The Household Code of Colossians: 3.18-4.1

Some scholars including MacDonald have suggested one explanation to understanding this seemingly anti-women view of Paul’s is to view the code as an insertion by someone other than Paul. As Carl already pointed out, this household code (shown in the middle of the slide here) deals with the interactions of different members of the household, that is, people interacting with other people. See the many contrasts here between husband and wife, master slave and so on. So bearing this in mind, if we were to remove these verses of the household code, we find that the surrounding verses flow with no interruption of their theme, which is the relationship of God with people.

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

The removed verses are awkwardly sandwiched between sections of Colossians that flow together well (MacDonald). Paul is giving the Colossians instructions and guidance concerning their relationship with God, saying in 3.17 to do everything in the name God, in the name of Lord Jesus. In 4.2, Paul instructs them to devote themselves in prayer to God and stay alert in thanksgiving to God. The God/human relationship is interrupted by the household code that deals with the interplay of people with other members of the household. This distinction is one that scholars point to as evidence of possible insertion by another.

These distinctions of man and woman, parents and children, masters and slaves may have come not from Paul originally, but from earlier Greek or Roman philosophical writers. David Balch highlights the fact that Aristotle wrote in Politics that “the first and fewest possible parts of a family are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children” (Aristotle, Book I, Sec III). Obviously there are similarities in theme here and with what Aristotle writes later in his book. Colossians doesn’t replicate works of antiquity perfectly, but there are some definite parallels drawn. Some scholars have suggested that it is possible that Paul (or a later scribe) inserted this section here as a reinforcement of traditional household roles (Osiek and Balch). James Dunn also raises the question of whether this could just be a “dollop of standard teaching.”
He questions whether this issue of household hierarchy even needed to be specifically addressed to the Colossians in the first place (Dunn, 1996, 242-243).

And there are also pragmatic reasons the verses may have been placed in the letter by Paul to the Colossians. As evidenced in nearly every letter we’ve looked at, Paul lived in volatile time where Jews and Gentiles frequently clashed and disputed. In the midst of this, Paul and the other apostles were trying to bring both sides to God through Christ Jesus. Family and order were two major components of the Torah, and Paul (and again here his strong Jewish background shows through) may have been attempting to merge the Gentile community into the larger Judeo-Christian community he was trying to create. Crossan and Reed say that the procedure for the early church was to take the “moral traditions of the church, the synagogue and the Greek schools and not discard them but to select, assimilate and qualify them by the gospel” (Crossan and Reed, 2004, 116). It is possible that Paul did not want to openly incite chaos and, therefore, there may have been a need for prudence and cautiousness on Paul’s part. As written in Colossians 3, Paul instructs them to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Paul stresses that earthly bounds and restrictions are not applicable in heaven. And as we’ve seen at other times in lecture, Paul is hesitant to cause any upheaval that could disrupt or overthrow social establishments. Complete equality would have caused quite a revolution at this point in history. While Paul had proclaimed there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, his message still had to be tempered to ensure daily survival.

Here I’ll be attempting to recreate the argument of John Barow concerning the translations from Greek to English. When revisiting the original wording of these verses in Greek, there are subtle differences in the connotations of the Greek and English words. When Paul talks about wives and women, he often uses the term hupotasso. Barow argues that hupotasso was used in an instructing manner, not in a description of wives. Paul uses hupotasso in the middle voice in Greek so it becomes hupotassomai. English has a passive and active voice (I teach and I was taught) but Greek has a middle voice as well. Barow uses what I think is a very easy analogy to understand in order to demonstrate the middle voice. “A person may teach (an active verb) and one may be taught (a passive verb), but a person may also teach himself or herself by careful listening, discovering, reasoning and learning. In that sense, the person is both subject and object of the action. That is what the Greek middle voice expresses: a voluntary action by the subject of the verb upon the subject of the verb” (Barow, 1988, 40). By using the middle voice, this means that wives voluntarily and willingly submit themselves to subordination to their husbands. They are not forced to. Barow says that "be subject to” is an awkward translation of hupotassomai at best. “Hupotassomai means something like ‘give allegiance to,’ ‘tend to the needs of,’ or ‘be supportive of’” (Barow, 1988, 41). The word is also often used in a military sense, where soldiers willing give allegiance to their commanders. They are not forced to submit, but rather they willing submit out of loyalty. Husbands are to be supportive of their wives, just as wives are to support their husbands through the love of the bond of marriage.

Drawing on MacDonald, Barow and Crossan and Reed, it is most likely that the household code of Colossians 3.18 is designed to help transform Gentile households into Christian households, and not the misogynistic insertion of a later scribe. Paul is laying out a
social structure where women aren’t subjugated in the home, but rather choose to love and serve their husbands voluntarily. The husbands in turn choose to love and serve their wives. Colossians 3.18-4.1 is likely a pragmatic household code, written to keep peace and assimilate diverse peoples. It is not an anti-woman or pro-slavery code. After all, Paul often references himself as a “slave in Jesus Christ,” and his followers as “fellow slaves in Jesus Christ.” All are equally slaves to Christ, regardless of earthly wealth or status. Heavenly things, not earthly bonds, are stressed in Colossians.

Before we turn leave the household code and move onto Pauline authorship of Colossians, are there any questions?