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THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM ON PRAYER: RELEVANCE OF A 16TH CENTURY CONFESSION FOR 21ST CENTURY HOUSEHOLDS?

FOR THE CHILDREN OF AFRICA

ABSTRACT

In a world characterized by power abuse and violence, *where* and *how* would people with the life-affirming ethos of God's alternative kingdom be formed? In view of this challenge, the essay explores the potential of the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism (on prayer) for moral formation in Christian households. It is believed that, through facilitating transformative encounters with the living God, the Catechism holds the potential also to shape (young) people's imagination and behaviour in present-day (African) contexts, provided that a critical-constructive awareness of the hierarchical origins of New Testament household codes be nurtured alongside it.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article explores the potential functioning of the Heidelberg Catechism in Christian households today, with special reference to the importance of prayer as discussed in its third part (*Sundays 45-52*). In the introduction of the tercentenary edition of *The Heidelberg Catechism, in German, Latin and English, with an Historical Introduction* (published in 1863 by the Direction of the German Reformed Church in the USA),¹ the Committee

1 Henceforth referred to as *HC 1863*.

responsible for commemorating the 300th anniversary of *The Catechism*² stated as follows (p. 40):

It was not considered by any means enough to have it prepared and published by authority; it was intended to have it wrought into *the very life of the people, that it might give form and shape, unity and harmony, to their general faith*; and no pains were spared ... to bring it into universal, vigorous practical use. It was to be a book in every way for the whole people (italics added).

After its first publication in 1563, the Elector Frederick III, who had initiated the project, solemnly committed the Catechism to ministers of education and religion, “charging them to make use of it constantly and diligently in their work” (HC 1863:40-41). The Catechism was meant to form an integral part, “the very ground and basis ... of the whole church system of the Palatinate” (p. 41). It was meant to support and enrich the preaching of the bible and to supply pastors with the vocabulary to do so.

Regarding its early history of reception, the Committee further reported (HC 1863:66):

The greatest attention was paid to catechetical instruction in the Netherlands. Here, no less than in the Palatinate, it became an institution, embracing in its operations the entire economy of education and religion. *It must begin in the family*, go forward in the school, and perfect its work finally in the great congregation, *as a necessary discipline for both young and old*. The pastors must faithfully keep up the afternoon service on the Catechism every Sunday; besides visiting the schools frequently, and holding catechetical exercises, once a week if possible, *in private houses* (italics added).

My interest in remembering the Heidelberg Catechism especially lies with families/households as an important part of its original target audience. I am intrigued to understand *how* the Catechism was supposed to serve as a lens through which the story of Jesus of Nazareth was retold specifically within the sixteenth century Palatinate context, and how this particular way of retelling the Christian story was supposed to lead to a comforting understanding of the entire gospel. I am further interested in how *The HC* may again serve as a lens through which the gospel of Jesus Christ can be understood to subvert notions of hierarchy and power today, transforming households into safe space, into communities of moral discernment where (grand)parents and children may learn to become wise readers of scripture and to live faithfully according to its perspectives on God and humanity.

2 Henceforth referred to as *The HC*.

The article therefore explores ancient, New Testament and present-day households as primary context for moral formation. My focus is on the *proposed world* (Ricoeur 1975) opened up and mediated by the Catechism in general, and the third part (on thankfulness and prayer) in particular, and its relevance (as interpretation of the *Our Father* prayer in Mat 6:9-13) for faith communities today. As a Reformed confession from the sixteenth century province of Kurpfalz in Germany, it was meant as an educational document (primarily yet not exclusively) for the youth (Jonker 1994:92), but also as a pastoral document of comfort in a time of social and religious turbulence (cf. *HC* 1863:11-127). No wonder it has soon afterwards, and through the ages, often been read by refugees and marginalised people experiencing all kinds of misery and alienation (*Elend, A 2, 117*). As in the case of the New Testament texts, the rhetorical function of *The HC* (with its explicit focus on Jesus Christ and not the particular exigence from which it originated) continues to invite faith communities to experience this *likewise*.

2. COMMUNITIES OF CHARACTER

Subsequent to the birth of *The HC* in sixteenth century Germany, an important paradigm shift in the development of moral thinking would be introduced by the (European) Enlightenment, and by what is today known as modernity. For the first time in history morality is characterised by the thinking, questioning individual, severed from shared notions of the highest good for humans and communities (as was typical in the classical period of the Greeks). A wide variety of ethical positions develops in this phase, and different forms of democracy with its emphasis on individual rights. Also the African continent with its communal ethos and social institutions is profoundly influenced and challenged by these developments (Oduyoye 2001:22-38).

In the twentieth century, however, more and more people realized that an ethics of autonomy, of personal conviction and principle, was not sufficient to deal with the complex issues of the time, and that individuals no longer had the collective power to influence the morality of society.³ Theologians who made major contributions to the development of an

3 It was particularly during the aftermath of the First World War that German sociologist Max Weber problematised the Kantian ethics based on personal conviction. Reflecting on the kind of people Europe needed to build a new society after the war, Weber pleads for an ethics of *responsibility* that would ask about the consequences of people's decisions and actions. For him, that means listening to others, respecting their opinion, enquiring with them about the best possible future (cf. Smit 1994:20-21).

ethics of responsibility were *inter alia* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Richard Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye.⁴ These scholars are all, from within their contexts, deeply concerned about the formation of moral people. The fundamental ethical question becomes one of *identity*. It is believed that who people are will determine what they see as moral challenges, and how they will respond. This, again, is primarily determined by the communities of character (family, neighbourhood, church, school, workplace) in which they live, where they learn to practise specific virtues and act responsibly (MacIntyre 1984).⁵

Further, as critique to Western male-dominated theology for centuries, Schüssler Fiorenza, doyenne of feminist biblical scholarship in the twentieth century, stresses the importance of a discipleship of equals among Christian believers. Characteristic of disciples of Jesus, she argues, is a spirituality of ethical interpretation and wisdom that accounts for the *implied rhetorical effect* of the biblical writings, for what they wished to *do* in the lives of their audiences in terms of justice and well-being (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 2011). Since Christianity's foundational documents originated from (and are often read) within patriarchal societies, deeply influenced by the ethos of empire, communities of character are profoundly challenged to be safe spaces where open and bold conversations on the bible, culture and gender can take place, and where gender-inclusive language – also with respect to God – can be nurtured, even against the bible's patriarchal grain and often devastating histories of interpretation.

These shifts pose a great challenge to (Christian) communities of faith today, even amidst so-called democracies with gender-friendly constitutions and far reaching bills of human rights. Although post-1994 South Africa, for example, bears the promise of a more accountable understanding of human dignity, it ironically often seems rather to experience a strengthening of the deeply entrenched sense of alienation

4 For Bonhoeffer, German theologian during the Nazi regime, the most important theological question is *Who is Christ for us today?* From there he develops his notion of *discipleship as transformative responsibility*, which would radically challenge communities of character with regard to their influence in society (cf. Mouton 2002:207-210).

5 Hauerwas popularised questions of moral identity and responsibility in his *ethics of communities of character* (1981). For him, people are formed as moral human beings within a particular community. What they do is the result of who they are, of where they belong. In his entire ethical project Hauerwas pleads for a revaluation and integration of the categories of identity, character, vision, virtue and narrative for the moral life. For Christians, the implication is that their ultimate responsibility is to live according to the biblical narratives they celebrate in worship.

among people (Mouton 2001:114-117). Instead of celebrating the richness of plurality and complementarity, of *sharing* one another's identities and stories of joy and pain, the 'postmodern' attitude for many becomes synonymous with a certain *disintegration*, with a *loss* of orientation and cohesion, the *loss* of a collective moral identity, memory and destination, and consequently, the *loss* of a corresponding ethos of dignity and respect for life. As far as the (ecumenical) church is concerned, tendencies of disintegration and lack of memory go against its distinctive nature as a diverse yet liberating, life-giving *community*. Such trends often tragically witness to the reality that Christians somehow have lost their orientation, their sense of calling, their *primary identity as Christians*. This is essentially a *theological* problem, which often manifests itself as a '*moral crisis*,' but in actual fact goes much deeper. It therefore calls for a careful and coherent *theological* response.

Yet, in a world (still) characterized by a general mood of exile and misery, alienation and despair (*Elend*), *where* and *how* could the sharing of identity and story, the comfort of belonging, be re(dis)covered? In a world characterized by corruption and conflict, power abuse and violence, *where* and *how* would people of character be formed – people with the identity awareness, memory and vision of God's alternative kingdom?

Since Christianity is primarily about *relations*, we are led to focus on the *transformative encounter between the God of the bible and people* as the ultimate source for a sustainable Christian spirituality and ethos. I therefore argue that Christian communities (households in particular) serve as powerful *social networks* in providing the stability and security where adults and children may learn to live faithfully (albeit critically) in the "world" of the bible, where they learn to love and be loved, and to re-tell their own stories in the light of the biblical story (Birch & Rasmussen 1989; Fowl & Jones 1991).

However, since the hierarchical language of the New Testament *household codes* – through their history of reception – continues to influence the structure and functioning of family, church and societies in deeply detrimental ways (fostering wife abuse and low self-esteem in women), I first turn to the nature of ancient households as probable backdrop to references to household relations in the New Testament.

3. EARLY CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLDS AS PRIMARY CONTEXT FOR MORAL FORMATION

Through the ages, households served as primary space for the affirmation and development of human relations and moral conduct. At the most basic

level of kinship in the ancient Mediterranean world was the *household* (*oikos*). It was an important constituent structure in the Greek *polis* and Roman empire, where relationships of power, protection, submission, honour and duty were to be properly shaped if a city was to flourish morally. The structure of the *oikos* was patriarchal (i.e. hierarchical) in nature, with fatherly responsibility as legitimate rule over free citizens, and the submission of women taken for granted. The ancient notion of *household* was much broader than the family in modern societies, including not only immediate relatives but also slaves, freedmen, and hired workers, as well as tenants and partners in trade or craft (Meeks 1983:75-76; Moxnes 1997:14-27). As such it was “a unit of identity, solidarity, and status” (Hanson 1996:66).

Reference to household *codes*, as embodiment of ancient household ethos, occurs in the New Testament in the so-called deutero-Pauline, Pastoral and Catholic letters.⁶ Household code discourse was of central interest in Schüssler Fiorenza’s groundbreaking work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, first published in 1983. Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument (1985:251-259) concerning the introduction of patriarchy into the New Testament via the ancient household code continues to be highly influential in feminist theological discourse. It fundamentally critiques and challenges the ways in which Western culture and theology have generated an anthropological dualism by adopting ancient household rules as model for the state (cf. Balch 1988:35). Feminist theology is thus committed not only to subvert the devastating effects of these choices, but also to uncover its political roots in the patriarchal household of antiquity.⁷

6 The basic form of the NT codes consists of “three pairs of reciprocal exhortations addressing the relationship between wife and husband, children and father, slaves and masters. In each case, the socially subordinate first member of the pair is exhorted to obedience to the superordinate second. The formal structure of such a household code, then, consists of address (wives), exhortation (submit to your husbands), and motivation (as is fitting in the Lord)” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:253; cf. Balch 1981).

7 In subsequent publications, Schüssler Fiorenza continues to remind professional guilds and faith communities of *what is at stake in the interpretation of the household codes*, and works out a process and method that would empower women to read “against the grain” of the patriarchal rhetoric of the bible (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992:7). She argues that the domination of such language “is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism and colonialism” (1999:10; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2011).

More recent postcolonial readings of the household codes challenged long-held views about the implied function of these texts by subverting imperial strategies through postcolonial theories. The usefulness of these theories for exploration of the place of early Christianity within the Roman Empire lies on various levels, *inter alia* in

how the colonized themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment (Sugirtharajah 2002:11; cf. Dube 2000; MacDonald 2010b:80).

The concept of household is *reinterpreted* in the New Testament in a variety of contexts. It forms the basic cell of the Christian movement and its nucleus is often an existing household.

(T)he synoptic Gospels contain several sayings and episodes where Jesus relativizes biological ties in favor of the new family that is established in the Reign of God. 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk. 3:35) (Thatcher 2007:32).⁸

According to John Elliott (1991), a dramatic shift regarding the two basic institutions of Judaism and early Christianity, namely the temple and *oikos*, is described in the book of Acts. Elliott (1991:212) succinctly describes Luke's deliberate contrast between

temple as a holy place of prayer and sacrifice, priests, rulers, law and lawyers, purity observance; and *household* as homes, family members, servants, friends, meals, hospitality, and domestic life.⁹

Throughout the teachings of the Lukan Jesus,

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- 8 Members of the Pauline groups speak of themselves as *family*, using rhetoric of kinship and affection, of belonging, blessing and mutuality: God is their Father, they are God's children, sisters and brothers *in God's new household* (cf. Eph 2:19-22). They use special familial terms not only to refer to themselves but also to distinguish themselves from 'outsiders' (Meeks 1983:75-80; MacDonald 2010a; cf. Elliott 1991:228).
- 9 In the Lukan economy of salvation, Elliott (1991:213) argues, these two systems represent opposed types of social institutions. Between the two, "(o)nly ... the household is capable of embodying socially and ideologically the structures, values, and goals of an inclusive gospel of universal salvation ... For the Christians (of Luke-Acts) the *oikos* constitutes not simply an additional form of social identity and religious allegiance alongside others such as the temple, the synagogue or the city. The Christian *oikos* is rather a decisive alternative according to Luke."

the household serves as the most apposite sphere and symbol of social life for illustrating features of life under the reign of God. In this connection the institution of kinship and family ... provides a model for a community of fictive kin united by the bonds of mercy, faith, and filial obedience. The boundaries of this symbolical family or household of God are expanded to include the marginalized, the outcasts, Samaritans, and Gentiles (Elliott 1991:227).

Within the first eight chapters of Acts

the scene shifts with regularity between the *household*, where the believers assemble, pray, receive the Spirit, break bread and generously share all things in common, and the *temple* as the center of political and religious control, a place for seeking alms, and the scene and object of conflict (arrest and imprisonment, critique of temple rulers, mob violence, beating, and death) (Elliott 1991:215).

According to Elliott, a major transition thus becomes apparent from temple to household throughout Luke-Acts.

In Acts the household becomes increasingly prominent as the scene and focus of the Christian movement which gradually shifts from Jerusalem and the temple to the households of the Diaspora (Elliott 1991:216).¹⁰

Within the context of household, *table fellowship* generally served as the most important matrix for the Jesus movement's social and moral formation.¹¹ In the alternative household of the early Christians, God was experienced as a

merciful, generous, and forgiving 'father' ... Jesus is recognized as 'Son of God' ... (B)elievers ... become the true 'children' of the

10 Elliott (1991:217, cf. 224-230) continues to say that "it is the household which gradually replaces the temple as the actual sphere of God's saving presence. The temple, at first the locale of hoped for salvation and symbol of Israel's holy union with God, eventually is unmasked as the political concentration of power opposed to God's people and the truly righteous. The household, on the other hand, once the gathering place of the powerless and the marginalized, eventually emerges as the institution where God's spirit is truly active and where familial relations, shared resources, and communal values concretize the vision of a salvation available to all the families of the earth."

11 For different types of Jewish and early Christian meals (symposium, passover, funerary meals), social and anthropological aspects of (family) meals, and Jesus' meals and table companions, see Neyrey 1991; 1996:159-182; Osiek & Balch 1997:193-214; Balch & Osiek 2003. For women at public meals, cf. Corley 1993.

heavenly Father ... 'brothers and sisters' one with another ... In this kingdom/household, Jesus is the generous lord and 'householder' (*oikodespotēs*) ... The meals of which he speaks ... and at which he serves ... are all signs of the inclusiveness, fellowship, status reversal, reciprocal service, and joy typical of life in the kingdom/household of God (Elliott 1991:228).

According to Acts 2:42, the early Jesus followers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." For them, the common meal became a central ritual of remembering God's providence, of thanksgiving (*eucharisteo*), worship and solidarity. Storytelling expressed their *anamnesis*, their memory of God's mercy through Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, as well as its (re-)appropriation in the present.

4. THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND PRESENT-DAY FAMILIES?

It is in this regard that I believe the third section of *The HC* on prayer (Q 116-129) has a crucial contribution to make in present-day households. For the Catechism, thankfulness and prayer form an integral and spontaneous part of God's gracious actions towards humankind through God's Word and Spirit:

Question 116 asks: "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?"
 Answer: "Because it is the chief part of thankfulness (*das vornehmste Stück der Dankbarkeit*) which God requires of us, and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who earnestly and without ceasing ask them of Him, and render thanks unto Him for them."¹²

The last part of the Catechism on thankfulness – as the comforting promises of God regarding the first two sections – forms part and parcel of what Christ makes available to believers through the Spirit. The Spirit of God makes us sincerely willing and ready to live for God (A 1), brings forth fruit of gratitude in us (A 64), renews us after the image of Christ (A 86), and quickens us to live according to God's will (A 90-115). The fresh, personal and dialogical style of the Catechism creates a positive alternative world that its readers may inhabit, and that invites them to adopt new roles (A 111). For a family to be reminded daily of God's gracious gifts in Christ and the Spirit, and to respond in thankfulness and awe, in reaffirming their deepest identity – whose they are and where they ultimately belong – is

12 Direct quotes from *The HC* are from the *Modern English Version* (RCUS, 2005).

all part of God's free and abundant grace (A 86). Such gratitude finds its deepest expression, according to *Question 116-128*, in our prayers – as the most important part of our thankfulness.

When it comes to the intended rhetorical effect of the *Our Father prayer* in the lives of its audiences, the Catechism yet again invites Christian families to ponder God's alternative for their often broken and stressed lives (Q 120-121). The first three petitions deal with God's *name*, God's *kingdom*, and God's *will* (A 122-124). The last three deal with *human needs* – our need for *daily bread*, for *forgiveness*, and the need to be *preserved and strengthened by God's Spirit against temptation* (Q 125-127). The first privilege individuals and families are invited to share, is to call on God as "our Father." *Question 120* reads: "Why did Christ command us to address God thus: 'Our Father'?" And the *Answer*:

To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer that childlike reverence for and trust in God, which are to be the ground of our prayer, namely, that God has become our Father through Christ, and will much less deny us what we ask of him in faith than our parents refuse us earthly things (cf. Burger 2004:25-33).

The first petition concerns respect and honour for God's holy name (Q 122; cf. Burger 2004:35-44). The second petition is for God's alternative kingdom to come (in a context of empire). *Answer 123* reads:

"Your kingdom come;" that is, so govern us by Your Word and Spirit, that we submit ourselves to You always more and more; preserve and increase Your Church; destroy the works of the devil, every power that exalts itself against You, and all wicked devices formed against Your Holy Word, until the fullness of Your kingdom come, wherein You shall be all in all.

Answer 123 of *The HC* challenges its readers to *remember* God's kingdom presented in Jesus Christ – God's kingdom of impartiality, compassion and care – and to have their lives fundamentally determined by it (cf. Berkelbach Van der Sprenkel s.a.:52-58; Delleman 1966:174-192). For the first audiences of *both* Matthew's Gospel and *The Heidelberg Catechism*, profound comfort was offered through Jesus' teaching of his disciples on how to pray: "Our Father in heaven, your kingdom come" (Mat 6:10), as well as the closing doxology according to some late manuscripts, "For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever!" (Q and A 128).

Answer 124 teaches us to pray that God's will may be done in the lives of our families and in the entire cosmos. Each of the remaining petitions potentially becomes a moment of profound (re)orientation and

(trans-)formation. The prayer for “our daily bread” reminds us that God is the source of all good things and that all our hard labour and anxieties are in vain if God does not bless us in all of that. At the same time it makes us mindful of others (who are deprived of many “good things” and) who may not share this perspective. *Answer 125* reads as follows:

“Give us this day our daily bread;” that is, be pleased to provide for all our bodily need, so that we may thereby acknowledge that You are the only fountain of all good, and that without Your blessing neither our care and labor, nor Your gifts, can profit us; that we may therefore withdraw our trust from all creatures and place it in You alone.

Likewise with the petition for forgiveness... (*Q and A 126*):

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;” that is, be pleased, for the sake of Christ’s blood, not to impute to us miserable sinners our manifold transgressions, nor the evil which always clings to us; as we also find this witness of Your grace in us, that it is our full purpose heartily to forgive our neighbor.

As well as the sixth petition... (*Q and A 127*):

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;” that is, since we are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment, and besides, our deadly enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, assail us without ceasing, be pleased to preserve and strengthen us by the power of Your Holy Spirit, that we may make firm stand against them and not be overcome in this spiritual warfare, until finally complete victory is ours.

The *Our Father* prayer as well as the Catechism (it seems) significantly conclude with “Amen.” *Question 129* asks: “What is the meaning of the word ‘Amen’?” The *Answer*: “‘Amen’ means: so shall it truly and surely be. For my prayer is more certainly heard of God than I feel in my heart that I desire these things of Him,” *inter alia* with reference to 2 Corinthians 1:20 – “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.”

In the final analysis, it is *our comfort, our deepest freedom, our ultimate safety* that we – “with body and soul, both in life and death, are not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ” (*A 1*, adapted to plural),

who through his Spirit teaches us daily (as individuals and families) to live and to pray as He did.¹³

While the household has through the ages been regarded as a primary context for moral formation, “table fellowship” probably remains the ideal space in (Christian) households for nurturing primary relationships (*and* welcoming strangers), for sharing daily experiences, for strengthening a sense of belonging and solidarity, for acknowledging our ultimate dependence on God, for learning to listen and speak with dignity and respect.¹⁴

However, since the household code material of the New Testament produced such abusive histories of interpretation (particularly in Africa), such a vision will have to problematise basic assumptions about patriarchal households structures, and will have to entail a simple (workable), yet profound exegetical and hermeneutical process. My concern is the people who are (still) marginalised, oppressed and brutalised because of society’s often unquestioned presuppositions (cf. Mollenkott 2003:51,56). My proposal for reading the Ephesians code in view of the formation of present-day “households of character” wishes to take this challenge seriously.¹⁵

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- 13 Readers of both *The HC* and the bible share the responsibility of reading these documents in ethically accountable ways, that is, within their literary-rhetorical and socio-cultural contexts. In both instances it would be of crucial importance to ask what these texts were supposed to *do* to their audiences *before* we ask about their relevance for today. Both the NT texts (deeply embedded within the 1st century Hellenistic world) and *The HC* (deeply embedded within divided 16th century Germany) originated from within contexts of empire, of competing loyalties and stratified societies socially as well as religiously. Both, however, offered radically alternative perspectives to the status quo. Both continue to invite their readers dynamically to imagine themselves in their textual worlds, and to consider the positions and roles they offer.
- 14 Christian families *choose* the sources and rituals that feed their memory and vision – their God images, authoritative texts, and prayer life. However, the disciplined choice for regular moments of learning/discernment poses enormous challenges amidst the busy schedules of present-day families. Yet, is the “family table” (as an inclusive metaphor for all expressions of “family” and “table”) not supposed to be a daily reminder of the eucharist, where old and young are reminded of what it means to have a heavenly Father, a caring parent-God? It is in this sense that *The HC* (with its personal, dialogical style) seems to be an ideal instrument for educators in general and parents in particular in systematically guiding children through the understanding of their faith.
- 15 Ephesians has through the ages played an important role in confessional documents, including the Barmen declaration and Belhar confession. It is referred to 38 times in *The HC* (only once to the household code – Eph 5:26 in

5. TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF EPH 5:21-6:9 FOR PRESENT-DAY “HOUSEHOLDS OF CHARACTER”?

Ephesians is generally divided into four major sections: the opening (1:1-2), a first and second main section (1:3-3:21 and 4:1-6:20 respectively), and the ending (6:21-24). Both the greetings at the beginning and farewell wishes at the end contain powerful blessings, summarising the document’s view on humanity as one of wholeness in relation to God and fellow-believers. The eulogy of 1:3-14 announces the thrust of the epistle as a confession of faith, a celebration of God’s gracious blessings towards all people *in Christ*.

The second main section consists primarily of paraenetic elements directed at the church. These are interwoven with theological and Christological motivations, and are intrinsically linked to, and informed by, the first main section. The structural and semantic coherence between the two main sections is indicated by various conjunctions (4:1, 17, 25; 5:15) which indicate the sections they introduce as direct and logical consequences of what was said before. The essence of Ephesians 1-3 (a new humanity in relation to Christ and fellow-believers) is thus explicated in terms of a life worthy of their calling (4:1).

Throughout this section, Christ’s *transformative power*, qualified by his humility as *sacrificial love*, serves as ultimate motivation for their new behaviour (4:32-5:2). Ephesians 5:15-6:9 illustrate the principle of the new life under the influence of the Spirit in terms of the three household relationships: husband and wife, children and parents, slaves and masters. The general introduction of 5:15-20 is followed by a reinterpreted version of the Greco-Roman *Haustafel* in 5:21-6:9. The radical example of the indwelling Christ (cf. 4:32; 5:2) and the Spirit (4:30; 5:18; 6:18) serve to *empower* and *transform* these relationships. The present participles following 5:18 (“Be filled with the Spirit ...”) as well as the imperatives in the household code indicate a process of continuous formation in accordance with the community’s new identity in Christ. The recipients were to exhibit the lifestyle of wise people. They were to live as God’s newly established people *in Christ* (Eph 2:14-15), in peace and unity as one collective family, healed and reconciled by the power of the triune God’s *self-giving* love.¹⁶

Answer 54), thereby contributing significantly to the Catechism’s framework and alternative world. My proposed reading of the Eph code involves a brief exploration of three interrelated yet distinguishable dimensions: the literary thrust and coherence of the entire epistle, its socio-cultural and moral world, and its implied rhetorical effect.

16 Chris de Wet (2012:400-412) argues that the NT *Haustafeln* exhibit the typical features of an ancient social contract, and are (re)appropriated in the NT for

In this sense it may be argued that 5:21 and 6:9c respectively frame the household code by emphasising its new perspective: “Submit to one another *out of reverence for Christ* ... and *there is no favouritism with him.*” It thus offers a reconfiguring of its patriarchal structure from a Christological perspective.

Yet, the hierarchical language of the code comes as a surprise after references to a new humanity in the first section (2:15). There is a certain tension between what the code seems to require and what Ephesians proclaims about the cosmos and believers’ place *in Christ*. It seems that the author was grappling to appropriate and articulate his soteriological vision of God and the *ekklesia* through the limited patriarchal language and metaphors available to him. It may thus be easy to idealise or romanticise the language of power in the household code while *either* failing to account for the patriarchal nature of ancient societies *or* capturing the radicality of Jesus’ teaching about the reversal of power in the Reign of God.¹⁷

Aware of the complex tension between the patriarchal language of 5:21-6:9 and the rest of the document, contemporary readers remain challenged with tricky issues of interpretation. On the one hand, we are invited to reinterpret the passage from the profound theological-rhetorical thrust of the letter. On the other hand, hermeneutically sensitive receivers may wonder: Does the language of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 (of mutuality *and* submission) challenge and significantly *redescribe* conventional connotations with a hierarchically ordered morality? Or does it reinforce a cultural-patriarchal pattern of subordination by merely *describing* reality, by reimposing a form of subtle and faith-sanctioned sexist hegemony? Questions regarding the literary (in)coherence of the Ephesians text have to be explored further in view of its socio-cultural and rhetorical contexts.

the sake of group cohesion and identity. “The author of Ephesians implies that the social contract the *haustafeln* represent is based on a larger, authoritative contract – namely the covenant between Christ and the church” (2012:401).

- 17 The code appears to be more ideologically complex and rather represents a dynamic wrestling, a transitional *process* where identity had to be negotiated time and again. It is probably “best understood as encoding *both* culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements” (MacDonald 2010b:67; emphasis added; cf. MacDonald 2004). Reconfigured household codes in the NT are typically phrased in patriarchal and hierarchical language, yet often surrounded by God images of impartiality, inclusion, provision, nurturing, protection and/or by Christological motivations, which provide them with a radically new orientation (cf. Balla 2003:165-178; Mouton 2002:71-74). From here ‘authority’ and ‘submission’ are redefined according to the example of Christ. These notions take on altogether different dimensions to that of the power and authority structures of society (cf. Kittredge 1998).

A second phase of my proposed reading of the Ephesians code addresses the need for a *socio-cultural analysis* of ancient households and their domestic codes. This has broadly been attended to in section three. The alternative perspective of the text is only to be appreciated once a probable picture of the world and values of the socio-cultural world behind the text become clearer (Mouton 2014:10-15; cf. Punt 2010). Through the work of scholars such as Balch (1981, 1988), Moxnes (1997, 2003), MacDonald (2010b) and De Wet (2012), we have become aware of the complexities and contingencies involved in the structure and functioning of ancient households, causing us to refrain from quick conclusions. However, if we assume that the life, death and glorification of Jesus is the primary *theological perspective* from which the author reinterpreted the Greco-Roman symbolic world, then this perspective has to be emphasised amidst the complexities presented by the text. In the process of reappropriation by later readers, the dynamic yet complex *process* of interpretation embedded in the text remains a guiding principle – more than its “static” *product*.

This brings me to my third point on the *implied rhetorical effect* of the Ephesians household code. The intended rhetorical effect of the Ephesians epistle is stated frequently and explicitly. Broadly speaking, the recipients are encouraged to live wisely for two reasons: (a) that the God who destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the God of peace and wholeness, the God with whom there is no favouritism, may be acknowledged and worshipped, and (b) that the church may be edified, built up, strengthened, encouraged (2:21 and 4:12, 16, 29). The author’s greatest concern is to maintain the unity of the church against whatever teachings threatened to divide or alienate it from its heritage.¹⁸

18 Although the implied effect of the letter as a whole may be fairly explicit, this is, as we have seen, not evident in the case of the household code with its ambivalent connection to the rest of the letter. This is where postcolonial theories have assisted us significantly in searching for a possible ‘hidden transcript’ in these codes – subtle and perhaps not so subtle motivating signals which would be recognisable only/mainly to insiders in the community, a way of expression typical of oppressed groups (cf. 3:1; 4:1; 6:10-20). With its emphasis on Christ as *lord of the entire cosmos* (1:21-22; 3:10; 4:8-10; 6:12), Eph seems to have a consistent *anti-imperial thrust*. It is therefore important to use “empire” as an exegetical lens through which to reframe the Eph household code as declaring ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ instead of the Roman Emperor. MacDonald (2010b:71) finds elements of resistance to the dominant social order in the code in the ways in which the *ekklēsia* is presented (with reference to purity, fidelity, and unity) – as expression of “the complex negotiations required with respect

The implied rhetorical effect of the God images and visions for the church referred to in the Ephesians code obviously has to be explored against the background of the hierarchical context of the Greco-Roman household codes. The *God images* referred to in the code (and the rest of the epistle), as well as the focus on *mutuality*, represent major transformative principles in the code. To underestimate these, is to violate the theological thrust not only of the code, but of the epistle as a whole (Mouton 2014:10-18; Mollenkott 2003:45-53).

6. CONCLUSION

How should Christians and others then read such scriptures – and *The HC* as a lens through which they were/are supposed to be read – *today*? How can “households of character” mediate the discernment of an alternative world, a world characterised by God’s radical presence, by God’s victory over death, with expressions of God’s life-giving kingdom versus dominating, abusive expressions of “empire” (often justified by means of these very texts)? How can Christian believers *reimagine* God’s liberating, healing presence in their personal and collective stories, even in contexts of domestic violence and the life-threatening HIV/Aids pandemic, with overburdened (grand)mothers and absent (grand)fathers?

What is needed, I believe, is a bold, prophetic hermeneutic that would allow the Christ of the scriptures and *The HC* to be God, and God’s Spirit to lead communities of faith into more imaginative and inclusive visions for Christian families today. The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnated Son of God, continues to challenge the hierarchical model of family relations transmitted by the patriarchal language of the New Testament household codes – not particularly but probably *implicitly* challenged by *The HC* – by inviting present-day families into an ethos of radical freedom and responsibility.

As the early Jesus-followers, Christian households today are challenged to be transformed into communities of (God’s) character by *accepting the open-ended rhetorical invitation of the New Testament writings to continue the story of Jesus*, by becoming characters – active participants – in this story, by embracing the new roles they offer, by embodying the alternative world and perspectives they present, doing *likewise*, not necessarily *the same*. As authoritative texts, the Ephesians code and *The HC* thus serve as ongoing invitations to critique and resist *any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire*. Anything less would confine the

to group identity in the Roman imperial world which early Christians shared with Jews” (cf. Osiek & MacDonald 2006:123-143).

God of Jesus to the (cultural) boundaries of ancient texts and confessions of the Reformed faith in ways contradictory to their theological thrust.

Ultimately, it is the choice of Christian families to give *priority* to the imaginative possibilities of God's liberating, healing love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. In a world characterised by an egocentric ethos of power abuse, an *oikos-centric* ethos of mutual respect and caring presents a radical alternative. In continuation with the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism, the saying, 'a family that prays together, stays together,' poses present-day families with a potentially life-changing challenge.

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