

'YOU ARE HEREBY ACCUSED OF BEING A CHRISTIAN – HOW DO YOU PLEAD?' – IN COURT WITH FIRST PETER

First Peter is read by comfortable, cocooned, safe, soft, financially secure western Evangelicals as if it were written for us, by one of our own, and quite recently. We read it as if it reflects our own gentle sanitised Christian existence in which the most troubling decision we ever have to make is whether or not we should engage in a spot of 'personal evangelism.' 'Don't be afraid' we say to each other – 'It's really easy, so just do it!' Many Evangelicals can more or less quote I Peter 3:15 and say 'We must always be ready to tell people about our faith,' and on this and similarly slender supports such as II Corinthians 5:20 ('We are ambassadors for Christ') many people try to erect their own very strong teaching that the NT commands all Christians to engage in personal evangelism. But the conditions for which I Peter was written was nothing like this! No Sir – not a bit of it. How then did our reading of I Peter end up here, so far from the blood and tears and all the serious life-threatening business Peter is actually talking about? We need to take a closer look at things.

As in so many parts of the NT the overall context of First Peter's message is made clear from the outset – it is all about RIGHTS – the rights we Christians may be able to claim in this life. Peter is very strong on this and says in effect “**AS CHRISTIANS WE HAVE NO RIGHTS IN THIS PRESENT WORLD.**” He was writing to people who were exposed to very serious social and legal trouble and were in constant danger of persecution, harassment and degrees of loss ranging from minor inconvenience all the way up to death itself. So what rights and protections could they claim **as Christians**? Peter says 'None!' Now to do full justice to this topic and Peter's stance on 'Rights' in general and specifically what he means by the 'reverence' and the *apologia* and the 'fear' he mentions in 3:15 and 16 would take a lot of research on my part, stretching over a number of years, and result in a very large book which almost no one would read. I will spare us all that but we will nevertheless have to pay some attention to background questions which will help us understand the context.

We know that in this present life people in general can expect to enjoy various rights – rights to life – rights of birth – rights of inheritance – rights of citizenship – and rights of use and enjoyment. Starting as soon as 1:3 Peter takes up these same things but now sets them forth in spiritual terms as things which mark the life of the Christians: God by his great mercy has given his readers 'new birth' and a 'living hope' and an 'inheritance' which cannot fade or fail in any way because it is stored up in the safest possible place, which is heaven itself. These stored things are at present invisible but will be revealed in the 'end time' (1:5). All these rich advantages are the cause of comfort and rejoicing for the Christians even though for a comparatively small time or degree it may be necessary for them to be saddened by various troubles.

This is the mild way in which he begins talking but as early as 1:7 the tone changes and he speaks of 'refining by fire' and by the time we get to 4:12-13 we read of 'fiery trials' and 'rejoicing to have a fellowship with the sufferings of Christ,' all of which sounds quite dreadful. But, says Peter, all the suffering in this life will end and burst forth into glory at last.

Peter's overall idea of the life of his readers is expressed very clearly in 1:17 and 2:11 where he calls them 'Displaced Persons.' This is a term which was very widely used after the Second World War when whole cities in Europe were destroyed in what was called 'Total Warfare,' and so millions of people who had to flee the guns simply had no homes to go back to. They were DPs – Displaced Persons – and quite a lot of them came to Australia and greatly enriched our society. Now Peter says that Christians, all Christians, are DPs, required to live where they do not belong, in a situation they would rather change if they could, among people who often do not want them, who sense them to be strangers who belong to a different city – a city which Peter calls Heaven. And as for normal rights of birth, inheritance, citizenship and peaceful enjoyment in this world, Peter tells them they have no such rights as Christians – they are pilgrims toward their real home, their heavenly city, and therefore it must come as no real surprise when the people of the towns of this present world fail to understand them, and resent and persecute and try to get rid of them.

Their response to this must be holiness, firstly towards God – holiness towards God in all circumstances, no matter what this world is throwing at them. The Lord God is in control of all their circumstances and all their suffering and even while they, like the prophets of old, cry out 'How long oh Lord?' they must still have reverence in their hearts toward him, never blaming him, never denying him, never turning away from him or taking their eyes off the invisible prize kept for them. Peter's words in 5:6 are particularly telling. Speaking to Christians who were genuinely suffering he gives them very difficult advice: 'Humble yourselves under the strong hand of God.' How hard it is for any of us to accept troubles from his strong hand as the cost of his strong blessing! Now to be 'humbled' means to be pushed down into the 'humus' or dirt, something which we all resent, but Peter says that while God does do this it is in order to lift them up at the proper time, and in the meantime they are to cast all their cares upon them because he cares about them! This is indeed a call to a serious Christian commitment.

But secondly their Christian holiness must be directed towards other people, even to those who slander them and those in authority who are persecuting and punishing them. In 2:13 Peter says: 'Be obedient to all earthly authority for the Lord's sake, whether kings or other authorities, because they are established by him for the curbing of evil and the fostering of the good. It is the will of God that by doing good you should silence the ignorance of senseless men.' As slaves of God they must honour the king, or in their case honour Caesar and his administration; such words have often been difficult for Christians to accept, and that is why Peter so clearly

enforces them. The call to obedience and submission in an overall sense is strong in I Peter – men, wives, the young and slaves are all mentioned and are given advice on Peter's main theme which is 'How to live as a Christian in a situation you would change if you could – how to accept and submit to an unwelcome reality.'

Peter's challenges to his first readers continue in the section 3:13 to 4:6 which contains the statement in 3:15 which is the focal point of this essay. He begins by saying: 'Who is going to slander you if you are zealous for the good?' but then concedes the possibility: 'But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed.' Now that is a big call – suffering as a blessing – how can he justify this? He does it by quoting Isaiah 8:12-13 where Isaiah himself, with the strong hand of the Lord bearing down heavily on him, is told he must not share the opinions of his opponents in Jerusalem around 700 BC, not to fear and be disturbed by the things they fear but to revere the Lord as holy and to fear him. Peter may be using these words in a slightly different way but the blessing he is thinking of for his readers will come about through not fearing their opponents, through revering Christ as the Lord of their situation and the holy one in their hearts, and through being:

always ready to give an *apologia* to all who ask of you a *logos* concerning the hope you have, but with gentleness and fear, keeping a good conscience, so that in your reply those who slander your good way of life in Christ may be put to shame.

In order to see more clearly what Peter has in mind here we will discuss the two key words above in bold Greek italics, words which are closely related as you can see by the way they both contain the syllable *log*. We will start with *logos*.

The word *logos*

Many Christians will know that *logos* means 'word' but it has many related meanings, one of which is 'account' or 'record.' In Acts 1:1 Luke for instance calls the whole of his Gospel, his first volume, a *logos* or carefully compiled account of all that has happened, and in Ephesus in Acts 19:40 the City Council complain about the riot led by Demetrius the silversmith, saying that they are going to have trouble putting together a *logos* or 'incident report' to the local Roman authorities who hated and feared and therefore punished all such demonstrations of unrest.

In Matthew 12:36 the Lord Jesus says that we will have to give a *logos* or account for our every worthless word, and this will be on the Day of Judgement. This verse neatly brings together three key ideas in this context – (1) Giving (or making or submitting a return or response), (2) *logos* (an account or record) and (3) Judgement of some sort. In Luke 16:2 the Lord Jesus speaks of a steward who comes under suspicion and is told he must submit his accounts (his *logos*) for scrutiny and judgement, and similarly in Hebrews we read of Christians leaders who must act as stewards who will be called to return a *logos* of their ministry. In Romans 14:10-13

Paul says: 'no longer judge one another' and this is because we will all equally stand before the judgement seat of God, and every knee will bow before him and each person will make their own individual *logos* before him. As far as Peter is concerned Christians who are called before any earthly judgement seat, whether justly or unjustly, must conduct themselves properly and always keep in mind that their interrogators themselves must in their turn submit their own *logos* before the one who is ready to judge the living and the dead as he says in I Peter 4:5. In all these last cases it is most important to note that the *logos* is not voluntary but is a report that is demanded by a person in authority, a person whose word is law.

I think that when Peter says in 3:15 'whoever asks for your *logos*' he actually means 'whoever **demand**s it.' The context and the words he has chosen to use show that it is much more likely that he is thinking in terms of an official inquiry not a casual enquiry over a cup of tea.

The word *apologia*

We can all see that this word looks like the English word 'apology' but in the NT it does not carry the sense of 'apologising' when you are sorry for something you have done wrong, but it meant a 'self defence' or a serious reply to serious accusations carrying serious consequences. Such an *apologia* could be very long indeed, occupying many hours over consecutive days, and we get a taste of this in Paul's self-defence speeches towards the end of Acts as a sentence of death draws ever nearer for him. History gives us many other moving trial scenes. Anne Boleyn's *apologia* or declaration of innocence before her execution by Henry VIII is particularly moving, Martin Luther's declaration that he had to take his stand on the Word of God and so he was left with no other choice but to stand firm is wonderfully impressive, as is the Apostle Paul's attempt to use his trial as an opportunity to actually convert all the people in the room – and there would have been many there. But the two most well-known examples from ancient times are probably the trials and *apologia* of Socrates and of Jesus.

Both these men have been highly influential in world history, both faced highly dubious charges and accusations, both suffered political execution, neither wrote anything themselves, both had followers who told the story of their legal trials and last hours in great detail – but there the similarity ends. Socrates gave his *apologia* at great length – Jesus said almost nothing after his capture and made no *apologia*. Socrates died by drinking poison but he took up the cup with his own hand – Jesus allowed his captors to kill him. Socrates died for Athens – Jesus died for the whole world. Socrates is still dead – Jesus was alive after three days, never to die again.

Six of the seven uses of *apologia* in the NT are used by Paul or refer to him. In I Corinthians 9 Paul devotes the whole chapter of 27 verses to giving his *apologia* or self-defence to those in the church who set themselves up to judge him. It may have been this chapter which many years ago set me wondering about I Corinthians. I saw

the letter as a pan of freshly broken eggs, with all the individual pastoral questions which Paul discusses being the very obvious yolks, but what was it that tied everything together, what was the whites of the eggs which was so easily overlooked? Actually the scientific study of egg whites is quite important and has been established for a long time but I was wanting to study the connecting tissue, the back story, in I Corinthians. Like a good scientist I removed all the individual questions, the yolks, and read Paul's text without them. What became clear for I Corinthians overall was in fact Paul's sustained defence of his Apostleship, his gospel, and his whole ministry – the same message as chapter 9. Surprisingly it had become clear that the backdrop or setting of I Corinthians was exactly the same as in 2 Corinthians except that in the second letter the backdrop is brought forward to front and centre stage with a single spotlight on it, while the many individual pastoral questions seen in I Corinthians have almost disappeared.

These chapters then comprise Paul's *apologia* before Christians who threaten his ministry, but the danger to his very life came from the Jewish opposition which finally brought him to trial and prison, to Rome, and presumably to death. The emotional toll of this can be felt in his words to his younger lieutenant in 2 Timothy 4:16 'In my first *apologia* no one stood with me but all abandoned me. May it not be recorded against them.' Did the court records show that some of his team had promised to be guarantors for him and had failed to show up? I do not know but a condemned man was certainly a dangerous friend to have. He prays these friends will do better next time.

We can conclude then that an *apologia* was a self-defence delivered in a serious situation, in response to accusations with serious consequences for one's life-work or personal safety. When I Peter 3:16 says to give your *apologia* with gentleness and respect we can ask why he felt he needed to say this. It is a simple but crucial question, almost always overlooked. It seems to me that these people were on trial before local magistrates who had great power and they were on trial for bearing the name of 'Christian' (4:14-16) which was itself seen as a form of wrongdoing. How could this be? Christians challenged the status quo and social norms in many ways: They could turn their backs on their own families by refusing to worship their own ancestors, they abandoned the pagan temples and festivals and the guild-based feasting which was involved, they refused to worship Caesar and the much-prized Roman Peace and were accused of 'Atheism' just like the Jews, and of course they preached the message about Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom and deity of Caesar. So of course they could be violently accused and slandered by their near neighbours who reported them, sometimes anonymously (which was against the best principles of written Roman law) and the penalties could be very high. (These things can be further studied in Pliny's letters Numbers 10, 96-97, from about the year 112 AD). Under these circumstances it would have been a big temptation for Christians to give way to anger and fear and to try to hit back at their enemies. Peter says NO – remember and copy the example of Jesus who both trusted in his Father in the worst of situations and had compassion on his enemies. Could we

say that his time on the cross was his *apologia* and his *logos*?

This essay has gone some way towards honouring Peter and his setting and his original intention for I Peter 3:15 but now we need to return to the way it is being used today. Is there anything very wrong in reading it as an encouragement to invite your neighbour in for a friendly drink and chat and a possible question about your faith? Such hospitality is one of the great foundational planks of the Gospel and there is no need to find special justification for it in I Peter 3:15 or anywhere else. 'Just do it!' If we let Peter speak for himself we will see that he was simply not talking about 'personal evangelism' let alone commanding all Christians to engage in it.

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