

Colossians 3:16-4:1
“Relating to Others in Christ”

Introduction:

Determining the connection between this passage and the previous one is difficult. The main reason for this is the absence of a conjunction at the beginning of verse sixteen. It may be that the thread of connection is the idea of thankfulness, since Paul ended the previous section with the call to be thankful (vs.15), continued that idea in verse sixteen with the reference to singing with thankfulness, and concludes the theme in verse seventeen with an admonition to give thanks to God. The absence of a conjunction may also imply that there is a close connection between the two main imperatives “*put on*” and “*take off*”, which governed the previous sections and the call in this passage to let the word of Christ dwell richly within. This would mean that the admonition to let the word of Christ dwell in them was not merely an additional injunction, it was foundational to the process of the believer’s transformation into the likeness of Christ.

I. Relating to Those Within the Fellowship: (3:16-17)

In the first portion of verse sixteen we read, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you*” (vs.16a). In the Greek text, the opening words are “*the word of Christ*”. This expression creates a certain ambiguity for the reader. The Greek title “*Christ*” is a genitive noun. This construction could either represent a subjective genitive, meaning Paul was referring to the word that came from Christ, or it could be an objective genitive referring to a word about Christ. Either idea could be true. But, based on the pattern we see in Paul’s use of similar genitive expressions, it is far more likely that Paul was talking about a word about Christ rather words that came from Him. And comparing this with what Paul had written earlier in the letter, it is likely that this was another reference to the Gospel but was expressed this way to maintain Paul’s focus on how believers are to center everything in Christ. Paul had written a significant amount in previous chapters about the centrality and significance of Christ to the Gospel.

The main Greek verb in this clause is translated as “*let...dwell*”. The verb is in the present tense and is in the form of an imperative. Therefore, this characterizes what Paul wrote here as something he was urging his readers to do. The verb itself means to live in a place, and the verb relates to the Word of Christ. Therefore, the Colossians were to ensure that the content of the Gospel thoroughly penetrated them. The sphere in which the Gospel was to dwell was “*in you*”. The pronoun is plural and could mean either that the Gospel was to dwell in each of them individually, or that it was to dwell in them all corporately. Both ideas are true, the question is which of these two ideas was Paul conveying here? The words translated above as “*dwell in you*” could also be translated “*dwell in each of you*”. Some interpreters have argued that this individualized application is the best understanding, based on what Paul wrote in verse fifteen where he made reference to peace ruling in individual hearts. However, not only was the admonition in verse fifteen focused on creating harmony within the overall fellowship, what Paul wrote

in the rest of this verse was focused on the worship of the collective body. Therefore, it is more likely that Paul was urging the community as a whole to put the message about Christ at the center of its corporate experience. Of course, for the word of Christ to truly dwell in the congregation as a whole, it would have to also dwell in the hearts of each individual. This metaphor of the word of Christ taking up residence within the community of believers reinforces the importance of deeply meditating upon the Gospel. Other portions of Scripture teach us that the Word of God will only have its proper place among us when we: heed what it says (Matt.13:9), interpret it correctly (II Tim.2:15), hide it in our hearts (Ps.119:11), and hold it forth for what it is, the word of life (2:16).

Then Paul wrote that the indwelling of the Gospel within the saints at Colossae was to take place “*richly in all wisdom*” (vs.16b). The adverb “*richly*” conveys the idea of abundance or extravagance, and thus this adverb adds the nuance that the indwelling of the Gospel should not be a superficial or passing thing, it should involve a deep and penetrating contemplation upon the Gospel that enables it to have transforming power in the life of the community. The Greek word translated as “*richly*” occurs in only three other places in New Testament (I Tim.6:17; Tit.3:6; II Pet.1:11), and in all of these the term describes the richness of God’s provision for human beings, and it has the same meaning here. This admonition to “*let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly*” touches on the same idea as Paul’s admonition to being filled with the Spirit (Eph.5:18). If the Word of God abundantly dwells within a group of believers, it does so by the power of God’s Spirit and is used by Him as the content and standard by which He transforms the community of believers so that more and more they reflect the image of Christ and God.

The indwelling of the content of the Gospel is also to be “*in all wisdom*”. The application of wisdom is a significant theme in this letter. Throughout the letter, wisdom is always seen as an important element in one’s spiritual life and is ultimately related to reflecting the mind of God. If wisdom or tact is absent in how believers relate to each other, no matter how well intentioned, each one’s actions could provoke negative rather than positive responses from one another.

As Paul continued his flow of thought he wrote, “*teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*” (vs.16c). The next portion of the verse is governed by three participles. The following chart shows the different ways that translators have understood the relationship that exists between these participles and their relationship to the various modifying phrases in the verse:

TNIV	ESV	HCSB
As you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts	Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in our hearts to God	Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom; and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God

Of these three, the TNIV correctly captures the basic structure of the verse. Paul was instructing the Colossian saints to teach and admonish each other by means of various kinds of songs, and he wanted them to do this singing to God with hearts full of gratitude. The words “*teaching and admonishing*” are adverbial participles that explain the manner (or possibly the instrumentality) of how the word of Christ was to dwell within them. The term translated as “*teaching*” stressed the idea of giving informational instruction (relating to the content that one is to believe), while the term translated as “*admonishing*” stressed the idea of giving warnings and correction (focused on proper attitudes and behavior). Paul was not saying that the only way that teaching and admonishing was to be done in the church was through singing, rather he said it should be done through singing as well as preaching and discipling. Though some may regard worship in song as primarily a personal emotional experience, Paul was instructing the Colossians that congregational singing, as with all the ways that we communicate with each other, should be adapted to instructive edification. Here Paul highlighted the importance of the lyrics that are sung in corporate worship as part of the way the truth of Scripture is to be assimilated into one’s mind and life. According to what the Scriptures teach in general, congregational singing must accomplish three things above all else, it must enable believers to express real devotion and adoration from the heart, it must do so in harmony with Biblical truth, and it must also do this in a way that is worthy before our Savior and God.

The next question is how are we to interpret Paul’s threefold description of worship singing in this verse? Etymologically, the word “*psalms*” was often used of OT psalms and carried the idea of a song with musical accompaniment. The word “*hymns*” referred to a song sung in praise to God, while the term “*songs*” was a general word for any sort of song. Many scholars argue that no rigid distinctions should be made between these various classifications of songs. Rather, they suggest that Paul was simply emphasizing the rich variety that existed in Christian singing. Essentially the three terms heighten the idea of joyousness called for in the passage. But if these words refer to essentially the same thing, then it would truthfully seem to serve no purpose to use these three different designations. It is far more likely that Paul had a rhetorical intent in using these various terms. He used them to refer to a wide variety of musical styles and traditions reflecting the differing cultural backgrounds that existed within the congregation, and thus the terms themselves probably retained their traditional distinctions, so that in using these terms Paul could refer to different musical forms that would have been familiar to his readers. The most general designation of the three is “*spiritual songs*”. The Greek word translated as “*spiritual*” conveys the idea of something that is prompted by or characterized by the working of the Spirit of God.

The final clause is rendered in the NKJV as “*singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*” (vs.16d), however, in the NAS, the same clause is rendered as “*singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God*”. The key difference is the translation of the Greek word “*charis*”. This word is often translated as “*grace*” in the New Testament, referring to God’s unmerited favor. However, the majority of Greek

scholars are convinced that in this context, the word is best translated as “*gratitude*” or “*thanksgiving*”. This term (rather than the more common Greek term for thanksgiving) may have been chosen to reflect the idea that true gratitude comes as a response to what God freely gives. The Greek participle translated as “*singing*” is parallel with the previous two participles “*teaching*” and “*admonishing*”. Syntactically this participle provides an additional aspect of the role of congregational singing in worship, that it is to fill one’s heart with praise and thanksgiving to God. The phrase “*in your hearts*” modifies the phrase “*with gratitude*”, expressing the sphere in which the gratitude should dwell. In the cultures of the first century Mediterranean world the heart represented the real inner person (of course, singing from the heart would naturally include, in this public setting, the audible use of one’s voice). The emphasis in this last clause is how public worship should be an opportunity for the community to express their thankful hearts with one another to God for His great blessings.

Next, summarizing the ethical instruction that he had given up to this point, Paul wrote, “*And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (vs.17ab). The reference to “*whatever you do*” is very general. It was expressed in contrast to the many specific rules and regulations which the false teachers were trying to impose upon the Colossians. Paul’s purpose in this verse was to simply enunciate a comprehensive principle these believers could use to guide their behavior and choices. This verse was meant as an interpretive summary of all that was written in verses twelve through sixteen. The terms “*word*” and “*deed*” were meant as an all-encompassing pair, as a general reference to anything these saints might do. The combination of these terms was a common way of referring to the totality of one’s interaction with the world around them. This combination of terms paralleled both Rabbinic concerns about behavior matching one’s confession, and Paul’s concern that believers show a consistent commitment to Christ. A truly Christian commitment will always govern whatever the believer says or does.

With the addition of the words “*do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*”, Paul was saying that there was unifying principle behind all that a believer should do in word and deed, something that should govern what they choose to say or do in whatever circumstances that one finds oneself in. That unifying principle is that the believer should only say or do what is consistent with one’s identity in Christ. This principle is very similar in nature to the principle that Paul gave to the saints in Corinth:

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
I Corinthians 10:31

Some interpreters have argued that this admonition is not a reference to individual daily behavior, but only to congregational worship. However, given the ongoing flow of thought throughout the chapter, it is better to conclude that though how one acts in worship is included, this principle was meant to have a universal application to everything in a believer’s life.

In writing this admonition, Paul was not simply giving the saints some spiritual jargon with which to label what they said or did, rather he was exhorting them to recognize the lordship of Christ in all things, at all times, and in every situation. Nothing was to escape the lordship of Jesus Christ, rather everything in their lives was to be in submission to the absolute authority of Jesus Christ. Another principle here is that living the entirety of one's life under the lordship of Jesus Christ obviates the necessity for rules. For external rules, even when they're good, are not adequate for every situation. However, having the principle that everything in one's life is to be lived in a way that is consistent with our submission to Christ provides a sufficient guide for every situation we will encounter. The Christian, in any age, when confronted by a moral issue, may not find any explicit instruction in the New Testament concerning what one is to do in that situation. Therefore, the idea here is that one is to ask oneself what would be the Christian thing to do in that situation? Can a particular thing be done without compromising one's allegiance to Christ? Can I do a particular thing in the name of Christ without bringing shame upon His reputation? If one asks these things in sincerity, it should guide a person through even the most perplexing situations.

Next, Paul wrote that there is an additional trait that should characterize the Christian as they live out their lives in the name of Christ, and that trait is, "*giving thanks to God the Father through Him*" (vs.17c). This participial clause once again highlights that gratitude is an important component of the Christian life, one that is an important source of the obedience we are called to render to Christ and God. Paul expressed that the believer's gratitude is directed toward the Father, and that this gratitude is channeled through our mediator Jesus Christ (I Tim.2:5). The idea here is not so much presented in the sense of Christ functioning specifically in His capacity as our High Priest, transmitting our thanksgiving to God, for this idea is not prominent in Paul's writing (though it is prominent in the Book of Hebrews). Instead, the idea is simpler here, that in all things, Christ is the conduit by whom we relate to God. But what is the implied reason that Paul provides regarding why we should express gratitude to God? Of course, the general testimony of Scripture is that we are to be grateful for every good thing in our lives. But here the focus was primarily on being grateful that God has delivered His people from darkness and had placed them in the kingdom of His Son (1:12). The emphasis throughout this letter has been on the salvation that God has provided through Christ. In this participial clause, Paul encouraged his readers to let thanksgiving to God pervade every aspect of their lives. This participle is best interpreted as expressing the manner in which an action was to be done, it was not as an independent imperative giving an additional separate exhortation. It conveys the attitude that should characterize how believers are to act as they obediently conform their lives to the ethical instruction that Paul gave in verses five through sixteen.

II. Relating Within Marriage: (3:18-19)

Before examining the following verses, it is helpful to know a little cultural background that helps us to better understand how to interpret the instruction that is contained in Colossians 3:18-4:1. The material in this portion of Paul's letter (as

well as the material found in Ephesians 5:22-6:9) is listed in a way that was common in the Greco-Roman world in the first century. In the culture at large, a collection of instructions like this was intended to provide guidance in regard to the ethical management of one's household (scholars refer to these collectively, as household codes of conduct). According to the cultural norms of the day, a Greco-Roman household included all those who were the responsibility of the head of the house; therefore, for the original readers, it would have been natural to include one's slaves as a part of one's household. The fact that Paul addressed both slaves and masters in this passage indicates that there were both servants and masters among the members of the Christian community at Colossae. The order of the instruction reflects the custom of the day, moving logically from marriage to family to the extended household, movement that was from the most intimate circle outward in couplets of relationships.

One matter over which there is great debate is the question of why Paul chose to give the instructions that he did. The reason for the debate is that some of the things Paul wrote (particularly his exhortations to wives, slaves, and masters) are at odds with the prevailing views of the modern western world. Some scholars find Paul's instruction in these verses so offensive that they have concluded (without any real evidence) that this instruction was not part of what Paul originally wrote but was inserted sometime later to justify a patriarchal perspective as inherently Christian. Others argue that some of Paul's instruction in this passage were deliberate accommodations to the prevailing culture. Meaning that Paul did not believe these things were ethically right, he merely taught these things so as to enable this Christian community to avoid unnecessary conflict with the culture at large. Historically we know that people in the Greco-Roman world were suspicious of new religious movements, particularly ones that expressed revolutionary ideas, such as the equality of all people. Because of this, it is argued by some that Paul and other New Testament writers urged Christians to respect the hierarchal structure of the Greco-Roman household as a means of defending the faith from charges that it was intent on overthrowing existing social structures. Christians from a number of denominational groups (including a substantial number of Evangelicals) believe that this hierarchal pattern stands in some tension with the New Testament teaching about the equality of all people in Christ:

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Galatians 3:27-28

Therefore, it is argued by some that the above exhortations represent a surrender to the cultural values of the day.

However, this position is adopted in the arrogant assumption that our society's contemporary values are beyond critique. The suggestion that Paul modified the truth in order to accommodate the culture is evidently false as Paul (following the example of Christ) asserted many ideas that challenged the cherished beliefs of both

Jews and Gentiles, and they did not compromise that truth even though their confrontation of the culture resulted in arousing violent responses. Additionally, there is a theological reason for rejecting this view. The Scriptures were inspired by God Himself, and God does not bend the truth to pacify rebellious humanity. And though there are places in Scripture where Christians are taught not to create unnecessary conflict with those around us, this is never done in such a way as to distort what is either true or righteous. The source of Paul's instruction in this passage was not the cultural norms of the day; the source was theological revelation from God. Though what Paul taught here might slightly resemble the social structure of Roman households, insofar as men were to assume the leadership role within marriage, there was also the more significant Christological context of what Paul taught here that defined the nature of this role in a way that was significantly different from what was normally practiced by Roman husbands. The role was not rooted in some notion of male superiority as was true in Roman society, rather the role was rooted in God's design in the original creation (Gen.1-2). Paul was not advocating male dominance of the family, but male leadership conditioned by Christian virtues.

Regarding what Paul taught in Galatians 3:27-28, the instruction about the equality of believers in Christ was never meant to eradicate all distinctions between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Paul was specifically instructing the saints in that passage that before God every believer has equal standing, no particular group of Christians are closer to Him than to any other group of Christians. It is likely, that part of the reason for this instruction was that some of the believers in this fellowship apparently misinterpreted the nature of Christian equality, teaching that all distinctions had been done away with in Christ. This then would be another destructive influence that was being exerted by the false teachers. Along with their ascetic tendencies, they were downplaying the importance of the various roles that exist in the family, and therefore, Paul had to re-clarify the roles that are meant to exist in a Christian household. This code is part of the overall ethical instruction in this letter. This instruction makes it clear that the creation of a new humanity in Christ did not mean the erasure of existing social relationships, but the transformation of those relationships as they are lived out under the lordship of Christ.

According to the norms of this era, a man would often hold three different household roles in the family, all of which are included in Paul's household code (husband, father, master). Paul's instruction required certain members of the household (wives, children, slaves) to submit to and obey others. The exhortations reflected the pattern in Roman households, whereby husbands, fathers, and masters exercised authority in the household over their wives, children, and slaves.

The first instruction that Paul gave in this household code was directed to Christian wives, teaching them how they should relate to their husbands, "*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord*" (vs.18). There are a couple of things to observe regarding the Greek term translated as "*wives*". First, in the Greek language at that time there was not a word that specifically referred to

“*wives*”, rather the Greek word for “*women*” was used here (as was the norm at the time) and the context makes it clear that the instruction given here relates specifically to a woman’s role as a wife. In the original Greek text there is no Greek word to support the translation “*your own*”, though this correctly interprets Paul’s intent (demonstrated by the use of the definite article with the word “*husband*”). It is also noteworthy that a Greek word meaning “*one’s own*” was included when Paul wrote the parallel text in Ephesians 5:22. Together these two verses convey that women are not called to submit to any and all men, rather wives are instructed specifically to submit their husbands. The instruction here is quite different from the norms of the ancient world. For the most part, those in the household who held subordinate roles were not addressed at all, rather only those vested with authority were addressed. In the few ancient codes that did address subordinates, it did so with a focus on maintaining order and showing deference to those in authority. In contrast to this, Paul’s instruction was not focused on maintaining order, but on admonishing everyone involved to relate to one another in a beneficial and self-sacrificing way.

Some interpreters have suggested that there were specific situations in the first century that required the subordination of women at that time, but that those situations no longer exist (such as the difference in ages that often existed—wives were often significantly younger than their husbands, differences in formal education, differences in opportunities to gain and hold resources, lack of sources of information in the home, a woman’s lack of social exposure). However, Paul made it clear elsewhere that his view regarding the headship of the husband was based on the pattern of God’s creation (I Tim.2:13) and the judgment imposed on the woman for the part she played in the first sin (Gen.3:16; I Tim.2:14).

It is helpful to understand that the Greek word translated as “*submit*” is in the middle voice, and it was framed as an appeal to a free agent. It was meant to evoke a voluntarily response on the part of the wife to choose to take a place of subordination to her husband (as opposed to simply doing so because she had no other choice). And this instruction relates to a role that God has given to wives, but the instruction in no way implies that wives are in some way inferior to their husbands. Contrary to the claim of Evangelical feminism, this injunction does not in any way diminish the dignity and ontological status of wives. The role of wives in a way parallels the role of Christ. His submission of Himself to the authority of God the Father did not mean that He was in any way inferior to the Father. Paul used this reality to mirror the sort of submission wives were to extend to their husbands (I Cor.11:3).

And there is no getting around the wording of Paul’s instruction. The word Paul chose speaks of yielding to the authority of another, and despite the great discomfort that many have with this instruction, no one as yet has ever produced any examples in ancient Greek literature where the Greek verb Paul used was applied to a relationship between persons, where it did not carry the sense of being under authority.

If Paul's instruction here is to be properly understood, one must recognize that Paul's teaching regarding husbands and wives must be understood against the background of both Jewish and pagan ethics. In neither of these cultures were wives granted any rights at all. Therefore, Paul's unique contribution was not the injunction for wives to submit to husbands, but the qualification he put on this, that this subordination was to take place "*as was fitting in the Lord*". The Greek word translated as "*fitting*" came from a Stoic philosophical background. But the addition of the phrase "*in the Lord*" made the expression thoroughly Christian. This phrase at once would transform the thinking of the Christians of that day, for this phrase invested the wife's position with an adequate safeguard. The Greek word that is translated as "*fitting*", though it is in the imperfect tense, it does not refer to an action exclusively in the past, but to the present. The precise connotation is that it refers to a behavior that has been and continues to be fitting. In the clause "*as is fitting in the Lord*" the use of the introductory "*as*" expresses the manner in which the submission was to be done. The verb itself means to do something that is proper or right. The clause as a whole expresses a limitation upon the exhortation to submit, that it is to be done in a way that is harmonious with being in Christ. Therefore, though a wife is to defer to her husband, she is not to do anything that violates the other teachings of the Scriptures that are applied to God's people. In this instruction Paul did not imply that a wife should give uncompromising obedience to her husband no matter how sinful or destructive his directives may be. Paul never implied that a wife should surrender herself to her husband so completely that she loses her unique identity as an individual member of the body of Christ. Therefore, a wife is not called to submit herself to physical or emotional abuse, nor conclude that she is to have no voice in the affairs of the marriage and the family. Those things could be true in a secular household of the first century, but they were never meant to manifest themselves in a Christian household. As is often the case with Biblical instructions, the exhortation that a wife should submit to her husband is not absolute. A wife is never to submit to her husband if doing so violates her Scripturally informed conscience. In such situations a wife has the right and duty to disobey her husband (Acts 5:29). It is also significant to keep in mind that whereas children (vs.22) and slaves (vs.24) are told to obey parents and masters, the wife is not told to "*obey*" but to "*submit*" to her husband (vs.18), implying a less authoritarian nature to this relationship in contrast to the others. One should also take to heart the cultural reality that submission may take various forms in different societies and different families, without taking away the idea of one party yielding to the will of another.

Next, Paul addressed the heads of the households, and wrote to them saying, "*Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them*" (vs.19). The Greek term translated as "*husbands*" can refer either to a male in contrast to a female, or it can refer to a husband. In this context it is clear that the latter was intended here. Paul gave husbands two commands from the Lord. First, they were to love their wives. The Greek word translated as "*love*" is in the present tense, thus it expresses that the instruction is for husbands to continually love their wives. In

every culture and language “*love*” is a word that can be defined in many varied ways depending upon who it is that is using the word. The verb that Paul used here (which is the word most often used to refer to the love that God expresses, and that Christians should express), was the one used the least in the vernacular of the first century. Apparently, this word was chosen because it had the least baggage, and in the New Testament, the apostles (by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) infused this word with a meaning that reflected God’s definition of love. Therefore, this is not some vague command, that husbands are to love their wives according to their own definition of the word, rather it is a specific command that husbands are to love their wives in a way that mirrors the love of God. This is why in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructed husbands to love their wives in the same way that Christ loves the Church (Eph.5:25). And in that passage, Paul made it explicit that love was not to be thought of as simply emotional affection, but as ongoing concern for the welfare of a wife’s whole person.

One also needs to notice at this juncture that the husband is not instructed to make his wife submit. Therefore, the idea of a husband who rules like a domestic despot is foreign to Paul’s teaching here.

Even among the Greeks, despite the advanced state of their culture, wives, as a rule, were not considered to be the equals or even the companions of their husbands, rather they were seen as inferior by nature. Roman culture also regarded women to be intrinsically inferior to men. And the Jewish perspective on women was greatly influenced by the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo, who was himself influenced by Greek philosophical thought, and he wrote that women were selfish, jealous and hypocritical, and that married men were no longer free but were in a state of slavery. Against these cultural trends, Paul expressed Christian truth that wives were to be cherished and cared for. God designed a wife’s submission to operate within a context of love. In that way she would be protected from the abuse that can come when one is under the authority of another. Because, if a husband truly loves his wife, he will never force her to submit to something humiliating, degrading, or that violates her conscience. And this instruction fits perfectly with the overall ethical instruction in Scripture, which focuses one’s attention away from oneself and instead on others. In the dynamics of Christian relationships, the husband’s loving approach to his wife’s well-being, is intended to make her responsibility of submission easier by removing any concerns she might have about her husband’s intentions toward her. The command that a husband is to love his wife was meant to have a moderating influence on the exercise of a husband’s authority. It is true that the primary responsibility for the final decision with respect to a matter rests with the husband, but the method of reaching that decision leaves ample room for mutual deliberation and gentle persuasion, in the course of which, there will definitely be times when a husband reverses his initial conclusion, and others where he will not. But in the process, a godly husband will be guided by his responsibility to serve the needs and preferences of his wife, over his own.

In the first century, Jew and Gentiles both assumed that the head of a household had the right to yield authority while others were merely to obey them. Though

Paul did not directly challenge this assumption, he did modify how Christians were to view authority. Authority was to be exercised in the context of mutual love and deference, and within the context of their mutual transformation from sinner to saint. Though the household codes of the first century required obedience of wife to husband, there was no parallel in them requiring husbands to love their wives. These codes were normally focused on maintaining effective household management – especially since households were typically viewed as a key building block of society and of the state. Therefore, those ethical codes were predicated on the practical concern for maintaining social order. God’s requirement that husband’s love their wives was predicated on moral and theological principles. Husbands were instructed to love their wives because of the tendency for those in authority to abuse their roles, while wives were told to willingly submit because those under authority tend to chafe in resistance to whatever authority they are under.

The second command that Paul gave to husbands was that they were not to be “*bitter*” toward their wives (vs.19b). The Greek word translated as “*bitter*” is not found anywhere else in Paul’s writings. The term was used in the Book of Revelation (8:11; 10:9-10), but there it was used three times to refer to something that was literally bitter tasting. In general, the verb refers to unresolved anger that is directed toward someone, anger that has been allowed to fester and grow. It is a condition of heart that can result in being harsh, unkind, insensitive, or acting in a severe or abusive manner. This second admonition clarifies what was meant in the first admonition to the husband, precisely by prohibiting attitudes and treatment that represented the polar opposite of love. A Christian husband was not to use his authority over his wife in the same way that those in the world did (to control a wife), but rather to express that authority in a way that was consistent with the character of Christ (focused on her needs and welfare). A husband who truly loves his wife, will put her interests ahead of his own.

III. Relating to Parents and Children: (3:20-21)

Next, Paul addressed the children in the fellowship and wrote, “*Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord*” (vs.20). The very presence of this admonition indicates that Paul addressed children as responsible persons within the congregation who were expected to learn from instruction and understand how to apply it. But the admonition raises an important question. Who did Paul have in mind when he addressed the children in the congregation. The Greek term translated as “*children*” is as imprecise as its English equivalent. There are those who argue that the reference is to children of any age (including those who have reached adulthood). It is suggested that the same is true in the Ten Commandments (Ex.20:12). However, others point to what Paul wrote in the parallel passage in Ephesians and point out that in that passage Paul told fathers to exercise their authority for the purpose of bringing the children up in the training and instruction of the Lord (6:4). It is argued that this particular admonition implies that younger children were in view. However, even though Paul was giving the same basic information to both churches at the same time, it is never wise to let the wording of one book of the Bible to be the sole criterion for interpreting another.

It should only be part of the information we use to draw a conclusion. More important is that the instruction here was intended as a general code meant to regulate behavior among everyone within a given household, so it is more reasonable to assume that it includes adult children living in their parent's household, rather than excluding them. Therefore, a reasonable nuanced application of this instruction would be that as long as children live in their parent's household they would be expected to obey their parents, while adult children who are no longer under the protection and care of their parents, but rather have established their own households should continue to show their parents deference and honor, but obedience would no longer be required. The qualification that the obedience was to be "*in all things*" means that children must not disobey their parents in anything that they are told to do, even if they find the instruction disagreeable or difficult, nor are they to put themselves on equal footing with their parents by arguing or questioning them. However, at the same time it must be recognized that situations of abuse must be seen as exceptions from this general rule, and of course this injunction to obey one's parents in all things does not include a scenario where the parent is commanding the child to disobey the Word of God. In such a situation the Word of God would have to take precedence over the authority of the parent. But even this is to be done in a respectful and loving way, not in arrogant defiance. Jesus anticipated a specific example where children would have to disobey their parents' wishes, in a situation where the child desires to come to Christ in faith and the parents are against it. For Jesus taught that His coming would be characterized by conflicts that divided families (Lk.12:51-53; 14:26).

Although Jewish home life was on a higher level than that of Gentiles, still in Paul's exhortation for children to obey their parents, Paul elevated this instruction even further by adding the instruction that this obedience was to be rendered in order to please the Lord. The phrase "*for this is well pleasing to the Lord*" gives the reason why children should render obedience to their parents. A child's obedience to his or her parents should be motivated by a love for Christ, and a desire to do what pleases Him. That the title "*Lord*" refers to Christ makes the best sense, as He is the one the title refers to throughout the rest of the household code.

The obedience of children to their parents is important to Christ and the Father. This is seen by how the opposite is portrayed elsewhere in Paul's writings. In one place disobedience to parents is described as a characteristic sin of those who rebel against God (Rom.1:30), and in another as a mark of the wickedness of the last days (II Tim.3:2).

Then Paul turned to address the fathers in the fellowship, "*Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged*" (vs.21). The first question in regard to interpreting this verse is, whom was Paul addressing in this reference to "*fathers*". Some argue that this is a reference to the parents generally (both father and mother). It is suggested that the Greek term translated as "*fathers*" refers to both parents, mother and father (Heb.11:23). Though there is some truth to this observation, the reality is that the father would have been the primary referent, as it was the customary understanding of the time that the father had authority over

the family, and the use of this term without qualification would most likely have been interpreted this way by Paul's readers who lived within Roman culture. The specific mention of fathers suggests that the father as head of the household has a special responsibility for training the children. No slight toward the mother was intended, as Paul would surely have recognized her rights and the power of her influence in the home. It is suggested that Paul taught here that discipline in the home was not to be viewed by Christians as a matter of ridged enforcement and the privilege of parental authority, rather the parent and child relationship was to be understood in the context of the family's shared relationship with Jesus Christ. In our age, where parental authority is being continuously challenged, the Christian home should be an example of healthy discipline. Harshness in men was widespread in Paul's day, but he wanted his readers to understand that such harshness should find no place in a Christian household. The Greek word translated as "*provoke*" refers to stirring up something, in the sense of creating irritation. The idea is to avoid arousing a response of resentment or hostility. Paul was exhorting fathers to raise their children in such a way that they did their utmost to avoid provoking a rebellious attitude within their children. The second clause of the verse is a purpose clause that modifies the admonition to the fathers, and it also provides the basis for the admonition. The Greek verb translated as "*discouraged*" refers to a state where one is disheartened to the extent that one loses one's motivation to try or make any effort. Paul was exhorting fathers not to stir up anger within their children, cultivating a contentious spirit that results in disobedience. Paul's concern here was that overly harsh use of parental authority can result in children no longer being open to the moral/spiritual instruction that they need. A good father not only corrects and disciplines his children, he also spends time with them, teaches them, entertains and encourages them, and by his example (in support of his verbal instruction) points them to Christ. Though the rod of correction may at times be necessary, it must be used with discretion, since the proverbs teach that a wise reproof is better than punishment (13:24; 23:13). The fact that Paul gave essentially a double warning about the negative impact that a father's treatment of his children can have may imply that this was a pervasive problem in that culture. A heavy-handed use of authority would not only be counter to the ethical approach to parenting that Paul was teaching here, it would be contrary to the virtues that are meant to define the new self, particularly the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, and patience (3:12-14).

The following parental practices can cause exasperation in the hearts of one's children:

1. Being over-protective through the establishment of too many rules
2. By showing favoritism
3. By depreciating a child's worth (by communicating that they are neither significant nor important)
4. By setting unrealistic expectations and goals
5. By failing to show affection
6. By not providing for a child's needs and reasonable desires

7. By a lack of objective, enforced standards
8. By harsh and constant criticism
9. By excessively harsh discipline

Godly parents must teach and warn, but they must be sure they are communicating what is true from a Biblical point of view, not simply teaching their own ideas and preferences.

IV. Relating to Masters and Slaves: (3:22-4:1)

The instruction in these next few verses was directed specifically to household slaves within a Christian household. However, the instruction here would have been equally applicable to Christian slaves serving a pagan household, or whose duties were not within a household (such as in agriculture). When we read what Paul wrote to slaves and masters, it is helpful to do so recognizing that this instruction is seen as controversial in our modern western context. The question has been raised why Paul did not simply confront the institution of slavery as a sinful societal structure, rather than instruct Christians on how they should behave within that structure? A common question in our time would be, isn't it immoral to own another person?

Christian interpreters have given a variety of different answers to those questions. Some have argued that the New Testament does not, in fact, oppose all forms of slavery. According to this view, slavery is not inherently evil, rather the evil was in how people practiced slavery, that they treated their slaves harshly and abused them. Others have argued that the New Testament authors themselves had not yet worked out the full implications of their theology on this matter. In other words, they were so profoundly influenced by their cultural environment that they had not yet come to understand that slavery itself was morally evil. Those who hold this latter view would argue that because of this, the instruction that Paul gives in this passage must be relativized in some way. They further argue that the implication of the general principles of morality taught in the New Testament clearly require the conclusion that all forms of slavery are immoral. The first view assumes that since the Bible does not condemn the institution of slavery it must then condone it. The second view assumes that our modern sensibilities should sit in judgment over Biblical teachings, for anything the Bible teaches that is contrary to our modern view of things must be wrong. These represent the two extreme points of view; many other answers lie somewhere between them. However, the best answer that Christians have given in response to this question is that the Bible in general, and the apostles in particular addresses the evil in the world in a different way than our culture does. Scripture teaches that evil does not come primarily from the social structures that human beings put in place. Rather, evil has its source in the heart of human beings and then is expressed through whatever social structures that are in place. Therefore, the solution to evil is the transformation of the human heart. When that happens, it naturally results in the end of evil institutions and the end of abuse in morally neutral institutions. The truth is that the abolition of slavery was the result of the western world embracing

the moral principles of the Bible. It is worth noting at the same time that the abuse of human beings did not end with slavery, it continues around the world even in places where slavery is technically illegal.

According to the New Testament, the Gospel is not only the means of personal salvation, it is the means by which individuals and society at large can be transformed, changed from being wicked, to being righteous. Paul understood that the true need of human beings was for God to make them new, and that this could only take place through the application of the redemptive work of Christ. This then was the focus of Paul's instruction to these saints, instruction that when followed would eliminate any evil present in those who embraced these things.

Understanding this, one must recognize that in no way should Paul's teaching to slaves and masters here be construed to be an endorsement of slavery. Paul was merely addressing these Christians within the social structures that existed at that time. Historically speaking, slavery with all its attendant evils was not only universally accepted in ancient times but was also considered to be a fundamental institution that was indispensable to civilized society. The reality was that more than half of the people living in the great cities of the Roman world were slaves and this was the status of the majority of professional people such as teachers and doctors as well as that of menials and craftsmen. It was generally accepted that slaves were people with no rights, because they were merely property existing only for the comfort, convenience, and pleasure of their owners. Generally speaking, most slaves were victims of war. In that age, slavery was politically and economically motivated, it was not racially motivated. People of all races could become slaves if their nation was conquered or subjugated by another. Therefore, virtually every class of people lived with the realization that war could cause them to lose everything and result in them being sold into slavery. Those who revolted against this institution, seeking to use power to gain personal freedom, found themselves in a worse position than before. About one hundred and thirty years prior to Paul writing this letter, there was the famous slave revolt led by Spartacus. Everyone knew that the Romans had violently and successfully put an end to that revolt, and that it resulted in over six thousand surviving slaves being publicly crucified to demonstrate the state's intent to enforce that institution. Paul's instruction here aimed to transform the master/slave relationship from within this culture. It was not the launching of a frontal attack upon the institution itself. To have done so would have involved political action. Not only would this have been quite impractical for this collection of small emerging churches, more importantly, if sinful people remained unchanged, there would be no moral foundation upon which the ongoing abolition of slavery could be accomplished. That does not mean that Paul or the other apostles were fearful of speaking the truth, they simply recognized that a violent overthrow was not the way in which God was going to put an end to the evils of slavery. Again, He would do it through the moral transformation of individuals.

As Paul addressed this part of the household he wrote, "*Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers,*

but in sincerity of heart, fearing God (vs.22). The modifying phrase “*according to the flesh*”, refers to the sphere of the obedience slaves were to offer, it was to be offered to their human masters. Christian slaves were to obey everything their masters told them to do. This meant that the slave was not to resist the master in anything, but rather to be in general submission to his authority. Of course there would be the obvious exception, that the Christian is never to obey human commands that contradict the commands of God. The expression “*eye service*” relates to the idea of working hard when one’s master was present and watching but slacking off when the master was not watching. The expression “*people pleasers*” further explains what Paul meant when he wrote not to do things as “*eye service*”. He was making it clear that one’s efforts were not to be a show that was meant to gain a master’s favor for personal advantage, rather one was to do their best out of principle. The clause “*but in sincerity of heart*” was written as a contrast to the previous clauses, implying that those phrases described insincerity of heart. The Greek term translated as “*sincerity*” literally means “*without a fold*”, and the term conveys that everything is open and visible, therefore no misdeed or faulty motive is hidden by duplicity. Obedience to these admonitions would be acutely important in a non-Christian household where the reputation of Christ and Christianity would be profoundly impacted by a Christian slave’s conduct. The final clause of the verse, “*fearing God*”, expresses the reason why slaves were to obey their masters sincerely, because of their reverent fear for God. A Christian slave’s obedience to his earthly master was to be rendered ultimately to Christ as the individual’s supreme master.

It is commonly suggested that this instruction is equally applicable to the relationship of employee to employer. Though it is true that this instruction can be applied to that relationship, it needs to be kept in mind that the relationship of employer/employee is radically different from that of master/slave, therefore, the application of this instruction should be done carefully.

Continuing with his instruction to Christian slaves, Paul wrote, “*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men*” (vs.23). In this verse Paul was putting additional stress on the idea that for the Christian, in every sphere of their lives, everything they do, including their labor for their earthly masters, was to be done ultimately for Christ. The reference to what the slaves “*do*” refers to all their assigned responsibilities. The Greek wording translated as “*heartily*” is literally “*from one’s soul*”, which expresses the idea of using all of one’s energy in what one does. The clause “*as to the Lord and not to men*” conveys the idea of doing what they did with a constant realization of who it was that they were actually serving. It was commonly known that one of the chief challenges for those who were slaves was a lack of motivation in one’s labors. This was because, since there was no gain for the slave, the work was often perceived as pure drudgery. As a result, it was often done grudgingly, with as little effort invested as possible, and with the goal of doing as little as one could get away with. The point was that a Christian slave had a different motivating influence than a non-Christian slave. This perspective was

meant to transform the most menial responsibilities and give dignity and honor to all their work.

Then Paul wrote, “*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ*” (vs.24). The Greek participle translated as “*knowing*” was used frequently by Paul to introduce the basis of his arguments or exhortations (Rom.5:3; 6:8; II Cor.5:6). His purpose in expressing himself this way was to remind his readers about a truth that they already knew, encouraging them to apply that knowledge to how they lived their lives. The Greek wording of the phrase “*the reward of the inheritance*” is a genitive of apposition, meaning that the two nouns in the phrase refer to the same thing but in different ways. Inheritance language was used often in the Old Testament to denote the promised land, but later on in the progressive development of revelation, the land became a tangible symbol of all that God had promised to do for His people. Therefore, in the New Testament, the inheritance that the apostles wrote about was the kingdom of God (I Cor.6:9-10; 15:50; Gal.5:21), or the spiritual salvation God provided in Christ (Heb.1:14). Ultimately, this inheritance would include bodily resurrection and eternal life in a renewed earth.

There is an ironic aspect to Paul’s use of inheritance language. Roman law in the first century prohibited slaves from receiving an inheritance from their masters. This was due to the fact that according to Roman law the slaves themselves were property that could be inherited by the heirs of their masters upon the death of those masters. Therefore, spiritually in Christ, they had something that no slave who was of the world could have, an inheritance. This then was a reminder about how much the lives of these saints had been enriched because of Jesus Christ.

This focus on the reward that these Christian slaves would receive at the end of their mortal lives would give them the motivation they needed that would enable even those serving in a non-Christian household to serve eagerly and zestfully. It would enable them to do this even if they served a master who was harsh, unconscionable, and ungrateful, because they could remind themselves of the rich spiritual riches that were awaiting them as a reward for their faithful service to Christ, a reward that would only get richer if they stayed faithful through a difficult situation. In this instruction Paul was applying the truth that a Christian’s life is hidden in heaven with Christ, and how the true nature of that life would be revealed at Christ’s second coming (3:4). It was true that in the fallen world they had little to take joy in. However, the eternal spiritual life that was already theirs’ in Christ would give them a rationale for energetic obedience toward their masters.

The last clause in the verse translated as “*for you serve the Lord Christ*” contains an ambiguity. The Greek verb translated as “*serve*” is in a form that could be either an indicative or an imperative. The NKJV and most other modern English translations render the clause as a statement (taking the verb as being in the indicative mood), however the evidence favors translating the statement as an exhortation (taking this verb as an imperative rather than as an indicative), which would lead to the translation, “*for you are to serve the Lord Christ*”. Two details favor this conclusion:

1. The other eight second-person plural verbs in this section (3:18-4:1) that form independent clauses are all imperatives.
2. Just like the other eight imperatives, there is no conjunction used with this verb.

The title “*Lord Christ*” that appears in this verse was only used by Paul one other time in his writings (Rom.16:18). It seems to be an emphatic expression, suggesting an implicit contrast with their human master, stressing that Christ was to be the ultimate master whom these Christian slaves were to serve.

Having given them a positive reason for diligent service, Paul now gave these Christian slaves a negative reason for that service, “*But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality*” (vs.25). There is a debate among interpreters regarding this verse. The debate is over to whom it was that Paul directed this statement. Isolated from its context it would sound like a general principle that applied to all Christians. However, the context indicates that this statement was part of Paul’s ongoing instruction to Christian slaves. Paul was warning these slaves about the consequences that would come upon them if they were to fail to continue to serve their earthly masters faithfully as a part of their service to their heavenly Lord.

Some have suggested that this was an admonition to the masters rather than to the slaves in the fellowship. However, it is better to conclude that this instruction was directed at the slaves. The most convincing evidence pointing toward this conclusion is that at this point in the letter Paul had not yet addressed masters (something he would do in the next verse). It would be unprecedented in New Testament household codes for an author to refer to the responsibilities of a household member before that member of the household had been addressed.

The Greek verb translated as “*does wrong*” means to act in an unjust manner or cause damage or injury to someone. In a context like this, it refers to a violation against the standard of the righteous character of God. In Philemon verse 18, Paul used this same verb. In that verse Paul was referring to the wrong that Onesimus had done to Philemon. It seems quite likely then that Paul had the possible ramifications of Philemon’s forgiveness and acceptance of Onesimus in view here. He did not want other slaves in Colossae to think that they could do wrong with impunity avoiding any penalty for their actions because they were now in Christ. He also did not want the slaves of the church to think that his personal forgiveness of Onesimus meant that he approved of what Onesimus did to his master.

The Greek verb translated as “*repaid*” is in the middle form, and it refers to a recompense, and Paul’s previous use of it in the context of the Divine tribunal, and his choice to use the future tense of the verb, indicates that this requital for disobedient slaves will take place before the judgment seat of Christ. This threat of judgment is the antithesis of the promise of a redemptive inheritance in the previous verse. Here Paul stressed that wrongdoing will be punished specifically because God does not act with favoritism. Doubtlessly, Paul meant this as a warning to Christian slaves not to presume on their position before God and think that He would overlook their misdeeds. The basic idea here is that in God’s

judgment (unlike human courts), He is not influenced by a person's status, position, wealth, nor even about how He might gain from showing an individual leniency. In general, this reminds the reader that though salvation is by grace, judgment is according to works.

Contrary to Hellenistic household codes, where the focus was on the power structure of this present age, Paul provided an eschatological perspective within which every Christian must be responsible for his or her own actions because of their accountability to God.

Lastly, Paul addressed masters, and wrote, "*Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven*" (4:1). Here Paul warned slave masters not to forget that as Christians they were not free to do whatever they wanted to do toward their slaves, they were responsible to relate to their slaves in harmony with God's ethical instructions. What Paul wrote to these slave masters was rooted in Christ's golden rule (Matt.7:12). Slave masters were to treat their slaves, as they themselves would want to be treated, if they were the slaves. The Greek verb translated as "*give*", means to grant something to someone. Masters were to give to their slaves what was "*just and fair*". The Greek word translated as "*just*" refers to doing something in harmony with a legal code. This wording might have reminded Paul's readers of the Roman legal and social standards of justice with respect to slaves. These standards specified not abusing or taking advantage of slaves in any way that would be an affront to societal norms. However, coming from Paul, this was not simply an encouragement to meet the legal requirements of Roman justice, it was a reminder that they had a higher standard of justice to live up to, the Law of God.

There is a significant amount of debate surrounding what Paul meant by treating slaves in a way that was "*fair*". Some interpreters argue that Paul was admonishing Christian slave-owners to treat their slaves as equals with the revolutionary social consequences that would follow. That conclusion actually reflects the biases of the scholars who hold this view, because the Greek term Paul used, simply carried the connotation of rendering to others what was due them. The more natural understanding is that "*fair*" treatment was to be understood as being within the context of slavery. The Greek word translated as "*fair*", like its English counterpart, often referred to a conditional type of fairness, as well as to an unqualified sense of complete freedom. Therefore, in context, the idea relates to equality between slaves. Masters were not to give preferential treatment to some, while withholding it from others. They were to make sure all their slaves were equally well taken care of. Eventually this ethic would radically change the attitude of slaves to their masters, and masters to their slaves. This admonition addressed to masters was significant and counter cultural. It recognized that there were not only obligations that rested upon slaves, but that masters also had responsibilities in this relationship. Paul emphasized the responsibility of Christian masters on the highest possible measure of accountability, they were to remember that they too had a master in heaven, which meant that they themselves were God's slaves and needed to obey His dictates regarding how they exercised

their authority over their slaves. Slave masters might pride themselves on their position in society and in their household, and they would naturally be very tempted to abuse that position at times. But Christian slave owners needed to remember that they themselves were answerable to a higher master, the Lord Jesus. The reciprocity that is at the heart of the Christian household code emerges here again in emphatic form. Owners and slaves ultimately serve the same Lord, and that fundamental spiritual reality not only relativizes their earthly relationships, but it also set the stage for its eventual abolishment.

Conclusion:

The prevailing focus throughout the household code is that the Christian is to live his or her life in conscious submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal in the Christian's life is to please Christ, our sovereign, and God. The Christian is to be other centered, being as concerned about the needs of others as he is concerned about himself; thus, the Christian does not act selfishly. In other words, the Christian is to love God supremely, and love others as he loves themselves (Matt.22:37-40). In our relationships with our fellow believers, we should always seek to live according to Christ's golden rule, doing to others, what we would have others do to us. And Christians are to remember that our rewards at the judgment seat of Christ will be determined at least in part, by how well we love one another, by how well we treat others in the family of God.