

Fear God & Honor the King

1 Peter 2:13-17

Beginning on March 22, 2020 we chose to stream online services instead of meeting in person because Governor Inslee said we were in danger of overwhelming regional medical resources due to COVID cases. By Easter, three weeks later, the makeshift 250-bed hospital built by the US Army at the Century Link Field Events Center was ordered to be taken down having not seen *one single patient*. Pot and alcohol retailers still operated while other “non-essential” businesses were forced to stay closed. Emmanuel Church met Easter evening, April 12th to sing and pray, then began morning services the following Lord’s Day. With gratitude we want to commemorate these events and grow in wisdom and faithfulness for whatever is next.

Overview of the Text

Peter writes to “pilgrims of the dispersion” (1 Pet. 1:1), Jewish Christians who by persecution were driven from their land into parts of Asia Minor (cf. Acts 8:1; 11:19). He instructs these believers to submit to ordinances and institutions, from the king to the local governor, for the Lord’s sake (v. 13). Even though they are man’s laws, God desires obedience so that by doing good Christians would “silence the ignorance of foolish men” (v. 15). People will still say false things, but it won’t go anywhere. Believers are free, not to use their freedom for evil purposes, but instead to use it to serve the Lord (v. 16). The question is not “Can I do it?” but “Should I do it?” Will it honor God, bless my family, edify my people? Freedom in Christ ought to result in faithfulness and goodness expressed to others: “Honor all. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (v. 17). We honor all people as made in the image of God, including those who despise us or themselves (cf. Jer. 29:7). Love is tangible, so love for the brethren ought to be practical and sacrificial. Fearing God has a close connection to how you treat the authorities He establishes. Fear Him and you don’t need to fear His minister of justice (Rom. 13:4). Fear Him and honor the king.

True But Limited Authority

The first thing question we might have in reading this letter from Peter is whether he takes his own advice. At his final appearance in Acts, the angel of the Lord springs him from prison, he goes to John Mark’s mom’s house, and then leaves Judea for Caesarea after his former guards are sentenced to execution by Herod (Acts 12:1-19). He didn’t turn himself in, and no one thinks to charge the angel of the Lord with ungodly civil disobedience. Like Peter, Paul escapes from Damascus, which was ruled by the governor who served under Aretas the king (2. Cor. 11:32; Acts 9:24-25). The day Daniel found out that Darius signed a decree outlawing prayer to anyone but himself, he went home and prayed out loud with his window open three times that day (Dan. 6:10). We see in Scripture that God establishes three governments: the family, the church, and the state. Each of these authorities is true, but each is limited in power and within its specific sphere. The only absolute authority is God, and only His word is infallible (2 Tim. 3:16). When someone misuses or abuses their authority, resistance can be lawful or necessary. Husbands and fathers have true authority, but when Nabal foolishly scorns and refuses to help David and his men, Abigail wisely disregards what he said. She provides for David and prevents bloodshed and destruction (1 Sam. 25:2-38). When the Sanhedrin arrest Peter and John and command them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, they simply say no (Acts 4:18-22). The reason why we have texts like 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7 is because disobedience is the exception, not the rule. The vast majority of the time we gladly obey and

Fear God & Honor the King

1 Peter 2:13-17

honor our leaders. It's important to remember that when we disobey, we don't become anarchists or libertarians, using our liberty as an excuse for selfishness or obnoxiousness. Peter wrote this text when Nero was in power. Jesus said the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do" (Matt. 23:2). They had not lost all their authority by false commands or by hypocrisy. Jesus also said to pay taxes to a corrupt and idolatrous Caesar (Matt. 22:21). Righteous civil disobedience is measured and strategic.

The Doctrine of Lesser Magistrates

In April 1550 nine Lutheran pastors published the Magdeburg Confession in response to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's Augsburg Interim which aimed to squash the Reformation and impose Catholicism on all Protestant lands. Five months later, Charles' troops sieged Magdeburg, but for 13 months the city fended them off and retained sovereignty and religious freedom. The doctrine of lesser magistrates holds that lower-ranking civil authorities have the right and duty not to comply and if necessary actively resist the unjust decree of higher authorities. Although this principle is part of natural law (understood by people without the Bible), the Magdeburg Confession articulated it for the first time and it became embedded in Reformed thought. John Knox's *Appellation Addressed to the Nobility*, the Huguenot *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, and Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* all built on Magdeburg which itself was founded directly on Scripture. Civil disobedience ought not to be an individualistic effort, but something done in conjunction with other law-abiding citizens and civil authorities who withstand injustice together. The American War for Independence is an excellent example of lesser magistrates opposing an unjust superior, King George V. He allowed English parliament to tax the colonies which they had no right to do. The tax was the presenting problem, but the principle was no taxation without representation, along with many other abuses listed in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." If this seems extreme or outdated, remember that Washington State openly defies the federal government's marijuana laws. Many local police departments rightly chose not to enforce the governor's mandates because the law is above him.

Faithful Resistance

When the criteria for quarantining the healthy population changed, coupled with discriminatory application of the mandates, we knew we had gather for worship, and continue inside. In *Lex Rex* Rutherford set out these steps against tyranny: 1) protest (including legal action); 2) flee if possible; 3) self-defense. We are still at the first stage and should not be fragile Christians jumping to 2) or 3). May the Lord bless and establish us as we worship and testify to the truth of the gospel that sets men free.