

Five Forms of Egalitarianism: With a Critique of David Instone-Brewer's View of the Household Codes

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I encountered a new type of egalitarianism the other day. At least, it was new to me. In the course of discussing different approaches to gender roles over the last ten years or so, my experience has been that the same four varieties of evangelical (or, in one case, quasi-evangelical) egalitarianism always crop up—exegetical, experiential, trajectory hermeneutic, and “kingdom now” egalitarianism—and I thought that I had the whole landscape mapped out. But then I came across an article by David Instone-Brewer in *Christianity* magazine which, though resembling two of these somewhat, was so different in its overall approach that it required a whole new category.¹ I haven't settled on a name for it yet, but for the purposes of this article we can call it “uninspired” egalitarianism.

First, though, here's a sketch of the original four. *Exegetical egalitarianism* consists of the view that we should do whatever the New Testament says, but that when the exegesis is done properly, there is no restriction on women being elders in the New Testament. Thus, the famous prohibition of 1 Timothy 2:12 is about teaching false doctrine in a way that usurps or undermines men, and need not imply eldership was off-limits; the requirement for elders to be “one women men” simply means that men were the only people in that world who would be polygamous; and the wide range of women in key roles in his churches indicates that Paul had

no problem with women teaching or leading men. This is the position of Tom Wright, Mike Bird, Ben Witherington, and many others; and although I disagree with it in a number of ways, I regard it as the most defensible of the four.²

At the opposite end of the spectrum is *experiential egalitarianism*, which represents those for whom, no matter what Paul or anyone else might say, their experience indicates that women can be elders, and that's that. This might be personal (“I've felt God tell me to do this, and you've got no right to say that's wrong”), or observational (“so-and-so is a woman, and she's an elder, and God is blessing her, so how can that be wrong?”), or even societal (“the world has changed, and if we keep doing this, they'll think we're idiots”). This brand of egalitarianism was pointedly illustrated to me recently when a French woman, with whom I was discussing 1 Timothy 2, pointed at the text and said simply, “Je ne serais jamais d'accord avec ça.”

Increasingly popular in the last ten years or so, *trajectory hermeneutic egalitarianism* is the idea that the New Testament doesn't give us God's definitive ethic, but it gives us an important stepping stone (or series of stepping stones) towards it. So yes, the apostles thought wives should submit to their husbands, but that doesn't mean *we* should; after all, they were children of their time, and God was trying to draw them forwards into new levels of

equality and inclusivity. I find this view to be both hermeneutically problematic, in putting “where the New Testament is headed” over “what the New Testament says.” Despite the attempts of William Webb and others to constrain the way it works in practice (as recent announcements on gay marriage have illustrated), it risks undermining huge swathes of apostolic teaching on other issues contemporary people find unpalatable.³

And then there is “*kingdom now*” egalitarianism. This view holds that we should all be egalitarians because the essence of the Christian life is to bring the future kingdom into the present and because in the new creation there will be no submission of wives to husbands or distinctions in gender roles in the church. Two Vineyard pastors put this to me recently, and my response was to suggest that, although I did not consider it a slippery slope leading to liberalism, it was certainly a slippery slope leading to *celibacy* (not to mention theonomy, the abolition of pastoral ministry, all denominations, and so on); I felt certain these two married, democratic, denomination-leading pastors would see where I was going with that. Anyway: those were the four I had encountered until a few weeks ago.

Then I read David Instone-Brewer, who is an expert in Rabbinics and New Testament Studies (as well as being the editor of the *Tyndale Bulletin* and an extremely gracious man), argue briefly in *Christianity* for what I am tentatively calling *uninspired egalitarianism*.⁴ His suggestion, following a paper he delivered to the Evangelical Theological Society in 2005, is that we should not assume that the instructions to wives in the New Testament *Haus-tafeln* (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Tim 2:9–3:7; 6:1–2; Titus 2:3–10; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7) are inspired by God (hence “uninspired”), since they clearly adapt the Aristotelian three rules of household submission. Rather, he argues, we should regard them like Paul’s quotations of Menander, Aratus and Epimenides (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12), namely, as citations of pagan thinkers rather than as divinely inspired instruction for God’s people: “we should not automatically attribute these to God and consider them to be part of his perfect law.” Consequently, he reasons, we should not follow them

today if we live in countries where gender equality is taken for granted—and in fact, it would be “an ironic paradox” if we were to do so. Interesting.

The argument, which forms the second half of an article ostensibly about Esther, runs as follows, with my comments in square brackets:

1. There was a battle between two rival family structures in the ancient world: the Jewish one, in which “many feisty and independent women are celebrated,” and the Gentile (Persian and Greek) one, in which “women were inferior to men.” [Fair enough, although as biblical critics never tire of telling us, there are a number of Old Testament passages that are not quite as proto-feminist as contemporary readers might like. Nonetheless, I agree with Instone-Brewer’s general point here, and regularly teach on the large differences between the pagan and Jewish views of women].

2. The book of Esther presents this struggle, with Esther trying to defeat the latter. [Yes. The narrative lauds her courage in approaching the king, and paints Xerxes as a boorish, drunken oaf at the time of his pronouncement in 1:22].

3. The Persian and Greek approach was victorious by the time of the New Testament, with Aristotle’s threefold submission (wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters) taken for granted in the Greco-Roman world. [Broadly speaking, yes].

4. Aristotle’s rules were gradually incorporated into both Jewish thinking and Christian thinking, and were only cited and kept in order to avoid seeming “uncouth and immoral in the eyes of their Gentile overlords.”⁵ [This is hugely debatable; see below].

5. Consequently, these texts should not be seen as part of God’s word to us. After all, not everything in the Bible is spoken by God; some is spoken by fools (Psa 53:1), drunken kings (Est 1:22) and pagan poets (Titus 1:12). In the same way, Peter and Paul are merely citing Aristotle’s three rules of submission in

these passages, and therefore we should not necessarily attribute them to God.

The problem with his fourth point, on which Instone-Brewer's argument depends, is not the claim that Jewish and Christian writers built their *Haustafeln* around Aristotle's structure (which they clearly did), nor the claim that they were eager not to appear uncouth or immoral to the Gentiles around them (which they clearly were). The problem is the enormous jump—with all its implications for our hermeneutics, our ethics and our view of Scripture—to the idea that *all* these writers were doing was citing Aristotle (rather than, say, adapting his form and subverting his content), and that in doing so they reflected nothing of God's intention for male-female relationships. This is far from the case. In *Contra Apionem*, Josephus grounds his instructions repeatedly in the Torah, and includes some instructions which first century pagans might well have regarded as “uncouth and immoral,” including the death penalty for homosexuality and failing to honour parents:

But, then, what are our laws about marriage? That law owns no other mixture of sexes but that which nature hath appointed, of a man with his wife, and that this be used only for the procreation of children. But it abhors the mixture of a male with a male; and if any one do that, death is its punishment. It commands us also, when we marry, not to have regard to portion, nor to take a woman by violence, nor to persuade her deceitfully and knavishly . . . The law ordains also, that parents should be honoured immediately after God himself, and delivers that son who does not requite them for the benefits he hath received from them, but is deficient on any such occasion, to be stoned. It also says that the young men should pay due respect to every elder, since God is the eldest of all beings . . . He hath also provided for such as are taken captive, that they may not be injured, and especially that the women may not be abused.⁶

Worse is to come when the New Testament texts are considered. In fact, of the four *bêtes noires* for contemporary egalitarian interpreters (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Tim 2:8–3:7; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7), only one mentions the concern about the perception of Gentiles at all (1 Pet 2:11–12). On the other hand, these texts repeatedly ground their instructions in the Scriptures, the created order, the nature of life “in the Lord,” and the relationship between Christ and the church:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, **as to the Lord**. For the husband is the head of the wife **even as Christ is the head of the church**, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now **as the church submits to Christ**, so also wives should submit 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, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, **just as Christ does the church**, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that **it refers to Christ and the church**. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Children, obey your parents **in the Lord**, for this is right. “Honour your father and mother” (**this is the first commandment with a promise**), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, **as you would Christ**,

not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but **as bondservants of Christ**, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will **as to the Lord and not to man**, knowing that whatever good anyone does, **this he will receive back from the Lord**, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that **he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven**, and that there is no partiality with him. (Eph 5:22–6:9)

Wives, submit 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. Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, **fearing the Lord**. Whatever you do, work heartily, **as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ**. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that **you also have a Master in heaven**. (Col 3:18–4:1)

We could go on, but this should suffice to make the point. Paul's stated basis for instructing believers in this way is *not*, as Instone-Brewer claims, merely to avoid appearing uncouth and immoral to the pagan world around them. Rather, it is to teach believers how to live out a Christ-shaped life in whatever position they find themselves in, through instructions that are thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures, the way of Christ, creation and the gospel, even when they use a traditionally Aristotelian *Haustafel* structure. As has often been pointed out, the New Testament household codes have been so thoroughly reworked in light of the gospel that to

refer to them as “citations” of Aristotle, as if they were merely parroting what he said in order to catch a break from nearby pagans, is thoroughly unwarranted. Though the form is Aristotelian, the content is unequivocally Christian, with its theological roots stretching right back to Genesis 1–2. In the case of Ephesians, Instone-Brewer's suggestion is particularly implausible, since the household code follows a lengthy series of instructions *not* to live like the Gentiles (4:17–19; 5:5–8, 11–12), and as is well-known, works out the practical nature of a Spirit-filled life of rejoicing, thanksgiving and submission (5:18–21). (The parallel passage in Colossians suggests that these mutually submissive relationships flow from the word of Christ dwelling within the believer, but the point is the same).

So to use the language of “citing” Aristotle, and from there to suggest that these texts carry no more authority over the believer than Paul's quotations of Menander or Epimenides is to misrepresent entirely the nature of the texts themselves, let alone the nature of Scripture. It is also to give undue credence to a common false dichotomy: biblical passages are either informed by previous Greco-Roman or Jewish texts, or they are inspired by God. The household codes in Paul and Peter, like all the writings in the New Testament, are shaped by both, with historical, literary and rhetorical contexts in no way displacing or abolishing divine inspiration. And that means that the passionate, courageous, Esther-like femininity that ancient Jews (and David Instone-Brewer) rightly celebrate can, and should, coexist with a marriage shaped around the service, love and submission of Christ and his church.

ENDNOTES

¹David Instone-Brewer, “Esther: The Best in Bed,” *Christianity* (August 2013), 58–59.

²Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: SPCK, 2002), 64–68; idem., “Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis,” *N.T. Wright Page*, accessed 17 December 2013, http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Women_Service_Church.htm; Michael Bird, *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives and Bobby Haircuts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians Volume I: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

³William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the*

Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

⁴Instone-Brewer, "Esther," 58–59.

⁵Philo, *Hypothetica* 7:2–3; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2:24–30; Titus 2:5; Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Tim 2:8–3:7; 6:1–2; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7; see Instone-Brewer, "Esther," 59.

⁶Con. Ap., 2:25, 28, 30.