

# The Context of 1 Peter 3:15

## Vincent Cheung

Copyright © 2010 by Vincent Cheung  
PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA  
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

**Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).**

Most instructors in evangelical apologetics, it seems, appeal to 1 Peter 3:15. They point out that the verse commands us to provide an "answer," defense, or *apologia* for the Christian faith. This is not our present focus. Then, they stress that the verse commands us to perform apologetics "with gentleness and respect." This is understood to mean that we are to speak with soft words and soft tones, without raising our voice, and without using insults and invectives – even biblical insults and invectives – at our opponents. It is this use of the verse that interests us.

The interpretation is *prima facie* impossible, because it would condemn the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself. They called the unbelieving and disobedient such things as whores, dogs, pigs, foxes, snakes, morons, hypocrites, murderers, wicked men, blind men, dead men, brutes, rubbish, dung, demons, sons of hell, and so on. Paul even told some of the Jews to castrate themselves if they were to promote circumcision against his gospel.

What, then, does this verse say? There is a definite and reliable way to determine the meaning, and this is to follow the grammatical-historical method of interpretation that these same evangelicals insist upon, but that is almost never applied when they appeal to this verse.

God speaks to us in the Bible. It is divinely inspired literature, but it is literature. Although the message applies to all men for all times, God used the words of human language, and he revealed these words at specific periods in human history. This means that the Bible is interpreted in accordance with some of the same principles that govern the interpretation of all works of literature. And one of the chief principles is that the meanings of the words and sentences are determined by the textual and cultural background against which they appear.

First, the textual context. The verse appears in a letter intended to encourage and instruct Christians who are facing persecution from authority figures, such as government officials (2:13-14), masters (2:18), and husbands (3:1). Therefore, although a broader application is possible, the verse mainly refers to offering a defense for the Christian faith in the face of interrogation, and in the face of people who have the authority and intention to inflict suffering (3:14).

Christians are urged to answer "with gentleness and respect" because, as the context indicates, they are addressing authority figures. As Peter writes, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (2:13). This is the same principle that Paul asserts in his letter to the Romans: "Everyone must submit himself to

the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (13:1). This is illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles:

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'" (Acts 23:1-5)

Paul did more than insult the high priest with an invective – he cursed the high priest and said that God would strike him. Contemporary evangelicals, given their interpretation of 1 Peter 3:15 and other verses, would never find this acceptable in any situation. What Paul said can never fit into their idea of how Christians ought to answer people. This in itself ought to produce suspicion against the typical evangelical interpretation. Once Paul was informed that he was addressing the high priest, he cited a biblical teaching and implied that he would not have cursed him if he had known that he was speaking to an authority figure. This is exactly what we would expect given Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13, and 1 Peter 3:15. Nevertheless, Paul did not retract his remark, or Luke did not see fit to record it.

As for the cultural context, the Bible's historical accounts are sufficient, and there is no need for extra-biblical information. Given the culture of that day, and especially in the way the people handled religious controversies, what did "gentleness and respect" mean *to Peter*? And, *to Peter*, what did it mean to handle religious controversies *without* gentleness and respect? What did *he* have in mind?

Herod beheaded John the Baptist. The Jews opposed Jesus, slandered him, and attempted to trick him, to put him at odds with the people and the government. When they failed, they conspired to murder him, and brought false witnesses and accusations against him. This continued on to the ministry of the apostles. The non-Christians whipped them, imprisoned them, threatened them to stop preaching the name of Christ, incited violent mobs against them, and even stoned some of them.

Peter taught his readers to answer with gentleness and respect against *this* background. At the time there were also religious zealots who, for one ideology or another, took up arms against the government. It is against *this* background that he wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men." Christians do not answer religious opposition with trickery, slander, and violence, and Christians do not respond to government oppression by attempting to overturn it. This is as far as we can go with the

"gentleness and respect," because the teachings and the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus continue to affirm the use of extremely harsh language against unbelief, heresy, and immorality.

In societies where the Christian faith has exerted influence, today's cultural context has become vastly different. The impact has been so extensive that even non-Christians generally behave in a peaceful manner. Yet we must continue to read 1 Peter 3:15 with Peter's culture in mind. When Christians read 1 Peter 3:15 against a cultural background that has already been somewhat christianized, they come up with a grossly perverted understanding of gentleness and respect that is far from what Peter had in mind when he wrote the verse, and that would even contradict the apostle's own practice.

With this in mind, consider Titus 1:13: "Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." This was also written within the cultural context of the first century, where religious controversies led to conspiracy, mob violence, and murder. It is against *this* background that Paul commanded Titus to rebuke the people sharply. Just imagine what *Paul* meant by "sharply"! If there is no room in the contemporary church for this kind of ministry, then our verdict must be that the contemporary church is so unfaithful to the word of God that it has no room for apostolic faith and practice.

This is not to say that we should always scream out our apologetics with insults and invectives, but that all the rhetorical options demonstrated in the Bible remain available to us. The irony is that those who teach apologetics insist on the grammatical-historical method of interpretation when they answer non-Christian misrepresentations of biblical passages, but they ignore the method when they appeal to 1 Peter 3:15 as a basis for the practice of apologetics. The result is that they are requiring Christians to answer their opponents in a manner that is in fact different from the one taught in the Bible, and legitimate rhetorical options are taken away. This abuse of Scripture is a serious offense, and Christians should no longer put up with it.