

In the Beginning Was the House

Part Two: The Exegetical Data

Dennis E. Smith[†]

What happens when we filter our data through the context of the house as gathering space? I will illustrate this point by presenting below in-depth studies of three phases of Christ group development as evidenced in selected NT texts.

Profile of a Pauline Community (40s to 50s CE)¹

House Gatherings

The Pauline *ekklēsiai* met in houses. The primary social network bringing together their membership appears to have been household connections. In Corinth household groups included Chloe's household (1 Cor 1:11), the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15), and a gathering at Gaius' house (Rom 16:23). It is also likely that Erastus hosted a gathering at Corinth (Rom 16:23) and that Phoebe hosted a gathering at Kenchreai (Rom 16:1–2). Prisca and Aquila hosted gatherings at their house in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19) and later in Rome (Rom 16:3–4). Philemon hosted a gathering at his house (Phlm 2). In Rome, Paul singles out several different household gatherings, including those associated with (1) Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3–4) as well as (2) "the family of Aristobulus" (16:10), (3) "the family of Narcissus" (16:11), (4) "the brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*) who are with them [Asyncritus, etc.]" (16:14), and (5) "all the saints (*hagioi*) who are with them [Philologus, etc.]" (16:15).²

More specifically, those gatherings took place in a room that had been furnished to accommodate a reclining meal, following the cultural model for house gatherings.³ Accordingly, Paul consistently identifies meals as a formative

1. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in "Revisiting Associations and Christ Groups."

2. See Lampe, who proposes up to seven different household gatherings based on the greetings in Romans 16 (*From Paul to Valentinus*, 359, 374–76, 379–80).

3. Paul's letters do not designate the specific dining posture since reclining was an expected cultural model for all formal meals of significance. However, in 1 Cor 14:30 the text reads: "If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby (*kathēmai*), let the first person be silent." In *From Symposium to Eucharist*, I interpreted this text to mean that the 1 Corinthians community had decided to sit at their meal (p. 178). I have now changed my mind. Following the model laid out in this paper in which reclining was the necessary norm, I would now interpret this text to mean "even if a revelation is made to someone else *who is sitting rather than reclining* [and thus is of a lower status in the group], let the first person be silent."

activity in a variety of locations, including Antioch (Gal 2:11–14), Corinth (1 Corinthians 11–14), and Rome (Romans 14–15).

Demographics

Steve Friesen has proposed that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the Roman empire were non-elites, primarily existing at a subsistence level. This would be the pool from which were drawn the membership of the Pauline communities.⁴ There was some level of social stratification, since some of their number needed to be householders in order to provide the houses in which they would meet. Paul characterized the majority of the Corinthian community as lacking learning, prominence, or status in society at large (1 Cor 1:26). The household itself was normally governed by the household codes that governed relationships between members of the household (husbands/wives, parents/children, masters/slaves). Paul attempted to subvert these codes by proclaiming that “in Christ . . . there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28). But after his death they were quickly reinstated in the late first and early second centuries CE (Col 3:18–4:1, Eph 5:21–6:9, Titus 2:1–10; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7). Paul’s circle included women in benefactor and leadership roles.⁵ He proclaimed the equality of slaves among the members (1 Cor 7:21–24), and in some cases slaves took on leadership roles.⁶ He even apparently urged Philemon to free his slave Onesimus (Phlm 15–16). For the most part, however, slaves seemed to have been left in limbo, so that Paul would argue that both slave and free lived under God’s grace and so, while each kept their social roles, they were nevertheless to be considered equal in some sense (1 Cor 7:21–24). Some house gatherings included Jews as well as gentiles; Paul tried various strategies to overcome tensions between them but was not always successful (e.g., Gal 2:11–14, Rom 14:1–15:13; see also 1 Corinthians 8).

The Corinthian *Ekklesia* and the Association Model

One of the earliest Christ groups we can reconstruct is the one at Corinth as described in 1 Corinthians. The self-identity of the group is expressed in Paul’s greeting at 1 Cor 1:2: *tē ekklēsia tou theou tē ousē en Korinthō, hēgiasmenois en Christō Iēsou, klētois hagiois*. The influential NRSV translation is: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus. . . .” (1 Cor 1:2). The translation of *ekklēsia* as “church” is anachronistic and misleading; there was no entity called “church” at this time. The basic meaning of *ekklēsia*

4. “Poverty in Pauline Studies.” See also Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, especially 1–4, where he distinguishes between the 0.5% who made up the elites and the 99.5% that made up the rest of the population in the Roman world.

5. See, e.g., Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2), Prisca (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5), Mary (Rom 16:6), Junia (Rom 16:7), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:12), Rufus’ mother (Rom 16:13), Julia and Olympas (Rom 16:15).

6. E.g., Erastus (Rom 16:23).

is “gathering” or “assembly.” It was also a term used as a self-identification by some associations.⁷ The difference was that as opposed to an *ekklēsia* of another hero or deity, this *ekklēsia* gathered to honor the Judean deity known simply as *theos* and the divine hero *Christos Iēsous*. So what set them apart was not the term *ekklēsia*; it was the phrase *ekklēsia tou theou* (“the gathering of [the Judean] God”).

Their “gathering” was convened at a formal meal. Paul makes this clear with the repeated use of the phrase “when you come together” (11:17), “when you come together . . . to eat . . .” (11:20, 33), “when you come together, each has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (14:26). All of their activities that we call “worship” took place while they were convened at the dinner table.

The meal they enjoyed followed the form of the Greek banquet tradition. First there was the *deipnon*, or meal proper (1 Cor 11:23–24). Then “after the *deipnon*” (11:25) they continued the evening with the *symposium*, an extended period of wine drinking accompanied by philosophical discussion or, in their case, the activities that we call “worship.” Each part of the meal was accompanied by a ritual of dedication to the Lord Jesus, first by means of shared bread (11:23–24), then, for the *symposium*, by means of a wine dedication (11:25). The sharing of bread, wine, and conversation fit the pattern of the formal meal in Greco-Roman culture. These were rituals of social bonding, as defined by Plutarch, who referred to the “friend-making character of the dining table”⁸ and attributed it to the sharing of wine and conversation, without which “gone is the aim and end of the good fellowship (*koinōnia*) of the party, and Dionysus is outraged.”⁹ Paul echoed the same idea in 10:16–17:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinōnia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Members and Non-Members

How were members defined and how did they get to be members? Paul’s initial description of the members of the gathering is in 1 Cor 1:2. Here the NRSV translates the phrase *klētois hagiois* as “called to be saints,” which again is an anachronistic phrase—what could “saints” mean at this period of development? The term *klētos* is a derivative of the verb *kaleo* and meant both “invitation to a meal” and “summons” or “call.”¹⁰ Paul used the term in a number of

7. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 182; see also Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 4–5.

8. *Quaestiones convivales* 612D–E; cited above in n. 10.

9. *Quaestiones convivales* 615A. See also Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 9–10, 54–55.

10. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 549.

different contexts. For example, in 1:1 he identified himself as “called to be an apostle.” *Klētoi hagioi* may have a different nuance. *Klētoi* may be a pun and thus refer both to “meal invitation” and “call,” so that the experience of “call” resulted from the shared bread and wine described in 10:16–17. The term *hagios* means “dedicated or consecrated to the service of God.”¹¹ Therefore, my tentative translation of the phrase *klētoi hagioi* is “dedicants.” Paul also identifies the “dedicants” as part of the wider circle of “all those who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2). The location of such an invocation would be at the gathering.

The most common term for members in 1 Corinthians is *adelphoi* or “brothers and sisters” (1 Cor 1:10 *passim*). As Harland reminds us, this was also a term commonly used in other associations.¹² It is a fictive kinship term and, even though it may have had a particular theological content in the context of the Corinthian gathering, the use of the term itself does not set them apart from other associations.

Also present at the gathering were two categories of non-members. They are referenced in this text:

But if all prophesy, an *apistos* or *idiōtēs* who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the heart of the *apistos* are disclosed, that person will bow down and worship God, declaring, “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:24–25; NRSV modified).

The term *idiōtēs* is translated “outsider” by the NRSV. However, the *idiōtēs* is called upon to utter the ritual affirmation: “if you say a blessing with the spirit [i.e. speaking in a tongue], how can anyone who is in the position of an *idiōtēs* say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since the *idiōtēs* does not know what you are saying” (14:16). Therefore, such an individual must be viewed as somehow fully embedded in the ritual activities of the gathering. Danker suggests that the term refers to non-members who might have been viewed as potential members.¹³ Paul defined the *idiōtēs* as occupying a designated position at the gathering: “the one who occupies the position of the *idiōtēs*” (14:16). Danker interprets the term *topos* (“place, position”) in this text as meaning “they had a special place in the room where the Christians assembled.”¹⁴ In the context of a banquet setting, the term referred to a designated position on the *triclinium* couches, as seen, for example, in Luke 14:7–10, where *prōtoklisia* or “the highest ranking position” is contrasted with *eschatos topos* or “the last position.” What is in view is the normal ranking at table in a *triclinium* setting. There was therefore a designated position on the dining couches for an *idiōtēs*; one might assume

11. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 10.

12. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 31–33.

13. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468.

14. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468.

that it was the lowest ranking position. Danker also notes how the term was used in associations “for nonmembers who may participate in the sacrifices.”¹⁵ Although no single English translation can accurately capture all of the nuances to the term *idiōtai* in this context, I propose that it be translated “uninitiated.”

There was also a category of non-members present at the gathering who were called *apistoi*. This term is translated “unbelievers” in the NRSV, but that translation is misleading since it privileges intellectual assent. *Apistos* is the negative version of *pistos* (“faithful”), which is related to *pistis/pisteuō* (“faith/believe”). The basic meaning of the *pist-* group of terms is “trust.” Members are self-identified as those who “trust in the Lord Jesus,” which involves having made a commitment of “faithfulness.”¹⁶ I would therefore suggest that the term *apistos* be translated “unpledged.”

Since the gathering and all of its ritual activities took place at the meal in the dining room, the *apistoi* would have been full participants in the meal but not as embedded in all of the rituals as were the *idiōtai*. For example, note that even though the *idiōtai* and the *apistoi* were both present for a prophetic proclamation, it is the *apistoi* alone who were subject to being spiritually changed by the event (14:24–25). The *apistoi* also extended dinner invitations, as seen in 10:27: “If someone who is an *apistos* invites you [to a dinner at his/her house], eat anything that is served without raising questions because of conscience.” This is usually interpreted as a social event with no relation to the *ekklēsia*. But it can also be read as an invitation to the *ekklēsia* meeting itself, especially since the term “you” in the text is the Greek plural form. Thus the meal described in 10:27 would also be an official *ekklēsia* event.¹⁷ In this case, an *apistos*, or “unpledged attendee,” is functioning as the host of the Christ group gathering.

Hosts and Hospitality

In a recent article on the identity of Erastus in Rom 16:23,¹⁸ Steve Friesen emphasizes how in Paul’s lengthy listing of individuals connected in some way to the Roman or Corinthian *ekklēsiai*, three are not designated as “brothers” or some other term indicating membership. Those three are Aristobulus (Rom 16:10) and Narcissus (Rom 16:11), both of whom are connected with the *ekklēsiai* in Rome, and Erastus (Rom 16:23), an *oikonomos* in Corinth. These three apparently share in common a patronage relationship to their respective *ekklēsiai*. Aristobulus and Narcissus are mentioned as the titular heads of households (Rom 16:10–11). Friesen concludes, and I agree, that this probably indicates that the households

15. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 468. The reference is to Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens*, 247, 422.

16. Emphasized especially by Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 198–202.

17. I owe this interpretation to my advanced Greek students, Jen Bluestein, Eric Meyer, and Rolando Quiroz, who disagreed with the translation I had proposed and convinced me of the viability of this reading.

18. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 231–56.

of both were members but the named paterfamilias was not.¹⁹ In the case of Erastus, the text reads: “Erastus, the city *oikonomos* . . . greets you” (Rom 16:23). Friesen argues that Erastus was not the upper class “city treasurer” (*aedile*) that scholars often assume him to be. Rather, he proposes that the term *oikonomos* refers to a “low to mid-level functionary in the city’s financial administration, not a Roman citizen, and probably a slave.”²⁰ He concludes that Erastus must have played some sort of patronage role in the community in order to have been singled out for praise by Paul, but that role can no longer be determined. He rejects the idea that Erastus could have hosted a “house church” (or house gathering) and concludes that neither Aristobulus nor Narcissus nor Erastus were present at any of the gatherings because they were non-members.²¹ In contrast, I propose that Aristobulus, Narcissus, and Erastus should be identified as *apistoi* (“unpledged”) and, as such, were not only present at the gatherings but also hosted them. Chloe may have been another *apistos* host, since she is named only as the titular head of a household but is not the one who actually contacted Paul (1 Cor 1:11).

In Romans 16 Paul singles out several individuals for praise, many of whom are hosts of house gatherings. This text effectively functions as Paul’s version of the honorific decrees that were so common in the collection of association inscriptions.²² Like the association decrees, Paul’s commendations are extended to those who have bestowed patronage or some other kind of service on the association. Paul’s list in Romans 16 includes two different sets of household associations, some of which are at Rome, to whom greetings are sent, and some in Corinth, from whom greetings are sent. Of those named as hosts for the Corinthian gatherings, three are members: Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3) and Gaius (Rom 16:23).²³ Another household group in Corinth was that of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16), who was not only the host but was also a member. He was given honorific recognition by Paul in 1 Cor 16:15–18.

Phoebe is named as a “patron” or “benefactor” (*prostatis*) as well as a “table servant” (*diakonos*) for the *ekklesia* of Kenchreai. The combination of these two terms, “benefactor” and “table servant,” provides a window into the role of a

19. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 249–55.

20. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 245–49.

21. Friesen, “The Wrong Erastus,” 249 n. 55.

22. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 6.

23. Paul describes Gaius as “host to me and to the whole church.” This has led Murphy-O’Connor, in an influential study, to conclude that Gaius’s house was of an elite size so that all members in Corinth could gather there at the same time. He also concludes, based on a count of named individuals in 1 Corinthians and Acts, that there were forty members in all who gathered at his house and that, because of the large number, they would have met in the atrium rather than the dining room (Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth*, 153–59). If we follow the model proposed in this paper, however, a single gathering of forty people would be highly unlikely. Consequently, I interpret this verse to mean not that everyone gathered at the house of Gaius at one time but rather that everyone was always welcome at his house.

host at a house gathering. For a householder, hosting a gathering in one's home would carry the assumption that rules of hospitality would be followed. An invitation would be extended, as indicated in 1 Cor 10:27. The dining room would be appropriately prepared, servants provided, and the guests treated equitably, but also with appropriate regard for individual social ranking. Normally it was the host who determined positions on the couches; thus special favors extended by the host might be partially responsible for the divisiveness at the table addressed by Paul in 1 Cor 11:17–34.²⁴ Since this was a household association, control of the menu might belong to the *ekklēsia*, but in some cases, as in 1 Cor 10:27, the host may have some say in the menu. Indeed, 1 Corinthians may give us a window into a rather common problem of an association meeting in a household setting, namely that tension could have developed between the host and the leadership of the association over the details of the gathering so that their roles would have had to be negotiated.²⁵

Hospitality as a Theological Metaphor

Hospitality is one of Paul's key metaphors for grace in Romans. The first four commonly acknowledged metaphors are justification, redemption, expiation, and reconciliation (Rom 3:21–26; 5:1–11). Hospitality is not usually singled out, but it has significance equal to that of the other four. It is expressed most specifically in Rom 15:7: "Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you." It is the phrase "as Christ has welcomed you" that identifies hospitality as a metaphor for grace.

The term translated "welcome" in this text is *proslambanomai*, which in this context can be roughly rendered as "to extend a welcome or receive into one's home or circle of acquaintances." In its broader meaning, it carries the sense of "to take to oneself" with a variety of nuances. In this context, however, it expresses the practice of hospitality.²⁶ Similarly, in Philemon 17 it is used to refer to Philemon's obligations to offer hospitality both to Paul and to Onesimus; it is Philemon's role as host to the church that is being referenced here (see also 1–2).

In the LXX, *proslambanomai* is used to refer to God's covenantal relationship with God's people, as seen, for example, in 1 Sam 12:22: "with graciousness the Lord has received you (*proslambanomai*) to Godself as a people." See also Ps 65:4 (LXX 64:5): "Happy are those whom you choose and bring near (*proslambanomai*)." These texts provide further theological background for Paul's use of *proslambanomai* as a term for the extending of God's grace, that is, by means of God's having drawn a people near to Godself.

24. As suggested by Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 158–59.

25. Malherbe discusses such a situation in the community of the Johannine epistles; see "The Inhospitality of Diotrephes," 222–32.

26. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 883.

In its context, the text in Rom 15:7 (“welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you”) is used in reference to issues at the table in the Roman Christian community.

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them (Rom 14:1–3).

The phrases “God has welcomed them” (Rom 14:3) and “Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7), both of which employ the verb *proslambanomai*, express the principle of grace by means of the metaphor of hospitality. But notice that hospitality here is not an abstract metaphor; it is actually being experienced at the gathering. Paul gives it a dynamic function at their gathering by tying their experience at the table to an experience of grace. He then turns the experience of “grace received” into the social ethics of “grace offered” with the sense that the practice of the “welcome” to be extended to one another is to carry the same weight as the welcome received from Christ as experienced at the table (or as it should be experienced, if the supper is truly the Lord’s, and not their own, as Paul argues in 1 Cor 11:20–21). Thus in the specific context in Romans 14–15, to “welcome one another” means allowing for diversity in regard to food restrictions in order to maintain the unity of the community at the meal. More specifically, it addresses tensions that may arise between Jewish and gentile members at the house gathering.

Profile of a Markan Community (ca. 70s CE)

House Gatherings

The house as a gathering space of the Markan community is defined in specific contrast to the synagogue. We find this contrast at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he returns to Capernaum and goes first to a synagogue and then to a house.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21–28)

The synagogue is characterized as if it is foreign territory; it is “their synagogue” (1:23). It is also corrupt, since within it was “a man with an unclean

spirit" (1:23). The very existence of uncleanness in the synagogue is a symbol of its corruption. Jesus responds by casting the unclean spirit out of the synagogue, just as later he will cleanse the temple (11:15–19). But he is unable to save either institution (see especially 13:1–2). At one point in the story when Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue, he is rejected and he can only marvel at their unbelief (6:1–6).

The specific contrast of the house with the synagogue is indicated by the introduction to the next pericope:

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (Mark 1:29–31)

The contrast is clearly intentional, since they enter the house "as soon as they left the synagogue."²⁷ There is no unbelief or corruption to be found in the house, only an illness that prevents the appropriate hospitality from being offered. Once Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, she is able to carry out her role in the household, namely "to serve them." The term for "serve" is *diakonein*, which means to serve at a meal. She is pictured as having a necessary role in order for the household to function as it should, and by healing her Jesus empowers her to carry out that role, namely, to offer hospitality. Accordingly, in this story the role of Peter's mother-in-law is to serve as an example of one who serves the community.

Demographics

A close reading of Mark reveals that the idealized membership profile of Mark's community did not include the wealthy. The wealthy are like the seed planted among the thorns for whom the "lure of wealth" chokes off the word (4:18–19). They cannot enter the kingdom of God; their only chance is to sell off their possessions and give it all to the poor (10:17–23). Therefore, the community of the Gospel of Mark was self-identified as the poor.

Hospitality and the Markan Gathering

1. The hospitality motif in 2:15–17.

Mark 2:15–17 is a pivotal story that defines in idealized terms the social formation of the Markan community.

And as he reclined in his house [*kai ginetai katakeisthai auton en tē oikia autou*], many tax collectors and sinners were also reclining with [*sunanekeinto*] Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus

27. See also Boring, *Mark*, 65–66.

heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to invite (*kalesai*) not the righteous but sinners." (NRSV modified)

Notice that this is a group gathered by Jesus. He is the one who extends the invitation to the meal. Indeed, according to the logic of the story, the house, identified in the text only as "his house," is assumed to be Jesus' house. The story defines the group so gathered as engaged in community formation, which is the symbolism of "reclining together." The ancient banquet was universally understood to be a ritual moment for social bonding. For the Markan community, therefore, the ritual of eating together in a formal, reclining banquet in a house was where the magic happened, where the community was formed, and where redemption happened. Thus the concluding words of Jesus define this event as more than a mere meal: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to invite not the righteous but sinners" (2:17).

The story therefore connects the offering of hospitality in the house with the social formation of Jesus' followers. As such, it fits with what we know about the ancient house. The house was designed so that guests in the home were to be received in the dining room where the host would be expected to offer the finest of his hospitality.²⁸ Note also the use of the term "invite." It is a common term for an invitation to a meal. Here it is used as a pun: to be invited to the meal is to be invited, or "summoned," into the community of Jesus.

How might we imagine a reclining meal in a simple non-elite house? They would not have had couches and luxurious place settings; therefore we should probably not imagine a *triclinium*-style banquet. More likely is the *stibadium* style as shown in Figure 11 of Part One. This may be the style implied in Mark's description of the room where Jesus and his disciples reclined for the Last Supper (14:12–16; see also 14:18, "while they reclined"). The room is described as a large upstairs room that had already been prepared for dining. The term describing the set-up of the room is *strōnnumi*, which literally means "spread something" (14:15). While it could mean to furnish couches with pillows, it could just as likely mean to spread the floor with cushioning. That is a style that makes sense of the kinds of settings where the community of Mark would

28. One should not be too specific in relating this story to the ancient house. Boring, for example, refers to the conclusion drawn by many scholars that the presence of the Pharisees at the meal can be attributed to the design of houses so that casual passersby could observe a banquet in the dining room (*Mark*, 81). This is an over-historicizing of the story. Rather, as Boring also acknowledges, the Pharisees here play a literary role. Their question is addressed to the disciples, thus identifying them as more than passersby; rather they are essential characters to the story. This story is best interpreted as a narrative elaboration of the Q text in which Jesus is critiqued as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34; Matt 11:19). In actuality, while there were "public" areas in an elite house where clients of the householder were received, "the dining rooms, baths, and bedrooms were only for invited guests" (Clarke, *Houses of Roman Italy*, 12–13; see also Vitruvius *De architectura* 6.5).

gather. It would be in a room that was not specifically designed for dining but which could be adapted for that purpose.

Reclining was a custom that marked social status. In the Greek tradition, only free male citizens reclined. If women, children, slaves, or social inferiors were included in the meal, they would normally sit. In the Roman period, it became more common for reclining to be made available to those who might traditionally be excluded. Nevertheless, in such cases reclining continued to carry the symbolism of status.²⁹ Thus when tax collectors and sinners are pictured as reclining together with Jesus (2:15), it represents a symbolic acceptance of them as being given equal status within the community of God.

Of course, tax collectors and sinners are not specifically the poor. Rhetorically, the term stands for a category of individuals who are here being vilified by “the scribes of the Pharisees” as being unacceptable (2:16). Their rhetorical status therefore is “not Pharisees.” Also among the “not Pharisees” were the poor, as exemplified by the poor widow (12:41–44), who is specifically contrasted with the scribes “who like to . . . have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” and who “devour widows’ houses” (12:38–40). In the Markan community the place of honor at the house gathering might well be given to the poor widow.

2. The hospitality motif in chapter six.

Another text that symbolically pictures the community gathering is the multiplication of the loaves story in chapter six.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them to get all the people to recline in groups (Greek: *symposia* by *symposia*) on the green grass. So they reclined in dining groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his

29. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 14–18, 42–46; Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals*, 28–31.

disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mark 6:30–44, NRSV modified)

The story is introduced with the phrase “The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.” This takes the reader back to the story where Jesus sent them out two by two with these instructions:

Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them. (Mark 6:10–11)

This story contains echoes of the hospitality story in Mediterranean culture. Here the disciples are being compared to the divine messengers who monitor the hospitality practices of the people. Note the parallel to this text in Q: “it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town [where the disciples were not offered hospitality]” (Matt 10:14–15; Luke 10:10–12). The mission of the disciples, therefore, emphasized fostering the practice of hospitality in the house.

Between the sending out of the apostles and their return to report to Jesus is the story of a banquet given by Herod “for the leading men of Galilee” (Mark 6:14–29). This was a banquet of such debauchery that it resulted in the death of John the Baptist.

In specific contrast to the banquet of Herod, Jesus’ banquet is held in “a deserted place.” Instead of the elite who attend Herod’s banquet, Jesus’ guest list is made up entirely of the “crowd.” The contrast between these two banquets is given emphasis later in Mark’s story: “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod” (8:15). Identity is defined by the meal community—you are who you eat with.

The primary focus of 6:30–44 is the practice of hospitality. Here the crowd serves as the stranger in the hospitality equation. The disciples want to send them away to find food on their own, but Jesus commands “you give them something to eat.” The disciples are thus being instructed in the practice of hospitality.

There is more at stake in 6:30–44 than simple hunger. This is clear when Jesus commands that the people are to recline in separate dining groups, “*symposia* by *symposia*.” This is tantamount to saying, “have the people prepare themselves for a banquet.” Here in the rural countryside Jesus has convened a series of substitute house gatherings, with each dining group symbolically representing a separate house gathering.³⁰ Then he prepares for them a sumptuous meal with the appropriate ceremonial prayers.

30. Collins points out that the division of the reclining groups into “hundreds and fifties” (6:40) is a reference to the divisions of the eschatological community as described in the *Damascus Document*. She acknowledges, however, that this is a shift in imagery from the description in 6:39 that they reclined “*symposia* by *symposia*” (Mark, 324–25).

The command of Jesus that all in the crowd should recline (6:39) can be compared with Jesus' meal with tax collectors and sinners in which they all reclined together with Jesus. This is an important component of the way in which the Markan meal community was intended to function: no matter the social class, all were to recline together. It has an effect similar to the Mishnah's rule regarding the Passover: "even a poor man in Israel does not eat until he reclines."³¹

By definition, hospitality was a ritual of bonding with and caring for a category of individuals who represented the most radical symbol of "otherness," namely the "stranger." For Mark's community, as represented by these texts, the invitation was understood to be radically inclusive. Functionally, the extending of the invitation would only be a first step in community formation; it is the gathering itself that ritually produces that formation. Here the ritual action that is emphasized is the act of reclining together, thus indicating a social bonding that at the same time proclaimed the full equality of the diners despite the "otherness" of their social identity.

Social Stratification: Patrons, Servants, and Hosts

A house gathering required a supportive social structure. Someone needed to provide a house in which to meet. Such an individual would function culturally as a benefactor, which would suggest some degree of social stratification in the Markan community. Since the Markan community self-identified as the poor, there would not be a very high degree of social stratification. The houses in which they would meet would be modest, befitting the general social class of the group.

One character in the story who may function as a literary model for a host is Levi, the tax collector.

As [Jesus] was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (Mark 2:13-14)

The very next scene is the meal of Jesus with tax collectors and sinner (2:15-17). Interpreters have often noted how anomalous Levi's story is, for unlike every other named character who is "called" (see 1:16-20; 3:13), Levi is not included in Mark's list of the twelve (3:16-19).³² In Luke's version of this story he assumes that the house in which the meal was held belonged to Levi (Luke 5:29). Thus Levi's act of "following" Jesus consisted in hosting a meal for Jesus and his disciples and other tax collectors and sinners.³³ In Mark, however, Levi "follows" Jesus by becoming a participant in a meal hosted by Jesus. But since Levi has been summoned to "follow," he is more than a participant; he is also an

31. *Pesah* 10.1, as quoted in Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 147.

32. Boring, *Mark*, 80; Collins, *Mark*, 190-91.

33. This correlates with the theme in Luke-Acts that discipleship is exemplified by the act of hospitality. See discussion of Acts below.

observer and is thereby being instructed in the proper way to host a gathering of Jesus followers. Similarly, when in chapters 6 and 8 Jesus multiplies loaves to feed the crowd, each story functions as a teaching moment for the disciples. Jesus tells them to feed the crowd, then demonstrates how it is to be done. After arranging the crowd into dining groups and ceremonially blessing the food, he then gives it to the disciples to serve (6:41; 8:6). It is as if the Jesus of Mark is saying to the community leaders, "this is how hospitality at community gatherings is to be practiced."

At any reclining banquet it was necessary that there be servants. Normally those servants were slaves, and normally they would go unnoticed by the diners. In Mark, those who serve the meal are singled out as important figures in the community, ranging from Peter's mother-in-law (1:31) to the disciples at the multiplication of loaves stories. This is not entirely unprecedented. After all, in the classic hospitality story from the Hebrew Bible, Abraham himself serves his guests (Gen 18:8). On the other hand, in the Pauline communities, while Paul mentions the existence of slaves, he never defines their roles at the meals. In Mark, however, perhaps because there is a greater consciousness of the underclass as the core members of the community, serving at the table is designated as an honorary task. This idea became embedded in Christian tradition through the preservation of the term "deacon" (as in 1:31; see also Rom 16:1–2) as a position of honor and leadership.

Normally it was the householder who served as host of the meal and controlled the guest list. That is the model Jesus embodies when he dines with tax collectors and sinners. However, on the symbolic level, the story in 2:15–17 implies that, whoever may host the meal on the earthly level, Jesus is ultimately the one who invites (2:17). In this way this story is parallel to other cultic meals of the day in which the god is the one who invites to the banquet.³⁴

Profile of the Acts Community (ca. 110–120 CE)³⁵

House Gatherings

There are no church buildings in the literary world of Acts, nor are there any hints that church buildings were somewhere in the community's future. When the community gathers it is in a house or, rather, in houses, since each house would have a limited capacity for a gathering. The reader, being familiar with the social function of houses, would assume that a formal gathering would take place in the dining room at the dinner table, whether or not a meal was explicitly mentioned. To be sure, the apostles and other missionaries proclaimed in the temple and in synagogues. But neither of these locations was conducive to

34. See, e.g., invitations to the feasts of Zeus Panamara: "the god invites you to the sacred feast," quoted in Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 81; see further 81–84.

35. This section of the paper is primarily based on arguments presented in "Meals as a Literary Motif in Acts of the Apostles" and "Religious Practices of Early Christian Converts."

community formation. Rather temple and synagogue function in the plot of Acts as primarily locations where conflict with the Jewish leadership takes place.³⁶

At the very beginning of the story, the house is specified as the setting where community formation takes place: "Their time was spent in daily devotion to the rites in the temple and to the communal meals in their homes, meals that were characterized by festive joy and equal sharing with all" (Acts 2:46, author's translation). The house is sometimes mentioned in passing as the gathering place for the community. In 5:42, for example, after the apostles have been released from prison, flogged by the Sanhedrin, and ordered not to speak of Jesus again, they immediately continued to proclaim Jesus as Messiah "in the temple and in the various private homes" (*kat' oikon*). Whenever Saul begins to persecute the Jesus followers, he does so by "entering house after house (*kata tous oikous eisporethomenos*), dragging out both men and women, and delivering them to prison" (8:3). In 12:12–17, a more extended description of such a house gathering is presented. After Peter miraculously broke out of prison, he went "to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, where many had gathered and were praying." In all of these instances, the second-century reader would picture the scene in the dining room of the house, because that was the default location for gatherings.³⁷

Demographics

In the Gospel of Luke, the purpose of Jesus' ministry was especially focused on bringing "good news to the poor" (4:18) and "feeding the hungry" (6:21). The gospel addressed the issue of caring for the needy by envisioning a patron class, exemplified by Zacchaeus, who gave half of his possessions to the poor and is praised by Jesus (19:8–9). In Acts the care for the poor becomes embedded in the community itself. The community functions by means of a communal sharing of properties. Those who owned "goods and properties" sold all they had for the specific purpose of distribution to the needy (2:44–45; 4:32–37). These texts envision a stratified membership that includes a patron class as well as a significant proportion of poor and needy.

The idealized Acts community needed maintenance from time to time, aided by the power of God. Like the practice of associations in which those who did not pay their dues were penalized,³⁸ so also in Acts, those who did not give their

36. See, e.g., 13:44–47; 14:1–2; 17:1–5; 18:4–7; see also Elliott, "Temple vs. Household in Luke–Acts," 216–17.

37. Notice also that in the Gospel of Luke all the meals of Jesus, including some found only in this gospel, are reclining meals; see 5:29–32; 7:36–37; 9:14–15; 11:37; 12:37; 14:7–11, 15; 22:12–14, 27; 24:30.

38. See, e.g., the *Iobakchoi*, a Bacchic association in second-century Athens, whose regulations included specified penalties for failure to pay the prescribed dues: "[each member is to] pay a fixed monthly contribution for the wine. If anyone does not fulfill his obligation, he is to be excluded from the *stibas*" (Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 119, 129 lines 46–48; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 255; note that *stibas* was a term for the banquet meeting).

fair share were penalized. This is the theme of a warning story in Acts 5:1–11. Here a certain Ananias conspired with his wife, Sapphira, to hold back some of the proceeds from the sale of their properties. Peter became aware of this and accused them of “lying to God.” As a result, they were both struck dead.

In Acts 6:1–6 another disciplinary matter was addressed. In this case there was a dispute about inequities in the distribution of food to widows. The solution was to appoint spirit-filled individuals who were charged with the task of overseeing the food distribution (*diakonein trapezais*, “wait on tables, serve meals”).³⁹ It was a matter of utmost importance to the community that its identity as defined in 2:44–45 and 4:32–37 be maintained. Thus the direct involvement of the power of God was invoked. These texts together reinforce the idea that “care for the needy” was primarily concerned with the provision of food, particularly at the daily communal meals (2:46; 6:1).

The place of women at a Hellenistic/Roman reclining banquet could be tenuous, ranging from exclusion from the banquet to taking on the lower class role of sitting rather than reclining to taking on an honored role as a reclining banqueter. In the Acts story women who are named as householders and hosts of the banquet would have reclined in a place of honor befitting their status as patrons. This group included Mary the mother of John Mark (12:12–17), Lydia (16:13–15, 40), and Priscilla, wife and equal partner in ministry with her husband Aquila (18:2–3). Widows were included among the poor and needy, the lowest status group at the table. They were to be treated as equals at the table (6:1–6), but it is unclear whether the reader was to assume that they reclined or sat at the table. Another class of women at the gathering is represented by Rhoda, a slave attendant who likely served at the table rather than participating as one of the diners (12:12–17). She is one of the few women in Acts who is both named and given a speaking part, yet the role she plays in the story is that of the stereotypical clueless slave, a role commonly found in Roman comedies of the era.⁴⁰ Shelly Matthews has concluded that “the overarching rhetorical aim of this author is . . . to circumscribe women within limited social and ecclesiastical roles.”⁴¹ That is to say, the core group of leaders in the Acts story is all men. This is illustrated early on when the apostles are gathered in the upper room of a house (1:13–14). Women are included in their number, but only Mary, mother of Jesus, is named, and none play any defined role in this scene or in subsequent events.

39. I disagree with Danker’s interpretation of this phrase in which he suggests that it is “improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal” and so thinks that *diakonein* here must mean “administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows without specifying the kind of assistance that is allotted” (p. 230). But the text *does* specify it is “tables” that are attended to, that is, the tables on which the communal meals were served. Associations were also known to appoint officers to see that food distribution took place equitably (Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 217).

40. Harrill, “Dramatic Function.”

41. Matthews, “Women in Acts,” 193.

The Acts Idealized Community as a Household Association

Acts 2:42–47 has numerous parallels to by-laws of Greco-Roman associations.⁴² The primary difference is in the genre. Associations wrote by-laws in a type of “legal” language that were then inscribed on stone or written on papyrus and posted at the meeting place. Acts is written in a descriptive narrative form. They also differ in another key respect. Association by-laws provided rules for actual meal practice. Acts 2:42–47 describes an idealized community of the distant past.

In my translation below I have given special attention to the affinity of Acts 2:42–47 to the by-laws of a specific association.

The new members were diligent in following the by-laws instituted by their recognized leaders, the apostles, namely to be loyal to the community, to participate in all of its communal meals, and to practice faithfully the prescribed communal prayers. A sense of awe pervaded the community as deeds of supernatural power were performed in their midst under the authority of the apostles. All of these believers were united in one community in which they shared all their goods, even to the point that goods and properties were sold and the proceeds given to members in need. Their time was spent in daily devotion to the rites in the temple and to the communal meals in their homes, meals that were characterized by festive joy and equal sharing with all.⁴³ They exemplified a communal life devoted to the praise of God and, as a result, were well regarded by all outsiders. On a daily basis, newcomers who were led by the Lord to join them were added to their rolls.

The statutes of the Zeus Hypsistos association (first century CE) provides useful comparative data.⁴⁴

The law which those of the association of Zeus the highest made in common, that it should be authoritative. / ⁵Acting in accordance with its provisions, they first chose as their / president Petesouchos the son of Teephebenis, a man of parts, worthy of the place and of the company, / for a year from the month and day aforesaid, / that he should make for all the contributors one banquet a month in the sanctuary of Zeus, / at which they should in a common room pouring libations, pray, and perform the other customary rites / ¹⁰on behalf of the god and lord, the king. All are to obey the president / and his servant in matters pertaining to the corporation, and they shall be present at / all command occasions to be prescribed for them and at meetings and assemblies and outings. / It shall not be permissible for any one of them to . . . make factions or to leave the brotherhood of the president for another, / ¹⁵or for men to enter into one

42. Smith, “Religious Practices,” 159–61; Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 211–15; Öhler, “Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde.”

43. The Greek (*en aphelotēti kardias*) is obscure. Here I have adopted the translation “with generous heart” (Conzelmann, *Acts*, 24; Johnson, *Acts*, 59) versus “simplicity of heart” (Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 155; Pervo, *Acts*, 88).

44. Roberts, Skeet, and Nock, “Gild of Zeus Hypsistos,” 40–42; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 106.

another's pedigrees at the banquet or / to abuse one another at the banquet or to chatter or to indict or accuse another or to resign / for the course of the year or again to bring the drinkings to nought.

Both the Acts idealized community and the Zeus Hypsistos association were governed by rules that defined their community life together, a community life that centered on the communal meal. The rules of the Acts idealized community are defined by the "by-laws (*hē didachē*; "teaching") of the apostles" and those of the Zeus Hypsistos association by its statutes (*ho nomos*; literally "law"). The communal meal in Acts is defined as "breaking of bread" (*hē klasis tou artou*; 2:42, 46). It is called a *posis* and a *symposion* in the statutes of the Zeus Hypsistos association, both of which can be translated "drinking party" or simply "banquet." Whereas the Acts idealized community practiced some of its rituals at the temple (*en tō hierō*) and its communal meals in the dining rooms of houses (*kat' oikon*; 2:46), the Zeus Hypsistos association met "in a common dining room" (*en andrōni koinōi*) located "in the sanctuary of Zeus" (*en tōi tou Dios hierōi*).

At their common meals the Acts idealized community practiced faithfully the communal prayers as prescribed by the apostles, prayers whose content is not specified. Similarly, at the banquet meetings of the Zeus Hypsistos association, they were to "pour libations, pray (*euchesthōisan*), and perform the other customary rites (*ta nomizomena*)," but it is not clear what was the content of "customary rites." What is clear is that religious rituals appropriate to the gathered group were regularly practiced.

Meals and Social Formation

The significance of the meal as constitutive of the community is foundational to the formation stories beginning in Acts 2:42–47. In chapters 10–11 and 15, the primary issue is the divisive effect of dietary laws in relation to the emerging gentile mission. In chapters 1–9, the community of Jesus followers had been entirely made up of Jewish converts. The Cornelius story in 10–11 introduces the gentile mission as a radical and unexpected development orchestrated by God. Peter has to be convinced of the legitimacy of the mission by a vision from God. Three times the vision presents Peter with a choice of unclean animals and commands that he "kill and eat." Each time he refuses, pointing out that he has always followed the dietary laws. At that point messengers arrive from Cornelius, a gentile centurion God-fearer in Caesarea who had also received a vision from God to seek out Peter. Peter, convinced by God's vision to him and to Cornelius, offers hospitality to the messengers (10:23), all of whom were gentiles (10:7). This is the first instance in which Peter eats with gentiles. The second instance is when he accepts the offer of hospitality from Cornelius (10:48). Consequently, whenever in chapter 11 Peter must answer to the "apostles and brothers" in Judea, they immediately accuse him of "eating with" the uncircumcised (11:3).

The issue is food, or more specifically, the communal meals that lie at the heart of community formation. The ultimate conclusion will be that, unless gentiles can eat at the same table with other members of the community, they cannot be considered brothers and sisters in Christ.

The issue of dietary laws is brought up again whenever Paul's mission to the gentiles is under review by the apostolic leadership in Judea (Acts 15). During the discussion, Peter reminds the group of his experience in the Cornelius episode. Then James develops a compromise position that incorporates a simplified version of dietary laws, often called the Noahide laws.⁴⁵ It was intended to allow gentiles and Jews to eat at the same table utilizing the same menu. The council agrees with James, a letter is drafted, and Paul is delegated to circulate it to the gentile communities (15:22–29; 21:25). Luke got the basic details of such a conference from Paul (Gal 2:1–10).⁴⁶ But the idea of an apostolic decree regarding food laws was his own contribution to the story in order to advance his literary agenda. This story illustrates the importance of equal sharing at the communal meals regardless of dietary restrictions. It is a variation of the earlier theme of equal sharing at the communal meals regardless of social status. The overall motif is that the community realizes its identity as community at the communal meals.

Hospitality and the Acts Gathering

In Luke–Acts, to offer hospitality to a guest in one's home meant to provide them with a sumptuous meal. Depending on the context, overnight lodging might be signified as well. There are two terms in Acts that refer to the act of hospitality: *xenizein* ("offer hospitality") and *menein* ("stay [with]"). The term *xenizein* is the verb form of *xenos* which means either guest or host in a hospitality context. The meaning of "stay with" as a hospitality term is clarified in the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke (24:13–35). When the two travelers arrive at their destination, they invite the stranger (Jesus) to "stay" (*menein*; 24:29) with them. The meaning of the term "stay" is indicated in the very next verse: "while he was reclining with them, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them" (24:30). Thus, in Luke–Acts the term "stay" takes on a technical meaning for the hospitality motif as indicating both a sumptuous meal and perhaps an overnight stay.

In Acts hospitality is offered and received in several stories. Hospitality with gentiles offered and received is central to the Cornelius story, as discussed above. At the beginning of the story Peter is in Joppa where he has accepted the hospitality of Simon the tanner. In 9:43 the term for accepting Simon's hospitality is *menein*. In 10:6 the term for the same act of hospitality is *xenizein*, showing

45. Segal, "Acts 15"; Livesey, "So-Called Noahide Laws."

46. Smith and Tyson, *Acts and Christian Beginnings*, 164–75.

that the two terms can be used interchangeably. When Peter offers hospitality to the arriving gentile messengers from Cornelius, the term is *xenizein* (10:23). When the gathered group at Cornelius' house offers hospitality to Peter, the term is *epimenein* (10:48).

One sign of true discipleship in Acts is the offering of hospitality by the recent convert. It plays a key role in conversion stories as a proof-of-piety motif. This is seen in 10:48, discussed above, where after being baptized the household of Cornelius immediately offers hospitality to Peter. It is also highlighted in the story of the conversion of Lydia in 16:11–15, a story that echoes the Cornelius story. Like Cornelius (10:20), Lydia is a gentile God-fearer (16:14) and a householder with an extended household. Her conversion is aided by the direct intervention of God ("the Lord opened her heart"; 16:14). Both she and her household are baptized, after which she immediately "urged" Paul and his companions to accept her offer of hospitality at her house. Her reason for making this offer is instructive: "if you judge me to be faithful (*pistē*) to the Lord" (16:15). Hospitality as a test of true discipleship could not be made more explicit.

The Lydia story also traces the theory of house church formation as presented in Acts. Paul first preaches in a synagogue, or, in this instance, "prayer hall" (*proseuchē*; 16:13), but the actual community formation takes place in a house, and it is occasioned by the offer of hospitality by the recently converted householder. As further confirmation, note that before leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas stop by at Lydia's house, where a group of believers were gathered (16:40). Lydia's house had become a full-fledged house gathering. Just as was the case in the earlier theme of sharing possessions with all in need, so also here the idealized Acts community depends on its patron class to be the backbone of community formation.

Another theme to emerge from the story of Lydia is that hospitality is initially offered to the evangelist. This becomes an essential component of the success of the evangelistic mission in Acts. Both Peter and Paul are supported in their travels by the hospitality of householders who are either explicitly or implicitly assumed to be members (9:43; 10:6; 17:7; 18:3, 7; 21:4, 8; 21:17; 28:7, 14).

A rather obscure use of the hospitality motif is found in Acts 27:33–38, a text that also contains the "breaking bread" trope. The scene takes place on the storm-damaged drifting ship just before it runs aground at Malta. Food has become scarce and the crew has not eaten in fourteen days. Paul urges them to eat to build up their strength since, based on a vision he has received from God, "none of you will lose a hair from your heads" (27:34). The meal scene itself is reminiscent of Jesus' meals in Luke: Paul "took bread, gave thanks to God before them all, broke it, and began to eat" (27:35). In response to what Paul has said and done, the crew "cheered up and also took food" (27:36). There seems to be a disconnect between these two verses so that Paul and the others appear to eat separate meals. The Western text clears this up by expanding on Paul's

actions with an additional phrase: “[Paul] began to eat and gave some to us.”⁴⁷ This reading may have functioned to make explicit what for the ancient reader was implicit in this scene. In the context, Paul has just spotlighted God’s care for the entire group. He then breaks bread in a ritual format, including giving thanks to God in a public manner. This text is meant to be read in the context of the meal motif throughout Acts so that Paul is here offering hospitality to a group of non-member gentiles just as Peter does for the messengers from Cornelius in 10:23. In both cases, the non-member gentiles at the meal have been blessed by God’s compassion and impartiality, an attribute of God explicitly named by Peter (10:34–35). These are examples of how “food/meals in Acts are not simply focused on group identity or ‘fellowship’ . . . but also function as catalysts for shifts to recruitment from the outside.”⁴⁸

Some Conclusions

The House as a Catalyst for Social Formation

Social formation took place at a communal meal, but not just in any location. The house was an essential component of the ritual process because it was a space in which hospitality was assumed in order for a gathering to take place. Theories that place the worship gathering in a space other than the house have to account for the presumed absence of the hospitality component of the formation ritual. The importance of the house to Christ-group gatherings over a period of several generations speaks to its importance to fundamental aspects of social and identity formation.

Reflections on the Hospitality Motif

As a theological metaphor for the “Christ event,” hospitality presumes a relationship between two “others” who within the world of the story represent the whole of humanity. And while it is an act of patronage that creates a relationship of patron/client, it does not participate easily in what is in effect an imperial metaphor. This is because the hospitality “myth” overturns the patronage default by defining the “client” as a “patron in disguise” and the patron as a once or soon-to-be client. It is a clever theological/rhetorical move, embedded in the myth itself, which enables hospitality to aspire to a relationship of mutuality rather than a rigid relationship of powerful versus powerless. Indeed, in the rhetoric of the hospitality myth there is a playful move in which the “host” becomes humble servant of the guest and serves the meal. Hospitality is therefore a ritual act that seeks to create a zone of mutuality and relationship across the starkest of boundaries within a world of suspicion, hostility, and conflict.

47. Pervo, *Acts*, 641.

48. Ascough, “Function of Meals,” 211 n. 12. Ascough, however, downplays the importance of hospitality in the meal scenes in Acts (p. 207 n. 2), a point with which I disagree.

Works Cited

- Ascough, Richard S. "The Function of Meals in the Book of Acts." Pp. 207–39 in *Mahl und religiöse Identität im frühen Christentum*. Ed. Matthias Klinghardt and Hal Taussig. Tübingen: Franke, 2012.
- Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.
- Clarke, John R. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.—A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1991.
- Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Mark: A Commentary*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.
- Conzelmann, Hans. *Acts of the Apostles*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.
- Corley, Kathleen E. *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1993.
- Danker, Frederick W., et al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Dunbabin, Katherine M. D. *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Elliott, John H. "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions." Pp. 211–40 in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*. Ed. Jerome H. Neyrey. Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991.
- Friesen, Steven J. "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26 (2004) 323–61.
- _____. "The Wrong Erastus: Ideology, Archaeology, and Exegesis." Pp. 134 and 231–58 in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*. Ed. Steven J. Friesen, Daniel N. Schowalter, and James C. Walters. Supplements to Novum Testamentum. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Harland, Philip A. *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- Harrill, J. Albert. "The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda (Acts 12:13–16): A Piece of Greco-Roman Comedy." *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000) 150–57.
- Johnson, Luke T. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville MN: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Klinghardt, Matthias. *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern*. Tübingen: Francke, 1996.
- Kloppenborg, John S., and Richard S. Ascough. *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary 1. Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 181. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011.
- Knapp, Robert. *Invisible Romans*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Krinzinger, Friedrich, ed. *Hanghaus 2 in Ephesus. Die Wohneinheiten 1 und 2: Baubefund, Ausstattung, Funde*. Forschungen in Ephesos 8/8. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010.

- Lampe, Peter. *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- Livesey, Nina. "The So-Called Noahide Laws." Pp. 175–77 in *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*. Ed. Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson. Salem OR: Polebridge, 2013.
- Malherbe, Abraham J. "The Inhospitability of Diotrephes." Pp. 222–32 in *God's Christ and His People: Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl*. Oslo: Universitetsfolaget, 1977.
- Matthews, Shelly. "Women in Acts." Pp. 193–95 in *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*. Ed. Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson. Salem OR: Polebridge, 2013.
- Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*. 3d ed. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Öhler, M. "Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde im Spiegel des antiken Vereinswesens." *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005) 393–415.
- Pervo, Richard I. *Acts: A Commentary*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- Poland, Franz. *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1909.
- Roberts, C., T. C. Skeat, and A. D. Nock. "The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos." *Harvard Theological Review* 29 (1936) 39–88.
- Segal, Alan F. "Acts 15 as Jewish and Christian History." *Forum* 4 (2001) 63–87.
- Smith, Dennis E. *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- _____. "Hospitality, the House Church, and Early Christian Identity." Pp. 103–17 in *Mahl und religiöse Identität im frühen Christentum*. Ed. Matthias Klinghardt and Hal Taussig. Tübingen: Franke, 2012.
- _____. "The House Church as Social Environment." Pp. 3–21 in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch*. Ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek. Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012.
- _____. "Religious Practices of Early Christian Converts According to Acts 2:41–47." *Forum* 2,2 (2013) 157–68.
- _____. "Revisiting Associations and Christ Groups." Forthcoming.
- _____. "Meals as a Literary Motif in Acts of the Apostles." In *Handbook of Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World*. Ed. Soham Al-Suadi and Peter-Ben Smit. London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming.
- Smith, Dennis E., and Joseph B. Tyson. *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*. Salem OR: Polebridge, 2013.
- Stowers, Stanley K. *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Taussig, Hal. *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
- White, L. Michael. *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*. ASOR Library of Biblical and

Near Eastern Archaeology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

White, L. Michael. "Regulating Fellowship in the Communal Meal: Early Jewish and Christian Evidence." Pp. 177–205 in *Meals in a Social Context*. Ed. Inge Nielsen and Hanne Sigismund Nielsen. Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity 1. Aarhus Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2001.