

## The Epistles of Peter

God's economy is to gain a universal man composed of Christ as the Head and the church as His Body. Christ is the embodiment and expression of the Triune God, and the church is the enlargement and expression of Christ. In the New Testament, the Gospels and Acts reveal how God obtains this universal man. The Epistles of Paul provide a full definition of this universal man, with each book covering a unique aspect of this definition. For example, the subject of Romans is the gospel of God concerning His Son, revealing how sinners are made sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as local churches (1:1, 3; 3:23; 8:14; 12:5; 16:1, 4-5). The subject of 1 Corinthians is Christ and His cross as the unique solution to all the problems in the church that hinder the growth of this universal man (1:1-2, 9; 2:2). Second Corinthians speaks of Christ's new covenant ministers and the ministry that produces this universal man (3:6; 4:1). In Galatians the subject is Christ replacing the law and being versus religion and tradition, both of which frustrate the formation of this universal man (1:4, 14-16; 2:19-21; 4:19; 6:14-15). Ephesians shows us

the church as the mystery of Christ, the Body of Christ as the fullness of Christ, becoming the fullness of God, which is this universal man (3:4; 1:22-23; 3:19). All of Paul's remaining Epistles focus on the same goal of gaining a universal expression of the Triune God through Christ and the church. Even the short Epistle to Philemon covers an important aspect by giving us an illustration of the believers' equal status in this universal new man (v. 16; cf. Col. 3:10-11).

The remaining Epistles of the New Testament may be considered as supplementary to the full definition covered in Paul's writings.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of a supplement is to add to, extend, and strengthen the principal work. James, Peter, John, and Jude all wrote on particular matters that were not covered extensively in Paul's Epistles. In a previous installment of "Touchstones" (*Affirmation & Critique*, April 2008), we covered John's Epistles,

which are on the fellowship of the divine life (1 John 1:3). In this article we will cover the Epistles of Peter, the main subject of which is the government of God. Peter's writings are structured on the Triune God's operation to accomplish a complete salvation for His chosen people, in order that He may have a dwelling place and that we might be glorified to express Him. Peter's writings confirm and strengthen the definition presented in Paul's Epistles by giving a thorough view of God's government.

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### **The Government of God in 1 and 2 Peter**

The majority of Peter's first Epistle concerns the Christian life and its sufferings (2:11—4:19). Concerning the Christian life, Peter emphasizes its manner, which must be holy, even holy according to the Holy One who called us (1:15). It should also be in a manner that is excellent toward all persons in all concerns. For example, toward the Gentiles, who speak against us as evildoers, we need an excellent manner of life so that we may glorify God in the day of His visitation (2:12). Concerning human

institutions, we should be subject to every one for the Lord's sake (v. 13). Servants should be subject to their masters, not only to the masters who are good and forbearing but also to the crooked ones, for the servants' enduring of unjust mistreatment is grace with God (vv. 18-20). Sufferings come to us in the marriage life and sometimes from our fellow believers in the church, yet even so, our manner of life can be effectual in gaining our partners and bringing in God's blessing (3:1-2, 7, 9). Moreover, we need to know that Christ, who suffered on our behalf, is a model for us to follow in His steps (2:21-25).

We should suffer for righteousness by the will of God, even as Christ did (3:14, 17-18) by arming ourselves with His mind for suffering (4:1), minister the varied grace of God as good stewards (v. 10), and rejoice in sharing the sufferings of Christ (v. 13). In his second

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Epistle, Peter says concerning the Christian life that our holy manner of life and godliness not only anticipates but even hastens the coming day of God (3:11-12).

Throughout his two Epistles, Peter mentions judgment frequently, and he covers a broad scope of the judgment of God. In these books we learn of the judgment on the fallen ancient world (2 Pet. 3:6), on the angels at Noah's time (2:4), on Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6), on unrighteous and ungodly men throughout all generations (v. 9; 3:7), on Christ (1 Pet. 2:23), on the believers who are God's household (1:17; 4:17-19, 6), and specifically on heretical teachers and mockers (2 Pet. 2:1, 3). Judgment will continue until the day of the Lord, when all men will be judged, as will the heavens and the earth (3:10, 12; 1 Pet. 4:5). Through these various judgments the Lord God will clear up the entire universe and purify it so that He may have new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13).

**G**od's judgment is for God's government. Peter does not use the term *government*, nor for that matter does he speak of an *administration* or *throne*. But by speaking about judgment, he demonstrates that God, the faithful Creator, is still ruling the universe. Judgment executes governmental authority by carrying out the will of government. For example, when moving to a new place, a person may have no immediate reason to contact politicians or administrators, but its police force and law court will soon make him aware of its government. To enter into any country, he must pass through the judgment of immigration officers, which likewise impresses him with the rule of government in that country.

Peter's repeated reference to the judgment of God in his writing on the Christian life and its sufferings is a clear indication that our life is to be lived under the government of God. In 1 Peter 1:17, Peter says that if we call as Father the One who without respect of persons judges according to each one's work, we should pass the time of our sojourning in fear. Commenting on this verse in his *Synopsis*, J. N. Darby shows how God's judgment here concerns the present exercise of government in relation to His children, saying that Peter

is not speaking of the final judgment of the soul. In that sense "the Father judgeth no man, but has committed all judgment to the Son." The thing spoken of here is the daily judgment of God's government in this world, exercised with regard to His children. Accordingly it says, "the time of your sojourn here." (377-378)

In the light of this judgment, we should pass the time of our sojourning in fear. Our Father is holy, and it is His intention that the family whom He has produced through regeneration would also be holy (1:3, 15-16). He expects

us to walk in a manner of life that is holy according to His nature, which we as His children possess. Otherwise, He will become our Judge in order to deal with our unholiness, in the same way that a father disciplines his own children (4:17; Heb. 12:9-10).

In 1 Peter 4:17, Peter tells us that it is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God. This is a strong indication that the disciplinary judgment of God in the universe has His own children in this age as its starting point. Daily, as His children, we are under His governmental judgment. The fiery ordeals that we pass through are part of God's governmental administration (v. 12), and He uses these to deal with everything that does not match His government. The purpose of this judgment is that we would live in the spirit (v. 6). It is God's judgment on His own house that affords Him a strong ground to judge those who "disobey the gospel" (v. 17). Again, the term *disobey* indicates that the gospel includes the aspect of God's government.

Herein lies the preciousness of Peter's writings as a supplement to the definition of the Christian life in the other Epistles of the New Testament: he combines the Christian life with God's government. The Triune God in Christ has passed through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection in order to redeem us and has become the life-giving Spirit to indwell us for our Christian life (Rom. 1:3; 3:24; 4:25; 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 15:45). At the same time, however, He is still the Creator of the universe and its Ruler. Although we have been born of God through regeneration to have a spiritual life and become part of the new creation, we still have a physical life in the old creation. As such, we need God's governmental dealings.

**B**efore God obtains a universe in which righteousness dwells, He must first obtain a household that matches Him in His holiness and righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24; 3:14; 2 Pet. 1:1; 2:21). The righteousness in God's household is the righteousness of the believers expressed in their living, which is the result of the growth and development of the divine life within them (1:5-7). We receive this divine life through regeneration, and grow and develop in this life by feeding on the guileless milk of the word (1 Pet. 1:3; 2:2). But we may disregard the nature of this life and fail to cooperate with its development within us. If so, God will discipline us in His government so that we may continue to grow and develop in the divine life; then we will not be judged with the unrighteous and ungodly (2 Pet. 2:9; 3:7).

Peter's Epistles warn us to pay attention to more than just grace in our Christian life. We need to also take heed to God's government. Based on God's grace, we receive the forgiveness of our sins and His supply. Based on God's government, we are disciplined when our living fails to

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match the requirements of His holiness and righteousness. If we know only the side of God's grace, we will fail to comprehend the meaning of suffering in our Christian life, and we will be unable to arm ourselves for these sufferings (1 Pet. 4:1). We will also fail to benefit as we ought from God's governmental dealing, the purpose of which is to nurture our growth and development. Moreover, if we disregard God's governmental dealings, we may continue to live in a loose way, rebellious to the government of God, and store up for ourselves future judgment in the day of the Lord (v. 18; 2 Pet. 3:10; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Peter's Epistles show how we should live a Christian life under the government of God. He reveals to us a Christ who has become a model of living under the government of God; when He suffered, He did not threaten but kept committing all to Him who judges righteously (1 Pet. 2:23). It is our experience of this Christ that enables us to receive God's governmental dealings administered through suffering (1:6-8; 2:3-4; 3:18, 22; 4:1, 15-16). In view of God's government, we should pass the time of our sojourning in holy fear, that is, in a healthy, serious caution that leads us to be holy in all our manner of life (1:15, 17). We should be humbled under the mighty hand of God, which carries out the government of God (5:6). We should commit our souls in well-doing to the faithful Creator (4:19), because, as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, He cares for us faithfully in His love and visits us (2:12, 25). Moreover, we should live to righteousness in the resurrection of Christ, having died to sins in His death (v. 24). To live to righteousness is to live in a way that matches the righteous requirements of God's government, which is based upon righteousness (Psa. 89:14). In Christ's death we have been separated from sins, and in His resurrection we have been enlivened so that we may spontaneously live to righteousness under the government of God (Rom. 6:8, 10-11, 18; Eph. 2:6; John 14:19; 2 Tim. 2:11).

### The Economy of God in 1 and 2 Peter

As if he was mindful that his subject, the government of God, might distract us from the central importance of God's economy, Peter begins both his Epistles with substantial sections devoted to God's economy (1 Pet. 1:1—2:10; 2 Pet. 1:1-21). Although Peter's style of writing is quite distinct from Paul's, these passages contain striking similarities in structure to passages in Paul's

Epistles. This confirms his testimony of his personal knowledge of Paul's writings, the high regard in which he held them, and how he had benefited from them (3:15-16). Finally, Peter concludes both of his Epistles with a strong reference to God's economy (1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Pet. 3:18), reminding us of this focus.

Peter presents God's economy as the energizing Triune God operating to bring His chosen ones into the full enjoyment of the Triune God. According to 1 Peter 1:2, the Father chose us in eternity past, the Spirit applies His choosing to us through sanctification, and the Son accomplished this selection through redemption by His death (which Peter refers to as the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ). Then in verses 3 through 25, Peter speaks of the operation of the Triune God. There is the Father's regeneration unto a living hope (vv. 3-9), the Spirit's application through the prophesying of the Old Testament prophets and the preaching of the apostles in the New Testament (vv. 10-12), and Christ's redemption unto a holy life and brotherly love by the sanctifying truth, based on regeneration by the incorruptible seed through the living word of God (vv. 13-25). In 2 Peter 1:4, Peter says that through precious and exceedingly great promises, we are enabled to become partakers of the divine nature. By referring to the nature of the Triune God rather than His person, Peter emphasizes our participation in and enjoyment of the Triune God. Moreover, in both 1 Peter 1 and 2 Peter 1 he stresses the divine power, in the former for its guarding function with a view to our complete salvation (1 Pet. 1:5) and in

the latter for its function of granting us all things that relate to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). In both instances, this power is granted to us inwardly, thus speaking of the energy of the divine life within us. Through this energy of life, we have the full enjoyment of the Triune God so that we may grow and develop in the divine life and eventually receive a rich and bountiful entrance into the eternal kingdom (vv. 5-11).

The human spirit and God's Spirit are the means for us to partake of the divine nature as our portion. In referring to the meek and quiet spirit of the believing wives, Peter calls the human spirit the hidden man of the heart (1 Pet. 3:4). The human spirit and the heart here are evidently distinct parts of our inner being, as the footnote in the Recovery Version explains:

Our heart is composed of all the parts of our soul—mind,

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emotion, and will—along with the main part of our spirit—the conscience (Heb. 4:12). Among all these, our spirit is at the center; hence, our spirit is the hidden man of our heart. (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 3:4, note 1)

Concerning God's Spirit, Peter uses the titles *the Spirit of glory* and also *the Spirit of Christ* (4:14; 1:11). *The Spirit of glory* is the One through whom Christ was glorified in His resurrection (Rom. 1:4). *The Spirit of Christ* denotes the Spirit after Christ's resurrection (8:9-11). This title denotes "the Spirit of God constituted through and with the death and resurrection of Christ for the application and impartation of Christ's death and resurrection to His believers" (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 1:11, note 3).

Peter is not concerned with defining the primary functions of the human spirit and the Spirit of Christ, as Paul does in his Epistles, since the nature of Peter's writing is supplementary. Therefore, it is to Paul that we must turn to learn that the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16); that the Lord, who in resurrection has become the life-giving Spirit, is with our spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Tim. 4:22); and that he who is joined to the Lord is one mingled spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17). Rather, Peter's concern is to show the function of our human spirit and the Holy Spirit in both Christ's and the believers' experiences of suffering for the will of God under the government of God. The function of the human spirit in the wives is for them to have a pure manner of life that can gain their husbands, who may be disobedient to the word of God (1 Pet. 3:1-4). The function of the Spirit of Christ, even before His resurrection, was for the Old Testament prophets to search into the time and the manner of time of the sufferings of Christ and the glories after these (1 Pet. 1:11). And the Spirit of glory as the Spirit of Christ's resurrection with its power is for us to suffer for the name of Christ; He rests upon us "for the glorifying of the resurrected and exalted Christ, who is now in glory" (Recovery Version, 4:14, note 2).

**T**he Triune God is operating to accomplish His complete salvation for the believers. By His operation we are regenerated, and then we feed on the guileless milk of His word in order that we may grow, be transformed, and be built up so that God may have a dwelling place and that we may be glorified to express Him. First Peter 1:23 says that we have been regenerated of incorruptible seed by the living and abiding word of God. In the next chapter Peter encourages us to long, as newborn babes, for the guileless milk of the word so that by it we may grow unto salvation (vv. 2-3). In 1:22 he says that we have purified our souls by our obedience to the truth. What Peter speaks of as the purifying of our souls corresponds to the transformation of our souls in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Thus, Peter covers three crucial

stages of God's organic salvation: regeneration, feeding for growth, and transformation. Through this organic salvation we can be built up as a spiritual house to express Him until eventually we become a corporate priesthood to tell out the virtues of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Although Peter does not use the term *the Body of Christ* as Paul does, his understanding of the goal of the believers' growth is the same, namely, a building composed of a corporate body of priests expressing Christ. Eventually, at the conclusion of our salvation, we will enter into His eternal glory, which will be the transfiguration of our body (5:10).

**B**oth 1 Peter 1 and Ephesians 1 begin by blessing the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The chapters share a similar structure based on the operation of the Triune God—the Father's selection, the Son's redemption, and the Spirit's application—although their style and emphasis are quite clearly different (cf. Eph. 1:3-6, 7-12, 13-14). Both chapters stress the believers obtaining an inheritance and the importance of the believers knowing the divine power of Christ's resurrection (1 Pet. 1:4, 5; Eph 1:11, 14, 18, 19-23). Moreover, both chapters describe the operation of the word of God, which Paul calls the word of the truth, in the believers receiving salvation (1 Pet. 1:23-25; Eph. 1:13).

We may also observe a parallel between 1 Peter 2 and 1 Corinthians 3, chapters which emphasize the need for the growth in life of the believers. Although these chapters use different metaphors—the former *babes* and the latter *plants*—they emphasize our need of an organic supply through the supply of milk and water respectively (1 Pet. 2:2-3; 1 Cor. 3:6-9). Both chapters use a change of metaphor to show that growth is not merely an individual matter but is for the corporate building. Peter says that the babes must also be living stones to be built up as a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). Paul says that the plants are also constituted with the Triune God as gold, silver, and precious stones to be God's building, God's temple (1 Cor. 3:12, 9-10, 16-17). Furthermore, by employing the same change of metaphor from the organic to the mineral, both passages reveal the need of transformation in order for the building to be accomplished.

Peter not only shares the same focus of God's economy as Paul but also refers to Paul to strengthen his own writing on the government of God: "Count the long-suffering of our Lord to be salvation, even as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them concerning these things" (2 Pet. 3:15-16). In many instances in his writings, Paul also speaks concerning "these things"—that is, concerning God's governmental and disciplinary judgment (1 Cor. 11:30-32; Heb. 12:5-11; 2:3; 4:13; 6:8;

10:27-31, 39; 12:29; 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 4:4-5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). Hence, both apostles faithfully speak the word of righteousness to the believers (Heb. 5:13), the word concerning God's discipline in His government. Peter goes on to highly commend Paul's writings: "In which some things are hard to understand, which the unlearned and unstable twist, as also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). Peter says that Paul's Epistles should be regarded like "the rest of the Scriptures" and should receive the same respect as the Old Testament. The deeper significance of this commendation lies in its demonstration that the early apostles, despite certain apparent differences, were absolutely one in the unique ministry of the New Testament. This fact is expressed with great clarity in note 2 to this verse in the Recovery Version:

What beauty and excellency are in this commendation!

Although the Corinthians attempted to divide Peter and Paul according to their divisive preferences (1 Cor. 1:11-12), Peter commended Paul, saying that Paul, like him, taught "these things" and that Paul's writings should not be twisted but should be regarded like "the rest of the Scriptures" and should receive the same respect as the Old Testament. For Peter to make such a commendation was not a small thing, for it was he who was rebuked to his face by Paul regarding the New Testament faith (Gal. 2:11-21). This indicates that Peter was bold in admitting that the early apostles, such as John, Paul, and himself, although their style, terminology, utterance, certain aspects of their views, and the way they presented their teachings differed, participated in the same, unique ministry, the ministry of the New Testament (2 Cor. 3:8-9; 4:1). Such a ministry ministers to people, as its focus, the all-inclusive Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God, who, after passing through the process of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, dispenses Himself through the redemption of Christ and by the operation of the Holy Spirit into His redeemed people as their unique portion of life and as their life supply and everything, for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ, which will consummate in the full expression, the fullness, of the Triune God, according to the eternal purpose of the Father.

**A**t the end of his first Epistle, Peter concludes with a word concerning grace: "The God of all grace, He who has called you into His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself perfect,

establish, strengthen, and ground you" (5:10). The phrase *all grace* refers to the riches of the bountiful supply of the divine life in many aspects ministered to us in many steps of the divine operation on and in us in God's economy; *in Christ Jesus* indicates the processes that the God of all grace has passed through to bring His redeemed people into an organic union with Himself to participate in the riches of the Triune God as their enjoyment (Recovery Version, notes 2 and 4). However, in order to benefit from grace, we need to grow by the enjoyment of grace. Therefore, at the end of his second Epistle, Peter stresses our growth in grace, which is our growth by the bountiful supply of eternal life provided by the divine power, and our growth in truth, which is the realization of the knowledge of our Lord, the reality of all that He is: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 3:18, notes 1 and 3).

## Conclusion

Peter writes on a subject that is supplementary to the main subject of God's economy as defined in the writings of Paul, namely, the government of God. In his first Epistle he prepares the believers for a Christian life with sufferings, equipping and arming them with the mind of Christ that fully understands the purpose of these sufferings under the government of God. His second Epistle reveals the divine provision with which they may grow unto the full development of their faith in view of God's government. Nevertheless, as we have seen here, his writing is in full harmony with Paul's Epistles, sharing with them the same focus and

basic structure of God's New Testament economy.

by Jim Batten

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a full explanation of this understanding, see Witness Lee, *A General Sketch of the New Testament in the Light of Christ and the Church, Part 3: Hebrews through Jude* (Living Stream Ministry: Anaheim, 1999).

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