

Stones and Authority

Notes for 9 Aug

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Read: [1 Peter 2](#)

There's a lot in this chapter... including two very difficult texts:

vv 13-14: For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority - whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed

v 18: You who are slaves must submit to your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you - not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel.

I'm going to cheat and ask us to look at verse 13 to the end of the chapter and then, time permitting, we'll look at vv 1-12.

Submit to authority

Vv 13-17 contains one of those scriptural injunctions that is rather difficult to deal with, particularly in our modern world of democracies. What are we to make of this instruction?

Context: Peter wrote this during the Roman Empire, a non-Christian government with pagan leadership. Christians were often viewed with suspicion and faced persecution (see the previous verse in which Peter talks about the 'unbelieving neighbours' and their false accusations). It is doubtful if Peter had ever had exposure to - or had even considered at all - anything like a modern democracy.

Here's a possible interpretation for our times:

"This passage calls believers to respect and obey governmental authorities, even when the government isn't explicitly Christian, so long as it does not require disobedience to God."

- Is that a good interpretation? Does it add anything unnecessary to the original text?
- Does this injunction preclude Christians getting involved in political action? Particularly when that political action is in opposition to the legally appointed government?
- Verse 17 ends with "Fear God, and respect the king". How do you do both of those things?
- A spoiler alert: Chap 3:1 and 3:7 (and, arguably 3:8) contain similar injunctions about 'submission'. Do you think that those texts, along with 2:13-17 and 18-20, are all of a piece?

Our era is very alert to the power structures that are present in our society - I would argue that the politics of the left in the last decade has been primarily engaged with deciphering just *who* has the power. Terms like 'structural racism', 'patriarchy', etc have entered the lexicon and been much discussed.

- Are Peter's instructions here hopelessly old-fashioned?

- If you could add an addendum to Peter's words to help us in 2025, what would it say?

Why submission?

1 Peter 2:13–25 urges Christians to respect earthly authorities, not because those authorities are perfect, but “for the Lord's sake.” It's an appeal to act out of reverence for God, not out of fear of man.

1. Submit to Human Institutions (vv 13–14)
 - Christians are called to cooperate with civil and governmental structures.
 - This includes both high-level rulers and local officials.
 - The purpose: to contribute to societal order and reflect Christ-like behavior.
2. Do Good as a Form of Resistance (v 15)
 - Doing good silences critics and undermines slander.
 - Christians are to be known for moral excellence, even under unjust regimes.
3. Live as Free People — But Not Selfishly (v 16)
 - Christian freedom is not license for rebellion, disrespect, or moral compromise.
 - True freedom means willingly serving God, *even* when under human authority.

Be practical!

- What's the best way for a Christian to behave in an *unjust* regime?
- What's the best way for a Christian to behave in a *just* regime?

Slavery

In the antebellum south of the US, Christian slaveholders frequently invoked New Testament texts - including [Ephesians 6:5-9](#), [Colossians 3:22](#), [1 Timothy 6:1-2](#), [Titus 2:9-10](#), and notably 1 Peter 2:18–20 - to argue that slavery was biblically sanctioned and morally acceptable. The broader New Testament instruction for servants to obey their masters was presented as divine order. Advocates claimed that obedience to masters - even harsh ones - was a demonstration of Christian duty and submission to God's authority.

In the British West Indies - and to some extent in the American South - 1720s-1800s editions of the "[Slave Bible](#)" were published. These heavily redacted versions emphasized passages like 1 Peter 2:18 (“Servants, obey your masters...”) while omitting significant portions of the Old Testament (eg, Exodus, which contains stories of liberation and justice). By presenting only statements of submission and obedience, these Bibles leveraged biblical text for social control, aligning faith-based instruction with oppression.

Prominent Southern theologians and ministers, such as [James Henley Thornwell](#), preached that slavery was consistent with Christian teaching, often affirming that it was within God's design - even though they emphasised humane treatment - thereby giving [theological backing](#) to the institution.

Pro-slavery intellectuals and religious leaders formed the ideological backbone of the Confederacy, publishing collections like *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (by writers including [Thomas R. Dew](#) and [James H. Hammond](#)) that defended slavery using Biblical imagery.

Modern theological scholarship strongly rejects such usage of Scripture as unethical and theologically unsound. Today, attempts are made to understand passages such as 1 Peter in light of their historical context. Their exploitative deployment in the American South remains a sobering example of how Scripture can be misapplied when divorced from its ethical and contextual framework.

Discussion

- Can you argue against the line of reasoning used by the pro-slavery advocates and outlined above?
- Can you argue using scripture alone? Or must you appeal to ideas from outside scripture?
- No-one in our discussion would condone slavery in any shape or form. It is abhorrent to us.
 - How can you best articulate a principle that 'just seems right'?
 - Is it enough that something 'just seems right' to us? Do we *need* scriptural authority to hold a position?
 - Could this discussion be yet another example of our old philosophical friend, the '[Euthyphro dilemma](#)' (*Is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good?*). Can we, as Christians, say that something is - unequivocally, definitely, certainly - *wrong*, if we have no Biblical text we can point at? In other words, can something be *good* even if God is silent/ambiguous on the topic? Give examples of some principle you hold that does *not* have any direct scriptural context.

Stones

Let's get back to the start of the chapter. Verses 1-3 seem to me to be a continuation of the previous chapter, and we shall skip over them here.

Verses 4-11 sets up a complex metaphor involving stones. Further, practically every verse echoes a text or two from the Old Testament (Psalm 117, Isaiah, Hosea, Exodus). This passage is usually understood as forming a conclusion to the exhortations beginning in 1:13. A line of thought beginning with the idea of rebirth, continuing through the idea of growth, finds its conclusion in the call to be "built up" into a holy people.

- Do the 'stone' and 'living stone' metaphors work for you?
- What do you make of v9 where Peter says "you are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession"? Are you a priest? What does that mean?
- In v12 Peter seems very concerned with how a Christian should appear to their neighbours. This is a repeated theme so far in this letter. Do you have any insight into, or ideas as to why this is so important to Peter?