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SLAVERY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT EQUALITY AND SUBMISSIVENESS

Michael Parsons

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INTRODUCTION

As we turn to the New Testament we confront many problems associated with its attitude to slavery. There is no programme for a new social order, as we might have expected: no suggestion that slaves ought to be freed. Indeed, we could be forgiven for believing that throughout the New Testament the institution is bolstered up by the apostolic exhortations to masters and slaves (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22; 1 Pet 2:18-25). The circumstances of human life are apparently accepted as found.¹ On the other hand, Longenecker, for example, points out that Galatians 3:28 ('There is neither... slave nor free') is an idea pregnant with societal implications. Yet, this is not apparent from the house codes (*Haustafeln*). Longenecker, himself, later describes Paul as 'relaxed and non-committal' about the issue of slavery.² Is it true, then, that the writers did not grasp the wrongness of slavery?³ Is it enough to say that to fault the early church on this point is 'evidence of unhistorical thinking' on our part?⁴

The intention of this short study is to focus on this problem in order to gain further clarity in an area which has been well researched.⁵ We first look at the fact that there is no direct comment on the wrongness of slavery and ask, tentatively, why this may be. Second, the study moves to a brief examination of the *Haustafeln* in this context. Third, the relationship between the *Haustafeln* and Galatians 3:28/Colossians 3:11 is examined.

NEW TESTAMENT SILENCE

The New Testament says nothing concerning the abolition of slavery nor of the manumission of slaves. Why does it not speak to this issue? Certainly, it seems wrong to deduce that the apostles had not solved the practical difficulties in applying the gospel.⁶ Some mystery religion groups had abandoned all distinctions; and Judaism allowed a foreign slave his freedom if he adopted the Jewish religion. So the abolition of master/slave distinction was an option open to the church.⁷ Neither should we assert that the apostles put off dealing with the problem because of the imminence of the coming End.⁸ The problem here is that the

¹ E Schweizer, *Colossians* (London, 1982) 217.

² R N Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids, 1984) 52, 54.

³ J N D Kelly, *Peter and Jude* (London, 1982) 115.

⁴ E Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, 1971) 162.

⁵ D L Balch, 'Let Wives be Submissive': *The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Chico, 1981); G E Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, 1983); J E Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen, 1972); J H Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (London, 1982); S Motyer, 'The Relationship between Paul's Gospel of "All One in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) and the "Household Codes".' (Unpublished paper presented to the Ethics Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, 1982); J P Sampley, 'And the two shall become one flesh': *A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33* (Cambridge, 1971).

⁶ Longenecker, op cit, 87.

⁷ Motyer, op cit, 22, fn 6.

⁸ For example, J Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford, 1983) 115, 120.

Haustafeln occur in the later letters, letters in which mention of the imminence of the parousia is absent.

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What are the viable answers? It may be that the apostles realised the danger of advocating abolition in a civilization in which slavery was part of the framework of its social structure. The demand for freedom had been heard before. Three wars had been fought and lost over the issue, and the lot of the remaining slaves merely worsened. The difficulty in protesting was the fact that slaves had no peaceful, constitutional way of agitating for their liberty.

There seems to be some mileage in the remark that the gospel was not primarily social and that, therefore, we should not expect direct comment.⁹ In this expectation, we may miss the point altogether. C H Dodd's comment¹⁰ that Paul 'took slavery in hand and set out to Christianize it' seems to miss the point. The apostle seems unconcerned with the institution. He is pastorally burdened for the outworking of the gospel as it confronts the concrete situation. The apostles, generally, are not making social comment on prevailing custom, they are asking the question, 'What does it mean to be slaves of Christ in this situation?'¹¹ or, 'What is the relationship between Christian freedom and social slavery?' The implication is profound. Slaves are responsible; the possibility of living a Christian life depends solely on Christ's grace—not circumstance. Masters are responsible to defend the rights of others. Christians are to be extraordinary people in the world in which they are placed.¹² The apostles sought to introduce into the new creation relationship between masters and slaves that which had been lost: namely, dignity. In so doing slavery was undermined and finally destroyed. Schnackenburg calls this 'a process of interior education';¹³ Jesus speaks of 'light' and 'salt'. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the apostles saw the implication. They wanted brother to live with brother in present concrete circumstance.

It should be pointed out that the New Testament writers are not unaware of the wrongness of slavery. Paul's list of lawbreakers includes 'slave-traders' (1 Tim 1:9-10). John incorporates slavery into his analysis of wrongs which pervade Babylon: wrongs for which the city is judged (Rev 18:13). Social comment is certainly implied in these two verses.

THE HAUSTAFELN

The starting point in contemporary studies, generally, is the freedom of Galatians 3:28, not the submissiveness demanded by the house codes.¹⁴ I see no reason that this should be so. It is sometimes claimed that the apostle's thought developed through the house codes to his more liberated position.¹⁵ However, it is clear from the unembarrassed proximity of Colossians 3:11 (no slave or free) to the *Haustafel* at Colossians 3:18-25 (slaves obey) that this is not a necessary deduction. The writer finds no incompatibility between the equality of which he

⁹ For example, R Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (London, 1975) 257.

¹⁰ C H Dodd, *New Testament Studies* (Manchester, 1953) 116.

¹¹ R P Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter, 1972) 131.

¹² R H Mounce, *Born to a Living Hope* (Grand Rapids, 1983) 35.

¹³ Schnackenburg, *op cit*, 260.

¹⁴ For example, Longenecker, *op cit*, 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

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speaks at verse 11, and the obedience which he demands at verse 22, for example. There is no hint of tension. I propose, then, to begin with the house codes and to return to the Galatians 3:28/Colossians 3:11 texts to see how we may interpret the latter through the former.

House codes are to be found in both Christian and secular sources of the day. In the New Testament the clearest examples are Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:22-6:9; 1 Peter 2:18-3:7; but there are influences elsewhere (1 Tim 2:8-3:13; 5:1-6:2; Titus 2:1-10; 3:1-8).¹⁶ Cannon defines *Haustafeln*: 'Ethical duties which are addressed to specific classes and which have to do with conduct befitting Christians in everyday life.'¹⁷

Christian *Haustafeln* have a basic structure. The form consists of three sets of reciprocal exhortations directed towards certain classes related socially together through the requirement of submissiveness. The order is generally from those pairs in closest relationship (wives/husbands) to those with the least close bond (slaves/masters). The first person addressed in each set is the subordinate one and is exhorted to submissiveness to the other. The formal structure of each pair is an address, followed by an admonition, linked closely with motivation.

The problem of the source of this material need not detain us long. Cannon outlines the possibilities. Some have maintained that the chief influence was popular hellenistic philosophy; others hold that the *Haustafeln* stem from Jewish writing; whilst others have denied any connection between the church's *Haustafeln* and those of the day. Without entering the argument ourselves it is worth noting that the Christian *Haustafeln* were clearly influenced by contemporary forms. However, though they did not originate with the church they were radically transformed by the Christian authors.¹⁸ The major differences are significant for our study.

1 The role-obligations are reciprocal

'The duties do not all belong to slaves, wives, children—the "lesser" roles; nor do the legitimate expectations all belong to masters, husbands, parents—the "greater" roles.'¹⁹ The slaves themselves are considered responsible human beings. Both Paul and Peter address them primarily as members of a community of believers: members who are to participate and to share in the common ethical responsibility of the church. This is a great advance on ethical teachers of the day who, with the incidental exceptional remark in Seneca's writing, address only the free male members of society. Slaves, then, are to obey within the hierarchical relationship in which they are placed. Obedience is not to be merely something done with reluctance, but is to be done with sincerity and wholeheartedly. Conversely, masters are to treat their slaves in the same way (Eph 6:9) providing what is right and fair. This is

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¹⁶ House codes are also found in early Christian, non-canonical literature: 1 Clement 1:3; 21:6-9; 38:1-2; Polycarp's letters to Ignatius of Antioch (4:1-6:1) and the Philippians (4:1-6:3); *the Didache* and *the Epistle of Barnabas*.

¹⁷ See Crouch, op cit, 12-13; Cannon, op cit, 105. Much of this immediate material owes a great deal to Cannon's exemplary work.

¹⁸ Contra W Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (London, 1987) 113.

¹⁹ A Verhey, *The Great Reversal* (Grand Rapids, 1984) 68.

articulated in the context of community, not in the context of the individual's rational acceptance of his role. In other words, each is to treat the other as a responsible human being in relationship—in this they are entirely equal.

2 The relationship is motivated by faith

That the slave and master stand in a hierarchical relationship is not questioned. However, the apostles motivate equal obligation within that structure by exhorting each member to live by faith. The repetition of 'Christ' and its equivalents is not a pious irrelevancy in the text—it is Jesus who provides intelligibility to the situation. It is remarkable that in the Ephesian *Haustafel* concerning slaves and masters the former are reminded of the Lord four times in as many verses. In the corresponding three verses of Colossians the apostle mentions Christ four times. Peter's exhortation expands to five verses concerning the Lord's example in suffering. Slaves are first of all, then, slaves of Christ; they work for him because ultimately it is he who rewards and punishes men. Masters, on the other hand, are to realise their position before Christ, the judge of all. They have a master in heaven. The significant thing again is an assertion that before Christ all are equal. Paul makes this explicit: the Lord's reward comes to everyone, 'whether he is slave or free' (Eph 6:8). Equality is not dependent upon social status, but upon creation reasserted in re-creation.

This noteworthy conclusion appears from the general contexts in which the *Haustafeln* occur. Paul's message to the Ephesian church is that Christ has come to make all one in him. The striking context of the Colossian house code is worth noticing. The truth of Colossians 3:11 is the very point Paul is putting across. As those who are already risen with Christ (3:1) the Colossians are now to live with each other in peace (3:15-17) as is befitting the church. The ethical exhortations of the *Haustafel* give instruction on how to thus live. Notice, the apostle says nothing of the hierarchical nature of the relationship. Christ is the controlling centre of Paul's thought and he exhorts submission in a hierarchical structure within the context of genuine equality.

What can we say about the function of the *Haustafeln* in the New Testament? It is going to vary in each writer's use. To give a blanket answer to cover every occurrence is to minimize the genius of the authors who are involved in creatively using traditional material for specific pastoral purposes.²⁰ The Ephesian and Colossian *Haustafeln*, for example, are clearly written to those within the church. No account is taken of those outside. It is generally supposed that the apostle is speaking to situations of, at least, potential disorder in the churches. Some have apparently wrongly interpreted Paul's message of freedom

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to include the breaking of all social order. Cannon speaks of a call to order in an unruly church.²¹

On the other hand, the Petrine *Haustafel* is directed to those slaves who have pagan masters. It does not speak directly to masters at all. This observation suggests a different function. Elliott

²⁰ Elliott, op cit, 208.

²¹ Cannon, op cit, 125f; Crouch, op cit, 157.

works out the function of this modified house code within its specific context.²² He identifies the recipients as both estranged and seeking what he calls 'at-homeness'. As the household image grew in significance for the early church, believers were 'encouraged to consider their new communal identity and the mutual obligation which this implied as determined by the fact that they were now "members of the household of faith".'²³ Elliott further notes the unusual prominence given to the instructions to slaves in the letter: they appear first, before wives and husbands. There is no mention of masters' obligations and the whole exhortation moves into a lengthy consideration of the sufferings of Christ. *The slave has become a paradigm*. What is said of the *oiketai* is typical of the condition and vocation of all the household. Unlike Paul's writing, concerned to maintain discipline and order, Peter employs a modified *Haustafel* to address those facing suffering as a result of unfounded Gentile slander and seeks to maintain internal cohesion within the sectarian group.²⁴

Whatever the overall function of the particular *Haustafel* may be, it is certain that the relationships between slaves and masters is explained by their relationship to Christ and that correspondingly new behaviour is expected from believers in that social situation. The slaves are not to presume on their new position in Christ and make it an excuse for serving their masters with less application to the task. Conversely, the masters are not to think of their slaves as anything less than responsible human beings. They are their equal in Christ. Both parties are to rid the hierarchical relationship of feelings of antagonism, of superiority and inferiority, and of dehumanizing pride.

3 Galatians 3:28/Colossians 3:11 and the *Haustafeln*

Already we have seen that the apostles are seeking to humanize relationships which in the society of their own day had become battlefields of contempt and antagonism. We have seen that the dynamic of apostolic instruction is not towards the dismantling of hierarchical structure, but against mutual opposition and polarity within that relationship. Men regain a sense of their equality when they stand together in Christ. This is also the message of Galatians 3:28.

However, Galatians 3:28 is customarily seen as being in some sort of opposition with the directions of the house codes. There are a number of possible approaches in this context²⁵ but all imply that the *Haustafeln* represent elements essentially out of character with the Christian gospel. It is said by some scholars,²⁶ for example, that Galatians 3:28 is

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Paul's eschatological conclusion, and that the house codes lie in tension with that, much as the 'already' exists in conflict with the 'not yet' of Christian experience. In other words the theology of freedom belongs to the New Age; submission to hierarchical structure is the result of living in the Old. Ziesler, for example, says, '...the theological realities of the New Age are

²² Elliott, op cit, ch 4.

²³ Ibid, 189. 'For Christians... the oikos constitutes not simply an additional form of social identity and religious allegiance alongside others... The Christian oikos is rather a decisive alternative ... membership of the former involves conflict with and critique of the latter.' (194)

²⁴ Ibid, 206.

²⁵ Motyer, op cit, 4-9.

²⁶ For example, Ziesler, op cit, 113-121; Motyer, op cit, 18f.

already undermining... inequitable, discriminating and hierarchical foundations.²⁷ Clearly, there is some truth in this, but one or two problems in the idea militate against holding it as the final word.

a It assumes that hierarchy is necessarily discriminating and unfair. If this were the case we would expect the apostles to argue against hierarchical structure. They do not. On the contrary, they show that there is a cosmic hierarchy (1 Cor 11:3). The *Haustafeln* show that submission to authority in both the church and at home is required. It is not hierarchy which is unchristian, but sinful discrimination within the structure that is unbecoming of the gospel.

b It posits a tension between Galatians 3:28 and the *Haustafeln* which is unwarranted. The tension is created by the choice of starting point. If we interpret Galatians 3:28 from the submissiveness enjoined in the *Haustafeln* as being compatible with Christian living we do not need to assume conflict. This conclusion is fully in agreement with the close, unabashed use of the idea of liberty (Col 3:11) only a few verses previous to the *Haustafel* of Colossians 3:18.

c It appears to hold that the three phrases in Galatians 3:28 are completely parallel ideas: Jew/Greek; slave/free; male/female. This is not the case. For example, one is born a Jew or one is not, one is born a man or a woman (significantly not husband and wife here) but one's status as slave or free is not entirely due to birth. Given that a slave's son became the property of the slave's master, it must be remembered that changes in status were not uncommon. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that the apostle is not here concerned with one's masculinity or femininity, nor with one's freedom or slavery as such, but with something else.

d It is clear, also, that the three phrases, as they stand, declare something that is the case now: 'You are all sons of God' (Gal 3:26). 'The three statements, extremely concise as they are, name the old status of the baptised and declare this old status abolished. By implication a new status is claimed. It is significant that Paul makes these statements not as utopian ideals or as ethical demands, but as accomplished facts.'²⁸ However, it is quite impossible to maintain that the apostle is saying that ethnic, social and sexual differences vanish on becoming believers. Clearly, this is not the case. The apostle directs his thinking against the kind of relationships maintained between these pairs in the society of his day. On the basis of created equality, he proclaims that in Christ barriers of inhuman mutual antagonism,

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divisions of hostility, chauvinism, the corrupting attitudes of superiority, have been destroyed. He is seeking to humanize the relations between various classes whose unity is undermined by social prejudice. Unity and equality do not demand uniformity, of course: 'slave and free remained what they were... Paul brings the relationships between (them) under the criticizing and transforming light of his new discernment.'²⁹

²⁷ Ziesler, op cit, p 121.

²⁸ H D Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia, 1979) 189.

²⁹ Verhey, op cit, 114.

To state this is not to say that Paul saw nothing wrong with slavery itself. Perhaps, before the apostles could condemn the institution and call for its abolition it was necessary for them to convince their churches that slaves were equal and responsible human beings.

CONCLUSION

First, we can see that the apostles used the contemporary form of house codes in their ethical instruction with creative and imaginative pastoral insight. Keeping the idea of order and submission, the New Testament writers show by their motivation and expectations that slaves and masters are equal in standing in Christ and are equally responsible to him. Paul employs the *Haustafeln* to emphasize that liberty does not mean disordered and unruly behaviour. It may mean the transforming of the relationships within hierarchical structure. Peter draws the church together in unity within the context of suffering. Second, there is a need to begin with the *Haustafeln* and then to proceed to Galatians 3:28. We thereby see that the ideas of equality and hierarchy are not incompatible within the influence of the gospel.

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