



The New Testament 'Household Codes' and Families & Households in the UK Today

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It is well-known that in various places in the Epistles/Letters in the New Testament, what are known as 'Household Codes' appear. The full list of passages that are classed as Household Codes varies from one secondary writer to another. Everyone includes Ephesians 5.21 or 22 -6.9; Colossians 3.18-4.1 and 1 Peter 2.18-3.7, though some see the relevant sections in these Letters as being more extensive than simply these verses (a matter to which I will return below). Some secondary authors also include 1 Timothy 2.8-15 and Titus 2.1-10(14) but, as these two passages, from the so-called Pastoral Epistles, are more about respective roles in worship and relationships within the overall Christian community respectively, so can better be called 'Congregation Codes,' I exclude them from discussion here.

This leaves the Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter passages. Links to the NRSVA translation of these portions are given below.

There are varying scholarly views on the Pauline authorship of either or both of Ephesians and Colossians and of the Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, but this debate is not of relevance to us here. There are varying views on whether the Ephesians passage depends on the Colossians one, or *vice versa*. That the two passages are quite similar to each other is indisputable, though it is impossible to say with certainty whether one is a reworking of the other. In any case – as with the variations among the three Synoptic Gospels – the differences, even if slight, are far from insignificant, so I retain each section as a passage in its own right.

The Ephesians and Colossians passages set out the duties of wives towards husbands, husbands towards wives, , children towards 'fathers' and 'father's towards children, slaves towards masters and masters towards slaves. The portion in 1 Peter has instructions for slaves towards their masters, wives towards husbands and (briefly) husbands towards wives.

Many contemporary 'Westerners' find the attitudes and actions seemingly enjoined in these passages to be very problematic indeed. Rachel Held Evans, in the first of her blog posts on the Household Codes, summarises well the perceived problem:

'Ever heard this before?

"The Bible says wives are to submit to their husbands, so clearly, Christian men are supposed to be the head of the household and Christian wives are supposed to defer to the wishes of their husbands when making family decisions."



Or this?

“The Bible teaches husbands to love their wives and wives to respect their husbands because men need respect more than they need love and women need love more than they need respect.”

Or what about this?

“The Bible says wives are to submit to their husbands and slaves to their masters, so clearly, it’s an outdated and irrelevant text that oppresses people.”

Which is typically countered with this...

“The Bible doesn’t approve slavery. What it says about slaves obeying their masters should be applied to employees and employers. But instructions to wives still stand.”

When it comes to the interpretation and application of the parts of Peter and Paul’s epistles typically referred to as the household codes, misunderstanding and controversy abound.’

On the face of it, our three passages appear to depict as the ideal for Christian family life a model that is hierarchical, male-dominated, in favour of slavery, and oppressive, not only to slaves, but to wives and children, too, all of whom must be utterly subservient to the (male) head of the household. No wonder that, in the very different circumstances of life in Britain today, there are those who choose to reject these passages completely as being outdated and irrelevant, even if there are also those (such as Tom Wright) who argue for their continuing direct applicability in some way.

But there are also those who have examined these passages more closely and more carefully, and who make a good argument that, if we look at the Greco-Roman context within which they were written, at the broader context within the Letters in which they are set and at the broader NT context generally, and more carefully at the original Greek meaning of some of the words often now found problematic, these passages very much do still have something relevant to offer to contemporary discussions around the family and the household. Not only Rachel Held Evans, but Ian Paul, Craig Keener and Shi-Min Lu have all posted useful analyses online in recent years (web-links below). The NT Codes may look as if they conform to the cultural norms of first Century Roman Empire, and as if they, like the Greco-Roman codes found in Aristotle, Epicetus and others, are only addressed to wealthy, patrician, patriarchal households, but a closer investigation into them reveals that, very subtly, the Codes all actually reframe and in fact subvert that norm. As Ian Paul notes, ‘In relation to the household codes ... we need to put them alongside their contemporary parallels. Perhaps the most influential of these was that written by Aristotle in his *Politics* ... the key thing to note is that the NT household codes **fundamentally undermine Aristotle’s rationale for ... hierarchy in relationships**’ (emphasis original).

Thus it is that, in all three NT passages, the various groups – husbands, wives, fathers, children, masters, slaves – are all addressed directly, in the second person. This generally marks the NT Household Codes out from the various other codes found in Greco-Roman writings, where wives, children and slaves were very often reflected about in the third person, in documents addressed to the husband/father/master. ‘No Greek or Jewish philosopher or Roman legislator had spoken to



women, children or slaves like this. None had given us this much agency, this much dignity.’ (Rachel Held Evans) That those in each group are addressed directly by Paul and Peter in itself demonstrates a valuing of and respect for all those in each group. They are being treated as persons in their own right, who can be spoken to, who can be exhorted to act in a particular way, and so who have the ability to make decisions freely – voluntarily and without being coerced. Then, it is noteworthy that, in the NT Codes, members of all the groups have responsibilities placed upon them. Again, it seems to have been typical in the Greco-Roman codes that wives, children and slaves were required to be subservient and obedient to the husband/father/master, while the head of the household had very few obligations towards other members of his household.

But in our Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter passages, the husband/father/master has a whole raft of responsibilities for and obligations towards everyone else. Put simply, in the NT Codes, the one with the most power in the household has a fundamental ‘duty of care’ towards everyone else, whatever their status. This is in addition to the responsibilities enjoined upon those without much power in the household. Put simply, in the Household Codes, very subtly, everyone has rights and everyone has responsibilities. There is thus reciprocity and mutuality.

The significance of this can be further established by expanding the focus of attention from just the actual codes themselves. In Ephesians 5, the first actual exhortation is in v.22, ‘wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord,’ and some English translations and commentators begin the section with this verse. However, in the Greek the verse has no verb! The verb used in v.21 is implicitly carried over into v.22, which means that v.21 must be seen as the start of the section, not v.22. V.21 reads, ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.’ And this injunction is addressed to everyone. There is no indication that it applies to some members of the Christian community and not to others. Therefore, the fundamental principle that is being enjoined in the Household Code in Ephesians 5 is *mutual* subjection to each other (under Christ), which is very far from a hierarchical/patriarchal model.

The fact that the same verb does ‘double duty’ for both everyone being subject to one another and also for wives being subject to their husbands leads me to conclude that, in truth, the various imperatives across Ephesians 5.22-6.9 certainly, and across Colossians 3.18-4.1 and 1 Peter 2-3 probably, should be seen as synonymous with or equivalent to each other, and not as implying different ways of acting according to whether one is a husband or a wife, a father or a child, a slave or a master. Instead of distinguishing between obligations between the various groups, perhaps the use of the same verb to describe how all should be to others and how wives should be towards their husbands implies that all the verbs used in the section all describe – in varying terms – ways in which all can be ‘subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.’ Therefore, for instance, ‘be subject’ (v.22) and ‘love’ (v.25) should be seen as equivalent and equal; ‘obey’ (6.1) and ‘do not provoke’ (6.4) are equivalent and equal; etc. They are all aspects of being mutually subject.



This way of exegeting the Code in Ephesians 5-6, if correct, confirms a sense that I have long had that the exhortation addressed to wives in 1 Peter 3.1-6 about focussing on adornment being ‘the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit,’ rather than on outward adornment, is as relevant to men/husbands as it is to women/wives. 1 Peter 3.7, with its reference to husbands and wives as co-heirs of ‘the gracious gift of life’ also, it seems to me, to confirm this way of reading the texts before us, as in fact reflecting a mutuality and, indeed, the equality of status implied by eg. Galatians 3.28 (‘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.’).

Given the evident centrality of Ephesians 5.21, ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,’ it is important that we are clear as to the exact meaning of ‘be subject’ (often rendered ‘be submissive’ or ‘be subordinate’) in the New Testament. R P Martin’s comment on the use of the word in Ephesians 5 (p.70) is helpful: ‘It is clear that submit/submissiveness cannot carry the sense of degrading servility, since 1 Cor. 15.28 shows how submission characterizes the relationship between Christ and the Father, and elements of voluntary consent and agreement are found in other places where the term is employed (1 Cor. 14.32; 16.16) as well as Eph. 5.24.’

Submission/being subject in the NT is voluntary, not coerced, and must be modelled on the example of the voluntary submission of Christ to the will of the Father. This is reminiscent of Philippians 2.1-11, particularly vv. 3-5, ‘Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,’ which leads into the very famous hymn on Christ’s self-emptying humility. Again, there is no indication that this exhortation is not addressed to everyone within the Christian community.

Indeed, the example of Christ and acting in submission to his Lordship are the fundamental underlying motives for the precepts in the Household Codes. Repeatedly in our passages, references to ‘Christ’ or to ‘the Lord’ appear. While Houlden (p.210) is inclined to downplay the significance of these references to Christ/the Lord (‘apart from this, there is nothing distinctive in these admonitions’), Martin (p. 126) notes that in Colossians 3-4, Colossians 3.17, ‘Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,’ is the over-riding principle, which is then given some practical outworking in the next section. ‘The primary motive behind the admonitions is that such an attitude expresses subordination to Christ’s Lordship, which is (naturally) a distinctively Christian component’ (p.127). I agree with Martin, and Held Evans and Ian Paul, that the inclusion of the repeated references to Christ or ‘the Lord’ in the Codes is part of what makes them distinctive. Indeed, it refocuses the whole intent of the Codes, away from a narrow emphasis on ‘horizontal’ inter-personal relationships, onto unity in Christ.

As Rachel Held Evans puts it:

‘the intent of these passages was not to affirm the Greco-Roman household structure as divinely instituted and inherently holy, but rather to point Christians to the example of Jesus, whose humility and love can be mirrored by his followers in any culture and in any situation.’ ‘Jesus changes everything.’ (emphasis original).



This insight into the fundamental purpose of the NT Household Codes is further confirmed when we take account of the broader context in which they are set within Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Peter. It is tempting to read the passages, Eph. 5.21-6.9, Col. 3.18-4.1 and 1 Peter 2.18-3.7 in isolation, but that not what their first hearers/readers would have done. They would have heard/read them as part of hearing or reading the whole of the Letter in question. And as is often the case with Paul's Letters, in Ephesians and Colossians 'doctrine and ethics are intimately related' (Rosner p. 212), and the same can be said of 1 Peter also.

And in all three, the Household Codes sit within a longer section of the whole Letter, and we need to be conscious of that longer section, as well as of the whole Letter, when we consider the Household Codes. In Ephesians, that longer section begins at 4.25, or perhaps even at 4.1. In Colossians, it starts at 3.1, while in 1 Peter, it begins at 2.11 and doesn't finish until 3.12. And what is said in these sections, outside the Household Codes, is addressed to everyone, and further helps us to understand the fundamental purpose of those Codes. The Codes are a part of what is enjoined in these broader sections, rather than standing apart from them.

This also means that what is said in those broader sections applies within families and households, as well as within relationships within the Body of Christ/the Church generally. So, for instance, the exhortation in Ephesians 4.1-3, about living 'a life worthy to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,' is surely applicable to domestic as well as to all other relationships. Similarly, what is said in Ephesians 4.25-5.2 (headed 'Rules for the New Life' in NRSVA), Colossians 3.5-17 ('The New Life in Christ' (NRSVA)) and 1 Peter 3.8-12 (note the explicit address to 'all of you' in v.8).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the necessity of probing them carefully in order to establish how subversive of Greco-Roman norms and how Christocentric they are, none of the NT Household Codes are set for use on any Sunday in the Church of England's version of the three-year Revised Common Lectionary. It is of greater concern to me that neither Ephesians 4.25-5.2 nor 1 Peter 3.8-12 are set for use, either. However, this argument, that what is said in the rest of the sections about Christian living should be taken into account when considering the NT Household Codes, is, I suggest, strengthened by the observation that Colossians 3.12-17, headed 'Rules for Holy Living' in some English translations (eg NIV), which immediately precedes the Colossians Household Code, is set as a lection on Mothering Sunday in any year, and on the First Sunday of Christmas (the Feast of the Holy Family) in Year C. Families and households are very much in focus on these two Sundays in the year. Over my years in ministry, I have often preached on Colossians 3.12-17 at weddings, but never on the Household Codes themselves.

Conclusion

'For centuries, there were Christians who argued that the New Testament household codes provided biblical support for preserving the institution of slavery. Today, there are many Christians



who argue that the household codes provide biblical support for preserving patriarchy.’ (Rachel Held Evans)

The analysis offered here suggests that, when we look more closely and carefully at the passages themselves, at the Greco-Roman household codes that they are modelled on, and read them within the contexts in which they are set, to argue that we can simply read ‘off the page’ what the NT Codes seem to be saying about domestic life and apply it literally as normative in our society today is illegitimate.

But once we take due account of how the NT Codes reframe what is said in Aristotle and others, and how the NT codes are set within broader ethical discourses that are clearly intended for all, then we can indeed still draw guidance from them for family and household life today.

All have rights. All have responsibilities. All are called to be subject to others. Those who have power have a duty of care towards those who do not. All are to seek to model their lives on the example of Christ,

Having started with Rachel Held Evans, I give her also the last word (emphasis original):

*‘We still live in a culture that is obsessed with power and in which many inequitable power structures – both formal and informal, spoken and unspoken – seek to divide us. **In this regard, the household codes remind us that where we may be advantaged with power or privilege, we are called to humble ourselves, to sacrifice, to love, to listen, to surrender our power, and to treat our fellow human beings as equals – co-heirs and brothers and sisters in the family of God. Where we may be disadvantaged and without power, we are reminded that we don’t answer to “The Man” anyway; we answer to Christ, who has been both powerful and powerless. Ultimately, we are called to heed these words: ‘In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!’ (Philippians 2.5-8)***

Surely all of that is applicable to families and households in our country today.



Web Resources:

The relevant biblical passages:

[Ephesians 5.21-6.9 NRSVA - The Christian Household - Be subject to - Bible Gateway](#)

[Colossians 3.18-4.1 NRSVA - Rules for Christian Households - Wives, - Bible Gateway](#)

[1 Peter 2.18-3.7 NRSVA - The Example of Christ's Suffering - Bible Gateway](#)

By Rachel Held Evans (a series of blog posts that form a coherent whole):

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/four-interpretive-pitfalls-around-the-new-testament-household-codes>

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/letter-to-nypha-church-submission>

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/aristotle-vs-jesus-what-makes-the-new-testament-household-codes-different>

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/grace-good-love-sarah-bessey-mutual-submission>

By Ian Paul:

<https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/aristotle-and-the-household-codes/>

By Craig Keener:

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/mutual-submission-frames-household-codes>

By Shi-Min Lu

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/womans-role-new-testament-household-codes>

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/religion-women-and-children-christian-womans>

(all web pages accessed January 2022)

Book Resources

Harinck, Douglas: *SCM Theological Commentary on 1 & 2 Peter* (SCM 2008)

Houlden, J.L.: *Paul's Letters from Prison* (SCM 1977)

Hunter, A.M.: *Galatians to Colossians (Laymen's Bible Commentaries)* (SCM 1959)

Martin, R.P.: *Interpretation Commentary on Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* (John Knox Press 1992)

Rosner, Brian: 'Paul's Ethics,' chapter 15 in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (ed J D G Dunn; CUP 2003)

Stambaugh, John and David Balch: *The Social World of the First Christians* (SPCK 1986) pp. 57f, 123f, 139f

Wright, N.T.: *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (SPCK 2002)