

Chapter 5. Christianity and Problems within the Household Code

The functioning of households presented Christians with yet another set of problems on the micro level of their social lives. We will examine the following concepts that create problems in this chapter:

- a. *The household code.⁴⁵⁷*
- b. *The possibility that believers could lose their families when becoming Christians.*
- c. *Some problems caused⁴⁵⁸ in the household by Christianity.*

Long ago Dibelius contended against the tendency to see in the Haustafeln of the New Testament a simile of actual social situations of addressees.⁴⁵⁹ The fact that the author used the household code in order to address the relationship of his readers to the government / society / families under which they lived, suggested that he was speaking to an actual

⁴⁵⁷ *With household code is meant not only the code that governed households but also a code which includes the newly formed household, namely the church or fellowship of believers. As such the term includes more than just traditional household matters, for example the relationships between the elder and the younger people.*

⁴⁵⁸ *It is important to note that we are dealing with perceptions here. Although Christian actions might not cause any problems whatsoever, it is still perceived by society as causing problems. Therefore, these suggested problems are seen as such by society and not necessarily by Christians themselves.*

⁴⁵⁹ *For a survey of the study, history and development of the household code see Balch (1976:2-10).*

situation. In his⁴⁶⁰ view the birthplace of the New Testamentic household code was to be found in the stoic literature from the Hellenistic period.⁴⁶¹ Others⁴⁶² thought that the New Testamentic household code was mindsprung in the Hellenistic Jewish writings. A third option which was convincingly presented⁴⁶³ regarding the origin of the household code, was that the codes were specifically Christian in provenance. None of these theories seems to be without problems.⁴⁶⁴ After extensive examination⁴⁶⁵ it was generally concluded that the New Testament codes speak to specific situations. The purpose of the household code in Peter specifically is twofold, firstly,⁴⁶⁶ to reduce sociol-political friction between the antagonists and Christians, and secondly, to instill actions and a sense of what is right according to God's will.

⁴⁶⁰ Referring to Dibelius' (1913:91,92).

⁴⁶¹ Weidinger (Dibelius's student) added other evidence (1928:3).

⁴⁶² Lohmeyer (1954:152).

⁴⁶³ Rengstorf (1953:131-145).

⁴⁶⁴ Examples of such problems are, as Balch expresses it:

- a. Although "there are some hints of reciprocal duties in Stoic texts, but no exhortation to pairs in a household".
- b. "There are close parallels to such pairs in a household in Hellenistic Judaism, but the suggestion that this is a 'Jewish-Oriental' influence in Philo has not been demonstrated" (Balch 1981:10).

⁴⁶⁵ Couch (1972:126).

⁴⁶⁶ Balch (1981:81).

There are similar (to that of Peter) and more complete examples of household codes elsewhere in the New Testament (Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-6:9).⁴⁶⁷ In these codes the formal structure are more obvious than in Peter who dealt with the household code in the following manner:

- a. *The wife - husband relationship (3:1-7).*
- b. *Exhorting the slaves without the masters (2:18-25).*
- c. *Omitting the child - father relationship totally.*

The following transpires with household codes.⁴⁶⁸

| <u>Subordinates</u> | <u>Superiors</u> |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Wives submit to husbands</i> | <i>Husbands love your wives</i> |
| <i>Children obey your parents</i> | <i>Fathers do not anger your children</i> |
| <i>Slaves obey your masters</i> | <i>Masters treat your slaves justly</i> |

Two features of Peter's household code are rather unique. Firstly, there was the introduction of submissiveness to "every human institution" (2:13,14). Secondly, the household code concluded with a command to "all of you" (3:8,9).⁴⁶⁹ The first unique feature could possibly presuppose that they were at that time not submitting to the human institutions. The second unique feature possibly alluded to the prospect that the author used the household code as a simile for all his readers. In other words, the principles embedded in the household code were

⁴⁶⁷ *For other occurrences of household codes see first Tim. 2:8-15; 5:1,2; 6:1,2; Tit. 2:1-10; 3:1, although not as structured the mentioned texts in Col. 3:18-4:1 and Eph. 5:21-6:9.*

⁴⁶⁸ *Balch (1981:1).*

⁴⁶⁹ *That this is in fact the conclusion of the household code in first Peter see Elliott (1976:243-245).*

made applicable to the whole church and all his readers. These texts will be discussed later when the solution to the mentioned problems are dealt with.

The household codes in Peter refer to the following problems that Christians experienced:

5.1 Problem One: Christianity Caused Slaves to Challenge their Masters

Slavery could well be said to be a kind of institutionalized marginality. Slaves were mere property and as such utterly devoid of honour and therefore they fell outside of the social order. In Roman law the slave was pro nullo.⁴⁷⁰ To be a slave was to be socially dead.⁴⁷¹ Slaves formed the boundary of social existence. The Roman law further classified slaves as chattel, not persons and as a speaking tool - instrumentum vocale.⁴⁷² Slaves were not allowed to choose their own religions since slaves of a household generally conformed to the religious preferences of the paterfamilias.⁴⁷³ It was seen as defiance for slaves to make such decisions on their own. It could be expected that masters would be harsh⁴⁷⁴ on them if they dared to become Christians while the masters were pagan, since religious non-conformity was viewed as

⁴⁷⁰ On Roman law with regards to this issue see Patterson (1982:40).

⁴⁷¹ Patterson (1982:1-101, 334-342). Other material on the status of slaves is Bradley (1987); Carter (1994:172-189); Saller (1991:144-165); Weidemann (1987).

⁴⁷² Patterson (1982:30-32) traces the developments in Roman law by which the slave was denied personhood and classified as a thing, the object of the absolute ownership (dominium) of the master, whose personhood was affirmed.

⁴⁷³ Balch (1981:68-69; 74-75).

⁴⁷⁴ For a discussion of harsh and cruel treatment of slaves by their masters see Plutarch, On The Avoidance Of Anger (excerpt of Maralia) 458F-464D.

a disturbance of the social equilibrium. To the masters this action was seen as a challenge. What was more important was the fact that the master was being challenged by someone who belonged to him and by someone who had no honour at all (by himself). This could be interpreted by the masters as a slap in the face. This phenomenon is described as follows:

“The Roman constitution insisted on proper worship of the state gods, so Romans reacted negatively when Jewish and Christian slaves - the first groups to do so - rejected the worship of their masters’ gods, insisting on an exclusive worship of their own God”.⁴⁷⁵

The deduction that we are dealing with non-Christian masters is made from the context of 2:18-20 where it seems evident that Peter addressed the slaves of non-Christian masters. Firstly, this can be deduced by the salutation “Οἱ οἰκέται”. Secondly, the deduction could possibly be made that these particular slave owners were non-Christians because of their description as τοῖς σκολιοῖς. Thirdly, these owners might be deemed non-Christian because they caused the slaves πάσχων ἀδίκως. This thought was mentioned again in 2:20, viz., that they were suffering for doing right. The idea that the owners were not addressed here was further ascertained by the absence of any directives to slave owners. Therefore slave owners were not among the members of the intended audience of this portion of first Peter.

5.2 Problem Two: Christianity Causes Discord in the Household

It is thought that the most social interaction occurred within the household. These households formed the primary structure of the Empire.⁴⁷⁶ Absolute power rested with the male head of

⁴⁷⁵ Balch (1981:74).

⁴⁷⁶ Tidball (1984:79).

the primary household. In case of his absence his eldest son was in command. Slaves also formed part of the household by taking care of the practical day-to-day functioning of the family. This structure with the paterfamilias on the top was utilized by Augustus when he declared himself the paterfamilias of the empire. Augustus converted the microcosm of the household (with inclusion of the paterfamilias) into the macrocosm of the empire.⁴⁷⁷

In first Peter 3:1-6 we find a similar argument to that of the slaves but this time the argument was directed at the wives. When the husband as head of the household became a Christian, there generally speaking was no problem, for the whole household then became Christians. The following summary on this issue is thus cited: "The wife of a Greco-Roman household typically adopted her husband's religious beliefs and observances".⁴⁷⁸ The problem was caused when someone in the household other than the head became a Christian, for they were all inferior and subordinate to the head and as such were not allowed such liberties. Her disobedience was seen as a disruption of the social order, for society dictated her role to be private.⁴⁷⁹ The husband saw this kind of action as a threat or challenge to his honour and position. The wife's worship with her husband was therefore important not only for the public order but also for the domestic order.⁴⁸⁰ As with the slaves, the wives were in a similar position.

⁴⁷⁷ A well documented discussion on the paterfamilias, the use thereof by the Roman government as well as the use by the Emperor of this phenomenon can be read in this section: Tidball (1984:79-81).

⁴⁷⁸ Campbell (1995:205). For further information regarding the relationship between husband and wife in first century society see Balch (1981:65-80; 85; 96-97; 99); Davids (1990:115-117).

⁴⁷⁹ For the societal dictation on the role woman in first century Mediterranean society see Campbell (1995:244).

⁴⁸⁰ Plutarch gives extensive advice to wives regarding this matter. His advice, however,

Christianity was thus accused of causing discord in the household since:

- a. *It was said (by society) that the paterfamilias was not in control of his household if he did not take action.*
- b. *Society demanded that the paterfamilias should not allow his subordinates independence.*
- c. *Religious, ethical and moral division in the household was interpreted as a weakness on the part of the paterfamilias.*
- d. *Christianity was seen as the cause of the paterfamilias' loss of honour.*

The end result might constitute (in extreme cases) expulsion from the household by way of divorce. In this event the Christian would have been left without a paterfamilias. In other cases they might have been treated harshly. Peter's advice was again submission.⁴⁸¹

is just the opposite of Peter's. For citation of Plutarch's remarks see Plutarch, On The Avoidance Of Anger (excerpt of Maralia) 140D, 144D-E. Balch (1981:85) also cites this passage and might be easier to find. Campbell (1995:206) has the insert from Plutarch quoted in his dissertation.

⁴⁸¹ *There is a remarkable resemblance between the syntax of 1:17, 1:22, 2:12 and 3:2. The submission that Peter advocates in 3:15 is in no way limited to sexuality but rather encompasses their whole lives. Even the phrase ἀγνήν ἀναστροφὴν (pure behaviour) is not only in reference to sexuality but rather the whole life. This would obviously include sexuality, as sexuality is part of married life. For further information on this issue refer to Hilber (1992:92) and Marshall (1991:101).*

5.3 Problem Three: Christians Possibly Lost their Inheritance

As part of the larger family profile the situation of children formed part of the discussion. Children inherited as long as they were in good standing with the patriarch. It seems as though Christianity would have sufficed as reason for disfellowshipping and even disowning. As a result the Christian lost his inheritance. Inheritance and property or the lack thereof contributed in the determination of status. The loss of inheritance thus also contributed to the Christian's loss in status.

5.4 Problem Four: Christians Voluntarily Relinquished Honour

There is also a paradox in the conduct of the Christian whether they be newborn babies, children or slaves. They were to live "as free persons ... but as slaves⁴⁸² of God" (ὡς ἐλεύθεροι ... ὡς θεοῦ δοῦλοι)(2:16). Thus they were to live as slaves and free persons simultaneously. Following the logic of the Greco-Roman social structure the juxtaposition of the metaphors of the slave and the free person meant that the believer was neither fully one nor the other. It was entirely possible for a freeborn person to become a slave. Similarly a slave could have been freed, but one could not be both at once. If, however, a slave was freed the δοῦλος would have thereby become not an ἐλεύθερος but rather an ἀπελεύθερος or ἐξελεύθερος.

⁴⁸² Israel used the self-designated slave concept in the LXX (Ps. 18:12,14; 26:9; Isa. 48:20). Paul did the same thing (Rom. 1:1; first Cor. 7:22; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1). However, in Peter the everyday experience of life in the Greco-Roman world seemed to provide the associations that would make the metaphor work for the intended readers instead of the early Christian tradition.

No matter what the Christian's previous status was, they were all asked to live as slaves of God. That meant voluntarily relinquishing their status (whatever status they had). Thus the following reversal of honour occurred when a free person became a slave (albeit voluntarily):

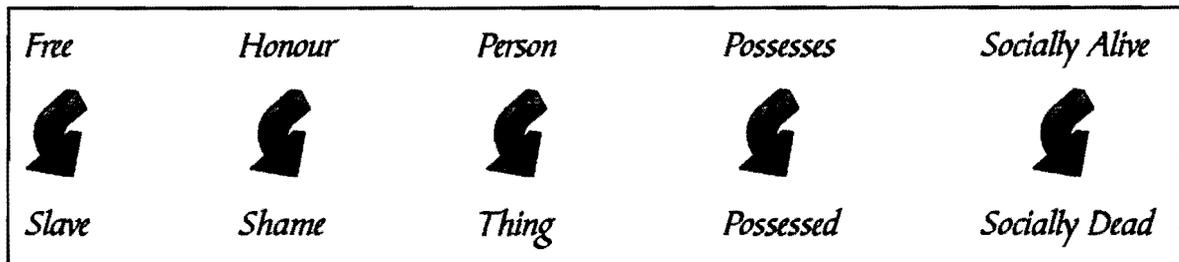


Figure 10

In figure ten we notice what happened to someone who became a slave. It was a shift down on the "status line" of society and thus movement occurred from honour to shame. The person also lost personhood and became a chattel. The person changed from one who owned to one who is owned. Lastly, they became socially dead in as much as they had no say in society. The spiritual application of such a voluntary acceptance of slavery will be discussed later. The importance here was the social problem caused by this attitude. Society strove to gain status. Here Christians move in the opposite direction. Society must have found this hard to understand. It would stand to reason that this attitude resulted in the Christian's classification as weird. This was interpreted, as other Christian actions, to be non-conformist. Non-conformity was despised in this society and hence caused problems for Christians.



So far it has been concluded that Christians were suffering. The causes of such suffering were investigated by examining the political (Roman system of government), macro social (honour and shame dynamic) and now the micro social problems (in the form of the households). In this chapter it was seen that various problems existed when subordinate members of the household embraced this new faith. The problems mentioned were:

- a. Christianity was seen as a challenge to the paterfamilias.*
- b. Christianity was seen as the cause of discord in the family.*
- c. Christians themselves could possibly have lost their paterfamilias and in so doing their inheritance.*
- d. By relinquishing their honour Christians were viewed as non-conformists.*

This completes the setting of the table as far as the problems facing the readers were concerned. Now the dissertation is going to proceed towards constructing Peter's solution: the reversal of roles as reasoning for remaining Christian in the face of hardship.