

## Foreigners and Exiles

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

1 Peter 2:11-17

This week Gallup released the results of a poll assessing public opinion on the honesty and ethics of professionals in 23 different fields, from veterinarians to car salespeople to teachers to clergy members. Gallup has been running this poll in some form for almost 50 years. And trust is down across all professions. In a time when trust between people seems low in general, perhaps it's not surprising that public opinion of professionals' ethics in almost every category has declined several percentage points since 2019. Most noteworthy for us in the church is the reputation of clergy members among the public. In the mid-1980s, 67 percent of respondents said that they had a high or very high opinion of the honesty and ethics of pastors. That was as high as the reputation ever got. In 2023, that number was down by half, only 32 percent of respondents ranked clergy members' honesty and ethical standards as "high" or "very high," compared to 40 percent in 2019. For comparison, nursing was the profession ranked most favorably in 2023. 78 percent of respondents rated nurses' trustworthiness that favorably.

Numbers without a narrative only tell a partial story. Many of us know people in our own families who have lost trust in the church. There could be lots of reasons for that, hypocrisy among Christians is certainly one of them. Church abuse scandals over the last 20 years have certainly had an effect on public and congregants' trust. It's also the case that fewer people in our culture are church members or personally know a pastor themselves. A lack of personal contact could also have an effect on opinions.

Recognizing a loss of public trust in the church gives pastors and church members pause. It's not good to see a decline in public opinion of our trustworthiness. For some of us it's even painful, because that loss of trust in the church or in Christ is personal for us. We WANT the public and private witness of the church to be clear and trustworthy; so that people we love who have been alienated from the church can better see Jesus. So Peter's words in this passage resonate for us. They give us something to do when we might feel the limits of our power to change anyone but ourselves. "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

If the church in North America today is facing a decline of public trust, the first century recipients of the letter we have as 1<sup>st</sup> Peter were working on establishing a good trust in the first place. Peter writes from Rome to Christians living across the Mediterranean in the province of Asia, modern day Turkey. He is addressing several churches he may never have met, though they would have known of him. And it's clear from his letter that these people are hurting. He writes to encourage them, to ground them in the hope of Christ as they endure through hardships and slanders they face. In chapter 1 he writes that his hearers "may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." But persisting in these challenges demonstrates the reality of their faith and "may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." (1 Peter 1:6-7).

What was the nature of the suffering the believers were experiencing? Peter doesn't spell it out, but it was probably multifaceted. First was a general sense of alienation in society, both with the ways of life in the Roman Empire and in their immediate surroundings. During Peter's lifetime, a nine-day fire in Rome totally destroyed three divisions of the city and damaged seven others. Emperor Nero's estate was unscathed, and so was the division of the city where many Christians lived, protected geographically by the Tiber River. Then, as today, the search for someone to blame began. Some blamed the emperor. Perhaps he had set the fire for his own purposes, so he could rebuild the city the way he wanted it. But Nero turned the blame toward the Roman Christians. Perhaps they'd set the fire. Or perhaps they hadn't directly set the fire, but their mere presence in the city called down the wrath of the Roman gods. So the Christian community in Rome was blamed. Some Christians received an arsonist's punishment, execution by burning as human torches at Nero's garden parties. A localized outbreak of state-sponsored persecution resulted, and perhaps up to a few thousand Christians were killed.

Peter's hearers across the empire would have heard of this. They were probably not experiencing wide-scale arrest and imprisonment, because in our passage Peter praises the government as useful for maintaining

order. But the specter of acts against them was within the realm of their awareness. Peter's letter also makes clear the hostility believers faced closer to home. False accusations were coming their way in the communities where they lived.

We know of some of the undeserved accusations from outsiders toward Christians in the first couple of centuries. They saw themselves as foreigners and strangers, citizens of another kingdom. So the Christians rejected worship of Roman gods. Did that make them atheists, their polytheistic neighbors wondered? They spoke about brother and sister love. Were they committing incest? Their feasts included eating and drinking the body and blood of the Lord. Were they cannibals?

So in a setting of hostility, in the face of misunderstanding and outright slander, Peter advises irreproachable behavior. Be a living apologetic, Peter counsels. Abstain from the sinful desires that war against your souls. Instead, live such good lives that those who accuse you will be ashamed of their slanders. By their good behavior, especially in their respect for governmental authority in the passage we're looking at, the Christians would show that they weren't revolutionary, weren't a danger to society. Even though they were free, and truly bound to no one but God, they were not lawless. Deferring to the secular authorities was their best bet to live quietly and decently in the empire. So there were sociological and pragmatic reasons for their deference to authority and their morally upright lives.

But further, and even more important, was the theological reason for good behavior that Peter gives: that their lives would speak well of Christ. When those who accused them witnessed the holiness and love of Christ in them, the rumors of foolish people would be quelled. And their motivation for good behavior is important as followers of Christ. The purpose of good behavior wasn't inspired first by a wish for vindication, although good behavior might well have that effect; but so that those who accused them would themselves recognize Christ in them, perhaps turning to him in faith too. Give them no reason to mistrust you; and every reason to trust Christ, Peter counsels.

General instruction to reject sin, pursue moral living and defer to authority seems straightforward enough. It's for the Lord's sake and for the sake of the salvation of others who see him in the lives of Christians. But my, oh my, is this humanly hard to do when we're under threat. The high bar of Peter's instruction here reminds me of a story told by Dr. Lerone Martin at Calvin University's January Series a couple of weeks ago. Dr. Martin tells the story of a 15-year-old Martin Luther King Junior, on a bus trip as a contestant in a speech competition. On the return trip, the bus filled as it made its stops. So the bus driver asked King to give up his seat for a white rider. King refused. The bus driver increased his volume, screaming at King to give up his seat. Finally, King's teacher, worried for his safety, begged him to stand up. So in response to his teacher's request, King did so, standing for a long 70-minute bus ride home. King reflected that he was the angriest he had ever been in that hour. He thought about his parents' instruction to love those who oppressed him. It felt impossible when people hated him simply because he was black. He thought on that bus that maybe he didn't want to be a pastor after all. It took incredible strength to defer and powerful restraint to check his anger. But in that tense moment on the bus, his teacher's instruction to defer to the bus driver's authority was the only way to go. What was a 15-year-old kid, a black kid in 1940s America going to do if the bus driver started beating him then and there? What sort of chaos could break out on the bus? Wasn't it better to defer for the sake of living to see another day? Wasn't maintaining order on the bus a good worth pursuing too?

In the future King could, and did, work out his own theology and practice for the ways in which love of God and neighbor could operate with strength and deference to authority in his time. He learned and prayed and communicated and organized with others who became willing and ready to bear the expected consequences while standing peacefully against what was for them unconscionable treatment of the image of God in African Americans. King's legacy of both restraint and resistance raises a question for our text, though. Peter holds up a high bar for Christian behavior both for individual witness and for civil engagement. Is Peter's instruction of deference to authority, especially regarding deference to the state, universally applicable? If so, King's action of nonviolent resistance is out of step. If so, Chinese house churches and clandestine deliverers of Scripture to closed countries are out of step. Peter's instruction to the Christians in Asia Minor could read like a command for all times and all places. Christians should always defer to authority, period. But heard against the backdrop of the marginalized status of Christians in the Roman empire, the instruction is more nuanced than that.

The Bible does offer praiseworthy examples of disobedience to the authorities. We might think of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who allowed Hebrew baby boys to live when Pharaoh had decreed their massacre. We have Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who prayed to and worshipped God rather than bow to the king's command to pray to or worship anything else. We have Peter himself and the other apostles who, when arrested and warned by the Jewish ruling council not to preach the name of Jesus, said, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" and were ready to take the consequences. So we can't say that all instances of resistance to authority are wrong.

1 Peter 2:17 offers a way to think through deference and resistance when faced with difficult decisions in living faithfully. It says "Honor everyone, love the family of God, fear God, honor the emperor." Christians owe honor to all, including the officers and offices of civil government. However we think about the challenges in our political and social fabric, we see also that lawlessness isn't a good alternative. Christians owe love to the family of believers. So we look out for each other. We do what we can to contribute to making the Christian family praiseworthy and strong. But reverence above all others is due only to God. Only to God do we offer our ultimate devotion and loyalty. So when the commands of God conflict with those of other authorities, the commands of God take precedence, and we try to follow them in a cross-shaped way.

So dear friends, make every effort to be deserving of trust. Live a moral private life. Live a loving public life. Do all you can to be a living apologetic, not to crush the enemies of Christianity, but to invite their wonder, so that in us they might see Christ and come to faith in him. We are foreigners and strangers, remember; our citizenship is in another country entirely. We see wrongs we would like to see rectified in line with the kingdom of God as best we can understand it. And we also seek to live wisely and well, so that those who mistrust or ridicule the church see Christ crucified in us.

Dear friends, if you feel out of step with this world, if you are not at home with its ways and feel unsettled about its authorities, remember: you are citizens of a city to come. Yet already now a chosen people, awaiting the return of your king and the arrival of your true home. Already now you are a royal priesthood, interceding for this world before God. Now you are declared holy in Christ and learning to walk in his ways. And you belong to God who never takes his eyes off you, whatever trials come. Thanks be to God.

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