

February 18, 2024 CCC
1 Peter 3:18-22 "A Good Conscience Toward God"

The First letter of Peter was one of the first books of the New Testament to be recognized as Scripture (Eusebius, 4th c.). It was used and quoted extensively in the first centuries. During the Reformation, Martin Luther wrote that 1 Peter, John's Gospel and Peter's Letter to the Romans were the "true kernel and marrow" of the New Testament. During the Renaissance, however, enthusiasm for 1 Peter was replaced by skepticism. 1 Peter has dramatic apocalyptic views that reflect non-canonical sources of the periods before and during the life of Christ, which we see in this morning's text.

1 Peter is included with the General or Catholic Epistles—James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude. General because they are addressed to a specific church address, but also address themselves to the wider church in surrounding regions.

1 Peter may be a baptismal service during a time (possibly mid-60's A.D., some put it later) when it is a big decision to confess faith in Christ. That sets you apart from others in society and invites their suspicion and opposition. In our text, Peter declares the surpassing power of Christ over all other authorities (v.22) and forgiveness of sins through His death (vv. 18,21) so thorough that the believer can have a good conscience.

The churches that the First letter of Peter address were weary of struggling within an unbelieving society and empire. They were having thoughts about the delay of Christ's return and wondering if Christ has forgotten them or if their hope was misplaced.

As mentioned, 1 Peter uses thoughts from writings which were not recognized by the early church as Scripture. The non-canonical book of 1 Enoch, attributed to Noah's great-grandfather of that name, writes about explanations for strange and difficult passages in the part of Genesis between Creation and Abraham: God's motivations for the Flood, explanations about the origins of evil spirits, the 1,000 year reign of the Messiah on earth, and explaining how angels fell from heaven. You can see how people might be interested in getting information on these subjects not provided in the canonical writings! 1 Enoch is believed to be quoted in Jude 1:14-15 and Hebrews 11:5, and the themes reflected in our passage this morning as well as 2 Peter 2:4-5. Please do not be afraid of the non-canonical writings, nor be spun around by people who say that the leaders suppressed these truths in order to control the church. If you read these non-canonical writings, you will see why they were not included in Scripture.

These themes are included in 1 Peter, however, and we can share the confusion and uncertainty of what seems to be a long delay in the return of Christ and the bringing of justice to the earth. God's delay is not weakness, but strength in patience. He is waiting for people to respond to him and be saved from the judgment to come.

Aren't we in the same anxiety and uncertainty and awareness of guilt? The First letter of Peter was written to draw the church into confidence and holy living. We are supposed to wait with a good conscience, not fear.

At the same time, we are told to remember that Christ suffered, the just for the unjust, to bring us to salvation. The church will also suffer, not always for our own sinfulness, but by getting involved with loving people who do not know Christ and do not know how to take care of themselves.

The people who received this letter were considered visiting strangers and resident aliens within the Roman Empire. Few of them had full Roman citizenship, some were slaves, most were workers in the trades who were not barred but restricted in their rights to marry, vote, or own property and were taxed at higher rates than citizens. Economic and political problems would force them to move around. Their forced mobility was one of the reasons that Christian faith spread so quickly in the first centuries. Their reliance on God was a powerful witness to those around them who could depend on no one or no government.

Having a clear conscience means that we are committed to the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. Having a clear conscience means that we are in agreement with what God does. Even if we do not see any results or the results are delayed, we will never regret thinking and acting on what is God's will. God's will right now is that the church be His body, act like He would act if he were here in the flesh. That's us, His hands and feet and heart, right here.

The exact circumstances of our lives here in Drexel Hill in 2024, the history of the places each of us were born, the political and economic global and local specifics, the social attitudes, the state of the Christian church, the fellowship of this congregation—these are all unique, just as the people first receiving this letter were in new and unknown circumstances. Like them, we receive the teaching of the apostles passed down 2000 years, and face a new day no one has ever faced. How can we keep a clear conscience as things stand now? Whichever way we turn we are closing our eyes to evil being done, or taking the benefits we can. On one hand we just want to live a quiet, peaceful life, which is of great benefit in the eyes of God, and on the other hand, we want to be on an urgent mission from God, eyes blazing with purpose.

The church has pondered these matters over the millennia, and there are many formulations that get at the same set of attitudes and behaviors that keep our conscience clear. The church has always taught that there are multiple moving parts of being God's faithful people, and they are all done at the same time.

But we cannot as individuals keep all these things balanced in our lives. The only way we can do all these things at the same time and honor God is if we work together with the other Christians in our faith community. These goals do not compete with one another, but form a whole. When people want to emphasize aspects of the church purpose that you think are misguided, be aware they are helping you remember the full work of the church. We need people we would rather not listen to or have to deal with.

Here is a simple statement of what the church is, which in 1910 was brought into the churches that eventually became our denomination. The Book of Order now tacks this on to the end of the discussion of the church. It's brevity makes it a helpful way to think about the multiple purposes of the church.

The great ends of the Church are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth;
- the promotion of social righteousness; and
- the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

(Book of Order 2023/2025 F-1.0304)

May we continue to fulfill these purposes of God as a congregation with a clear conscience as we wait for the return of Christ in glory.

This article discusses what we know of the source of the Six Great Ends.

Rogers, Jack B., and Robert E. Blade. "The Great Ends of the Church: Two Perspectives." *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 76, no. 3 (1998): 181–86.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23335460>.