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THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN THE PURPOSES OF GOD: AN INVESTIGATION AND APPLICATION OF THE INSTRUCTIONS IN EPHESIANS 6:1–4

Benjamin Sear

Fatherhood is much misunderstood and maligned in the twenty-first-century West. This article provides a biblical theological overview of the role of fathers in Scripture, with a particular focus on Ephesians.

Ephesians 6:1–4 instructs fathers to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. We wish to determine the force of these commands and their implications in considering how fathers relate to their family. These are important considerations in a time that wrestles with the place of authority in relationships and the role of others in nurturing the faith of children.¹ What are God’s purposes for fathers and what is the nature and significance of New Testament Christian families? Can we still use covenantal language? This article will examine these questions via a “theological exegesis” of Ephesians 6:1–4 in light of the broader revelation of Scripture. Firstly, human fatherhood will be examined within the Old Testament using a canonical-contextual approach.² Secondly, we will perform a close exegetical reading of Ephesians 6:1–4, taking into account its context within the letter and its first-century Hellenistic environment.

¹ By this we refer to the particular roles of, for example, Sunday Schools/ Junior Church, Youth and Children’s Workers and Family Workers (which we think are all extremely valuable) alongside the role of parents in raising children in the Christian life.

² In this we identify with a covenantal, redemptive-historical approach, as espoused by Michael Horton. The canonicity of Scripture is by virtue of its divine authorship and unifies and culminates in the person of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. This model accounts for the one and the many in Scripture, namely a unity around Jesus Christ within the diversity of different covenantal administrations of God’s kingdom, as revealed within the divine discourse of Scripture. For more on this method, see Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 147–264 and Michael S. Horton, “Interpreting Scripture by Scripture,” *Modern Reformation* 19.4 (2010).

Fatherhood Revealed in the Old Testament

We will examine fatherhood and the central place of families in God's purposes in the Old Testament in relation to creation and the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. This is important if fatherhood transcends the situation of God's covenant people and will therefore inform the calling of fathers in our primary text, Ephesians 6:1–4.

Familial Likeness

Fatherhood is at the heart of God-ordained human life within the context of marriage of those created in God's likeness.³ Earthly dominion and service of God was given to people in relationship and Genesis 4 and 5 reveal that the birth of children is a gift of God and that children are born in the likeness of their parents.⁴ Pre-fall, one assumes both likeness and loveliness, growing up in their father's likeness and in harmony in the likeness and service of God, reflecting Trinitarian other-personned love.⁵ However, the fall gave rise to disordered love and sinful sons, exemplified in the murderous Cain.⁶ In God's grace life continued, but humanity was thereafter in need of a saviour.⁷ These texts in Genesis show us that the human father/child relationship was established in the original creation order.

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 30. See Genesis 1:26–31 and 2:18–25.

⁴ Genesis 4:1 and 5:1–5.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 255–256.

⁶ Adam's failure to prevent Eve from eating the fruit and the subsequent Fall led to these disordered relationships, as seen in the curses of chapter three and Adam and Eve's shame. This role of responsibility is seen in the broader biblical data that describes humanity as being in "Adam" through which sin and death was introduced into the world and to all. As covenant head, it appears as though Adam was charged with instructing and preserving harmony and righteousness in family life.

⁷ The fall brings a universal break between creature and creator, see Romans 3:9–18. It also leads to broken/distorted relationships between family members including husband and wife, bringing children into the world and ultimately the way offspring and descendants relate to each other, as seen in the case of Cain and Abel, see Genesis 4.

Families in the Plan of Redemption

Families immediately become a centre-point for God's plans of redemption, as God promises to undo Satan's work through a descent of Eve (the *protoevangelium*).⁸ The story of Noah is an example of God saving through family solidarity where Noah's righteousness, leadership and obedience provide a means for himself and his family to escape the flood.⁹

This familial trend continues in the Abrahamic covenant of grace that will bless Abraham, a nation and all families of the earth through a promised "seed" as God continues to work out his redemptive plans.¹⁰ This was for Abraham and his household who were to appropriate the covenant by faith.¹¹ Israel's election hinges on the Abrahamic Covenant, but their dwelling in the land depended on their obedience to a new covenant (Mosaic) where God's law was articulated at Mount Sinai.¹²

⁸ Genesis 3:15.

⁹ The flood narrative of Genesis 6:5–9:29. There is a strong sense of family solidarity here, though Waltke helpfully observes that there is no "imputation" of Noah's righteousness, they were responsible for their own sin and would have to appropriate Noah's faith as they entered the ark. Bruce K. Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 156. See Ezekiel 14:14; 18:20 for individual responsibility for sin.

¹⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 314–317. See Genesis 12:1–3. This covenant focusses on the provision of land, a great nation and the blessing to the whole earth through the promised seed of Abraham. As a covenant of grace it will ultimately be fulfilled by God, but there is a condition of obedience for those who would remain within the blessings of that covenant. Abraham was justified by faith, but the blessings of the covenant (which look forward to fulfilment in Christ) are his and his descendants' (family's) by virtue of the obedience in faith that Abraham showed.

¹¹ Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 234–267. This covenant was represented by circumcision, a reminder of God's faithfulness and subsequently the call to live righteously before God (circumcised hearts).

¹² We believe that the broader canon of Scripture reveals that the Mosaic Law was always intended as a temporary "guardian" of God's people (Galatians 3:23). It was intended to instruct Israel about how to live a holy and righteous life in that context, reflecting the law in creation. It was also implemented to reveal sin and our need of the grace of God. As a covenant of works, Israel's dwelling in the land depended on their obedience. The Mosaic Law is typological in the sense that it reveals the need for a perfectly obedient Israel (Christ), an ultimate sacrifice that will deal with sin (Christ) and the one who will tabernacle with us and draw us into

As we approach our text in Ephesians, we see that family solidarity has been a key aspect within God's purposes.

Fatherhood within the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenant

God acts as a father towards the people of Israel corporately. Yet God's plan for humanity is centred on human families, which we argue served as the primary arena (unit) for covenant life and broader stability within the covenant people.¹³ We will consider the role of fathers by examining the Abrahamic and Mosaic/Wisdom literature.¹⁴

Enculturation of the Covenant Way

A father was to bring about enculturation of the covenant way of life.¹⁵ This is seen in Abraham's calling to "charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice," passing on the covenant through the generations.¹⁶ In the Mosaic Law, the covenant way of life is summarised in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. This called Israelites to love God with their entire lives and to bring their children up to love God too.¹⁷ God's law was to become part of the "fabric of life and conversation" and is immediately

permanent and unshakeable relationship with God (Christ). Therefore, the Mosaic Law shows us that the promises made to Abraham were only going to be fulfilled by a gracious act of God, which is fulfilled in Christ.

¹³ Chris Wright, "Family, Covenant and Kingdom of God: Biblical Reflections,," *Transformation* 19.1 (2002): 14.

¹⁴ We are including the Wisdom Literature (which we define as Job, Proverbs, Songs of Solomon and Ecclesiastes) with the Mosaic Law, because in one sense wisdom literature reflects the wisdom/order that God has bestowed upon creation as a reflection of his nature and moral character. The Mosaic law itself is a reflection of this natural, moral law and the wisdom literature (though rarely referring to covenant) can be considered as covenant ethics lived out. Cf. Chris Ansberry, "The Wisdom Literature: Introductory Matters" (lecture presented at the Wisdom Literature Course, Oak Hill College, 2013), 2.

¹⁵ He was the "guardian of the law." Bertram, "παῖδες," *TDNT* 5:604.

¹⁶ Walke, *Genesis*, 269. See Genesis 18:19, Exodus 12:26, 13:14; Deuteronomy 4:32; 6:7, 20.

¹⁷ Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 180. See also Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 169–170. Block helpfully highlights that "heart, soul and might" are better interpreted heart (will), entire person and substance (resources). It is literally all of ourselves and all we have with which we are to love God. Block, *Deuteronomy*, 182–184.

set in the context of families.¹⁸ There was no record of schools at this point in Israel's history and the term for education was not broadly used, so the home was the focal point for teaching the way of life, shaped by the Torah and God's holiness.¹⁹ This was a responsibility primarily for the father, reflected in the Wisdom Literature.²⁰ Proverbs 1–9 contains persuasive rhetoric from a father to encourage his son to live a life shaped by the fear of the LORD.²¹ Corporate celebration and service was part of this enculturation, particularly the Passover celebrations, which were domestic, corporate and included children.²²

Raising Children with Genuine Authority

Fathers could expect honour and obedience.²³ Children were to honour and obey their parents. This was a command born out of the holiness of God (Leviticus 19:1–3), clearly mandated in the Decalogue and developed as something right, wise and loving to do.²⁴ As mediators of God and his covenant, honouring one's parents was akin to honouring God himself.²⁵ Discipline was important if children were to live righteously, reflecting God's discipline, who disciplines the "son in whom

¹⁸ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, ApOTC 5 (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 142. Whether taken literally or metaphorically, the call to have law represented on the hand, head, doorpost and gates, shows that the law (in love) was to characterise the individual, home and community in all of life's aspects. See Deuteronomy 6:6–9. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 170–171.

¹⁹ Genesis 18:19, Exodus 12:26, 13:14; Deuteronomy 4:32; 6:7, 20. This would also have included practical skills such as trades, see Waltke, Genesis, 269 and Bertram, "παιδεία," *TDNT* 5:603.

²⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 117.

²¹ Glenn Pemberton, "The Rhetoric of the Father in Proverbs 1–9," *JSOT* 30.1 (2005): 67–69. See Proverbs 1:7; 9:10, Ecclesiastes 2:26; 12:13–14. The book of Proverbs appears to adopt a similar style to other Ancient Wisdom literature, such as "The Instruction of Amen-em-Ope" which helps us to understand its form as conversational wisdom passed from parents (particularly a father) to their children. See Bruce Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *BSac* 136 (1979): 221–38.

²² Exodus 12:21–28.

²³ This honour due parents is seen much earlier in the Old Testament data, an example being the dishonouring of Noah by his son, Ham. See Genesis 9:20–28.

²⁴ See Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Leviticus 18:7–14; 19:3; 20:9; 20:19, Deuteronomy 22:21; 22:29; 27:16, Proverbs 4:1; 10:1; 15:20.

²⁵ Failure to do so could result in stoning, death or curse. See Deuteronomy 27:16.

he delights.”²⁶ Honouring one’s parents can make the difference between life and ruin.²⁷

Provide Protection and Provision

The provision of inheritance is a major theme.²⁸ There is the call to protect and provide, including, for example, protection against injustice.²⁹

Father with hope for their Children and Future Generations

All of God’s purposes and blessings rest in his grace. As the Old Testament unfolded, God continued to provide confidence that he would be faithful to future generations and, within these promises, parents went about their duties.³⁰ This didn’t guarantee believing children (it’s for those who appropriate the covenant), but they could trust the grace and faithfulness of God to continue.

Therefore, fathers were primarily to be faithful Israelites themselves, but had a divinely ordained mediatorial role of representing God to their children, seen in the honour they were due. Fathers were God’s agents to bring up children in the covenant way by modelling and teaching them to love God and live in harmony with his statutes, ensuring the continuation, stability and holiness of the covenant people in the land.³¹

The Context of Ephesians 6:1–4

Before performing an exegesis of our primary text (Ephesians 6:1–4) we will examine the text’s context within the letter and comment on the nature of these instructions to Christian families.

²⁶ Proverbs 3:11–12.

²⁷ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 158–159. Compare Proverbs 4:20–23 with 5:3–6 and the promise of long life in the land in Deuteronomy 5:16.

²⁸ Inheritance has a very broad scope in Scripture, including in relation to God. God provides an inheritance of the land for Israel (Numbers 18:20; 26:53), himself as an inheritance for them (Deuteronomy 10:9) and describes Israel as his inheritance (Deuteronomy 4:20). To be outside this inheritance meant you were not one of God’s people.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 22:15.

³⁰ Psalm 102:28; 103:17–18, Isaiah 65:23 and other passages that look forward to the new covenant such as Ezekiel 37:24–26 and Isaiah 59:21.

³¹ See Deuteronomy 4.

Reconciled and Adopted in Christ, the Message of Ephesians

The letter to the Ephesians is addressed to the saints that have faith and are in Christ Jesus.³² The Father has reconciled a people to himself and each other by forgiveness of sins through redemption in the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.³³ This reconciliation, which is fully realised at Christ's return is the fulfilment of the Covenant of Redemption.³⁴ Ephesians depicts a new community of Jew and Gentile in covenant with God through Jesus Christ, a body of brothers and sisters in Christ, called to be holy and blameless for the praise of his glory.³⁵ A community called to lives of unity, purity and harmony, growing into maturity in Christ and displaying God's wisdom to heavenly authorities and the world.³⁶

Christian Tradition in the Household

Paul's instructions to the new society culminates with instructions to the familial household, 6:1–4 being the second part of a Christian "household code" or *Haustafel* (HT).³⁷ The example in Ephesians has particularly strong correlation with the HT in Colossians and is one of two types of Christian household, namely familial households and the household of God.³⁸

The use and nature of HT in Scripture is debated. It is recognised that pre-existing forms of HT existed that dated from Greek Philosophy and may have influenced Hellenistic Judaism and subsequently Christianity.³⁹

³² Ephesians 1:1–2.

³³ Ephesians 1:3–10; 1:2; 2:15–16; 4:1–3; 6:15, 23.

³⁴ Christ is the redeemer promised in Genesis 3:15, the seed of Abraham who blesses the world. He is also the true and righteous Israel who lives faithfully towards his Father and through which a people are adopted as God's sons by virtue of Christ's true sonship, fulfilling Israel's election as the first-born in the Old Testament.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27; 10:14–17, 1 Timothy 5:1–2, John 19:26–27.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin's Bible Commentaries: Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. John King (Forgotten Books, 2007), 237. See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 64–69. Stott's breakdown of the letter is helpful: (i) The New Life we have in Christ (1:3 - 2:10), (ii) The New Society we have in Christ (2:11 - 3:21), (iii) The New Standards: Unity and Purity (4:1–5:21) and (iv) The New Relationships: Harmony in home and hostility to the Devil (5:21–6:24). See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 25.

³⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians, Paideia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 136.

³⁸ See Colossians 3:18–4:1.

³⁹ Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, WUNT 155 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 165–167.

In Aristotle's *The Politics* he argued that one should investigate the state beginning at the smallest part, the household.⁴⁰ This examined marriage, as well as master/slave and father/child relationships.⁴¹ A well-ordered household equated to a well-ordered society, with the father leading and maintaining harmony.⁴²

Best argues that the HT in Ephesians was poorly transferred from such pre-existing forms without consideration, lessening our need to pay attention to it.⁴³ However, we argue that, even if borrowed, Christian HT's are unique in precise form and the motivational force behind them is what shapes our response to them.⁴⁴ In the case of 1 Peter 2:13–3:7, the HT may have been devised as an evangelistic/apologetic strategy.⁴⁵ In Ephesians however, solidarity of the Christian household is assumed and is shaped in a couple of ways, namely by the acknowledgement of the Fatherhood of God and reverence for Christ, that distinguish it from HT templates:⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 357.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 25 and Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 136–137.

⁴² PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 127.

⁴³ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 523–526. Best argues this because of the ease by which the HT can be detached from the text without a great loss of continuity, its style and its pastoral inadequacy. He argues that the HT fails to address many potential family scenarios.

⁴⁴ This also applies to other areas of Scripture where there are disputes over the use of pre-existing literary forms, such as lists of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. For an excellent assessment see Anthony Thiselton, "Vice Lists, Catechesis, and the Homosexuality Debate," in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 440–453. Thiselton argues that pre-existing forms do not negate the force of Paul's argument, which is seeking to present a way of life that is fitting for those as the community in/under Christ Jesus.

⁴⁵ The context is about living in a Pagan society and the HT was likely composed to instruct Christians how to live in a way that was Christ-like and distinctive, yet called for the honouring of certain relationships and to refrain from disruptive behaviour that would bring unhelpful criticism to Christianity. See Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 358.

⁴⁶ John Barclay, "The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 76.

The Archetypal Father, Ephesians 3:14–15

As Paul prays for their Christ-like maturity, he prays to the Father from whom “every family” (πᾶσα πατριὰ) in heaven and earth derives its name.⁴⁷ What is the function of this address? The statement reveals that all families in heaven or earth owe their existence to God the Father.⁴⁸ The term πατριὰ can refer to the family as a whole, but also plays on “father” (pater) which emphasises paternal descent, the idea of common ancestry in the Old Testament.⁴⁹ One finds emphasis therefore that God the Father is the source of all families and the archetypal Father, from which all fatherhoods are derived and are likely to share some degree of transcending commonality.⁵⁰ This correlates well with God the Father being creator of all, but also with God the Father as the origin of fatherhood as a particular act. Lineage is a divinely-ordained gift; those who went before us and the continuation of God’s church rest in God’s grace.⁵¹

Given that Paul is articulating the standards for God’s new society, we shouldn’t be surprised of a reminder that family life, lineage and fatherhood are given and shaped by God and that we should seek to live in a way that mirrors the Father’s perfect fatherhood.

Subjecting to one another out of Reverence for Christ

The Christian household is also shaped by Christ. 5:21 appears at the end of Paul’s instruction for corporate worship and begins the HT material. The call to be “subject to one another” (ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις) is the fourth in a string of participles that modify the imperative in 5:18

⁴⁷ There is debate over whether Paul is referring to Jesus or the Father, however “Father” is to be preferred because of the use of πατέρα and that Paul is praying, an act usually towards the Father, through the Son.

⁴⁸ The prayer also acts as an encouragement, because we pray to the one who has authority over all life. We also see that the building up of the household of God is a Trinitarian work. The families to which Paul refers is up for debate. Stott argues that Paul is referring to the “whole family,” as a reference to our unity in Christ and therefore to all believing families, whether alive today or those departed. See Stott, *Ephesians*, 133. However, it more likely refers to “every family” (there is no definite article) whether earthly, or heavenly (angelic). See O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 256. Earlier, the letter distinguishes between the two realms, both of which will be brought under Christ. See Ephesians 1:10; 3:10.

⁴⁹ See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 227 and Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 474–475. See Exodus 12:3; 1 Chronicles 23:11, Exodus 6:17, 19; Numbers 2:34.

⁵⁰ Stott, *Ephesians*, 134.

⁵¹ Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” 76.

to be “filled with the Spirit.”⁵² For some, this sequence of participles is one argument in favour of not associating this verse (5:21) with the following HT. They also argue that the mutual submission in this text is incompatible with household relations of genuine authority/obedience.⁵³

We argue that 5:21 links to the corporate household but begins a section of its own, modifying the instructions given to families. This is especially clear in 5:22 which relies on 5:21 to supply a verb.⁵⁴ A transition from corporate to familial households is natural given that the household was commonly the place for gathered worship and Paul appears to be presenting the household as an extension (and basic unit) from the corporate covenant people. In addition, we deny that “mutual submission” is mutually exclusive with personal relationships that conform to a pattern of norms. Thielman notes that the theme of submission permeates 5:21–6:9 and that there is an emphasis on recognising one’s God-ordained position that all submit to one another in Christ, because all are ultimately living for him.⁵⁵

Fatherhood Revealed in Ephesians 6:1–4

We will now perform an exegesis of our primary text, taking into consideration the nature of fatherhood revealed in the Old Testament data and the letter’s first-century Hellenistic environment, in order to understand Paul’s instructions to families and fathers in particular.

The Structure of Ephesians 6:1–4

Hoehner helpfully breaks down the section as follows:⁵⁶

1. Responsibility of children’s obedience (6:1–3)
 - a. Imperative: obey parents (6:1a)
 - b. Reason: it is right (6:1b)
 - c. Motivation: Old Testament command and promise (6:2–3)
2. Responsibility of father’s care (6:4)
 - a. Negative: Do not provoke to wrath (6:4a)
 - b. Positive: Care for them (6:4b)

⁵² Best, *Ephesians*, 515.

⁵³ See Best, *Ephesians*, 515–517 and Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 131–132.

⁵⁴ ὑποτασσόμενοι in 5:21 supplies the verb for 5:22.

⁵⁵ Thielman, *Ephesians*, 373–374. Perkins helpfully points out that mutual submission recognises and maintains humility, mutual correction and rank, see Perkins, *Ephesians*, 125.

⁵⁶ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 68. See also Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 360.

The pattern in Christian HT's is to address those with a "submissive" role, then the ruling party, both of whom are answerable to the Lord.

6:1: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."

In the ancient world, respect for parents was expected and emphasised.⁵⁷ In Greco-Roman households, honour showed itself in love, gratitude, obedience, learning virtues and provision, with both divine and earthly motivations.⁵⁸ Honouring the gods was primary, but honouring parents was closely bound up with this. As we have developed previously, honouring parents is a core tenet of Judaism, bound up in divine and earthly motivations and secondary to and including how we honour God.⁵⁹

Paul instructs Christian children to obey (ὕπακούετε) their parents. ὑπακούετε refers to following instructions, to "obey", "follow" or "be subject to" and is applied to a host of divinely-willed relationships in the New Testament.⁶⁰ In the LXX ὑπακούετε is used to commonly translate שָׁמַע (*sha.ma*) (to hear), which puts emphasis on receiving and putting divine will into action.⁶¹ Fathers (and parents) speak with God-ordained authority.

The first motivation for this obedience is that it is "right" (δίκαιον), denoting living in requirements of justice.⁶² This ties in well with our understanding of "subjection" in 5:21. Paul seems to be appealing to the widely acknowledged fact that children should obey their parents which is no surprise if fatherhood is derived from Trinitarian relationships and if the law has been written on the hearts of all.⁶³

⁵⁷ Best, *Ephesians*, 562–563.

⁵⁸ Children obeyed their parents because of divine will (and potential recompense) and the older age of their parents (natural motivation). See Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, 70–79.

⁵⁹ See Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, 97–111.

⁶⁰ BDAG 1028b. Parents: Eph 6:1, Col 3:20, Masters: Eph 6:5, Col 3:22, cf. Rom 6:16, Husbands: 1 Pet 3:6, Christ: Heb 5:9. Denotes compliance: Phil 2:12, surrender: Acts 6:7, Romans 10:16; 2 Thess 1:8; Rom 6:12, 17, went out obediently: Heb 11:18, enforced obedience of hostile spirits or powers: Mark 1:27, elements Matt 8:27, to yield to a higher power: Mark 4:41 Luke 8:25; 17:6

⁶¹ Gen 22:18, Prov 2:2, Leviticus 26:14. See Kittel "ὕπακούω," *TDNT* 1:223–224.

⁶² Giving what is "right," "fair" and "equitable"; see BDAG 246a. See 2 Thes 1:6, Acts 4:19, Phil 4:8, Phil 1:7, 2 Pet 1:13, Luke 12:57, Col 4:1, Matt 20:4.

⁶³ See Romans 2:14–16. Stott, *Ephesians*, 239.

The obedience of children is part of their Christian life, because they are to obey “in the Lord” (which qualifies *ὕπακούετε*), a mark of the Spirit’s work.⁶⁴ Given that the letter is addressed to adults and children we assume it was read publicly. It does not give us an indication of the age of the children, but assumes understanding of their commitment to Christ and being fully part of the Christian community, learning in solidarity with their parents.⁶⁵ Their relationship to their parents is a sphere within which to carry out their obedience in the Lord.⁶⁶ This is likely a universal obedience (cf. Colossians 3:20–21) unless it conflicts with their primary allegiance to the Lord.⁶⁷

A child’s duty to obey is emphasised by Paul’s second motivation.

Ephesians 6:2–3: “Honour your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

In continuity with the Mosaic Law, children are to honour their parents, submitting from the heart.⁶⁸ Paul writes a modified rendering of Exodus 20:12 from the LXX.⁶⁹ The honouring of one’s parents was re-emphasised by Christ and the dishonouring of parents belongs to the behaviour of unrighteous living.⁷⁰ The definition of the Greek for honour (*τιμάω*) calls for both an estimation of value and the responsibility to honour and revere, a term that continues to be applied to both God and parents.⁷¹ The force of this imperative suggests that reverence to our parents continues to be an aspect of how we learn to honour God;

⁶⁴ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 439.

⁶⁵ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 440–441.

⁶⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 402.

⁶⁷ Jesus recognised that family division and tension may arise for his sake. Unlike other cultures at the time, family solidarity could be broken if Christ-like living was going to be compromised.

⁶⁸ Best, *Ephesians*, 565.

⁶⁹ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 442.

⁷⁰ Mark 7v9–13; Matthew 15v3–6. See Romans 1:26–32, Timothy 1:8–11 and 2 Timothy 3:2–5.

⁷¹ BDAG 1004b. To set a price on, estimate, value: Matt 27:9a. To show high regard for, honour, revere: God: Matt 15:8, Mark 7:6, John 5:23; 8:9 (Jesus honours his Father); Christ: John 5:23; parents: Matt 15:4; 19:19, Mark 7:10; 10:19, Luke 18:20, Ephesians 6:2, Cf. Matt 15:6; widows: 1 Tim 5:3; everyone and the emperor: 1 Peter 2:17; Paul: Acts 28:10; rewarding the devout person by God: John 12:26.

that our parents are to be estimated highly in recognition of their God-given position.⁷²

As in the Old Testament, parental honour comes with a promise, but is modified from “land” to “earth” (γῆς).⁷³ What is meant by the reference to “earth”? It is likely that Paul is referring to the “here and now.”⁷⁴ Honouring one’s parents and living wisely have eternal and immediate ramifications, as reflected in the Wisdom Literature. The obeying and honouring of parents is right and essential if fathers are to fulfil their task in instructing children to honour God and live well.⁷⁵ Children therefore need to see the importance of obeying their parents because of the vital role their instruction can play.

Ephesians 6:4: “And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Finally, we turn to the direct call on fathers. The Christian HT reflects first-century patriarchal culture, addressing the father as responsible for leading and nurturing the family.⁷⁶ Paul’s first imperative is a negative one: “do not provoke your children to anger.”

In Roman culture, the father was given almost complete authority over their sons, known as the *patria potesta*.⁷⁷ The head of the household (paterfamilias) was given sovereign and life-long authority over those in the household.⁷⁸ These were powers that could easily be abused in horrific ways.⁷⁹ In contrast, the Christian father, in reverence for Christ, is obliged to be self-controlled in their power and gentle, not “provoking

⁷² Stott, *Ephesians*, 239 and Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 789.

⁷³ This serves to show that the promised land has faded from view and that believers are no longer under the Mosaic Covenant.

⁷⁴ This is a difficult verse to interpret and is the only place in the New Testament it is mentioned alongside the call to honour, see Matt 15:4; 19:19; Mark 7:10; 10:19; Luke 18:20. Given that the new covenant promises are bound up in Christ and the inheritance is looking forward to a future kingdom, we might interpret this as looking forward to the new creation/eternal life. However this does not seem to be what Paul intends. The term “long time” (μακροχρόνιος) is different from αἰώνιον which is perpetual (eternal), see Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 793.

⁷⁵ Ephesians reflects both the righteous (living for God) and justice (living rightly) aspects we saw in Abraham’s instructions in Genesis 18:19.

⁷⁶ The “kai” in verse 4 strongly connects the behaviour of children to that of the father.

⁷⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 398.

⁷⁸ Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, 45–47.

⁷⁹ Stott, *Ephesians*, 245.

to anger” (παροργίζω).⁸⁰ Provoking children to anger is to promote an attitude that cannot be part of the Christian way of life.⁸¹ Human anger is rarely given a positive estimation in the New Testament and usually has selfish connotations and is often directed against God.⁸² Where there is anger, there is often sin and therefore to encourage anger is the very opposite to modelling and encouraging a Christ-like life.⁸³ Conversely, when someone refrains from anger, they make room for God. How does a father mutually submit to their children in Christ? They execute their God given authority in a way that retains the individual (and equal) value of their child, is constructive, other-person loving and for their child’s best.

Paul now moves to a positive imperative. Instead of provoking their children, fathers are to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” The strong “but” (ἀλλὰ) highlights the contrast between παροργίζω and ἐκτρέφετε (bring up). ἐκτρέφω means to feed, nourish, cherish and bring up.⁸⁴ This act has already been ascribed to Christ in 5:29, who nourishes and tenderly cares for the church. Within the individual household, the father is to do the same. A father is to carefully nurture in godly love.

The two nouns παιδεία (discipline) and νοουθεσία (instruction) are difficult to differentiate.⁸⁵ However we will examine these terms to attempt to understand what a Christian “upbringing” looks like in principle, as terms modified by “in the Lord.”

παιδεία refers to the provision of guidance for responsible living.⁸⁶ It is used in the New Testament to refer to God’s discipline and training in righteousness.⁸⁷ This is not simply giving instructions, but education and cultivation. In Greek culture the upbringing of a child involved passing on culture, belief, conduct and a comprehensive education.⁸⁸ In Hellenistic Judaism, Philo’s works were “permeated” by the thought of παιδεία, the education and culture of individuals.⁸⁹ Enculturation included

⁸⁰ BDAG 780b. “To make angry,” see also Rom 10:19, Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21.

⁸¹ See Ephesians 4:26, 31.

⁸² Stahlin “παροργίζω,” *TDNT* 5:419–421. See Luke 4:28 and Luke 15:28.

⁸³ Cf. Colossians 3:20–21, where provoking behaviour causes children to lose heart, possibly in their walk with the Lord.

⁸⁴ BDAG 311a.

⁸⁵ Best, *Ephesians*, 569.

⁸⁶ Also upbringing, training, instruction.

⁸⁷ BDAG 748b. See 2 Timothy 3:16 and Hebrews 12:5, 7, 8, 11.

⁸⁸ Bertram, “παιδεία,” *TDNT* 5:596–600.

⁸⁹ Bertram, “παιδεία,” *TDNT* 5:612.

religion and in Roman Culture distinct domestic cultural and religious rituals were practiced.⁹⁰ Worship was tied into piety (*pietas*) towards one's forebears whether alive or dead, binding a family together and supposedly preserving their future, traditions that no child would think to break.⁹¹

First-century Judaism had religious tradition deeply woven into the fabric of family life and ethnic identity. Fathers took primary responsibility for Torah-centred education when their children reached seven.⁹² The family was, as Barclay notes, the “key arena” for the socialisation of the next generation.⁹³ The family protected against cultural assimilation and familial celebration of festivals bound them to larger congregations.

The gospel transformed many aspects of this way of life. God's people were no longer a singular ethnic identity, because God was calling Jew and Gentile into a new community. Christ's calling may involve leaving families for his sake, forgoing family ritual and the scattering and isolation of individuals.⁹⁴ As such, the Apostles called Christians to be content and seek primarily to live for the Lord in their situation, at the expense of establishing families.⁹⁵ Despite all this, the book of Ephesians still sets an ideal for the Christian familial household, where the call to *παιδεία* presents the father as the one with the primary responsibility for leading a culture that lives for the Lord Jesus. This motivation is unlike *παιδεία* in Greek culture, where the individual grew up into a particular stature for their own sake. Christian enculturation is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6, where the covenant way was to be part of the fabric of life and conversation. Fathers are called to be, as Douglas Wilson describes it, “the guardians of culture,” bringing every aspect of household life under the lordship of Christ and avoiding cultural assimilation.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” 67.

⁹¹ Worship was often associated with Fortuna (God of fortune) and the Genius of the paterfamilias, which represented the family's power and continuation across thousands of generations by reproduction. Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” 67–68.

⁹² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 400.

⁹³ Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” 69.

⁹⁴ See Wright, “Family, Covenant and Kingdom of God: Biblical reflections,” 17–18 and Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” 72–75.

⁹⁵ See particularly 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 and 1 Peter 2:11–3:25.

⁹⁶ Douglas Wilson, *Father Hunger: Why God Calls Men to Love and Lead their Families* (Nashville: Nelson, 2012), 67.

Fathers are also called to the task of *νουθεσία*. This refers to “counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, *admonition, instruction*.”⁹⁷ In the New Testament it has the idea of turning people from wrong and laying good on their hearts. This act of directing one’s mind to something has a proverbial thrust. This term most likely refers to the verbal aspect of raising children, whereby their mind and disposition is influenced for the good.⁹⁸ Fathers are to teach their children the words of Christ and help them to live wisely on the earth, disciplining and instructing according to his mandates.⁹⁹

In all these things it is important to remember, that whilst the human father’s role is important, the “fate” of children ultimately rests in God the Father. As the Israelites were to trust that God would continue to show favour to them and their offspring, so Christians are to hope in the grace of God to future generations and those that God is calling.¹⁰⁰ However, the book of Ephesians appears to establish the household as the foundational arena for nurturing the Christian life. Fathers are called to lead and maintain harmony by modelling and articulating the Christian life to their children, who reciprocate with obedience and honour.

Application and Conclusion

We have sought to investigate the instructions given to fathers and their families in Ephesians 6:1–4, taking into account the biblical-theological data on fatherhood and families and finally an exegetical study of our primary text within the context of the letter and the first-century Hellenistic environment. Now we tie these together in a summary and application.

God’s Purposes for Families

The gospel shaped HT in Ephesians 5:21–6:9 describes God’s intentions for family life. This way of life draws from the biblical-theological data and applies it to God’s new society in Christ within the context of the first century. We conclude that Paul’s use of the HT in Ephesians sets the familial household, once again, as a primary context for the training of righteousness and the love of God.

⁹⁷ BDAG 679b.

⁹⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 407–408.

⁹⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 408. See also Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 799 and Best, *Ephesians*, 569–570.

¹⁰⁰ See Acts 2:37–39. Cf. Psalm 103:13–18 and Psalm 100.

The contextualisation of the HT within the climax of Paul's description of the new society indicates that Paul saw Christ-centred families as key to the church's health. Ephesians 5:21 serves to characterise and closely link the familial and corporate households, suggesting a degree of overlap. The centrality and function of the familial household in Ephesians reflects the Old Testament data which presents families at the heart of God's purposes for humanity. These families reflect humanity created in the likeness of a Triune God and owe their continuing existence to God the Father.¹⁰¹ God's salvation promises and covenant stipulations were established within families, who served as the primary arena for the expression, transmission and enculturation of covenant life, bound up in loving and fearing the LORD and providing stability and continuity for the covenant people.¹⁰² In light of this, we are happy to describe Ephesians' depiction of a family in Christ-centred solidarity as the Christian covenant family, the primary nexus for learning and living out the Christian life and bringing stability and continuity to the church.¹⁰³

God's Purposes for Fathers

Within this covenant family, Ephesians 6:1–4 presents fathers as those who are to take the lead in mediating God's fatherly love, character and authority to their children by creating a Christ-centred culture (enculturation). Cochran's helpful article presents this mediating fatherhood as the act of living in the likeness of God and seeking to unite the will of their children with their own and conversely with the will of their heavenly Father.¹⁰⁴ This enculturation is seen in Ephesians 6:4 with the call to nurture children in *παιδεία* and *νουθεσία*. Both of these are defined and motivated by Christ.

The Ephesian HT's depiction of fatherhood holds a high degree of continuity with the broader biblical data, due in all probability, to its

¹⁰¹ Ephesians 3:14–15.

¹⁰² This is seen in Abraham's call to teach righteousness and justice to his children, the familial context of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and household setting of the wisdom literature.

¹⁰³ By this definition of "covenant family" we refer to the fact that Paul is happy to set the ideal of an entire family living for Christ. We believe that Ephesians calls us to presume faith in children and therefore to raise them to live for Christ until we see clearly articulated evidence of their rejection of him.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory C. Cochran, "Remembering the Father in Fatherhood: Biblical Foundations and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of the Fatherhood of God," *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 1.2 (2011): 21–23.

origin in the divine and eternal fatherhood of God.¹⁰⁵ The combined data reveal that fatherhood involves begetting children in their own likeness with the task of raising them to love and serve God within the covenant.¹⁰⁶ We note consistent themes of covenant enculturation as divinely ordained mediators of God, child-rearing with authority, wisdom, protection and provision bound up in the hope of God's continuing grace.

We argue that the centrality of familial households and the father's duty to lead and shape the culture of these families means that the exhortation and encouragement of fathers to be involved in their family's discipleship should be a central aspect of church life. The influence of fathers on their children is significant and unique, which perhaps reflects their God-given position. Statistics indicate that when fathers are converted, there is a 93% probability of the family following, compared to 17% with the mother.¹⁰⁷ Fathers appear to have the greatest impact on the regular worshipping patterns of children.¹⁰⁸ We should be wary of handing over complete responsibility of our children's discipleship to a third party.

Given the broader biblical data and Ephesians 6:1–4, we can also consider the following reflections/applications:

Nurture Children with Genuine, Good Authority

Paul's instruction for children to show obedience and honour reflects the divinely ordained position of fathers.¹⁰⁹ Authority is a challenge in a culture that struggles with the mutuality of authority and intimacy within relationships.¹¹⁰ However, fathers should expect honour from their children, as a relationship that reflects the divine Father/Son relationship that demonstrates authority and obedience in equality.¹¹¹ A father's

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 3:14–15.

¹⁰⁶ We note that the covenant way of life depends on the epoch of history. However, the basic premise remained the same and is now bound up in living for Christ.

¹⁰⁷ Polly House, "Want your church to grow? Then bring in the men," *Baptist Press News*, 3 April 2003, <http://www.bpnews.net/15630>.

¹⁰⁸ S. Michael Craven, "Fathers: Key to their Children's Faith," *Battle for Truth*, 13 June 2006, <http://www.battlefortruth.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=174>. If these statistics are accurate, then they demonstrate the unique influence of fathers.

¹⁰⁹ Seen in both Ephesians 6:1–3 and the Old Testament Decalogue.

¹¹⁰ Mike Ovey, "A Question of Sonship" (Lecture presented at Oak Hill College, 2015). This suspicion creates "liquid," shifting relationships. It is quite common, for example, for parents to adopt the status of "friendship" with their children.

¹¹¹ In the New Testament we see that the divine relationship between Father and Son is revealed as two distinct persons who relate to each other differently without any

authority is part of how children learn to honour and obey God, so it must be exercised. However, fathers are called not to provoke (6:4). Living in reverence to Christ (5:21) involves submitting to their children in the sense of genuinely seeking the best for them. Their authority should preserve a child's safety, life, personality and their equality of value as people in the image of God, enculturating a life of love that grips the child's heart to live for Christ.¹¹² Equally, a father that doesn't show an interest in the development and welfare of his children is likely to provoke anger in this way too.

Encourage Household Worship and Service

We argue that worship and service together as a family should be encouraged. Ephesians 5:21 links the corporate and familial households together in a way that suggests a spilling over of worship activities between the corporate and familial households. The familial Old Testament festivals and New Testament's call to *παιδεία* add weight to the call for family worship as part of this enculturation, providing opportunities

loss of equality. The Father, as father, commissions his Son to save sinners and gives him authority to give life and to judge (for creation see John 1:1–5, Hebrews 1:1–2, for salvation see John 3:16 and John 18:11, for authority to give life and to judge see John 5:17–23, 26–27, 30). As a son, it is Jesus' delight to obey his Father, even to the point of death on a cross (see John 8:29; 14:31; 17:4–8 and Mark 14:36). Through obedience he remains in the Father's love and fulfils what the Father has given him to do (see John 15:10 and Matthew 3:13–17 where the concern to “fulfil all righteousness” is taken to refer to Christ fulfilling the law as an act of perfect obedience to his Father). It is for this reason Jesus can say that the Father is greater than him (see John 14:28). The intimacy and equality of the Father and Son is not mutually exclusive to authority and obedience. All these things are bound together in mutual love and delight. The Father proclaims his love and delight in his Son at Jesus' baptism (see Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:21–22. We also note the presence of the Spirit in the context where this perfect love is expressed; they are in it together). For Athanasius, this reciprocal knowledge and mutual love is the root of the Son's commission and inheritance. See Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 188. Father and Son both love and seek glory for the other. As the Son does his work the Father declares the glory of his Son (See John 8:54, 17:1). And the Son declares the glory of the Father through his words and works and demonstrates love through obedience (See John 12:28).

¹¹² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 406 and David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Nurture and Admonition,” in *A Theology of the Family*, ed. Jeff Pollard and Scott T Brown (Wake Forest, NC: The National Center for Family-Integrated Churches, 2014), 283–284. Legalistically forcing decisions or behaviour will likely only breed legalism and cheap grace.

to model the Christian life to children and prepare them for worship in the household of God.¹¹³ Serving the Lord together reflects the unified will of the divine Father/Son and the original creation mandate to serve in families.¹¹⁴

Father with Delight

Underpinning this must be a father's delight in his heavenly father and his children; only then can fathers fulfil their call to nurture (*ἐκτρέφετε*) in a caring way. Jesus delighted in and sought to glorify his Father in Heaven and we should do the same.¹¹⁵ As fathers reflect on the Father's love shown in Christ, they will better know how to model him and Christ to their children. God the Father delights in having a Son in his likeness that loves him and obeys him. He also delights in those he adopts and rejoices when they seek to obey him.¹¹⁶ Fathers should be thankful for the gift of children and delight in seeing them grow up in the imitation of God. Celebrating this should be part of their verbal admonition (*νουθεσίᾳ*).

In all these things, fathers are called to be faithful mediators of God, bringing all things in the home under Christ, so that their children might grow up to live a life for Christ themselves.

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¹¹³ Arthur Pink, "Family Worship," in *A Theology of the Family*, 48.

¹¹⁴ We do not think this means that churches must arrange their services so that families sit and learn together, see David Gibbs, "Unity in the Gathering or 'Adults Only' Church?," *The Briefing* 376/7 (January-February 2010). However, we can see the benefit of learning in solidarity, as this aids future conversations.

¹¹⁵ Cochran, "Remembering the Father in Fatherhood," 15.

¹¹⁶ See Zephaniah 3:17, 1 Corinthians 4:5.