Winter School 2015, Stellenbosch University, Session P2

Changing the world through reimagining household ethos in view of Eph 5:21-33?

1. **Household as primary context for moral formation**

* Through the ages, households or families served as a primary space for the affirmation and development of human relations and moral conduct
* Ancient household formed a core element of society where relationships of power, protection, submission, honour and duty were to be properly shaped if a city was to flourish morally
* Complex history of interpretation of NT household codes: hierarchical language still seems to foster wife (and slave) abuse and low self esteem in women, particularly in Africa

1. **Household codes as embodiment of ancient household ethos**

* Ancient domestic codes and *oikos*/household management (discourse) since Aristotle
* Structure and purpose of ancient households essentially patriarchal, i.e. hierarchical, in nature
* Introduction of patriarchy into NT via ancient household codes (Schüssler Fiorenza)

1. **Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 in its socio-cultural and -rhetorical context**

* Literary “thrust” of Ephesians: transformative power of *in Christ* status and relationships
* Eph household code (re)framed by 5:21 and 6:9? – “Submit to one another *out of reverence for Christ … There is no favouritism with him*”
* Yet, the hierarchical language of the code creates a certain tension in the letter
* Implied rhetorical function/effect of Eph household code?

1. **Thus, was Eph 5:21-33 supposed to change the 1st century Greco-Roman world?**

I briefly explore six potentially transformative elements:

* Inclusive *God images* represent a primary principle for a life-sustaining rereading of the code
* The *direct address* to members of all social classes seems to be unusual in terms of ancient household ethos
* The focus on *mutual submission* is noteworthy, yet the hierarchical language poses a lasting challenge to later audiences
* *Subjection* of (Christian) wives to (Christian) husbands *in everything*? Limitations?
* The *husband’s self-emptying* in terms of voluntary servanthood (cf Phil 2:5-8). Limitations?
* *Organic oneness and interdependence* of husband as “head” and wife as “body”

1. **Conclusion**

Reimagining the implied rhetorical effect of the Ephesians household code today would require careful *discernment* and bold hermeneutical choices. In my view, the text primarily challenges us to use its explicit theological thrust as a rhetorical *lens* to read against its patriarchal grain and history of reception. In continuation with the dynamic process of reinterpretation represented by it, Eph 5:21–33 invites and stimulates an ongoing, faithful struggle to interpret God’s radical presence in the world. Anything less would confine the God of Jesus Christ to the socio-cultural boundaries of an ancient canonised text in ways contradictory to its own thrust.

Ultimately, it is the choice of Christian families to give *priority* to the imaginative possibi­lities of God’s liberating, healing love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. As such, the Eph code serves as an ongoing invitation (cf Winter School theme) to critique and resist any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire.

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