

BIBLIOTHECA EPHEMERIDUM THEOLOGICARUM LOVANIENSII

CCLIV

THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD
AND LOCAL HOUSEHOLDS
REVISITING THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

EDITED BY

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THE DOMESTIC CHURCH AND THE EARLY CHURCH
THE HOUSEHOLD AS CONTEXT FOR CHRISTIANIZATION IN
LATE ANTIQUITY

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay begins with a paradox¹. An honest look at the earliest Christian literature reveals disparate, even contradictory, views on family and household life. Some sayings of Jesus preserved in the Synoptic gospels suggest that the spread of the Christian message might entail profound divisions within families. For example: “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (Mt 10,35-36)². Similarly, the apostle Paul showed little interest in fostering the structures of family life or marriage. Because he expected the imminent second coming of Jesus, Paul thought it best that everyone should remain in the state in which they received the faith (1 Cor 7,26-28); the additional responsibilities of marriage and family life were seen as a source of anxiety and distraction from “the affairs of the Lord” (1 Cor 7,32-34). In later centuries, even after eschatological expectations had ebbed, texts such as these supported ascetical ideals and practices and gave short shrift to marriage, family, and household³.

But there is another side to the story. From the very beginning the spread of the gospel required not only itinerant preachers, but also married householders to provide them with lodging and material support⁴.

1. After its delivery at the INTAMS conference in Leuven, Candida Moss and Meghan Henning generously read and offered comments on this lecture. It has benefitted much from their contributions.

2. See also Mt 10,37-38 with parallels in Lk 14,26 and Mk 10,29. See also *Gospel of Thomas*, logia 55 and 101. The Lukan variant of this verse even urges Jesus’ disciples to “hate” (*misei*) their families.

3. See, e.g., the discussion in E.A. CLARK, *Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity*, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995) 356-380. On the impact of 1 Cor 7 on development of Christian asceticism, see D.G. HUNTER, *The Reception and Interpretation of Paul in Late Antiquity: 1 Corinthians 7 and the Ascetic Debates*, in L. DI TOMMASO – L. TURESCU (eds.), *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2008, 163-191.

4. See especially the work of G. THEISSEN, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, trans. M. Kohl, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1992.

Paul himself, although he was no enthusiast for marriage, encouraged Christians to remain married to non-Christians and even hoped that such a union might lead to the conversion of the unbeliever (1 Cor 7,12-16); he also cited Jesus' prohibition of divorce and remarriage, as did all three of the Synoptic gospels⁵. Moreover, Paul explicitly mentioned the Christian communities that met and worshipped in the homes of Prisca and Aquila, as well as the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16,15), "the people of Chloe" (1 Cor 1,11), and the church that met in the household of Philemon. In fact, the phrase "domestic church" originated because of these meetings in the homes of Christians⁶. By the early years of the second century the author of First Timothy could speak of the church as the "household of God" (3,15) and characterize the ideal Christian leader (the *episkopos* or "overseer") as the man who had managed his own household well and raised his children properly (1 Tm 3,4-5). Clearly, the household could not be dispensed with so easily.

These contrasting perspectives on family and household will provide the framework of this essay. I will argue that both the early Christian *critique* of domestic life and its wholesale *appropriation* were two sides of a process by which the church entered into Roman society and began, very gradually, to "christianize" that society. The household played a critical role in that process, at least partly because of the special place it occupied in the religious and political imagination of Greco-Romans. Therefore, in the first part of this essay, I will briefly discuss the role of the household in Roman society and examine some of the different attitudes we find toward it in the Christian literature of the late first and early second centuries. Then, in the second part, I will look briefly at a Christian writer from a slightly later period – Clement of Alexandria – who articulated with particular clarity the goals and values of the Christian household. What all of these teachers had in common, despite their differences, was the conviction that the Christian household could be a critical context for the transformation of human relationships under

5. 1 Cor 7,10-11, apparently alluding to the sayings preserved in Mk 10,2-9.

6. The Latin words, *domestica ecclesia*, first appeared in the Old Latin (pre-Vulgate) translations of Paul's epistles, where he refers to the "church in the house" of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16,5; 1 Cor 16,19) and of Philemon (Phlm 1,2). The *Vetus Latina* reading can be found in the Pauline commentary of Ambrosiaster. See his citation and comments in the *Commentarius in epistula ad Corinthios prima* 16,19: "*Salutant vos in domino multum Aquila et Priscilla cum domestica sua ecclesia*. Duas ecclesias memorat, publicam et domesticam. Publicam dicit, quo omnes convenient; domesticam, in qua per amicitiam colligitur. Ubicumque enim presbyter solemnina celebrat, ecclesia dicitur" (AMBROSIASTER, *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur commentarius in epistulas Paulinas*, ed. H.J. VOGELS [CSEL, 81/1-3], Wien, Hoelder – Pichler – Tempsky, 1966-1969, v. 2, p. 193).

the impact of gospel values. It was precisely this simultaneous affirmation and critique of established social relationships, I will suggest, that helped to shape the identity of the household as “domestic church” in the early centuries.

II. THE ROMAN HOUSEHOLD AND THE CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLD

First, then, the *domus*. The Roman household lay at a unique juncture between two social and cultural worlds in antiquity. On the one hand, it was the locus of all private activity; it was the realm of women, children, and slaves, in contrast to the forum or city, which was the proper arena for the activity of the freeborn male citizen. On the other hand, the household was an intrinsic part of the broader religious and political economy of the ancient world, and it was the male head of the household who was the connecting link between these two domains. In theory at least, the *paterfamilias* was the undisputed master or *dominus*, whose word was law and whose “fatherly power” (*patria potestas*) extended even to matters of life and death. Moreover, the life of the household itself was viewed as a fundamental building block of society, the foundation of a well-ordered city, state, and cosmos⁷. Pagans and Christians alike acknowledged the essentially political character of the household and the human bond of marriage that was its necessary precondition. Cicero, for example, succinctly stated the common conception in his treatise *On Duties* when he wrote: “The origin of society is in the joining (*coniugium*) of man and woman, next in children, then in the household (*domus*), all things held in common; this is the foundation of the city and, so to speak, the seed-bed of the state (*seminarium rei publicae*)”⁸.

In addition to this political dimension, the household also had specifically religious features. Commenting on this aspect of domestic piety, John Barclay has observed⁹:

7. The reverse was also the case: a disordered household was viewed as a danger to civic order and a tear in the social fabric. Hence Christians, such as the author of 1 Tm 3,4-7, endorsed the role of Christian leaders who managed their children and households well and were well regarded by outsiders.

8. *De officiis* 1.17.54, cited in C. HARRISON, *The Silent Majority: The Family in Patristic Thought*, in S.C. BARTON (ed.), *The Family in Theological Perspective*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996, 87-105, p. 89, n. 3. Augustine stated similar sentiments in the opening pages of *De bono coniugali* 1.1.

9. J.M.G. BARCLAY, *The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity*, in H. MOXNES (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, London – New York, Routledge, 1997, 66-80, p. 67.

Roman households ... honoured the hearth (*Vesta*) and the *Penates*, the deities who watched over the store-house and guaranteed the food supply. In addition, they worshipped gods of the household known as the *Lares* (probably deified spirits of dead ancestors), who were often represented by small statues or paintings ... Roman habit often associated these gods with the figure of Fortuna and the Genius of the family – specifically the Genius of the *paterfamilias* – so that the domestic cult was intimately linked with the honour and prosperity of the head of the household.

Given this strong identification of the Roman household with the religious and political life of the empire, it is not surprising that some early Christians articulated their distinctive identity by repudiating that crucial bearer of religious and political identity: the *paterfamilias* and the household he represented¹⁰.

We see this response most vividly in the second and third-century Apocryphal Acts, whose heroines, such as the virgin Thecla or the matron Mygdonia, expressed their Christian faith precisely by rejecting husbands, marriage, and household. We see it in heroes, such as the apostle Judas Thomas, who persuaded young couples to renounce sex on their wedding night. Commenting on the spirituality behind these sexual and cultural renunciations in the Apocryphal Acts, Peter Brown has written: “Married intercourse was treated as the linchpin of the towering structure of the ‘present age.’ To break the spell of the bed was to break the spell of the world. This was a world whose social structures stood condemned”¹¹. It would be easy to dismiss such stories simply as pious legends, promoted by ascetic extremists (which, to a great extent, they were), but that would be to overlook the widespread popularity of Thecla’s cult and the Thomas legend both in the East and in the West throughout late antiquity¹². The figure of Thecla, for example, was constantly cited as a model of the virgin’s renunciation in ascetical texts from the early church. These stories of radical renunciation continued to inspire (and to entertain) Christians who seemed to enjoy the spectacle

10. In some early Christian texts the disciple of Jesus is called upon to abandon the family in order to acquire a new one in the Christian community and in the kingdom of God. See, e.g., Mk 10,29-30: “Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life’”. I thank Candida Moss for reminding me of this text and its notion of an alternative family.

11. P. BROWN, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 98.

12. See the excellent study of S.J. DAVIS, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, Clarendon, 2001.

of humbled patriarchs spurned by their wives and fiancées¹³. Such tales vividly demonstrated the fragility of the structures of “this age” and the vulnerability of its most powerful citizens. One suspects that it was precisely this inversion of power relationships that accounts for the popularity of the Apocryphal scriptures then as now.

Most Christians, however, seem to have inclined to more moderate views. If the Pastoral Epistles and the Deutero-Pauline epistles are in any way representative of an emerging consensus in the opening years of the second century, then it appears that marriage and household life had come to be seen as a potential bearer of Christian values¹⁴. This is especially the case with the so-called “household codes” found in Colossians and Ephesians, as well as in 1 Peter and several of the Apostolic Fathers¹⁵. These texts are famous (or infamous) for their explicit affirmation of the hierarchical relations embedded in the Roman (and now Christian) household. Based on ancient traditions regarding “household management” (*oikonomia*), these tables of ethical guidelines fully endorse the position of the *paterfamilias* as *dominus* or master of his wife, children, and slaves. One sees this very clearly in the code of Col 3,18–4,1:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord ... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (RSV).

One could hardly find a clearer statement of the Christian appropriation of the structures of the Roman household, even the inherently brutal institution of slavery¹⁶.

13. The diary of the pilgrim Egeria (22-23) speaks of her visit to the shrine of St. Thecla in Isauria, where the *Acts of Thecla* were read in their entirety in a liturgical context. I am grateful to Meghan Henning for this reference.

14. In the case of the Pastoral Epistles the vision of the church as the “household of God” (1 Tm 3,15) may have been directed specifically against the kind of household subversion encouraged by the Apocryphal Acts. See D. McDONALD, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster, 1983, who suggests that stories about Thecla may lie behind the polemics of the Pastoral Epistles. This theory has recently been endorsed by DAVIS, *The Cult of Saint Thecla* (n. 12), pp. 8-18.

15. Col 3,18-4,1; Eph 5,21-33; 1 Pt 2,18-3,12; 1 Tm 2,8-15; 6,1-10; Ti 2,1-10; 1 Clem. 3.21.6-8; Ignatius, *Pol.* 4.1-5.3; Polycarp, *Phil.* 4.1-3. Space does not permit a full examination of all these household codes. I have focused only on a representative sample of them.

16. On the matter of slavery, however, one should note that 1 Pt 2,18-21 goes further than Colossians or Ephesians by urging slaves to endure suffering at the hands of unjust masters and thereby to follow the model set by Christ.

Nevertheless, even within the Colossians code, I would argue, there is a subtle critique and realignment of familial relationships. Mutual responsibilities are outlined: wives are told to submit, but husbands are told to love; children are told to obey, but fathers are told not to provoke; slaves are told to obey and serve, but masters are told to treat their slaves justly. While one might question the extent to which Christianity actually altered domestic institutions such as slavery, the example of Paul's admonition to Philemon may give reason for optimism. Even though a runaway slave could be punished with torture, mutilation, or death, Paul sent Onesimus back to his Christian master with the admonition that Philemon should accept his slave, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Phlm 1,16). Unless Paul's confidence in Philemon was tragically misplaced, the case of Onesimus suggests that Christian convictions sometimes did force a reconsideration of traditional domestic relationships.

My argument, however, does not depend on an immediate and wholesale transformation of Roman society, something that it would be unrealistic to expect. My point is simply that some Christians began to see the household as a place that could be permeated with a spirit of love and forgiveness. It is significant, for example, that just a few lines before the household code in Colossians we find the following words: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3,12-14). The author of Colossians seems to have envisioned domestic relationships within the Christian household as a primary context within which to exercise these specifically Christian virtues. In other words, the household was deemed capable of genuine Christianization.

This perspective is even clearer in the Letter to the Ephesians, which seems to be dependent on Colossians, but which presents significant developments beyond that text. Here the husband-wife relationship is re-configured both in terms of the marriage between Christ and the church and in terms of the relationship between head and body:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself

in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5,21-27; RSV).

In Ephesians we see a critical development over Colossians: here the male head of the household, specifically in his role as husband, is likened to Christ as husband and head of the church. On the one hand, of course, it is possible to see this identification as deeply problematic. It grants a kind of sacred legitimacy to male authority by the analogy with Christ: the heavenly Lord thereby underwrites the earthly lord. But from another perspective one can read the Ephesians code as both a critique and a subversion of a household structure based on coercive power. The Lord who is presented as the model husband is the one who loved and gave himself up for the Church. The model of the "Christian patriarch" is one who attained his position precisely by repudiating earthly power and emptying himself. In Ephesians, I would argue, we see again the dialectical movement involved in the Christianization of the household: that is, an appropriation of the dominant cultural models of family, on the one hand, and a significant revision or critique of these models of domestic relationships, on the other hand.

This interpenetration of church and household was so profound that by the early years of the second century, as I noted above, the author of the Pastoral Epistles could speak of the church as the "household of God" and characterize the ideal Christian leaders (bishops and deacons) as men who had succeeded in the task of household management. The Pastor's vision of the Christian household, however, did not pertain only to households run by men. He also dealt explicitly with the exemplary conduct expected of women who managed households, especially widows. Older women were expected to "train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, devoted to the home, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited" (Ti 2,4-5). Women who wished to be formally enrolled as widows in the church had to demonstrate their worthiness by means of their domestic duties: "She must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way" (1 Tm 5,10). In the context of discussing the support to be given to widows, First Timothy even declares: "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tm 5,8). All of this is a far cry from the "hatred" of family enjoined in some of the gospel texts¹⁷.

17. Cf. BARCLAY, *Family as Bearer of Religion* (n. 9), p. 77: "We have traveled a long way here from when Jesus' disciples left the dead to bury their own dead!".

From the point of view of the history of the Christian household it is significant not only that these texts were preserved and transmitted, but also that they were eventually accepted into the New Testament canon as writings composed by the apostle Paul. As a result, in subsequent centuries they served as a foundation for Christian thinkers who had a special concern for familial matters. In the remainder of this essay I would like to look more closely at one Christian writer who developed his understanding of the Christian household in direct dependence on these New Testament household codes: Clement of Alexandria from the late second century. Clement was a lay teacher in cosmopolitan Alexandria who addressed himself to a complex urban audience with competing interests and values. On the one hand, he was dealing with educated, cultivated city-dwellers (both pagan and Christian), to whom he wished to demonstrate that the Christian life was compatible with that of an urbane Alexandrian citizen. On the other hand, he was faced with radical Gnostic and Encratite teachers, who thoroughly repudiated the possibility of a truly Christian marriage and household. To both audiences he argued that the life of a married householder could be infused with authentic Christian virtue. Clement thus did more than anyone else in the pre-Constantinian Church to portray the Christian household as a “domestic church”, that is, as a community within which commonly accepted social roles and social structures were both assumed and revised in the light of Christian convictions¹⁸.

III. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLD

There are many dimensions of Clement’s thought that are relevant to the question of the “domestic church”, and I can only highlight a few of the more important ones here. It seems that the household and its potential for Christianization were never far from Clement’s mind. His treatise, *Paidagogos*, portrayed Christ, the divine Logos, in the thoroughly domestic role of the *paidagogos*, the tutor or guardian (usually a trustworthy slave) charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the upper classes¹⁹. In the opening pages of the work,

18. For a more extended discussion of the origins of “Encratism” (both as a tradition of Christian thought and an anti-heretical label) and Clement’s response to it, see D.G. HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 101-113.

19. On the social role of the *paidagogos*, see N.H. YOUNG, *PAIDAGOGOS: The Social Setting of a Pauline Metaphor*, in *Novum Testamentum* 9 (1987) 150-176; *The Figure of*

Clement even described the saving action of the Logos as one of *oikonomia*, a word that conjured up both the notion of “household management” and the “dispensation” of salvation²⁰. This book dealt with a wide range of moral issues, almost all of them situated in the domestic setting: how to conduct oneself at dinner parties, how to engage in sex with one’s wife in a discrete and self-controlled manner, whether men should practice depilation or the removal of their bodily hair (Clement’s answer to the last was no). As Blake Leyerle has observed (borrowing the language of Pierre Bourdieu), Clement’s aim was to “extort what is essential while seeming to demand the insignificant”²¹. In the household under the tutelage of Christ, no behavior could be seen as random or ill considered; all must be *kata logon*, “in accord with reason”. It is also worth noting that in Clement’s vision of divine pedagogy all members of the household remain children under the guidance of the Logos.

A somewhat different agenda was present in Clement’s “Miscellanies” (*Stromateis*), especially the third book, which is devoted to a defense of marriage and household against the assault of radicals, such as Marcion and Tatian. Clement devoted a good portion of this treatise to responding to interpretations of the sayings of Jesus and Paul that Tatian and others had taken in a radically ascetical direction. Noting that both Jesus (in Mt 19,4-6) and Paul (in Eph 5,31) had cited Gen 2,4 (“Therefore a man leaves his mother and father and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh”), Clement argued that Encratites were wrong to hold that marriage belonged only to the time before the coming of Christ²²:

How then can marriage be a state only intended for ancient times and an invention of the law, and marriage on Christian principles of a different nature, if we hold that the Old and the New Testaments proclaim the same God? “For what God has joined together no one may ever put asunder” for any good reason; if the Father commanded this, so much the more also will the Son keep it. If the author of the law and the gospel is the same, he never contradicts himself.

For Clement, the integrity of the Christian household was an essential aspect of his argument against radical ascetics who despaired of any

the Paidagōgos in Art and Literature, in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (1990) 80-86.

20. *Paed.* 1.3.3; text in CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Le Pédagogue*, ed. H.-I. MARROU – M. HARL (Sources Chrétiennes, 70), Paris, Cerf, 1960, p. 112.

21. B. LEYERLE, *Clement of Alexandria on the Importance of Table Etiquette*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995) 123-141, p. 140, citing P. BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 69.

22. *Str.* 3.12.83 (GCS 52/2, 234; ed. O. STÄHLIN – L. FRÜCHTEL); *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen*, trans. H. Chadwick – J.E.L. Oulton (Library of Christian Classics), London, SCM, 1954, p. 79, slightly altered.

“Christianization” of sex, marriage, or family. As Clement saw it, it must be possible for members of the Christian household to embody the highest Christian virtues; if not, then the radicals have won.

We see this argument most explicitly in Clement’s extensive use of the Pastoral Epistles, which he found most helpful in responding to the radicals’ appeal to 1 Cor 7. Clement had a particular interest in 1 Tm 3, where the author indicated that household management was the ideal preparation for ministry in the church. It is noteworthy that Clement characterized the work of the householder in the language of “public service” (*leitourgia*) and “ministry” (*diakonia*), which suggests that he viewed marriage and household management not simply as a preparation for ministry, but as an essential type of ministry²³:

Both celibacy and marriage have their own different forms of service and ministry to the Lord; I have in mind the caring for one’s wife and children. For it seems that the particular characteristic of the married state is that it gives the man who desires a perfect marriage an opportunity to take responsibility for everything in the home which he shares with his wife. The apostle says that one should appoint bishops who by their oversight over their own house have learned to be in charge of the whole church. Let each man therefore fulfill his ministry by the work in which he was called, that he may be free in Christ and receive the proper reward of his ministry.

For Clement, the practice of *oikonomia* was a form of ecclesiastical ministry, an extension of God’s own providential activity into the world.

In another section of the *Stromateis*, where he described the characteristics of the true Christian sage or “Gnostic”, Clement could even claim that the married householder was superior to the celibate, if he remained inseparable from the love of God in the midst of his active concern for the household. Although his personal salvation may be less secure, Clement argued, in his commitment to the household he “actually preserves a faint image of the true Providence”²⁴. Clement’s view derives from his conviction that even the act of procreation is “cooperation with the work of creation” and a participation in the divine image. It is also consistent with his tendency to view the household as a genuine locus of the divine presence. For example, Clement could interpret Mt 18,20 (“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them”) as referring to the husband, wife, and child. “Through his Son”, Clement wrote, “God is present with those who are soberly mar-

23. *Str.* 3.12.79 (GCS 52/2, 231-232; ed. O. STÄHLIN – L. FRÜCHTEL); *Alexandrian Christianity* (n. 22), pp. 76-77.

24. *Str.* 7.1.70; trans. *Alexandrian Christianity* (n. 22), p. 138.

ried and have children. By the same mediation the same God is also with the man who exercises continence in accord with reason”²⁵.

Before concluding I would like to point to one further writing of Clement that deserves attention for its teaching on the Christian household, “Who Is the Rich Man Who Can Be Saved?” (*Quis dives salvetur*). This little work, which is something like a lengthy sermon, is well known as the first Christian writing to discuss in a comprehensive way the problem of the possession of wealth. Taking as his starting point the story in Mark’s Gospel regarding the rich young man whom Jesus sent away sorrowful because he had great possessions (Mk 10,17-31), Clement offered the view (which eventually became standard in Christian tradition) that the rich man’s problem was his excessive attachment to wealth. Borrowing Stoic terminology he argues that possessions are “a matter of indifference” (*adiaphora*); the ethically relevant factor is not the external wealth, but the internal passions that keep one attached to them. The most important feature of Clement’s argument, however, was not his full embrace of the household or his use of philosophical concepts to justify this, but rather the extent to which specifically Christian considerations shape his discussion of the problem²⁶.

For example, Clement saw the possession of material goods as necessary in order to carry out many precepts of Jesus, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the homeless. Wealth is justified, but only for the purpose of sharing (*koinonia*)²⁷. Citing some of the harsh sayings of Jesus regarding “hatred” of family, Clement argues that they mean Christians should not let relatives become an obstacle to the faith; after all, if Christians are required to love their enemies, they must certainly love their nearest of kin²⁸. For Clement, the guiding principle in the Christian use of household goods was the two-fold command of love of God and love of neighbor, and this love has been dramatically displayed, he argued, in the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan²⁹. Clement’s insistence on love as the motivating power behind the Christian use of wealth was so strong that it led him actually to re-conceive the divine nature in terms of a familial image, but a decidedly

25. Str. 3.10.68; trans. *Alexandrian Christianity* (n. 22), p. 71, slightly altered.

26. Cf. E. OSBORN, *Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 73: “Stoic self-sufficiency and freedom is modified by Clement so that it is no longer acceptance of the inevitable but is creative discipleship ... Christian freedom looks to the future of God’s kingdom and differs as sharply from Gnostic libertinism as it does from Stoic indifference”.

27. *Q. div.* 13.

28. *Q. div.* 22.

29. *Q. div.* 28.

non-patriarchal one in which the mutual love of father, mother, and child expressed the divine gift that inspires human giving³⁰:

Behold the mysteries of love, and then you will have a vision of the bosom of the Father, whom the only-begotten God alone declared. God in His very self is love, and for love's sake He became visible to us. And while the unspeakable part of Him is Father, the part that has sympathy with us is Mother. By His loving the Father became of woman's nature, a great proof of which is He whom He begat from Himself; and the fruit that is born of love is love. This is why the Son Himself came to earth, this is why He put on manhood, this is why He willingly endured man's lot, that, having been measured to the weakness of us whom He loved, He might in return measure us to His own power. And when he is about to be offered and is giving Himself up as a ransom He leaves us a new testament: "I give you my love". What love is this, and how great? On behalf of each of us He laid down the life that is equal in value to the whole world. In return He demands this sacrifice from us on behalf of one another.

Clement's point went well beyond the immediate question of whether Christians should make use of possessions. He suggested that the Christian understanding of God, and specifically the Christian belief in how God was manifested in Jesus, has fundamentally changed the terms in which one answers the question. Marriage, children, household, family, possessions – all these realities have their place in Clement's deeply incarnational theology, but their use has been radically re-defined in terms of the absolute gift of love that Clement sees in the Incarnation. If we were able to ask Clement, "Is the household a 'domestic church'?" I think he would give the following answer: If the members of that household are living their lives and loving their neighbors impelled by that Love that first loved them, then, yes, they are a "domestic church", because this is no more and no less than what it means to be "church".

IV. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to describe the way in which some early Christians adopted the traditional structures of the Roman household and yet reconceived their roles within that household. From the time of Jesus to that of Clement of Alexandria, we see an increasing cultural assimilation, if you will, but also increasing reflection on the limits of that assimilation. There were a number of reasons for this development. I have

30. *Q. div.* 37; *Clement of Alexandria*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Loeb Classical Library) Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 347.

already noted that Christians usually met in family homes, a fact which surely must have encouraged them both to assume the value of the traditional household and to think about it in Christian terms. The ascetic critique of family life and the pagan fear of subversion that it must have encouraged would also have led moderate Christians, such as Clement, to look for ways in which the household could become a genuine locus of Christian life. In later centuries, both John Chrysostom and Augustine, though in very different ways, will address these issues and articulate their own visions of the Christian household and its role in Roman society.

Finally, however, I would suggest that there may have been something deeper going on in the simultaneous Christian assimilation and critique that I have described, something deeper, that is, than merely a response to social conditions. As a religion born of the conviction that God had become human in the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian faith had an implicit commitment to redeeming all that was human, all that was “worldly”. The household was the place where much of human life was lived: the place where people were born and died, where they ate and drank and slept and made love; it was the place where the basic social relationships were modeled and internalized. The impulses we have seen in the letters to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Timothy, and in Clement of Alexandria – the impulse to realign hierarchical relationships, the impulse to re-imagine domination as forgiveness, service, and self-emptying, and to re-describe household duties in terms of Christian charity – these are the impulses that animated the Christian embrace of the Roman family. The early Christian household was the place where the most mundane of human relationships could be transfigured by the love of God made present in Christ. This, I would argue, was enough to create the “domestic church”.

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