

Social Dimension of God's Call  
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“‘To this you have been called’: Christian Identity in 1 Peter as Individual and Corporate, Spiritual and Social.”

Abstract: After the theological introduction (1 Pt 1:1-2:10), the discussion shifts to the social dimensions of God's call. The tone is set by the call for the Christians to conduct themselves honorably among their Gentile neighbors. This is no idle request, however, but one that assumes the mistreatment of these Christians by their social superiors. Chapter 2:17 marks the transition from spiritual identity to social situation, and calls these believers to appropriate conduct in all relationships, both spiritual and social. Based on an adaptation of the Hellenistic Household Code, the section on social behavior focuses especially on slaves. The suffering of Christ is both a model for behavior and a source of hope for those believers who suffer unjustly in their social relationships, for “to this you have been called.”

The section of 1 Peter under discussion in this lecture deals with the Christian's call to live in this world. Peter found it was much easier to swear he would die for Christ, than it was to simply admit that he knew him and had been with him (Peter denied Christ three times). We experience the same practical problem. To quote Annie Dillard once again, the business at hand (the business of faith), is to find “workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideals and the absurdity of the fact of us.” How does 1 Peter address the problems of keeping our lives in line with the ideals of our faith? We begin again with some history.

The Legacy of Alexander the Great. When Alexander the Great died after conquering the known world (fourth century BCE), he left behind a lasting legacy, though not necessarily a political one. His generals quickly divided up his empire into petty kingdoms and went to war with each other. Alexander's political empire did not survive, but his cultural legacy still had great impact in New Testament times, and in some ways is still felt today. Alexander had the vision of uniting his empire not just with military might, but by the ties of culture. He spread the Greek language, architecture, and education everywhere he went. He also introduced Hellenistic religion into new areas, and at the same time adopted for himself the old eastern concept of the divine ruler, the king as manifestation of God.

The peoples Alexander conquered, like the Hebrews of Palestine, were allowed to keep a good deal of autonomy if they did not resist, including keeping their old religions and much of their own governmental structures. But they were also expected to adopt

Greek ways, including language, education, and philosophy. The *gymnasium*, the cultural and educational center of hellenism, represented the center of Greek values in a given locale. No matter what its size or prestige, a city without a *gymnasium* was not considered “modern” or cosmopolitan. *Gymnasia* were built in the major cities for the education of young boys and as social clubs for the men, combining the study of Greek philosophy with Olympic style sports, which were carried out in the nude (*gymnasium* means “naked”). The *Koiné* dialect (“common” Greek), a simplified form of earlier classical Greek, bound the far-flung reaches of the empire together. The Greek language became so pervasive that the Jews living outside Palestine were no longer speaking Hebrew, so some of their scholars translated the Hebrew OT into Greek (the LXX). By NT times, even the Galileans were speaking Greek, and the entire NT was written by Greek-speaking authors, most of them Jewish Christians. Other developments, such as the spread of Greek philosophy and education, had profound impact on the first Christians. Reflections of Greek rhetorical and epistolary theory are found in Paul and elsewhere in the NT. Almost all the NT authors used and quoted the LXX as their Bible.

The Rise of the Roman Empire. Alexander’s untimely death and the division of his empire into smaller kingdoms left a power vacuum which the Romans eventually filled. For many years the Romans were fighting wars in other areas, content to let the eastern Mediterranean wait. By about the middle of the first century BCE Rome began to consolidate their power in that region, too, subjugating Egypt and Syria, and along with them, Palestine. For almost three generations Palestine (or at least Judea) was ruled by Herod the Great and his offspring. Herod, a Jew in name only, was a client king who ruled at the pleasure of Rome. He and his children were educated in Rome, though they ruled as eastern despots. Eventually the Romans installed governors over Judea, and then over all Palestine. By the time of Jesus, Judea was an occupied territory, with a Roman senatorial appointee as governor.

Herod attempted to turn Palestine into a thoroughly Roman province. Not only did he build palaces for his own use, and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but he also converted a small fishing village on the Mediterranean into the Roman provincial capital complete with artificial deep water harbor for shipping, and a Roman aquaduct to supply water. He renamed the village in honor of Augustus Caesar, calling it Caesarea (one of several places around the empire with that name). Herod also rebuilt the old northern capital of Samaria, renaming it Sebaste, the Greek translation of “Augustus,” the revered one. In many places throughout Palestine, Greek temples were built. Jesus grew up in the shadow of a Greek city, Sepphoris, only four miles NW of Nazareth (Nazareth was probably in the administrative district controlled by Sepphoris). Though not mentioned in the Gospels, Sepphoris was an important center of Greek culture. Herod’s son Antipas, the ruler during Jesus’ ministry, turned Sepphoris into his Galilean capital.

The Emperor Cult. Augustus, the Caesar at the time of the birth of Christ, won a lasting peace through military victory. This peace, the *Pax Romana*, was heralded as the divine Golden Age, a kind of “millennium.” A new calendar was put into effect, allegedly in response to auspicious cosmic signs (a comet and planetary alignment), and it was proclaimed that Augustus had ushered in the “end of the age.” According to the

Romans, time literally stopped, and started again as the Golden Age. Augustus himself was hailed as a god. Though Augustus allegedly discouraged the practice in his lifetime, after his death his divine status was widely proclaimed. His title means “revered one,” and implies divine status. Julius Caesar, who arranged to be adopted by Augustus in order to create a dynasty, proclaimed Augustus to be a god, so he could thereby name himself “Son of God.” In artwork and on coins, the Caesars were portrayed as Olympian gods, and hailed in inscriptions and proclamations as “lord” and “savior,” and “the manifestation of God.” Stylized statues portraying the Caesars as Olympian gods have been found all over the greater Mediterranean region.

Although Augustus’ Golden Age did not last, the practice of worshipping the Caesars as gods gained in popularity. A new religion, the emperor cult, grew up around the Caesars, complete with temples, priests, and sacrifices. When one Caesar died, the remnants of his cult were often destroyed or removed, but the ubiquitous statues portraying the Caesar as an Olympian god were sometimes just refitted with a new head, the likeness of the new king! Though scholars have long suspected that the Romans themselves did not believe in the religious aspects of this emperor cult, recent reviews of the evidence has caused many to conclude that the combining of politics and piety into a civil religion was embraced by many Roman subjects in a most sincere way. This seemed to be especially true out in the provinces, where wealthy individuals were encouraged to become community benefactors in the name of the emperor-god, and cities vied with each other to see who could give greatest honor to the divine king. The landscape of Asia Minor was dotted with many temples and priestly shrines dedicated to emperor worship, such that any understanding of 1 Peter must take this everyday fact of life into account.

Students of 1 Peter have long wrestled with the problem of the apparent persecution reflected by the theme of suffering in the book. But historians claim there was no wide-spread organized (government) persecution in Asia Minor during the time that 1 Peter was likely written. Others have tried to explain the apparent persecution in sociological terms, taking the words “alien” and “exile” in a literal political sense. It is more likely that the problem faced by these Christians was a very real persecution, but not one perpetrated by the government but by the neighbors and former colleagues of these Gentile converts. The peer pressure was probably very strong to conform to and participate in the emperor cult, much of which was carried out in public, community festivals. A Christian response to the emperor cult, which we know played a significant role slightly later in the situation behind the book of Revelation, was undoubtedly also involved to some degree in the writing of 1 Peter.

The Household Code. Another aspect of 1 Peter that requires our attention is the use of a “Household Code,” or “Household Rules of Order.” Such codes, which instructed people in the proper fulfillment of their social roles (husbands/wives, masters/slaves, fathers/children), date at least back to Aristotle in the fourth century BCE. Other examples of NT Household Codes are found in Colossians and Ephesians, with aspects of this material also evident in the Pastoral Epistles (1, 2 Timothy and Titus). It

is worth noting that all of these documents, along with 1 Peter, were addressed to people in Asia Minor.

Household Codes were based on old societal models from the time of the Greek city-states, which were originally intended to instruct people on how to be good, productive members of society. This often amounted to state propaganda, though the codes came to reflect a broad consensus of what it meant to be a good, upstanding person. From Aristotle onward, these codes were adapted to later political realities as a way to promote stability, and seem to have reflected "conservative," long-standing values (at least those held by certain usually patriarchal leaders in a society). This was especially important in the Hellenistic era, including Roman Hellenism, when societies were in great flux. There was no exact set format for the codes, though they typically addressed the family patriarch as husband/father/slave owner, and often included elements of reciprocity (addressing husbands and wives, fathers and children, masters and slaves). One example of the adaptation of a Household Code is found in the Jewish historian Josephus. Josephus wrote a rendition of Jewish social laws (including some of the Ten Commandments) which, it appears, he consciously tailored to resemble a household code (*Against Apion* II:190-219). Thus, Josephus could assert, Jewish social ethics were really the same as conservative Hellenistic ethics. Whether it was effective or not, such propaganda was designed to present Judaism's "best" possible face to a skeptical pagan audience.

In part, the New Testament adaptations of the household code appear to have a similar concern as that found in Josephus--i.e., to portray to a hostile society the early Christians as socially "mainstream," comprising no threat to their neighbors. This concern is especially noticeable in the Pastoral Epistles, where women and slaves are singled out and advised *not* to exercise their new-found Christian freedom in ways that might draw the criticism of their pagan neighbors. At the same time, the New Testament "Christianizes" the household codes, in that the passages describe in recognizable first century terms the ideals of redeemed Christian relationships within a particular cultural setting. Notably, the Pauline passages emphasize an element of reciprocity in the relationships, especially visible in Ephesians 5:1ff (cf. 5:21).

1 Peter's Adaptation of the Household Code. 1 Peter's household code is markedly different than those in Paul, and the adaptation of the code in 1 Peter gives us some important clues for the situation reflected there. But scholars have long noted that this material is unusual, since it begins with admonitions to slaves, and because of its lack of symmetry and reciprocity. In addition, scholars are uneasy about the juxtaposition to the household code of the material on submission to governmental authorities (2:13-17), and the relationship of 2:18-3:7 to the mention of elders and the admonition to young men to submit to them in 5:1-5. The material is also recognized as unusual because (1) While the idea of "submission" is not unique to 1 Peter, his strong emphasis on the theme is a peculiar feature of this Christian household code; (2) There is a noticeable lack of reciprocity--masters are not even mentioned. (3) There is no section on children and parents. (4) Christian wives of non-Christian husbands are singled out, but husbands are

barely mentioned, and then in only a cursory way; (5) It is odd that the section begins with admonitions to slaves.

The admonition to various individuals to submit to the superior ties the section together. The section 5:1-5 is related to 2:13-3:7 because it continues the admonition to submit to the superior (young men submit to the elders). "Submission" is mentioned in 2:13, 2:18, 3:1 and 3:5, and in 5:5. Note the other instance of "submit" in 1 Pet 3:22 (Christ subjects to himself "angels and authorities and powers"). Believers must submit to kings and rulers temporarily, knowing that heavenly and earthly authorities and powers will all ultimately submit to Jesus Christ.

The statement to slaves, wives, and husbands of the admonition to submit to "every human institution," (2:13, JUpotavghte pavsh/ ajnqrwpivnh/ ktivsei), is clearly intended in the context of governmental authorities, as seen by the illustrations that immediately follow ("to kings, to rulers," ei[te basilei'...ei[te hJgemovsin, ktl.; cf. Paul's statement on submission to governmental authority in Romans; Ro 13:1; 1 Pet 2:13). This exhortation (2:13, "submit to every human institution") should be understood as the general admonition of which the others form a series of specific examples.

Not only does the household material begin with slaves, "slaves" are the primary focus of the household code. Each section of the code (slaves, 2:18-25; wives, 3:1-6; husbands, 3:7) gets noticeably shorter than the one before, and only the section on slaves clearly reiterates the underlying concern with suffering. Suffering unjustly has already been introduced in the thought of 2:11-17, in relation to governmental authorities, but is not a feature of the section on wives or husbands. On the other hand, the theme of suffering, together with the examples of the suffering of Christ, and the reminder "it is for this you have been called" (3:9), is reiterated in the conclusion, 3:8-4:11. This reiteration focuses our attention back on 2:21ff, the suffering of Christ as encouragement, "for to this you have been called" (2:21).

By putting together the sections 2:13-17 and 2:18-3:7, 1 Peter is adapting inherited tradition material. Household code material is combined with another tradition or *topos*, that of "station code" that deals with citizen and government. While the "seam" is not entirely smooth, the juxtaposition of "household rules" with submission to governing authorities is not conceptually difficult, as some would claim. The backgrounds of the "Household Management" *topos* seem to allow this connection. Arius Didymus, the first-century BCE Stoic philosopher, is regarded as "the most useful near-contemporary resource" for understanding the household code of 1 Peter (David Balch). Like Aristotle, 1<sup>st</sup> century philosophers regarded the household (*oikia* oijkiva) as a microcosm of the city-state (*polis* povli), the povli" as an expansion and outgrowth of the oijkiva. "Both are organized in a relationship whose axis is power, the lesser to the greater."

The Function of 1 Peter 2:13-17. The section begins with the admonition to "submit to every human institution" (2:13). The phrase "every human creation/ institution" continues to spark debate. While it has been common to translate *ktisis*

(ktivsi") as "institution" in English, referring to governmental institutions, this is unsatisfying, since this falls outside the known parameters of the word's uses, and since the context refers to persons, not institutions. On the other hand, the connection to governmental authorities is quite clear from the next phrase ("kings or rulers"). "Human" here is implicitly contrasted with "divine," a contrast made explicit elsewhere. But why use ktivsi" at all? Scholars tend to agree that the word ultimately reminds us of the "createdness" and necessary subordination of even the most powerful human rulers (contrast Christ's ultimate subjection of authorities and powers in 3:22). It is significant that the section on "Social Identity" ends with the call for the recipients to "entrust their souls to the faithful Creator" (*pistō ktistē*, pistw'/ ktivsth/, 4:19).

The entire section (2:11-4:19), the center of 1 Peter, is bound together with the contrast between the call for submission to human rulers (ajnrwpivnh/ ktivsei) and the call to entrusting oneself to the faithful Creator. This connection is all the more striking when we notice that the emperor cult hailed the Caesar as *ktistēs*, "founder" or "creator" (!) of a temple, a city, of Rome, and indeed the whole *oikumenē* (inhabited world). The observation that the members of the household and the state (oijkiva and the povli") are organized in a relationship whose axis is power, from the lesser to the greater (see above), is important for our understanding of this section of 1 Peter. This precisely describes the organization of relationships found in 2:17. In the statement "honor all men, love the brothers, fear God, honor the king" (pavnta" timhvsate, thVn ajdelfovthta ajgapa'te, toVn qeoVn fobei'sqe, toVn basileva tima'te), we find a summary of the authority concerns of 1 Peter, organized in a relationship whose axis is power, from the least to the greatest. The point of course is that the one who suffers as a *Christianós* (wJ" Cristianov") should remember that the seemingly all-powerful human rulers are only temporary, as are all things in this life. Within society, honor is due to all men, especially to the king (social relationships, from lowest to highest).

The structure of the verse confirms the interpretation suggested here (see chart). In the believing community, love is due the brothers and sisters, and fear is due God<sup>1</sup> (spiritual relationships, lowest to highest). Christians exist in both sets of relationships, and are to remember that God is in control of both spheres. 2:17, the end of the introductory section (2:13-17), summarizes 1 Peter's social and spiritual relationship concerns by expressing the range of both social and spiritual relationships, and the appropriate responses to the "parties" who represent the parameters of those ranges. This "summary" prepares the transition to the specific social relationships treated in the household code (slaves, wives, husbands), as it also maintains close proximity to the spiritual relationships presupposed for these Christian recipients in 1:2-2:10, and 5:1-11. In this sense, 2:17 is a pivotal verse for the entire book of 1 Peter.

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<sup>1</sup>Some see this statement as a kind of corrective to the view expressed in Proverbs 24:21 ("Fear God and king"), responding that "fear" is appropriate for God alone, and only "honor" for the king. This probably reads too much into the verse, since the LXX can use "fear" and "honor" interchangeably for the appropriate attitude toward God. In any case, this is probably beside the point for this verse.

The twice given example of Christ's suffering and the repeated admonition, "To this you have been called," focuses our attention on the purpose of this central section of 1 Peter. "Calling," introduced in the theological section of 1:1-2:10, now combines both the spiritual calling of these believers (corporate and individual), with their social "calling," especially aimed at slaves. However, this is not to say that the slaves addressed in this section were to regard their slavery as a divinely mandated fate which they had to accept. Rather, it is simply a call to be Christians whatever their social status, and a reminder that their lives in this world, while temporary, are indeed the place where their Christian commitment is lived out. This is of course the message to each one of us. Whatever our lot in this life, it is temporary. But we are called to a higher existence. That call is not a summons to forsake this world and turn inward (or "upward"!), but quite the opposite, it is a call to live out the "kingdom of God on earth," to be salt and light in this world. For us this means a call to be the best citizens, the best marriage partners, the best employees, etc., that we can be, partly because our non-Christian neighbors are watching (as in the Pastoral Epistles), but mainly because of the sacrifice and example of Christ.

Concluding observations: 1 Peter employs adapted household code language to make a point about living as a Christian in this world. We should hear the admonitions in terms of our own social situations. The adapted character of the NT codes should remind us that it is never sufficient simply to pick out a verse according to our own liking, and attempt to impose an idea on another as "biblical" (e.g., the "submission of women" as an article of Christian faith). The unifying theme of 1 Peter is "God's Call." The call of God transcends the spiritual, and has definite practical implications for these believers in their day-to-day social lives. The suffering of Christ as encouragement in the believers' own suffering intersects with God's call at key points ("to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you," 2:21; for to this you have been called" (3:9); "It is better to suffer for doing good..., Christ also suffered," 3:17-18). The theme of God's grace and protection during "a little while" of suffering begins and ends the letter (1:6, 5:10).

Throughout 1 Peter these themes are interwoven and interact with the book's eschatology, the theme of the third lecture. As 1 Peter's eschatology moves between "already" and "not yet" aspects of the revelation of Christ, so also does the author describe the believers and their present and coming salvation in such terms. Their spiritual identity is based upon the past: both their corporate and personal spiritual existence. 1:2-2:10 speaks in terms of their new birth and describes these converted Gentile believers in terms of biblical Israel. Who these Christians are *spiritually* in the opening section has direct and dramatic impact on who they are *socially* in the central section (2:11-4:19). It also sets the stage for their (near) future (4:7), where potential suffering is described in more dramatic terms than previously ("fiery trial of testing," 4:12). All of this brackets their day-to-day social existence, with its "mundane" suffering, but puts their experience into not only Christian but eschatological perspective. In this arrangement 2:13-17 plays a pivotal role within its context.

The Christian writer Walter Wangerin describes these realities when he writes about faith, and the interplay between eternal faith and everyday existence.<sup>2</sup> Wangerin says “faith” is a verb: it is moving, and moves us. To make faith a “noun” is to make it static, a mere intellectual confessionalism. Living faith progresses, like the action in normal human walking. There is a moment in which we move ourselves off balance and then catch ourselves with the other foot. Without “losing our balance” there would be no forward motion. So is faith for us.

Faith flows, Wangerin writes, and therefore must be thought of as a verb. To be in faith is to be changing. This happens because (1) faith is *relationship*; (2) because it is relationship *with the living God*; and (3) because it is relationship with the living God *enacted in the world*. Faith as process is the constant losing of one's balance, a falling forward, the risk necessary in common walking. It is the constant loss of stability, the denial of self and dying into God.

Our faith in the living God must be enacted in the world. We are called to live out our lofty ideals in the mundane, day-to-day realities of life. As Peter knew, it was much easier to swear that he would die with Christ, than it was to simply admit that he knew him (Peter denied Christ three times). As stated at the beginning of this lecture, the business at hand (the business of faith), is to find “workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideals and the absurdity of the fact of us.” As Peter experience, the answer to the gap between our ideals and our experience (not always living up to our ideals), is God's grace and forgiveness. This is the problem of (and the answer to) living by an eternal, spiritual faith which can only be properly expressed by our engagement in this world. To this we have been called, by the eternal God. As Paul said, let us live our lives in a manner worthy of that calling.

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2 Walter Wangerin, *The Orphean Passages*, Harper and Row, 1986.