

## THE RIGHT USE OF SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

*2* <sup>13</sup>Submit to every human authority for the Lord's sake; whether to the king as the supreme [human authority], <sup>14</sup>or to governors as those appointed by him to punish evil doers and to commend those who do what is right. <sup>15</sup>[Submit to all such authority] because this is the will of God. Silence the foolishness of ignorant men by doing what is right. <sup>16</sup>Live as free men, but not using this freedom as a pretext for evil; rather, [using it] as servants of God. <sup>17</sup>Respect all men; love the brotherhood [of believers]; fear God; honor the king. (1 Pet. 2:13-17)

### **Introduction**

During the reign of the communist regimes, the people of Eastern Europe were held captive under an awful political tyranny: there was no freedom of speech, no private ownership of businesses, no exchange of goods with the western nations. When those communist regimes were toppled, the people became free. Now they could engage in freedom of speech; now they could own their own businesses; and now they could receive goods from the western nations.

But some of those people tragically misused their freedom. Gaining the freedom to interact with the west, they imported pornography into their homeland. Gaining the freedom to own their own businesses, they began to sell the pornography they import from the west. Gaining the freedom of speech, they used it to advertise their pornography and to advocate their "right" to distribute such material to their fellow countrymen (*Our Daily Bread*, 4/3/92.) Amazingly, these people who have been brought into a state of freedom are now using that freedom to enslave their fellow citizens: exposing them to the seductive, addictive, and destructive influence of pornography. That is a terrible misuse of political, economic and personal freedom!

In 1 Peter 2:13-17 the Apostle Peter cautions us as Christians not to imitate such people by misusing our spiritual freedom. As spiritually free men, we must not use our freedom to engage in wickedness; on the contrary, we must use our freedom to serve God. Christ has brought us out of bondage and into a state of spiritual freedom for a godly purpose; namely, that we might serve God.

### **I. Serve God with Your Spiritual Freedom, ...in Your Personal Life**

Peter identifies the Christian as being "a free man," referring to the spiritual freedom we have in Christ. This is a freedom from the tyranny and dominion of the devil. The Apostle John describes the whole world as lying in the clutches of the evil one: "*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one*" (1 Jn. 5:19.) The Apostle Paul describes the course of this world as being dictated by "*the ruling prince of the air* [i.e.; the devil,] who is "*the spirit who is now working in the sons of disobedience*" (Eph. 2:1-2.) Our Lord Jesus' ministry of exorcising demons was a demonstration of the fact

that He alone is the Savior who can deliver us from the dominion of the devil. In our Lord's parable of the strong man being overpowered by one who is stronger, Jesus is "the stronger one" who is able to overpower the "strong man" (i.e.; the devil): *"When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. <sup>22</sup>But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils"* (Lk. 11:21-22.)

Not only is the spiritual freedom of which Peter speaks a freedom from the tyranny and dominion of the devil, it is also a freedom from the accusations of the devil and the just condemnation of God. In Revelation 12:10 the devil is called *"the accuser of our brothers ... who accuses them before our God day and night."* But Revelation 12:10 goes on to report, *"the accuser... has been hurled down,"* (i.e.; defeated and cast out.) The Old Testament prophet Zechariah received a graphic picture of these things:

*Then he showed me Joshua the high priest [Joshua the high priest is representing all of God's people] standing before the angel of Jehovah, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him ... <sup>3</sup>Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. <sup>4</sup>The angel said to those who were standing before him, Take off his filthy clothes. Then he said to Joshua, See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you. (Zech. 3:1-4)*

Consider the testimony of the Apostle Paul concerning our Lord's victory won at the cross of Calvary:

*He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup>having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col. 2:13b-15)*

But Peter now informs us that we are not to view this freedom *"as a pretext for evil"* (vs. 16.) We are not to view our spiritual freedom as being a covering that shields us from the judgment of God and allows us to continue to engage in wrongdoing without fear of consequences. According to Proverbs 14:9a, *"Fools make a mockery of a trespass offering."* A fool thinks that the presentation of a sacrifice to God (*"a trespass offering"*) will not only atone for his guilt, but will also permit him to continue in his wrong doing without fear of just retribution at the hands of the LORD. The fool views the sacrifice of Christ as a cheap source of security: a shield that protects him from punishment and a license that permits him to practice sin without fear of suffering the consequence of judgment. The fool fails to see that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ is a most sacred act whereby Christ paid the awful price of sin in order to redeem the believer from the punishment of his sins and to save him for a life of obedience to God, note Titus 2:13-14, *"our Savior Jesus Christ <sup>14</sup>... gave himself for us, so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people for his own possession, [a*

*people] zealous for good works.*” When the fool misinterprets and abuses the sacred sacrifice of Christ, he will find that that sacrifice will mock him: Proverbs 14:9a may also be read, *“A trespass offering mocks a fool.”* In other words, because he has made a mockery of Christ’s sacred sacrifice, God will mock him—God will finally reject him with contempt.

Peter reminds us that as Christians we have been made free (from sin) in order to become obedient to God. Peter equates spiritual freedom with being *“servants of God.”* In verse 16 he writes, *“Live as free men, but not using this freedom as a pretext for evil, rather, using it as servants of God.”*

Let us serve God in our state of spiritual freedom, by submitting ourselves to His will:

*... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. <sup>13</sup>Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness; <sup>14</sup>for sin shall not be your master. (Rom. 6:12-14a)*

## **II. Serve God with Your Spiritual Freedom, ...in Your Public Life**

The Apostle Peter exhorts us as Christians to be subject to every humanly instituted authority—for the Lord’s sake (vs. 13a.) We are commanded to be law-abiding citizens within the society in which we find ourselves.

Peter addresses his epistle to *“those who have been chosen [by God] and who are refugees of the Dispersion, residing in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”* (1 Pet. 1:1.) Based on that designation found in the greeting of his epistle, perhaps these Christian people were of the opinion that, because they were spiritual “refugees,” they were under no obligation to obey any man-made and man-run system of government that belongs to this present world.

We must recognize that as Christians we have a dual citizenship. Paul reminded the Philippian Christians, *“our citizenship is in heaven”* (Phil. 3:20.) But while at Philippi, Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship and demanded justice when he and Silas had been unjustly beaten and cast into prison: *“Paul said to the officers: They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out”* (Acts 16:37.)

We must not withdraw from participation in society and from our civic duties. It was at least partly due to Christians withdrawing from public life that caused a vacuum to be created in American society, a vacuum that was subsequently filled by those who advocate a humanistic social policy. Nor must we set ourselves

against the civil authorities as adversaries who intentionally seek to disrupt the society. Such conduct not only fails to respect the God-given position of the civil magistrate, it also gives him cause to view the church as an enemy of the State. Note the Apostle Paul's exhortation concerning obedience to the civil authorities:

*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God ...<sup>7</sup>Render to everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (Rom. 13:1,7)*

For the sake of Christ, we are called to lead lives as law-abiding citizens. The Christian church was falsely accused of advocating lawlessness, of being a disturber of the peace and a disruptive force in society. Consider the charge that the Jews falsely brought against the Lord Jesus, recorded in Luke 23:1-2, *"Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. <sup>2</sup>And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.'" Far from inciting the civil authorities against the church, we are to "silence the foolishness of ignorant men by doing what is right" (vs. 15b)—i.e.; by being law-abiding citizens.*

But we must first and foremost be God-fearing citizens. Peter is not counseling us to compromise our Christian faith or to deny either the absolute authority of Christ or our absolute allegiance to Him. Note that Peter exhorts us as *"servants of God,"* first and foremost to *"fear God"* and then to *"honor the king"* (vs. 16-17.) As Christians, we must obey the laws of the State that are in harmony with the moral law of God and not in conflict with the divine law. But we must protest against the State when it enacts policies and laws that violate the moral law of God.

This raises the question, "On what occasions should the Christian protest against the civil authorities?" First, a Christian must do so when the civil authorities forget or reject the fact that their authority is derived from God, not from themselves or from the people—note Jesus' testimony before Pilate: *"You would have no authority against me, unless it had been given to you from above"* (Jn. 19:11a.) As noted previously, the Apostle Paul asserts, *"there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God"* (Rom. 13:1.) Second, a Christian must protest against the civil authorities when those authorities violate the moral law of God—note Daniel's counsel to King Nebuchadnezzar that he govern in accordance with the divine standard of righteousness and mercy: *"Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my counsel. Renounce your sins by doing what is right; and your iniquities, by showing mercy to the poor. By so doing, you may possibly continue in your honorable state"* (Dan. 4:27.) Third, a Christian must protest against the civil authorities when the civil authorities require us to obey their dictates at the expense of the law of God

and the gospel of God—note the apostles’ response to the authorities when they sought to silence the witness of the early church:

*We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood. <sup>29</sup>Peter and the other apostles replied: We must obey God rather than men! (Acts 5:28-29)*

What forms should Christian protest take? Christian protest may take the form of calling the civil authorities to accountability by reminding them of their office as God’s servants—“[the civil magistrate] *is God’s servant to you for good*” (Rom. 13:4a)—and confronting them with their offense against God’s moral law, (as did Daniel with Nebuchadnezzar, recorded in Daniel 4:27 and noted above.) When necessary, Christian protest may take the form of refusing to obey the civil authorities when they require us to disobey God, (as did the apostles; note, again, Acts 5:28-29 quoted above.)

Let us serve God in our state of spiritual freedom, by being God-fearing, law-abiding citizens.

## **Conclusion**

We must remember that Christ has brought us into a state of spiritual freedom for a godly purpose. We must not misuse that freedom to engage in personal wrongdoing or to instigate social turmoil. We must use our spiritual freedom to serve God—in our private lives and in our public lives as citizens of the society in which we find ourselves.