

How much do we really know about the lives of early Christ followers?

Author:Carolyn Osiek^{1,2}**Affiliations:**¹Department New Testament, Brite Divinity School, United States²Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Note:**

Prof. Dr Carolyn Osiek is Professor Emerita of the Department New Testament, Brite Divinity School, United States. She is also participating as a research associate of Prof. Dr Andries G. van Aarde.

Correspondence to:

Carolyn Osiek

email:

c.osiek@tcu.edu

Postal address:

4356 West Pine Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63108, United States

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We know very little about the everyday life of Christ believers in the first years. What can be extrapolated from other ancient sources must be combined with the minimal evidence from Christian sources. The two major rituals, baptism and Eucharist, may have been celebrated quite differently than we imagine. The lives of families must be seen as context for these celebrations.

Introduction

Two stories from recent experience illuminate what must have also been ancient Mediterranean ways of group belonging according to extended kinship structure.

Over the past years, I have led many groups to the Holy Land. Once, to make conversation with our Israeli Arab bus driver, I asked him, 'Do you have a family? Do you have children?' In the United States where I live, those two questions would be more or less equivalent. His answer was, 'Family, yes. Children, no.' They were two different questions to him, because the first meaning of family is not the nuclear family, but the extended family.

Some years ago, I was taken to a very remote island in the Philippines, to a town that was accessible only by boat. There was a Catholic church there and when I was talking to the priest, I asked him what his biggest problems were. He answered that his biggest pastoral problem was that people were always thinking of themselves and not the good of others. 'I, I, I, it is always I,' he said. This puzzled me as I had always heard that Filipinos are very family oriented, so I asked him about this. He looked at me strangely and finally said, 'Well, of course. Family is part of the "I".' These two narratives are examples of what is called sociocentric thinking.

Mediterranean unity?

The assertion has sometimes been made that there is an essential unity of Mediterranean culture, from east to west. This line of thinking tends to appear in older Mediterranean anthropologists, almost all of whom are from England or America. Those who have followed these lines are well aware that other scholars of Mediterranean cultures have not been at all happy about these claims of Mediterranean cultural unity, especially some of the few who are actually from Mediterranean countries. For example, a Portuguese scholar went on the attack against the 'Mediterraneanists' for their Anglo-American ethnocentricity. He suggested that the theory of a pan-Mediterranean culture area mostly serves the interest of 'distancing Anglo-American scholars from the populations they study' (Pina-Cabral 1989:399). Others from Mediterranean countries have been more receptive (e.g. Albera 2006).

We are all quite aware in our own countries that there is really no such thing as a national culture, even though we may sometimes speak as if there were. Rather, there are many smaller subsets of regional, ethnic, linguistic and even kinship cultures that make up the whole. We sometimes get lazy as historians and assume, because it is easier, that all ancient Mediterranean culture was alike, whereas there must have been just as many, if not more, subcultures from region to region and city to city, with less contact and interplay with each other than subcultures have in a modern context. It is much more difficult to try to understand these ancient subcultures because they are for the most part inaccessible to us.

That matrix of ancient cultures and subcultures was the context in which early Christianity arose and prospered. When we read early Christian sources, we must try to understand them through the lens of a culture or set of cultures far different from what we know. Methods of food production and marketing, of clothing manufacture and of transportation and communication, were all radically different from what we experience in a westernised urban centre today. Even more important, presuppositions about social organisation were very different.

House churches and beyond

With this in mind, we can approach the subject of early Christian daily life with the realisation that social grouping by kinship structures was basic to the understanding of life. Like many religious and philosophical movements of the time, the first groups of disciples of Jesus met most often in private domestic contexts. For a parallel example, a Roman woman named Sergia Paulina hosted a social and religious group, a *collegium*, in her home in Rome. Her grateful guests left an inscription that gives us the information. Attempts have been made to show that she was a Christian and her group a Christian house church, but they have not been convincing. Her domestic gathering, however, gives us a helpful parallel to what was happening amongst early Christian groups.

Some well-known New Testament figures hosted such gatherings in their houses. Amongst the disciples of Jesus, Mary the mother of John Mark, cousin of Barnabas and sometime travelling companion of Barnabas and Paul, hosted the group of believers in her house, the place where Peter thought to go in the middle of the night when he was miraculously delivered from prison (Ac 12:12). Lydia, the merchant of purple cloth in Philippi, began a group in her house that continued beyond the presence of Paul and Silas (Ac 16:14–15, 40). Priscilla and Aquila hosted a church in their house in Rome (Rm 16:3–5). Gaius seems to have had a house large enough to host ‘the whole church’ in Corinth (Rm 16:23). The Letter to the Colossians records that a woman named Nympha hosted a church gathering in neighbouring Laodicea (Col 4:15).

The word that Paul, Matthew (18:17) and Acts (9:31; 11:26; 15:22) use – *ekklēsia* – and the expression ‘the church in (his or her or their) house’, *hē kat’oikon ekklēsia*, was not the only possible word to use: *synagōgē* had been used by the Judean people for some time already to denote worship assemblies. James 2:2 and a few other early Christian sources also use it for an assembly of Judean people who believe in Jesus. Both words, *ekklēsia* and *synagōgē*, mean approximately the same, an assembly or gathering. Both are used extensively in the LXX for the assembly of the people of Israel. *Ekklēsia* probably sounded more contemporary in the Greek cities of the Roman East, where it connoted a civic assembly of citizens.

These assemblies could take many forms: preaching, discussion, initiation rituals and celebration of the common meal that Paul calls the Lord’s Supper (*kyriakon deipnon*). About this meal, Paul had received a tradition ‘from the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:23), meaning in this context, probably not a vision or locution directly from the risen Jesus, but tradition received through the mediation of the group of disciples in Jerusalem, especially Peter and James (Gl 1:18–19).

Founders

Paul was not, of course, the only founder of churches. There were many others spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, even as far as Rome before Paul’s arrival there and if we are to take later tradition seriously, far to

the East as well. The Pauline churches become the focus and nearly the norm, simply because we have the most information about them. We know very little about exactly how Paul evangelised. What we have in his letters sometimes recalls what he taught them, but most often moves on to solve new problems that have arisen since his departure. Paul rarely quotes or alludes to sayings of Jesus and when he does, it is usually to invoke the authority of ‘the Lord’. Does this mean that he did not use sayings of Jesus in his initial evangelisation, or simply that he assumes they know all that and can therefore build on it in his letters?

Whether his congregations were mostly Judeans or others, Paul must have presented them with the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative. There is no other way to explain the frequency of use of them in his letters as part of his explanations and proofs, sometimes to communities that were almost surely predominantly Gentile. Did Paul and other preachers of Jesus know the Scriptures completely, or did they select certain texts as prophetic of the coming of Jesus and from them, preach the Gospel? One example would be Genesis 15:6, used twice by Paul to begin his explanation of how Abraham is the father of those who believe (Gl 3:6; Rm 4:3). Another is Psalm 110:1, which appears in several quotations and allusions in Paul’s writing and in Acts (see 1 Cor 15:25–26; Ac 7:55). Another is Psalm 16:10, used twice in Acts to argue for the resurrection of Jesus (Ac 2:25–32; 13:35).

Baptism

Baptism was quickly adopted as the initiatory rite, taken presumably from the Jewish custom of ritual immersion as a sign of purification. The texts of the New Testament are ambiguous about the necessity of baptism and they present two different formulas: ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ in Acts 8:16; and in the triadic ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ in Matthew 28:19. There is no talk of Jesus baptising; the stories of John’s baptism and Jesus’ participation in it is a ritual of conversion, not of initiation. Yet at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to baptise all nations (Mt 28:18–20). Only the Gospel of John and only at one point, portrays Jesus’ disciples baptising during Jesus’ lifetime, even whilst it adamantly denies that Jesus himself baptised (Jn 4:1–2). Paul is quick to point out in 1 Corinthians 1:14–17 that baptising is not his mission, but rather, preaching and evangelising. Nevertheless, it is clear that baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus is important for him. When, how and why did baptism emerge as a necessary initiation ritual for membership in the community, so important that the command had to come from Jesus himself? And if it was so important by the time Paul was active as a missionary, why was he careful to distance himself from its performance at Corinth? Of course, we will never know the answer to this question.

Where did they baptise? Every indication is that for some time, at least through a second or third generation, baptism was done by full immersion in running water. When Paul speaks in Romans 6:3 about the ritual as baptism into the



death of Christ Jesus, the symbolism only works if it is full immersion, dipping of the full body, including the head, under water. The *Didache*, thought to have been compiled toward the end of the first century, directs that baptism be done preferably in cold running water. If there is none to be had, however, it can be done by pouring water on the head three times using the Trinitarian formula that also appears in Matthew 28:19. But the pouring on the head is said by way of concession. The ideal is immersion in cold running water. If that is not possible, any water will do, just poured on the head.

Where would they find this running water? The obvious place would be a river or stream, deep enough for complete immersion or, at seaside cities, the sea itself. Many but not all Roman cities were located near such running water. For those that were, a group trip to the river or the beach would be the way that baptism could be administered. We can imagine the whole of a house church group, perhaps forty or fifty, setting off together to perform and witness the ritual, with the principal figures standing in the water, much as scenes of John's baptism in the Jordan are pictured in art and film.

In cities where no river or stream of sufficient size was available, there were public fountains, distributed throughout the neighbourhoods, with flowing water from a system of aqueducts that may have brought fresh water from mountain springs as much as thirty kilometres away. The fountains, however, were intended to supply drinking water, so immersion in them would have been highly discouraged.

The other possibility is the public baths. Very few private houses had their own bath complexes. Most inhabitants of Roman cities, even the affluent, went to the public baths, which were also massage and sports centres and the place for unofficial business and gathering the latest gossip. At some times and places, there were earlier hours for women (when the water was not completely hot) and later hours for men (the best part of the day). At some of the baths in Pompeii, there is evidence of two complete bath systems, one larger and more centrally located than the other. Most assume this is for separation by sex. It could also, however, separate free and slave. At other times and places, it seems that public bathing was done by men and women together (Ward 1992). In the next century, Clement of Alexandria remarks drily that modest Christian women in his Alexandrian church who hesitate even to be seen by men outside their family do not hesitate to strip naked at the baths in front of their male slaves (*Paed.* 3.5.32.3). The point of his comment is that the mistress fails to see any threat to her modesty because slaves have been so depersonalised (even by Christians well into the second century) that they are not thought of as men. But the comment also reveals that in this time and place, at least, male slaves were not prohibited from the area where free women bathed.

Can we imagine a little procession of Christians going to the baths, finding a private corner and performing baptisms there? Unless they accompanied it with singing, they would

probably have attracted little notice, especially if all had undressed like everyone else at the baths. By the second century, when private houses were being remodelled inside, baptisteries could be incorporated into the remodelled space and baptism could then be a private ceremony, done in standing rather than flowing water.

The common meal

Many different kinds of assemblies took place in house churches for the gathering and dissemination of teaching and information. The most important was what Paul calls the Lord's Supper, the *kyriakon deipnon*. The name 'Eucharist' does not seem yet to be attached to the common ritual meal (that meaning in 1 Corinthians 14:16 is unlikely). In Paul's day, it was probably a weekly meal on the first day of the week after the Jewish Sabbath, at the usual time for banquets, beginning in the middle or late afternoon. At this early stage, we know little of how they actually conducted it other than what we already know about banquets in Roman culture and the curious comments that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34.

It might have appeared to the outsider – and outsiders there were (1 Cor 14:23) – like an ordinary group of members of an organisation coming together for a common meal, like any such social and religious *thiasos* or *collegium* in which membership consisted of a monthly dinner together with the usual camaraderie and a contribution into a common fund for charitable purposes, including burial of members. Most of these groups had patron gods to whom they were attached and many had a wealthy living human patron of either sex, often of the elite classes, who supported them financially, provided a place to meet and was in return honoured with dedicatory inscriptions and statues. Did Christian groups have similar patrons? Witness Gaius of Corinth who hosted Paul and 'the whole *ekklēsia*' (Rm 16:23), which presumably meant all the smaller house churches that came together for special occasions. They met in his house because he was the only one with a house large enough.

If there were no members with a house large enough, they assembled in other kinds of buildings – for example, a rented hall or a room of an apartment block. Multi-residential apartment buildings were already being built, at least in Italy, by the middle of the first century. We are not sure about the East, because no good evidence has yet been found for their use there that early. These buildings in Italy could go as high as five stories and some were built of poor quality and always in danger of collapse. There were no elevators, of course, so living on the top floor was a health hazard, especially in times of fire. Others of these apartment buildings seem to have been built much better and were intended for wealthier inhabitants. It has been suggested (Jewett 1993 and later) that the configurations of persons whom Paul greets in Romans 16 may indicate groups of believers that do not meet in houses: those of Aristobulus (Rm 16:10), those of Narcissus who are 'in the Lord' (Rm 16:11) and the other small groups named in vv 14–15 'and those who are with them'. On the



other hand, these expressions have other possible meanings: wealthy households in which some members are believers but the heads of household are not.

Whatever the type of building, they assembled at the ordinary time for a meal, in mid afternoon, in a household in which many other things may have been happening at the same time: children were being born, growing up and playing; food and clothing were being prepared and processed; the sick were being cared for; and the dying were being attended.

They gathered for the common meal and ate and drank. It would be expected that the person or persons in whose house they were would lead any prayer, conversation, or toasting that took place and therefore also this ritual commemoration. Toward the end, the host or hostess of the household in which they met took bread and a cup of wine, recalled the last supper of Jesus with his disciples and repeated words passed down by tradition as those of Jesus. The evolution of the common meal from Passover meal to Lord's Supper to Christian Eucharist is very unclear. Theories abound and are riddled with guesswork. We cannot solve that problem here. Instead, we can look at what was probably the second part of the meal.

In the classic Greco-Roman formal banquet, eating comes first – then drinking and entertainment or conversation. As the drinking increases, the conversation gets more philosophical! But even when there is only moderate drinking, the time for wine and words is after the meal. This is then the natural time for reading and comment on the Scriptures and on letters that they may have received from important leaders or communities in other places and for preaching and instruction in the faith.

The Lord's Supper was not celebrated in secret. It took quite a few years, into the next century, to develop the understanding that only the baptised should participate (*Did.* 9.5) and a similar passing of time before leadership of the Lord's Supper was reserved for specially delegated persons (Ignatius *Smyrn.* 8.1–2). It was common for the doors of houses to stand open most of the day, especially when there were guests, so that neighbours and passersby could see that nothing suspicious was happening inside. When distinguished guests were being entertained, those passing by could also be impressed with the importance of the host and/or hostess. Rather more surprisingly, it seems that uninvited guests could wander into parts of the house. The Roman architect Vitruvius (*De architectura* 6.5.1) remarks that certain parts of the houses of important people were not private but *communia*, open even to uninvited persons to enter *by right*. These open areas were in the atrium and peristyles which comprise the common open courtyard spaces of the house. By contrast, other parts of the house could be entered only *by invitation*, such as dining rooms and bedrooms. He does not say that there were parts of the house reserved for family alone.

Vitruvius was speaking of the great houses of the elite, of course, because the elite were his readers. We do not

suppose that a gathering of followers of Jesus in the first few generations took place in such a house. Yet the evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum suggests that houses of those of lesser social status followed the same architectural patterns as those of the elite, as far as was possible. We can assume then that the same kinds of social customs prevailed beyond the households of the elite. We have a good indication in a chance comment of Paul that outsiders came right into the assembly of followers of Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 Paul discusses lack of appropriate behaviour at the Lord's Supper. Following the order of the banquet, with eating first, then talk, in the next two chapters he develops the image of the assembly as the Body of Christ with its many spiritual gifts and then gives an inspiring meditation on love (*agape*). In Chapter 14 he goes on to describe another aspect of the assembly, with prayer, speaking in tongues and prophecy. His main point is that both speaking in tongues and prophecy are important spiritual gifts, but that prophecy is more to be desired because it is immediately comprehensible, whereas glossolalia requires interpretation. If everyone is speaking in tongues and no one is interpreting, how will the outsider (*idiotēs*) who enters be able to understand what is happening? Rather, he or she will think that everyone is mad (1 Cor 14:23).

What motivated members to continue to attend these meals? Was the determining factor the sense of supportive community or the promise of life after death? Or something else?

Conversion

Two patterns of conversion are presented in the New Testament: communal and individual. One model of conversion presented especially in Acts of the Apostles is that an entire household is evangelised and baptised at the same time, as in the stories of the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 and the households of Lydia and the anonymous jailer in Acts 16. The conversion of whole households is not limited to Acts of the Apostles, however. Paul states that he baptised the household of Stephanas at Corinth (1 Cor 1:16). Following this pattern, the group of persons who assembled for the Christian meal may have been composed in some cases largely or even completely of members of the same household.

The other model of conversion, probably more prevalent, is that people made personal decisions about joining such a group, with or without other members of their household. Sometimes a wife or husband joined the community and his or her spouse did not. Sometimes slaves joined it but their owners did not. Both of these situations are apparent from 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 2. We speak of such a culture as *sociocentric*. This does not mean that members of these cultures were not capable of making personal decisions about their beliefs and religious practice. They certainly could do that, but probably the tendency to form factions, small dissenting groups, is more likely than individual dissidents acting

independently, as evidenced in 1 Corinthians. Paul does not there criticise them for individualism, but for dividing into factions. Ironically, he uses his name and that of others, Apollo, Cephas and Christ as leaders of the factions.

Public or secret?

The *Quo vadis* version of the early church pictured its members hiding in their houses and especially in the catacombs, meeting secretly and under constant persecution, then later becoming more public after they become an 'official' religion under Constantine. Actually, the reality may have been the opposite. There were many years in which early Christ believers saw no reason to hide their practice and they made no attempt at secrecy. When they began to experience opposition, they may have become more secretive. With public baptisms and open doors during their mealtime meetings, believers in Jesus had little to hide. Only in subsequent generations did their gatherings become more private and closed in, with their own baptisteries and halls in which the Eucharist was no longer celebrated in the context of a meal, but now of a larger gathering of people who stood or sat on the floor in a rectangular room with a moveable altar at one end. The small groups had now become an organisation.

These are some of the aspects of early Christian life that we know, or at least, think we know, but with many empty spaces. Here are some of the further questions about which we know very little.

Conclusion

What did these groups of followers of Jesus in the first generations in the cities of the Roman Empire look like from the outside? Were they just like everyone else, except for a few odd practices like raising every child that was born instead of exposing those that were unwanted, as Tertullian says (Apol 39)? Did they really do that or was that only the ideal?

We know more about the men in the group than the women, although we know something about some of the women, as evangelists, apostles and heads of households. But where are the children? They must have been everywhere that these people were meeting. Why are they almost never mentioned?

We have abundant material from Paul's letters, telling what he has to say to a community once he has left a city, but we know next to nothing about how his letters were received, letters that often chided them and urged them to change. What forms of leadership arose in the local communities after the founding apostle left? How did various church groups in a city and especially those in networks amongst cities, stay in contact?

Whilst there are many things that we will never know about the earliest Christians, careful comparative reading of social information from the ancient sources and the use of the social sciences to help in interpretation can bring us much farther than we would be if we assume that 'they were just like us'. There are some ways in which this is true, that we share a common humanity. However, we are all shaped by the social constructs with which we are surrounded. Rather than think of ourselves as the norm, we need to realise that we are only part of a great movement of history that has run much of its course before us and will continue to run well beyond our time.

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