

Christians in Society

SCOTT HOEZEE

These days, sharp words and harsh verbal exchanges make for great television; turn on one of the so-called reality shows on TV any evening and you will see roommates, or spouses, or chefs who are in a cooking competition biting each other's heads off in fights that millions of viewers find entertaining. Sometimes, though, you will even see pastors or theology professors on a split screen on CNN or Fox News arguing about something; even those religious figures often cut each other off, talk over each other, shout each other down. Is that how we Christians are supposed to react when we meet opposition? The Apostle Peter did not think so. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore why.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

I am Meg Jenista.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. In this series, Dave and Meg, we have been looking at 1 Peter and noting that his main theme – he talks about a number of things – but his main theme is about suffering in the Christian life; and particularly suffering for being a Christian – suffering ridicule and insults and maybe worse just for being a Christian. We have explored already how Peter says we have to keep in mind that we have a living hope kept in heaven for us; and that has to help us get through the trials that come. We have talked about imitating Jesus when we meet opposition; but today Peter is going to get very practical as he takes on another aspect of our Christian life, and that is how – first of all, how we behave with each other even inside the community of the faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, most of the abuse that we are going to experience – and probably most of the abuse we dish out – is verbal. You know, I have not been in a fight since first grade. I do not know about you guys, but... The way we use our tongues; the Bible has a lot to say about that – about speech and language. James calls the tongue a fire because it can really fry people. That is really where we are going to experience, probably, personal attacks. That is the way it is going to happen, and the question is, what do we do about it? How do we respond?

MEG JENISTA

Right; I do not find myself particularly tempted to punch anyone in the face, but it is a great temptation when you have the opportunity to drop that line in – to throw...

DAVE BAST

You would really like to cut them down, wouldn't you?

MEG JENISTA

To throw that snark; when you have that thing that is just too witty – that can be a great temptation.

DAVE BAST

The problem is, you often think of that afterwards: Oh, I wish I would have said...

MEG JENISTA

Maybe that is the Holy Spirit preserving you from actually saying it to someone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, it is interesting, Peter has been encouraging patience in this letter; mostly for the slights and the hurts we are going to endure in the wider world; but he knows that if you get sneered at long enough, eventually you can sort of get just a little bit cranky, and then when you go to church, let's say, when you are in the community of faith and then you get it again from a fellow believer, that is when, maybe, you are going to let your guard down. It is sort of like all day long you put up with your colleagues at work and you do not say anything; and you come home and you kick the dog or you bite your spouse's head off. Why? Because they are there; and Peter knows that can happen in the community of the faith, too. We can bite each other's heads off, even as sisters and brothers in Christ.

MEG JENISTA

Which is why Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 3 is so stark – so dramatic and straight to the point when he says in 1 Peter 3, beginning in verse 8:

Finally, all of you be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

DAVE BAST

You know, I cannot remember the last time I have tried to obey that. I do not know about you, Meg, and you, Scott, but okay, somebody really says something nasty to me and I say, "Oh, God bless you." Repay insults with blessings? For to this you were called? That is what we are called to as Christians?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And to love one another...

DAVE BAST

It is in the Bible, I guess.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, well, it is right here; but, to love one another. So, this is not saying love the people out there in society. I cannot help but think that if Peter had spent some years hanging out with eleven other disciples, and if the Gospels show us anything it is that those twelve disciples often got into it. Who is the greatest? I am the greatest. I am better than you are. Who is going to sit on his right and his left? The disciples knew a little something that even in a community of likeminded people, bad things happen, and you cannot help but think he is harking back to that as he is talking to his readers now, knowing that they face the same dynamics in their own communities of faith.

MEG JENISTA

Well, he does not even have to go that far back in history; he just goes to his own conversations with Paul that are recorded in Galatians 2 about how to go about ministry. They both love Jesus Christ; they are both committed to the Gospel and to ministry, but that does not mean that they do not have their own exchange.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they got into it. You know, when it says respond to insults or criticism or attacks or whatever with blessing, I do not think that means literally you say God bless you, or something like that, because that sounds kind of snarky, too. When you are blessing somebody, you are really wishing them well, right? I think what Peter is trying to get at is that we develop a spirit of charity; we are charitable; we are gracious; just because maybe we are on the receiving end does not mean that we get all riled and hate that person, but we still somehow find it in us to say, “You know, I really wish you well.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things we said in a previous program in this series is that Peter refers to us as family, and one of the things we noted at that time is in our spiritual family, as in our families of origin, our biological families, you do not get to choose who your cousins are; you do not get to choose. Sometimes you go to family reunions and you cannot believe you are related to some of these people, but you are; and so, you make room for them in your life and you wish them well. I think, Dave, that is what you were saying; that you want them to flourish. You do not always agree with them; you make mistakes with each other, but at the end of the day, you do not want them dead; you do not want them to disappear; you want them to flourish the same way you want to flourish. You want them to get a benediction from Jesus the same way you get a benediction from Jesus.

DAVE BAST

The commandment, as I recall, is not love your friend as you love yourself – it is love your neighbor as you love yourself. G.K. Chesterton said that is because God gives you your neighbor. We pick our friends, and they are easy to love, relatively speaking; but God gives us our neighbor, and the neighbors that are closest to us, basically, are the people in church with us, and that is whom we are called to love as we love ourselves.

MEG JENISTA

I think a piece of that ability to turn around and extend a blessing, even when cursing has been extended to us, is the ability, as our pastoral care professor in seminary used to tell us, to know that you do not know; to know that you do not know what it is like to be another person; to know that you do not know what they have been through in the past week or what they are encountering. So, whatever is being thrown at you is – there is something else behind it; and if you can be gracious enough to recognize that, then there is some room to love regardless.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is like Lincoln’s great line: With malice toward none; with charity to all. Charity means giving the other person the benefit of the doubt and figuring: You know, maybe they are not evil or malicious; maybe they’ve just got a bad day going and I can kind of give them a break.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as Neal Plantinga sometimes has said: One of the things that being a Christian in the Church means is that we extend one another a long line of moral credit. We give people the opportunity to be forgiven, as we have been forgiven ourselves; but Peter knows that it is not just inside the Church where we are going to have to deal with this, so we will return to what has been a wider theme in Peter, and that is how you deal with it in the wider world as well.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*; we are digging into 1 Peter Chapter 3 today. I am Dave Bast, along with Meg Jenista and Scott Hoezee, and I am going to read verses 13 through 17 now, as we come back to Peter’s theme of facing suffering.

¹³Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats. Do not be frightened, ¹⁵but in your hearts revere, or set aside, set

apart, Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have; ¹⁶but do this with respect and gentleness, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Richard Mouw years ago picked up on that passage, and he wrote a book on Christian civility: Answer with gentleness and respect. Boy, we do not see a lot of that these days; certainly not on TV.

MEG JENISTA

Well, and a big theme in 1 Peter would be the countercultural nature of being Christ's followers, and in today's culture, it would be phenomenally counterculture if the Church was the place where people spoke kindly to one another, and that we gave each other the benefit of the doubt and assumed good in the other person, and spoke in that way. We may end up being naïve, but it would be a countercultural naïveté, and that might just be worth it for the testimony.

DAVE BAST

You know, my denomination – my church – finished its annual meeting some time ago. At the center of the debate this year were debates about human sexuality. This is happening all over. It is happening in a lot of churches; and there were deeply held positions that differed drastically. The best thing, I think, about it is the whole thing was carried on in a very positive sort of polite and gracious way; that people did not start to get angry and shout at each other. They did not malign or try to twist or distort; and to me, at the very least, that is what Peter is calling us to do. Even if we disagree or differ on some very fundamental questions in the Church, we can be gracious about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What happens when you address somebody as Peter advises here, with gentleness and respect? Well, what you are saying is we disagree, but I love you. I still see the image of God in you. That means I am going to treat you a certain way. We disagree, but disagreement does not stop you from being God's image bearer. You deserve gentleness. You deserve my respect, and I am going to give it to you because I recognize that you are made in the image of God; and certainly, if you are a brother or sister in Christ, you have been recreated in that image in Christ. How could you not be gentle or respectful to the Jesus in front of you? The mini-Jesus.

MEG JENISTA

Can I tell you what I find difficult about that, though, is that in responding to the hateful speech that we see around us, and opting for gentleness and kindness, sometimes we hide speaking truth to one another under the guise of being polite, and we equate being polite and letting things slide with the gentleness and kindness that Peter is speaking of here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I can see where that can be a problem, but it is possible to speak the truth in love – I think that is in the Bible somewhere.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it is a balancing act, for sure; Meg is right. These days, gentleness and respect can also be an excuse for just clamming up; not rocking the boat.

DAVE BAST

I want to pick up something, though Meg, that you said earlier about being countercultural, at this point. You know, we throw around that word countercultural, and we have talked about it in this series of programs on 1 Peter because one of the ways we are going to suffer, Peter says, is by being countercultural – distinctively. We keep that so superficial, most of us; but I think it goes much deeper than that in our interpersonal relationships. Our culture has become so coarse and so vile in its verbal attacks. Just read the comments on

web pages. I saw this morning when other people criticize something, those who disagreed started in with these profane tirades and rants, and that is all over the Internet. People have sort of lost it in the way they go after each other.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what sometimes happens with that, when people get that way is that for the moment – you know, people’s attention spans can be kind of short, too, and that is another issue – but for the moment, it becomes all consuming: I have to win. I have to be right; and this is the most important thing in the world. That is why I really love that line that before we move on here I do not want us to lose that line about set Jesus apart in your heart as Lord. Peter says remember Jesus is Lord. Relax, Peter is saying, Jesus is in charge. I think that is what he means when he says in your heart, set apart Jesus as Lord. In other words, remember, you are not in charge. You do not have to win the battle; He already did. You can take things a lot more lightly.

DAVE BAST

If you know that Jesus is Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the ultimate issues have been decided.

DAVE BAST

There is one other line there, though, that I also want to pick up on in this section. He goes on to say: Always be ready to be able to give a reason for the hope that you have in Christ; and he is really talking about our “testimony,” and I think there is a strong correlation between how we behave and how we respond to people, even if we are attacked by them, and how we are able to bear witness to the Lord Jesus. We can kind of destroy that witness by our own behavior.

MEG JENISTA

Well, and I think too, throughout 1 Peter, when Jesus is set up as our example, we are reminded that he suffered, and that he did not strike back; and so when our primary motive is that zinger or that win in the debate, when we call Christ to mind, we are given a far different example of what it means to win in the Gospel kingdom sense; and we can sacrifice some of our self and our own pride if we have that view of Jesus as Lord, and the kingdom in our minds.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And to do that consistently as well, right? I mean, back in Peter’s day, of course, they did not have tape recordings or audio recordings or recordings on cell phones, but these days we know even good people – good Christian people – if they once... If something got caught on tape by them once making a racist remark or saying something terribly cutting, and if that gets aired, their whole reputation is retroactively undone, and that is one thing Peter is saying here: Hey, do not give your critics a legitimate reason to criticize you. Do not mess up your testimony by even having one instance of just unraveling it all.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is another very powerful motivation for us to behave in this way – to respond in this way. I mean, we have talked about our sense of the Lordship of Christ, and to be clear in our own minds and hearts, really, that Jesus has won the great victory, and so the battle does not rest on our shoulders, Peter is going to go on to emphasize that in, quite frankly, one of the weirdest passages in the whole New Testament; and you know, at *Groundwork*, we do not avoid the hard ones; we dig into scripture, as we say...

MEG JENISTA

Bring it on!

DAVE BAST

Yes, we are going to bring it on in just a moment, so keep listening.

MEG JENISTA

You are listening to *Groundwork*, as we dig into 1 Peter to understand the unique calling of Christian suffering. I am Meg Jenista; I am here with Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We were just talking about what it means to set Christ as Lord, and how that affects our engagement in the world and in the Church together; and so, we continue to turn to 1 Peter and see what it is that Peter has to say about following Christ's example.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, as you mentioned a few moments ago, as Peter rounds out this third chapter, in verses 18 through 22, which I will read now, he says some very curious things, which we can talk about as we wrap up this program. Peter writes in verse 18:

For Christ also suffered once for sins; the righteous for the unrighteous; to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit, ¹⁹and in that state he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits. ²⁰To those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In only few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also. Not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God; it saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him.

There is a lot going on in those few verses.

DAVE BAST

There is a lot going on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are spirits, the flood...

DAVE BAST

Here is a passage that raises more questions than it answers; that has often been described as the most difficult passage in the whole New Testament. I mean, who are these spirits? Are they dead people? Are they fallen angels – demons – demonic powers? Were they people alive in Noah's day? What does Noah have to do with it? What does it mean to say: He went in the Spirit and proclaimed; what did he proclaim? Was that preaching? Was that salvation of those who had died? And wait a minute... We are saved through baptism, he says? Baptism saves us? Do we believe that? What is going on here?

MEG JENISTA

I think it is important, if we want to answer that question of what is going on here, is to ask why it is that Peter goes here where he does in the logical progression of the argument? So what is it about Jesus preaching to these imprisoned spirits? What is it about that that strengthens the argument that Peter is making throughout the letter?

DAVE BAST

So, what is it? What do you think?

MEG JENISTA

I think it demonstrates what Peter had just said; that Jesus is Lord – set-apart Jesus is Lord; and so, when we talk about Jesus being Lord, what is the extent of that Lordship? And he takes us to the farthest reaches of hell and the grave and says even there, Jesus has something to say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and it is difficult for us to figure out this verse – these spirits imprisoned long ago and, oh, my goodness...

DAVE BAST

And what does it have to do with Noah?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; but I think for Peter, in his mind, it was clear that this goes to... what you were just saying, Meg – this goes to the scope of Jesus' work. It is not just local. It is not just a little thing that happened there in the Mediterranean basin; this is cosmic. Jesus won such a huge victory – and that is the point, right? We can relax. So often when we talk to each other, especially when we ratchet up our rhetoric and we get nasty with each other; we are fighting as though it all depends on us, and if we do not get this right today at our church meeting or something, then the whole thing is going to go down the tubes; and Peter says: What are you talking about? Relax. Jesus won such a big victory; he even went to these imprisoned spirits and gave them the testimony of his resurrection. Relax. He won.

DAVE BAST

What is clear in this passage is that Peter mentions the three great things that Jesus did. He died on the cross; he starts out with that, and that was to save us from our sins, he says; and he rose again; he was raised in the Spirit, or maybe we could say by the power of God he was raised from the dead; and he ascended into heaven. That is the last thing he says: He has been enthroned in glory. So, it is all about the victory of Jesus, which is the title of a great book by N.T. Wright, the great New Testament scholar, the victory of Jesus (*Jesus and the Victory of God*). Take that, Peter says, with you whenever you face these kinds of situations, or these adverse circumstances. Jesus is reigning... You know, God is on the throne, as people sometimes... Well, it is Jesus who is there reigning now in power and glory.

MEG JENISTA

And I think that speaks, then, to why Peter moves directly to baptism. So, not only is Jesus Lord over the imprisoned spirits; not only is Jesus seated on the throne in heaven as the sovereign king over the universe, but that that victory is applied directly into each believer's life, and that is what we receive, in some sense, through our baptism – this idea of identification with this Christ who is Lord and king. So, that admonition to not be fearful is directly applied to us in our baptism.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, the early Church compared itself to the ark, and Noah and his family were saved from the raging waters – they were, in a sense, saved through water, and kept safe in the ark.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a big biblical theme – the ark – Moses in his little reed basket in the Nile River – the people through the Red Sea...

DAVE BAST

Passing through the water.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the Reformed confessions that some of our churches use, the Belgic Confession, at one point when it is talking about baptism, it refers to Jesus, our Red Sea – so that water theme goes all through. I am not quite sure how Peter got from those imprisoned spirits to Noah, but I know why he did it, and Meg, it is exactly what you said. You know, Paul is the one who always talks about being in Christ, and that is not Peter's phrase, but it is the same idea. Once you are baptized, you are one with Jesus; and you know he is Lord, so you can relax. That knowing who won, knowing who is who, knowing that Jesus is Lord does not make us

smug; it does not make us arrogant; and it certainly does not give us a license to treat people arrogantly or badly, but Peter says it gives us confidence to live wonderfully for Jesus in a very hostile world; and thanks be to God that that is Peter's message.

DAVE BAST

Yes; amen. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So, tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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