

Authority and Submission in Peter and Paul

Jean Sheldon

Scripture Reading

- **Reader:** Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around.
- **ALL:** “But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all for the Son of Man didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.” Mark 10:42-45, CEB footnote.

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- **Reader:** When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”
- **ALL:** But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” Acts 5:27-32, NRSV. END

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Personal Backstory

- Father's words to Conference President
- Difficult Boss at LLU
- Former GC Officer-Turned-College President
 - Vows of Celibacy, Chastity, and Poverty
 - Decided that I should serve as his assistant (read secretary)
 - Tried to cheat clients by two tuition figures and blamed it on me
 - Decided to put God first and not do for my boss more than I could
 - Told me he was glad I was leaving because of my theology

Every Authority (1 Peter 2:11-3:7, NRSV)

- “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.”

Governing Authorities (Romans 13:1-7, NRSV)

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

“All Authorities:” Issues at Stake

1. Nero? Domitian? Constantine? Inquisition? Immoral Kings? Hitler? The Taliban? ISIS? Trump?
2. If there is “no authority except from God,” what does this imply for a grossly immoral and tyrannical authority? Are we to assume per Paul that God appoints and supports someone who is immoral and abuses his power and others?
3. Are we to assume that everything a fairly moral and fair-handed authority figure does is to be supported as God-ordained? On what basis can we think not? “Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

Masters and Slaves (1 Peter 2:18-25, NRSV)

“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd of your souls.”

Masters and Slaves; Bosses and Employees

- You are a Roman slave girl whom your master found exposed as an infant and took home to raise. You have managed to learn about Jesus and have decided to be His disciple. You have now fully reached puberty and know that your master will expect you to begin bearing him children to raise them as his slaves. Does Peter's counsel to slaves include this practice?
- Your boss has called you into his office and offered you a much-needed raise in pay on condition of sexual favors to himself. You know that if you decline his "offer," you will likely lose your job. Does Peter's counsel sanction your acceptance of his "offer"?

Husbands and Wives (1 Peter 3:1-7, NRSV)

“Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments of fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

“Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.”

Husbands and Wives: Issues at Stake

- What is the difference between Peter's counsel and current "male-headship" theology?
- What kind of authority does Peter assume the husband will exercise?
- According to Paul in Galatians 5:22, 23, "gentleness" is one of the fruit of the Spirit. Is this fruit only for women to exercise and not for men?
- How did Sarah "obey" Abraham? I thought Abraham obeyed Sarah at times?

Abram's Dream (Genesis Apocryphon)

- And on the night of our entry into Egypt, I, Abram, dreamt a dream; and behold, I saw in my dream a cedar tree and a palm tree. Men came and they sought to cut down the cedar tree and to pull up its roots, leaving the palm tree standing alone. But the palm tree cried out/saying, "Do not cut down this cedar tree, for cursed be he who shall fell it." And the cedar tree was spared because of the palm tree and was not felled.
- And during the night I woke from my dream, and I said to Sarai, my wife, "I have dreamt a dream and I am fearful because of this dream." She said to me, "Tell me your dream that I may know it." So I began to tell her this dream and told her the interpretation of the dream: that they will seek to kill me, but will spare you. Say to them of me, 'He is my brother, and because of you I shall live, and because of you my life shall be saved.'"
- And Sarai wept that night on account of my words.
- Then we journeyed towards Zoan, I and Sarai.
- And when those five years had passed, three men from among the princes of Egypt came at the command of Pharaoh of Zoan to inquire after my business and after my wife and they gave goodness, wisdom, and truth. And I exclaimed before them because of the famine. And they came to ascertain with much food and drink the wine.

Abram's Dream, continued

- During the party, the Egyptians must have seen Sarai, and on their return they praised her to the king, sayin "How beautiful is her face! How fine are the hairs of her head! How lovely are her eyes! How desirable her nose and all the radiance of her countenance. How fair are her breasts and how beautiful all her whiteness! How pleasing are her arms and how perfect her hands, and how desirable all the appearance of ho hands! How fair are her palms and how long and slender are her fingers! How comely are her feet, how perfect ho thighs! No virgin or bride led into the marriage chamber is more beautiful than she; she is fairer than all other women Truly, her beauty is greater than theirs Yet together with all this grace she possesses abundant wisdom, so that whatever she does is perfect."
- When the king heard the words of Harkenosh and his two companions, for all three spoke as with one voice, he desired her greatly and sent out at once to take her. And seeing her, he was amazed by all her beauty and took her to be his wife, but me he sought to kill. Sarai said to the king, "He is my brother," and so I, Abram, was spared because of her and was not slain.
- Was this the obedience Sarah rendered Abraham that Peter refers to? Can you think of another instance? Note that Sarah here does not refer to Abraham as "my Lord."

Another Perspective

- “The wife, if she has the Spirit of Christ, will be careful of her words; she will control her spirit, she will be submissive, and yet will not feel that she is a bonds slave, but a companion to her husband. If the husband is a servant of God, he will not lord it over his wife; he will not be arbitrary and exacting. . . .
- “Neither the husband nor the wife should attempt to exercise over the other an arbitrary control. Do not try to compel each other to yield to your wishes. You cannot do this and retain each other’s love. Be kind, patient, and forbearing, considerate and courteous. By the grace of God, you can succeed in making each other happy, as in your marriage vow you promised to do” (AH 118).

The Nature of God's Authority

“God could have destroyed Satan and his sympathizers as easily as one can cast a pebble to the earth; but He did not do this. Rebellion was not to be overcome by force. Compelling power is found only under Satan's government. The Lord's principles are not of this order. His authority rests upon goodness, mercy, and love; and the presentation of these principles is the means to be used. God's government is moral, and truth and love are to be the prevailing power” (DA 759).

Exegetical Observations

- The word translated “subject to” is *hupotasso* and is the same verb as is used of “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” in Ephesians 5:21, NRSV.
- The word used for “authority” is *exousia*, usually “authority,” not *katexousia* (“tyrannical authority”).
- The thrust of both Paul’s and Peter’s instruction about (Roman) authority is about punishing wrongdoers. The concern is that Christians not misuse their freedom in Christ to flaunt authority where unnecessary and defy the laws of the land.

General Questions

- How much of what Paul and Peter say about authority is applicable to the circumstances of the Roman Empire and culture? Why not to our circumstances?
- How much of what Peter says to wives applies directly to us today? Should we require women to call their husbands, “lord”? What should it mean for a wife to obey her husband?
- Given that we have rejected and abolished slavery in this country on biblical grounds (though the “other side” also upheld slavery on biblical grounds, how should we deal with Peter’s admonition to slaves?
- How does our view of authority impact the way we interpret and apply Scripture?
- How can we persuade “plain readers” of Scripture that our position on authority is biblical?