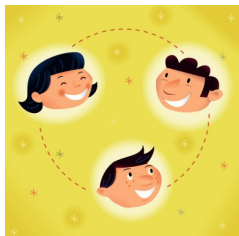


Similar constraints exist for Christians in many places today. Many women yearn for a Christian community which might provide a place of freedom from burdensome hierarchies, offering an affirming and egalitarian context for relationships to be enjoyed. When love and mutual submission is the mark of the community in such contexts (Phil. 2, Eph 5), Christian wives may win public approval for the Gospel and, if God so ordains, even “sanctify” their husbands according to the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians ch. 7.

Paul’s ethics in this letter are from one point of view, recklessly libertine- let no-one’s views take you captive except those of Jesus Christ. Everything that Jesus would be pleased with is permissible. On the other hand, Paul’s ethics seem seriously servile. We are to exercise our freedom in such a way as to act and speak with an overriding principle of “the first shall be last”, “you shall not lord it over them”, and “submit to one another”.



Paul also instructs the Christians regarding **Children in Households**. Children in such times were often more important for the potential of carrying on the family line than for their own worth. In a Jewish household in Colosse children may have been cared for well. However, in most communities there was no room for women, children, or slaves to speak unless spoken to in public life. “Children” was a term for any unmarried member of the household and may also refer to adolescents or adult. The authority of the parent, particularly the male, was the given context at Colosse. Respect and love befitting a Christian (see chapter 3:1-17) was Paul’s instruction to children. Restraint



The hope is that such actions and attitudes will honour Christ and perhaps transform the relationships.

Paul also addresses the third major element of societal relationships; those of the **marketplace**. The rights and conditions of slaves in the 1st Century are well documented. The letter to Philemon reveals much of Paul’s ethics in the constraints of government laws and social norms of the day. Paul did not order Philemon to release his slave when both slave and master became Christians. This does not suggest Paul honoured slavery as godly. More likely, once again, that insisting on emancipation immediately might have destabilized society and could have brought disrepute to the Gospel. Rather, (see Philemon 12-18) Paul appeals for grace and urges Philemon to consider the pattern Paul himself has taken in giving Onesimus a high status as his “son”. Paul offers to pay any of Onesimus’ debts and to ensure that there was no injustice associated with the slave. Here is an example of the submissive way described in more detail in Ephesians chapters 4 & 5, Colossians ch. 3, and Philippians ch. 2. It is the pattern by which Jesus Christ made his mark as the servant of God (Mark 10:45).



# The letter to the Colossians



The Core of Christianity

Study No.5

## New Life in the New Community Col. 3:18-4:1

Having put his arguments for building one’s life on the firm foundation of Christ through faith and finding freedom therein, the Apostle Paul now instructs the early church on how its freedom should be exercised in the real world.



### WIVES TOWARD HUSBANDS (18)

1. Submit to your own husbands
2. As is fitting in the Lord

### HUSBANDS TOWARDS WIVES (19)

1. Love your wives
2. Do not be bitter toward them

### CHILDREN TOWARD PARENTS (20)

1. Obey your parents in all things
2. This is well pleasing to the Lord

### FATHERS TOWARD CHILDREN (21)

1. Do not provoke your children
2. Or they may become discouraged

### SERVANTS TOWARD MASTERS (22-25)

1. Obey your earthly masters in all things (22)
  - a. Not with eye-service, seeking only to please men
  - b. But with sincerity of heart, fearing God
2. Do your work heartily (23-24)
  - a. As to the Lord and not to men (23)
  - b. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance (24)
3. The one who does wrong... (25)
  - a. Will be repaid for the wrong done
  - b. There will be no partiality

### MASTERS TOWARD SERVANTS (4:1)

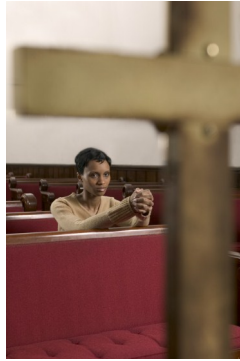
1. Give your servants what is just and fair
2. Knowing that you also have a Master in heaven

## What Paul's teaching mean for today?

### **The Church (Colossians 3:1-17)**

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Colossians 3:17

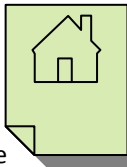
The corporate life of a Christian community is the best environment to see the "new self" / "new man" / "new Adam" developing and growing. Christ is Lord of the whole of creation. It follows that every aspect of our lives is in Jesus' interest and should come under his rule. So, vs. 17 speaks of "whatever you do" and verse 18 and following goes on to apply this teaching about Christ to different environments of daily living and relationships- not just religious practices. "In the name of Christ" refers to acting in a manner that represents the character and purpose of Jesus Christ. **The New Testament does not provide a detailed code of conduct and rights for Christians.** Codes or rules for Paul are suited to that period of immaturity when the Jews were under the Law of God. He pictures



them children under guardians. But children who have come of age know their parent's will without having to consult a long list of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Galatians 3:23-4:7 teaches this. Rather, the New Testament provides the framework and principles, and the Holy Spirit and our corporate wisdom helps us to face any situation or relationship that may arise. Special regulations can often be got around and avoided or obscured. An honest and humble approach to dilemmas and issues of life is called for. As we make Christ's words central to an understanding of God's will we better represent our future dwelling where we will know God's will and dwell with Him.

### **The World (Colossians 3:18-4:1)**

**The household in Colossae** would, like most in the Roman Empire at the time, have been structured by a common code of conduct. It may have been a broad group of people including slaves, relatives, and children. The household was, like many societies, the stabilising and basic unit of society. A head of the household might be a woman, like Lydia of Philippi, Chloe of Corinth, or Nympha of the Lycus Valley (Col. 4:15). Usually, however, it was to care for and have authority over those who dwelt in that household. When the head of a household was converted to Christianity there is biblical evidence to show whole households being baptised and adhering to the new faith. Households were also where the early church began to meet (a church at "so and so's" house). Roman codes of conduct were very clear as to the legal rights of women (or lack of them) and of men. Equally the behaviour of children and parents, slaves and masters (often all under the same roof) were governed by fairly common rules of society.



The Christian Church was born in such an environment. New life in Christ had to be

practiced in a real world setting. We would not suggest that the rules of the typical family/ household in the 1st Century Lycus Valley fit hand in glove with the new freedoms God promised in Christ. Nevertheless, God's new way of living out loving relationships unfolded in such a setting. In Christian assemblies of the early churches, a woman could be spoken of as having a new status and freedom in the Gospel (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). Navigating this new status in the marketplace and the household no doubt became tricky. Breaking societal conventions may have easily brought into disrepute the name of Christ (e.g. Col. 4:5,6).

Do Paul's instructions apply to marriage today? To suggest that Paul would spend the first half of this letter denouncing codes of conduct and rules and regulations and then turn to impose a new set upon wives and husbands seems contradictory. Some commentators suggest Paul's commands here are universal even for today. However, there is no evidence here that Paul argues for subordination of women due to any inferiority or because of a supposed order in creation. In the verses that follow, one could not argue that the command to slaves to act toward masters as is "fitting in the Lord" justifies slavery as a God-ordained hierarchy. Roman codes of conduct for marriage are not God-ordained hierarchies for us to emulate; even if we did so with humility and love. The subordination of wives to husbands seems to fit better in Biblical theology as a consequence of the fall (see Genesis ch. 3). Wouldn't the freedom Paul proclaims through the Gospel of Christ set a new direction for relationships between men and women? (Galatians 3:28 proclaims "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"). What about the new self, the new community, in view in this letter? These particular directions are to married people, perhaps not to all men and women. Paul's motive to specify submission for the wives and not "love" as is the command to the husbands may have been pragmatic. Furthermore, the focus is on humility and love in both cases. Each partner is called to revolutionise their existing relationships by honouring Jesus as their primary reason for doing anything. We also should not assume that wives being addressed by Paul's letter had their husbands beside them. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 gives us a clue that becoming a Christian in these times may have caused great tensions and even divorce or separation. The emphasis seems to be on acting in a humble and servant-like manner as is fitting for a follower of Jesus, on matter what the cost.

**Lets picture a household** in the 1st century Lycus Valley in Phrygia where financial decisions had to be made. The regular pattern of Graeco/Roman living would suppose that the head of the house might have the right to decide financial matters. In the light of Paul's teaching...

**Example 1:** Christian wife, non-Christian husband. Wife should submit to the household's view in so much as is "fitting in the Lord"

**Example 2:** Christian husband, non-Christian wife. Husband should take care of and charge of his household and decide on financial matters in a manner that expresses love and exhibits the fruit of the spirit, support for the church's mission, etc.

**Model 3:** Christian couple. A new dynamic transforming the previous hierarchy may emerge as it is learned in the community of the Church. The wife could be consulted on all matters and be a partner in decisions. In public, some care to act in appropriate accord with society may have been wise under the circumstances of being a marginalised sect.

