

Silencing the Critics

Above Politics and Parliaments, Part 1

1 Peter 2:13-15

When the Apostle Peter wrote his first recorded letter, times were troubling. Political upheaval; moral digression; philosophical and religious confusion; governmental corruption; rising taxation and economic burdens and a lowering of the value of human life; and for Christians, the clouds of persecution were gathering.

Christians were now scattered throughout the empire, misunderstood, mistreated, maligned, rejected by family members, singled out by employers . . . some were even beginning to experience imprisonment and abuse and even death.

In addition to all of that, they were living under the reign of an emperor who was growing increasingly insane and, even more alarming, more and more openly brutal and hateful to Christians.ⁱ

So when the early church, under the reign of Nero, received Peter's inspired letter – and when **chapter 2, the latter part** was first read in the early church, people might have concluded that Peter was actually the one losing his mind.

If you'll turn to 1 Peter and chapter 2, let's simply read that opening line as we begin a new series in our study through 1 Peter; this is a new subject Peter brings to our attention – I'm simply going to call this new series of studies, Above Politics and Parliaments.

As verse 13 opens, I want you to imagine a congregation of believers shocked and somewhat stunned to their very core; **13. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, 14. Or to governors as sent by him**

Stop there for now. Obviously we've got to lay a little groundwork and context. In the minds of the early Christians, questions would soon be flying,

which is why both the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter elaborated on this subject.

Now, the immediate context for verse 13 is provided in the previous verse which informs us that the believer is to demonstrate to his culture an excellent behavior – and such an excellent work ethic and personal life of integrity that the slanders against him won't be able to stand.

Peter reminds them in **verse 12** that they are closely scrutinizing your good works. And evidently, some of those good works are going to spill over into what it means to be a good citizen.

That's the immediate context. The larger context – that every believer grapples with in every generation – is simply this – how do I respond and interact and even influence my governmental authority?

Carry that question into the 21st century and you're likely to get a number of answers.

Some would say that we ought to effectively abandon politics and government entirely, emphasizing the preaching of the gospel to the exclusion of any kind of attempt to influence governmental institutions.

Yet those same people who would suggest such an isolationist viewpoint, at the same time seem to admire William Wilberforce, the converted Member of Parliament who spent his wealth and influence in the political arena attempting to end the slave trade throughout Great Britain.

He was a political leader, driven by his Christian conscience. And both the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter clearly emphasize the point that political leaders are appointed by God.

And don't we all rejoice when one of them – like a Daniel or Joseph of old – happen to follow after God after being elected?

While the mission of the church is spiritual – and the gospel message is our primary message – God happens to call men and women into spheres of influence where they carry their Biblically informed conscience – and their character and their biblical wisdom and skill so that they spread their influence in the worlds of law, business, finance, labor, education, medicine, industry, construction, agriculture, and on and on – and even into the world of politics and government.

St. Augustine, the early church theologian from the 4th century, wrote that believers who served in governmental positions were – quote – “blessings bestowed upon mankind.”ⁱⁱ

Wayne Grudem – who has spoken for me in the recent past – in his recent, and rather, massive book simply entitled *Politics*, summarized the influence Christians have had on governments and cultures throughout history:

- Christians were primarily responsible for outlawing infanticide, child abandonment and abortion in the Roman empire by AD 374;
- They outlawed the brutal battles-to-the-death of gladiators by AD 404;
- They outlawed the punishment of branding the faces of criminals;
- They instituted prison reforms that included segregating male and female prisoners;
- They stopped the practice of human sacrifice among the Irish and Prussians;
- They argued and eventually outlawed pedophilia
- Christians primarily were the reason behind the granting of property rights and other protections for women;
- They prohibited the burning alive of widows in India (by 1829);ⁱⁱⁱ

William Wilberforce, I mentioned earlier, gathered weekly with a group of wealthy and influential believers and they strategically developed plans and methods to bring their Christian conscience to bear within their culture: they not only successfully ended slave trading by 1840 throughout Great Britain;

- they also organized the Society for the Education of the Africans;

- the Society for Bettering the Conditions of the Poor;
- the Society for the relief of Debtors – by the way, they saw the release of 14,000 debtors over a five-year period which allowed them to actually get jobs so they could pay off their debt – what a novel idea;
- they also established hospitals for the poor and the blind;
- they helped war widows and veterans in need of medical and psychiatric help.

And listen to this – Wilberforce and his friends were nicknamed – the Saints (and I'm not talking about New England; they're not saints).^{iv}

Wilberforce and his colleagues were called the Saints – a name they bore this name with gladness.

I am reading the biography of Hannah More, a woman who greatly influenced her world in Great Britain. In fact, she was a close friend of both Wilberforce and John Newton, the converted slave trader and author of the great hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

Hannah More's biography includes the time when Wilberforce struggled with his religious commitment and his political involvement. Did they coincide? Could he do both? His mentor was John Newton . . . now a Pastor . . . and Newton answered Wilberforce's question by writing him in a letter, “Stay at your post and do not give up the work, for you have been placed there by God.”^v

And that's biblical advice, because Paul wrote in Romans 13 that governmental authorities have been appointed by God – more on that later.

By the way, Hannah More devoted much of her life to teaching and educating women in languages, mathematics and the sciences – another radical idea. Rousseau had largely influenced the prevailing thought that women – he wrote (during the same time Hannah More started her school for women), that women were only to be educated in whatever related to men; how to please them, to be useful to them, to raise them when young and to care for them when grown; they are expected to know just enough to be entertaining for an hour or two.^{vi}

So Hannah More's ideas about educating young women wasn't welcomed at all. In fact, one medical doctor agreed with Rousseau by speculating that if women were educated in the same subjects as men, it would harm their reproductive organs.

And what compelled Hannah More to violate the status quo and seek to influence her culture otherwise?

It was nothing less than the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation emphasized the individual priesthood of the believer – and Hannah More was convinced that women should be able to read the Bible for themselves.^{vii}

The mission of the church is not to set up or officially influence governmental forms of education, or the world at large in areas of law or medicine or industry.

Grudem writes, but it is the mission of individuals within the church to accept their post – where God has placed them – to bring their Christian character and conscience and Biblical conviction to bear upon their world of education and medicine and science and law and government.^{viii}

I don't know of anyone in the evangelical church who looks down on a William Wilberforce, or Pastor John Newton's advice, or Hannah More's passion . . . in fact, the unbelieving world now looks on most of what they did and says, "Those were really good works . . . those were good things they did!"

I believe we need a new generation of William Wilberforce's and Hannah More's. We need a fresh generation of reformers in education and finance and law.

We need a Christian conscience on the Board of Education in Wake County. We need Christians with wisdom in the field of law enforcement and in the fields of banking and tax reform. We need Christians in every phase of life.

We need to pray, as Paul challenged the church in Rome, to pray for those in Caesar's household – Caesar's administration (*Philippians 4:22*).

So in our generation today, that would mean we need believers in the White House senate and in those subcommittees that keep showing up in the news.

We need wise believers in the discussion on our national debt; when you think of the debt that the next generation is going to have to live with, one author wrote, it's no wonder babies are crying when they're born.^{ix}

We need men and women who love Christ first and foremost, but who, like William Wilberforce, accept their post as that of God's assignment – who will love Christ enough to introduce Him wisely and winsomely into their business, their school, their

post, their classroom, and into every phase of life. And that's exactly what Peter has in mind.

Now, with that in mind, let's dive into Peter's exhortation.

First of all – notice again the command in *verse 13. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution.*

Submit yourselves – literally, place yourselves in an attitude and posture of submission. Peter's words carry a sense of urgency.^x

Submit yourselves. Which means, it doesn't matter if you elected them or not. These people certainly didn't elect Nero.

It doesn't matter if you agree with them or not – it doesn't matter if you like them or not. There was little to agree or like about Nero.

Paul writes to the believers living under the shadow of Nero in Rome this way; ***There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. (Romans 13:1-2)***

They have been placed in power by God. In other words, you might not have wanted them, but God evidently did.

Imagine this startling statement of God's sovereignty – God establishes every political office and every governing official. He wasn't surprised by Nero's rise to power – nor anyone else's. In fact, He orchestrated it. He put them there.^{xi}

So in plain terms, here's the surprising truth to the Romans and the Americans and every other country represented in my audience. After all the campaigning and all the praying and all the talking and all the debating and all the voting; God's candidate is always elected.

Now at this point in Peter's letter, this would have been a great time for Peter to roll out the Christian's strategy for unseating Nero . . . persecution was brewing . . . he had obviously lost his grip on sanity; and it's time to overthrow the Roman Senate while we're at it.

But isn't that the way of the world. The world is usually working on those power moves . . . they live and breathe that stuff. In fact, it won't be long before Nero's throat will be cut by political rivals. Very few Caesar's died natural deaths.

So here's how the church shows herself to be uniquely different – her members are given to excellent behavior and good works. So long as the scriptures are not violated – a Christian should be known for quiet respect and submission to just law.

The verb here translated “to *submit*” is actually a military term that refers to lining up in rank and file. Soldiers might not like their orders; they may not agree with their orders; it might even cost them their lives to follow their orders; but they line up and follow their commanding officer.^{xii}

The Christian happens to have a higher perspective. He sees above politics and parliaments. He knows ultimately that God is in control and God’s purposes are being fulfilled; and we’re simply called to demonstrate good works by continuing to do our best and literally help our world around us by providing truth and wisdom and grace.

Now in case you thought there might be loopholes to this command, Peter closes them all down by mentioning every institution and every governmental authority.

Notice, *verse 13* starts at the top of the food chain – *whether to a king as the one in authority (that’s the top of the heap)*;

- in an African village this would be the chief;
- in a communist country, this would be the chairman;
- in a democratic country, this would be the president or prime minister;
- for the believers in Peter’s generation, this would be the emperor.

Then Peter adds in *verse 14*, not just to the king, *but – to governors as by sent by him*. In other words, any official representing the emperor, was also to be submitted to.

And this wouldn’t have been any easier – especially during the days of Peter.

And keep in mind that just because someone is ultimately appointed by God, that doesn’t mean they don’t need correcting or challenging.

John the Baptist challenged Herod, another governor, for his adulterous marriage to his sister-in-law (*Luke 3:19*).

Pontius Pilate was a governor. And it was to Pilate that Jesus Christ delivered that higher perspective that Peter is delivering and I’m preaching to this day. *Pilate said to Jesus, Do you not know that I have the authority to release you or have you crucified? And Jesus answered, “You . . . have no authority over me unless it has been given to you from above (John 19:10-11)*

Felix was another governor during the days of the Apostles. We know from *Acts 24* that Felix was given to accepting bribes. We’re told that Paul had a

private conversation with Felix on one occasion and the scriptures tell us that Paul talked to him about *righteousness and the coming judgment*. I’d love to know what Paul told him . . . what we *do* know is that the Bible says that Felix *was alarmed and sent Paul away (Acts 24:25)*.

Conviction and warning and the gospel message were delivered in these cases, but the overarching principle was that of respect for their office . . . and that remained.

So the command is clear . . . although, depending on where you’re living in the world – and when – it might be more distressing and difficult that we can imagine today.

For us – in this land of unparalleled freedom and blessing, submitting to authority means that we refuse to cut corners and wink at laws and run down leaders and refuse to submit to ordinances and parking tickets and code and safety requirements unless we get caught.

I’ll give you one illustration – since we’re coming up on tax season. In their book, co-authors Levitt and Dubner explained how a simple change in the U.S. tax rules ended up exposing incredible deception – which more than likely involved Christians and non-Christians alike.

In the 1980’s, an I.R.S. research officer in Washington just had that feeling that taxpayers were incorrectly claiming dependents for the sake of extra exemptions. Sometimes it was a genuine mistake, but sometimes the claims were comically fraudulent – with one example of a dependent whose name was listed as Fluffy – obviously a pet and not a child. (at least one would hope).

So he decided that the best way to clean up the mess was to require taxpayers to list their children’s Social Security number. But no one agreed and his idea never made it out of the agency.

A few years later, as Congress clamored for more tax revenue, his idea was brought up – and immediately rushed forward and put into law for tax year 1986. When the returns finally came in, seven million dependents had suddenly vanished from the tax rolls. Seven million! He and his bosses were shocked. Pets and phantom children had disappeared. And that year, his idea generated 3 billion additional tax dollars.^{xiii}

Now if you’re wondering what the role of government really is – and it does indeed include collecting taxes – Paul, in fact, tells Christians to pay

their taxes honestly and completely. **Render tax to all that is due them (Romans 13:7).**

In fact, on one occasion, Jesus was asked if He was going to pay his taxes and He effectively said yes. And then He told Peter to go fishing and He told him that the first fish he caught would have a coin in its mouth that would cover both of their taxes.

Now that's the way to pay your taxes – go fishing.

We don't get to perform that miracle – so don't bother going fishing in April – but while we don't get to perform the miracle, we are commanded to perform the principle – pay your taxes.

But is that all that government is supposed to do – collect and spend our taxes?

Peter actually gives a pretty interesting summary of the job description of a good government – notice **verse 14. Or to governors as sent by him (the king) – now notice – for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.**

To punish what's not right and praise those who do what's right – by the way, that sounds like moral legislation to me!

The idea that morality can't be legislated is a myth. From laws that punish murder and pedophilia and theft to requiring seat belts and safety ordinances and drunk driving restrictions – all of which is designed to protect life – listen, that is legislation driven by an internal moral compass regarding the value of life and right and wrong.

Which by the way, emphasizes again the opportunity of the Christian who enters their world of influence with their moral foundation based on the character of God.

Your world is held accountable in defining what's evil and be encouraged in rewarding what's good, because you inform them.

To punish and/or to praise – that's the signature intention of God's design for those in authority.

Peter uses two words here. First, he uses a word for **punish** that effectively shatters the ideology that God isn't interested in anything other than reforming the criminal and protecting society from further crimes. No, the word Peter uses actually includes some kind of appropriate retribution; here's the definition of the word in the Greek language – the inflicting of just punishment on the one who has harmed another.^{xiv}

So the governing authority is actually commissioned by God to hand out penalties and to punish those who violate just law.

But that isn't all. They are also given the responsibility to **praise** those who do what is right.

The word Peter uses here can be translated, commending, or recognizing.^{xv}

In Great Britain, to this day, outstanding citizens are given knighthood – a special commendation and status. They also dispense special awards to people in the kingdom who've done an admirable job in their vocation.

I remember watching one particular documentary where Queen Elizabeth reward a number of people – it was incredibly touching to watch one man – a sheep herder who had bred sheep his entire life – who had faithfully weathered that incredibly difficult occupation with all its hazards – and it documented his tearful joy as he knelt before his queen and received from her a special commendation. What a great thing that is.

In the United States, people are given achievement awards and honorary doctorates. The community at large awards the prestigious Nobel prizes for those who excelled in their fields.^{xvi}

Has it ever occurred to you that in the mind of God, the government is responsible not only for the security of its citizens, but in fostering their moral well-being. Punishing evil – and rewarding good.

And all of you who are in a position of authority – from the school teacher to the judge to the senator . . . when you do that with character and conviction, you are fulfilling God's unique role for you in that field . . . and a nation that is filled with people like you happens to be incredibly blessed.

Today, it's estimated that 1/3rd of all Christians live in some form of civil freedom while the vast majority – more than two thirds live in some sort of repressive government.^{xvii}

But imagine what it was like in Peter's day . . . and more and more in our own day, when everything is being turned upside down – when evil is being rewarded and good is being punished.

So why bother with submission to that kind of authority?

Peter assumed you'd ask that question, so he gives two incentives for submitting.

- a. First, notice **verse 15 – For such is the will of God.**

In other words, you are obeying the Lord's direction.

And by the way, you are recognizing that ultimately God placed kings and governors in power for His purposes – and most often, God doesn't explain Himself.

I have a commentary written by early church fathers; many of them aren't the best exegetes – often times they are allegorical and mystical . . . but I pulled it off my shelf to see what they would say about this command by Peter, since all of them lived within a generation of great persecution. One church father simply named, Didymus the Blind, wrote this comment about the government, in agreement with Peter's perspective – he wrote, "We should not be worried if they do not act in the way appointed by God, because He is in charge of them and will judge them accordingly."^{xviii}

In other words, God might be ignored by government, but God will have the last word.

In the meantime, God has given us His word on the matter – *this is the will of God*.

b. Secondly, you are not only obeying the Lord's direction, you are silencing the Lord's opposition

Notice, *for such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish man*.

Peter doesn't pull any punches here does he? He refers to those who are spreading slander about the Christians – and we know from history that the Christians were being slandered as treasonous to the Emperor – that they were seditious and planning to overthrow the government.

So how do you silence that? By showing respect for the King and the government; you certainly can't burn incense to the emperor and worship him; but that doesn't mean you march on Rome and try to unseat him either. You silence them in that manner.

Literally, Peter writes, you *muzzle* them. Peter implies that these slanderous people are mad dogs constantly yelping and snapping and biting at their heels.^{xix}

Further, Peter describes them here as ignorant. *You muzzle the ignorance of foolish men*.

This doesn't mean the critics are uneducated. That's not what *ignorance* here means. It has nothing to do with their SAT scores.

This is a reference to willful, hostile rejection of the truth. This is willful and hostile . . . they are yapping and snapping and biting.

And that makes Peter's counsel all the more remarkable. How do you silence the vicious, hostile, biting slander of people who are repressing the truth.^{xx}

Not by barking louder! Not by snapping and yelping and biting back.

Get this – they know intuitively the truth . . . and they know the rumbling of that suppression in their gut that only makes them yelp and snap all the more viciously. And what they'd love to do is bring you down to their level of engagement.

Peter is telling us here that if there will be any silencing of our critics, it will not be because we are stronger or bigger or louder; but that we meet their vicious attack, not by self-defense, but through humble well-doing.

In other words, we respond with excellent behavior and good deeds and respectful attitudes toward the office of authority, which we knew was ultimately under the authority of our God.

I'm not going to give the name of the Chinese County where this happened . . . but according to Open Doors Ministry, Chinese government officials became so fed up with sky-high rates of crime, drug addiction, and sickness in one particular county in the Yunnan province.

Finally, in desperation, if you can believe it, the mid 1990s they turned for help to those who were considered model citizens in their area: who also happened to be, Christians.

One official interviewed said, "We had to admit that these people were a dead loss because of their addiction to opium," – and he didn't want to be named. He said further, "Their addiction made them weak and sick. Then they would go to one of their priests, who required animal sacrifices of such extravagance that the people became poor. And because they were now even more destitute, they stole from one another and law and order deteriorated. It was a vicious cycle that no amount of government propaganda could break.

He continued, "We noticed, that in some villages in the county, there were people who were peace loving. There was no drug problem, or any stealing or social order problems. These households also seemed to have plenty of chickens and pigs.

So we commissioned a survey to find out why these villages were different. To our astonishment and embarrassment, we discovered the key factor was that these villages had a majority of Christians.

The article recorded how officials launched a daring experiment just 19 years ago (1998) the likes of which were unthinkable in China—they picked out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to opium.

Christians agreed to be bussed into the village – and the government covered the expenses – and the villagers were herded together by the police and the Christians told their personal testimonies of faith in Christ and the difference He had made in the way they lived.

They visited several times. And a year later, there were 17 new Christians in this village; these 17 individual Christians soon became established financially because they stopped spending money on drugs. Eight of the 17 soon saved enough money to purchase sewing machines and start small businesses.

By early 2002, 83 of the villagers had become Christians and their village was changing. The

government official said – and I quote – “We have begun extending this strategy to many other villages since then.”^{xxi}

And what are these officials now accusing Christians of doing wrong? Nothing. Because of their good works – and their peaceful law abiding lives, the gospel became intriguing . . . and people came to faith in Christ.

The gospel replaced opium with chickens and pigs . . . the gospel turned law breakers into law abiding citizens.

And that change, in one life, changed families . . . and changed families changed a village . . . and that village has now affected a county . . . and who knows . . . it may one day change their country.

Where do you start? It doesn't sound all that dramatic, does it? But here it is . . . for the Lord's sake . . . be good citizens . . . respect the law and those in authority . . . this is the will of God and . . . by doing what is right, you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 02/12/2017 by Stephen Davey.

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ii Charles Colson, God & Government (Zondervan, 2007), p. 318

iii Wayne Grudem, Politics (Zondervan, 2010), p. 49

iv Colson, p. 118

v Karen Swallow Prior, Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More (Nelson Books, 2014), p. 113

vi Ibid, p. 18

vii Ibid, p. 19

viii Grudem, p. 53

ix Adapted from J. Allen Blair, Living Peacefully: A Devotional Study of 1 Peter (Kregel, 1959), p. 120

x D. Edmond Hiebert, 1 Peter (BMH Books, 1984), p. 163

xi Adapted from Juan R. Sanchez, 1 Peter for You (The Good Book Company, 2016), p. 101

xii Adapted from John Phillips, Exploring The Epistles of Peter (Kregel, 2005), p. 108

xiii Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner, Freakonomics (Morrow, 2006), p. 239: www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/january/10012808.html

xiv Hiebert, p. 166

xv Ibid

xvi Adapted from Phillips, p. 110

xvii Life Application Bible, 1 & 2 Peter/Jude (Tyndale House, 1995), p. 66

xviii Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude (IVP, 2000), p. 92

xix Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Hopeful: I Peter (David C Cook, 1982), p. 72

xx John MacArthur, 1 Peter (Moody Publishers, 2004), p. 150

xxi The Pastors Connection (Open Doors USA e-mail, August 2002); Kelly Callaghan, prayer and courier coordinator, Open Doors USA