

1 Peter 2:18-3:12

Most of you will have heard of John Bunyan, the seventeenth century writer and preacher who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*. I want to read to you from his own account of his conversion. He was a young man, working as a tinker, and he tells us this.

"Upon a day, the *good* providence of God called me to Bedford, to work at my Calling: and in one of the streets of that town I came where there were three or four women sitting at a door in the sun, talking about the things of God. And being now willing to hear what they said, I drew near, to hear their discourse.

"Their talk was about a new birth — the work of God in their hearts; as also, how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature. They talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what Promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil."

"Methought, they spake as if *joy* did make them speak. They spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me, as if I had found a new world; as if they were 'people that dwelt *alone*, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours.'

This experience was a crucial step toward faith for Bunyan. But notice a few things. This was not a formal evangelistic event. There was no mesmerising speaker. As far as we know these women were not trained evangelists. They were just ordinary Christians. In my experience, for the majority of people their crucial contact with the gospel is through ordinary Christians. People like me have a role in seeing people converted, but overwhelmingly my role is to help ordinary believers live out their lives as godly men and women in the world.

And notice too that it was the quality of their lives that made all the difference. They spoke as if "joy did make them speak" with pleasantness and grace. Bunyan confessed that actually their words were far beyond his understanding, but he wanted what they had, and this finally led him to faith.

It seems to me that this goes a long way to explaining why the New Testament letters don't particularly emphasise mobilising people in evangelism, teaching them gospel outlines, or getting punters along to evangelistic meetings. It is not the New Testament writers are uninterested in people hearing the gospel, rather they expect that as they live out their lives for Christ in the world, it will result in people getting converted.

And so you find again and again in scripture, the most important thing that we need to learn as we commend the gospel to the world, is not what to say, but how to behave.

As we have unpacked 1 Peter we have begun to see the contours of Peter's portrait of the church. We live as "scattered exiles" in a hostile world with joy and hope as we look forward to our final inheritance. We live differently, focusing on our hope, enjoying our identity, with new habits of repentance, stirring up new affections of love, and cultivating a new appetite for God's word. We live out those new lives in the public realm – declaring God's praises, living good lives among the pagans – as Peter puts it – submitting to authorities, living as free people.

But from that general picture, today Peter gets very specific. What really changes lives is when those broad truths all become focused down on a young tinker sitting down to listen to three older ladies in the street, or a colleague at work seeking us out because they noticed we were kind, or a friend at school or in college who notices a sense of joy in us and wants to know why, or an unbelieving family member who finally decides that they need the stability, and purpose and contentment that comes from our faith.

Peter talks specifically about our behaviour in three places this morning. He expects that if we get this right it will bless both us and the world.

The first place is the workplace.

➤ *In the workplace*

📖 **1 Peter 2:18**

Now there is a controversial word – submit. In our culture dominated by rights it doesn't sit easily. Especially the injunction to submit to harsh masters. But the Biblical mind-set is not dominated by rights, but responsibilities.

That doesn't mean that we are always a pushover at work. There is plenty of New Testament advice, and plenty of examples of seeking justice. The Tolpuddle Martyrs, who were foundational figures in the fight for the rights of poor labourers, were committed bible believing Christians.

However this emphasis on responsibility rather than rights, on submission rather than fighting our corner, changes everything. We work, not for the money, but for the boss, for the organisation. We don't do as little as we can to justify our wage we actively seek the benefit and welfare of the person or organisation we work for. Because underneath it all we are working for God, and for the reward and commendation that only he can give.

So submitting to an injustice, paradoxically results in benefit to us.

📖 **1 Peter 2:19**

Indeed it is the essence of what it means to follow Christ.

📖 **1 Peter 2:21-23**

One remembers the distressing reports of the execution of Saddam Hussein as he cursed his onlookers, the horrific footage of Colonel Gaddafi cursing his captors as he was mortally wounded, and the dignity of Jesus stands out all the more.

And that too is our calling.

We have had some heroes of that kind of lifestyle in this church in the past. I remember the man who every day faced mockery for his faith and lifestyle in a small company in East Oxford. Eventually, however, the directors of the company asked me to come to speak to them about Christianity, because of his witness.

Some here will remember Harold Poyser, who at the end of his years was a college servant. Senior academic staff used to ask for his prayers for them, and he would invariably say "I will not only pray for you, we will pray together" and he would take them to the college chapel and they would kneel together before the Lord.

And I dare to hope that we have heroes like that here with us still. Who work for the good of the company, not their narrow self-interest. Who shrug off the day to day irritations and injustices of the workplace, because they know God will commend them. And they know that this is simply the palest reflection of the suffering that our Lord and saviour endured in order to save us.

Lives like that are fruitful.

And then Peter talks about the home.

➤ *In the home*

 **1 Peter 3:1-2**

There is that word again – submit. Once again of course it is not an absolute injunction, but the extreme feminists are wrong in suggesting that there is no difference between male and female in marriage. In our post-feminist age that is increasingly being recognised. John Gray in *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* for instance, says that women need to be “cherished” and men need to be “respected.” In the secular literature on marriage there is a real recovery of the glory of femininity and masculinity in marriage.

Peter’s language may feel a bit politically incorrect, because frankly he is not nuancing what he says for our culture, but his fundamental call has enduring validity.

One of the commonest reasons for unhappiness in marriages to today is that the woman feels left to it in the home, and the man is more or less absent. Dig a little bit and you will find a man unwilling or unable to lead his family, and a woman who has either grabbed the reins, or felt she must pick up the reins, but done it with a profound sense of desertion. Men lead your family. Women let them lead.

It doesn’t need to be cruel oppressive patriarchy. All good marriages are a partnership of equals, but it is also a partnership of complementary genders which need different things in order to thrive.

But then notice the fruit of that lifestyle here. The unbelieving husband gets converted. Not due to the clever words of his wife, but because of her pure and reverent lifestyle.

And contrary to all the catwalks in the world, and half the adverts on the TV, clothes do not make the woman.

 **1 Peter 3:3-4**

Peter is not saying dress drab. It is fine to dress nicely. Rather he is saying that true beauty is not just skin deep it radiates from deep inside us.

The French writer Marguerite Duras wrote:

“I know it’s not clothes that make women beautiful or otherwise, nor beauty care, nor expensive creams, nor the distinction of costliness of their finery. I know the problem lies elsewhere. I don’t know where. I only know it isn’t where women think.”

Here is where true beauty lies – “a gentle and quiet spirit” before God.

And husbands too must honour their wives.

 **1 Peter 3:7**

Peter’s un-nuanced description of wives as “the weaker partner” tends to shock and so blind us to our true responsibility as husbands. Paul describes it as loving our wives

As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy

Here Peter talks of considerateness, respect, and living as heirs together of life.

Here is a model that our world longs for. Here is a harmony and a mutual giving which shames those who stir up the battle of the sexes. The world is won over by marriages like that.

Husbands and wives here. How is God calling you to change? Wives – do you have that gentleness and quiet spiritedness? It comes, says Peter, from putting your hope in God.

Husbands – have you learned to lead in a way that truly seeks the best for your wife, and the whole household, taking her needs really seriously? That comes from a deep understanding that Christ gave everything for you – so you must do likewise for your wife.

And then from the workplace and the family Peter turns to the family of God – the church.

➤ *In the church*

 **1 Peter 3:-8-9**

Notice that the first priority for God’s people is the quality of their life together. Churches need good bible teaching, good organisation, gospel vision and much more but they are useless without sympathy, love, compassion, humility.

Notice too that Peter expects a bit of evil and insulting to be flying around from time to time. In verse 8 he is clearly talking about the life of the church since he speaks about “one another” so I don’t think it is likely that he moved on from that in verse 9. Peter expects the family life of the church to be in part dealing with some of the effects of our sinful nature.

It strikes me that church difficulties are often made worse by the fact that we don’t expect anyone ever to sin in church. Not so. What keeps a church healthy is not the absence of sin – that will not occur until the new creation. It is that sin is not allowed to spiral out of control. So that when something bad is done to us – we bless. When something bad is said we speak grace.

This will be a challenge for us as a church over the next few months. We are living in very exciting times of gospel expansion. It is transparently obvious that the church is growing. And not only with Christians joining us but with people becoming Christians at the moment.

And in part because of that growth we have formed our new missional homegroup in central Cowley, which is now up and functioning, and we hope that it will in time become a separate church – that is so exciting.

Perhaps more painfully for us all, most of us here will know that as a result of our time of prayer and fasting in the spring I became convinced that the Lord was calling me to be even more involved in raising up a new generation of gospel hearted men and women in Oxford. In discussion with the elders it became clear to us all, I think, that this vision, particularly to be much more involved with students looked very unlikely to be compatible with our vision and location here in East Oxford.

The elders sent me away to reflect on that and out of those discussions has come mine and Judy’s conviction that we should seek to establish a new church in the centre of the city over the next couple of years.

The elders have been extremely generous allowing me time and the freedom to work on this, and it does seem to be gathering a real momentum at the moment. I have been clear all along that Magdalen Road does not have the resources to give major support to this - so we are seeking financial support from elsewhere. My expectation is also that the vast majority of us here will continue to belong to Magdalen Road. Magdalen Road has a great vision for gospel witness in East Oxford.

However, of course, some will feel called to be involved in this new project in the centre, and the elders are generously committed to supporting and blessing everyone as they

seek to work out their own sense of calling before the Lord. I am very firmly committed to doing everything that I can to ensure that Magdalen Road continues to thrive. After all, after our immediate family, you here are the most precious people to Judy and me in the world.

But this won't be without pain. The pain of gospel growth.

Someone described it to me as like a family breakup. In some ways it is. Families sometimes break up because of divorce, of course. But they naturally and healthily move apart as well, as kids grow up, and follow their own calling, and establish themselves as independent adults. And there is sadness in that – even tears, and sometimes some fractiousness in the process. But it is healthy and normal growth.

I want us to think of this next couple of years in that way. There is a deep love between us which will not be broken. We must preserve like-mindedness, sympathy, love, compassion. We must deal with the squalls of turbulence associated with the fact we are both moving into the unknown. As someone said to Judy “Magdalen Road has been the Comonts” for nearly a generation now.

Just as you raise your kids and then you have to leave them to live out the values that you inculcated in them, so, if this new project does come to fruition, it will fall to you collectively to live out the gospel values which we have sought to forge in this family of God.

And my prayer is that like a healthy family spreading its wings the two churches will become deep, warm, adult gospel partners. Both pursuing their good gospel visions. Both cooperating together in evangelism and training and church planting and more.

I had coffee with a senior Anglican clergyman this week who is nearing retirement. We chatted about the idea of a central free church and he said “Peter, you must do it. As the Church of England becomes engulfed by political struggles the future for the gospel in this country rests much more with the free churches. You must multiply. You free churches need to know this is your moment.”

There is a sacrifice for us all in multiplying. But it is worth it for the sake of Jesus Christ.

And just as the quality of our work life, and our family life is the essential issue, so the quality of our life as a church as we face this challenge will determine our fruitfulness.

 **1 Peter 3:10-12**