HONOR AND SUBJECTION IN THE LORD:
PAUL AND THE FAMILY IN THE REFORMATION

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Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 
Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

Paul’s Letter to the Colossians 3:18–19

St. Paul has taught us men
To rule our wives with understanding
Not by harassment and crude tyranny,
Because wives are the weaker sex.

From a German woodcut by Barthel Behaim, c. 1530

One of the first things that any history student learns about the Reformation, even in the most cursory survey overview, is the significance of sola scriptura for Martin Luther and all of the reformers who followed. While most students grasp the basic importance of this principle and its revolutionary implications quite easily, it is more of a challenge to demonstrate how the general Reformation-era population incorporated the words of the scripture into their daily lives. It is particularly difficult to discern explicit connections between the teachings of Paul and commonly accepted ideas about families and gender relations in the sixteenth century. Nonetheless, if we are effectively to convey the importance of sola scriptura at all levels of the Reformation, it is vital to explore those links and reveal them as clearly as possible. With that in mind, the following discussion seeks to begin to provide a coherent picture of the reception of Paul’s teachings on the family in the Reformation.

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1 Throughout this chapter, translations of scripture passages are taken from The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, RSV, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York, 1977).
3 For a full discussion on the theological debates regarding the nature and subjection of women, see John Thompson’s chapter in this volume.
As the above quotations suggest, Paul’s teachings were not only debated and proclaimed by theologians and preachers; they were also incorporated into popular literature and woodcuts. Such popular influences are more difficult to trace than are the explicit references in theological treatises, but they are important indications of the reach of Paul’s teachings throughout Reformation society. The above verses also indicate the complexity of Pauline influences: Paul’s epistles supported ideas about the importance of male authority and strict social hierarchies at the same time that they noted certain limitations on that authority. While male reformers clearly used Paul’s teachings to justify and reinforce patriarchal authority within the family, support for such hierarchy is not unique to Paul: it can be found throughout the Bible. Considering this widespread biblical support for patriarchy, the most significant influence of Paul on Reformation ideas about the family may be seen in the way that reformers used Pauline teachings to emphasize the burdens and limits of patriarchal power.

To introduce the topic of Pauline influence on Reformation ideas about the family, I will begin with a brief overview of the current state of scholarship on the history of the family in the sixteenth century, followed by a brief discussion on Pauline texts and patriarchal ideas. Next, we will look at sixteenth-century ideas about family relationships, focusing on the defense of clerical marriage, the roles of wives and mothers, the mutual obligations of husbands and wives, and relations between parents and children. As we will see, Paul was consulted most explicitly on the general topic of marriage and the mutual duties of husbands and wives; while the epistles attributed to Paul provided some general advice about wives, mothers, and the relationship between parents and children, they offered very little guidance regarding specific obligations or daily responsibilities. Nonetheless, some Reformation authors found in Paul important general principles regarding family relationships and the need to put Christ at the center of those relationships.

The Reformation and the Family

Today the popular image of “pre-modern” family life in Europe generally falls at one of two extremes: grim or nostalgic. People focused on critiquing modern western society, in particular the impact of industrialization and capitalism, will point back to an earlier, rather fuzzy period in history, when life was natural and “good”: all children had