

# The Subversive Revolution of Christianity

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[ 0 : 00 ] So as of a few weeks ago, as we all know, we have a new government in Westminster, and some have described Keir Starmer's victory as something of a revolution. It's not of course a true revolution, it's more of a change of operator, I suppose. But history is full of moments of true revolution.

Moments where everything changes and the tide of history shifts in a new direction. In ancient history, we might think of Alexander the Great sweeping across the Middle East and the Mediterranean, or Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon.

In more modern history, one might think of the American or French revolutions in the 1780s, or 1916, the Easter Rising in Ireland, 1917, the Russian Revolution, or more modern still, 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

These are all moments which changed the world. And that's not to mention the litany of wars that pepper history and change the story of so many peoples, cultures, and lands.

But our focus this afternoon is on a bigger revolution than any of these, a moment that changed the world more substantially than all the world's wars and revolutions put together.

[ 1 : 15 ] And that moment is the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a cross. This is what the New Testament professor Tom Wright says. Whether we believe in Jesus, whether we approve of his teaching, let alone whether we like the look of the movement that still claims to follow him, we are bound to see his crucifixion as one of the pivotal moments in human history.

And Jesus' first followers saw it as something more. They saw it as the vital moment, not just in human history, but in the entire story of God and the world.

They believed that with this event, the one true God had suddenly and dramatically put into operation his plan for the rescue of the world.

They saw it as the day the revolution began. The cross of Jesus Christ is a revolution. And it's a revolution that continues to this day.

The cross itself is a revolutionary moment that changes the fate of the whole world. But the movement that comes after it, the church, is called to continue that revolution that began the day that Jesus died in their lives and the way they relate to the world.

[ 2 : 35 ] And this is what Peter, in this section of his letter, is calling Christians to do. He's calling the church to be revolutionaries. But a key difference between every other revolutionary moment in history and the cross is this.

Every other major shift or revolution in history comes with bloodshed and violent victory. A defeat of the opposing side that comes at the cost of many lives.

Not so the cross. The revolution that Jesus began on the cross begins not with him leading armies or starting a violent rising on the streets of Jerusalem.

He didn't pick up a sword and march on the Roman occupiers of Judea. He let himself be arrested, tried under false charges, and executed on a cross on a lonely hill outside the city gates.

If this is revolution, it's a subversive revolution that challenges the world that looks to strength and power and influence.

[ 3 : 44 ] It's a revolution through weakness. And it's a subversive revolution that the church is called to be a part of. Christians are not called to fight or man the barricades or take to the streets in protest.

They're called to take up their cross, just like Jesus took up his, deny themselves and follow him. This is the subversive revolution of Christianity.

Peter highlights two aspects of the revolutionary behavior the church is called to exhibit. Doing good and submission. He spends the bulk of these verses thinking about submission and so we will too.

But he begins by calling his readers to a revolution of goodness. The revolution of Christianity is in part a moral and ethical one. God is a holy God.

That is, he is perfect and distinct in his perfection. We are not. We're sinners. We're incapable of stopping ourselves from thinking, saying or doing things which are wrong and hurtful.

[ 4 : 52 ] But when Jesus calls us to follow him and believe in him, he calls us to a new way of life. We are called to be holy as God is holy.

Peter says this in chapter one of his letter. So part of the revolution of Christianity is this moral revolution of the heart.

As we believe in Jesus and as his Holy Spirit dwells in us and gets to work on us, we are equipped and enabled to live lives of holiness. Something that was impossible before.

And so Peter writes, dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 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.

As Christians, we're not quite at home in the world. That's a key theme in this letter. We're exiles, travelers, strangers. And yet, of course, this is our home at the same time.

[ 6 : 01 ] There's a tension. Being a Christian is to live in that tension. We live in the tension of being citizens of heaven and subjects of Christ on the one hand, but we also live in Glasgow and have a responsibility to the city and the people in it.

And we're subject to the laws of the land. We long for the new creation, but live in the old. And in this life of tension and exile, God calls his people to a subversive revolution of goodness, because goodness is revolutionary in a world of darkness.

This is exactly what Jesus brought during his life on earth. And it's what his followers are called to in our lives on earth. And it begins in our hearts.

Peter says there's a war going on in your heart. You have sinful desires in your heart that are battling against you every day. Impulses to reject the goodness of God and decide morality for ourselves.

And it can be a constant struggle which can just wear you down. You know the good that God calls you to. But you know also your heart struggles with temptations to power and pleasure, selfishness and greed, anger and hatred.

[ 7 : 23 ] Human heart is a war zone. But Peter calls us to retaliate against our sinful desires and abstain from them.

Because he sees how important it is that the church embodies the goodness of Christ in every culture. And so he highlights the importance of living good lives so that if Christians are accused of doing wrong, their good lives and their good deeds will actually lead people to God.

So that if Jesus were to come back, they would glorify him and know him. In the days of the early church when Peter's writing, Christians could very easily be accused of doing wrong.

They didn't worship the emperor and they didn't take part in the religious life of the empire and its idols. And the religious life really was the heart of cultural life in the empire.

And this at the very least made them suspect and gave the impression that they had no love for or investment in the culture. Today, we might find similarities.

[ 8 : 32 ] Christians can easily be accused of doing wrong, particularly when it comes to moral stances that we take because of the gospel. Opposition to abortion is construed as misogyny.

Affirming the Bible's sexual ethics is construed as homophobia. And holding to the Bible's view of the gender binary makes you a turf. And there's not a lot we can do about many of these preconceptions people have, which is why Peter says, live good lives.

The revolution of Christianity calls us to respond to such accusations, if they come, with a radical goodness and a life that is defined by love, compassion and a selfless desire to care for the people God has placed around us.

And this is what Jesus did. And it's what he meant when he said that we must love our enemies and those who hate us. The revolution of Christianity is that it doesn't retaliate.

The Christian response to hatred or being ostracized or bullied is to keep loving with a radical Jesus shaped love that leaves people frankly scratching their heads.

[ 9 : 49 ] The Christian response to hatred. our revolutionary goodness is subversive. It doesn't fit the stereotype that culture might paint. It should challenge and force people to reckon with the apparent contradiction.

It should force people to reckon with Christ. And that radical goodness will only come with effort and prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit.

It's something that we need to cultivate and it will be hard and it will be sacrificial. And it begins, as Peter says, by cultivating a heart that loves Jesus, that loves his goodness, that loves his laws. And that's why Peter urges us to fight the fight of our inner life so that when we face the challenges of the outer life, our hearts are ready to respond with love and grace, goodness and holiness. When the goodness of Christ shines out from us, the subversive revolution of Christianity will be underway and people will be drawn to the light of Christ that has clearly been at work within us.

[ 11 : 04 ] Let's now consider the more challenging aspect of the subversive revolution, the revolution of submission. Let's first set the scene that Peter's addressing to get our bearings properly.

Now, Christianity, when Peter's writing, is that it's a young and new movement. And from the perspective of Roman culture, it's a suspicious movement. It's clearly related to Judaism, but the Jews often reject it.

It calls its followers to worship a man named Jesus as Lord, which seems to challenge the lordship of the emperor and the importance of the state religion.

And its followers follow all sorts of strange practices and they hold to a strict moral code that seems to go against the grain of the morals of the culture that they're living in.

The state has every reason to be cautious about this movement that's emerged from some sandy backwater of the empire. And so too to those who hold power, not just in the public square, but in the private sphere of one's own home.

[ 12 : 08 ] Slave owners would be suspicious if one of their slaves started following this Jesus movement. And husbands who had more power than their wives in Roman culture would also be concerned if their wives started following this counter-cultural sect, not least because a wife in Roman culture was expected to follow her husband in his religious practices.

And for a wife to become a Christian, it would potentially be a huge embarrassment to her husband who might suffer under the accusation from his peers that he can't control his own home. And so this is the situation that faces the church in these early days.

How do the weak and the powerless who've come to know Jesus live in a society where they have little recourse to protection or appeal?

This is the challenge that faces these Christians. Let's look at each case in turn and see why Peter urges Christians to a radical revolution of submission in the face of adversity.

And as we do, let's consider what that means for the subversive revolution of the cross today. So firstly, the political case. Peter says, submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

[ 13 : 32 ] Christians didn't worship the emperor, but they were to obey him and every other human authority. Jesus famously was asked whether God's people ought to pay taxes to Caesar or not.

What he did is he took a denarius, a coin, and asked whose head was featured on it. The response was Caesar's. So his argument was that God's people are to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.

And this is the same kind of idea that Peter's expressing here. Because Peter's recognizing that God has placed people in positions of power and authority. Sometimes it's true that they misuse that authority, but God ultimately is the one who has put them there.

And Christians are called to respect that. The subversive nature of Christianity is that we obey those who are in charge.

It's only when the state oversteps its authority and tries to force Christians to do something that would mean we would have to go against God's law that we don't obey the state.

[ 14 : 42 ] No other political revolution begins with obedience to those in power, but Christianity does. The prophet Jeremiah, he once wrote to the exiles in Babylon that they ought to seek the welfare of the city where they've been exiled.

And so must we. We must seek the welfare and the good of Glasgow and humbly obey the laws of the land, showing ourselves to be the best citizens of Glasgow because we are also citizens of heaven.

In that way, we will silence those who might claim Christianity to be immoral or insular, archaic or dangerous. And so Peter says, for it is God's will that by doing good, you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.

Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil. Live as God's slaves, show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

In the United States at the moment, there's a developing movement called Christian nationalism, whose goal is to essentially take hold of the reins of political power and then impose Christian morals on the nation.

[15:58] Now, on the one hand, I slightly sympathize with their goal. God's law is good for all people. But their goal more than anything else seems to be power and being able to impose it.

We can dream about a Christian nation, but it's better to be practical. And indeed, that's what Peter and the other apostles do when they write to the churches. Use your freedom to serve God and love your neighbor.

Respect everyone, love your church family, fear God, and honor those in positions of authority. The way of Christ is not a yearning for power in order to impose God's law.

The way of Christ is radical submission and weakness that shows the beauty of God's law and the beauty of the gospel is such that we hope when people see our behavior, they will be drawn to God and drawn to his law rather than it being imposed upon them.

And that, after all, is what Jesus did when he submitted himself to the Sanhedrin and to Pontius Pilate. Let's take the slavery case next. Peter tells Christian slaves, In reverent fear of God, submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

[17:17] For it's commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, that is commendable before God.

The big question we need to deal with from the off is, is Peter condoning the practice of slavery? The answer, no, he isn't. But why, one might ask, does the New Testament not condemn slavery outright?

The New Testament commentator, Paul Actemeyer, is really quite helpful here. He writes, But Christianity is at heart opposed to slavery as a practice.

Though some Christians have owned slaves in the past, many abolitionist movements in history have been spearheaded by Christians because the Bible teaches us that all people are made in God's image and are equal, therefore, before God.

And so in the ancient church, for example, people like Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea fought against slavery and especially the sexual abuse of slaves. In the medieval church, the great scholar Thomas Aquinas declared forcefully that slavery was a sin.

[18:48] St. Ansgar campaigned against the Viking slave trade. St. Bathil campaigned for the abolition of slavery. And during the time of the transatlantic slave trade, though some Christians were regrettably blind to the abuses, the abolitionist movement was pushed forward by Christians like Frederick Douglass and William Wilberforce.

Their understanding of the gospel led to social transformation and the freeing of many lives in bondage and chains. But here in the first century, Peter urges submission.

Abolitionist movements would come in time as the subversive revolution impacted the state. But the pagan Roman Empire reigned supreme when Peter was writing.

He urged submission and the continued practice of doing good, even to cruel and barbarous slave masters, because that is the pattern of Christ.

Peter writes in verse 21, To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.

[20:01] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. To most sane people reading about Jesus going willingly to the cross, the most surprising thing is that there is no hint of retaliation at all.

He doesn't even try to defend himself, despite the fact that he is innocent. Instead, as Peter says, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

And this, says Peter, is an example for Christians to follow. Because Christians know that this life is not all there is, and that death is not the end of the story.

Because of those things, because those things are true, we can endure suffering like Jesus did. We believe in God the judge, that one day he will judge all who have done evil.

So many people suffer so many terrible things, and so many perpetrators get away with it. They live their whole lives and die with no retribution, with no justice being served upon them.

[ 21 : 16 ] There is no justice for so many people. But God promises that no one will get away from what they have done. He is the just judge.

And his people can rely on that in every circumstance. And it's why we, and the people that Peter is writing to, the slaves that Peter is writing to, can suffer with hope.

It's because this life is but the prologue to the eternal life to come, and there is a judge who judges justly. Thirdly, the third area that Peter urges submission is in marriage, and specifically when a wife becomes a Christian, but her husband doesn't.

Peter says, Wives, in the same way, submit yourselves to your own husbands, so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

In other words, the same principle that Peter's applied in society and in the master-slave relationships, he also applies here to marriage. The hope is that the husband who is suspicious of his wife's new religion, or even hostile to it, will see that it has brought about a positive change in her.

[ 22 : 39 ] Your beauty, Peter writes, should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

In saying this, he's not, of course, banning all wearing of jewelry or suggesting that doing your hair or wearing nice clothes is a wrong and sinful thing to do. Rather, what he's doing is emphasizing a principle that runs throughout Scripture and applies to both men and women, that it's not our external appearance that ultimately counts, but what's inside, our heart.

And in the particular situation that Peter is writing into, a gentle and quiet spirit, a Christ-like spirit, will be much more powerful and beautiful than a spirit of retaliation and hatred and more beautiful than anything that we might clothe ourselves with.

As Proverbs says, charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. And that's the principle that Peter's drawing on here. And so Peter then appeals to women in previous generations.

He writes, for this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her Lord.

[ 24 : 05 ] You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. This isn't a command that all wives are to call their husbands Lord, but it's Peter's way of conveying what Paul does more famously in Ephesians, where we're all called to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, and more particularly, Paul urges wives to submit themselves to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, and husbands are called to love their wives in the same way that Christ loves his church.

That is, a love that is totally sacrificial. We could spend an awful long time thinking about this, but let me just share one quotation from Kathy Keller in the book that she and her husband co-wrote, *The Meaning of Marriage*, that I think helpfully explains the Christian marriage ethic.

She says, both women and men get to play the Jesus role in marriage. Jesus in his sacrificial authority, Jesus in his sacrificial submission.

By accepting our gender roles and operating within them, we're able to demonstrate to the world concepts that are so counterintuitive as to be completely unintelligible unless they are lived out by men and women in Christian marriages.

Christian marriage is not a place for authoritarian domination, but sacrificial love from husbands looking out for their wives' needs.

[ 25 : 31 ] It's why Peter adds a clarification on what is expected of husbands. Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Weaker here doesn't imply anything other than the fact that men tend to be physically more powerful than women. What Peter is urging is that husbands don't misuse that strength and balance, but instead respect their wives as fellow heirs of Christ and recognize that both partners stand equal before God.

That's not a surprising statement in our age, but it was shocking in Peter's. The gospel proclaims that slaves and women have equal standing in God's eyes with slave owners and with men. It's not surprising, therefore, that in the first and second centuries, the church was filled with slaves and women. The church radically recognized their worth.

We too must, as the church of Christ, recognize the worth of all. Not one of us is better than another. Today, Peter's words urging submission don't mean that Christians should necessarily suffer in silence, though.

[ 26 : 51 ] In Peter's culture, a suffering slave or wife had very little recourse to help in a culture that looked down on them. Today, thankfully, across 2,000 years, the ethics of the gospel have so permeated our own culture that slavery is widely seen as an affront to humanity and domineering or cruel husbands are rightly seen as evil.

And so, particularly in a marriage, if you are suffering, please tell someone that you trust. And indeed, the church ought to be a haven and a refuge for sufferers.

It ought to be a place where people feel safe and feel valued. It's our duty as the church to make that a reality if we are to honour the love of Christ.

And so, what does revolutionary submission look like today? Well, it looks like loving those who hurt us at work, at school, at university, whatever situation or setting we live our lives in.

It means not retaliating if someone insults us for what we believe. It means continuing to love people who actively hate what the gospel of Jesus Christ stands for.

[ 28 : 08 ] And in marriage, if a Christian is married to someone who doesn't follow Jesus, it means showing your spouse Jesus through radical love that goes beyond what anyone would expect.

In every circumstance, we don't fight back. We win people with radical submission and radical goodness because that's what Jesus has showed us and that's what Jesus has done for us. Ultimately, all of this comes back to the revolution of the cross. The cross is not just our example, though Peter's made very clear that it is. The cross is the subversive revolution that changed the world and can change us if we put our hope and trust in Jesus because of what he did on the cross. Peter tells us at the end of chapter 2, when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed for you were like sheep going astray but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

[ 29 : 31 ] We are all like sheep who have wandered from the shepherd and from the safe green pastures of his goodness. That's what the Bible tells us.

God is the shepherd and we are his sheep but we wander by rejecting him and we wander by our sinfulness. But Jesus' death on the cross brings about a revolution.

in the aftermath of the American victory over the British at the Battle of Yorktown where America won their freedom, legend has it that the British sang the ballad The World Turned Upside Down.

The title of that song actually comes from the Book of Acts where the gospel message is said by its opponents in Thessalonica to have turned the world upside down. And they're right.

The gospel and the cross turns the world upside down. because here is God incarnate Jesus taking the punishment for sin on behalf of the guilty.

[ 30 : 30 ] The all-powerful God who made the universe takes on humanity and dies in our place in shame and weakness and humiliation.

Through the cross as Jesus breathes his final breath as he hangs upon the bloodied nails he brings us healing. He brings us home.

Our sins are forgiven. We have a new life and we have a living hope. We return like sheep who were lost to the divine shepherd of our souls God where once we were lost now we are found where once we were separated from God and a huge chasm lay between us now we have a relationship with God our Father.

now we are united to God the Son by faith and now we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. A subversive revolution occurs the moment the Christian first believes because they are healed by

the blood of Jesus whose death has brought us back to the shepherd.

The death of Jesus was shocking. Death by crucifixion was horrifying and cruel and no one when it happened would ever have expected that a man dying on a cross in shame and weakness would ever amount to anything but when Jesus went willingly to the cross for you and for me to bear our sins he began the revolution of salvation.

[ 32 : 05 ] A final thought as I close in John Bunyan's famous story The Pilgrim's Progress which is an allegory for the Christian life. the Christian comes to the cross and the great burden which he has been carrying falls off at the foot of the cross and that's exactly what happens still when we come to the cross.

Every time the burden of our past our fears of the future fall off. The burdens of our guilt and our sin are cast aside.

We are forgiven and we enter into the revolution of Christ crucified. And this is why we must live lives of radical goodness and radical submission.

We've been saved by the one who is better than anyone who ever lived and who submitted himself lower than anyone should ever have to with the hope that others will come to the foot of the cross and cast off all of their burdens.

At the cross we return home and are embraced by the shepherd of our souls. Let's pray.