

Household of God in 1 Timothy
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1. Introduction

Most scholars agree “the household” is an important theme in 1 Timothy but beyond that differ widely regarding *what* the theme is and *how* it functions.

2. Study of the LTT

consensus-majority view of liberal and critical scholarship: late, non-Pauline

prima facie claims of each letter and testimony of early church¹

tide is beginning to turn

“Pastoral Epistles” replaced with “The Letters to Timothy and Titus” (LTT)

household theme is often a feature in these debates

household theme features most in 1 Timothy (3:14–15)

(cf. God’s household: 2 Tim. 2:19–24; human households: Tit. 2:2–10)

3. *Oikonomia Theou*

key exegetical issue *oikonomia theou* (1:4)

- “godly edification” (NKJV)²
- “divine training” (RSV)

- “stewardship from God” (ESV) (cf. Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25).³

- “God’s plan” (HCSB) (Eph. 1:10; 3:9)
- “God’s redemptive plan” (NET Bible)

- *oikos* (house/household) and *nomos* (law)
- planning, governance, organisation, and purpose⁴
- administration, management or plan of God for salvation of mankind

God is Saviour (1:1; 2:3; 4:10; cf. Tit. 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Luke 1:47; Jude 25)

¹ Cf. Muratorian Canon, lines 59–63 (ca. 170–200); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3 (ca. 175). For history of reception and interpretation, see Bray, *Pastoral Epistles* 51–68. Köstenberger, *Timothy and Titus*, 12–14. Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 4–7.

² So, BDAG, s.v., *oikonomia*, §3; Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 58.

³ So, Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 367.

⁴ LSJ, s.v. *oikonomia*.

Couser: apostolic gospel is the “theological core”⁵ of *oikonomia theou*

- Johnson: “God’s way of ordering reality/things;”⁶
- Kuruvilla: “the economy of God;” “his management and stewardship of his creation”⁷
- Couser: “God’s household rules”⁸

Kuruvilla: “‘this economy of God’ is the gospel in its broadest sense of God’s grand, eternal plan to consummate all things in Christ. This is not merely a description of the atoning work of Christ; rather, it is the delineation of God’s operation stretching from eternity to eternity.”⁹

divine plan perceived and responded to by faith (1:4; *en pistei*)

Wieland: “Sin is whatever opposes or steps out of alignment with God’s *oikonomia* (1:4), expressed to some extent in the Law but more fully in the gospel (1:8, 11).”¹⁰

4. The Household of God

oikos theou, the church of the living God (3:15), is the *realisation* of God’s plan *in history*

“household of God” (3:15; cf. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:4; cf. Eph. 2:19; 2 Tim. 2:20; Tit. 1:7)¹¹

temple of God (cf. Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21–22)¹²

linguistically and conceptually related to God’s *oikonomia*, and developed in the notion of stewardship and correspondence between human families and church¹³

Similar domestic images (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9; 4:1–2; 9:17; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; Col. 1:25).

head of the household, *paterfamilias*, i.e., *God*

- God dwells with his people (cf. Gen. 28:17; Ex. 23:19; 2 Sam. 7).
- e.g., Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–4; Deut. 7:6; Isa. 2:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 22:3–4
- Jews and Gentiles now full members (2:4; 4:10; cf. Eph. 2:18–22), through same salvation in Christ (1:15–16; cf. Rom. 9:8; Gal. 3:7)

Towner: “it is in keeping with [the] divine pattern (*oikonomia theou*) that the church is named the *oikos theou*, “the household of God” in 3:15. The metaphor makes the people of God the microcosm or paradigm of a world obedient to God’s ordering; and its mission is to extend this reality beyond its walls so that God’s way of ordering life can be known and obeyed by more and more of the unbelieving world.”¹⁴

⁵ Couser, “Sovereign Savior,” 112.

⁶ Johnson, *Letters*, 149. Followed by Towner, *Letters*, 69, 113; Bray, *Pastoral Epistles*, 89–90. Kuruvilla, *Letters*, 21.

⁷ Kuruvilla, *Letters*, 21.

⁸ Couser, “Sovereign Savior,” 112.

⁹ Kuruvilla, *Timothy, Titus*, 22.

¹⁰ Wieland, “Re-Ordering the Household,” 159.

¹¹ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 507. Köstenberger, *Timothy and Titus*, 450. Johnson, *Letters*, 231. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 180. On the distinction between *oikos* and *oikia*, see Perkins, *Pastoral Letters*, xxx–xi.

¹² So, Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 220–221.

¹³ Tomlinson, “The Purpose and Stewardship Theme within the Pastoral Epistles,” 68–70, 81.

¹⁴ Towner, *Letters*, 69.

Christian community in every place (cf. 2:8) is “household of God,” and “assembly of the living God” (*ekklēsia theou zōntos*, 3:15; cf. 3:5; 5:16)

5. God as Father

Father (*patēr*, 1:2)

juxtaposition of “God” with Christ Jesus indicates the *Father* (1:1, 2; 2:3, 5; 5:21; 6:13–14, cf. 3:15; 4:10). God the Saviour is God *the Father*.

- messianic promises (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Ps. 2:7)
- his chosen people (Ex. 4:22–23; Deut. 32:6; Isa. 43:6; 63:16; Jer. 3:19; 31:9; Hos. 1:10)
- *new covenant*, Jew and Gentile, adopted into God’s family, through union with Christ and incorporation into his divine sonship, by renewing power of the Spirit (e.g., Matt. 6:9; 23:9; John 1:18; 20:17; Rom. 8:15; 2 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 4:6; Rev. 21:7, cf. Mark 14:36)

church is household where God is head, the “heavenly *paterfamilias*”¹⁵

Creator

- “who gives life to all things” (6:13; cf. Gen. 1–2; Deut. 32:6; Ps. 148:1–6).
- who determines proper ordering and function of all things
- provides for those who hope in him (5:5; 6:17)
- his creation is good and holy if rightly received
- reason for thanksgiving not abstinence (4:4–5; cf. Gen. 1:29–31; 2:8–9; 9:3; Matt. 5:45; 6:25–33)
- marriage/family are sphere for godly living and good (2:15; 3:4–5, 12; 5:3–16)
- creation design of ordered complementarity between sexes (2:13–14; cf. Gen. 2:7, 8, 15, 18–23).
- those outside his household are also under his rule and provision (2:1–3)

Judge

- everything happens before him (*enōpion tou theou*, 2:3; 5:4, 21; 6:13)
- living properly means living to please him (2:1–3; 4:8; 5:4; 6:17–18)

6. Life in God’s Household

the saved: Jews and Gentiles (1:2; 2:7); young and old; men and women; adults and children (2:11–12; 3:4–5; 5:1–2); slaves and masters (6:1–2); rich people and those in need (5:16; 6:17); those with different marital status (e.g., *faithful* husbands; widows; 3:2, 12; 5:3–16); heads of households; and, potentially, kings and those in high places (2:2).

must remain in salvation, through active faith and godly living (2:15; 4:16; 6:11–12)

Hymenaeus and Alexander put themselves outside God’s *spiritual* household educative discipline (1:19–20; cf. Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:5)

Members of God’s household are bound together:

¹⁵ Wall, *Timothy and Titus*, 178.

- familial allegiance of duty, love, and service (5:1–16)
- beloved brothers and sisters (4:6; 6:2; cf. Mark 3:31–35; Luke 11:27–28)
- equally know God as Father (1:2)
- sibling bonds don't negate order and obligations of certain relationships within human households (3:4; 5:4), the church (2:11–12) or world (2:2; 3:7)

Some obligations have origins in God's OT instructions

- heads of households to manage and provide for those in their care (3:4; 5:8; cf. Job 29:12–17; Ps. 68:5–6)
- children to submit to their fathers (3:4; cf. Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20)
- adult children to provide for needy parents and relatives (5:4, 8, 16; cf. Ex. 21:15, 17; Lev. 21:1–3; Deut. 27:16)
- wives and mothers to fulfil family responsibilities (2:15; 5:10, 14; cf. Gen. 1:28; Prov. 31)

Other obligations arise from social structure of the day and missional intention, e.g.,

- slaves to honour and serve masters, even if believers (6:1–2; cf. Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; Tit. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 2:18)
- *only* slavery about which NT speaks *positively* is believers' slavery to Christ in obedience (Rom. 6:16–22; 1 Cor. 7:23; Eph. 6:6; 1 Pet. 2:16).
- Paul urges slaves who can to gain their freedom (1 Cor. 7:21)
- In 6:2, Paul overturns conventional social order:

Towner: "the socially inferior slaves [are depicted] as benefactors of their socially superior masters."¹⁶

correspondence between God's household and human households that runs both ways:

relationships in God's household are analogous to relationships in human households:

- Timothy is to exhort older men as a father, older women as mothers, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters (5:1–2);
- Timothy is Paul's "true child" (1:2, 18; cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 3:10)
- the church is to care for widows who are without family (5:3, 16)
- teaching and governing responsibilities in the church are assigned to men not women (2:11–12; 3:1–13; cf. 1 Cor. 14:33–35) reflecting ordered complementarity of marriage in God's design (cf. 2:13–14; cf. Gen. 2:18, 23–24; Eph. 5:22–33; Col. 3:18–19; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1–7);
- and role of overseer corresponds to managing human households (3:4–5; 5:17; cf. *proistēmi*),¹⁷ which includes responsibility for education of children:

MacDonald: "The teaching authority of one who manages his household well (1 Tim. 3:4) should be viewed as rooted in the teaching authority of fathers (cf. Titus 1:6). In 1 Timothy managing the household is a determinative criterion for the capacity to manage the *ekklēsia* of God, and the teaching role of fathers is implicitly linked (and would have been recognized immediately by an ancient audience) to teaching in the *ekklēsia* of God."¹⁸

¹⁶ Towner, *Letters*, 386.

¹⁷ Towner, *Letters*, 254–55.

¹⁸ MacDonald, "Education," 290/

conduct in human households impacts membership in God's household:

- members who do not provide for relatives deny the faith, worse than unbelievers (5:8);
- younger widows who wilfully fail in their domestic responsibilities bring dishonour to the church and risk membership in it (5:11-15);
- widows who have been faithful in own family deserve honour, and, if needed, material support from the church (5:3-6, 9-10);
- fulfilling one's role in human household is selection-criteria for roles in church (3:5, 11, 12; cf. 5:9),
- demonstrated "hospitality" is necessary virtue for overseers (3:2; Tit. 1:8; cf. Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2).
- Failure to meet one's household obligations works against the mission of church (3:7; 5:8, 14).¹⁹

correspondence not always like-for-like, e.g., care of widows

- family members were to provide their needs (5:4)
- fifth commandment to honour one's parents (*timaō*, 5:3; cf. Ex. 20:12)
- pleased God (5:4) and aligned with secular expectations
- failure to do so was denial of Christian faith and "worse than unbelievers" (5:8, 16)
- if widows did not have believing family, *the church* was to provide as their household
- OT: care of orphans and widows a core element of covenant faithfulness (e.g., Ex. 24:19)
- believers were not to abdicate their responsibilities
- church was not to take up the proper duties of family and ensure limited resources went to those who had no alternative
- similar concerns in Acts 6:1-6

Johnson: "A genuinely tragic consequences of 1 Timothy's canonical marginalization is that 5:3-16 is not included with Rom 14 and 1 Cor 8-10 as one of Paul's splendid examples of moral reasoning within the complex cultural realities of the first-century Mediterranean world. It is equally unfortunate that a preoccupation with only one aspect of social inequity (that having to do with gender) has so dominated the analysis of the passage that its challenge to the contemporary church at other levels is obscured. Where else in the New Testament is the tradition of community support for the poor, and the mutual responsibility of households and of the *ekklēsia* for such support, as a manifestation in faith itself, so clearly stated?"²⁰

correspondence not always like-for-like, e.g., Timothy

- ministry responsibilities overrode conventional social relations
- youth not to be despised
- no obstacle to leadership/authority in God's household, even over "elders" (*presbyteroi*)
- able to provide example of belief and life to *all* believers (4:12; cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11)
- to be honoured as a faithful servant of Christ Jesus (4:6).

Pao: both widows and youth were "outside the center of the power structure in ancient societies" and "though marginalized, these two groups are to be honored as visible symbols of the powerful gospel."²¹

¹⁹ Ho, "Mission," 252-53.

²⁰ Johnson, *Letters*, 276.

²¹ Pao, "Let No One Despise," 754.

correspondence is nuanced: place of the human household

Barclay: "the natural family is the essential building block of the church."²²

- primary spheres for godliness and Christian virtue (5:4, "first learn;" cf. 2:10, 15; 3:2–13; 5:9–14; 6:1–2).
- missional dimension
- including raising godly children (3:5, 12; 5:3, 10, 14)

household of God is constituted by spiritual familial bonds and modelled in some respects on the human household and in other ways, which disrupt it

household of God as a social entity does not supplant or compete with human household

Conclusion

Use of household metaphor is *theologically* and *missiologically driven*

primarily shaped by salvation plan of God

eschatological horizon of godliness holding promise for the life to come (4:8)

"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony at the proper time" (2:5–6), when according to God's plan, Christ Jesus "came into the world to save sinners." (1:15)

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²² Barclay, "Household Networks," 275.

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