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Re-writing "Household" in the Early Church

David A. deSilva, Ph.D.

People will often come to a pastor for marital counseling because a crisis has arisen in their relationship or because the relationship has reached the breaking point. Very few pastors have the luxury of meeting with couples because the latter simply feel a desire for "marriage enrichment," or want to explore ways in which they can strengthen their marriage and stave off trouble down the road. Because of the increasing fragility of marriage — as much among Christians as among the unchurched — it seems prudent to give a prominent place to the preventative work of forming a wholesome and life-giving understanding of marriage from the pulpit and within Christian education as well as the remedial work of bringing couples in crisis to a point where they can re-invent their relationship on the basis of God's love for each of the pair. What heartache, what tension, what strife could be prevented by helping people form a solid, biblical understanding of their marriage covenant while the seas are calm and the horizons unclouded! So I would urge Christian leaders, in their work with married couples, to let that biblical understanding drive their ministry to them, and not to wait for crises to arise to begin to lay such a foundation.

Obviously, one important component of such a vision for marriage is the question of how husbands and wives are encouraged to relate to one another, and on what basis. Here, too many people — usually males — are already "experts" on the matter. "My wife is supposed to submit to me, not give me trouble! It says so in the Bible. Look at Ephesians 5:22!" Even Paul grounds the model of a hierarchical marriage in the creation account of Genesis 2, though the creation story itself gives no hint of moving in this direction. Nevertheless, many husbands come to the pastor's office or to the pew harboring a basic idea that God wants his wife to do as he says, angered by her stubborn refusal to submit to him and to please him.

Now it is well known that ancient ethicists prized the model of the hierarchical household, with the husband/father/master exercising authority over the other members of the household.[1] Aristotle held this to be inherent in the nature of the two genders, just as it was inherent in human nature to mate in the first place (*Politics* 1.2 1252a25-32). The male was "natural ruler" and the female "natural subject." Greco-Roman authors especially were careful to qualify the nature of the husband's authority over his wife. While the father's rule over children and slaves

*David deSilva (Ph.D., Emory University) is Professor of New Testament and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary.

was absolute (Aristotle likened it to a monarch's power), the husband's rule over his wife was more like "constitutional rule," in which the citizens are equal in essence, but different in power (*Pol.* 1.12 1259b6-10). Plutarch agrees: "Every action performed in a good household is done by the agreement of the partners, but displays the leadership and decision of the husband" (Plutarch, "Advice on Marriage" 11). Jewish authors were more sweeping in their claims about the relationship of husband and wife. Josephus, for example, passes down the following instruction: "The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man [a claim not made, by the way, by Greek and Latin authors]. 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* 2.199; LCL).

Given this ideal of household management, it is not surprising to find the ideal wife depicted as someone who is submissive to the husband, who stands behind her man if not by him. This submissiveness is represented in several ways. First, the ideal wife is silent in public. Plutarch reflects this in his advice to a young couple in the 2nd-century AD: "A wife should speak only to her husband or through her husband, and should not feel aggrieved if, like a piper, she makes nobler music through another's tongue" (Plutarch, "Advice on Marriage" 32). The words of an honorable woman, like her very body, must never become public property: "she should be shy with her speech as with her body, and guard it against strangers" ("Advice on Marriage" 31). Second, she keeps herself as much as possible to the private spaces of the home, an arrangement legitimated on the basis of the superior physical strength of males and the nurturing gifts of females in Xenophon (*Oeconomicus* 7.16-41). Third, she is modest and chaste, providing legitimate children for the household and giving the husband no occasion to be disgraced by another male. As a final sign of her submission to her husband and embeddedness in him, a wife is to share her husband's religion. "A wife ought not to have friends of her own, but use her husband's as their common stock. And the first and most important of our friends are the gods. A marries woman should therefore worship and recognize the gods whom her husband holds dear, and these alone. The door must be closed to strange cults and foreign superstition. No god takes pleasure in cult performed furtively and in secret by a woman" (Plutarch, "Advice on Marriage" 19). In sum, this is the epitaph for the perfect wife: "I was chaste and modest; I did not know the crowd; I was faithful to my husband .... He, through my diligent performance of duty, flourished at all times."[2]

When we come to the New Testament, we might easily think that the early church leaders simply baptized these family arrangements as God's eternally valid design for the family. In so doing, we might be challenged by the words of Jesus

that Dr. Colijn brings to our attention in her paper, where there are no "fathers" in the family formed around Jesus, but only brothers and sisters and mothers (Mk 3:32-35) united to One Father — a name that none of us dare assume in Jesus' re-invented household (Mt 23:8). But perhaps that need not trouble the hierarchalist long, since the words of Paul and the other apostolic voices are so clear on the subject.

But are they so clear? Even as they help the church adapt to the realities of life within the structures of the Greco-Roman society (to a growing extent, seeking to fulfill the ideals of that society so as to reduce the tension between church and society, as in Titus 2:5, where young women are taught, among other things, to "be submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited"), are they not also bringing live-giving transformation to those structures?[3]

This possibility is hardly welcomed by all Christians. Indeed, I am struck, as I read some of the principal texts (e.g., the household codes in Ephesians or 1 Peter) in the Greek and compare this with available English translations, by the tendency of translators and editors to help the old structures remain secure, and to neutralize the leaven of the good news in this sphere. Consider a frequently-encountered editorial phenomenon surrounding the household codes in Ephesians 5-21-6:9. The author of Ephesians has used an injunction to mutual submission (Eph 5:21) as the general introduction to the household codes, an obvious and distinctively Christian modification of the model of the husband as a dominant and the wife as a submissive partner. Eph 5:21 and 5:22 are grammatically inseparable, since the former actually provides the verb for the latter. The editors of the New International Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible insert a paragraph heading between Eph 5:21 and Eph 5:22, an insertion that serves ideological goals rather than grammatical clarity. The heading exists simply because these editors find the biblical text as it stands to challenge the hierarchical household they hold too dear. The NRSV, NJB, and NLB all follow a better path here, placing a paragraph heading prior to 5:21, which is clearly intended in the Greek text to govern the household codes that follow.

Embedding the cultural ideal of a wife's submissiveness in the new, Christian injunction to submit to one another in relationships was revolutionary; but the author of Ephesians goes further when he presents the relationship between Christ and the Church as the model for husband-wife relationships. Even while this model reinforces the submissiveness of the wife, it so radically reshapes the "authority" of the husband as to make it unrecognizable to the husband whose wrote the epitaph for his wife: "He, through my diligent performance of duty, flourished at

all times." Now the husband is to give away his life for the building up and nurture of his wife, helping her to find herself in God and discover all the riches that are hers in Christ. Now the husband, through diligent performance of his duty in Christ, is to make her flourish at all times, even as Christ came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). The author of Ephesians, though preserving the form of a hierarchical relationship, nevertheless confounds the dominant's culture's understanding of the implications of hierarchy by introducing the model of the Lord who is Servant (Mk 10:41-45; John 13:1-17).

Translations of 1 Peter 3:7 provide another example of domesticating the New Testament's domestic codes, though perhaps not as blatant as the paragraph heading removing Ephesians 5:21 from the discussion of mutual marital obligations in Christ. The Greek reads: Οἱ ἄνδρες ὁμοίως, συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνῶσιν ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ, ἀπονέμοντες τιμήν ὡς καὶ συγκληρονόμοις χάριτος ζωῆς. Consider these translations:

> KJV "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with *them* according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life..."
>
> NIV "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life..."
>
> NRSV "Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life..."
>
> NASV "You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow-heir of the grace of life..."

With the exception of the NASV, all these translations suggest that husbands honor the wives, in part at least, as the weaker vessel, suggesting a certain condescension in the act of honoring a wife, before bringing in the statement about the wife being an equal heir. The author's syntax, readily apparent in the Greek, however, points to the woman's relative frailty as the motive for the husband's being considerate in his dealings with her (rather than being domineering or taking advantage of his natural advantages). The woman's status in God's family as a fellow-heir of the

"gift of life," however, provides the sole rationale for the husband's honoring her.[4] Such honor is presented not as a generous act of a patronizing husband, but as the wife's due given her dignity in God's family.

Now why dwell on this? The author of 1 Peter is speaking in unison with the philosophical ethicists of his day when he urges that the relative physical strength of husband and wife become an occasion for consideration and gentleness rather than exploitation or contempt. Would that all Christians lived up simply to the standards set by pagan philosophers! The author goes beyond them, however, when he insists that Christian husbands honor their wives as "fellow heirs of the grace of life" (1 Pet 3:7). Notice what the author has done. Who are "fellow heirs," except siblings? The author has introduced the harmonious and egalitarian relationship of siblings, sister and brother, into the model for Christian marriage as the ultimate basis for that relationship, since it is an eternal basis. This stands in considerable tension with the hierarchical model of husband and wife taught in the culture. The model of "fellow heirs," hence sibling relations, make co-operation as partners the dominant mode in the Christian household, rather than the female's submission to the male.

In both Ephesians and 1 Peter, then, I find the authors to be introducing far more radical material into their representation of the relationship of husband and wife than the simple, hierarchical model can embrace and embody. Yet embodying Christ and Christ-likeness is central to the call of every Christian. Focusing on cultivating the mind of Christ towards the spouse — and one is hard-pressed to find "insisting on submission" in Philippians 2:1-11, though mutual submission is certainly taught there — is at the heart of every healthy marriage, the fulfillment of the Christian marriage covenant. Learning to live with your husband as your brother in Christ, your wife as your sister in Christ, and teaching your congregations how to do the same, points the way forward to learning how truly to love one another as Christ loved us. It also replaces a model for marriage that frequently bears the bitter fruit of the suppression of the yearnings and growth of one member for the advantage or security or ego of the other, fruit that poisons all who eat from the common table in that household, both the couple and the children.

1 Peter 3:7 provides us with a smooth segue into the second topic, which is the manner in which the early Christian leaders sought to infuse relationships between Christians with the ethos of kinship, specifically of siblings.[5]

Dr. Colijn develops the idea that Jesus and the apostles regarded the church as a family related by the blood of Jesus and by adoption by God. I want to spell out just one of the many implications of their explicit choice of sibling relationships as the model for relationships within the church and the ethos those

relationships are to manifest.

Both Jewish and Greco-Roman ethicists promoted a well-articulated ideal of *philadelphia*, the "love of sisters and brothers." This "love" should manifest itself in:

- ✠ cooperation with, rather than competition against, one another;
- ✠ mutual trust, based on the premise that siblings would cooperate with one another for each other's good at all times;
- ✠ harmony and unity, manifested in the sharing of ideals and the sharing of possessions;
- ✠ a commitment to forgiveness, reconciliation, patience, and hiding one another's shame.

From this list, I would focus on sharing possessions as a prime manner in which New Testament authors urged believers to let the love and kinship of the Christian family become "real." "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 Jn 3:16-18).

Among Greco-Roman ethicists, since friends were held to "own all things in common" (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1159b31-32), the same was all the more to be expected of close kin. Brothers are "to use in common a father's wealth and friends and slaves" (Plutarch, "On Fraternal Affection" 1 [*Moralia* 478C-D]). Children dividing an inheritance were urged to allow one another to take what is preferable and suitable to each, considering that "it is the care and administration of the estate that is being distributed, but that its use and ownership is left unassigned and undistributed for them all in common" ("On Fraternal Affection" 11 [*Moralia* 483D]). To out-manouevre a brother out of something he treasured is to gain a trifle but lose "the greatest and most valuable part of their inheritance, a brother's friendship and confidence" (*Moralia* 483E). With regard to the family estate, they are to "abolish, if possible, the notion of 'mine' and 'not mine'" ("On Fraternal Affection" 12 [*Moralia* 484B]).

The conviction that siblings were to make use in common of their inherited goods undergirds the exhortation to "benefit" and "share with" one another within the Christian community (Heb 13:16; cf. 6:9-10; 10:24-25). Lucian, though scornful of the Christian movement, nevertheless bears witness that this attitude was thoroughly established among Christians by the second century: "their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another.... Therefore they little esteem their material goods and consider them common property" ("On the

Passing of Peregrinus" 13). As siblings in Christ, the believers are to pool their resources in every way so that every member of the family knows the love of this family at his or her point of need and so that all arrive safely at the heavenly goal. The picture of the earliest community of disciples painted by Luke is one in which the ideal of friendship is fully lived out: "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). As the need to care for the poor in their midst made itself felt, the Christians of means would sell their houses and lands, and bring the proceeds to the apostles for distribution (Acts 4:34-35).

The aversion of democratic and socialist countries to communism need not dull our appreciation of this picture: what we witness in the early church is not an attempt to create a system of government and economics enforced through terror, but rather an attitude that each believer has toward his or her fellows — "love for the brothers and sisters" — and lives out without reservation. The realization of kinship through the sharing of possessions continues in the famous collection project for the poor in the Judean churches (Acts 11:29), which is also a prominent topic of Paul's letters as he actually carries out that project, a project that also bears witness to the Christians' commitment to their family abroad, as it were.

A major venue for the sharing of possessions was hospitality (see, for example, Rom 12:13b; 2 Tim 1:16; Tit 1:8; Heb 13:2; 1 Pet 4:9; 3 John 5-10), an important expression of the love of believers one for another, a living out of the ethos of kinship within the trans-local Christian community. In the words of Edwin Hatch, "Christianity was, and grew because it was, a great fraternity. The name 'brother'... vividly expressed a real fact.... a Christian found, wherever he went, in the community of his fellow-Christians a welcome and hospitality."[vi]

Missionaries, itinerant teachers, and leaders of the movement were especially dependent on the hospitality of their fellow-believers along the way (3 Jn 5-8; 1 Cor 16:5-6; Philem 22). Hospitality was also necessary for the very existence of the group, since the houses of the better-endowed believers became the meeting places for local Christian communities (See Rom 16:3-5, 23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2; 1 Pet 4:9).

Recovering the "love of sisters and brothers," especially manifested in sharing possessions and hospitality, is essential for the church's ability to meet the desperate needs of Christians in urban settings that lack family and resources, to make disciples of children who lack any consistent parental presence in their lives, to rescue families from situations of domestic violence, and to help families and individuals move from homelessness back to stability. The relief efforts of local congregations and global boards do not substitute for the personal involvement of

individuals and families in extending God's gifts to their sisters and brothers — the means by which the "family of God" becomes real to all parties concerned. However, if we want to pursue the vision of Jesus and the apostles for the church and indeed become the arm of healing and restoration God years for us to become, we cannot try to work out how to fit these values into our lives. We need rather to work out what our lives need to look like in order to make room for these values — which really means, to make room for these *people*.

The Mediterranean villa was ideally suited to living out the vale of hospitality. Much of the home was actually devoted to "public" space, where guests would be entertained, clients received, visitors lodged, even businesses or trades practiced, with "private" spaces in the back end of the house or the second floor. How does the architecture of our homes lend itself to hospitality? Have we organized our houses, perhaps selected our houses, perhaps even built our houses in such a way that makes spaces for the family of God, whether a guest suite for a family in transition, a small workshop for an unemployed person getting back on his or her feet, a common area for Christians from your church and seekers from your community to meet regularly and interact?

Hospitality is a matter not only of space but also of time. Do you leave margins in your schedule, making room there for those people God will bring into your life — or those people whom God will lead you to seek out — to mentor, to invest yourself in, to give a share in your inheritance of spiritual formation, practical wisdom, and emotional stability? Have you set your lifestyle expectations at such a level that you and your spouse are not working three jobs, but have learned to be content more with having time to build up the sisters and brothers than with having enough money to sustain a bloated evaluation of what is "necessary" for a stable home?

As we continue to expand our view of "household" from the nuclear family of the industrial West to the community of faith bound together by the blood of Jesus, our attention goes to the hospitality of our local churches as well. Does our church provide a community in which people can find their identity and grow into their vocation after generations on welfare? Does it seek out and invite such people to come experience the hospitality of the church? Does it provide a community in which the young who have had no father in their lives, or whose experience of "mother" has been wounding, can experience being nurtured by older brothers and sisters in Christ? Does it provide a community of redemption for those in any kind of distress, rather than acting as a self-protective community that reinforces the experience of exclusion and rejection?

These are a few of the questions we might ask of ourselves and our

congregations, as we think about how to "make room" in our lives, our homes, and our congregations for the family of God, and as we move from the sin of "*mine*" and even of "*ours*" to the faithful stewardship of *God's* resources for all those whom God would touch through us.

For further reading:

Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*, Books VIII and IX

David Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Missoula, MN: Scholars Press, 1981).

Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

David M. Bossman, "Paul's Fictive Kinship Movement," *BTB* 26 (1996) 163-71.

David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

_____, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

Russ Dudrey, "'Submit Yourselves to One Another': A Socio-historical Look at the Household Code of Ephesians 5:15-6:9," *Restoration Quarterly* 41 (1999) 27-44.

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Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997.

Plutarch, "On Affection for Offspring."

Plutarch, "On Fraternal Affection."

Plutarch, "Advice on Marriage."

Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*.

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[1] See further David Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Missoula, MN: Scholars Press, 1981); David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 178-85.

[2] Cited in Russ Dudrey, "'Submit Yourselves to One Another': A Socio-historical Look at the Household Code of Ephesians 5:15-6:9," *Restoration Quarterly* 41 (1999) 27-44, p. 34.

[3] See further deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*, 226-37, as well as Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997.

[4] This is often correctly observed in critical commentaries, as in J. H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (Anchor Bible 37B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 578-80; Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 205-206. See also the discussion of this verse in Steven Bechtler, *Following in His Steps: Suffering, Community and Christology in 1 Peter* (SBLDS 162; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 174-76.

[5] For a fuller treatment of the ethos of sibling relationships in the ancient world, and its adaptation within the fictive kinship group of the church, see deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*, 165-173, 212-225.

[6] Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 146, citing Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (Oxford and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1881), 43-44.