2017), 106.

because we see their value. We pay our taxes, and are glad to. Yes, I mean that, because taxes are one important way we generously share in the welfare of all.

We are subject to those in authority, but our loyalty is to the only One to whom we belong. We follow Jesus.

VI

So when our human-made institutions are doing wrong, when there is injustice by individuals or systems, we act. We do what we can, with whatever we have, to change things. Within the law, if at all possible, because breaking laws is a serious thing.

We do this to serve others. You know, "love your neighbour."

I get nervous when Christians start "standing up for their rights." I guess that's what bothers me about churches defying the government's pandemic orders. We've shown that the church does not need to gather in person to worship; online is not ideal, but it's okay. They seem sucked into all sorts of conspiracy theories and bad science.

Most worrying to me, however, is that they are breaking laws for themselves, not giving themselves for others. In the other examples I started with — Black Lives Matter; Karl Barth defending Jews in Nazi Germany; Peter risking execution because of his witness to Jesus' good news for everyone; Jesus resurrecting from the government-closed tomb — people defied the authorities *for the sake others*.

Resisting evil sometimes means breaking the law. When we do, we will accept the consequences that come with "being subject," always knowing who our true Judge is.

We will protest. We will put our bodies on the line. Without violence, however. Those we oppose, and those acting on their behalf, are also beloved of God.

We will resist those "fleshy desires," the ways the world does politics. We will be truthful, gentle-hearted, seeking the best for others. We won't tear down our opponents, but build up everyone.

That's how the church fights back. It will make us enemies. Pray that our actions will show them Jesus, so they too will join the celebration when he arrives and everyone is subject to him.

Amen.