

Armagh Baptist Church Bible Studies
Wednesday 16th June 2010 – 8:00pm
1 Peter 2:13-17 – ‘Submission to State Authorities’

Introduction

I'm very conscious, having lived both sides of the border myself, that here in the church in Armagh, we have members of our congregation who live on both sides of the border too. Some of us live in Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, with a Queen as the Head of State, and some live in the Republic of Ireland, with a President as Head of State. Some of us are subjects in a Kingdom, and others are citizens in a Republic.

‘Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité’ – were the 3 great slogans of the French Revolution. They are still the basic foundation stones of France today: ‘Liberty for all; Equality for all its citizens; and Fraternity or brotherhood.’ These are also the foundation stones of the United States of America, which is another Republic. They don't have a king, but they do have a democracy, governed by a President (Barack Obama). It's just the same in the Republic of Ireland – they too have a democratic government, with a President, Mary McAleese, as their Head of State. There is no king (as mentioned here in v.13 and v.17), but the principles contained in this passage still hold true nevertheless.

Here in Northern Ireland, we live in a modern democracy with a Parliament at Westminster, and a devolved Assembly at Stormont. Two houses which discuss and debate policies and make laws governing life in the UK, and here in Northern Ireland. In Westminster there is a cabinet of ministers, each with a portfolio of responsibilities and a prime minister (David Cameron) with his deputy (Nick Clegg) serving together in a coalition. And then in Stormont we have a First Minister (Peter Robinson) and his deputy (Martin McGuinness) in a shared Executive and Assembly. Now whether we would have chosen them or not, they have all been elected democratically, by popular vote, to govern us and to lead us. And then of course, we have the Queen, who is really just a figure-head within our modern democracy, but she is our Head of State, nevertheless.

The basis of a modern democratic country is basically people rule, with a national figure head, and an elected group of ministers to lead the country.

But what do those words actually mean? ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’.

Liberty means we should be free from tyrannical control, we should be free from a military dictator, or even a dictatorial king or queen. The principle of Liberty should also ensure freedom of speech and freedom of religion, so that people can worship in accordance with their own consciences.

Equality means that all men and women should be on an equal footing, with equal opportunities. It should be one person, one vote, and everybody should have an equal say in the running of the country.

What about **Fraternity** or Brotherhood?

Well, that simply means that we should all co-operate for the good of all, for the benefit and well-being of our fellow-countrymen and women.

These are high ideals, but do they always work out in practice?

Well in terms of **freedom**, we find that some groups or minorities are always discriminated against. In the past it might have been homosexuals or Muslims who were discriminated against, but with reverse discrimination being practiced by recent governments, at times it feels as if we as Christians (who are trying to uphold the teachings of the Bible) are fast becoming the minority group which is being discriminated against.

In terms of **equality**, George Orwell, in his book *Animal Farm*, which we had to read at school (a satire about the Russian Revolution) the animals in the farm-yard one day painted up on the barn wall, *‘All animals are equal!’* and they all of course thought this was wonderful. But when things settled down a bit after the Revolution, someone added a few words underneath:

*‘All animals are equal – **but some are more equal than others!***

And haven't we seen that in recent times? It's not just that our elected representatives drive around in big limos, but they have been found out in the expenses scandal, to be feathering their own nests, and lining their own pockets, selfishly living just to enrich themselves, and at a time when the country's finances were going down the tubes! So where is the equality and brotherhood in all of that?

But are these three ideals found in God's Word?

(i) Liberty (It's there in v.16)

*‘Live as free men, but don't use your freedom as an excuse for evil
– live as servants of God!’*

We should be allowed to live our lives free from a human dictator, yes.

But as believers, we are first and foremost set free from sin.

But notice, we are set free from sin, in order to serve God!

It's not that all of us are 'free to do what we think is right in our own eyes.'

Our freedom is not absolute – our freedom must be exercised within clearly defined boundaries of good and evil (see 1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

So Peter says to us here, *‘Live as free men, but don't use your freedom as an excuse for evil – live as servants of God!’*

(ii) Fraternity or Brotherhood (It's there in v.17)

'Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king'.

The word fraternity or brotherhood does appear in these verses.

But what does the Bible mean by brotherhood here? Well, the only 'brotherhood' the Bible recognises is *'the brotherhood of believers'* (NIV). It's not referring to the brotherhood of orange, or black or freemasonry. Particularly in freemasonry the idea of 'brotherhood' just becomes an excuse for a cloak of secrecy to cover up all kinds of wrong practices.

What it's talking about here is the brotherhood of believers – brothers and sisters in Christ – with Christ as our elder brother, and God as our heavenly Father. As brothers and sisters in Christ we should love each other and seek to work for, and care for the well-being of each other in the family of God. This should be our first priority – to look after one another.

So no allegiance in this world, in any club or society should be stronger or more important to us than the bonds of allegiance between us as believers and fellow members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

If there is some club or society, or 'brotherhood' in your life, which has become more important to you than the church of believers, then I suggest to you that you'd need to do some re-ordering of your priorities.

(iii) But do we find Equality in these verses?

Some would point us to Acts ch.4 in the early church. Not an equality in possessions, but a strong fraternity that prompted them to sell some of their possessions from time to time, in order to give to anyone who was in need among them (Acts 4:32-37).

The only equality that the Bible recognises among men is that of their sin:

'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' (Rom 3:23).

Our sin, our depravity, our lostness, our deserving of God's eternal punishment, and the fact that we all will face death - that's what makes us all equal in God's eyes. *'Death is the great leveller'* as someone has said.

But in God's Kingdom, the church, all believers are equal in one sense.

As we were learning recently in 1 Peter 2:9, we are a *'priesthood of all believers.'* In that sense we are all equal – we can all approach God directly, we all have a role to play in the church of Jesus Christ using our God-given gifts. And yet in terms of office there will be a leadership within the church: deacons, elders, pastors, teachers, etc.

There is an equality of position in Christ, but a difference in role or function. Some lead; some follow! Some serve; some submit. (See 1 Peter 5:1-6).

But back in 1 Peter 2:13-17, I don't believe that political equality is set out in these verses. Rather, God-ordained structures are set out before us:

There's a picture of the Structure of Society:

King (Supreme Authority) (President)

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Governors – His agents or envoys (to punish wrong / commend right)

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The people submitting themselves to their authority

But alongside the picture of Society, there is a picture of the Church

Fear God (as our Supreme Authority)

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Brothers – love - Believers – love – Sisters

The church of believers submits to and honours the king & governors!

See also **Romans 13:1-7** for what Paul said about this.

- He tells us to be good citizens and to pay our taxes

- He warns us against rebelling against existing authorities

- Because, he says, such authorities have been established by God!

In fact the Bible teaches that it is God who raises up and overthrows governments, not men!

Cf Isaiah 40 – it was written in a time of tremendous international upheaval, but read vs.9-17 and 21-26.

The God who can overthrow Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Greece and raise up the Roman Empire, is also the God who brought them all down again!

Remember again the context of 1 Peter: The people of Northern Turkey in AD63 were living under the power and authority of the Great Roman Empire, and wicked, eccentric Nero was the Emperor at the time. He was the worst of all dictators, and the most wicked of Emperors, but it's against that political back-drop that both Peter and Paul write what they did.

So if God told believers in Nero's day not to rebel against Nero(!) surely in our day of liberty and democracy and rights for all, what real reasons do we have to rebel?

But what if our democratic government, or the people of our nation in a referendum, pass or enact laws that are contrary to Biblical Teaching – what should we do then? Rise up and get those decisions over-turned? No!

Listen again to Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:4

'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world, on the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.'

We have only two weapons of offence as Christians – Ephesians 6:17-18.

'The Sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of God'

'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests.'

God's Word and Prayer

That's how the early church moved forward, with the Word of God in one hand, and prayer in the other, and they turned the world upside down!

If we want to change things in our country, then as Christians, that is how we should do it:

- **By preaching** and teaching as widely and as faithfully as possible the principles and righteous standards of the Bible.

- **By praying**, believing that prayer is a powerful weapon that can stem the tide of unrighteousness, and bring about changes in the hearts and minds of the people who make up our democratic country.

We have that advantage over New Testament times – at least our voice has as much right to be heard as anybody else!

Also: pay your taxes, use your vote, write to your MPs or TDs.

There is nothing to stop a Christian getting involved in politics, as long as he's prepared and able to live up to Biblical principles – e.g. Moses in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon!

So what can we learn from vs.13-17 this evening as we close:

1. The Responsibility of State Authorities (v.14)

To punish those who do wrong. To commend those who do right.

Therefore they need to have laws to distinguish right from wrong, not on some basis of popular morality, but based on the morality that God has revealed to us in His Word. The O.T. moral code is not out of date, despite what that Bishop Scotland said about it.

The Bible clearly teaches that: Homosexual practice is wrong, abortion is murder, euthanasia is evil, adultery is wrong, marriage is to be honoured by all, so divorce and remarriage can only be allowed in certain circumstances.

2. The Responsibility of Christians to be Model Citizens (v.15)

Christians in the 1st Century AD were being accused of all sorts of things simply because they were a misunderstood minority:

e.g. Cannibalism – because rumours were going about that they ate the flesh and drank the blood of their leader - a misunderstanding of the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper. But they were accused of cannibalism!

e.g. Atheism – Because they rejected all the gods of Rome as being no-gods at all, and because they didn't take part in the Jewish Faith either, they were outside of the two main religions of the Roman World, therefore they were regarded as Atheists! Even though they were actually the ones worshipping the Living and True God in spirit and in truth!

e.g. Immorality – the early believers held an Agape Feast or Love Feast. They talked so much about loving one another that to an outsider, or person of the world, they equated such talk of love to immorality and sexual love!

So God says to these early Christians, through Peter, *'It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men!'* (v.15)(v.12). We shouldn't give anybody any grounds whatsoever to bring any charge against us as Christians, we should simply get on with living to please God, and if we do that then by and large we will be law-abiding citizens.

3. The Responsibility to use our Liberty to Serve God (v.16)

We are free from sin, and we are free from tyranny and dictatorship.

We live in a free society. We are free to live life as we choose.

Nobody forces us to do anything we don't want to do.

But with that privilege of freedom, comes responsibility too:-

(i) Not to use our freedom, negatively, as an excuse to do wrong.

To live immorally, or to live secretly or to do things behind closed doors.

Our liberty should not be used as a licence to live as we like.

(ii) But we should use our freedom, positively, to serve God.

'Live as servants of God'. If we're free from the tyranny and dictatorship of a Rome or a Russia or Iran or North Korea, then we should appreciate the liberty we have that others don't have. There are many things they can't do, such as preach openly or publicly, or evangelise openly.

We have these freedoms, so let's use them to the full!

We are free to give our allegiance to God, so let's not keep our faith hidden!

4. In Summary – 'Show Proper Respect to Everyone' (v.17)

First Commandment – *'Love the Lord your God...'*

Second Commandment – *'Love your neighbour as yourself'*

In other words *'show proper respect to everyone.'*

(i) Love your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember, our first allegiance is to those within our church fellowship.

(ii) Live a life that shows you fear God most of all.

By your everyday lifestyle and behaviour show you put God top priority, first place in your life.

(iii) Remember to honour the king / government.

Give them the proper respect and honour that it is God's Will for you to give them. Don't ignore the State, or rebel against it, but respect and comply with it as far as we possibly can.

In so doing we'll not only be model citizens, we'll also be model Christians!
And in so doing we'll be doing what Titus says:

'Making the teaching about God our Saviour attractive' to the lost. (NIV)

'Adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things' (AV Titus 2:11)

And bringing glory to God as well (Matthew 5:16, 1 Peter 2:12). Amen.

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