

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 6, Reading 1 Peter Attuned to Kinship Structures and Values 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to the explainer. Today, we're going to dig into a really powerful social strategy from the ancient world that honestly has some big lessons for us today. It's the story of how this tiny marginalized group didn't just survive.

They completely thrived by basically reinventing the whole idea of family. So let's get into it. All right, let's start with a puzzle.

Why in the world would anyone join a group that pretty much guaranteed they'd become an outcast? I mean, early Christians faced this intense social pressure for leaving their family traditions behind. This wasn't some private thing you did on your own. It was a huge public act of defiance that came with a very real price.

So what could possibly make that worth it? To really get their solution, we first need to feel the full weight of their problem. In the Roman world, converting meant you were cutting the very ties that defined your whole social life, your identity, everything: their old communities, their friends, their neighbors. They used a whole arsenal of social weapons to try and force them back into the fold. We're talking about constant public insults, being completely cut off from business and social circles, and yeah, even physical violence.

The goal was pretty simple. Make them feel totally alone and completely ashamed. So how did this movement possibly survive all that pressure? Well, they made a radical counteroffer.

They didn't just give people new beliefs. They gave them a whole new family. So instead of fighting for approval from their old community, they just built a brand new one from the ground up.

The core strategy here is something scholars call fictive kinship. And listen, this wasn't just some nice fluffy metaphor. It was a powerful social technology, a real deliberate system where total strangers committed to treating each other with the loyalty, the obligation, and the love that you would normally only reserve for your absolute closest family.

The early Christian text of 1 Peter talks about this as a literal new birth. So this wasn't like joining a club. The idea was that you were being reborn from a better imperishable seed, the word of God, into a completely new family with a new identity and a whole new future.

And this new family, it was presented as a clear, undeniable upgrade. I mean, look at this. Converts were trading what they called futile traditions for a living hope.

They were swapping a perishable inheritance for one that was imperishable. And maybe most importantly, they were exchanging all that shame from their old community for a higher kind of honor that came straight from God. Okay.

So they had a new family. That sounds great. But what did that actually look like day to day? You know, it's one thing to call each other brother and sister, but it's a whole other thing to actually act like it, especially when you're under constant pressure from the outside world.

So the text of 1 Peter lays out this really practical code of conduct called Philadelphia, which just means brotherly love. First up, love earnestly. That means putting the group's needs way ahead of your own.

Second, cover sins. When a family member messes up, you protect their honor, and you forgive them. You don't hit back.

Third, and this is a big one, put away slander that constant jockeying for status that defined the Roman world that had to stop inside this new family and finally show hospitality. This was absolutely crucial because opening up your home is what created the actual physical space for this new family to even exist. Now, this new family identity didn't just exist outside of society.

It started to reshape the most rigid institution of the time from the inside out: the Roman household, and it did so by challenging its most basic values. Okay, first you have to understand the Roman ideal. The writer Plutarch sums it up perfectly here.

A wife's religion was her husband's religion, period. End of story. To rush up some other God was seen as this profound act of disloyalty, not just to him, but to the entire household.

So the advice in first Peter starts off sounding pretty conventional, right? It says, Hey, be a model wife in every other way. The strategy was that your respectful behavior could actually win over a non-believing husband without you even having to say a word, but this created a huge conflict. I mean, the strategy works perfectly right up until the moment a husband demands that his wife participate in a pagan ritual.

Now what? That's a direct conflict with her new ultimate allegiance. So what happens then? And here is the subtle, but brilliant twist. After all that advice about submission, the text adds this critical line telling wives not to fear any intimidation.

The message was crystal clear. Your ultimate loyalty is to God. And when it comes to worship, you have to be willing to resist your husband's pressure.

Then the text completely reframes the husband's role. See, a Roman husband was told to honor his wife because she was the weaker vessel. But 1 Peter adds this revolutionary new reason.

Honor her because she is your fellow heir. That one phrase, fellow heir, basically recasts the strict hierarchy of marriage into something much more like a sibling relationship before

their husband and wife, their brother and sister in God's family. But maybe the most radical transformation of all involved slaves.

In a society where slaves were at the absolute bottom of the social ladder, 1 Peter takes their experience, enduring unjust suffering for doing the right thing, and holds it up as the model for all Christians to follow. The lowest person in society becomes the example for the highest. This was a total inversion of Roman social values.

So the crucial takeaway here is this. Creating a new family wasn't just some comforting metaphor. It was a powerful social technology.

It had enormous historical consequences, and it allowed a marginalized movement not just to survive, but to eventually thrive. And historians absolutely confirmed this dynamic. As the classicist Edwin Hatch wrote, Christianity grew because it was a great fraternity.

Think about it. A Christian could travel anywhere in the known world and among people they'd never met, find a family ready to give them a home, support, and protection. And that kind of leaves us with a final question for today, right? This ancient strategy of building a chosen family shows the incredible power of a community built on real mutual support and love.

It makes you wonder, in a world that can feel so isolating sometimes, what could our own communities look like if we really dared to treat strangers like family?