

THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO PAUL



REDISCOVERING THE COMMUNITY
CONFORMED TO CHRIST

JAMES W. THOMPSON

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BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*
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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thompson, James, 1942–

The church according to Paul : rediscovering the community conformed to Christ /

James W. Thompson.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4882-1 (pbk.)

1. Bible. Epistles of Paul—Theology. 2. Bible. Epistles of Paul—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 3. Church—Biblical teaching. I. Title.

BS2655.C5T46 2014

262—dc23

2014009995

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Dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague

Charles A. Siburt Jr.

a devoted servant of the church



CONTENTS

Preface ix

Abbreviations xi

Introduction: *Reimagining the Church* 1

1. A Community Like No Other: *The Key Themes—from Paul’s First Letter* 23
2. Not Just Any Body: *The Church and Paul’s Corporate Christology* 51
3. The Church Made Visible: *Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans* 79
4. Spiritual Formation Is Corporate Formation: *The Transformative Church in Romans and 2 Corinthians* 103
5. Justification Is about Unification: *The Death of Jesus and the People of God in Romans and Galatians* 127
6. “Missional” May Not Mean What You Think: *Evangelism and Social Action according to Paul* 151
7. The Universal Church Is the Local Church: *Koinōnia according to Paul* 175
8. Discovering the Real Megachurch: *Cosmic Church and House Church in the Disputed Letters* 199
9. Leadership Like No Other for a Community Like No Other: *Authority and Ministry in the Undisputed Letters* 221

Conclusion: *The Church after Christendom* 243

Bibliography 249

Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 267

Modern Author Index 283

Subject Index 287

PREFACE

This study is both a continuation of themes I have developed in earlier books on Paul and a response to recent literature by practitioners who have proposed a new understanding of the church. In *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, I maintained that Paul's pastoral ambition was the moral formation of his churches. I elaborated on this theme in *Moral Formation according to Paul*, demonstrating the ecclesial character of Paul's ethic. Issues raised in the first two books have led me to offer this comprehensive examination of Paul's ecclesiology, continuing my dialogue between Pauline scholarship and the issues in the life of the contemporary church.

Because Paul's voice is largely missing in the recent attempts to redefine the church, I write in the hope that his voice will be heard. I am convinced that Paul's task of forming churches in the pre-Christian culture can inform our attempts to shape churches in a post-Christian culture.

I am grateful both to my dialogue partners and to readers who helped in the preparation of the book. My wife, Carolyn, has devoted many hours both as copy editor and as compiler of the bibliography. Wesley Dingman and Mason Lee read earlier drafts and made suggestions. Dr. Carson Reed, professor of practical theology at the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University, offered helpful comments on parts of the book. I am also grateful to Mrs. Kay Onstead and the late Robert Onstead, who established the Onstead Chair in Biblical Studies, which provided the funding for travel and research.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Dr. Charles A. Siburt Jr., my conversation partner, colleague, and friend over four decades. Dr. Siburt, who was

professor of practical theology at Abilene Christian University until his death in 2012, devoted his life to churches throughout the United States, and left a lasting impression on congregations, students, colleagues, and many others, including me. Countless congregations, especially in Churches of Christ, are indebted to him for his wise counsel.

ABBREVIATIONS

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen.	Genesis	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Exod.	Exodus	Songs (Song)	Song of Songs
Lev.	Leviticus	Isa.	Isaiah
Num.	Numbers	Jer.	Jeremiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Lam.	Lamentations
Josh.	Joshua	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Judg.	Judges	Dan.	Daniel
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hosea
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Joel	Joel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jon.	Jonah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Mic.	Micah
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Nahum	Nahum
Ezra	Ezra	Hab.	Habakkuk
Neh.	Nehemiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Esther	Esther	Hag.	Haggai
Job	Job	Zech.	Zechariah
P(s).	Psalms	Mal.	Malachi
Prov.	Proverbs		

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt.	Matthew	Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Mark	Mark	Rom.	Romans
Luke	Luke	1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
John	John	2 Cor.	2 Corinthians

Gal.	Galatians	Heb.	Hebrews
Eph.	Ephesians	James	James
Phil.	Philippians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Col.	Colossians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	2 John	2 John
1 Tim.	1 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Tim.	2 Timothy	Jude	Jude
Titus	Titus	Rev.	Revelation
Philem.	Philemon		

ANCIENT TEXTS, TEXT TYPES, AND VERSIONS

LXX Septuagint

APOCRYPHA AND SEPTUAGINT

Jdt.	Judith	Sir.	Sirach
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees	Wis.	Wisdom

OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

2 Bar.	2 <i>Baruch</i>	<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
1 En.	1 <i>Enoch</i>	<i>T. Dan</i>	<i>Testament of Dan</i>
Jub.	<i>Jubilees</i>	<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>	<i>T. Mos.</i>	<i>Testament of Moses</i>

DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND RELATED TEXTS

1 QH	<i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i>	1 QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i>
1 QM	<i>War Scroll</i>	1 QSa	<i>Messianic Rule</i>

GREEK AND LATIN AUTHORS

<i>Aristotle</i>		<i>Dionysius of Halicarnassus</i>	
Pol.	<i>Politica (Politics)</i>	<i>Ant. rom.</i>	<i>Antiquitates romanae</i>

<i>Cicero</i>		<i>Diogenes Laertius</i>	
Flac.	<i>Pro Flacco</i>	<i>Vit.</i>	<i>Vitae philosophorum</i> (<i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>)
Leg.	<i>De legibus</i>		
Off.	<i>De officiis</i>		

<i>Epictetus</i>		QE	<i>Questions and Answers on Exodus</i>
<i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai (Dissertationes)</i>	Rewards	<i>On Rewards and Punishments</i>
<i>Josephus</i>		<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>		
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>		
		Plato	
		<i>Resp.</i>	<i>Respublica (Republic)</i>
		<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>
		Plutarch	
		<i>Quaest. conv.</i>	<i>Quaestionum convivium libri IX</i>
<i>Philo</i>			
<i>Abraham</i>	<i>On the Life of Abraham</i>		
<i>Alleg. Interp.</i>	<i>Allegorical Interpretation</i>		
<i>Decalogue</i>	<i>On the Decalogue</i>		
<i>Embassy</i>	<i>On the Embassy to Gaius</i>		
<i>Heir</i>	<i>Who Is the Heir?</i>	<i>Seneca</i>	
<i>Moses</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i>	<i>Ira</i>	<i>De ira</i>
<i>Names</i>	<i>On the Change of Names</i>	Tacitus	
<i>Prelim. Studies</i>	<i>On the Preliminary Studies</i>	<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales</i>

SECONDARY SOURCES

BDAG	Bauer, Walter, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gringrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93.
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983.
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76.
TLNT	Spicq, Ceslas. <i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i> . Translated and edited by James D. Ernest. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

INTRODUCTION

Reimagining the Church

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, my wife and I visited a village church in East Germany. Like the churches throughout other towns and villages of Germany, it stood at the center of town, with a spire that was visible from a distance. We entered a beautiful building that seated at least three hundred, but only twelve were in attendance on this Sunday morning—including the preacher, the organist, and us. If this village church was like others throughout Europe, it once would have been the center of community life, and the seats would have been filled. Now, however, it appeared to be a relic of the past.

Similar scenes are occurring throughout Europe and North America. In a society that is increasingly post-Christian, churches everywhere are losing their place in the public square. Even if not to the extent of that German village church, we watch as attendance at traditional churches declines and the average age increases. Indeed, the fastest growing category in the religious census is that of the “nones”—those who have no religious affiliation.¹ This group is especially prominent among those under thirty, a third of whom are unaffiliated with a church.² While the majority in North America and Europe still describe themselves as Christians, an increasing number are not associated with a church.

1. Pew Forum, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

2. Amy O’Leary, “Building Congregations around Art Galleries and Cafes as Spirituality Wanes,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/us/new-churches-focus-on-building-a-community-life.html>.

In response to this trend, established churches are reinventing themselves, and new experimental forms of church are emerging in an attempt to maintain contact with the increasing number of unaffiliated people. Strategies for addressing this problem are abundant in contemporary literature. Some reinvent the church according to consumer tastes or perceived popular demand, hoping to regain market share. Many recognize the negative associations of the word *church* and avoid the term, identifying their groups as “spiritual communities” and meeting in buildings designed not to look like a church. Many have chosen to plant new churches rather than work with established ones in order to be free to experiment with new forms of church. While the prescriptions for an ailing church vary, they concur that the church must address this changing situation if it is to survive.

I am not writing to offer an additional suggestion for reinventing the church or restoring its place of prominence in the public square. Nor am I convinced that the church should have the place in society that it once had. Indeed, I am convinced that the aging congregation with a declining membership is no less a faithful witness than the growing church. Having observed the numerous attempts at reimagining the church, I am convinced that the most basic questions are not being asked. In the various strategies for reinventing the church, the theological identity of the church is assumed but not examined. The crisis of the church pertains not only to the loss of numbers but also to the fundamental question, what kind of church should survive? That is, what is the purpose of the church?

The modern church, like its ancient counterpart, exists alongside numerous other communities. People enter the church with expectations that have been shaped by a variety of experiences. Thus the church inevitably faces the challenge of defining itself and its mission among people who have been shaped by other experiences of community. Assuming that revitalization begins with knowing who we are, our challenge is to delineate the distinguishing marks of the church.

CHALLENGES TO ECCLESIOLOGY

Although growing secularism plays a role in the decline of the church, other factors also contribute to the current situation. Protestantism originated as a protest against the established church, and a basic uneasiness about the church has continued in Europe and North America. If we were to ask which item in the Nicene Creed resonates least in popular American culture, the answer would probably be “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

One can observe this fact in the gap that exists between the number of people who believe in God, pray regularly, and consider themselves “spiritual” and those who participate in a believing community. Indeed, the word *unchurched*, commonly used for self-identified Christians who are unaffiliated with a congregation, suggests the popular separation between Christian practice and church membership.

One contributing factor in this decline is the popular conviction that the church distorted the pure religion of Jesus from the beginning. Nineteenth-century liberals attempted to return to the religion of Jesus instead of following the church’s religion about Jesus. The numerous lives of Jesus written during that period were attempts to recover the real Jesus that had been obscured by the church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Adolf Harnack gave a classic expression of this, arguing that “individual religious life was what [Jesus] wanted to kindle and what he did kindle.”³ He maintained that the two primary tenets of the message of Jesus were “God the Father, and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with him.”⁴ He describes the kingdom of God in individualistic terms.

If anyone wants to know what the kingdom of God and the coming of it meant to Jesus’s message, he must read and study his parables. He will then see what it is that is meant. The kingdom of God comes by coming to the individual, by entering into his soul and laying hold of it. True, the kingdom of God is the rule of God; but it is the rule of the holy God in the hearts of individuals; *it is God himself in his power*. From this point of view everything that is dramatic in the external and historical sense has vanished; and gone, too, are all the external hopes for the future. Take whatever parable you will—the parable of the sower, of the pearl of great price, of the treasure buried in the field—the word of God, God himself, is the kingdom. It is not a question of angels and devils, thrones and principalities, but of God and the soul, the soul and its God.⁵

Although Harnack recognized the communal aspect of Christianity, his focus was on the individual. This emphasis on the religion of Jesus reflected the common view that the church distorted the authentic religion of its founder.

While Jesus continues to rate favorably in the modern mind, the church has received a continuing barrage of bad press. Consequently, a steady stream of books—both popular and scholarly—has offered proposals for returning

3. Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, ed. T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 68.

5. *Ibid.*, 56. I owe this citation to Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1–2.

to Jesus, peeling away the church and the religion about Jesus. Evangelicals, capitalists, socialists, feminists, the socially liberal, and the socially conservative have all expressed either loyalty to or admiration of Jesus while criticizing the church. In 1928 Bruce Barton presented a capitalist Jesus in *The Man Nobody Knows*, challenging readers to go behind the creeds and find in the Gospels a Jesus who had all the qualities of leadership required for the free enterprise system.⁶ Others have discovered in Jesus one whose care for the poor and advocacy of the redistribution of wealth were subverted by the church.⁷ Feminists have discovered a Jesus whose work of liberating women was rejected by the church.⁸ A common theme in contemporary literature is that Jesus's acceptance of sinners was soon abandoned by the church.⁹ According to Robert Funk, Jesus was a "party animal"¹⁰ and the subverter of everything around him but whose vision was subverted by the church.¹¹ The attempts of the Jesus Seminar to peel away the distortions by the church and discover the enlightened and iconoclastic Jesus who speaks in aphorisms and parables are also attempts to rescue Jesus from the church and present a version of Jesus that is compatible with the social ideals of the authors.¹² What

6. Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of Jesus* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925). Barton discovered in Jesus personal magnetism, executive ability, and the capacity to recognize potential in others. Jesus was a sociable man and an outdoorsman who taught about "a happy God, wanting his sons and daughters to be happy" (28).

7. See John Dominic Crossan, *Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 421–22. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 100–104.

8. Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (New York: Crossroads, 1984); Leonard J. Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal about His Revolutionary Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2007). According to both Schüssler-Fiorenza and Swidler, Paul maintained the egalitarianism of the Jesus movement, but the suppression of women began with the Pauline tradition (e.g., Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:8–15). They regard 1 Cor. 14:33b–36 as a post-Pauline addition. For a critique of the egalitarian interpretation of Jesus, see John H. Elliott, "Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002): 75–91.

9. See Marcus Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 91–93.

10. Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 208.

11. *Ibid.*, 302–4.

12. Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover (*The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus; New Translation and Commentary* [New York: Macmillan, 1993], 32–33) insist that the work of the Jesus Seminar is outside church control. N. T. Wright suggests that Burton Mack's *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) presents a Jesus who was compatible with the anti-Reaganism of many academics in that period (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 39). See also James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 62: The Jesus rediscovered by the Jesus Seminar "is a Jesus who could well be imagined in many a twentieth-century faculty staff

Albert Schweitzer said at the beginning of the twentieth century about lives of Jesus written in the previous century has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹³ The portrayals of Jesus become a reflection of the authors' own ideologies. Thus Jesus stands for the values of the interpreter. These values became lost with the emergence of the church that abandoned the liberating message of Jesus by introducing creeds, doctrines, and a church that Jesus never intended.

Recent popular literature continues to communicate the separation between Jesus and the church, maintaining that following Jesus is an individual pursuit. The lead article in a recent issue of *Newsweek* bore the title "Forget the Church. Follow Jesus."¹⁴ The focus on the individual is also evident in contemporary popular evangelical literature. George Barna speaks of a revolutionary Christianity in which believers are "devout followers of Jesus Christ who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshiping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many are not."¹⁵ Barna probably speaks for a large number of Americans, going to great lengths to commend these "millions of deeply devout Christians" who "live independently of a local church."¹⁶

The sharp contrast between Jesus and the church is easy to make. We know Jesus only through the portraits from his followers, and we can reconstruct his teaching by giving preference to the sayings that are most compatible with our own cultural setting. In keeping with the twenty-first-century interest in being nonjudgmental, Jesus is remembered as the one who said to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11), but not as the one who made demanding claims about radical obedience and the indissolubility of marriage (cf. Mark 10:1–11). Thus Jesus becomes protean in our culture. On the other hand, we know the church from two thousand years of history, and its sins over this period are notorious. It has frequently stood on the side of the rich, abandoned the poor, and pursued its own power.¹⁷ When Dostoyevsky's

room or as an independent 'loose cannon' academic, with his unsettling anecdotes, disturbing aphorisms, and provocative rhetoric."

13. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 4. "Each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live." He adds, "There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a life of Jesus."

14. Andrew Sullivan, "Forget the Church. Follow Jesus." *Newsweek*, April 10, 2012.

15. George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2005), 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 112; see Keith D. Stanglin, "Barna's Revolution and the Devolution of Ecclesiology," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 11, no. 1 (2008): 63.

17. Cf. Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 24–29.

Grand Inquisitor says to Jesus, “Go and come no more,” he is undoubtedly speaking for the church in many eras. As Gerhard Lohfink has shown in his excellent book *Jesus and Community*, the church has not been the community that Jesus intended.¹⁸ Lohfink demonstrates that the church abandoned some of the major commitments of Jesus’s ministry and calls on believers to recover Jesus’s original intention.

An additional factor is the legacy of the focus on the individual’s relationship to God apart from the church, which is deeply rooted in Protestant Christianity. Martin Luther’s desire to find a gracious God was an individual quest. He found the answer in the doctrine of justification by faith. Although he remained a man of the church, he brought a concept of individual salvation that affected his understanding of the church. Indeed, the Protestant Reformation, with its reaction to the perceived triumphalism of the church, left unclear the relationship between the church and individual salvation. According to the Augsburg Confession, “The Church is a congregation of saints, in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.” This understanding of the marks of the true church became standard among the Protestant Reformers.¹⁹ It leaves unclear, however, the relationship between Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. Oliver O’Donovan describes the weakness of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Anglican confession of faith. The first article on the church (article 19) echoes the Augsburg Confession, defining the church as “a congregation of faithful [people], in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” Prior to that statement is a series of articles on salvation. But the relationship between the church and salvation is unclear. O’Donovan concludes, “The ecclesiastical theory of the Reformation was tacked on as a large and overgrown appendix to an evangelical theology which had no real place for the church.”²⁰ This results in a doctrinal breach between salvation and the

18. The title of the German original asks this question forthrightly: *Wie hat Jesus die Gemeinde gewollt? (What Did Jesus Intend for the Church to Be?)*

19. Cf. John Calvin, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a Church of God exists.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 2:289. Cf. the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”

20. Oliver O’Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1986), 92. I am indebted to Jeremy S. Begbie, “The Shape of Things to Come? Wright amidst Emerging Ecclesiologies,” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 187.

church and an individualistic understanding of salvation.²¹ Nicholas Perrin maintains that “at its worst, Western Protestantism has functionally defaulted to a notion that views the church as little more than a loose association of Jesus’s Facebook friends.”²²

Rudolf Bultmann combines Luther’s legacy of individual salvation with the existential encounter of the individual with God. He organizes his *Theology of the New Testament* around “man prior to the revelation of faith” and “man under faith.” This division reflects the most important feature of Bultmann’s treatment of human identity: the *generic* individual.²³ While Bultmann recognizes the communal nature of faith, he places his focus on the individual’s decision to receive salvation.

The Protestant focus on the individual has a long history in evangelistic movements and revivalism. This emphasis has been especially dominant in North America, as leading thinkers have focused on individual freedom. Revivalists have presented the individual as alone before God and in need of salvation. They have called on individuals to make a decision for Christ but have said little about incorporation into the church.²⁴ Parachurch organizations commonly conduct their ministries independently from the church. Thus evangelicalism, according to Stanley Grenz, is a movement that “has never developed or worked from a thoroughgoing ecclesiology.”²⁵

The emphasis on the individual is the legacy not only of Protestantism but also of the Enlightenment, which provided an individualist impulse and promoted such values as personal freedom and self-interest.²⁶ This individualism has deep roots in the American tradition. It is present, for example, in Jefferson’s claim that the individuals are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Tocqueville saw individualism as the distinguishing feature of American life and maintained that it led people to extreme selfishness.²⁷

21. Begbie, “Shape of Things to Come?,” 187.

22. Nicholas Perrin, “Jesus’s Eschatology and Kingdom Ethics: Ever the Twain Shall Meet,” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 102.

23. Ben C. Dunson, “The Individual and Community in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Pauline Scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9 (2010): 65.

24. Gerry C. Heard, *Basic Values and Ethical Decisions: An Examination of Individualism and Community in American Society* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1990), 6. An example of the individualistic focus, according to Heard, is the preaching of the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. In these meetings preachers such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards called upon people to repent in order to avoid punishment and to be united with God.

25. Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 288.

26. *Ibid.*, 322.

27. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: New American Library, 1956), 193–94.

The individualist tradition claims the primacy of the individual over all other forms of social life, which it regards as the result of contracts between individuals.²⁸ The idea of the “social contract,” composed of free persons who enter into a contract to live under common laws in order to support the interests of the individual, has been an important feature of Western thought.²⁹ This contractualism has an ecclesiological counterpart in modern views of the church as a voluntary association of individual believers.³⁰ As Gary Badcock maintains, “The individualism of late capitalism is perfectly matched by the notion that the church is a ‘voluntary association,’ so that the important thing in its realization is that each person makes his or her own decisions to belong.”³¹ According to this view, individuals find their identity as Christians prior to and apart from membership in the church.³² They experience a personal relationship with Christ and then join a church that exists to promote the spiritual well-being of the individual. The church is the aggregate of the individual Christians who “contract” with each other to form the community.³³ Thus relationships within the church become instrumental to the goals of individual self-interest.³⁴

The result of the primacy of the individual self-interest is that the church now competes for members in a marketplace for consumers. In *The Churching of America, 1776–1990*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that the choice made by the Founding Fathers of not having an established church resulted in an economic understanding of religious life. They maintain that, where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members. Consequently, the “invisible hand” of the marketplace is at work in the church in the same way as in the marketplace.³⁵

Another contributing factor to the decline of the church is the general loss of what Robert Putnam calls “social capital”—the general decline of associational life. Putnam observes that individual bowlers increased by 10 percent from 1980 to 1983, while league bowling dropped by 40 percent. Similarly, people

28. John R. Franke, *Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 167.

29. Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 167.

30. *Ibid.*, 168.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Stanley J. Grenz, “Ecclesiology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257. See also Heard, *Basic Values and Ethical Decisions*, 3.

33. Grenz, “Ecclesiology,” 257.

34. Begbie, “Shape of Things to Come?,” 187.

35. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 9.

no longer participate in the PTA, labor unions, or political groups that rely on face-to-face interaction as they did in the past.³⁶ The internet has replaced these institutions as vehicles for bringing people together for a common purpose. These forces join together to create a loss of communal relationships in general.

THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH IN RECENT THOUGHT

In the past generation Protestants from various traditions have indicated their dissatisfaction with the traditional understanding of the church as the place where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. The recognition that the institutional church has lost its privileged place in Western society and the decline of church membership have provided the occasion for new proposals for the church in a changing culture. We now confront competing claims for the nature and purpose of the church.

Political Action Committee

James Davison Hunter describes the “relevance to” paradigm of the church, according to which the task of the Christian community is to speak to the pressing issues of the day and shape public policy.³⁷ While liberals and conservatives choose different issues, they agree that the task of the church is to mobilize and influence public opinion in a democracy. Liberals have addressed the most contentious issues of the day: wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the rights of the marginalized, and the evils of corporate capitalism.³⁸ Conservatives have mobilized to shape public policy on sexual mores, abortion, and the maintenance of a “Christian America.” Despite their differing priorities, both hope to inject Christian values into the larger society, and both exist in continuity with the Constantinian relationship between church and society.³⁹

The Church as Corporation

In response to the decline of church membership, others have focused on church growth. In 1989 Donald McGavran articulated a vision of church

36. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 111–13. See also Robert N. Bellah et al., “Individualism and the Crisis of Civic Membership,” *Christian Century* 113, no. 16 (May 1986): 510–12.

37. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 215.

38. *Ibid.*, 215–16.

39. This view fits with H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology of “Christ the Transformer of Culture.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 190–229.

growth based on social science models.⁴⁰ According to McGavran, “The chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth.”⁴¹ Assuming an ecclesiology that places numerical growth at the center, McGavran proposes a basic strategy based on the building of homogeneous churches. The literature consistently maintains that, because people do not like to cross socioeconomic lines, the church can grow only when potential converts can associate with people like themselves. Thus the homogeneous church has the greatest prospects for growth. With a heavy reliance on marketing practices, advocates argue that one can predict the results by applying principles that work in the marketplace. With its focus on growth as the primary aim of the church and its use of market analysis, the movement represents an ecclesiology heavily influenced by the principles of free market capitalism.⁴² The inevitable result of this market-driven approach to the church is the competition among the churches. In subsequent chapters I will address the conflict between this reductionistic view of the church and the witness of the New Testament of a community where there is “no longer Jew or Greek” (Gal. 3:28).

The Church as Theater

Growth is the focus of the megachurch, which also reflects dissatisfaction with the traditional ecclesiastical forms.⁴³ While the megachurch is not a formal ecclesiology, it assumes an ecclesiological vision based on the increase in numbers. The church is primarily evangelistic, encouraging individuals to increase the size of the church. Consequently, the worship and ministries of the church are designed to attract new members and be sensitive to the perceived needs of the audience. The seeker-sensitive church seeks continuity between the church at worship and its attractiveness to the seeker; thus it focuses on entertainment.⁴⁴ Megachurches require a more theatrical style than the tradi-

40. Donald McGavran, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

41. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 90. Charles Van Engen criticizes the church growth movement: “The true church exists apparently to grow the church which exists to grow more church.” *Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 479.

42. See Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 216. “The oft-told story of Willow Creek Community Church founder Bill Hybels going door to door to ascertain just what would appeal to suburban Chicago residents in a church is emblematic of the utilitarian bent of the megachurch movement: identify the needs and desires of the target group and fulfill them.”

43. See Lacey Warner, “Mega-Churches: A New Ecclesiology or an Ecclesial Evangelism?” *Review and Expositor* 107 (Winter 2010): 22.

44. *Ibid.*, 25. See also Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 215–17, 19. Kilde (220) speaks of the audience-centered nature of evangelical worship demonstrated by architectural trends.

tional church, with an emphasis on the performance of professionals rather than the participation of the congregation. Traditional Christian symbols, including the pulpit and the table, no longer have the central place they once had. Sound systems and lighting are of paramount concern, in keeping with the emphasis on the church as theater.⁴⁵ The shape of the worship service is determined less by theological reflection than by the preferences of consumers who are engaged in comparison shopping among churches. Practitioners emphasize the methods for attracting others but assume the ecclesiology of growth without establishing theological foundations. While they assume an ecclesiology of growth, their assumptions grow out of the experience of the marketplace.⁴⁶ They ignore the fact that, with the exception of Acts, the New Testament writings indicate little interest in numerical growth.⁴⁷ This emphasis is an expression of modern individualism, and the effect will be a church incapable of challenging the values of this world.⁴⁸

The Church as Association

A wide variety of clubs and associations bring together people who enjoy the company of those who pursue common interests. Members pay fees to join and participate, and they receive benefits in return. They enjoy the social interaction with each other and the activities that the group provides. One may, in fact, hold membership in multiple associations to pursue one's interests. The mission of the association is to meet the needs of its members in order to grow.⁴⁹ As in Paul's day (see below, under the heading "Paul and the Renewal of the Church"), the church may find a model in associations and clubs as it meets the needs of its members, providing social contacts and a variety of programs. Unlike many other associations, the church can offer benefits for every age group.

Because the association is bound together by individuals who share a common interest, people join and leave the group based on its capacity to meet their needs.⁵⁰ It belongs to the members and is responsible to them. The association

45. Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 217.

46. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 125. "When numerical growth is taken as the criterion of judgment on the church, we are transported with alarming ease into the world of the military campaign or the commercial sales drive."

47. *Ibid.*

48. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 283.

49. Ellen T. Charry, "Sacramental Ecclesiology," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 201.

50. Gerhard Lohfink, *Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu: Reden über Jesus und die Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 257–58.

belongs to one segment of the member's life but does not make claims on the member's marriage, vocation, or leisure time. The group is the sum of the individual parts. As I will argue in this book, the church is more than the sum of its parts. It belongs not to the members but to God. We do not join it, as we might join the health club, because the church is composed of the people who are called by God. While it, like the association, provides a place to belong, it is not an association of individuals but the people of God united in Christ.

The Missional Church

The missional church movement rejects the marketing approaches that preceded it and focuses not on the benefits of church membership to consumers but on the mission of the church. Advocates trace the roots of the missional church movement to Lesslie Newbigin's observations about the Western world as a mission field.⁵¹ Newbigin recognized the diminishing role of the institutional church in a post-Christian world and articulated a call for a church that is faithful in the new situation after Christendom. Advocates of the missional church have observed that the traditional understanding of the church as the place where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered fits within the context of Christendom but is inadequate in a post-Christian era, for its focus on the church as "the place where" offers no understanding of its mission.⁵² George Hunsberger writes of the need for "reinventing or rediscovering the church" in the modern world.⁵³ Advocates of the missional church speak with a keen awareness that the church no longer has a privileged place in society and can no longer serve as "chaplain to the culture and society,"⁵⁴ and they reject the attractional model of church in favor of a focus on the mission of the church. This is a call for recovery of the essence of the church in the purpose of God.

Although the word *missional* has been widely used and co-opted by many,⁵⁵ one can delineate the most prominent features of the missional church move-

51. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 389–90, for the influence of Karl Barth in formulating the idea of the *missio Dei* as the foundation for mission.

52. George Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 79.

53. *Ibid.*, 77.

54. *Ibid.*, 78.

55. Cf. Allan J. Roxburgh's comment, "The word 'missional' seems to have traveled the remarkable path of going from obscurity to banality in one decade." Quoted in Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1.

ment. As the term suggests, the missional church's central concern is ecclesiology. According to Darrell Guder, "Mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God's sent people."⁵⁶

The central foci of the missional church movement include the following:

1. The Mission of God (*missio Dei*). The missional church is a turn from an ecclesiocentric view to a theocentric view of the church and its mission. God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world. This understanding shifts the agency of mission from the church to God. It is God's mission that has a church rather than the church that has a mission. According to Guder,

"Mission" means "sending," and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's act in human history. God's mission began with the call of Israel to receive God's blessings in order to be a blessing to the nations. God's mission unfolded in the history of God's people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its revelatory climax in the incarnation of God's work of salvation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. God's mission continued then in the sending of the Spirit to call forth and empower the church as the witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

This view focuses on the mission of God the Father, who sends the Son into the world, and who, with the Son, sends the Holy Spirit into the world. The church is not the vendor of religious goods and services but the people called and sent. Its task is to discern what God is doing in the world and to participate in this mission.⁵⁸

2. The Reign of God. The mission of God finds expression in the gospel of the reign of God as announced by Jesus. Although conceding that the gospel of the early church was *about* Jesus, Hunsberger devotes his primary attention to the gospel that Jesus preached. Because the central message of Jesus was the reign of God, the faithful church will continue to proclaim this message. Hunsberger summarizes the message of the kingdom as a "world characterized by peace, justice, and celebration."⁵⁹ This understanding makes the work of God in the world larger than the mission of the church, although the church is directly involved in the kingdom.

3. The Church of God. The church, which is rooted in the message of the reign of God, is an alternative community. Lois Barrett says that, living in anticipation of the ultimate reign of God, "the church as an alternative

56. Darrell L. Guder, "From Sending to Being Sent," in Guder, *Missional Church*, 6.

57. *Ibid.*, 4.

58. For a critique of the trinitarian missiology, see Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 52.

59. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation," 90–91.

community can make a powerful witness when it chooses to live differently from the dominant society even at just a few key points.”⁶⁰ It rejects the dominant values of the world in order to represent the reign of God. Writers define what this means in a variety of ways.

Advocates of the missional church have offered a welcome alternative to the entertainment and marketing model and have attempted to offer a theological foundation for ecclesiology. They correctly call for the church to recognize its diminished role in Western culture and to accept its countercultural status as the harbinger of a new world. This approach, however, leaves unanswered questions. The claim that mission originates in the mission of God may be ultimately true, but it is reductionistic. While a major theme of Scripture is God’s role of calling and sending, God cannot so easily be confined to that category. Nor is the self-understanding of the church limited to being sent, as I will argue in this book. It is not clear that the whole character of God or of the church can be defined by mission.

The claim that the mission of the church is founded on Jesus’s proclamation of the reign of God is also problematic, for it places the synoptic portrayal of Jesus at the center and marginalizes the early church’s self-understanding after Easter. Indeed, Hunsberger asks when the church lost as its defining quality the gospel of the reign of God that Jesus preached. The answer is that the church made the transition with the christological claims about Jesus. For example, Paul mentions the kingdom only rarely. In most cases he employs the language with reference to the realm that one enters after death. In his epistles, he replaces Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom with the announcement of the revelation of God’s righteousness. The focus on Jesus’s message rather than the religion about Jesus is remarkably similar to that of the nineteenth century liberals’ advocacy of the religion *of* Jesus rather than the religion *about* Jesus.

One is left with uncertainty about what is meant either by the *missio Dei* or by the kingdom. Should the *missio Dei* be understood primarily as God’s work in redemption, and thus the church is the primary way that God works in the world? Or should the *missio Dei* be understood as God’s work in all creation? The latter view marginalizes the church and envisions God at work outside the religious sphere. The task of the church, according to this understanding, is to discover what God is doing and then seek to participate in it.⁶¹

A similar question emerges in the focus on the reign of God. Hunsberger offers the theological foundation in the ministry of Jesus and the sending of the

60. Lois Barrett, “The Church as Apostle to the World,” in Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 127.

61. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 31.

disciples. In the Gospels' portrayal, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom, which was present in his words and deeds. He also gathered a community of those who repented and conformed their lives to the reality of the kingdom. Therefore the kingdom could not be separated from Christology. Jesus did not invite his listeners to discover what God was already doing, but announced that the long-awaited kingdom was present in his ministry. While others healed and did acts of compassion, only Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. Thus one is left to wonder what the missional church advocates mean by their references to the kingdom.

If the proposals for the missional church leave uncertainty about the mission of God in the world, they also leave questions about the identity and message of the church. What is the role of the sacraments? What polity is most appropriate for the Christian community? The church's identity, as I will argue in this book, cannot be understood apart from its Christology and soteriology. What about the edification of the community? The missional church reiterates the low ecclesiology that is common in Protestantism. If the church's role is to discover what God is doing and then join in that, the kingdom of God could function without the church.

The Emerging Church

Dissatisfaction with the traditional church and with evangelicalism has evoked an alternative vision that advocates call the emerging church. The term is so diffuse that one has difficulty defining it or knowing who speaks for it.⁶² Nevertheless, some common themes characterize the movement, which is based on the premise that the church must respond to postmodern culture. As the designation "emerging church" indicates, it is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology. The common themes include (a) the necessity for change, (b) an emphasis on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, (c) submersion into the postmodern culture, (d) a highly communal existence, (e) a refusal to be pinned down to a single ecclesiology and an openness to all ecclesiologies, (f) a reluctance to place boundaries describing who is in and who is out, (g) participation in spiritual activities, and (h) identification with the life of Jesus.⁶³

Advocates of the emerging church also draw a wedge between Jesus and the church, proposing an ecclesiology based on a return to the way of Jesus of the Gospels. Brian McLaren says in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, "Often I don't think Jesus would be caught dead as a Christian, were he physically here today. . . .

62. See Paul Doerksen, "The Air Is Not Quite Fresh: Emerging Church Ecclesiology," *Direction* 39, no. 1 (2010): 4.

63. See Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today* 51, no. 2 (2007): 35–39.

Generally, I don't think Christians would like Jesus if he showed up today as he did 2,000 years ago."⁶⁴ McLaren maintains that a church is a "community that forms disciples who work for the liberation and healing of the world, based on Jesus and the good news of the gospel."⁶⁵

These basic tenets raise questions about the viability of this alternative ecclesiology. While its focus on worship, community, and mission are appropriate, weaknesses in its outlook prevent it from being a viable alternative today. While its central premise of the need for change has some value, the total submersion of the movement in postmodern culture prevents it from being an effective counterculture. Because all institutions need boundaries that establish identity, the reluctance of this movement to draw boundaries will ultimately undermine its identity. Moreover, the openness to all ecclesiologies and the preference for praxis over theology leaves the movement without an adequate doctrinal foundation as a basis for praxis.

PAUL AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

Attempts to reimagine the church have focused on strategies and often assume an ecclesiology without offering a critical analysis of the identity of the church. A special irony can be seen in the near absence from the discussion of Paul, the one who shaped communities more than anyone else we know. Paul offers the first written reflection on the nature of the church. Neither the attractional models of the church growth movement nor the missional or emerging church models incorporate Pauline theology at a substantive level into their understanding of the church. The rare appeals to the Pauline literature do not engage the larger theological context of Paul's thought.⁶⁶ Thus when George Hunsberger says, "It is hotly debated when and how the church lost its sense of this gospel of the reign of God,"⁶⁷ he need look no further than Paul, who proclaimed Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2) rather than the message of the reign of God. As Alfred Loisy famously said, "Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the church that came."⁶⁸

64. Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 87.

65. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 292.

66. Charry, "Sacramental Ecclesiology," 204.

67. Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation," 91.

68. Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. Christopher Home (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 166. Responding to Adolf Harnack's criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, Loisy

Although Jesus's message of the kingdom implies a community committed to God's reign,⁶⁹ the church was not a topic of his discourses. It was Paul who established churches. Wherever he preached Christ, new communities emerged, united by their reception of the basic christological confession. Although the word *ekklēsia*, which appears only three times in the Gospels, probably originated in the earliest Jerusalem church as a self-designation of Christ believers, Paul developed this usage. He nurtured his communities through his personal catechesis, letters, and visits. In his letters, he rarely speaks to individuals but establishes corporate consciousness by speaking to the whole church. English translations obscure the fact that, with rare exceptions (cf. Rom. 2:1–16; 8:2), he speaks only in the second-person plural.⁷⁰ He has “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28) because his ultimate ambition is to present communities to Christ at the end (cf. 2 Cor. 1:14; 11:1–4). As an apostle who preaches where Christ has not been named, he does not speak of individual conversions but speaks of the establishment of churches. Thus he knows of no believer who is not affiliated with a community.

Paul's ecclesiology may be overlooked because he gives no extended treatment of the major themes commonly associated with the church. He does not speak at length about church polity, and his references to baptism and the Lord's Supper are scattered among the letters. Moreover, the individualistic reading of Paul has led interpreters to overlook his ecclesiology. Nevertheless, Paul is the first to offer sustained reflection on the identity of the church.⁷¹

Because we know more about Paul's churches than we know about any other community in the New Testament, the apostle is the indispensable guide for anyone who looks for scriptural resources for reimagining the church. We can observe not only his practices of community formation but also his reflections on the nature of the church. His letters record both his initial work of establishing a church and his responses to challenges to communal identity.

Although Paul gives no separate treatment of ecclesiology, it is central to his thought and woven into all the major issues that he faced. Indeed, the major controversies are actually ecclesiological matters indicating how the churches define themselves. Paul's converts brought with them views of community that undoubtedly shaped their own understanding of the church. Parallels to

insisted on the continuity between Jesus and the church. On Loisy's meaning, see Badcock, *The House Where God Lives*, 69–74.

69. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 26–29.

70. Paul's second-person singular is always used as a literary device known as “apostrophe.”

71. Charry, “Sacramental Ecclesiology,” 204.

existing practices, including initiatory rituals,⁷² communal meals,⁷³ and religious instruction,⁷⁴ would have evoked associations with ancient communal practices. Because of similarities between other communities and the church in which they were now members, converts undoubtedly understood the church in ways that corresponded to their previous experiences. Paul's task was to offer an alternative vision of community.

The earliest Jewish converts saw the parallels with the synagogue and interpreted the church accordingly. The fact that in many instances the church emerged from the synagogue indicates the abiding influence of synagogue life and worship. The reading of sacred texts in the assembly, the call for holy living, and the nature of the leadership would have led the Jewish converts to interpret their own experiences in these ways.⁷⁵ The use of the term *ekklēsia* and the sense of belonging to a worldwide movement would have been analogous to the self-understanding of the synagogue.⁷⁶ Indeed, the ethnic associations of the synagogue would have shaped the Jewish converts' understanding of membership in the church, thus creating one of the major issues for Paul's task of community formation. Paul's challenge, particularly in Galatians and Romans, is to offer an alternative understanding of community.

The term *ekklēsia*, which Paul inherited from the earliest Palestinian community, could have resonated with non-Jewish listeners, who would have understood the church as a new kind of civic gathering. E. A. Judge and others have argued that the observer would have identified Christian groups as philosophical schools.⁷⁷ The Christian apologist Justin and the pagan physician

72. For the literature on the initiatory rituals of the mysteries, see Richard S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying about the Formation of Pauline Churches?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 50–70.

73. See Wendell L. Willis, *Idol Meat at Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 68 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 7–64.

74. Loveday Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools," in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 67; Clarence E. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*, Novum Testamentum Supplement Series 81 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 335.

75. See John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 126–40; James Tunstead Burchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 277–87; Richard Ascough, "Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 234.

76. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 80.

77. Cf. E. A. Judge, "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community," in *The First Christians in the Roman World*, WUNT 2/229 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 4–15; Robert Wilken, "Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology," in *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The*

Galen both referred to the Christian movement as a school.⁷⁸ Several have observed the parallels to the Epicurean communities. Clarence E. Glad suggests that Paul's "psychagogic" practice, his style of caring for the community, has affinities with that of the Epicureans.⁷⁹ In both communities, the Pauline and the Epicurean, there is a pattern of "mutual participation by community members in exhortation, edification and correction."⁸⁰ Epicurus, like Paul, attempted to maintain unity among his scattered followers by writing letters to his friends in distant places.

Numerous types of voluntary associations provide the background for the converts' understanding of community. Some of the voluntary associations incorporated persons who shared the same craft or trade. Rituals and communal meals were common among their activities. These voluntary associations frequently functioned as burial societies.⁸¹ Pythagorean communities were characterized by a community of goods, a required daily regimen, and strict taboos on diet and clothing.⁸²

Although *thiasos* (Latin *collegium*) was the most common designation for these voluntary associations, a few inscriptions indicate that some designated themselves as *ekklēsia*.⁸³ In some instances the leadership structure involved overseers (*episkopoi*) and servants (*diakonoï*).⁸⁴ Some voluntary associations, like Paul's churches, imposed strict regulations for moral purity.⁸⁵

Paul's task was to define the community of believers in ways that did not conform to ancient concepts of community. When he converted people from different social classes and ethnic groups, he formed a community that was unparalleled in the ancient world. Thus his task was to build lasting communities, and his letters are attempts at ecclesial self-definition that challenged the common views of community.

Contemporary attempts at reimagining the church have provided the stimulus for this study, in which I bring Paul into dialogue with the current conversation. My task is to offer the theological foundation for the rediscovery of

Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity, ed. S. Benko and J. J. O'Rourke (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1971), 268–91.

78. See Wilken, "Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology," 274.

79. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus*, 8.

80. Ascough, *What Are They Saying?*, 45.

81. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 74.

82. Diogenes Laertius, *Vit.* 21.95–100. Cited in Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 83.

83. Richard S. Ascough, "Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Christian Communities: Overcoming the Objections," in *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien*, ed. Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum* 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 159.

84. *Ibid.*, 165–69.

85. *Ibid.*, 179.

the church by examining Pauline ecclesiology within the larger framework of the apostle's theology. Thus my study will not be limited to the traditional ecclesiological categories—polity, sacraments, ministry, and worship. Nor do I limit Paul's view of the church to the numerous images for the community (e.g., body, temple, bride),⁸⁶ for his ecclesiology is not limited to these traditional categories. Because Paul does not treat ecclesiology as a separate category, but integrates ecclesiological reflection into the major themes of his theology, this study will examine the significance of the major theological themes for Paul's understanding of the church. Indeed, all the letters struggle with the question of the identity of the community, which Paul cannot discuss without demonstrating the interdependence of the major themes.

In this book I explore Pauline ecclesiology in the conviction that Paul's ecclesiology, expressed to communities in a pre-Christian world, offers insights for ecclesiology in the post-Christian world. I am convinced that the voice of Paul needs to be heard in the contemporary conversation about the identity and mission of the church. While we cannot reproduce the Pauline churches in the twenty-first century, we can learn from Paul's articulation of communal identity.

In chapter 1 I will explore Paul's task of community formation in an analysis of the church of the Thessalonians, the first of Paul's churches about which we have information. In this catechetical letter, Paul shapes a corporate identity for readers who have experienced diverse types of community. He identifies gentile readers with Israel, providing a communal narrative and ethos for new converts and boundaries that will distinguish them from others in that city. He also introduces the imagery of siblings, which will become a constant feature in all his letters.

In chapter 2 I will demonstrate the role of Christology in defining Paul's communities. They are not collections of individuals who have joined together for a common cause but rather the people "in Christ" and in the body of Christ. Their identity comes not from their social contract but from their incorporation into the risen Christ. Their unity with Christ is the basis for their unity with each other. A community incorporated in Christ will share a common destiny with Christ and abolish the common distinctions between ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Although Paul says little about baptism and the Eucharist, the scattered references indicate that his churches, like other communities of believers, practice baptism as the rite of entry into the community and observe the

86. Cf. Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

Eucharist regularly. Because analogies to these practices existed among other groups, Paul's converts probably interpreted both practices in ways that were consistent with pagan rituals. In chapter 3 I will argue that Paul interprets both baptism and the Eucharist as manifestations of the believers' identity in Christ and their share in the destiny of Christ. Both practices express the solidarity of the community with Christ and with each other. Unity within the community creates boundaries from the larger society.

In chapter 4 I will argue that Paul establishes a community of memory and hope. As the community of the new creation, it looks back to its entrance into God's new world and forward to its ultimate destination. In the present, it is the community that is being transformed into the image of Christ and sanctified in anticipation of final salvation. Because Paul envisions the church in the present as the foretaste of the ultimate redemption, he challenges the church to be a counterculture wherever it exists.

In chapter 5 I will describe the communal dimension of Paul's doctrine of justification. As the scholarship of the last generation has shown, the doctrine of justification was not primarily an individual concern but a corporate matter that would redefine the nature of the community. Justification by faith was a foundation for Paul's view of the church as the community in which ethnic and social barriers are erased. His vision of a united church composed of Jews and gentiles was based on the doctrine of justification.

In chapter 6 I will explore the mission of the churches that Paul founded, recognizing the distinction between Paul's apostolic mission and the task of his churches. Paul does not commission his churches to imitate his work as missionary but to be lights in the world by demonstrating the reconciling power of the gospel. While Paul offers little social ethic or missionary mandate for his churches, he calls on them to be the community that shares in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Having demonstrated in earlier chapters that Paul's churches are full manifestations of the people of God, in chapter 7 I will explore whether the concept of the universal church is present in the undisputed letters of Paul, maintaining that, while the church is local, churches are united into the nascent universal church. Although Paul establishes local communities that are not organically connected to each other, he insists that the scattered churches encourage each other and give financial support to each other. He acknowledges the differences among churches in different locations, but he envisions mutual recognition among all of them. The collection for the saints in Jerusalem is the primary example of Paul's desire for a united church.

In chapter 8 I will focus on the legacy of Paul in the disputed letters of the Pauline corpus, observing the points of continuity and discontinuity between

the earlier and later letters. Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles reflect a later stage in ecclesiological reflection. In Colossians and Ephesians the universality of the church, a theme that is largely implicit in the undisputed Pauline letters, becomes explicit as a result of the changing situation. These letters offer the vision of a cosmic church, the true “megachurch.” The Pastoral Epistles play an important role in maintaining the Pauline legacy. Contrary to a popular view, the primary focus of the Pastoral Epistles is not the establishment of a church order but the preservation of the apostolic faith in Paul’s absence. Within each house church, leaders emerge to pass on the tradition to the next generation.

The distinctive feature of Paul’s communities is the absence of positions of power and the active participation of the whole church in building the community. In chapter 9 I will examine the leadership structures that grow out of the Christian message. Paul prepares the church to act in his absence and to continue his work in the dialectical relationship between the leaders who employ their gifts for the community and the involvement of everyone in the same tasks.

In the conclusion I will synthesize the major aspects of Pauline ecclesiology and bring them into dialogue with contemporary conversations about the nature of the church and its mission. The Pauline model does not guarantee numerical growth; however, it offers the means for the church not to mirror other communities but to challenge our understanding of the community.

❖ 1 ❖

A COMMUNITY LIKE NO OTHER

The Key Themes—from Paul’s First Letter

Most studies of Pauline ecclesiology do not begin with 1 Thessalonians, for the epistle says little or nothing about the major themes commonly associated with the topic. It does not mention the body of Christ or the sacraments, and it does not give explicit instructions about church polity.¹ Indeed, the term *ekklēsia* is used only twice (1:1; 2:14). Nevertheless, because 1 Thessalonians is probably the first record of Paul’s attempt at community formation, it provides a valuable resource for understanding Paul’s ecclesiology and the corporate identity he intended for his readers. As both a record of Paul’s original catechetical instruction and an anticipation of future correspondence, the letter introduces the basic themes of ecclesiology that Paul will develop as he encounters new questions.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH OF THE THESSALONIANS

Paul addressed his first letter to the “church of the Thessalonians in God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:1) only months after the establishment

1. Raymond Collins, “Church of the Thessalonians,” in *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians*, Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium 66 (Leuven: University Press/Peeters, 1984), 285. Abraham J. Malherbe, “God’s New Family at Thessalonica,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Studies in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and L. O. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 116.

of this community. According to the narrative in Acts, the community began when “some of them were persuaded” by Paul’s preaching in the synagogue (Acts 17:4) and joined him and Silas, while others reacted with hostility. Among the converts, Luke mentions only devout Greeks and a few leading women (Acts 17:12). Although Luke says little about the collective identity of Paul’s converts and does not describe the founding of an *ekklēsia*, he suggests their corporate identity when he recalls that “brothers” (*adelphoi*, NRSV “believers”)—presumably the new converts—helped Paul and Silas escape to Berea (Acts 17:10). Luke’s narrative suggests that the “brothers” had come from the synagogue but now were separated from it. Paul’s address to the “church of the Thessalonians” reflects his assumption that the converts understand their identity as an *ekklēsia* separate from the synagogue and other communities.

Although 1 Thessalonians depicts the converts in Thessalonica as gentiles who “turned to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9), not as former members of the synagogue (cf. Acts 17:1–4), the epistle agrees with the narrative of Acts in one important respect: the preaching of the gospel resulted in the formation of a community composed of those who responded to Paul’s preaching of Christ. They “were persuaded” by Paul’s preaching, “received the word” (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13), and “turned to God,” separating themselves from the synagogue and from the surrounding society. Paul indicates that his gospel (*euangelion*) remains the foundation of the church’s existence (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8–9; 3:2), reaffirming that “we believe that Jesus died and rose again” (1 Thess. 4:14) and “died for us” (1 Thess. 5:10). His original preaching was also an appeal to the listeners to “[turn] to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead” (1:9–10), an adaptation of synagogue missionary preaching.² Both 1 Thessalonians and the narrative of Acts indicate the divisive character of Paul’s preaching. While some received his message, hostility emerged from the populace (cf. Acts 17:5–6; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 3:2–4). Conflict between church and society existed from the beginning and also existed in the other communities that Paul planted (cf. Phil. 1:28; 1 Cor. 6:4; 2 Cor. 1:3–7).

Paul’s other letters demonstrate a similar interest in the preaching that called the community into existence. According to 1 Corinthians, Paul had preached “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2), “planted” a vineyard (3:6), laid a foundation (3:10), and “fathered” (*egennēsa*, NRSV “became your father”) the community through the gospel (4:15). He offers a different image in

2. Malherbe, “God’s New Family at Thessalonica,” 116; Franz Laub, “Paulus als Gemeindegründer (1 Thess),” in Josef Hainz, ed. *Kirche im Werden: Studien zum Thema Amt und Gemeinde im Neuen Testament—in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Collegium Biblicum München*. (Wien: Schönigh, 1976), 25.

2 Corinthians 3:2, indicating that the church is the letter that he had delivered (*diakonētheisa*, literally “ministered”). In Galatians he declares that there is no other gospel than the one that he had preached (1:6–9) and that he had originally “publicly exhibited” Christ as the crucified one (3:1). Similarly, he recalls that in the Philippians’ conversion, God “began a good work” among them (Phil. 1:6). The existence of churches, therefore, was the manifestation of God’s power in Paul’s preaching (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; Phil. 2:13; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus Paul does not speak of the conversion of individuals but speaks of the corporate response to the gospel and the beginning of the community. For Paul, to be a believer is to be in a church.³

The Holy Spirit played a decisive role in the founding of the church. It first empowered Paul’s preaching (1 Thess. 1:5; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:1–4), demonstrating that Paul did not come as an orator with words alone, but with power. As a result of the Thessalonians’ reception of that word “with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1:6 NASB), they became a model of changed lives throughout the wider region (1:6–10). The Spirit is a continuing reality empowering the community for ethical living (4:7). Paul probably does not distinguish it from “God’s word, which is also at work [*energeitai*]” among them (1 Thess. 2:13 NRSV).⁴ Thus the church is united not only by a common possession but also by the power at work in its midst.

The presence of the Spirit is a constant theme in Paul’s other letters. Believers receive the Spirit at conversion (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–13; 2 Cor. 3:1–3; Gal. 3:1–6; Rom. 5:5), and they continue to “live by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16–18; cf. Rom. 8:4), which empowers them to live the ethical life (cf. Rom. 8:1–11; Gal. 5:22–29), work miracles (1 Cor. 12:10; Gal. 3:5), speak in tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 28), and prophesy (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:1–5). The church is thus the community that lives by the power of the Spirit.

Although 1 Thessalonians says little about the demographics of the converts, it indicates that they were gentiles brought together in a community defined only by its allegiance to Christ. One may also assume that gentiles were incorporated into the community without circumcision and lived alongside Jewish converts from the synagogue. The Thessalonian church, like other Pauline churches,⁵ probably included people of means as well as those who engaged in

3. Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 559.

4. Cf. Phil. 2:13, “It is God who works [*ho energōn*] among you”; cf. also 1 Cor. 12:6, “It is the same God who activates [*ho energōn*] the gifts of the Spirit”; 12:11, “One and the same Spirit activates [*energei*] all of [the gifts]” (my translations).

5. Studies of the demographics of Pauline churches have been based primarily on the analysis of 1 Corinthians. Cf. Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 69–119; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early*

manual labor.⁶ The exhortation to “work with the hands,” which is unique to the Thessalonian letters (1 Thess. 4:11; cf. 2 Thess. 3:12), suggests that at least some depended on manual labor for their existence.⁷ Although Paul does not mention the presence of women and children, one may assume their presence in the Thessalonian community.⁸ Indeed, the household baptisms reported in both Acts (10:2; 11:14; 16:15; 18:8) and the Pauline letters (1 Cor. 1:16) suggest the presence of entire family units, including slaves (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17–24; Gal. 3:28), in Paul’s churches.⁹ Such diversity was unprecedented among ancient associations.¹⁰ It presented a potential for conflict, as Paul’s subsequent correspondence indicates. Thus communities defined only by their acceptance of Paul’s preaching included Jews and gentiles, various ethnic groups, the rich and the poor, free people and slaves, and men and women in the close proximity of the house church (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–28; 7:17–24).¹¹

Christianity (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 29–59; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 51–71. Georg Schöllgen (“Was wissen wir über die Sozialstruktur der paulinischen Gemeinden?” *New Testament Studies* 34 [1988]: 71–82) has shown that one cannot generalize about the demographics of all of Paul’s churches. See also Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 168–69.

6. Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 103; Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 133, 151. See also Richard Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*, WUNT 2/161 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 162–90. Ascough’s argument that the Thessalonian church was composed of manual laborers (174) rests exclusively on the advice in 4:11, which is probably traditional paraenetic instruction, as the context in 4:9–10 suggests.

7. See the discussion in Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 165–76. Ascough argues that the Thessalonians were composed only of manual laborers who shared the same trade as Paul. The fact that Paul sent aid from Philippi to Macedonia (Phil. 4:16) suggests that the Thessalonians were poor. Ascough’s evidence that the entire church is poor is not conclusive.

8. Ascough (“The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 [2000]: 187) argues that “there are some indications in 1 Thessalonians that the community was composed primarily of men.” This conclusion is drawn from the fact that Paul (a) addresses the community as *adelphoi*, (b) does not mention women or children, and (c) addresses only men in 1 Thess. 4:4. See also Lone Fatum, “Brotherhood in Christ: A Gender Hermeneutical Reading of 1 Thessalonians,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 183–97. This conclusion is unwarranted, however. Paul rarely mentions women and children specifically in the letters, although their presence is assumed.

9. Peter Pilhofer (“Περὶ δὲ τῆς φιλαδελφίας . . . [1 Thess 4:9]: Ekklesiologische Überlegungen zu einem Proprium früher christlicher Gemeinden,” in *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt: Greifswalder Aufsätze 1996–2001*, WUNT 2/145 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 216) observes that it would have been inconceivable to join ancient associations with one’s slaves.

10. *Ibid.*

11. John M. G. Barclay (“Thessalonica and Corinth: Social Contrasts in Pauline Christianity,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47 [1992]: 49–74) has shown the limitations of assuming that the numerous churches established by Paul were identical in composition or in the issues that emerged among them. However, his attempt to distinguish between the Thessalonian

ESTABLISHING CORPORATE IDENTITY: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Paul's task is unprecedented in antiquity. The creation of a corporate identity for converts whose only common interest was the conviction that Jesus suffered, died, and was raised from the dead (cf. 1 Thess. 4:14) separated the believers from the communities from which they had come—the family, the clan, the tribe, the civic assembly (*ekklēsia*)—and brought them together with those whom they did not choose. This new community came together in a house church, which played a major role in shaping its identity as a household.¹² In his catechetical instruction to new converts, Paul established the corporate identity of his converts. The consistent use of the second-person plural indicates that Paul speaks not to individuals but to the entire community.

Our message of the gospel came to you . . . and you became imitators of us and of the Lord, . . . so that you became an example. . . . For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you. (1:5–8)

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. (2:13)

As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you . . . we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. (2:17)

As his use of the “you” plural indicates, Paul writes to communities, creating a collective identity. In the present they suffer together (3:2–3) and encourage one another (4:13; 5:11) in the context of various trials. Because Paul is anxious about their endurance, he sends Timothy to encourage their faithfulness (3:2, 6). He prays that the community will be sanctified at the parousia (3:13). They are his “joy” and “crown” (2:19). Thus he envisions a community that

and Corinthian congregations rests on the limited evidence of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians, both of which were written to answer specific questions. For example, Barclay's argument that the two communities experienced different relations with outsiders (hostility from outsiders in 1 Thessalonians, peaceful relations in 1 Corinthians) cannot be determined from the text. As 2 Cor. 1:3–7 indicates, Paul assumes that the community in Corinth shares with others in suffering.

12. See below on the church as family. On the relationship between the household setting and Paul's ecclesiology, see Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 75–77. See also Malherbe, “God's New Family at Thessalonica,” 116; Karl Olav Sandnes, *A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994), 93–111; Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 153; Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 33–42.

is on a corporate journey that began with conversion and will end at the parousia. From the beginning, allegiance to Christ involved participation in the community.

The formation of the community involves the resocializing of the converts by providing them with a new self-designation, a demarcation between insiders and outsiders,¹³ a social dialect that would distinguish them from other groups, and a new way of life.¹⁴ The frequency of the meetings of the community undoubtedly played a role in the resocialization process. Paul's instruction that the letter be read to the whole community (1 Thess. 5:27) is probably his expectation for all his letters. The meetings provided the members an opportunity to "encourage one another and build one another up" (4:18; cf. 5:11) and to admonish others (5:14). This identity is a major dimension in Paul's ecclesiology. His designation for the community is a window into his ecclesiology.

The new social dialect of the Thessalonians expressed the continuity of this gentile community with Israel as the people of God. Indeed, they stand in solidarity with Jewish believers in Judea who have suffered at the hands of "the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets" (1 Thess. 2:14–15). Thus Paul affirms that his converts belong to Israel. Indeed, the foundational image for the church in 1 Thessalonians is that of the people of God, as Paul's distinctive vocabulary indicates.

Ekklēsia

Paul addresses the community as the "church (*ekklēsia*) of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," using a variant of his address to the other communities he had founded. Indeed, he writes also to the *ekklēsia* in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1), to the *ekklēsiai* of Galatia (Gal. 1:2), and to the *ekklēsia* in Philemon's house (Philem. 2). These designations reflect the

13. Paul contrasts the believers with "outsiders" (1 Thess. 4:12; cf. 1 Cor. 5:12–13), "others" (1 Thess. 4:13; 5:6), and the "children of darkness" (1 Thess. 5:5; cf. Phil. 2:15). In 1 Corinthians he contrasts believers with unbelievers (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12; 10:27; 14:22–23), and "us who are being saved" with "those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). See James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 46.

14. Paul Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11–12. The insider vocabulary that Paul mentions in 1 Thessalonians includes Greek terms that take on new meanings within the community. These include *euangelion* ("good news," 1:5; 2:2, 9), *logos* ("word," 1:6, 8; 2:13), *eklogē* ("election," 1:5), and *pistis* ("faith," 3:2, 6). Elsewhere he refers to his *kērygma* ("proclamation," 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:4). This new dialect is central to their self-understanding as a community. See also Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 59–62.

collective identity of his converts, which Paul inculcated while he was present with them. The fact that Paul writes to churches rather than to individuals also indicates the communal nature of his pastoral work.

Any Greek-speaking audience would have been familiar with the term *ekklēsia*, which could be used for any assembly (cf. Acts 19:32) and was widely used for the assembly of the free men entitled to vote (cf. Acts 19:39).¹⁵ The popular assembly (*ekklēsia tou dēmou*) was an essential part of the Greek system of governance.¹⁶ Having at least some features in common with the Pauline *ekklēsia*, it was a place for instruction and reasoned discourse as well as the location where factions developed.¹⁷ Indeed, the “church of the Thessalonians” would have been one of numerous communities in the city. The other communities included various voluntary associations, mystery cults, and philosophical or rhetorical schools as well as the Jewish synagogue.¹⁸ None of these groups, however, identified themselves as an *ekklēsia* of God or as “holy ones.”¹⁹

The designation of the community as “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” distinguishes the readers from the political assembly and the other assemblies and associations in Thessalonica, including the local synagogue.²⁰ The unusual partitive genitive (“of the Thessalonians”) also distinguishes the community from the surrounding populace, signifying that they are a gathering “from among the Thessalonians.”²¹ In contrast to his customary practice, Paul focuses on the community rather than the location.²² This designation is parallel to Paul’s

15. J. Roloff, “ἐκκλησία,” *EDNT* 2:411. See also Küng, *The Church*, 81.

16. Raymond F. Collins, *The Many Faces of the Church: A Study in New Testament Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 1. On the view that Paul’s use of *ekklēsia* is derived from Greek political discourse, see George H. Van Kooten, “Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ: The ‘Church of God’ and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησία) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Response to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley,” *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 522–48. Van Kooten maintains that Paul deliberately uses *ekklēsia* to contrast the communities of Christ believers with political assemblies and to claim that his converts formed an alternative society (532). For an extensive analysis of the Greek *ekklēsia*, see Klaus Berger, “Volksversammlung und Gemeinde Gottes: Zu den Anfängen der christlichen Verwendung von ‘Ekklesia,’” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 73 (1976): 167–207.

17. Van Kooten, “Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ,” 540–46.

18. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 71–84.

19. *Ibid.*, 79.

20. Collins, *Many Faces of the Church*, 2. For the view that Paul is contrasting the “church of the Thessalonians in God the Father” from a community gathered in the name of Roman leaders, see Karl P. Donfried, “The Assembly of the Thessalonians: Reflections on the Ecclesiology of the Earliest Christian Letter,” in *Ekklesiologie des Neuen Testaments, für Karl Kertelge*, ed. Rainer Kampling and Thomas Söding (Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 393.

21. Collins, *Many Faces of the Church*, 2. See also “churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:4).

22. Malherbe, “God’s New Family at Thessalonica,” 119.

more customary usage, “the churches of God . . . in Judea” (2:14), which also have an identity separate from the synagogue. Unlike the other groups in Thessalonica, they are “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus, among other communities, only they have been established and exist in God.²³ They express their collective identity in their rituals and their distinctive pattern of life (cf. 4:1–5:10).

Pauline usage maintained the connotation of an assembly, for he assumes that the readers will hear his words as they are gathered for worship (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27). Indeed, he employs *ekklēsia* elsewhere to describe the occasion when the whole community gathers together (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28, 34–35).²⁴ However, in most instances Paul employs the word for the community itself, assuming that the assembly is a distinguishing characteristic of its existence.²⁵ His use of the plural “churches” (Rom. 16:4, 16; 1 Cor. 11:16; 14:33; 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1, 18; 1 Thess. 2:14) and the numerous references to the church in someone’s house (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Philem. 2; cf. Col. 4:15) indicate that the self-designation of each of the local communities was an *ekklēsia*, a local manifestation of the one *ekklēsia* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9). As both Acts and the letters agree, “the church of the Thessalonians” is one of numerous *ekklēsiai* founded by Paul, who maintains the designation *ekklēsia* consistently throughout his correspondence.²⁶

Paul’s consistent use of the terminology of “the church(es) of God” (*ekklēsia[i] theou*) further distinguishes the local communities from other *ekklēsiai*.²⁷ Paul employs a phrase that is an appropriate translation of the Hebrew *qahal ’el* (cf. Deut. 23:2, 4; 1 Chron. 28:8; Neh. 13:1), a term used for Israel in the Old Testament. *Qahal* can refer either to an assembly that

23. Ibid.

24. Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 131.

25. Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 329. Traugott Holtz (*Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 13, 3rd ed. [Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998], 38) suggests that *ekklēsia* portrays the community as a public assembly in contrast to the mysteries. Peter Pilhofer (“Die Ökonomische Attraktivität christlicher Gemeinden der Frühzeit,” in *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt*, WUNT 2/145 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 207) indicates that the frequency of the meetings distinguished Paul’s converts from religious cults and other associations. Lohfink (*Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu*, 266) indicates that the word *ekklēsia* indicates the public character of the community: “The church is not an esoteric circle, nor a group of friends.”

26. Only Titus and 2 Timothy do not contain the word.

27. The full form *ekklēsia theou* appears also in 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13. It appears in abbreviated form in twenty-five instances in the singular. The plural abbreviated form appears in 1 Cor. 7:17; 14:33–34; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor. 11:28. See Wolfgang Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes: Zur Grundlegung der Ekklesiologie bei Paulus*, WUNT 2/85 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 112.

has been called together for a special purpose²⁸ or to the congregation as an organized body.²⁹ The LXX translators rendered *qahal* into the Greek *ekklēsia* 73 times out of 123 occurrences of the term, while the remaining passages employ *synagōgē*.³⁰ *Qahal 'el*, however, is rendered only once as *ekklēsia theou* (Neh. 13:1); it is most frequently rendered in the LXX as *ekklēsia kyriou* or as *synagōgē kyriou*. Indeed, *synagōgē* is used more frequently than *ekklēsia* in the LXX for the people of God.³¹ Consequently, several scholars have argued that *ekklēsia theou* is not taken from the LXX but is a translation of *qahal 'el*, which is frequently in apocalyptic literature for the “assembly of God.”³² This phrase was frequently used in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other apocalyptic literature for the eschatological people of God.³³ Indeed, the reference to the *ekklēsia kyriou* in Deuteronomy 23:2–4 plays an important role in Second Temple Judaism as a *terminus technicus* for the true Israel as the *qahal 'el*.³⁴ According to 1 QSa 2:4, for example, “No man smitten with any human uncleanness shall enter the assembly of God; no man smitten with any of them shall be confirmed in his office in the congregation.”³⁵ Thus *qahal 'el* became a term in the Second Temple period for the true Israel.³⁶ This designation indicates that Paul taught the Thessalonians that they were the eschatological people of God, the renewed community anticipated by the prophets.³⁷

Although *ekklēsia theou* is unique to Paul in the New Testament, his designation of the community as *ekklēsia* is shared by some other New Testament writers. The word is the common designation for the community in

28. It is used for evil counsel (Gen. 49:6), civil affairs (1 Kings 12:3; Prov. 5:14; 26:28; Job 30:28), war or invasion (Num. 22:4; Judg. 20:2; 21:8; 1 Sam. 17:47; Ezek. 16:49; 38:7), and the company of returning exiles (Jer. 31:8).

29. It is used of Israel as a congregation or organized body (Lev. 16:17, 33; Num. 16:3; 20:4; Deut. 2–4, 9; Neh. 13:1), for the restored Israel (Ezra 10:12, 14; Neh. 8:17), for a company of angels (Ps. 89:6), and for an assembled multitude (Gen. 28:3; 35:11; 48:4; Num. 22:4). F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 874.

30. Paul Trebilco, “Why Did the Early Christians Call Themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?,” *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011): 446.

31. Roloff, “ἐκκλησία,” 2.411.

32. Donfried, “Assembly of the Thessalonians,” 404. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes*, 211n2.

33. Roloff, “ἐκκλησία,” 2.411.

34. See Andrie Du Toit, “Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul’s Theology,” *New Testament Studies* 55 (2009): 135.

35. Translation in Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 2004), 161. Cited in Donfried, “Assembly of the Thessalonians,” 404.

36. Walter Klaiber, *Rechtfertigung und Gemeinde: Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Kirchenverständnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 17; Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes*, 126–27.

37. Lohfink, *Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu*, 269.

Acts,³⁸ 3 John (6, 9–10), and Revelation (1:4, 20; 2:1, 7–8, 11–12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Among the Gospels, only Matthew employs the term as the designation for the community formed by Jesus (16:18). This evidence suggests that, while Jesus formed a community to live under God’s reign, *ekklēsia* is the term first used by the post-Easter church to designate the followers of Jesus. Paul probably inherited the term from his Greek-speaking predecessors in Jerusalem who used it to distinguish themselves from other Jewish groups and to claim that they were the eschatological people of God.³⁹ Thus the church’s exclusive use of *ekklēsia* is noteworthy, for it differentiated the community from the empirical synagogue and expressed its conviction that it was the eschatological people of God.⁴⁰ Although *synagōgē* is frequently used synonymously for *ekklēsia* in the LXX, those who believed in Christ avoided the former term because it already designated Jewish communities.⁴¹ Indeed, what distinguishes this community from the synagogue is that it exists “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” As the people who will be saved from God’s wrath (1 Thess. 1:10), the *ekklēsia* of God does not share the destiny of those among the *Ioudaioi* who forbid the gentile mission, for the wrath of God has come upon the latter (2:16).

The twofold reference to “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” anticipates the inseparability of the Father and Son throughout 1 Thessalonians. The community has “turned to God from idols” and awaits the return of the “Son from heaven” (1:9–10). The word about Christ is nothing less than the “gospel of God” (2:2, 9). Paul prays that God will reunite him with the Thessalonians and that the Lord will multiply their love for one another (3:11–13). The “churches of God . . . in Judea” are “in Christ” (2:14). Thus the eschatological people of God are those who are “in Christ,” believing that Jesus died and arose (4:14), and they await his return (1:10; 4:13–18).

“In God” (*en theō*) is unusual for Paul and may be analogous to “in Christ” (*en christō*, cf. 4:16; cf. 2:14; 5:18) and “in the Holy Spirit” (*en pneumati hagiō*, 1:5; cf. Rom. 8:9).⁴² Malherbe suggests that *en* is used in an instrumental sense to mean “the assembly of the Thessalonians brought into being by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴³ However, the instrumental and incorporative uses of *en* are not always distinguishable.⁴⁴ Parallel phrases in 1 Thes-

38. Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3–4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 19:32; 20:17, 28.

39. Lohfink, *Gegen die Verharmlosung Jesu*, 268.

40. Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 328.

41. Trebilco, “Why Did the Early Christians?,” 451–58.

42. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 99.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Donfried, “Assembly of the Thessalonians,” 400.

salonians indicate that the familiar “in Christ” has more than an instrumental significance. Paul’s goal is that they “stand firm in the Lord” (3:8) in the midst of persecution. To stand “in the Lord” is also to be “imitators . . . of the Lord” in affliction, like Paul (1:6) and the believers in Judea (2:14). Paul also speaks of “the dead in Christ” (4:16), who will be gathered with those who are alive at his return and join them in the air (4:17). “In Christ,” therefore, suggests a relationship with Christ that began with conversion (1:5) and extends to the eschaton (4:13–18).⁴⁵ In the present the community joins Paul and others in imitating the afflictions of Christ (cf. 1:6; 2:1–2, 14–16), but it anticipates the time when it will be with Christ at the parousia. Both the faithful ones who have died and those who remain will be “with the Lord forever” (4:17; cf. “with him,” 4:14). Thus Paul anticipates the idea of the communion of the saints, which will be later articulated in the Apostles’ Creed.

Believers remain “in Christ” under all circumstances because the word that was preached is at work (*energeitai*) among them (2:13). This divine energy is the equivalent of the power (*dynamis*) that was present in the first preaching of the gospel (1:5). One may compare Paul’s use of *energein* elsewhere to describe the divine work among the believers. God works among believers (Phil. 2:13, literally “among you”) through the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:6; Gal. 3:5). Thus the community is unlike all other communities, for it exists “in God” and “in Christ,” just as God lives in the community through the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 4:8).

The designation of the community as *ekklēsia* suggests that Paul affirms the continuity of the church with Israel. Along with his predecessors in Jerusalem, he found in the term an appropriate designation for the community because the main alternative term, *synagogē*, was the common term for the remaining Jewish community.⁴⁶ Those who believed in Christ could employ the term without suggesting that they no longer belonged to the synagogue.⁴⁷ Gentile converts were no longer among the *ethnē* but were now incorporated into Israel.⁴⁸ What distinguished this *ekklēsia* from others was its incorporation into Jesus Christ.

The Believers

Paul employs other terms to differentiate the *ekklēsia* of the Thessalonians from other communities. Those who responded to the preaching of the good

45. Ibid. For further discussion of “in Christ,” see chap. 2 below.

46. Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity*, 206.

47. Ibid.

48. Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes*, 154.

news are the “believers” (*pisteuontes*, 1:7; 2:10), a term that Paul uses frequently in his letters. While the noun *pistis* and the verb *pisteuō* would have been known to a Greek audience, Paul employs the words with a significance that would have been unusual in the larger culture. He speaks the language of the Septuagint, which employs *pist-* with an object for those who place their trust in God (Gen. 15:6; Prov. 30:1; Isa. 28:16) or the law (Sir. 32:24). In a few instances, *pist-* is used without an object for “the faithful” (cf. Ps. 100:6; Wis. 3:9; 1 En. 108:13). Thus, like *ekklēsia*, the designation of “believers” was a part of the vocabulary of Judaism. In using the language without elaboration in 1 Thessalonians, Paul assumes that the term is the shorthand expression of the readers’ collective identity.⁴⁹

Although Paul speaks of the believers without specifying the object, his usage of *pistis* in the letter indicates the wider scope of this shorthand expression. Like the Israelites, the Thessalonians believe in God (1:8) but also “believe that Jesus died and rose again” (4:14), a conviction that separates them from the synagogue. This word anticipates Paul’s later use of the term for those who share in the christological confession: those who “believe in [their] heart that God raised [Jesus] from the dead . . . will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). As Paul indicates elsewhere, believing is the appropriate response to the proclamation of Christ, and it is the continuing response of the community (cf. 1 Thess. 3:2, 6). Thus the present participle *pisteuontes* suggests that ongoing faith is a distinguishing feature of Pauline communities.⁵⁰

Just as “the believers” is a badge of identity for the Thessalonians, it also signifies the boundary separating the community from the rest of society. At the beginning the believers “received the word” in spite of persecution (1:6), which has continued (3:2–3) as a result of their conversion. Paul distinguishes the believers from “the Gentiles who do not know God” (4:5), “the others” (4:13), and from “outsiders” (4:12).

In subsequent letters, the designation of believer serves as a means both of establishing boundaries from the world and of indicating the social inclusion within the community. In 1 Corinthians Paul distinguishes regularly between the believers and the unbelievers, indicating that the world is divided between those who believe and those who do not (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21; 14:22; cf. 2 Cor. 6:15). However, the saving events are for “everyone who has faith/all who believe” (Rom. 1:16; 3:22; cf. Gal. 3:26). The community is thus defined by faithfulness rather than ethnic identity (cf. Rom. 10:4; 10:9, 14).

49. See Collins, “Church of the Thessalonians,” 295: “It is not the believing individuals as such who are cited as examples for the believers of the Grecian provinces, rather it is the belief of the church as such which is exemplary.”

50. Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity*, 74.

As the other New Testament witnesses indicate, the designation of the community as “the believers” did not begin with Paul. Its prominence in all four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline letters, Hebrews, and 1 Peter indicates that the terminology was a self-designation in the earliest church. While forms of *pist-* appear in the LXX, the word group has a prominence in the New Testament that is unmatched in Jewish literature. Trebilco makes the plausible suggestion that the special place of this word in the new vocabulary goes back to Jesus.⁵¹

The Elect

Just as *ekklēsia* is a term that places this gentile community within the story of Israel, other words that Paul employs identify the community with Israel. When he describes their conversion as their election (*eklogē*, NRSV “[God] has chosen you,” 1 Thess. 1:4),⁵² he employs a term that was fundamental to Israel’s identity.⁵³ The election tradition is one of the great symbols of Israelite faith, as the use of *eklegein* and *eklektos* indicates. The Deuteronomist repeatedly recalls that God chose Israel, “the fewest of all peoples” (Deut. 7:7). God demonstrates the selection of Israel in the saving events that called it into existence (4:37) and in the covenant with succeeding generations (7:7–11). Indeed, the refrain throughout Deuteronomy is the description of Israel as the people whom God chose (12:5, 11, 18, 21; 16:6, 7, 11, 15, 16; 17:8, 10, 15) in separating Israel “out of all the peoples” (14:2).

Election is especially important in the exilic literature. The prophet promises the exiles that God “will again choose Israel” (Isa. 14:1). Second Isaiah repeatedly addresses the exiles as the people whom God has chosen, using forms of *eklegein* (Isa. 41:8–9; 43:10; 44:1–2; 49:7). Despite the humiliation that the exiles have suffered, they remain God’s elect (*eklektos*, NRSV “chosen,” Isa. 42:1; 43:20; 45:4; 65:9). In the apocalyptic literature the term refers to the eschatological people of God (1 En. 62:2; T. Mos. 10:10).⁵⁴

The echo of Israel’s election tradition is also evident in the identification of the community as “beloved by God” (1 Thess. 1:4), a phrase that is unusual in the New Testament but is characteristic of the election tradition. According to Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites, “Because [God] loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them” (Deut. 4:37). God chose Israel, not because they were more numerous than the other nations, but because he

51. Ibid., 119–20.

52. *Eklogē*, used also in Acts 9:15; Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28, does not appear in the LXX, which expresses the concept of election with *eklegein* and *eklektos*.

53. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 259–68. Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 78.

54. J. Eckert, “ἐκλεκτός,” *EDNT* 1:417.

loved them (Deut. 7:7–8). God “set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples” (Deut. 10:15). Second Chronicles 20:7 indicates the importance of the designation of Israel as God’s beloved. Jehoshaphat stands in the assembly (*ekklēsia*) and recalls that God gave the land to the descendants of Abraham, “God’s beloved” (NRSV “friend”).⁵⁵ Thus, in addressing the Thessalonians as “beloved by God,” Paul equates them with the people of Israel.⁵⁶

The Calling

In 1 Thessalonians, as in the Old Testament and later Jewish literature, the theme of God’s election is inseparable from God’s calling. The community has come into existence not by its own choice but because of God’s call, which determines the lives of the people both in the present and in the future. Paul speaks once in the aorist tense to remind the readers that they were called (4:7) and twice in the present tense to describe God as the one who calls (2:12; 5:24). The two tenses reflect the dynamics of Paul’s ecclesiology of God’s calling. He reminds his readers of “God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (2:12). God called them to a life of holiness (4:7). God is “the one who calls you” (5:24).

The twofold use of the present participle, “the one who calls you” (*ho kalōn hymas*, 2:12; 5:24), is both an epithet for God and a description of the origin of the church’s existence. Paul employs this epithet in eschatological contexts to reaffirm the ultimate destiny of the community. According to 2:12, God calls the community “into his own kingdom and glory.” That is, the church that is saved from the coming wrath (1:10) looks forward to God’s “kingdom and glory.” The kingdom, the dominant theme in the synoptic accounts of the message of Jesus, is employed only rarely by Paul, for whom the word applies to the final triumph of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24–25) at the parousia.⁵⁷ It forms a hendiadys with “glory” (*doxa*), which Paul also employs for the final triumph of God (cf. Rom. 5:2; 8:18). The coming of Christ at the parousia will usher in the kingdom of God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:21–24). God’s kingdom and glory are the ultimate destiny for believers who are found “blameless” (3:13; 5:23) at the parousia of Christ (cf. 3:13; 4:15; 4:23). As Paul says in later epistles, only those who avoid the vices listed in his catechetical instructions will “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:21; cf. Eph. 5:5). Consequently, Paul distinguishes sharply between those who are called into

55. Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes*, 127.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Collins, “Church of the Thessalonians,” 290.

God's kingdom and "others" (*loiipoi*) who have no hope (4:13; cf. 5:6). Thus the final destiny of Israel in God's kingdom (cf. Dan. 2:44) is the destiny of the gentile church.

While God's kingdom and glory are the church's future destiny, the community has experienced only persecution (*thlipsis*) since its founding (1:6; 3:3–4, 7). Undoubtedly, conversion to Paul's gospel resulted in the hostility from family members and neighbors in Thessalonica. Consequently, the believers have imitated Paul in his own suffering (1:6; 2:2). Recognizing the challenge that persecution presents to the faith of his converts, Paul sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians not to be "shaken by these persecutions" (3:3). He adds, "You yourselves know that this is what we are destined for" (3:3). In fact, during his initial visit he had "kept on telling" (cf. *proelegomen*) them that they would suffer.⁵⁸ Thus persecution is the prelude to the community's entrance into God's kingdom and glory.

The persecutions suffered by the church belong to the believers' ecclesiological identity, as Paul will explain in subsequent letters (see chaps. 3–5). His statement that "we are destined [*keimetha*] for this" suggests that he envisions the community's suffering within the context of their incorporation into Israel's story. *Keimai* suggests a destiny determined by God (cf. Luke 2:34; Phil. 1:16). In apocalyptic literature, *thlipsis* is the prelude to the final eschatological victory (Dan. 12:1; Hab. 3:16; Zeph. 1:15).⁵⁹ This apocalyptic understanding is reflected in the encouragement offered to new churches in Acts, according to which "it is through many persecutions (*thlipseōn*) that we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). As an eschatological community, the Thessalonian church shares the destiny of Israel as it endures sufferings in anticipation of the kingdom of God.

As Paul indicates elsewhere, the kingdom becomes a reality in the final triumph of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24, 50), the place that the righteous enter (1 Cor. 6:19; Gal. 5:21; cf. Eph. 5:5) at the end. Paul uses the term rarely but speaks more frequently of the return of Christ. The election of the community in 1 Thessalonians is a call into the kingdom (2:12). Unlike the rest of society, the church waits for the Lord (4:13). Paul repeatedly describes the church as the waiting community (cf. 1:9–10; 3:18; 4:13–18; 5:23). God has destined the community not only to experience persecution (3:2–3) but also "for obtaining salvation" (5:9). The eschatological future is the motivation for the church's ethical conduct in the present (3:13; 5:1–11) and the source of their mutual

58. For the translation, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 194.

59. J. Kremer, "Thlipsis," *EDNT* 2:152.

encouragement (4:18; 5:11).⁶⁰ Unlike others, the Thessalonians were able to comfort other believers because they believed in God's eschatological purpose for them.⁶¹

Paul speaks of the kingdom primarily in paraenetic texts, indicating that entrance into the future kingdom requires appropriate moral conduct in the present. Thus the reference to the kingdom in 2:13 appears in a passage that recalls Paul's original catechetical instruction for communal moral norms. He had encouraged and urged and appealed to the Thessalonians to "lead a life worthy of God, who calls [the community] into his own kingdom and glory" (2:12). To "walk" (*peripatein*) recalls the term for ethical behavior in ancient Israel. To walk "worthily" is to live in such a way that the future kingdom impinges on the present.⁶² Paul prays that the church will be sanctified at the coming of Christ (3:13) and reminds the Thessalonians that their conversion was the occasion when God called them (4:7) to holiness. Similarly, the gnomic statement that "the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17) suggests that the future kingdom determines conduct in the present.

The Holy Ones

Election is a call to holiness (4:3, 7). Although Paul does not address the community as saints (*hagioi*),⁶³ as in the other letters (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2), holiness is a major theme. The repeated use of *hag-* indicates that holiness (*hagiasmos*) is a central focus of the letter. Indeed, the entire ethical section is framed by a reference to the community's holiness (4:3; 5:23).⁶⁴ Paul introduces the ethical section with the prayer that God will strengthen the hearts of the community "in holiness" (*hagiōsynē*) so that they may be blameless at the return of Christ (3:13) and concludes it with the benediction, "May the God of peace himself sanctify [*hagiasai*] you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:23). The ethical section of

60. See Collins, "Church of the Thessalonians," 291.

61. Malherbe, "God's New Family at Thessalonica," 123.

62. Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 92.

63. In the only reference to the *hagioi* in 1 Thessalonians, Paul refers to heavenly beings. On angels as heavenly beings, cf. Ps. 89:6, 8; Job 15:15; Dan. 4:10=4:17 LXX; cf. also 1 En. 1:9; 12:2; 14:23; 20:1-7; 1 QH 3:22; 10:35; 1 QM 10:11. *Hagios* is used elsewhere as an adjective in reference to the Holy Spirit (1:5-6; 4:8) and holy kiss (5:26).

64. Maren Bohlen, *Sanctorum Communio: Die Christen als "Heilige" bei Paulus*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 183 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 115.

the letter (4:1–5:23) is a description of the holiness (cf. *hagiasmos* in 4:3, 7) to which God has called the community. Paul’s prayer for the holiness of the community at the end time indicates the corporate nature of holiness. Paul envisions a final status for the corporate community and anticipates ultimate redemption only for the elect and holy (4:13; cf. 3:13); others “have no hope” (4:13). Holiness involves drawing sharp boundaries between the community and the surrounding society.

Paul uses the root word *hag-* in more than one dimension in 1 Thessalonians. In the prayers in 3:13 and 5:23, the word stands for the final status of believers, who have not yet reached that goal.⁶⁵ Paul uses the word in a similar way near the end of Romans, declaring that his ambition is to do priestly service to God in presenting the gentiles “sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:16). In the meantime, holiness defines the practice of believers in the present, presenting sharp alternatives between modes of existence. The Thessalonians have been called to sanctification (*hagiasmos*) rather than uncleanness (*akatharsia*, 4:7). Sanctification becomes a reality in their avoidance of fornication and the sexual practices of the gentiles (4:3–5).

As with the other designations for the community in 1 Thessalonians, the focus on holiness identifies the church with Israel, whom God called to be holy (Lev. 19:2).⁶⁶ Indeed, the sexual ethics of 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 and the call for brotherly love (4:9–12) are indebted to the holiness code (Lev. 17–26). This description of the members of the community as the saints is derived not only from the holiness code but also from apocalyptic literature, in which the eschatological people of God are the “holy ones.”⁶⁷

Paul instructs the community to have shared moral norms that are consistent with holiness (cf. 4:3–7) and not to behave “like the Gentiles” (4:5). While he divides the world between insiders and outsiders, the community does not live in total isolation; nor is its moral conduct totally countercultural, for he advises the believers to behave “respectably” (*euschēmōnōs*) toward outsiders.

The designations for the church in 1 Thessalonians are indebted to the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic literature. Thus, although Paul does not describe the church as the new Israel, he addresses the church with terms that

65. Eckart David Schmidt, *Heilig ins Eschaton: Heiligung und Heiligkeit als eschatologische Konzeption im 1. Thessalonicherbrief*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 167 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 337, suggests that in 1 Thessalonians Paul avoids referring to the believers as saints (*hagioi*) because he consistently indicates that sanctification remains incomplete until the end.

66. See Andy Johnson, “The Sanctification of the Imagination in 1 Thessalonians,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 276–78.

67. Klaiber, *Rechtfertigung und Gemeinde*, 22–23.

would have been largely unintelligible to the gentile audience but were familiar designations for Israel. He resocializes the converts by identifying them with the eschatological people of God.

The Church as the People of God in the Other Letters

The identification of the *ekklēsia* as the chosen and the called characterizes Paul's view of the church in the other letters. Paul regularly describes the conversion of his readers as their calling. Just as Paul is an apostle only by God's calling (cf. *klētos*, Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:15), the community owes its existence not to its own choice but to the calling of God (Rom. 1:6; 8:28; 1 Cor. 1:9, 26; 7:15; Gal. 1:6; 5:13), who has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). Paul applies the ancient theme of God's election of Israel, an insignificant people by the world's standards (Deut. 7:7–11), to the gentile converts. As a consequence of God's choice, he describes the gentile communities of Galatia as "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). Those who believe in Christ are the legitimate descendants of Abraham (3:7–29).

Paul develops the theme of election in Romans, as he addresses gentile converts whom he includes as the descendants of Abraham (Rom. 4:1–25; cf. Gal. 3:6–29). These gentile converts are "called" (Rom. 8:28, 30) and "elect" (8:33). This claim raises the questions that Paul seeks to answer in Romans 9–11: If the gentile churches are God's elect, what is the status of the physical descendants of Abraham? Has God's original election been nullified (9:6, 14)? Paul appeals to the election tradition to answer the question, maintaining that the presence of gentiles is evidence not of divine injustice (9:14) but of God's consistency in working out the divine purpose through election (9:11). The children of the promise rather than the physical descendants are the heirs of Abraham (9:8). The claim of Scripture that through Isaac their descendants will be named (literally "called," 9:7) applies to the gentiles. One is not saved by works but by the divine call (9:12). Indeed, Paul appeals to a classic election text (Hosea 2:23) to claim that God has called not only Jews but gentiles also: "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved'" (Rom. 9:25).

Although God has called both Jews and gentiles, a remnant of the Jews remains, and they are called by election (Rom. 11:7). The remainder of Romans 11 is an affirmation that the situation that now prevails is not permanent, for ultimately Israel will be saved (11:26), and God will be merciful on them as he has been on the gentiles. Indeed, according to Romans 9–11, God works out the divine plan through election and has now called gentiles in the same way that he once called the Jews. These same themes persist in the disputed

letters (cf. Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1) and among other New Testament writers.⁶⁸

Holiness is also a consistent theme throughout Paul's letters. Paul describes holiness as a condition that has been attained at conversion. The perfect participle in 1 Corinthians 1:2 (*hēgiasmenos*) indicates a status that the Corinthians have already attained. Similarly, Paul urges the Corinthians to abstain from the sexual vices of Corinthian society because they have been sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11). In Romans Paul urges those who are "called to be saints" (1:7) to choose between two alternatives. Whereas they once presented their members as slaves of uncleanness to lawlessness, their task is now to present their members as slaves of righteousness for sanctification (6:19). Indeed, Paul suggests that they have already been freed from sin; they now bear fruit for sanctification (6:22). In each instance, sanctification is the term for the new status of believers and their radical separation from their past. This separation also implies separation from the surrounding culture.

As the alternative to sanctification, the image of uncleanness (Rom. 1:24; 6:19; 1 Thess. 4:7) provides further insight into the nature of holiness. Paul employs the imagery to indicate the radical separation of insiders and outsiders.⁶⁹ He describes the community as the temple of God, Israel's holiest place (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). According to 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1, the presence of God in the temple is the basis for the community to "come out from them" and touch nothing unclean (6:17). As a result, Paul urges the readers, "Let us cleanse ourselves [*katharisōmen heautous*] from every defilement of body and of spirit" (7:1).

Just as God called Israel to be a holy people (Lev. 19:2; Deut. 7:6), God also calls the church to holiness. Thus the use of forms of *hag-* are also rooted in Israel's self-understanding and are closely related to the concept of election. According to Deuteronomy 7:6, Israel is "holy to the Lord," for God has chosen Israel from all the nations of the earth. At the gathering at Sinai, God declares, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). In the holiness code (Lev. 17–26), the laws articulate all that is involved in being a holy people (Lev. 19:2). Elsewhere, the *hagioi* is used as a substantive to describe either the angels (cf. Job 15:15; Dan. 4:14; 7:27; Zech. 14:5) or the faithful people of God (Ps. 73:3 LXX; 82:4–5 LXX). The word is used with special frequency in *1 Enoch* and in the Dead Sea Scrolls for the eschatological people of God.⁷⁰

68. See James 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:4, 9; 2 Pet. 1:10; 2 John 1; Rev. 17:14.

69. Bohlen, *Sanctorum Communio*, 129.

70. Cf. *1 En.* 43:4; 51:2; 100:5; 1 QM 10:9–11. See Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity*, 122–28.

Hagioi, like the other designations for the community, identifies the gentile community with Israel. Paul’s consistent use of the plural *hagioi* indicates that he includes all believers rather than a select few.⁷¹ In some instances he addresses his letters to the “saints” (*hagioi*) rather than to the *ekklēsia* (cf. Rom. 1:7; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1), while in other instances he employs forms of both words (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). “Holy ones” (*hagioi*) is apparently a synonym for *ekklēsia* and a significant aspect of the election tradition. Paul describes the gentile readers in Romans and 1 Corinthians as “called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2). The holy ones have been called (Rom. 8:30; 9:12, 24; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:15, 17, 21; Gal. 1:6) and chosen (Rom. 8:33; 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Cor. 1:27).

The remarkable feature of Paul’s doctrine of election is that he regularly employs the categories of election and holiness to describe gentile communities, using the same categories that functioned to separate Israel from the nations. In order to protect Israel’s identity, writers of the Second Temple period appealed to the election traditions to ensure Israel’s separation from the peoples. According to Nehemiah, the returned exiles reconstituted the community, appealing to Deuteronomy 23:1–2: “It was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God” (Neh. 13:1). Paul engages in a remarkable tour de force when he employs the language of election to gentile churches to distinguish them from others—including the “Judeans” (NRSV “Jews”) who persecute the followers of Christ among them (1 Thess. 2:14–15). For Paul, however, the foreigners constituted the renewed people of God.

This vocabulary would have been scarcely intelligible to the gentile audience. The churches founded by Paul lived in continuity with ancient Israel. Community formation thus involved the establishment of a new identity. Paul’s gentile converts have been incorporated into Israel’s identity. By resocializing the community with categories drawn from Scripture, Paul indicates that the church is nothing new but has deep roots in Israel’s story. To be God’s *ekklēsia* is to be called and loved by God and separated from the peoples.

Children of Light

Paul’s description of the Thessalonian community as “children of light and children of the day” (1 Thess. 5:5) also echoes the election traditions of Israel. In Jewish literature the designation of Israel as “sons” or “children” is common. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the image of sonship is used to describe

71. Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity*, 128.

both the “sons of light” (1 QS 1:9; 2:16; 3:13, 24–25; 1 QM 1:3, 9, 11, 13) and the “sons of darkness” (1 QS 1:10; 1 QM 1:17, 10, 16; 17:8; 1 QH 6:29).⁷² As in Jewish literature, Paul uses the term to establish boundaries between the community and the rest of the world, who live in darkness (1 Thess. 5:4–6).

The Family of God

Paul develops the imagery of the family in distinctive ways. The description of believers as “children [literally “sons”] of light” and “children of the day” suggests that they are God’s children.⁷³ Paul develops the image of the family in a variety of ways, although he never speaks of the church as a family. God is the Father (1:1) and Jesus is his Son (1:10). Paul uses the language of the family to describe his relationship to them. When he was with them, he was gentle, “like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (2:7).⁷⁴ In this role he shared not only the gospel but his very self, because the Thessalonians were “beloved” (2:8–9; *agapētoi*, NRSV “very dear”). He was also like a father instructing the children about proper behavior (2:11–12). When he was absent from them, he was “orphaned” (*aporphanisthentes*), longing to see their face (2:17). As a parent he regards them as his glory and joy (2:20).

The *ekklēsia* in Christ, unlike the synagogue, is not an *ethnos*,⁷⁵ a nation in the conventional sense, but an assembly of people from diverse backgrounds. The persecution (*thlipsis*, 1:6; 3:3) that accompanied their conversion undoubtedly involved the loss of family relationships.⁷⁶ Consequently, Paul discovers in family life the most appropriate image to describe a community composed of those who were alienated from their closest relatives. While this image is known in Greek and Jewish communities for those who are not physical relatives,⁷⁷ its

72. Eduard Schweizer, “*υἱός*,” *TDNT* 8:359.

73. Reidar Aasgaard, “My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!” *Christian Siblingship in Paul*, JSNT-Sup 265 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 121.

74. On the rendering of *trophos* as “wet nurse,” see Malherbe, “God’s New Family at Thessalonica,” 121.

75. See my *Moral Formation according to Paul*, 56.

76. See Sandnes, *New Family*, 21–31. The story *Joseph and Aseneth* describes the alienation from families that new converts to Judaism faced. Aseneth cries out, “All people have come to hate me, and on top of those my father and mother, because I, too, have come to hate their gods and have destroyed them. . . . Therefore my father and mother and my whole family have come to hate me and said, ‘Aseneth is not our daughter’” (11:4; translation by C. Burchard in *OTP*). See also Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 34–52; Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes*, 82–83.

77. See Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity*, 16–18, for the use of “brother” at Qumran and in other ancient religious communities. Cf. 1 QS 6:10, 22. For *adelphos* as a designation for fellow Israelites, see Ps. 22:23, where “your brothers” is identical with *qahal*,

frequency is remarkable in the Pauline letters.⁷⁸ It has an especially significant place in 1 Thessalonians.

The most common use of the image is the identification of believers as siblings to Paul and to each other. Indeed, Paul addresses the readers as *adelphoi* thirteen times—the highest frequency of the word in all his letters.⁷⁹ He describes various believers as brothers (cf. 3:2; 4:6), and he extends that term to include believers in Macedonia (4:10). As a comprehensive term for the members of the community, *adelphoi* includes not only the men but also the women and children.⁸⁰ The family image for a community composed of people from different ethnic groups and social strata was unparalleled in antiquity.

The image of the family shapes the behavior of the community and determines their relationships with each other. Paul's instructions are largely about the treatment of siblings, the avoidance of familiar sibling quarrels, and the appropriation of family responsibilities. Indeed, Paul's frequent use of "one another" reflects the family relationship and the solidarity of the community.⁸¹ Paul prays that the Thessalonians "will abound in love for one another and for all," just as he abounds in love for them (3:12); he has taught them the value of "love of the brothers and sisters" (*philadelphia*, literally "brotherly love")—that they should "love one another" (4:9) as well as the siblings in Macedonia. He challenges the readers to "encourage one another" (4:18; 5:11), to "build up each other" (5:11), and to seek the good of one another (5:15). The reciprocal pronoun "one another" (*allēlous*) suggests two dimensions of communal identity that shape the moral conduct of the readers. In the first place, it suggests that believers care for "one another" without regard for social position. In the second place, the term indicates the equal status of all members within the group.⁸² The term indicates the community's primary

the cultic community. The frequency of *adelphos* in early Christian communities distinguishes it from the ancient associations, in which the word was rare. See Eva Ebel, *Die Attraktivität früher christlicher Gemeinden: Die Gemeinde von Korinth im Spiegel griechisch-römischer Vereine*, WUNT 2/178 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 211; Klaiber, *Rechtfertigung und Gemeinde*, 25.

78. Reidar Aasgaard, "'Role Ethics' in Paul: The Significance of the Sibling Role for Paul's Ethical Thinking," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 516.

79. Malherbe, "God's Family at Thessalonica," 122.

80. Pilhofer, "Περὶ δὲ τῆς φιλαδελφίας," 149. In letters where Paul specifically mentions women of the congregation, he also addresses the whole church as *adelphoi* (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10–11, 26; 5:11; 7:12–14; Phil. 4:1–2).

81. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 57.

82. Michael Wolter, "Die ethische Identität christlicher Gemeinden in neutestamentlicher Zeit," in *Woran orientiert sich Ethik*, ed. Wilfried Härle and Reiner Preul, Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie 13 (Marburg: Elwert, 2001), 86.

focus on the care for siblings in the new family rather than the care for others outside the group.⁸³

Like the terminology of election and holiness, the sibling image distinguishes members of the family from “outsiders” (4:9–12) and “others” (4:13). While Paul does not limit loving action to insiders (cf. 3:12), his primary concern is the care for the siblings. Within the intimacy of the community, he instructs men not to wrong a brother by making advances toward his wife (4:6). The Thessalonians’ task is to honor those who lead (5:12–13), be at peace within the community (5:13), encourage the fainthearted (5:14), and help the weak. All of these were the responsibilities of family members toward each other in antiquity. Those who had formerly been strangers to each other have now transcended the barriers of class and ethnicity to take on a common identity as family.⁸⁴

As in ancient Israel, the community’s identity also determines its ethical norms. Its sexual conduct reflects both its call to be a holy people (4:3, 7; cf. Lev. 18–19) and the sibling relationship of the members, as Paul indicates in the instruction not to defraud a brother in sexual matters (4:6). Throughout the epistle, moral conduct is an expression of the relationship among siblings. “What they are (i.e., siblings) has consequences for how they are (their ethical praxis).”⁸⁵ The task of the siblings was to maintain the family honor, to “behave properly toward outsiders” (4:12).⁸⁶ Indeed, Paul’s frequent use of “one another” reflects the family relationship and the solidarity of the community.⁸⁷ As siblings, they practice “brotherly love” (*philadelphia*), a word that was used in antiquity for love within a natural family, because they have been taught to “love one another” (4:9).

The image of family also shapes the emergence of leadership and polity in the Thessalonian church. The epistle never refers to priests, elders, pastors, or any other title to designate recognized leaders.⁸⁸ The community does not come together in a hierarchical relationship, for the familial relationship creates the members’ reciprocal care for each other.

While Paul employs a variety of images for the church, the image of the family is predominant throughout his correspondence. He addresses the readers

83. Cf. Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 13. “Their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws” (trans. A. M. Harmon, LCL).

84. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 56; Aasgaard, “*Beloved Brothers and Sisters*,” 307.

85. Klaus Schäfer, *Gemeinde als “Bruderschaft”: Ein Beitrag zum Kirchenverständnis des Paulus*, Europäische Hochschulschriften (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 25.

86. Thompson, *Moral Formation*, 57.

87. Schäfer, *Gemeinde als “Bruderschaft*,” 27.

88. See chap. 8.

as *adelphoi* in all the letters, refers to individuals as *adelphos* (cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; 2:13; 8:18, 22; Phil. 2:25), and assumes that his readers will regard each other as *adelphoi*. Thus his instructions commonly presuppose the family relationship. A brother should not stand in judgment against a brother (Rom. 14:10), despise him (14:11), or place a stumbling block in his path (15:13, 15; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11–13). Because family relationships establish boundaries from others, siblings should not take members of the family to court before unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:1–11). Nor should siblings be guilty of jealousy, strife, or quarreling (cf. Gal. 5:19–21).⁸⁹

The image of the family is not only Paul's predominant designation for the church; it is also the predominant image for the church in the New Testament. In Acts, the image is sometimes used as a designation for the people of Israel (2:29, 37; 3:17, 22; 7:2, 13, 23, 25–26, 37; 13:15, 26, 38; 15:7), but it is also used to distinguish those Christ believers from the “unbelieving Jews” (14:2; 16:2, 40; 17:6, 10, 14; 18:18, 27; 21:7, 17, 20; 28:14–15). The author of Hebrews addresses his readers as “holy brothers and sisters” (3:1) and describes Jesus as one who was “like his brothers and sisters in every respect” (2:17). He addresses the social alienation of his people, recalling previous acts of compassion for each other (6:9–10; 10:32–34) that were normally the tasks of the family. James uses *adelphos* nineteen times to describe both his relationship to his readers⁹⁰ and his readers' relationships as siblings who care for each other in times of need (cf. 2:14–26) and do not speak evil of each other (5:7–9). Although 1 Peter uses *adelphos* only once (5:12), the family imagery is pervasive, for the community belongs to a “family of believers” (*adelphotēs*, 2:17; 5:9; cf. 4:17), and they assume the family responsibility of caring for one another in the context of hostility from outside (1:22–25). The image is also common in the Johannine letters (cf. 1 John 2:9–11; 3:10–16; 4:20; 3 John 3, 5, 10) and in Revelation (12:10; 19:10).

While the household setting of early Christianity influenced the community's self-understanding as family, this image precedes the Christian movement. The address to Jewish listeners in Acts as *adelphoi* (cf. Acts 2:29, 37; 7:2) probably reflects common usage. Jesus's use of kinship language to describe the disciples (cf. Mark 3:31–35; 10:29–30) refines the term by suggesting kinship based on loyalty to him and the kingdom. This family relationship did not include all Israel but included only those who followed Jesus.⁹¹

89. On these vices as common hindrances to family life, see Philip Francis Esler, “Family Imagery and Christian Identity in Galatians 5:13 to 6:10,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 134–38.

90. He uses the vocative *adelphoi* fifteen times.

91. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 39–44.

FIRST THESSALONIANS AS A WINDOW TO PAUL'S ECCLESIOLOGY

As Paul's first letter to a community that he founded, 1 Thessalonians offers an important window into his ecclesiology. Inasmuch as this letter repeats the catechesis that Paul offered to these new converts, it reflects the self-understanding that he gave to converts who had abandoned the previous sources of identity. Paul offers a coherent vision of the church that will distinguish it from all other *ekklēsiai* in Thessalonica. These gentile converts do not comprise a new community but now belong to the people of God whose roots lie in ancient Israel. Inasmuch as Paul maintains this image throughout his correspondence, it is his most foundational metaphor for the church. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, Paul transforms the image with his Christology. Indeed, his correspondence consistently demonstrates the significance of Christ for the church's identity as the people of God. Gentile converts are the children of Abraham (Rom. 4:3–22; Gal. 3:7–9, 26) and the descendants of Isaac (Rom. 9:6–13; Gal. 4:21–31) and of the ancestors in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:1–11). They are the children of the promise to ancient Israel and the people in whom the new covenant promised by Jeremiah (31:31–34) has become a reality (2 Cor. 3:6). This gentile community is the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), in contrast to the “Israel according to the flesh” (1 Cor. 10:18; NRSV “people of Israel”).

As the *ekklēsia* of the Thessalonians, the believers are not only a local community. They also belong to a larger movement that includes “the churches of God . . . in Judea” (1 Thess. 2:14) as well as *ekklēsiai* of God in many other cities. Their roots in Israel are so deep that they now regard outsiders as gentiles (4:5). Paul has taught them to identify themselves as the elect, the holy, the believers, and as brothers and sisters—terms that are borrowed from Israel's Scripture and Jewish tradition.

God has chosen (1:6) a people rather than isolated individuals. Consequently, the church that exists because of God's sovereign choice is neither the result of a social contract between persons nor the result of consumer choice. It is composed of those who have responded to the divine initiative, receiving the word (1:6) and being incorporated into the community through faith. Because God is the one who chooses a people, the church is composed not of those whom we have chosen but of all who believe.

While they designate themselves with the categories from Scripture, the converts are not, like Israel, an *ethnos* but a community united only by their reception of the gospel that Paul preached. Faith that Jesus died and arose (4:14) unites them and separates them from the synagogue and from the rest of society, drawing hostility from family and friends. In place of the alienation

from their own families, Paul brings them together as a family. As a diverse community united only by the reception of the message and a common conviction, they are unparalleled in antiquity.

Paul's attempt at community formation leaves numerous unanswered questions that will emerge in future correspondence. If gentiles have been incorporated into Israel, what is the status of what Paul will later call Israel "according to the flesh" (*kata sarka*, Rom. 9:3)? Can gentile converts who have not been circumcised and do not observe the food laws actually sit at the table with Jewish Christ believers? Who are the children of Abraham? In Galatians, Paul will develop the family imagery further, arguing that those who believe in Jesus Christ are the real children of Abraham and God's heirs (Gal. 3:7–4:6) and that the truth of the gospel requires Jewish and gentile believers to sit down at the same table. In 1 Corinthians, Paul will confront the issue of whether the rich and the poor can come together at the same table with mutual respect. The major task of Paul's letters is to define the nature of the community of believers in response to those who attempt to maintain old models of community. Paul has only introduced a sketch in 1 Thessalonians that he will fill out as he encounters new questions.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY FORMATION THEN AND NOW

Paul's attempt at community formation in a pagan culture provides insights for the church in a post-Christian culture. Paul knows nothing of the individual Christian, for people respond to the gospel by living in communities. As people united by the confession of the death and resurrection of Christ (1 Thess. 4:14), the church is unlike other communities, which are defined by ethnicity, gender, social status, and the personal choice of the members. If the church lives by its confession, it will discover, with the Thessalonians, that the majority culture is likely to reject it and to respond with disdain or hostility. If we are disturbed that the Christian faith has lost its privileged place in Western society, the Thessalonian church is a reminder that the first communities had no expectation of public acceptance. From the beginning, the church has lived in tension with its culture because it was brought together by beliefs that most people do not accept. The task of the Christian community is to be faithful under difficult circumstances and to define itself by its basic confession rather than by the standards common to other communities.

Like all communities, the church is united by a shared narrative.⁹² A faithful

92. See Grenz, "Ecclesiology," 255: "The role of a group as a community of reference is connected to its ability to forge a link to both the past and the future." He adds, "A community has

community acknowledges that its confession of Jesus Christ is part of a long narrative of Israel's story and recognizes its indebtedness to Israel. It retells Israel's story, speaks the dialect that it has learned from Israel's Scripture, and makes moral choices based on that narrative. Indeed, the end of the narrative (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11) determines the common life of the community in the present. The community does not exist by consumer choice; rather, it has been chosen by God and lives among others who were also chosen to live out that narrative. Thus this shared narrative establishes the solidarity of the members with each other. As participants in Israel's story, the church is destined for both suffering (3:2–3) and ultimate vindication (4:13–5:11). Its ultimate goal is to be sanctified in Christ (3:13; 5:23).

A church that participates in the ancient narrative of Israel will resist becoming a consumer commodity that exists to meet popular demand. As a participant in Israel's story, the church experiences exile and restoration, disappointment and hope. Its task is to be faithful under all circumstances, even when it appears not to be successful. Adoption into ancient Israel brings believers together from all cultures into a common inheritance.⁹³ With its roots in ancient Israel, the church does not identify itself with popular ideology, the national interest, or political causes, for the confession that brought it into existence transcends other loyalties.

Commitment to the Christian confession creates boundaries between the church and the dominant culture. A community defined by its belief that Jesus rose from the dead and will return (1 Thess. 4:13–18) is a community of hope, in contrast to the majority culture (cf. 4:13). The hope for God's coming kingdom provides the basis for ethical seriousness (cf. 5:1–11) to live "worthy of God, who calls [the community] into his own kingdom and glory" (2:12). Thus the community's cohesion is evident in its moral behavior. It rejects the majority culture's view of sexuality and lives in holiness. It practices self-giving on behalf of both believers and nonbelievers. The members participate in building up the community.

We know nothing about Paul's expectations for the growth of these communities. Paul's catechesis is aimed at ensuring that the members live "worthily of God" by accepting the behavioral norms that define this community. Indeed, Paul's praise of their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thess. 1:3) reflects his goal for the church. Paul

a history; in fact, it is, in an important sense, constituted by that history, a history that begins in the past and extends into the future." On the role of memory in establishing community, see Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 53–71.

93. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1023–24.

assumes that their transformed lives will make an impression on the rest of society (cf. 4:12).

The faithfulness of the community requires the cohesion and solidarity of members who did not choose each other. The church is not only the place where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered, but it is also a holy people who live in continuity with ancient Israel. It is also a family in which the members encourage one another, support the weakest among them, and continue to recall the confession that brought them into existence. Life in this community requires the intimacy of brotherhood and mutual support among people who were formerly isolated from each other by the barriers of social class and ethnicity. Thus both the “church of the Thessalonians” and the church at any other location is God’s creation, a community unlike other communities.