

HOUSEHOLD CODES¹

NT writers adopted a number of conventional literary devices to aid them in the teaching of ethics. One significant device of this sort is referred to by scholars as a household code. This term is a translation of the German term *Haustafel* (“house table”), which Martin Luther originally coined and which was taken up by scholars to describe the extended passages in the NT that address various members of a household. A number of sections in the NT letters have been classified in this way (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Tit 2:1–3:8; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7), and related teaching occurs in the writings of the late first- and second-century apostolic fathers. The focus of the present article is on the non-Pauline NT and later usage of this form of instruction, but the lines of research have developed in such a way that some discussion of the Pauline usage must fall within our purview (*see DPL*, Households and Household Codes).

1. Definitions: The Parameters and Permutations of the Household Code
2. The Household Code Tradition in Recent Scholarship
3. Household and Church Codes in the Later New Testament and Apostolic Fathers
4. Conclusions

1. Definitions: The Parameters and Permutations of the Household Code.

1.1. The Form. The ideal household code is characterized by teaching addressed to the two members in a household relationship (wives and husbands; slaves and masters; children and parents); use of an imperative verb expressing subordination (Gk *hypotassō*) or obedience (Gk *hypakouō*); grounds or motivation for the behavior enjoined; and reciprocal address. But close inspection of the various passages generally categorized as household codes reveals a number of differences that complicate the issues of the genesis and form of the NT device.

1.2. Variations Within the New Testament. The typical assumption is that the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians represent in some sense the basic form, with somewhat divergent later examples being understood as developments or expansions of an ideal form corresponding to developments in the church’s sense of self-identity in relation to the world as the house church became the institutional church (so esp. Herr).

Although this interpretation is open to question, it does seem clear from a comparison of the form and themes that the related passages belong to a common tradition(s) that in different settings and times proved to be capable of adaptation to new situations. Thus within the Pauline and Petrine writings we find passages that address believers specifically from the perspective of

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NT New Testament

DPL Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. R. P. Martin and G. F. Hawthorne

Gk Greek

esp. especially

their place in the household (Eph; Col; cf. 1 Tim 6:1–2; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7). However, other passages related in form and tone address believers according to their positions in the broader context of the Christian congregation. Injunctions may be divided along gender lines, whether generally or in the marriage relationship (1 Cor 11:3–16; 14:33–35; 1 Tim 2:8–15), and along generational lines (1 Tim 5:1–2); Titus 2:1–10 combines these perspectives. Elsewhere the church as a whole is instructed to acknowledge the secular authorities (Rom 13:1–7; Tit 3:1–2; 1 Pet 2:13–17; *see* Civil Authority). And several passages encourage the church similarly to submit to its leaders and/or exhort leaders to lead well (1 Cor 16:16; 1 Thess 5:12–13; Heb 13:17; 1 Tim 3:1–13; Tit 1:6–9; 1 Pet 5:1–5).

In view of both the similarity of form, content and tone in these passages and the variety of groups and concerns addressed, the adequacy of the term “household code” to describe the tradition as a whole has been questioned. D. Schroeder (1976, 1959) chose the more general term “station code,” which identifies and links the passages on the basis of their common form and concern to teach believers how to behave in their various stations in life. Others (Balch, Weiser) prefer to think in terms of two subspecies of one tradition: the term “household code” applies to the form as it occurs in Colossians, Ephesians and 1 Peter, but the term “church code,” or “congregational code,” more accurately describes the tradition’s application or expansion in those passages that exceed the bounds of the household (e.g., 1 Tim 2:1–6:2; Tit 2:1–3:8).

Both of these approaches share the assumption that a basic form was altered or expanded as new situations warranted. The most recent work of H. von Lips suggests another explanation. He observed the relationship between the household code in 1 Peter and the code in Titus 2:1–3:7 and determined that these two examples share certain features that set them off from Colossians and Ephesians: the parent/child category is absent; instructions are addressed to slaves but not masters; subordination to the state, which Colossians and Ephesians do not mention, is enjoined; 1 Peter and Titus prefer the verb *subordinate* or *submit* (Gk *hypotassomai*; used throughout) to *obey* (Gk *hypakouō*; used in Col and Eph of slave and child) and the noun *despotai* of the masters (Col and Eph use *kyrioi*); and the codes in 1 Peter and Titus make extensive use of theological material to ground the instructions (Titus 2:11–14; 3:3–8; 1 Pet 2:21–24; 3:18–22). These points of contact, especially the addition of the instruction concerning the state, suggest the emergence of a new schema or a parallel tradition rather than one that has undergone transformation. Whether this explanation is an improvement remains to be seen. However, his attentiveness to the text and context, instead of primarily secular parallels, for clues about the meaning of the codes is noteworthy. This methodology has not always been followed.

2. The Household Code Tradition in Recent Scholarship.

Three crucial questions determine the direction that study of this teaching form has taken: Where did it come from? What circumstances in the Christian communities gave rise to its usage? What is the intention of the ethic it enjoins?

2.1. The Question of Source. For the most part scholars have concentrated on discovering the source of the code as it appears in the NT in the hope that this would provide the clue to its

cf. compare

e.g. *exempli gratia*, for example

meaning. Initial investigations concluded that codes used in Stoicism had been modified only slightly for Christian use (Weidinger, Dibelius). Then some scholars noticed that the emphasis on subordination seemed closer to the teaching of Hellenistic Judaism as seen, for instance, in Philo (Schroeder 1959 and esp. Crouch). L. Goppelt (1973, 1993 [1978], 1982), building on the work of Schroeder, concluded that the NT household codes are genuinely Christian products; in some respects they compare with Stoic and Hellenistic Jewish relationship ethics but are more specifically the result of Christian reworking of Hellenistic ethics “on the basis of principles developed by Jesus and Paul” (Goppelt 1993 [1978], 173).

More recent scholarship emphasizes to a greater extent the influence of the Greco-Roman culture on the NT device (Lührmann, Thraede, Balch 1981, Müller, Lips). The structure of Aristotelian household ethics (addressing social relationships, reciprocity, placing one of the pair under the authority of the other) might explain the codes in Colossians and Ephesians. But the more likely immediate source of the NT tradition, which becomes more diverse in content, is to be found in the broader contemporary Hellenistic discussion of the theme “concerning the household” (Gk *peri oikonomou*), which developed from, but was not restricted to, Aristotle in terms of content and form.

For a number of reasons, looking to the contemporary culture for an understanding of the NT household codes is a useful approach. The absence of an identifiable source for the form recommends caution and sensitivity (Hartman). It is clear that the NT writers were indeed influenced by their environment, and in this respect it is important to note how the early church utilized the Hellenistic “household” concept as its own sense of identity developed. This concept, rather than formal considerations alone, would seem to be the common denominator that links NT with secular social ethics. The ancient household was regarded as the basic building block of society; its stability guaranteed the stability of the city-state, and so discussion of the relation of household members to the state authorities came naturally within the purview of a discussion of ethics related to the household. The teaching developed to safeguard the relationships and responsibilities in the household and respect for the state established some of the categories and suggested the method of instruction of the NT household code. But there is no question of an uncritical, wholesale adoption of secular ethics on the part of NT writers.

2.2. The Question of Causal Circumstances. Martin Dibelius and K. Weidinger answered this question on the basis of secularization in the early church. In their opinion the delay of Christ’s return and the pressing concern for survival in a hostile world led the church to find a way to make itself at home in society. The secular code, with some slight Christian modifications, encouraged the kind of behavior that would facilitate this transition. The codes were taken over so completely, however, that nothing about a particular church’s situation might be learned from them. This view has been largely rejected, though it has still influenced the interpretation of later NT writings.

Other scholars maintain that the household code was applied to quiet the unrest caused in Christian communities by the enthusiastic enactment of the Pauline equality tradition preserved in Galatians 3:28 (Col 3:11; 1 Cor 12:13; Schroeder 1959; Crouch; Martin, 3:931–32). Goppelt argued similarly that the tradition called Christians undergoing stress because of the faith to remain engaged in the social structure rather than emigrate out of it (Goppelt 1982).

E. Schüssler Fiorenza’s feminist reconstruction combines the two preceding views, interpreting the household codes as evidence of the church’s return to patriarchy. Early efforts to live according to the equality promised by Paul’s gospel (Gal 3:28) led to some exuberant excesses and apparently drew criticism and hostility from secular critics. Rather than stand firm

for the gospel and coequality of the sexes, church leaders in the name of Paul returned to the acceptable secular arrangement for the church in order to promote peace with the hostile world.

On the whole Schroeder, Crouch, Goppelt and Balch seem to be on the better track in their various ways. Balch (1981) especially pointed out that there is no sign of an emancipation movement in 1 Peter, much less one based on Galatians 3:28. What does seem evident in all cases is some sort of social instability in the church, whether brought on by errant theology or eschatology (Col; 1 Tim; and perhaps linked to false teaching) or stressful conditions in society in which Christians were being alienated and persecuted (1 Pet; see Elliott). In either case the solution arrived at was for the Christian community to structure its social behavior in ways that reflected conformity rather than opposition to the outside world. The more fundamental question is the intention in encouraging such behavior.

2.3. *The Question of Intention.* Along with the search for the source has gone the search for the motive or intention of the ethic taught by the NT household code, and numerous suggestions have been made (accommodation to secular ethics, Weidinger, Dibelius and more recently Schüssler Fiorenza; quieting enthusiastic unrest, Crouch, Martin; preventing internal disintegration brought on by outside pressures, Elliott 1981; defense-apologetic, Balch; mission, Schroeder, Goppelt).

However, the variation in the form the tradition takes and in the circumstances it addresses in the NT, as well as the absence of a single secular prototype, suggest that any one of the proposed solutions may be too narrow. It can be said generally that the NT household and church codes are concerned with Christian behavior in typical life situations; as in the secular Hellenistic setting, so too in the church: household roles and the household context provided the typical forum for discussing social ethics. Once the household metaphor is taken over as an expression of congregational identity (Eph; 1 Tim; Tit; 1 Pet), the same pattern of teaching can be expanded and applied to address life within the relationships in the broader Christian community and life as a Christian in the world. Goppelt observed correctly that life lived at this level in the various social roles insured that Christians would be in daily contact with unbelievers with every opportunity to testify to the faith (Goppelt 1982, 2:170; 1993, 162–79).

Whether the household codes were specifically missionary in orientation in every NT application is another question. What can be said is that through them the NT writers reflect sensitivity to the expectations of society at large and seem to encourage Christians to live according to patterns that were widely accepted as respectable. But in view of the emphasis on justice and fairness and the extent to which the ethic is grounded in theology, none of the NT household codes reflect uncritical secularization. A creative middle ground was sought, and at least in some cases (Tit; 1 Pet) this would facilitate a “salt and light” Christian existence in the world. In other cases it might serve a different purpose or have in-house matters more in mind.

3. Household and Church Codes in the Later New Testament and Apostolic Fathers.

3.1. *1 Peter.* As indicated, the circumstances of the recipients of a letter containing a household code provide the more reliable clues to the intention of the teaching than anything inherent in the form itself. 1 Peter is somewhat distinct (as compared, for instance, with Titus) in that it addresses churches already experiencing or about to experience alienation and abuse in society. This dimension of Christian existence had apparently led some people in those churches to consider either a form of compromise to avoid this criticism and hostility or perhaps to pull out and attempt to live a Christian life beyond the range of pagan society.

Peter responds to these options by reinforcing rather than reducing the sense of tension felt by his readers with a theology that explained their experience of alienation. God's election to membership in his family set them in a paradoxical situation—nonmembers in a world in which they must continue to live (1 Pet 1:1–2). On the one hand Christians are “foreigners,” those who reside without citizenship and without rights in a land that is not their own (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11). On the other hand they are the equivalent of resident aliens, a slightly different metaphor that implies the same sorts of limitations as “foreigners” but also implies the need to live on in that foreign country (1 Pet 1:17; 2:11). Since God's action in Christ for his people has determined their situation, they may rejoice; and however much the pressures of this life might seem to contradict it, the hope of salvation to be realized in full only in the end is sure (1 Pet 1:3–7). This theology may explain how the predicament has come about and provide some assurance about the future fulfillment of God's promises, but there is little incentive in it for a continued commitment to living the arduous Christian life in a hostile world.

Another factor is mentioned to convince Christians to stay engaged in the social life of the world, whatever the perils: mission. At 1 Peter 2:11–12, Peter makes the turn from the theology of the Christian identity as aliens to appropriate Christian living. The main motive for living an exemplary life before pagans is the hope of their salvation (1 Pet 2:12; cf. 1 Pet 3:1, 15). If Christian living can lead to this, then the importance of continued engagement in social life can be seen. It is this point that the household code that immediately follows (1 Pet 2:13–3:7) seeks to explore. Engagement will mean living as far as possible in accordance with the patterns of social life, and the secular household ethos provides the essential categories.

1 Peter 2:13–17 calls for submission to the government authorities. This would include a general attitude of respect toward those in authority (cf. Tit 3:1; Rom 13:1–4), which would be demonstrated in the specific acts of paying taxes (cf. Rom 13:6–7) and offering prayers in behalf of civil leaders (cf. 1 Tim 2:1–2; 1 Clem. 61.1–3). The rationale is that the civil government has been ordained by God and that such behavior will disprove the false accusations of outsiders who have slandered Christian households as being disloyal to the city-state. Apparently this kind of accusation was a current problem; the implication from the letter is that even exemplary behavior in this regard might not stop the abuse from unbelievers.

1 Peter 2:18–25 commands Christian slaves to submit to their masters. It is possible that it was more common in these churches for slaves to be Christians than masters, since masters are not addressed (cf. 1 Tim 6:1–2; Tit 2:9–10) and since the lengthy theological foundation establishes Christ's suffering as the pattern for Christian slaves who must continue to suffer unjustly. The unique christological grounding reveals the special circumstances of the churches to which Peter writes (cf. the confessional material used to ground the behavior in Titus 2:11–14; 3:3–7). In any case, the church's calling to engagement in the world prohibited slaves from opting out of this social institution. To encourage anything else would be regarded by unbelievers as anarchy.

1 Peter 3:1–7 closes the household code with teaching addressed to wives and husbands (*see* Marriage). Wives are to be submissive to husbands, and the two possible scenarios of mixed and Christian marriages are envisaged. A Christian wife whose husband was an unbeliever might experience harsh treatment for insubordination because of her foreign religion (1 Pet 3:1–2). Exemplary behavior might also be linked to her faith and so win over the unbelieving mate to Christ. Outer adornment is the specific aspect of respectable conduct given to illustrate the

1 Clem. 1 *Clement*

teaching (cf. 1 Tim 2:9–10). Spiritual inner adornment is commended (a gentle and quiet spirit), and Sarah’s demeanor provides a pattern. Christian husbands are to refuse to treat their wives harshly (1 Pet 3:7). They are fellow heirs of eternal life; failure to treat them with the respect they are due as human beings and fellow heirs will affect their relationship with God (cf. 1 Tim 2:8).

At this point in the letter the teaching addressed to the traditional household code categories comes to an end. There is no question of the wholesale adoption of a pagan ethical code. The conduct encouraged certainly corresponds to secular ideals of respectability, but the grounds and intention of the teaching are thoroughly Christianized. What is unique about the code as it is applied in 1 Peter (in contrast to Col, Eph, 1 Tim, Tit) is the insistence on respectability and engagement by Christians in the social life of the world even when they have been marginalized by unbelieving society.

Church concerns continue in 1 Peter 3:8–5:11, with various themes being linked to the dominant one of suffering. In 1 Peter 5:1–5 Peter returns briefly to the traditional format, addressing the congregational categories of elders in authority and younger believers who are to submit to that authority. The teaching to both parties is traditional (for leaders, cf. Acts 20:28; Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 3:1–13; Tit 1:6–9; for the younger, cf. 1 Cor 16:16; 1 Thess 5:12–13; Heb 13:17); the decision to expand the household code to address behavior within the broader congregational setting is in keeping with Peter’s overarching concern for the church in the world; this “household” of God must maintain the lines of authority and order that will insure its acceptability in a society looking precisely for such things.

3.2. *The Apostolic Fathers.* Several passages in the group of late first- and second-century Christian writings known as the apostolic fathers assume the pattern observed in the NT household and church codes. Circumstances and concerns have changed. It is more likely that a less critical endorsement of the traditional patriarchal social order (such as Schüssler Fiorenza argues for the NT household codes) has now become evident in some cases.

3.2.1. 1 Clement. Clement’s (*see* Clement of Rome) main concern as he addresses the Corinthian congregation is for unity and harmony (see esp. 1 Clem. 20; 37–38; 46–48). One threat to church stability came from a group that had apparently challenged ecclesiastical authority (1 Clem. 21.5; 44.1, 4; 47.6). The two passages fashioned as household codes suggest that Clement urged a return to traditional family values as the key to harmony. Moreover, the authority of the male head of the house, central to Roman ethical thinking among the aristocracy, corresponded to Clement’s views of ecclesiastical authority in the church.

Two passages in *1 Clement* take the form of household or church codes. *1 Clement* 1.3 addresses teaching meant for all to the head of the family according to a hierarchical organization: submission to leaders, honor to older men (elders?), instruction to younger men; women were to cherish their husbands and live in subjection. *1 Clement* 2.1 states the goal of this pattern: to live in humility as characterized by a willingness to be in subjection (as the household ethic dictates) rather than demanding subjection (cf. Eph 5:21).

1 Clement 21.6–8 serves the theme of harmony expounded in the hymn of *1 Clement* 20. This time in the hortatory first person plural, the same basic order of instruction is followed: to honor leaders and elders (possibly church officers), to teach the younger, to guide women toward the good, to teach the children in the faith. Despite the first-person address, the absence of instructions to the husbands or fathers suggests the main addressee is the male leader of the household.

Differences between the NT household codes and those in *1 Clement* are evident and probably indicate changed circumstances and outlook. Instructions concerning children emphasize teaching rather than obedience to parents, perhaps because of the concern to safeguard the faith for succeeding generations. Slaves and masters are not addressed. In addition to addressing instructions to the male head of the house, the emphasis on the behavior of wives (in terms of obedience, purity and silence without reference to status in marriage or in Christ; cf. Eph 5:22–33; 1 Pet 3:1–7) reveals Clement’s preference for the accepted order of things in his Roman setting. The household codes outline the divine pattern for unity and stability (1 Clem. 1.3; 20.11; 21.4). But the divine pattern, as Clement interprets it for household ethics, seems completely uncritical of Roman patriarchal assumptions (see Stambaugh and Balch, Bowe, Jeffers).

3.2.2. Ignatius and Polycarp. In the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp main concerns include false teachers (Ign. *Pol.* 3.1; Ign. *Eph.* 6.2; Ign. *Trall.* 6.1; Ign. *Magn.* 8.1; Ign. *Smyrn.* 6.2; Pol. *Phil.* 7), and the answer to their threat comes in maintaining unity in the church and ecclesiastical (episcopal) order (Ign. *Pol.* 1.2; 6.1; Pol. *Phil.* 5.3). To aid the church in achieving this unity Ignatius in his *Letter to Polycarp* 4.1—5.2 introduces a church code (somewhat closer in tone and content to the NT codes than *1 Clement*) that combines instructions concerning treatment of widows and slaves and reciprocal instructions to wives and husbands with instructions to Polycarp himself concerning ministry. Although the immediate application of the code is to an internal matter, we should be aware of Ignatius’s general positive attitude toward unbelievers and desire for their repentance that underlie his instructions to live in harmony with the world (Ign. *Eph.* 10.1–3). Thus the pattern of life described in the household or church code might be applied to internal instability, but it is not without outward effect. Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* 4.2—6.1 instructs the church similarly, according to household groups and church-specific groups—wives, widows, deacons, young men, young women, elders—blending them much as Titus 2:1–10 does. Although he does not elaborate, the order of life Polycarp encourages is introduced as that which pleases the Lord (Pol. *Phil.* 5.2; 6.1; 4.1).

3.2.3. The *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. The *Didache* is partly (*Did.* 1.1—6.2) a catechetical work designed to prepare new believers for baptism (*Did.* 7.1) and partly a text on church order (*Did.* 6.3—16.8). The much different purpose of the *Epistle of Barnabas* is to demonstrate that Christians are the genuine children (*see* Son) of God. *Didache* 4.9–11 instructs parents to discipline their children, masters to treat their slaves reasonably and slaves to be subject to their masters. The reciprocity, the theme of submission and the motivation (the impartiality of God, who is over both master and slave) suggest a link with the tradition as used in Colossians and Ephesians. Probably the writer has incorporated material from the Pauline letters (the possibility that the writer had access to an earlier teaching source, which Colossians and Ephesians also knew, is explored by Munro). *Barnabas* 19.5, 7 uses the same material (the matter of source is unclear; there may have been a common source accessible to each writer)

Ign. *Eph.* Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians*

Ign. *Trall.* Ignatius *Letter to the Trallians*

Ign. *Magn.* Ignatius *Letter to the Magnesians*

Ign. *Smyrn.* Ignatius *Letter to the Smyrneans*

with slight alterations, reversing the order of instructions to slaves first, then masters. In each case the household code material has been incorporated into the collection of traditions used to explain the Two Ways teaching (of “life and death,” *Did.* 1.1; of “light and darkness,” Barn. 18.1). The household and community relationship ethics implied by these sections are not applied in any discernible way to immediate situations. The material is simply included as orthodox.

4. Conclusions.

The household codes of both the NT and the apostolic fathers reflect an awareness of the expectations of the Greco-Roman environment of the church. However, they also reveal some subtle differences in the way the church at different times and in different situations sought to interact with secular society. NT usage of the device demonstrates sensitivity to secular values and in critically adjusting certain features (emphasizing justice and fairness and providing a theological rationale) aimed to direct Christians to a constructive middle ground, avoiding either the simple return to patriarchy or emancipation. 1 Peter utilizes the household code with Christian engagement in the social life of the world in mind (cf. Tit 2–3), and it is significant that this engagement is necessitated by the church’s identity and mission as aliens and foreigners who are God’s elect.

In the writings of the apostolic fathers, household codes are used—without evidence of the critical reflection upon the church’s responsibility in the world seen in 1 Peter—to preserve the status quo. The shape of the two codes in *1 Clement* suggests a preference for patriarchy on the Roman model; Schüssler Fiorenza’s interpretation may fit this later situation. The *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas* have employed another recension of the household code but in any case offer its teaching as traditional without reflecting on its implications. Ignatius and Polycarp are more in touch with NT household codes but are mainly preoccupied with restoring church stability and unity. For this the codes provide a structure for respectable behavior in relationships that complement the writers’ understanding of ecclesiastical authority. Although Ignatius’s outlook on the church in the world may be an exception, the household codes in the late first- and second-century church seem to function less to keep the church on the cutting edge of eschatological tension with contemporary society and more to preserve a status quo.

See also House, Spiritual House; Households, Family; Slave, Slavery; Social Setting of Early Non-Pauline Christianity; Woman and Man.

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Barn. *Epistle of Barnabas*

EB Études bibliques

ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. D. N. Freedman

SBLMS Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series

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FRLANT Forschungen zur Religion und Literaturedes Alten und Neuen Testaments

3d third edition

HNT Handbuch zum Neuen Testament

ed. edition; editor(s), edited by

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2d second edition

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SNTSMS Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series

QD Quaestiones Disputatae

Herm Hermeneia

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