

1 Peter 4:

Christianity & Culture

1. Throughout 1 Peter is a tension between the exhortation to be a good citizen or member or slave or wife, and parallel instructions which run directly counter to Roman culture. The very fact that slaves and wives are addressed without condescension, and believers are instructed to love, be hospitable to and serve one another with a unity of spirit and sympathy, tender-heartedness and humility, flies in the face of the hierarchical, status-centric culture. In the words of Joel Green,

Turning his attention thus to the internal life of Christian communities and doing so with imagery borrowed from household relations, Peter addresses his concern for harmony among believers. In doing so, however, he also voices a telling strategy for engaging the wider world of Roman antiquity. This is because, in Greco-Roman political philosophy, the household was a microcosm of the body politic. Here was focused the range of social relationships and obligations, including the distribution and deployment of power, the proper observation of honor-based status strata, and boundary-making and boundary-keeping with respect to those outside the household. That is, the household provided the arena in which were inculcated an awareness of one's place in the world in relation to others and how appropriately to defer or to command respect. Consequently, relations within the household had a ripple effect outside the household. If among Christians mutuality should become a defining practice, if Christians should embrace the ideal of other-oriented service without reference to status honor, and if Christians should exercise among themselves unwavering love, then this cannot help but score a blow against a world distinguished by status-based distribution of power and privilege. That Peter counsels a relational ethic focused on the mutuality of "one another" statements while at the same time celebrating Christ (and not one's social betters) as the rightful recipient of "glory"... and ruling power, is thus an intensely political statement. Remembering that the primary image of Christ in 1 Peter is "the one who suffers"—that is, one whose marginal status in the world not only was documented by his maltreatment at the hands of his contemporaries but is also recognized and, indeed, esteemed by Peter—it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Peter's household ethic is purposely dissident, dramatically so.¹

Our culture is much less status-oriented than some others, and certainly less than first-century Rome. One might imagine instead Peter advising a (modern) church not to pursue career advancement, but rather to focus on ministry.

- a. Green describes two ways in which Peter's message is subtly but powerfully dissident: in rearranging the status structure of the social unit, and in glorifying an executed criminal as Lord. What "sacred" priorities of *our* culture are undermined by the gospel?
- b. A friend at work tells you with passion about his church. It meets in a warehouse, is growing quickly, and the pastor counsels youth and adults alike not just to avoid being workaholics, but to keep to 40 hours per week so as to have more time for church ministries and outreach. Your friend, who hasn't been a believer long, asks you if this is biblical. How do you answer?

¹ 1 Peter (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary, 2007), p. 140-141.

2. Peter exhorts them to “be serious and disciplined” (4:7), as earlier he exhorted them to “prepare your minds for action” (1:13). He fleshes this out a little in three earlier passages: 1:13-15; 2:1-2; 2:11-17:

1:13-15: Therefore prepare your minds for action;* discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct...

2:1-2: Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation...

2:11-17: Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

- a) What further instructions does he give in 4:7-11?

The call to serious discipline is reflected in various modern voices. Richard Foster, in his revival of classic spiritual discipline, teaches prayer, fasting, study, meditation, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance and celebration. Others in the “social gospel” tradition point to social ministries and care of the disadvantaged. Still others in the evangelical tradition emphasize a mixture of Bible study, prayer, worship and determined evangelism.

- b) Think of someone in our church who best exemplifies the call to “be serious and disciplined” with mind prepared for action. What is this person like? What lies at the heart of Peter’s exhortation?

3. In 4:7-11, Peter paints a picture of life within the Christian community, both in the context of the suffering they are undergoing and in light of the coming judgment. Verse 4:8 contains the popular exhortation, “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.” (The word for “cover” is *kalypto*, meaning, “to cause something not to be known, i.e., hide, conceal, keep secret.”)

What does Peter mean here? Is this a statement about covering sins so they aren’t exposed to God’s judgment, or does it refer to the healing effect loving actions have in the broken relationships which necessarily fill churches?

—

Fun fact: 1 Peter has the notably obscure passage, 3:18-20, describing Jesus “proclamation to the spirits in prison.” The two main theories are that the “spirits in prison” are either those who perished in the Flood, or the Nephilim, the fallen angels of Gen 6:1-6. Most favor the second option because of apparent parallels to the apocalyptic text 1 Enoch, the first 36 chapters of which describe the fate of the Nephilim.

Fun quotation: Theophylact of Ohrid, an 11th century Byzantine archbishop from Bulgaria, on 1 Peter 4:6: “It was the habit of the Fathers to take this verse completely out of context... But if they had paid the slighted attention to the context, they would have seen that here the ‘dead’ are those who have been shut up in hell, to whom Christ went to preach after his death on the cross.”