



Silent Wives, Verbal Believers: Ethical and Hermeneutical Considerations in 1 Peter 3:1–6 and Its Context

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First Peter's exhortations to Christian wives (1 Pet 3:1–6) and its call to Christian living for all believers (3:14–16) exhibit significant linguistic repetition. Does the similarity of terminology indicate a similarity of values? In this essay, I conclude that, while most of the mirrored language between these passages conveys a common Christian ethic, some repeated terminology does in fact highlight differing ethics. I will focus my attention on one such example. The ethical tension between the silent witness exhorted for wives with their unbelieving husbands (3:1) will be examined in relationship to the command for believers to be ready with a verbal defense of their Christian hope (3:15). Following this, I will explore hermeneutical considerations for understanding this ethical tension.

VERBAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 1 PETER 3:1–6 AND 3:14–16

First Peter 3:1–6 is part of the household code of 1 Peter (2:11–3:12). As the part of the household code addressed to wives, 3:1–6 follows the initial exhortation

Wives are to be silent witnesses; believers (including women) are to be verbal witnesses. With this tension, 1 Peter invites us to consider the complex task of the Christian community as it engages its social environment in challenge and testimony, then and now.

for all believers to submit to political rulers (2:13–17) and the admonition for slaves to submit to their masters (2:18–25). The call for wives to submit to their husbands is followed by a brief exhortation to Christian husbands (3:7). The paraenesis that follows the household code is once again for a more general audience. These general instructions include 3:13–17, which guides all Christians in their response to suffering that occurs because of their Christian behavior.

The language of 1 Pet 3:1–6 and 3:14–16 is strikingly similar at many points.¹ As Richardson picturesquely observes, 3:14–16 “is painted in the colors drawn from the palette of the description of the Christian woman” of 3:1–6.² Ethical language in particular is mirrored between the two passages. Repetition of specific words or their related forms occurs at least ten times between the two sections. (The English rendering of the NRSV is provided.)

“word” (λόγος): 3:1 (twice) and 3:15 (“accounting;” cf. also ἀπολογία, “defense”)

“conduct” (ἀναστροφή): 3:1, 2 (“lives”) and 3:16

“reverence” (φόβος): 3:2 and 3:16

“not fearing” (μὴ φοβέομαι): 3:6 and 3:14

“holy/sanctify” (ἅγιος/ἁγιαζω): 3:5 and 3:15 (also “purity” [ἁγνός] at 3:2)

“heart” (καρδία): 3:4 (“inner [self]”) and 3:15

“gentle/ness” (πραῦς/πραύτης): 3:4 and 3:16

“hope” (ἐλπίζω/ἐλπίς): 3:5 and 3:15

“lord” (κύριος): 3:6 and 3:15

“doing good” (ἀγαθοποιέω/ἀγαθός): 3:6 and 3:16³

Given the significant language similarities, one might assume that the ethical admonitions of each section would be in essential agreement. In fact, Richardson explicitly states that in the section beginning at 3:8 characteristics of wives “are commended to all Christians.”⁴ In addition, Elliott, in his commentary on 1 Peter, takes pains to emphasize at the various points of common language that wives are paradigmatic for the whole of the Christian community.⁵

In most cases, the language similarities between 3:1–6 and 3:14–16 do mirror common ethical values, such as good conduct, reverence, gentleness, and hope.

¹This is the case, even though 3:1–6 and 3:14–16 fall in different subdivisions of this part of 1 Peter. Whether the household code concludes at 3:7 (Paul J. Achtemeier, *A Commentary on First Peter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996] 73) or at 3:12 (David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* [Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981] 128–129), it is clear that 3:14–16 falls outside of the household code proper.

²Robert L. Richardson, “From ‘Subjection to Authority’ to ‘Mutual Submission’: The Ethic of Subordination in 1 Peter,” *Faith and Mission* 4 (1987) 75.

³Richardson (“Ethic of Subordination,” 75) notes most of these connections but does not do much with the tensions between the two passages.

⁴*Ibid.*, 74.

⁵John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 559, 566, 574, 583, 585, 625, 629, 636. Given this motif in Elliott’s commentary on 1 Pet 3:1–7 and 3:14–16, it is surprising that he nowhere mentions the way Christian wives are *not* to be exemplary for the whole community; e.g., their silent witness is not paradigmatic for all Christians. In fact, Elliott, commenting on the Christian’s ready defense, states that “[t]his reply to any and all is to be marked by the same qualities urged earlier of Christian wives” (629). What Elliott neglects to note is that a verbal reply is prohibited for wives in the previous context.

The following linguistic comparison highlights the commended values shared between the two passages.

SHARED VALUES	3:1–6—WIVES	3:14–16—ALL BELIEVERS
Realm of the <i>heart</i> prioritized (καρδία); 3:4, 15	Proper adornment is the hidden person <i>in the realm of the heart</i>	Admonition to set apart Christ as Lord <i>in the realm of the heart</i>
Believer’s <i>conduct</i> crucial in witness to unbelievers (ἀναστροφή); 3:1–2, 16	Chaste <i>conduct</i> might win unbelieving husband	Good <i>conduct</i> will put to shame those who revile
<i>Reverence</i> to typify believer’s actions in reference to unbelievers (φόβος); 3:2, 16	<i>Reverent</i> conduct might win unbelieving husband	Believers to give an account of their hope with <i>reverence</i>
Prohibition from <i>fearing</i> intimidation (μὴ φοβέομαι); 3:6, 14	<i>Not to fear</i> anything that alarms	<i>Not to fear</i> when suffering for doing what is right
<i>Gentleness</i> to characterize believers (πραΰς/πραΰτης); 3:4, 16	The hidden person of a <i>gentle</i> and quiet spirit is precious in God’s sight	Believers to give an account of their hope <i>with gentleness</i>
<i>Hope</i> expressed as a value (ἐλπίζω/ἐλπίζεις); 3:5, 15	Example for wives: holy women of the past who <i>hoped</i> in God	Believers should be ready to give an accounting for the <i>hope</i> in/among them ⁶
<i>Holiness/sanctifying</i> as a value (ἅγιος/ἁγιάζω); ⁷ 3:5, 15	Example for wives: <i>holy</i> women of the past	Believers are to <i>sanctify</i> Christ as Lord
Priority of <i>good conduct/doing good</i> (ἀγαθοποιέω/ἀγαθός); 3:6, 16	Wives follow Sarah’s example by <i>doing good</i>	<i>Good conduct</i> will put abusers to shame

While it is clear from even this brief summary that there may be some differences of nuance in the distinct commendations to wives (3:1–6) and to all believers (3:14–16), the shared nature of most of these values is apparent. Nevertheless, at least one example of common language between the two passages, specifically the λόγος (“word”) language, reflects distinctive behavior for wives in contrast to believers more generally.⁸ The example of silent versus verbal witness raises an important question for the interpretation of Petrine ethics.

⁶Achtemeier rightly renders ἐν ὑμῖν as “among you,” “referring to the hope common to the Christian community that binds together and upholds its members” (*1 Peter*, 233–234).

⁷These words are cognates, the first is an adjective (“holy”), the second a verb (“to sanctify” or “set apart as holy”).

⁸A second example of ethical tension occurs with reference to κύριος (“lord”) at 3:6 and 3:15. Sarah’s commendable action of calling Abraham “lord” sits in apparent tension with the command to sanctify Christ as Lord. For a brief discussion of this difference, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 165.

A POINT OF ETHICAL TENSION BETWEEN 3:1–6 AND 3:13–16

Language of λόγος (“word”) is used both at 3:1 in relation to wives and at 3:15 (along with ἀπολογία; i.e., “defense”) in instructions for all believers. In spite of repetition of language between the two verses, there is discontinuity in the behavior commended. Believers as a group are to be ready at all times to make a defense (ἀπολογία) to anyone asking them for an accounting (λόγος) of their hope. This defense is almost certainly a verbal one, given the nature of the term ἀπολογία (“defense”), especially in the context of 3:14–16. Goppelt, for example, claims that this defense “points to a running debate,” while Elliott defines it as a “public account of oneself.”⁹

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In contrast, wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands so that the unbelieving husband might be won by the wife’s conduct alone—“that...they might be won without a word” (λόγος; 3:1).¹⁰ While (all) believers are to respond to unbelievers with a *verbal account* of their hope, the response of wives toward their unbelieving husbands is to be marked by pure and reverent *conduct alone* (3:2). Though the importance of good conduct is impressed upon the audience throughout 1 Peter (1:15; 2:12; 3:6, 11, 13, 16, 17; 4:19), there has been no limitation given prohibiting a verbal defense. Only at 3:1 is such a limitation to be found, and there only addressed to wives of unbelieving husbands. Michaels recognizes the potential discord between the silent witness of 3:1 and the verbal testimony of 3:15. In fact, he mentions that this is the only place in the New Testament where words on the part of Christians are excluded.¹¹ His answer to this dilemma, however, is less than satisfying: “The author’s point is not to forbid verbal testimony by Christian wives but to suggest tactfully that such testimony is not obligatory, and sometimes not helpful.”¹² In context, the very purpose of their submission is so that their unbelieving husbands might be *won without a word*. Hence, submission is quite closely tied to their nonverbal witness. To conclude that the author is merely suggesting that the wives are not obliged to speak seems to minimize the potent language of 3:1–2.

⁹Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 244; Elliott, 626. See also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 237.

¹⁰There is a play on words in 3:1. The wives may win over their husbands, who disobey the word (τῷ λόγῳ), without a word (λόγῳ).

¹¹Michaels, *1 Peter*, 158.

¹²Ibid.

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

How might the contrasting picture of silent wives and verbal believers be understood? At least two hermeneutical issues are important to consider. Certainly, it is crucial to take note of the different audiences addressed in 3:1–6 and 3:14–16. Wives of unbelieving husbands are addressed in the first section, and all believers, presumably including wives, are the audience of the second passage. This helps to mitigate against the idea that the two passages are in direct contrast to each other. Nevertheless, there remains a tension between the limitation placed on wives to a nonverbal witness with their husbands and the commendation for all believers to provide a verbal defense of their hope to unbelievers.

In addition to the issue of audience, the tension within the text regarding verbal and nonverbal witness requires attention to the setting of 1 Peter. What is the social context of the exhortation to wives? How would the words of 1 Pet 3:1–6 have been heard by the original audience? And additionally, how would a first-century reader or hearer configure the word to husbands at 3:7?

A study of ancient household codes affirms the traditional nature of 1 Pet 3:1–6 as well as most of the household code more generally.¹³ Outside the New Testament (as well as within it), ancient writers took interest in defining the relationships among various parts of the household. Traditionally, Greco-Roman authors addressed three central household relationships. As Aristotle describes it, “The investigation of everything should begin with its smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.1, 1253b).¹⁴ Within Greco-Roman ethics, one tenet for understanding the relationship between husband and wife was the inferiority of women to men. As Plato explains, “[T]he better are the superiors of the worse, and the older in general of the younger; wherefore also parents are superior to their offspring, men to women and children, rulers to ruled” (Plato, *Laws*, 11.917a).

The injunction for wives to submit to their husbands (1 Pet 3:1) fits well within a general understanding of roles in the ancient household. For instance, the husband’s role as ruler of the household is affirmed by Aristotle. “[I]t is a part of the household science to rule over wife and children” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.5.1, 1259a). Josephus, a Jewish writer of the late first century, also affirms the authority of the husband and with it the expectation of obedience from the wife. Arguing from the Law, he concludes, “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” (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.200–201). In such a cultural context, the Petrine exhortation for wives to submit to their husbands would have sounded quite traditional.

¹³Balch’s monograph (*Let Wives Be Submissive*) provides ample evidence of similarities between Greco-Roman household codes and the New Testament household codes.

¹⁴Translations of all classical texts are those of the Loeb Classical Library.

What begins to sound edgy is the lack of concern that wives would return to belief in the god(s) of their non-Christian husbands. Ancient writers accentuated the importance of a wife's allegiance to her husband's gods. For example, Plutarch, a Greek writer of the late first century, contends that "[a] wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husbands' friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in" (*Advice to Bride and Groom* 19, *Moralia* 140D).

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This common emphasis upon a wife's submission to the religious alliances of her husband is clearly missing from 1 Pet 3:1–6. In fact, quite the opposite sensibility is expressed. The purpose of the wives' submission is to convert their husbands to Christian faith (3:1)! This would necessarily have prohibited wives who had recently converted to Christianity from returning to their former objects of worship. In addition, after commending Sarah's submissive behavior as an example to these wives, the writer refers to the way in which they become Sarah's daughters: by doing good and not fearing any intimidation (3:6). The latter idea implies that these wives are facing coercion from some source. The most likely source would be non-Christian husbands, who, as we have seen, would have every reason to expect their wives to remain faithful to their (the husbands') gods.¹⁵ Coercion to renounce their allegiance to Christ would be the intimidation most close at hand for wives who had recently turned away from their husbands' religious commitments. The reassurance not to be alarmed by such intimidation, coupled with the missional thrust of the wives' submission, would have provided a subversive element to the otherwise traditional contours of this part of the household code.

Even more striking to the ears of a first-century audience would have been the exhortation given to believing husbands (3:7). The way in which these husbands are to live with their wives is by assigning honor to them. In the first-century context, honor was a limited commodity (only so much to go around) and the assignment of honor was typically mono-directional (from those lower in status to those with higher rank). Given this context, the exhortation to assign honor to one's wife, who was understood to be subordinate in status to her husband, would have struck a countercultural chord.¹⁶ The instruction to assign honor to one's wife

¹⁵Ernest Best, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 127; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 121; Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 225.

¹⁶As Elliott notes, "[H]onor was one of the prized commodities over which [Greek] persons contended and fought...one person's gain meant another's loss [of honor]"; John H. Elliott, "Disgraced Ye Graced: The Gospel ac-

as a co-heir of life would have reminded the believing husband of her essential equality of status before God and in terms of spiritual inheritance (see 1:3–5). This would have stretched the boundaries of traditional thought in relation to the subordinate status of women. Philo, a Jewish author of the first century, illustrates the traditional perspective in his discussion of Gen 2: “Why was not woman, like other animals and man, also formed from earth, instead of the side of man? First, because woman is not equal in honor with man” (Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, 1.27).

To sum up a reading of 1 Pet 3:1–7 against its social backdrop, the command for wives to submit to their unbelieving husbands would not have raised eyebrows in the first-century context. It fits well within ancient household code ethics. The author’s choice to draw upon traditional material is no surprise in the context of 1 Peter either. The introduction to the Petrine household code (2:11–12) makes it clear that the churches addressed are being maligned because of their Christian behavior. It seems that some of their Christian practices (“honorable deeds,” 2:12) are viewed instead as evil behavior by their unbelieving neighbors (“they malign you as evildoers,” 2:12). This may reflect Christian rejection of pagan temple activities (4:3–4). Such rejection of standard practices would have been viewed as much more than religious withdrawal. It would also have been seen as antisocial (anti-community) behavior, since temples were centers of social as well as religious life. This antisocial stance could easily have been understood as subversive activity.¹⁷

In this kind of a situation between the Petrine churches and their pagan environment, the author calls for as much compliance to the social mores of their culture as possible without compromising allegiance to Christ. With the gospel and the glory of God at stake (1:25; 2:12, respectively), believers should submit to human institutions whenever possible (2:13), so that their only “offensive” behavior arises from their complete allegiance to Christ. It is from this vantage point that we should understand the call for wives to submit to their unbelieving husbands.

The Christian husband’s call to assign honor to his wife as a fellow-inheritor of grace would, on the other hand, have questioned the status systems that were both assumed and defended in first-century Greco-Roman culture. By doing so, the exhortation to husbands provides an important counterpoint to the more tradition-shaped address to wives. In addition, because it is the husband as the primary holder of power who is called to act in a way that sows seeds counter to the existing system, accusations that Christians were subverting the social order could be minimized. By definition, revolution subverts the existing order through unsanctioned uses of power. If those with socially legitimized power change existing

ording to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (1995) 168. Balancing this idea of honor competition would have been the notion that honor was also a shared commodity within the ancient household (e.g., the dishonor of one household member necessarily brought disgrace on the others).

¹⁷In fact, it becomes apparent in the second century and beyond that the Christian tendency to withdraw from centers of social life invited both misunderstanding and slander from pagan neighbors (Elliott, *1 Peter*, 632).

authority structures by their behavior, we do not speak of revolution but progressive social change. Miroslav Volf, in reflections on church and culture in 1 Peter, notes the effectiveness of indirect means for changing social structures: “[T]he call to follow the crucified Messiah was, in the long run, much more effective in changing the unjust political, economic, and familial structures than direct exhortations to revolutionize them would ever have been.”¹⁸

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FIRST PETER’S WORLD AND OURS

With these hermeneutical considerations (audience and social context) in mind, we return to tension points between 1 Pet 3:1–6 and 3:14–16. Given especially the historical backdrop to the letter, it seems clear that the exhortation for wives to present a silent Christian witness to their husbands is not the ultimate ethical norm in relation to unbelievers. Rather, in a cultural context where rejection of the gods of one’s husband is socially unacceptable, silent rather than verbal witness is one way to minimize accusations against the gospel and the church, while remaining true to the purpose of winning the unbeliever. The ultimate ethic in this regard, reflected in 3:15, is to be ready to provide a verbal (as well as nonverbal) defense to unbelieving neighbors for the common hope Christians possess.

At no point is it the goal of 1 Peter to overthrow the social system of the first-century world. That system is generally assumed and endorsed in order that the Christian hope might be vindicated (2:11–12, 15; 3:1). As I have already argued, however, the seeds of structural change are sown in the exhortation to Christian husbands. In addition, such seeds are sown precisely at the tension point between the specific commendation to Christian wives at 3:1 and the exhortation to verbal witness for the whole Christian community at 3:15. Full witness, including both verbal and nonverbal elements, is the ultimate task for the Christian community as it engages its social environment in challenge and testimony.

In the end, what does noticing the ethical tension do for us as we read 1 Peter in our own cultural contexts, which are by all accounts quite different from the original context? One effect of this tension is to invite the reader to envision a movement from the particularities of the story of wives in the Petrine churches to the broader story enacted by the gospel. The story or meta-narrative envisioned by the gospel, based on the mutual values expressed in 1 Pet 3:1–6 and 3:14–16, develops its contours from the continuing impact of Christian hope on culture. We may speak of the trajectory of the text’s message as it moves into new contexts. In 1 Pe-

¹⁸Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” *Ex Auditu* 10. Online: <http://www.northpark.edu/sem/exauditu/papers/volf.html>.

ter, there is indication of this trajectory both between the text and its social setting as well as within the text itself precisely at the discussed tension point. The textual trajectory points toward transformation that lies beyond the transformation envisioned in the text for its first-century cultural particularities. “[The Petrine] community was to live an alternative way of life in the present social setting, transforming it, as it could, from within....[T]he community did not seek to exert social or political pressure, but to give public witness to a new way of life.”¹⁹ This new way of life, however, opened up new possibilities that in fact had the potential to change social constructs.

In 1 Peter, the faith community’s answer to a wider world is envisioned as a verbal one, even though in relation to unbelieving husbands wives are to bear a silent witness. It is within the overarching Christian story that wives are expected to submit to their husbands in silent but effective witness at a time and place where to do otherwise would put the success of the gospel in jeopardy. But the same overarching Christian story points toward a future church in which the boundaries of ancient household codes are removed, not for the sake of liberation itself but because of the inherent liberation of the gospel and for the sake of the higher task of witnessing, both verbally and nonverbally, to Christian hope. ⊕

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¹⁹Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference.”