

Jesus' Ministry in Light of Corporate Identity

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(Reference "Life in the Big City" at <http://faculty.occ.edu/markmoore/sociology.htm>)

In individualistic societies, like the Czech Republic, people see themselves psychologically and define themselves based on their own achievements, personality, and preferences. In group oriented societies, on the other hand, individuals define themselves based on the groups to which they belong.¹ For example, a Jewish person of the Mediterranean world, when asked to describe himself, would say something like, "I am the son of Akiba, a goldsmith from the tribe of Judah and the town of Bethany." In other words, "I am the sum total of my kinship connections." These connections include (1) the household,² (2) fictive families (like the teacher's students or members of a synagogue), (3) workers' guilds or other volunteer association, (4) patron/client groups (see below), and (5) the city/state and ethnic group to which one belongs.³ The bottom line of group orientation is that we must not merely look at individuals on the streets of Rome; we must discover the groups to which they belong if we are to correctly interpret their behaviors, values, and intentions. Nowhere is this more true than in the church and its treasury. This new fictive family was to have no poor among them (cf. Deut 15:4). Thus they share their resources and give them to the Apostles who would act as patrons, distributing the goods to those who had need (Acts 4:34-35).

Because of this group orientation, individuals bound themselves to others in a social system called **Patron/Client**. This involved three people: A patron who controlled resources, a client who offered allegiance, and a broker who brought the two together. We may independently go to the market to buy goods necessary for everyday life. But for everything else -- land, capital business, food after a drought, protection, appointments to an office, citizenship, legal aid in court, etc. -- we need a patron who will accept us as his clients.⁴ It works like this: The patron is a member of the upper 2% of the urban elite who own virtually everything. The patron views himself as the father of a very large family, whether it is an actual kinship group, a city, a province, or in the case of the emperor, the entire Roman world. It is his job to take care of his people, who, in turn, are obligated to pay him homage and deference. He is to offer clients the resources and protection they need to sustain life as well as a good number of social services and entertainments. In fact, most entertainments and public buildings of the ancient world are forms of benefaction. The clients, in turn, are to offer the patron services, fidelity, and honor. For example, the clients are obligated to show up at the patron's house each morning to pay him honors and make their petitions; they are to help him get elected to public office, and they are to

¹ Bruce Malina, "Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: A Guide for U.S. Consumers," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989): 127-141.

² The household consisted minimally of father, mother, and children. Secondarily it included extended family member such as grandparents, aunts/uncles and cousins. Thirdly, it encompassed the servants of the household and "adopted" workers. David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 173.

³ Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996) 158-64. This group-oriented perspective permeates nearly every page of the gospels and Acts. This is a crucial hermeneutical concept which deserves full and widespread attention in our reading of the New Testament.

⁴ John H. Elliott, "Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 3/4 (1987) 42.

follow in his public processions, especially his funeral.⁵ And, of course, when one receives a gift, s/he is obligated to publicize it and perpetually remember it, calling attention to the “magnanimous munificence” of the patron (Seneca *Ben.* 2.25.3).⁶ At the same time, the patron is obligated *not* to mention it or ever bring it up again as leverage against the client.

Truly, it is not “what you know but who you know.” While that, to us, smacks of nepotism, the ancients do not see this system as evil. On the contrary, these exchanges of honor and benefaction are viewed as the “practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society” (Seneca, *Ben.* 1.4.2).

In this social system, reciprocity is mandatory to the honorable person (Cicero *De Offic.* 1.47-48). Ingratitude is seen as one of the chief vices since it disrupted the social interchange of humanity. It is classed with sacrilege against the gods. Those who don’t reciprocate are labeled as ingrates and imperil their future by being blackballed from the whole system of giving and receiving (cf. Heb 6:4-8). Interestingly, the New Testament concepts of God’s grace and our response of faith (i.e. fidelity to our patron), are deeply bound up in this social system.⁷ In fact, evangelism, in this context, is not so much “winning the lost” as “spreading the fame” of our magnificent patron.⁸

Examples from the Gospels:

1. **Mt 1:1-18**, This ingenious genealogy demonstrates the importance of a family line and what can be argue from it.
2. **Mk 3:31-35** demonstrates Jesus’ new fictive family. It is no longer biology that determines kinship, but spiritual rebirth.
3. **Lk 4:16-30** shows how fixed social groups were and the kind of serious antagonism that could arise when people didn’t stay in their proper place.
4. **John 17** reveals Jesus’ self-perception that he was, indeed, from a different family – from a divine one. While some say this was John’s radical (and late) Christology, the very first words recorded from Jesus’ lips (Lk 2:49) show this same awareness.

Implications in Acts & Epistles:

1. **Economic sharing** – The church refused to allow the needs of the poor to go unmet. This was *koinonia*, *not communism* (cf. Acts 4:32; Deut 15:4).
2. **Spiritual Gifts are for Building up the Body** – Eph 4:9-13; 1 Cor 12:7, 12; 14:4. We carry out our ministry for the good of the whole not for self-aggrandizement.
3. **We are baptized into a body** – We may accept Jesus personally, but he is not our personal savior (1 Cor 12:13). We are spiritually connected and responsible for each other. Even the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is more corporate than corporeal (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19 [cf. v. 15]; Eph 2:22)

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 55.

⁶ D. A. deSilva, “Patronage,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 767.

⁷ D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* 115.

⁸ Examples of patron/clients in Luke/Acts would include the prudent servant (Lk 16:4-9); Pilate and Herod (Lk 23:6-12); Theophilus (Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2); Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 22); Felix (Acts 24:2-4; cf. 24:27; 25:9).