

The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9

Is there a divinely ordained hierarchy in the life of the church and home that is based on gender alone?

GORDON D. FEE

IBEGIN THIS DISCOURSE WITH A DISCLAIMER, SINCE THE TITLE SUGGESTS FAR MORE THAN ONE CAN DELIVER in a limited amount of space. It suggests far more knowledge about this topic than I actually have—indeed, it is safe to say that there is much more that we *don't* know about these things than we actually do. What I hope to do is to offer a few probings into the cultural background of this passage—which has become such a crux for people on both sides of the issue of whether there is a divinely ordained hierarchy in the life of the church and home, based on gender alone.

I. Preliminary matters

There are some preliminary matters that are important for our understanding of the passage itself.

1. *Some assumptions about Ephesians itself and the role of this passage in this letter.* Contrary to what is probably the majority opinion in current New Testament scholarship, I think the Ephesian letter is by Paul. Furthermore, I think the letter has to be kept in its historical context as a companion letter with Colossians and Philemon.

The letter was probably not written specifically to the church in Ephesus—some early manuscripts lack a name in 1:1; in 1:15 Paul speaks about only having heard about their faith, and there are no personal words whatsoever. It may have been either the letter to Laodicea that ended up in Ephesus, or—more likely, in my opinion—this was a circular letter to the many churches in the province of Asia that sprang out of what he had to say to the Colossians.

What is important for our purposes is the letter's clear association with Colossians and, therefore, with Philemon. One of the unfortunate things that happened in the organizing of the Christian canon was the separation of Philemon from Colossians, for both letters would have been read together in Philemon's house church, with both Philemon and Onesimus present. The point, of course, is that the so-called house rules that occur only in Colossians and Ephesians almost certainly spring from the circumstances that brought Onesimus back to Philemon's household and thus back to his house church.

All of this is to say that, in the Colossian expression of our text (3:18–4:1), you could substitute personal names for the generic terms there. Thus: "Apphia, submit to Philemon, as is fitting in the Lord. Philemon, love Apphia and do not be harsh with her. Onesimus, obey your earthly master, Philemon, in everything; and do it, not only when his eye is on you. . . . Philemon, provide your slaves [including Onesimus] with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."

I press this point because these house rules grow directly out of the situation that caused Paul to write these letters in the first place: the return of Onesimus to Philemon, and the strange doctrines that are being spread among the Colossian Christians as reported to him by Epaphras.

2. *Some observations.* Before turning our attention to some words about culture, I want to make a few further observations that are important for understanding this passage in the larger context of Ephesians.

Note first that verse 18 is the swing verse in a passage that begins in 5:1–2—key not only for walking as children of light (vv. 2–17), but also especially for everything that follows. This is made certain by the fact that when Paul addresses husbands in verse 25, he deliberately echoes the language of verse 2:

"Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (v. 2).

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it" (v. 25).

Moreover, you have probably heard at some point that Ephesians is full of long sentences. Indeed it is, and here is an especially long one: the sentence that begins in verse 18 does not end until verse 23. Now all English translations try to help the reader out of the morass by breaking this into smaller sentences; however, in so doing the modern reader can miss a lot.

a. In Greek the sentence has a single subject and verb, which comes in the form of an imperative: "You [the readers] be filled with the Spirit"; this is then followed by a string of modifying participles:

- speaking to each other in psalms, hymns, and so on;
- singing and hymning the Lord (Christ) from the heart;
- thanking our God and Father always for all things through Jesus Christ;
- submitting to one another in the fear of Christ, followed by words to the wives with respect to their husbands.

b. The significance of this is twofold:

Most of the earliest churches met in households, and the various households themselves, therefore, served as the primary nuclei of the body of Christ in any given location.

Ephesians 5:18–6:9

5¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church—³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one

flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

6¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honour your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—³ “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one of you for whatever good you do, whether you are slave or free.

⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

—New International Version, Inclusive Language Edition, published in Great Britain by Hodder & Stoughton (1996 edition)

First, the words to wives and husbands are to be understood as totally dependent on their being filled with the Spirit. That is, all the words in 5:22–6:9 presuppose a household of believers who are continually being filled with the Spirit of God.

Second, and especially important for us: In Paul’s mind there is the closest kind of link between Christian worship and the Christian household. This is almost certainly because the former (worship) took place primarily in the latter (the household). The point is that most of the earliest churches met in households, and the various households themselves, therefore, served as the primary nuclei of the body of Christ (or God’s household) in any given location.

3. A final, significant observation about the passage as a whole. Notice that three relationships are assumed:

wives and husbands,
children and parents,
slaves and masters.

But notice also that in each case the second party in the relationship is usually the same person: husband = father = master. This would not always be the case, of course, since the assumption of the passage is very decidedly that of the Roman villa; that is, the household of the elite, or privileged.

• The model thus has little to do with villas where women served as heads of households, in which case the first relationship does not pertain at all, and the second probably less so (although widows may well have had children in the household).

• So also in the case of “married” slaves within the household (a true marriage, even though not recognized by Roman law); the “head” of the wife in this case was not her husband but the householder.

• Among the larger masses of people, moreover, very few of these relationships pertain at all or, as in the case of artisans like Priscilla and Aquila, there is a very clear sense of partnership in the marriage as in the business itself.

Here are two final observations about the passage in general that begin to move us toward some cultural matters themselves. Notice, first, that in terms of words used, Paul’s obvious greater concern in the first relationship is with the husband/householder. There are four times as many words to him as there are to the wife. In the other two relationships, however, the number of words goes in the opposite direction—two to one. This in itself suggests that the crucial matter for Paul is with what Christ has done to the first relationship.

Second, it is important to note that in each case the first person addressed is the vulnerable and powerless one in the relationship. In the case of wives and slaves, they are to rethink their *status* in terms of their serving Christ, as they relate to the male head of the household. And note, finally, that the male householder is not told to take his proper role as leader of the household—that was in fact the assumed cultural reality that could so easily be abused. Rather, he is told to model the character of Christ in his relationships to his wife and slaves.

What kind of a world is this into which Paul is speak-

The world presupposed by our text is a world so radically different from ours culturally that it is difficult for us even to imagine our way back into that setting.

ing, as he leaves the structures intact, but radically alters the relationships in terms of living cruciform?

II. Altered relationships

1. *Culture in general: some assumptions.* This word *culture* is sometimes used in a way that suggests that there is an “oughtness” to culture. But that is an illusion. Culture simply is; it is not a matter of “should be.” Culture is what defines *us*; we do not define it, we simply try our best to *describe* it. Indeed, until recent times it was not even a subject of discussion, because it was simply assumed. But this is also our difficulty, because with regard to the first-century household, we must ferret out from a variety of legal and literary remains how people viewed the *familia*—which included the entire household, including slaves.

2. *The Greco-Roman world.* What we do know—and this has now been put into wonderfully convenient form by David deSilva in his recent book *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (InterVarsity, 2000)—is that three basic assumptions defined the cultural milieu of the Greco-Roman world: Honor/shame; patronage; and kinship. The concept of honor and shame ruled everything; honor, or its opposite, disgrace, was regularly the basis for most moral appeals. A common sense as to what was honorable or shameful was the fabric that held Greco-Roman culture together.

Patronage refers to the mutual relationship that existed

between unequals, in which each was understood to benefit the other. This is the cultural reality that most Americans in particular find utterly distasteful. We get ahead on the strength of our own ingenuities. We get what we want or need by buying and selling, and those who get ahead by buying favors are scorned. But such a worldview was simply nonexistent in the time of Paul.

Indeed, the Greco-Roman worldview was quite the opposite: it was predicated on the reality of a world that was bottom-heavy; where the top few percent were the elite or privileged, and where the rest of humankind was rather totally dependent on being in good standing with a patron. Seneca, in fact, said that the giving and receiving of favors was the “practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society.” Such a worldview is especially in place when you read Philemon, where Philemon was both Paul’s patron and friend. Because he was Paul’s patron, Paul asks for the privilege of hospitality; but because he was a friend, he presumes upon the reciprocity of such friendship to intercede for the life of Onesimus (since, in another sense, Philemon owed his life to Paul).

Kinship comes out of patronage, in the sense that to survive people needed to be in some kind of relationship with others, especially within a “family.” But this is also one of the difficulties we face when we come to the “house rules” in Ephesians, because it assumes a privileged household, and by the time of Paul, especially in the larger cities (Rome, Ephesus, Corinth), the majority of

people would not have been attached to a household, but they would have lived in the large *insulae* (apartments), or in their own form of slums, including street people.

That is the world, then, that is presupposed by our text. It is a world predicated on honor/shame, patronage, and kinship, a world so radically different from ours culturally that it is difficult for us even to imagine our way back into their setting. But what interests us here is how these cultural realities played out in the Greco-Roman household.

III. Greco-Roman households

Let us examine two drawings. *Figure 1* is a representation of the typical *insula*. Far more people lived this way than in the household assumed by Paul in this passage. This is a typical *insula*, based on the ruins of Ostia, the ancient seaport of Rome. Because its harbor silted up, the city was simply abandoned; and although most of its marble and other important movable materials were carted off over the centuries, the ruins are especially well preserved. This *insula* (an apartment house in this case) would also most likely be the pattern for the

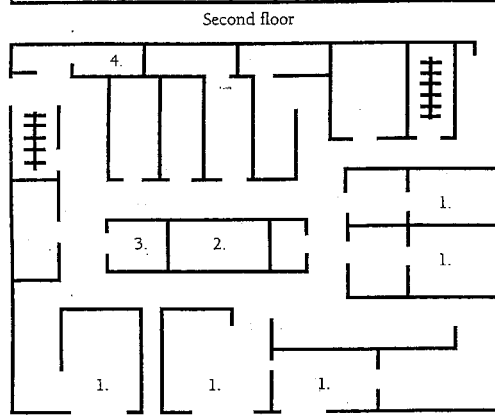
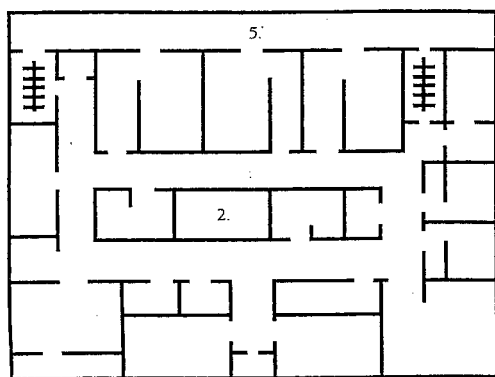


Figure 1. A typical *insula*. Key: 1. shop; 2. lightwell; 3. well; 4. latrine; 5. balcony.

Figure 2. A typical *domus*. Key: 1. fauces; 2. shop; 3. atrium; 4. impluvium; 5. cubiculum; 6. tablinum; 7. andron; 8. peristyle; 9. triclinium; 10. oecus.

home of artisans like Priscilla and Aquila, where the living and gathering of the church would be upstairs while the ground floor rooms that opened onto the street were shops. Such people usually did not have slaves, but rather servants or hired workers. And even though such households would often be the location of a “church that met in someone’s household,” this is not the basic pattern assumed in Ephesians 5—which, as noted above, is probably related to the fact that Paul has just been writing to Philemon of Colossae and to the church that meets in his house.

Such a household would look more like the drawing in figure 2. Here is the more typical domus, in which the privileged few—people like Philemon of Colossae or Stephanas and Gaius of Corinth—lived. This is clearly the kind of household presupposed by Paul in this passage. So we shall begin with the household itself, which assumes this kind of dwelling and which usually had a large number of people attached to it.

1. *The basic sociological model here is clearly that of patronage; it was a mutual relationship between unequals in which each benefited the other. There are several aspects to this:*

a. By law, the man, the *paterfamilia*, was the master of his household (thus the patron). Although he did not necessarily exercise it in a hurtful way, under Roman law his rule was absolute, in the sense that none of the others in the household had legal means to redress any grievances.

b. Usually, but not always, the *paterfamilia* required the household to serve his gods, since the gods were looked upon as responsible for “order,” for causing and maintaining things the way they are.

c. Such a household, unlike our understanding of home, was not a place of consumption, but of production. It was, therefore, again in sharp contrast to our culture, not thought of as a private haven (a refuge to return to after a day “out there”); rather, the Greco-Roman household was almost always semi-public (especially theatrium).

d. The householder and a few higher-level slaves had the only public roles. Here, for example, is the ideal about woman’s place found in Philo of Alexandria:

Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air with full scope for discussion and action—all these are suitable to men both in war and peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house, within which the middle door is taken by the maidens as their boundary, and the outer door by those who have reached full womanhood.

2. *What it meant for a woman to enter such a household as a wife. We know from a large number of census lists from Egypt that:*

- The average age of a man when he married was 30, and a woman’s age was less than 18; she thus entered his household as a teenager, whom he had also to educate in the ways of his household.

- The reason for marriage was not “love” in our usual sense, but to bear legitimate children, to keep the family line going; failure to bear children, especially sons, was often a cause for divorce.

- Most men, although not all, were promiscuous:

Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children. (Demosthenes)

- Some wives, therefore, were promiscuous as well (although they always had to be more discreet, because their act would be considered infidelity, which was a matter of shame).

3. *In this kind of household, the idea that men and women might be equal partners in marriage simply did not exist. Evidence for this can be seen in meals, which in all cultures serve as the great equalizer. In the Greek world, a woman scarcely ever joined her husband and his friends at meals; if she did, she did not recline at table (only the courtesans did that), but she sat on a bench at the end. And she was expected to leave after eating, when the conversation took a more public turn.*

4. *Slaves, of course, did all the work, both menial and clerical, including tutoring the children (they couldn’t have imagined a society without slaves). Slavery was not based on race, but initially on*

conquest in war, and eventually on economic need. Nonetheless, slaves had absolutely no rights before the law, evidenced by the fact that they could not even marry.

5. *Finally, we return to the matter of religion. It is precisely because religion was regularly practiced in a household that, when such a householder became a follower of Christ, his familia would also as a matter of course follow Christ. Thus the familia (a Latin term for which we have no exact equivalent), which consisted both of blood relatives and all those attached to the household, both slave and freedperson, automatically became the nucleus/locus of the earliest Christian communities. And because there was already a semi-public aspect to the “home,” it also then became a place where many from outside the household would come and join in the worship—thereby creating a new kind of kinship, where Christ was now the new paterfamilia.*

One final important note here. When such a householder became a follower of Christ, it was also invariably for him and his household a matter of shame—because he had chosen as his household religion to be a follower of a

It is especially difficult for any of us even to imagine our way back into that Greco-Roman culture, let alone to have any sense of feeling for it.

Jewish messianic figure who had died by crucifixion, which was one of the ultimate expressions of shame in that culture. What Paul does not do—indeed, it would never have occurred to him—is to add shame to shame by dismantling the *structure* of the household. That was simply in place. What he *did* do was in some ways far more radical: he applied the gospel to this context.

What interests us, returning to our text, is how a new kinship based on the household's common relationship to Christ as "head" of his body, the new household of God, affected all of these various relationships.

IV. The household of God

As we move toward looking at the now-Christian household as God's household, I want to point out some of the difficulties we have in reading this text, beginning with one of its more common abuses: using it to tell modern husbands that they should assume their proper role as head of their wives. Since the modern household looks almost nothing like the Greco-Roman household, this issue must be given a new cultural setting. The modern application is almost always put in terms of: "When you reach an impasse in decision-making, who has the authority to make the final choice?"

I don't know whether I hear Paul laughing or crying when that utterly modern reading is superimposed on this text—as though that were actually somehow derivable from the passage itself. And in any case, what would that look like for a couple of normally strong people like my wife, Maudine, and me, who are both second children, neither of whom likes to make decisions at all! In June we celebrated our forty-fifth anniversary, and I would say that we have never had such a decision-making stalemate in all these years. To be sure, we've had our moments—but never on this issue. Of course, we don't get anything done, either!

But let me quickly add that it is especially difficult for *any of us* even to *imagine* our way back into that Greco-Roman culture, let alone to have any sense of feeling for it. Indeed, in our context I almost always have a strong sense of need here to apologize to the singles—which in itself is evidence of how different from them we really are culturally. So let's say some things about ourselves and why we have such difficulty imagining that world.

We are heirs of a culture in which two major events in the past 300 years have radically altered Western culture forever, and which turned the basically patronal culture that preceded it completely on its head—namely, the so-called Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the individual, created a culture in which individual rights came to be regarded as the highest good. So much is this so that by the late twentieth century the concept of individual

rights had finally almost totally superseded that of the common good. But the Enlightenment alone did not create the structural changes in our understanding of home and family. After all, look at the British manor house, with its "enlightened" autocrat, which has taken such a beating in a whole series of movies in the past decade.

No, it took the Industrial Revolution to really turn things on its head. It did so by turning both men and women outside the home into the marketplace. Just one statistic tells us how radically American culture changed during the past century. In 1885, it is estimated that 88 percent of all consumer goods were produced in the home for the household. One generation later, in 1915, that was totally reversed—over 85 percent of all consumer goods were now produced *outside the home*. The eventual effects of this one reality alone brought staggering changes to our culture, including especially all the new opportunities that women began to enjoy, including:

- equal opportunities for education,
- the (nearly unheard of) right for women to vote,
- and, eventually, the right to serve in almost every way in the public domain.

But it also resulted in our homes being thought of as havens of refuge from the world out there and, until recently, as the place for the nuclear family to exist—a nearly sacred concept in Western culture that was totally foreign to Paul's world.

The fact that our cultural assumptions are so different from theirs makes it difficult for us even to imagine how absolutely radical and earth-shattering the Christian gospel sounded in their ears. Take especially Paul's conclusion to his argument with the Galatians over true ecclesiology, having to do with Jew and Gentile as members together in the one household of God. "In Christ," he says, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ."

But such a revolutionary statement was not intended to abolish the structures, which were held in place by Roman law. Rather, it was intended forever to do away with the significance attached to such structural differences, which pitted one group of human beings against another. And the most radical thing of all was that such people—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women—shared a common meal together, itself a cause for cultural shame, and thus celebrated their Lord's death until he was to come again—which, as 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 makes clear, created considerable tension for the traditional householder. No wonder the world had such difficulty with these early Christians, and why they were considered to be "haters of humanity," because they so willingly broke the rules—not by tearing down the structures, but by making them ultimately irrelevant! Such

What makes our text so radically countercultural lies in Paul's urging those who are filled with the Spirit and worship Christ as Lord to have totally transformed relationships within the household.

people are greatly to be feared as the worst of all possible anarchists.

So what in the end is it that makes our present text so radically countercultural? What Paul obviously did *not* do was to demolish the structures and create new ones. What was radical lay in his urging those who are filled with the Spirit and worship Christ as Lord to have totally transformed relationships within the household

Thus wives and slaves, respectively, are to continue to submit and obey but now to do so as those who are thereby *serving the Lord*. And that changes things. But the more radical change is for the male householder, whose model is Christ and his love for the church. Christ is thus the “savior of the body” (a remarkable phrase indeed). In this case, however, Paul is not emphasizing salvation from sin (although that, too, of course is finally included). Rather, “savior” is the most common designation for the emperor. Used of God in the Old Testament (as God my Savior), it most often carries its more common sense of provider and protector (cf. 4:15–16).

Note then the only thing that is said to the householder in terms of his relationship to his wife. Three times—at the beginning (v. 25), in the middle (v. 28), and at the end (v. 33)—Paul says the one truly radical thing: “Love your wife.” That does not refer to either romance or sex, but to him giving his life in loving service to her. And note that there is regular emphasis on “his *own* wife.”

The model is Christ’s love for the church; look at how Paul expresses that. The imagery is that of a man taking a bride; Paul provides this with a marvelous echoing of Old Testament language from Ezekiel 16, where God betroths Israel, the naked and orphaned teenager, and washes her and dresses her in the finest of clothes.

Thus Paul now images the husband as treating his wife as just such a bride, adorned and glorious to behold. It is assumed that he will continue to provide leadership to the household, but his role will be radically transformed into one of caring for the people within the household for *their own* sakes, not having them around to serve *his own* self-interests. This is also why the Christian household, which is always a kind of nucleus of the larger Christian community, should always be understood as the first place where all the other imperatives are to find their first place of existence. The household, which was also the church, was the place where Christian life had to be put into practice.

We would do well here to go back and reread chapter 5 in light of this reality. Here is the more abbreviated version in the letter that is the companion to this one, excerpted from the full text of Colossians 3:12–4:1:

12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

This, I would urge, is how these texts finally apply to us and to our homes. In the end, the structures are immaterial since they are predicated altogether on cultural givens that are simply not ours. Indeed, in light of this text, the structures are ultimately irrelevant, except that some structure must be in place or the household will fall apart. But these depend largely on the people involved, their own giftings, personalities, and how they relate to each other.

But whatever the structure, at issue is that we live Christlike in our relationships with one another in our homes.

*God calls us to Peace, shalom
to be filled with the Spirit,
and thus submitting ourselves to one another
in reverence to Christ
to love with Christ’s love,
by self-sacrificial giving of ourselves.*

If we do that, the matter of structures will pale into insignificance. n



Gordon Fee is professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, Canada. He has written numerous books and commentaries, including *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Eerdmans, 2000). He taught previously at Wheaton College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. This article was first presented at CBE’s international conference in

Dallas last June and has been edited for publication. The drawings on page 9 are reproduced from *Families in the New Testament World*; © 1997 Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.

News of Interest

A *New York Times* news story late last summer reported the following:

After 26 years of debate, amendments, delays and parliamentary maneuvering, the Brazilian Congress [has] approved a legal code that for the first time in the country’s history makes women equal to men in the eyes of the law. . . .

As feminist groups see it, though, the most significant advance is the abolition of the traditional concept of “paternal power,” which gives fathers unrestricted legal rights to make all decisions on behalf of their families. Under the new legislation, they will have to divide that authority with their wives, and single mothers will be regarded as heads of households. . . .

[According to] Solange Bentes Jurema, president of the National Council for Women’s Rights, one of the country’s leading feminist organizations, “The family is no longer an institution that is the property of the man, but a union in which all members have responsibilities and duties.” . . .

“These are important advances,” said Jacqueline Pitanguy, a sociologist and women’s rights advocate. “But we also have to ask: What took so long?”