

The transformative ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33 and its implications for a contemporary South African context

David Adams



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Supervisor: **Prof. Elna Mouton**

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

Abstract

The New Testament passage that treats the dynamics of the marriage relationship most extensively is Ephesians 5:21-33. This passage is embedded in the Ephesian domestic code, which employs a conventional form used widely in the first-century Mediterranean world and which consequently reflects a patriarchal hierarchy. Does this, however, imply that Ephesians is advocating a marriage relationship that is patriarchal and hierarchical, or does this passage point beyond the particular first-century cultural context to a loftier ideal? Scholars are today divided in their assessments of Ephesians 5:21-33. Some regard the passage as a reactionary accommodation to the *status quo*, while others excuse this social conformity as being necessitated by a struggle for survival in a hostile first-century world.

This thesis seeks to re-read Ephesians 5:21-33 rhetorically against the background of the socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world and prevailing perspectives on the status of women, domestic social structures, and marriage. It takes into consideration the general rhetorical thrust of Ephesians as a whole, the particular way in which Ephesians 5:21-33 is framed textually, as well as the structure, content and uniquely Christological context. Such a re-reading shows that the conventional household code of the first century is in fact infused with a radical transformative ethos which subtly, but significantly, challenges the patriarchal hierarchy. For, it invites readers to step into a new, alternative reality in Christ, thereby entering a place of ongoing reorientation in their marriage relationships, embracing an attitude of mutual submission and other-centred service towards each other – a marriage relationship modeled on the relationship between Christ and the church.

This points to the conclusion that it is this transformative ethos in Ephesians 5:21-33 that is transculturally normative rather than the first-century patriarchal hierarchy in which it is embedded. This has profound implications for pastoral ministry in present-day South Africa, for readers from more traditional backgrounds often read this passage as simply reinforcing the patriarchally hierarchical *status quo*, while readers from less traditional backgrounds may tend merely to dismiss it as archaic and irrelevant. In reality, the transformative ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33 provides an ongoing challenge to both authoritarian hierarchical marriage structures on the one hand, and *laissez faire* egalitarian marriage relationships on the other, while holding out a compelling vision – a vision of a magnificent other-centred marriage partnership under the lordship of Christ.

Opsomming

Efesiërs 5:21-33 is by uitstek dié gedeelte in die Nuwe Testament wat die dinamika van die huweliksverhouding op die mees uitgebreide wyse behandel. Hierdie gedeelte is onlosmaaklik verbonde aan die Efesiese huisreëls, wat weer gebaseer is op die konvensionele vorm wydverspreid in die eerste-eeuse Mediterreense wêreld, en weerspieël gevolglik 'n patriargale hiërargie. Die vraag is egter of hierdeur geïmpliseer word dat Efesiërs 'n patriargale en hiërgiesse huweliksverhouding verkondig, of wys hierdie gedeelte, verby die bepaalde eerste-eeuse kulturele konteks heen, na 'n hoër ideaal? Geleerdes is vandag verdeeld in hulle beoordeling van Efesiërs 5:21-33. Sommige beskou die gedeelte as 'n behoudende aanpassing van die *status quo*, terwyl ander hierdie sosiale behoudendheid verskoon as genoodsaak deur die stryd om oorlewing in 'n vyandige eerste-eeuse wêreld.

Hierdie tesis beoog om Efesiërs 5:21-33 retories te herlees teen die agtergrond van die sosio-historiese konteks van die eerste-eeuse Mediterreense wêreld en die heersende sienings van die status van vroue, huishoudelik-sosiale strukture en die huwelik. Dit neem in aanmerking die algemene retoriese strekking van Efesiërs as geheel, die bepaalde tekstuele omraming van Efesiërs 5:21-33, sowel as die struktuur, inhoud en unieke Christologiese konteks. So 'n herlees toon dat die konvensionele huishoudelike kode van die eerste eeu in werklikheid besiel was met 'n radikaal herskeppende etos wat op subtiele, maar betekenisvolle, wyse die patriargale hiërargie uitdaag. Want, dit nooi lesers om 'n nuwe, alternatiewe werklikheid in Christus te betree vanwaar hulle hulself voortdurend kan heroriënteer in hul huweliksverhouding, en 'n houding van wedersydse onderworpenheid en ander-gesentreerde diens aan mekaar aanvaar – 'n huweliksverhouding gemodelleer op die verhouding tussen Christus en die kerk.

Só 'n herlees lei tot die gevolgtrekking dat dit hierdie herskeppende etos van Efesiërs 5:21-33 is wat transkultureel normatief is, eerder as die eerste-eeuse patriargale hiërargie waaraan dit onlosmaaklik verbonde is. Dit bring diepgaande implikasies vir die pastorale bediening in die hedendaagse Suid-Afrika mee, want lesers met 'n meer tradisionele agtergrond lees dié gedeelte dikwels as 'n versterking van die patriargale, hiërgiesse *status quo*, terwyl lesers met 'n minder tradisionele agtergrond mag neig om die gedeelte bloot af te maak as argaïes en irrelevant. In werklikheid voorsien die herskeppende etos van Efesiërs 5:21-33 'n volgehoue uitdaging aan beide outoritêr-hiërgiesse huwelikstrukture aan die een kant, en *laissez faire* gelykmakende huweliksverhoudinge aan die ander kant, terwyl dit 'n dwingende visie voorhou – 'n visie van 'n heerlike ander-gesentreerde huweliksvennootskap onder die heerskappy van Christus.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the past decade-and-a-half, my wife and I have regularly been involved in assisting couples with marriage preparation in the local Cape Town church where we minister – a church which is evangelical, charismatic and reformed. Many aspects of the marriage relationship are highlighted as we explore facets such as communication, handling conflict, sex, finances, and relating to parents and in-laws. Through it all we encourage couples to grow in their dependence on God, praying together and seeking guidance for their relationship in the Bible as the authority for our faith and conduct. The New Testament passage that treats the dynamics of the marriage relationship most extensively is Ephesians 5:21-33 and our reading of this passage often gives rise to much discussion – discussion which at times is quite heated!

Our church congregation comprises quite a wide cross-section of the Cape Town population from various socio-economic, racial, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. This is representative of a considerable spectrum of people from fairly liberal to more conservative, both South African and foreign, including a significant number of displaced people from other parts of Africa. Therefore initial responses to a reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 can vary considerably. For those who are part of a milieu in which marriage itself is frequently regarded as outmoded, the injunction, “Wives, submit to your husbands... for the husband is the head of the wife...”, immediately makes their hackles rise. They certainly do not want to embrace an authoritarian, patriarchal hierarchy as the model for their marriage relationship. In applying terms such as headship for the husband and submission for the wife, Ephesians 5:21-33 thus often provokes a response that is filled with so much emotion that there may be no desire to read any further, and the passage may simply be dismissed as reflecting stereotypical chauvinistic attitudes. Consequently for such readers, this text may readily be categorised as a relic from an archaic past world that has little or no

bearing on the present world in which they live - a world in which husbands and wives are equals, and free of the social restraints of the past.

On the other hand, there are those whose initial response to the reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 is that it merely confirms the traditional perspectives on marriage which have been passed down to them. For many more traditional African communities the model for the marriage relationship is strongly patriarchal, with authority wielded by the husband while the wife is simply expected to submit to his authority, and serve him in submission. For people reading Ephesians 5:21-33 from this perspective, their initial reading of the text often merely reinforces such a *status quo*.

Is this indeed the message of Ephesians 5:21-33? Is the epistle in fact advocating for marriage relationships everywhere and for all time the patriarchal *status quo* of the first-century Mediterranean world? Is such a hierarchical model for the husband-wife relationship intended to be transcultural? If not, is there any aspect of this pericope that has wider relevance in other cultural settings?

As a pastor, I occasionally hear husbands justify abusive authoritarian behaviour towards their wives on the basis of such a biblical text, and I am appalled that such a misreading can be construed to lend 'biblical support' to destructive domestic relationships. On the other hand I do not want to shy away from this text and simply ignore it out of embarrassment or for fear that it may lead to such gross misunderstanding. For, will a closer reading of this text not reveal that, although framed in the form of the conventional household codes representative of the cultural world of the day, this culturally specific form is in Ephesians 5:21-33 infused with a radically new ethos¹ which is very much in keeping with the ethos of the teaching of

¹ In line with the distinction made between the use of the terms 'ethics' and 'ethos' by Smit (1991:51-55), I have chosen to refer to the ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33 rather than the ethic contained in this pericope. In the technical sense, 'ethics' is the scientific discipline dealing with processes of human decision-making on moral issues. 'Ethos', however, is the "more comprehensive and socially influential factor" (Smit 1991:51) referring to the moral world of people, and determining how people "live and act almost unconsciously, unreflectively, in their every-day actions and decisions" (Smit 1991:53). Furthermore, "ethics seldom determines ethos", while "ethos more often determines ethics" (Smit 1991:52).

Jesus and Paul? Such an other-centred ethos would have challenged and transformed the dynamics of the marriage relationship as it was generally understood in the first-century Mediterranean world. Would such an ethos continue to be significant for us today, similarly challenging our present-day understanding of the marriage relationship, whether patriarchal or egalitarian?

Biblical scholars dispute whether Paul himself wrote the letter to the Ephesians. Some regard the epistle as pseudonymous, reflecting an interpretation of Paul's thought in a later context by the Pauline school.² Detailed 'introductory' discussions are beyond the scope of this work, and I shall simply refer to the writer of Ephesians as the Paul of the canonical text. Despite the ongoing debate as to who this canonical Paul is, there is nevertheless fairly general agreement that the letter was written at some point during the latter half of the first century – if by Paul himself, then possibly during a period of imprisonment in the late 50's and early 60's³; if pseudonymously by the Pauline school, then possibly during the later decades of the first century.⁴ Since Ephesians 5:21-33 is therefore most likely written within the socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world, I shall begin by examining, from literature available, the dynamics of the marriage relationship within that context. I shall then survey various readings of Ephesians 5:21-33, before continuing with a closer reading of Ephesians 5:21-33⁵ in light of the rhetoric

² See Taylor (1999:338-339) for a concise summary of this debate.

³ Barth (1974a:51), a Swiss-German biblical scholar, in his monumental two-volume commentary on Ephesians espouses Pauline authorship and, on the basis of his analysis of the evidence available to him, concludes that the 'best guess' for the origin of this letter is Rome in about AD 62.

⁴ Lincoln (1993:86), a British scholar who has made a significant contribution to the study of Ephesians and has employed insights from rhetorical criticism, has come to support a pseudonymous authorship for Ephesians, proposing that the letter was aimed into "a setting of Gentile Christianity in the churches of the Pauline mission, probably between 80 and 90 CE and possibly in western Asia Minor."

⁵ In my reading of Ephesians 5:21-33, quotations are from the *New International Version*, which renders this pericope as follows:

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her

employed – reading this pericope in the context of the rhetorical thrust of the rest of the epistle, as well as its internal structure, rhetoric and content. From this I shall draw certain conclusions and discuss their implications for the contemporary South African context in which my wife and I minister.

to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Chapter 2

The socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world

By the first century AD, Roman authority had been extended throughout the entire Mediterranean world, and the Roman Empire was flourishing in a period of relative peace and stability which historians have termed the *Pax Romana*. The culture of the cities of the Roman Empire tended to reflect a Graeco-Roman ethos, for the Roman Empire had largely assimilated and built upon a Greek legacy. In the fourth century BC, the Greeks under Alexander the Great had conquered the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, and in subsequent centuries the major cities of the region had undergone an extensive cultural Hellenisation. Sizeable Jewish populations were resident in many of the Mediterranean cities, and these populations, although distinct, had also undergone a significant Hellenisation. As the Roman Empire came to eclipse the Greek Empire militarily and politically in the second and first centuries BC, the Romans largely embraced Greek philosophy and learning. Consequently, by the first century AD there had been a measure of cultural continuity in the Mediterranean world that went back a few centuries. This is the world in which the letter to the Ephesians was composed.

In seeking to determine whether the Ephesian household code, and in particular the pericope on the marriage relationship, simply reflected the attitudes of society in general, or in fact challenged conventional attitudes, it is necessary to establish how the marriage relationship was generally comprehended in the first-century Mediterranean world. As a background to the reading of Ephesians 5:21-33, I shall therefore begin by exploring the socio-historical context of the first-century Mediterranean world as it impinges on the marriage relationship, and attempt to discern broad trends in Graeco-Roman and Jewish perspectives on the status of women, domestic social structures, and marriage in that era. While sources for the

socio-cultural composition of the New Testament world are sparse and fragmentary,¹ and much of the work in this field remains somewhat speculative, any insights that are gleaned may well assist in studying the text as both a reflection of and response to the social and cultural settings in which it was produced – employing what scholars like J H Elliott have termed ‘social-scientific criticism’. This will hopefully help determine nuances of meaning both explicit and implicit in the text – meanings made possible and shaped by the social and cultural systems inhabited by both authors and intended audiences.

2.1 The status of women

It appears that the status of women was not constant through all periods in the ancient Mediterranean world. In terms of the Graeco-Roman world, the status of women seems to have been at a low point in the time of Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BC, at least in Athens, but may have improved somewhat in the centuries before the spread of Christianity, according to the research that Keener (1992:160), a North American scholar, has done. By the first century there were some theoretical justifications for considering women the equals of men, for, as Meeks (1983:23), who is noted for his studies of the first Christians and their social world, points out, the Stoics had taken up the Cynic epigram attributed to Antisthenes that “virtue is the same for man and for woman”, and Cleanthes is said to have written a book on the topic, although in practice “women remain conspicuously absent among the pupils of the earlier as of the later Stoics” (Meeks 1983:23). Musonius Rufus, one of the Stoics, wrote tracts urging that “women too should study philosophy” and that, except for vocational matters, daughters should “receive the same education as sons”, although, as Meeks (1983:23) points out, his aim was specifically to equip women better for their traditional roles as managers of their households. Thus, although in the first century there were more opportunities for some women to break through the traditional pattern than in previous centuries (Osiek 2002:31) – and indeed women were active in commerce and manufacture,

¹ Botha (1992:2), a South African scholar, observes that the literary sources of antiquity are, furthermore, undoubtedly one-sided in that, without exception, they were all produced by men, and then usually men of the middle and upper classes.

and in religious matters, both in cults that were exclusively or primarily practised by women and in state or municipal and private cults that appealed to men and women alike (Meeks 1983:24) – yet philosophers generally considered women to be morally weaker than men, and advocated hierarchical roles in both the home and society. Indeed, “the hierarchical pattern of the family, in which the male was always superior to the female, as surely as parents to children and masters to slaves, was deeply entrenched in law and custom and its erosion constantly deplored by the rhetorical moralists and satirists” (Meeks 1983:23).

In the world of Hellenistic Judaism, “properly behaved Jewish women were to be honored, but mistrust of women’s moral character in Jewish texts is often stronger than what we find in the philosophers” (Keener 1992:161). The first-century Jewish writer, Josephus, for example, regarded “the prohibition of women’s testimony as part of God’s law, based in the moral inferiority inherent in their gender” (Keener 1992:163), and, in a patriarchal society with strong prejudices against women, “many Jews felt that to be born female was a disadvantage” (Botha 1992:2). Indeed, as Botha (1992:2-3) points out, just as it was “a rhetorical commonplace that a Hellenistic man had to be grateful that he was born a human being and not a beast, a man and not a woman, a Greek and not a barbarian”, so too this formula found its way into the liturgy of the Jewish synagogue, in which “three times daily the Jew thanked God that He did not make him a gentile, a woman, or a slave.” Most Jewish women were almost continually under the control of a male: a Jewish girl was totally dependent on her father, with the *patria potestas* being extraordinarily far-reaching, and the custom of early marriage ensured that she simply passed from the control of her father into the control of a husband (Botha 192:3). The rights of a Jewish husband over his wife were nearly as extensive as those of a father over his daughter. For example, as Botha (1992:3) points out:

- when married, a woman forfeited the right to property
- the husband had the exclusive right to divorce
- the married woman was placed in the same category as minors and, like them, was subject to the all-embracing power of the head of the household.

Thus, the rigidly patriarchal structure of Jewish society placed women in a secondary and subordinate position at all periods of their lives. This *status quo* was reinforced

by the Jewish religion, which was directed exclusively by men, and was given expression even in the architecture of the temple in Jerusalem, where women were assigned to their own forecourt, outside the temple proper. Furthermore, it was reinforced by the folklore of this first-century context, as Botha (1992:5-11) concludes.

In both Graeco-Roman and Jewish contexts in the first-century Mediterranean world, most men “harboured rather negative views of the status, prestige and abilities of their mothers, wives, sisters, female friends and daughters” (Botha 1992:2). The men of antiquity nearly always regarded women as suited to be followers, not leaders, by virtue of their disposition, and “the vast majority of male writers viewed women as socially subordinate, often ignoring those women who violated the stereotype, or sometimes honoring them as exceptions to the rule” (Keener 1992:164). Such an observation is corroborated by the findings of a survey of funerary inscriptions from this era, which has shown that women were praised for their “chastity, loyalty, obedience, and domestic skills” (Yarbrough 1985:59). Traditional Roman writers portrayed the feminine ideal as supportive and subservient – “the male ideal of women’s submission was that they be meek, quiet, and apparently what we would consider ‘shy’ and ‘self-conscious’ in the presence of men” (Keener 1992:164). Indeed, they generally saw a qualitative difference between the character of men and that of women: manly character was seen to be synonymous with strength and courage, while timidity and self-consciousness were regarded as innate feminine traits (Keener 1992:165).

2.2 **Perspectives on the domestic household**

The connection between society and the domestic household was generally understood to be a close one. Greek philosophers as early as the fourth century BC considered the household “a microcosm, the basic social unit whose structure ought to reflect the pyramidal structure of the whole society and even the universe” (Johnson 1998:430), and it was Aristotle (quoted in Lincoln 1990:357) who

delineated the primary components of the household as master and slave, husband and wife, father and children:

“Now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households... The investigation of everything should begin with the smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships, I mean that of mastership, that of marriage..., and thirdly the progenitive relationship”.

Over the next few centuries such a ‘household code’ or *Haustafel* seems to have been embraced by ethicists and philosophers as a genre for discussing the domestic household structure and the duties and obligations that went with it. Lincoln (1990:357) traces the continuity of this discussion of household management, retaining its Aristotelian outline, down through the centuries into the Roman period, and its adaptation by Philo and Josephus in the first century AD in their interpretation and praise of Mosaic law, devoting attention to family relationships and obligations, particularly in the context of interpreting the Fifth Commandment (to honour father and mother). Josephus (quoted by Lincoln 190:357) wrote that

“the woman... is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be obedient, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for God has given authority to the man.”

Philo (quoted in Lincoln 1990:357-358) instructed that “wives must be in servitude to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things.” The reflections of Philo and Josephus “are clearly influenced by Greco-Roman moralism” (Johnson 1998:430). Lincoln (1990:357) points out that it was from Hellenistic Judaism that the household code was mediated to early Christianity,² probably via the Hellenistic synagogues.

² Balch (1988:25) is in agreement with this, as he traces the origins of the New Testament household codes.

By the first century AD, both Graeco-Roman and Jewish ethicists were thus discussing the issue of domestic structure, focusing on authority and subordination and including prescribed duties for each member of the household. Indeed, “the subject was of such concern in the first century that scarcely a pagan philosopher worth reading neglects to discuss it” (Johnson 1998:430). The head of the household was seen to hold all three superior roles of master, father and husband. Indeed, as Lincoln (1990:358) summarises, “typical of the content of all these discussions is the notion that the man is intended by nature to rule as husband, father, and master, and that not to adhere to this proper hierarchy is detrimental not only to the household but also to the life of the state.” For, if the head of the household ruled appropriately, and all members of the household fulfilled the duties expected of them, then “life within the household was seen to reflect the harmony intended by God or the gods as they ruled the universe” (Johnson 1998:430).

Within these household codes, as Keener (1992:165) argues, the submission of wives was never questioned. Roman law gave men binding authority over their wives and unmarried daughters. The philosophers, in the tradition of Aristotle and Plato, had long extolled such obedient submission on the part of wives, while the role of the husband was ruling his wife: Aristotle had argued that “the man was by nature superior to the woman and fit to rule her”, while “Plato described a woman’s virtue as taking care of the home and being obedient to her husband” (Keener 1992:165). Noting that a Jewish philosopher like Philo assumed that the masculine ruled the feminine, while describing the wife’s proper duty to her husband in the language of slave service, Keener (1992:166) concludes that “the ideal model propagated in ancient society was that wives should be submissive and obedient, often even slavishly so”, while the husband ruled the household.

In terms of the legal status of women in the ancient Mediterranean world, although there may have been some differences under Greek, Roman and Jewish law, “both in Greece and Rome the household was conceived as a patriarchal institution, whose male head exercised sweeping, although not entirely unrestricted authority over the other members” and “from the social structures alone, one would have a

difficult time distinguishing pagan from Jewish households in the cities of Hellenistic-Roman Diaspora” (Lincoln 1990:359-360).

2.3 The relationship between husband and wife

Yarbrough (1985:53-60), a North American scholar and former student of Meeks, indicates, in a survey of Graeco-Roman attitudes to the relationship between husbands and wives from the fourth century BC to the first century AD, that philosophers from this period tended to focus on two somewhat contradictory issues: the special character of the relationship and the dominance of the husband. In general they tended to stress, on the one hand, that husbands and wives share all things in common, while also maintaining that it is the husband who rules. His survey covers various philosophical traditions represented in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, and, although various nuances of opinion are apparent, an overall ethos is presented.

Thus, from the *Peripatetic* tradition,³ as Yarbrough (1985:54) observes, on the one hand there were injunctions that a husband should take care of his wife for the sake of the gods, and remain faithful to her, and that a man’s wife is more nearly his equal than other members of the household, so that marriage is closely akin to the partnership between citizens. Yet, on the other hand, the subservient role of the wife was strongly underlined in numerous statements, such as:

- The wife is inferior to her husband.
- A woman comes to a man’s house as a suppliant.
- The friendship that exists between husband and wife is a friendship between unequals.
- The man is stronger, the woman weaker.
- While the husband oversees affairs outside the household and the woman is mistress of affairs within the household, even where the wife is mistress, she must accede to her husband’s wishes.

³ The Peripatetic tradition derived from the school of philosophy founded by Greek philosopher, Aristotle, in the fourth century BC.

In the **Neo-Pythagorean** tradition, too, there was, on the one hand, a recognition that the close relationship between husbands and wives was part of the 'divine order', determining that between them there should be love and togetherness, and making them as if they were one person. Yet, at the same time, it was held that the duty of the wife was to acquiesce to her husband, to be subject to him, and to submit to what he demanded of her (Yarbrough 1985:54-55).

From the **Stoic** tradition, some slightly more enlightened perspectives are discernible, evidenced particularly in the writings of Musonius, who promoted the ideal of perfect companionship and mutual love between husband and wife, with each striving to outdo the other in their devotion:

"But in marriage there must be above all perfect companionship and mutual love of husband and wife, both in health and sickness and under all conditions, since it was with desire for this as well as for having children that both entered upon marriage. Where, then, this love for each other is perfect and the two share it completely, each striving to outdo the other in devotion, the marriage is ideal and worthy of envy, for such a union is beautiful" (quoted in Lincoln 1990:359).

Yet, along with such lofty musings, Musonius was by no means egalitarian in his outlook on marriage, for, as Yarbrough (1985:56) points out, he still employed the typical Greek distinctions between man and woman: stronger-weaker, ruler-ruled, better-worse. Indeed, he advocated that the wife should serve her husband with her own hands, and that the aim and goal of her life should be to please her husband.⁴

From the **Middle-Platonic** tradition, Yarbrough (1985:56) observes that Plutarch⁵ spoke of the importance of love for the relationship between husband and wife, and urged that husbands and wives share all things in common – bodies, property,

⁴ Lincoln (1990:359) concurs that Musonius' writings essentially argue that men are the rulers and superior while women are the ruled and inferior, that men should work outside the house and women inside, and refer to the woman as a great help, who must be willing to serve her husband with her own hands.

⁵ Plutarch was a biographer and philosopher who lived during the latter half of the first century and early decades of the second century AD.

friends, relations. Indeed, Plutarch advised husbands to exercise control over their wives, not as the owner has control of property, but as the soul controls the body, by entering into her feelings and being known to her through goodwill. Such statements certainly accord a special status to the marriage relationship, and may sound fairly enlightened. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that, in Greek thinking, the soul often tended to be regarded as infinitely superior to the base body. Furthermore, possible egalitarian overtones are certainly muted in other statements by Plutarch, for in his numerous admonitions for wives he urged that they subordinate themselves to their husbands, that they do not make friends of their own but rather enjoy their husband's friends in common with him, and that they worship only their husbands' god (Yarbrough 1985:57).

Indeed, while some scholars have contrasted the 'egalitarianism' of Musonius and Plutarch on the one hand with the unqualified patriarchy of Philo and the Neopythagoreans on the other, Lincoln (1990:359) feels that this involves a misrepresentation of these views, and that in reality the similarities in their perspectives on marriage far outweigh the subtle differences. For that matter, the same general trends are evidenced in the ancient Jewish writings from this period, as Keener (1992:166-167) points out. Thus, despite certain enlightened concepts highlighting the special character of the marriage relationship, in general the patriarchal hierarchy was deeply entrenched in ancient Graeco-Roman attitudes to marriage. This is not surprising when one comprehends, as Webber (1994:60) points out, that the ancient Roman religion made each husband not only the head of the household but the chief priest in the domestic religion, for, when a woman married, "she was 'converted' to her husband's faith and carried across the threshold of his home as a symbol of her entrance into this new religion."

Yet, certain gradual changes in perceptions of marriage in the ancient Mediterranean world may well be discernible. Hunter (1992:7) claims that there were some shifting emphases in the rhetoric of Roman philosophers and moralists on the subject of marriage around the time of the rise of Christianity. He asserts, with regard to marriage, that "what was once a mainly civic institution ... became internalized as a private, moral code" (Hunter 1992:7), so that, whereas in the first century BC a man

was supposed to think of himself first and foremost as a citizen who had fulfilled all his civic duties, a century later he was supposed to consider himself a good husband, and as such he was officially required to respect his wife. Interestingly, Hunter (1992:9) goes on to find that this “new morality of the Greco-Roman philosophers, although it took shape largely independently of Christian influence, became an important bridge between the early Christians and their culture”, and he points out that “Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria in the late second century borrowed directly from the works of Musonius and Plutarch to forge a Christian theology of marriage that harmonized with the prevailing philosophical ideals”, and that “the resultant democratization of the traditional philosophical teaching on marriage was ... the most profound single revolution of the late classical period.”

2.4 Insights from cultural anthropology

The insights that North American scholars, Malina⁶ and Neyrey (Malina 1981; Malina & Neyrey 1996), have gleaned from cultural anthropology and applied to the ancient Mediterranean world highlight particular cultural notions about the family, gender, and values that pertained in this context. These may be helpful in filling in the picture already discernible – painting, in broad brush strokes, something of the ethos of the status of women, the domestic structures that existed, and perspectives on the roles of husbands and wives in general. Some of the aspects that they have highlighted are:

- All people in the first-century Mediterranean world were situated in some sort of hierarchical relationship, subject to some authority figure – a situation that was considered “normal and praiseworthy, not strange or unnatural” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:3).
- The common modes by which people were identified were by “generation, geography, and gender” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:102), and these qualities

⁶ Malina has been a pioneer in applying the tools of cultural analysis to biblical interpretation.

served to constitute different 'species of human', some of which "were patently and inevitably inferior (slave/female/barbarian), while others were superior (free/male/Greek)" as determined by 'nature' (Malina & Neyrey 1996:102-103).

- The ancient Mediterranean world was thoroughly gender divided, since kinship was viewed as the focal social institution, and patriarchal kinship was accorded paramount value. Thus there were clear notions of what it meant to be male or female, and "these notions extended to every place, object, task, and time" (Malina & Neyrey 1996:104).
- A theory of physiognomics was developed to assist in categorising the nature of human beings in terms of their gender, their group and place of origin, and their appearance. This stereotypically contrasted males and females in a manner that would appall many modern readers, with each gender having its own constitutive nature as indicated by its radically different form (Malina & Neyrey 1996:111). This was closely allied to "a systematic division of all things into gender-related categories: persons, space, tasks, and things" (Malina & Neyrey 1996:112).
- The ancient Mediterranean perception of society was always vertical, with people seen as being endowed with higher or lower status by birth. It was held that "all humans were simply not created equal", but were "created in vertical arrangements or hierarchies that account for the qualitative difference among them." Every significant status was seen to consist of "a different type of human nature, with different endowments, capabilities, natural functions, and attributes"; and "because human males and human females are two species, even if of the same genus, they naturally have to be ranked vertically" (Malina & Neyrey 1996:105).
- Ancient Mediterranean society was collectivist and group-oriented, viewing itself sociologically in terms of generation, gender and geography, with constant concern for public awards of respect and honour (Malina & Neyrey 1996:153). The collectivist person is a group-embedded person, a person set

in relation to others, and always in relation with and connected to at least one social unit, usually a kinship group (Malina & Neyrey 1996:156). In contrast to individualist societies, collectivist societies naturally value group goals over individual goals, for the people who make up these societies “are persons who define themselves almost exclusively in terms of the groups in which they are embedded”; thus, “their total self-awareness emphatically depends on such group embeddedness” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:157). Growing up in such societies, people “were constantly shown that they existed solely because of and for the sake of the group in which they found themselves”, and “without that group, they would not have any identity” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:169). They thus perceived themselves as “always interrelated with other persons, while occupying a distinct social position both horizontally (with others sharing the same status, ranging from center to periphery) and vertically (with others above and below in social rank)” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:169).

- The dominant and focal social institution in which most people in the first century were embedded was the kinship group or family, and in particular the immediate patriarchal household of father, mother, married children, unmarried children, slaves and servants (Malina & Neyrey 1996:158). Thus males were known in terms of their father and his extended family, while females were known in terms of another person, generally a male member of the family – often her father, or once married, her husband.
- People in the first-century Mediterranean world “might also be embedded in a web of patron-client relationships” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:162). In return for favours received from the patron or benefactor, the client owed loyalty and commitment to the patron.
- Embedded in collectivist cultures, ancient persons had duties rather than rights – duties related to social expectations of them in accord with their roles and status, which were perceived as ascribed by God and part of ‘nature’ (Malina & Neyrey 1996:166). “It was presumed that people with certain roles in society would carry out those roles in keeping with society’s expectations”

(Malina & Neyrey 1996:173). Duties, especially those that defined roles within the primary institution of the family, were clearly articulated and inculcated. Thus by the first century, there were lists of household duties that formally expressed the reciprocal duties among the various members of the family: “A husband must treat his wife with the respect owed blood relatives, even though she may not be his kin. She in turn must show loyalty to the male in whom she is now embedded, transferring to him the loyalty formerly owed her father. Children are to obey their parents, in particular their fathers; and slaves must obey their masters” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:167). Within the family, the father and mother had clearly defined roles: “the father was begetter and protector; and the mother, nurturer and provider” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:173).

- “Because human beings have no control over their gender, geography, or generation, group-oriented persons tend to perceive existing roles and statuses within clans and families, as well as individual members within them, as ordained by God or gods” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:175). Paul reflects a similar social perspective in asserting that the body has many parts – it is not all head or eye or hand; its specific ordering is done by God, for “God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”⁷ The social body is quite similar, “for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God”⁸ (Malina & Neyrey 1996:175). “Because the social order, both theoretically and actually, is God’s doing, it follows that there will be a built-in resistance to social mobility and to status and role changing” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:176).
- Just as today we have narcissistic, self-centred individualists (displaying idiocentric behaviour) as well as supportive, other-centred individualists (displaying allocentric behaviour), so in antiquity there were self-centred collectivists and other-centred collectivists (Malina & Neyrey 1996:225). This

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 12:18.

⁸ See Romans 13:1.

means that collectivists are not altruistic and other-centred just because they are collectivist.

- Mediterranean society has traditionally employed the concepts of honour and shame to express societal approval or disapproval of behaviour (Malina & Neyrey 1996:176). The male is linked to the public sphere and the female to the private sphere of life, giving rise to an elaborate set of tasks and functions that are gender specific: public, outdoor tasks for males and private, indoor tasks for females (Malina & Neyrey 1996:178). Thus,

“a male’s honor rating requires that he be a public person, doing public actions and avoiding the world of women. Conversely, female honor requires women to be private persons, doing home-related activities in that sphere, and avoiding the world of men” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:181).

In a gender-divided social system that accorded honour or shame to encourage conformity, males had “to keep their females in line so as not to cause public shame for their kinship group” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:113).

Furthermore,

“it is impossible to underestimate the importance of honor and shame in the socialization of males and females in the ancient Mediterranean world. The manner in which these pivotal values were imparted to family members formed the way people understood themselves, perceived others, and developed moral judgments about proper behavior. To know the gender of someone was already to know a whole set of norms to which they must conform if they were to be honorable in that society” (Malina & Neyrey 1996:182).

With reference to the concepts of honour and shame, Domeris (1993), a South African scholar, has challenged the general applicability of some of the insights of scholars like Malina who have used a structural functionalist model of society which

tends to view societies as static. Domeris (1993:292) points out that the notion of a pan-Mediterranean mentality, which such studies assume, is regarded as problematic by various cultural anthropologists. Furthermore, since societies are not static but changing and “historical indications typify the world of the New Testament as one of society in transition” (Domeris 1993:295), Domeris favours a conflict model of society which is more dynamic. In fact, he finds that, “rather than operating as fixed values, as early cultural anthropologists assumed, honour and shame varied from one community to another, with significant changes in nuance” (Domeris 1993:288).

Domeris substantiates this by looking at differing concepts of honour and shame in the ancient Greek, Jewish and early Christian worlds. With regard to honour and shame in the Jewish world, Domeris (1993:286) sees the Wisdom of Ben Sirach as the most important source, with several sections devoted to seeking honour and avoiding shame (including “allowing a woman to dominate a man”). From his study of Jewish writings,

“the keynote for both the biblical and rabbinic view of humankind is that people are created in the image of God... The honour of any person derives ultimately from his or her possession of the image of God. This in part accounts for the concern, expressed in a range of Jewish writings, for the poor, orphans, widows and the marginalised of society. Thus the words and deeds of Jesus are not out of keeping with traditional Jewish thinking with regard to honour and shame” (Domeris 1993:286).

Yet at the same time “the Gospels do in fact represent Jesus as re-ordering the norms of his day, promoting a society with upside-down estimations of honour and shame, and with particular appeal to the misfits of society” (Domeris 1993:294-295). Jewish society elevated the Jewish educated male as the pinnacle of the created order and thus of the hierarchy of honour; and the desire for wealth and power by this elite guaranteed both the continuation of the *status quo* and the coercive nature of the societal norms they propagated (Domeris 1993:295). In contrast to such a hierarchy, Jesus raised up a child (Matthew 18:1-5) and declared that such was his

model for entry into and possession of God's kingdom – “thus Jesus redefines the ideal man/woman” (Domeris 1993:295). Such a reinterpretation of traditional notions of honour and shame is also witnessed in the beatitudes, and is further emphasised by the types of people with whom Jesus associated – sinners, tax-collectors and prostitutes – evidence that Christianity began as a counter-culture movement (Domeris 1993:295).

Domeris (1993:285) concludes that “the New Testament use of terms for honour and shame thus indicates links with classical Greek thinking on these values, but at the same time shows significant variations, in line with traditional Jewish thinking.”

The insights that we derive from the field of cultural anthropology may not be conclusive in establishing particular perceptions of marriage and the domestic household structure in the first-century Mediterranean world, but they do nevertheless cast a helpful light on the other evidences gleaned from writings from this era.

2.5 **Some conclusions**

Piecing these fragments together, some tentative conclusions on marriage in the first-century Mediterranean world are possible. The domestic household was widely regarded as the vital basic subunit of society, and household codes were an integral part of ethical philosophy in both Graeco-Roman and Jewish circles. A domestic patriarchal hierarchy was taken for granted, and in society in general the status of women was regarded as inferior to that of men. By the first century, acknowledgement of the special character of the marriage relationship in the domestic household was at times beginning to be accompanied by exhortations to mutual love and respect between husbands and wives, but the strict differentiation of roles on the basis of gender endured with wives clearly filling a subservient role in the marriage relationship.

Chapter 3

A survey of various readings of Ephesians 5:21-33

From the study of the first-century Mediterranean socio-historical background to the composition of the letter to the Ephesians outlined in the previous chapter, it is evident that the domestic household tended to be regarded as the basic component of society. Furthermore, both Graeco-Roman and Jewish writers addressing issues of social ethics took the patriarchal, hierarchical structure of domestic households for granted. In their ethical writings, duties and obligations were often discussed in terms of the relationship between the head of the household and subordinates. In these discussions the three-fold format of husband-wife, father-children, and master-slaves was frequently used. There is general consensus among biblical scholars that such a conventional 'household code' is being employed in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 as a convenient framework for discussing household relationships. There are, however, differences of opinion as to the reasons for the use of such a conventional household code in Ephesians, and on whether or not the writer's appropriation of such a household code was intended to make the domestic patriarchal hierarchy of the day normative for all cultures. The debate continues, both as to why a conventional household code is appropriated and why such emphasis is placed on the marriage relationship in the Ephesian code.¹ This is due in part to the fact that, "as with other such issues in Ephesians, there are frustratingly few clues about any actual life-setting for such an exposition" (Lincoln 1990:364). In attempting a brief

¹ Lincoln (1990:364) suggests four possible reasons why Ephesians lays heavy emphasis on the marriage relationship: firstly, it may have been addressing a possible tendency among church members to view marriage simply as a natural relationship, treating it no differently from the way that their non-Christian neighbours treated it; secondly, it could be that the sexual immorality inveighed against in 4:19; 5:3-6,12,18 was regarded as a real threat, and the stress on the special status of Christian marriage was therefore a further means of combating such a menace; thirdly, the extolling of marriage could have been a corrective to the denigration of marriage through ascetic tendencies that may have been prevalent; and fourthly, it may well be that there was no particular occasion for emphasising the marriage relationship, since Ephesians' vision of life in the world is one which is particularly concerned with unity – the ultimate unity of the cosmos in Christ and the present anticipation of that in the unity of the church – and an essential aspect of unity in the church is harmony in the Christian household, for which the husband-wife relationship is key.

survey of various readings of Ephesians 5:21-33, I shall summarise the different perspectives in this scholarly debate by discussing the following two general approaches:

- the Ephesian *Haustafel* is seen by some to represent a reactionary accommodation to the *status quo*
- the Ephesian *Haustafel* is regarded by others to exhibit a veneer of conformity necessitated by the struggle for survival in a hostile environment.

3.1 **A reactionary accommodation to the *status quo***

There are a number of New Testament scholars who view Ephesians as deutero-Pauline and see the epistle as the product of a phase, later in the first century, when the focus had turned from the hope of Christ's imminent return to issues concerning the ongoing maintenance of the church. In contrast to Paul's undisputed letters, as Lincoln (1993:128) points out, "in Ephesians there is no mention of Christ's parousia"; "instead believers are to look forward to a more extended period of existence on this earth, in which the Church is set goals in its quality of life", and "there is also a sense, conveyed through the household code, of the need for believers to adjust to the values of surrounding society while at the same time maintaining a distinctive identity." Lincoln (1993:128-129) asserts that this contrast is particularly discernible in the evaluation of marriage: "In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul makes it clear, because of his imminent expectation of the end and because of the need to give undivided attention to the Lord, that his preference is that believers, even those who are betrothed, remain single if at all possible and that those who have wives live as though they had none", while Ephesians "no longer treats marriage as a second-best option but by relating it so closely to the union between Christ and the Church gives it an exalted status."

From this sort of observation, some scholars proceed to view Ephesians as reflective of certain somewhat reactionary developments. As Wessels (1989:67-68), a South African scholar, points out, the church is thus perceived to replace the coming Messianic kingdom as the focal point of reference, with Christology consequently

becoming a function of ecclesiology. Ephesians is seen, in Käsemann's terminology, as 'the classical document of the church', and the church is spoken of in almost celestial terms: "God's household" (2:19), "a holy temple" (2:21), the place where "the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:10), and where the glory of God is revealed (3:21). The union between Christ and the church, his bride, as a *hieros gamos* is further seen to emphasise this, with the church depicted as being "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (5:27). Such triumphalist ecclesiology is regarded as a departure from the attitude of Jesus and the first believers, and is equally viewed as an unsuitable ecclesiology for the present day – "an understanding of the church which emphasises her glory and splendour and neglects her role as servant" (Wessels 1989:68), and which tends to put the emphasis on the preservation of the church in a changing world and on the maintenance of existing church structures.²

In embracing a type of code of household ethics commonly employed by contemporary philosophers in the ancient Mediterranean world, some scholars therefore see Ephesians as replacing the eschatological ethics of Jesus found in the undisputed Pauline letters with an ethic of the *status quo* – part of the process of adaptation as early Christianity lost its eschatological expectation of Christ's return. Since the origin and ethics of such *Haustafeln* were Hellenistic, mediated to early Christianity via Hellenistic Judaism (Lincoln 1993:89-90), these are not seen to represent authentic Christian ethics, and are viewed as incompatible with the radical ethics of Jesus or the eschatological ethics of the undisputed letters. Drawing on North American feminist theologian Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion, as Taylor (1999:339) points out, some regard the Ephesian household code as an interruption in the instructions of Ephesians 4-6 on how Christians can put into practice the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church, that Ephesians 1-3 claim Christ has accomplished – and a scholar like Tanzer goes so far as to view 5:22-6:9

² Ackermann (1989:76), a South African theologian, suggests that such a triumphalist interpretation of the scriptures has given rise to an other-worldly Christianity that "has sanctioned slavery, racism, sexism and capitalist exploitation" down through the ages.

as a later addition to the letter.³ The Ephesian household code is thus viewed as a sign of compromise and accommodation, and hence a step back from an earlier more radical ethics.

Thus, for example, Stagg (1979:543), a North American scholar, asserts that, while Jesus “thrust upon his followers awesome freedom and awesome responsibility”, the household code in Ephesians “is best understood as representing one step in the pilgrimage of a church somewhere between that freedom and an institution regulated by elaborate structures, orders, and rules.”

Lincoln (1993:141) too sees Ephesians as a reinterpretation of the Pauline message for a later situation, discerning that “the inevitable process of adjustment of the Pauline churches to life in society with its necessary increasing institutionalization, which was to have both positive and negative effects, is clearly underway in Ephesians.” In this vein, then, Lincoln (1990:360) finds that, “despite the Christian modifications he provides for conduct within the household, which at times produce tensions with the notion of patriarchal domination, and despite what he has said earlier about the radical contrast between believers and unbelievers, the writer of Ephesians, like the writers of other early Christian household codes, assumes that in this area the basic pattern of Christian conduct will have the same hierarchical structure as that prevailing in society as a whole.” He sees the death of the apostle Paul and the delay of the parousia as key factors contributing to Pauline Christians taking a long-term perspective on their churches’ need to assimilate to life in wider society, while preserving their essential identity, and deduces that “the form the code takes in Ephesians reflects its writer’s attempt to contribute to this process” (Lincoln 1990:360). He therefore concludes that, “despite its distinctively Christian elements, in terms of the actual roles it enjoins it falls well within normal expectations about the patriarchal household in the Greco-Roman world” (Lincoln 1990:365).

Regarding the Ephesian *Haustafel* as a regressive development, Johnson (1998:431), in her contribution on Ephesians to the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, goes further to assert that “the writer of Ephesians finds in the conventional,

³ See Briggs Kittredge (1998:134) for a concise statement of this position.

patriarchal household structure a reflection of the unity and harmony of the universe effected by God in Christ and calls his church to live appropriately in light of this redeemed cosmic reality.” By quoting Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31, she sees the institution of marriage being grounded in creation, rather than in social order. Thus Ephesians is seen to be concerned that the church faithfully mirror the creation and that the household mirror the church. “The result for women is thus a retreat from the initial freedom promised them in Paul’s preaching and a reassertion of conventional patriarchal morality” (Johnson 1998:431). Johnson’s verdict is thus that Ephesians presents a “rather unfortunate view of human marriage”, and that “the author of Ephesians has moved a significant step away from Paul’s theology” (Johnson 1998:432).

Hendrix (1988:11), another North American scholar, is also convinced that “there can be no question that Ephesians promotes patriarchalism”, for, in adopting a conventional household code as a model, “however much the author qualifies the interaction of the hierarchy with admonitions of mutual concern, the structure, itself, is taken for granted: women, children and slaves are subordinated to males, parents and owners.”

Similarly, the North American scholar, Briggs Kittredge (1998:143), finds that the Ephesian household code essentially interprets marriage asymmetrically, reinforcing the inequality of the relationship by emphasizing subordination as a necessary feature of that union. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:269) likewise finds that the Ephesian code essentially elaborates upon “the relationship of wife and husband in patriarchal marriage”, theologically reinforcing the cultural-patriarchal pattern of subordination of wife to husband by using metaphors like head and body and by likening the marriage relationship to that between Christ and the church – which “clearly is not a relationship between equals.” Although she does concede that “the patriarchal-societal code is theologically modified in the exhortation to the husband”, since “Christ’s self-giving love for the church is to be the model for the love relationship of the husband with his wife”, so that “patriarchal domination is thus radically questioned”, she nevertheless asserts that “this christological modification of the husband’s patriarchal position and duties does not have the power, theologically,

to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code, even though this may have been the intention of the author” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:269-270). In fact, she concludes that “Ephesians christologically cements the inferior position of the wife in the marriage relationship”, since, in taking over the household code pattern it “reasserts the submission of the wife to the husband as a religious Christian duty”, and consequently “the cultural-social structures of domination are theologized and thereby reinforced” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:270). To be sure, the way in which the church down through the centuries has read and interpreted the Ephesian household code has largely lent support to a patriarchal hierarchy in the domestic household, thereby substantiating Schüssler Fiorenza’s commentary. Was this, however, the intention of the writer, and is this indeed the way in which this passage should be read?

3.2 **Conformity for pragmatic reasons**

There are other scholars who see Ephesians’ employment of a conventional first-century *Haustafel* not so much as a gradual accommodation to the morality of first-century society, but rather as providing a veneer of conformity, so that Christian communities would at least appear less subversive, in order to survive in a hostile environment. In a world that regarded the domestic household as the basic unit of society, there were highly pragmatic reasons for appropriating the conventional household code as a tactic to defuse perceptions of Christianity as a subversive religion and a threat to the state and to society in general. These scholars often see a more radical ethic concealed within this conformist framework – although Johnson (1998:431) accuses such a line of argumentation as merely a ploy “to take the patriarchal sting out of the Ephesian household code.”

One such scholar is Keener, who works from the assumption that the letter to the Ephesians was written by Paul while imprisoned in Rome (Keener 1992:139). Keener’s thesis is that Paul was not trying to mandate roles in the home for all cultures, but was rather dealing with a pressing issue in his congregations. For, why otherwise, he asserts, would Paul, whose “social statements are among the most

progressive of his day” and who calls for mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21, then proceed in 5:22-33 to deal more explicitly with the submission of wives than with that of husbands? The answer that Keener (1992:139) proposes is, in short, that, “if he wanted the gospel to gain a strong hearing in the Greco-Roman world, he needed to temper his radicalism with prudent sensitivity to his culture.” In the words of a fellow North American, Webber (1994:61), in the Ephesian household code “we find the church adopting or commending a standard of behavior not entirely because of its own deep convictions but because of the need to survive as a small minority group of dubious reputation in a world where minority rights and religious freedom were completely unknown”; thus, “to present a positive image was important for survival and important also to a church with a mission”, for “how could the gospel be heard by people who had heard nothing good of those who proclaimed it?”

Stagg (1979:542) discerns a progressive development in the various New Testament *Haustafeln* as they address with specific rules both the concern for conduct and for the image of the church as perceived by the outside community, and in this development he finds that “the Ephesian code falls somewhere between the prophetic concern for a quality of life whatever its peril and the later code which urged the avoidance of that which would cause anyone to ‘speak evil of the message from God’ (Titus 2:3), the use of words ‘that cannot be criticized’ (2:8), and such conduct ‘as to bring credit to the teaching about God our Savior’ (2:9).”

Keener (1992:139) argues that by the first century the Roman aristocracy were feeling their power base increasingly threatened by the social changes occurring around them – changes that included the upward mobility of what were regarded as socially ‘inferior’ elements, such as former slaves, foreigners, and women. In line with this, foreign religions were sometimes suspected of aiding what the aristocrats viewed as subversion of the appropriate moral order. Judaism and other foreign religions were viewed with hostility by the Roman elite precisely because they were winning so many converts in Rome, where “the success of Jewish proselytism seems to have threatened the traditional Roman establishment” (Keener 1992:142).

Indeed, Keener (1992:141) points out that Roman mistrust of eastern cults is reflected in Roman literature, citing the writings of Apuleius and Petronius, and notes that scandals had arisen in first-century Rome in which both Isis-worshippers and Jews in that city had been perceived to represent “a foreign superstition of the sort that could subvert the morals of virtuous Roman women.” Lincoln (1990:358) supports this notion, stating that “writers in Greco-Roman society singled out the cults of Dionysus and Isis, which attracted women devotees, and also Judaism, since Jewish slaves rejected the worship of their Roman masters’ gods, for stereotyped criticism on grounds of producing immorality and sedition.” Conservative writers like Plutarch and the satirist Juvenal reacted against foreign cults which, they believed, were greatly strengthened through the gullibility of women. “As Christianity spread in the Roman world and women and slaves converted to this new religion, it too became the object of similar suspicion and criticism” (Lincoln 1990:358). The conversion of wives to Christianity thus posed a threat to upper-class men, and through them could provoke increased hostility towards Christians. Thus, although Ephesians 5:22-33 deals only with Christian spouses, “the behavior of Christian families would no doubt affect public perceptions about Christianity” and “Paul did not want the church to be viewed as an immoral mystery cult” (Keener 1992:142)

In a society where the ideal figure of the Roman upper class was that of a ‘benevolent patriarch’, who ruled fairly on behalf of those under him, but maintained his own superior rank and social status, Keener (1992:145) claims that “the aristocratic discomfort was increasing by Paul’s day”, and that “the antifeminist rhetoric of Roman aristocratic males was apparently getting hotter as well.” Where the family was viewed as a microcosm of society, the basic unit upon which society was built, and political philosophy since Aristotle had outlined the proper family relationships necessary for the health of society as a whole, those who challenged the old traditionalism were opposing standard aristocratic opinion and risked the charge of political subversion.⁴

⁴ Lincoln (1990:358) agrees that the Graeco-Roman view of the domestic household as the foundation of the state “is extremely significant for interpretation of the early Christian use of household codes”, since proper household management was generally regarded as a matter of crucial social and political concern, and “any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order of the household could be considered a potential threat to the order of society as a whole.”

The religious dimension of this situation was also crucial. "In Greco-Roman culture, wives, children, and slaves were expected to accept the religion of the male head of the household, the *paterfamilias*, and so religious groups that attracted women and slaves were particularly seen as potentially subversive of societal stability" (Lincoln 1990:358). Religions that were thought to ignore traditional roles for women would therefore be viewed as threatening by the conservative male establishment. Groups accused of undermining the moral fabric of Roman society thus sometimes protested that they did in fact conform to traditional Roman values, by producing their own lists or 'household codes' with their conventional threefold format of husband and wife, father and children, and master and slave, closely approximating those normally used in their day (Keener 1992:146). The use of such household codes was thus a significant way for foreign religious cults to demonstrate their lack of subversiveness to Roman society. "If they could demonstrate the 'orthodox' character of their family practices, they would have answered a critical charge leveled against them by powerful members of the surrounding society" (Keener 1992:146). By illustration, Keener (1992:146) goes on to point out that Josephus, in fact, followed this three-part household code pattern in his defence of Judaism against Apion, one of its slanderers. He therefore concludes that "early Christian household codes may serve the same apologetic purpose: to show that Christians were good members of society who did not seek to radically overturn Roman social structures" (Keener 1992:146-147).⁵ Lincoln (1990:358) concedes that this may be a possibility, when he notes that "social tensions between Christians and the rest of society, as well as tensions within the early Christian movement, need ... to be given their due in any account of the emergence of Christian household codes." For, while there is no mention in Ephesians of relationships with outsiders in connection with the household code itself, "the writer does see its injunctions as part of believers' wise conduct in the world, which makes the most of opportunities for good and understands the will of

⁵ Webber (1994:61) concurs that, just as Jewish writers of the first century like Josephus and Philo "made a determined effort to persuade a Gentile audience that Judaism also believed in good order, obedience to the law, and households in which each member knew and accepted the role assigned them", so "it was only natural, then, that Christians also would attempt to show that their beliefs were not subversive" – the evidence for which he finds in the several New Testament epistles which contain adapted versions of the household codes. Lincoln (1990:360) too considers the household codes of the New Testament in general to "reflect a stage in which Christians were conscious of criticisms of subverting society and of the need to adjust to living in the Greco-Roman world without unnecessarily disrupting the status quo."

the Lord for present circumstances (cf. 5:15-17)" (Lincoln 1990:359). He therefore allows that "it may well have been external factors, the need to respond to accusations from outsiders and to set standards in line with common notions of propriety, as much as internal ones, the need to respond to enthusiastic demands for freedom on the part of believers, that led Christians to take up the household code", although he points out that "the precise reason for early Christians' taking up this topic originally and the exact relation between inner and outer social tensions in such a move must remain matters of conjecture" (Lincoln 1990:358).

In addition, Keener (1992:147) suggests that, "by adhering to certain societal standards, the early Christians could perhaps hope to distinguish themselves from traditional objects of Roman slander, 'undignified' eastern Mediterranean religions, including such mysteries as the cult of Dionysus." Rogers (1979:249-257), in his article on "The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18", has, for example, pointed out that the wild, drunken practices connected with the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine, may well form the general cultural background for the commands in Ephesians 5:18 and the exhortations of 5:19-33.⁶ Keener (1992:258) too asserts that the exhortation in 5:18-21 "could have functioned particularly well in showing that Christians did not act like the drunken revelers in some of the mysteries", and agrees that "the cumulative weight of different motifs in one section of his letter may suggest that Paul is actively seeking to distinguish Christian gatherings from the more distasteful of the pagan religious associations" (Keener 1992:259).⁷

⁶ The cult of Dionysus had long been notorious for women's frenzied participation (Keener 1992:259) – a cult which was associated with sexual immorality (Keener 1992:260). Celebrated with drunkenness, the worshippers of Dionysus symbolically overturned the social order in their ritual, involving gender role reversal and a breakdown of traditional social status categories, with wine being provided at festivals across lines of social status, and even to slaves (Keener 1992:260). According to popular tradition Dionysus was said to derive from Asia Minor, and the cult of Dionysus had spread widely in Hellenistic times, and continued to be practised in the Roman period, although it took some time to become fully accepted in Rome where the cult had been stigmatised (Keener 1992:261). Keener (1992:261) points out that, in Rome, Jewish worship had been compared to that of Dionysus, and that Christians could therefore also expect the comparison to be drawn with them, provoking scandal.

⁷ Ephesians 5:18-21 contrasts drunkenness with true spiritual worship and properly submissive relationships, which, as Keener (1992:259) suggests, "might suggest that the contrast is between true and false kinds of worship." Keener (1992:259) adds: "Music, sexual liberation, and abuse of wine were not limited in any way to the mysteries, but if Paul is concerned to set Christianity apart from Roman perceptions of 'foreign cults', these would be some issues that he would need to address. Paul is at least concerned in this context to distinguish Christians from those who perform pagan deeds in darkness (5:8-14). The darkness to which he refers surely contrasts with the true light of Christ (5:14), but it could also point to the secretive (5:12), nighttime initiations of most of the mysteries."

For Keener this had nothing to do with a reticence on Paul's part to challenge the structures of his day, in contrast to Jesus' activism, but had simply to do with the fact that "the rest of the Roman world required a different strategy for change than Jewish Palestine had"; indeed, "now that he himself was in Rome, the issues that would contribute to a lifestyle defense of Christianity had no doubt become even clearer to him" (Keener 1992:147). It was all part of Paul's strategic thinking, for "stressing the wife's submission would be important for evangelizing resistant elements in the Roman world and for resisting progressive cultural temptations for wives to affirm too much independence at the expense of their marriage" (Keener 1992:147).

At the same time Keener (1992:157) points out that, "despite Paul's attempt to relate to the best values in Greco-Roman culture, his words differ from those values precisely where Paul believed those values fell short of the will of God"; indeed, in affirming that all believers were equal before God in Christ, regardless of race, social status, or gender (Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:4-6; cf. Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13), "for all the social conservatism in Paul's words, there is yet a subversiveness he dares not play down." Consequently, while those who wrote most about morality in the first-century Mediterranean world called on wives to obey and husbands to govern them honourably, "Paul avoids the nuances of 'obedience' and 'ruling', but he does not mind calling on wives to submit or husbands to love, because this was behavior that should indeed characterize all Christians" (Keener 1992:157), whereas he does call upon children and slaves to obey.

Keener (1992:169) claims, therefore, that Paul's argument in Ephesians 5:21-33 is both powerful and well crafted:

"If wives submit to their husbands, Roman moralists and others could not claim that Christianity subverted pagan morals. But if the husband also submits, and husband and wife act as equals before God, Paul is demanding something more than Roman moralists typically demanded, not less."

This kind of argument is rejected by some scholars. Johnson (1998:431), for example, finds little support in Ephesians for the notion of an anxiety for the church's

reputation among non-believers; and, if this is indeed the case, then Ephesians' "willingness to contradict – not simply reinterpret – Paul's understanding of relations between women and men must derive from a sense of great peril," for here one sees "a deliberate alteration of the received tradition." She goes on to conclude that "by subordinating the interests of the women in the congregation to the interests of the church's public image, the author apparently operates more from fear than from faith" (Johnson 1998:431) – a valid indictment of this line of argument.

3.3 Some preliminary conclusions

While agreeing that the general form of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 is essentially part of that particular genre that is evidenced in other household codes from the first-century Mediterranean world, and so is rooted in a patriarchal, hierarchical understanding of relationships in the domestic household, I do not believe that Ephesians is either simply a reactionary tract that is seeking to entrench the traditional patriarchal hierarchy in domestic households,⁸ nor merely a pragmatic ploy to placate accusations against Christianity. To be sure, what the writer of Ephesians does is to root the new reality of new life, new community, new standards and new relationships in the reality of the social world of the time. As seen in the previous chapter, this world was one in which a domestic patriarchal hierarchy was taken for granted as simply part of the natural order, although various writers may have enjoined the development of positive two-way relationships within this unquestioned framework – especially as regards the husband-wife relationship. There is just no evidence that there was any consideration at all of the possibility of a domestic structure that was not essentially patriarchal and hierarchal. The work of cultural anthropologists like Malina reinforces this picture of the first-century Mediterranean world – even though, of course, his structural functionalist approach is not really designed to yield information on dissenting perspectives, as Domeris (1993:288-290) points out. In such a context of rigid social stratification in which

⁸ Wessels (1988:296), in his doctoral thesis entitled *Early Catholicism in Colossians and Ephesians?*, concludes that the *Haustafeln* in both these letters do not in fact represent an early catholic reaction against an earlier, more radical, Pauline position. Indeed, he affirms that the Ephesian paraenesis is thoroughly Pauline (Wessels 1988:304).

notions of the emancipation of women or the abolition of slavery were not even a remote consideration (Wessels 1988:295), is it not inevitable that the writer of Ephesians would root comments on the domestic household in the reality of the time?

I am convinced that this is a more likely reason for the incorporation of a conventional *Haustafel* here in Ephesians. The discussion is simply rooted in the world of both the writer and implied readers. The thesis of scholars like Keener, that there were pressing pragmatic reasons for adopting the widely used household code, as outlined above, is interesting, and may well have provided an ancillary motive for doing this in Ephesians – indeed, certain scholars, as we have already seen, have pointed out how Ephesians 5:18-21 subtly contrasts Christian praxis with practices evidenced in cults like that of Dionysus, thereby placing the Ephesian household code directly within the context of concern about possible societal misconceptions concerning Christianity. Nevertheless, to elevate this motivation to become the primary reason for incorporating a conventional household code, ignores the overwhelming reality that this was simply *the* model for domestic relationships in the first-century Mediterranean world, and hence this is the model that is appropriated in Ephesians.

Sampley (1971:157) propounds another reason for appropriating a conventional domestic code in Ephesians, since, “in large measure, the subjection urged upon the wife is ideal for what the author wants to say about the church.” “In the church’s relation to Christ there is no qualification of submission”, and so “for the purposes of his statement about the submission of the church, the author found a ready format in the unmodified *Haustafel* admonition to the wives” (Sampley 1971:157).

While acknowledging the appropriation of a contemporary form of household code, however, does the writer of Ephesians not infuse this model with a radically new ethos that transforms relationships within the domestic household? Can one not discern here an ethos of “other-centredness” which will radically modify the way that members of the domestic household relate to one another? Is the rhetoric employed in Ephesians not intended to captivate readers and propel them far beyond the

limited realm of the first-century Mediterranean *status quo* and mundane concerns simply to refute accusations of subverting morality and social order? For, as Verhey (1984:126), from his study of the ethics of the New Testament points out, “the *Haustafel* of Ephesians stands as far from the conventional understanding of roles as the peace of God stands from the conventional hostility between Jew and Gentile.” Surely something of a far higher order is discernible here. As Stagg (1979:544) affirms, in a reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 “much light from Jesus Christ breaks upon the husband/wife ... relationship beyond the limited range of any domestic code.” Indeed, this pericope is unique among the New Testament household codes in its treatment of “the union of husband and wife by analogy with the union of Christ and the church” (Hunter 1992:5). In the next chapter I shall explore this rhetorical dimension further, thereby seeking to substantiate whether or not Ephesians 5:21-33 is in fact infused with a transformative ethos, which radically modifies the conventional household code of the first-century Mediterranean world.

Chapter 4

Re-reading Ephesians 5:21-33 rhetorically

In seeking to substantiate the notion that Ephesians 5:21-33 represents far more than simply an endorsement of a conventional household code of the first-century Mediterranean world with its stereotypical domestic patriarchal hierarchy, I shall employ a multi-dimensional approach. In re-reading Ephesians 5:21-33 rhetorically, I shall start with a wide-angle view of the relationship of this pericope to the general rhetorical thrust of the letter as a whole, and then examine how it is framed in the Ephesian domestic code, before narrowing the perspective to make a detailed study firstly of the structure of the passage and then of various aspects of its content.

4.1 **The rhetorical thrust of the letter to the Ephesians**

4.1.1 **The rhetoric of Ephesians**

Rhetoric is the disciplined art of persuasion which is employed in order to accomplish certain purposes. Persuasion may be of the truth of a set of propositions, or it may be towards a certain kind of action – most New Testament texts attempt both of these (Kitchen 1994:14). Rhetoric was a key subject included in the curriculum of Graeco-Roman schools and was practised in almost every form of communication (Cousar 1996:37). Thus, the letter to the Ephesians may be seen to build on the Hellenistic tradition of epistolary writing, attempting to persuade its readers of the validity of its argument and the correctness of its ethic (Kitchen 1994:14).

Rhetorical criticism has come to be viewed as making a useful contribution to the study of ancient texts, with rhetorical critics of the New Testament seeking to understand how the rhetorical patterns of a particular text would impact its intended audience. Such critics thus focus their attention on the forms of expression employed in ancient Greek rhetoric, as well as trying to learn as much as possible

about the historical situation of the original readers of the text. Ancient Greek rhetoricians recognized essentially three broad species of rhetoric (Pregeant 1995:30), namely:

- judicial rhetoric – designed to persuade the audience to make judgments about events in the past;
- deliberative rhetoric – encouraging the audience to take some action in the future; and
- epideictic rhetoric – celebrating or denouncing some person or some quality.

The letter to the Ephesians combines two of these species of rhetoric. The first half of the letter, with its celebration before God of all that he has accomplished for the implied readers¹ and its context of praise and thanksgiving, can be seen as a Christian version of the ancient letter of congratulation, while the second half of the letter is a variation on the Greek letter of advice (Lincoln 1993:81). Thus, in combining the congratulatory and the paraenetic types of letter,² Ephesians essentially combines the epideictic and deliberative genres of rhetoric (Lincoln 1993:81-82). The epideictic discourse in Ephesians 1-3 attempts to persuade by increasing the readers' allegiance to certain values, while the deliberative rhetoric of Ephesians 4-6 seeks to persuade those readers to take particular actions in the future. As Lincoln (1993:82) discerns, "the celebration, thanksgiving, prayer and anamnesis of chapters 1-3 serve to consolidate the implied writer's and readers' common relationship to God and Christ and the common values and perspectives entailed in this relationship, and they do this in a way that appeals to the implied readers' religious experience, emotions and commitment"; and so, "these chapters provide a highly effective springboard for the deliberative argument of the second

¹ Since the rhetoric of Ephesians emerges from the writer's perception of the readers and their situation, the rhetorical genres employed provide perhaps a key to unraveling the riddle of the audience to whom it is addressed, since the phrase "in Ephesus" is omitted from some of the most reliable early manuscripts: "for whatever reason, the readers are in danger of losing their way and need to be reminded of the hope of their calling (1:18) and of the quality of the lives they are to live worthy of that calling (4:1)" (Cousar 1996:172-173).

² A contrasting opinion is provided by Hendrix (1988:9) who holds that, while the author of Ephesians has framed the document in an epistolary genre, its form follows the general conventions of honorific decrees. Consequently, he views Ephesians as "an epistolary decree in which the author recites the universal benefactions of God and Christ and proceeds to stipulate the appropriate honors, understood as the moral obligations of the beneficiaries" (Hendrix 1988:9).

part of the letter in chapters 4-6, which calls for behaviour in line with the values of those who belong to the Church.”

The rhetoric of the letter thus provides a highly significant interpretive framework for understanding the message of Ephesians, and the key themes that are presented as integrally part of the general rhetorical thrust of the letter as a whole should clearly be borne in mind when reading any particular passage, such as the Ephesians 5:21-33 pericope. Let us therefore turn our attention to these key themes.

4.1.2 **The new, alternative reality in Christ**

The recurring theme running right through the letter to the Ephesians is the radical, new, alternative reality in Christ – the new identity of believers in Christ, the new community of the church, and new lifestyles commensurate with this new identity. As Stott (1979:24), the British scholar and clergyman, points out, “the letter focuses on what God did through the historical work of Jesus Christ and does through his Spirit today, in order to build his new society in the midst of the old.” With this theme in mind, Stott (1979:25) goes on to suggest that the letter can be analysed into the following components:

- the *new life* which God has given us in Christ (1:3-2:10)
- the *new society* which God has created through Christ (2:11-3:21)
- the *new standards* which God expects of his new society, especially unity and purity (4:1-5:21)
- the *new relationships* into which God has brought us – harmony in the home and hostility to the devil (5:21-6:24).

This radical, new, alternative reality is fleshed out in various ways, powerfully emphasising the discontinuity with the past. Let us examine some of these dimensions.

.1 'In Christ'

The phrase "in Christ" and its variants occur numerous times throughout the letter. The identity of the readers is integrally tied up with the notion that they are now "in Christ", and this new identity is to transform their perspective on every aspect of their lives. It is God's plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (1:10). "In Christ", the readers are part of God's new community, the church, which is referred to as Christ's body; and indeed God has appointed Christ to be "head over everything for the church" (1:22). Indeed, the arrangement of elements in Ephesians 1-3 in an a-b-c-b-a chiastic pattern serves to emphasise the pivotal confession of faith in 1:22-23 and its dramatic consequences: those who were dead, have been made alive (2:1-10); those who were far away, excluded from citizenship in Israel, have been brought near (2:11-18); and those who formerly had been powerless and statusless foreigners and aliens, have been made fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household (2:19-22) (Mouton 1997:126).

Ephesians underlines heavily that its readers' identity and status are all of grace (Lincoln 1993:148). Rather than grounding the identity of the church autonomously, the writer roots it in the election and calling of God "before the foundation of the world"; and it is a status God "lavished on us", "according to the riches of his grace" (1:3-14). Furthermore, the writer assumes that his readers have experienced not only the grace of God but also the power of God: "Salvation is seen as an act of liberation, of transference with Christ from one sphere of power to another – from bondage to the sphere of the flesh, 'this world-age' and death to enjoyment of the new order of resurrection life and the heavenly realms (cf. 2:1-6), from enslavement to impurity, covetousness and idolatry to inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (cf. 5:3-5)" (Lincoln 1993:150).

So radical is the transformation in Christ, that it elicits a new perspective on every aspect of life. So, for example, even Paul's imprisonment is interpreted afresh: although a prisoner of the temporal authorities within the Roman Empire, he is presented rather as "the prisoner of *Christ Jesus*" (3:1) and "a prisoner for the *Lord*" (4:1). Christ's sovereignty over his life and circumstances was such that it totally

transformed his reality, and it is Christ's headship that is presented as the key for a transformed perspective for all who are part of Christ's body.

.2 Unity

The letter is permeated with an ethos of unity and inclusivity – of oneness in Christ. The declaration of God's plan to unite the whole human race under Christ's headship (1:10) paves the way for the rhetorical thrust of the letter – namely, to convince Gentile Christians that they are not second-class citizens in the church, inferior to Christians from Jewish backgrounds – “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (2:19-20). Indeed, the implied readers are being urged to have an attitude of mind “marked by shifts both from a view of humanity defined by exclusivity and separation (between people and God and between Jewish and Gentile believers) to an identity and ethos of inclusivity and unity, and from an emphasis on cultic activities (covenant, circumcision, law, temple) to an emphasis on relations in which people of different ethnic groups, gender, and social status have been united with Christ into one body or household” (Mouton 1997:122).

Indeed, the language of “mystery” is applied to the notion of unity as a thread running right through Ephesians: it is applied to cosmic unity in Christ (1:9-10), to the unity of Jew and Gentile in the one body, the church (3:3-6), and to the way in which the latter unity acts as an announcement about the former (3:9-10), and then to the striking reflection of the unity of Christ and the church in the marriage union (5:31-32).

Thus, “the larger theme of Ephesians is God's eternal purpose of bringing all creation into unity” (Webber 1994:70). The ethical implications of all this are spelled out in 4:1-6:9, with an ethic of unity (Kitchen 1994:20), and consequently, as the pericope on marriage unfolds in 5:21-33, “the unity in human marriage is drawn back into this larger theme in 5:31-32” (Webber 1994:70).

The church is thus presented in Ephesians as “a reconciled and reconciling community, the place in which both Jews and Gentiles and humanity and God have been reconciled to each other” (Lincoln 1993:153). In achieving one new community, Christ’s peacemaking is thus seen to have overcome the major division within humanity in the first-century Mediterranean world. And, as Lincoln (1993:153) points out with reference to Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, “that major division can be treated as the prototype of all divisions.”

.3 **An alternative reality**

Ephesians is rich in metaphors for the church which reflect an alternative reality: the fullness of Christ (1:23; 4:13), the household of God (2:19), the holy temple (2:21-22), the bride of Christ (5:23-24), and, most prominently of all, the body of Christ (1:23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4,12,16; 5:23,30). Jesus is portrayed as an exalted, reigning figure whose power is manifested in a glorious resurrection and ascension (1:20-22), and such “christological assertions pave the way for saying that believers, too, have been raised with Christ and are even seated with him in the heavenly places (2:5-6)” (Cousar 1996:175). At the same time, Ephesians describes the present as “a time of warfare with cosmic forces, which demands from the church perseverance, discipline, and an alertness to all the divine resources available (6:10-20),” so that “the death and resurrection of Jesus do not translate the church into some beatific state but thrust it right into the middle of the struggle between good and evil, justice and injustice, freedom and oppression” (Cousar 1996:175).

Thus, as Lincoln (1993:150-151) comments, Ephesians

“sees the resurrection and exaltation of Christ as the supreme demonstration of God’s power, as inaugurating a new situation within history and its conflict of powers. Through their relationship to Christ believers are initiated into a new dominion, whose reality they are to appropriate. Again and again, whether it is expressed in terms of growth in unity, putting on the new person, living as children of light or taking up the whole armour of God, what believers are called on to do is to avail themselves of the resources that come from the new centre of power in their

lives so that the distinctive pattern of behaviour that flows from this power can be produced. This is the force of the exhortation to be filled with the Spirit (5:18).”

Just as Jesus had redefined the concepts of honour and shame, as Domeris (1993:294-295) has pointed out, so here in Ephesians there is a re-ordering of norms in line with the new, alternative reality in Christ.

Thus, for example, where authority is frequently associated with a hierarchy of domination and control, Ephesians 1:22-23 by contrast declares that God has appointed Christ to be “head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”, thereby reflecting a very different kind of headship – a headship of caring for and carrying responsibility for the church. This picture of headship for the growth of the church is again discernible in 4:15-16. This ethos is powerfully emphasised in 5:2 and 5:25, where Christ’s love of the church is directly linked with the radically alternative definition of honour seen in Christ’s willingness to lay down his life for her.

This ethos is part of the very fabric of the letter to the Ephesians. Hendrix (1988:9-10), for example, in proposing that Ephesians be understood as an honorific decree in which the honours due to the benefactor and the moral obligations of the beneficiaries are spelt out, highlights the dramatic re-ordering of norms, where the benefactor is seen to bestow citizen status in the new community on aliens and sojourners: “This striking reversal of honorific conventions in which the benefactor rather than the beneficiary grants citizenship throws into even sharper relief the all-encompassing beneficence of the divine benefactor.” As with many decrees, he sees Ephesians as a prescription of reality, in which “the author adapts a pervasive social reality, the benefactor-beneficiary phenomenon, and through this adaptation prescribes a new network of benefaction” (Hendrix 1988:10). The ethos of the benefactor-beneficiary or patron-client phenomenon,³ which was an integral part of

³ Hendrix (1988:6) points out that, in the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean, the title ‘benefactor’ or *soter* (saviour) had become personalised epithets of an increasingly divinised Hellenistic royalty. He also notes that “an ethos of reciprocal benefaction and honour for the common good of the

the fabric of society in the first-century Mediterranean world, is thus articulated in a Christianised form in Ephesians, achieving a powerful reinforcement of Christian identity and cohesion, and emphasising that Christians are those who honour their divine benefactor through moral behaviour, animated by love as expressed in mutual benefit (Hendrix 1988:10).

The quality of this love as other-centred is integral to the alternative reality that is promoted in Ephesians. As Cousar (1996:173) points out, “unlike many discussions of self-identity, the message of Ephesians avoids being narcissistic.” The readers are repeatedly told that God’s calling for the church is that it live for something beyond itself – “for the praise of his glory” (1:12,14). Indeed, as Lincoln (1993:153) asserts, “the vision of the Church in Ephesians is of a community of forgiving and accepting love based on its experience of God’s forgiving and accepting love in Christ (cf. 4:32-5:2).”

4.1.3 **Lives lived in line with this new reality in Christ**

Hence the implied readers are exhorted to live lives worthy of this calling (4:1), making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit (4:3), and growing up into Christ, the head, from whom “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:16). This new reality is expected to see an outworking in lifestyles that stand in stark contrast to those of contemporary society, as seen in the demand that they “must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking” (4:17). Rather, they are to “put off the old self” and “put on the new self” (4:22-24) – a contrast that is as great as that between light and darkness (5:8).⁴

People and the glory of her patrons was the social premise of the benefactor-beneficiary phenomenon” (Hendrix 1988:10).

⁴ Rogers (1979:257) has seen further evidence of the contrast presented between the new identity in Christ and the worldly context in possible allusions to practices in the Dionysian cult in 5:15-21.

It is this rhetorical thrust, focusing on the new creation or new humanity under Christ's headship and in relation to fellow believers, that catches the reader up into the alternative reality in Christ and then propels the reader into the household codes in chapters 5 and 6. The integrity of the whole letter is then surely at stake if one reads these household codes simply as a reaffirmation of the general morality and household structures of the day.⁵ For, the import of this letter is that, although the readers are still in the world, yet in Christ the mundane is radically transformed. Indeed, "the communicative, transformative power of the Ephesians epistle lies in its potential ability to persuade its readers toward appropriating their honorable position in Christ, toward inhabiting its alternative moral world" (Mouton 2002:121-122). Under Christ's headship or sovereignty, an alternative perspective is shed on earthly realities. Barriers, such as "the dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile (2:14), are broken down and a new humanity emerges (2:15). For the Christian this implies that there is a new embeddedness in Christ, and in the new society, the church, which transcends the way in which a person had formerly been embedded in society. For the church this new perspective means that all in the household of God are fellow-citizens with equal standing in Christ – integrally part of the one new humanity that has been created in Christ, despite the fact that different gifts have been apportioned to the different members of this household "for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:12-13).

⁵ Viewing the rhetorical thrust of the letter to the Ephesians in this way emphasises the integrity of the document as a whole as a canonical text. It also affirms the integral relationship of the paraenetic section to the rest of the letter. This contrasts, as Cousar (1996:32) points out, with earlier studies where, for example, Dibelius, in the early 20th century, stressed that the content of the paraenetic material in the Pauline letters had come from various sources (Jewish, Christian and pagan) and that they were assembled by Paul with little thought either to their inner coherence or to their applicability to the specific letter. They therefore had little to do with the theological foundations of the ethics of Paul, but rather belonged to tradition. However, Cousar goes on to point out that Furnish has more recently countered this view by arguing that Paul's paraenetic sections should not be isolated but examined in the light of their contexts within the letters. "When this is done, it becomes clear that Paul carefully assimilates the ethical materials from the various sources and appropriates them in line with his theological purposes" (Cousar 1996:32). Thus, Paul's use of traditional materials, such as the household code, perhaps reflects more of a pastoral concern to be concrete and relevant.

4.1.4 **Thematic links between Ephesians 5:21-33 and the rest of the letter**

Further support for the notion, that Ephesians 5:21-33 should be read with the rhetorical thrust of the whole letter in mind, is provided in the numerous thematic links between this pericope and the rest of the letter. In the first place, this pericope is integrally linked grammatically and structurally via 5:21 to the previous pericope (5:15-21), so that “its injunctions are to be seen as specific examples of the wise living in the fullness of the Spirit that this writer requires of believers” (Lincoln 1990:363). Some of the other links to earlier passages in Ephesians are:

- The exhortation to mutual submission (5:21) may be viewed as a variation on the calls to bear with one another in love (4:2), to be kind and forgiving to one another, and to walk in love (4:32-5:2).
- The notion that such mutual submission is to be exercised “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) harks back to the key confession of 1:22 where all is brought into submission to Christ.
- The analogy to human marriage of Christ’s relationship with the church, where he is the head and the church is the body, recalls earlier use of this imagery in 1:22-23 and 4:15-16.
- Believers are said to be members of Christ’s body (5:30), language already used of them in 4:25.
- The “one flesh” unity of the marriage relationship may be seen as a further instance of the unity motif already expressed in relation to the cosmos (1:10) and the church (2:14-18; 4:1-16).
- The depiction of Christ’s love and self-giving for the church (5:25) employs a formulation encountered earlier in 5:2.

- The “holy and blameless” of 5:27 may be viewed as a reiteration of a theme from 1:4, “where the display of such holiness and blamelessness is seen as the purpose of God’s election of believers from before the foundation of the world” (Lincoln 1990:377). Impurity is what characterises outsiders (4:19; 5:3), while purity is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s church. The implication of the church being presented as “a radiant church ... holy and blameless” (5:27) is not only that there is no physical blemish, but that the bride’s beauty is clearly ethical.
- Just as the domestic household tended to be regarded in the first-century Mediterranean world as the basic subunit of the state, so in Ephesians there is a possible parallel perspective on the domestic household as a microcosm of Christian society, the church, which is described earlier in Ephesians as God’s household (2:19).

The focus on marriage in 5:21-33 is certainly not out of place. It is concordant with the tenor of the letter as a whole, as Lincoln (1990:364) asserts, since the writer’s “vision of life in the world is one which is particularly concerned with unity – the ultimate unity of the cosmos in Christ and the present anticipation of that in the unity of the Church. An essential aspect of unity in the Church is harmony in the Christian household, and the pairing within the household that lends itself most to the exposition of unity is clearly that of husband and wife.”

Thus, in Ephesians “marital unity serves as an instance of Church unity, and Church unity serves as an instance of ultimate cosmic unity” (Lincoln 1990:365).

4.2 The household code framed by 5:21 and 6:9

In our reading of the Ephesian household code, it is crucial to note the interpretive framework in which it is set, for both the initial statement and the concluding verse of this code strongly influence the whole tone of the passage. The verses 5:21 and 6:9 radically modify the conventional wisdom of the day by placing domestic relationships within a framework of mutual submission and equal worth, and by viewing these relationships from a Christ-centred perspective. It is therefore of crucial significance to comprehend that the Ephesian household code flows out of the injunction contained in 5:21. I shall address this issue first, and then go on to look at the radical statements contained in 5:21 and 6:9.

4.2.1 The structural relationship of 5:21 to the Ephesian household code

In the Ephesian paraenesis, 5:21 is a transitional verse indicating that the exhortations about household relationships form the major part of the paraenesis about wise living that begins at 5:15. Thus, “the primary resource for such living is the Spirit, with whom believers are to be filled, resulting in mutual edification, worship, constant thanksgiving, and mutual submission”, and “the exhortation to mutual submission forms a transition between the preceding injunctions in 5:15-20 and the instructions to wives and husbands in 5:22-33” (Lincoln 1990:385). Indeed, the participle in 5:21 is dependent on the main verb, “be filled”, of 5:18 and, in turn, the exhortation to wives in 5:22 is dependent on this participle for its sense, since it contains no verb.⁶ Thus, as Wessels (1989:71) points out with reference to Barth and Roberts, for grammatical and syntactical reasons, 5:21 belongs to 5:18-21 (in which five successive participles are attached to the imperative, ‘Be filled with the Holy Spirit’), but at the same time the content of 5:21 forms an essential part of 5:22-33. The verses that follow 5:21 consequently flow directly out of it, and any attempt

⁶ Although there are a large number of manuscripts that do repeat the verb *hypotassein* in 5:22, textual criticism tends to support the notion that the best Greek text has no verb in 5:22 and is dependent for its sense on the participle in 5:21 (Lincoln 1990:351; Girard 2000:129).

to isolate the instruction to wives to submit to their husbands from the general admonition to submit to one another violates the intention of the whole passage.

In general, therefore, 5:21 provides a link between the discussion of relationships in the body of Christ, or God's household, and relationships in the domestic household, and consequently 5:21 stands as a general heading for the whole of the household code in Ephesians. In particular, however, 5:21 clearly stands as a heading for 5:22-33. This is further emphasised structurally through the employment of an *inclusio* – the notion of 'fear' or 'respect' provides the opening element of an *inclusio* in 5:21 that will be completed in 5:33 (Lincoln 1990:352; Schnackenburg 1991:243; Girard 2000:126). The recognition of this stylistic element is crucial to our reading of the Ephesian exhortation to husbands and wives. As the French Canadian scholar, Girard (2000:128), points out, this *inclusio* determines the overall framework of the discourse – a framework of mutuality – since both 5:21 and 5:33 address interpersonal relationships in their mutuality. Structurally, therefore, "to love his wife" and "to respect her husband" echo "to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"; and from this "one can infer a sort of semantic equivalence" (Girard 2000:128) between submission, love, and reverence or respect.

4.2.2 The content of 5:21

As a heading for the Ephesian pericope on marriage, and indeed for the Ephesian household code as a whole, 5:21 emphasises a christologically motivated mutual submission. The clear implication is that "in the Christian household, mutual submission 'out of reverence for Christ' (5:21) is to be the rule" (Thurston 1993:76). This is "a call which serves to relativize the otherwise hierarchical relationships within the household" (Cousar 1996:174), and brings into focus a radically new perspective on the conventional household codes of the first-century Mediterranean world.

Indeed, in presenting the duty of submission as a mutual one, 5:21 is somewhat unique in the Pauline corpus. For, although "there are similar injunctions in the writings of Paul, only here in the Pauline corpus is the actual verb 'to submit' employed for mutual relationships among believers" (Lincoln 1990:365), while

elsewhere the notion of submission is only used for the attitude of specific groups.⁷ This mutual submission stands in stark contrast to the hierarchical pattern that is seen in the conventional Graeco-Roman and Jewish codes of the day, where only the submission of the lesser to the greater tends to be stressed. However, as Keener (1992:157) points out, “when Paul calls on wives to submit in Ephesians 5:22, he presents this as a particular *example* of the submission of all believers to one another in 5:21.” Furthermore, in the light of the call for mutual submission in 5:21, just as the wife should submit to her husband, so should the husband, following Christ’s example of self-sacrificial service for his wife, also submit himself to his wife. For, as Sampley (1971:117) points out, the mutual submission enjoined in 5:21 cannot be seen to belong only to the 5:22-24 admonition to wives⁸; rather 5:21 must be understood as the author’s critique of the basic stance of the *Haustafel* form wherein one group is ordered to be submissive to another group vested with authority over it.⁹ For, “by means of 5:21, the author introduces the entire *Haustafel* form in such a way that the absolute submission and the absolute predominance of one or the other class is qualified from the very start by a mutual submission” (Sampley 1971:117). As Schnackenburg (1991:242) states, in extending mutual submission to everyone in 5:21, this is made “a *Leitsatz* for the whole section of the *Haustafel*.”

This mutual submission, which is inclusive of all the church, is enjoined “out of reverence¹⁰ for Christ”. Thus, it is clearly placed in the context of the subordination

⁷ For example, the notion of submission is applied to women (1 Corinthians 14:34; Colossians 3:18; 1 Timothy 2:11; Titus 2:5), children (1 Timothy 3:4), slaves (Titus 2:9), and as the attitude of believers to the state (Romans 13:1,5; Titus 3:1).

⁸ In responding to the comment that 5:21 is no appeal for a general mutual subordination but what is meant is rather ‘let each of you subordinate himself or herself to the one he or she should be subordinate to’, Lincoln (1990:365) too assesses that such an interpretation simply “does not do enough justice to the force of this verse.”

⁹ Further support for the notion that the ‘mutual submission’ of 5:21 is not only applicable to the wife, but also to the husband, is proffered by Girard (2000:128) who points out that the *hypotassomenoi* of 5:21 is in the masculine – rather than being rendered *hypotassomenai* in the feminine. This, he concludes, emphasises the mutuality of the submission intended, and that it thus does not have bearing only on wives’ submission to their husbands in 5:22. Schnackenburg (1991:242) too regards the use of the masculine form of the participle in 5:21 as underlining the fact that the exhortation to mutual subordination is addressed to all.

¹⁰ There is much debate as to how best to translate the Greek *phobos* in 5:21 and 5:33. Barth (1974b:662-668) is against translating it as ‘respect’, which he considers to infer a weaker notion of the

of all believers to Christ as head of the church – a theme that has provided an overarching principle for identity and conduct throughout the letter to the Ephesians. Indeed, the same verb *hypotassein* is used in both 5:21 and 1:22 – the latter being the pivotal verse in which the writer declares that God has made all things subject to Christ. Mutual submission within the domestic household is therefore a reflection of the submission of all to Christ. Attitudes and conduct expressed in domestic relationships are to be governed by one's attitude towards Christ. As Stagg (1979:545) states, "remembering that one is 'in Christ' and under Christ should determine the quality of relationships from the Christian's side." Indeed, the authority of Christ is "the *Leitmotiv* of all that Paul will unfold in the *Haustafel*" (Barth 1974b:668). Furthermore,

"just as Paul showed in 2:11-12 that the intervention of the Messiah alone has unified the formerly hostile Jews and Gentiles, so he insists now that only a third party, and a conduct informed by the right and power of that party, brings light into darkness and order into chaos. The third party who cares equally for both the supposedly stronger and weaker groups is again Christ" (Barth 1974b:668).

Thus, the authority that the writer of Ephesians proclaims "is not the authority of the husband, parents, masters, church, custom, resolution, or tradition (to say nothing of Paul himself) but solely Jesus Christ" (Barth 1974b:668).

Ephesians 5:21 thus appeals to husbands and wives, and to other members of the household, to model their conduct towards one another on Jesus himself. As Stagg (1979:544) remarks, this is an appeal to all "to place themselves in a subordinate

concept, and prefers to employ the word 'fear', which he feels implies something like awe in the presence of Christ, and captures more of a sense of the numinous and the realisation that it is he who has the final claim upon us both now and eschatologically. "Whenever the Old Testament and New Testament, as well as intertestamental and later Jewish writings, speak of the 'fear of God' or the 'Lord', more is meant than awe, reverence, or respect" (Barth 1974b:663) and so Barth retains the strong term 'fear' rather than these softer words. Lincoln (1990:366) suggests that "'fear' need not involve fright or terror but conveys a more serious sense of reverence and obligation than 'respect'." Stagg (1979:545) points out that "this is not the fear without love which is evil and destructive; it is fear which knows both the love and the authority of Christ." However, in contemporary English usage, the word 'fear' has an overwhelmingly negative connotation, and so I align myself with the translators of the New International Version of the Bible in rendering *phobos* as 'reverence' in 5:21 and 'respect' in 5:33, even though this unfortunately loses the clarity in English of the *inclusio* of 5:21 and 5:33.

position to all others.” It is an appeal that is christologically motivated, rooted in Jesus’ designation of the servant role as proper to himself and to his followers, with a total rejection of the world’s measure of greatness in terms of ruling over other people (as seen, for example, in Mark 10:42-45). Jesus prescribed the servant role of choosing the subordinate position whereby, “paradoxically, each thus assumes a place below the other”; and “the result is the elimination of any caste system which denies any the dignity of full personhood” (Stagg 1979:544).

Ephesians 5:21 is to be understood not only as a general injunction to be followed by all Christians, but it is here specifically an “introduction to the entire Haustafel form and therefore a rubric under which all of 5:22-6:9 is to be interpreted” (Sampley 1971:117).

4.2.3 The statement in 6:9

The powerful statement that concludes the discussion of domestic relationships in 6:9 that, with God, “there is no favouritism”,¹¹ removes any notion of superior and inferior roles within the domestic household. The ground is level before God. By emphasising this principle as part of the very framework of the Ephesian household code, it significantly affects one’s reading of the whole code.

Whereas in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish household codes of the day the duties and obligations of the subordinates (wives, children and slaves) were stressed, in Ephesians the role obligations of husbands, wives, children, slaves and masters are seen to be reciprocal. Thus masters are enjoined to treat their slaves in the same way as slaves are instructed to work – “with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart” (6:5,9). Not only are wives seen to have obligations towards their husbands, but husbands also have obligations towards their wives, while “few, if any, other

¹¹ Mouton (1997:129) points out that the idiomatic expression in 6:9b literally means “He does not lay hold of someone’s face”; in other words, “He does not esteem anyone according to face value.” She notes poignantly that this expression “probably originated in the context of slavery, where slaves were chained to one another while waiting to be sold on the market. As inferiors they were not allowed to lift up their heads until a potential buyer would do so, sometimes brutally, in order to examine their teeth and general health.”

contemporary moral systems found it necessary to list these and to remind husbands about them” (Wessels 1989:71).

For the early Christians, “all of life was understood to be under the lordship of Christ” (Thurston 1993:3). Consequently, since submission to one another is enjoined “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) and in the awareness that there is no favouritism with God (6:9), the attitude in which domestic relationships are to be conducted is radically transformed. As Keener (1992:169) remarks, “someone who keeps in mind that he or she has a Lord in heaven is not likely to lord it over others, but to take more willingly his or her place as a servant – whether the world views them as master or servant (6:7-9).”

4.2.4 **A preliminary conclusion**

Thus, by framing the Ephesian household code with the statements of 5:21 and 6:9, a challenging new interpretive framework is presented by the writer. Just as in the household of God, so also in the domestic household the commonly held perspective of the day on the relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters, is viewed from a new perspective “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Indeed, 5:21 “stands as a superscription to the entire Haustafel and qualifies the submission urged upon the wives, children and slaves, as well as the authority of the husbands, fathers and masters” (Sampley 1971:158).

In similar vein to the injunctions to the members of the household of God to see themselves as of equal standing in Christ (2:11-22) and to relate to one another in an appropriate manner – humbly and gently, patiently, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, and serving one another (4:1-16) – so the household codes are framed with injunctions to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) and to remember that “there is no favouritism with him” (6:9). This places the Ephesian pericope on marriage, and indeed the whole household code, in a radically new interpretive framework which is key to comprehending the ethos of 5:21 -33.

4.3 The structure of 5:21-33

Girard (2000:126-137), in his technical examination of Ephesians 5:21-33, has employed structuralist criticism to distinguish the following sections¹²:

- 5:21 The initial marker in the *inclusio* delineating the maxi-structure
- 5:22-24 The first section, addressing wives
- 5:25-31 The second section, addressing husbands
- 5:32-33 Defining the conclusion of the pericope, with 5:33 as the final marker in the *inclusio* that delineates the maxi-structure.

He goes on to discern a structuralist formula for the whole pericope of

$$A / (BCD)^{\alpha} // (BCD)^{\omega} / A$$

with further intra-sectional structuring (Girard 2000:135). Girard employs this structural analysis to help distinguish dominant ideas in the pericope and discern particular emphases.

Thus, he discerns in the first section (5:22-24, or in fact 5:21-24) a chiastic XYYX construction, in which the intra-sectional *inclusio* (X-X) confers on the concept of 'submission' the status of dominant idea – an idea that is not restricted to the attitude of the wife towards her husband, since the initial marker of the *inclusio* clearly includes 5:21, but effectively roots the submission of wives to husbands, both stylistically and theologically, within the framework of the more general morality of the mutual submission of Christians to one another. The duplication of the word 'head' (*kephale*) in 5:23 at point YY of the chiastic construction occurs in a kind of theological proverb (*a masal*) which seeks to define the relationship of husband to wife in comparison with the relationship of Christ to church (Girard 2000:128). This, then, is seen to represent the subdominant idea in this chiastic construction, evoking a sense in which the concept of headship is paradoxically subordinated to that of mutual submission. Girard (2000:129) asserts from a structural point of view that 'head' here first of all means 'responsibility', and points as proof to the fact that 5:23c contains only the image of salvation effected; thus, "in the comparative transposition

¹² This is very similar to the four structural divisions that Lincoln (1990:355-356) suggests, namely 5:21, 5:22-24, 5:25-32, and 5:33. Lincoln (1990:384) goes on to discern a broad chiasmus in the overall structure of this pericope, as one sees wives addressed and then husbands, and then in reversed order in the final verse – first husbands and then wives. He thus delineates this ABBA pattern as follows:
5:22-24 / 5:25-32 / 5:33a / 5:33b.

centered around the word 'head', 'husband' is equivalent to 'Christ savior', 'wife' to 'Church body [of Christ]'."

In the second section – the address to husbands (5:25-31) – Girard (2000:130) discerns two subsections. The first of these subsections comprises 5:25-28, and reflects a concentric symmetry, with a twofold relation in the pattern XZYX.

Structural analysis of this subsection produces the following insights:

- The moral exhortation, "Husbands, love your wives", is emphasised in the *inclusio* (X...X) portion of this pattern in 5:25 and 5:28. Furthermore, "loved" and "gave himself up for" in 5:25 form a hendiadys – that is, the expression of one single idea by two equivalent, synonymous terms which clarify and complete one another. This emphasises the quality of the love being urged on husbands for their wives. Then in the final marker of the *inclusio* (5:28) there occurs another more prosaic comparison, that the husband must love his wife as one loves one's own body.
- The ZY portion of this subsection that appears in 5:26-27 serves to develop the theological comparison of 5:25, emphasising in the dyad (Y...Y) that Christ the lover gave himself for the church, his bride, to sanctify her and free her from all that could be a cause of reproach. Through this ZY structure, Christ's purpose which emerges at point Z in 5:27 "takes on a somewhat special semantic value" (Girard 2000:131) – namely, "to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish." The focus around which the whole of the small theological development of 5:26-27 is organized is thus the church.

The second of the two subsections in the address to husbands comprises 5:29-31. This acts as an explanatory subsection further developing the comparison between 'love of wives' and 'love of own bodies' introduced in 5:28 (Girard 2000:132). Here there is a concentric construction (XYX), which subtly moves from 'flesh' (*sarx*) in 5:29 to 'body' (*soma*) and a christological justification in 5:29-30 and back again to 'flesh' (*sarx*) in 5:31. Thus the church is again at the focus of this subsection, and, in

a representative way, this may be seen to give prominence to the wife in both 5:25-28 and 5:29-31.

Furthermore, in the second half of the marriage pericope, there is an *inclusio* constituted by “love your wives” in 5:25 and “love his wife” in 5:33 (Girard 2000:132), forming a homogeneous whole of the above two subsections and incorporating the final marker of the large *inclusio* that is discernible in the maxi-structure of the pericope.

Returning to the maxi-structure, the two sections framed by the markers of the large *inclusio* (A.....A) form a true diptych between 5:21-24 and 5:25-28 (Girard 2000:133). This links Christ’s headship of the church (5:23) with Christ’s sacrificial love of the church (5:25). Girard (2000:135) also points to a structuralist parallelism between Christ’s headship of the church as Saviour (5:23) and Christ’s care for the church (5:29). This evokes an understanding of headship that has to do with taking responsibility in relation to life (‘Saviour’) and sustenance (provider or food, well-being and protection), rather than dominating and lording it over the church.

Such a structuralist analysis is thus of considerable help in discerning the true ethos of the pericope, for from the structural perspective it emerges that this passage focuses on:

- submission, rather than headship – and a submission, furthermore, that is mutual
- a headship that is integrally linked to sacrificial love and serving
- the wife as the object of such sacrificial love and care.

4.4 The content of Ephesians 5:21-33

4.4.1 The reciprocal nature of obligations in 5:21-33

As we turn from the structure to the content of the pericope, one of the characteristics of the Ephesian household code that stands out clearly is the reciprocal nature of the obligations enjoined on the various members of the household. In line with the exhortation to submit to one another, all members of the domestic household are addressed directly, with responsibility laid on each member to implement the principles that are to govern relationships. Furthermore, in keeping with the principle of mutual submission in 5:21, it is highly significant that those members of the household who customarily filled subordinate roles – wives, children and slaves – are addressed directly, just as are those who held positions that were generally perceived to be socially superior – husbands, parents and masters. Indeed, as if to stress the reciprocal nature of obligations, the conventionally ‘lesser’ partner of each relationship is in fact addressed first (Osiek 2002:30). This stands, as Keener (1992:168) points out, in somewhat stark contrast to the conventional household codes of the day, which tended to be addressed only to the male householder in the form of instructions as to how to rule the household. In addition, as Keener (1992:170) remarks¹³,

“while others speak of wives, slaves, and children submitting differently, they do not speak in terms of *everyone* submitting: rare indeed is the ancient writer who would, with Paul, call *all* people, including the male heads of households, to submit to one another – other writers certainly would not have had them share the same verb as Paul does in 5:21-22. Other writers may have qualified traditional gender roles, but no one we know of qualified them as clearly as Paul did.”

¹³ Sowle Cahill (1996:161) assesses that the Ephesian household code, and other similar codes in the New Testament, “are unique in addressing slaves directly”, while “the reciprocal address to women in the Christian versions is not in their predecessors absolutely unparalleled.” Balch (1988:46-47) points out, with regard to the question of addressing wives and children, that there was some precedent in the Aristotelian tradition for addressing these categories; nevertheless, he affirms that the direct address to slaves is particularly unusual, although even here he traces a measure of precedent for this to the Hellenistic Jewish writer, Philo.

Consequently, in the Ephesian household code, as Balch (1988:33), a North American scholar, observes, there is no special interest in super- and subordination; rather there is a stress on specifically Christian motives, such as *agape* (in 5:21-33) and the equalising Lordship of Christ (in 6:9). Furthermore, as Stagg remarks, the Ephesian domestic code would have a very different meaning had some been instructed to subordinate or subjugate others to themselves; but “we have here not the pagan principle of ruling but the Christian principle of voluntarily subordinating oneself to another.” The focus is on each individual’s attitude and their contribution to mutual submission, and not on the other’s. This is perhaps particularly remarkable in the reciprocity evidenced in the writer’s admonitions to masters and slaves, as Lincoln (1993:141) comments. The fact that slaves are addressed profoundly challenged the thinking of the day, and underlines the notion that a new community was in the making, based on new understandings of social morality. As Balch (1988:33-34) suggests, drawing on the work of Meeks, “many modern evaluations underestimate the integrating power of the early Christian congregation”; indeed, “this integrating power is something entirely new in ancient social history: masters and slaves have the same Lord and judge.”

The pericope on marriage must therefore be read within the context of a general and profound appeal for a reciprocity of obligations to characterise relationships within the household. In addressing marriage, both wives and husbands are enjoined to do their part in giving effect to the principle of mutual submission advocated in 5:21, rather than enforcing their partner’s compliance. Both partners are being exhorted to serve one another because of Christ’s reign in their lives.

This is further substantiated by the way in which the verb *hypotassein* is employed in this pericope. As Barth (1974b:709-710) points out, the verb *hypotassein* (to be subject) does not here mean simply “to be submissive” or “to be subordinate”. When used in the New Testament in the active voice, this verb describes the act of subjugation of any power, person or thing to God, and reveals the existence of a hierarchy, with the subjugated being put in their place and having to obey and serve God, so that law and order are thus established (Barth 1974b:709). However, when used in the middle or passive voice, the verb *hypotassein* “describes a voluntary

attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden” (Barth 1974b:710) – a kind of subordination that is expected only of Christ and those who are ‘in Christ’ (that is, of those who know how faith, hope and love qualify the fear of the Lord). “Such subordination can be offered with enthusiasm,” says Barth (1974b:710), for “it is a demonstration of that ‘total humility, gentleness, mutual bearing, love, unity, peace’ which in 4:1-3 were described as the constitutive works not of miserable slaves and bootlickers but of the free children of God, of persons in high standing, even of princes.” This submission is of the same kind as Jesus demonstrated when he washed the feet of the disciples (Wessels 1989:74).

Consequently, as expressions of submitting to one another, the injunctions to wives to submit to their husbands and to husbands to love their wives are, in the final analysis, not very different. Furthermore, the injunction to submit is not addressed to wives alone – for in 5:21 all are called upon to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”; and the injunction to husbands to love essentially reflects a general exhortation in 5:2 for all to “live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Thus, as Keener (1992:167) suggests,

“the parallelism is clear enough: all are to submit as part of the church, and all are to love as Christ did. Husbandly love and wifely submission in this context thus become examples of those more general virtues, rather than statements that love is only the husband’s role, and submission only the wife’s.”

Stott (1979:235) too refers to the close association between the two words, ‘submit’ and ‘love’:

“When we try to define the two verbs, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between them. What does it mean to ‘submit’? It is to give oneself up to somebody. What does it mean to ‘love’? It is to give oneself up for somebody, as Christ ‘gave himself up’ for the church. Thus ‘submission’ and ‘love’ are two aspects of the very same thing, namely of that selfless self-giving which is the foundation of an enduring and growing marriage.”

The reciprocal nature of obligations in the marriage relationship, as propounded in Ephesians 5:21-33, thus points to a dynamic partnership. Indeed, as Barth (1974b:701) suggests, “Paul’s doctrine of marriage may best be described by the terms ‘partnership’ or ‘covenant’.” The genuineness of this partnership and the reciprocity of obligations is lent further support through the quotation from Genesis 2:24 in 5:31, in which the unity of husband and wife is stressed. This significantly erodes a hierarchical relationship, for, “from the moral viewpoint, this purpose of unity and stability soon becomes unrealizable if one does not conquer the natural instincts of domination (‘to subject’ rather than ‘to be subject to’), egotism (the love that grasps, possesses, and draws all things toward itself rather than the love that gives and ‘delivers itself up for’)” (Girard 2000:150).

4.4.2 **A comparison of the exhortations to wives and husbands**

In attempting to assess whether indeed a new perspective is being introduced into the conventional household code as it is employed in Ephesians, it is significant to make a comparison of the particular addresses to wives and husbands, since both marriage partners are addressed. In analysing the exhortations to both partners, both what is said and what is omitted or downplayed may be of significance.

.1 **The exhortation to wives**

To call on wives to submit themselves to their husbands would not have been a radical statement in the first-century Mediterranean world, but would most probably have been taken for granted by most men and women alike as simply the natural order of things. However, as Keener (1992:166) argues, while Paul urges wives to submit to their husbands, “by placing it in the context of mutual submission, he defines it quite differently than most of his culture did.” This reciprocity of obligations has already been examined in the previous section. Let us examine now how this alternative perspective is further entrenched in the address to wives. In other words, let us explore the extent to which the conventional injunction to wives is tempered in Ephesians 5:21-33, and how this is achieved.

Firstly, wives are accorded the status of moral agents, alongside their husbands, and are exhorted “voluntarily to subordinate themselves to their husbands” (Lincoln 1990:367). In other words, they are addressed “as persons who are free and able to make their own decision” (Barth 1974b:611), and are “not placed at the disposal of their husbands” (Stagg 1979:545) – a significant perspective in a strongly hierarchical domestic patriarchy. As the church’s submission to Christ is willing and free, rather than coerced, so also the wife’s submission to her husband is to be viewed in a similar light.¹⁴ Furthermore, in voluntarily submitting themselves to their husbands, wives are to see this as part of their submission to the Lord.

Secondly, their submission to their husbands is significantly tempered by certain structural, grammatical and syntactical elements in this text:

- On the basis of his micro-structuralist analysis of the integral relationship of 5:21-22, Girard (2000:136) deduces that “the attitude of subjection prescribed to wives in particular is placed clearly within a general exhortation actually addressed to all Christians ... in the essential and explanatory framework of the spiritual relationship of every believer with Christ.” One sees this very clearly in Barth’s translation of 5:21-22, which reads as follows: “Because you fear Christ subordinate yourselves to one another – [e.g.] wives to your husbands – as to the Lord” (Barth 1974b:607). For Barth (1974b:610), “E.g.’ communicates exactly what is indicated by the structure of the Greek sentence: the subordination of wives is an example of the same mutual subordination which is also shown by the husband’s love, the children’s obedience, the parents’ responsibility for their offspring, the slaves’ and masters’ attitude toward one another.” Thus a wife’s subordination to her husband is enjoined only within the frame of mutual submission. This gives further support to the notion that 5:21 is, in fact, a heading for the whole marriage pericope, and is applicable to wives and husbands alike in their attitudes towards each other.

¹⁴ This viewpoint is contested by Briggs Kittredge (1998:138-139), who questions the reading of this pericope as a request for voluntary submission, since she deduces that, “by constructing submission as the natural relationship of wife to husband and justifying it by analogy to Christ and the church, the author has made obedience to husbands a requirement for wives.”

- In addressing the wives in 5:22, the writer “omits the verb so that the notion of submission has to be carried over from the present participle of the previous clause” (Lincoln 1990:354).¹⁵ Thus this verse does not actually contain the verb ‘submit’. While Lincoln (1990:367) doubts whether this has any theological significance, it does have the effect of muting the force of the address to the wives. Indeed, Girard (2000:128) contends that there is a general softening of the verbal forms in the address to wives; in fact, the only imperative is in the general heading of 5:21. For, as Girard (2000:128) points out, when Paul explicitly directs his morality of submission to wives, “he implies the verb ‘hypotassein’ within an elliptical sentence (v.22) or relegates it to a subordinate clause within a comparison (v.24).” Consequently, “it is as if Paul, whether intentionally or intuitively, was averse to saying in an explicit, rough, and lapidary way, ‘Wives, be subject to your husbands!’” (Girard 2000:128). Rather, “Paul seems to present wives’ subjection less as an exhortation than as a statement of fact” (Girard 2000:139), reflecting the generally held social view of the time while intentionally softening the subordination of wives.
- Even in 5:33, when wives are again addressed alongside their husbands in the concluding verse of the pericope, an imperative is avoided, and “the very form of the sentence limits the recommendation only to the man (use of the subjunctive)”, so that “the respect shown by the wife to her husband is not the object of a formal order; it appears rather as a consequence of the effort made by the husband to practice self-giving love, the love which ‘delivers itself up’” (Girard 2000:146-147). Thus Girard (2000:127) translates 5:33 as follows: “...[let] everyone love his wife as he loves himself, in order that the wife might fear her husband.”

Thirdly, in elaborating on the content of this ‘submission’ that is here enjoined upon wives, it is necessary to explore the possible nuances of meaning. The word *hypotassein* can have various shades of meaning depending on the context in which it is used, but Girard (2000:144) asserts, on the basis of a survey of the use of the

¹⁵ See footnote 6 earlier in this chapter.

word in the Septuagint and the New Testament as regards human relationships, that “nowhere, whether in the Church or in civil society, is there any question of advocating an autocratic power or of recommending blind and total obedience.” In fact, he goes on to find that, in virtually every occurrence pertaining to social, socio-ecclesial or moral matters, one could, without weakening or betraying the text, translate the word *hypotassein* by ‘respect’.¹⁶ Thus, “in the sphere of human relationships, ‘hypotassein’ never has the very strong meaning of constraint and domination that it has in theological and Christological enunciations” (Girard 2000:144).

In attempting to fill in the content of this submission, Barth (1974b:714) has drawn a distinction between ‘subordination’ and ‘obedience’, noting that wives are called upon in the Ephesian *Haustafel* to subordinate themselves while, in contrast, children and slaves are called upon to obey. Lincoln (1990:367-368) makes light of such a distinction, suggesting that “this is to drive a wedge between terms that are frequently synonymous”, for “there is obviously a difference between willing submission and imposed obedience but hardly a major distinction between voluntary subordination and voluntary obedience.” Nevertheless, the distinction that Barth makes here does potentially represent another small way in which the conventional household code may have been subtly modified. Taken on its own, it may be quite insignificant, but, taken along with numerous other pointers, it contributes to a cumulative effect.

Fourthly, in the context here, the wife’s submission is “to a husband whose humanity is implicitly modeled on the example of Christ” (Mouton 1997:127). The exhortation to wives is therefore integrally linked to the concomitant call to husbands to give themselves in love, as the European scholar, Schackenburg (1991:246), highlights. In the context of the rest of the letter to the Ephesians, the church’s submission to Christ “means looking to its head for his beneficial rule, living by his norms,

¹⁶ Keener (1992:168-169) also concludes that the word ‘respect’ best captures the essence of the sort of submission that is being enjoined upon wives in the Ephesian domestic code. In fact, he sees the notion, in 5:33, that “the wife must respect her husband” as summarising the whole exhortation to wives. He concludes that this alone makes this exhortation to wives to submit quite weak by ancient standards.

experiencing his presence and love, receiving from him gifts that will enable growth to maturity, and responding to him in gratitude and awe”; and “it is such attitudes that the wife is being encouraged to develop in relation to her husband” (Lincoln 1990:372).

It is an idealised picture that is held up for emulation here in the Ephesian household code. The notion in 5:24 that “wives should submit to their husbands in everything” implies that there is no limit to the submission expected of wives, and indeed “the possibility is not even considered that wives’ submission to their husbands might conflict with their submission to Christ” (Lincoln 1990:373). The ideal presupposes that the husband has the wife’s welfare constantly in view, and so it is a matter of submission to selfless love rather than to the whims of the husband. Thus, “what is called for from wives is complete subordination to complete love” (Lincoln 1990:373). In the midst of our frail humanity, this ideal may seem unattainable, and yet with the Holy Spirit’s enabling it is a vision worth pursuing. For, wifely submission acquires very different overtones when it is regarded as voluntarily serving a partner who in turn gives himself self-sacrificially in loving service.

.2 The exhortation to husbands

In an initial reading of the exhortation addressed specifically to wives, readers of the first century may well not have detected much that would seem to modify the customarily viewed role of the wife in the marriage relationship, for the nuances outlined above are subtle. However, in the exhortation addressed specifically to husbands, the transformative ethos of this pericope comes more clearly into focus. What is said to husbands and how they are addressed, is particularly striking. For, as Lincoln (1990:373) points out, “after the exhortation to wives to submit, with its depiction of husbands as heads, what might well have been expected by contemporary readers would be an exhortation to husbands to rule their wives.”¹⁷ Instead, the exhortation is for husbands to love their wives – an exhortation that

¹⁷ Keener (1992:167) too notes a fairly general scholarly consensus that the household codes of the first-century Mediterranean world “normally instructed the head of the household how to ‘rule’ or ‘govern’ his wife, rather than how to love her.” There were, however, some modifications to this general pattern, as seen for example in the writings of Musonius, as have been pointed out in chapter 2.

occurs no less than three times in 5:25-33. Thus, as Barth (1974b:701) stresses, the “sum and refrain” of the special exhortation to husbands is essentially ‘love your wives’ (5:25a), ‘the husbands owe it [to God and man] to love their wives’ (5:28), and ‘each one of you must love his wife’ (5:33) – in short, “the apostle tells the husbands in three statements to ‘love’ her, love ‘her’, ‘love her’, and he has nothing to add beyond this.” Furthermore, the type of love that is enjoined upon husbands, and the way in which the exhortation is directed to husbands, are highly significant in discerning the import of this passage. How then does the address to husbands contrast with that to wives, and how does this affect our understanding of the pericope as a whole?

An immediate contrast is evident in the way that, in fleshing out the mutual submission principle, considerably more space is devoted to the exhortation to husbands to love than to wives to submit.¹⁸ As Girard (2000:139) observes, “the second part of the diptych, addressed to husbands (vv.25-31), is much more developed than the one directed to wives (vv.22-24).” Thus it is the role of the husbands to which Paul devotes the major part of his attention in the marriage paraenesis. This is further emphasised by the way in which there is no hesitation in using strong verbs to address the husbands, in contrast to the way in which the verbs are softened in addressing the wives. Thus, in the moral exhortation, “Husbands, love your wives” (5:25), the imperative form of the verb is used; and the sense of duty or command is further accentuated in 5:28, “husbands ought to love their wives” (Girard 2000:130).¹⁹

Nowhere is the husband urged to rule over his wife, or to inculcate submission in his wife – indeed, the husband’s role in the wife’s submission is not addressed at all.

¹⁸ In this regard, Lincoln (1990:355) maintains it is noteworthy that 143 words are addressed to husbands compared to 47 addressed to wives, so that “the writer to the Ephesians addresses over three times as much of his appeal to husbands, the dominant partners, as to wives, the subordinate ones.”

¹⁹ Girard (2000:139) goes on to remark that “the places where the imperative form is used certainly betray sensitive spots in conjugal relationships which required Paul’s energetic and theologically well-founded admonition concerning the mutual subjection of men and women (v.21) and the love husbands must lavish on their wives (v.25; see also v.28a). In fact, in Paul’s time, the ‘husband’ still had the attitude reflected by the corresponding Hebrew word *‘ba’al* (literally ‘lord’, ‘master’, ‘ruler’).”

Rather, the husband is to give effect to the mutual submission enjoined in 5:21 by loving his wife, and with a quality of love that is modeled on Christ's love for the church, since husbands are challenged to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25). This is clearly intended to be a sacrificial kind of love,²⁰ for, "in the last analysis, the love of Christ for his Church can be defined only by reference to the exemplary mystery of the cross: self-renunciation, self-emptying ('kenosis'), to the point of the total sacrifice of his breath and blood" (Girard 2000:130). For husbands to be exhorted to be willing to lay down their lives for their wives is certainly a radical departure from the norm. As Keener (1992:172) remarks, "Paul's language seems to go considerably beyond his culture in this respect."

In comparing the husband's love to the love of Christ for the church, the love that is being enjoined here is an unselfish, self-giving love that is not influenced by the worth or any other qualities of the object of that love – just as Christ's love for the church is a love for that which is still imperfect, in order that he might bring her to perfection (5:26-27).²¹ In 5:25-27, as Keener (1992:167) points out, "Christ's love is explicitly defined in this passage in terms of self-sacrificial service, not in terms of his authority." Christ's love for the church is shown in how he cares for her and sanctifies her (5:26-27) and is sacrificially committed to her (5:25). This clearly gives content to the type of 'headship'²² that is envisaged in 5:23²³ – a headship which in

²⁰ The hendiadys in 5:25 structurally emphasises that a specific, unique kind of love is here being promoted, as Girard (2000:130) points out, a love that is sacrificial.

²¹ Barth (1974b:715) notes that, in the Septuagint and New Testament, the same verb for 'love', *agapao* (and the noun *agape*), denotes the love of God and Christ for a chosen person or an elect people, and the love of God's children for God, Jesus Christ, the neighbour, a man or woman, the self, or the world. "A strictly philological examination of the terminology used for 'love' and 'loving' outside and inside the Bible does not lead to the sharp distinctions among *agape*, *philia*, and *eros* that have been made for the sake of systematic, ethical or moralistic clarification", in which *agape* supposedly "always means an unselfish, self-giving attitude that is not influenced by the worth or any other qualities of the beloved", while *philia* is equated with "the friendly, reciprocal give and take between equals", and *eros* is regarded as "the passionate or sophisticated desire to possess and/or use the other" (Barth 1974b:715). In the light of this, Barth (1974b:716) deduces that "in Ephesians the employment of the term 'love' to describe the marital relation does not exclude from *agape* all elements of mutual help, partnership between equals, passionate desire, and sexual fulfillment that have been attributed primarily to *philia* and *eros*."

²² The word *kephale*, translated 'head', occurs four times in Ephesians – in 1:22; 4:15; and twice in 5:23. There has been much debate as to what this term signifies. Some, like Barth (1974b:183), maintain that the basic meaning of the term is 'ruler', with the emphasis on authority. Others have

the case of Christ is integrally linked in 5:23 to his role as Saviour of the church.²⁴ Thus, “any exercise of headship on the part of husbands will not be through self-assertion but through self-sacrifice” (Lincoln 1990:374). As Wessels (1989:71) observes, “to love like Christ means to take the form of a servant, to wash her feet (as Jesus did, John 13), to think first of her interest (as Jesus did, Philippians 2:4), to give himself up for her, as Jesus did.” Indeed, “a husband who will love his wife as Christ loves the church, can in no way rule over her as a male chauvinist” (Wessels 1989:71). What is reflected here, then, is essentially a headship of taking responsibility and serving, rather than being served. In 5:28-29 the aspect of ‘feeding’ and ‘caring’ is taken up to further emphasise the attitude being advocated, for the husband’s love is likened to his care for his own body: “Just as a husband cares for his body’s needs, so his love for his wife should be of the sort that cares for her needs and facilitates her growth and development” (Lincoln 1990:378). In 5:29 we have the image of the husband feeding and caring for his own body likened to Christ nourishing and cherishing his body, the church, of which he is the head, as was earlier pointed out in 5:23. Thus, as Girard (2000:142) points out, “in this sense ‘head’ should be understood in the moral and sociological sense of ‘responsibility’, rather than as an anthropological and philosophical observation on the respective

followed Bedale’s research findings based on studies of the word as employed in the Septuagint and elsewhere, and have concluded that it could signify ‘first’ or ‘beginning’. In this vein, “the church is the Eve of the Second Adam; Christ is ‘head’ to the church, as is Adam to Eve” (Kitchen 1994:101), and the husband is then not being held up as the ‘master’ or ‘ruler’ of the wife, but as the source of her being. Indeed, some, like Kitchen (1994:101) see “a clear reference to Adam in the background of this passage”, and so regard it as “hardly surprising that the ‘marriage’ text of Genesis 2:24 is added.” With reference to 5:23, Girard (2000:129) also recognises this possibility, when he says that “it is possible for ‘kephale’ to be used here in the manner of a ‘midrash’, expressing the idea of ‘first’ place – not first with the meaning of primacy, domination, honour, but simply of chronological priority in the sense that Adam was created before Eve.” He also feels that “this could be an implicit reference to the Genesis account here in the first section of the pericope, since in the second section there is a verbatim quotation from Genesis (5:31)” (Girard 2000:129).

²³ Barth (1974b:706) points out that it is significant in 5:23 that the husband is referred to as ‘head’ instead of being called the ‘soul’ of the wife, and that the term ‘head’ is defined in a way that concentrates solely on love for the wife. This infers that headship is not intended as an expression of superiority of the husband over the wife. In contrast, Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic doctrine tended to distinguish between the noble soul and the base body, which needed to be tamed and directed.

²⁴ In his translation of 5:23, Barth (1974b:614) marks the words “the savior of his body” as a parenthesis which he sees as complementing Christ’s title of ‘head’ with a more specific and extensive description, thereby denoting in effect that “he proves himself head by saving.”

natures of man and woman.” It is a headship that takes responsibility for caring and nourishing.²⁵

The serious charge to husbands in the Ephesian household code thus “retains the formal headship of husband over wife, but in effect it calls for a radical subordination (the word not used) of husband to wife” (Stagg 1979:546). The principle of mutual submission of 5:21 is therefore given substance in a very tangible way, for not only are wives to submit to their husbands, but husbands are called upon to emulate Christ’s example and “love their wives in such a radical way that husbands become their wives’ servants, too” (Keener 1992:166).

In the address to husbands in this pericope, there are two further elements that are significant in according a dignity to wives that was not always typical of first-century Mediterranean society. By adding “he who loves his wife loves himself” in 5:28, there may well be a reflection of Jesus’ ‘second commandment’ – “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) – and the “love your neighbour as yourself” of Leviticus 19:18. The wife is thus regarded as the husband’s primary and exemplary neighbour (Barth 1974b:719; Lincoln 1990:384; Girard 2000:131). This substantially elevated her status in the androcentric first-century Mediterranean social world. Coupled with the quotation from Genesis 2:24 in 5:31, reflecting the uniqueness of the social partnership that is established in marriage, this pericope goes further to accord to the marriage relationship a status that is superior to all other human relationships, thereby according a special dignity to wives.

In conclusion, then, while Sampley (1971:116) maintains that “the husbands are nowhere in 5:22-33 exhorted to submission or anything like submission”, the whole tenor of the address to husbands focuses on a submissive, selfless kind of love. While it is true that submission is not demanded of husbands in explicit terms – in

²⁵ As Verhey (1984:126) points out, it is vital that such an understanding of headship be grasped, for “the analogy of the relationship between Christ and his church to the relationship between husband and wife is a beautiful one”, yet dangerous if extended beyond its intention: “The analogy does not intend to say the husband is the ‘Lord’ or ‘Savior’ of the wife. It points instead to the husband’s service and love.”

that the verb 'submit' is not used in the address to husbands in 5:25-33 – the whole meditation upon the love of Christ is in effect an exhortation to submissive love (Kitchen 1994:102). Thus, the injunction to husbands to emulate Christ's costly self-surrender is an extremely vivid portrayal of what mutual submission is to mean for husbands, and a clear justification for reading 5:21 as applicable to both wives and husbands.

Thus, in terms of contemporary first-century instructions on marriage, "Ephesians' exhortation to husbands to love their wives is by no means conventional or matter of course" (Lincoln 1990:374). By modeling this love on that of Christ for the church, it radicalises this love and substantially transforms the ethos of the conventional domestic hierarchy and code.

4.4.3 The Christological context

While the Ephesian household code does resemble the general form of the Graeco-Roman and Jewish domestic codes of the first-century Mediterranean world, it is radically transformed by its Christological context. This Christological context is readily apparent from the very start in the way in which the code is framed since, "as a general injunction and motivation, respectively, Eph 5:21 and 6:9b frame the household code by reinterpreting its patriarchal structure from a christological perspective" (Mouton 1997:129). Instead of aligning the instructions with the harmony of the natural order, as might have been expected,²⁶ the motivation is to bring one's conduct under the headship of Christ, thereby harking back to God's glorious purpose, as stated in Ephesians 1:10, "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ", and the climactic declaration in Ephesians 1:22-23, that "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." Both husband and wife are to submit to one another

²⁶ Johnson (1998:431) asserts that "Ephesians is concerned that the church faithfully mirror the creation and that the household mirror the church", so that "the result for women is thus a retreat from the initial freedom promised them in Paul's preaching and a reassertion of conventional patriarchal morality." However, I feel that Ephesians rather holds up the image of a new alternative creation in Christ as the model for both church and household.

“out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands “as to the Lord” (5:22). Husbands are to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25). As members of the body of Christ, allegiance to Christ implies a new way of relating between husbands and wives – a way of relating that is other-centred and submitted to serving the other, modeled on the example of Jesus himself. Indeed, status in Christ redefines the traditionally patriarchal relationship; for, in addition to the concept of mutual submission, the husband “hears that he is the head of the wife ‘as Christ is the head of the church’ (5:23)” and that “Christ’s headship is characterized by the power of his love – a power which is paradoxically revealed in the ‘weakness’ of his suffering”, while the wife is encouraged “to claim her primary identity in Christ and to be empowered by his example” (Mouton 1997:127).

Thus, “the revolutionary genius of this passage is in the way it teaches about marriage by analogy with the relationship of Christ to the church” (Webber 1994:68). The prophetic insight contained in the Old Testament was that God’s relationship with Israel could be understood by seeing what happens in human marriage – showing how God is offended by the faithlessness of the people he has called; and the joy of a wedding reflecting the joy of the unity with God to which we are called. But here in Ephesians the analogy is turned right around, for the argument in 5:21-33 is from the Heavenly Marriage to human marriages, and not *vice versa* – that is, the human is seen in the light of the heavenly, and the exhortation is for the human to model itself on the heavenly (Lincoln 1990:353). “Making the marriage of Christ and the Church the archetype for Christian marriage has no antecedent and is Ephesians’ unique addition to the early Christian household code tradition” (Lincoln 1990:363). This is powerfully projected in 5:31-32, where the quotation from Genesis 2:24, instead of conventionally rooting the domestic social order in creation, may be seen to root the new alternative order being presented Christologically in the profound mystery of the relationship between Christ and the church – a mystery that has already been highlighted in Ephesians 3:6 as signaling the abolition of old societal divisions and ushering in a new community in Christ. Thus, from the Christological viewpoint, “the purpose of the unity of the human couple is to reflect,

symbolise, and strive to reproduce the unity of the Risen One with humanity, his bride” (Girard 2000:150).

The Ephesian *Haustafel* is therefore thoroughly Christ-centred. As Barth (1974b:655) points out, in this pericope, as throughout the letter, Christ is praised and the same procedure which determines the structure of the letter as a whole and each of its subsections is followed:

“God, or the Messiah of God, whom Paul knows and praises, loves man in such a way that neither sin, nor death, nor former divisions, nor institutions, nor structures, and certainly not marriage, can escape the power and riches of grace... The ‘peace’ between God and man, Jews and Gentiles, of which Paul spoke in Eph 2:14-16 shall be extended into every house and praised by the conduct of husband and wife.”

The Christological emphasis in 5:21-33 is on loving and caring, with Christ’s love presented as a submissive love, involving the giving of himself. There is the wonder – the “profound mystery” spoken of in 5:32 – entwined throughout this pericope around the husband-wife relationship, as Girard (2000:141) remarks, of the Bridegroom leaving the Father’s house in heaven, where he enjoyed transcendent intra-trinitarian relationships, in order to contract unheard-of relationships with humankind based on total self-giving, a course of action which “leads him to the cross, a paroxysmal experience of self-sacrificing love.” Thus “the bride is honoured in the act of Christ’s sacrifice, as the recipient of his sacrificial love; she is not simply relegated to a position of subservience” (Kitchen 1994:104). In the earthly parallel within this pericope, the wife is also accorded special honour – she is the one whom the husband is to love with a willingness to lay down his life for her. Thus, in Ephesians, “the power of Christ’s sacrificial love is emphasized as a reconciliatory strategy through which any ‘dividing wall’ between people had been abolished” (Mouton 1997:125) – whether between Jew and Gentile, or here in Ephesians 5:21-33 between husbands and wives, another fundamental form of otherness. Thus, “the paradoxical example of Christ as *servant-lord* serves to empower and radically redefine these relations” (Mouton 2002:73).

The injunctions to mutual submission – for wives to “submit to their husbands in everything” and for husbands to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” – are thus direct consequences of acknowledging Christ’s headship over everything (as portrayed in Ephesians 1:22). While this may well seem like an impossibly tall order for mere humans to fulfil, yet the intrinsic Christological focus of this pericope underlines that this is possible only in Christ and by his grace and enabling. Indeed, the mutual submission that is enjoined in 5:21 flows directly out of dependence on the Spirit, since 5:21 is integrally related to the verses which immediately precede it – as has already been noted, “submit to one another” is in the original text a subordinate participial clause which is dependent on the preceding imperative, “be filled with the Spirit” in 5:18. Being filled with the Spirit is clearly intended to affect one’s relationships with others, particularly in the home. By implication, “the power of the Spirit is sufficient in believers’ lives to enable them to fulfil God’s will in interpersonal relationships” (Keener 1992:159). The verse following immediately after the Ephesian household code also pointedly focuses on the need to be empowered by Christ, for in Ephesians 6:10 readers are urged to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

Chapter 5

Some conclusions on the transformative ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33

From the previous chapter it is evident that the conventional household code of the first-century Mediterranean world has been modified in a subtle but significant way. While the patriarchal hierarchy is not dismissed *per se*, the code is infused with a radical new ethos of mutual submission and other-centredness which transforms the conventional understanding of the marriage relationship.

5.1 A subtle yet powerfully transformative ethos

Some readers today may be disappointed that the patriarchal hierarchy is not rejected outright in the Ephesian *Haustafel*, and feel that the subtle subversion of the conventional domestic code is not strong enough to modify the *status quo*. The Ephesian household code consequently tends to be viewed by such commentators as representing a regressive step back from the radical new ethics of Jesus and the undisputed letters of Paul.¹

However, the transformative ethos of the Ephesian *Haustafel*, that has been discerned in our reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 in the previous chapter, is directly in line with Jesus' re-ordering of the norms of the society of his day, as seen for example in his redefinition of concepts such as 'honour' and 'shame' to promote "a society with upside-down estimations of honour and shame" (Domeris 1993:294-295). Here, in the Ephesian domestic code, the least in the household are elevated to positions of honour, while the head of the household is enjoined to lay his life down in other-centred service, emulating Jesus' paradoxical praxis. A clear correlation with statements in the undisputed Pauline writings is also evident, as

Lincoln (1990:366) points out:

“Paul had called for mutual submission and service in such passages as Galatians 5:13b and Philippians 2:3,4. In fact, in the latter passage, the qualities of selflessness and a regard for others that does not insist on one’s own rights that the apostle desires to see are linked to the heart of his gospel by being grounded on the pattern of Christ’s life. He did not insist on the equality with God that was his by rights but became a servant.”

Such a redefinition of societal norms strongly identified with the disempowered and embraced a profound vulnerability that went quite contrary to notions of status and power – a vulnerability that is deeply embedded in biblical imagery from the New Testament, seen for example in:

- the Son of God’s arrival as a vulnerable, defenceless, dependent baby in a manger in Bethlehem
- Jesus’ upbringing in a rural Galilean backwater, and his close association with humble fishermen and others on the periphery of both Jewish and Graeco-Roman society
- Jesus’ identification with the outcasts and the despised in his death on the cross
- entrusting the apostolic mission, on Jesus’ ascension, to those who often lacked influence and power – including women and slaves and the disempowered; indeed, we discern God’s willingness to entrust an eternal treasure to mere ‘jars of clay’, to cite a vivid metaphor from 2 Corinthians 4:7.

Such a vulnerability is surely evidenced in the way in which the conventional patriarchal hierarchy is subtly infused with a new other-centred ethos in the Ephesian household code. The outer form is not summarily overturned, but it is infused with a totally new heart attitude which, as it would take root in people’s lives, would radically transform the way in which they would relate to one another.

The infusion of the conventional household code with such a transformative ethos, as is evidenced in Ephesians 5:21-33, embraces a view of social transformation as a

¹ Such a perspective has been described in 3.1 above

gradual and subtle, yet inexorable, process. There is substantial biblical precedent for adopting such an approach, for many of the biblical images that are used to refer to the coming of the kingdom of God – God’s rule under Christ’s headship – emphasise the process as stealthy and progressive rather than cataclysmic. We see this, for example, in metaphors from both the Old and New Testaments:

- In Daniel 2, the kingdom of God is likened to a rock that is cut out, but not by human hands; starting small, it will grow and grow to fill the whole earth, crushing the kingdoms of this world.
- In the gospels Jesus told numerous parables concerning the kingdom of God, and in one of these compared its growth to that of a mustard seed: “Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of the garden plants and becomes a tree” (Matthew 13:32).

The tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the kingdom that pervades Jesus’ teaching and the New Testament writings in general is further testimony to the gradual transformation of society as it is progressively brought under God’s rule. What begins inconspicuously will gradually permeate all of creation, so that all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). This is typified in the very Incarnation, where God identifies with fallen humanity to such an extent that Jesus was seen by many as simply ‘one of us’. As a rural Galilean, an itinerant teacher, Jesus was willing to be so much part of a particular cultural form and setting that he risked not being recognised for who he really was. As the North American scholar, Kraft (1979:175), comments in his book *Christianity in Culture*, “God in Jesus became so much part of a specific human context that many never even recognized that he had come from somewhere else.” Yet, as he rubbed shoulders with ordinary humanity and touched people’s lives, his amazing identification was to lead to dramatic transformation – calling forth a new humanity. The spark which he brought was to ignite a fire that would spread through all the world and down through the centuries, radically transforming people’s lives and society at large.

In the New Testament *Haustafeln*, we see the church being exhorted to live out, within the structures of society, the newness of the life of God’s kingdom. In this

way, as Yoder (1972:192) points out in his classic work *The Politics of Jesus*, the early church was challenged to transform

“the concept of living within a role by finding how in each role the servanthood of Christ, the voluntary subordination of one who knows that another regime is normative, could be made concrete. The wife or child or slave who can accept subordination because ‘it is fitting in the Lord’ has not forsaken the radicality of the call of Jesus; it is precisely this attitude toward the structures of this world, this freedom from needing to smash them since they are about to crumble anyway, which Jesus had been the first to teach and in his suffering to concretize.”

5.2 **An invitation to ongoing reorientation**

The key hermeneutical question, as Girard (2000:126) points out, thus becomes: “How are we to separate, when appropriate, the gangue of expressions too intimately linked with a given culture from the precious gold which reflects the light of God’s transcultural design?” In seeking to answer this question, the South African scholar, Mouton (1997), helpfully brings to our understanding of the transformative potential of Ephesians the concept of *liminality*, thereby employing an anthropological concept to apply to an ethics of transition in which the implied readers of Ephesians are exhorted to a behaviour concomitant with a new reality in Christ. Thus Ephesians is seen to function as a threshold or bridge between two different modes of existence: between the known and the unknown, between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’, and between remembrance and hope (Mouton 1997:122). A cyclic movement of continuous reinterpretation and renewal within this liminal space is thus set up (Mouton 1997:124), and the potential for an ongoing interaction between readers and text is created, which is of relevance not only for the implied readers, but for readers down through the ages and in diverse cultural settings. Thus, “in a co-operative shared work, the Spirit, the text, and the reader engage in a transforming process, which enlarges horizons and creates new horizons” (Thiselton 1992:619).

The persuasive power of Ephesians is therefore embedded in the delicate Ricoeurian processes of *orientation*, *disorientation* and *reorientation*, as Mouton (2002:252) highlights, and she goes on to spell this out:

“In practical terms, this means that its shifting, transformative potential lies in its ability to continuously reorient its recipients in accordance with the radical example of Christ during the process of (re)-reading. During his earthly ministry, Christ – as a living parable in his moral world – reversed, reordered and upset the familiar, conventional preconceptions of God and humanity by consistently practising an ethos of *love*.”

It is this transformative reorientation or realignment that is clearly evidenced in the Ephesian marriage pericope. Employing the contemporary wine-skin of a conventional household code, it is filled with the new wine of new ways of relating in Christ Jesus. As Girard (2000:143-147) points out, the sort of ethics that is enjoined comprises:

- **A conjugal ethics of ‘love-subjection’**, since submission and love are placed in a strict parallelism in the maxi-structure of this pericope, and must therefore be treated together; indeed, the ‘submission’ of 5:22,24 and the ‘self-giving love’ of 5:25 are equivalent and, up to a certain point, interchangeable²; it is a sacrificial love, since the hendiadys ‘to love’ and ‘give oneself up for’ attests to a modeling on Christ, the paradigm, at once human and divine, who subjected himself in everything at the hands of his adversaries and assassins.³

² Girard (2000:145) points out that Paul could not, because of his own culture and lest he offend those to whom his message was addressed, properly reverse the two terms ‘subjection’ and ‘love’. Nevertheless, Girard (2000:146) finds that, “even though the terms ‘subjection’ and ‘love’ in their concrete contextual meaning are not perfectly interchangeable, they nonetheless express the same conjugal ethics of selflessness, of self-renunciation for the benefit of the other spouse.”

³ There is strong support for this elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, where Christians are advised, with regard to communal ethics:

- “do not think of yourself more highly than you ought” (Romans 12:3)
- “in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3)
- to follow the example of the self-emptying (*kenosis*) to which Christ himself assented, as portrayed in Philippians 2:5-8; indeed, there is in this passage the foundation of a Christian ethics and spirituality that is quite inescapable (Girard 2000:145).

- **A conjugal ethics of ‘fear’** – a word that carries a lot of weight in this passage, since it is used twice and determines the large *inclusio*, “which formally unifies the whole pericope and gives it its dominant semantic color” (Girard 2000:146); the word is filled with nuances of respect and veneration, within the framework of human relationships completely renewed and deepened by the experience of faith in Christ; and when directed to wives, it is not a command, but is seen rather as a consequence of the husband’s self-sacrificing love (Girard 2000:146-147).
- **A conjugal ethics of ‘responsibility’**, since a headship of responsibility is reflected in 5:23 and 5:28,29; a responsibility which, in the final analysis, does not fall to the husband alone, since “in reality, there is no dichotomy between the head and the body” (Girard 2000:148), for the head is integrated into the body.⁴

These various facets complete and support one another in order to define new conjugal mores, which are to be the specific mark identifying Christians, and which run counter to the prevailing mores of the day. In so doing, a high status is accorded to marriage. For, “through the love, on the one hand, and the fear, on the other, which marriage involves, husband and wife are to mirror the great mystery itself, the union between Christ and his Church” (Lincoln 1990:385).

It is this ethos of mutual submission and other-centredness, the appropriate way for married couples to relate to each other out of reverence for Christ, that is the focus of Ephesians 5:21-33 rather than the patriarchal hierarchy that simply reflects the first-century Mediterranean domestic *status quo*.⁵ Consequently, it is this ethic of

⁴ In further support of this perspective, Girard (2000:148), noting that 5:29 explicitly mentions two concrete signs of love as responsibility – to provide food and comfort – points out that “even in ancient societies, this twofold task was shared by man and wife. The former earned and brought the food, but it was the latter who prepared it to nourish her husband and children. The same applies to the clothes and the heating of the home, including the radiance of affective warmth.”

⁵ As Webber (1994:62) points out, “we need to remember that when we search the scriptures for an ideal for our own lives on which to base practical conduct in our time, we are apt to find the practical first-century instructions for which the letters were written and miss the fundamental ideal which may be glimpsed only in the occasional unguarded moment. Large parts of Paul’s correspondence dealt not with eternal ideals but with immediate realities.”

relating that is transculturally normative rather than the culturally specific patriarchal hierarchy, in which it is couched in this passage. As Lincoln (1990:385) points out, for the modern reader significant aspects of the form and content of this pericope may be seen to underline the passage's masculine perspective and its acceptance of a patriarchal structure, "and yet they retain within them the radical emphasis on the husband's love with its potential for their transformation." For, indeed, in Ephesians 5:21-33 the writer takes up the language and conventions of the day and infuses them with a transformative ethos. His starting-point is with the norms of first-century Mediterranean society – and indeed, "the *whole* New Testament was written in a culture where men usually led in the home" (Keener 1992:134). To expect anything other than this, is perhaps to approach the text with "an incredibly ethnocentric historical naïveté" (Keener 1992:186). Indeed, bearing in mind the deeply entrenched nature of the domestic patriarchal hierarchy in the thinking of the first-century Mediterranean world, would it not appear to be a fairly remote possibility that the writer of Ephesians could even have conceived of a human society in which wives could share equally with their husbands in the leadership of their homes? Yet, the writer is captivated by the vision of a wholly new attitude and way of relating between husbands and wives under the lordship of Christ, and this vision thoroughly permeates the Ephesian domestic code to such an extent that the transformative ethos with which the household code is here infused, if applied without reservation, would lead to a marriage relationship that would be a genuinely other-centred partnership, non-hierarchical in attitude, where both husband and wife serve and submit themselves to each other. Lincoln (1990:391) lends support to such a perspective when he comments that the writer of Ephesians presents a distinctive vision of marriage:

"Although the roles and duties of believers who shared this vision would from the outside have been hard to distinguish from those in other marriages, the internal ethos and dynamic of such marriages would have felt quite different. To have fulfilled one's role and carried out one's duties under the guidelines of mutual submission, and as a wife to have subordinated oneself voluntarily to a husband who cherishes one with a self-sacrificial love, would have been to experience a very different reality than

that suggested by the traditional discussions of household management.”

Webber (1994:64) too concludes that, though the formal structure of the Ephesian household code remains similar to the conventional domestic codes of the day, “the spirit has been radically changed”, for “now the issue is no longer structure and order, but a self-sacrificing love that takes no more thought for prerogatives than did Jesus in washing his disciples’ feet and dying on the cross.”

5.3 **Ephesians 5:21-33 and transcultural normativity**

Ephesians 5:21-33 is thus not in essence commending the patriarchal hierarchy as the model for all husband-wife relationships. For, as Stagg (1979:546) notes, while the pattern and general perspective of the Ephesian *Haustafel* may be inherited from first-century society, yet “Ephesians brings the marriage relationship under the claims of Christ and of love.” The Ephesian household code thus looks beyond such structures of patriarchal hierarchy to a radically new way of relating that, when applied, would in effect have the consequence of transforming those structures. Indeed, the call of 5:21 leaves the way open to further corrective and ongoing transformation of the marriage relationship out of reverence for Christ. Furthermore, as Hays (1996:65) – the North American scholar noted for his work in the fields of New Testament ethics and Pauline theology – proposes,

“if marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church, the exalted ecclesiology of Ephesians must deconstruct static patriarchal notions of marriage. The church, in Ephesians, is not dominated by Christ; rather, in unity with Christ, it is nurtured into full maturity, into ‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (4:13).”

In this regard it is of interest to compare the issue of the normativity of the patriarchal husband-wife hierarchy with that of slavery, since the Ephesian household code also embraces the relationship between slaves and masters. The very fact that slavery is

dealt with in this same household code points to the notion that the institution itself or the outward form of the domestic relationship is not at issue, but rather the heart attitude. Making a comparison with the instructions to slaves and masters in 6:5-9, Keener (1992:196) suggests that slavery is a concession,⁶ while treating other people justly is a command. In instructing slaves to obey their masters as they would Christ, the writer “is addressing slaves in a less-than-ideal situation, not upholding the institution of slavery”, and so “if Paul could call on slaves to submit without supporting slavery, we must allow that he could have asked wives to submit without supporting male dominance” (Keener 1992:135). He consequently proposes that those who today will admit that slavery is wrong but still maintain that husbands must exercise an authoritarian headship over their wives are inconsistent (Keener 1992:207). To the challenge that, while marriage is a God-ordained institution, there is no indication that slavery was a God-ordained institution, Keener (1992:208) responds that this still begs the question as to whether a wife’s submission to her husband is a permanently God-ordained part of marriage: “It was the subordinationist link between the two that made them part of ancient household codes and forced Paul to address the issue in Ephesians” (Keener 1992:208).

⁶ Keener (1992:197) points out that it is likely that Paul was addressing a particular kind of slavery that occurred within the context of domestic households: “he is addressing household slaves, members of his urban congregations whose situation was better in many ways than that of rural free peasants.” Furthermore, Paul, in a brief letter like Ephesians, addresses various issues with which a congregation is struggling, and it is to be expected that, within the scope of only a few verses on how slaves and masters are to treat one another, he is likely to be more concerned about giving positive advice to those within the system than with entertaining the hypothesis of a social revolution (Keener 1992:198). “Paul’s lack of comment on the institution of slavery is thus no reason to assume that he supports it” (Keener 1992:199).

Keener (1992:185) argues that Paul “was out to change the world by starting where he realistically and reasonably could: by spreading Christianity and demanding that all Christians love and respect one another as themselves. Whether he considered the possibility of Christians being able to radically alter even basic socioeconomic structures is uncertain; they were a small persecuted minority in his day with no visible way to affect social structures controlled solely by the aristocracy.” Although Paul did not call for the violent overthrow of these structures, the principles Paul lays down for acting within them – mutual submission and equality – ultimately challenge the moral right of structures such as slavery to exist” (Keener 1992:186).

Indeed, in the long-term, “Christianity, as a classless religion in which slaves became prominent church leaders and heroes of the faith, was well equipped to ultimately abolish slavery” (Keener 1992:204). “In the meantime, it had the moral power to give slaves self-esteem and strength for their task until slavery had been abolished. On a practical level, church funds were often used to free slaves, and sometimes Christians even became slaves themselves to ransom others; regarded as spiritual equals, slaves could rise to the position of bishop in the postapostolic church” (Keener 1992:204).

The writer of Ephesians essentially advises the implied readers in the setting in which they lived; their setting is not, however, made valid for all times. The standard household codes of the first-century Mediterranean world are employed, but these are not the standard codes for our world. Readers in different contexts need to bear this in mind. In our own present-day context, by way of comparison, as Keener (1992:209) perceptively points out,

“although we respect governments and those in authority, we do not try to reinstitute the monarchy so that we can obey New Testament demands that we submit to the king; nor would we reinstitute slavery so slaves can submit to their masters. Neither should we reinstitute old authority roles in marriage and thereby ignore the kinds of authority structures now standard in our culture.”

It is therefore the allocentric, serving attitude or ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33 that is transculturally normative, and should to be transposed into marital relationships in other cultural contexts, rather than the patriarchal hierarchy. In marriages where both partners are bending over backwards to outdo each other in love and service, and are seeking to give full expression to their submission to Christ, the question of a ‘supreme authority’ in the household other than God surely becomes less of an issue than some would make it out to be. The injunction in Ephesians 5:21-33 is thus that husbands and wives each strive for that ideal, to make their marriages a pure reflection of their loving service of the Lord Jesus Christ, living out his alternative reality in a world that may live by very different standards. It is an invitation to embark on a journey of discipleship – to step into and be willing to inhabit that dynamic space of ongoing reorientation in their relationship to each other under Christ’s lordship.

Chapter 6

Implications for a contemporary South African context

The ethos of mutual submission and other-centred service that we find in Ephesians 5:21-33 is radical. As Webber (1994:59) affirms, “if any one [New Testament] passage provides a charter for a radically new way of understanding marriage, this is the one: the tension between what we find in the world around us and what God calls us to be is nowhere more evident than here.” Yet, how does one effectively bridge the gap between the *there and then* of the world of the New Testament text and the *here and now* of our contemporary context?

6.1 Bridging the gap between text and present-day context

In exploring the dialectic between the past world of the text and the present world of the interpreter, the key question, as Mouton (1997:136) points out, is “how the culturally-bound alternative world of Ephesians may be brought into relation with, and impact on, present-day moral challenges.”

In seeking to address this hermeneutical question, Stott (1992:195-197) suggests that contemporary readers essentially have one of three options, namely:

- total rejection of the relevance of the biblical passage as culturally obsolete;
- a wooden, unimaginative literalism that attempts to apply the biblical passage directly into the present-day context; or
- a *cultural transposition* of the ethical heart of the biblical message, stripping away its ancient cultural dress, and re-clothing it in appropriate modern cultural terms.

It is this third option which is of particular relevance for contemporary readers of Ephesians 5:21-33. For, a study of the rhetoric in which the Ephesian *Haustafel* is embedded, has indicated that what is at issue here is not the structural nature of the relationships in the domestic household, but rather the heart attitude that should pervade these relationships for those in Christ. As Stagg (1979:544) comments, “as a manual or rule book, the Ephesian Domestic Code is problematic; as a chapter in the life of the church, it is highly instructive.” For indeed,

“structures and codes need constantly to be reviewed in terms of the awesome freedom and responsibility which Jesus himself embraced and which he thrusts upon any who dare presume to follow him. Jesus never taught that we have ‘wine’ without ‘skins’, but he left no doubt as to the difference and the importance of distinguishing between the two (Mark 2:22). Structures and codes would seem to be ‘skins’ to Jesus; potentially serviceable but also vulnerable to idolatry when made ends in themselves, refusing to give way to ‘fresh skins’ as needed” (Stagg 1979:543-544).

As Mouton (1997:127-137) so insightfully remarks, the challenge that the rhetoric of Ephesians delivers to its readers – both past and present – is to be willing to be ushered into a ‘liminal space’, in which the *liminality* is ongoing, urging upon the readers a continuing openness to reinterpretation under the lordship of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. For, “in spite of its patriarchal embeddedness, the [Ephesians] document invites contemporary readers to identify with Christ in the paradoxical triumph of his resurrection and exaltation and to grow beyond all limited and stereotypical views of humanity” (Mouton 1997:136-137). In this process the disciple has never ‘arrived’, for there are always possibilities for further growth and the need to be open to being further moulded by the Lord, since Christ himself is the model for our praxis.

Such an approach takes seriously the transformative rhetorical thrust of the letter as a whole. As Lincoln (1993:153-154) extrapolates, in Ephesians

“what the writer believes has been achieved in the Church is the overcoming of the major division within humanity in the first century CE. That major division can be treated as a prototype of all divisions (cf. Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). If the Church in Ephesians stands for the overcoming of the division between Jews and Gentiles, it stands in the appropriation of contemporary readers for the overcoming of divisions caused by class, colour, wealth, gender, nationality or religious tradition. Anything less would be a denial of that nature of the Church which is axiomatic for Ephesians.”

In short, this means that Ephesians 5:21-33 is best appropriated today “by attempting to do what its writer has done, that is, to bring to bear on the marriage conventions of the day what is held to be the heart of the Christian message” (Lincoln 1993:162). With the concepts of love and justice being at the heart of the Christian message, this produces

“a view of marriage where both partners are held in equal regard, where justice will require that traditional male dominance cannot be tolerated, and where love ensures that the relationship does not degenerate into a sterile competition for control. Instead of assigning love to the husband and submission to the wife, a contemporary appropriation may well build on the opening exhortation of the paraenesis in 5:21 by emphasizing a mutuality of loving submission. Submission and love can in this way be seen as two sides of the same coin – unselfish service of one’s partner” (Lincoln 1993:162).

Certainly this takes seriously and embraces the transformative ethos with which Ephesians 5:21-33 is infused.¹

¹ It is a serious indictment against the church down through the centuries that this transformative ethos has not been strongly embraced. In her article, *The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding*, Osiek (2002) highlights the negative effect that this pericope has had on the church as it has been propounded as merely supporting a patriarchal domestic *status quo*. Indeed, even in the decades towards the end of the first century AD, as Botha (1992) points out from his studies of folklore, most early Christian groups failed effectively to change their attitude towards women, and remained exponents of a rigid patriarchy.

6.2 **Some implications for a contemporary pastoral context**

This has profound implications for the contemporary South African context in which my wife and I minister. We have pastoral responsibility for preparing couples for marriage and providing marriage enrichment programmes and counseling in a Cape Town church congregation that is becoming increasingly diverse – culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically. Marriage and domestic structures are so integrally part of the cultural fabric of a community that one can easily be accused of cultural insensitivity or irrelevance or, worse still, ethnocentric arrogance if one dares to tamper with such matters. Yet this vital area of relationship is so often in need of Christ's transformative intervention and needs to be brought under his lordship, restoring dignity and bringing wholeness and genuine partnership in mutually other-centred love and caring.

In our wider society there are many marriage relationships that function in the mode of an authoritarian patriarchal hierarchy. Based on social traditions, for many this is simply assumed to be the domestic structure to follow, despite the ongoing democratisation of South Africa politically and economically. At times such relationships can be strongly authoritarian and abusive, robbing people of dignity, and very far removed from the image of God's alternative society. Such relationships are desperately in need of an infusion of the transformative ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33, where the husband's role comes to be characterised by a desire to serve his wife selflessly, sacrificially laying down his own rights and taking up the responsibility to love his wife as modeled by Christ, without demanding to be served, while the wife's partnership is affirmed.

While abuse of power and dreadful indignities and dehumanisation may characterise some strongly authoritarian hierarchical households, yet sometimes those who have grown up in more traditional communities, where domestic households may exhibit a strong patriarchal hierarchy, tend to write off challenges to this domestic structure as inappropriate 'western' imports. Certainly, in seeking to be culturally sensitive in the contemporary South African context, one wants to avoid imposing 'western' concepts

of the marriage relationship on people from more traditional cultures. Yet it is not really the concept of a western-style, egalitarian, non-hierarchical marriage partnership that is being propounded in Ephesians 5:21-33. Neither is it merely a 'love patriarchy', that Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:270) detects in the Ephesian *Haustafel*, that is being advocated. It goes far deeper than this, for what is being advocated, as we have seen, is a radically new other-centred way for husbands and wives to relate to each other. Taken to its logical conclusion, such other-centred praxis will lead to a genuine, non-hierarchical partnership.

Furthermore, I believe that the subtle way in which the transformative ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33 is infused into the conventional household code of the first-century Mediterranean world provides a significant clue as to the pastoral approach to preparing couples from more traditional backgrounds for marriage. For, in essence, one is not inviting people simply to throw overboard their culturally conditioned concepts of the marriage relationship, but one is rather encouraging people to embrace this ethos and allow it to mould and transform their understanding and practice in relating together as husband and wife. The external cultural form is not so much at issue as the heart attitude.

By way of illustration, we have come to know a Zambian couple who have taken up residence in Cape Town. Their traditional culture dictates that a wife present her husband with his meal on bended knee as a sign of her respect – a custom that for many in a 'western' setting may smack of servility and a debasement of the woman. As Christ has transformed their lives, however, they have learnt to love and serve each other in a wonderful mutuality that transcends their cultural backgrounds. Yet occasionally this wife will still serve her husband his meal on bended knee, voluntarily expressing her respect and delight in him in an age-old custom, while secure in the knowledge that there is no inequality in their relationship, but rather a genuine partnership.

At the other end of the spectrum, our experience has taught us that the egalitarian, non-hierarchical marriages, that are increasingly part of the urban social landscape, are often equally in need of Christ's transformative intervention, since idiocentric or

self-centred behaviour may frequently characterise the dynamics of such marriage relationships, and many of these marriages are troubled with the tension of openly conflicting wills. The ethos of mutual submission and other-centredness that we see advocated in Ephesians 5:21-33 is a desperately needed antidote to such competition for power and selfish personal goals. To confirm just how far removed the public image of the more egalitarian, 'western' marriage relationship in our contemporary urban South African context is from the other-centred ethos of the Ephesians pericope, one need merely open the pages of almost any popular magazine and turn to an article on marriage. Almost invariably it will address issues such as "Are my needs being met by my partner?" or "Am I fulfilled in my marriage?" The emphasis is extremely narcissistic,² caught up with each partner's own interests, rather than focusing on each partner's responsibility to serve their spouse. Because of this pervading ethos, many egalitarian husband-wife relationships are desperately in need of an infusion of the ethos of Ephesians 5:21-33.

Faced with our society's models of stiflingly authoritarian patriarchal hierarchies on the one hand, and the fragility and impermanence of *laissez faire* 'liberated' marriages on the other, it is no wonder that many young people hesitate to get married. In our church context, where we have many students and people in their twenties, we have witnessed this to be a very real dilemma for some. In fact, marriage breakdown is a spectre that looms over many a South African family, and haunts perceptions of marriage. Yet, Ephesians 5:21-33 presents a glorious vision of an alternative way of relating in marriage. It is this radically other-centred attitude that needs to be promoted with clarity and conviction. Too often pronouncements from the pulpit are vague and unhelpful, and wedding sermons all too frequently either merely contribute a few blessed thoughts, or else focus on the mechanics of headship and submission in an attempt to be 'biblical', while leaving the unfortunate

² This is quite the opposite of the whole tenor of the letter to the Ephesians, as Lincoln (1993:147) points out, for, "unlike many contemporary discussions of self-identity, the message of Ephesians for its readers is not narcissistic. Its theological and Christological framework transforms issues of the readers' identity into issues of their calling. Their identity is not autonomous or self-grounded but entirely dependent on God's electing purpose actualized in his call."

impression that Christian marriage is an unequal relationship in which the husband takes all the decisions and the wife merely acquiesces.

Recently my wife and I counselled with an earnest, extremely capable, professional young woman who was soon to be married. We were astonished to learn that, in her desire to be 'scriptural', she felt constrained to leave all decision-making to her future husband, and merely held out the hope that she would somehow be able to adapt to this new role. Seeing her resigned to her fate, like a bird about to have its wings clipped, seemed so far removed from the tantalising vision that is held out in Ephesians 5:21-33 with its compelling transformative ethos. While also requiring sacrifice and a submission of oneself to one's partner, yet it holds out the ideal of a magnificent other-centred partnership that is pervaded with oneness and indeed with Christ's very nature.

Indeed, this is the biblical ideal – a marriage in which both partners cooperate in love, instead of either one seeking his or her own way. A mutually other-centred cooperation, out of reverence for Christ, is the picture of relationships we find in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Given the difficulty of loving and serving as radically as this text demands – with Christ's death as the standard for love, and our allegiance to Christ as the standard for submission – the immediate context that brackets this passage in the letter to the Ephesians is particularly significant: this is a quality of life that flows, as we read in 5:18-21, from being filled with the Spirit. It is a quality of life that we cannot expect to attain in our own strength; rather, as we are encouraged in 6:10, we are to draw our strength and inspiration from Christ and his mighty power.

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