

Service, sacrifice and reciprocity at the core of relationships in the household of God

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Over the last four weeks we have been considering some of the broad themes in the letter to the Ephesians.¹

In the first two introductory talks Stevie focussed upon the radical *inclusiveness* of the church, as those who are called to *unity in Christ* regardless of their background. We heard that the church is the place where the “walls that divide” are broken down and hostility is done away with.

All this extends from the wonderful Grace of God found in Jesus.² “For Christ is our peace”, writes Paul, through his blood “he has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create *in himself* one new humanity... for through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father”.³

Paul describes this new humanity as ‘the *household* of God’,⁴ and again as, “a holy *temple* in the Lord; in whom you are also built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God”.⁵

This understanding of a new humanity, “rich in its variety”⁶ yet connected to each other through the indwelling Spirit of their Saviour, stood in stark contrast to ideas of religion at the time as legitimization of the existing social order, or of the state and its power. In such an environment the church stands as a testimony to the “rulers and powers”

¹ This sermon leaves aside textual issues surrounding this letter. Here we assume Paul wrote, or gave authority to be written, a general letter to the churches in the Ephesus region. His intention is to encourage them on in their life in Christ.

² Eph.4:7; 3:2.

³ Eph.2:13-18.

⁴ Eph.2:19.

⁵ Eph.2:21-22.

⁶ Eph.3:10; Rev.7:9-10.

of the Wisdom of God,⁷ achieved not through force or coercion but through *service* and *sacrifice*.

I want to come back to this in a moment when considering what Paul has to say about the family as the building block of this alternative household – this household of God. But first we need to recall Richard’s point last week as he spoke about what life in such a household might be like.

In considering what Paul has to say regarding “how then do we live”, Richard emphasised Paul’s teaching that Christian ethics is not a list of rules, or a matter of do’s and don’ts, rather it is always a call to live according to who we *really* are in Christ. This is a crucial point when thinking about Christian ethics. Ethics is not about trying to keep the rules. It is about behaving according to who we have become through our *baptism into Jesus*.

“I therefore”, writes Paul in Ephesians chapter 4, “beg you to *lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called*, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope in your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all and in all”⁸

Again, Paul returns to the language of service and sacrifice when he concludes this section of his letter: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and *gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*”.⁹

So then, how we live, how we relate to each other is grounded in who we are *in Christ*.¹⁰ This is why there is no place for any behaviour that would negate this identity – fornication, greed, slander, profanity and so on.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eph.4:1-4.

⁹ Eph.5:1-2.

¹⁰ Ehp.3:17.

With this in mind Paul then turns to the more specific area of family life within the household of God. What does such an ethic look like lived out in the everyday of family life?

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In the section that follows we have the origin of much bad press that surrounds Christianity in modern society, where Paul in particular is seen as the father of misogyny, the patriarch of all disciplinarian fathers and the apologist of oppression.

What was Paul trying to say here? How does this part of his letter fit with what he has just been saying?

Paul writes as a Jew to a predominantly Jewish church living in a Hellenised culture in the commercial centre for the eastern Roman empire. In this he describes a family not very different from what one would have found throughout the Jewish diaspora. This may not be a typical family, clearly it is idealised as having enough wealth to include slaves.

Yet it is an archetypal family, if you like, and the relationships he touches upon, man and woman, children and parents, slaves and masters, would have been very familiar to those for whom he wrote. Paul is not describing a family which from outward appearances or structure was radically different from Jewish families of the time, or for that matter, non-Jewish families either.

The context of both Jewish and Greek culture is of importance here. Children and women were seen as not fully human in the Jewish world view. They only existed in relation to men. Any “rights” they may have had (if we can talk of “rights” in such a world), also extended from their relation to men. Even Jewish boys only became fully human when they became men at their age of majority.

Moreover, there was a general cultural zeitgeist which extended beyond the particulars of Jewish culture. In regard to relations to marriage, eminent ancient historian Edwin Judge has written of the pervasive influence of Hellenism:

“...many of the attitudes to marriage which are regarded nowadays as the regrettable legacy of the past are not Pauline, but have their origins firmly in the doctrines of Greek humanism . I refer to the view held by many of the Greeks that women are by nature inferior to men, that they lack both in intellectual and emotional capacity, that the husband owns the wife in some sense and uses her for the purpose of procreation, and that marriage is to be undertaken as a public duty.”¹¹

How can Judge say this in justification of Paul, given the plain meaning of the text we have heard today regarding marriage?

The key lies in Paul’s opening statement to his teaching:

“Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.”¹²

Paul is taking the same principles of *sacrifice* and *service* that are found in Christ and saying these principles are to be let lose in the context of the Christian family – be it Jewish or Greek in origin. When this is done transformation ensues.

Paul has no ideology or humanist agenda here, no law that he seeks to impose or rules around how Christian families *have* to function. He is not proposing a restructuring of family relationships nor a critique of marriage and family in the first century. Egalitarianism, or “equality” as we would understand it, is not his concern. His concern, as he has argued previously, is that women and men will grow into *maturity* in Christ.¹³

In so doing, however, “the walls that divide”¹⁴ *will* be broken down and people *will* be set free to become who they are created to be.¹⁵ Unity and peace between men and women does not come through application of

¹¹ Edwin Judge, *St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society*, in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century, Pivotal Essays by E.A. Judge*, ed., David M Scholer, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 2008. P.113.

¹² Eph.5:21.

¹³ Eph.4:13. See also Col. 1:28.

¹⁴ Eph. 2:14.

¹⁵ Eph.2:14. See also Gal.5:1.

democracy or rigid egalitarianism. Rather, unity “springs from the full surrender that each makes to the other in their different ways”.¹⁶

So Paul takes full account of the social conventions of his time but rather than tackling these specifically by prescribing a new law or set of rules, a new kind of Pharisaism, as it were, he works the yeast of the Gospel into existing institutions and the result is a different kind of bread. In so doing, he is setting in train something far more subversive than prescribing remedies that will themselves date over time and place.

“Paul is not interested in mere social reform or replacing one order with another. Nor [on the other hand], does he ignore society or deny its reality”.¹⁷ Rather, by calling all, whatever their position, to surrender their own “rights” to the good of the other, something more fundamental, more transformative, more lasting is achieved.

By pointing back both to the creation order (albeit within a very Jewish framework¹⁸) and linking this to the work of Christ,¹⁹ he is asserting men and women have *mutual* obligations of service and sacrifice toward each other because this is the way it is, this is the way we are created to be, and this is who we are in Christ.

Moreover, he is saying women are people too and when both they and men live out their calling of love and respect toward each other, marriage and family life is redeemed since it finds its rightful order in Christ – an order based upon *reciprocity* not domination.²⁰

The same goes for relations between children and parents, slaves and masters, as between men and women. Children have obligations according to the law – “honour your father and mother, so that it may be well with you”.²¹ *But*, insists Paul, as part of *God’s* household, children

¹⁶ Judge. P.115.

¹⁷ Judge. P.115.

¹⁸ Eph.5:31-32.

¹⁹ Eph.5:24-25.

²⁰ Eph.5:21.

²¹ Eph,6:2-3.

are people, they have existence in Christ and so are to be treated with respect and not “provoked”.²²

Similarly, slaves are not to see their new found liberty in Christ as a licence for anarchy, just as masters are to see themselves as “having the same master in heaven”, and so “will receive the same again from the Lord, whether slave or free”.²³

This was radical stuff indeed, as Philemon was later to discover when Paul wrote to him to treat his run-away slave Onesimus, not as a possession returned to him, but as a brother in Christ.²⁴

Yet, again, even in this case, Paul didn’t lay down a rule as to how slaves in general were to be treated or that slavery should be abolished. Rather he let loose an *irresistible dynamic* that would topple *all* forms of oppression, even the domination of empire of which slavery was an integral part.

This yeast worked its work even when in centuries to come oppressors, through their justification of slavery as ordained of God in scripture, sought to hijack for their own ends this very principle Paul is here enunciating.

As the American civil war and the South African apartheid era bear witness, it is not just a misreading of this text but dangerous to treat it as a kind of transcultural law that applies “just so” in all contexts at all times. Their mistake, as well might be ours, was to take a surface reading of Paul’s argument in a way that served their own ends.

Be this as it may, it remains that Paul is here calling us to an ethic, both within and beyond the household of God, that exactly the opposite.

This is perhaps best summarised in the words of Edwin Judge who, typically, gathers together these many threads in Paul’s letter so well:

²² Eph.6:4.

²³ Eph.6:8.

²⁴ Phil.15-16.

“The mystery of sacrifice and service, therefore, which Paul perceived in the cross, leads him to his fundamental position on all questions of social relations... which is the complete surrender of one’s own interest for the sake of the other. There could be no more radical approach to the problems of status and order in society than this”.²⁵

²⁵ Judge. P.115.