In the Beginning Was the House[1]

Part One: How Social and Identity Formation of Early Christian Groups Took Place

Dennis E. Smith[†]

Introduction

If we are to attempt a thick description of first- and second-century Christ group social and identity formation, we must take seriously the importance of the context, that is, the physical space in which that formation took place. Indeed, before we can correctly analyze any text, concept, or theology we need to account for the physical space in which it was born and nurtured. Too often we interpret our data as if it existed only as a set of ideas or as if it was manifest in some version of "church" as we know it today. In fact, physical space is more often than not a determinative factor of meaning.

I propose that the physical space where early Christ groups were formed was the ancient house. The house is the primary, if not the only, named assembly space for Christ groups in the NT. The house was the determinative social environment for what they became. It was never viewed as a temporary meeting place until they could build a proper church, since church buildings did not yet exist, either physically or conceptually. The house was synonymous with their identity as Christ followers. They had fully adapted to and were fully embedded in the social environment of the house.

Archaeological Data[2]

Interpreting the house as a social environment begins with the archaeological data. The spectacular remains of Roman period houses in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ephesus offer a rich collection of such data. Unfortunately, however, surveying this data is like viewing an episode of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." The archaeological remains are dominated by houses of the elites. Wealthy houses dominate the archaeological data because mansions survive better than hovels. Early Christ groups, however, did not come from

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1. With apologies to Hal Taussig who wrote the seminal study *In the Beginning Was the Meal*.

2. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in "The House Church as Social Environment" and "Hospitality, the House Church, and Early Christian Identity."

the elite class (more on that below). The houses in which they would have met would have been dwellings at the lower end of the spectrum.

Nevertheless there were some characteristics shared in common in all ancient houses. The most important was that, regardless of the size of the house and the social level of the householder, when guests were entertained it was in a dining space where a small group (ca. nine to fifteen) could recline together and enjoy a formal meal.

The Triclinium

The classic Roman style dining room was the *triclinium*. The example below shows a *triclinium* design on a mosaic floor from a Roman villa (Figure 1). The design indicates where the couches were to be placed. The term "*triclinium*" refers to a three-couch arrangement, typically in a "Π" shape.[3]

In the classic *triclinium* design each couch was expected to hold at least three diners, with nine diners being the normal expected capacity (Figure 2). The diners reclined on their left elbows with their feet extended toward the wall at an oblique angle.

Figure 1

Figure 2

3. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 38–43.

Figure 3

An example of this style of dining room *in situ* is found in a Roman house in Ephesus.[4] This dining room is prominently located off of the courtyard and, in its later phase, included a mosaic floor that indicated the placement of the couches. Figure 3 shows the room populated with eight diners so as to provide the scale (keep in mind that diners in this room would have originally reclined on couches). The walls in the room are also decorated, a feature that is regularly found in dining rooms of the elite class in the Roman period.

Another way in which a *triclinium* might be designed was by building permanent couches for the diners in the form of masonry platforms on which cushioning would be placed for the recliners. An excellent example was found in Ostia in a "clubhouse" of the association of the builders. Here there were several dining rooms extending off of a central courtyard, some of which had permanent couch platforms. In the Figure 4 example, the sides of the *triclinium*

Figure 4

4. Krinzinger, *Hanghaus 2*, 492–95 (mosaic description by Veronika Scheibelreiter). The room measures 5.35 m west wall, 5.54 m east wall, 6.18 m south wall, and 6.31 m north wall (p. 405).

were extended to make room for more diners than the classic nine. Dunbabin posits that the room could have accommodated twelve or more.[5]

The classic *triclinium* design tended to be the preferred style and size for dining in a variety of settings. An example is found at the imperial resort at Sperlonga, which dates from the time of Tiberius. Here guests of the emperor were provided with a spectacular statuary presentation of scenes from the *Odyssey* arranged at the entrance of a large cave. The guests would view the spectacle only nine at a time, however, from the position of an outdoor *triclinium* that faced the cave (Figure 5).

A variation of the *triclinium* was the "*biclinium*," in which the center couch was omitted. This example from Pompeii shows a *biclinium* constructed for garden dining (Figure 6).

Figure 5

Figure 6

5. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 97–98.

Figure 7

The *biclinium* was also the standard design for mithraea. An example is the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia (Figure 7). In the standard design of a mithraeum, the central position opposite the entrance and the focus of the hall, was occupied by the cult image of Mithras slaying the bull.

Biclinia were also commonly provided for funerary banquets at family tombs in Ostia, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8

The Stibadium

Another style of couch design in the Roman period was the *stibadium*. By the fourth century CE, it had become the normative pattern for reclining banquets.[6] A third-century mosaic located on the dining room floor of a house from Sepphoris pictures a *stibadium* arrangment (Figure 9). Note that the image shows four reclining diners, although it appears there is room for more.[7]

The *stibadium* is the form of dining arrangement most commonly pictured in the Christian catacombs in Rome. The fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla (Figure 10) shows seven reclining diners. The table contains a chalice, a plate of
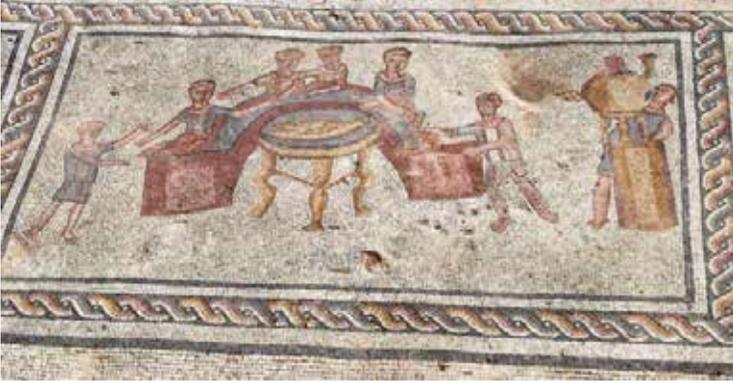

Figure 9

Figure 10

6. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 6, 169–74.
7. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet*, 166, plate XII; 169–74.

Figure 11

fish, and baskets of bread. It pictures what may be a funerary banquet with possible echoes of NT references, especially John 21:9–14, a meal of fish and bread prepared by the risen Lord and served to seven of the disciples (21:2).

A simple form of *stibadium* arrangement is illustrated in a wall painting from an Augustan period (first century BCE) columbarium burial chamber in Rome (Figure 11). It appears to be made up of a set of cushions arranged on the floor. This style could easily be set up in the modest housing characteristic of Christ group gatherings. It is a style that required no furniture and could be set up in any space that could be adapted for dining.

The Emergence of Church Buildings
When did church buildings begin to appear? The first standardized Christian church buildings took the form of the basilica, which began to appear in the late third to early fourth centuries CE. Basilicas functioned in Roman architecture as centers of governmental administration and expressions of imperial power. Michael White has traced the development from the house gathering to the basilica. He rejects earlier studies that posit a single line of development from house to basilica. Rather he argues that the Christian basilica was an adaptation of the imperial basilica and represented the phase in which Christianity moved from a private cult to a state religion. He emphasizes that the house church within a private dwelling and centering on the dining room was the norm for most Christ groups for the first three centuries of Christian origins. That is to say, there was no specifically "Christian" architecture during this period.[8]

Concurrent with the emergence of church buildings were changes in the central liturgy. That is to say, the change from a dining room setting to an assembly hall setting tended to take place concurrent with the change from a full meal to

8. White, *Building God's House,* 11–25.

a token meal, namely the Eucharist, in which only a symbolic portion of bread and wine would be ingested.[9]

The Banquet

Formal meals in the ancient Mediterranean world were reclining banquets that followed a ritual order as defined in the culture. The focus was on the sharing of food, wine, and conversation in such a form that social bonding or community formation took place. Plutarch called it the "friend-making character of the dining table."[10] Within the banquet community, social equality among the diners was assumed, but in practice it was often in tension with an emphasis on honoring the status stratification of the diners.[11] Those who bonded at the dinner table also took on an ethical responsibility toward the group as a whole, a phenomenon I call social obligation.[12] Because the meals of the Christ groups are communal and assumed to have significance, they are not ordinary meals but rather formal meals or banquets. Therefore they should be analyzed according to the banquet model.[13]

How Large Would a House Gathering Be?

The normative number of diners in a *triclinium* dining room setting was nine, although on occasion up to twelve or fifteen might be squeezed together in the reclining space. Images of *stibadium* meals often picture smaller groups of diners, but not exclusively so; *stibadium* dining arrangements for nine to twelve diners are also evidenced. The size of the dining group was important to the social function of the formal meal; it was intended to be an occasion when all of the diners would interact together in a social bonding experience.

Some wealthy elites gave large elaborate dinners as a way to impress their guests, but such gatherings were heavily criticized by Roman moralists for being contrary to the social purpose of the dinner gathering.[14] A good example of

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9. White, *Building God's House*, 119–20; "Regulating Fellowship," 180–81, 195–97.

10. *Quaestiones convivales* 612D–E; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 9–10, 54–55.

11. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 10–12, 55–58.

12. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist,* 10.

13. See also Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft*; Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal.*

14. See, e.g., Plutarch *Quaestiones convivales* 679A–B: "If both space and the provisions are ample, we must still avoid great numbers, because they in themselves take away the pleasure of conversation. It is worse to take away the pleasure of conversation at table than to run out of wine. . . . People who bring together too many guests to one place do prevent general conversation; they allow only a few to enjoy each other's society, for the guests separate into groups of two or three in order to meet and converse, completely unconscious of those whose place on the couches is remote and not looking their way because they are separated from them by practically the length of a race course. . . . So it is a mistake for the wealthy to build showy dining rooms that hold thirty couches or more. Such magnificence makes for unsociable and unfriendly banquets where the manager of a fair is needed more than a toastmaster."

the importance of the normal *triclinium* arrangement for nine diners is shown in Figure 5 above. The Sperlonga villa of Emperor Tiberius spared no expense in creating a theatrical experience in a coastal grotto, but confined the guest list to nine diners at a time in accordance with the cultural expectations of a properly conducted banquet.

The default norm for Christ-group gatherings, therefore, would be a maximum of nine to fifteen diners. The modest houses in which they met would have limited the size of the gathering. But even more important was the purpose of the gathering, namely, that it functioned as a ritual of social formation. Accordingly, it was essential that the gathering maintain the standard size for the social intercourse that was central to the banquet experience. This was not a rule, it was social convention; it was the way the banquet worked its magic. If the size of a gathering grew too large, then another house gathering would be formed. That is why there were multiple house gatherings of Christ groups in various urban locations.

Associations

Kloppenborg and Ascough define associations in this way:

> Life in Greek and Roman cities and towns was organized around two poles, the *polis* or town and the family. . . . Between poles of the family and the *polis* there existed a large number of more or less permanent private associations, guilds, or clubs, organized around an extended family, the cult of a deity or hero, an ethnic group in diaspora, a neighborhood, or a common trade or profession. Most of the associations had cultic aspects and most served broadly social goals.[15]

Note especially the emphasis of some associations to organize around family groups and/or around the cult of a deity or hero. The "broadly social goals" of associations included especially an emphasis on gathering for formal meals (see Figure 4 above).[16] Actually, there was little if any separation between "social goals" and cultic practices, since the ancients did not distinguish between secular and sacred.

Associations occurred throughout the Mediterranean world over a period of several centuries, from as early as the sixth century BCE to the late Roman period. They are known to us primarily by means of inscriptions or papyri that contain such items as decrees honoring members or benefactors, dedications to their deities or patrons, and by-laws defining responsibilities and conduct of members at their meetings.[17]

Associations wrote the book on group gatherings. Christ groups did not have to invent a new form of gathering; they simply followed the association model. In fact, it is misleading to think of Christ groups as having an identity

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15. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 1.
16. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 87–131.
17. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 3–4.

separate from the association model. They did not imitate associations; they *were* an association.

The Hospitality Motif

There are two well-known exemplars for the hospitality motif in Mediterranean culture.

1. Abraham and Sarah at the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18–19). Synopsis: Abraham sees three strangers approaching his tent. He runs out to offer them hospitality. "My lord," he says, "if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves (i.e. recline) under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on." Then he and Sarah prepare the finest bread and the most succulent calf that they have, and Abraham himself serves it to the guests. His guests then reveal to him that they are divine beings disguised as ordinary strangers. In return for his hospitality, they bestow a divine gift, the promise of a son to be born to Sarah. Then they move on to the next villages, Sodom and Gomorrah, and test their hospitality. Sodom and Gomorrah fail miserably and are punished for their inhospitality.

2. Baucis and Philemon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8). Synopsis: Baucis and Philemon are an elderly couple who live a simple life in a small hut. One day two strangers knock at their door asking for hospitality. Being pious people, the couple invite the strangers in and share with them all that they have, meager though it is. They soon find that these are no ordinary strangers but rather gods disguised as mortals. They have just entertained Zeus and Hermes. As a reward for their hospitality, the gods promise the couple whatever gift they may choose, while the rest of the village lies destroyed in a flood, because no one there would offer hospitality to these strangers.

Notice the components of the basic story:

1. Divine beings disguised as strangers test the piety of mortals in offering hospitality to strangers. Those who do so are rewarded. Those who do not are punished with immediate destruction.
2. The stranger is the archetypal "other," generally someone who is from a distant land and/or another culture. Hospitality is shown here to be embedded in Mediterranean culture as a ritual means for resolving tension with the displaced "other" by peaceful rather than violent means.
3. Hospitality is signified by hosting a meal in which the stranger is treated as guest of honor and is feted with the finest that the host has to offer. The primary theme of the motif emphasizes relationship with the "other" as offered through table fellowship.

The hospitality motif is referenced frequently in the NT. Hebrews 13:2 makes it into a command: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Note that the

generic reference to "some" indicates that many such stories were known to the author. The Abraham story is referenced directly at several points in the gospels, most notably in the Q text in which Jesus instructs the disciples before he sends them out on an itinerant mission: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town" (Matt 10:14–15; see also Luke 10:10–12). The story is referenced indirectly in those texts where the divine personage appears in disguise and in need of hospitality; see, for example, Matthew 25 (the sheep and the goats) and Luke 24:13–35 (the road to Emmaus).