

## The Christian and Social Order, Part 3: Difficulties at Home

### 1 Peter 3:1-7

#### Review

1. **Context:** Implications of ethical behavior in specific life settings – i.e., how the main imperatives in 2:11-12 – moral purity (11) and exemplary goodness (12) – apply to specific life contexts (2:13-3:12)
  - It is in the ancient literary form of a *household code* that was used by the moral philosophers of that time to give instruction in role-related behaviors (cf. Eph. 5:22 – 6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1)
  - **Note:** 2:13 contains the general behavioral principle: “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.*” (See comments on submission below). The Christians had been given an exalted status in God’s plan (2:9-10). Lest his readers be tempted to use this status as an excuse to disregard all externally imposed human authority, he reminds them that they represent his interests more effectively through submission, e.g. 2:16, “live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.” The behavioral guidelines that follow in this context are *implications of a fundamental posture of submission.*
2. Two important terms in this passage:

**Submit** – Comes from the Greek term, *hupotassein*, “to order oneself under.” A good definition in this context is “placing yourself under the social order of the day” (2:13, 2:18, 3:1). *It is a posture of seeking the welfare of others, even the entire society, over one’s own well-being.* This means not only submitting to authority, but also exercising great care in wielding authority, whether as husbands (3:7) or elders (5:1-5). Submission not only appears significantly in 1 Peter but is also a recurring theme in early Christian instruction (cf. Rom. 13:1, 2, 5; 1 Cor. 16:16; Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21).

Ancient Romans looked upon early Christians in much the same way we do cults today. They were accused of being socially disorderly, and that culture prized social order. What the Roman historian Tacitus said of Jews was likely carried over to Christians: “*First thing they teach their converts is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers of little account.*”<sup>1</sup> This perception led to resentment and mistreatment, especially for wives married to unbelieving husbands, as it was considered disgraceful for wives to not follow the religion of their husbands. Tertullian comments on how pagan husbands treated their Christian wives: “*If a vigil has to be attended, the husband, the first thing in the morning, makes her an appointment for the baths; if it is a fast day, he holds a banquet on that very day; if she has to go out, household affairs and urgency at once come in the way.*”<sup>2</sup> For them, as well as all Christians of this time, the posture of submission was a challenging aspect of Christian witness.

**Freedom** (2:16) – Their redemption from the previous “empty way of life” (1:18) brought questions of whether they must maintain their obligations to the various relationships and structures of society. Some among the government (2:13-17), masters (2:18-25), husbands (3:1-6) wondered whether Christianity would threaten the stability of important social institutions. Even local festivals were affected by the noticeable absence of the Christians (4:3-4). Peter reminds them that their freedom did not release them from the need to “do right” by fulfilling their obligations to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, Book V, Chapter 5. Written 100-110 AD, covering the period 66-96, directly after Nero’s reign (54-68), which was the likely period in which 1 Peter was written. Online translations of Tacitus include the collection by the University of Chicago ([https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A*.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Uxorem* (To My Wife), Book II, section iv, written circa 207 AD. Online translations are hard to find, but the quote appears in Adolf Harnack, *Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, “Methods of the Mission: Catechizing and Baptism, The Invasion of Domestic Life,” <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/harnack/mission.v.iii.html>.

3. Behavioral guidelines in specific life settings:
  - Citizens *submitting* to government (2:13-17)
  - Slaves *submitting* to masters (2:18-25)
  - Wives *submitting* to husbands (3:1-6)
  - Husbands, “in the same way” *submitting* to (honoring and living considerately with) wives (3:7)
  - Brothers and sisters *submitting* to one another (3:8)
  - Christians *submitting* to the hostile culture (3:9, bless when reviled, seek peace)

### A Closer Look at 3:1-7

#### *Instruction to Wives*

3:1-2

We would be insensitive to teach on this text without acknowledging the abuses it has (inappropriately) been made to serve. Many women understandably hear this text according to how it has been practiced by abusive men. Some men have unthinkingly applied it without considering the unusual context. These same people would be careful to nuance Peter’s previous instruction to slaves in light of their unique situation (2:18-25), but then see the instruction in 3:1-7 as more absolute and less circumstantial. For these reasons, we must begin with the ancient context to see it more accurately.

We can assume that most of the women in Peter’s audience were originally from Asia Minor where Greco-Roman attitudes prevailed, but some of the converts likely had Jewish background. Regardless, it seems clear for a variety of reasons that the context Peter has in mind is Graeco-Roman.

- Jewish perspective: “The dominant impression left by our early Jewish sources is of a very patriarchal society that limited women’s roles and functions to the home, and severely restricted: (1) their rights of inheritance, (2) their choice of relationships, (3) their ability to pursue a religious education or fully participate in the synagogue, and (4) their freedom of movement.”
- Women in Asia Minor, however, had more freedom than even a woman from Athens would have. Women were able to vote and hold public office. They were allowed some property rights, ran their own businesses, and held prominent roles in some of the pagan cults.<sup>3</sup> It was still true, however, that women were expected to participate in their husband’s religion as a matter of what held the family together. If a wife adopted a different religion, it was often viewed as dishonorable, insubordinate, and socially disruptive.

Given this context, Peter’s message should be viewed as instructions for women to live respectably under social customs in a way that maintains a good reputation for the gospel.

- Miroslav Volf (1994) calls this “soft difference.” By “soft,” he does not mean “weak,” but soft vs. hard, an attempt to win others not through aggressive evangelism or any form of activism, but through good behavior, sometimes even “without words” in hopes that others will eventually be “won over.” (1 Peter 3:2; 2:12, 15) It is where one’s life becomes a proclamation which can affirm or deny the authenticity of the gospel. It may use words, but generally only in response to direct challenge or inquiry, but always with a gracious manner (1 Peter 3:15-16).<sup>4</sup>
- “Submission,” in this context, does not refer to the same kind of restrictions a Jewish woman would experience in Palestine. It is more pragmatic. “Peter wants wives to submit because of the influence (3:1b–2) they can exert on their non-Christian husbands. This is entirely consistent with his agenda at

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<sup>3</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter*, 183.

<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter” (*Ex Auditu* 10, 1994), 15-28.

2:11–12, that Christians live such holy lives so that nothing can be lodged against the gospel because of their behavior.

3:3-4

- A popular belief among the philosophers of this time was that women who practiced “strange and superstitious” religions did so as part of an overall disavowal of morality. Dress and ornamentation that attracted undue attention was part of a disposition that thumbed its nose at social values. Peter’s instructions not to focus on external beauty but on the “unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” would create the opposite effect of both demonstrating and engendering respect. Living with purity and honor would silence those who believed Christianity was a source of danger and moral decay.
- Peter’s comments are not meant to prohibit women in all times and places to braid their hair or to wear jewelry or fine clothing. The emphasis is on the contrast between external appearance and attracting undue attention to oneself instead of cultivating internal virtue. This emphasis is universal, though the standards as to what constitutes outward modesty are somewhat culturally conditioned.

3:5-6

- Peter offers the example of “holy women of the past,” particularly Sarah.
- Peter reminds his readers of the “holy women of the past who put their hope in God.” He urges his readers to do likewise. Like slaves, the women who first heard Peter’s message were vulnerable to violence. In Roman society husbands had the right to “discipline” their wives, and abuse was not necessarily recognized as illegal. Recognizing the vulnerability of their situations, Peter encouraged these women to put their trust in God and do what is right without fearing what their husbands might do to them.
- The deepest root of Christian womanhood mentioned in this text is hope in God. “Holy women who hoped in God.” A Christian woman does not put her hope in her husband, or in getting a husband. She does not put her hope in her looks. She puts her hope in the promises of God. She looks more confidently at the troubles and miseries and obstacles of life that seem to make the future bleak, and focuses her attention on the sovereign power and love of God who rules in heaven and executes his will on earth. She believes in the sovereignty of God, and she knows his promise that he will be with her and strengthen her no matter what. This is the deep, unshakable root of Christian womanhood that Peter makes explicit in verse 5. He is talking about women with unshakable biblical roots in the sovereign goodness of God — holy women who hope in God.
- The next thing to see about Christian womanhood after hope in God is the fearlessness that it produces in these women. Sarah, Abraham’s wife, is an example, “And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.” The presence of hope in the sovereignty of God drives out fear. Or to say it more carefully and realistically, the daughters of Sarah fight the anxiety that rises in their hearts. They wage war on fear, and they defeat it with hope in the promises of God.

### *Instruction to Husbands*

3:7

- Notice, “Husbands, *in the same way*,” or “likewise.” The literal reading is “Husbands, likewise, dwelling with [your wives] according to knowledge.”
  - This is uncommon for “household codes” of the day to address husbands directly. Peter evens the field, as does Paul with his instructions to husbands in Colossians 3:18 – 4:1 and Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9
  - Peter regards husbands’ “being considerate” as part of “submitting to the order,” but not so much to the order society, but “submitting for the Lord’s sake” (2:13), not “using freedom as a cover-up for evil” (2:16), and “showing proper respect for everyone” (2:17).

- “Living together” or “dwelling with” (Gk., sunoikeo), was most often used as a reference for marital sex, and probably includes that meaning here, but with additional meaning. “The Christian man is neither demanding nor selfish in his sexual and marital relations; he is instead considerate, sensitive, and serving.
- Two reasons are given:
  - “Weaker partner,” which is almost certainly a reference to physical strength.
  - “Heirs with you of the gracious gift of life,” which is a beautiful statement of equality and joint responsibility of the Christian man to give attention to his wife’s well-being.
- “So that nothing will hinder your prayers” places that treatment of one’s wife in line with repeated Christian instruction that harboring ill-will or deliberate mistreatment is a hindrance to one’s hearing with God (cf. Matthew 5:21-26; 6:12, 14-15; 18:19-35; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; James 4:3).

## Application

- Some of these instructions are universal. Men then and today may tend to be demanding, sexually and emotionally. Women then and today may tend to emphasize looks over character. Men then and today have more brute strength and often assert that strength to abuse and overpower women. In these respects, Peter’s instructions are timeless.
- The meaning of “submission” in our context elicits completely different responses. Some women appreciate the term and the practice, and many do not. Some of the reactions come from ridiculous and abusive practices of submission that misappropriate passages like this and others. Other reactions come from thoughtful questions about whether there is a complementary relationship of headship-submission in the male-female relationship (complementarian) or whether there is full equality (egalitarian). For our purposes, we will focus on three points:
  - The submission of wives to husbands in 1 Peter 3 transcends that specific context somewhat, in that Peter calls on the example of women from the past who behaved in the same manner.
  - On the other hand, the context suggests the specific applications of submission have some level of expediency. Even the example Peter gives from the past (Sarah) involved unusual circumstances.
  - Both Peter and Paul (Ephesians 5:21ff) teach a joint responsibility of husbands and wives submitting to each other’s needs. This is often called “mutual submission” that is true regardless of one’s convictions on the complementarian-egalitarian continuum.
- A striking feature of Peter’s instruction is how he levels the field for wives and husbands in submitting to each other’s deepest needs, as evidenced by the language, “in the same way” (3:1, 7). The higher volume of instruction for women arises from contextual need. It is true that the term “submit” is used in 3:1 (as in 2:13, 18) but not in 3:7, similar to the dynamic in Ephesians 5 where the submission of the wife to the husband is illustrated by the submission of the church to Christ, which is not duplicated in the husband-wife dynamic. This suggests merit to the complementarian perspective of male spiritual leadership, which is a discernible narrative in Scripture. Nevertheless, just as Peter conveys his message in a structure of reciprocity, “in the same way” (3:1, 7), so Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives begins with the main imperative “be filled with the Spirit,” and one of its applications, “submitting to *one another* out of reverence for Christ” (5:18-21).<sup>5</sup> Actually,

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<sup>5</sup> The imperative of 5:18, “be filled with the Spirit,” is followed by five participles that flow out of this indwelling: “*speaking* to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, *singing* and *making music* from your heart to the Lord, always *giving thanks* to God the Father for everything... *submitting* to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:18-21). The instruction in 5:22 to “submit” does not appear in the verse but is assumed from 5:21. This also helps us to see that Paul’s instructions to husbands starting in 5:25 is also part of this submissive posture, thus *mutual* submission.

the term “submit” does not occur in Ephesians 5:22, but instead reads “wives, to your husbands as unto the Lord,” picking up the participial implication of “submitting” from 5:21.

- What Submission Is Not, Based on Peter 3:1–6
  - Submission does not mean always agreeing with her husband. This is clear in that these women are Christians and their husbands are not. The husbands have one set of ideas about ultimate reality and the women have another.
  - Submission does not mean relinquishing thinking for yourself. These women heard the gospel and responded intellectually, volitionally, and spiritually. Peter does not tell them to retreat from that commitment. The text also assumes their husbands have heard and “disobeyed the word.”
  - Submission does not mean refraining from efforts to change her husband. The whole point of this text is for the wife to “win” her husband (3:1). The only difference in this case is a quiet strategy.
  - Submission does not mean putting the will of the husband before the will of Christ. The wives are followers of Jesus before and above following their husbands. Submission to Jesus relativizes submission to husbands. When Sarah called Abraham “lord” in verse 6, it was lord with a lowercase “l,” like “sir” or “m’lord.” Her obedience is qualified by her supreme allegiance to the sovereign Lord.
  - Submission does not mean that wives derive their personal worth or spiritual strength primarily through their husbands. Certainly husbands should strengthen, build up and sustain their wives. But this text assumes even when their husbands’ spiritual leadership is lacking, Christian wives are not bereft of strength. She, in herself, has the resources for faith, virtue, and character, and is asked to summon these to the occasion.
  - Submission does not mean that wives are to act out of fear. “You are her [Sarah’s] children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening” (3:6). In other words, the Christian woman’s submission is free, not coerced by fear.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These observations appear in my resource files with no annotation, but I do not remember deriving them myself. Attestation to unknown source.