



Sociologically Speaking, What Kind of Group Was the Christian Assembly?

Modern scholarship commonly holds that Christianity began as a Jewish sect in the cities and villages of Judea and Galilee in the first century *annos Domini* (A.D.) or in the years of the Common Era (C.E.). However, we need to understand what we mean by “sect.” When the nineteenth-century sociologists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch first began using the term *sect*, they opposed it to *church*. A sect was defined as a deviant group within a cohesive religious culture. But first-century Judaism bears little resemblance to “church,” especially if one has in mind the model of Christendom. No one particular Jewish group dominated the land of Israel in the monopolistic way that the state churches dominated European territories. Some Jews at the time of Jesus belonged to parties called the Sadducees (a priestly aristocracy), the Pharisees (students of the Torah who dominated the synagogues), the Essenes (a quasi-monastic “sanctuary for Israel”), and the Zealots (a nationalist party);¹ undoubtedly many Jews adhered to none of these parties. Within the spectrum of Jewish life, Christians—who confessed their founder, Jesus, to be the Jewish Messiah—took their place as one party among others. They shared certain convictions with all Jewish parties, were allied with some parties in some of their views, and had their own unique beliefs. But this could be said of every one of the Jewish parties. So if Christianity is to be identified as a Jewish sect at



the time of its origin, we must have a different definition of sect than that given by Weber and Troeltsch.

One possible definition is presented in the analysis of Peter Berger, who observed, "The attitude toward the world largely determines the inner social structure of the sect."² In other words, Berger defines a sect in terms of its relationship vis-à-vis the world rather than vis-à-vis the dominant religious group. Under this definition, Christianity would be classified as a sect not because of its opposition to other Jewish parties in the land of Israel, such as the Pharisees or the Sadducees, but because of its attitude toward the world, including the worlds of Judaism, Hellenism, and Rome. Under this definition, the Essenes may also be classified as a sect, while the Pharisees and the Sadducees are not because they were more accommodating to the world. Jewish Christianity, or rather the Christian Jews for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written, lived in the same relationship to the Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman worlds as the Essenes. In a sect, under this definition, the boundary between the pure community and the impure world is clearly defined, and one crosses into the community of the elect by a rite of initiation. Baptism served as the Christian rite of initiation. It was different from the Pharisees' immersion rite (*mikvah*) in that it constituted a one-time, permanent rite of passage; the Essenes likewise had an elaborate ceremony for entering the covenant, described in *The Rule of the Community* (1QS) and another document (CD) found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.³ Besides a special initiation rite, the Christian sect practiced a ritual meal called the Lord's Supper, which bore similarities to other Jewish meals yet had its own distinct meanings. In addition, Christianity differed from other Jewish parties in its attitude toward the Sabbath, circumcision, kosher dietary laws, and tithing, which seemed to range from a more casual observance to outright abolition in the Christian assemblies that embraced Gentiles.⁴

Perhaps most significantly for future Jewish-Christian relationships, Christianity made no worldly territorial claims.⁵ The very fact that Christians reached out intentionally to include the Gentiles (as opposed to simply receiving God-fearing Gentiles into Israel by circumcision and *mikvah*) also set apart Christianity from other Jewish parties. Eventually, Christianity would be dominated by Gentile congregations, and the Jewish congregations would be totally eclipsed. But as it emerged into the Greco-Roman world, Christianity was perceived as a Jewish messianic sect.

A Jewish Messianic Sect

Christianity may be regarded as a Jewish sect because it shared with other Jews a belief in one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who gave his Torah to Moses on Sinai. Christians shared with other Jews a body of sacred writings, which they read in their assemblies and studied. Christians believed that the God of Israel was also the Lord of the universe who guides human history and becomes involved in human affairs. This was the same God whom their teacher, Jesus, called *Abba*, “Father,” and who designated Jesus as “Son” at his baptism by John.

Christians were not unique in believing that their teacher, Jesus, was a prophet, even the final prophet and, in fact, the Jewish Messiah, born of the house of David. Josephus, in his *Antiquities*, tells us there were many prophets and would-be messiahs who appeared in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea between the time of Herod the Great’s death in 4 B.C.E. and the outbreak of the Roman-Jewish War in 66 C.E. These prophets and messiahs were routinely executed by Roman procurators as troublemakers, and their followers scattered. There is only one reason why the sect of the Nazarene stood out from the others that flourished briefly in the first century: it survived. It survived the execution of its teacher because God raised Jesus from the dead. As Luke reports Peter saying to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. . . . Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:32, 36).

Jesus’ career had begun as a prophet who typically called Israel to repentance. “Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near’” (Mark 1:15). But Jesus identified the message of God’s kingdom with himself: “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). For the disciples of Jesus, it was not enough to carry on his teachings; they also had to confess him as Messiah (Mark 8:27–29; Matthew 16:13–20; Luke 9:18–20). Jesus’ death and resurrection brought about a crisis moment (*kairos*) to which his fellow Israelites had to respond. Nascent Christianity stood against the world not only in teaching the values of the kingdom of God, which reverse the conventional values of this



world, but also against the Jewish world in calling people to faith in Jesus as Messiah. In whatever ways Christianity shared some of the apocalyptic “contempt for the world” characteristics of the Essenes, it differed from the Essenes in that it did not withdraw from the world but actively proselytized with a message of hope in the future that God would bring about, a future that was already inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus. Christians shared with the Pharisees belief in the resurrection of the dead, but differed in that their Lord Jesus was already raised from the dead and therefore the future is beginning now.

Luke gives us in Acts 2–5 a picture of the worship of these Jewish Christians. The most striking point in Luke’s account is the continuing participation of these sectarians in the worship of the Jerusalem Temple, although there is no mention of their participation in the sacrificial cult. At the same time, they gathered in homes for teaching and fellowship, to celebrate “the breaking of bread,” the Eucharistic meal instituted by Jesus in which they continued to experience the presence of the risen Lord among them, and for prayer. But in the same community of Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, who, if the example of Stephen is typical, were hostile to the temple (Acts 6–8). Stephen, at his trial, indicates a critical attitude toward the law, while we see in the Jewish Christian communities of Palestine a continuing commitment to fasting, observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and ritual purity.⁶

Jewish Christianity was centered in Jerusalem, where it was headed by James, the brother of the Lord. The family of Jesus ruled the Jerusalem church. James’s successor was Simeon, the son of Cleopas, a cousin of the Lord. On the whole, relations between the Christians and their fellow Jews in Jerusalem were amicable. But things came to an impasse over the response of the Christians to the defense of Jerusalem in the Roman-Jewish War (66–70). Because of the example of Jesus in advancing God’s reign in signs and wonders among Gentiles as well as Jews in Galilee, Christians could not share with their fellow Jews a nationalistic zeal for the defense of Jerusalem when zealotry provoked a war with the Romans. The Gospel of Mark, written around the time of the Roman-Jewish War, has Jesus warn his followers, “When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains” (Mark 13:14). Many Jews in Palestine had no interest in fighting a war against the Romans, which they did not believe could be won. Flavius Josephus, most famously, defected to the Roman side. But when the Jewish pop-

ulation of Jerusalem banded together to defend the city, Simeon led the Christians of Jerusalem to Pella in Trans-Jordan. Jewish Christian refugees from Judea also headed to Galilee, to Antioch in Syria, and to Alexandria in Egypt, where there were already large Jewish communities. It needs to be stressed that the Christians who emigrated to these Jewish centers were also Jews.

It was for these Christian Jews that the Gospel of Matthew was written.⁷ This Gospel could have originated in any of these locations because it reflects a rivalry with the religion of the scribes and Pharisees who were engaged in reconstituting Jewish religious life after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. (see also the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:17–6:16). The rivalry between the Christian scribes and those who “love . . . being called rabbis” (23:6–7) became especially hostile between 70 and 90 and is reflected in Matthew 23, which has no counterpart in any other Gospel. The separation of Christians from the synagogue was made official by the inclusion of a malediction against “Christians and heretics” in the great prayer (*Tefillah*) of the synagogue, variously called Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh ‘esreh*) or Standing (*‘Amidah*).⁸ The intensity of polemic in this Gospel against the Sadducees as well as the Pharisees (22:23–32) argues strongly for its provenance in northern Palestine, where some of the priestly aristocracy settled in Tiberias and Sepphoris after the destruction of Jerusalem and struggled with the scribes over the future of the Jewish liturgy, although the more common scholarly opinion places the provenance of the Gospel of Matthew in Antioch. The priests promoted *Tefillah*, and the scribes promoted *Shema* with its blessings (*berakoth*).⁹ The criticism of the hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners” (6:7) may be a reference to *Tefillah* *‘Amidah* (“standing”). Against this and the orations of the pagan Gentiles (6:7), Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray (6:9–13). It is from the Gospel of Matthew that we have the text of the Lord’s Prayer with its balanced parallelism as it came to be used in Christian worship and devotion. The emphasis on “making disciples” in the Gospel of Matthew reflects an intense instructional program, seen especially in chapters 5–7 (the “Sermon on the Mount”). Matthew 18 also reflects a disciplinary process typical of a tightly controlled sect.

The text of the Lord’s Prayer with its concluding doxology is also found in another document that originated in a Jewish Christian community: the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve* (see 8:2).¹⁰ This early church order was probably written around the end of the first century



and either draws on material in Matthew or utilizes material that was also used in Matthew (especially in chapters 1–6).¹¹ It also tries to distinguish Christian practice from Jewish, even though the practices are similar; for example, Christians should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays because “the hypocrites” fast on Mondays and Thursdays (8:1). The *Didache* is a priceless treasure trove of Jewish Christian practices of catechesis, baptism, and the Eucharist. The eucharistic prayers in chapters 9–10 are so typical of the Jewish prayers before and after meals that they have been studied by Jewish scholars interested in establishing the forms of these prayers before the compilations of the Mishnah.¹²

The outflow of Christian leaders from Judea led to a tradition of traveling apostles, prophets, and teachers. Itinerant Christian prophets and teachers (who should be distinguished from the apostles and evangelists sent out by churches to found other churches, such as Paul, Barnabas, and Silas) went from being honored to being tolerated to being regarded as nuisances or worse; hence the warnings against “false prophets and apostles” in the Gospels. *Didache* 11 and 15 admonishes the Christian community to welcome apostles and prophets with proper hospitality and even give them the privilege of presiding at the Eucharist, but to put a time limit on their stay (three days) and not to despise the residential bishops and deacons elected by the community, who should enjoy a place of honor along with the itinerant prophets and teachers.

It is uncertain how long Jewish Christianity flourished. Jewish Christian congregations flourished in Bethlehem, Hebron, and Nazareth, in Pella in Trans-Jordan, and in Syria and Egypt. Elsewhere, their influence was eclipsed by the growth of Gentile Christianity. Jewish Christians living in Trans-Jordan and in eastern Syria lost touch with the mainline church and often by default embraced “heretical” positions. For example, the Ebionites took daily baths for purification, used unleavened bread and water in the Eucharist (rejecting wine), held a dualistic view of spirit and matter, and regarded Christ as the true prophet assisted by an archangel.¹³ It may be that the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) reflect the concern of the Gentile church, emerging into dominance, about these teachings of Jewish Christianity, now considered aberrant.

In Syria a flourishing literature in Syriac (a language related to Aramaic) had a Gnostic cast; these works include the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Acts of Thomas*, and the *Odes of Solomon*. Also in Syria, the ascetic



features of sectarian Christianity emerged in the tradition of hermits, who practiced separation from the world. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, this meant separation from normal social functions, such as sex, family, commerce and money, and even the conventions of honor and shame (see saying 37). To “enter the kingdom of God,” one must be “solitary” (see sayings 16, 23, 30, and 76). An ethos that had defined apocalyptic sectarianism became a means of personal salvation. Ascetic Christian solitaries flourished in eastern Syria already in the second century.¹⁴ The aim of the first holy men was to be perfect, to live in “the ranks of angels.” At first they lived on the edges of towns, but as more people visited their hermitages to seek advice, inspiration, arbitration, and healing, they began to move farther out. The object of the hermits was to escape the world. By the fourth century, they moved into the desert to escape the world in the church.

Some Christians returned to Jerusalem after the Roman-Jewish War, but they were expelled from Jerusalem along with all Jews after the Bar Kochba rebellion in 135. Emperor Hadrian had a new city built on the site of Jerusalem, Aelia Capitolina, which was dedicated to the Roman gods and goddesses. Christians from elsewhere came to Aelia as tradespeople to work on the construction site, but these were Gentiles. These Gentile Christians developed an interest in the site of Jesus’ Last Supper on Mount Sion. They referred to the house of the Upper Room as the “Mother of the churches” and were allowed to assemble there because it was outside the city walls.¹⁵ These new Christian settlers of Aelia also ventured to other sites connected with the life of Jesus, such as the site of his birth in Bethlehem and the cave of his burial and resurrection on the Mount of Olives. The development of a Christian interest in Jerusalem and the Holy Land came from Greco-Roman Christians, including the learned third-century Christian exegete and teacher Origen, who still referred to the heavenly Jerusalem as “the mother of us all.”¹⁶

A Greco-Roman Household

Christianity, from its beginnings, was an urban religion. Jesus himself was from the village of Nazareth, located on the trade route from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast. Nazareth was a satellite village of Sepphoris, a splendid “model city” about one hour’s walk away, built by Herod Antipas. It is possible that as carpenters, Joseph and Jesus



worked at construction sites in Sepphoris, since the project was enormous and would have required all the skilled labor the region could supply.¹⁷ There is no evidence that Jesus was affected by the Greco-Roman culture, except to contrast the lifestyle of a Herodian ruler with that of John the Baptist (Luke 7:25; see also Matthew 11:8). In spite of agrarian and nomadic images in his parables and sayings, Jesus himself was not a peasant, nor is it likely that Jesus attracted much of a peasant or “proletarian” following.¹⁸ Jesus’ trade (it was not uncommon for rabbis to have a trade) gave him some mobility, since tradesmen went where their skills were needed, as we see also in the example of the Apostle Paul, who was a tentmaker. Not many Galilean farmers or Judean shepherds were able to follow him because their livelihood depended on working the land and herding their flocks. The same was true of the fishermen Jesus called as his disciples; they had to leave their nets and boats in order to follow Jesus (although the Gospel records indicate that family members were left to carry on this lucrative industry, and these disciples returned to this business after the resurrection). Jesus’ travels took him from town to town in Galilee. The Gospel of John reports three journeys to Jerusalem during Jesus’ three-year ministry, not just the final journey reported in the Synoptic Gospels. The post-resurrection church used Jerusalem as a headquarters until the Roman-Jewish War. When Christianity spread, it was to other cities, including Damascus and Antioch in West Syria.

What was true about Jesus was even more true of Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the apostle. Wayne Meeks has mapped the social world of Apostle Paul.¹⁹ Paul hailed from the port city of Tarsus and was familiar with the urban culture of the Greco-Roman world. He used the military highways built by Rome and the sea lanes to take the gospel from place to place. He founded congregations in major port cities like Ephesus (Asia Minor), military posts like Philippi (Macedonia), and commercial centers like Corinth (Greece). It has been estimated that there was more long-distance travel in the first several centuries of the Roman Empire than at any other time in history before the nineteenth century. People traveled for business. For example, Paul met Lydia, a dealer in purple goods, in Philippi (Macedonia), but she was from Thyratira (Asia Minor) (Acts 16:14).

Something of the social mobility of the period is indicated in the fact that Lydia was a woman running her own business. Admittedly, it was a textile business. Women could operate such a business out of their own



homes. Greek women did not usually play a public role in civil life (the Ptolemaic queens of Egypt being a notable exception). Nevertheless, women in Greco-Roman society did acquire business skills by managing the affairs of their household, which might include supervising slaves and keeping accounts. The primary outlet for women outside the home in both Greek and Roman society was participating in religious festivals and serving as priestesses in the cults of gods and goddesses, the most famous of whom were the Vestal Virgins in Rome. But Michael Grant showed that women were progressively liberated in Roman society so that they could even enter the civil arena to study law and politics in spite of the conservative social attitudes of prominent figures like Augustus and Virgil. In fact, women would not again achieve the emancipation they enjoyed in Roman society until modern times.²⁰

The House Church

The primary social unit of Greco-Roman society was the household. The book of Acts indicates that when Paul and his missionary companions encountered hostility in synagogues, and even when they didn't, they often took up residence in the households of individuals: Lydia in Philippi (16:15), Jason in Thessalonica (17:5–9), and Prisca and Aquila in Corinth (18:2–4). The meeting places of Pauline congregations, as of other congregations, were in private houses. House churches mentioned include those in the homes of Gaius (Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14), Crispus or Stephanus (1 Corinthians 1:14, 16), Prisca and Aquila with homes in Corinth and Rome (1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5), and Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus (Philemon 2). Four times in Paul's letters, he refers to "the church (*ekklesia* = assembly) at so-and-so's house" (*he kat' oikon*). It may be that the nucleus of a church was a household. But households in Greco-Roman society could be quite extensive, including immediate relatives, slaves, freedmen clients, hired workers, and sometimes tenants or partners in a trade or craft. It was not always the case that everyone in a household would convert to Christianity; sometimes one's spouse, a slave's master, or a master's slave remained pagan. But often the sense of social solidarity prompted all or most members of the household to embrace the cult of the head of the household. We read in Acts of a whole household receiving baptism (16:25–34). In such situations, not everyone



held Christian convictions to the same degree, which probably explains why Paul's letters are so full of admonitions and exhortations.

We might wonder how large the congregations assembled in private homes could be. The number of people living in a Roman household of even moderate means could be large. Dinner parties of thirty to forty guests were not uncommon. If all the guests did not fit in the typical Roman dining room (called the *triclinium*, with reference to three couches, on each of which three guests could recline), the extra seating (or reclining) could spill into the peristyle or into open gardens. Larger homes of patrician families with spacious open gardens could accommodate as many as the two thousand guests that Cicero testifies he once fed.²¹

Determining the social background of the early generations of Christians has not been an exact science, but it is apparent that Christianity appealed to all social classes—many *humiliores* (the poor), some *potentiores* (the politically-connected), and even a few *honestiores* (respectable citizens)²²—since Apostle Paul testifies to the clashes between social classes in the celebration of the Lord's Supper at Corinth. There must have been some *honestiores* among Christians with sufficient means to serve as patrons of the church and whose homes could accommodate congregations of considerable size. Prisca and Aquila, who owned houses in Asia and in Rome, may have been among them.

The greater freedom of women to participate in religious cults in Greco-Roman society contrasts with the more restricted role of women in the Jewish synagogue. Paul, as a Greek-speaking Jew with a Pharisaic education who held Roman citizenship, might have been conflicted about this, and it shows in the First Letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, a passage devoted to the veiling of women, Paul mentions that women are not forbidden to pray or to prophesy in the public assembly (11:5). Prisca (Priscilla) was accorded a role in the assembly on the basis of her gifts (1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:3; Acts 18:2, 18, 26), even taking precedence over her husband Aquila (Romans 16:3; Acts 18:18, 26). This license to pray and preach publicly does not remove creaturely differences, since Paul still requires that women wear a veil. On the other hand, in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, Paul states that women are not allowed to speak in the churches but are to be subordinate and may ask questions of their husbands at home. This seems to represent a Judaizing tendency out of sync with the charismatic Greek assembly at Corinth, and one may wonder if this passage is authentically Paul.



One possible reason for the diminishing leadership role of women in the Gentile church by the second century may be not only a re-Judaizing but the prominence of women in Gnostic circles. Among Gnostic groups such as the Valentinians, as well as among the Marcionites and Montanists, women were equal with men and could hold all offices in the Gnostic conventicles, perhaps even that of bishop.²³ Orthodox Christians reacted as we see in 1 Timothy 2:11–15.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul dwells on “order” in worship, even to the point of curtailing speaking in tongues if no one is present to interpret the message. Paul assigns more importance to prophesying than to glossalalia and to lucid speech than to ecstatic. Here we might remember the social context. Even large cities tended to squeeze their populations into a small area. Ramsey MacMullen estimates that the average population density in cities of the Roman Empire was two hundred per acre. He further calculates that about one-fourth of the area of typical cities was given over to public facilities.²⁴ Life was crowded, and not much happened that escaped the notice of the neighbors. This situation undoubtedly influenced Paul’s concerns in 1 Corinthians 14 that things be done “decently and in order,” not only to avoid scandal, but also to appeal to potential converts with the gospel.

A Cultic Association

Another possible sociological model for the early church was the cultic association or club that flourished in Greco-Roman cities. Clubs and associations abounded in the Greco-Roman world.²⁵ These clubs existed as religious guilds, trade guilds, dining clubs, and funerary associations. In Rome they were often called *collegia* and could be public or private clubs.

Wayne Meeks analyzes similarities and differences between the voluntary club and the Christian assembly.²⁶ Both the clubs and the church were voluntary groups that gathered around a particular purpose rather than a social relationship. Burial associations, for example, were popular among slaves and the lower classes, because monthly dues provided a way of arranging for decent burials of association members. Some of the Greek clubs seem to have originated as means for sharing the costs of a sacrifice, especially if the deity being honored was not included in state sacrifices and festivals.²⁷ The banquet was a feature of all clubs and associations. Thus, both the church and the clubs could be devoted



to the worship of a deity. Many clubs, like the churches, depended on the benefactions of a patron (or patroness). In contrast, membership in the church was by a process of initiation that entailed a resocialization and reorientation.²⁸

The Christian assemblies were stricter in their membership requirements but also broader in their membership in terms of including people from all social classes. Also, many of the terms of officeholders and functions in the clubs are missing in Pauline terminology, except for the positions of *episkopos* (overseer) and *diakonos* (waiter) (Philippians 1:1; Romans 16:1). In the case of *diakonos*, the office of deacon, as it developed in the church, was broader than its use in the meal clubs. Where Roman influence was strong, as in Corinth and its port city of Cenchreae, *diakonos* may have meant *patronus*. This may be the sense in which the term is applied to Phoebe in the masculine form (Romans 16:2) because women could also be patrons of clubs or associations.

The club or cultic association was a model that could be used by Gentile Christians. It was not unrelated to a household, but it transcended family relationships. The Christian assembly did not offer sacrifices, as did some cultic associations, but it did have the eucharistic meal. It did not engage in public processions or sponsor public festivals, as some clubs did, but by the second century, Christians had learned because of intermittent persecution not to call undue attention to themselves. The Christian assembly did not practice esoteric initiation rites like those of the mystery cults, but it did have a rite of initiation in baptism. Whether or not Christians saw themselves as forming a club, it is clear that some Roman officials saw Christians as forming such a group. From time to time, Roman officials banned the meetings of clubs and associations because of the riotous behavior that often followed drinking parties or their potentially subversive character. In a letter to Emperor Trajan (c. 112), Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Asia, relates that the Christians he had interrogated reported that they gathered before daybreak "to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god," and again later in the day to partake of "ordinary and harmless food," but "they had ceased this practice after my edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden secret societies."²⁹ There is evidence of other bans or restrictions on clubs.³⁰

The fact that the banning of supper clubs affected Christian practice, perhaps relocating the Eucharist from the evening to the morning, suggests that some Christians were meeting as a cultic association. Dinner parties in private houses would not have been banned. Yet not

all houses would have been large enough to accommodate growing assemblies. Coming together as a club or association and renting a dining hall provided one possibility. Public dining facilities would have been available to clubs and associations in taverns, inns, and outdoor gardens, as well as in temple complexes in which cultic associations met to eat. According to 1 Corinthians 8:10, Christians were invited to join dinner parties in pagan temples, where the participants would eat the meat sacrificed to idols, a practice Paul discouraged because it would have put the weak in bad faith. “Secular” dining facilities also were available, but it is uncertain whether Christians would have rented such facilities as inns and taverns, especially during a time of persecution or out of concern to protect a reputation for sobriety. Some clubs had their own facilities.

In contrast, Christians were not likely to be molested in cemeteries, since Romans respected burial and funeral customs. A Christian Eucharist celebrated on the grave of a deceased Christian would look to the Romans like the *refrigerium* (meal for the dead), and the church would look like a burial society. In fact, Christians could constitute a burial society and even take over certain cemeteries. The famous catacombs, or burial chambers, in Rome were acquired by Christians from previous pagan owners some time in the third century, reflecting a fashionable shift to Christianity among the middle classes as well as a place of refuge in times of persecution.

A Synagogue or School

Both in Palestine and in the Greco-Roman cities, it would be natural for Christianity, as an offshoot of Judaism, to organize itself as a synagogue. Synagogues flourished in the Jewish Diaspora. According to the book of Acts, Paul often went to the local synagogue first when he arrived in a new city. Yet, ironically, the term *synagogue* is not used in Paul’s letters. In fact, it is used only in James 2:2 and Hebrews 10:25 to designate a Christian gathering for worship, and both letters are addressed to Jewish Christians. Some have questioned whether Acts is accurate, since the mission of Paul was to the Gentiles and not to the Jews. Yet he found many of his converts (like Lydia) among the God-fearing Gentiles who attended worship in Jewish synagogues. One may also wonder if the Diaspora synagogues of the early centuries C.E. were quite the imposing institutions we see today in contemporary Judaism. Diaspora Jews



probably also gathered initially in private homes, to judge from the synagogues unearthed in Dura-Europas, Stobi, Delos, and elsewhere that were converted from private houses. Christian communities also received private houses that were donated to the congregation as the place of meeting for the *ekklesia*, including the house church discovered in 232 at Dura-Europas on the Roman-Persian frontier where a Roman garrison was stationed. In the plan of this house church, a wall was knocked down to make a room for a gathering of about sixty people. The bathroom had been converted into a baptistery with the walls decorated by mosaics of the three myrrh-bearing women. One room connecting the baptistery and the assembly hall could have been used for teaching catechumens; another room adjoining the assembly hall could have been used as a sacristy.³¹ The title churches in the city of Rome (*tituli*) also go back to the time when titles to private houses were turned over to the church.

Christians did not call their places of assembly synagogues, but the name *synaxis* (gathering) was attached to their order of worship by the fourth century, especially for the service of readings, preaching, and prayer, which would have corresponded liturgically to the Jewish Sabbath service. The second-century Mishnah lists five liturgical elements that could not be performed without the presence of a quorum of ten adult males: the recitation of the Shema with its blessings, the recitation of the *Tefillah*, the priestly blessing, the reading of the Torah, and the reading of the Prophets (Megillah 4:3). Scholars have assumed that these constituted the main elements of the Sabbath service. In the churches in the East (especially Syria), the architecture of the church building also reflected that of the synagogue, with a central *bema* on which were seated the bishop and presbyters instead of the rabbi and rulers of the synagogues. But in the apse, which was empty in the synagogue, the Christian churches located the table for the Lord's Supper.³²

Synagogues were places of study as well as places of prayer. They related to another model of the Christian assembly in Greco-Roman cities: the philosophic school.³³ The Christian assembly was certainly something more than a philosophic school such as those of the Pythagoreans and Epicureans. It is possible that Christian leaders, like philosophers, attracted disciples who kept their work going after their death; New Testament scholars have spoken of a Pauline school as well as a Matthean school and a Johannine school. But there was also a

teaching component to the assembly associated especially in catechetical work with converts, which emerges in detail for the first time in *The Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215). Robert Wilken suggested that already by the middle of the second century, some Christians gravitated toward the model of the philosophical school as a way of countering the more negative image of Christianity as a new cultic association that would arouse the suspicions of imperial officers.³⁴ Apologists such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen presented themselves as Christian philosophers. Clement, as head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, turned it into a center of Christian philosophy. Origen made it also a place of biblical scholarship and uncommon exegesis.

A Shadow Empire

Finally, we need to inquire how Christians, who developed a cohesive structure and group identity at the local level, were also conscious of belonging to a global movement “with all who invoke the name of Jesus Christ in every place” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul referred to each of his congregations as an *ekklesia*. This term is usually translated as “church,” but *church* carries a lot of subsequent baggage that *assembly* lacks. When Paul appropriated the term, its most common use was to refer to the public meeting of the free male citizens of Greco-Roman cities. These assemblies met to acclaim candidates for office and to approve the proposals of city councils, although by the third century, actual elections were rare outside of North Africa.³⁵ But the term *ekklesia* had also been used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to render *Qahal Yahweh* (“the assembly of the Lord”), which referred to the gathering of all the tribes of Israel or their representatives. In either case, the term *ekklesia* transcended all the models of Christian community we have discussed: the sect, the household, the cultic association, and the school.

The work of the people that was done in the civic *ekklesia* was called *leitourgia*. The “liturgy” was a public work performed by representatives of the people. It was in this sense that Paul called his work of collecting charitable gifts from the assemblies in Macedonia and Greece for the assembly in Jerusalem a *leitourgia* (2 Corinthians 9:22). Paul also regarded his apostolic service as a *leitourgia* (Romans 15:16; Philippians 2:17). Yet this concept is not devoid of the connotation of the Old



Testament priesthood, since this term is used to describe the sacrificial ministry. The sacrificial gift rendered by Paul to God is the faith of the assembly (Philemon 2:17). Yet the liturgical aspect of the assembly is indicated by the fact that each person contributes his or her gift “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). In 1 Corinthians 14:26–31, Paul insists on some order in the use of these gifts. Interestingly, in a later letter to the Corinthians from Clement of Rome (c. 96), the word *leitourgia* was applied for the first time to the order of worship: “the sacrifices and services . . . that the Master has bidden us to do at the proper times he set.”³⁶

The Pauline mission was not just to found local churches; it was also to form a network of local churches that were kept in a conscious relationship with one another. Paul and his delegates visited the churches and sent them letters, which were read aloud in the assembly and were possibly shared from one local *ekklesia* to another. If the opening words of 1 Corinthians refer to “all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place,” the close of the letter also invokes a consciousness of the wider Christian fellowship: “The *ekklesiai* [plural] of Asia greet you; Aquila and Prisca and the *ekklesia* at their house greet you much in the Lord. All the brothers (and sisters) greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. I, Paul, greet you in my own hand” (1 Corinthians 16:19–21). This network made it possible for Christians to travel throughout the Roman Empire, equipped with letters of introduction from recognized leaders (such as Paul provided for Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2), and receive hospitality and fellowship in the Christian assembly at that place.

But by the end of the first century, the global fellowship could no longer depend on known leaders in a local assembly who would be recognized by other local assemblies. An office of local leadership was needed. This was provided in the office of overseer or bishop (*episkopos*) that had emerged in Christian associations. The Greco-Roman offices of bishop and servant or deacon (*diakonos*) were merged with the council of elders (*presbyteroi*) who governed the Jewish-Christian congregations. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote letters to the local assemblies in Asia even as he was being transported to Rome for trial and certain death in the arena, pleading for the recognition of the authority of a single bishop in each place along with the college of presbyters. To the Magnesians, he wrote that they should respect their youthful bishop, Damas. To the Trallians, he wrote, “Everyone

must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God's council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these. I am sure that you agree with me in this."³⁷ To the Smyrnaeans, he wrote that they could avoid schism if they would

all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would God's law. Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. Without the bishop's supervision, no baptisms or love feasts are permitted. On the other hand, whatever he approves pleases God as well. . . . He who pays the bishop honor has been honored by God. But he who acts without the bishop's knowledge is in the devil's service.³⁸

The diversity of Christians within local assemblies throughout the cities of the Roman world required strong leadership that all Christians would recognize and respect. Bishops did not gain this recognition easily. They had to compete for respect with charismatic prophets, visionary Gnostic teachers, holy ascetics living in the deserts, and courageous confessors who were entitled to a seat in the presbyterate by virtue of their public witness to the faith. There was no comparable model of leadership in the Jewish world at the time of the emergence of the monepiscopate. "Rulers of the synagogue" were responsible for the orderly conduct of public worship, but they lacked the teaching authority that accrued to the Christian bishop, and their job was not necessarily lifelong. Lifelong rule by a single leader was also unknown in the cultic associations of Greco-Roman world. It is interesting that titles of rank were also developing in the Jewish synagogues of the second and third century; we hear of "principals," "fathers," and even "mothers." But these offices applied to local synagogues.

In contrast, in Roman Palestine in the second century, the office of "patriarch" developed in place of the high priest as the recognized leader of the Jews in Palestine. The patriarch was the head of the rabbinic academy, the chair of the rabbinic Sanhedrin, and the regulator of the calendar. The Romans also recognized in the Jewish patriarch a civic authority to collect taxes and appoint judges.³⁹ By the third century, the patriarch was exerting spiritual authority over all Jews in the



empire. In the same way, by the third century, all the Christian assemblies of a city looked to one single or “monarchical” bishop, and some bishops of great metropolitan centers were exerting a spiritual authority over other churches in the province.⁴⁰

Christian bishops appealed to other authorities to prop up their own authority. When Clement, a leader of the church in Rome in the 90s (though probably not a bishop), wrote to the church in Corinth to chastise them for ejecting their leaders from office, he explained how the apostles had appointed “bishops” from their first converts. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 185) argued against the Gnostic claim of having secret knowledge from the apostles by pointing to bishops who were the “successors of the apostles,” and he confounded the heretics by providing a list of twelve successive bishops in Rome beginning with Linus. By 250 Cyprian of Carthage was assuming that the apostles themselves had been bishops, and, for added measure, he argued that Christian bishops replaced the Old Testament priesthood. Moreover, bishops were not imposed from the outside or from above; they were elected by the local assembly. The authority of the people of God stood behind the selection of a bishop. As teachers who expounded on the scriptures read in the assembly, the bishops became authoritative interpreters of the authority that stood over both the bishop and the people: the Holy Scriptures.

Within a council of elders, there could be disputes and disagreements, not least when heretical ideas were promulgated in the assembly. As the number of Christians increased, the one Christian community of a city divided into several assemblies. Christians were supposed to be one body formed by sharing in the one bread and the one cup. The bishop could promote this unity by making the rounds from one assembly to another, presiding at the Eucharist in each place of assembly, or he could delegate a presbyter to preside in his place. The bishop became the badly needed focus in the Christian community of each city when heresy or persecution threatened to tear the Christian community apart.⁴¹ The bishop became the Christians’ civic leader. The bishops also provided a focal point for the network of local churches. They were elected by their local Christian assemblies. But as we see already in *The Apostolic Tradition*, bishops were ordained by other bishops from other local churches. This brought the recognition of the whole church to the election of the local church and extended the “catholic” dimension of Christianity.