

Paul's Congregations

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WHO WERE THE EARLY CHRISTIANS?

What kinds of people belong to these early congregations? Who signs up?

Paul's congregations are typically based in individual homes. We call those "house churches" these days. They didn't have church buildings. There probably weren't that many synagogue buildings that one could recognize. Even Jewish communities typically began in homes as well, and in these home congregations or house churches we should imagine a mix of people from across the social spectrum of any Greek city. There's the owner of the house, a kind of wealthy patron. It might be someone like Stephanus or Phoebe. Also the members of their household, family members as well as household slaves and even their clients if they were in a artisan guild. Say tent makers or merchants of some sort. We might typically expect that the household would include not only the immediate family and others around them but even the clients and business partners.... Paul seems to have recognized the opportunity that these house church congregations afforded for getting into the networks of individual relationships that afford to him access to many different people within the Greek city.

What do these people do when they get to him?

The worship of an early Christian house church probably centered around the dinner table. They don't necessarily all sit facing forward like in a church building that we think of today but rather they're in someone's dining room and the center of their activity really is the fellowship meal or the communal meal. The term communion actually comes from this experience of the dining fellowship.... We need to remember that dining is one of the hallmarks of early Christian practice almost from the very beginning. All the gospel traditions tend to portray Jesus at the dinner table as a very important part of his activity. Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch is over dining, and when we look at the context of the letters, especially First Corinthians, the role of dining in fellowship is central to all of their religious understanding and practices.

We also know that all other aspects of worship that we think of as going with early Christian practice probably happened around the dinner table as well. Paul refers to one person having a song and another person bringing a prayer. Everyone is contributing to the banquet whether it's in the form of food or in the form of their piety and worship. They all bring it to the table.... Some of them bring prophecies or charismatic gifts, and these too form some of the concerns that Paul deals with in some of the letters. Sometimes charismatic gifts also produce tension within Paul's communities. We hear at times of Paul having to discipline people or suggest that the congregation discipline people by kicking them out of the fellowship dinner because he doesn't like the ethical

behavior of some people. We hear of questions of dining with pagans and going to dinner parties where the meat might not be of a suitable sort, so there's all kinds of questions that come up in the context of this house church environment in Paul's letters.

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PAUL'S COMMUNITIES: NOT JUST PROLETARIAT

Who were the people [in Paul's communities]? Who responded to [him]?

The traditional view of the composition of the early Christian communities -- and the ones we know anything about are the Pauline communities -- is that are from the proletariat. Early Marxist interpreters of Christianity make a great todo with this. It's a movement of the proletariat....

But if you actually look at the Book of Acts, and you look at Paul, and you begin to collect the people who are named, or identified in some way, here you have Erastus, the City Treasurer of Corinth; you have Gaius of Corinth, whose home is big enough to let him be not only Paul's host but the host to all of the Churches of Corinth, all of the little household communities can meet in his house at one time. You have Stephanos and his household who have been host to the community. You have Lydia, in Philippi, who is the seller of purple goods, a luxury fabric. You have Prisca and Aquila, and we wonder why the woman is usually mentioned before her husband. She must be a woman of some consequence, who runs a tent making establishment, accordingly to the Book of Acts, in which Paul joins, as a fellow artisan.

So you begin to get the impression that you have quite a variety of different social levels represented in these early Christian communities. Not people at the absolutely top level; you have, with the exception possibly of Erastus, no one from the aristocratic orders - no one who would be a member of the city council. You have no agricultural slaves, are at the bottom of the hierarchy. But, in the rest of the social pyramid, everything in between, you seem to have representatives in these early Christian groups. The people who are named, whom we can identify, have the further characteristic that they seem to cross various boundaries, they're betwixt and between. In some ways, they are marked by high social status. Take Paul, himself. He clearly uses Greek very fluently. He clearly has rhetorical skills, though probably not of the sort that one would have learned at the university. He knows some of the things that are being discussed in the philosophical schools. On the other hand, he's a hand-worker, a tent maker, which is at the other end of the scale, and this is characteristic of most of those people that we know of, as leaders, who are named in the group. So, we begin to get a picture of upwardly mobile people, to use a modern anachronistic way of describing them

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