

THE PHYSICAL SETTING OF HOUSE CHURCHES

Gregory Linton, Ph.D.
Professor of New Testament
Johnson University
Knoxville, TN

Recent research into the nature of house churches in the NT era has revealed the physical setting and social customs that influenced their meetings. These studies have suggested the kinds of places where Christians met and what they did when they met together. Research on the physical setting of early Christian gatherings has highlighted the central role that meals played in house-church meetings. The residential facilities in which Christians met were well-suited for the preparation and administration of banquets. The popular practice of sharing meals with one's neighbors and associates was continued by Christians who emphasized the spiritual significance of breaking bread together. To reveal the nature of early Christian gatherings, this lecture will first summarize the evidence for their residential setting and then describe the role of the meal in Christian fellowship.

Types of Residential Dwellings

Richard Krautheimer offered a four-stage chronology of Christian meeting places, which has proven to be influential.¹ From AD 50 to 150, Christians gathered in domestic residences called *house churches*. About this period, Peter Lampe emphatically states that "there was no community-owned real estate in the first two centuries. . . . The worship took place in private dwellings, in the homes of Christians who had room to assemble a house community."² Around AD 150, believers began to modify house churches to provide larger meeting spaces. Krautheimer uses the phrase *domus ecclesiae*, a phrase which first appeared in a Greek form in Eusebius of Caesarea c. A.D. 313-39.³ He proposes translating this phrase as "community

center” or “meeting house,” but literally it means “house of the church.” From AD 250 to 313, Christians in some regions began using large rectangular halls for their meeting places. L. Michael White uses the term *aula ecclesiae* (“hall of the church”) for these structures.⁴ After AD 313, Constantine began building large monumental structures that followed the pattern of the *basilica*, which was a large, public structure in Roman cities.

The boundaries between these four stages are not fixed. For example, house churches probably existed during all four stages. Krautheimer notes that “houses, legally or practically in private hands, were used for services even in the early fourth century in North Africa.”⁵ White also observes that “the archaeological evidence indicates that *domus ecclesiae* and *aula ecclesiae* forms continued well after that point when basilicas had supposedly become the norm.”⁶ The dates offered by Krautheimer mark the approximate beginning of new types of Christian meeting places.⁷ In this lecture, we will focus on the first period of house churches and examine theories about the types of places where early churches met.

Since the earliest Christians did not modify the houses where they met, archaeologists cannot determine whether a structure provided a meeting place of Christians. Michael White notes: “There can be no archaeological evidence for the earliest household meetings (the house church proper). By definition, then, there was no architectural adaptation and, consequently, nothing distinctively Christian about the physical setting.”⁸ However, archaeologists have identified the remains of residences that may suggest the types of places where Christians met.

In the previous lecture, I briefly discussed some evidence for residences in first-century Jerusalem, so now I want to focus on the types of dwellings that Paul’s churches may have used. In the Roman Empire, people lived in three different types of dwellings: *insula*, *domus*, and *villa*. In addition, some people lived in rooms above their workshops. The actual layout of each type of

dwelling could vary due to factors such as the amount of space, the shape of the ground, the climate, the date of building, and the personal tastes of the owner. However, each type possesses some common features.

Insula

The term *insula* (“island”) refers to an apartment or tenement complex that housed numerous families. Often, they consisted of four or five floors built around a central courtyard. Although many *insulae* were poorly constructed and provided housing for lower-income families, some were large and stoutly built, providing housing for higher-income families.⁹ The lower floors contained larger apartments for upper- or middle-class renters, and the upper floors contained small cubicles of about 10 square meters (108 square feet) that housed slaves and freedmen.¹⁰

If Christians met in *insulae*, they could have met in the workshop areas on the ground floor, in one of the single-room or two-room apartments on the upper floors, in one of the larger apartments on the lower floors, or in the courtyard area. Because such spaces would have been accessible and visible to others, Paul Trebilco speculates that this is why, in 1 Cor 14:23-25, Paul refers to outsiders or unbelievers overhearing the worshipers speaking in tongues and thinking they were out of their mind.¹¹

Several scholars have criticized other historians who assume that Christians met primarily in larger single-dwelling homes. For example, Robert Jewett has emphasized that the majority of Christians likely met in tenements in the poorer parts of cities like Rome. He argues that the two sets of five names listed in Rom 16:14, 15 are slave names; therefore, those believers likely gathered in tenements rather than in detached dwellings. Jewett prefers to call these gatherings “tenement churches” rather than “house churches.”¹²

Likewise, Edward Adams published a major work this year in which he argues that the early Christians may have met in a variety of places other than houses, including workshops, barns, warehouses, hotels and inns, rented dining rooms, bathhouses, gardens, watersides, urban open spaces, and burial sites.¹³ Some of these suggestions are more plausible than others, but, as we discussed in the last lecture, our most explicit evidence suggests that they met primarily in residential dwellings.

Jewett and Adams have proposed meeting places other than houses because only a small percentage of people in the Roman Empire lived in free-standing dwellings. Recent research has emphasized that 80 to 90 percent of the population lived at or just above subsistence level.¹⁴ According to White, “the more lavish homes at Rome, which took up to 33 percent of the residential space, housed only a small portion of the total population of the city; probably no more than 3 percent, and that includes extended families and household slaves. The rest of the population was crowded into the huge insulae or tenements.”¹⁵ The Roman historian Beryl Rawson also argues that few Romans lived in a *domus* with an *atrium*: “I envisage the great majority of the population . . . living in small, cramped apartments which had little space for more than the conjugal family and a small number of slaves.”¹⁶ Since property ownership was beyond the reach of the masses, many early churches may have met in small groups in tight little apartments.¹⁷ Acts 20:7-12, for example, suggests that the Christians in Troas met in a third-story apartment.

Jewett's theory is also supported by Peter Lampe, who has shown that Christians in Rome lived primarily in the slum neighborhoods. They lived primarily in Trastevere and along the Via Appia from the Porta Capena to the Almone River. These densely populated, moist lowlands were two of the poorest neighborhoods in ancient Rome. They likely contained numerous *insulae*

and comparatively few houses.¹⁸ Because Roman Christians were poor, their dwellings were probably smaller, which would have increased the number of house-church communities in the city. According to Lampe, the large number of house churches in the city contributed to the "fractionated" nature of Christianity in the city.¹⁹

Carolyn Osiek and David Balch disagreed with Jewett's theory of "tenement churches." In their view, "the atrium-house is surely not the exclusive but is the primary setting for Pauline *ekklēsiai*, which did not meet primarily in apartment buildings."²⁰ They argued that no archaeological evidence reveals the presence of *insulae* in pre-Neronian Rome, its port Ostia, or anywhere else. They note that the apartment buildings discovered at Ostia are dated to the Trajanic period or later, a half-century after Paul. Even these dwellings were condominiums inhabited by wealthy people. One complex in Pompeii, the Sarno Bath complex, was built earlier than Paul, but its inhabitants were wealthy.²¹

A. J. Brothers countered this assessment of Osiek and Balch: "It is quite clear that apartment blocks (*insulae*) existed in Rome itself earlier than at Herculaneum or at Ostia." He points to references to multistory buildings in Livy and Vitruvius. He also describes the physical remains of *insulae* in the heart of ancient Rome near the Church of St. Maria in Ara Coeli.²² Ian M. Barton also noted that Cicero referred to such structures as *insulae* when he was writing in the 40s BC about an incident that took place half a century earlier.²³

Osiek and Balch contradict their own argument by citing literary references in Strabo, Seneca, Martial, and Juvenal that support the presence of *insulae* in pre-Neronian Rome. They conclude from this evidence: "The archaeological remains we have from the mid-first century, in Pompeii and Herculaneum, are for condominiums for the wealthy, while the literary evidence points to the poor living in the third to fifth floors of the tall, narrow Roman apartment

buildings.”²⁴ The lack of archaeological evidence for low-rent, multifamily housing is not surprising since archaeologists have not focused on excavating residential remains. Instead, archaeologists tend to excavate public, monumental buildings. Also, these structures were not made to last. Perhaps many of them were destroyed and built over.

Later in their discussion, Osiek and Balch seem to recognize the likely presence of *insulae* in larger cities: “The vast majority of people, perhaps as many as 90 percent in larger cities, lived in the much more constricted quarters of the insula or in apartments of one or two rooms crowded above or behind shops.”²⁵ In a later writing, Balch admitted that he wrote incorrectly that no archaeological evidence supported the existence of apartment buildings in the first century.²⁶ Jewett therefore seems justified in arguing that many gatherings of Christians were actually tenement churches rather than house churches.

Domus

The second type of dwelling was the *domus*, which consisted of a suite of rooms grouped around an *atrium*.²⁷ The atrium was a rectangular room with an opening in the roof called a *compluvium*. These dwellings had just a few small windows in their outside walls. This construction made them quiet, cool, and less vulnerable to burglary.²⁸ People entered the atrium from the street by a narrow passage called a *fauces*, which means “throat.” An elaborate and imposing door enclosed this passage. On either side of the *fauces* were small rooms that were sometimes converted into shops that faced the street. These shops were called *tabernae*.

The atrium usually had a marble basin, called an *impluvium*, situated under the opening in the roof. The *compluvium* sloped inward to channel rain into the *impluvium*. The atrium was surrounded by various rooms such as the *tablinum* along the rear wall, the *cubicula* (bedrooms), and *alae*, whose purpose is not known.

Some Roman houses added a peristyle to the back of the house. The peristyle was a small garden enclosed by a colonnade on three or four sides. It was a typical component of Greek or Middle Eastern dwellings that Romans adopted for their houses. A hallway positioned to one side of the *tablinum*, called an *andron*, provided convenient access to the peristyle. The peristyle was lighter, more open, and more informal than the atrium. Therefore, inhabitants perhaps used the peristyle more frequently during the warmer months.²⁹

Additional rooms, including the private living quarters of the family, surrounded the peristyle. A dining room located next to the peristyle was called a *triclinium*. According to Dennis E. Smith, “Dining rooms tended to be constructed to allow for five, seven, nine, or eleven couches in an intimate arrangement. Although larger banquet rooms have been found, they tend to be designed in such a way that dining couches could be arranged in clusters of small groups.”³⁰ A house could contain multiple triclinia, which would be used during different seasons. An elaborately decorated room next to the peristyle, called an *oecus*, served as a reception hall for dining.

Osiek and Balch note an interesting feature of atrium-houses. They were designed to be open to the public. The Romans conducted their business at home.³¹ Therefore, the entry to the house, which was designed to impress the guest, was left open to the street. Passersby could see right through the house. They could see through the atrium to the *tablinum* “where the owner was displayed as if upon a stage.” They suggest that the Romans “wanted the relationships and activity in their houses to be a microcosm of the city, with influence running from inside the house out into the forum, temple, and comitium.”³² The authors note that “the lack of privacy in Roman houses and society would drive most modern people insane.”³³

Villa

The third type of residence was the villa, an estate consisting of a house, grounds, and auxiliary buildings. If they were available to early Christians, villas provided larger, more convenient spaces in which to meet. An example of a Roman villa has been excavated at Anaploga near Corinth. It covers 175 square meters (1,884 square feet) and has a mosaic floor that was laid around A.D. 75-100. The mosaic floor was 49 square meters (527 square feet). It probably served as a *triclinium*. The *atrium*, which included an *impluvium*, covered an area of about 30 square meters (323 square feet). The villa was destroyed around A.D. 350.³⁴

Although Jerome Murphy-O'Connor assumes that such facilities were available to early Christians, Jewett has convincingly argued that the possibility seems remote.³⁵ White states that "it is now believed that it was highly unlikely that Christians assembled in any regular fashion in the atrium of a large Campanian style villa."³⁶

If Christians met in a *domus* or villa, they most likely convened in the dining room of the house, which in some cases opened onto a peristyle or *atrium*. The dining room could be the largest and most suitable area in the house for a gathering of people. These meetings may have been similar to the dinner parties that were so popular with Greeks and Romans. During the course of their "agapē meals" or "love-feasts" (Jude 12), they would observe the Lord's Supper. After the meal, they gathered in the *atrium* or peristyle for worship, prayer, and teaching.

Reasons for Meeting in Homes

Brad Blue suggests four reasons why Christians met in houses. First, they were readily available for use. Second, they were relatively inconspicuous, a feature that was necessary during times of persecution. Third, they followed the pattern of Jews who also assembled in homes for their synagogue meetings. Fourth, houses had facilities for preparing, serving, and eating the

Lord's Supper and fellowship meal.³⁷ An additional benefit of meeting in houses is that they contained water facilities where Christians could baptize converts. Also, meeting in homes promoted close interpersonal relationships because of the intimate family atmosphere. The house setting is consistent with the family metaphors used for the church 271 times in the NT: the household of God, brothers, children of God, etc. (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:5-7; 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 3:14-15; 5:1; 6:23).³⁸

Meals in House Churches

In the Greco-Roman world, meals were an important part of society. These meetings may have been similar to the dinner parties that were so popular with Greeks and Romans. Smith has shown that sharing meals together was a central activity of various social groups in the Greco-Roman world: “When any group of people in the ancient Mediterranean world met for social or religious purposes, their gatherings tended to be centered on a common meal or banquet.”³⁹ Examples of such meals include the Greek *symposium*, the Roman *convivium*, philosophical banquets, dinners for clubs and associations, funerary banquets, sacrificial meals, mystery meals, and Jewish festival meals. Meals were often followed by drinking, entertainment, and discussion.⁴⁰

The NT evidence indicates that Christians met together in order to eat a meal.⁴¹ From the very beginning as we saw in Acts 2:46, a shared meal was a central aspect of their meetings. Acts 20:7 indicates that the Christians in Troas gathered on the first day of the week to break bread. In 1 Cor 11:17-21, Paul uses the phrases “when you come together” and “when you come together as a church” to describe their gathering to eat the Lord’s Supper. Dennis Smith concludes from this evidence that “we should imagine Christian meetings taking place at table most if not all of the time.” In fact, he argues that the entire worship service of the Christians

took place in the dining room. The repetition of the phrase “when you come together” in 1 Corinthians 14:26 supports this assertion.⁴²

Smith has also shown that formal meals in the Greco-Roman world shared a similar form and structure regardless of the setting.⁴³ Both Greek and Roman meals consisted of two main parts: the evening meal and the “drinking party,” which was called the *symposium* by Greeks and *convivium* or “second tables” by the Romans. The second part included dessert, serious drinking, and entertainment. Meals could also begin with an appetizer course. The transition from the first part to the second part was marked by a ritual libation, sipping from a common cup, and removal of the tables. Also, a “paean” was often sung at that time.⁴⁴

The Tannaitic literature, written from the third to seventh centuries but reflecting traditions that may go back to the first century, describe a similar structure of Jewish meals. The meal began in the anteroom with each person saying a benediction over the wine as the cup was passed. Then they shared in the appetizer course after which they moved to the dining room, where they reclined for the main course. After the meal, they offered another benediction over the wine and then shared in the dessert course.⁴⁵

Smith also argues that these ancient meals shared a common “social code.”⁴⁶ They were imbued with the same significance regardless of the setting. First, table fellowship defined the boundaries of the social group. Second, “the act of dining together is considered to create a bond between the diners.” Third, “sharing a meal also created a sense of ethical obligation of the diners toward one another.” Fourth, the customs of reclining and ranking places at table formally recognized and acknowledged the social status of the participants. Fifth, participants in a meal shared equally in the meal, a factor that tended to break down social barriers. Sixth, meals were occasions for festive joy and good cheer. Seventh, meals always contained some form of

entertainment.

Meals in Christian settings would have special significance for the worshipers. Such meals recalled Jesus' customary practice of sharing meals with his disciples and others (Mark 2:15-17; 6:35-44; 14:3-9; Luke 5:29-33; 7:36-50; 11:37-52; 14:1-14; 22:7-23; John 12:1-8). They also provided a foretaste of the coming kingdom, which Jesus described as a banquet (Matt 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-48; 13:22-30; 14:15-24; 15:11-31; 17:7-10; cf. Rev 19:9, 17). Perhaps, they also reminded the disciples of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances during meals (Mark 16:4; Luke 24:13-35; 24:36-49; John 21:9-14).

First Corinthians 11:17-34 describes the Lord's Supper as consisting of eating a full meal and not just nibbling bits of bread and sipping juice from a cup. Twice the word *deipnon* ("feast, banquet") is used to describe the meal. This term refers to the main meal of the day in contrast to *ariston*, which describes a meal taken earlier in the day, and it can even mean "feast" when it refers to a formal meal with guests.⁴⁷ Smith supports this definition: "By far the most important meal of the day was the *deipnon*, now translated 'dinner' or 'supper,' which, when it was extended into a significant social event to which guests would be invited, became what we call a 'banquet.'"⁴⁸ This meal might begin in the afternoon and continue for three hours or more.⁴⁹ Robert Banks says that the term "tells us that it was not a token meal (as it has become since) or part of a meal (as it is sometimes envisaged), but an entire, ordinary meal. The term indicates that this is the main (normally evening) meal, the one to which guests were invited."⁵⁰

The Lord's Supper was also called the *agapē* ("love-feast") in Christian literature. Jude 12 uses the plural form to refer to the "love-feasts" of the believers. The activity that took place during these meetings is described by the verb *suneuōcheomai* ("feast together").⁵¹ Jewett has argued that the word *agapē* in Rom 13:8-10 actually refers to love-feasts instead of to "love" in

general.⁵² Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35-107) also used *agapē* for Christian common meals (*Smyrn.* 6:2; 7:1; 8:2). Relying on this type of evidence, Bo Reicke has demonstrated that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of a common meal through the fourth century.⁵³

According to Jewett, 2 Thess 3:10 indicates that the church in Thessalonica shared a common meal. Some believers refused to work, so Paul instructs the community to prevent them from eating. Jewett concludes from this admonition: "*The sanction must be enforceable for the regulation to be effective.* This means that the community must have had jurisdiction over the regular eating of its members, which would only have been possible if the community was participating in a common meal on an ongoing basis" [his emphasis].⁵⁴ Jewett also highlights evidence in the letter that the Christians contributed their fair share to this common meal instead of relying on a wealthy patron to provide the food.⁵⁵

First Corinthians 10:16 and 11:23-28 indicate that these meals included eating bread and drinking from the cup. Typical Jewish meals opened with the breaking of the bread and ended with the sharing of a cup. Greco-Roman meals followed a similar pattern of an opening benediction, the meal, a benediction over wine, and the symposium.⁵⁶ Banks observes that "the breaking and distribution of the bread was the normal way of commencing such a meal, just as the taking of a cup was the usual way to bring it to a conclusion; prayers of blessing accompanied both."⁵⁷ First Corinthians 11:25 supports this observation when it says that the cup was blessed "after supper."

Peter Lampe has shown that the Greco-Roman dinner party also began with an invocation of the gods at the beginning of the meal. The meal ended with drinking of wine and singing.⁵⁸ In Greco-Roman settings, a meal was followed by the *symposium*, a philosophical discussion. If Christians followed that pattern, worship and study may have followed their meals. The activities

described in 1 Corinthians 14:26 likely took place during the meetings after the meals.⁵⁹

The meal symbolized the fellowship and unity that existed among the believers.
According to Banks, the meal “deepened those relationships in the same way that participation in
an ordinary meal cements and symbolizes the bond between a family or group.”⁶⁰ Based on the
evidence, White rightly concludes: “The communal meal was the center of fellowship
(*koinōnia*), as eating was a sign of social relations with others. The extension of hospitality
through the meal setting was the central act that served to define the worshipping community, the
church (*ekklēsia*) in household assembly.”⁶¹

Although the meal setting provided opportunity to develop intimacy with other believers,
it also presented opportunities for conflict and internal strife. In fact, all the references to
Christian meals in the NT, except Acts 2:46 and 20:7, describe problems associated with them.
Gerd Theissen, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Peter Lampe, and others have suggested that the
abuses of the Lord’s Supper described in 1 Cor 11:17-34 resulted from social differences.⁶² If we
assume that the Christians met in the *domus* or villa of a wealth patron, we can envision that the
wealthy homeowner would invite his wealthy friends to eat with him in one of the dining rooms
earlier in the day. After visiting the baths, the wealthy would begin dinner at “first tables” around
3 p.m. The poorer people and slaves would not have this leisure; therefore, they would arrive in
time for “second tables.” Also, the triclinium would be in use by the time they arrived, so the
poorer members perhaps ate together in the peristyle or atrium of the house.⁶³

Perhaps the Christians engaged in the Greco-Roman *eranos* (dining club) where each
person brought a picnic basket either for oneself or to share with others. Since the wealthy
Christians arrived earlier, they may have eaten a meal consisting of meat and other delicacies
while the late-arriving poor Christians would have nothing to eat. The poor may have resented

the insensitivity of the wealthy.⁶⁴ Paul's solution is that they should recognize the unity of the body and share what they have in common (1 Cor 11:29, 33) or else eat their meals at home before they gather together (1 Cor 11:34).

We can also envision such distinctions occurring in a setting in an *insula*. The wealthier residents on the lower floors could provide better food than the poorer residents who lived in the upper floors. The wealthy residents may have been able to eat earlier so that no food would be left for the poor residents by the time they arrived.⁶⁵

Later, the Lord's Supper was separated from the meal. Earlier liturgical historians, such as Hans Lietzmann and Gregory Dix, argued that the *agapē* meal and the Eucharist were separate from the beginning of the church, but historians today accept that originally they were united.⁶⁶ One factor in the later separation was the excesses and problems associated with the meals. Another factor was the difficult logistics of feeding larger groups. A third factor was the transfer of meetings from homes with dining facilities to buildings intended primarily for worship. No evidence for this separation exists before the middle of the second century.⁶⁷ Sometime between AD 360 and 370, the Council of Laodicea banned Christian gatherings in private homes. Eventually, the Lord's Supper was reduced to a somber ritual within the liturgical service instead of the joyous sharing of a meal in a family setting.

Conclusion

Evidence from the NT shows that the normal practice of the first Christians was to gather in homes in order to share a meal. Investigation into the residential setting of Christian meetings has suggested several characteristics of those meetings. They involved much social interaction and personal participation. The atmosphere was likely informal and celebratory. Sharing a meal signified mutual acceptance and social and spiritual bonding. Since finances were not invested in

the construction and maintenance of buildings, they could be used to provide for the material needs of poorer believers.

Over the next few centuries, Christians in various regions began to modify houses in order to provide larger meeting places and to build large, public worship centers. As time went on, Christians no longer gathered together to share love-feasts. The separation of the Lord's Supper from the love-feast meant that dining facilities were no longer needed. Omission of the love-feast resulted in less interpersonal interaction among the worshippers. Worship became more formal and less participatory because the seating was oriented toward the dais, or raised platform, in the front. Distinctions between clergy and laity increased. The clergy acted as the performers in worship, and the laity acted as spectators and recipients of their ministry.

The increasing emphasis on church buildings from the third century onwards has hindered the expansion of Christianity in many regions. If Christians must raise enough money to build a building before they consider themselves a church, fewer churches will be started. If Christians adopt the NT understanding that a church consists of a gathering of believers in someone's home, many more churches will be started. Derek Tidball noted the following limitations to mission that arise from an emphasis on buildings: "(1) much energy, time, finance, and personnel is invested in keeping a building in good repair; (2) public buildings are inflexible in their use and location; (3) they are impersonal especially when compared with homes and (4) they emphasise the need for people to come to a strange place in order to receive the gospel thus making an additional barrier between the hearer and the good news."⁶⁸ In many settings around the world, the NT practice of house churches is still the most effective way to reach people for Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Richard Krautheimer introduced his chronology in the first edition of *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* in 1965. His most recent discussion can be found in Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (4th ed.; rev. by Richard Krautheimer and Slobodan Ćurčić; Pelican History of Art; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 23-37. L. Michael White added a fourth stage (*The Social Origins of Christian Architecture: Vol. 1, Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Harvard Theological Studies 42 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990).

However, one should note that the boundaries between periods are not absolute and that overlaps may occur. For example, the earliest example of a structure built solely for the purpose of Christian gatherings may be the mud-brick church recently excavated at the Roman site of Aila, located in 'Aqaba, Jordan. The excavators date this church to around the turn of the fourth century, perhaps slightly before the program of basilica building instituted by Constantine (S. Thomas Parker, "The Roman 'Aqaba Project: The 1997 and 1998 Campaigns," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 44 (2000): 383). Peter Richardson argues that Christians built church buildings before Constantine ("Architectural Transitions from Synagogues and House Churches," in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. Julian V. Hills [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998], 379-80).

² Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (trans. Michael Steinhauser; ed. Marshall D. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 372.

³ Kristina Sessa, "Domus Ecclesiae: Rethinking a Category of Ante-Pacem Christian Space," *JST* 60 (2009): 92, 100. Sessa says that "Eusebius used the term simply to denote the physical buildings belonging to and used by a Christian community" (92). The phrase underlined church ownership of the buildings (104). She also says that L. Michael White mistakenly attributed its first appearance to Adolf von Harnack but that the phrase does not appear in Harnack's writings (94 n. 14). She proposes abandoning the use of the term to refer to pre-Constantinian buildings (108).

⁴ White, *Building God's House*, 22, 127-39.

⁵ Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 36.

⁶ White, *Building God's House*, 23.

⁷The reader may question where the meetings of Christians in Roman catacombs fit into this chronology. According to Bradley Blue, this is a "romantic notion" that "cannot be substantiated." The Christian presence underground reflected a concern for "decent burial

procedures” (“Acts and the House Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf; vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. B. W. Winter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 123-4). White concurs that “it is doubtful that the catacombs were ever used for regular assembly and worship” (*Building God’s House*, 12).

⁸ White, *Building God’s House*, 21.

⁹ A. J. Brothers, “Urban Housing,” in *Roman Domestic Buildings*, ed. Ian M. Barton; Exeter Studies in History (Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 1996) 54.

¹⁰ Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10,” *BR* 38 (1993) 26; also, “Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts,” in *Paul the Apostle to America: Cultural Trends and Pauline Scholarship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 79.

¹¹ Paul Trebilco, “Early Christian Communities in the Greco-Roman City: Perspectives on Urban Ministry from the New Testament,” *Ex Auditu* 29 (2013): 30-31.

¹² Robert Jewett, “Are There Allusions to the Love Feast in Romans 13:8-10?,” in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder* (ed. Julian V. Hills; Harrisburg, Penn: Trinity Press International, 1998) 266-7. See also Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church,” 23-43; and Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts,” 78-80.

¹³ Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?*, rev. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2016). Earlier, David J. Horrell proposed envisioning domestic space above the non-elite buildings and shops east of the theatre in Corinth as a more likely setting for Christian gatherings than a villa with a triclinium and atrium or peristyle (“Domestic Space and Christian Meetings at Corinth: Imagining New Contexts and the Buildings East of the Theatre,” *NTS* 50 [2004]: 349-69). Daniel N. Showalter later corrected Horrell by noting that there is no archaeological evidence of second floors above the businesses and shops east of the theatre (“Seeking Shelter in Roman Corinth: Archaeology and the Placement of Paul’s Communities,” in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*, ed. S. J. Friesen et al., *NovTSup* 134 [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 333-4). David L. Balch has also suggested that references to “sitting” in 1 Cor 14:30 would more likely refer to meals in taverns, open gardens, and peristyle gardens rather than to triclinia in elite homes (“The Church Sitting in a Garden,” in *Contested Spaces: Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament*, ed. David L. Balch and Annette Weissenreider [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012], 201-34). In these settings, people would sit on cushions or on chairs, benches, and stools made of wood, marble, or stone.

¹⁴ Steven Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 347; Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁵ White, *Building God's House*, 144-5.

¹⁶ Beryl Rawson, "The 'Roman Family' in Recent Research: State of the Question," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 124.

¹⁷ Bradly S. Billings, "From House Church to Tenement Church: Domestic Space and the Development of Early Urban Christianity—The Example of Ephesus," *JTS* 62 (2011): 549; Trebilco, "Early Christian Communities," 28.

¹⁸ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 19-66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 372.

²⁰ Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and Household Churches* (The Family, Religion, and Culture; ed. Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 16-17. Later, Balch retracted this statement and proposed that the early Christians also met in workshops and tenement buildings ("Rich Pompeiian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches," *JSNT* 27.1 [2004]: 28.

²¹ Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 16-22.

²² Brothers, "Urban Housing," 50-51.

²³ Ian M. Barton, "Introduction," in *Roman Domestic Buildings*, ed. Ian M. Barton; Exeter Studies in History (Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 1996) 3.

²⁴ Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 22-23.

²⁵ Ibid., 31.

²⁶ David L. Balch, "Paul, Families, and Households," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 285 n. 4.

²⁷ For additional details on the various architectural features of the *domus*, see Brothers, "Urban Housing," 34-49.

²⁸ Ibid., 34.

²⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

³⁰ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 25.

³¹ Davina C. Lopez and Todd Penner argue that modern distinctions between “public” space and “private” space did not exist in the ancient world (“Houses Made with Hands’: The Triumph of the Private in New Testament Scholarship,” in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch*, ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 176 [Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012], 89-105. Paul Trebilco offers a similar assessment (“Early Christian Communities,” 32). On the other hand, Dennis E. Smith argues that it was not the case that uninvited outsiders could simply walk in and attend a Christian gathering in a house church. The guest would have to be invited by the host (“The House Church as Social Environment,” in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch*, ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 176 [Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012],” 15).

³² Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 25-26.

³³ Ibid., 17. See also Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10-12.

³⁴ Blue, “Acts and the House Church,” 160.

³⁵ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Good News Studies 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 161-78.

³⁶ White, *Building God’s House*, 107.

³⁷ Brad Blue, “The Influence of Jewish Worship on Luke’s Presentation of the Early Church,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Petersen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 474-5.

³⁸ Trebilco, “Early Christian Communities,” 37-40.

³⁹ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 1-2.

⁴⁰ Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 192-6.

⁴¹ Smith, “The House Church as Social Environment,” 16.

⁴² Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 177-179, 200-202. See also Peter Lampe, “The Eucharist: Identifying with Christ on the Cross,” *Int* 48, no. 1 (1994) 43; Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 203, 212; White, *Building God’s House*, 107.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27-31.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 144-7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9-12. The seven points that follow either summarize or quote from these pages.

⁴⁷ BDAG, 215.

⁴⁸ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵⁰ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (rev. ed.; Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1994), 81.

⁵¹ BDAG, 970.

⁵² Jewett, "Are There Allusions to the Love Feast in Romans 13:8-10?," 265-78.

⁵³ Bo Reicke, *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos in Verbindung mit der altchristlichen Agapenfeier*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift (Uppsala: A. B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1951); cited in Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church," 32-33.

⁵⁴ Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church," 37.

⁵⁵ Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts," 85.

⁵⁶ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 188-189; Lampe, "The Eucharist," 37.

⁵⁷ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 81. See also Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 24; Blue, "The Influence of Jewish Worship," 488-489.

⁵⁸ Lampe, "The Eucharist," 37.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 43; Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 203. This pattern is also found in Tertullian (Osiek and Balch, 212).

⁶⁰ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 83. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 165.

⁶¹ White, *Building God's House*, 109.

⁶² Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 166-9; Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 200-201; Lampe, "The Eucharist," 36-42; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 81-84; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale

University Press, 1983), 67-68; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 21-22, 191-200; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, ed. and trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 145-74.

⁶³ Dennis E. Smith disputes that Christians would have gathered in the *atrium*. He says that the *atrium* is rarely found outside Italy, and it was not a space normally used for dining. He suggests that those who propose the *atrium* as a meeting place assume that “early Christian worship looked a lot like worship in a basilica” (“The House Church as Social Environment,” 11-12).

⁶⁴ Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth*, 166-9; Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 200-1; Lampe, “The Eucharist,” 36-42.

⁶⁵ John McRay, “House Churches and the Lord’s Supper,” *Leaven* 3 (1995): 16.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 141-145; Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 285-287; White, *Building God’s House*, 15-17, 107, 119, 193 n. 61, n. 63.

⁶⁷ White, *Building God’s House*, 119-20.

⁶⁸ Derek Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 147 n. 10.