

# “Aliens and Exiles: 3) Dissenters in a Conformist Society”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Fear God. Honor the Emperor” (I Peter 2:2-17).**

Over the past years I have had a number of occasions to spend time on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. In the entrance to the student cafeteria (MacKay Hall), there are several plaques that commemorate graduates of the seminary who gave their lives in Christian service. One of the plaques commemorates the life of James Reeb, a young minister who went to Selma, Alabama, in 1965 and was killed by a mob of angry whites protesting the fact that Reeb had answered the call of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to help register African Americans in Selma. The other plaque commemorates the life of Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister who was killed by an angry mob in 1837 in Illinois for preaching and publishing a newspaper advocating the abolition of slavery. In each of these instances an individual gave his life for something that he believed was greater than mere survival. For James Reeb, it was the right of people to vote. For Elijah Lovejoy, it was the conviction that the institution of slavery was evil and had to be abolished.

## I.

The Christians who formed the churches on in Asia Minor were in many ways living in exile. They were far from the church’s roots in Jerusalem. They had not known Jesus. They never saw him. They never heard him teach. But they believed in him and they were willing to undergo persecution for the name of Jesus.

One of the key issues for these early Christians was the relationship between the church and the state. As Christians, we believe that we are citizens of two states. There is the City of God and the City of Man. Our allegiance as Christians is ultimately to the City of God, but we

are also citizens of state and we owe our allegiance to those who are properly elected to serve our city, state, and nation.

The Christian faith has always acknowledged the role of the civil authority. Jesus was once shown a Roman coin and asked if it were proper to render taxes to Caesar. Jesus replied by saying that we are called to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Rome admonishes the church at Rome with these words, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1).

The author of I Peter speaks with the same voice as Jesus and Paul. He recognizes the authority and value of the state to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. Like the Apostle Paul also, I Peter holds that such submission to the state is God’s will for the Christian.

But having acknowledged the legitimate role of government for the Christian, I Peter goes on to state another priority. He speaks of a higher loyalty than our loyalty to the state. This is found in the brief conclusion of this passage in two very brief sentences: “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” The author of I Peter suggests that there is a higher loyalty than our loyalty to any particular government, political party, or political ideology for that matter. It is our obedience to God that commands our greatest allegiance. This passage suggests several notions that are critical for us today.

## II.

The first is the notion of Christian freedom. I Peter puts it like this: “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.” The Apostle Paul stated something very similar to this, when writing to the church at Galatia; “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

This Wednesday we will celebrate the Fourth of July holiday, which commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence by the founders of this country on July 4, 1776. As American citizens we are rightly proud of the freedoms we possess, and know that we must be diligent in protecting those freedoms for ourselves and others as well.

But as Christians, we also experience another kind of freedom, and it is the freedom to live our lives as servants to God. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer wrote in one of his “Writings of 1520” about what he called “The Freedom of the Christian.” In that treatise Luther framed a remarkable series of sentences. “The Christian,” he wrote, “is Lord of all and servant to none.” Then he went on to say, “The Christian is servant to all and Lord to none.” Luther asserted that as Christians, we are free in Christ to obey only the Word of God in Jesus Christ and in Scripture. As Presbyterians, we have affirmed that “God alone is Lord of Conscience.” That means we are free people, not just to believe whatever we want to believe. We are free to believe God’s word in Scripture as God speaks that Word to us. No church court, no governing body, no council can bind our conscience. We are captive only to the Word of God.

Now the early Reformers of the church such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were largely in support of the established government, largely out of fear of anarchy. But later Reformers such as John Knox in Scotland began to see that Biblical Christianity led to a new kind of freedom. Knox argued against the divine right of kings and argued for the freedom of common people.

As Presbyterians, we stand in a tradition of those individuals who have placed great value on the freedom given to us in Christ. There is a great cloud of witnesses who have treasured that freedom: the Covenanters in Scotland; the Huguenots in France; the citizens of Mecklenburg County who stood against King George III of England and the hated British rule; the Confessing Church in Germany who stood against Hitler—all of these individuals stood for the freedom of the church from government imposition and the rights of Christians to the liberty of conscience.

Thus, when Mary, Queen of Scots, summoned John Knox and scolded him for his objection to her proposed marriage, she asked him, “What have you to do with my marriage?” and “Who are you within the Commonwealth?” Knox allegedly replied, “A subject born within the same, Madam.” It has been said that with those words democracy was born. Or when a Scottish working woman by the name of Jenny Geddes let out a scream during a worship service in St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, and threw the stool on which she was sitting at the head of an Anglican Bishop who was trying to impose the Prayer Book of the Church of England on the Scottish Presbyterians, then we begin to see the deeply ingrained notion of freedom that is so critical to our faith.

It is this radical notion of freedom that calls us to be “dissenters in a conformist society.”

### III.

There is another notion that is central to I Peter’s word to those exiles and aliens in Asia Minor and it is an insistence on the “common good.” There is a verse in I Peter which may be the most comprehensive summary of the Christian faith and ethic in the New Testament: “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the Emperor” (I Peter 2:17).

As Christians we are called to honor all people. That is to say that we are called to work for the common good in the society in which we live. One of the sharpest debates with which the founding fathers of this nation had to come to grips with was the conflict between “individual interests” and the “common good.” They sought to give individuals the room to pursue their own interests, but always held that the interests of individuals had to be checked by devotion to the common good. Much of the malaise that affects the church and our nation today is the loss of the willingness of individuals to subvert their own personal self-interest to the interest of society as a whole. We have spawned a generation of people who have turned their backs on the school system of our city and county and who are willing to ignore the neighborhoods in our city where violence, poverty, and despair are as great as they are in Baghdad and Beirut. All about us are the single-issue groups, the one issue candidates, people who are so preoccupied with their own self-fulfillment that they cannot see that their attitude is the path to destruction.

Any society that is concerned only with self-fulfillment and self-gratification is a society that is doomed to be destroyed. Jesus taught us that we are called “to serve and not to be served.” But where are the statesmen? Where are the citizens? Where are those of us who believe we are part of a great republic, whose own interest—whether banking, industry, law, religion or whatever—cannot succeed unless our whole society succeeds.

It is this insistence of the good of our entire society—and not just ourselves—that calls us to be “dissenters in a conformist society.”

#### IV.

Then, too, we are called to remember the priority of this passage in I Peter that is stated in these two sentences: “Honor God. Obey the Emperor” (I Peter 2:17). As Christians, we are sometimes called to a higher righteousness than the laws of any state.

In the New Testament there are two Greek words that are translated by the English word “time.” One word is the word “chronos” which means time in the sense that we measure seconds, minutes, hours, and days. There is another word, “kairos,” which is also translated as “time.” But it represents a very different notion. It means time in the sense of a moment of great opportunity, a moment that if not captured is inevitably lost.

Throughout our history there have been these “kairos” moments that have shaped our destiny. One of these moments occurred in May 1934 when a group called the “Confessing Church” of Germany met in the town of Barmen, Germany to express their opposition to the movement of National Socialism that was led by Adolph Hitler. That group, which was composed of both Lutheran and Reformed Christians, wrote what was later called the “Barmen Declaration” in which they affirmed that they would listen only to the Word of God in Jesus Christ and not to the idolatrous word of Aryan superiority.

Another “kairos” moment occurred in this country on April 16, 1963, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in jail in Birmingham, Alabama for disturbing the peace. During his stay in jail, King wrote what became known as a “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which was written to his fellow clergymen in that city. In his letter he noted that many of the clergy in that city did not like King being in Birmingham. The time wasn’t right, they said. They didn’t like the demonstrations in the streets. But, as King, pointed out, they weren’t willing to do anything about the conditions that caused these demonstrations. King went on to state an important case of civil disobedience. He made a distinction between “just” laws and “unjust” laws. “Just laws,” King noted, “were consistent with God’s moral laws. Unjust laws are not consistent with God’s moral laws.” King went on to say that Christians have a moral right to obey just law, but that Christians also have a moral right to disobey laws that are unjust—laws that degrade human personality.

#### V.

Today, we find ourselves living in a time when our nation is being tested, and our city as well. We are a bitterly divided nation—divided over the War in Iraq—divided by our inability to deal with the rising price of oil and the threat to our environment.

We are polarized in our community as well—polarized between white and black, rich and poor, young and old.

In these times, we need to recover our calling as Christians to live in the freedom God has given us in Christ, to work for the common good and to never forget that we are called to “Fear God and obey the Emperor.”

Amen.