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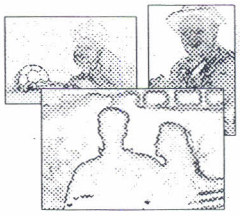

The Family of Flesh and the Family of Faith: Reflections on the New Testament Household Codes

By Robert F. Hull, Jr.

Introduction

A number of the New Testament letters contain lists of the obligations that members of the household owe to each other (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7). Since the early sixteenth century, these lists have been generically labeled the "household code," or "house-table," based on the heading *Haustafel* used by Martin Luther in his Shorter Catechism.

Within recent decades the household codes have been magnets for controversy wherever Christians have debated the roles of men and women within the Christian family. Consider the Southern Baptist Association's recent resolution for wives to "submit graciously" to their husbands and the reaction to that resolution by some Southern Baptist congregations and the general public. In view of the often simplistic approaches to these texts, we need to take a closer look at them within their historical and social contexts and our own.

Terms and Texts

The household codes in Colossians and Ephesians stand somewhat apart from the 1 Peter text in following a set form, which includes the following:

1. Directions are given to pairs of persons in unequal relationship to each other: wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters.
2. Obligations of the subordinate to the superior (wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters) are given before the obligations of the superior.
3. In each case the obligations of the subordinates are introduced by an imperative either to obey *(hypakouein)* or to be submissive to *(hypotassein)*. Obligations of the superiors are introduced by a variety of imperatives in no set pattern.
4. A rationale or motive is usually given to support the response of each person in the relationship, ranging from the simple comment that a particular response is "right" (or "good," or "fitting") "in the Lord" to more elaborate comparisons of the believers' conduct to the actions or attitude of Jesus.

Although the 1 Peter text addresses only slaves, wives, and husbands, it uses forms of the same verb *(hypotassein)* to address the subordinates that we find in Ephesians and Colossians.

It is generally recognized by scholars that these New Testament passages reflect a model of social teaching that was widespread in the Hellenistic environment of early Christianity. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (30–8 B.C.) discusses the same three pairs as Colossians and Ephesians, and in the same order (*Roman Antiquities* 2.24.3–2.27.2). The Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, does the same thing (*Epistle* 94.1). Philo (ca. 30 B.C.–A.D. 50) uses his commentary on the Ten Commandments as an opportunity to discuss all kinds of social relationships. These he illustrates in terms of pairs with

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unequal status, the subordinate obedient to the superior (*On the Decalogue* 165–167). The presence of this patterned form of social teaching suggests to many that all these household codes spring from a common source.

Sources of the Household Codes

For those who believe—as I do—that scripture comes to us through the inspiration of God, the idea that biblical writers may have used secular sources is potentially troubling. And yet in 1 Cor 15:33 Paul quotes a popular proverb that derives from a line in a play by the Greek playwright Menander: "Bad companions spoil good morals." The doctrine of inspiration does not require us to believe that their education and environment did not influence the writers of scripture. One finds Greek and Roman moral teachers routinely addressing similar social themes, organized around conventional topics: friendship, civic duty, sexual conduct, the state, duties to the gods, marriage, and household management. When some of the same topics are dealt with in both the New Testament and earlier secular writings in the same patterned format, it is reasonable to suggest that the New Testament writers may have been influenced by the teaching tradition embodied in the earlier works.

It is now widely recognized that a very influential framework for teaching about mutual obligations within the family was constructed by Aristotle (394–322 B.C.). For Aristotle, relationships within the family must be rightly ordered for society at large to function properly. Within the politics of his world, the rule is "a place for everything and everything in its place."

> Now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for the state is composed of households. Household management falls into departments corresponding to the parts of which the household in its turn is composed; and the household in its perfect form consists of slaves and freemen. 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; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships. . . . (*Politics* I 1253b1–13)

Aristotle goes on to describe these pairs as "classes of rulers and ruled" (1260a9). And it is clear that for some to be ruled and others to be rulers is not simply an arbitrary decision or a matter of political convenience, but a determination by nature. When we dig into the foundation of Aristotle's thought, we find reasons to be troubled, for he is convinced that a female is naturally inferior to a male, as a child is to an adult, and that a slave is to be considered a piece of property, a "living tool." All these "ruled" classes

> possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form. (1260a10–14)

We can go still deeper. In ancient Greek biological theories, we find a widespread assumption that females are inferior to males from the moment of conception. For Aristotle, the male is "better and more divine" than the female, because in the act of conception, the female contributes matter, but the male contributes the soul *(psyche)* (*Generation of Animals* 2.4.738b20–28). Nature requires that both males and females exist in order to keep the race going, but the male is the generic norm, and the female is a

deviation from it. "We should look upon the female state as being, as it were, a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature" (*GA* 4.6.775a15). Galen (ca. A.D. 129–199), perhaps the most widely respected physician in Greco-Roman antiquity, agrees that the female is less perfect than the male. This is in part because her generative organs are on the inside, not the outside, rendering her incomplete but still useful for nature's purposes (*On the Usefulness of Parts of the Body* 14.7).

We may find the above notions laughable, but we should make no mistake about how influential these biological theories were. They formed part of the world-taken-for-granted of the educated, and they influenced law, politics, social philosophy, and moral discourse. They contributed to the generalized notion of men as strong, commanding, and purposeful and women as weak, subservient, and utilitarian.

The Family of Flesh

With certain local and temporal qualifications, in the first-century world of early Christianity, gender roles and concepts were roughly the same among Greeks, Romans, and Jews. Men were expected to be the guardians, women the guarded; men politically powerful, women powerful within the house; men well educated, women less well educated. Among Greeks and Romans, the husband decided whether a newborn child should be kept and raised or abandoned as unwanted. It was held as an ideal in Greco-Roman marriage that the woman should give up attachment to any gods except those her husband worshiped. There was a notorious double standard with respect to sexual relations outside marriage. Among Jews there were notable exceptions to many of these expectations, but the general understanding of male superiority was unquestioned. A person's social status (legal class, citizenship, wealth, pedigree) could affect the generalizations described above, but the idea that women were the equals of men would simply not have been entertained in the ancient world.

The Family of Faith

Metaphors that derive from the family are frequently used in the New Testament to describe believers in Jesus. To some extent, these metaphors describe a new "family of faith" (Gal 6:10) that calls into question many of the taken-for-granted family values of the Hellenistic world. For example, Jesus says in Matt 23:9, "Don't call anyone your father on earth, for you have one Father, a heavenly one." Thus in a patriarchal culture, the very notion of fatherhood is relativized in the family of faith, where God becomes the measure of true fatherhood. Surprisingly, Paul describes himself as "father" of the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:15), but this is not a power play. Although Paul's use of the metaphor is often seen as buttressing his right to discipline, in fact, Paul asks his readers to imitate him in forgoing some of his rights on behalf of the gospel (1 Cor 4:6–13).

Note that Jesus does not say "and fathers," because within the household of faith, God is the only adequate father.

Some of the gospel narratives also relativize the values of the family of flesh with respect to the family of faith. Simon, Andrew, James, and John leave their households to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16–20). Jesus sets aside the natural family ties to declare that "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35 NRSV). A little child, utterly without power, becomes a model for those who are ready for the reign of God (Mark 10:15). To the disciples, who have "left all" to follow him, Jesus responds:

> There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children. . . . (Mark 10:29–30 NRSV)

If there is "no longer male and female" why are Christian wives told to be obedient or submissive to their husbands?

Note that Jesus does not say "and fathers," because within the household of faith, God is the only adequate father. What is especially interesting, given the ubiquitous social inequality of the Greco-Roman world, is that all are considered siblings within the church regardless of their social class. To be sure, we know that there are some (not many!) who are well born and powerful within local churches (1 Cor 1:26), but in the family of faith, power relationships are subject to the gospel. Philemon must accept the Christian Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (Phlm 16 NRSV). Even Paul, who is "father" to the Corinthians because he "begot" them "through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15), is at the same time their "brother" (1 Cor 1:10, 11).

There is not space here to summarize the narratives in the Gospels and Acts in which men and women are represented as co-disciples and co-laborers in the new family of faith. Many readers of the New Testament would point to Gal 3:26–28 as the theological high point in describing the breaking down of ethnic, class, and gender distinctions in the creation of this new family:

> In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (NRSV, altered)

Household Codes in New Testament Context

Given the ideal picture of the new family of faith with its leveling out of social distinctions, the household codes need some explaining. If there is "no longer slave or free," why are Christian slaves instructed to continue acting like slaves? If there is "no longer male and female" why are Christian wives told to be obedient or submissive to their husbands? Explanations of why the household code occurs in the New Testament may be grouped into three models.

One explanation is that the earliest followers of Jesus expect his immediate return. They can afford to advocate socially revolutionary ideas, including the abandonment of family by believers and the social equality of converts. It does not matter how unpopular these ideas might be with the political and religious authorities; when Jesus returns, he will inaugurate an entirely new order. But when the return of the Lord does not occur within the first generation, the church settles down and adopts a more conformist social ethic, so as not to be considered a threat to the larger society. This model sees the adoption of the household code as a capitulation to the conventional social tradition. In this view, to add a qualifying phrase such as "in the Lord" to a command that wives obey their husbands is only to add a little theological window dressing, to give religious sanction to the dominant social practices.

A second explanation is that the gospel has never intended to set aside certain basic social and gender distinctions. What Gal 3:26–28 is describing is spiritual equality, but not social equality—that is, equal access to salvation by all persons, but not the remaking of the social order. This view often invokes the model of a thoroughly hierarchical world, with divinely ordained spheres of authority for all the orders of creation, for secular government, and for all social institutions, including the family. In this reconstruction, such phrases as "in the Lord" serve to distinguish social and gender roles in the church from comparable arrangements in the world. The hierarchy may look the same, but the motivation is very different.

The third view understands that any Christian group lives in a certain tension with its culture, at the same time reflecting the social norms and bringing the gospel to bear in such a way as to ultimately transform that society in line with the "new creation in Christ." Thus the household code in the New Tes-

tament mirrors a society in which patriarchal rule and the rights of masters over slaves are not only customary but also sanctioned by Roman law. For a powerless, minority religion to challenge this system head-on would be to condemn Christianity to an early death. But the Christian motivations added to the code are much more than window dressing. If a Christian wife's obedience to her husband is "fitting" (a word at home in Stoic ethical teachings), it is also to be "in the Lord" (Col 3:18), that is, insofar as this obedience is in accord with Christian teaching. If Christian wives are to be subject to their husbands "as to the Lord" (Eph 5:22), they are to render such obedience to husbands who love them "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). Moreover, the submission of these wives is a specific example of the mutual submission of all Christians to each other (Eph 5:21). Children, whose legal rights are scarcely better than those of slaves, are nevertheless addressed as free moral agents whose obedience is not simply to be compelled, as it could be under Roman law, but yielded, as under the law of Christ (Col 3:20; Eph 6:1). And rather than stressing the authority of the father (the legal head of the household) to discipline the children, the text instructs fathers not to discourage or embitter their children (Col 3:21; Eph 6:4) and to bring them up with proper Christian nurture (Eph 6:4). That slaves are addressed reminds us that they will be a part of any Greco-Roman household with sufficient means to purchase them. They too, although without legal standing within the Roman Empire, are addressed as responsible members of the church. It is not within their power to alter the political realities, but it is within their power to render obedience to their Christian masters conscientiously (Col 3:22–25; Eph 6:5–8). Moreover, the Christian master also answers to a master in heaven, who judges without partiality (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9).

We can say more about the precise situation addressed in 1 Peter, because it is clear that the church there is under very active social pressure. Some believers are suffering from misunderstanding, slander, and even physical abuse because of their faith (1 Pet 2:12, 15, 18–20; 3:13–17; 4:1–4, 12–16). In this context, scrupulous observance of the expected social regulations will give the lie to any charge that Christians are threats to good order within the empire. Some wives have even forsaken their husbands' religions—a socially threatening act. They are instructed to be submissive in the hope that they may win their husbands to Christ by "the purity and reverence of [their] lives" (1 Pet 3:1–2).

The codes show that the church cannot be isolated from the general culture if it is going to commend the gospel to that culture.

The Household Codes and the Contemporary Church

How do the New Testament household codes function within contemporary church life? Are they to be dismissed as completely irrelevant to life in the modern West? On the other hand, are they to be regarded as normative for Christian families of all times and cultures? I believe that both these approaches are simplistic. The codes show that the church cannot be isolated from the general culture if it is going to commend the gospel to that culture. But the church's proper response to particular societal expectations must be worked out case by case with delicacy and discernment. It is well known, for example, that some Roman authorities were greatly concerned about Isis worship because they thought female worshipers of Isis had too much power over their husbands. In a setting in which Christianity was lumped together with other dangerous, subversive, and antitraditional religions, would it have been wise for the New Testament writers to ride roughshod over the predominant social ethics of their time and place? But must the contemporary church treat all the New Testament ethical teaching as a static code of conduct?

I believe that it would be wrong for us to argue that the New Testament sanctions the practice of

slaveholding, even though no text speaks directly against it. The abolition of slaveholding in the West involved the leadership of Christians who were convinced that slavery was contrary to the gospel—despite the fact that the New Testament authors never draw out that implication themselves. Similarly, the decline in the exposure of unwanted infants in the Roman Empire came about largely because of Jewish and Christian opposition, even though there were no mass demonstrations against this perfectly legal practice and no New Testament text speaks directly about it.

The authority of the New Testament involves more than a "thus saith the Lord." It is not easy to extract the household code from wider social rules laid down in the New Testament. Both 1 Tim 2:9 and 1 Pet 3:3 warn women against elaborate dress, adornment, and hairstyles, and they do so in direct connection with instructions for them to be submissive and quiet before their husbands. How is it that most modern Christians seem to be able to ignore the dress code as culturally determined and not binding, even while many insist that the house code is transcultural and permanently binding?

All of us in the West have to commend the gospel in a cultural setting very different from that of the first-century Roman world. In that world advanced formal education for women was a rarity, as was participation in politics. In fact, that was the general situation in the West until roughly a century ago. It is not difficult to find printed sermons that oppose extending the vote to women, as it is not difficult to find sermons that oppose the emancipation of American slaves. If we find this shocking today, it is a measure of the difference in our setting, where equal educational opportunities are taken for granted, many women hold executive positions over male subordinates, and many of the most capable judicial, political, and religious leaders are female.

Perhaps our guiding principle for mutual responsibility in the household ought to be "as is fitting in the Lord" (Col 3:18 NRSV). I suspect that what this will mean for each of us will vary from place to place, time to time, and situation to situation. But if the transforming power of Jesus is active in our homes, our families of flesh will be formed on the model of the family of faith. I would expect that wives would love their husbands with the self-sacrificing love of Jesus, even though Eph 5:25 does not require them to. And I would expect that husbands would see clearly that sometimes they should submit to their wives, even though the New Testament text supports a generally patriarchal model. How many women whose knowledge and abilities far outstrip those of their husbands are nevertheless required to defer to them in all things? And how many women who are not married and probably never will be are expected to submit and defer to males within the church?

I have suggested that the New Testament household codes counsel a modified patriarchy as a way of enabling the gospel to penetrate its ancient culture. If I am right about this, perhaps I am also right in suggesting that in a culture where women have full access to education, political power, and employment, a patriarchal model will hinder the gospel. I believe that until women are welcomed as full participants in the life and leadership of the family of faith, we are expecting Christ to do his work in the world with one hand tied behind his back.

For Further Reading

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