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Obedience and Submission in 1 Peter¹

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Obedience and submission are pervasive concepts in 1 Peter, but are often misunderstood. This article examines the meaning of these terms in the ancient world generally and in 1 Peter in particular. ‘Obedience’ means ‘heeding’ the gospel message – i.e., conversion. The verb often translated ‘disobey’ refers to ‘being unpersuaded’ by the gospel. To ‘submit’ means to voluntarily place oneself in an ordered relationship/arrangement. This involves preserving the integrity of the relationship and honouring the person in authority. It does not imply grudgingly following specific orders, suppressing one’s will in favour of another’s, or tolerating abuse. This exploration leads us to question the adequacy of prevailing postcolonial interpretations which focus on strategies for surviving and resisting systemic injustice in human institutions (e.g., empire, slavery, patriarchy). The postcolonial focus too easily obscures Peter’s focus on Christ’s redemption and on God as creator and judge of all.

Reading 1 Peter in church and world

Obedience and submission are pervasive concepts in 1 Peter. For those who accept this letter as God’s authoritative word, it is important to understand how Peter² is using these concepts, not least because they have significant implications for day-to-day relationships involving power and authority. For example, in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*’s Form of Solemnization of Matrimony – a service deeply rooted in a high view of Scripture – the wife pledges to ‘obey’ her husband, using a term that occurs in the NT with reference to wives only in 1 Peter 3:6. Although this precise wording is seldom used today, the BCP remains a fundamental standard of doctrine and worship for Anglicans worldwide. Hence it is important to understand what Peter means – and does not mean – by the term ‘obey’. The same goes for the related term ‘submit’, which Peter uses in his discussions of various human relationships, including marriage (2:13, 18; 3:1, 5; 5:5; cf. 3:22).

Yet exegesis, interpretation and pastoral application are often difficult to disentangle, especially in these areas. If we are not careful, we can

¹ I am grateful to Dr Claire Smith for commenting on an earlier draft of this article with valuable suggestions for improvement.

² Although scholars have disputed the letter’s authorship, I will refer to the author as ‘Peter’ (1:1), both from personal scholarly conviction and for clarity.

unintentionally impose twenty-first century assumptions and meanings on our understanding of Peter's first-century terms. Consequently, when we come to explain and apply Peter's text, we can end up applying what we have inadvertently imported into the text, rather than being formed and challenged by the text. Furthermore, our hearers may reject the authority of the text, not because of what Peter is actually saying (which may be challenging enough), but because of pain and anger caused by applying what Peter is wrongly heard to be saying.

Part of the problem is the modern terminology we use to translate, explain and apply Peter's text. Finding unfreighted language is harder than we might think. For example, when modern English speakers hear the English terms 'obey' and 'submit', they often envisage specific situations in which a person suppresses his or her own will in favour of another's or grudgingly follows an order. Understood this way, Peter's instructions to 'obey' and 'submit' can sound like an instruction for Christians to surrender themselves to instances of coercive control and violence, contrary to other parts of Scripture (e.g., 2 Corinthians 11:19–21). This can be seen to endorse or even excuse abusive relationships in which the dominant paradigm is that of control.³

To avoid issues such as these, several modern translations employ more general terms for submission such as 'accept the authority of' (1 Peter 3:1 NRSV) or 'be subject to' (1 Peter 3:1 ESV). This avoids the connotation of grudgingly following specific orders. However, it raises further potential problems, since the modern terminology of 'authority' and 'subjection' is most commonly found in political and military spheres. Understood this way, the use of these words in 1 Peter can sound like an endorsement of fixed pervasive hierarchies of human status or worth.⁴

Some seek to explain the concept of wives' submission using the terminology of male 'leadership' and male/female 'roles'.⁵ This language is intended to counter the idea of fixed hierarchies of worth, since it limits

³ For examples from a US context see Steven Tracy, 'Domestic Violence in the Church and Redemptive Suffering in 1 Peter', *CTJ* 41 (2006): 283–84; Caryn Reeder, '1 Peter 3:1–6: Biblical Authority and Battered Wives', *BBR* 25.4 (2015): 520. Such a view is rightly rejected by Claire Smith, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2019), 142, 189–203. Note that domestic control and abuse is not a predominantly 'conservative' or Christian phenomenon; indeed, it seems to be increasing alarmingly in 'progressive' and post-Christian societies: see Jess Hill, *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse* (Carlton: Black Inc., 2019), 169, 183, 286, 418–19.

⁴ Cf. Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020), 91–102.

⁵ E.g., Wayne Grudem, 'Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them: 1 Peter 3:1–7', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to*

submission to specific functions and activities. It also helps to undergird the husband's responsibility to love and care for his wife (cf. 1 Peter 3:7).⁶ Furthermore, since this language is at home in the modern economic and business world, it provides points of analogy with workplace authority structures that are comprehensible to many modern hearers.⁷ Yet this advantage carries with it an inherent danger: it risks uncritically importing modern concepts of 'leadership' from the workplace into Peter's meaning. This can lead to a focus on issues such as decision-making processes which, while possibly a valid extension of the concerns of the biblical authors, are probably peripheral to their focus.⁸

An influential scholarly approach to 1 Peter that seeks to mitigate problems with modern application is that of postcolonial interpretation. Postcolonial interpreters seek to read 1 Peter in light of strategies adopted by colonized groups.⁹ They regard the description of the recipients as 'sojourners' (παρεπίδημοι, 1:1; 2:11) and 'temporary residents' (παροικοι, 2:11; cf. παροικία, 1:17) as central for interpretation. For example, the recent Global Commentary prepared by a group of scholars for the Lambeth Conference 2022 regards these terms as marking out the recipients as 'minorities in a colonized world', such that 1 Peter is to be read as offering 'strategies' for 'suffering Christians' and a 'mirror for us to examine power dynamics both in the public and domestic sphere'.¹⁰ For postcolonial interpreters, 1 Peter is as regarded describing societal structures and institutions that are inherently unjust, such as empire, slavery and patriarchy. Various strategies are identified in the letter for dealing with these unjust human institutions, e.g.: conformity for the sake

Evangelical Feminism, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 194–208.

⁶ Grudem, 'Wives Like Sarah', 206.

⁷ E.g. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 37, 41, 184.

⁸ E.g., Grudem, 'Wives Like Sarah', 200; George W. Knight, 'The Family and the Church: How Should Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Work Out in Practice?', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 349–50.

⁹ For an overview see Abson Joseph, 'The Petrine Letters' in *The State of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Nijay K. Gupta (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 426–30.

¹⁰ Jennifer Strawbridge (ed.), *The First Letter of Peter: A Global Commentary* (London: SCM, 2020), 21–22.

of survival,¹¹ resistance for the sake of distinctiveness,¹² ‘polite resistance’,¹³ and ‘(Assimilated) Resistance’ with ‘Subversive... Good Works’.¹⁴

Some have embraced the postcolonial approach as a valuable framework for how to apply (and not apply) 1 Peter’s instructions today.¹⁵ Others, however, have used a postcolonial approach to argue that 1 Peter’s instructions to ‘obey’ and ‘submit’ are deeply problematic. In the face of systemic injustice, just ‘following orders’ (which is what ‘obey’ and ‘submit’ are often understood to mean) is not an excuse, but an act of guilty complicity. So, for example, Jennifer G. Bird argues that the letter has ‘socio-political implications that lead to collusion with Empire, thus, 1 Peter is one of many texts in the Christian canon that perpetuate imperial ideology’.¹⁶ On this view, 1 Peter’s perpetuation of abuse, especially in relation to women, must not be excused or adapted for Christians today; rather, it must be exposed and critiqued.¹⁷

This gives rise to two important questions. Firstly, a hermeneutical question: Have prevailing postcolonial interpretations adequately comprehended the attitude of 1 Peter towards the social relationships it describes? That is, is it correct to say that 1 Peter is describing inherently unjust social constructs – e.g., empire, slavery, patriarchy – and providing ‘strategies’ for oppressed people to respond to them? Or, is the letter doing something else? Secondly, a semantic question: What does Peter mean when he uses the language of ‘obedience’ and ‘submission’? This

¹¹ David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*, SBLMS 26 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1981); cf. Strawbridge, 1 Peter, 51.

¹² John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1981).

¹³ David G. Horrell, ‘Between Conformity and Resistance: Beyond the Balch-Elliott Debate Towards a Postcolonial Reading of First Peter’, in *Reading First Peter with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of First Peter*, ed. Robert L. Webb and Betsy Bauman-Martin, LNTS 364 (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 111–43 quoting 143.

¹⁴ Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 337 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 245–73 quoting headings; cf. Reinhard Feldmeier, *The First Letter of Peter: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, trans. Peter H. Davids (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 151–57.

¹⁵ E.g., Peter H. Davids, ‘A Silent Witness in Marriage: 1 Peter 3:1–7’, in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 225–38; Strawbridge, 1 Peter, 55–56.

¹⁶ Jennifer G. Bird, *Abuse, Power and Fearful Obedience: Reconsidering 1 Peter’s Commands to Wives*, LNTS 442 (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 3.

¹⁷ Bird, *Abuse*, 142–44.

article seeks to answer the semantic question, with a constant eye to the hermeneutical question.

The key terms are ὑπακοή (1:2, 14, 22), ὑπακούω (3:6), ἀπειθέω (2:8; 3:1, 20; 4:17) and ὑποτάσσω (2:13, 18; 3:1, 5, 22; 5:5). As noted above, these terms are often glossed in English as ‘obedience’, ‘obey’, ‘disobey’ and ‘submit’ respectively. Although this article will continue to employ these English glosses, the ultimate purpose of the article is to question common modern connotations of these terms (see above) and to correct and fill out the terms’ meanings by examining their actual usage in 1 Peter. This will require both 1) examining the broad semantic range these terms can have in ancient Greek and 2) investigating the specific meaning of each term as it is used in 1 Peter.¹⁸ In doing so, the article will also address issues raised by common postcolonial interpretations.

1. ‘Obedience’: heeding the gospel (chapter 1)

The first chapter of 1 Peter contains three references to ‘obedience’ (ὑπακοή, 1:2, 14, 22). This term, along with the cognate verb ‘obey’ (ὑπακούω, cf. 3:6), is sometimes understood to convey a primary sense of following specific instructions, whether willingly or grudgingly.¹⁹ Admittedly, the verb does carry this narrow sense at times in the NT (e.g., Luke 17:6). However, the semantic range of the word-group is far broader than this. The form is literally ‘hear under’ (ὑπ[ό] + ἀκούω). In ancient Greek literature, the verb’s range of meaning includes ‘to listen, give ear, hearken’; ‘to heed, comply with, obey’; ‘to be subject, be under the rule’; and ‘to answer’.²⁰ The LXX uses ὑπακούω to translate the Hebrew verb ‘hear’ (שָׁמַע), especially when a concrete response is involved;²¹ thus, ὑπακούω is often best translated ‘listen’ or ‘heed’ (e.g., Proverbs 1:24; 22:21 LXX). The idea of ‘heeding’ – i.e., hearing a message and exhibiting a concrete response – fits several key NT instances of ὑπακούω/ὑπακοή denoting a holistic reorientation of attitude and life in response to the gospel message (Acts 6:7; Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). As we shall now see, this sense of ‘heeding’ the gospel also fits instances of ὑπακοή in 1 Peter.

Peter’s first use of ‘obedience’ (ὑπακοή) occurs in his opening address (1:2). Peter is here describing the ‘elect’ status of his addressees (cf. 1:1): ‘according to [the] foreknowledge of God [the] Father, by [the] sanctification of [the] Spirit, *unto obedience and sprinkling of [the]*

¹⁸ I.e., paradigmatic and syntagmatic analysis.

¹⁹ ‘[O]ne listens and follows instructions’: BDAG, s.v. ‘ὑπακοή’; ‘to follow instructions’: BDAG, s.v. ‘ὑπακούω’.

²⁰ Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2185–86.

²¹ *TDNT*, s.v. ‘ἀκούω, κτλ.’, 224.

blood of Jesus Christ (εἰς ὑπακοὴν καὶ ῥαντισμὸν αἵματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). Although the meaning of this final prepositional phrase is disputed,²² it is best to understand Peter here describing two interrelated goals (εἰς) for the elect: firstly, that they exhibit ‘obedience’ (ὑπακοή; cf. Exodus 24:7), expressed without qualification; and secondly (καί), that they receive the benefits (ῥαντισμὸν) of the atoning death (αἵματος) of Jesus Christ (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; cf. Exodus 24:8).²³ Peter is thus highlighting ‘obedience’ as a prominent concept at the start of his letter. It is natural to regard the term here as having the sense in which it appears in other parts of the NT (see above), i.e., ‘heeding’ the gospel message by exhibiting a concrete response, primarily by trusting in Christ’s atoning death for salvation. This understanding of the term fits well with what Peter goes on to describe: a reorientation of life springing from Christ’s atoning death, including new birth (1:3; cf. 1:23; 2:2), a ‘living hope’ of an imperishable inheritance through Christ’s resurrection (1:3–4, cf. 18–19) and a life of confident endurance in suffering modelled on Christ’s (1:5–7; cf. 2:21–25; 3:18–4:1; 4:13). Thus, ‘obedience’ here denotes conversion.²⁴

This understanding of ‘obedience’ as conversion is confirmed by Peter’s subsequent uses of the word. In 1:14, Peter describes Christians as ‘children of obedience’ (τέκνα ὑπακοῆς). For Peter, obedience is not simply an attribute of Christians (i.e., Peter does not write ‘obedient children’, ὑπήκοα τέκνα). Instead, the genitive of source or relationship (cf. John 1:12; Romans 8:16; Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 John 3:1–2) depicts ‘obedience’ as something that metaphorically gives birth to Christians and so defines their identity and consequent lives (cf. 1:3, 23; 2:2). Again, ‘obedience’ is best understood here as ‘heeding’ the gospel – i.e., conversion. This creates a decisive change of lifestyle involving

²² Some translations regard the genitive Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as objective with respect to ὑπακοὴν and possessive with respect to αἵματος: ‘for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood’ (ESV); however, this is ‘something of a grammatical monstrosity’: Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 87. Some take Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as subjective with respect to both ὑπακοὴν καὶ ῥαντισμὸν: ‘because of the obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ’ (Francis H. Agnew, ‘1 Peter 1:2: An Alternative Translation’, *CBQ* 45 (1983): 68–73 quoting 73; cf. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, AB 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 319; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, THNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 20–21). However, this requires εἰς to have a rare causal sense, which is out of step with Peter’s other uses (cf. 1:3–5); furthermore, Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ reads most naturally as possessive with respect to αἵματος (cf. 1:19) (Sydney H. T. Page, ‘Obedience and Blood-Sprinkling in 1 Peter 1:2’, *WTJ* 72 (2010): 293–95).

²³ Page, ‘Obedience’, 295–97.

²⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 55–56.

holiness and the ‘fear’ of God (1:14–17), grounded in knowledge, faith and hope in Christ’s atoning death and resurrection (1:18–21).

In 1:22, Peter expands on the concepts he introduced in 1:2. He expands the cultic purification term (‘sprinkling’, ῥαντισμόν, 1:2) to ‘having purified’ (ἡγνικότες) your souls’ (1:22). He expands the unqualified term ‘obedience’ (ὕπακοήν, 1:2), to ‘obedience/heeding of the truth (τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας)’ (1:22), thus confirming that ‘obedience’ means heeding the gospel. He clarifies the connection between obedience and sprinkling, initially expressed simply by the word ‘and’ (καί, 1:2), as instrumental: obedience to the truth (i.e., heeding the gospel or conversion) is the means (ἐν) by which Christians have purified their souls (1:22). The perfect participle ‘having purified’ (ἡγνικότες) implies that heeding the gospel has ongoing consequences for the lives of Christians. These consequences are developed in 1:23–25 in terms of communal love springing from the preached gospel message (λόγου, 1:23; τὸ ῥῆμα τὸ εὐαγγελισθέν, 1:25).

Thus, ‘obedience’ (ὕπακοή) in 1 Peter 1 is primarily a matter of ‘heeding’ the gospel message of Christ’s death and resurrection. It denotes conversion and implies a holistic reorientation of life around the gospel message.

2. ‘Disobeying’: being unpersuaded by the gospel

This sense of ‘obedience’ as ‘heeding’ the gospel message is confirmed by examining Peter’s use of the negative term ἀπειθέω (1 Peter 2:8; 3:1, 20; 4:17). This word is often translated ‘disobey’/‘not obey’ (e.g., NRSV, ESV). However, as Jensen has demonstrated, ‘the distinct contribution of this word-group’ is not ‘behavioural’ (nor ‘volitional’) but ‘cognitive’; it is thus better translated as ‘unpersuaded’.²⁵ In 1 Peter, being ‘unpersuaded’ by the gospel message leads to unbelief and thence to judgment.²⁶ Unbelievers ‘stumble’ over Christ because they are ‘unpersuaded by the word’ (τῷ λόγῳ ἀπειθοῦντες, 2:8). Husbands may need to be won over because they are ‘unpersuaded by the word’ (ἀπειθοῦσιν τῷ λόγῳ, 3:1). The spirits were in prison (3:19) because they were ‘unpersuaded’ (ἀπειθήσασιν) by Noah’s preaching (3:20). Severe judgment will come to ‘those [outside God’s household] who are unpersuaded by the gospel of God’ (τῶν ἀπειθοῦντων τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίῳ, 4:17) and who thus continue in sin and do not receive salvation (4:18).

It is worth noting that Peter views both outsiders and those in the ‘household of God’ as accountable to God (4:17, cf. 4:5). Peter does not

²⁵ Matthew D. Jensen, ‘Some Unpersuasive Glosses: The Meaning of Ἀπειθεῖα, Ἀπειθέω, and Ἀπειθής in the New Testament’, *JBL* 138.2 (2019): 391–412 quoting 411–12.

²⁶ Jensen, ‘Unpersuasive Glosses’, 410–11.

regard outsiders merely as oppressive ‘others’ who must simply be resisted or survived. Rather, because God relates to all people as the sovereign and judge of ‘each person’s works’ (1:17), there is a sense of solidarity between Christians and outsiders. What defines Christians as distinct from outsiders is not primarily a matter of human power imbalances. Rather, it is a matter of whether one ‘obeys’ (i.e., heeds) the gospel for the sake of salvation or ‘disobeys’ (i.e., is unpersuaded by) the gospel. Since there is always the prospect that those who are presently ‘unpersuaded’ might be ‘won’ by contact with believers (3:1, cf. 3:15), the boundaries between Christians and outsiders are at present porous. This undergirds a sense of confidence and vocation in the world for believers, grounded in the preached gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection (cf. 2:4–10).

3. Submission in human arrangements (2:11–17)

Peter first uses the verb ‘submit’ (ὑποτάγητε) in 2:13. Given the potential for modern misunderstanding and misapplication, it is helpful to clarify the general semantic range of this verb and its cognates in regular Greek usage, before returning to discuss its specific usage in 1 Peter.

The ὑποτάσσω word-group is a subset of a broader set of terms indicating ‘arrangement’ or ‘order’ (τάσσω, etc.).²⁷ The form of the verb is literally to ‘arrange/order under’ (ὑπο+τάσσω). The word is used for a wide variety of ordered arrangements. The arrangement/order normally involves an element of authority, although the nature of such authority varies considerably depending on the kind of arrangement/order in view.

The verb ὑποτάσσω has both transitive and intransitive uses. The transitive use involves a subject imposing an order on another thing or person; it means ‘to subject’ or ‘to subordinate’. Transitive uses can be found in varied contexts in ancient Greek texts, e.g., letters attached to the end of words;²⁸ human authorities (including the Messiah) subjected to God (Psalm 59:10 LXX; 1 Corinthians 15:28); the created order arranged under God (1 Clement 20:1) or humanity (Psalm 8:7 LXX; Philo, *Creation* 84) or Christ (1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22; Philippians 3:21; Hebrews 2:5, 8); political and military authority structures;²⁹ and the ordering of an individual’s inner life.³⁰

The intransitive use, by contrast, involves a subject voluntarily placing him/herself within an ordered arrangement; it is normally marked by the middle or passive voice or a reflexive pronoun and means ‘submit’. Clement, for example, deliberately contrasts these two uses, both commending

²⁷ TDNT s.v. ‘τάσσω, κτλ’.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 737f.

²⁹ *T. Jud.* 21:2; Josephus, *J. W.* 2.140; Plutarch, *Apoph. lac.* 66.

³⁰ Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* 3.26; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.12.12; 1 Corinthians 14:32.

humble voluntary ‘submitting’ to others (intransitive ὑποτασσόμενοι) and condemning arrogant ‘subordinating’ of others (transitive ὑποτάσσοντες, 1 Clement 2:1). Intransitive uses occur in varied contexts in ancient Greek texts, e.g.: people submitting to political arrangements (Daniel 6:14 Θ; Luke 10:17, 20; Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1; 1 Clement 61:1; Josephus, *J.W.* 4.175); people actively trusting and delighting in God’s sovereignty in the face of danger rather than disbelieving, clamouring or quarrelling;³¹ children (including Jesus) submitting to parents (Luke 2:51; Hebrews 12:9); people in authority voluntarily ‘yielding’ to others in specific circumstances for various reasons;³² and a general use that deliberately encompasses various kinds of submission operating together for the sake of a united community (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Clement 37:5–38:1; cf. 2:1). It is also used by Christians to refer to household and church relationships; we will examine these usages below.

Returning to 1 Peter 2:13: the imperative ‘submit’ ὑποτάγητε is an intransitive usage denoting voluntary submission.³³ It is a prominent command in the discourse.³⁴ The submission in view is ‘to every human creature’ (πάσῃ ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει). The term ‘every’ (πάσῃ) indicates that Peter is referring to a variety of orders/arrangements with different kinds of authority; this is consistent with the broad range of uses of the ὑποτάσσω word-group surveyed above. Peter’s command has within its scope the various kinds of human orders described in the subsequent discourse: political (2:13b–14; cf. 2:17), household/economic (2:18), marriage (3:1–7) and relationships amongst believers (3:8–12; cf. 2:17; 5:1–5).³⁵ The term ‘human’ (ἀνθρωπίνῃ) recalls and qualifies Peter’s preceding statements about antagonism and distance between Christians and the rest of humanity (2:4–12). Even though Christ is ‘rejected by humans (ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων)’ (2:4), this does not mean Christians should reject human authority entirely; rather, Christians should ‘submit’ to ‘human’ (ἀνθρωπίνῃ) arrangements/orderings (2:13).

The phrase ‘human creature’ (ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει) is sometimes understood to mean a thing created by humans, i.e., ‘human institution’.³⁶ On this understanding, Peter is instructing his readers to submit to

³¹ Psalms 36:7; 61:2, 6 LXX; Romans 8:7; 10:3; Hebrews 12:9; James 4:7; cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.12.11; 1 Clement 34:5.

³² Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.4.19; Let. Aris. 257; 2 Maccabees 13:23.

³³ It is a causative/permissive passive imperative; cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 440–41.

³⁴ The imperative heads its clause with no prior connective.

³⁵ 2:13–3:12 form a unit: Feldmeier, *First Peter*, 22; Green, *1 Peter*, 72; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), xxxvii; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 117.

³⁶ E.g., BDAG, s.v. ‘κτίσις’, 3; Feldmeier, *First Peter*, 158.

authority systems and power structures *as instituted by humans*. This understanding supports postcolonial interpretations that regard the letter as directly addressing unjust institutions/systems such as the Roman Empire, first-century slavery and first-century 'patriarchy'.³⁷ However, firm evidence for this use of κτίσις is lacking.³⁸ Rather, the word normally refers to God's creation, including the human members of that creation (cf. Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 4:13; Didache 16.5; 1 Clement 59.3).³⁹ Hence, Peter's focus here is not on *systems* or *institutions* per se, but on *human beings* who are subject to God as creator (cf. 4:19).⁴⁰ The effect of this focus is twofold. Firstly, it relativizes the significance and power of the human arrangements Peter is about to discuss. They are not supreme but simply 'human', subject to the creator.⁴¹ Secondly, it confers an inherent (albeit contingent) value on these relationships as being under the creator's rule.⁴² Hence, even alongside the existence of injustice (e.g., 2:18–19), these arrangements enable 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιέω/ἀγαθοποιός; 2:14, 15, 20; 3:6, 17; cf. Romans 13:1–7; 1 Timothy 2:1–4); such 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιῆα) is the primary activity of those who entrust themselves to God as 'faithful creator' (πιστῷ κτίστῃ, 4:19). God the creator is superintending these human arrangements for his own purposes, despite the existence of injustice. Hence submitting 'on account of the Lord' (διὰ τὸν κύριον) is not merely a strategy for bearing up under unjust systems;⁴³ it is a recognition of the intrinsic-yet-contingent value of human arrangements under the authority of 'the Lord' (cf. 3:12). Such value is not located in the form of the arrangements per se; rather, the value derives from the fact that God is sovereign over human arrangements to enable humans to 'do good' in concrete relationships.

Understood this way, Peter is not making a direct comment about dealing with systemic injustice such as that found in 'empire', 'slavery' or 'patriarchy'.⁴⁴ He is simply affirming the contingent value of various kinds of ordered human relationships within the order established by God as creator. There is thus no problem in seeing different levels of directness between God's creation purposes and the 'goodness' of the various human arrangements Peter describes here. We can see from elsewhere in the Scriptures that the 'good' of marriage is far more fundamental to God's

³⁷ E.g., Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 45–47.

³⁸ The parallels cited in BDAG, s.v. 'κτίσις', 3 are indirect and unconvincing: Williams, *Good Works*, 224–28.

³⁹ BDAG, s.v. 'κτίσις', 2.

⁴⁰ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 182; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 124; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 127–28.

⁴¹ There may be an implied critique of imperial claims to divinity: Williams, *Good Works*, 224–28.

⁴² Smith, *God's Good Design*, 143.

⁴³ *Contra* Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 45–47, 62.

⁴⁴ *Contra* Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 47.

purposes (e.g., Genesis 2:18–25; Ephesians 5:31–33) than contingent economic arrangements that can give rise to slavery (e.g., Deuteronomy 5:6; 1 Corinthians 7:21). Furthermore, while Peter acknowledges that injustice may exist within human arrangements, he insists that injustice does not have the final word. Peter has already affirmed that the Father upon whom Christians call is an impartial judge of all humanity's deeds (1:17). He goes on to affirm that the risen, ascended Jesus Christ even now has all heavenly authorities 'subjected' to him (ὑποταγέντων; 3:22); and that all human beings will ultimately need to 'give account to the one who is ready to judge living and dead' (4:5). Hence Christians are to regard themselves ultimately as 'slaves' (δοῦλοι) only to God and 'free' (ἐλευθεροί) in relation to the world (2:16), in which they may thus operate as metaphorical benefactors, 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιοῦντας) even in their difficult temporal circumstances (2:15). While there is a 'subversive' element in such good works,⁴⁵ this does not negate their inherent value.

The series of four asyndetic imperatives in 2:17 identifies a complex of varied responses appropriate for different kinds of relationship. Each of these responses recalls key points made in the letter so far: for the fraternity of believers, 'love' (ἀγαπᾶτε; cf. 1:22); for God, 'fear' (φοβεῖσθε; cf. 1:17); for 'all' and for the 'Emperor' (cf. 2:13), 'honour' (τιμῆσατε/τιμᾶτε). This forms an imperative frame that conceptually and syntactically governs the following sections, each of which begins with a participle: 'submitting' (ὑποτασσόμενοι) for household slaves (2:18), 'submitting' (ὑποτασσόμενοι) for wives (3:1), 'dwelling with' (συνοικοῦντες) for husbands (3:7) and '[being] like-minded, sympathetic, fraternally loving...' (implied ὄντες) for fellow Christians (3:8).⁴⁶ While these participles retain an imperatival force from their controlling verbs in 2:17,⁴⁷ nevertheless they are not presented as independent commands.⁴⁸ Rather, the participial instructions must all be understood in light of the multidimensional understanding of the Christian life set out in the imperatives of 2:17.

This means that the submission as described in the following sections is not primarily a matter of following specific orders (though it may involve this); rather, Peter deliberately frames the concept of submission in terms of honouring human beings in various positions of authority, while fearing God as creator, judge and redeemer (2:17). These are the controlling concepts in what follows.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Good Works*, 245–73.

⁴⁶ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 194, 221.

⁴⁷ Pace Feldmeier, *First Peter*, 167.

⁴⁸ Pace Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 189, 200–201; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 137–38; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 137.

4. Submission for slaves (2:18–25)

In 2:18, Peter's topic shifts from the government sphere to the microeconomic/household sphere, i.e., the submission of 'slaves' (οἱ οἰκέται) to 'masters' (τοῖς δεσπόταις). Slavery in the ancient world was a more widespread and varied phenomenon than we might assume from the modern history of slavery. While some slaves faced harsh conditions, others could rise to eminent positions. Nevertheless, all slaves faced a significant lack of power and control over their lives.⁴⁹ Peter's instructions acknowledge this reality, but provide a distinctive Christian perspective on it. Ancient secular discussions of slavery seldom, if ever, use the term 'submit';⁵⁰ the use of this terminology for slaves seems to be a distinctively Christian phenomenon (e.g., Titus 2:9; Didache 4:11; Barnabas 19:7). The phrase 'in all fear' (ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ) refers not to masters but to God (cf. 1:17; 2:17), reminding the readers that household/economic submission is not merely a pragmatic strategy for dealing with human power, but an issue of faithful living before God.

The second half of 2:18 shifts the topic to slaves' submission in unjust circumstances: while some masters are 'good' (ἀγαθοῖς), others are 'crooked' (σκολιοῖς), i.e., not in line with the creator's intentions for those in authority (cf. 2:13–14). In such circumstances, counterintuitively, submission for Peter does not mean grudgingly conforming one's actions to the desires of a crooked master. In fact, it means the precise opposite: 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιῶντες, 2:20), which incurs 'suffering' (πάσχοντες, 2:20) from masters who are not 'good' (ἀγαθοῖς, 2:18). In this case, 'submitting' (ὑποτασσόμενοι, 2:18) is exhibited not through following orders, but through 'bearing up under' (ὑποφέρει, 2:19) and 'enduring' (ὑπομενεῖτε, 2:20) suffering 'unjustly' (ἀδίκως, 2:19).

Nevertheless, Peter does not directly instruct slaves to endure physical violence.⁵¹ Peter's only explicit mention of physical violence is in relation to the slave who 'sins' (ἁμαρτάνοντες) and is consequently 'beaten' (κολαφιζόμενοι, 2:20). When describing the opposite, i.e., the slave who is 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιῶντες), Peter uses the more general term 'suffering' (πάσχοντες, 2:20). This elsewhere refers to being verbally slandered for 'righteousness' (δικαιοσύνην, 3:14) and for 'doing good' (ἀγαθοποιῶντας, 3:17; cf. 3:9, 16); thus, for example, Peter may be referring in 2:20 to slaves being maligned for not participating in their masters' debauchery (cf. 4:1–4). While it is true that slaves also incurred physical beatings for non-compliance,⁵² this physical suffering is not Peter's focus, nor is it something that Peter explicitly instructs slaves to tolerate.

⁴⁹ Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 135.

⁵⁰ E.g., Aristotle uses the term 'rule' (ἄρχει) (*Pol.* 1.5.6).

⁵¹ Pace Reeder, '1 Peter 3', 523.

⁵² Reeder, '1 Peter 3', 523–24 n. 19.

Yet the form of submission that Peter does advocate – i.e., doing good in the face of evil – might seem in human terms to be a foolish strategy that might endanger long-term survival. Therefore, Peter grounds his instructions not in pragmatic human strategies, but in the atoning activity of Jesus Christ, which, as we have seen, is the firm basis for the new existence Christians have come to live in through their ‘obedience’ to the gospel. In 2:19–20, Peter makes the link to Christ implicitly in several ways. He frames his explanation in terms of participation in divine ‘grace’ (χάρις, 2:19, 20), which recalls the precious and sure gift of salvation through Christ (1:2, 10, 13; 5:10).⁵³ He also alludes to the Isaianic Suffering Servant through the phrase ‘because of consciousness of God, someone bears up under sorrows’ (διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ ὑποφέρει τις λύπας, 2:19).⁵⁴ This reference to the Isaianic Servant becomes even more explicit in 2:21–25, where Peter uses various allusions to Isaiah 53 to describe the events of Jesus’ passion, presenting Jesus both as the substitutionary atoning sufferer (ἔπαθεν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν) and as the ‘paradigm’ (ὑπογραμμόν) for Christians experiencing unjust suffering (2:21).⁵⁵

For Peter, a Christian’s suffering is not in itself redemptive; rather, Christ’s prior redemptive work provides a certain hope and a pattern for living in the midst of suffering.

5. Submission and obedience for wives (3:1–7)

In 3:1, Peter’s discourse shifts again to a related yet distinct topic: ‘likewise wives, submitting to your own husbands...’ The adverb ‘likewise’ (ὁμοίως, 3:1) is not intended to imply that the content of Peter’s instructions to wives (3:1–6) is to be understood as parallel to the content of the instructions given to slaves (2:18–25).⁵⁶ Rather, ὁμοίως serves to highlight the syntactic (i.e. structural) parallel between 3:1 and the structurally similar 2:18, both of which are syntactically dependent on 2:17.⁵⁷ In other words: just as the phrase ‘slaves, submitting’ (οἱ οἰκέται ὑποτασσόμενοι, 2:18) began one kind of application of the imperatives in 2:17 to one group of people, so also (ὁμοίως) the phrase ‘wives, submitting’ (αἱ γυναῖκες, ὑποτασσόμεναι, 3:1) now begins another kind of application of the imperatives in 2:17 to another group of people. The content of 3:1–6, therefore, should not

⁵³ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 191; cf. Feldmeier, *First Peter*, 171–72.

⁵⁴ Cf. the Servant’s consciousness of God (Isaiah 50:4–9; cf. 53:11); ‘he bore our sorrows’ (אֵינִי הָיִיתִי לְאֵן, Isa 53:4 MT); ‘bear’ (φέρω, Isaiah 53:3–4 LXX; ἀναφέρω, Isaiah 53:11–12 LXX; cf. 1 Peter 2:24).

⁵⁵ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 194–95.

⁵⁶ *Contra* Reeder, ‘1 Peter 3’, 524, 527–29; Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 57. See Smith, *God’s Good Design*, 141–42.

⁵⁷ Green, *1 Peter*, 91.

be read primarily in light of the content of 2:18–25, but in light of the imperatives in 2:17.

In this case, the key imperatival phrases in 2:17 are ‘honour (τιμήσατε) everyone’ and ‘fear (φοβεῖσθε) God’. These are directly relevant to the specific situation described in 3:1. In this ‘mission’ situation, believing wives are seeking their unbelieving husbands to be ‘won’ (κερδηθήσονται) to ‘the word’ (τῷ λόγῳ).⁵⁸ Presumably these wives had previously sought to speak the gospel word to their husbands (cf. 3:15), yet the husbands are ‘unpersuaded’ (ἀπειθοῦσιν). The key issue facing wives in such a situation is: How can they both ‘honour’ their unbelieving husbands and ‘fear’ God (cf. 2:17)? In such a scenario, the two imperatives seem to be incompatible. Wives were normally expected to adopt their husbands’ gods, so a wife’s commitment to Christ, especially when expressed verbally, potentially dishonoured her husband.⁵⁹ Peter advises that in this case, the wife should express her submission by exhibiting ‘pure conduct in fear’, which may be observed by the husband and so be the means by which he is ‘won’ wordlessly.

Submission for wives primarily involves honouring their husbands and so upholding the integrity of their ordered marriage relationship, within the bounds of their overarching commitment to God and Christ. This involves not dressing provocatively and thus shamefully (3:3) and maintaining a ‘gentle and quiet spirit’ (πραεὺς καὶ ἡσυχίῳ πνεύματος) that does not clamour or quarrel in the face of a husband’s unwillingness to heed the word of the gospel (3:4). This is similar to the attitude all Christians should have towards outsiders (3:16; cf. 1 Timothy 2:2, 11), but is especially relevant to the husband-wife relationship.⁶⁰ Ideally, the attractive character of such submission may lead to the husband being persuaded by the gospel; but regardless of outcome, it is still precious in God’s sight.

It is often claimed that the details of the instructions of 3:1–6 are drawn from Greco-Roman household ideals, which means Peter’s instructions here are designed to provide a survival strategy intended to allay husbands’ fears about Christianity by demonstrating its compatibility with Greco-Roman marriage values.⁶¹ Some take this to imply that Peter’s instructions should be applied differently in various modern cultures, depending on whether the culture is aligned with or rejects such ‘patriarchy’.⁶² However,

⁵⁸ Cf. David G. Horrell, ‘Fear, Hope, and Doing Good: Wives as a Paradigm of Mission in 1 Peter’, *Estudios Bíblicos* 73 (2015): 409–29.

⁵⁹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 211.

⁶⁰ Green, *1 Peter*, 99; Horrell, ‘Fear’, 415–16.

⁶¹ E.g., Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 206–7; Davids, ‘Silent Witness’, 226–27; Reeder, ‘1 Peter 3’, 524–27; Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 59–61.

⁶² So Strawbridge, *1 Peter*, 57.

several observations demonstrate that Peter is not here simply providing a strategy for surviving Greco-Roman patriarchy.

Firstly, the use of the ‘submission’ word-group for marriage relationships was an almost exclusively Christian phenomenon (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5).⁶³ Greek-speaking authors outside NT circles seldom describe ordered marriage relationships using ‘submission’ terminology; instead, they normally use other terms more directly related to political and economic spheres such as ‘control’;⁶⁴ ‘rule’;⁶⁵ ‘leadership’/‘governance’;⁶⁶ and ‘serve as slave’.⁶⁷ In the one passage where Plutarch uses ‘submission’ terminology in relation to marriage, he is comparing the status of wives in marriage to the honoured position of philosophers in an ordered society.⁶⁸ In contrast to his more usual political/economic terminology, Plutarch’s use of the term ‘submit’ here places the focus on the preservation of honour and order, which is also the focus of 1 Peter 3:1–7.

Secondly, modesty and gentleness over against outward beauty (3:3–4) are not distinctively Greco-Roman values. While they are praised in Greco-Roman literature as virtues that befit honour in the marriage and order in the household (e.g., Aristotle, *Oec.* 3.1; Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 29–32), they are also commended in the Jewish Scriptures as befitting the same things, in the latter case linked to the ‘fear of the Lord’ (Proverbs 31:10–31, esp. 31:30; cf. Isaiah 3:16–24).⁶⁹

Thirdly, the meaning of Peter’s phrase ‘pure conduct in fear’ (τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφὴν, 3:2) works directly against the idea that Peter is counselling conformity to Greco-Roman values for the sake of survival. By using this language, Peter is recalling the attractively distinct – yet potentially dangerous – Christian values derived from obedience to the gospel of Christ, which lead Christians to fear God rather than humans (1:17, 22; 2:12, 17; 3:16).⁷⁰

Fourthly, Peter’s language in 3:3–4 explicitly recalls the apocalyptic perspective he has introduced in chapter 1. In 3:3–4, Peter commends the

⁶³ Cf. Karl L. Armstrong, ‘The Meaning of Ὑποτάσσω in Ephesians 5.21–33: A Linguistic Approach’, *JGRChJ* 13 (2017): 168–69; Kelvin F. Mutter, ‘Ephesians 5:21–33 as Christian Alternative Discourse’, *TrinJ* 39NS (2018): 9–10; Benjamin Marx, ‘Wifely Submission’ and ‘Husbandly Authority’ in Plutarch’s *Moralia* and the *Corpus Paulinum*: A Comparison’, *JGRChJ* 14 (2018): 62–63.

⁶⁴ κρατέω/κράτος, Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 33; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.201.

⁶⁵ ἀρχή/ἄρχω, Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.12; 1.5.1–2, 6; 3.4.5; Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 8; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.201; Arius Didymus cited in Stobaeus, *Flor.* 2.149.5.

⁶⁶ ἡγεμονία/ἡγεμονικός, Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 11.

⁶⁷ δουλεύειν, Philo, *Hypoth.* 7.3.

⁶⁸ Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 33.

⁶⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 204–5.

⁷⁰ Green, *1 Peter*, 95.

‘hidden’ (κρυπτός) person (3:4), as a contrast to outward beauty, which includes, e.g., ‘wearing of gold ornaments’ (περιθέσεως χρυσίων, 3:3). While this hidden person may be unacknowledged by the husband, her virtuous nature is ‘expensive/valuable (πολυτελής) in God’s sight’ and ‘imperishable’ (ἀφθάρτω, 3:4). This recalls apocalyptic language from 1:3–25. The faith of Christians under trial, which is ‘more expensive/valuable than gold’ (πολυτιμότερον χρυσίου), will result in praise and honour at the revelation (i.e., ‘apocalypse’, ἀποκαλύψει) of Jesus Christ (1:7). The ‘imperishable’ (ἄφθαρτον/ἀφθάρτου) nature of Christians’ future inheritance and God’s word (1:4, 23) forms a contrast to the ‘perishable’ (φθαρτοῖς) quality of silver and ‘gold’ (χρυσίω, 1:18).⁷¹ Peter’s grounding of his instructions in his apocalyptic perspective shows that he does not regard submission merely as a strategy for conformity and survival. Rather, Peter advises acting in a way that is commendable to God the creator and judge of all, with or without ‘outward’ (ἐξωθεν) human approval.

The transcultural element in Peter’s instructions is confirmed by his appeal to the ‘Holy women who hoped in God’ from the past who adorned themselves by ‘submitting’ (ὑποτασσόμεναι) to their own husbands (3:5). Peter’s instructions are grounded not in Greco-Roman values, but in the Scriptures. Peter’s specific appeal to Sarah who ‘obeyed’ (ὑπήκουσεν) Abraham, calling him Lord’ (3:6) has puzzled interpreters. Firstly, the word ‘obey’ (ὕπακούω) is never used of Sarah in the LXX. Secondly, in the one place in Genesis where Sarah calls Abraham ‘Lord’, she is being sceptical, not ‘obedient’ in the sense of following specific instructions (Genesis 18:12).⁷² However, the reference becomes more explicable if we understand the term ‘obey’ here in a similar sense to ‘obedience’ in chapter 1 (see above) – i.e., as ‘heeding’ a message or person in a way that involves a reorientation of attitude. Sarah’s transformation of attitude is evident in the narrative of Genesis 16–18. Throughout this narrative, Sarah is markedly (and often redundantly) described as Abraham’s ‘wife’ by the narrator (16:1, 3), God (17:15, 19) and God’s representatives (18:9–10). As Abraham’s wife, Sarah is the one who is expected to bear the promised offspring (cf. chapter 15). Initially, however, due to her inability to conceive, Sarah seeks to achieve this outcome in a way that seriously undermines her status as wife, by giving her slave to Abraham to bear children (16:1–2). Abraham ‘obeyed’/‘heeded’ (ὑπήκουσεν) the voice of Sarah in this matter (16:2 LXX), which the narrative depicts as having disastrous results (16:4–6). However, as the narrative progresses, both Abraham and Sarah learn that God will indeed bring about offspring

⁷¹ Green, *1 Peter*, 98.

⁷² Reeder, ‘1 Peter 3’, 536–38 summarizes the interpretive issues and various solutions which include appeals to Genesis 12:10–20; 20:1–18; Sarah’s general attitude; and second-Temple interpretations (e.g., *T. Ab.*).

through ‘Sarah your wife’ (17:19; 18:10). When Sarah finally responds to this pronouncement by naming Abraham as her ‘Lord’ (18:12), this represents a turning-point in her attitude. Even in her incredulity, she is demonstrating that she has indeed learned to obey/heed Abraham as her husband and is honouring him as such.⁷³

Sarah thus functions for Peter’s readers as a model of ‘obedience’ – not as an idealized model of how to always follow a husband’s specific orders, but as a key example of a woman who has learned to ‘heed’ and honour her husband, even in difficult and humanly impossible circumstances (cf. ‘hoped in God’, 1 Peter 3:5). Wives thus become Sarah’s ‘children’ (cf. ‘children of obedience’, 1:14) by honouring their husbands as husbands, and trusting God in difficult circumstances. This involves ‘doing good’ (ἀγαθοποιῶσαι, cf. 2:15, 20; 3:17) and ‘not fearing any intimidation’ (μὴ φοβοῦμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν; cf. 3:14). The latter phrase contrasts with the ‘fear’ of God that is appropriate for Christians as they submit (2:17; 3:2). Wives are to fear God and so ‘do good’, rather than succumb to human ‘intimidation’ (πτόησιν) from unbelieving husbands, who might coerce them to do wrong. Thus, the ‘fear’ of God is the answer to husbandly ‘intimidation’ and control. The same terminology and concepts are used in Proverbs (3:7, 25 LXX), which Peter may be alluding to here.⁷⁴ Hence 1 Peter certainly does not condone abuse; in fact, it is an encouragement to wives today (or husbands, for that matter) not to put up with abuse, and to seek safety in such circumstances.

In 3:7, the command to ‘honour (τιμήσατε) everyone’ (2:17) is now applied to Christian husbands, who are to dwell with their wives by ‘showing [them] honour (τιμὴν)’ (3:7).⁷⁵ The fact that wives should be honoured as ‘fellow-heirs of the grace of life’ shows that submission does not imply inferiority of worth or status. The phrase, ‘a weaker vessel, the female’ (ἁσθενεστέρω σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ), refers not to inherent inferiority,⁷⁶ but to physical vulnerability,⁷⁷ probably linked to reproductive capacity (cf. Genesis 18:11 LXX).⁷⁸ This instruction to husbands to honour and value their wives provides further evidence that 1 Peter in no way condones wives simply tolerating abuse.

⁷³ Cf. Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 156–57.

⁷⁴ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 216–17.

⁷⁵ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 217.

⁷⁶ Pace Feldmeier, *First Peter*, 183.

⁷⁷ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 217.

⁷⁸ Israel A. Kolade, ‘The Weaker Vessel’ (1 Peter 3:7): A Linguistic and Contextual Analysis of Ἀσθενεστέρω Σκεύει, *Presbyterion* 47.1 (2021): 121–26.

6. Submission among believers (5:1–5)

The final reference to submission in 1 Peter occurs with reference to relationships amongst the fraternity of believers (cf. 2:17; 3:8). In this case, the ‘younger’ are instructed to ‘submit’ (ὑποτάγητε) to the ‘elders’ (5:5). As with previous references to submission, the specific nature of the elders’ oversight and authority determines the specific nature of submission. Just as Christ exercised his role as ‘shepherd (ποιμένα) and overseer (ἐπίσκοπον)’ (2:25) by sacrificial self-giving (2:21–24), elders are to ‘shepherd (ποιμάνετε) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (ἐπίσκοπούντες)’ (5:2) by following the example of the ‘chief shepherd’ (5:4), becoming Christ-like ‘models’ (τύποι, 5:3; cf. Matt 10:25; Mark 10:42; cf. Luke 22:25).⁷⁹ The ‘authority’ in view here is not the ‘domineering’ (κατακυριεύοντες) authority of political or military leaders (5:3).⁸⁰ Rather, the authority is that of role models of humble self-giving. The younger are to ‘submit’ by placing themselves within this order of exemplary sacrifice, which primarily involves following their model of good conduct (5:5).

7. Reading obedience and submission in 1 Peter today

In summary:

1) The noun ‘obedience’ (ὕπακοή) in 1 Peter means ‘heeding’ the gospel message, which involves a holistic reorientation of life in light of Christ’s death and resurrection – i.e., conversion. The verb often translated ‘disobey’ (ἁπειθέω) refers to ‘being unpersuaded’ by the gospel. The verb ‘obey’ is also used to describe a wife ‘heeding’ and honouring her husband, especially in difficult circumstances.

2) The verb ‘submit’ (ὑποτάσσω) in 1 Peter, when used in relation to humans, means voluntarily placing oneself in an ordered relationship/arrangement. This involves preserving the integrity of the relationship and honouring the person in authority. There are a variety of such ordered relationships, with a corresponding variety in the kinds of authority in view.

3) The terminology of obedience and submission does not imply grudgingly following specific orders or suppressing one’s will in favour of another’s. It may involve following specific instructions, but this is not the central idea. Indeed, when the person being submitted to is not ‘good’, submission may involve ‘doing good’ despite the desires of the person in authority and trusting God when slandered. Nevertheless, there is nothing meritorious about tolerating abuse in a marriage (or any other situation).

⁷⁹ Jobs, 1 Peter, 305–6.

⁸⁰ Cf. later writers who used overtly political/military concepts when describing submission to church leaders (1 Clement 1:3; 37:2; 57:1–2; Ignatius, *Pol.* 6:1).

Those who suffer in such contexts can find encouragement in the NT to seek justice and their own safety (Matthew 18:15–17; 2 Corinthians 11:19–21).⁸¹

This exploration of the language of ‘obedience’ and ‘submission’ in 1 Peter has led us to question the adequacy of prevailing postcolonial interpretations. The postcolonial focus on systemic injustice in human institutions (e.g., empire, ancient slavery, first-century patriarchy) too easily obscures Peter’s focus on God as creator and judge of all. For Peter, human orders/arrangements (e.g., government, economic structures, marriage) have an inherent value, despite the existence of injustice, since they exist under God as creator and judge. While those redeemed by Christ’s death and resurrection are indeed ‘sojourners’ and ‘temporary residents’ in the world, they may nevertheless genuinely ‘do good’ in these arrangements, following Christ’s example, secure in their salvation and future as God’s children. Thus, for Peter, submission in human relationships is far more than a strategy for living in inherently unjust systems; it is a right attitude by redeemed Christians to fellow humans within God’s creation.

Understood this way, 1 Peter is more directly applicable to our modern world than is often acknowledged. For example, while modern slavery is rightly illegal and cannot be condoned, Peter’s encouragements in 2:18–20 could be applied to workers involved in legal but suboptimal economic arrangements with limited choice and power, e.g., call centre operators or gig economy workers. Furthermore, 1 Peter 3:1–6 contains much comfort and wisdom for Christian wives with unbelieving husbands in any society. Nevertheless, 1 Peter does not say everything that needs to be said about these topics. Other parts of the Bible are necessary to address key issues, e.g., the grounding of the order of marriage in creation and redemption (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; Ephesians 5:21–33) and the rightness of removing oneself or others from unjust economic situations when possible (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:21; Philemon).

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⁸¹ 2 Corinthians 11:19–21 makes this point through irony.

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