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Wives, Husbands, Children, Slaves: Forming the Faith among the First Christians

John G. Nordling

In a recent article, Peter J. Scaer demonstrates how the lawlessness and decadence of the 1960s and 1970s have paved the way for our present delusions: divorce, cohabitation, a hookup culture, and now abortion, gay “marriage,” and a generation grown up without fathers or extended families.¹ There can be no doubt that willful violations of the sixth commandment lead to the jealous God’s punishment of sinners—down to the third and fourth generation “of those who hate me,” the Decalogue says (Exod 20:5).² In a manner of speaking, our Lord Jesus Christ brought not peace but a sword, pitting son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—“and a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matt 10:35–36). This is because Jesus’ coming—swordlike—splits families asunder, some being for the Lord Jesus, and others against. But domestic tranquility, as we shall see, ever has been a most elusive item—since the fall into sin, when our first parents were estranged from each other (Gen 3:12–13), and Cain’s jealousy of Abel led the former to murder the latter (Gen 4:8–12). I would argue that not just biblical history but, indeed, all *human* history demonstrates the dismal record of families in crisis—as true now as ever it has been.

Haustafeln, Ancient Families, and Godly Submission

In this study, I shall address the original circumstances surrounding Paul’s paraenetic statements to wives, husbands, children, and slaves—as the apostle formed the faith among those first Christians mentioned in the so-called *Haustafeln*, which is German for “house tablets [of rules].”³ Thomas Winger suggests that rather than “tables of duties,” *Haustafeln* might better be translated “domestic orders”⁴—

¹ Peter J. Scaer, “Critical Theory and Intersectionality: The Abolition of Man,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2023), 39–56. See especially page 39.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

³ Richard N. Soulen, “Household Rules,” in *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, new expanded 2nd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 91.

⁴ Thomas M. Winger, *Ephesians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 632.

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i.e., the orderly *arrangement* of those diverse persons who constitute a human family.⁵ Here we can do justice to only the first, and arguably most fully worked-out, *Haustafel* in the New Testament—namely, Ephesians 5:22–6:9.⁶ Naturally, all New Testament *Haustafeln* function similarly and pertain, I would argue, to being a real Christian in the midst of those domestic relationships wherein God has placed one—whether in the first or twenty-first century AD. I need to emphasize here, however, that slavery was never intended to be part of God’s created order—whereas the family was always part of God’s plan. Marriage is given by God, defined in his very creation as one man and one woman for mutual love, for procreation, and for the raising of children (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31). However, slavery, like war, was the fruit of the fall into sin and so cannot compare to the freedom God gives to the Christian in Christ Jesus (cf. John 8:32, 36; Rom 6:6; 8:2; Gal 2:4; 4:31; 5:1, 13, etc.). Nonetheless, Paul can speak about slavery in ways that are instructive for Christian life here below, and this holds implications for godly vocation.⁷

Also, I shall be dispensing with the scriptural order of persons presented in this article’s title. That is, instead of beginning with wives (as Paul himself does in Ephesians 5:22ff.), I shall begin with the slaves and work backward from there: slaves, children, husbands, wives. I do this, first, because the ancients among whom Paul wrote could not help but think of the (extended) “family” in quasi-servile terms: the Latin words *familia* (“household of slaves”), *familiaris* (“belonging to the slaves of a house”), *famularis* (“relating to servants or slaves”), *famulatus* (“servitude, slavery”), and *famulus/famula* (“house servant, slave”) link the ancient family rather directly to slavery.⁸ Hence, in the ancient world, slavery was that social unit upon which the *paterfamilias* (“father of the house”), *materfamilias* (“mother of the house”), and

⁵ The term *Haustafel* is generally attributed to Luther (e.g., “Table of Duties” in SC, section 3), who may have popularized it from contemporary usage. See Winger, *Ephesians*, 632.

⁶ Other New Testament units that fall into the category of *Haustafeln* are Col 3:18–4:1, 1 Tim 6:1–2, Titus 2:1–3:7, and 1 Pet 2:11–3:22 and 5:1–5. See Winger, *Ephesians*, 632, which includes (in note 141) similar units in the apostolic fathers.

⁷ For which, see, for example, John G. Nordling, “Slavery in the New Testament and Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation,” in *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 137–139.

⁸ For the Latin words and their definitions, see D. P. Simpson, *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1959, 1968), 240–241. Obviously, the English word “family” is related to all these words etymologically—especially to the first one (*familia* –ae, f.), from which the other words derive. However, *familia* was not used to describe “father, mother, and children” in the common meaning of “family” today: “It did have a technical, legal usage akin to ‘family’, but in common parlance most often meant ‘slave staff, exclusive of the master’s family’” (Richard Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” in *Classical Slavery*, ed. Moses I. Finley [London: Cass, 1987], 67).

liberi (“legitimate children”) in a sense depended.⁹ Another way of putting it is that although slaves were nonpersons, and so quintessential outsiders by ancient standards, civilized persons could not help but think of communal life *as such* as somewhat dependent upon the institution of slavery and those many persons who served their masters and mistresses selflessly as slaves.¹⁰ So the Romans included slaves nearly everywhere in ancient society—and in those domestic arrangements that most resembled our own, no less. Saint Paul valued them too and so includes them in most of his *Haustafeln*. Thus, we shall make our beginning with the slaves.

A second point, related to the first, is that Paul was ever keen to structure his *Haustafeln* with an eye toward forming the faith of those Christians who constituted a congregation, regardless of social status. Hence, Paul thought of the slaves—the lowest rung of the ladder, as it were—as sharing the same faith as possessed by the children, the *paterfamilias*, and the wife, all of who participated in the liturgical worship of the congregation, which typically assembled in a domestic residence.¹¹ In his treatment of Ephesians 5:21–6:9, Winger frequently comments upon the christological nature of the paraenesis contained within this *Haustafel*: that willing subordination to one another within the body of Christ is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit, who, as it were, *inspires* the godly order that takes place between the diverse family members;¹² that all proper submission is ultimately submission to God himself, who establishes the order and stands at its head (e.g., Ps 37:7; 2 Macc 9:12; Rom 13:1; 1 Cor 15:27–28; Heb 12:9; Jas 4:7), so refusal to submit represents an attitude that arises from a sinful heart in rebellion to the word of God (Rom 8:7; 10:3);¹³ that when slaves submit to masters (Eph 6:5–8), children to parents (6:1–2), and wives to husbands (5:21–24) there is a submission to Christ himself, who has purchased and won sinners to himself by his atoning sacrifice (Matt 20:28; 26:28; 1

⁹ For the three Latin words and their respective definitions, see Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, 426, 364, 344.

¹⁰ For a lay of the land, see “The Ambiguity of Ancient Slavery,” in Nordling, *Philemon*, 44–59.

¹¹ The expression *κατ' οἶκον* refers to a church “throughout” someone’s “house” four times in the New Testament (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2), each time designating both a fellowship of believers and a place of meeting. Thus, Otto Michel, “*οἶκος κτλ.*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 5:130. More generally, the expression *κατ' οἶκον* without the name(s) of any house owner(s) occurs twice in reference to Christians meeting in houses for the Lord’s Supper and for teaching and preaching (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Thus, Nordling, *Philemon*, 152–153.

¹² The dependence of the participle *ὑποτασσόμενοι* (“being subordinate,” Eph 5:21) upon the imperative *πληροῦσθε* (“be filled up in the Spirit,” Eph 5:18) describes an activity moved by the Holy Spirit, rather than simply being a command. Thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 598, 600.

¹³ Winger, *Ephesians*, 603.

Tim 2:6; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 1:18–19, etc.);¹⁴ and that the whole point of Paul’s more extensive instruction to husbands that they love their wives as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25–33—nine verses) is that he was unfolding the “mystery” (5:32) of the gospel of Christ, for which the role of the husband in Christian marriage is a type.¹⁵ Hence, I would argue that there is a kind of progression that can be discerned by proceeding from slaves to children to husbands to wives, rather than the other way around. God intends that each family member die to him- or herself by submitting to the other, assuming one’s proper station in life, and participating in the means of grace with other Christians—most of whom occupy a different God-given vocation from oneself.

I. Slaves

Slaves [οἱ δοῦλοι], obey [ὑπακούετε] your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service [κατ’ ὀφθαλμοδοουλίαν], as people-pleasers [ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι], but as servants of Christ [ὡς δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ], doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service [δουλεύοντες] with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free [εἴτε δούλος εἴτε ἐλεύθερος]. Masters [οἱ κύριοι], do the same to them, and stop your threatening [ἀνιέντες τὴν ἀπειλήν], knowing that he who is both their Master and yours [καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ ὑμῶν ὁ κύριος] is in heaven, and that there is no partiality [προσωποληψία] with him. (Eph 6:5–9, my translation)

This instruction for slaves indicates not only an awareness that slaves were part of the worshipping congregation in the Pauline assemblies, but also that the apostle knew exactly what sort of persons he was dealing with whilst writing the instruction for them. It was “countercultural”¹⁶ for Paul to address them at all, inasmuch as they were beings without personhood and therefore regarded—in the culture and by secular law—as little more, perhaps, than an animated tool (ἔμψυχον ὄργανον)¹⁷ or a piece of property (*res*): “We compare slavery closely to death [*servitatem mortalitati fere comparamus*].”¹⁸ All the more remarkable, then, that Paul regarded such beings

¹⁴ “The divine order is for Christ to be the Savior and his people to be the saved.” Thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 603.

¹⁵ Winger, *Ephesians*, 608. Paul’s admonition to the wives that they submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Eph 5:22–24—three verses) is noticeably briefer and not as well developed as the paraenesis intended for husbands.

¹⁶ Thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 663.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.13 (1161b).

¹⁸ Justinian, *Digest* 50.17.209, citing the jurispudent Ulpian, AD 211–222. Also, “a slave [*servile caput*] has no rights [*nullum ius habet*]” (4.5.3.1, citing Paulus, AD 193–222), and “before the

as fellow baptized children of God—as being, in effect, among those “saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph 1:1).¹⁹ And yet the *Haustafel* is wise to the ways slaves “typically” behaved whilst rubbing shoulders with masters and persons of higher status than themselves: “not with eyeservice, as menpleasers [μὴ κατ’ ὀφθαλμοδουλίαν ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι]” (Eph 6:6a KJV) is how the apostle puts it, tellingly.²⁰ In the world outside the church, everyone *knew* that the only appropriate way to deal with slaves was through violence, force, and intimidation: one had literally to beat the silly out of them so they would attend to the assigned tasks upon which a smoothly running household depended.²¹ Paul was on to the game that inevitably transpired between the typically unmotivated slave (who worked only when the master was looking on, “eyeservice”) and the sadistic despot who typically rained blows and demeaning slaps upon any domestic within reach because they *were* slaves, so he could not trust them. Sheila Briggs refers to this sad state of affairs as a “discourse of evasion” that stubbornly resisted “the coercive character of slavery”; K. R. Bradley refers to it as a “form of servile resistance” to the social system “of which the slaves themselves were the victims.”²²

Whatever it was, the *Haustafel* lets on that this hellish struggle between master and slave could now be broken. One thinks of Yahweh’s tender word to Jerusalem that her “warfare is ended,” that her “iniquity is pardoned,” and that she has received from Yahweh’s gracious hand “double for all her sins” (Isa 40:2). As in Old Testament times, so in the great new age of the church a vast recompense had been paid

praetor those persons [i.e., slaves] are considered as non-existent [*pro nullo*]” (28.8.1, preface, citing Ulpian). *The Digest of Justinian* was not compiled until the early sixth century AD, although it contains the names and pronouncements of many earlier jurists (from ca. 150 BC on). For their respective dates, see E. C. Clark, “Tables of Juristic Writers,” in *History of Roman Private Law*, 3 vols. in 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1906; repr., New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1965), 156–63; Nordling, *Philemon*, 44nn29–31.

¹⁹ For the association, see Winger, *Ephesians*, 663.

²⁰ The nearly verbatim injunction occurs in Col 3:22—which represents a parallel, though greatly abbreviated, *Haustafel*.

²¹ “Romans regularly and legitimately inflicted on their fellow men corporal punishments that maimed and even killed. It is important to move beyond shock at the cruelty of Roman civilization and not to lose sight of the fact that more was at stake than physical pain: to the Romans the anguish was in significant measure social and psychological, the insult to *dignitas*” (Richard Saller, “Corporal Punishment, Authority, and Obedience in the Roman Household,” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], 151). *Dignitas* is literally a “being worthy, worth, worthiness, merit, desert.” Thus, C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879), 577. Thus, “Lamia is seeking a praetorship. And everyone knows that neither *dignitas* nor favor is lacking him [*omnesque intelligunt nec dignitatem ei deesse nec gratiam*]” (Cicero, *Fam.* 11.17, my translation).

²² Sheila Briggs, “Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation; Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 110, 111; and K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 31.

for the sins and shortcomings of all people—of slaves, as well as masters—by the all-availing sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ upon a cross, which was a servile death.²³ Now all things were “new,” Paul announces in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (cf. Isa 65:17; Rev 21:4–5)—including, one imagines, what had been the sordid state of affairs between slaves and masters in the world outside the church. Oh, to be sure, the apostle must in another *Haustafel* cajole Christian slaves not to show any less respect to masters because “they are brothers” (1 Tim 6:2), indicating that slave back talk and insubordination could well have been problems in the Pauline assemblies.²⁴

Nonetheless (and to return to the *Haustafel* in Ephesians 5:22–6:9), there was now, as a result of the gospel, a new state of affairs that could begin to exist between slaves and masters in Christ Jesus: slaves could obey their earthly masters with the “fear and trembling” of a new esteem and respect for them (Eph 6:5), as they would serve “Christ” (6:5),²⁵ doing the will of God “from the heart” (6:6), and “slaving away [δουλεύοντες]” with a good will as unto the Lord and not unto man (6:7, my translation), etc. So Christian slaves vis-à-vis their masters (and, for that matter, Christian employees still today vis-à-vis their bosses) could (and still *can*) take comfort in the fact that their “service” (work, labor, toil, etc.) was really expended as unto “Christ” (6:5) and “as to the Lord and *not* to man” (6:7, added emphasis). Of course, it requires *faith* to see it this way and to take God at his word—especially if one labored under a cruel and vindictive master. But there you have it: a *promise* (more than a mere rule!) extended by Paul to the parties involved, so that slaves could render their best work “with a sincere heart” (6:5), and with a “good will” (6:7), and masters could forego with their “threatening” (6:9). Indeed, the latter were to remember that they also possessed a Master (with a capital *M*!) “in heaven,” and that there was “no partiality” with him (6:9; cf. Col 4:1). If, as we have seen, slaves were beholden to their

²³ “All-availing” recalls the wording of the Prayer of Thanksgiving in Settings One and Two of the Divine Service: “With repentant joy, we receive the salvation accomplished for us by the all-availing sacrifice of His body and His blood on the cross” (*Lutheran Service Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006], 161, 178). For the servile death of Jesus upon a Roman cross and the significance of that death for the slaves who would have been exposed to Paul’s missionary preaching in the first century AD, see “The Servility of Christ and the First Christians,” in Nordling, *Philemon*, 111–116.

²⁴ Paul writes, “So that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled” (1 Tim 6:1b). Disrespect and disobedience on the part of Christian slaves would cause the unbelieving world (and unbelieving masters, especially) to disparage the newfound faith, whereas honorable service would have had an evangelistic effect upon the same. Thus, the study note on 1 Tim 6:1, in Edward A. Engelbrecht et al., eds., *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2076.

²⁵ “Fear and trembling” need not be correlated to the secular principle of the master’s ability to punish a slave, but could be “part of the typology” (thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 666) wherein when slaves show “fear”—that is, respect—to their masters, they participate in the church’s submission to Christ as unto God himself. In the same way, then, wives are to “fear/respect” their husbands (Eph 5:33, my translation; cf. 1 Pet 3:1–2) and children are to “honor” their parents (Eph 6:2).

masters/persons in authority, so masters/persons in authority were in a sense beholden to their slaves/dependents and responsible for them. This is not the *mutual* submission that the egalitarian Alan Padgett imagines.²⁶ Rather, it is what Winger styles a *willing* submission wherein the slaves, children, and wives freely and willingly, from hearts changed by the Holy Spirit, no less, are subject to the ones whom God desires them to be subject to—namely, to the masters, parents, and husbands, respectively.²⁷ Such may be a tough sell nowadays in modern, egalitarian America—but the offensive *ordo* is the one supported by Scripture and the one toward which it behooves every Christian, regardless of vocation, to be striving.

II. Children

Children [τὰ τέκνα], obey [ὕπακούετε] your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother [τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα]” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers [οἱ πατέρες], do not provoke your children to anger [μὴ παροργίζετε], but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord [ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ κυρίου]. (Eph 6:1–4)

This portion of the *Haustafel* is crammed with biblical admonition Paul expects the Ephesians to apply from their awareness of Old Testament precedents; however, before considering the biblical evidence, let us recognize that, as a whole, this household code offers a response to what could have been, and often was, a conflict raging between irascible *patresfamiliae* (“fathers-of-families”) and their children—especially wayward sons. If you’ve ever seen *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966 musical, directed by Richard Lester), you’re on the way to understanding correctly the tension in Roman society between fathers and dissolute young sons trying to have at their patrimony to spend on what?—love affairs with as-yet virginal courtesans, and buffoonish tomfoolery at the fathers’ expense.²⁸ Obviously, the

²⁶ See Alan G. Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), *passim*, but see especially 41–42.

²⁷ For *willing* submission (as opposed to mutual submission), see Winger, *Ephesians*, 602, 605, 607, 637. For a theological critique of mutual submission, see my review of Padgett’s *As Christ Submits to the Church*, *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, January 5, 2012, <https://logia.org/logia-online/170>. See also John G. Nordling, “Research Notes [on Ephesians 5:21],” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 3–4 (2013): 327–334; John G. Nordling, “Does Ephesians 5:21 Support Mutual Submission?,” *Logia* 24, no. 4 (2015): 19–20; and Winger, *Ephesians*, 600–602.

²⁸ The movie was inspired by the farces of the ancient Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus (254–184 BC), particularly *Pseudolus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Mostellaria*. It tells the “bawdy story” of a clever slave attempting to contrive his own freedom by helping his young master to “woo the girl next door.” See Wikipedia, s.v. “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” last modified November 22, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Funny_Thing_Happened_on_the_Way_to_the_Forum.

Plautine picture is overdrawn, and Roman fathers genuinely loved their children—as all parents generally do.²⁹ Still, allowance must be made for the awesome *patria potestas* (literally “fatherly power”) over wives, children, slaves, dependents, and anyone, theoretically, who inhabited the *domus* (“house”).³⁰ In earlier Roman times, fathers wielded the still more awful *ius vitae necisque* (“the power of life and death”) over family members. Before exacting a severe penalty, the *paterfamilias* was obliged to consult a council of relatives, but its advice was not obligatory. An abuse of the father’s rights was punished by *infamia* (“infamy”) through a decision of the censors. Later legislation in imperial times curtailed considerably the “power of life and death” until the power was abolished by Valentinian I (AD 364–375).³¹ Nonetheless, such “fathers’ rights” undoubtedly exerted an influence over every aspect of domestic life from early to late Roman times—including, as we might imagine, when Saint Paul wrote this *Haustafel* for the benefit of those Christians who read his letters at the Divine Service.

Back in the old days, so the story went, every citizen’s son was the child of a chaste mother and so was from the beginning reared not in the chamber of a purchased nurse but in the original mother’s bosom and embrace, and it was her special glory “to study her home and devote herself to her children [*tueri domum et inservire liberis*].”³² However, the fabric of Roman society began to unravel in the centuries before Christ with the importation of vast numbers of vanquished persons into the Roman world as slaves. Slaves (*servi*) were so called because commanders generally sold the people captured in battle, and thereby “saved” them (*servaverunt*) instead

²⁹ Katherine N. Macfarlane, “The Roman Family: Legally and As It Really Was,” *Social Education* 43, no. 7 (November/December 1979): 551–554.

³⁰ See “*Patria potestas*,” in Adolf Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953; repr. 1980), 621. The *domus* (“house”) did not possess the legal precision of *familia* and so was more diverse in meaning: “*Domus* could refer to the physical edifice or to all those who lived within it, both free and slave. *Domus* was the realm over which the head exercised *dominium* or *potestas*; as such, possession of a *domus* was an attribute of power and prestige” (Richard Saller, “The Hierarchical Household in Roman Society: A Study of Domestic Slavery,” in *Serfdom and Slavery: Studies in Legal Bondage*, ed. M. L. Bush [London: Longman, 1996], 115).

³¹ See “*Ius vitae necisque*,” in Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, 534. *Infamia* (“evil reputation”) not only was connected with a diminution of the estimation of a person among his fellow citizens but also produced certain legal disabilities that differed according to the grounds for the infamy. The *nota censoria* was a moral punishment inflicted by the Roman censors for misconduct in political or private life. See “*Infamia*,” in Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, 500.

³² Tacitus, *Dialogus* 28. As translated in Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 79.

of butchering them at the battle's conclusion.³³ Suddenly it was fashionable for Roman parents just to get out of the child-rearing business altogether and let the slaves take over; Quintilian advises Roman elites to choose wet nurses and childminders (*paedagogi*) who spoke Greek correctly, were of a philosophical bent, and possessed good character: "It is the nurse that the child first hears, and her words that he will first attempt to imitate."³⁴ To be sure, whippings were exacted mainly from slaves in Roman households, and only rarely from the freeborn children—usually when they were young and rowdy—nor were they ever punished as severely. Nonetheless, I think it can be said that routine violence was part and parcel of normal family life in the extended households in Roman antiquity: not only would there have been the inevitable shrieks and howls resounding through the *domus* as a result of spankings administered to naughty children by mothers, teachers, and even grandparents,³⁵ but also there would have been the hissing of a lash biting deeply into slave bodies for such trifling offenses as coughing at dinner,³⁶ flashing the master an insolent look,³⁷ failing to prepare a meal to the master's complete satisfaction,³⁸ or taking out one's fury on a slave because of a failed love affair.³⁹ Such were whipping boys "in the literal sense."⁴⁰ Indeed, many slave masters hired *tortores* ("torturers") to rough up the slaves and do the dirty work: "After all, administering a brutal beating could be an exhausting job better left to professionals."⁴¹

Into such darkness the *Haustafel* bursts, as a sunbeam lighting up a vast cavern. To return to our passage, children were to "obey" their own parents as also slaves "obeyed" their own masters—the second-person plural imperative *ὑπακούετε* occurs identically to admonish both children (Eph 6:1) and slaves (6:5).⁴² The apostle says that such obedience is *δίκαιον* ("right," Eph 6:1b)—that is, in accord with God's will (Acts 4:19; 2 Thess 1:6) and God's law (Rom 2:13; 7:12).⁴³ Here then is where Paul

³³ Justinian, *Digest* 1.5.4.2, citing the jurispudent Florentinus (AD 193–223). In Nordling, *Philemon*, 106n417, with additional evidence. For ample additional examples of battles, times, and places where prisoners of war were enslaved, not butchered, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 107n420.

³⁴ Quintilian, *Instit.* 1.1.5. As translated in Saller, "Slavery and the Roman Family," 80.

³⁵ "Punishment of a child for bad conduct was not the role solely of the father and did not require legal justification in the form of *potestas*. Mothers and grandfathers might also strike a child for purposes of discipline" (Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 161). For maternal and grandfatherly correction, see Seneca, *Contr.* 9.5.7; and Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.64.

³⁶ Younger Seneca, *Ep.* 47.3, in Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 158.

³⁷ Younger Seneca, *Ira* 3.24–25, in Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 158.

³⁸ Martial 3.94; Petronius, *Sat.* 49, in Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 158.

³⁹ Plautus, *Poen.* 410, 819, in Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 158.

⁴⁰ Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 158.

⁴¹ Saller, "Corporal Punishment," 159.

⁴² The verb *ὑπακούω* ("obey") derives etymologically from *ὑπό* ("under") and *ἀκούω* ("to hear/listen"), implying a "subordination of the ear." Thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 655.

⁴³ G. Schrenk ("*δίκαιος*," in Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:188) contends that the phrase "for this is right [*δίκαιον*]" (Eph 6:1b) in relation to the obedience

quotes the fourth commandment, about honoring one's father and mother (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16)—intended, I think, not only for an epistolary audience possessing some familiarity with Old Testament Scripture, but also possibly for a formerly pagan readership all too familiar with the ways of the world as surveyed in preceding paragraphs.⁴⁴ As a word of God's law, the statement would have both guided and condemned the hearers—the children who strove to heed their parents but found their actions fell short of God's command. However, just as Scripture presents Jesus as “the Righteous One” (Acts 3:14; 7:52), so also is he “righteous” on behalf of the unrighteous (Matt 27:19; Luke 23:47; 1 Pet 3:18)—that is, there is the real forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus to all who are penitent and believe the gospel.⁴⁵ And fathers are expressly admonished not to provoke their children to anger, but to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4)—injunctions of the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 18:19; Deut 6:7; Prov 13:24; 22:6) applied by Paul to the Ephesian context.

Again, as was the case with the slaves, the apostle envisions a scenario wherein sons and fathers are not at one another's throats (as frequently happened in the world outside the church, evidently), but wherein domestic harmony could prevail among family members—conceivably, where it had not before. This is “the first commandment with a promise,” as the code puts it (Eph 6:2), and the one to which long life is expressly attached (6:3). Paul intended there to prevail among the first Christians the situation wise old King Solomon presumed in Old Testament times: “Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov 23:22).

III. Husbands

Husbands [οἱ ἄνδρες], love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her [καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς], that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes

of children means not only that which is “right and fitting” in terms of natural law, but rather that which “corresponds to the righteous divine order enjoined by the commandment.” In Winger, *Ephesians*, 658n23.

⁴⁴ Winger maintains (*Ephesians*, 141–144) that Paul wrote the letter for both Jews and Greeks (i.e., former pagans) in the body of Christ at Ephesus. The apostle calls the Ephesians “you Gentiles in the flesh” who were at one time “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise,” etc. (Eph 2:11–12).

⁴⁵ Thus, Winger, *Ephesians*, 658.

it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound [τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν], and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love [ἀγαπάτω] his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects [ἵνα φοβῆται] her husband. (Eph 5:25–33)

Of course, Roman men could at one and the same time be slave masters, fathers of wayward sons, and heads of family units extending far back into remote antiquity. Whilst surveying slaves and children in the world outside the church, we have seen a consistent picture of Roman manhood emerge: “peevish,” “short-tempered,” “cruel,” “stingy,” and “suspicious” are words that come naturally to mind. “Lecher” and “philanderer” might well be added to this list since Roman men were notoriously promiscuous and thus capable of carrying on love affairs with married women, slave girls (forever vulnerable to their masters’ attentions), prostitutes for hire, and even prepubescent boys should the opportunity arise. For a lay of the land, consider the passages Shelton provides under the heading “Adultery” in her sourcebook *As the Romans Did*. First, under “Where to Meet,” Shelton lists the poet Ovid (P. Ovidius Naso, 43 BC–AD 17), who advises men on where to meet women and how to initiate love affairs. That would be at the horse races, where tight seating forced gallants to put the squeeze on some unsuspecting woman to take advantage of her.⁴⁶ Next, under “Deceiving One’s Husband,” more advice from Ovid on how an obviously unsatisfied matron might give her husband the slip at a dinner party, thereby permitting both her and her paramour to enjoy each other sexually under the covers of a dining couch.⁴⁷ In Pompeii and other Roman cities, corner restaurants doubled as houses of prostitution: “They were forever being shut down because of the noise, vice, and violence they bred. Prostitution nevertheless flourished throughout the cities of the empire, known to us chiefly through references to the taxes paid on the exercise of the profession. In the one place really well excavated, Pompeii, twenty-eight brothels have been identified and, scattered along back streets, another nine single rooms rented by prostitutes.”⁴⁸

For compelling evidence that Roman males could have homosexual relations with boys (or hapless older slaves who were obliged to *play the part* of boys with insistent masters), see the following:

⁴⁶ Ovid, *Ars* 1.149–151, as translated in Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 51.

⁴⁷ Ovid, *Am.* 1.4.47–48, in Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 52.

⁴⁸ Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press), 86–87. For the taxes and single rooms mentioned in the citation, see 182nn107–108.

Another [slave], who serves the wine, must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; he cannot get away from his boyhood; he is dragged back to it; and though he has already acquired a soldier's figure, he is kept beardless by having his hair smoothed away or plucked out by the roots, and he must remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's drunkenness and his lust [*inter ebrietatem domini ac libidinem*]; in the chamber he must be a man, at the feast a boy [*in cubiculo vir, in convivio puer*].⁴⁹

Finally, there was the “double standard” so decried by modern observers.⁵⁰ The Roman view, that wives were supposed to be chaste and faithful to their husbands, but not necessarily husbands to their wives, extended the older Greek view that “we have courtesans [τάς . . . ἑταίρας] for pleasure, concubines [τάς . . . παλλακὰς] to look after the day-to-day needs of the body, [and] wives [τάς . . . γυναῖκας] that we may breed legitimate children and have a trusty warden of what we have in the house.”⁵¹ Males typically married later in life, and women much earlier—so when Augustus was emperor, for example, there was a proclivity among men toward bachelorhood and the desire to avoid legitimate marriage, with its entanglements, altogether.⁵² This hardly meant that Roman men refrained from sex and led “chaste and decent” lives, however. Far from it: they had had a lifetime to play the field and

⁴⁹ Younger Seneca, *Ep.* 47.7, as translated in Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales I*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library 75 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1917), 305. A comparable text is Petronius, *Sat.* 75, wherein Trimalchio explains that for fourteen years he was his master's “favorite [*ad delicias*]”: “No disgrace in obeying your master's orders. Well, I used to amuse my mistress too. You know what I mean; I say no more, I am not a conceited man” (as translated in Petronius and Seneca, [*Satyricon*,] *Apocolocyntosis*, trans. Michael Heseltine, E. H. Warmington, and W. H. D. Rouse, Loeb Classical Library 15 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1913], 151). Both passages appear, independently translated, in Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 186 and 198, respectively. For male pederastic relations in Rome, patterned after Greek models, and the involvement of slaves, see Beert C. Verstraete, “Slavery and the Social Dynamics of Male Homosexual Relations in Ancient Rome,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 5 (1980): 227–236.

⁵⁰ E.g., Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 78; Richard Saller, “The Hierarchical Household,” 126; Richard Saller, “Symbols of Gender and Status Hierarchies in the Roman Household,” in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations*, ed. S. R. Joshel and S. Murnaghan (London: Routledge, 1998), 89; and Annalisa Rei, “Villains, Wives, and Slaves in the Comedies of Plautus,” in Joshel and Murnaghan, *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, 105n10.

⁵¹ Demosthenes 59, Theomnestus and Apollodorus against Neaera 118–122, as translated in W. K. Lacey, “Marriage and the Family in Athens,” in *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), 113.

⁵² The Augustan marriage laws penalized males who had not become fathers by age 25. Thus, David Herlihy, “The Household in Late Classical Antiquity,” in *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 18. In about AD 384, Saint Augustine chose as fiancée a ten-year-old girl, resolved to wait two years until she reached the legal age of twelve (*Conf.* 6.13). The marriage never took place (Augustine's conversion intervened), but had it done so, “Augustine would have taken a bride probably twenty years younger than himself” (Herlihy, “Household,” 17).

sow their “wild oats” with slave girls in the *domus* who were either willing or unwilling paramours; it made no difference.⁵³ So by the time the older men “settled down” (in their late twenties or early thirties), they often found their legitimate wives to be mere girls by comparison, and less than interesting. When one possesses ample amounts of money, time to play the field, and easy access to girls (or even boys) of one’s own choosing, it can be difficult to commit to but one spouse and do one’s duty. I submit that similar relational dynamics prevailed in many Roman marriages too, marred as these were by infidelity and playing the field—on both sides, by Roman matrons as well as by their dissatisfied husbands.

The Pauline *Haustafel* presumes a completely different picture, obviously. Again, the apostle likely adapts the code to a Gentile (formerly pagan) readership that possessed some awareness of Old Testament Scripture. Here is a passage the young Christians at Ephesus might well have pondered together: “Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well” (Prov 5:15). Here, wise old King Solomon is scarcely talking about hydrology in the desert. No. This is Bible-speak for cherishing one’s own wife sexually, like drinking deeply from a cistern, well, or fountain in a parched land. For three verses later Solomon states, far more suggestively, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love” (Prov 5:18–19; cf. Song 4:5; 8:14). And so on and so forth. Sometimes the Bible does not leave much to the imagination! What is clear here is that sex could be savored within the bonds of holy matrimony, and one can grow old with “the wife of [one’s] youth.” The first Christians were hardworking men and women, who would not have had time to fill idle days with illicit sexual encounters with slaves and others outside the man-woman marital relationship designed by God for Adam and Eve in paradise.⁵⁴ And in the *Haustafel* it is *the husband* who plays the part of Christ and so is responsible for keeping his wife—and, by extension, his children, slaves, and any hangers-on—in the one true faith, and on the way back with him to their one heavenly home. That seems to be the point of Paul’s statement that no one has ever “hated his own flesh,” but “nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph 5:29)—just as Christ does the church through the ministry of the word and the sacraments. Both Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are likely alluded to here, please notice.⁵⁵ The husband is to the wife, children, and all dependents as Christ is to the

⁵³ For the sexual availability of slaves in Roman households, see Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 72, 78, and Saller, “The Hierarchical Household,” 125–126.

⁵⁴ For Christian attitudes toward work that clashed with classical ideals, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 128–137.

⁵⁵ The “washing of water with the word” (Baptism) is mentioned in Eph 5:26. Then too, “Christ truly nourishes the church, even to the point of giving his very body and blood for her to eat, spreading a banquet before her” (Winger, *Ephesians*, 616). Winger presents (*Ephesians*,

church—loving her and selflessly “[giving] himself up for her [ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς]” (5:25). Here Paul uses the language of the atonement: “to give oneself for [ὑπὲρ] something” (added emphasis).⁵⁶ Winger points out how quickly the apostle moves from admonishing the husband to “proclaiming the Gospel, which is the main theme of the section.”⁵⁷ The husband’s loving of the wife mirrors—albeit imperfectly—Christ’s love for his church, where the Savior lays down his life for us sinners, washing us clean of our sins baptismally, feeding us amply in our “daily bread” and with forgiveness at the Supper (Matt 6:11), and keeping us with other sinner-saints on the way with him to our heavenly home. This “being on the way with Jesus” is a metaphor for the life in Christ that every Christian experiences as a “journey” through this vale of tears to the heavenly Jerusalem.⁵⁸

And as for the problem of a wife not submitting to her husband, which is a common problem in many Christian marriages still today, the way to deal with that, Saint John Chrysostom counseled, was for the husband to “wear down” his wife by persistent patience, kindness, and Christ-like solicitude:

Do you want your wife to be obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then be responsible for the same providential care of her, as Christ is for the Church. And even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and even to endure and undergo suffering of any kind, do not refuse. Even though you undergo all this, you will never have done anything equal to what Christ has done. . . . Even if you see her belittling you, or despising and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her. There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife. A servant can be taught submission through fear; but even he, if provoked too much will seek his escape. But one’s partner for life, the mother of one’s children, the source of one’s every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if

616n86) the following passages as suggestive of the Lord’s Supper: Ps 23:5; John 4:32–34; 6:53–58; 21:15–17; and Rev 2:7.

⁵⁶ Compare Gal 1:4; 2:20; and Eph 5:2. Comparable formulae (but using varying prepositions) occur at Matt 20:28; 26:28; Rom 5:6, 8; 8:32; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Tim 2:6; and Titus 2:14.

⁵⁷ Winger, *Ephesians*, 609.

⁵⁸ See Arthur A. Just, “The Journey,” in *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 21–25.

she were a slave, and not with a woman by her own free will? Suffer anything for her sake, but never disgrace her, for Christ never did this with the Church.⁵⁹

Still, Paul encourages a metaphorical interpretation of man-woman marriage in his statement that “this mystery” here is “profound,” and that it refers to “Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32). Such marriage is at the heart of the Christian religion and so pertains to everything that should matter to us, both small and great. It cannot be studied or preached on too much among the redeemed, especially as marriage is under such satanic attack in the world—as experienced now in modern America.

IV. Wives

Wives [αἱ γυναῖκες], submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord [τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ]. For the husband is the head of the wife [κεφαλή τῆς γυναικός] even as Christ is the head of the church [κεφαλή τῆς ἐκκλησίας], his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ [ὡς ἡ ἐκκλησία ὑποτάσσεται τῷ Χριστῷ], so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Eph 5:22–24)

Up to this point, we have seen how Roman women—like their male counterparts—could play the field, engage in wiles specific to their sex, contract love affairs outside the bonds of matrimony, and so break a man’s heart, just as some women always have done since the dawn of time. To be sure, there was an unfair double standard between men and women in Roman society; but women then were extraordinarily adept at striking back at male chauvinism, real or imagined, and leveling the playing field. That is what the erotic poetry of Catullus, Horace, and Ovid is all about.

What is not so well known in our circles is how marriage *worked* for girls and women in Roman society. Again, we have seen that girls were married off at a tender age to older husbands who rarely were interested in them as equals—which concern is of prime importance for us in *modern* marriages, to be sure. What mattered more than compatibility between equals in the original situation, however, was *the girl’s virginity*—for just this insured the *legitimate* issue upon which the nuclear family depended for its perpetuation into the future.⁶⁰ So of course marriages typically were

⁵⁹ St. John Chrysostom, “Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22–33,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catharine P. Roth and David Anderson, Popular Patristic Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 46–47. See my more extensive treatment of Chrysostom’s remarkable homily in Nordling, “Does Ephesians 5:21 Support Mutual Submission?,” 24–28.

⁶⁰ For the crucial distinction between legitimate “sons [υἱοί]” and what the ESV translates as “illegitimate children [νόθοι]” see Heb 12:8. But really, νόθοι here means “bastards”—that is, persons born out of wedlock (usually of slave concubines) in an enfranchised citizen’s household. Such

arranged between *patresfamiliae* who hoped to establish liaisons between other families that would help them economically. At marriage, the as-yet virginal girl passed from the “hand” (*manus*) of her father and into the “hand” of the new husband in a family different from her own—a legal procedure known as *conventio in manum* (an “‘into the hand’ agreement”).⁶¹ Such arrangements ensured that legitimate wives, like trusted slaves, were never quite welcome even at home in the new family—but could constitute “the enemy within.”⁶² Also, as with slaves, so a “severe cognitive dissonance” existed between husbands and wives in even the most stable of marriages, in the opinion of some.⁶³ And the tendency of Roman wives to submit to the *manus* of one’s father (and not to the *manus* of one’s husband) led to disunity throughout Roman society—and not simply for those couples who would end their marriages in divorce.⁶⁴

Thus, when marriages failed, as often happened, husbands and wives went their separate ways with not a lot of remorse nor tears shed: the dowry (*dos*) reverted to the erstwhile wife’s father (or guardian), with interest;⁶⁵ children remained with the father, not the mother, whom they might not ever see again;⁶⁶ and each (former) spouse got on with life as best he or she could—perhaps with a *new* marriage, love

could not inherit and would remain in the household as legal nonentities. See Saller, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 71–73; and Nordling, *Philemon*, 63–64.

⁶¹ *Conventio in manum* was “an agreement accompanying the conclusion of a marriage, by which the wife entered into the family of her husband and acquired the legal position of a daughter (*filiae familiae loco*) dependent upon his power (*manus*).” Thus, Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, 416.

⁶² “So too in her role as Stranger, the wife can exhibit the servile vice of treachery. This fear, though best known as centering on the figure of the step-mother, was not confined to her. Rather, since for Rome the children were the husband’s, both legally and biologically, all mothers were step-mothers, fostering another’s children” (Holt Parker, “Loyal Slaves and Loyal Wives: The Crisis of the Outsider-within and Roman *Exemplum* Literature,” in Joshel and Murnaghan, *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, 156).

⁶³ Thus, Parker, “Loyal Slaves and Loyal Wives,” 164, and secondary scholarship listed there.

⁶⁴ Jack J. Gibson, “Ephesians 5:21–33 and the Lack of Marital Unity in the Roman Empire,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (April–June 2011): 174–175.

⁶⁵ The new husband was the legal owner of the dowry and could invest it as he wished. However, he could not alienate the landed property generated by the dowry as a matter of principle—for all of it, with interest, had to be returned to the former wife’s *paterfamilias* (or guardian, in case the father had died) at the dissolution of the marriage. See Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 44, citing *BGU* 1052 (13 BC Alexandria), which documents the items he has received from Thermion’s household as a dowry, and how he will furnish his new bride “with all necessities” and “according to his means” (lines 13 and 15) available at https://papyri.info/ddbdp/bgu;4;1052lin1_34, accessed January 3, 2023. Also see “Dos,” in Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, 444.

⁶⁶ Thus, Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 21n17, which notes that there is no mention in Younger Pliny *Ep.* 5.16.1–7 of a little girl’s mother who “is perhaps dead or perhaps separated from her children by divorce.”

interest, or paramour in tow.⁶⁷ Granted, examples presented in the previous footnote feature marital goings-on at the extreme upper edges of Roman society (knights, senators, holders of high office), and lower-class marriages could be more stable, to be sure.⁶⁸ Still, it can be said that the frequency of divorce at all levels of Roman society, and the many illicit dalliances, *lessened* marriage as a social institution in the eyes of most—and even *cheapened* it. In this respect, marriage among the ancient Romans could not have been too different in its negative perception—though, perhaps, for different reasons—from its scorned position now by many in the more permissive societies of the West. Hence, it is for good reason that the author of Hebrews exhorts his readership that marriage should be “held in honor among all,” and that the marriage bed be “undefiled” (Heb 13:4); for clearly then, as now, there existed problems that could produce heartbreak and worse for Christians, and all others, in ancient Roman society.

Again, it is not difficult to see how our *Haustafel* was designed by Paul to combat the problems marriage faced in the world of that day, and to form the faith among the first—and all subsequent—Christians. Here we face the unpopular dictum that Christian wives should “submit” to their husbands “as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22) and “in everything” (5:24). An analogical relationship is assumed here: the wife cannot take on the role of head in the marital relationship because that would imply that “the church can act as her own savior.”⁶⁹ Once again, and as is typical of the other relationships mentioned in the Ephesian *Haustafel*, Paul moves quickly from talking about power dynamics between husbands and wives to Christ and the gospel.⁷⁰ So at least two things can be said regarding the submission of wives to husbands among the Christians at Ephesus. First, theirs would have had to have been a *willing*, rather than a *forced*, submission—just as, as we have seen, Paul desires slaves to submit willingly to their masters, children to their fathers, and husbands to loving their wives, even as Christ loves the church. Such submitting of oneself to another cannot take place unless a heart has been brought to repentance and faith by the

⁶⁷ See the several women to whom the eventual emperor Augustus was married (Suetonius *Aug.* 62, in Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 55, 58): Claudia, Scribonia, Livia Drusilla, and nameless others to whom he had been betrothed. Most of the named brides of Augustus also had been married previously, according to the account provided by Suetonius. And this from an emperor who would publish extremely harsh laws against adultery, divorce, celibacy, and willful childlessness! For the pertinent legislation, see Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 54–55. On divorce in general, see “Divortium,” in Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, 439–440.

⁶⁸ E.g., one Spurius Ligustinus, descended from the Sabines, was married to his brother’s nameless daughter who “brought with her nothing except her free birth and chastity” (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 42.34, in Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 256). Theirs was a fruitful marriage (six sons and two daughters), and apparently a happy one.

⁶⁹ Winger, *Ephesians*, 606.

⁷⁰ Winger, *Ephesians*, 606.

gracious activity of the word and the sacraments in the life of a Christian. Otherwise, it would have been a *forced* submission, which is antithetical to the gospel and the Christian religion.

Second, Christ is the “head” of the church and himself “Savior” of his body. As the church does not attempt to save herself, but graciously receives salvation from Christ, so the wife cherishes her husband’s self-sacrifice for her (cf. Eph 5:25, 28).⁷¹ With a husband so playing the part of Christ, she can submit to him and put all of what she has been created to be into serving her vocation—which might consist of duties that could be perceived as less than desirable in marriages then as now (1 Cor 7:4–5). There is considerable freedom as to specifics, but still a wife’s submitting to her husband need not be demeaning *in itself*—and this is the point that should be recognized now, by us, as faithful Christians in modern America. Jesus Christ has given up himself for his church, sanctified her, cleansed her “by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26). Now the church, as embodied by the wife in the marital relationship, gives her all for her Lord. Not because she has to, but because she *wants* to—indeed, because she *gets* to. It is her greatest *joy* to be a submissive wife in the marital relationship to her husband and to the rest of the family who depend on her. Some sense of this surely impelled Paul to craft this portion of the Ephesian *Haus-tafel* for wives in the way that he did. In order to help wives to be saved amid all the wrong thinking regarding marriage that was rampant in the world of that day, and to help modern wives to be saved amid all the harmful thinking regarding sexuality and marriage that is going on in our day. The godly vocation of wife and mother is as essential now in modern families as ever it has been.

Conclusion

As has been evident so far, the New Testament *Haus-tafeln* are not about more rules and regulations, by the following of which we shall bring about greater domestic tranquility. What has been shown throughout is that families in Paul’s day, as families in our day, are often in grievous estate and we cannot save ourselves. Therefore, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, sent his Son into the world to rescue sinners, including those who constitute troubled families—which might include all of us. While slavery is an institution of the fallen human world, the other vocations discussed here are rooted in creation. For all of them, Paul’s household code has much to teach us concerning Christian contentment, the dignity of the Christian no matter what his or her position in life may be, and the joy that can be found in service toward others, most especially in our families, as husbands lead and cherish their wives, and in their mutual love, care for the children God has given them. The

⁷¹ Study note on Eph 2:24 in Engelbrecht et al., *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 2026.

household codes, with their practical admonitions to godly living, would have attracted many outsiders to Christ in the original situation and so brought them into the proximity of the word and sacraments so that they could be saved. But mainly the *Haustafeln* guard each Christian's faith—so that all of us, each in his or her proper vocation, may be on the way to life everlasting with the other diverse household members into whose proximity the Lord has put us. Let us study these *Haustafeln*, then, and learn from them. God will bless us richly as we do.