Found Families: "Confessional Communities" in the Early Christian Movement

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Canadian Society of Biblical Studies 2025 Annual Meetings

It is a well-known axiom that when you marry your betrothed, you marry their family as well. Through marriage, outsiders become fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. Such a merging of families may begin to approach the concept of the fictive kinship portrayed in the New Testament, exemplified by the attested use of "brother" and "sister" for fellow members of Christian communities. By fictive kinship we mean the adoption of family categories or modes of relating that imitate those of a culture's kinship norms, but that are applied to those who would not normally be considered family relations. Much has been written about the origins and reasons for the early Christian adoption of fictive kinship language.[1] David Bossman sees the apostles organizing a social movement, with fictive kinship being the glue that held this movement together.[2] He states, "the object of brotherhood is shared identity and corresponding mutual benefits and in-group obligations."[3] By helping Christians to view themselves as a family, the apostles, and Paul in particular, encouraged others to remain dedicated to the community. Relatedly, Dirk van der Merwe argues that the kinship language in 1 John "entrenches their identity as a group, and serves to continue to regulate social (ethical) behaviour in this group."[4] While concurring with the notion that fictive kinship promoted group cohesion, David deSilva also adds that this reimagined family would have served to ease the tensions

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[1] Karl Olav Sandnes, *A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 91 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994); Jerome H. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, Loss of Family and Loss of Honour," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip Francis Esler (London: Routledge, 1995), 139–58; Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997); Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, The Family, Religion, and Culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Jan Willem van Henten and Athalya Brenner, eds., *Families and Family Relations: As Represented in Early Judaisms and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions*, STAR 2 (Leiden: Deo, 2000); Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Fictive Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians*, JSNTSup 247 (London: T&T Clark, 2003); Reidar Aasgaard, *"My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!" Christian Siblingship in Paul*, JSNTSup (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Korinna Zamfir, *Men and Women in the Household of God: A Contextual Approach to Roles and Ministries in the Pastoral Epistles*, NTOA 103 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Timothy J. Murray, *Restricted Generosity in the New Testament*, WUNT 2. Reihe 480 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018); David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

[2] David M. Bossman, "Paul's Fictive Kinship Movement," *BTB* 26, no. 4 (1996): 167–69.

[3] Bossman, "Fictive Kinship," 169.

[4] Dirk G. van der Merwe, "Domestic Architecture: Culture, Fictive Kinship and Identity in the First Epistle of John," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21, no. 2 (2010): 209; cf. Lone Fatum, "Brotherhood in Christ: A Gender Hermeneutical Reading of 1 Thessalonians," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 190.

between Jews and Gentiles.[5] Descent from Abraham was no longer a requirement for inclusion among the people of God. Rather, all could join the family who had God as Father and Jesus as brother. Discussions of the function of early Christian fictive kinship have thus emphasized how familial language and customs served to keep the communities together.

This paper does not seek to dispute what has been previously argued regarding fictive kinship. Rather, we hope to add to an understanding of the efficacy of this practice by taking an interdisciplinary approach that considers recent advances in trauma care. The New Testament is univocal in its portrayal of the persecution faced by early Christian communities. Jesus predicts this persecution (Matt 5:10–12; 10:16–18; 24:9; John 15:18–20; 16:2), Acts narrates persecutions (e.g., Acts 4:3; 5:17–33; 6:8–14; 8:1–3; 9:23–25), Paul writes about persecutions being suffered (2 Cor 4:8–10; 11:23–27; Gal 6:12; Phil 1:29–30; 1 Thess: 3:3–4), and Revelation speaks of persecutions still to come (Rev 2:10; 6:9–11; 13:7; 14:12–13; 20:4). Early Christians experienced trauma from displacement, arrest, loss of loved ones, or the experience of social stigma. The support provided by house churches and other Christian gatherings would have allowed for the processing of trauma and emotional healing. We do not argue that fictive kinship was an intentional method of trauma recovery. This would be anachronistic. Yet the bonds of kinship alluded to in Paul's epistles and narrated in Acts would help to explain how the young movement was able to grow in the face of trauma. We first explain the confessional community framework, focusing on how community has been found to be a productive method for processing trauma. We then demonstrate how many of the elements of a successful confessional community can be found in the first century Christian communities, as described in the New Testament.

Trauma and Confessional Communities

While the presence and effects of trauma can easily be traced throughout history, the intentional study of trauma only began in the last few decades. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in the United States has identified that trauma "occurs as a result of violence, abuse, neglect, loss, disaster, war and other emotionally harmful experiences. Trauma has no boundaries with regard to age, gender, socioeconomic status, race,

[5] deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*, 227–41.

ethnicity, geography or sexual orientation."[6] It may occur as a result of a single event, a series of events, or chronic ongoing conditions which cause individuals to maintain a heightened stress response for unhealthy lengths of time and frequency. Beginning with the seminal article by Vincent Felitti et al. on adverse childhood experiences, plentiful studies have demonstrated significant correlation between the experience of trauma and impaired physical and mental wellness for individuals, families, and communities.[7]

The ideal therapeutic goal for individuals suffering the effects of trauma tends to be two-fold: experiencing post-traumatic growth as well as a restoration to baseline health and day-to-day functioning. In this paper, whenever we use terms such as "healing," "recovery," or "overcoming trauma," we are referring to the accomplishment of these two goals. Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi have defined post-traumatic growth as "positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a traumatic event."[8] A variety of these positive changes have been studied, including appreciation of life; connection in relationships; confidence in personal strength; recognition of new opportunities; and personal spirituality.[9] It should be noted that while reduction of clinical symptoms (including those of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression) may and often does correlate with post-traumatic growth, reduced symptomology is not seen as an inherent component of post-traumatic growth.[10] This second goal, however, is a key element to trauma recovery. Mental health professionals

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[6] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, HHS Publication No. SMA14-4884 (Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014), https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf.

[7] Vincent J. Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245-258. See also: Brook Hadwen, Eva Pila, and Jane Thornton, "The Associations between Adverse Childhood Experiences, Physical and Mental Health, and Physical Activity: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Physical Activity & Health* 19, no. 12 (2022): 847-854; Thomas Selden et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences: Health Care Utilization and Expenditures in Adulthood," *Health Affairs* 43, no. 8 (2024): 1117-1127; Christopher Cambron, Christina Gringeri, and Mary Beth Vogel-Ferguson, "Physical and Mental Health Correlates of Adverse Childhood Experiences among Low-Income Women," *Health & Social Work* 39, no. 4 (2014): 221-229; Hilda Björk Daníelsdóttir et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental Health Outcomes," *JAMA Psychiatry* 81, no. 6 (2024): 586-594;

[8] Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, *Facilitating Posttraumatic Growth: A Clinician's Guide,* The Lea Series in Personality and Clinical Psychology (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), 11.

[9] Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, "The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9, no. 3 (1996); Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2004), 4.

[10] Jane Shakespeare-Finch and Janine Lurie-Beck, "A Meta-Analytic Clarification of the Relationship between Posttraumatic Growth and Symptoms of Posttraumatic Distress Disorder," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 28, no. 2 (2014): 223-229.

describe the relationship with symptomology as one of management and not eradication. Complete elimination of symptoms is not consistently realistically attainable with current trauma recovery modalities.[11] However, symptoms may be effectively mitigated to allow for baseline wellness and the ability to successfully function in everyday life.[12] This coupled with post-traumatic growth is considered a successful recovery.

Notably, a consistent contributor for post-traumatic growth both in individuals and groups is positive community engagement. This concept has readily been demonstrated in the wake of a global pandemic, with early research showing social participation as an avenue for healing.[13] When examining specific cultural groups which have endured traumatic incidences, whether historically or contemporarily, the need for community engagement for post-traumatic growth becomes even more crucial. Therapeutic models for individual recovery which neglect communal participation in sensitive groups often result in prolonging or even impeding the process of healing.[14] While many different modalities can foster post-traumatic growth, the role of social participation within a community is vital for recovery for individuals and groups within a traumatized society. Community engagement creates social support, teaches cognitive reappraisal, strengthens mutual caring (give and take), and embodies a greater abundance of positive regard and love—all significant avenues for healing.

In the early 2000's, developmental psychiatrist Dan Siegel proposed the concept of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), a transdisciplinary framework for examining the interconnectedness of the mind, brain, and relationships for the purpose of promoting mental health in individuals and communities. While itself not a formal therapy, IPNB principals have been interwoven into clinical practice and inform developmental education and policy.[15] Due to its emphasis on the interaction between neurobiological processes and embodied relationships,

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[11] Sadie E. Larsen et al., "Residual Symptoms Following Empirically Supported Treatment for PTSD," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 11, no. 2 (2019): 207-215.
[12] Kate St. Cyr et al. "'You Can't Un-Ring the Bell': A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding Veteran and Family Perspectives of Recovery from Military-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *BMC Psychiatry* 22, no. 37 (2022): 1-11.
[13] Roni Laslo-Roth, Sivan George-Levi, and Malka Margalit, "Social Participation and Posttraumatic Growth: The Serial Mediation of Hope, Social Support, and Reappraisal," *Journal of Community Psychology* 50*,* no. 1 (2020): 47-63.
[14] Anna Ortega-Williams et al., "An Integrated Historical Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth Framework: A Cross-Cultural Exploration," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 22*,* no. 2 (2021): 220-240; K. Schultz et al., "Key Roles of Community Connectedness in Healing from Trauma," *Psychology of Violence* 6*,* no. 1 (2016): 42-48.
[15] Daniel J. Siegel and Chloe Drulis, "An Interpersonal Neurobiology Perspective on the Mind and Mental Health: Personal, Public, and Planetary Well-Being." *Annals of General Psychiatry* 22*,* no. 1 (2023): 5.

IPNB has been a natural framework to utilize in psychotherapeutic groups. A few core concepts from the framework clearly point to an integrated group therapy model. For example, IPNB posits the development of secure attachments and attuned relationships rewire the brain and foster healing.[16] The theory also suggests that the ability for an individual to coherently present autobiographical narrative while his or her stress response is deactivated is crucial for trauma recovery.[17] Thus a setting of non-judgmental relational engagement for vulnerable story-telling can be conducive for the reforming of the brain and healing of the mind, a theory which research has confirmed.[18] As described in Badenoch and Cox's *The Interpersonal Neurobiology of Group Psychotherapy and Group Process,* "when implicit neural networks are activated in group, the members, supported by the therapist, can amplify the sense of attunement to the specific kind of struggle the member is experiencing, and, consequently, potentiate the possible repair."[19] Siegal's IPNB framework has more clearly articulated why group therapy demonstrates effective positive results for participants. Meta-analysis shows that thousands of psychotherapeutic group participants have experienced significant decreases in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder compared to symptomatic control groups.[20]

The "confessional community" therapeutic modality developed by psychiatrist Curt Thompson merges three formidable elements for post-traumatic recovery and growth: confessional communities are rooted in the IPNB framework; structured around evidence-based practices such as group psychotherapy and narrative exposure therapy; and led by the biblical principal of spiritual formation. The modality typically involves six to eight participants with two facilitators, meeting weekly for ninety minutes at a time.[21] Participants are committed to confidentiality and heartfelt participation. The formation and regular meeting of the community

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[16] Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are,* (New York: Guilford, 2020), 12.
[17] Siegel, *Developing Mind,* 350-355.
[18] Amir Izaki et al., "A Narrative on the Neurobiological Roots of Attachment-System Functioning," *Communications Psychology* 2*,* no. 96 (2024): 1-10; Jeannette C. G. Lely et al., "The Effectiveness of Narrative Exposure Therapy: A Review, Meta-Analysis and Meta-Regression Analysis," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 10*,* no. 1 (2019): 1-13.
[19] Bonnie Badenoch and Paul Cox, "Integrating Interpersonal Neurobiology with Group Psychotherapy," in *The Interpersonal Neurobiology of Group Psychotherapy and Group Process,* ed. Bonnie Badenoch and Susan P. Gantt (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.
[20] D. Schwartze et al., "Efficacy of Group Psychotherapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials," *Journal of Society of Psychotherapy Research* 29*,* no. 4 (2019), 415-431.
[21] Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Desire* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2021) 108.

is done "with the assumed presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in mind and with the explicit intention of incorporating stories, wisdom, and texts from the biblical narrative for the purpose of being formed into the image of Jesus."[22] These groups are called *confessional* as they are centered around participants confessing truth, sharing their stories with one another and responding to each other's stories.[23]

Thompson's confessional communities are built upon several key concepts for spiritual formation, emotional healing, and overall post-traumatic growth for individuals and communities.[24] For the success of the group, participants must commit to vulnerability: recognizing personal error and need for help as well as recognizing one's ability to help others. This includes sharing and hearing one another's stories, thoughts, and feelings from a place of courage. Participation in a confessional community requires embodiment. This is a complete engagement with one another in the present moment, physically as well as mentally and emotionally. It involves practicing being a present, non-anxious recipient and reactor to the experiences of others. Invariably in any group, individuals will upset or hurt one another. An important facet of the confessional community is the work of rupture and repair. Participants identify and acknowledge hurts dealt by one another in the community and intentionally seek restoration of the relationship. Imagination is another key element for post-traumatic growth in a confessional community. Participants must be willing to practice envisioning new possibilities and engaging in new perspectives to overcome fear and shame. Without this imagination, true lasting change does not occur. Taking these elements combined allows for the final undergirding component: the commitment to creating things of goodness and beauty as the image-bearers of God. Through the incorporation and interweaving of evidence-based practices, the IPNB framework, and Scriptural principles, many have experienced recovery and post-traumatic growth through engagement with the confessional community modality.

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[22] Thompson, *The Soul of Desire,* 95.

[23] Note that while this method follows the principles of IPNB, it is also very similar to the cognitive behavioral therapeutic modality known as narrative exposure therapy, a systematized and evidence-based modality developed for treating individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder or exhibiting similar symptoms. See Sevastian Siehl, Katy Robjant, and Anselm Crombach, "Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses of the Long-Term Efficacy of Narrative Exposure Therapy for Adults, Children and Perpetrators," *Psychotherapy Research: Journal of the Society for Psychotherapy Research* 31*,* no. 6 (2021): 695-710.

[24] Here are noted the five elements expressed in Curt Thompson, "The Way of the Confessional Community," (2024), https://curtthompsonmd.com/content/uploads/2024/06/Confessional-Community-Article-2.pdf.

Trauma in the Early Christian Movement

To argue that Christian communities were engaging in practices analogous to Thompson's confessional community model for trauma recovery, it is first necessary to show that many Christians had suffered trauma as a result of their aligning with Jesus and his followers. There are Christians mentioned in the New Testament who appear to have been quite wealthy. These include Barnabas, a property owner capable of supporting a group of Christians (Acts 4:36–37), and Philemon, a slave owner with spare room to lodge Paul upon his arrival in Colossae (Phlm 16, 22).[25] Others had political or social power, such as Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10:1), Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 13:7, –12), and those working in service to the emperor (Phil 4:22). Yet the experience for most early Christians appears to have been traumatic. Trauma could come through physical violence and persecution, through social and familial isolation, or even simply through the fear of these perceived threats to health and happiness.

The threat or reality of persecution from the religious and political elites is omnipresent in the New Testament. It is an obvious yet important point that all four Gospels reach their climax when Jesus, the hero of their narratives, is killed through an act of state-sponsored violence (Matt 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19). Throughout the Gospels Jesus predicts that his followers would be similarly treated (e.g., Matt 5:10–12; 10:16–18; Mark 10:29; Luke 21:12; John 15:19–20), a fact that suggests at least the threat of persecution for the Gospels' audiences. In Acts, the predictions become reality as Christians are killed, imprisoned, and made to flee. In his monograph on persecution in Acts, Scott Cunningham says, "Persecution is an almost omnipresent plot device in Luke's second volume."[26] He finds that in Acts, only a relatively small number lose their lives via state-sponsored persecution, yet nearly all suffer ongoing trauma through the threat of violence.[27] Thus, persecution is a literary device in the structure and plot of Acts that speaks to the lived reality of Luke's audience. Just as the

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[25] On the topic of patrons in the early Christian movement, see discussion and references in Peter Lampe, "Paul, Patrons, and Clients," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 214–18.

[26] Scott Cunningham, *"Through Many Tribulations": The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSup 142 (Sheffield: Sheffield academic, 1997), 287.

[27] Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 186. On the reality of persecution for the Lucan community, see also Frieder Schütz, *Der leidende Christus: Die angefochtene Gemeinde und das Christuskerygma der lukanischen Schriften*, BWANT 89 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969), 105; Charles H. Talbert, *Learning through Suffering: The Educational Value of Suffering in the New Testament and in Its Milieu*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 75–90.

characters like Peter and Paul remain steadfast despite persecution, the Christians reading Acts are encouraged to endure through their persecutions.[28] The New Testament epistles confirm this conclusion by regularly exhorting the reader to endure (e.g., Rom 12:14; Gal 4:29; 1 Thess 3:3–4; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12–14; 1 John 3:13; Rev 2:10–11).[29] The New Testament affirms the threat of displacement, imprisonment, and death that many early Christians faced.

The number of Chirst followers who experienced state-sponsored persecution is a matter of debate, but recent studies on trauma show that even the expectation of suffering can be traumatic. People can develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), even when they were not present for the traumatic incident. Just the expectation of experiencing trauma could lead some to PTSD.[30] Conversely, those who experience trauma tend to react based on their expectations before, during, and after the traumatic event.[31] The writings in the New Testament point to a community who expected suffering. Warnings of Jesus in the Gospels, predictions and encouragement in the epistles, and the apocalyptic framework of Revelation all indicate a people who were, at minimum, expecting to experience trauma. This mindset could damage a community quite apart from any real violence perpetrated against them.

Typically, someone facing tragedy in the first century could rely upon his or her kin. Yet many Christians were doubly disadvantaged in that they were oppressed by the elites and disowned by their families. As Jerome Neyrey puts it,

> If a village turned on someone, he would presumably still have family to fall back on, either his father's house and land or his own house and land. He would still have kin in the area, whose first loyalty would be to him. He would not necessarily be hungry or mourning. But a disciple who suffered disinheritance by his father or banning from the family land would become a *ptochos*, and immediately suffer lack of subsistence, kinship and honour.[32]

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[28] Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 334.

[29] See Philip F. Esler, "'Keeping It in the Family': Culture, Kinship and Identity in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians," in *Families and Family Relations: As Represented in Early Judaisms and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Athalya Brenner, STAR 2 (Leiden: Deo, 2000), 164. Esler argues that, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul intentionally uses the reality of shared oppression to heighten the group's commitment to one another.

[30] Trond Heir, Ines Blix, and Charlotte K. Knatten, "Thinking That One's Life Was in Danger: Perceived Life Threat in Individuals Directly or Indirectly Exposed to Terror," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 209, no. 4 (2016): 306–10.

[31] Sarah B. Dokkedahl and Yael Lahav, "Peritraumatic Dissociation and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms: The Moderating Role of Perceived Threat," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 15, no. 1 (2024): 5–6; cf. G. A. van Wingen et al., "Perceived Threat Predicts the Neural Sequelae of Combat Stress," *Molecular Psychiatry* 16, no. 6 (2011): 664–71.

[32] Neyrey, "Loss," 154–55.

In a kinship-oriented society, no longer being included in one's family would be devastating. The loss of the emotional, social, and financial bonds provided by one's kinship group would represent a genuine trauma in the life of a first-century Jew or Gentile.[33] This ostracism is addressed in the Gospels (Matt 10:35–37; 19:29; Mark 10:29–30; 13:12; Luke 12:52–53; 14:26), which likely points to the struggles being encountered by many early Christians. In their book on families in New Testament, Osiek and Balch remind us, "The same sensitivity to honor and status that was part of the life of others was part of [Christian] life as well."[34] One's lineage was a core aspect of honor in the first century Mediterranean world.[35] To remove oneself from this system of support and honor or, more likely, to be removed due to anti-Christian prejudices, would amount to a maximally traumatic event from a sociological perspective.

Whether through overt persecution or familial abandonment, many, if not most, Christians would have experienced trauma. The endurance of the Christian movement is a testament to the effectiveness with which the various Christian communities were able to process and redefine this trauma. In the remainder of this study, we will demonstrate how the practices of the early Christian movement assisted the members of the community in reaching positive social, emotional, and spiritual outcomes in a manner similar to the confessional community model.

Confessional Community Strategies among Early Christians

With the ubiquity of trauma among first-century Christians, methods of resilience were essential to prevent the untimely demise of the movement. This section will discuss four related practices attested in the New Testament that would have assisted Christians in thriving despite their difficulties. To combat the disappointment of familial disenfranchisement, the Christian communities adopted a form of fictive kinship. This led to the sharing of goods and financial support of fellow Christians. Community members were instructed to encourage one another, and leaders of the movement assisted in recontextualizing the trauma being faced. These last two points are especially relevant, as they underlie the positive results demonstrated by the confessional community model for trauma recovery.

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[33] Neyrey, "Loss," 148; Halvor Moxnes, "What Is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 37; David Peterson, "The Worship of the New Community," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 391.
[34] Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 102.
[35] deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*, 18–19.

A. Kinship Language and Group Cohesion

The anthropological study of kinship asks questions regarding who is considered part of one's family and how family members are expected to treat one another. Fred Eggan, in a reference book used widely in the twentieth century, writes that kinship, in addition to defining who constitutes a relative, also involves "the particular customs by which the behavior of these relatives is regulated in daily life."[36] More recently, Carol and Melvin Ember say that from an anthropological perspective, kinship provides "the main structure of social action in noncommercial societies."[37] They go on to say that for many cultures around the world, "Mutual aid often extends to economic cooperation on a regular basis. The unilineal descent group may act as a corporate unit in landownership."[38] For those cultural groups who pass on inheritance via a single line of descent, often through fathers, the family is the primary source of economy and financial support. Land ownership remains in the kinship group, who ensure that the family property continues to prosper for future generations. A culture structured around a mentality of kinship assumes that family will be the primary *modus operandi* to ensure human flourishing.

Both Jews and Gentiles living in the first century CE Mediterranean world would be considered unilineal descent groups by modern anthropological standards. Inheritance passed from father to son, and the bonds of kinship tended to be seen as the closest connection two people could have with one another. In his study of brotherhood in the Greco-Roman world, Trevor Burke demonstrates that the likes of Aristotle, Musonius Rufus, and Plutarch all considered brotherly love to be the height of familial attachments. "Of all familial relationships, there is no one closer than a brother (Aristotle), and no stronger supporter either (Musonius Rufus). Indeed, the close nexus of family relationships is such that brothers who fail to love one another properly reflect poorly upon their own father and mother (Plutarch)."[39] Honor would come to a family whose brothers cooperated with one another in perfect harmony.[40] The family

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[36] Fred Eggan, "Kinship," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 390.
[37] Carol R. Ember and Melvin Ember, *Cultural Anthropology*, 14th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 264.
[38] Ember and Ember, *Cultural Anthropology*, 272.
[39] Burke, *Family Matters*, 126.
[40] Burke, *Family Matters*, 126–27.

unit was the main holder of generational wealth and the primary locus of one's honor.[41] As explained above, removal from the family would have been devastating for the typical Christian.

Fictive kinship served to mend the social loss experienced by Christians who were disinherited. This reimagining of family in terms of the Christian religious movement is demonstrated by the ubiquity of family language in the New Testament. To take Galatians as an example, Paul describes his audience as being children of God (Gal 1:1–3; 3:26; 4:1–7), children of Abraham (3:7, 29), children of Paul (4:19–20), children of Sarah (4:21–31), and siblings to each other (1:2, 11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18).[42] Churches would have a leader, or *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος) who would act as a father figure to the local community, while acknowledging God as the true father.[43] Paul uses the term "sibling" (ἀδελφός) more than 130 times, the vast majority of which are used in a context of fictive kinship.[44] The term is also adopted in Acts (1:15–16; 6:3; 9:30; 10:23; 14:2), Hebrews (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22), James (1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:1; 3:10; 5:7), the Petrine epistles (1 Pet 5:12; 2 Pet 1:10; 3:15), the Johannine epistles (1 John 3:13–14; 3 John 3, 5, 10), and Revelation (1:9; 6:11; 12:10; 19:10). The sheer volume of uses suggests that the language of family was widespread among early Christians.

The language of kinship appears to have come from a sense of shared genealogy within Judaism. In Acts, "sibling" is often used of fellow Jews (2:29; 3:17; 7:2, 26; 13:26, 38; 23:1, 5, 6; 28:17). The term could be seen as an acknowledgement that any Jewish person was a descendant of Abraham and heir to his covenant.[45] Josephus speaks of the Essenes behaving "like brothers" with each other, as if they all had one father.[46] Regarding the Christian adoption of this Jewish custom, Fitzgerald remarks, "early Jewish Christians took over such a designation from their former coreligionists, among whom it was also commonly used."[47] This custom of considering Christians to be each other's siblings may also have its origin in Jesus's statement

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[41] Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 41.
[42] Esler, "Family," 175.
[43] Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 166.
[44] "Sibling" is a preferable translation, rather than "brother," because the masculine was used in a generic sense. Verses in which women are included in the term ἀδελφοί include Acts 1:15; 11:29; 15:3; 18:18; 28:14. For a longer list of uses that would possibly include women, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 97.
[45] Schnabel, *Acts*, 97.
[46] Josephus, *J.W.* 2.122.
[47] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 222.

that his mother and brothers are those who do the will of God (Matt 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 8:21; cf. Luke 22:32).

This article suggests that a primary function of Christian fictive kinship was supporting traumatized members, but others have offered alternate proposals. Philip Esler, following the foundational work of Henri Tajfel, proposes that kinship language is a way for Christians to encourage group cohesion by dichotomizing those inside and outside the group.[48] In this framework, the leaders of the movement do not want their members to apostatize or conform too much to the wider culture. Fictive kinship works to insulate those on the inside from those on the outside. Under this conception, fictive language was, in a sense, outwardly focused, in that it sought to solidify the barrier between those inside and outside the community.[49] Yet the early Christian movement was also a missionary movement, requiring a steady flow of outsiders into the community. If the lines between outsiders and insiders were too heavily drawn, a strategy of group cohesion would be at odds with a strategy of mission.

If the fictive kinship present in the early Christian movement was embraced purely for group cohesion and retention, we might expect that it would be practiced in a way that generally conformed to the wider culture, so that members would be maximally enculturated in the new movement. Yet the evidence for Christian fictive kinship attested in the New Testament points toward a counter-cultural ethos. Greco-Roman society expected a separation between slaves and free, with architecture designed to assist this dichotomy. Osiek and Batch point out that in this way, "The Christian confession and the design of Greco-Roman houses were at odds with each other."[50] In Christian communities, slave and free were encouraged to eat, worship, and fellowship together (1 Cor 11:21, 33–34; Gal 3:28–29; Phlm 15–16; Jas 2:2–4). Karl Sandness correctly points out that within the system of brotherhood and fellowship, hierarchies still existed. Paul is Philemon's fellow (κοινωνός, Phlm 17) yet is still in a position to issue demands (Phlm 8–9, 21). Similarly, Onesimus is to be Philemon's brother, while still (presumably) his slave.[51] Despite this hierarchy, the fellowship and relative equality present in

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[48] Esler, "Family," 160–64; cf. Henri Tajfel, "La catégorisation sociale," in *Introduction à la psychologie sociale*, ed. S. Moscovici, vol. 1 (Paris: Larousse, 1972), 272–302.
[49] Bossman, "Fictive Kinship," 169; Burke, *Family Matters*, 250; Merwe, "Domestic Architecture," 208–9.
[50] Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 199.
[51] Karl Olav Sandnes, "Equality within Patriarchal Structures: Some New Testament Perspectives on the Christian Fellowship as a Brother- or Sisterhood and a Family," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 161–62. Cf. Reidar Aasgaard, "Brotherhood in Plutarch and Paul: Its Role and Character," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality*

Christian communities seem to go beyond a simple strategy to keep members in and exclude outsiders. Rather, fictive kinship served as an internal support for all who considered themselves to be a part of the Christian movement.[52] The following sections will demonstrate three important ways that the kinship model functioned as an effective modality for trauma resilience.

B. Sharing of Goods

Following its narration of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Acts gives a summary of life within the early Christian movement. It is no doubt an idealized image of these early times.[53] Luke himself narrates times when a Christian individual or community failed to live up to this ideal (5:1–11; 6:1), but the imperfect periphrastic construction in Acts 2:42 ("they were devoting themselves") indicates ongoing action. The reader should understand that this is the general attitude of the Christian communities, without assuming that the ideal was perpetrated in every instance.[54] The summary discusses how the Christians were taught by the apostles, participated in fellowship, broke bread together, ensured the needs of all in the community were met, and worshipped God (Acts 2:42–47). A similar summary appears in Acts 4:32–37 with more of an emphasis on the sharing of goods. To understand the connection between kinship and goods sharing, it is first important to understand the "fellowship" held by the early believers.

The Greek term κοινωνία in Acts 2:42, often translated as "fellowship" (KJV, ESV, NIV, NASB, NRSVUE), has attracted much debate. I. Howard Marshall sees the term as referring to "the holding of a common meal or to a common religious experience."[55] Under his interpretation, the "fellowship" was mostly restricted to communal gatherings in which God was

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and Metaphor, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 171–72. Aasgaard makes a similar point from the writings of Plutarch, who encourages brothers to live in perfect harmony, while acknowledging the older brother as having authority over younger siblings.

[52] Bruce J. Malina, "Early Christian Groups: Using Small Group Formation Theory to Explain Christian Organizations," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip Francis Esler (London: Routledge, 1995), 109.

[53] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 73.

[54] For the plausibility of a system of goods sharing in 1st century Palestine, see Brian Capper, "The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 4 (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1995), 323–56.

[55] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 88. Cf. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 92–93. Hauck approaches this interpretation when he speaks of a "spiritual term for the fellowship of brotherly concord." See Friedrich Hauck, "Κοινωνία," in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 809.

worshipped and a religious meal was shared. Craig Keener sees the term as having a financial connotation. Citing Musonius Rufus, he argues that κοινωνία "included sharing profit, and early Christians sometimes used the term κοινωνία to refer to sharing with others."[56] C. K. Barret offers a discussion of the various interpretive possibilities for κοινωνία in Acts 2:42, before settling on a broad view of community centered on the apostolic teaching that resulted in acts of charity.[57] Under this interpretation, the sharing of goods, while a logical outcome, is not an essential aspect of κοινωνία. Eckhard Schnabel combines the concepts of harmony and charity, "In the context of Luke's summary, the term 'fellowship' describes the harmonious unity of the believers and the willingness to sell possessions and give the proceeds to needy fellow believers."[58] There continues to be debate about what kind of "fellowship" was being enacted by the early Christians.

From both a historical and literary perspective κοινωνία in Acts 2:42 has strong economic connotations. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the word is used to refer to a monetary gift (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4, 9:13; Heb 13:16). It could also refer to a business partnership (2 Cor 6:14) or, in one of its few uses in the Septuagint, a monetary pledge (LXX Lev 5:21). Evidence from inscriptions and non-literary papyri tend to use κοινωνία in contexts involving business or property, and it appears often in reference to marriage. In an inscription found in Boiotia and dated circa 170 BCE, the people of Thisbe entered into an agreement (κοινωνία) with Gnaeus Pandosinus regarding grain and oil.[59] The word is used in a papyrus contract from Memphis to describe a business partnership.[60] Numerous papyri speak of the "partnership of marriage" (κοινωνία γάμου or γάμου κοινωνία), as does a second century BCE inscription from Priene.[61] The use of κοινωνία in a marital context is instructive, as a marriage involved both a relational and economic agreement. The husband and wife would form a new household, which would

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[56] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1002–3. Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 160; Peterson, "Worship," 390–91.

[57] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1, ICC (London: T & T Clark, 1994), 163–64. Fitzmyer similarly refers to a "communal form of life" (Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 270).

[58] Schnabel, *Acts*, 179.

[59] IG VII 2225.

[60] P.Bour. 13, dated February 27, 98 CE.

[61] Papyri with this term written between the first century BCE and the second century CE include BGU 4.1051; BGU 4.1052 Z.1–34; BGU 4.1099; BGU 4.1100; P.Yadin I 18; P. Oxy. II 372. The inscription is Priene 51. The similar phrase κοινωνίαν γαμικόν appears in 3 Maccabees 4:6.

involve cooperation and mutual support. This is illustrative of the life in early Christian communities as, according to Acts, members took care of each other economically.[62]

Κοινωνία is not always used in a financial context. The New Testament authors use κοινωνία to speak of fellowship with God (1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 13:13[14]; Phil 2:1; 1 John 1:3, 6), participation in Christ's sacrifice (1 Cor 10:16; Phil 3:10), fellowship with Christians (Gal 2:9; 1 John 1:3, 6), and partnership in the Gospel (Phil 1:5; Phlm 6; cf. Wis 8:18). While it may be possible to find a financial undertone in some of these passages, it would press credulity to state that such could be done in every instance. Yet the literary structure of Acts 2:42–47 supports the notion that κοινωνία, as used in Acts 2:42, entailed material support. Acts 2:42 lists four activities to which the community members were "devoting themselves" (προσκαρτεροῦντες): 1) the teaching of the apostles, 2) "fellowship" (κοινωνίᾳ), 3) the breaking of bread, and 4) prayers. Marshall argues that these four activities involve the four aspects of the early Christian worship service.[63] Others have argued that the breaking of bread and prayers are appositional to, and thus explanations of, "fellowship."[64] Yet this misses the fact that all four elements listed in verse 42 are expanded upon in the same order in verses 43–47. It first states that the apostles were working wonders and signs (v. 43). It then discusses how the believers had everything in common, selling possessions to ensure that all could eat (44–45). They were "breaking bread in their homes" (46) and praising God (47). David Peterson, arguing that Acts 2:43–47 is a further explanation of verse 42, says, "Luke is giving a description of the ministry of these disciples to one another in a variety of contexts, not simply telling us what happened when they gathered for what we might call 'church.' Here is a brief portrayal of their community life as a whole."[65] Based on this connection between κοινωνία and the selling of possessions described in verses 44–45, it is best to conclude that "fellowship" assumes a component of financial partnership and support. The evidence above for the phrase "partnership of marriage" (κοινωνία γάμου) is instructive, as both marriage and Christian "partnerships" involved relational and economic components.

How would such economic interdependence have been perceived in the first century? It will be our argument that the sharing of goods as narrated in Acts best accords to ancient views

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[62] The financial connotations of the term are discussed in definitions 2 and 3 in BDAG, 553.
[63] Marshall, *Acts*, 88.
[64] Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, vol. 1, EKKNT 5 (Zurich: Benziger, 1986), 130; Witherington, *Acts*, 160.
[65] Peterson, "Worship," 389. Cf. Keener, *Acts*, 1:1003.

of kinship, but other theories have been proposed. Some have seen parallels with the Greco-Roman notion of friendship.[66] Philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, along with Jewish writers Philo and Josephus, espoused the virtue of sharing one's possessions with their friends.[67] Yet Ben Witherington points out the difference between Greco-Roman friendship and the fellowship described in Acts:

> What is interesting about the Christian use of such conventions is that while friendship in the Greco-Roman mold often involved reciprocity between those who were basically social equals, what Luke seems to be inculcating here is conventions whereby Christians with goods will provide funds to the community for those who are needy *without thought of return*, and thus he is suggesting something more akin to family duties.[68]

Douglas Hume, whose thesis is largely dependent upon seeing the Christian community as analogous to Greco-Roman friendship, nevertheless concludes "the believers' friendship depicted in these passages is distinctive among literary portrayals of friendship in the Greco Roman world."[69] Based on the disparate socio-economic levels and prestige among early Christians, it seems unlikely that first century observers would have conceived of Christian goods sharing as a result of friendship.

The Qumran community could be seen as a comparable religious group in which members shared their wealth with each other. In the Community Rule, it is stated that potential members would bring their possessions into the community of God.[70] Similar statements appear elsewhere in the same document and in the Damascus Document.[71] From 1QS 6.17–25 it is clear that membership in the community was contingent upon turning over all possessions and wealth to the group. Herein lies a key difference between the Qumran and Christian communities, because Acts shows the selling of possessions to be voluntary (5:4). Barrett finds it notable that, as opposed to the Essenes, "nothing is said in Acts about a *law* requiring converts to the Christian

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[66] Brian Capper, "Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 516; Douglas A. Hume, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35*, WUNT 2. Reihe 298 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 76–77.

[67] Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 30.168; Plato, *Republic* 4.424A; 5.449C; *Critias* 110C–D; Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1168B.31; Philo, *Good Person* 12.86; *Hypothetica* 11.10–13; *Abraham* 40.235; Josephus, *A.J.* 18.20. For a longer discussion about possible cultural connections with the goods sharing in the early Christian movement, see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Hellenistic Parallels to the Acts of the Apostles (2.1–47)," *JSNT* 8, no. 25 (1985): 49–60; Pieter W. van der Horst, "Hellenistic Parallels to Acts (Chapters 3 and 4)," *JSNT* 11, no. 35 (1989): 37–46; Keener, *Acts*, 1:1012–23.

[68] Witherington, *Acts*, 205.

[69] Hume, *Early Christian Community*, 150.

[70] 1QS 1.11–12.

[71] E.g., 1QS 5.2; 6.2–3, 17–25; 9.3–11; CD 9.1–15.

church to hand over their property.[72]" Christians were not compelled to give their possessions. Conversely, Christians did not hold an implicit claim another's possessions; they were still expected to work as they were able (1 Thess 4:10–12; 2 Thess 3:12).[73] The giving of goods was fully voluntary.

The kinship model makes better sense of the sharing of goods in the early Christian movement than does friendship or religious association. This interpretation sees the early Christian movement acting as a family to one another. Within the kinship structure, goods were shared and everyone was fed. In his study of the cultural context of Jesus's beatitudes, Neyrey finds the connection between wealth and family: "In antiquity, wealth and honour were not individual possessions such as we see in the personal fortune of John D. Rockefeller, but the property of the family or kindship group."[74] In his monograph on generosity in the early Christian church, Timothy Murray reaches a similar conclusion based on the connection he finds with Roman *pietas*.[75] Admitting that Jews living in Palestine may not have been familiar with the specific term or particulars of Roman law, he nevertheless finds that "the general pattern of inter-family solidarity that is exemplified in the Roman sources may be assumed to be present, without too much differentiation, in Jewish families of the same period."[76] After surveying Greco-Roman, Jewish, and New Testament sources, Murray concludes "one's first priority was to meet the needs of the family of believers."[77] As discussed in the previous section, kinship formed the strongest bonds in the first century Mediterranean world. These bonds entailed financial support to ensure that family members did not starve. With many believers losing their family as a result of becoming Christian, it was necessary for the Christian community itself to become a family for its members. Incorporation into this new family included the promise of a full stomach.

In modern peer-based therapeutic group work, this model demonstrated by the Christian community is known as mutual aid. Geoffrey Nelson et al. have defined the therapeutic term "mutual aid" as referring to communities or networks "in which people with a problem in living or a common experience come together on a voluntary and equal basis to share their

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[72] Barrett, *Acts*, 1:168.
[73] On the expectation that Christians would work, see Burke, *Family Matters*, 206–7.
[74] Neyrey, "Loss," 140. Cf. Hume, *Early Christian Community*, 112.
[75] Murray, *Restricted Generosity*, 33–47.
[76] Murray, *Restricted Generosity*, 55. Cf. Catherine Hezser, "The Graeco-Roman Context of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 38–39.
[77] Murray, *Restricted Generosity*, 158.

experiential knowledge and to provide and receive informal social support."[78] Dominique Moyse Steinberg describes the model as a process wherein participants "1. develop collaborative, supportive, and trustworthy relationships; 2. identify and use existing strengths and/or…develop new ones; 3. work together toward individual and/or collective psychosocial goals."[79] Within the mutual aid model, participants share power, resources, experience, knowledge, and wisdom. This form of strengths-based treatment is considered a necessary component to mental health and recovery.[80] The ability for individuals to mutually engage in the giving and receiving of support consistently results in improved self-efficacy and resiliency as well as the mitigation of trauma-related symptomology. The mutual aid experienced in the fictive kinship of early Christian communities demonstrated a foundational principal of post-traumatic growth. Believers would receive care as they were expected to care for others, leading to the holistic recovery of individual believers as well as the community at large.

C. Encouragement

While the fictive kinship of early Christianity ensured that fellow Christians did not starve, and while food security does contribute to overall felt safety, this alone would not have been sufficient to overcome the trauma being faced through persecution and social stigma. Both through example and instruction, Christians were taught the importance of loving, strengthening, and encouraging each other. This emotional and social support would have given community members the resilience they needed to endure. The New Testament is full of exhortation directed at fostering such a supportive fellowship.

The Gospels narrate Jesus's instructions regarding community cohesion. Disciples were not to rule over each other but serve each other (Matt 20:26; 23:11; Luke 22:26). The commands to be reconciled to one's brother could equally apply to fictive families (Matt 5:22–24; 18:15, 35). When Jesus informs his disciples that he would be in their midst when two or three of them were gathered in his name (Matt 18:20), he affirms the importance of togetherness

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[78] Geoffrey Nelson et al., "'Nothing about Me without Me': Participatory Action Research with Self-Help/Mutual Aid Organizations for Psychiatric Consumer/Survivors," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26, no. 6 (1998): 89.
[79] Dominique Moyse Steinberg, "Mutual Aid: A Contribution to Best-Practice Social Work," *Social Work with Groups* 33, no. 1 (2010): 59.
[80] Bronwyn Hyde, "Mutual Aid Group Work: Social Work Leading the Way to Recovery-Focused Mental Health Practice," *Social Work with Groups* 36, no. 1 (2013): 43-58.

and fellowship. Donald Hagner notes, "the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation… in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name."[81] The occasion for Jesus's final words to Peter differ in Luke and in John, but the message is the same: strengthen the brothers (Luke 22:32; John 21:15–17). In John, Jesus gives the disciples a "new commandment" that they love each other (13:34–35). As the command is issued in a private context to those who have continued to follow Jesus throughout his ministry, the command is most likely intended to refer to love within the community.[82] Jesus loved them first, and they would reflect his love by loving each other, just as Jesus first washed their feet and then commanded them to do the same for each other (John 13:14).[83] It is this mutual love that would enable future generations to "be one" as Jesus and the Father are one (17:21). This unity would be observable from outside the community (17:21b) and would have God as its center.[84] The Gospels show supportive love to be *sine qua non* for the young Christian movement.

According to Acts, one of the primary tasks of the apostles was in the strengthening of the church. When the Jerusalem council made their decision not to require circumcision, the church in Antioch was comforted and local prophets Judas and Silas went about the task of encouraging and strengthening the community (Acts 15:31–32). More common is the refrain that Paul went through various cities "strengthening the churches" (Acts 14:21–22; 15:41; 16:40; 18:23; 20:1–2). Before Paul began his missionary career, Barnabas is also said to have exhorted/encouraged (παρεκάλει) the church at Antioch (11:23). It was evidently not enough to evangelize. As Barrett puts it, "New disciples need to be strengthened, confirmed, established in the faith."[85] Yet even those more mature in the faith needed prayer and exhortation, as when Paul spoke to the leaders in Ephesus for the last time (Acts 20:18–38). The statement in Acts 4:32 that the believers were "one heart and soul" (καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία) entails this concept of mutual encouragement and support. Likely an allusion to Deuteronomy 6:5, the phrase indicates that the Christians' religious conviction included a dedication to each other.[86] Acts, like the Gospels, portrays mutual love and support as essential for the followers of Jesus. As noted earlier, this

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[81] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC 33B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 534.
[82] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: XIII–XXI*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 613.
[83] J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 760.
[84] Brown, *John XIII–XXI*, 776; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Waco: Word, 1987), 302.
[85] Barrett, *Acts*, 1:686.
[86] Barrett, *Acts*, 1:253; Witherington, *Acts*, 206; Schnabel, *Acts*, 269–70.

mutual care is an important social engagement marker for individual and communal healing and resilience building. Meta-analysis demonstrates that the respect-based giving and receiving of help, both physical and intangible, frequently positively impacts personal trauma recovery while decreasing mental illness symptomology, such as anxiety and depression symptoms.[87] The simple instruction of encouragement is of itself a form of treatment for communities facing trauma.

The rest of the New Testament is filled with instruction and personal narration about the importance of encouragement within Christian communities. In writing to the Romans, Paul anticipates both giving and receiving encouragement (Rom 1:12; 15:32).[88] In the same epistle, Paul connects encouragement from God with harmony among Christians (15:5). Joseph Fitzmyer summarizes Paul's logic: "When Christians live not only for themselves, but for others, then that solidarity is achieved. God himself is seen as the source of such harmony, because he supplies the grace of endurance and encouragement."[89] The topic of encouragement occurs regularly throughout the rest of the Pauline corpus (e.g., 1 Cor 14:3, 31; 2 Cor 1:3–4; Gal 6:2; Eph 6:22; Col 2:2; 4:8). While God is the ultimate source of Christian comfort, Paul makes it clear that believers are to mediate this encouragement.[90] In 1 Thessalonians Paul is especially concerned with encouragement. He instructs the Thessalonians to encourage each other (1 Thess 2:12).[91] This encouragement would partially come from the hope of Christ's resurrection (1 Thess 4:18).[92] In the letter's final instructions regarding encouragement (1 Thess 5:11, 14), Paul acknowledges that the Thessalonians are already in the habit of encouraging each other (καθὼς καὶ ποιεῖτε, 5:11). The Pauline communities were taught to be encouraging communities, personifying the compassionate presence of Christ. The practice of embodying the emboldening

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[87] Cecilie Egmose et al., "The Effectiveness of Peer Support in Personal and Clinical Recovery: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Psychiatric Services* 74*,* no. 8 (2023): 847-858; Ruth E. Cooper et al., "The Effectiveness, Implementation, and Experiences of Peer Support Approaches for Mental Health: A Systematic Umbrella Review," *BMC Medicine* 22*,* no. 72 (2024):1-45.

[88] On whether this was genuine anticipation on Paul's part, or simply a rhetorical flourish, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 63.

[89] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introd. and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 703. Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 749.

[90] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids/Milton Keynes: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2005), 143.

[91] On interpreting παρακαλέω as "encourage" here, see F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 (Waco: Word, 1982), 36.

[92] Weima discusses the similarity with P.Oxy. 115, which is a letter of comfort after the death of a loved one. A key difference is the Christian hope Paul provides (Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014], 336).

and uplifting heart of God by speaking encouragement into the lives of others is a foundational principle of the modern confessional community.[93] This enduring emphasis on encouragement shaped the early church even as it supports healing for believers today.

The general epistles show that Paul was not the only one to stress the importance of supportive Christian communities. Hebrews 3:13 instructs the readers to "παρακαλεῖτε one another every day." The imperative comes from παρακαλέω, a verb that can refer to both comfort/encouragement and exhortation.[94] Some see the term in Hebrews 3:13 as referring exclusively to exhortation, but Paul Ellingworth correctly notes that in the LXX, which heavily influences the thought of Hebrews, the primary meaning of the term is "comfort." A preferred translation would thus be "encourage one another every day," as "encourage" entails both comfort and exhortation.[95] The readers were to continue gathering together, because in the gathering there would be encouragement and strengthening (Heb 10:24–25). Christians were to love and serve each other (Jas 2:8; 1 Pet 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8–10; 2 Pet 1:7; 1 John 2:10; 3:11–14; 4:7–21; 2 John 5). Karen Jobes, commenting on 1 Peter 4:8, points out that the "earnest love" being commanded is not about pure emotions, but "a love that persists despite difficulties because it is a love that also 'covers a multitude of sins.'"[96] Hardships might come from within the community, but love must endure.

Commands to love are so ubiquitous in the New Testament they almost become cliché. But a practical reason for this emphasis was likely the need for a crafted microculture in which early Christians could find security and safety, bolstering a resilient community. Christians loved each other so that they could endure persecution and ostracism.

D. Recontextualizing Trauma

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[93] Thompson, "Confessional Community," 2.
[94] BDAG, 765.
[95] Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 223; cf. Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). For those who see only a sense of exhortation in Heb 3:13, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 117; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 259.
[96] Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 278. Commenting on the same passage, Elliott points out the numerous household terms that appear in the context, indicating the kinship commitment Peter expected from the believers (John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 37B [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 750, 757).

Perhaps the most effective strategy of resilience attested in the New Testament is the redefinition and recontextualization of trauma. In this process, those who experience trauma learn to view their difficulties through the lens of growth and hope. Jesus prepared his followers to have this mindset, and it was embraced by the New Testament authors. First Peter is especially concerned with processing and redefining persecution.

The Gospels show Jesus as both predicting his death and teaching that his death was necessary (Mark 8:31; Luke 13:33; 17:25; 24:26; John 3:14). Yet he also sought to prepare his followers for their own suffering they would face. Those who truly followed Jesus must "take up their cross" and follow him, because those who lose their life would save it (Matt 16:24–25). The cross was a symbol of shame and political terror. Yet, for the Christian, it would be a mark of their victory. This is why Jesus could say that his followers who were persecuted and slandered would be "blessed" (Matt 5:10–12; Luke 6:22–23). Their reward for enduring such injustice would be great, and they could take comfort in the fact that the prophets were persecuted as well. Yet more than identifying with the prophets, persecution and hatred would connect the believer with Jesus (John 15:18). Through the resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that worldly persecution was less meaningful than eternal realities. Despite present persecutions, Christians knew that Jesus had overcome the world (John 16:33). This knowledge imparted to Christ's followers would be repeated as Christians continued to face hardships.

When the predicted persecution came, the early Christians followed Jesus's example in reinterpreting and embracing their trials. In Acts 4, after Peter and John faced threats from the religious elites, the believers quote from Psalm 2 in understanding their situation in the context of Scriptural fulfillment. God's people had always been oppressed, and so the oppression they experienced only served to prove that they were on the right side.[97] In the New Testament epistles, we see how Christians not only considered persecution a fulfillment of prophecy—it was a necessary step in spiritual development. Paul writes that believers should rejoice in their difficulties, because they ultimately lead to hope (Rom 5:3–5). The rest of the world may view suffering as something to be avoided, but Christians were encouraged to boast in their troubles (καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν) just as they boasted in God (καυχώμενοι ἐν τῷ θεῷ, Rom 5:11).[98]

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[97] Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 307.

[98] Schreiner, *Romans*, 255; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 560.

James 1:2–4 similarly reinterprets suffering as a cause for joy due to the spiritual growth it provides. Blomberg and Kamell say, "James highlights that Christianity does not shelter one from any adversity; Christians will face trials. The concern here, however, is how each person will respond."[99] Paul applies this attitude to his own life in 2 Corinthians 11:23–31, in which he treats his suffering like a badge of honor. It was not uncommon for contemporary authors to list their troubles (e.g., Seneca *Ep.* 82.14; Epictetus *Diss*. 1.1.22), but Paul is not boasting about his own stoicism or mastery over himself. Instead, he saw his weaknesses as a testament to the power of Christ (2 Cor 12:8–10).[100] Narrative exposure therapy is a foundational modality of the confessional community. A key element of this modality is contextualization, wherein the individual expresses his or her traumatic experiences within the context of personal life story as well as larger collective story. This allows for meaning-making, which in turn reduces learned helplessness and reinforces the power of community.[101] This practice of telling one's most difficult stories to reframe personal understanding has long been a powerful tool for persecuted populations.[102] When reframed in light of the metanarrative of the Gospel, the pains of early Christians were more easily endured. The believer could withstand their trials because of the hope provided by the promise of resurrection and glorification (Rom 8:17–18).[103]

Because it is so focused on the possibility of persecution, 1 Peter serves as a useful case study in how Christians conceived of their suffering. The letter begins by stating that trials would test and purify the believer like gold is purified in fire (1 Pet 1:6–7).[104] Therefore, suffering has a purpose. It goes on to say, in a possible parallel to the beatitudes of Jesus, that Christians who suffer are blessed (1 Pet 3:14).[105] First Peter, like the Sermon on the Mount,

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[99] Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT 16 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 49; cf. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 72.
[100] Ben Witherington, III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 388–89.
[101] "Narrative Exposure Therapy/Narrative Expositionstherapie: What is NET?" *NET Institute*. Accessed on May 14, 2025 from https://www.net-institute.org/whatisnet.
[102] Nicolas Gwozdziewycz and Lewis Mehl-Madrona, "Meta-Analysis of the Use of Narrative Exposure Therapy for the Effects of Trauma among Refugee Populations," *The Permanente Journal* 17*,* no. 1 (2013): 70-76.
[103] Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 506.
[104] Jobes, *1 Peter*, 94. There is a possible Jewish parallel in Wisdom of Solomon 3:5–6: "Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them."
[105] It is possible to take the optative in this verse to imply that persecution was an unlikely possibility. However, Achtemeier is probably correct that the optative was an acknowledgement of the situations of the readership which, according to 1 Peter 1:1, was quite varied (Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 230–31).

reorients the relationship between shame and honor, blessings and cursing, power and suffering.[106] Doing good, even if it brought suffering, was its own reward because it aligned the believer with God's will (1 Pet 3:17). Finally, suffering associated the Christian with Christ's suffering, which would also entail association with Christ's glory (1 Pet 4:12–14). Just as Christ first suffered crucifixion followed by resurrection, the Christians saw their persecution as a sign of their soon glorification as part of Christ's second coming.[107] In 1 Peter, suffering brings growth that will ultimately lead to eternal perfection in Jesus.

Conclusion

Most early Christians lost social capital because of their decision to join the community of believers. Many would have faced trauma, either through state-sanctioned persecution or familial and social ostracism. Using Thompson's confessional community framework, we have shown that many strategies used to overcome trauma today were also used among early Christians. This included the creation of a new kinship group, which would have functioned as replacement for the family that many early Christians had lost. Families ensured that fellow kinship members did not starve, and through their fictive kinship, first century Christians embraced this ethos by sharing goods. Emotional needs were also met through the mutual love and encouragement that is regularly taught throughout the New Testament. Christians helped each other to redefine and process trauma as an opportunity for growth and fellowship with Jesus. These strategies help to explain how a counter-cultural movement with little social capital could survive and thrive in the midst of oppression.

This article has taken a broad view of the New Testament to show how the confessional community framework is illustrative of the early Christian experience. In doing so, we hoped to demonstrate some of the general practices being used to overcome trauma, but this method does not allow for in-depth exegesis of specific authors or passages. It is our hope that this article will lead to more trauma-informed exegesis. While some scholars have begun to study the New Testament through the lens of trauma, much more work could be done.[108] We have

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[106] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 623.
[107] Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1971), 162–63; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 287.
[108] Works that exegete New Testament passages through the lens of trauma include Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn, and Else K. Holt, eds., *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond*, Studia Aarhusiana Neotestamentica 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Peter Yuichi Clark, "Toward a Pastoral Reading of 2 Corinthians as a Memoir of PTSD and Healing," in

shown that any approach that considers trauma should also consider resilience. The authors and original readers of the New Testament were not defined by their trauma, but rather, they defined their trauma. This insight should inform future work on early Christians and their texts.

Bible through the Lens of Trauma, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, SemeiaSt 86 (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 231–48; Christopher M. Hays and Milton Acosta, "A Concubine's Rape, and Apostle's Flight, and a Nation's Reconciliation: Biblical Interpretation, Collective Trauma Narratives, and the Armed Conflict in Colombia," *BibInt* 28, no. 1 (2020): 56–83; Cory M. Marsh, "Moral Injury and the Basilikos of John 4:46–54," *BBR* 33, no. 1 (2023): 34–54.