



THE IMPERATIVES

in 1 Peter

By Rex D. Butler

WHEN SIMON PETER composed his letter to the scattered Christians of northern Asia Minor (modern Turkey), he did so with the authority of “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:1).¹ Later in his closing remarks, he reminded his readers that he was a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” (5:1). Furthermore, his pastoral tone in the letter indicates he had a close relationship with these Christians. Although the Bible does not mention Peter’s sojourn in northern Asia Minor, his writing this letter suggested that he evangelized this region sometime between his participation in the Jerusalem Council in AD 48 and his arrival in Rome in the 60s.² Certainly his leadership over the churches in this region is evident in the imperatives that he utilized throughout the letter.

In the central section of this letter (1 Pet. 2:11–4:11), Peter listed the responsibilities of the people of God,³ beginning with Christians’ relationships to others, both inside and outside the church (2:12–17). Peter then highlighted the relationships of slaves to masters, wives to unbelieving husbands, and husbands to their believing wives (2:18–3:7). Finally, he concluded this exhortation on relationships with several general instructions (3:8–17).

Addressing all the readers of his letter, he charged them to “be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit” (3:8). According to Thomas Schreiner, these five adjectives carry the weight of imperatives that the apostle Peter expected his readers to fulfill in their relationships with others in the church as well as with outsiders.⁴

The first and last adjectives carry similar meanings—“like-minded” and “humble-minded.” As Schreiner observed, “harmony and humility belong together, for the primary means by which harmony is disrupted is pride and self-assertion.”⁵ Next, the second and fourth adjectives are synonyms, both conveying the idea of “compassionate.” Finally, the third adjective constitutes the central command to love one’s brothers and sisters. Thus, Peter gathered together these imperational adjectives to encourage his readers toward a community of faith nurtured by mutual affection and strengthened by unity.⁶

In the next verse, Peter turned his attention toward the believers’ relationships with unbelievers. Though written

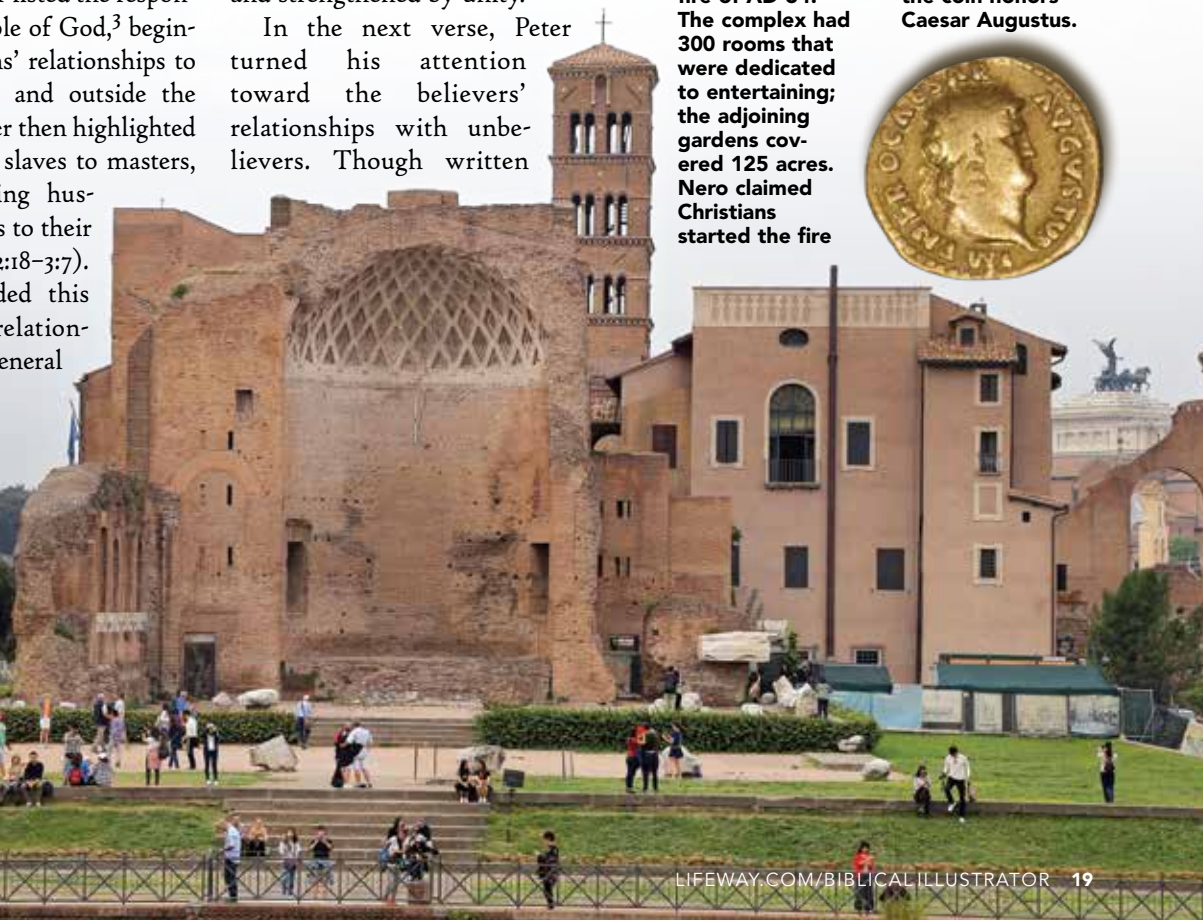
in the form of participles, his verbs deliver the force of imperatives: Do not return “evil for evil or insult for insult,” but give “a blessing instead” (v. 9). With these instructions, Peter echoed the Lord Jesus’ command to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28; see Matt. 5:44).⁷

The abuses and insults that pagans heaped upon Christians were well documented elsewhere. About fifty years later in Bithynia, the same region to which Peter wrote this letter, the governor Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan that Christianity was a “madness” and an “depraved and extravagant superstition”

Bottom: Partial ruins of the Domus Aurea (also known as Nero’s Golden House), which Emperor Nero began constructing after the great fire of AD 64. The complex had 300 rooms that were dedicated to entertaining; the adjoining gardens covered 125 acres. Nero claimed Christians started the fire

that had ravaged the city.

Below: Gold coin known as an aureus, which was equivalent to 25 denarii. Issued by Nero in AD 64, the coin honors Caesar Augustus.



COIN: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ VILIA DEI QUINTILI/ ROME (80/81246)

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(Pliny the Younger, *Epistle* 10.96). About the same time, Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius also scorned the Christian religion as a “pernicious” and “mischievous superstition” (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*).⁸

Tacitus went on to accuse Christians of “hatred of the human race,”⁹ probably because they abstained from acts of idolatry and immorality that were common among their pagan neighbors. Peter made a similar observation that the pagans “pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you” (1 Pet. 4:3-4).

As mentioned above, Peter intended these imperatives of 1 Peter 3:8-9 to guide the believers’ relationships to each other and to outsiders. Paul Achtemeier connected these imperatives to those listed in 1 Peter 2:17.¹⁰ In these earlier verses, Peter opened his section on believers’ responsibilities with four succinct commands: “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (2:17). These imperatives sum up the major topics of Peter’s letter.

All relationships were included in Peter’s command to “honor all people,” but especially in mind were the believers’ relationships with unbelievers. As mentioned, Peter urged his readers to bless those who mistreat and insult them, and he promised that those who do so will “inherit a blessing” (3:9). In support of this admonition, he cited Psalm 34, whose themes are reflected in 1 Peter: suffering and deliverance of God’s people, judgment of the wicked, and godly living as evidence of hope in God.¹¹

Furthermore, Peter had in mind an apologetic purpose in guiding his readers’ interactions with unbelievers:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and

reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

—1 Peter 3:15-16; see 2:12

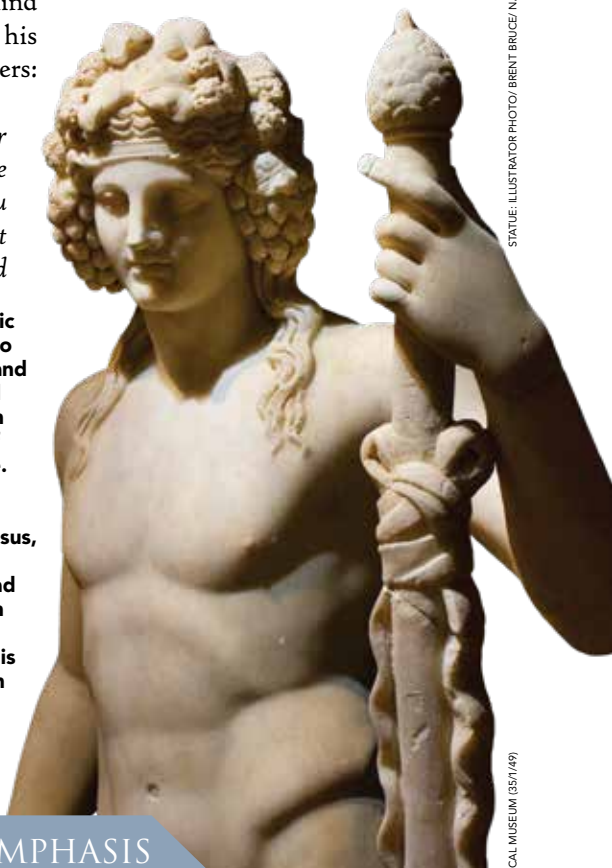
Much has been said already about Peter’s imperative to “love the brotherhood.” Later in the letter, Peter added more commands: “keep fervent in your love for one another,” “be hospitable to one another,” and “as each one has received a



Lower left: Grave stele depicting Euempolos playing with two children; he holds a bird in each hand. His name, Euempolos, designates a cheap slave. The Athenians probably granted his freedom thanks to his participation in a battle against the Spartans. Part of Peter’s instructions included a slave’s relationship with his master. The stele,

made of Pentelic marble, dates to about 390 BC and was discovered at Pireas, which is southwest of Athens, Greece.

Right: Marble statue of Dionysus, the Roman god of wine; his head is crowned with vines; he holds the thyrsus in his left hand, which Dionysus’s followers carried as a symbol of their devotion.



PARALLELISM FOR EMPHASIS

In 1 Peter 3:8, we find parallelism that was commonly used in both the Old and New Testament eras. The outside elements reflect parallel thought; the central component is considered the most important.

- Harmonious
- Sympathetic
- Loving towards brothers and sisters
- Kindhearted
- Humble

Below: From Pompeii, silver drinking cup; the scene depicts the myth of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. Part of

Peter's instructions warned against following unrestrained behavior, including drunkenness (1 Pet. 4:3).



STATUE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BRENT BRUCE/ NARLES ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (173B/2538)

special gift, employ it in serving one another" (4:8-11).

Peter's last two commands, "fear God, honor the king," reflected Jesus' instructions to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). Peter's words also recalled Proverbs 24:21, where the writer instructed his son to "fear the LORD and the king." In his letter, however, Peter distinguished between the Christian's reverential fear of God and the honor he owes the king or emperor.¹²

Peter expounded upon the command to "honor the king" in the verses preceding these four commands: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right" (1 Pet. 2:13-14). Paul paralleled this idea in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 13:1-7). At the time that Peter and Paul were writing these instructions, the ruler was Nero, who soon would instigate the first imperial persecution of Christians. The principle,



Above, from left to right: Bust of the Roman historian Suetonius, who lived about AD 69-122; he wrote a series of short biographies on well-known Roman men and later a larger work entitled "Lives of the Caesars." Describing Nero's interactions

with believers, Suetonius wrote, "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition" ("Life of Nero," 16:2).

Statue of Pliny the Younger on the facade of Cathedral of St.

Maria Maggiore in Como, Italy. Pliny (61-113 AD) was a lawyer, author, and member of the Roman Senate. Part of Pliny's writings detailed everyday life in the 1st cent.; described the eruption of Mount Vesuvius; and, in a letter to Emperor Trajan,


inquired about what to do concerning Christians who refused to renounce their faith. Pliny was raised by his uncle, who is referred to as Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79).

Bust of Nero, Roman emperor from AD 54-68.

however, remained; Christians were to "honor the king," for "such is the will of God" (1 Pet. 2:15).

The instruction to "fear God" saturates the entire letter. It is expounded most clearly, however, in one of the oft-quoted imperatives in 1 Peter: "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you" (5:6-7).

The imperatives in 1 Peter apply as readily to today's believers as they did those to whom Peter addressed in this letter. Today, believers live in a post-Christian society that in many ways resembles the setting of the first-century church. We do not face official persecution from our government, but we encounter insults, skepticism, and opposition from an increasingly pluralistic and secular culture. If we are not only to survive but thrive, we must find ways to implement Peter's imperatives: "Honor

all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king." 

1. All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

2. Edwin A. Blum, "1 Peter," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Hebrews-Revelation)*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 212; Merrill C. Tenney, "First Epistle of Peter," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 643.

3. J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, vol. 49, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word, 1988), xxxvii.

4. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 163.

5. *Ibid.*, 164; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, vol. 37B, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 603.

6. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 606.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 16; Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96; in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 1-4.

9. Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96, in *Ibid.*

10. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 222.

11. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 166.

12. *Ibid.*, 133; Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary*, 188; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 500-501.

Rex D. Butler is professor of church history and patristics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana.