

Submission to Authorities

There is a uniqueness about the body of Christ, both local and global. Here specifically in St James, Bobbin Head and Warrawee, yet also found in millions of other local manifestations around the world. House church networks, mega churches, different denominations, persecuted believers gathering in secret as a family, or an individual clinging to the word of God on their own. This is the chosen people, the royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that we read of last week. Globally, in Christ-one body, to declare the praises of our God who has called us out of darkness and into the marvellous light.

I begin here because Peter is deliberately dragging this background, this knowledge of our family in Christ, straight into the discussion that follows. His first words are urging us as "foreigners and exiles" to consider what follows.

There can be both an immediate, physical understanding of these words and a larger spiritual meaning for the entire body of Christ throughout salvation history. Firstly, it's true, the early Christian church were spreading through persecution, being driven out of their homelands into the lands of other nations, culturally, linguistically, religiously distinct from their place. In Peter's day they were foreigners and exiles literally. Yet he makes an observation through the timeless appeal of God's word to us today also, hinted at his phrase at the end of vs. 12 "on the day he visits us" that this is for all Christians in the period of salvation history until Jesus returns as judge. We also are foreigners and exiles in the sense that entrance into the kingdom of God fundamentally changes our allegiance and citizenship. Coming from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light is not just a spiritual change – it changes our lives, and must impact how we interact with our world currently.

If you are in Christ-with all those who have similarly professed him as Lord, around the globe. Your primary submission now is to Christ himself – he is lord. Ahead of your passport, ahead of your birth country, full submission to Christ as one of God's chosen people and special possessions is the starting point. If we cannot accept that, then we cannot understand the monumental change the gospel invites us into, and therefore the context in which submission to earthly authorities begins. Your first allegiance is to Jesus Christ, not Scott Morrison or the Liberal Party in governance.

When we read then *"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."*

We must understand from Peter's own life and numerous other examples in the Scriptures, that there is an order of priority in effect. There are numerous examples in the Old Testament from the lives Moses, Joshua, Daniel and others that involve a clear decision to disobey an order from authority because they saw it as conflicting

with God's call upon them. Peter's life is perhaps the most instructive here however as this is also his letter. In Acts 4 and 5 on multiple occasions he disobeys the order of the authorities, declaring that he must obey God and not Men. In context that meant he was going to continue to preach the gospel even as they were ordering him to stop. As clear as the call to submit to governing authorities, there are equally clear examples of God's people engaging in faithful disobedience, so we're going to have to explore a little more deeply.

So, what does it mean to submit?

Well, it cannot mean unconditional obedience for we simply don't see that in numerous places in the scriptures, including in the life of Peter who wrote this letter. The literal interpretation of the Greek word, *Hupotasso* is an ordering underneath authority-submitting yourselves underneath another authority.

The unwritten condition here, which I believe we see implicitly in action throughout the pages of scripture but Peter doesn't explicitly state here, is that God is a God of order and not chaos. It is God who has ordained governing authorities to maintain peaceable order in our world. The governing authorities are for humanities good, enabling the flourishing of life. Our submission to the governing authorities affirms this God ordained purpose for the peaceable flourishing of life.

But it's rarely that neat is it? What about government policies we don't agree with? What about when we consider our governing authorities are causing harm and chaos, locally and abroad? What about when we consider they are a restriction on our ability to submit to Jesus? What about governments that have evil practices? These lines are rarely clear cut but it's imperative we work toward clarity for our own conscience sake as the implications can have a profound impact on our social and civic engagement. I offer the following points in that quest for clarity:

1. As far as possible, in submission to God we are to be model citizens in society.

I've pointed out the numerous examples of disobedience to authorities. But that cannot be our starting point here. The clear intent is that of all people in society it should be the followers of Jesus who are the most upright, the most serving, the model citizens. Not in a pious, self-righteous manner, but as those who are enslaved to Christ, willing to lay their lives down in love for others.

Almost every issue worthy of our attention and discussion as believers today has become politicized, so much so that for most of us any issue unconsciously gets run through our political or ideological filter before our Scripture/God filter. My response to this passage isn't primarily informed by the authorities being conservatives or liberals, or libertarians or communists.

Tim Keller, the respected evangelical minister and author says *"most Christians are just nowhere nearly as deeply immersed in the scripture and in theology as they are in their respective social-media bubbles and News Feed bubbles. To be honest, I think the 'woke' evangelicals are just much more influenced by MSNBC and liberal Twitter. The conservative Christians are much more influenced by Fox News and their particular loops. And they're [both] living in those things eight to 10 hours a day. They go to church once a week, and they're just not immersed in the kind of biblical theological study that would nuance that stuff."*¹

My concern, with Keller, is to consider Peter's concern and how I read the rest of Scripture informing this. I can see in this passage a missional intent of Peter's – what do I mean by that?

I consider, for example, the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:37-40 that tells us to Love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength-AND to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is missional in that it is forcing us to look outside of ourselves and to consider our interaction in society (our love for neighbour). This is a concern of Peter's in this passage in vs. 12 and 15, others seeing our deeds and it resulting in glory to God. Submission to authorities for Peter is important because it is integral for our mission and witness to God. In your submission to governing authorities consider how this displays itself in our society and whether it is leading to God being glorified.

Alignment with a political or social group may win acceptance within that particular group, but it won't necessarily result in glory to God, it won't necessarily be a fruitful witness to the gospel. Peter is driven by that concern here. That is his intent of our submission.

2. Submission is not passive but an intentional, sacrificial decision for the good of others.

I've said a sacrificial decision because we see in the scriptures that submission is an intentional understanding and choice for the benefit of others. Submission is not just a passive, apathetic response to authorities, it is an intentional choice to mark ourselves as good people. Jesus, in submission to God the Father, chooses to lay down his life for the redemption of the world.

There's this juxtaposition that Peter uses in vs. 16 *"¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves."*

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/timothy-kellers-mora1-universe/603001/>

Be free to be a slave of God. A passive submission to government authorities that allows evil to roam freely is unacceptable for a follower of Jesus. Often in church history the church has been motivated to act when their own interests have been thwarted by government. Self-sacrificial behaviour would look for other areas also however, in alignment with scripture that serve the oppressed, stand on the side of good, and lay themselves down to overturn injustice where it occurs. Immigration and global movements of people will continue to be a major issue. Environmental concerns will continue to be major issues. Issues of identity and social engagement or acceptance of people based upon that will continue to be significant. I have personal views on these issues, but that's not the point today. The point is that, Christians must look at these issues through the lens of benefit to the other, a missional lens, a sacrificial choice. That would be a marked improvement on our engagement with society, even if a diverse range of views and ideas remain.

Faithful disobedience, where chosen, is not a power play, it's not a show of earthly might or right- it is a choice to sacrifice, a choice to side with weakness and trust God to be the strength.

3. Christians may not be able to submit to every directive from governing authorities but they must appropriately submit to the consequences of their faithful disobedience.

Peter himself says in Acts 5 "we must obey God and not men". This is in the context of gospel proclamation. As someone in God's family, someone saved by Christ, it is an unacceptable directive from any governing authority to keep their people from having the ability to hear about Jesus.

The global church (and therefore each local expression) must still engage with the fact that there are billions of people in our world currently forbidden from the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus. We can debate the means, but we cannot lose the imperative - these people need the opportunity to respond to Jesus. The suffering, persecution and martyrdom of those making the sacrifice to enable this is a witness to the glory and triumph of God. They make that choice not with the might of an opposing earthly government or an ambassador that might advocate on their behalf, but with God as their chief defender and one in whom they can trust for all things.

The Christian must accept the consequences of their submission to God and faithful disobedience to governing authorities where necessary. Let God be their defender. Let their suffering and persecution, if it unfolds, be a testimony to the glory of God.

This feeds into my last point;

4. The evidence of our submission will result in glory to God not tolerance or acceptance into a secular society.

Peter's goal is correct and we affirm it. We want people to see our good deeds, we

trust that they may also win favour at times. But our submission to God will normally, I believe, result in persecution, not acceptance and tolerance. It is right to engage with winsome, sacrificial love for the world, but often we will discover in the words of Hebrew 11:38 that "the world was not worthy of them." Those who have chosen the path of ultimate submission to Christ.

Peter himself, as are the majority of disciples, traditionally considered to be among the earliest martyrs. The apostle John was exiled for life. Stephen is stoned to death in Acts 7. Paul suffers constantly through the book of Acts. Church history is awash with Christians, in full submission to God enduring suffering and persecution. Our present day is full of examples from the Chinese church, to the North, West and East African churches, to the Indian church, The Iranian church. Believers are enduring suffering because of their submission to Christ. And this results in glory to God – as we read in Hebrews 12: 28 "we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken – so be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe."