

# Extended Exegetical Essay on the Household Code in 1 Peter

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*Written as my Capstone Project for my Master of Divinity at Malyon College*

## **ABSTRACT**

This essay discusses the Household Code or *Haustafel* in 1 Peter 2:18-3:7, its reception history, and its application today. It argues that the content of this *Haustafel* was strongly influenced by the socio-political context in which it was written, and that while the underlying concepts are timeless the specific applications are not. Greco-Roman culture was strongly patriarchal and held a high value for household order. Peter's advice to slaves and wives to submit quietly to the man-made institutions they found themselves in was both apologetic as it protected the gospel from criticism of being disruptive and protective as it minimised risk of personal harm to Christian slaves and wives in non-Christian households. Peter's choice to mainly direct his *Haustafel* to the subordinate members of the household was counter-cultural and empowering. The reception history of this code, however, shows that it has mainly been used to keep slaves and wives subordinate, and Peter's description of women as the weaker vessel has been consistently used to prove that women are inferior to men. It has also been used to compel women to stay in destructive marriages. This essay argues that this is a misuse of this passage, and that if we follow a redemptive hermeneutic then it should be seen that it points to mutual submission and the equality of men and women.

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical references are to 1 Peter.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will consider the *Haustafel* in 1 Peter 2:18 - 3:7. This passage has been used over the centuries to keep slaves and women in subjection, and to demonstrate that women are inferior to men. However, I consider that this is a misuse of Peter's words. When one examines the social context in which this letter was written, there is clear evidence of a subversion of patriarchal attitudes, and an elevation of the status of slaves and wives. If one uses a redemptive hermeneutic, it follows that this trajectory should be followed towards an egalitarian model. This has happened with slavery in Christian theology, but in many circles this has not happened with marriage.

## 2. CONTEXT

The *Haustafel* was a common convention in Greco-Roman literature, found in writings such as Plato's *Republic*, Xenophon's *Oeconomics*, Aristotle's *Oeconomica* and Seneca's *Moral Epistles* (Jobes 2005, 181), and which was used by Paul in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and Titus 2:1-10. While the biblical *Haustafeln* conform in some respects to the Greco-Roman ones, they do not simply affirm them, and indeed subvert them in significant ways. One important difference is that only the *paterfamilias* is addressed in Greco-Roman codes, as it was his role to instruct his subordinates, whereas in biblical *Haustafeln* subordinate people are directly addressed (Jobes 2005, 185). Paul's *Haustafeln* tend to be more mutual – he addresses both sides of the relationship – slaves and masters, husbands and wives, parents and children. Witherington (2010, 571) suggests, I think correctly, that Peter's focus on the subordinate member of the relationship in this letter is because he is "concerned with the social interface between Christians and non-Christians", and a problem is more likely to arise if the weaker member has a different faith to the stronger.

Roman culture was strictly hierarchical with a line of authority starting with the emperor, through the senatorial class, the landowners and various ranks down through to slaves at the bottom. The household was the building block of society,

and reflected the authority structures of the empire, with the *paterfamilias* having near total authority over his household (Harding 2003, 208). If his household failed to adhere to social norms, the *paterfamilias* was held responsible and lost honour (Cooper 2014, 9). As the household was a microcosm of the state, a failure of good order in the household was considered to lead to potential chaos and anarchy for the state (Campbell-Reed 2001, 269). Balch (1981, 26) explained, “The household relationship, which we normally consider private, individual matters are here part of a social-political philosophic ethic.” One of the reasons for the persecution of minority religions was that they were seen to undermine the hierarchy of the household, putting the whole of society at risk (Harding 2003, 208). Christianity was a threat to good order as it put the claims of Christ above family ties (Matt 19:27-30; Luke 9:57-62, 4:25-27) (Campbell-Reed 2001, 269). Part of the reason that Peter and Paul wrote household codes may have been apologetic – “religions introduced into the empire by foreigners were judged in large part by whether or not they complied with the expectations for household relationships” (Jobes 2005, 183), and so encouraging Christians to comply with Greco-Roman expectations as far as was compatible with obedience to God was wise.

The focus of 1 Peter is on Christians who were outsiders in their society, who were suffering shame and physical attack because of their counter-cultural faith. Part of Peter’s intention in his instructions to Christians to submit seems to be a desire to protect them as far as possible from further suffering (Padgett 2011, 83) rather than a reinforcement of society’s patriarchal structure. Webb (2001, 63) agrees, “The reform within these codes was enough to better existing sociological structures, but not so radical that it would jeopardize other aspects of Christian mission or overly threaten governmental structures.”

Slavery was unquestionably accepted throughout the ancient world, and slaves were property. “According to Roman law, a property owner had the right to use, enjoy, or abuse whatever he owned” (Van Til 2010, 64). Slaves had few rights. They were subject to corporal punishment, torture and execution at the whim of their masters and in place of their masters (Glancy 2006, 156). Sex with slaves was seen as morally neutral, and slaves had no right to say no. (Glancy 2006, 21) “A man’s

sexual access to his slaves of either sex is as old as Homer. They were his property. The slave was not dishonoured or regarded as acting immorally” (Treggiari 2003, 166). Aristotle thought that slaves were slaves because they did not possess reason, and that they differed little from animals, not having the deliberative part of the soul (Harding 2003, 209-210). Slaves were expected to follow the religion of their master, and to refuse to participate in the religious rites of the household was a grave offence (Witherington III 2010, 573).

Wifely submission and quietness were normative in the culture. Aristotle, in discussing household management in *Politics*, wrote, “the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” (Harding 2003, 209). Josephus in writing on Jewish marriage said, “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed, for the authority has been given by God to the man” (Harding 2003, 413). Plutarch said that women ought to keep silent and do her talking “either to her husband or through her husband” (Harding 2003, 216).

In Roman culture, there were many factors that lead to differences between men and women. Women tended to be married young, as young as twelve years old, whereas their husbands were often thirty or more. Women were also far less educated than men. “The differential between men and women in knowledge, social exposure, strength, economics, and age as marriage ‘partners’ created its own hierarchy. With one exception (strength differential) all of these factors are culture-based pragmatics.” (Webb 2001, 214).

### **3. EXEGESIS OF 1 PETER 2:18 - 3:7**

To understand this passage, we need to begin with 2:13. The imperative that governs this whole section is ὑποτάγητε. It is passive, which indicates submitting oneself, as the active meaning of the verb is to subject or subordinate. It is a weaker word than ὑπακοή which is used in 1:2, 14 and 22 in relation to God and which is usually translated obey. Campbell (1998, 110) suggests translating it as honour to make this distinction plain, but I think submission is a better translation as honour is

quite weak in English. However, unquestioning obedience is not being enjoined. According to Forbes and Köstenberger (2014, 78), submission “meant to recognize one’s appropriate station in life and fulfill it accordingly”. Submission is required to πάση ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει. κτίσει can refer either to creation or creature, and there is disagreement over how it should be understood. Some, such as Witherington (2010, 572) translate it as human individuals, however it is more commonly translated human institutions. Could Peter be using the word κτίσει to suggest that the authorities and societal structures (including slavery and patriarchal marriage) to which they are to submit to are human creations, which should be followed out of respect for God, rather than God-ordained structures, which have a timeless weight? I suggest that the use of ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει gives this connotation.

The reason for submission is then given: διὰ τὸν κύριον. The goal of submission is not to please people but God. In 2:16 Peter says what the characteristic quality of the submission should be: ὡς ἐλεύθεροι. This is striking in connection with slaves. For a slave to behave as if they were a free person caused great disquiet to their masters, who liked to keep the distinction very clear (Glancy 2006, 72). A free person was one born into freedom, very different from a slave or a freed person - a manumitted slave who still owed a duty to their former master (Green 2007, 74). To tell a slave that they were a free person was totally counter-cultural. Because every Christian is a free person, regardless of how society regards them, and at the same time are slaves of God, they are able to make the choice to voluntarily submit and the ultimate authority of human institutions is denied.

### **3.1 Advice to Slaves 2:18-25**

Peter’s advice to slaves is unusual in that it has no corresponding advice to slaveowners. To modern ears, his calm acceptance of an institution built on injustice seems monstrous, but we must remember the world in which Peter was writing and acknowledge the redemptive nature of his humanisation of slaves. Peter’s instructions to slaves were subversive, as slaves, not slaveholders, were identified with Christ, and unjust slaveholders were identified with those who crucified Christ.

Peter's instructions to slaves and later to wives uses the participial form of ὑποτάσσω, but most commentators agree that it has imperatival force. However, I agree with Panning (1981, 263-264) who argues that the use of participles rather than imperatives point back to 2:13 and show how the submission expected of everyone applies in particular circumstances. It is present, indicating that the submitting is an on-going requirement, not an occasional action.

ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ is probably a dative of manner, showing how they should submit. The likely object of the fear or respect is God, not the master, particularly as it picks up the use of the imperative φοβεῖσθε in 2:17 which refers to God. This instruction is repeated to wives and husbands in the following sections by use of ὁμοίως in 3:1 and 3:7, and so the behaviour of all should be motivated by fear or respect for God.

A slave's submission is not to be based on the master's behaviour, but on the slave's status as a free slave of God (2:16). Peter's acknowledgement that masters could be unscrupulous is significant – he is recognising the reality of slaves' lives and their right to justice, as opposed to Aristotle, who considered that it was not possible to treat a slave unjustly (Jobes 2005, 188).

2:19 provides the motivation for submission. Achtemeier (1996, 195) points out the chiasmatic pattern of verses 19-20:

- A. τοῦτο γὰρ χάρις
- B. πάσχων ἀδίκως
- B. ἀγαθοποιοῦντες καὶ πάσχοντες
- A. τοῦτο χάρις παρὰ θεῷ

which confirms that χάρις in 2:19 is referring to divine approval, as it is in 2:20 (Forbes and Lim 2006, 73). Slaves are reminded that God's commendation is reserved for those who suffer for their identity as a Christian and consequent ethical framework, not for those punished for laziness or poor performance (Le Roux 2018, 163). This is supported by διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ. This phrase is unique in the New Testament, and Forbes and Köstenberger (2014, 87) suggest that though the usual meaning of συνείδησις is conscience, in this context it means to be mindful of God.

2:21 makes it clear that the slaves' suffering is not meaningless. They are called to follow Christ's example, in his footsteps. Ὑπογραμμός is an evocative word, referring to the stencil used by students as they learnt to write (Forbes and Köstenberger 2014, 90). It must have been so encouraging to slaves and other Christians enduring unjust suffering to know that Christ had been there before them, and that he was showing them how they should conduct themselves. The focus is on Christ's suffering rather than his death because that is what they are to imitate, and the suffering of Christians for their faith is a key theme of this letter. This section points back to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. 2:22-23 gives examples of what aspects of Christ's behaviour they should imitate. His suffering was not for doing wrong and he did not lie to avoid suffering. When he suffered, he did not retaliate, or threaten, but instead entrusted himself to God. ἀντελοιδορει, ἠπειλει, and παρεδίδου are all imperfect, giving the sense of continuing action, and help to draw a picture of a man steadfast under repeated suffering. As Christians suffer injustice, they can know that there is one who judges justly, by whom they will ultimately be vindicated as Christ was.

2:24-25 remind them, in contrast, of the uniqueness of Christ's suffering, and of the benefit that has accrued to them. Because of his suffering in bearing their sins they are enabled to live to righteousness, and they have a shepherd and guardian to care for them. οὗ τῶ μώλωπι ἰάθητε has been taken to be symbolic, or a promise of physical healing because of Christ's suffering. However, Moxnes (2014, 39) suggests that it also has a performative effect. As slaves were subject to frequent beating, bruises and welts would be a normal part of their experience. To tie these marks to the marks on Christ's body would bring emotional and spiritual healing, as it affirmed their value as people.

Crucifixion was a form of execution which was particularly associated with slaves, though it could be applied to other low status persons (Glancy 2006, 100). Tacitus refers to the crucifixion of a slave as "the punishment usually inflicted upon slaves" (Harding 2003, 222). In dying a slave's death and by acting as a slave in washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-14) Christ dignified slavery. Furthermore, he commanded his followers to be the slaves of all (Mark 10:43, Matt 20:26-28),

elevating serving to a virtue. Thus, the response of slaves to unjust suffering becomes representative of the appropriate response of all Christians to persecution.

### 3.2 Advice to Wives 3:1-6

Next, Peter addresses wives using the vocative γυναῖκες. He is clearly referring to wives not women in general because they are told to submit to their own husbands, rather than all men. He goes on to explain why they should submit, with a first-class condition – if their husbands are disobeying the word then they may be won by the wives' pure behaviour. The purpose of wifely submission is explicitly given as evangelistic, not theological. This implies that the focus of these instructions is wives of non-believing husbands, which would be consistent with the rest of the letter. Jobes (2005, 204) explains that the reason for wives not using words was that in that culture it was shameful for a wife to be seen as instructing her husband, and so a silent example would be a much more powerful witness.

Peter's instruction for wives to submit themselves to their husbands reflects cultural expectations, as women were presumed to weaker and less clear-headed than men, and were expected to be subordinate to them (Green 2007, 92). However, he is counter-cultural in encouraging them to worship differently from their husbands. In Plutarch's *Advice to Bride and Groom* he says, "it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in" (Baugh 2003, 119-120). Offering sacrifices to the gods and to the emperor was part of everyday life, and wives were expected to be "keepers of the flame", maintaining the religion of the household (Witherington III 2010, 360). For Peter to counsel wives to disobey their husbands in matters of religion, and even to try to convert them, was very subversive indeed. MacDonald (1996, 203) sees Peter investing women with power, even though they have no formal authority, as they work to convert not just their husbands but possibly other members of society. She reminds us of Timothy, whose mother and grandmother are cited as such strong influences on him (2 Tim 1:5).

In 3:3-6 Peter gives more instruction on what their submitting should look like. Their adornment should not be outward – braiding, wearing, putting on – but inward – a



gentle and calm spirit. In contrast to χρυσίον which seems valuable, the thing described as having great value to God is the woman's gentle spirit. Many have understood Peter to be advocating that Christian women should be dowdy. Tidball and Tidball (2012, 245) contend that that is not his point. Rather they suggest that Peter is telling wives not to dress in a suggestive way, particularly the way that women in some sexually promiscuous cults did. In the first century, the traditional role of women was challenged by some, 'new women', who abandoned traditional female domestic roles, dress, chastity and behaviour (Winter 2003, 38-39). This may also have influenced Peter's teaching, as the way one dressed was an indicator of the values one held, and to dress ostentatiously could have been taken to indicate loose morals (Tidball and Tidball 2012, 260). Jobes (2005, 205) also suggests that modest clothing could have been a protection for women leaving the house to attend Christian gatherings – if they had been dressed up their motives could have been misconstrued. Another aspect of outward appearance that Peter may be addressing is the use by women of their appearance to get what they want from their husbands. They should not try to use their beauty or their sex appeal to manipulate their husbands into becoming Christians (Edwards 2017, 132).

Peter goes on to suggest that his hearers should be like the holy women of old, particularly Sarah. The reference to Sarah is both expected and surprising. Expected because she is the mother of Israel, and therefore to be emulated. Surprising because we have only one reference to Sarah calling Abraham Lord, in Genesis 18:12, and then it seems to be somewhat sarcastic. Abraham, on the other hand, is shown obeying Sarah, and is explicitly told to do so by God (Gen 16:2,6; 21:12).

It seems likely that the obedience referred to is the two occasions when Abraham instructed her to hide her identity as his wife to protect him from Pharaoh and from the King of Gerar (Gen 12 and 20). Bird (2011, 31) suggests that the situation they found themselves in, as aliens in a somewhat hostile land, could account for Peter using this reference, as it was similar to the readers' situation. Sarah's beauty contributed to their risk. Her submission to Abraham which put her in danger could be considered a model for women suffering injustice at the hands of their husbands,

particularly as God rescued her (Gen 12:11-20). Becoming daughters of Sarah (3:6) carries covenant implications, as Paul argues in Galatians 4:21-31, as well as an ethical sense of behaving like her and the other matriarchs, doing good and not fearing intimidation. μή φοβούμενοι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν carries a powerful sense of not being afraid of fear. This is such a helpful thought for those needing to stand up for what they believe in, as often the fear is worse than the thing feared.

### 3.3 Advice to Husbands 3:7

Peter concludes his *Haustafel* with one verse directed at husbands, again starting with ὁμοίως. As Edwards (2017, 133) points out, “husbands are to take their behavioral cues from wives, who in turn take *their* cues from slaves ...[who] follow the righteous example of the Lord Jesus”.

τῷ γυναικείῳ is an adjective used substantively – literally the feminine – rather than the more usual γυνή. Some, including Jobes (2005, 207) and Achtmeier (1996, 217) consider that Peter is telling the *paterfamilias* how he should treat all the women in his household, but Forbes and Köstenberger (2014, 104) say that the context shows that wives are intended. Certainly wives seem to be the main consideration, though respectful treatment of female slaves and daughters would be appropriate for a godly man.

Men are to live together with the feminine according to knowledge. γνῶσιν can be understood as recognition – that is recognising that they are the weaker vessel (Forbes and Köstenberger 2014, 104). ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει is controversial today, as it is seen by many to be diminishing women. However, I think that Peter was acknowledging the reality of women’s weaker position in that society, as well as the timeless fact of their relative physical weakness. The ability of most men to physically overpower most women, and the fact that in Greco-Roman culture men had control over the women in their lives, meant that men owed women a special consideration. I appreciate this recognition that women’s lack of physical strength and their vulnerability to male strength is a factor in our lives, and that it does not diminish the honour to which I am entitled, nor my spiritual position.

Men are also told to honour their wives as co-heirs of the grace of life. Many have taken this to mean that the wives in mind are Christian. Jobes (2005, 207-208) questions this, and suggests that in context it may be referring to Christian men whose wives may not have truly committed to Christ, though they may be following the outward form of Christianity. Peter may in part be saying that men should not use their physical and social strength to coerce their wives, corresponding with the instruction to wives not to try to use their appearance to manipulate their husbands.

The conclusion of this section is surprising and powerful. Men are to behave this way εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐγκόπτεσθαι τὰς προσευχὰς ὑμῶν. The appropriate treatment of wives by their husbands is so important to God that the prayers of men who do not give it are hindered. This ties in with 3:12 which says that God hears the prayers of the righteous, and also with the biblical theme of God's care and priority for those who are overlooked by society (Prov 3:34 for example, quoted by Peter in 5:5).

#### **4. RECEPTION HISTORY – SLAVES**

The history of the use of the *Haustafeln* by slave owners does not make edifying reading. Proponents of slavery have long used passages such as 1 Peter 2:28-25 to argue that slavery was “an abiding and eternal principle” (Webb 2001, 186).

##### **4.1 Early Church**

For many centuries Christians accepted slavery unquestioningly, and many Christians were slaveowners (Harper 2011, 213). For example, Clement of Alexandria frequently refers to slaves in Christian households. He cites 1 Peter 2:18 to enjoin them to be submissive but instructs owners not to treat them like animals (Osiek and Balch 1997, 192). Ignatius wrote to Christian slave-owners, “ Do not be haughty to male slaves or female slaves; yet do not let them be puffed up, but let them rather endure slavery to the glory of God, that they might obtain a better freedom from Christ” (Glancy 2006, 151-152). By the fourth century church leaders began to speak against the sexual use of slaves, and insisted that Christian sexual

morality applied to their use as well as sex with free people (Harper 2011, 323). We have a concrete example of the acceptance of slavery by Christians in a bronze collar from the fourth or fifth century which is inscribed, "I am the slave of archdeacon Felix. Hold me so that I do not flee" (Glancy 2006, 9). There is no hint of embarrassment in a Christian leader humiliating and compelling an unwilling slave. Bede does see some honour in slaves, saying, "Be sure to note carefully the extent to which Peter beholds glory even in the state of slavery" (Bray 2000, 94).

## **4.2 Medieval, Reformation and Post-Reformation**

Throughout this period, slavery continued to be accepted throughout the Christian world, with no evidence of any organised action against it until the rise of Abolitionism in the eighteenth century. However, with the fall of Rome the incidence of actual slavery dramatically decreased, and by the twelfth century had disappeared from England, France and Germany (Klein 2014, 12-13). Slavery in 'Christian' nations became a major factor again with the rise of colonialism, and by the late 1700s Britain was the world's largest slave-trader (Klein 2014, 15).

## **4.3 Modern**

To understand changing attitudes to slavery, we will consider the situation in the United States. Early American slave owners objected to missionary efforts among their slaves as they were concerned that if they were converted to Christianity, they would rebel. However, it was argued that the opposite would be the case, as the master's authority would be endorsed by God, and enforced by the slave's conscience. (Irons 2008, 29-30). This was confirmed by William Fleetwood's 1705 *The Relative Duties of Parents and Children, Husbands and Wives, Masters and Servants*, which taught that God had ordained these hierarchical structures, and that baptism did not change them (Irons 2008, 30). Early American slaves argued though that slavery and Christianity were incompatible, forcing Virginia to pass a statute in 1667 that explicitly denied baptised slaves the right to freedom. It was argued that this was necessary to enable the spread of the gospel among slaves (Irons 2008, 28). When George Whitefield was involved in establishing the new colony of Georgia

in the mid-eighteenth century, he taught that slavery was a sign of God's providence, and a useful tool of mission to Africans (Koch 2015, 369-393). He quoted 1 Peter 2:18 in 1740 to remind slaves of their responsibility as Christians to be subject to their masters even if they were 'froward' (Irons 2008, 89). As E. Boyden explained in 1860, "For eighteen centuries, men understood the Scriptures to teach that slavery is an allowable institution, not a hideous sin, or any sin at all, however undesirable as an institution of the State" (Irons 2008, 13).

The Bible was used by both sides of Abolition debate. Slaveowners and their supporters pointed to the general acceptance of slavery in the Bible and to the instructions to slaves in the *Haustafeln* as evidence that slavery was God-ordained. Abolitionists on the other hand declared the equality of all people under God precluded slavery (Carson 2016, *Anti-Slavery and the Bible*). Harriet Beecher-Stowe's highly influential *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seems to use Peter's equation of slaves with Christ in her depiction of Tom's redemptive suffering and death (Glancy 2006, 151).

Sadly, many African-Americans, including former slave Fredrick Douglass, saw the Bible as a tool of oppression. He wrote, "I have met many religious colored people, at the South, who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery and to wear chains with meekness and humility." (Callahan 2006, 23). Recorded testimony of former slaves showed that the main focus of the religion taught to them by their masters was that God wanted slaves to obey, based on the *Haustafeln*, and that they would be rewarded for their obedience in the after-life (Callahan 2006, 33).

## **5. RECEPTION HISTORY – WIVES AND HUSBANDS**

### **5.1 Early Church**

In the early church, the idea of wifely submission as a tool for evangelism is endorsed in 1 Clement 1:3 (Osiek and Balch 1997, 148). However, passages like 1 Peter were also used to encourage women to stand against their non-Christian husbands in matters of faith, even to the point of martyrdom (Cooper 2014, 14).

Justin Martyr in his *Apology* described the situation of a woman who converted to Christianity when her husband did not. She tried to convert him with words, contrary to 1 Peter, which resulted in much strife, and eventually in their divorce and the martyrdom of her teacher (MacDonald 1996, 207-212). MacDonald (1996, 212) remarked on “how quickly the story moves from its setting in the home of a married couple to the public domains of law and government. ... the violence extends well beyond the particular household in question.” This story helps the modern reader to understand Peter’s motivation for encouraging wives to maintain peace in their households if possible.

Peter’s instructions to wives to submit, and particularly his reference to wives as the weaker vessel, was used to affirm the inferiority of women to men. St Ambrose in *On Paradise* (375 AD) said, “holy women were subject to the stronger vessel, obeying their husbands as lords (1 Peter 3:1-6)”, though he also affirmed the instruction for men to honour their wives (Clark and Halton 2017, Chapter 1). Hilary of Arles said, “[the wife] must be subject to him [the husband] just as the other members of the body must be subject to the head” (Bray 2000, 97). He considered the wives the lesser and the husbands the greater (Bray 2000, 99).

Augustine used his mother as an example of wifely submission. She continued to honour her husband as master and serve him as a slave even though he was unfaithful and abusive, and counselled other women to do the same (Reeder 2015, 519).

## **5.2 Reformation**

The Reformation brought about changes in the attitude to marriage, particularly in Protestant areas. It was no longer seen as a second-class state, with celibacy as the ideal. However, wives continued to be seen as subordinate to their husbands, and 1 Peter was frequently cited to demonstrate her relative weakness (Irwin 1979, 44-49).

Luther encouraged marriage and had a very successful marriage himself. However, he still considered wives inferior to their husbands, quoting 1 Peter.

Peter says that they are joint heirs of the same grace (1 Peter 3:7) ... yet there is a great difference between the sexes. ... therefore, let us note from this passage that it was written that this sex may not be excluded from any glory of the human creature, although it is inferior to the male sex (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner 2003, 26).

In 1524 he quoted 1 Peter 3 saying that Peter had a low opinion of women, considering them weak both physically and spiritually. So Luther told the men, “the man who marries a wife should know that he cares for a child.”, and the women “the wife should have the qualities of fearing, venerating, and obeying the husband” (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner 2003, 94).

Sebastian Franck in his *Proverbs or Clever, Wise Sayings* (1548), quoted what he claimed to be the popular opinion of women,

A woman is a poor, fragile vessel inclined to anger, small-minded and faint-hearted; she turns from one thing to the next, and inattentive and talkative as a child. Therefore St. Peter gives this advice to men, that they should live with their wives in understanding, aware and tolerant of their weakness. (Irwin 1979, 66).

A woman is by nature a prattling, babbling thing ... St. Peter speaks of two virtues which are befitting to women. The first is mild-temperedness, the second tranquillity ... he opposes to two vices which are in-born in women ... she can't help but scold, curse and fight it all out with her mouth. (Irwin 1979, 68).

Robert Cleaver in *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1598), quoted 1 Peter to demonstrate that the wife was by nature weaker than her husband, but urged husbands to therefore treat her with special care, “a wife, because of her infirmities, is so much the more to be borne withal of her husband” (Irwin 1979, 77). He encouraged the husband to rule his wife (Irwin 1979, 78).

William Gouge (1575-1653) used 1 Peter 3:7 to describe the role of a wife, “Her place is indeed a place of inferiority and subjection, yet the nearest to equality that may be. ... wherein man and wife are, after a sort, even fellows and partners” (1 Peter 3:7) (Pollard and Brown 2014, 128).

Richard Steele (1629-1692) wrote, “The great duty of every wife is to reverence her own husband. ... For the great study of the wife should be to get a ‘meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God,’ yea, and of man too, ‘is of great price’ (1 Peter 3:4)” (Pollard and Brown 2014, 249-250).

The shifting religious affinities of this period did, however, lead to the challenging of patriarchal authority when wives and children took a different view from the *paterfamilias*. Leaders such as Gouge encouraged disobedience in this situation, stating in *Domesticall Duties* that the duty of submission was over-ridden by one’s duty to God (Walsham 2014, 134-135).

### **5.3 Modern**

With the rise of women’s rights in the mid-1800s, the wholesale acceptance of women’s natural inferiority began to be challenged, though many in the church pushed back. Some feminists considered that Christianity was an instrument of oppression, and so rejected it completely. Others sought to find ways to reconcile their faith and their desire for the emancipation of women. For example, Emily Faithfull argued against those quoting Paul and Peter to ‘keep women in their place’, saying that biblical instructions needed to be understood in their historical context, and wifely submission is no more eternally binding than slavery. She argued for following the ‘spirit’ of Scripture which, she believed, encouraged female emancipation (Swartz 2013, 141-143).

## **6. APPLICATION**

As I read the way that Peter’s words have been used as a tool of oppression over the centuries, it would be easy to reject them outright. However, they are part of God’s Word to us, and therefore are useful to us if read aright.

### **6.1 Submission**



Submission is not a popular concept today. We tend to think that we need to stand up for our rights and ensure that we are not taken advantage of. The submission that Peter commands, following in the teaching of his master, can seem to us weak and foolish. But it is powerful. It enables us to live as free people whatever our situation (2:16).

In telling slaves to submit to their masters and to endure their abuse, Peter appears to be stating the obvious. What other choice did slaves have? However, his command changes them from victims to agents. Choosing to submit and to endure for God's sake and in imitation of Christ is a very different thing from being compelled to, even if from the outside it looks the same. While the suffering that Peter is addressing is persecution, this attitude can be helpful to us when we are faced with unavoidable suffering. Changing our view of suffering from an evil that cannot be avoided to a trial that we can choose to submit to and learn from for Christ's sake empowers us.

Mutual submission, where we put the needs of others before our own, is an important biblical concept, and is something we all need to be reminded of often.

## **6.2 Marriage**

I am surprised that delving so deeply into Peter's advice to wives, and its reception history, has changed my understanding of wifely submission. While preparing for my wedding, I wanted to promise to obey my husband. My fiancé was not comfortable with that, so we spent time examining the Bible, and finally wrote our own vows where I promised to honour him as the leader of our family. However, as I have considered the context in which Peter was writing, and the redemptive pattern it follows, I now think that male leadership is a cultural mandate, and that Christian marriage should entail mutual submission, which is, in fact, the reality in my marriage.

However, many still consider wifely submission normative for Christians. Strauch (1999, 41-50) and Grudem (2006, 203-205) argue that the submission of wives to husbands enjoined in 1 Peter is timeless, as it is based in the Old Testament. They say that ὑποτάσσω means submission to an authority and is never mutual in the Bible. Today many churches and Christian 'experts' teach women that they should submit to their husbands without question, whether they agree with him or not. Some make an exception for instructions which would violate God's known commands, but others say even in that case she should obey as God will take care of her. Tracy (2008, 287-296) did a survey of non-egalitarian Christian literature and their advice to Christian wives and I found much of it very disturbing. He identified three different models of marital submission. The first is unqualified wifely submission, and unqualified male authority. Under this model, "to disobey a husband is to disobey God" (Tracy 2008, 291). Wives are considered inferior and subordinate to men (Tracy 2008, 292). The second model is wifely submission in everything that does not clearly contravene God's word (Tracy 2008, 293). She should make no decisions on her own. The third is limited male authority, otherwise known as soft complementarianism, which "affirms male headship and female submission, but significantly qualifies male headship by de-emphasizing or limiting male authority, defining it more in terms of the responsibility to sacrificially serve" (Tracy 2008, 296).

I think what Peter was really saying to his readers is that all of you are free people, but you are living in a pagan society that has certain expectations of your behaviour depending on your station in life. Submitting yourself voluntarily to those expectations pleases God because it reduces the likelihood that Christianity will be considered subversive and therefore increases your ability to spread the gospel. This is not an easy thing to do, but you have a wonderful example in Christ who even though he was God accepted the status of a slave and suffered a slave's death without retaliating for your sake. Your submission is not a sign of dishonour but of honour, because you are choosing to follow in Christ's footsteps.

However, we are no longer living in a patriarchal society, where women's lives were circumscribed and where slavery was freely accepted. To argue that the submission enjoined on wives is normative, whereas the submission enjoined on slaves is

cultural, seems illogical, particularly as slaves' submission is based on Christ, surely a biblical, non-cultural basis, and wives' submission is based on Sarah, who doesn't appear to have been uniformly submissive!

Webb's (2001) work is very helpful. He suggests a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" where we compare biblical advice with the surrounding culture. He says we must consider how an original reader would have received the text, whether it would have been freeing or limiting. As Tidball and Tidball (2012, 247) say, "many see New Testament teaching [on marriage] as creating a current that pushes forward in the direction of equality beyond the narrow banks of the patriarchalism of his world." Webb (2001, 247) explains further,

The text takes us on a journey that clearly involves restoration of the society to which it was given. However, to stop where the Bible stops ... ultimately fails to reapply the redemptive spirit of the text as it spoke to the original audience. It fails to see that further reformation must happen in order to fulfill the spirit-based component of meaning within the text's words.

If Peter's injunction to submit to human institutions was primarily an evangelistic strategy, we must consider what would be the equivalent today. Certainly, appropriate submission to authorities in our lives is an important value for Christians. We need to generously keep the law, pay our taxes, and honour our political leaders. We need to honour our bosses at work, not undermining or belittling them, and honestly earn our pay. And our marriages should be such that each partner is able to thrive, without manipulation or coercion. But the on-going sexism still so prevalent in Christianity can no longer be considered an effective evangelistic strategy. Women being empowered to speak and to lead is far more culturally appropriate. As a woman in the secular workplace I never experienced discrimination, even though I worked in IT, which is strongly male dominated. As a woman in church-world, though, I have been surprised to frequently be made to feel lesser because of my sex. When Peter wrote his letter, he was empowering women to see themselves as much more than society told them that they were. Sadly, the church today is still in many cases being counter-cultural in the opposite direction.

We must ensure that our teaching on marriage empowers both women and men, and that it encourages both to develop in Christlikeness and mutual submission. Teaching women that their husband's opinion is more important than their own is not helpful, though both must be taught to listen humbly to the other, and to seek God's heart together.

### **6.3 Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is an on-going scourge in our society, with far too many women dying and suffering at the hands of their husbands. Until the 1970s, it was generally considered that domestic violence was rare, and that if it did occur it was at least partially the woman's fault (Gerhardt 2014, 59). Peter's advice to wives has been used to silence women suffering domestic violence. They have been told that their submissive acceptance of suffering is following Christ's example, and may lead to their husband's salvation (Porter 2015, 65). The example of Sarah obeying Abraham in lying about her identity is often used by pastors who counsel women to stay in abusive marriages. "Godly women should simply trust God" (Tracy 2007, 9). Feminist scholars have almost all considered Peter's advice as negative for women both when it was written and in its application over the centuries (Bauman-Martin 2004, 255). Corley (1995, 354-357) sees 1 Peter's advice of suffering submission as being very dangerous, as it "perpetuates a cycle of victimization, violence and abuse in domestic situations", and she cannot see that it communicates God's liberating Word.

While I don't reject Peter's words, I believe that any use of this text that unnecessarily keeps people in unsafe situations is wrong. Reeder's (2015) discussion of the use of this text is helpful. She argues that while the context in which Peter was writing is not comparable to our situation today in the west, there are many Christian women in the persecuted church for whom this reality remains all too relevant, who would be helped and encouraged by 1 Peter. In our setting, however, Christian leaders must never pressure women (or men) to stay in marriages or jobs that are degrading or dangerous. We must ensure that our teaching on marriage and divorce always carries a rider that God does not require

the endurance of suffering that can legitimately be avoided, and the safety and dignity of people in unsafe situations must be paramount. Care must be taken not to minimise women's lived experience of domestic violence, and women fleeing such situations should always be assured of the support of the church.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

1 Peter 2:18-3:7 carries the authority of Scripture, and so as Christians we cannot ignore it because it doesn't fit with our modern sensibilities. However, we have an obligation to ensure that we read it as Peter intended. To do this, we need to consider the culture and the context in which he was writing. Having delved into this I am convinced that he was not writing to limit wives or women or to say that they were of lesser value than men in any way, just as he was not endorsing slavery as an institution. Rather, he was writing to encourage slaves, wives and husbands to live godly lives in a hostile environment in such a way that the gospel would be advanced. Unfortunately, this passage has been used for the last two millennia to keep women and slaves in what was perceived to be their rightful place. When we apply this passage in our lives today, we should follow a redemptive hermeneutic, considering how Peter's advice to a Christians in a patriarchal society applies to us today.

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