



Are You Serious? First Peter on Christian Life in a Complicated World

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The first epistle of Peter contains so many ideas contemporary North American Christians find offensive that it is difficult to see how it might be helpful. While the first chapter and the first ten verses of the second chapter contain promising and even dramatic passages regarding Christians having a “living hope” in the risen Christ and now being “God’s people” even though they once were no people, after that things sound rather grim. The author tells the readers to accept the authority of every human institution (2:13) and honor the emperor (2:17). Slaves are to accept the authority of their masters (2:18); wives are to accept the authority of their husbands (3:1); husbands are to honor their wives as the weaker sex (3:7). And all are to suffer (3:14, 17; 4:1, 12–16) and humble themselves (5:6).

This seems like the worst sort of capitulation to the status quo, calling the reader to political passivity, patriarchy, peonage, and patience in pain and suffering. Even putting the best construction on these statements seems of little avail, since here there is no justification by faith, no distinction between law and promise, and nothing on the means of grace or the forgiveness of sins. There is next to

First Peter’s call to good conduct, to acceptance of human authority, and to suffering may sound more like legalism or moralism than good news about being new creatures in Christ. Or, might such living—based in hope and sharing in Christ’s own suffering—lead Christians to be intentional participants in God’s providential governance of their world and creative reshaping of society?

nothing about God's ongoing creative work or prophetic denunciation of the world's evils. Instead, there is the repeated invitation to suffering and to bearing scorn and evil in the hope that their witness to their faith will be seen by unbelievers.

The view of the church¹ contained in these chapters seems sectarian at best, despite the appeal to terms used originally of Israel, such as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people (2:9), the household of God (4:17), and a flock (5:2–3). Those to whom the epistle was written are called to holy conduct (1:15); they are to abstain from desires of the flesh (2:11), obey with deference (2:18), eschew outward adornment (3:3), and rejoice in suffering (4:13). They face a fiery ordeal in this world because of their faith (4:12). Despite their being elected by God “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness” (2:9), thereafter proclamation is notable mostly by its absence. Instead, unbelievers seem to have the upper hand throughout, ridiculing the believers (2:15; 3:16), punishing them even when they do right (2:20; 3:14, 17), and reviling them (4:14)—leaving “God's chosen people” to persist in obedience and doing their duty.

My initial reaction after rereading 1 Peter was, “Are you serious?” It sounds more like legalistic pietism or moralistic evangelicalism than good news about being new creatures in Christ. It seems to commend a judgmental attitude toward life in the world more typical of early monastic movements than of Christians whose faith is to be active in Christ's mission and in service in God's world. It sounds incredibly naïve to think that such simple behaviors could have any impact on systemic evil and entrenched power.

ANOTHER LOOK

Perhaps the problem is in reading 1 Peter from the perspective of North American mainline Christianity. In the world beyond the purview of privileged North Atlantic postmoderns things might look quite different. Even to step back and see the amorality of so many of our contemporaries should take our breath away: no moral code and no sense of guilt. And our churches collude in this by cheap grace, in fear of offending anyone.

How might the words of 1 Peter be heard in the midst of political oppression or by a disenfranchised minority or by persons living in situations of such poverty and illness that parents cannot even provide food for their children? Would words such as “honor” make more sense then? Could it be God's will that by doing right in such circumstances Christians might make an impact on ignorant and unbelieving oppressors? Might it not be possible that it is a credit to the Christian faith if those believers who are denied basic human rights endure undeserved suffering? Could it be that God approves such a witness because it is similar to Christ's suffering without retaliation? In extreme circumstances and poor health, cannot even

¹The usual New Testament word for “church,” ἐκκλησία, is never used.

the jarring words addressed to wives and husbands be understood as important for personal and spiritual support in the face of dire threats to life itself?

Even if situations are not always this extreme, might it not be wise to live so as to be faithful even when evil is less blatant and temptation seemingly more innocuous? If in our present-day First World sophistication and tolerance we have accommodated ourselves to the fallen aspects of creation to such an extent that living lives of witness and honor, purity and humility, or suffering and non-retaliation sounds parochial and naïve, whose problem is it, 1 Peter's or ours?

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Christian life as doing one's duty in the face of trials is not simply duty for its own sake, according to 1 Peter, but such a life is related directly to God's ways as revealed in Jesus Christ. Presumably, that is why the tone of this epistle is anything but gloomy or defeatist, despite the obedience and suffering expected of its readers. In fact, the mood of joy and hope in 1 Peter sounds much like many narratives in Christian history, from second-century martyrs, to missionaries of all ages facing obstacles and opposition, to the Confessing Church under Nazism. If we are embarrassed or perhaps even shamed by such things it may be all the more reason to study this epistle for some time before rendering judgments about its teachings. It may be that behind all of the strange-sounding recommendations stands a theology well suited to contemporary Christians living in a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christ and to his followers. Or, perhaps not. Perhaps 1 Peter is so closely related to its first-century context² that its specific counsels are not realistic or even faithful in most present-day contexts. We shall have to see.

A RESURRECTION HOPE IN A CRUCIFIXION WORLD

In the section from 2:11–3:12, 1 Peter addresses the situation of Christians living in a society that is at best nonsupportive and generally quite hostile toward members of this new religion.³ The theme is their duty to “subject yourselves⁴ for

²Scholars agree that 1 Peter was written prior to the end of the first century, but differ on a more precise date, in part depending on their view of who wrote the letter. See John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 118–130, for an extended discussion.

³Recent scholarship gives many reasons for hostility towards Christians in this region. Generally it has less to do with official persecution, following more from popular suspicion, misunderstanding, and resentment of foreigners, which led to slander and making criminal charges. See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 98–103, and Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 41–45.

⁴Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 179. Others translate this term (ὑποτάγητε) variously as “be subject to” (RSV), “accept the authority of” (NRSV), “be subordinate to” (Elliott, 485–488)—in this case, to the natural and social order and one's appropriate place in it. The important point in translating the term is to make it clear that the believer (now free because of Christ) is the one who is subjecting him/herself to some civil authority.

the Lord's sake" to the authorities and structures of the world (2:13), which means to practice good or honorable conduct in relation to the powers, institutions, and stations of that society, even and especially when this results in their suffering unjustly. Why are they to do this? For several distinct reasons: (1) to bear witness by their good conduct in society to the God of Jesus Christ, so that nonbelieving Gentiles will see their good behavior and glorify God (2:12); (2) to silence the widespread but ignorant opposition to Christians—as belonging to a secret society, being judgmental, practicing superstition, and committing criminal acts—by doing right in relation to civil responsibilities (2:15); and (3) to fulfill their call to suffer for doing good, because Christ suffered for them and they are to follow his example (2:21).

It is significant that the audiences for this epistle are addressed as “resident aliens” and “visiting strangers”⁵—foreigners, in other words. Yet despite that fact, they are encouraged to participate in society by accepting the obligations of citizens, even while (or precisely because of) having their primary loyalty to God. This emphasis is not unique to 1 Peter, of course, and probably is drawing on Jesus' teachings, such as “render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's” (Matt 22:21 RSV). The particular way that this is to happen is what is more distinctive, since in 1 Peter the civil authority is not identified as having been instituted by God, in contrast to Rom 13, for example. This means that with regard to the Roman Empire and its civil religion, where the emperor was considered to be divine, 1 Peter relativizes that notion in at least two ways. The emperor and other rulers are called “human creatures” (2:13)⁶ and this is why Christians are to “fear” or “reverence” God but *not* the emperor, whom they are to “honor” just as they are to honor all people (2:17). And Christians are called “slaves” of God (and not of the emperor) and in light of that are to live in society as “free people” (2:16).

Then, perhaps to the readers' surprise, 1 Peter immediately spells out what this means for “slaves of God” who also are slaves of human slave-masters. “Slaves, [for the Lord's sake (omitted here but here and later understood)] subject yourselves to your masters,” whether they are kind or harsh, for it is a credit to you if mindful of God's will you do right yet suffer unjustly (2:18–19). Several things need to be noted here. First, the most unusual aspect is that these slaves are ad-

⁵Elliot, *1 Peter*, 456. He argues here as in several earlier writings that these two Greek terms, *παροικιοι* (“resident aliens”) and *παροπιδημοι* (“visiting strangers”), ought to be understood first of all as actual historical or sociological descriptions of these Christians, who are living elsewhere than in their place of birth and who lack roots (language, customs, religion, culture, political-social allegiances) in the society in which they are dwelling (457–462 and 476–483). He acknowledges that a second, metaphorical, use is possible also, because as persons called by Christ they are doubly estranged, but Elliot insists (convincingly, I believe) that it is misleading to interpret the terms *only* as metaphors. The reasons for this have to do with the numerous comparisons in the biblical record from as far back as Abraham to the people of God as living faithfully in foreign territories, as well as with the first-century Greek legal definitions of these terms—which help today's reader to make sense of the specific instructions in 1 Peter regarding conduct in society. Elliot thinks that focusing on the terms *only* as metaphors tends to lead to thinking of Christians as citizens of some heavenly world, thereby treating life in the historical world as of lesser importance to God, since believers are only aliens here (151–152).

⁶*Ibid.*, 484; Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 179. The NRSV translates it as “human institution.”

dressed in the same way as other Christians: as human beings, creatures of God, followers of Christ. They too are members of congregations for whom the meaning of living in society as “slaves of God” is by no means either clear or simple. Whatever else might be said, the human dignity attributed to slaves should not be missed.

Second, 1 Peter addresses slaves but not slavemasters, perhaps because the slavemasters in the regions of the Christians to whom this letter was written were unbelievers (surprise!). Here and throughout the early Christian movement there were numerous slaves who became Christians and who, as with all slaves of God, were to live as “free people” yet not using their freedom as a pretext for evil (2:16). Free, because they too have been “ransomed from the futile ways” of their ancestors by the blood of Christ (1:18–19), and yet for the time being still live in society as slaves. As with resident aliens and traveling strangers, but to an even greater degree, slaves lacked civil and economic rights even while being an essential part of the economy. In individual cases early Christians ransomed slaves, but in general the institution was taken for granted by the tiny minority that was Christian and who could hardly alter it. There is a difference, however, in 1 Peter from the teachings to slaves who were Christians in Eph 6:5–8 and Col 3:22–25. First Peter tells the slaves to “subject *yourselves* to your masters,”⁷ which expresses an awareness of Christians’ more critical relationship to society, while in both Ephesians and Colossians slaves simply are to “obey.”⁸

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Finally, in 1 Peter the slaves’ suffering is linked directly to the foundational christological basis for this whole section (2:11–3:12): “For to this [suffering unjustly] you have been called, because Christ also suffered, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps....When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness” (2:21–24a).⁹ Here, as everywhere else in 1 Peter, right(eous) living or good conduct, including the suffering that frequently results from living out a resurrection hope in a crucifixion world, is the chief outward mark of being a follower of Christ. And while there is little here on which to

⁷Emphasis added. See note 4, above.

⁸See the important discussion of this by Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 191–200.

⁹A similar passage appears in 3:16b–18, where both Christ’s suffering and the believers’ suffering are connected to God’s will to save. This is taken even further in 4:13–15, where suffering believers are said to be sharing Christ’s sufferings.

base arguments for abolishing slavery, 1 Peter does at least place slaves in both the same state of grace and the same predicament as other Christians in seeking to live faithfully.

Marriage is considered next: “[Believing] wives, in the same way [i.e., for the Lord’s sake], subject yourselves to your husbands” (3:1), not, however, as a general principle but to win them to faith in Christ through their wives’ good conduct. “[Believing] husbands, in the same way [i.e., for the Lord’s sake], show consideration for your wives,...paying honor [as an equal¹⁰] to them as the weaker sex” and also and especially because “they too are heirs of the gracious gift of life” (3:7). Here at the core of family and household, we see 1 Peter’s consistent emphasis on Christians living above all as servants of God within every institution of society.

These duties all are drawn together in 3:8–12, with its focus first on all Christians loving one another, but then moving the focus beyond the Christian community to reiterate to all believers essentially what was said to slaves: “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing” (3:9). It is for this that “all of you” were called. This stance of maintaining good conduct in society while nevertheless receiving an abusive response is paradigmatic for members of these Christian communities. This is the case both because of their literally being foreigners and particularly because of their “new birth to a living hope,” which adds to their foreignness a crucial eschatological dimension from which their conduct flows. And this newness intensifies their suffering (“double jeopardy”), a point to which 1 Peter returns several times in the remaining portions of the epistle (e.g., 3:14, 16; 4:14, 16, 19; 5:9).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

It is time to draw implications from this discussion for living faithfully in our context. Several questions persist. Can what was said to a tiny minority group over two millennia ago be of any value to North American Christians who, nominally at least, are a majority in our society? Other than its being included in the canon of the New Testament, has 1 Peter actually proved to be of value for life in society during the intervening centuries? Is there any value in focusing on 1 Peter’s detailed teachings on conduct, or for all practical purposes might they be ignored for the sake of the rich presentation of the gospel in 1:3–2:10?

I do not propose to answer these questions directly but rather to have them set the stage for some further reflection. If we step back from the more detailed previous considerations and look from a different angle, certain words and perspectives become important. “Hope” appears frequently (1:3, 13, 21; 3:15) and in key places. It seems to be as important as faith in speaking not only of one’s relationship to God but also for characterizing that relationship as one of expectation for the future that God will bring about. The future is pictured in several ways: as an

¹⁰Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 227–228, speaks of this as a new eschatological viewpoint, which limits or qualifies the present historical forms of life. For more extensive background, see also Elliott, *1 Peter*, 579–599.

inheritance to be revealed in the last time (1:4–5, 9); as grace (1:13); as something that is already present in some sense in Christ’s resurrection (1:20); as God’s coming to judge (2:12; 4:5, 17); as the imminent end (4:7); as the time when God’s glory is revealed (4:13); as when Christ, the chief shepherd, will appear (5:4); and as the time when God will restore, support, strengthen, and establish all the believers (5:10).

More important than these details is the interpretive framework this hope for the future provides for everything else that is said. Without hope, the repeated mention of sufferings would mean there would be no reason for joy or for right conduct in society. Without this specific hope, the Christians’ witness to the Gentiles through their deeds would be of little avail, for its truth depends on the return of the resurrected Christ. He will validate their witness, so that the Gentiles may glorify God when he comes to judge (2:12). And Christ then will proclaim the gospel, as he once did to the dead, so that all may live in the spirit (4:6).

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It is this hope-filled, future-directed framework (for which I will use “hope” as shorthand) that underlies the specific directives for living in a complicated society. Hope provides the critical stance for the writer and for the readers’ understanding and behavior. Hope is transformative, sometimes in terms of far-reaching and systemic social change, but always in terms of one’s perspective on the present and one’s analysis of the contradictions of the present with God’s promised future. What may seem solid or intractable is revealed through hope to be transient, whether in ourselves or in society. Therefore, we have the freedom to enter in fully for the sake of worthy temporal goals or to “sit loose” in our participation in the constructs of this age (as “resident aliens” and “traveling strangers”) as well as in our concern for our own success or failure in those constructs.

Even suffering is changed by hope, since hope is set on the risen Christ and his promise of our resurrection. This will not make suffering or death less real, but it will locate both of these in relation to Christ’s suffering and death, which have been overturned by God and through which all that threatens to destroy us will be destroyed. In the meantime, hope gives us patience in suffering even as it also gives us the impatience needed to bring about goodness and justice now in light of the future.

If we look specifically again at 2:11–3:12, in light of hope, does anything look different? Better? Or does a firm hope in God’s coming future typically only mean that we can do all of the things mentioned without getting too hung up on them? If that were the case, our reflections here are scarcely worth the bother. They would

lead to a somewhat deceptive and crassly manipulative ethic for getting along by going along—exactly the opposite of the conduct and character that 1 Peter calls us to. Here is where the somewhat quaint-sounding language of 1 Peter needs to be taken seriously. While on the face of it most of the directives are about good conduct, the presupposition for them involves “new birth” and “genuine” faith, by which the readers “are receiving” salvation (1:3, 7, 9). From this comes self-discipline, a break with previous conformity to the way things are, and personal holiness, obedience, and love (1:13–15, 22).

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It is this Christian *character* that is the human basis for living in accord with 2:11–3:12. While each instance of recommended honorable conduct is to work in support of God’s will for life in the civil, economic, and family realms and at the same time to bear witness to the truth of their faith for the sake of unbelieving Gentiles, this is not only a teleological or utilitarian ethical approach to faithful living. The seemingly inevitable suffering occasioned by right(eous) conduct in a world complicated and compromised by sin indicates that more is at stake. Whether we choose to call it “character,” “discipleship,” or “sanctification,” individual Christians, in their obedience to the God who sent his son to suffer unjustly because of human sin and to die bearing the sins of all, are *dying* with this suffering savior even and precisely as they do good for God’s world and bear witness to God’s son. And, they are being raised into people with unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, tender hearts, and humble minds (3:8–9)—into the image of Christ, in other words.

“Character” and similar words, however, have a history of being understood in individualistic ways and of being socially irrelevant. This is a far cry from 1 Peter’s message. The content of eschatological hope must guide us here. Nearly every pronoun in 1 Peter is in the second person *plural*—“all of you.” This is a call to all members of Christian communities to participate in the institutions and responsibilities of society in ways that anticipate the promised future. Nearly all the directives in this epistle are aimed at shaping society in the direction of God’s will and ultimate purposes. It is not claiming too much to say that there is a doctrine of divine providence¹¹ at the foundation of 1 Peter, which hearkens back to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, to the sufferings destined for Christ, and to his subsequent glory (1:10–12). By being joined to this chosen race, Christians are involved not merely in following catalogs of civic and family duties. They (we) are

¹¹See the discussion by E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1947) 76–81. He bases his claims particularly on 1 Pet 1:6; 3:17; 4:14, 19; and 5:6–7. See also Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 334–336.

now intentional participants in God's providential governance of their (our) complicated world—"infected with hope," as someone has said—so that their (our) actions are aimed at prophetic opposition to that which is "old" and at creative reshaping of even the most mundane aspects of life in society in the direction of the "new" that is promised. Here we are speaking of good character not primarily as personal virtue but as one's commitment to loving service of others.

If even this way of speaking offends our sophistication and calls forth our cynicism, maybe the only hope for us is already there in 1 Pet 4:1–3a: "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention..., so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do." ⊕

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