

Heavenly Citizens Submitting to Earthly Authorities

1 Peter 2:11-17 (text: 2:13-17)

27 September 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 a.m.
(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We are now one-third through Peter's first letter. And, right from verse 1, Peter has often called his readers, "sojourners" and "exiles."¹ Yes, as Christians, they are citizens of Christ's heavenly kingdom! So, here on earth, they (and all Christians) should remember that they are strangers, sojourners, pilgrims, resident foreigners who should not put their roots here so deeply down that they lose their citizenship of God's eternal kingdom.

That being the case, here comes now the question: If Christians are citizens of Christ's *heavenly* kingdom, how should they then relate to (interact with) the *earthly* kingdoms from which they are not yet freed, but are, in fact, still citizens who even share in the privileges of these, their earthly kingdoms/countries?

More specifically, what should the Christian do if the government of his earthly citizenship – yes, if e.g. the government of New Zealand – makes laws that violate God's laws!

Should the Christian get involved in the shocking activities which some who profess to be Christian have done?

For example, is it right for Christians who are against abortion to damage abortion clinics – to graffiti these; to bomb these clinics; to threaten medical staff who perform abortions; to kidnap and even murder these doctors & surgeons – as some have sadly done in the Name of God, especially in the USA?

Is it right to incite violence against such medical staff even by using wrong words in our prayers, e.g. as one preacher once prayed, that "calamity would strike" a certain abortion-performing doctor?²

Yes, should Christians use violence in demonstrating against unbiblical laws made by their governments?

No! Not at all!

You see, in our text, Peter describes the correct way in which Christians should relate to the governing authorities here on earth. And here is Peter's overriding message:

Christians, you have indeed been made free by Christ (you're slaves to no one), but don't use your freedom as a cover/excuse to do evil!

Our sermon has three points:

- Submit to Earthly Authorities
- Reason for Submitting
- Manner of Submitting

¹ Cf. e.g. 1 Pt 1:1, "*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...*" (ESV; Emphasis mine).

1 Pt 1:17, "*And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile...*" (ESV; Emphasis mine).

1 Pt 2:11, "*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul*" (ESV; Emphasis mine).

² For a summary of these and many more atrocious anti-abortion actions performed, among other, by people who claim to be acting on God's behalf, cf. e.g. **Anti-abortion violence** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-abortion_violence]

Submit to Earthly Authorities

Verses 13 & 14 tell us that Christians should submit to the governing authorities. In our case, it means that we will submit to the New Zealand government and its law-enforcers, the police.

What does *submit* mean?

Well, literally it means *to place oneself under*.³

Thus, what v. 13 & 14 say is that Christians (you & I) must place ourselves under (we must live according to) the governmental order.

Now, of course, the Christian's submitting to the government is in all areas in which the government does not go against God's Word, for if the government goes against God's commandments, then the Christian must obey God rather than the government.

Look, does the Bible not give us such examples?

For example, remember what the Hebrew midwives⁴ did when the Egyptian king ordered them to kill every baby boy born from the Hebrew mothers?

Ex 1:17 tells us: "***The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.***"⁵

And Heb 11:23 tells us: "***By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.***"⁶

Also, remember how Daniel's three friends obeyed God rather than submitting to King Nebuchadnezzar's orders to worship his gods and the statue which he had built (Dan 3:13-18)!

And also remember how John & Peter did not obey the Sanhedrin's orders not to speak & teach in the Name of Jesus?⁷

My brother & sister, when government commands the Christian to do things that go against God's commands, then the Christian will respectfully say "No" to government, and obey God!

However, ordinarily the Christian will & must submit in loyalty and respect to government!

In fact, v.13 commands Christians to submit themselves "***to every authority instituted among men!***" So, this will include the authoritative *institution* as well as the authoritative *person*!

After all, as Rom 13:1 says, "***...for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.***"⁸

³ The Greek word here is from *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω), i.e. a combination of *hypo* (meaning "under") and *tassō* (meaning "to place, order, appoint").

⁴ In Hebrew *məyallādōt* (מַיָּלְלוֹדוֹת) "...Ex 1:15 + 5 times in Ex 1;—*cause* (or *help*) *to bring forth*, viz., *assist* or *tend as midwife*...." (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [*Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*](#) (p. 408). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Ex 1:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Heb 11:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ Here is how John & Peter replied to the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:19), "***But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.'***"

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Ro 13:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Indeed, *at some level*,⁹ all authorities have been established¹⁰ (instituted¹¹ / ordained¹²/ appointed¹³)¹⁴ by God!

My brother & sister, what will happen if citizens (including Christian citizens) would not submit to their governments? Yes, what's the alternative to submitting to government? Well, it's chaos!!

So, Peter, by the Holy Spirit, mentions two kinds of human institutions under which the Christians should live exemplary lives: the *king* and the *governor*. For Peter's first readers this meant they should submit to their emperor in faraway Rome and to the emperor's governors who ruled in the towns of Asia Minor.

Now here's a striking thing! You see, the emperor to whom v.13 refers was in all likelihood none other than the *rascal*¹⁵ Nero!¹⁶

What's more, all indications are that, at the time when Peter wrote this letter, he was in Rome¹⁷ – i.e. in the same city from where Nero was ruling!

Wow!

Question: Keeping in mind Emperor Nero's behaviour, were there any personal grounds on which Nero could insist that people should respect him?

See? See what our text expects of Christians? It expects of them to be good citizens even in extreme situations!

See how Peter's desire (God's desire) for Christians is that they will be good people (well-behaving citizens)?

Reason for Submitting

⁹ A well-chosen phrase by McKnight: "The odd combination of "creation" and "human" leads one to suspect that Peter sees the institution of government as supervised and appointed by God at some level" (McKnight, S. (1996). [1 Peter](#) (pp. 142–162). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

¹⁰ So, among other, the NIV84, NIV, NASB

¹¹ ESV, RSV, NRSV

¹² KJV, AV

¹³ NKJV

¹⁴ The Greek word in Rm 13:1 is *tetagmenai* (τεταγμένοι), a Perfect Passive Participle Feminine Plural Nominative of *tassō* (τάσσω) "to cause someone to be in a state involving an order or arrangement—'to cause to be, to be placed'..." (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 150). New York: United Bible Societies).

Also cf. "...^① to bring about an order of things by arranging, *arrange, put in place*

^② of an authority structure pass. αἱ οὐσαι (ἔξουσίαι) ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμένοι εἰσὶν *the (structures of authority) presently existing are put in place by God Ro 13:1...."* (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 991). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁵ Word well-chosen by McKnight (ibid)

¹⁶ Yes, if the early dating of 1 Peter is correct (i.e. the early 60s) then the king/emperor to whom 1 Pt 2:13 refers is Nero! For the dating of 1 Peter as 63-65 AD, cf. e.g. Elwell, W.A. & Yarbrough, R.W. (1998). *Encountering the New Testament: a historical and theological survey*. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books p. 364).

¹⁷ This is gauging by Peter's words at the end of this letter (1 Pt 5:13), *She who is in Babylon* (i.e. the church in Rome), *chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.* ¹⁴ *Greet one another with a kiss of love.*

Peace to all of you who are in Christ (NIV84).

My brother & sister, if we compare the life you & I enjoy under our New Zealand government with the lives Peter's first readers lived under their government, then you & I live as royals!

After all, most of Peter's first readers were regarded as non-citizens with no rights and privileges whatsoever!

Yet, our text commands them to submit to their political authorities!

Why? Why did Peter (by the Holy Spirit) not want those Christians to take out their bitterness on their police officers, governors and emperor? Why did Peter want them to behave kindly and with greatest respect to those who ruled over them like tyrants?

Two reasons: 1) to honour God; 2) self-protection

To honour God:

Have you noticed how verse 13 does not just say, "***Submit yourselves to every human institution...***"?

No, it says, "***Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution...***"¹⁸

What does that mean?

Well, remember verse 12 – the verse just before our text? This is what it says: "***Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.***"¹⁹

See? If unbelievers – even perhaps an unbelieving ruler, politician or police officer – could see the justice and holiness of God in the behaviour of Christians, then they might be cut to the heart and give praise to God! And so, proper behaviour can lead to an opportunity to speak of the grace of God and the love of Christ!

Indeed, if Peter's first readers (if all Christians) could submit to their governmental authorities, they would be following the example of Christ. After all, only four verses after our text (in 1 Pt 2:21b-23) Peter says, ***Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,*** ²² ***who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth;*** ²³ ***and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;***²⁰

See? See why Christians should submit to their earthly governments?

The first reason is to honour God!

Here's the second reason: *self-protection.*

You see, verse 15 says, ***For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.***

Why should Peter's first readers (despised & looked down upon by their rulers) submit to them?

Because in doing so, those Christians would be in a better position to silence their accusers and remove their ignorance about Christians!

¹⁸ Emphasis mine

¹⁹ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (1 Pt 2:12). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation (Emphasis mine).

²⁰ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (1 Pt 2:21–23). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

So, if Peter's first readers would submit to the authorities, they might (as v.14 says)²¹ escape punishment and rather receive the praises of their governor for doing things that are right/good!

What sort of good/right/kind things could Christian citizens do to/in their local communities?

Well, there's much that skilled New Zealand Christians could do to make life easier for our fellow citizens. But what Peter had in mind for his first readers could well have been:

- supplying grain to their towns in times of hunger;
- Not charging too much for their products;
- Erecting public buildings or adorning/renovating old buildings (as they did in Corinth);
- refurbishing the theatre;
- Widening roads;
- Helping in times of civil upheaval.²²

What can the Reformed Church of Wainuiomata do in our community?

Well, our Committee of Admin has led us to getting a defibrillator installed just outside our front door – to the left! The one-off amount it cost us to do this is nothing compared to the blessing it will be to the community and to us. Already now, this defibrillator is registered with the emergency number 111, and can now be used by any paramedic, ambulance driver and doctor to serve our community.

Another service we give to the community is that we have Te Kura (the correspondence school) using our fellowship room, kitchen and facilities on Thursdays. On those mornings, special-needs school students from the community receive extra tuition.

That's a good start! The Reformed Church of Wainuiomata should not be seen as people who just care for themselves, but doing good for the community!

Question: Will we win hearts for God's kingdom by submitting to our national and local authorities and by being good citizens of New Zealand? Will our good citizenship prevent us from getting laughed at, ostracised or persecuted for our faith?

Well, let's not be naïve! The likelihood that our submitting to the authorities (and the chances that our kind deeds to the community) will win over hearts for the Lord or for us are not in our hands. However, it is not naïve to think that sometimes such good behaviour may have the prayed-for effect!

Manner of Submitting

My brother & sister, last month our New Zealand government placed Auckland under level-3 lockdown restrictions. They did this for a good reason – i.e. in an effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

But sadly, one church in Auckland's Mt Roskill area showed little consideration for this government regulation.

The regulation was that, under level-3 lockdown, churches could have ten people meeting together *only if it was for a funeral or a wedding* – not for other church meetings.

²¹ 1 Pt 2:14 “...or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right” (NASB).

²² So Bruce Winter (apud McKnight, *ibid*)

Yet, on Saturday the 15th August, this specific church held a prayer meeting at which they breached government's restrictions. So, the police came in shut down that prayer meeting!²³

A few days later, a professor in religion at a New Zealand university said in the media something to the following effect, i.e. that some Christian communities think they can ignore government regulations, for they see even these COVID regulations as something by which government hinders God's work.

Well, sadly, this professor's words are true! That is indeed how some Christian communities think – and not just in New Zealand!²⁴

But that church in Mt Roskill had no Biblical reason to go against government regulations. After all, considering the threatening pandemic circumstances, the regulations put in place by government are fair and not aimed at working against God! Such rebellious actions by churches have done the Name of God (and the cause of Christians in general) a great disfavour!

Yes, now even faithful worshipers like us may be hated and called “fundamentalists!”

Well, it was exactly to avoid such flagrant disobedience to fair government laws that Peter (by the Holy Spirit) wrote the words of v.16, “*Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*”²⁵

You see, my brother & sister, even the *socially excluded Christians* of Peter's times, had to submit to their human authorities, not only because they urgently wanted to protect themselves, but also because they were ultimately free from the jurisdiction of their human authorities!

Yes, Christians lived (still live) under their human authorities as *free* people; not as slaves/servants of the king/emperor, but as servants of God! After all, ultimately, these human authorities (be they ever so powerful) will have no final say over Christians' souls!

Indeed, even if the Christian gets killed by ungodly human authorities, yet, because he/she is in Christ, the Christian is ultimately free!

However, this ultimate freedom from human authorities – Christians are not to use this as an excuse to despise their human authorities and to rebel against them or attack them!

Yes, if Christians really understand the freedom they have in Christ (now that they have been made right with God), then they will let this freedom be seen in their respect and loyalty (yes, in their *willing* submission and honour) to their human authorities!²⁶

You know what? Martin Luther understood this well! You see, he lived under the authority of emperor and pope – an authority no less powerful than that of Emperor Nero! Yet, no one said it better than Martin Luther. Here is how he said it in two short sentences:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

²³ Cf. e.g. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12363614

²⁴ Cf. e.g. this NewsHub item of 25 September 2020: **Coronavirus: Overseas influence, desire to connect may be behind challenges with Auckland church - religious expert**

[<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/09/coronavirus-overseas-influence-desire-to-connect-may-be-behind-challenges-with-auckland-church-religious-expert.html>]

²⁵ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (1 Pe 2:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁶ I love the words of McKnight (ibid), “Christians are free because they have been redeemed. The state's authority over them is secondary, and their submission to the state is secondary to their submission to the Lord. Christians are to be good citizens because they are obedient to the Lord, not good Christians because they are obedient to the state.”

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all!”²⁷

My brother & sister, the New Zealand government allows for Christians (for you & me) a whole lot more freedom than what Peter’s first readers had – or than Christians currently in China have.

You see, you & I are allowed to speak against our government’s abortion laws. And if we do it with respect of life and property, you & I could even pack out thousands of baby booties on the lawn before parliament to vividly show how many babies have been aborted! After all, even such an action is within the structures allowed by our government!

But the Christian should never damage property, nor hurt or kill anyone, for how will such atrocious actions ever cause non-Christians to see the glory of God?

Well, Peter ends our text by recapping with v. 17, **“Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”**²⁸

But this sermon would be incomplete if we did not hear this last word...

You see, there are (in fact there have been) situations in which the believing Christian may not be able to *obey* or *disobey* – yes, when, sadly, *suffering* remains the only “option.” This happened e.g. to the Apostle Paul, to Peter, to thousands of Christian martyrs through the ages – also to Reformers like John Huss, Guido de Brès, William Tyndale; also to Dietrich Bonhoeffer under Hitler, and to many more!

But (and here’s the point) in *this* these martyrs were just following the example of the Lord Jesus who knew that His path was leading to the cross – the reason why you & I are able to celebrate the Lord’s Supper this morning, for by His cross (empowered by His resurrection) He has set us free from bondage to sin and satan!

AMEN (2,578 words excluding footnotes)

²⁷ “Ein Christenmensch ist ein freier Herr über alle Dinge und niemandem untertan.

Ein Christenmensch ist ein dienstbarer Knecht aller Dinge und jedermann untertan” [https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/community/leserblogs/fr_hst_ckstreffen/Luther-Von-der-Freiheit-eines-Christenmenschen-id41704096.html].

“On the Freedom of a Christian (Latin: "De Libertate Christiana"; German: "Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen"), sometimes also called "A Treatise on Christian Liberty" (November 1520), was the third of Martin Luther’s major reforming treatises of 1520, appearing after his Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation (August 1520) and the work Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (October 1520). The work appeared in a shorter German and a more elaborate Latin form. There is no academic consensus whether the German or the Latin version was written first.[1] The treatise developed the concept that as fully forgiven children of God, Christians are no longer compelled to keep God's law to obtain salvation; however, they freely and willingly serve God and their neighbors. Luther also further develops the concept of justification by faith. In the treatise, Luther stated, ‘A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.’ “ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Freedom_of_a_Christian].

²⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 2:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.