

A review of the epistle so far points up the marvelous new position New Testament saints have received as a result of the cross. Believers, Jews and Gentiles have been born again through the Word of God by the power of the Spirit, receiving a new, sinless nature. We are united together as living stones, a house and temple of God, a holy priesthood with direct access to God and a royal priesthood commanding God to others. A special, precious people, a people of God, a people who are God's own possession. A people not looking for earthly well being but longing for the future heavenly inheritance awaiting them. Yet a people remaining here in this world as aliens and pilgrims sent to glorify God and as witnesses for the Savior to the lost. A people who are to have a foundation of interactive, godly behavior amongst themselves, and then live godly lives before the unsaved around them; have good conduct despite negative attitudes of their neighbors; conduct that would ultimately lead some who were persecuting them to salvation. And even if some die in their sins, they will glorify God before the Great White Throne because of the witness to Christ in the conduct of those they had slanderously accused.

Now Peter opens up another avenue for our conduct to glorify God; our open respect for authority and those in authority. And beyond that, our respect for all men and certainly for all brothers and sisters in Christ. We honor those in authority beginning with God Himself who establishes all authority. One basic form of giving honor is to honestly pay our taxes. All levels of authority are included, even that of masters over servants, verse 18. Respect for authorities includes both obedience to the laws of their jurisdiction and an honoring attitude in public and private. One should address a public official with his honorable title because of the God given office he is occupying (even if he is personally corrupt and a scoundrel). This may sound incredibly naive to some. But remember that Nero, one of the most notoriously evil men to ever come to power ruled about the time Peter writes this. Note how Paul addresses Roman Governors and King Agrippa in Acts.

(The campaigns and results of recent elections in this country may have frustrated some believers but Peter guards our tongues and attitudes. We are to be as aliens and pilgrims here. We are citizens of heaven with our interests and inheritance there, not here. Therefore some refrain from involvement and do not feel free to vote at all.) The Lord Jesus is our example. He paid whatever taxes were due. He was always respectful to governmental and religious authorities and when speaking of them. He was respectful even when they were unjust or acting beyond their authority, verse 23. Jesus doesn't denounce their incompetence or their willful miscarriage of justice in condemning Him to death by crucifixion. He refuses to rise to the bait the rulers (and Judas) set out tempting Him

to take a stand against the Roman government. He does not condemn the death penalty even though it was truly, this time if no other, being applied to an Innocent Man. Any protest, while fully justified, would have diverted attention from this pure and righteous Man. His silence but exposed their sin, putting it in stark relief against the Standard that was before them. His was a simple, yet profound, submission to God, and to the hatred and whims of sinners.

What are the legitimate functions of government on the earth? Peter tells us, "for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well." They usually do less of the latter than the former. Men are always trying to limit the powers of government over them while seeking to expand the duties of government to benefit them. Men try to improve things by changing the form of government. Even more effort is put into trying to change the leadership. There are revolts. But nothing is ever found truly satisfactory. We await the King of kings and Lord of lords. Yet any form of government is far superior to the anarchy of Noah's time. No matter what the form of government or who is in charge, our willing and complete obedience to the laws of the land and rules of the workplace (or school) will silence the ignorance of foolish men and honor God.

The hearts of men lust for independence from parental authority, from classroom authority, from governmental authority, and at the bottom of all, independence from God (sadly, even in His own House). But the believer is to be characterized by subjection to all authority. What about Peter's own answer to the religious rulers of Judea who forbid speaking about Jesus. "We ought to obey God rather than men." (We are to be in obedience always to someone.) There are very, very few situations in which we may be called upon to make that choice. And if we are we should not resent receiving the judicial punishment of the government. (Would that we were evangelizing enough to be forbidden.) While enduring such punishment, Paul and Silas glorified God to the salvation of their jailer, Acts 16:20-40. Peter calls attention to Jesus' example in verses 21-23. See also the example in Acts 4:1-33.

Currently, we shudder to hear professing Christians boldly speaking against authorities and of defying them and seeking their overthrow. This is not conduct Jesus or any of His apostles sanction, much less encourage. Peter denounces such in his second epistle (ch. 2) as does Jude. Instead of bringing about conviction, repentance and salvation, these unnecessarily offend government authorities and citizens, closing hearts against the testimony to Christ borne by faithful believers.

Being born again, a people of God, we have freedom (not independence) all men would envy. But we

must beware that we not take advantage of our liberty for fleshly ends and use it to cloak malicious acts. Liberty is not License. Though believers are free we are not yet free of the flesh which moves us to sin. But we are now free to not sin, and free to willingly subject ourselves to the Lord and His wishes.

We are free to love the brotherhood. Here again is that filial love, mentioned in 1:22, awakened in us when born again. Every believer on earth is part of that brotherhood. Do we love them and pray for them? Share with them the things of Christ, His assembly, the hope of His return for us and with us, etc.? We even love those who we cannot not fellowship with fully. In faithful love

for these and for the Lord, we are not to receive them at the Lord's Supper because of their unscriptural conduct, or teaching, or associates

But we are also now free to honor all men. After all, they are each made in God's image. We are free to whole heartedly fear (respect, honor, obey) the awesome One who gave His only Son to save us for Himself. And we are free to honor the king, as God's appointee, w h e t h e r a good man or not. These are not inconsistent Christian behaviors. God give us grace to pursue them fully.

By Ron Canner, December 15, 2004.