



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

Resourcing for Prayer Network

Practical Help (2) FAMILY AND COMMUNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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In writing this Cliff has drawn from his 1972 doctoral thesis 'The Sociology of the New Testament Church to AD 62' which has never been published.

We hope that it is helpful to you in your groups

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Roman society in the first century A.D. was in transition from a Republic to an Empire: from being governed by an elected Senate to coming under the control of an Emperor (a dictator). It was a time of social turmoil in which the one constant factor was the family. It was the family that gave stability to the whole Greco-Roman world in a time of great uncertainty.

Time of Transition

The family at that time of transition was nothing like the family we know today in our Western civilisation. It was also nothing like the extended family in Victorian England or in African society. The family in Greco-Roman society was a household consisting of blood relatives, adopted children, servants and slaves. The larger households also included wage labourers at one end of the social scale and 'friends' at the other end.

Friends

The friends were extremely high status, enjoying great prestige due to their close and intimate relationship with the head of the family to whom they acted as counsellors and advisers. When Jesus conferred this title upon his disciples, he was paying them the highest tribute possible. He was sharing his inner thoughts with them; taking them fully into his confidence. *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you"* (John 15.15). Clearly, Jesus was fully familiar with the household structure of Roman society in making this statement. He knew that the highest status in Rome was to be called a 'friend of Caesar'.

Adopted Children

The adopted child also enjoyed a privileged position within the family and high status in society. There were six principles of adoption in Greek society all of which have spiritual significance for us in understanding Paul's teaching in Galatians. The six principles are: -

- ▶ The adopted child is a true son - as one born by blood
- ▶ The adoptive father promises to provide daily necessities
- ▶ The adopted child cannot be repudiated

- ▶ The adopted child cannot be reduced to slavery
- ▶ The adopted child cannot be reclaimed by his natural father
- ▶ By the adoption the child is constituted an heir

Paul had all of these principles in mind when he declared to the Gentile Christians *"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3.26). He reinforced this with the statement *"So you are no longer a slave, but a son: and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir"* (Galatians 4.7). For a Jew to make this statement to the Gentiles was of huge significance. Paul was saying that because God had **adopted** them, they were actually more secure in the love of the Father than if they had been born Jews! What a wonderful reassurance this is!

Pater Familias

In Roman society the 'Pater Familias' (head of the family) was the ruler of his household. In large households he had enormous power. Jesus was quite familiar with this kind of household as is seen in his parable of the 'Unmerciful Servant' where the householder exercised absolute power (Matthew 18.21-35). This unity of the household-family was essential which is reflected in Jesus' statement, *"Every household divided against itself will not stand"* (Matthew 12.25).

Family Unity

In order to preserve the unity of the family it was essential that they should share a common religious commitment. When the head of the household became a Christian it was expected that the whole family would adopt the same faith, as when the Philippian jailer was converted. Luke's account of Paul and Silas praying and singing in prison that led to the jailer's conversion says *"At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds: then immediately he and all his family were baptised"* (Acts 16.33).

Early Church Model

It was this large household-family that became the model of the Early Church in New Testament times and for several centuries beyond. Jesus was the head, and all the members shared a common belief. They met in one another's homes and shared their food as they would in any family home, and there was love, and loyalty, and commitment to each other.

Community of Believers

They were all adopted children of the same status in their loyalty to the Head of the family - to Jesus, who had rescued them from a crooked generation steeped in the evil practices of darkness, and brought them into the kingdom of light. When they came together their joy overflowed in praise and thanksgiving. The Risen Jesus was the Head of the family, the leader of the community. *"Jesus is Lord!"* was constantly upon their lips. They were a community of believers! They were family!

Comments

If this is found helpful we would value your comments and we will consider publishing the whole thesis. Please also do let us know the kind of material that would be helpful to you in your group situation.

This Resourcing For Prayer Network mailing is a way in which we can work together and provide the materials you need. Please contact both Ingrid and Monica on ingrid@issacharministries.co.uk and monica@issacharministries.co.uk

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