

# Marriage for the King

## Some Dutch Thoughts on Marriage, Family, and Culture

Prepared for the *Reformed Congregational Fellowship* Conference

Ross Macdonald

April 11, 2018

That the following has been dubbed “some thoughts” should already betray the tentative nature of this paper, which is more of an exploration—a ‘buffet’ of sorts—than a systematic presentation. For the sake of disclosure our buffet will contain Dutch cuisine here and there, but the conclusions and applications hope to be catholic in the best sense of the word. Those well acquainted with the various debates in the Dutch Reformed tradition (e.g. the ‘common grace’<sup>1</sup> controversy or the intricacy of the ‘organic motif’<sup>2</sup> in Herman Bavinck) will be disappointed by the more general fare offered here, but we hope it proves filling nonetheless (even if it sorely needs seasoning)! The topic of this year’s conference seems to long for the former days when Western society largely took the confessional position for granted.

This is no longer the case in our present time, where ‘marriage’ is being debated and contorted into ever more polarizing positions. And this is a fact to lament. Not as those who mourn from a distance as though the circumstances are always beyond us—the church is the light of the world (Matt. 5:14-16), and thus when we behold such depravity in our midst we should own some sense of responsibility for the opacity of darkness and absence of light. At the same time, the fact that Biblical illiteracy is at an all-time high in our culture presents its own opportunity for the Gospel to be heard ‘for the first time,’ and therein we seek the Lord’s blessing in our efforts to salt the stony earth of New England. I believe family reformation among Christ’s people is one of the needs of the hour. This reformation is not only one of many vital needs, but even more (with God’s willing power) it is one of many vital opportunities for the advance of the Gospel.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World*; edited by J. J. Ballor & S. J. Grabill (2 vols.; Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), and J. Bowlin (ed.), *The Kuyper Center Review, Volume 2: Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See James P. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2012).

This is especially true given the endless parade of debauchery that now confounds our culture. The “Pence Rule” was a point of mockery less than a year ago, that is, until the headlines churned with shock over sexual scandals from within the very industry that *promotes* promiscuity and degrades human sexuality as its *forté*! Why all the outrage? As one put it:

“The great ethical division is not between men and women, but between men and women on the one side who want to honor and serve God, and men and women on the other who want to Rube Goldberg their very own new ways of being human ... the unfolding sexual fiasco has shown that conservative Christians have been right about sex all along.”<sup>3</sup>

This is certainly true, and yet “we are not ignorant of Satan’s devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). Conservative evangelicals are regularly lulled to sleep by the siren-song of our culture’s unmoored sexuality. We tithe mint leaves and swallow camels, or rather, host massive conferences to ‘virtue-signal’ our resonance with civil rights; all while ignoring the way such rhetoric is being used to frame the debate over transgenderism and homosexuality. Worse yet, we sit contented with our ‘relevance’ in this regard while deceived women wound their consciences and sacrifice unborn children on the altar of ‘feminism.’ What does “being right all along” actually mean if we look at the state of our cultural cauldron—where the water is just beneath boiling and we’re finding ever new ways to adjust with the temperature—come to think of it, how did we get here? What is the calling for Christians and churches in our cultural moment, where the politics are as divided as the marriages and families they trample upon? In His exalted and kingly rule, what does Christ demand of husbands and wives? Of children and church bodies? Of preachers and disciple-makers?

### **Introduction: The King and the Culture**

One of the major players in our current milieu is the confusion most Christians sense toward cultural engagement. We live, and move, and have our being in a secular and pluralistic society—a factor that becomes far more determinative for the average Christian’s political musing than, say, the Kingdom of God. Following the insight of Henry Van Til’s famous adage:

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/brief-statement-organizers-next-big-womens-march.html> (accessed 12-20-2017). Elsewhere he writes: “Feminists have declared unrelenting war on their own children—and thereby as a consequence have declared war on their own bodies, their own wombs and breasts, and their own most gracious bent toward biological hospitality. They have declared war on their own femininity. And then they have the unvarnished gall to call it feminism.”

“culture is religion externalized,” we must be sobered to the fact that the current battles over marriage and sexual identity are *politically* divisive because they are inherently *religious* by nature. We don’t mean to say that they are religious issues only as far as *Christians* are concerned, but rather they hold the same ‘sacred’ weight for those who would seek to repress and overthrow their “holy, righteous, and good” foundation. Rather than take up the mantle of the prophet, or patiently sow the seeds of truth and testimony, the church has been pressured to kowtow for every cultural screech. Christians, then, are pleased to find Christ a seat at the ‘round table’ of whatever newly-forged “dialogue” is deemed laden with potential.

A recent example of this sad approach can be found in Miroslav Volf’s *A Public Faith*.<sup>4</sup> Many of the insights Volf offers in this book warrant further elaboration, which is perhaps as much a compliment as a criticism. He begins by surveying the various ‘malfunctions’ of faith in our current context, and therein his incisive comments are truly helpful. He nods to Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* regarding the ‘new humanism’ and its concomitant notion of human flourishing which “makes no reference to something higher which humans reverence or love or acknowledge.”<sup>5</sup> Stemming from this disavowal of the transcendent, as Volf goes on to argue, such a concept squarely affects practical considerations of ethics, and therein, the social and political dimensions of its implications. When man becomes the measure of all things there can be little vision for a society that transcends the self. He picks up Augustine’s thought that human flourishing consists of people having ‘everything they want,’ but that is qualified by the condition of wanting ‘nothing wrongly.’<sup>6</sup> One can deeply appreciate Volf’s emphases on the failure of Christian communities to cast an alternative vision of human flourishing, not to mention his underscoring the difference between merely *sharing* a vision for God-centered human flourishing but *actually forming* deep convictions around it. So much for the positive aspects.

In some ways, *A Public Faith* echoes the concerns of a very different book by James Davison Hunter, when (e.g.) the latter summarizes: “In short, commitment to the new city commons is a commitment of the community of faith to the highest ideals and practices of human flourishing in a pluralistic world ... through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible,

---

<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 58. On this point (with similar appropriation of Augustine), see James K. A. Smith’s discussion of Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker* in *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 27-29.

just possible, that [Christians] will help to make the world a little bit better.”<sup>7</sup> It is, ostensibly, to this same larger goal that Volf relates his personal goal of making Christian communities “comfortable with being just one of many players,”<sup>8</sup> on the way to rekindle the ‘vibrancy and confidence’ of the early Church. The ‘ancient future of the church’ (as Robert Webber would say)<sup>9</sup> is an admirable course, but it must be remembered that the *political* milieu was not one of pluralism. If the martyrs of the early centuries had pinched their requisite ash to the Caesars, Jesus—symbolically—could have reserved a spot at the ‘round table.’ To apply the situation to our context (political shifts notwithstanding); allegiance to Christ will always expose the *true* Caesars of a given society, however varied their surrounding Pantheon may be.

Instead of reducing our cultural mandate to “one of many players,” which will surely spawn the same pencil-necked inactivity that Volf seeks to overcome, Christian communities must strive to expose the militant edge of the ‘new tolerance,’ and thus *accurately* survey the playing field. Jesus tells us that “the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8), which may explain years of ‘conservative Christian’ governors and justices nodding at the occasional flexing of opposing power; and that in contrast to the governors and justices who uphold sinful and unjust laws because they (apparently) understand the doctrine of lesser magistrates better than Protestants! To put this another way: there was a muffled groan among these erstwhile “sons of light” when Obergefell was hoisted upon the nation, and yet somehow the only resistance to report was a county clerk in Kentucky!

This is what we mean by the call to “*accurately* survey the playing field.” However, even this language betrays a major problem with Volf’s conception of cultural engagement, viz. the concept of political formation as a ‘sport’ in which we all are ‘players.’ For his part, Volf seems to treat such an arrangement as ‘given’ (or at least tacitly neutral). Questions arise. In his approach, who is the referee? His discussion of ‘boundary-maintenance’ is fine, but it doesn’t answer this question. Nor does it address the possibility of the whole ‘game’ being rigged by sinful blindness, where the opposing (i.e. secular) ‘players’ happen to be the referee committee, which accordingly

---

<sup>7</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 279; 286.

<sup>8</sup> Volf, *A Public Faith*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Webber. *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999).

slants the “round-table” toward the very ‘coercion’ Volf wants *Christians* to avoid! Here also, he addresses Christian ‘coercion’ but fails to address *being coerced* once we don our team jersey (one thinks of the bakery business of Aaron and Melissa Klein and their ‘re-education’ in Colorado). In terms of the new frontier of unmoored sexuality, this becomes a peculiar blind-spot.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, we must come to terms with the pluralistic secularism that is our current fish-tank, and Volf is not being dis-ingenious when he emphasizes that bold disagreements are ‘laudable.’<sup>11</sup> Bold disagreements have always been desirable, to a point, when they are constrained to sipping coffees over a table at the local Target cafe—but we are beyond that; now our daughters may have to go to that particular Target’s restroom with the realization that a man, who happens to ‘feel’ like a woman (or at least claims to on that occasion), could be in the next stall. This is where the “round-table” leads; and the other ‘players’ are only ramping up their playoff strength. Seeking the mutual beneficence of human flourishing is a vital necessity for Christians who are commanded to “seek the welfare of the city.” The problem arises when the definition of ‘welfare’ is weaponized against God’s creational purposes. To put this another way; where does the so-called ‘common good’ described by Volf apply when the depravity of man becomes institutionalized?

“Abortion and sodomy were sins long before they were constitutional rights . . . We are told, *ad nauseam*, to keep our morality out of politics. It would be more to the point to tell the idol-mongers to keep their politics out of morality.”<sup>12</sup>

What is the standard? How far does it apply, and what does it (socially and politically) imply? The ‘referees’ have a remarkably different rulebook; so much so that Christians ought to re-consider the desirability of “becoming just another player”! At the same time, we must contend at one level or another—and here we would agree with Volf against the ‘external view’<sup>13</sup> of Christian presence in the world; as it has led to a knee-jerk withdrawal of the ‘light’ (Matt. 5:14ff) and therefore stands complicit with the relative darkness of our culture (as mentioned at the outset). But it is precisely this latter darkness that seems to evade Volf when (e.g.) he writes

---

<sup>10</sup> e.g., in the summarizing points Volf draws from Wolterstoff on *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 136-7.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Empires of Dirt: Secularism, Radical Islam, and the Mere Christendom Alternative* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2016), 208-9.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 88.

that proponents of the ‘external’ view “...presuppose that the culture in which they live is a foreign country pure and simple, a land bereft of God, rather than a world that God created and pronounced good.”<sup>14</sup> True enough that this world is not a ‘foreign country’ *pure and simple*, but it is truly foreign in its darkness—which must factor into the Christian’s life (1 Peter 1:1, 2:11f; Titus 2:12). Along the same lines, God’s initial pronouncement of the world’s goodness should cause Christians to labor toward “prophetic presence” (as Volf advocates) *as much as* to remember that the ‘good’ world became inhabited by fallen man in sinful rebellion.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) ridiculed the idea of liberalism (in the democratic sense) existing on an ‘independent basis’—for, when it comes to unregenerate man, “reason is not up to the demands.”<sup>15</sup> He rightly acknowledged the implications of relating creation to the Triune Creator, and similar the implications of the Fall. “For Kuyper there simply are no ways of thinking separate from comprehensive religious and philosophical beliefs.”<sup>16</sup> While the political vision of the ‘round table’ seeks to demur such commitments at the outset, Kuyper’s view of the kingship of Christ bound him to reject the pretense of autonomous rationality. Where Volf might have Christians laboring to divide societal ‘seats’ equally, Kuyper is concerned to see the kingly Son kissed by kings and rulers of the earth “lest He be angry” (Ps. 2:10-12)! Accordingly, Kuyper rejects the forfeiting of ‘religious’ commitments for the sake of the ‘public square’—a proposition that is roundly absurd. At the same time, Kuyper stresses the needful distinction of God-granted authority wielded by the State and the similarly unique authority of the church:

“Positive government action in matters pertaining to our spiritual life is something we do not desire but fundamentally oppose. The gospel spurns the crutches of the powerful. All that it asks is unlimited freedom to develop in accordance with its own genius in the heart of our national life ... Only this we do not want: that the government arm unbelief to force us, half-armed and handicapped by an assortment of laws, into an unequal struggle with so powerful an enemy.”<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> James J. S. Foster, “Neither Ignore, nor Modify, nor Disrupt: The Kuyperian Model of Deliberation as Applied to Same-Sex Marriage” in Gordon Graham (ed.), *The Kuyper Center Review, vol 1: New Essays in Reformed Theology and Public Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), Kindle loc. 1457.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, Kindle loc. 1468.

<sup>17</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Maranatha* quoted in *ibid.*, Kindle loc. 6000.

While the Kuyperian tradition of Calvinistic engagement with society has been hijacked toward many incompatible applications, of import for our purposes is the centrality of Christ's kingship for all matters of life. Our 'public faith' is a part of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear upon the unfolding redemption of the entire world. But failing to remember the *opposition* against which Christ builds His redeemed church (Matt. 16:18) will likely gauge how far we've forsaken faithfulness for accommodation. As always, we need to be reminded that only the *Christian* hope is mankind's hope. This assertion bears heavily on our consideration of marriage and family. What is the *Christian* hope according to these institutions of God? In what sense is a family "Christian"? Kuyper states the obvious:

"...you may easily be tempted to call a household Christian just because the Bible is read every morning and afternoon, and because its members pray and rest on the Sabbath, while the situation is in fact one where husband and wife are not one but two, [and] where no care is given to the way the children are raised..."<sup>18</sup>

And yet many self-assessed "Christian" households would fit this bill. Here is where Kuyper's distillation of Christ's kingship over the sphere of family is so timely. Far from breaking the bruised reed of believers discouraged by failures and difficulty, this acknowledgment of Christ's relation to and interest in the believer's household is a great encouragement, for "Christ is the redeemer of the family as well."<sup>19</sup>

The life of the family is sick, just like the rest of human life, and Christ is the Physician who restores health also to the sickened family. This is not only true for the members of the family whose souls need the sanctification of Christ in every way, but it also holds for the family as such. Sin touches not only the people who together make up a family, but also the relationships in which parents live with their children, husbands with their wives ... It is not only the family's members, but also the natural function of the family itself that has suffered under sin."<sup>20</sup>

The effects of sin upon relationships in the home is carefully traced out by Kuyper across several chapters in the second volume of his work *Pro Rege* (lit. 'for the King'). We will now consider some examples where husbands and wives are, perhaps, susceptible to stumble.

---

<sup>18</sup> Abraham Kuyper (J. J. Ballor & M. Flikkema, eds.) *Pro Rege: Living under Christ's Kingship* (vol. 2; Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), Kindle loc. 6014.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 6022.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, Kindle loc. 6045-54.

## The Display of Marriage

The Scriptures teach that God created man and woman in harmonious equality as His image-bearers amidst the creation (Gen. 1:27). Though there is equality between man and woman in terms of this image-bearing status, God nevertheless designated distinct roles for the man and woman in His paradise (Gen. 2:15, 18). The claim that such complementary roles were issued only after the Fall of mankind into sin (Gen. 3) fails to recognize God's creational pattern man and woman (1 Cor. 11:9; 1 Tim. 2:13-15). The Fall has corrupted this creational pattern which God blessed (Gen. 1:28), and has distorted the ability of men and women to know and serve God according to His good intentions. This distortion causes women to sinfully usurp the role and responsibility of men, as well as causes men to sinfully abuse their role and responsibility toward women (Gen. 3:16). Ultimately the evil of this distortion is magnified by the testimony of Jesus Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-32); as husbands and wives are called to be a picture of the relationship of the last Adam to His redeemed Bride (Rom. 5:14).

Jesus grounds His teaching on marriage to creation. In Mark 10.1ff we find a challenge from the Pharisees: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (the text notes they were "testing Him"). Referencing the concession of divorce that Moses "commanded," Jesus declares: "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (vv. 5-9).

Kuyper appeals to Jesus' declaration of marriage "from the beginning of creation" to assert its unique place in the purpose of God:<sup>21</sup>

"Jesus does not ... promulgate a law, but He goes back to what God had done. In what God had done, Jesus points to creation as the starting point that determines everything. In creation, the difference between man and woman was indicated from the very beginning. They were not left to themselves, but received in creation their respective ordinances for life."<sup>22</sup>

Again, Kuyper grounds marriage in creation to emphasize the horizon of God's intent:

---

<sup>21</sup> The reader is directed to the recent reprint of Herman Bavinck's *The Christian Family* for a fascinating depiction of marriage and children in relation to the Triune image.

<sup>22</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 5019-32.



“These words of Jesus have not received the attention they deserve. They have been understood as a rule only for marriage, with people failing to comprehend that these words actually contain the basic principle for our entire civil life. And that principle comes down to this: Jesus did not come to institute a new civil order for our human life, but that he rather accepted and confirmed the existing order of affairs. Jesus was not bent on nor intending to institute a new ordinance for married life, or creating a new, Christian kind of marriage. He was intent on nothing new—he himself creates nothing, but takes marriage as it had been instituted in paradise. An order for marriage already existed. That order had been promulgated in paradise and assigned to humanity; indeed, it was rooted in the very creation of man and woman. And Jesus does no more than to wipe away the layer of dust under which this original marriage had become largely unrecognizable, to show marriage once more in its original purity, and he now calls humanity back to following in civil life the creation ordinance given by God.”<sup>23</sup>

Kuyper acknowledges the unique role Christ has given to husbands:

“Christ’s kingship is not intended figuratively but as a reality. Christ’s kingship over the family does not mean that husbands, as good Christians, must acquit themselves of their family duties faithfully and honorably and that the spirit of Christ operates indirectly on them so that they might be moved and equipped to fulfill their domestic duties. Instead, according to Eph. 5:23, Christ is explicitly given an authority from God over husbands as the heads of their families. The text does not speak about some kind of spiritual influence, but about authority. As the King anointed by God, Christ rules over husbands as the heads of their families and, through them, He rules also over their families. There is a rulership here. Husbands preside over their families, but they do so under Christ and are therefore accountable to Him.”<sup>24</sup>

It is one of the great difficulties and frequent grievances of marriage that the husband’s Christ given and directed authority is abused. Which Kuyper quickly acknowledges: “Husbands who abuse their authority in their homes for their own advantage and aim at something other than the honor of Christ, and in Christ, the honor of God, do not make their family a Christian family, but rather dechristianize it by their spiritual selfishness.”<sup>25</sup> It is the self-denying, self-giving,

---

<sup>23</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 5934-41.

<sup>24</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 6334-40.

<sup>25</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 6359-62.

self-sacrificing example of Christ that sets the pattern (as well as bears the weakness) of the Christian husband. Kuyper rightly identifies selfishness as a barrier toward godly life in particular for the husband. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) once observed:

“Because Christ’s teachings contradict the interests of selfish men, that’s why the world so generally rises up against it with indignation, even as a country will rise against an invading enemy: for he comes to take away that which is dearest to them; as it is said of Luther, that he meddled with the pope’s crown, and the friars’ bellies; and therefore no wonder if they swarmed all about his ears. Selfishness is so general and deeply rooted in our world that (except with a few self-denying saints) self-love and self-interest rule the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Kuyper moves practically to consider the charge of Christ upon the husband. He is, in a guarded but genuine capacity, to minister to his wife and children as a priest within his home. This does not undermine the unique authority of Biblically qualified leadership over a congregation, nor does it jeopardize the genuine ‘priesthood’ of all believers. Rather (as Kuyper maintains) Christ has displayed His rule over the family specifically through the husband/father, who is thereby held accountable to minister the things of Christ to his household:

“...the Christian religion must have a unique place within the family. Not only must the Christian religion be present in the members of the family, but the Christian family as such must also pay its respects to the Christian religion. There must be both personal religion and family religion. It is not enough for the members of the family to pray each for themselves; they must also pray together, and in order for this to continue it is necessary that time be set aside for family prayer. There must be family prayers—prayers of both adoration and thanksgiving. And that adoration must, whenever possible, be expressed in the family singing together in order to praise the grace that has been shown them. And in order for the spirit of piety to be constantly fed, the family must assemble around the Word. The communal reading of God’s Word ought always to strengthen the family’s religious spirit. We often do not understand how the reading of a chapter that seems so far removed from us can nourish that spirit, but the experience of the ages teaches us that a communal submission to the Word exercises a sanctifying and hallowing influence on all of life. It goes without saying that the entire family must also hallow such special events as baptisms, illnesses, birthdays, professions of faith, and so on. Nevertheless, the religious sensitivity of the family’s life is strengthened above all by its daily religious exercises. Every family must have an altar, and the father must serve at that

---

<sup>26</sup> <https://zwingliusredivivus.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/self-love-rules-the-world/> (accessed 10-27-17).

altar as the family priest. Where this altar worship is absent or observed mechanically, the family lacks a Christian character. Conversely, it is only where this worship is the rule and law that a family shows itself to be a Christian family, even as the celebration of the Sabbath gives it the opportunity to strengthen its religion.”<sup>27</sup>

Turning to wives, Kuyper strikes at the stumbling block of a wife’s duty to submit to her husband, which she does “unto Christ” (Eph. 5:22), which takes on significance for the concomitant display of a church’s submission to Christ:

“The apostle refers to the critical point, which determines whether this growth is going in the right direction, with these words: “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph. 5:24). The apostle does not mince his words; he does not soften or nuance what he has to say, as if to save face or spare wives their feelings. Instead, he is short and to the point, supposing that the genuine, real wife will immediately agree, and that those wives who are not yet woman enough to assent may the sooner the better be brought back to more proper habits of the heart. He does not say that wives should flatter their husband and accommodate him so as to allow him for the sake of his children and the servants to be the master of his house. Nothing of the sort. He uses the only word suitable, submit; and not only in various general family practices, but in everything. This submission is so complete that it can in fact be compared to the submission with which the church submits to its King. A corrupted and degenerate church, a church that has surrendered its character as church and is in fact no longer one, will always seek new ways to shirk its obligation to obey its King and rebel...”

Kuyper further elaborates on the way a lack of submission re-arranges family life:

“...no ordinance of God is so stubbornly resisted by unbelieving wives as this one. Whenever the submission of wives to their husbands is raised in worldly circles, people begin to smile with disdain. Wives here will show their husbands a thing or two! They may appear to submit to them, but they will find ways to assure that they are in fact in charge. Rather than wives submitting to their husbands, it will be the husband who dances to the tune of his wife. In most families things never get this far. Instead, husbands and wives compromise and come to some kind of understanding. The husband usually controls the money, and this gives him a powerful means of coercion. He will in general also be quick to concede things to his wife for the sake of peace. Time and again there will be things he chooses to overlook, not to mention the many things that escape his

---

<sup>27</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 6102-14.

attention. Many men are not nearly as involved in their families as they should be. In their household they want peace more than anything else, and leave almost everything up to their wives. This creates a *modus vivendi*, a working arrangement that leaves the honor of husband and wife intact ... And, because Scripture teaches us that Christ's kingship over the family ought to be apparent first of all in that, according to the distinction of the creation ordinance, husbands must once more become real men and wives real women, we must insist that the Christian character of a family breaks apart wherever wives do not find it to be the delight and love of their heart to be truly wives and to submit to their husbands."<sup>28</sup>

This *modus vivendi* demonstrates just how familiar Kuyper is with typical family dynamics and patterns of sin. Writing with respect to Christ's twofold kingship over the church and family, Kuyper discusses the fractures that so often rise up between family members over the faith. Here too one senses the depth of insight and experience Kuyper carries into his argument:

"If some (but not all) of the family's members come to the faith, a conflict will break out in the family over that faith. According to the testimony of Christ Himself, He will then cause division in the family such that the husband may rise in enmity against his wife, parents against their children, or brothers against their sisters (see Luke 12:51-53). Jesus even prophesies that the unbelieving members of the family will hate the believing members, with such hatred in fact that they will deliver them over to prison. When this happens the family will be dissolved, the bonds holding it together will be nearly untied, blood will cease to mean anything, and instead of surrendering to the family's rights, the church will have to make the earthly interests of the family yield before Christ's honor ... Others may revel in this; they may be proud and say: "We don't all agree, but we don't make each other's life difficult and can get along just fine." But the outcome often is that you no longer have anything to talk about anymore and avoid matters of faith, and that instead you distract yourself by discussing worldly entertainment and similar topics in an attempt to avoid anything and everything that could cause quarrels and division. There Christ does not split the divided family, but the family bond has silenced Christ and His kingship instead. It is either Christ or the family. And according to Jesus' words, the family must yield before Him. But the opposite actually happens, for the family has now excluded Christ. This is not something we may cover up and excuse. Everyone senses and feels that such situations are out of line with what Jesus prophesied. While one or more members of the family may indeed confess Christ, their confession does not manifest

---

<sup>28</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 6537-45.

itself in family life; it is veiled within the context of the family and quietly passed over, and the members prefer to have peace within the family instead of peace with God. What makes this so repulsive is the fact that in such a situation where believers and unbelievers meet and avoid talking about the faith for the sake of peace, it actually ends up being the party that opposes the faith that assumes control over the family's discussions and determines their tone. In the end, the discussion turns to worldly matters alone—and this, of course, is precisely the unbelievers' cup of tea."<sup>29</sup>

Despite the stumbling blocks and discouragements of marriage and family life, there is a wonderful simplicity about the calling of marriage. This was well expressed by J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) in his *Expository Thoughts* (on Mark 10:1-12):

“Happy are they, who in the matter of marriage observe three rules. The first is to marry only in the Lord, and after prayer for God's approval and blessing. The second is not to expect too much from their partners, and to remember that marriage is, after all, the union of two sinners, and not of two angels. The third rule is to strive first and foremost for one another's sanctification. The more holy married people are, the happier they are.”

In more difficult times—speaking with regard to mortality rates in childbirth—marriage seemed to be largely utilitarian, though doubtless there was affinity and harmony in ways that defy most modern relationships. The danger of speaking too intently on the topic of marriage plays into the sentimentalism and immaturity of our day. In that sense, frankly, the younger generation of believers among us would do well to gain a utilitarian understanding of marriage, for that is indeed one legitimate aspect (far more so than the idea of quasi-eternal ‘soul mates’)!

Jesus seems to teach this as a principle in Mark 12:18-27, when He responds to the Sadducees “who say there is no resurrection” (v. 18). The trap is meant to pull a *reductio ad absurdum* on the custom of Levirate marriage, hypothesizing a woman who had seven husbands without an heir. “Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife” (v. 23). Jesus swiftly rebukes them, but of more interest is His revelation about the state of marriage after the resurrection: “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (v. 25). The whole complex of marriage, sexuality and reproduction is for this earthly life, and not (judging by the import of being comparable to angels regarding marriage) for the life to come.

---

<sup>29</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, Kindle loc., 7024-32.

In light of this, we are not to over-estimate marriage, but rather retain something of the gift, blessing, calling, and help it offers us for God’s purposes in our earthly lives. It seems that the Puritans often lived with a sense of modesty and utility; even in the midst of difficult and tragic losses, surely keeping their eyes fixed on the eternal glory that would never fade. Not much earlier one finds the example of the Welsh Martyr, John Penry (1559-1593), who leading up to his execution was not permitted to see his wife Eleanor, and his four little girls, Deliverance, Comfort, Safety and Sure-Hope. He was able to leave them copies of the Bible, and when he signed his last letter to his wife, he wrote: “From your husband for a season, and your eternal brother.” What an excellent perspective to carry into the Christian’s marriage!

### **The Family and the Church**

The church bears a certain responsibility for family life, as is evident within the form of teaching thematically addressed in Scripture—the household codes (which we’ll consider in detail below). Kuyper relates the responsibility of the church to the corrupting presence of sin in family life, which necessitates the ministry of the church, and in particular the labors of the pulpit:

“The minister has the duty in his preaching to oppose the work of sin in a systematic way. It is simply not the case that all members of the congregation clearly understand and perceive what family life demands of them. Each one is rather inclined to attribute and orient everything in family life toward himself.”<sup>30</sup>

Kuyper recognized that much preaching in his time had turned away from addressing the daily realities of Christian families and instead addressed the ‘personal life of faith’ (perhaps we might say the ‘buffered’ self!):

“When we consider how preaching guides the family, what strikes us is the extent to which those who preach today have departed from the apostolic path. When you open the apostolic writings, you find much preaching that touches upon our faith life proper, but you also find the apostles preaching at greater length and in greater detail about husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, government and subjects, and so on. Yet if you were to analyze the statistics today, you would find that preachers occupy themselves almost exclusively with the personal life of faith and do not at all (or only

---

<sup>30</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, kindle loc. 7788.

incidentally) address the relationships that are relevant to family life. This is not intentional, but it appears more spiritual.”<sup>31</sup>

What does faithfulness to the ethical vision that was given to the church for the sake of *families* require of its leaders, that we might fulfill our Savior’s commission?<sup>32</sup> The New Testament contains by example and exhortation what Luther termed the *haustafeln* (lit. ‘house tables,’ or more commonly ‘household codes’). These household codes, with their well defined theme of moral conduct in the relationships of the family (not to mention their unique structure), have attracted wide and ever-growing interest—not least due to the increasing fragmentation of the family unit in our day. From ancient times<sup>33</sup> presumably until the eve of the Industrial Revolution the household constituted the basic socio-economic unit in society, notwithstanding exceptions that only serve to prove the rule.

In an age of ‘self-emancipating’ perversions, one is hardly surprised to see the concomitant disintegration of the household. Indeed, the great analyst of our secular milieu, Charles Taylor, discusses the development from the ‘porous-self’ of the past to the ‘buffered-self’ of modernity and beyond, the latter having “won out invulnerability to the imprisonment of an enchanted past.”<sup>34</sup> In the city common one sees a phenomenon today no different than that under most roofs: a collection of ‘buffered’ individuals, straying from the beliefs, needs, and forms that once manifested interdependence between the individual, community, and nature. Walter Pater once remarked that ‘we have within us that which rusts iron and grows corn,’ but in our secular age the individual finds even that creaturely reality far from experience. It is from this vantage point that the Biblical exhortations toward marriage and household relationships,

---

<sup>31</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, kindle loc. 7754-58.

<sup>32</sup> “In the Pastoral Letters, the body language is absent and the church is molded on and depends on well-managed Christian households for its credibility both corporately and with regard to its leadership. Ecclesiology buys into household ideology, in a manner that has had long-lasting impact...” Turid Karlsen Seim, “Interfacing House and Church: Converting Household Codes to Church Order,” in A. C. Niang and C. Osiek (eds.), *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch* (PTMS 176; Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 68.

<sup>33</sup> “Plato emphasized the significance of the relationship between rulers and ruled ones, with a reference to pairs like parents and children, masters and slaves, men and women, old and young, etc. He dealt with the relationships belonging to a household (marriage, slaves, children) in his *Laws* VI.771E-VII.824C. Aristotle criticized Plato’s view on the direct analogy between the state and the household (*Pol.* I.1253b. 1-14). In Aristotle’s view, the household (οἶκος) is the most important kernel of the state.” Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 166.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007), 301f.

namely the household codes, arrive as a strange relic from an alien epoch, both obtuse in its demands and unrealistic in its ethical vision.

How often we could survey the broken relationships in Christian homes and think of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:35f ("I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household"), agreeing with that revelation as though hostility and division in Christian families almost always result from zealously pursuing the call of Jesus? Is not the very opposite true? All too often hostility and divisions in Christian families result from *failing* to pursue the Lord's call; especially as it pertains the daily, thorny reality of responsibility and relationality! How do the Scriptures portray the household—and what bearing, if any, does that portrayal carry upon issues of worship, identity, community, and discipleship?

The broad language of οἶκος in the New Testament demonstrates the significance of such imagery for early Christianity.<sup>35</sup> In many (if not most) of its instances οἶκος can refer to a physical structure, which is then metaphorically extended to refer to those who live in the house, and thus becomes understood as a 'household.' Stanley Porter elaborates: "... 'house' language is transferred from a literalness to a metaphorical conception that can be used to speak figuratively of the occupants of a household all the way to a spiritual union that would, in some way, represent a family."<sup>36</sup> The metaphorical sense of 'household,' though attested to in pre-Christian writing, must have become pronounced as distinctions between Judaism and nascent (Gentile) Christianity led toward the development of 'house churches' (cf. Rom. 16:5; Philem. 1:2). In any case, Paul often expresses the relationship between God and His people, as well as God's people to one another in terms of 'household' terminology (cf. Eph. 2:19; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 3:15, 5:8). As the household is a *social* unit, Paul utilizes the household codes to draw out the responsibilities of the church membership toward one another, as exemplified by the actual dynamics of the households that comprised the early churches. to one another and ultimately the householder, to emphasize the need for appropriate behavior among the various groups in the church.

---

<sup>35</sup> Many instances refer to a physical building (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 11:34; 14:35; 16:19; Col. 4:15; Heb. 3:3, 4; and 1 Pet. 2:5), while other instances include 1 Cor. 1:16; 1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:4; 2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19; Titus 1:11; Heb. 10:21; 11:7; and 1 Pet. 4:17.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley E. Porter, "Family in the Epistles," in R. S. Hess and M. D. Carroll (eds.) *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 152-154.



Just as rulers of households appoint an οἰκονόμος to manage the affairs of their οἶκος, so God appoints Paul and others to similar roles, giving them an οἰκονομία related to the accomplishment of His plans. The household codes are hereby best understood in terms of the wider scope of Paul's writings; such that its component admonitions remain dependent upon a broader theological compass to understand their integration in the full administration and will of the Lord. This likewise explains why the domestic arrangements and ethical patterns are robustly adorned around their relation to Christ.<sup>37</sup> Along similar lines, it becomes less tenable to follow the widely accepted view that the household codes have an apologetic thrust, whereby Paul attempts to vindicate the early Christian communities from suspicions that its teaching undermines social structures<sup>38</sup> and thereby threatens the stability of the civic order. Such a claim is not without precedent, as Craig Keener observes:

“...groups accused of undermining the moral fabric of Roman society ... sometimes protested that they instead conformed to traditional Roman values, by producing their own lists, or ‘household codes’, fitting those normally used in their day.”<sup>39</sup>

The conclusion is often reached that Paul's aim was to promote a manner of social behavior that was respectable in the eyes of those outside of the church (see e.g. 1 Tim. 3:7, 6:1; Titus 2:5, 8, 10; 3:10; cf. 1 Peter 2:12). Doubtlessly, Paul (like Peter) urges an upright and orderly lifestyle, encouraged in the household codes, as the partial means of evangelistic mission in an often hostile world (cf. 1 Thess. 4:12). On the other hand, the robust vision of Christ as the Lord who ordains Paul's οἰκονομία plots the moral exhortations amidst more theologically fertile concerns. For Timothy Gombis, Paul gives a comprehensive view of relationality in redeemed humanity.<sup>40</sup> Where ‘old humanity’ has been corrupted by the malignant influence of the flesh, the powers and authorities, the ‘new humanity’—the church—is the people of God, created

---

<sup>37</sup> See e.g., John M. G. Barclay, “Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity,” *Australian Biblical Review* 49 (2001), where he finds the household codes to be a “consistent attempt to apply the Christology of the letter to the realm of the household duties,” 44.

<sup>38</sup> One thinks of Acts 17:6! cf. Kevin C. Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 145f.

<sup>40</sup> Timothy Gombis, “A Radically Different New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians” *JETS* 48.2 (2005), 317-30.

“according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:24). Central to this focal point, the household codes draws upon the relationality between Christ, the redeemer of humanity, and the believer who is called into union with Him—and thereby—His ‘body.’ Christ, by virtue of His redemption of the body, establishes His relational authority in the church, an authority which is characterized by union with Him. Christ is proclaimed the “Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:2), a soteriological theme that courses through Paul’s treatment of marriage as the basis for the husbands’ treatment of their wives. As is true across the Biblical vision of marriage and family, to quote James Hering: “the vertical axis (Christ-body) determines the horizontal behavior.”<sup>41</sup> It is precisely here that *eisegesis* is embraced, as the nature of the admonitions assault modern perceptions of liberty and dignity. Hering aptly summarizes:

“The [household codes] commands requiring obedience and submission appear to be out of step with our times and certain declarations of Scripture, and are, perhaps, fundamentally inconsonant with the Christian faith. A palpable undercurrent of discomfort with the [household codes] message is easily recognized in many studies.”<sup>42</sup>

Paul orients the ethical vision across the span of God’s good creation and the eschatological promise of consummated glory. God created man and woman in harmonious equality as His image amidst pristine creation (Gen. 1:27), designating distinct roles for the man and woman in His paradise (Gen. 2:15, 18). As the household codes presuppose, and other texts explicitly declare, any claim that such complementary roles were issued only after the Fall of mankind into sin fails to recognize God’s *good* pattern of creation for man and woman (1 Cor. 11:9, 1 Tim. 2:13-15). When it comes to the sharper edges of Paul’s moral demands, this theological rationale remains the same; when the household code calls for wives to “be submissive,” Paul understands that this role is laid out in the Scriptures because the unity as well as the distinction of the husband and wife is a reflection of Christ and the church, which calls faithful women to have a unique posture of submissiveness (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11). Far from rendering her worship passive, or non-participatory, a woman who abounds in submissiveness and turns away from exercising authority does so *as* an act of worship. She encourages her brethren by demonstrating the posture of the church toward her Bridegroom, who is Christ (Rev.

---

<sup>41</sup> J. P. Hering, *The Colossian and Ephesian Haustafeln*, *ibid.*, 200.

<sup>42</sup> *op. cit.*, 263.

21:9); and so accordingly, the church body is called to likewise receive His Word (1 Thess. 2:13) and follow His leadership (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23). An unmarried woman or widow in the church does not reflect this posture to a husband but rather directly to the Lord, and thereby encourages both husbands and wives, as well as any others, to “care about the things of the Lord” with utmost devotion (1 Cor. 7:8, 34-35).

In this sense, the household codes are understood not as attempts to vindicate the appearance of the early church toward outsiders,<sup>43</sup> but rather to vindicate the testimony of Jesus Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-32); as husband and wife are called to be a picture of the relationship of the last Adam to His redeemed Bride (Rom. 5:14). Paul’s ethical vision orbits around the blazing center of God’s glory revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this is what drives the current interest in understanding Biblical and historical forms of family life, ranging from the droves of mass-market ‘guides’ to academic tomes:

“It is simply a fact (whether allowed, welcomed, discouraged, or encouraged) that a major audience of this scholarship on ... early Christian families ... is Christian believers seeking to understand their present in relation to their (reconstructed) past, and their sacred texts which mirror, embody, and sometimes challenge the cultural norms and expectations of their day.”<sup>45</sup>

While this is true, it is in reaction to the difficult commands we have considered (and others contained within the household codes that we have not had time to consider), that many interpreters either reject sound exegesis or reject the Scriptures altogether; pitting verse against verse, and epistle against epistle. James Dunn serves as an example of such sad dismissal when he insists the ancient church does not “share our enlightenment,” and the question must be asked,

---

<sup>43</sup> This is especially clear in the case of 1 Peter, where the concept of the ‘household of God’ served as the core symbol of Christian communal identity, and similarly where Peter encourages rejection of society’s modes of conduct (cf. 1 Pet. 1:14-19; 2:11-12, 17; 3:8-9, 13-17; 4:1-4, 12-19; 5:2-3).

<sup>44</sup> Due to time limitations, I was not able to consider the complex matter of ethical injunctions to slaves, as the *haustafeln* treat slavery in due course and with no sense of pressure (e.g. 1 Peter 2:18-20, cf. Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 3:22-25). I heartily recommend the work of Benjamin Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishers, 2012), who critically engages William Webb’s *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001). Webb, and those in his train, draw parallels between the gender debate and the slavery issue. Consequently, they maintain that in the same way the New Testament establishes an ethic that ultimately led to the manumission of slaves, it likewise ‘liberates’ women. An important dissimilarity between relevant texts on gender and slavery is that the former are grounded in creation, unlike the institution of slavery.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, “Why Family Matters for Early Christian Literature,” in D. L. Balch and C. Osiek (eds.) *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 347.

he adds, “if the [household codes] can be regarded as Scripture for the church of today”!<sup>46</sup> In reaction to the larger ‘egalitarian’ theories that seek a similar amputation of the Bible, John Elliott rejects the theory that Jesus was a revolutionary egalitarian and founded a community that put into practice a ‘discipleship of equals.’ He concludes:

“As no discipleship of equals was founded by Jesus, so none was introduced following His death. Attention to household and family following Jesus’ death and instruction on household conduct did not entail an “abandonment” of equality and a ‘reversion’ to patriarchalism, but continuation of a concentration on household and family initiated by Jesus.”<sup>47</sup>

Far and away from rejecting God’s Word, the household codes (in their widest frame of reference) demonstrate that the church and the family unit were designed to be complementary, compatible, and harmonious; even as the leadership of a church is called toward “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4:12), this must include the ministry that is commanded to take place within the household relationships—that ‘children should grow in the fear and admonition of the Lord,’ and leaders be qualified by the very responsibilities ordained by God for them (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9), that they might fulfill the pattern of discipleship expressed in the household codes not merely within but *through* their ministry!

This will not come about through church-growth strategies that actually undermine the unity, roles, and calling of the family, nor can we expect to discipleship of family life in contexts where the unity and roles of the family are usurped by well-intentioned structures that inevitably play into a consumeristic approach to the faith. Furthermore, much ink has been spilt (especially in light of the ‘Refo500’) about the possibility of post-Christendom ‘reformation’ occurring through new ecumenical impulses; surely (such advocate suppose) the scenes of doctrinal ‘hurdles’ being overcome in a sweep of ‘unity’ will advance the cause of Christ. Far from bringing about reformation in the church, this only further erodes the cause of God and truth.

The ‘ecumenism’ of this variety endeavors to keep a Hus from his writings, a Luther from his theses, and a Wycliffe from his lexicon! Needless to say, reformation will not come about from bundling together what remains to be burned. “As [Marty] Lloyd-Jones said about some

---

<sup>46</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The Household Rules in the New Testament,” in S. C. Barton (ed.) *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 60.

<sup>47</sup> John H. Elliott, “The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11.2 (2003), 173.

ecumenical endeavor or other; ‘putting all the ecclesiastical corpses into one graveyard will not bring about a resurrection’!<sup>48</sup> If we are to tell such ‘enemies of Judah and Benjamin’ that they “may do nothing with us to build” (Ezra 4:3), how is church reformation to be sought? There are several crucial answers to this question, but not least among them is the need for marriages and families to be disciplined unto the commands and example of Christ. The English Puritan John Brinsley (1600-1665) gives just such a charge:

“Would we have the church’s floor purged? Let every one of us purge his own floor! For every man to sweep before his own door is the next way to make the street clean. For every one to purge his own floor, is the next way to have the church’s floor purged. Home reformation is the first step, and a good step to church reformation. Here we begin the work, every one at home: the reforming of our selves, and those belonging to us; it is our Savior’s speech to those good women, which lamented and bewailed Him going to His passion: “daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. Hear the church ... speaking in a like language to her daughters: “daughters ... reform not me, but reform yourselves and your children.” Not that [only] private Christians may have an eye to public reformation, but the main business which they should be most intent about is home reformation.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusion: Marriage for the King**

In a recent work, James Davidson Hunter describes his vision of Christian living in late modernity.<sup>50</sup> His vision is largely derived from Jeremiah 29:4-7, with its obvious calling to the “exiles” of the world described in 1 Peter 1:1 (cf. 2:11-17). He proposes a model of *faithful presence*, standing upon the view that our ‘bottom-up’ sensibility of cultural change must cede to a more institutional (‘top-down’) approach. This is precisely the point that faithfulness to the import of the Biblical presentation of family applies pressure. Though combatting rampant individualism is certainly a battle-line worth holding, Hunter’s failure to enlarge the ‘institution’ of *family* to serve as a vital bridge from the individual to larger communal cultural institutions presents a failure to understand the logic of relationality in the New Testament. When the church and the family, as

---

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Empires of Dirt*, *ibid.*, 199.

<sup>49</sup> John Brinsley (C. Matthew McMahon, ed.), *Church Reformation Tenderly Handled* (Coconut Creek: Puritan Publications, 2013), 60.

<sup>50</sup> J. D. Hunter, *To Change the World*, *op. cit.*

two spheres ordained and ordered by God, are properly understood and aligned, the influence of generations is most thoroughly forged. Indeed, the fundamental significance of the household codes and related texts regarding familial roles toward culture-formation should not be easily passed over. For example, one might consider the household codes as part of what Alan Kreider calls the “patient ferment” of the early church;<sup>51</sup> that he fails to include this in his analysis becomes a striking absence. Hunter’s call in *To Change the World* is to be like ‘sons of Issachar, knowing the times’ of our generation. To Hunter’s point, a ‘faithful presence’ in this generation “requires that Christians understand the unique and evolving character of our times.”<sup>52</sup> I likewise appreciate his timely reminder that Christians “must renounce the dominant script of the world and embrace the alternative script that is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the Church.”<sup>53</sup> It is good to summon a ‘faithful presence’ toward “the highest ideals and practices of human flourishing,”<sup>54</sup> but, what is lacking is the summons to a faithful *proclamation*. After all, our pervasive commission (Matt. 28:19-20) is not creating human flourishing but rather discipling the nations!

Accordingly, we should see as suspect any approach that, with monograph-length labors in systematic theology and intertextual exegesis, concludes “wives, submit to your husbands” (Col. 3:18) in fact means the very *opposite*; or that “husbands...love [your] wives as your own bodies” (Eph. 5:28) is merely sentimental! Such dodges can be accomplished by active rejection in the hands of egalitarian skeptics *as much as* by church structures and leaders that do not model, instruct, and engage according to the warrant of Christ’s kingship over marriage and the family. This was formative for the communal identity of the earliest Christians, and through their faithfulness became a leavening agent in the dough of paganism. John Elliott concludes:

“However much we moderns and heirs of the American and French revolutions cherish the hard won prize of political and legal (and in some domains economic and social) equality, we must as honest historians acknowledge that this is a development of the modern era and not to be found in the societies and even mentalities of antiquity ... Jesus turned to the οἶκος and the family as the focus of His ministry and basis of His teaching

---

<sup>51</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> J. D. Hunter, *To Change the World*, *ibid.*, 197.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 237.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 279.

concerning the reign of God. This focus on household and family as both basis and model for the subsequent movement was maintained by His followers after His death ... The household provided one of the chief models, if not *the* root metaphor, for depicting the communal identity, unity, intimacy, and loyalty of the believers in relation to God, Jesus Christ, and one another.”<sup>55</sup>

The church in the West has largely abandoned the centrality of the local church in terms of equipping individuals and families according to both the patterns and restrictions of the Scriptures. May the Lord give wisdom and resolve to revive the Biblically defined roles within and function for the family, and the churches that are both comprised of them and called to disciple the members thereof. Kuyper again lays out the charge:

“The church ... has a most solemn task to fulfill for and in the family. It may not abandon the family to its own lot. It does not have to pass through locked doors; the church has the right to enter in the name of him who is the King of the church and also the King of the family. The church, and not the world, has to tell the family how to be in order to honor Christ. It has to guard against the desecration of marriage, and with the help of the government it must also oppose every wicked notion circulating in the public mind concerning free love, polygamy, and divorce, so as to protect Christian marriage in the life of the nation as the foundation for a Christian society. The church must find avenues to fight against the sin of sexual immorality, which in all kinds of ways always serves to attack the family, uproots its very foundations, and consumes with its curse whatever falls into its clutches. By the power of its word and by its influence, the church must resist every form of evil that might undermine marriage and thereby rob the family of its greatest honor.”<sup>56</sup>

May the Lord help each of our ministries to recover the relationally rich nature of the local church as ‘*the* family of God’ by following the Biblical patterns for worship, discipleship, and hospitality.<sup>57</sup> The reformation of the church ought to begin with the reformation of the family, and that itself begins with godly marriages. With this in view, Kuyper calls us to the first footholds of such a noble and needful desire:

---

<sup>55</sup> J. H. Elliott, *ibid.*, 207.

<sup>56</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, kindle loc. 7862-70.

<sup>57</sup> The significance of hospitality is a further area vital for discipleship (cf. 1 Peter 4:9). See Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2018).

“For a family to be Christian, three things must be present in it through the Spirit of Christ and the result of his work. The first is the restoration of what sin and misery have corrupted. The second is the elevation of original family life to its ideal. And thirdly, in order that this blessing might not be passing but fix its roots in the family and seek to be nourished there, the family must sanctify its communion by establishing a family altar ... so as to give to God the honor and worship He is due for what He (in His grace) has given the family and to ask Him to bless its life. Only in this way can Christ exercise His dominion as our King over the family as well. Only in this way will He be honored as King in the family and through the family. The good things that happen will proceed from Him through his Spirit. And ... the exalted grace they enjoy in family life, comes to them from their God only for the sake of Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

Above all, may the Lord strengthen what remains weak within our marriages and families, that they may truly be *for the King*. Amen.

---

<sup>58</sup> A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, *ibid.*, kindle loc. 6138-46.