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Paul's Ekklesia

A Study of Its Origin and Organization

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Abstract

The main purpose of this essay is to examine Paul's use of the term ἐκκλησία in reference to its origin and organization. When tracing the background, we find that Paul was mainly influenced by the Jewish context. Because Paul self-identified as a Christ-believing Jew with a God-given mission to take the gospel to the gentile Greco-Roman world, I conclude that he understood the term as an abbreviation of ἐκκλησία του θεοῦ. This "Church of God" is translated from the LXX (Neh 13:1) and proves Paul's desire to be in harmony with the OT and to the salvation history given to the Jews.

I conclude that Paul organized the ἐκκλησία as a double-layered entity, where its members were part of both a small local gathering of Christians, and connected to a universal body where Christ was both its instigator and the ultimate eschatological goal. I also conclude that Paul used household and body imagery to identify his Christian gathering, which was small enough to be regarded as house churches.

Keywords: ἐκκλησία, ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, LXX, Greco-Roman, House church, Universal church

Abbreviations

BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , W. Bauer, W. F. Danker, W. F. Arndt & F. W. Gingrich 3ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990)
NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed, Moisés Silva (Michigan: Zondervan, 2014)
LXX	The Septuagint
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed, Kittel (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Scholars have made much effort to examine the Greek word ἐκκλησία. Common English renderings are “congregation,” or “church,” which is an elusive term even in contemporary language. For example, “church” can signify the one Catholic Church, a local or house church, or the Christian Church as a universal entity. In other words, Christians use ἐκκλησία differently depending on the context. But how can we understand ἐκκλησία in the writings of Paul, and what lessons can be learned from his use of the word?

Paul’s selection of this particular word is somewhat surprising; the term seems to have a general meaning of “assembly” – a secular word used in the Greco-Roman world. The Hebrew counterpart can be found in the LXX and functions as a word used for the gathering of Israel and for the synagogue. So how can we understand its origin? Since ἐκκλησία is such an important and central concept in the Pauline Letters, the need for further clarity regarding its meaning, origin and implications is in my view necessary for understanding Paul’s ecclesiology.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of the Greek word ἐκκλησία in the writings of Paul and by doing so shed further light on how we understand the organization of the early church as a civic or familial gathering. To achieve this purpose, I will try to answer the following questions: (1) Was Paul’s use of the word primarily influenced by the Jewish or the Greco-Roman context? (2) What lessons can be learned, e.g. about how the early Christians were organized?

1.3 Method, material and limitations

To achieve my purpose, I will use a philological and historical-critical method in the analysis and evaluation of the source texts, primarily the Pauline Letters in their historical and literary context. I will focus on Paul’s usage of the word ἐκκλησία in varying contexts and examine the Jewish and Hellenistic background of the term, as well as how the word is used in early Christianity in general, primarily by other New Testament authors. In terms of material, I will refer to primary sources, mainly relevant texts from the Pauline Letters, and use secondary sources such as monographs, articles, commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and dissertations that are relevant to the topic.

I will not distinguish between the undisputed letters and the letters where Paul’s authorship is disputed, but, for convenience sake, refer to Paul as the author of all letters in the Pauline letter

collection. Regardless of the questions of authorship, the so-called deutero-Pauline texts are central to the understanding of how the Pauline communities were organized. We can thus observe a certain degree of development in Paul's understanding and use of the term ἐκκλησία over time.

Because of limitations of space, I will not examine in detail the question to what degree existing organizations like voluntary associations and synagogues, respectively, influenced Paul's notion of ἐκκλησία.

1.4 Survey of research

Since the middle of the twentieth century, several researchers have focused on domestic structures such as households and house churches as the primary gathering place for the early Christians. Floyd Filson set the agenda for this research in 1939, when he highlighted the house church as the basic unit of organization at the local level.¹ He thereby shifted the scholarly focus from the traditional notion of city-wide churches into smaller domestic units. In addition to this shift, there has been a scholarly debate, in particular in recent decades, about whether the term ἐκκλησία should primarily be understood from a Hellenistic or a Jewish background.

Continuing Filson's work, Richard Banks wrote the influential *Paul's Idea of Community* (1980), in which he advocates the rendering of ἐκκλησία as first and foremost a gathering of smaller units (house churches), this because of the two main types of community in which people would associate themselves in the Greco-Roman world: the public life and the household order.² To Banks it is unlikely that the "whole church" could have exceeded 45 people; "hence we must not think of these various types of community as particular large."³ According to Banks, Paul's ἐκκλησία had three main characteristics; first it was a voluntary association for a small group of like-minded people, comparable with the synagogue and other cults. Secondly, it had some of the character of the household unit, which separated it from other contemporary organizations; it was a place where personal identity and intimacy could be found. Thirdly, the small local churches were part of a universal idea which transcended borders of nationality and time (though not understood as one universal church).⁴ By the setting of the ἐκκλησία in ordinary homes rather than in cultic places, Paul shows that "he does not wish to mark off his gatherings from the ordinary meetings in which others, including church members, were engaged."⁵

Banks further argues that we can identify the vital metaphor of the family in Paul's letters,

¹ Filson 1939, 109-112.

² Banks 1980, 15.

³ Banks 1980, 42.

⁴ Banks 1980, 49.

⁵ Banks 1980, 50.

paralleling the household context of community gatherings with a household language. As a community, the purpose of ἐκκλησία, according to Banks, was the edification of its members through their God-given ministry to one another.⁶ Paul integrated the notions of commonwealth and household into his understanding of ἐκκλησία, reflecting, “a broader range than its Jewish and Hellenistic counterparts.”⁷ Key elements were the identity and unity within the church expressed in the fellowship with God and with one another in word and action.⁸ This view of community, Bank says, has its origin in Christ’s words, “Who are my brethren?” and, “When two or three are gathered” and the fact that Christ as resurrected acts as unifier between the members of the church.”⁹ Building on Edwin Hatch’s work on the significance of secular voluntary associations¹⁰, there was intense research done by a five-year seminar in 1988–1993, which resulted in a collection of essays arguing for the viability of voluntary associations as a social model of the early ἐκκλησία.¹¹

In his article “*Ekklesia* and the Voluntary Associations” (1996), Wayne O. McCready suggests that the early ἐκκλησία deliberately moved into the gentile world by adopting the parameters of a voluntary association.¹² The early ἐκκλησία did not have to invent the notion of a religious society distinct from the family or state, since forming associations was a common activity of the Graeco-Roman world.”¹³ To McCready, the Christian ἐκκλησία was influenced by at least four contemporary institutions: (1) households; (2) voluntary associations; (3) synagogues; and (4) philosophical schools.¹⁴ The members of the Christian ἐκκλησία were socially diverse, had close personal ties with each other, had a familial structure and were involved in educational activities, which distinguished them from contemporary voluntary associations.¹⁵ The concern for the fellow member of the ἐκκλησία, and the idea of belonging to an exclusive and distinctive Christ-centered community, were likely decisive factors for growth and success in early Christianity.¹⁶ McCready concludes that the early ἐκκλησία shared significant common features with voluntary associations and were consequently viewed as such by outsiders and to some degree also by insiders, “It makes eminent sense that voluntary associations offered an initial reference point that placed churches comfortably within the parameters of Greco-Roman society – especially when the Jesus movement

⁶ Banks 1980, 110.

⁷ Banks 1980, 110.

⁸ Banks 1980, 111.

⁹ Banks 1980, 189.

¹⁰ Hatch 1881.

¹¹ Kloppenborg and Wilson 1996.

¹² McCready 1996, 59.

¹³ McCready 1996, 61.

¹⁴ McCready 1996, 62.

¹⁵ McCready 1996, 63-64.

¹⁶ McCready 1996, 66.

consciously and deliberately wished to appeal to gentiles.”¹⁷

In his article “Why Did the Early Christians Call Themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?” (2011), Paul Trebilco argues that the origin of the use of ἐκκλησία can be traced back to the Hellenists in Jerusalem.¹⁸ It aligned the Jesus movement with the coveted tradition of Israel as the people of God. Trebilco advocates that ἐκκλησία was used as a collective name for their assembly because of its use in the LXX and because the main alternative, συναγωγή (synagogue), was already in use by the Jewish community.¹⁹ The term ἐκκλησία distinguished the Christian assembly from ἡ συναγωγή but without suggesting that they were no longer part of ἡ συναγωγή, but rather they now belonged to both.²⁰ Both terms were used in the LXX for the assembly of Yahweh, “members of the ἐκκλησία could express their continuity with the OT people of God without claiming sovereignty over the Palestinian Jews.”²¹

In 2012 Young-Ho Park (in contrast to Bank’s household view) emphasizes the civic connotations of Paul’s usage of the term and its Hellenistic background in his monograph *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*. Park argues that the most fundamental way of being part of ruling in Greek society was to participate in the secular ἐκκλησία.²² The civic connotations of Paul’s term would mean that the groups identified more as public organizations than as domestic-based units.²³ Park argues for his position by showing that Paul uses ἐκκλησία in greetings, trans-local relationships and in plenary gatherings, and that each mark the civic qualities of these groups.²⁴ He is critical of the house-church model of the church, “Paul struggled to prevent his church from becoming entirely absorbed in a household orientation...the civic nature of ἐκκλησία lay at the very center of Paul’s understanding of church.”²⁵ The semantic range (of ἐκκλησία), Park argues, could be expanded from a house fellowship to one as large as a universal institution, tracing the, “universal church” to the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία and the pre-Pauline stage of Christianity.²⁶ In regard to possible influence from the LXX, Park further points out that in the period of its translation and transmission, the Jews lived in a Hellenistic environment where they were adequately exposed to Greek political culture.²⁷ His analysis brings him to the conclusion that Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία centered on the civic and public assembly, with one ἐκκλησία in each city (with the possible

¹⁷ McCready 1996, 69.

¹⁸ Trebilco 2011, 459.

¹⁹ Trebilco 2011, 450.

²⁰ Trebilco 2011, 454.

²¹ Trebilco 2011, 458.

²² Park 2012, 15.

²³ Park 2012, 221.

²⁴ Park 2012, 103-121.

²⁵ Park 2012, 133.

²⁶ Park 2012, 3.

²⁷ Park 2012, 219.

exception of the Corinthian church).²⁸ Park concludes that despite its regular gatherings in domestic spaces, the early ἐκκλησία could not be domesticated but was public in nature due to the civic connotation (of ἐκκλησία) in the Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian contexts.²⁹

Richard H. van Kooten argues in his article “Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ: The ‘Church of God’ and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησίαι) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Response to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley” (2012), that the background of the term ἐκκλησία lies not primarily in the LXX but rather in the continuing importance of the Greek civic assemblies.³⁰ The phrase ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ refers to a parallel, alternative organization, existing alongside the civic counterpart. This double meaning of ἐκκλησία (as the civic, political assembly and as “the church”) is, to van Kooten, “explicitly alluded to Origen’s *Contra Celsum* . . . where he describes the Christian and the civic political organizations as two contrasting but potentially overlapping assemblies.”³¹

He argues that against the Greco-Roman background of the political ἐκκλησία, “Paul’s frequent and consistent use of ἐκκλησία assumes a clear political meaning. This is particularly evident in the way in which Paul characterizes the Christian ἐκκλησία as ἐκκλησία of the nations, ἐκκλησία of God, ἐκκλησία of Christ and ἐκκλησία of the saints.³² To van Kooten Paul’s view belongs to a line of thought which understood the Christian community as an alternative political structure to the contemporary civic ἐκκλησία and there is therefore “no reason to assume that Paul’s views are inherently subversive to the political institutions of his time.”³³

Further, he argues that the actual functioning of the Christian ἐκκλησία mirrors the operations of the civic assemblies. His arguments for the civic implications are as follows: (1) Both the civic and the Christian ἐκκλησία function as places of instruction; (2) they are both almost naturally filled with factions and divisions; (3) they are considered as places where the use of ratio should be endorsed; (4) the influence of “mania” should be restrained and (5) both were accessible to all citizens, but women were not allowed to speak.³⁴

Gregory K. Beale argues, in his article “The Background of ἐκκλησία Revisited” (2015), that the LXX, “ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ”, “ἐκκλησία κυρίου” and, “ἐκκλησία” were the primary sources from which Paul drew his understanding of the church.³⁵ The early Christian ἐκκλησία was the continuation of the Israelite assembly of God, which stood in contrast, or as an alternative, to the

²⁸ Park 2012, 220.

²⁹ Park 2012, 221.

³⁰ Van Kooten 2012, 523.

³¹ Van Kooten 2012, 529.

³² Van Kooten 2012, 537.

³³ Van Kooten 2012, 539.

³⁴ Van Kooten 2012, 539-540.

³⁵ Beale 2015, 165.

civic, “assemblies of the world”.³⁶ Beale concludes that the Greco-Roman background is influential, but the OT connection appears to be clear: “there are significant occurrences of ἐκκλησία in Paul that have clearly been influenced by the LXX and were perhaps sparked off by exegetical traditions associated with Philo, especially Paul’s references to the ‘church of God’ (ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ).”³⁷

Richard Last suggests in his article “The Neighborhood of the Corinthian *Ekklesia*: Beyond Family-based Descriptions of the first Urban Christ-Believers” (2016), that family-based descriptions of the earliest Christians, “tend to reflect a modern cultural setting in which religion is conceptualized as a non-public phenomenon.”³⁸ Last argues that the basic unit in Cristian Corinth was the neighborhood-gathering.³⁹ Paul identifies the ἐκκλησία in Corinth neither as “churches” or any other type of non-domestic based groups, instead Paul simply mentions them as houses and its therefore problematic to assume that its semantic opposite is a partial ἐκκλησία grouping, namely a house-church.⁴⁰ By investigating how the social organization of neighborhoods in the ancient Roman *domus*, Last explains how it was a central hub for communal, occupational and social relationships. It is conceivable to Last that the ἐκκλησία primarily attracted workers and residents who lived close to the *domus*.⁴¹ Last concludes that non-family-based social connections drove the expansion of the early church in particular communal spaces.⁴²

In the article “The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Jesus Movement”, (2017) Ralph J. Korner, finds no evidence of a non-civic group self-designating as a ἐκκλησία, with the exception of some semi-public gatherings.⁴³ An ἐκκλησία association would have been perceived not as a threat to Roman rule but as a positive attempt to integrate themselves into the ἐκκλησία discourse in Asia Minor.⁴⁴ Korner finds no counter-imperial rhetoric in Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία as a group identity, but instead identifies the term as a socio-ethnic, pro-democratic, love-based community.⁴⁵ Its members could have been viewed as being in continuity with the Jewish heritage and not simply with the Greco-Roman culture. This fact had implications for the early Christians in that they identified themselves with their Jewish heritage, but also gave their communities socio-cultural relevance.⁴⁶ To Korner it is clear that Paul made a creative and distinctive contribution to the semantic use of ἐκκλησία, “Paul created a non-civic, trans-locally connected semi-public

³⁶ Beale 2015, 166.

³⁷ Beale 2015, 152.

³⁸ Last 2016, 401.

³⁹ Last 2016, 401.

⁴⁰ Last 2016, 407.

⁴¹ Last 2016, 414.

⁴² Last 2016, 419.

⁴³ Korner 2017, 79.

⁴⁴ Korner 2017, 184.

⁴⁵ Korner 2017, 213.

⁴⁶ Korner 2017, 149.

association comprised of Greeks, Romans, ‘barbarians’ and Jews”.⁴⁷ Korner concludes that Paul by giving the early Christ-followers a political identity, provided them with a type of defense mechanism in the ancient Greco-Roman society as a voluntary association.⁴⁸ Not every Christian community appear to have self-identified themselves as an ἐκκλησία, but the NT only attributes ἐκκλησία to Christ-follower groups which, “were aligned either with Paul, the ‘elder’ John, the ‘prophet’ John, or Matthew.”⁴⁹ Paul’s metaphorical portrayals of Christ-followers as the temple of God and the body of Christ, can be seen as having its primary ideological goal of constructing a socio-religious bridge between Paul’s ἐκκλησία and Christ-followers who held other apostolic allegiances (particularly the apostles in Jerusalem) and not to, “bridge the Jewish-gentile ethnic divide.”⁵⁰

From this survey of research, we observe controversies around two points: First, is the term ἐκκλησία primarily influenced by a Jewish or a Hellenistic background? Most scholars give priority to the Jewish influence, whereas van Kooten, Last and Park have argued in favor of decisive Hellenistic influence. Secondly, there is the question how the ἐκκλησία was organized, as a civic or familial gathering, where the controversy is most clearly observed in Banks and Park. Finally, there is a consensus that the common voluntary associations in the Greco-Roman society must have influenced the early ἐκκλησία to some degree.⁵¹ In the next section, I will commence my analysis with a brief philological study of the word ἐκκλησία.

⁴⁷ Korner 2017, 259.

⁴⁸ Korner 2017, 263.

⁴⁹ Korner 2017, 264.

⁵⁰ Korner 2017, 264.

⁵¹ For the ongoing debate on associations and synagogues: Ascough 2015, 27-52; Korner 2015, 53-78; Gruen 2016, 125-131; Ascough 2017, 118-126; Korner 2017, 127-136.

Chapter 2: Historical Background and Conceptual Analysis of ἐκκλησία

2.1 Introduction

BDAG gives the following renderings of ἐκκλησία: “(1) A regular summoned legislative assembly as generally understood in the Greco-Roman world. (2) A casual gathering of people, a gathering. (3) People with shared belief, community, congregation, including both the OT Israelite assembly and the Christians in a specific place.”⁵² The noun ἐκκλησία derives from the compound ἐκκαλέω meaning “calling out” or “calling forth”. Even though it seems like a semantic probability, Paul refrains from such an interplay of ideas, rather the rendering should always be that of “assembly,” or “gathering of people.”⁵³ The cognate adjective ἔκκλητος means “chosen” or “selected” and, as subjunctive plural, οἱ ἔκκλητοι is applied to a group of citizens selected for a particular purpose.⁵⁴

In order to comprehend the meaning of ἐκκλησία we need to distinguish between the Jewish use of the word, how it was used in the Greco-Roman context, and its use in the NT. In the next chapter we will deal with the Jewish and Hellenistic background in more detail and attempt to ascertain whether it is the Jewish or the Hellenistic notion of ἐκκλησία that is most influential on Paul’s understanding of the term.

2.2 Jewish Background

The word ἐκκλησία occurs about 100 times in the LXX, where it almost invariably renders the Hebrew לְהִקָּבֵץ; meaning “summons to an assembly” or “the act of assembling.” It should also be noted that συναγωγή as a translation of לְהִקָּבֵץ occurs even more frequently than ἐκκλησία in the LXX. Thus, συναγωγή and ἐκκλησία have a similar meaning, and both were used in the LXX as Greek renderings of לְהִקָּבֵץ. English translations generally vary between “assembly,” “company” and “congregation” depending on context. When ἐκκλησία is coupled with the genitive attribute κυρίου, (1 Chr 28:8; Neh 8:2) it refers to the people, or congregation, of God. In many cases no addition is made, since the context makes it evident that ἐκκλησία refers to the community of God. These instances are so common in 1 and 2 Chronicles and Psalms that we can speak of a technical term.⁵⁵

⁵² *BDAG*, s. v. ἐκκλησία.

⁵³ Dunn 1998, 537 see also NIDNTTE, 134.

⁵⁴ NIDNTTE, 134.

⁵⁵ Schmidt 1965, 527. See also Roloff 1990, 412.

2.3 Hellenistic Background

The Hellenistic term ἐκκλησία is attested from the fifth century B.C. and denoted the popular assembly of all the citizens of a Greek city state or “polis”. The ἐκκλησία met at regular intervals but also, if needed, more often in case of an emergency. Every citizen had the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion, but a decision could only be made if there was an expert present. The ἐκκλησία had its roots in Greek democracy, especially in reference to political decision-making. It was regarded as existing only when it assembled.⁵⁶ The ἐκκλησία was also engaged in decisions on changes to laws, the appointment of officials and the negotiations of various contracts and treaties.⁵⁷ The ἐκκλησία opened with prayers and sacrifices to the gods of the particular city it was located in.⁵⁸ We can observe the political usage of the ἐκκλησία in Acts 19:32, where it refers to the “regular assembly” of the inhabitants of Ephesus.

2.4 ἐκκλησία in the NT

The word ἐκκλησία occurs 115 times in the NT: two times in the Gospel of Matthew, twenty times in Acts, sixty times in Paul’s letters, six times in the general epistles and twenty times in Revelation. In an overwhelming majority of the NT passages, ἐκκλησία is used as a fixed term translated with “congregation” or “congregational assembly,” or “church.”⁵⁹ According to NIDNTTE, the ἐκκλησία in the NT represents:

God’s new creation, the eschatological order of salvation and thus the people of God. It is not only the church’s origin that lies with God. The very nature of the church can be understood only in relation to the Lord, i.e., as ἡ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, “the congregation of God” ... It is true that for Paul the ἐκκλησία has its concrete existence as a local geographic entity. The apostle thus writes, e.g., τῆ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ τῆ οὔσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ, “to the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:2), indicating both that it belongs to God and that it is composed of people in a particular place.⁶⁰

2.4.1 ἐκκλησία in the Gospels

The only mention of ἐκκλησία in the gospels can be found in Matt 16:18 and 18:17. Both refer to the Christ-believers as a community, either as the post-crucifixion ἐκκλησία (16:18) or in the sense of ἡγῶν (implying “synagogue,” 18:17).⁶¹

⁵⁶ O’Brien 1993, 123.

⁵⁷ McCready 1996, 60.

⁵⁸ NIDNTTE, s.v. ἐκκλησία 1.

⁵⁹ Roloff, J. 1990, s.v. ἐκκλησία.

⁶⁰ NIDNTTE, 139.

⁶¹ NIDNTTE, 141.

2.4.2 ἐκκλησία in Acts

In Acts 20:28 (“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son”) we observe that Luke writes about the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ as a universal idea transcending the local churches, but the book indicates first of all the Christians meeting in a particular place: Jerusalem (Acts 5:11, 8:1, 11:22, 12:1, 5), Antioch (13:11), and other churches Paul visited (14:23, 15:41, 16:5). In Acts 7:38 the noun is used in reference to Israel in the wilderness.

2.4.3 ἐκκλησία in the Pauline letters

The mention of house churches occurs in 1 Cor 16:19, Rom 16:3–4 and in Phlm 2. Paul identifies the ἐκκλησία in the plural in 1 Cor 4:17, 11:17, 12:28 and 14:33–34. Further, he refers to the “churches in Christ,” “churches of God” and the “churches of the saints,” in a certain area in Gal 1:22, 1 Cor 16:1, 19 and 2 Cor 8:1, to several churches in more than one region in Rom 16:4 and 2 Cor 8:19 and to all the churches in 1 Cor 7:17, 14:33 and 2 Thess 1:4.

2.4.3.1 ἐκκλησία imagery in the Pauline Letters

Closely connected to ἐκκλησία as a heavenly/universal gathering is the image of the body. Perhaps it is most clearly observed in Col 1:18, 24: “He [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent [...]” Reference to the body also occurs in 1 Cor 12:27: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” In Romans 12:4–5 we observe a similar passage where Paul writes: “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

In Colossians and Ephesians, Paul more implicitly connects the concepts of body and the ἐκκλησία. For example, the passage in Eph 1:23 reads: “And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” In Eph 5:22–33, Paul writes about the relationship between Christ and the ἐκκλησία: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior [...]” In Col 2:19: “[...] holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.” We can find further mention of ἐκκλησία as a body in Eph 1:22–23; 3:10; 4:1–16; 4:4–6.

The metaphor of the temple is used by Paul in three passages, denoting the people of God gathering in the ἐκκλησία. In 1 Cor 3:16–17 Paul teaches the Corinthians that they, collectively, are the temple of God. In 2 Cor 6:16–18 Paul states that “We are the temple of the living God” and

quotes OT texts which speak of God's presence with Israel (Lev 26.12; Ezek 37:27). In Ephesians 2:20–22 the ἐκκλησία is set forth as a heavenly temple which is God's people in whom he lives by his Spirit.

The theme of family relationships can be observed in 1 Tim 3:15, where the ἐκκλησία is described as the household of God. Members of this household are to treat one another as they would members of their own family (1 Tim 5:1–2). They are to care for one another in need (1 Tim 5:5, 16), and overseers are to be skillful in managing the household of God (1 Tim 3:1–7).

Further images speak of the ἐκκλησία as God's field (1 Cor 3:9) or being the building of God. In 2 Cor 11:2, we observe the imagery of ἐκκλησία as a bride to her one husband, who is Christ.

2.4.4 ἐκκλησία in the General Epistles and Revelation

The author of Hebrews cites Ps 21:23: “In the midst of the assembly [ἐκκλησίας] I will praise you” (Heb 2:12), reflecting an understanding of the ἐκκλησία as a heavenly assembly, which is also evident in Heb 12:23. In Jas 5:14 the word is used in the technical sense for a local congregation organized by the pattern of a Jewish synagogue.⁶² In Revelation ἐκκλησία is found mainly in the first three chapters, referring to the seven established churches of Asia, but also “all the churches” is addressed in Rev 22:16.

2.4.5 ἐκκλησία in the Latin Church (*ecclesia*)

In the Latin church, the Greek loan word *ecclesia* survived and transcended common Latin renderings such as Tertullian's *curia* and Augustine's *civitas dei*. These, and other renderings, never became a technical term for the church. There is, according to K.L Schmidt, a high degree of probability that the Latins adopted ἐκκλησία because of its history in the LXX. The English word “church” almost certainly comes from the adjective κυριακός (of the Lord) and not from ἐκκλησία.⁶³

⁶² NIDNTTE, 143.

⁶³ Schmidt 1965, 515.

Chapter 3: The Tension between Jewish and Hellenistic Influence on the Concept of ἐκκλησία in the Corpus Paulinum

3.1 Introduction

In the following two chapters I will investigate and analyze two areas of scholarly controversies and tension regarding the interpretation of ἐκκλησία. I will first discuss the question of the degree of Jewish and Hellenistic influence, respectively, in Paul's choice of the term ἐκκλησία as well as important themes connected to its origin. In the next chapter I will examine the competing interpretations of ἐκκλησία as either a civic or a familial gathering and discuss how these notions relate to the universal ἐκκλησία.

3.2 Jewish Influence

According to Gregory K. Beale the conclusion can be reached that the early Christian assembly (usually translated 'church') is the "continuation of the true Israelite assembly of God in the new covenant age, which implicitly stands in contrast, or as an alternative, to the civic assemblies of the world". Beale concludes that there are "significant occurrences of ἐκκλησία in Paul that have clearly been influenced by the LXX and were perhaps sparked off by exegetical traditions associated with Philo, especially Paul's references to the church of God."⁶⁴

Robert Banks acknowledges influence from LXX, but does not examine it in depth. He argues that the word ἐκκλησία brings us to the threshold of Paul's understanding of the term, but it does not "carry us over," meaning that to understand it correctly we need to look at Paul's imagery of Christian community rather than at semantics.⁶⁵ Banks argues that in the Greco-Roman society there had traditionally been two types of communities which people might associate themselves with: the civic and the household order. In the late Hellenistic period the voluntary associations met a need for conceptualizing interests that neither the civic assembly or the household could provide. The majority of these associations (or clubs) were established around interests, vocation or commitment but were not open to anyone.⁶⁶

According to Banks there was among the Jews a widespread dissatisfaction with the priestly hierarchy in Jerusalem, particularly in view of its collaboration with the Romans and its absorption of Greek culture. In reaction to this, brotherhoods were formed, among them the known Qumran

⁶⁴ Beale 2015, 166.

⁶⁵ Banks 1980, 51.

⁶⁶ Banks 1980, 17.

community and the Essene communities. Apart from the brotherhoods, the synagogue also became a center of religious and communal life for the Jews in exile.⁶⁷ Banks concludes that it is the synagogue and the Greco-Roman mystery-cults that must be brought into closest comparison with Paul's idea of community and in a wider background monastic fraternities and philosophical schools also played a role.⁶⁸ To summarize, Banks traces the background of Paul's use of ἐκκλησία from both Hellenistic and Jewish sources when he concludes that:

Comparison of Paul's understanding of ἐκκλησία with the intellectual and social climate of his day emphasizes both the comprehensiveness of his idea and its appropriateness for his times. Attention has already been drawn to three aspects in the contemporary scene that were particularly significant: those aspirations for a universal fraternity which captivated the minds of educated Greeks and Romans and devout Jewish leaders; the significance of the household as a place in which personal identity and intimacy could be found; the quest for community and immortality persuade through membership in various voluntary and religious associations. In a quite remarkable way, Paul's idea of ἐκκλησία managed to encompass all three.⁶⁹

3.3 Hellenistic Influence

In her article "Not with Eloquent Wisdom: Democratic Ekklesia Discourse in I Corinthians 1-4," Anna C. Miller encapsulates the current state of debate when she questions the scholarly consensus of locating the origin of the ἐκκλησία as a Christian community title in the LXX. Miller argues that the LXX uses ἐκκλησία interchangeably with synagogue for "an extremely wide range of gatherings that included not only the Israelites as a chosen people, but also such groupings as war parties (Gen 49:6) or even a group of evil-doers (Ps 26:5)."⁷⁰ She argues that explaining the Christian title ἐκκλησία with reference to select aspects of its LXX usage neglects that the term "was employed most widely and persistently to designate the civic, political assembly of citizens."⁷¹

According to Miller, we need to view the Corinthian church as a democratic assembly where all participants share a right to leadership through speech and claim to judgement in accordance with Hellenistic democratic discourse.⁷² This idea about civic influence based on observing Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians assumes that Paul had adopted the framework of a democratic institution. This is an assumption we cannot lightly embrace, and it raises multiple questions of how to value the impact of Hellenistic culture in general and the ἐκκλησία gathering in particular in Paul's communities.

⁶⁷ Banks 1980, 17,18.

⁶⁸ Banks 1980, 22.

⁶⁹ Banks, 1980, 48.

⁷⁰ Miller 2015, 326.

⁷¹ Miller 2015, 326.

⁷² Miller 2015, 347.

Young-Ho Park argues that for the Greeks in the period of classical democracy (508–322 BCE), ἐκκλησία meant the actual gathering at a specific time and space, rather than an abstract community. The ἐκκλησία met to decide the defense of the country, control of the magistrates, food supply etc. According to Park’s research, each year was divided into ten *prytanies*, and each *prytany* had one ἐκκλησία κυρία and three ἐκκλησία, which had different functions. These assemblies could comprise of at least five thousand people, sometimes as many as 21,000.⁷³ The Athenian ἐκκλησία usually convened at the Pnyx in Athens, which was “almost a symbol of the ἐκκλησία and the democracy.”⁷⁴ Park summarizes that the representative capacity of the ἐκκλησία was a significant factor in the Greco-Roman culture as a whole, because “the most fundamental way of being a part of ruling is participating in the ἐκκλησία.”⁷⁵ Park highlights this by explaining that “the Greek preference in politics is best seen in people’s zeal for gatherings as an ἐκκλησία [...] about one-third or one-fourth of the citizens attended forty or more ἐκκλησίαί a year.”⁷⁶ Park argues that participation in the ruling by attending the ἐκκλησία was of the highest importance in Greek identity and pride and was the “crux of the democratic constitution.”⁷⁷

In the process of the oncoming Roman Empire, the function of the ἐκκλησία changed. Some scholars have argued for the “rubber-stamp theory,” i.e. that the ἐκκλησία was only a confirmatory body for the council.⁷⁸ Park dismisses this theory as a myth, and instead argues that the council and the ἐκκλησία “basically admitted each other as partners in civic life, even though their interactions were not always harmonious.”⁷⁹ For Park it is important to stress the centrality and importance and survival of the Greco-Roman ἐκκλησία through the transition from the classical period (508–322 BC) into the Hellenistic period (323-31 BC). Because of the limitations of this thesis, we cannot venture further and provide evidence for different positions, but to me, Park’s arguments are thin. To what extent did the occupying Romans affect Greek democratic institutions? How strong was the influence of the ἐκκλησία in the Hellenistic period? Park does not provide adequate answers to these central questions.

Van Kooten also argues for Hellenistic influence when stating that the Greek ἐκκλησία had strong political similarities with Paul’s parallel ἐκκλησία. He argues that Paul uses political overtones in Rom 16:4 when he talks of “all the ἐκκλησίαί of the nations”, concluding that “it seems that Paul intended to forge an alternative, non-ethnic, global community, which takes the

⁷³ Park 2012, 11-12

⁷⁴ Park 2012, 12.

⁷⁵ Park 2012, 15.

⁷⁶ Park 2012, 25.

⁷⁷ Park 2012, 26.

⁷⁸ Jones 1963, 177; Magie 1950, 640-641; Fox 1987, 51.

⁷⁹ Park 2012, 30.

form of a collective of assemblies from the nations.”⁸⁰ Van Kooten’s arguments about similarities between the secular and the Christian ἐκκλησία are to me well founded, but there are important dissimilarities that he misses, among which Paul’s family imagery is most lacking.

3.4 The ἐκκλησία “of God”

In 1 Cor 1:1, 10:32, 11:16, 22, 15:9; 2 Cor 1:1; 2 Thess 1:4; 2:14 and Gal 1:13, Paul qualifies the term ἐκκλησία by adding τοῦ θεοῦ (of God), stating its interdependence of God in its very core definition. G. K. Beale and several commentators makes the interesting suggestion that Paul’s references to ἐκκλησία without the following “of God” are presumably abbreviations of “church of God.”⁸¹ Beale argues that Paul alludes to Neh 13:1 which is the only place in all of the LXX where the full phrase ἐκκλησία θεοῦ occurs. He concludes that the “similarity between Nehemiah and Paul’s churches in their reading and teaching of scripture may have been part of what sparked Paul ... to focus on ‘the assembly of God’ allusion from Neh 13:1.”⁸² In contrast to Beale, Park fails to acknowledge the phrase ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, but argues that the LXX translators were well aware of the political weight of the word ἐκκλησία in their political world. The civic nature of the LXX ἐκκλησία is central to Park, when he argues that the ἐκκλησία at Mount Sinai was the archetype of all subsequent ἐκκλησία for the Israelites.⁸³ In the LXX the term was almost always used exclusively for the assembly representing the whole nation, implying the discontinuation with the New Testament counterpart.⁸⁴ Last is also critical towards the LXX background: “These whole assemblies of Israel were, of course, ad hoc and huge. So, it is difficult to imagine how and why either Paul or the Corinthians would identify their small and scheduled weekly meetings (1 Cor. 16:1-2) with one-off gatherings of an entire ethnic group.”⁸⁵

The significance of Beale’s insight is twofold, in my opinion: (1) the direct use from the LXX proves Paul’s desire to be in continuity with the Scripture and its Jewish heritage; (2) when Paul uses ἐκκλησία it is always to be understood as an abbreviation of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. Beale rightly points to the clear LXX background for Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία.⁸⁶ Out of the 60 times ἐκκλησία occurs in Paul’s letters, twelve have the addition τοῦ θεοῦ. The fact that Paul after his conversion identified himself as a Christ-believing Jew indicates that Paul identified the local ἐκκλησία as an entity called by God himself, just as in the OT. The local ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ is

⁸⁰ Van Kooten 2012, 537.

⁸¹ Beale 2015, 155. See also; Schmidt 1965, 505, 507, 516; Roloff 1990, 412; Marshall 1972/73, 363; Trebilco 2011, 176-78.

⁸² Beale 2015, 154.

⁸³ Park 2012, 89.

⁸⁴ Park 2012, 219.

⁸⁵ Last 2016, 408.

⁸⁶ Beale 2015, 152.

therefore the starting point of understanding further renderings of the concept such as the house ἐκκλησία and the universal ἐκκλησία. The fact that the local ἐκκλησία, without the qualifying τοῦ θεοῦ, had a secular counterpart in the Greco-Roman world does not indicate that Paul thought it secular in nature, i.e. that it only existed when gathered, but that he found its origin in the LXX both as ἐκκλησία and ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. Park places too much weight on the Greco-Roman influence and fails to take into account the centrality of the twelve occurrences of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ in Paul. The Jewishness of Paul has to stay undisputed when considering Rom 9:2-5:

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

However, Park's arguments in favour of the Greco-Roman influence is not to be fully disregarded. He rightly argues that the Jewish people had been "amply exposed to Greek political culture."⁸⁷ Paul was surely affected by culture outside his Jewish heritage, but I find it inconsistent with overall New Testament theology to claim that the origin of the ἐκκλησία is to be found anywhere outside of the LXX. Why would Paul want to build and refer to an ἐκκλησία in discontinuity with its LXX counterpart? Paul could very well have been balancing both spheres of influence, but I regard the addition of τοῦ θεοῦ to ἐκκλησία, by which Paul refers to both an eschatologically and historically anchored entity, as highly significant, implying that the Jewish background is the most influential on Paul's understanding.

3.5 ἐκκλησία as the Assembly of God

The most common rendering of ἐκκλησία in Paul's letters is the identifiable, literal gathering in a particular place.⁸⁸ When he wants to describe more than one local congregation he uses the plural (1 Cor 16:1, 19; Gal 1:2; 1 Thess 2:14). We observe in 1 Cor 11:18-20 the primary sense of the assembly and meeting place: "For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it [...] When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat."

This primary use of ἐκκλησία in the NT as gathering predominates overwhelmingly. This fact should not lead us to the conclusion that the ἐκκλησία was secular in nature, as Park argues. I agree with O'Brien that concludes: "As in the case of ancient Israel, the gatherings referred to by

⁸⁷ Park 2012, 218.

⁸⁸ BDAG, s.v. ἐκκλησία.

our term [assembly of God] were in order to hear the Word of God and to worship.”⁸⁹ The connection to the OT is clear in this regard.

3.6 Conclusion: The Priority of Jewish Influence

It is puzzling that Paul choose the word ἐκκλησία for the Christian gatherings when considering that the Hellenistic counterpart was a democratic institution well known to all who lived in this part of the world. It would also be well known that the size of these gatherings was very large and political in nature. We could almost label these assemblies as universal in nature, gathering thousands of people. How can we connect them with Paul’s understanding of the Christian communities? Could Paul have envisioned or compared the LXX ἐκκλησία to its Hellenistic counterpart? Both the LXX and the civic ἐκκλησία only existed when gathered, but there were no democratic attributes in the ἐκκλησία of the LXX. Hence, if we view Paul’s communities as copies of the LXX or the Hellenistic ἐκκλησία we run into problems.

Did Paul want to create the equivalent of a Greek democratic institution with civic connotations, as argued by Miller and Park? We need to remind ourselves that even though Paul was on a Gentile mission, he could hardly have had the enormous gatherings of the civic ἐκκλησία in mind when constructing the small Christian communities. Here Banks’s argument in favor of a dual influence is especially interesting. I agree that Paul’s communities were appropriate for his time. I suggest that Paul balanced the Jewish heritage and the LXX origin of his communities with an already established concept in everyday life of the Greek citizen, but with a stronger influence of the first. Paul used the established and known term ἐκκλησία even though it carried secular connotations. Can we trace the origin of the ἐκκλησία to the classical Greek period? Yes. Was it still in function in the Hellenistic period? Yes, but perhaps its influence had diminished because of Roman rule. In my opinion, Paul did not primarily have in mind a democratic temporal gathering. Unlike Park we cannot assume that Paul had in mind a clear civic connotation when choosing the term. The fact that Paul referred to the LXX ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ LXX suggests that the Old Testament background is of decisive importance.

The scholarly controversy about how to value Jewish and Hellenistic influence in Paul’s ἐκκλησία communities has been the main focus of this chapter. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the organization of these communities in light of what has been said thus far.

⁸⁹ O’Brien 1993, 125.

4. The ἐκκλησία as Familial or Civic Gathering?

4.1 ἐκκλησία as a House Church

We again observe the description of an identifiable gathering, with the distinction that the believers met in a particular home. Examples of such house groups can be found in Nympha's house in Laodicea (Col 4:15), in Colossae, Philemon's house was used as a meeting place (Philem 2) and also in Lydia's home at Philippi (Acts 16:15, 40). In Rom 16:5 a house church (οἶκον ἐκκλησίαν) is mentioned. Similarly, the gathering in the house of Aquila and Prisca is referred to as ἡ ἐκκλησία κατ' οἶκον αὐτῶν, "the church in their house" (1 Cor 16:19). In Corinth we observe that the qualification "the whole church", implies that they also gathered in smaller units (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23).

Last criticizes the scholarly assumption that the "whole church" in Corinth indicates that there was a series of house churches connected to the ἐκκλησία. He points out that they are mentioned simply as "houses."⁹⁰ Can we accurately describe the Corinthian ἐκκλησία as an example of the existence of house churches? Last is critical of this labeling which, to him, "seems to be a reflection of the contemporary cultural context, not a proper social description of the supposed 'basic unit' of the ancient Jesus movement."⁹¹

In contrast to Last, Banks strongly advocates the house-church idea, and argues that to embrace the gospel is to enter into community. When Paul alludes to the whole church, the implication is that at other times the Christians in Corinth came together in small groups, quite possibly also as "church".⁹² In Rome, Banks argues, "there is no suggestion, presumably due to the size of the city, that Christians ever met as a whole in one place."⁹³ Banks finds it unlikely that the "whole church" in Corinth could have exceeded 45 people.⁹⁴ Even if we cannot find explicit evidence of such an assumption in the texts, it is probable that many of the early Pauline communities were small during the early stages of Paul's mission. Admittedly, it is problematic to assume the existence of house churches in Rome and Corinth when explicit evidence is missing, rather we observe the mention of "houses". However, I think we have to assume that the Christians gathered in smaller groups. How else are we to understand the "whole church" in 1 Corinthians other than that it implies smaller parts of the same church?

⁹⁰ Last 2016, 408.

⁹¹ Last 2016, 406.

⁹² Banks 1980, 38.

⁹³ Banks 1980, 39.

⁹⁴ Banks 1980, 42.

Roger Gehring claims that a house church has the following constitution: (1) A group that has developed its own religious life; (2) The content of the regular gatherings of the group includes worship, proclamation, baptism, communion, prayer and fellowship; (3) It has organizational structures.⁹⁵ He concludes, “In recent research scholars tend to agree that the early Christian movement was characterized by the coexistence of two church forms: the house church and the whole church at any given location.”⁹⁶ Last argues, and I agree, that there is lack of evidence for Gehring’s definition and that it sounds too similar to a traditional local church. Last questions the scholarly view that in Corinth, the house church would have assembled many times each week, and that they practiced the same activities at the city-wide assembly. Last asks why they would meet daily, if the city-wide ἐκκλησία already assembled weekly. One can, in turn, question Last’s objection. Why would they not assemble many times a week? In Acts 5:42 we observe that Christ-followers met every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.⁹⁷

Park argues that if one sets aside the letter of Philemon as an exceptional situation, the only group called “house church” is the family of Prisca and Aquila. Paul struggled in Philemon and 1 Corinthians to prevent his church from “becoming totally absorbed in a household orientation while using the term οἶκος for worship space.”⁹⁸ By using the civic tone of the word ἐκκλησία Paul reminded his audience of the public dimension of the church. Park argues that even though almost all Christian gatherings took place in a home setting Paul rarely uses ἐκκλησία for a household, and therefore contrasts the household imagery with the civic nature of the church.⁹⁹

Park’s conclusion is in consonance with the evidence. The concept of the house church is clearly observed in the disputed letters (Col 4:15), but also in the undisputed letters (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Philem 2). These references cannot be explained as exceptions. There are also external non-Pauline references to house churches (Acts 16:15, 40). Another problem with Park’s conclusion is his presupposition that Paul was at all motivated by replicating the secular Hellenistic ἐκκλησία as a model for his communities. In my view, Park is inconsistent in his way of relating to the house church and does not, in the above example, elaborate or give evidence for the so-called struggle with the household orientation in Philemon, which is all the more problematic since he describes it as an “explicit” example.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Gehring 2004, 27.

⁹⁶ Gehring 2004, 157.

⁹⁷ It is, hence, possible to argue that for Paul, the early Christian community in Jerusalem constitutes as an example of fellowship that could translate into Paul’s communities.

⁹⁸ Park 2012, 132.

⁹⁹ Park 2012, 133.

¹⁰⁰ Park 2012, 132.

Even if Park does not deny the existence of house churches in Corinth, he opposes the idea that it was organized as several house churches as well as a larger gathering, which the Christians attended simultaneously. Instead Park argues that the typical house church was not established with any strategic organizational effort but was an improvised response to Paul's teaching. To Park it is a great mistake to assume that all house churches were organized into the same form.¹⁰¹ He rightly warns against easily affirming that Paul thought of all house fellowships as an ἐκκλησία. I agree with Park's point that it is problematic to draw conclusions from 1 Corinthians about the organization of the Church.

4.2 The ἐκκλησία as a Civic Assembly

When advocating the civic nature of the ἐκκλησία gathering, Park argues: (1) Most instances of the term ἐκκλησία in the LXX denote the assembly representing the whole nation; (2) The LXX ἐκκλησία is less concerned about the procedures and discussions than it is about the result; (3) The Jewish people in both the diaspora and Palestine had been amply exposed to Greek political culture.¹⁰² From this background, Park continues his arguments for the civic connotation of the ἐκκλησία. He suggests that for the inhabitants in Greek cities the term ἐκκλησία meant a civic assembly and did not so much mean a casual meeting. Park rightly questions Bank's pre-Christian definition: "any gathering of a group of people."¹⁰³ Indeed, this oversimplified statement by Banks is not an adequate description and highlights the problem of exaggerating one particular interpretation of ἐκκλησία over another. Park makes his civic interpretation of the term clear when he writes:

Paul utilized the political capacity of this word to establish his letters' recipients as the honourable citizens in an ἐκκλησία and relied in the diplomatic nuances of this word to locate his ἐκκλησία in the web of translocal relationship. The genre of epistle provided Paul with a unique chance to interpret the recipients' status in the new reality of faith in Christ, as well as a chance to secure the authoritative platform from which to speak in form of the civic ἐκκλησία, [...] corresponding to the idea of a single ἐκκλησία per city.¹⁰⁴

To Park, the pre-Pauline usage of ἐκκλησία was possibly modified in the references of "abuse" and of "officials titles" in that they carried a universal nuance.¹⁰⁵ He argues that the civic scale and public nature of ἐκκλησία were drastically different from those of the private οἶκος. He states that in

¹⁰¹ Park 2012, 169.

¹⁰² Park 2012, 97.

¹⁰³ Banks 1980, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Park 2012, 124.

¹⁰⁵ Park 2012, 127.

1 Corinthians Paul utilized the civic term as leverage in order to highlight the divine nature of the community, which was in danger of being absorbed by the influence of owner of the facility where the ἐκκλησία gathered. Further, he points out that “scholars should take care not to over-emphasize the influence of the domestic residence as the early Christians’ worship place on the group’s social formation, ethos, and theology.”¹⁰⁶ He finds support for his civic nature of the ἐκκλησία in the assumption that there was a set civic organization in Corinth. In my opinion, this is analogous to what he critiques Banks of doing, when he argues for a similar set organization of a series of Corinthian house churches. Here Korner rightly has found a middle ground between the civic and house ἐκκλησία. He identifies the ἐκκλησία as a non-civic organization, but concludes that Paul gave the early Christ-followers a political identity and consequently provided them with a type of defense mechanism in the ancient Greco-Roman society.¹⁰⁷

4.3 ἐκκλησία as a Universal Entity

When investigating the use of ἐκκλησία as a universal entity we understand it as a locally undefinable phenomenon. Arguably, it is used in this way in 18 places in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 10:32, 11:22, 12:28, 15:9; Col 1:18, 24; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6; Eph 1:22, 3:10, 21, 5:23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 32; 1 Tim 3:15), and in seven additional places in the NT.¹⁰⁸

Even though Banks prefer to use the term “heavenly church” in opposition to “universal church.”¹⁰⁹ The earthly universal ἐκκλησία could be comprised of both the identifiable local gathering of Christ-believers, as well as the totality of all the churches. It could at the same time be other-worldly or heavenly in its close connection to the risen Christ (as we have seen already mentioned in Acts 9:4). I agree with Banks that the Pauline churches “lacked any unified organizational framework.”¹¹⁰ Yet, he continues, they were “the visible manifestation of a universal and eternal commonwealth in which men could become citizens.”¹¹¹

Park argues that whenever the ἐκκλησία had universal connotations, it relates to the pre-Pauline era and thereby the ἐκκλησία developed from the singular ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem into a Pauline “Gentile-plural” paradigm. This transition was to Park not smooth or free from struggle.¹¹² His conclusion is speculative and therefore problematic in at least two areas: He builds on the assumptions that, (1) polemic existed between the Gentile and the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία and; (2) that

¹⁰⁶ Park, 2012, 220.

¹⁰⁷ Korner 2017, 263.

¹⁰⁸ Matt 16:18; Acts 5:11, 8:3, 9:3, 12:5, 20:28; Heb 12:23.

¹⁰⁹ Banks 1980, 45-47.

¹¹⁰ Banks 1980, 48.

¹¹¹ Banks 1980, 49.

¹¹² Park 2012, 134.

the absence of the term ἐκκλησία in Romans and in the post-Pauline epistles implies Jerusalem's centrality.¹¹³ Even though we can observe a struggle between Peter and Paul in Galatians, we cannot find additional support that there was in fact a continuous schism in the Pauline corpus. The second argument, which is from silence, is hence not a strong argument. I suggest that the general centrality of the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία was undisputed, but to attribute it the whole role of the universal ἐκκλησία is to me problematic. One could both subscribe the title "universal" to the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία without disqualifying the later Pauline ἐκκλησία from being included in the term, on the basis that the constitution and origin of the ἐκκλησία can be found in the LXX as the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ as well as its diversity in size and place in the NT. One defining factor that shifted the weight from Jerusalem to the Gentile ἐκκλησία could have been the persecution and scattering of the ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem that we observe in Acts 8:1.

To Korner, Paul's ἐκκλησία can be defined as a socio-ethically inclusive sub-group designation with a universal dimension. Korner argues that as with the supra-local ἐκκλησία in the LXX, Paul speaks of "his regionally disparate, yet trans-locally connected, ἐκκλησία (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2) as together forming a universal ἐκκλησία of Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman Christ-followers who together share in the salvation history of socio-ethnic Israel (1 Cor 12:28)."¹¹⁴ Korner point out that Paul equates the "body of Christ" in 1 Cor 12:27 with the ἐκκλησία. So far so good. But he concludes that it seems to be feasible to suggest that there was no universal designation that was adopted by all Christ-followers. He thus fails to connect the rich descriptions of the ἐκκλησία found in Col and Eph to his conclusions made from his study of the undisputed letters of Paul in general and 1 Cor in particular. The result is the conclusion that Paul does not unequivocally use the word ἐκκλησία in a universal sense. The imagery of the ἐκκλησία as the body of Christ can, according to Korner, be referring only to the Corinthian community.¹¹⁵ Even though Korner could be correct in his assertions regarding the Corinthian ἐκκλησία, in view of the wider context of NT scripture (such as Col 1:18 "He is the head of the body, the church...") his conclusion regarding the universal ἐκκλησία is questionable.

There are three passages of special interest in the undisputed Pauline letters: (1) In 1 Cor 10:32: "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God [...]." He is here not speaking of a local congregation but of a third group of people (the Christians) who exists besides Jews and Greeks. (2) In 1 Cor 12:28, Paul says that God has appointed [...] in the church first apostles, second prophets [...]. This passage clearly denotes the global community of Christ-followers, or a universal entity. This description of the church in a distinctively trans-local way, points towards a

¹¹³ Park 2012, 135.

¹¹⁴ Korner 2014, 237.

¹¹⁵ Korner 2014, 262.

different understanding of the ἐκκλησία than that of the local gathering. (3) In Phil 3:6: [...] “as to zeal a persecutor of the church” [...] We here observe that Paul identifies the ἐκκλησία as a different entity than a specific local occurrence. An important parallel passage can be found in Acts 9:4 when Paul is confronted by Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’.” As we know by context, Jesus is here referring to the church. The fact that the ἐκκλησία as a universal concept is identified in the early Pauline Corpus, suggests that the idea was incorporated in the early stages of the development of the ἐκκλησία.

In Paul’s later writings the language used when describing the universal ἐκκλησία is more elaborate. In Col 1:18 and in Eph 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-24, 27, 29, 32, we observe that the ἐκκλησία is described as a heavenly, eschatological community to which all believers belong. One example of the universal implications can be found in Eph 3:10-11: “That through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

4.4 Conclusion

The fact that Paul used the already established secular word ἐκκλησία for the Christian communities had its benefits, but if we understand, and we should, the secular ἐκκλησία as a continuous meeting place in a Greek city state, it is a far stretch to place Paul’s ἐκκλησία in the same tradition, when considering the small size of the gatherings. I suggest that the small units of Christians throughout the Pauline communities, reflected a distinct concept of the ἐκκλησία. There are too many Pauline passages to disregard the representation and importance of the ἐκκλησία as a smaller gathering. Thus, we need to identify the house gathering as a proper ἐκκλησία in Paul’s understanding of the term.¹¹⁶ Indeed, the house gathering can be a basic unit of the church when we consider the close connection with the household imagery used in 1 Tim 3:15 and Eph 2:19 and when adopting the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία as role model of the ideal community.

I suggest that every local gathering of Christians that worship Christ is by definition a ἐκκλησία. I therefore conclude that the house gathering is as much an ἐκκλησία as the larger local congregation. I also conclude that the civic connotation was a positive byproduct, but not the main idea of Paul’s ἐκκλησία construct. In Acts 20:20-21 we find an additional clue of the centrality of the house as a meeting place in early Christianity: “How I did not shrink from declaring to you

¹¹⁶ Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 2; cf. Acts 16:15, 40.

anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The connection to the LXX ἐκκλησία or to the Greco-Roman world is in this regard not clear. The LXX ἐκκλησία was constituted as a gathering of the whole people of Israel. As Banks has rightly argued, it is necessary to understand the house ἐκκλησία in the light of Paul’s introduction of Christian family imagery. The new Christians belonged to the “body” observed in the first half of 1 Corinthians, and to the “household of God” observed in 1 Tim 3:15. I therefore conclude that Paul introduced a new type of gathering with the house ἐκκλησία, which can neither be traced to a Jewish nor to a Greco-Roman equivalent, but was unique in nature.

In my opinion, the notion of a universal ἐκκλησία finds its *raison d’être* in its close connection to ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. It is an assembly initiated by God himself. It is therefore heavenly in nature and is in fact universal in the sense that it is held together and connected to God himself. The key for understanding the elusiveness of the universal ἐκκλησία can be found in the LXX counterpart, which in nature is not just an assembly, but an assembly of God. The eschatological nature of the universal ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ is reflected in Matthew 16:18: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” When Paul organized the Christian communities, it is clear that he envisioned both the identifiable local gathering and an unidentifiable universal entity enabled and created by God himself.

Chapter 5. Summary and Conclusions

5.1 The Jewish Influence on Paul's Understanding of ἐκκλησία

Paul's ministry concentrated on the planting of Christian communities among the Gentiles. He continued to establish and strengthen them through reoccurring visits and instructional correspondence. Even when in strained relationships as with the Corinthian ἐκκλησία he never reduced his commitment, giving evidence to his passion for building the kingdom of God through the local communities of Christians. His teaching of the church needs to be deduced by investigating the themes of the ἐκκλησία in terms of descriptive language, metaphors, theological insights and pastoral advice. In his early writings, his description of the ἐκκλησία is more simplistic and focuses on the local assembly of God. In his later writings like Ephesians and Colossians, we can observe a richer and more developed description of the ἐκκλησία. This continuity between the earlier undisputed and the later disputed Pauline letters is key to understanding Paul's ecclesiology.

Paul's desire to be in continuity with the OT and its Jewish heritage is central when we trace the origin of the ἐκκλησία. Paul self-identified as a Christ-believing Jew with a God-given mission to take the gospel to the Gentile Greco-Roman world. I therefore conclude that Paul deliberately adopted the free LXX-term ἐκκλησία for his communities which translated this desire to be in harmony with the OT without disqualifying the Jews as the chosen people of God or their designated gathering of the synagogue. In the LXX, the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ ("assembly of God") stands out as the very core of what Paul wanted his communities to resemble: A gathering that was called together by God himself. The significance of this fact can easily be disregarded as periphery. Many scholars have failed to give enough notice to its implication – that we are to view every occurrence of the term ἐκκλησία as an abbreviation of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. The significance of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ not only places Paul's communities in harmony with the OT and the Jewish heritage, but more importantly, it emphasizes the God-genitive of the assembly. I have argued that Paul balanced both the Jewish/LXX and the Hellenistic background when naming the Christian gatherings ἐκκλησία. The contemporary Hellenistic ἐκκλησία was a democratic institution known to all Greeks at the time of Paul. Even if there is doubt as to how influential it was in comparison to the ἐκκλησία of classical Athens, it was clearly still a place for public discourse and justice, and was important to the Greek democratic system, despite Roman rule.

As stated earlier, I suggest that the Paul's ἐκκλησία was an abbreviation of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, which makes it wholly different to its secular counterpart. I also suggest that Paul's desire to be in harmony with the LXX and the Jewish heritage was not at the expense of being in tune with

the contemporary Hellenistic society: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

I conclude that the Hellenistic influence was in the background for Paul, and that his main influence was the LXX ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. I also argue that Paul uses the lens of the gospel when balancing the Hellenistic and Jewish background of the ἐκκλησία. Hence, what is beneficial for spreading the gospel is the underlying motive and drive of Paul. His gospel-centered community blended in a genius way the OT heritage and contemporary society without becoming either a Jewish or a Greek entity.

5.2 The ἐκκλησία as a Local Gathering and a Universal Entity

The most common rendering of ἐκκλησία was the literal gathering in a particular place. I argue that this included house churches. The distinction between the “whole church” and its implicated smaller units in 1 Corinthians, could indicate that Paul’s had in mind a house church design for his communities. The private house of one of the wealthier new Christians can be seen as the only plausible place where the ἐκκλησία could gather, given the fact that it took several hundred years before the early church had its own buildings. Perhaps every Pauline Christian gathering was small, maybe no more than 45 people. This fact indicates that it was natural for Paul to adopt a house environment as the gathering place for his communities. The few instances in the NT where an implicit house church is mentioned must be taken seriously as to not diminish their significance as circumstantial. One key aspect to understanding Paul’s communities is in light of Paul’s introduction of Christian family imagery. The new Christians belonged to the “body” observed in the first half of 1 Corinthians, and to the “household of God” observed in 1 Tim 3:15. I therefore conclude that Paul introduced a new type of gathering with the ἐκκλησία, which can be traced firstly to a Jewish and secondly to a Hellenistic origin, but was still unique in nature.

Simultaneously I suggest that Paul understood the ἐκκλησία to be other-worldly or universal. The local ἐκκλησία was not an island but connected to a larger body (of Christ). Even though the ἐκκλησία lacked a unified organizational framework I suggest that it was still connected to other ἐκκλησίαι in the region as well as to the ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem (i.e. by Paul’s engagement for the saints in Jerusalem observed in Rom 15). Paul himself was the chief organizer and designer of such a trans-local idea of the early church.

As mentioned, I argue that when Paul organized the early church he had mainly the household and body imagery in mind. He thus combined the intimacy of the household with the eschatological, universal body of Christ. I suggest that every member of the local church was by effect also a member of a larger entity – a kind of double membership. Hence Paul organized the

ἐκκλησία as double-layered entity, where its members were part of both a small local gathering of Christians, but also connected to a universal body where Christ was both its head, instigator and the ultimate eschatological goal.

5.3 Theological Implications

Paul's organization of the early church suggests that it was still under construction. In my impression it was an organic and locally varied construction more than a static, in advance set organisation. Therefore, the ecclesiological implications are to me twofold: (1) Pauline church structure could comprise of different combinations of house groups, house churches and larger city-wide gatherings, independent or interdependent of each other, depending on the geographic and demographic context. (2) The Pauline church construct was inter-connected through Paul's gentile ministry as well as to the Jerusalem church. These two observations suggest that we are to understand the Pauline churches both as locally diverse as well as part of a larger international network of Christian communities. We cannot take lightly the inconsistency of Paul's community construct, and refrain from making either-or-judgements of whether or not Paul intended the church to be civic or family oriented. I have concluded that Paul still very much was a Jew when he constructed his communities. I suggest that he used the gospel as a lens when balancing LXX and Hellenistic influence. This indicates continuity with the OT as well as the teaching of Christ. We are hence forced to accept strong Jewish influence that transcends time. A kind of ancient-future theology construct where we can label Paul's communities as under development, with a God-given authority.

5.4 Further Studies

I suggest that the Jerusalem ἐκκλησία and Paul's relation to its origin and organization was formative to his Gentile mission and to the ἐκκλησία construct, but to what degree? In Rom 15 and Acts 15 we observe how Paul when visiting the "saints in Jerusalem" shows the outmost respect for the "pillars."¹¹⁷ What clues can be found in the NT of the connection between the Jerusalem church and the Pauline churches? Was in fact the Jerusalem church seen as a role model for Paul when he organized and planted his gentile churches? As mentioned, Park suggest that polemic existed between Paul and Peter. What evidence can be presented of a contrary position? I have suggested that in Paul's

¹¹⁷ Gal 2:9.

view the ἐκκλησία was far more than a local phenomenon. But how can the notion of ἐκκλησία as a universal idea translate into Pauline discourse? Another area (previously highlighted in this thesis) where further research is necessary is the ongoing debate on the extent to which voluntary associations and synagogues influenced Paul's communities.

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