

Woman's Role in New Testament Household Codes: Transforming First-Century Roman Culture

SHI-MIN LU

Dismayed and confused by constant concerns about safety for girls and exclusion of women from church leadership, Faith Martin began a journey searching for theological developments regarding such demeaning views of women.¹ Other studies of women in the church, such as Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld's *Daughters of the Church*, reveal a consistent disparagement of women since the third century.² Interpretations of NT household codes favoring male authority have often been cited to support such practices. These interpretations bear two kinds of illusions. One implies that church membership is predominantly male. The more serious concern is that presumptions of superiority and inferiority contradict the gospel message of love and grace, the good news of setting the oppressed free. Therefore, a proper theological hermeneutic of the NT household codes demands the inclusion of cultural dimensions.

Scholarship over the last few decades has offered abundant insights into the Greco-Roman world. Research has revealed that male-dominated household management had its origins in Greek philosophy, was adapted by the Romans, and influenced the household codes in a few NT epistles. Archaeological studies piece together an image of ancient social life further illuminating the cultural context of the Christian church in its germination. For understanding the NT household codes, these findings offer social, in addition to theological, perspectives.

David Balch offers convincing evidence that the rules regarding household management can be traced to Aristotle's *Politics* over 300 years before the church.³ The rule of household management stems from Aristotle's concept regarding harmony in the city-state. Harmony in the family, the basic unit of the city-state, sustains harmony for the city-state. Harmony among the members of a family is crucial for the stability of the city-state. But for Aristotle, this harmony is achieved at the cost of slavery and female subjugation. Following Jesus's ministry of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18–19), it is plausible that the first Christian communities consisted of the oppressed, surely including many women and slaves. Alan Kreider's research affirms that women indeed greatly outnumbered men in the church of the first two centuries.⁴ If the NT household codes had simply mimicked Greco-Roman subjugation, the epistles would have met resistance from church communities full of the poor and the oppressed!

Balch properly describes the church communities in Asia Minor addressed by 1 Peter as under sharp criticism by outsiders. He keenly points out that the cultural milieu of honor and shame informs the household codes in 1 Peter. Joel Green, on the other hand, highlights the subversive message regarding honor as imbedded in the whole epistle—"honor everyone," "honor Christ," "if you suffer as a Christian do not be ashamed."⁵ The

household codes in Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter all bear some tension against the pervasive Roman household rules. The consistent appearance of admonishment to women and slaves in each set of household codes signifies the importance of their behavior for church communities. A larger portion of the codes addresses women than slaves.

The NT household codes' treatment of women is one of the key elements conveying the love and grace of the gospel, contrasting with the patriarchal hierarchy dominating the first-century Greco-Roman world. As Christian women bore witness in their daily lives, transformation began throughout the social structure.

An initial investigation of the philosophy behind household management in Greek writings and this formal philosophy's impact on the Roman world reveals the debatable assertion of male superiority based on rationality. There was an intricate relationship between women's role and the cultural values of honor and harmony. Analysis of household codes in 1 Peter and Ephesians follows the initial philosophical investigation. The analysis shows that NT household codes are the Christian gospel in cultural forms. Instead of wiping away a culture due to its defects, the gospel corrects and heals the wounds caused by cultures while assuming the cultural forms. Women's role in NT household codes indeed testifies to this transforming power.

Household Management in Greek Classics

Although the majority of Plato's *Republic* concerns the construction of an ideal state, Paul Shorey notes that the theme of the book is justice.⁶ The logic behind *The Republic* is that human needs—food, housing, clothing, and the like—drive people to form a city since no one person can meet all needs (II.369B, D). Two virtues are indispensable for a city: sobriety and justice (IV.430D). Justice is "having and doing one's own and what belongs to oneself" (IV.433E). Sobriety is manifested in "the control of the worse by the naturally better part" of the soul (IV.431A). This ability to control comes from the rational side of the soul in contrast to "the irrational and appetitive" (IV.439D). Extending soberness from individual to city, soberness of a city is for the superior to rule over the inferior, as the rational part of the soul should rule over the irrational part. Without any explanation, Plato asserts that children, women, and slaves belong to "the mob of motley appetites and pleasures and pains" (IV.431C) and are ranked with those to be ruled.

Plato's theme on the constitution in *The Laws* remained the same thirty years after finishing *The Republic*. The purpose of the constitution is "effecting the happiness of those who enjoy them" (*Laws* I.631). The desired happiness of the city and of the individual continued to be "peace and mutual good will" (I.628). The dualistic division of material and spiritual with the

superiority of the latter is evidenced in Plato's two categories of the good things: "merely human" (those pertaining to physical and material wellbeing in the order of health, comeliness, bodily strength, and wealth), and "divine" (in the order of wisdom, sobriety of spirit, righteousness, and valor). His counsel for the institution of law reveals the central role of family as *The Laws* attends to various aspects of family life (IV.721).

Two observations surface before moving on to Aristotle. First, if justice means that people can live out their gifts and potential, the ruler and the ruled should receive equal treatment for they all strive to perform their duties properly even though they are endowed with different levels of authority. Second, it is questionable that rationality is the better part of the soul. The Apostle Paul also describes the inner battle of the soul (Rom 7:18–24), but the triumph does not come from power of will or "calculations of reason" (*Rep.* IV.439C). Plato's elevation of rationality leads to Descartes's statement, *Cogito ergo sum*. This is in tension with biblical teaching that human beings bear the image of God, who is the "I am" (Exod 3:14). Thus, for Christians, it should be "I am, therefore I think." This will be further discussed later. For now, we consider the supporting logic for Plato's elevation of reason and his demeaning of women and slaves.

In *Ethics*, Aristotle analyzed the human soul to affirm the superiority of the rational part of the soul "possessing reason absolutely and in itself," and laid down the theoretical foundation for his *Politics* by defining justice in light of virtue (*Ethics* I.8; V.5). He further distinguished domestic justice from political justice. The former dealt with slaves and children as if they were properties while the latter was justice for equal partnership "between citizen and citizen." Although the relationship between husband and wife was not in the same rank as that between master and slave, the hierarchy between husband and wife made this husband-wife dyad fall into the domestic category (*Ethics* V.10). Aristotle agreed with Plato, his teacher, that human basic needs drive people to form a city (*Rep.* II.369D). Aristotle also elaborated that "every state is a sort of partnership" beginning with the partnership between female and male, and that every state is composed of households (*Pol.* 1252a 1–8, 25–29; 1253b 1–14). Just as a slave is a slave by nature, Aristotle justified the subordination of women and children in light of their capacity of soul: "the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form" (1254a 8–24; 1259b 25–35). Aristotle's reasoning indeed reflects Plato's concept of justice of everyone doing according to one's ability, and the hierarchical authority according to one's capacity of rationality. This classical Greek philosophical foundation for household management carried over into the Roman Empire.

Household Management in the First-Century Greco-Roman World

The patriarchal hierarchical nature of Roman society is evidenced in its familial structure. Since the archaic period, the *paterfamilias* enjoyed unlimited power in his household, not only over family possessions but also over all household members. He represented

the family to the larger society. He acted as a priest over the cult of the ancestors. His role and responsibilities in the family are like that of the aristocracy, "composed of the most important heads of families, in the political life of the state."⁷

When Augustus brought an end to the civil war between the camps of Caesar and Pompey, he left the economic policy largely untouched.⁸ Géza Alföldy further notes that social relations and social structure of the Roman world of the first two centuries of the Empire also showed little change. Social stratification continued to be a prominent feature of Roman society.⁹ Years of warfare during the expansion of the Roman Empire resulted in an influx of wealth that created a group of "new men" who moved from lower to upper strata, even to the rank of senator.¹⁰ Part of the cost for this *Pax Romana* was the lives of many soldiers who left behind widows. A group of "new women" also emerged, who seemed to deviate from the traditional moral value of modesty.¹¹ Augustus, in his attempt to regulate wealth and the elite class, issued several edicts related to domestic matters in the name of moral reform.

Within two years, Augustus issued two laws known as the *lex Julia: lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus* (c. 18 BC) and *lex Julia de Adulteriis Coercendis* (c. 17 BC). The former intended to restrain marriage within social class boundaries and to encourage procreation. It penalized the unmarried and childless particularly through restricting their inheritance rights. The latter aimed to boost morality by exposing adultery to the public sphere through a trial with judge and jury.¹² Although the trial might have raised women's social status by removing the power of *paterfamilias* over his family members in the act of "honor" killing in the Republic era, a double standard is noticeable here: Men were exempt from this law. In addition, the dress codes for women were specified to distinguish the modest wife from the adulteress and the prostitute. Bruce W. Winter succinctly articulates Augustus's purpose of elevating the senatorial class profile through conforming their wives' lifestyle to an expected standard. In this way, a man's honor became intricately intertwined with his domestic life.¹³

The societal responses to the *lex Julia* revealed the futility of Augustus's effort to regulate morality and wealth of the elite.¹⁴ Despite the ineffective result of the written laws, these laws reveal a few facts related to women's social status. First, women continued to be ruled by men. Second, within the patriarchal hierarchy, wealth facilitated upward mobility for women. Third, a man's honor became closely knitted with his wife's lifestyle. Fourth, a man could initiate public trial in suspicion of his unfaithful wife or daughter to defend his honor, but he could no longer execute "honor" killing. Indeed, domestic life could no longer be totally private, for the law set women free from the absolute power of *paterfamilias*. If the written laws for regulating household management of the upper strata bore little success, most likely there existed unwritten agreements regarding domestic matters.

James Crouch's presentation of the evolution of Stoicism provides valuable insights to the shape of popular philosophies in the Greco-Roman world around the first centuries BC and AD.¹⁵ By the time Augustus inaugurated his campaign for

moral reform, Greek philosophy had already established a stronghold in the Greco-Roman world. Texts from philosophers of various traditions reveal Platonic-Aristotelian influence.¹⁶ The association of household management with stability of state, the importance of subordination of the lower parties of the dyads for the prosperity of household, and the moral values of modesty of women all indicate the far-reaching power of the unwritten laws. The submissiveness of the inferior parties of the dyads was assumed. As the early Christian church emerged, they must have been familiar with written and unwritten laws regarding household management.

Gospel in Cultural Forms

Examining the apologetic function of the household code through the lens of social context, Balch asserts that the author of 1 Peter exhorts the churches in Asia Minor to live up to the expectation of the larger society. Churches should abide by society's demands on the subordinate parties, as indicated in the emphasis on the submission of wives and slaves.¹⁷ Applying Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social theory regarding institutionalization and the routinization of charisma, Margaret MacDonald presents the changing functions of the household codes for the Christian communities in different developmental stages in the Pauline letters.¹⁸ Both external social context and internal group dynamics contributed to this change as the Christian communities witnessed rapid growth. She also notes the subtle protest in these epistles against the prevalent ethics of their contemporary culture. Altogether, these scholarly works provide a dynamic picture of the early church that facilitates understanding of how the household code functioned in the Christian communities, and how the early church lived out the gospel message.

These scholars rightly point out that NT household codes are an adaptation of the widespread contemporary household management schema. Since the church members came from some kind of household, they would have known the written and unwritten laws pertaining to their roles in their households. While some scholars consider Christianity a movement mimicking the trend of greater social freedom for women in the Greco-Roman world,¹⁹ the following analyses of NT household codes reveal a more encompassing purpose: expressing the gospel message of love and mercy through household relationships. The epistle's purpose goes beyond the superficial admonishment of subordination. In light of the good news, the codes set free not only women but also slaves and other household members from oppressive cultural elements. NT household codes bear the power of the gospel in cultural forms.

1 Peter: Women's Role Exemplifies a Lifestyle for All Christians

Balch is right that Christian communities in Asia Minor were among the minority religious groups who needed to defend their

legitimacy and come to terms with Roman household ethics.²⁰ The prominence of the Isis cult must have roused official and social suspicion concerning Christian communities.²¹ Slander and threats of suffering indicated in 2:12; 4:4, 12 affirm that these Christian communities were under the scrutiny of the larger society. As such, it is plausible that the church may have been encouraged to conform to the outsiders' belief that women and slaves were subservient classes. Balch's argument for the

apologetic function of the household codes in 1 Peter thus seems reasonable. However, situated within the overall theme that the church is God's chosen race, the NT household codes actually bear witness to the gospel in subtle ways. Instead of strictly conforming to the dominant Roman cultural values, Joel Green rightly contends that the household codes in 1 Peter exemplify how NT authors adapted the codes according to "the demands of their faith commitments."²² Facing the changing status of women in their time, church members—with women in the majority—were exhorted to live out their faith in Christ in their daily lives as witness to love and honor in Christ. Peter²³ did not ask the church members to withdraw at the threat of social scrutiny, but to engage the society with a new identity, a new perspective of honor, and a new attitude toward subordination.

In 1 Peter, the first redemption of the Roman patriarchal culture is the renewal of identity in Christ. The beginning two verses of 1 Peter can be easily skipped over as merely salutation, but they actually set the tone for the rest of the letter.²⁴ Peter identified the recipients to be *eklektōis* ("chosen") and *parepidēmois* ("strangers"). This identity comes from "the foreknowledge of God the Father," "in the sanctification of the Spirit," and is made possible through Jesus Christ's "obedience and sprinkling of his blood." Thus, from the beginning of the letter a special honor of "being elected" is attributed to the Christians in Asia Minor. This resonates with Roman honor. On the other hand, being "diaspora" connotes shame with trauma, refugees, and exile.²⁵

The first aspect of their "being elected" is elaborated starting with 1:3, "new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," and culminates in 2:9, that everyone in Christ belongs to a community as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." As resurrection would refer to "the divine inauguration of a new world order,"²⁶ Peter assured "the chosen ones" of an eschatological inheritance (1:4) and encouraged them to pursue "praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:7). This new identity of chosenness, with its eschatological hope of honor in Christ, provided a solid foundation for Christians to endure societal scrutiny and to bear witness to their faith as they lived as aliens (1:17) in this world.

The Jewish converts understood what "strangers" meant. They had been in virtual exile for a few centuries. How could Gentile converts who grew up in their homeland understand the

alienation resulting from exile? In 1:14–17 Peter explains that such alien status occurred not because of their physical location but because of their different lifestyle. Kreider understands *paroikous* in 2:11 as “resident aliens” and interprets this to mean “at home everywhere; fully at home nowhere.”²⁷ Due to their distinctive way of living, the early Christians did not conform to the dominant values of their time. Thus in their practice of Jesus’s teaching, they would share the same rejection as Jesus did. But the suffering would not outweigh the joy and honor of becoming a member of God’s household and the hope of eschatological inheritance. This new identity in Christ subtly challenges the hierarchical belief of Greco-Roman household management based on the portion of rationality a person possesses. The foundation of personhood shifts from rationality to God’s love through Christ’s suffering that makes everyone truly equal. The purpose of life is not the pursuit of personal happiness or state happiness, but to glorify God, with joy as a side effect.

The new identity in Christ leads to new perspectives on relationships between husband and wife. As mentioned above, the *paterfamilias* acted as the priest of the household gods. One of the signs of household harmony or peace is the religious uniformity of wife and slaves. Balch notes that Jewish and Christian slaves were the first group to reject the worship of their master’s gods for the sake of exclusive worship of their own God.²⁸ Likewise, when a married woman converted to follow Jesus, she would disturb the religious harmony in the household. Because women apparently were the majority in the first Christian communities, their allegiance to Christ deviated from their husbands’ religious practice. This must have caused negative reactions from society. First Peter tackles the issue after addressing slaves.

The imperative *hypotagete* (“be subordinate”) in 2:13 indicates “finding and occupying responsibly one’s place in society, not resignation.” It is qualified by “because of the Lord” (2:13), “as persons having freedom” and “as God’s slaves” (2:16), and differs from the unconditional obedience (*hypakoē*) to God and to the gospel (1:2, 14, 22).²⁹ For a married woman whose husband was not converted yet, her obedience first belonged to God for she had assumed a new identity in Christ. She was first God’s slave. Thus, there would be no compromise in her allegiance to God. Other than that, she continued to be her husband’s wife and under his authority in the household. Her proper roles and responsibilities as a household wife in the Roman society would not differ from her neighbors’. Thus the instruction should not be taken as a theological principle but as an exhortation for a Christian wife in a non-Christian family to minimize conflict due to religious practices.³⁰ In light of the overall instruction of “honor all” (2:17), her behavior not only meets the requirements of the Roman cultural mandate (except one), but also bears testimony to her faith.

Unlike the Platonic and Aristotelian advice of dominance regarding a husband’s relationship with his wife, 1 Peter contains instruction for Christian husbands in 3:7. It begins with the phrase, “in the same way”—the same way as described for Christian wives to honor all in the household. How did husbands

honor their wives in Roman society? They did not! But 1 Peter gives the instruction for the man to “live knowledgeably” with the women (including their wives) in his household. Drawing from a near-equivalent term in 1:18 and 5:9 regarding redemption, and the analogous adverbial phrases in 1:17, 2:19, and 3:2, Green explains “to live knowledgeably” as “informed by the character of Christ who redeemed you and the overarching purpose of God.”³¹ Without contradicting the cultural belief that women were weaker, 1 Peter exhorts that the weaker ones also receive honor instead of being marginalized. Harmony would no longer be displayed by the proper ruling order in the household; rather it is lived out in mutual honor between household members. In addition to noting the differences of Peter’s household code from the Aristotelian ones, Green observes similarities between the instructions to wives in 3:1–6 and those to all Christians in 3:14–16. Thus, household relations still model relations for the larger society. Green observes the chiasmic structure of 2:13–3:12, which wraps the household codes around the example of Christ:

- 2:13–17: instruction for everyone
- 2:18–20: instruction for slaves
- 2:21–25: the example of Christ
- 3:1–7: instruction for wives (and husbands)
- 3:8–12: instruction for everyone

As such, slaves and wives were encouraged to model after Christ, and they exemplified a lifestyle for all Christians. The status of slaves and wives reflected the status of Christians in Roman society who were without power and privilege and were under social scrutiny.³² The purpose of Peter’s household code is “not so much to take a position relative to secular society, as it is to present examples of the way Christians are to live vis-à-vis their world.”³³ Thus, women’s role in Peter’s household code is indeed one of the key elements of expressing the love and mercy of the gospel. The code not only defined the internal relationship among the members of God’s household, but also exhorted the members to live out the gospel message through their marginalized roles.

Ephesians: Juxtaposition of Husband-Wife and Christ-Church

The Christian communities in Ephesus, located in Asia Minor, would face a similar social scrutiny as those addressed by 1 Peter. MacDonald, however, positions the epistle in the context of uncertainty regarding the Apostle Paul’s personal presence. The issue of leadership succession may have loomed large in this context, for these Christian communities may not have had direct interaction with Paul. Unlike Balch’s theory of apologetic function for the household codes, MacDonald views the codes as a pathway toward institutionalization. As the growing number of Christians would require better structure for sustainability, hierarchy and order might be reinforced in the process. Adopting the term “love-patriarchalism,” MacDonald points out that, in the process of institutionalization, love still undergirds the structure.³⁴

Indeed, the teaching did not seek to overturn the existing patriarchal structure. However, the epistles revolutionized

women's status and women's role, inside and outside church, by defining their new identity in Christ, proposing mutual submission, and paralleling the husband-wife and Christ-church relationships. These practices undermined the popular mentality of the inferiority of women of the time. Through household relationships, the transformation of the cultural values began with the smallest step in the daily interaction within the household and rippled through society.

Similar to 1 Peter, the first redemption presented in Ephesians is the renewal of Christians' identity in Christ. The recipients of Ephesians were called "saints" with the quality of being "faithful in Christ" (Eph 1:1). Paul's custom of referring to them as "saints" bears the idea of being "set apart from everyday usage, dedicated to God."³⁵ The second qualification keenly reveals Paul's intention of identifying their new status as followers of Jesus Christ and being "brought into a living fellowship."³⁶ The prominence of *en Christō* ("in Christ") and equivalent expressions indicates the centrality of Christ.³⁷ As such, Paul repeated the phrase "in Christ" in Ephesians before he presented his household code. This new identity in Christ entitled Christians to their inheritance in heaven (Eph 1:14) and ensured their eschatological hope of glory and honor.³⁸ The slave Christians in the communities must have extra joy because they would have no share of any inheritance under Roman law. By claiming that Christians have honor and inheritance in Christ, Paul indeed subtly altered the social code of honor and shame, and the treatment of the marginalized.

How does one obtain this new identity in Christ? Being reconciled into one body, they stopped being foreigners and aliens and moved into the household of God. They become God's residence through the Spirit (Eph 2:11–22). The concept of household is essential here. More important is that their new identity in Christ liberates them from the old hierarchy based on their presumed portion of rationality. Unity occurs when they align themselves with the head, Christ, in the Spirit. New humanity in Ephesians is not judged by rationality, but by God's criterion—love. All enter into the household of God, the kingdom of God, and thus are all under the rule of the only *paterfamilias*, God.

The theme of "church" is so prominent that some scholars consider it the primary subject of Ephesians. Peter Thomas O'Brien nevertheless identifies "cosmic reconciliation and unity in Christ" as the central message.³⁹ Either way, ecclesiological emphasis is present. What would be the purpose of the Ephesian household code in light of this theme? O'Brien contends that even though the verb for "subordinate" is in the middle voice (*hypotassomenoi*), thus intensifying the reciprocal pronoun "to each other" (*allēlois*). The flow of argument "is not speaking of *mutual* submission in the sense of a reciprocal subordination, but submission to those who are in authority over them."⁴⁰ However, in light of the themes of unity and equality presented in Eph 2, of new identity in Christ and the exhortation of love throughout the epistle, O'Brien's interpretation does not fit well. His choice may be partly due to his understanding of unity as solely dependent on the Spirit.⁴¹ O'Brien's view represents those who insist on

male-dominance. However, Eph 4:11–16 describes a visible and growing unity when all the members of the body align properly to the head, Christ. The addition of *allēlois* actually gives more weight to the mutuality. As Andrew Lincoln notes, the mutuality comes because of the Christians' new identity in Christ. This new identity inspires a new attitude toward Christ's "overwhelming love and at his power," an attitude "in light of his sovereign claim and righteous judgment."⁴² Likewise, John Paul Heil recognizes the "submission" in 5:21 in light of believers subjecting to Christ like all things being brought to Christ's feet (1:22).⁴³ To be consistent with Green's interpretation of "submissive" as applying the active engagement aspect of subordination, the mutual submission would encourage each member to function responsibly. The result is their growing into the likeness of Christ. This surely is a more cohesive picture of unity.

O'Brien asks the right question, "Why [has] Paul placed such a heavy emphasis on the marriage relationship here in the Ephesians household table?" But O'Brien presents only half of the answer: "the harmony of the Christian family is an essential element of this oneness," in light of God's universal vision to sum up all things in Christ.⁴⁴ The mutuality in the household codes subtly challenged the pervasive cultural values, especially those regarding women's social status. The codes not only affirmed women's new identity in the household of God, but also defined a new love relationship for church members as a way to testify to the gospel message. The juxtaposition of husband-wife and Christ-church not only elevates women to a glorious position in the context of the church, it also reminds all church members of their marginalized position in society.

Conclusion

MacDonald applies "love-patriarchalism" to Pauline household codes arguing that the codes retained the patriarchal hierarchy in the process of institutionalization. However, retaining the social strata does not mean Paul intended to keep the structure. As with 1 Peter, authors of NT household codes did not aim to demolish the social structure but to define for the first Christian communities the proper relationships among the members of the communities. The first purpose was to live out the gospel message and convey the message to the larger society. On the surface the Christians seemed to adapt to the existing patriarchal hierarchy, but as indicated above, the subtle alteration of the codes in light of the new identity in Christ asserted the transformational power of the gospel in daily life. Following the Roman emphasis on family order as the foundation of social and state harmony, the transformation in family life certainly would ripple across the whole social structure.

Fear of unbridled desires, especially sexual desires, seems to be the basis for Plato and Aristotle appealing to reason as a safeguard against irrational desires. On the other hand, both philosophers recognized the desire for immortality through procreation, which necessitated the union of male and female and regulations related to this union. Neither Plato nor Aristotle denied the natural tendencies of desire, but the motivation of

regulation was to rule over these desires. They tried to win the battle by reason. Through subjugating women externally, they thought they could contain such desires internally. This desire to rule invites power and, possibly, abuse of power. Justice quickly turns into legalism that demands each person accept the status quo.

Admitting that human beings are creatures—creatures bearing God’s image—challenges this status quo. The new perspective will bring out the gifts God has given each person, female and male, young and old, slave and free. Reason and relationship are only two dimensions of who a person is. Abuse of power can be reduced because right authority and hierarchy are built upon the foundation of love. NT household codes might have accepted some forms of the household management dyads, but in subtle ways the authors of these codes altered the social honor/shame code, as well as women’s status. These codes conveyed the love and mercy of the gospel in daily mundane life, instead of a grand “constitution” like *The Laws* or *Politics*. Through the Roman Empire’s emphasis on harmony within households, NT household codes initiated the transformation not by removing patriarchal hierarchy, but by changed interaction in daily life that rippled through the Empire.

The theological admonishment for the early church should have elevated women’s status within the church communities. However, the process of institutionalization must have put more weight on male leadership as shown in the Pastorals.⁴⁵ This implies a reversal of the tide. By the third century, gifts from patrons were channeled through the bishop’s office, suggesting minimization of women patrons’ role in church.⁴⁶ This might be a sign of reducing their leadership as well. Historically, the church exhibited gradual conformation to patriarchal hierarchy. MacDonald is correct that, in institutionalization, leadership authority—male leadership authority—overshadowed the ideals in the epistles.⁴⁷ When the church emerged out of marginality into the mainstream, the dynamics between the church and the society also changed. Martin’s comment properly reflects this trend: “The founders of the Roman church were Roman men with the Roman gift of government and organization. Roman law became the basis of canon law, and the patriarchal mentality was absorbed into the veins of the church.”⁴⁸ Thus it is important to recover proper understanding of the purposes of NT household codes in light of their social context and the NT authors’ motives.

The study of NT household codes illuminates the grace and mercy of the gospel and demonstrates hope for the oppressed and marginalized. Anachronous application of the codes would only eclipse that power.

Notes

1. Faith McBurney Martin, *Call Me Blessed: The Emerging Christian Woman* (2d ed.; Pittsburgh: Spring Valley, 1998), 20–26, 58–60. Martin notices that Jesus treats women as equals. However, Christian fathers such as Tertullian blamed Eve for opening the door to the Devil and destroying the image of God. Augustine classified women in the lower, material realm while men occupied the higher, spiritual realm. Subsequent church leadership in Europe viewed women as lesser human

beings. This view persisted in medieval theologies despite the cult of the Virgin that venerated Mary. Reinforced by the Reformers, Protestantism presented a “less perfect” spirituality of women compared to men. The trend continued into the twentieth century.

2. Origen commented that Phoebe’s diaconate role was a special case needing the Apostle Paul’s validation. Hippolytus decreed ordination for clergy and not for widows, whose lot was prayer. Such evidence indicates the shrinking roles in church ministry for women in the third century. Ruth Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1987), 107–8.

3. David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Chico: Scholars, 1981).

4. Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove, 1995), 16.

5. Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

6. Paul Shorey, *Plato with an English Translation: The Republic*, 12 vols. (Cambridge: W. Heinemann, 1930), 11:xii.

7. Géza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome* (trans. David Braund and Frank Pollock; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 5.

8. Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 2:75.

9. Alföldy, *Social History of Rome*, 94, 106.

10. Alföldy, *Social History of Rome*, 118–19.

11. Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 72; Lynn H. Cohick, “Women, Children, and Families in the Greco-Roman World,” ch. 14 in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

12. Richard Alexander Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1994), 105–6.

13. Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 44. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, 12, reveals another aspect of the accusation of adultery for elite women attempting politics. First of all, “patriarchal Roman society did not like women’s involvement in politics.” Since the usual tactic of charging a political opponent with treason was not applicable for women, accusation of adultery opened the door for dismissing female political discord. The most famous case is Augustus’s indictment of his own daughter, Julia, in 2 BC. See Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, 108–9; Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 51–52.

14. The equestrian revolt was a resistance against the law’s effect on inheritance, seen as an intrusion into domestic matters over which there had been much more liberty regardless of the opposition, Augustus legislated an amendment, *lex Papia Poppaea* (AD 9), to push his agenda forward. See Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 47–49, 54–56.

15. When Panaetius set free Stoicism from pure philosophical debates of the nature of the universe to embrace moral duties especially in terms of serving the state, he enabled Middle Stoicism to engage the practical Roman mind. The Stoic theme shifted from logic to human relationships, “particularly those of family and kinship.” Greek philosophy not only slipped into the upper strata through philosophical education, but gained popularity among the masses. See James E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 56–57.

16. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 52–58, aptly notes the Platonic-Aristotelian influence in the household management writings of eclectic

Stoics such as Seneca (first century AD), Hellenistic Jews including Philo and Josephus (first century AD), and Neopythagoreans such as Bryson of Heraclea and Callicratidas (first centuries BC and AD). Winter's survey of the philosophical responses to "new women" reveals similar imprints of Greek philosophies (*Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 59–74).

17. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 109.
18. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
19. Carolyn Osiek et al., *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 2.
20. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 63.
21. The Isis cult brought much suspicion from Roman society. A frieze recovered from ancient Rome depicts veiled men (not women) in procession honoring Isis. See Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 81. Its feminist tone sharply contrasts with the androcentric Roman tradition. This became Octavian's thrust "to maintain the renown of [their] forefathers" against Antony. Despite the official effort to eliminate the Isis cult, the cult persisted and finally was tolerated. See Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 71; Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 58.
22. Green, *1 Peter*, 71.
23. Scholarly consensus regarding authorship of 1 Peter is elusive. Although pseudonymity in the NT world is a recognizable practice, in light of certainty being unattainable, I follow Achtemeier and Epp, who honor the tradition associating the letter with Peter for "its intent to be apostolic"; see Paul J. Achtemeier and Eldon Jay Epp, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 43. Likewise, aligning with the canonical perspective for "its 'authorization' of the letter and the letter's message," Green attributes authorship to Peter; see Green, *1 Peter*, 10.
24. Achtemeier and Epp, *1 Peter*, 80.
25. Green, *1 Peter*, 13.
26. Green, *1 Peter*, 28.
27. Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism*, 12.
28. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 74.
29. Green, *1 Peter*, 73.
30. Achtemeier and Epp, *1 Peter*, 209.
31. Green, *1 Peter*, 100.
32. Green, *1 Peter*, 72.
33. Achtemeier and Epp, *1 Peter*, 55.
34. MacDonald, *Pauline Churches*, 43. The term comes from Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 69–89. According to Gerd Theissen's definition, love-patriarchalism "takes social differences for granted but ameliorates them through an obligation of respect and love, an obligation imposed upon those who are socially stronger. From the weaker are required subordination, fidelity, and esteem. Whatever the intellectual sources feeding into this ethos, with it the great part of Hellenistic primitive Christianity mastered the task of shaping social relations within a community which, on the one hand, demanded of its members a high degree of solidarity and brotherliness and, on the other, encompassed various social strata." See Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (trans. and ed. John H. Schütz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 107.
35. Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 87.
36. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 87.
37. Eph 1:3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 20; 2:6, 7, 10, 13; 3:6, 11, 21; 4:32.
38. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 121.

39. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 58.
40. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 404.
41. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 64.
42. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990), 367.
43. John Paul Heil, *Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 241.
44. O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 411.
45. MacDonald, *Pauline Churches*, 207–14.
46. Osiek et al., *A Woman's Place*, 11.
47. MacDonald, *Pauline Churches*, 136.
48. Martin, *Call Me Blessed*, 49–50.



SHI-MIN LU is a PhD student of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. Her research focuses on the ecclesial integration of Confucian familism, the core value of Chinese culture that has many implications for the Chinese church. This article was co-winner of the student paper competition at CBE's 2015 conference in Los Angeles.

INTERN AT CBE



Want to gain real-world experience while engaging the issue of biblical equality? CBE offers opportunities for professional and personal development in a variety of areas:

Bible and Theology, Writing and Editing, Business, Marketing, Graphic Design, and more!

"I feared I would be answering phones or doing some other mindless busy work. But my internship with CBE was much better than I expected. I really felt like part of the CBE team.... I was able to do real writing work."

Nicholas Colby Watson Wolfe
former writing intern

CBE.TODAY/INTERN