

## “Global” and “Local” in the New Testament and in Earliest Christianity

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By Paul Trebilco

Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

In this paper I want to look at one way of discussing the broad subject of the nature of earliest Christianity, a way that has been overlooked in most of New Testament scholarship until recently. Here I will look at the sense of *place* in earliest Christianity; more precisely at what could be called the sense of the “global” or the “worldwide”, and the sense of the “local”. I hope that the relevance of this subject for our seminar topic of “*History and Theology of Mission in the New Testament: Global Challenges and Opportunities*” will become clear in due course. Here I will be painting with broad-brush strokes, in order to cover a range of material. I greatly look forward to discussion in the Seminar.

I want to begin by looking at what could be called the sense of worldwide connectedness in earliest Christianity.

### 1. The sense of the “global” in earliest Christianity

In early Christian literature, there is a very strong sense of being a worldwide movement or network. This is seen simply in the references to “the world” in the following passages:

Rom 1:8 “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed *throughout the world* (ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ).”

Col 1:5-6 “You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is *bearing fruit and growing in the whole world* (ἐν παντὶ τῷ κόσμῳ) so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves ...”

1 Pet 5:9: “Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters *in all the world* (τῇ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ὑμῶν ἀδελφότητι) are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

1 Tim 3:16 “[Jesus] was revealed in flesh ... proclaimed among Gentiles, believed on *in the world* (ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ), taken up in glory.”

These passages – and there are a number of others<sup>1</sup> - show the sense of not just belonging to a local group, or one restricted to a particular ethnic community, but rather, the sense of being a worldwide movement. Of course, their “world” was geographically smaller than ours, but it was still very considerable. Today, we might

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<sup>1</sup> See also 2 Cor 2:14: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us *spreads in every place* the fragrance that comes from knowing him”; Acts 13:47: “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation *to the ends of the earth*.’” Other passages which show a similar consciousness of the “world” are Matt 5:14; 8:11; 24:14; Mark 13:27; John 1:29; 3:16-17; 4:42; 12:47; Acts 1:8; Rom. 9:17; 10:18; 11:15; 16:16; 2 Cor. 3:2; 5:19; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 1:8; 1 John 4:14.

take the idea of Christianity being a global movement for granted. Yet, recall how small Christianity was in the first century. We do not know how many Christians there were; one recent estimate suggests there were 2,700 Christians in 60 CE, and 10,500 by 100 CE.<sup>2</sup> But on any reckoning, early Christianity was numerically very small. Yet it had this sense of being “for the world”, and, for example, of the faith of the Romans being proclaimed “throughout the world”. I would suggest that this sense of “world-wideness” was a vital element in early Christian identity.

### 1.1 Connections

Not only did the early Christians see themselves as a worldwide movement, but they also understood themselves to be interconnected, and to “belong together”. The evidence for this has suggested to one author that we should think of first-century Christianity as “the Holy Internet” – a network of interconnected groups.<sup>3</sup>

This sense of interconnectedness was in part caused by all the *contact* between Christians in different places. By contrast with what I am suggesting here, it has been common in the past to think of at least some early Christian communities as insulated, isolated and introverted, and hence to see them as unaware of what was going on for other Christian groups in other places. But when we look at what we know of early Christianity from this period, this seems very unlikely. Rather, a strong sense of interconnectedness and of networking emerges.

Take Rom 16 for example. Here Paul, writing in Corinth, sends greetings to 28 people in Rome. He had not visited Rome, yet he can greet this number of people. Perhaps he knew some only by reputation, but he probably knew a good number of them personally. It is likely that he had met some of them during *his* travels, when they lived elsewhere, but he had also met some of them during *their* travels – perhaps they visited him when he was in Antioch, or Corinth, or Ephesus or Philippi, and now they had moved to Rome. This is a snapshot of the mobility of the earliest Christians, and a testimony to interconnectedness.

There is much further evidence for interconnections in early Christianity. Firstly, note further details about mobility. As Bauckham notes: “mobility and communication in the first-century Roman world were exceptionally high. Unprecedentedly good roads and unprecedentedly safe travel by both land and sea made the Mediterranean world of this time more closely interconnected than any large area of the ancient world had ever been.”<sup>4</sup> It was not only the wealthy who travelled; ordinary folk went on trips to healing shrines, to religious festivals and to games; slaves accompanied masters; soldiers, sailors and brigands all travelled. Even people who did not travel would regularly be meeting people who did. We should think then of the members of the early Christian communities as people who were quite mobile, and frequent contact between Christian communities would have been the norm. Of course, the leaders of the early Christian groups also travelled a great deal; think of the travels we know about for Paul, Timothy, Titus, John Mark, Peter, Barnabas, Apollos, Priscilla and

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<sup>2</sup> See Bas van Os 2006, p13. Cf. R. Jewett 2007, p61-2, who thinks that there were several thousand Christians in Rome alone by 64 CE. But my overall point would not be affected by a much higher estimate of Christian numbers.

<sup>3</sup> See Thompson 1998, p49-70.

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham 1998, p32; see in general Casson 1974.

Aquila, Andronicus and Junia, and Philip the evangelist and his four daughters who were prophets. Later in the first century we know of travelling teachers like John, the author of Revelation, and he speaks of travelling people who call themselves apostles (Revelation 2:2). The Johannine letters speak of travelling teachers (2 John 10-11; 3 John 3-8) as does the *Didache* (11:1-6). But ordinary people travelled too – as Romans 16 shows. All of this is the stuff of interconnectedness.

Secondly, in letters, Christian writers regularly related their readers to the worldwide Christian movement, and to Christians elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul writes: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, ... called to be saints, *together with all those who in every place* call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Here, because of the situation in Corinth, Paul is intentionally connecting the Corinthian Christians to all Christians everywhere. In 1 Thessalonians 2:14 he relates the Thessalonian Christians to those in Judea: “For you, brothers and sisters, *became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea*”.

Or note the number of times in 1 and 2 Corinthians when Paul speaks of “all the churches”. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:17 we read: “let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in *all the churches*.” Or 1 Corinthians 11:16 “But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do *the churches of God*.”<sup>5</sup> Paul seems often to be deliberately connecting the Corinthians to all the other believers. This is part of his strategy for calling the difficult Corinthians into line: take note, he says, of how all the other Christian communities do things. But he also forges connections from one community to another in other letters as well.<sup>6</sup>

So the sense of *belonging together* was fostered by many reminders of others, in other places, who shared the same experiences, or who did things in the same way. Again, the implication is that they all belonged together.

Thirdly, the actual *sending* of letters was a way of establishing and fostering connections between groups. From the time of Paul and through the second century, the sending of letters from one church to another was a common practice. Paul is, of course, our best example, but there are others. Simply think of 1 Peter, written by Peter and other leaders in Rome,<sup>7</sup> to churches spread throughout Asia Minor, or John writing Revelation to seven churches, or Christian leaders in Rome writing 1 Clement to the church of Corinth around 95 CE, or Ignatius writing to six different churches, or Polycarp of Smyrna writing to the church of Philippi. In the mid-second century, Dionysius, bishop of Corinth wrote seven letters to various churches.<sup>8</sup> And the letters that have survived are probably only the tip of the iceberg.

<sup>5</sup> See also 1 Cor 4:17; 14:33; 2 Cor 8:18; 11:28.

<sup>6</sup> See for example 1 Thess 1:7-8; 2 Thess 1:4; and the greetings in Rom 16:16 and 1 Cor 16:19; see further Hvalvik 2005, p126-133. He speaks of Paul creating “an ‘ecumenical consciousness’ in his churches” (p133).

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Pet 5:13.

<sup>8</sup> See Eusebius HE 4.23.1-12.

These letters established strong connections between churches. But letters were carried by people; Phoebe carried Romans for example.<sup>9</sup> Each letter implies a messenger; this person was often the letter's first interpreter, who probably stayed for a few days before going home. They would be given hospitality, would meet with the whole church for worship and to read and interpret the letter, convey oral news that was additional to what was written down, and receive news to take back home.<sup>10</sup> Hence letters meant written contacts, but also very tangible personal contacts, that must have established warm personal relationships. These letter-carriers forged strong links between churches, and even Christians who did not travel must have gained a strong sense of belonging to a much wider movement from contact with such messengers.

There is another interesting insight in this regard from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written in Rome in the early second century.<sup>11</sup> In the vision Hermas was told to make two copies of the book he wrote; one was for Clement who "will send his [copy] to the foreign cities, for that is his commission" (*Vis* 2.4.3). Thus, "Clement was the Roman church's secretary responsible for communications with other churches. This ... included having multiple copies made of Christian literature produced in Rome and sending the copies out by messengers to other churches."<sup>12</sup> So Hermas provides us with detailed evidence of the way in which Christian literature was deliberately circulated and links between groups were developed. Again, this fosters contact, and a sense of belonging.

Fourthly, in these letters, the language of the *family* is regularly used. Paul speaks of all Christians as "ἀδελφοί - brothers and sisters"; this is the most common way of addressing each other in the NT.<sup>13</sup> "Brothers and sisters" is used even of people the readers do not know personally. Note 1 Peter 5:9: "Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your *brothers and sisters in all the world* are undergoing the same kinds of suffering." You do not know all these people – they are "in all the world" – but they are your brothers and sisters, and you belong together. The language of family, of calling each other brothers and sisters, cements these bonds of connectedness. 1 Peter is written to suffering Christians; for a small group which was experiencing suffering, its precarious position would be greatly assisted by that sense of solidarity with other "brothers and sisters" in the family, not only locally, but also "in all the world". This language of fictive kinship encouraged new Christians to replace their natural family bonds (which may have been severed by conversion in any case) with new Christian ties that encompassed family members everywhere. So the almost universal early Christian practice of calling each other "brothers and sisters" cements the sense of being a global inter-connected movement.

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<sup>9</sup> See Rom 16:1-2; see also Jewett 2007, p22-23, who notes that Tertius (see Rom 16:22) was probably Phoebe's scribe, and that Tertius would have read the letter aloud.

<sup>10</sup> See Richards 2004, p201-209. See also 1 Cor 4:17; 2 Cor 2:4; 7:5-16; Eph 6:20-21; Phil 2:25-29; Col 4:7-9; 1 Thess 5:27.

<sup>11</sup> See Ehrman 2003, p169 who dates the book "during the early part of the second century, perhaps 110-40 CE."

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham 1998, p42. See also Polycarp, *Philippians* 13.1-2, concerning the exchange of letters from one place to another.

<sup>13</sup> In general see Aasgaard 2004.

Fifthly, we should not think that only peace and harmony was fostered by all of this interconnectedness. The evidence for conflict and diversity in earliest Christianity is again testimony to interaction. The network, the “Holy Internet”, was a vehicle for conflict and disagreement, as well as for support. Think of the evidence for rivalry between leaders. Paul speaks a number of times of other teachers who are, in his view, leading his congregations astray; we note Galatians and 2 Corinthians 10-13 in particular. Or note Revelation with its reference to those who think they are apostles but are not (Rev 2:2), or to the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6, 15), and to Jezebel (Rev 2:20-23) – all travelling teachers. We get the impression of itinerant teachers of a range of persuasions turning up in different places. There are divisions, factions, disputes; different ideas are circulating. The evidence for conflict and disagreement suggests, not enclaves of isolated churches, but teachers and leaders promoting different things in different places and an intense interest in conflicts happening elsewhere. This speaks of world-wide inter-connectedness.

Late in the second century, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus could write: “Therefore I for my part, brothers and sisters, who number sixty-five years in the Lord and have conversed with the brothers and sisters from all parts of the world ...”<sup>14</sup> Such a claim is credible, and the evidence suggests that many Christians in the first two centuries could have made it. With this amount of contact on “the Holy Internet” it is unsurprising that Christianity saw itself as a world-wide movement.<sup>15</sup>

So there is extensive evidence that early Christianity was not a collection of relatively isolated, introverted communities, but rather a network of communities in close communication with each other; one dimension of their social identity was a strong, lively and informed sense of participation in a global movement. We do not see enclaves of exclusive, self-sufficient churches out of communication with others. Rather we have quite the opposite: a network of geographically dispersed communities with close and constant communication amongst themselves.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Theology

There were very significant *theological reasons* for early Christianity seeing itself as a world-wide movement of inter-connected groups. Let me then briefly discuss these theological underpinnings.

Firstly, note the use of “in Christ language”, not only in Paul but also in books like 1 Peter (3:16; 5:10, 14). Recall a verse like Galatians 3:28 “There is no longer Jew or

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<sup>14</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.24.7.

<sup>15</sup> Further evidence could be developed here. One obvious area is that of the Pauline Collection; this clearly attempted to foster a sense of “belonging” across Jewish and Gentile Christianity, and between different churches across a wide geographical area. See further Hvalvik 2005, p141-3.

<sup>16</sup> I am not claiming that Christians were unique in forming a network; for a discussion of “connectedness” amongst Diaspora Jews see Barclay 1996, p418-424; for limited “translocal links” among associations see Ascough 1997, p223-241. But on the “lack of models for an international religious operation that seeks to win new converts in new regions and establish new religious communities in new cities and towns”, see Schnabel 2004, p536-545 (quote from p536).

Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; *for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” We might add – and not just in one place, but everywhere. Here is a powerful sense of solidarity with one another, which was fundamental to their experience. Such a sense of belonging is not just an “add-on”, an additional extra as it were, but rather is at the heart of their new community. Given the experience and belief that all Christians were “in-Christ” *together*, we can easily see how both a sense of connectedness, and the sense of being a worldwide movement emerged.

Secondly, note the language of Jesus as the “second” or “new Adam”, in Romans 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45. Again, this powerfully speaks of the worldwide implications of early Christian faith. Jesus had created a new humanity, a new human race, spread over all the world. Passages like 2 Corinthians 5:19 speak of this Adam-wide, world-wide dimension of Jesus’ work: “in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself”.

But such creation-wide language is found elsewhere. Recall the Johannine Pentecost in John 20:22: “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” This consciously recalls Genesis 2 – God breathing into Adam. This “breathing” on the disciples by the risen Christ is an event as epochal, as significant, as the first creation – and with creation-wide significance.

Thus, their theology was of the renewal of humanity as a whole and indeed of creation – this led to a world-wide mindset, and, we can suggest, a fostering of world-wide connections.

Thirdly, the early Christians confessed that “Jesus is Lord”.<sup>17</sup> When Christians proclaimed this, they were saying that universal sovereignty, claimed by Caesar, was rightfully given only to Jesus. “Every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:10-11). Universal sovereignty belonged to Jesus and his Lordship was over the cosmos. We can suggest that there is a direct connection between one of the earliest confessions – Jesus is Lord – and the world-wide dimension of the Gospel proclaimed by the early Christians. Again, theology naturally leads to praxis – to seeing themselves as a world-wide movement.

Finally, we could go on to speak of the Matthean Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...” (Mt 28:19), or of Acts 1:8: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Or we could talk about the Johannine language of “God so loved the world that he gave ...” (John 3:16). This sense of “going to the world” even slips into Mark 13:9-10: “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; .... And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.” And note what is said of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in Mark 14:9: “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed *in the whole world*, what she has done will be

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3.

told in remembrance of her.”<sup>18</sup> This theological sense of the Gospel for the world is all-pervasive.<sup>19</sup>

But I hope I have said enough to show that the praxis of the early Christians – of being a global interconnected movement – was rooted in theology. Praxis flowed from theology, and theology reinforced praxis.

## 2. The importance of the sense of “local” in earliest Christianity

One dimension of early Christian experience then was the sense of being a “global” movement. I want now to put the case that a second dimension of early Christian experience was a very powerful sense of being rooted in one place – of being “here”, of being “local”. So “location” was very important in early Christianity, and there was a strong commitment to *place*. What I am suggesting is that, using the lens of “place”, earliest Christianity can be thought of as having a very strong theological commitment to *both* being a world-wide movement and to “being here”, to being in “this place”, to locality. This dialectic between a focus on the world-wide, with a vision of the impact of their faith for all, and on the local – with an intense and context-specific experience of community – is, I suggest, one of the key dynamics of earliest Christianity.

### 2.1 The significance of the house church

One key feature of “local” experience for earliest Christians was the house church. Let me note some vital characteristics of house churches. Firstly, as is well recognised, in the New Testament period and beyond, the early Christians met in each other’s homes for teaching, for worship and for all facets of their life together.<sup>20</sup> Paul writes of a “house church” in 1 Cor 16:9: “Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord.” And note Col 4:15: “Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See the parallel in Matt 26:13. Note also, for example, Luke 13:29 “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.”

<sup>19</sup> The literature on mission in the NT is relevant here; see, for example, Schnabel 2004, p1545-7.

<sup>20</sup> On the development from the house church to the *domus ecclesiae* (“the house of the church”) and on to more specifically Christian forms of architecture see White 1990.

<sup>21</sup> See also Philemon 2; Rom 16:5. References to house churches in the later NT and in post-NT literature are surprisingly rare; for the latter see the *Martyrion of Justin* 3; *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 71.2. But as Barth and Blanke (2000, p262) note: “Since in the absence of specific church buildings no other rooms existed for the worship of the persecuted minority, there was no need to mention house churches.” Note also Jewett’s emphasis (2007, p64) on “tenement churches”, which would have consisted “entirely of members living in tenement buildings and lacking the sponsorship of a patron may have conducted their services within the *insula* itself, either using one of the workshop areas on the ground floor, or using temporarily cleared space used by Christian neighbors in upper floors.” He sees four such “tenement churches” mentioned in Rom 16:10, 11, 14, 15 respectively.

The nucleus of the group would often have been a particular household,<sup>22</sup> although new converts from outside the household and from non-Christian families, would join the group. As Branick notes “The private home ... afforded a place of privacy, intimacy and stability for the early Christians.”<sup>23</sup> It was in the house church that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated; since the Lord’s Supper was at this stage a full meal, and since there is no hint in the two places where Paul speaks of it that the management of the meal was in the hands of an official of any kind, the person in whose house it was held probably made the arrangements for the meal and had a presiding role over the Lord’s Supper.<sup>24</sup>

The size and structure of house churches had a considerable impact on church life. The maximum size of any house church depended on the number of people that could be accommodated in the largest house owned by one of its members. The average size of a house church is debated, and clearly relates to the size of houses in different places and the relative wealth or poverty of members of the church. However, the average number of people that could be accommodated in a wealthy person’s house is probably 30-40,<sup>25</sup> but we should certainly not think that every house church had a person of this sort of wealth amongst its members. Clearly some house churches would be much smaller. It is also clear that several house churches came to exist in some cities.<sup>26</sup>

My point here is that “community” or “church” for the early Christians was focussed predominantly on the home. This led to a strong familial ethos; it is closely connected to the fact that, as we have already noted, by far the most predominant form of address in the New Testament is “brother and sister”. The use of kinship language reflects a tight and intense community, and it stems in part from the location in the house church.

All this means that the sense of being a community *here*, was very powerful. It was “church” experienced in the home, in the dining room. The house church shaped early Christian experience, for it was an intense and “place-oriented” expression of Christian faith. They belonged together, as a household community, in Jerusalem, or Ephesus, or Rome.

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<sup>22</sup> This also reflects the fact that a community often began through the conversion of a household; see 1 Cor 1:16; Acts 16:15, 34; 18:8.

<sup>23</sup> Branick 1989, p14.

<sup>24</sup> See 1 Corinthians 11:14-22; 11:17-34. Similarly, leadership of the house churches in general was often, though probably not always, provided by the people in whose home the group met; see Fitzmyer 2000, p82.

<sup>25</sup> Branick (1989, p38-42) argues that 30-40 people could be accommodated at a meeting in a wealthy person’s house; Barth and Blanke (2000, p261) opt for 40; Blue (1994, p142-3; see also p175) argues for larger numbers: 75 in a large reception hall, with more being accommodated in adjoining rooms, but this is in a large mansion. On housing in this period see Osiek and Balch 1997, p5-32.

<sup>26</sup> See Malherbe 1983, p70. There were probably at least seven different house churches in Rome; see Gehring 2004, p144-51. Lampe (2003, p431-2) notes the analogy with the Jews in Rome, where there were a number of different synagogue communities. Col 4:15 suggests there was more than one house church in Colossae.

## 2.2 Using local language

I also want to suggest that locale influenced language. The Christian faith came to *different* expression in somewhat *different* language in Jerusalem, and in Ephesus, and in Rome. Several examples of the way in which “local place” shaped the expression of the Christian faith could be given. In Acts 17 we read Luke’s account of Paul preaching the gospel at the Areopagus in Athens. According to Luke, Paul picks up on the great interest in knowledge in Athens; he speaks of the altar to “the unknown God”, and then points out that “what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (17:23). He makes this God known to them as Creator of all and then returns to the theme of knowledge when he says that the past has been a time of unknowing or ignorance, but that people must now repent (17:29-30). Clearly, it is the Lucan Paul that we are reading here;<sup>27</sup> the speech gives us a cameo of how Luke thinks the Gospel can be translated into concepts that Athenian listeners can understand, and so in this way builds a very Athenian linguistic bridge of communication across which they can travel.<sup>28</sup>

A less well-known but very significant example of the translation of the Gospel into local language is found in the Christology of the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. The Pastoral Epistles, probably written in Ephesus, use the term *epiphaneia* (“appearance, manifestation”) or the associated verb in seven places. For example, in 2 Timothy 1:10 we read: “this grace ... has now been revealed through *the appearing* of our Saviour Christ Jesus (διὰ τῆς ἐπιφανείας τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ,)”. In 1 Timothy 6:14 we read: “I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until *the appearing* of our Lord Jesus Christ (μέχρι τῆς ἐπιφανείας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).”<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that ἐπιφάνεια is a vital component of the author’s Christology.<sup>30</sup> “Epiphany” is used of the first “appearance” of Jesus,<sup>31</sup> and *also* of the second “appearance” of Jesus,<sup>32</sup> which is elsewhere referred to as his parousia. Hence, for the author, God’s saving activity in Jesus is bracketed by two epiphanies with a period in between. Using the noun ἐπιφάνεια and the verb ἐπιφάνω, the Pastor speaks of

<sup>27</sup> We cannot go into the issue of how Luke’s presentation relates to the historical Paul. Note Barrett’s view (1998, p825): “Luke no doubt supposed that this kind of address was what Paul would have said to the Areopagus Court; it was ‘... not what happened but Luke’s idealized version of what ought to have happened’ (Johnson 318). It might be a little better to say that Luke was not in a position to recount something that he had himself heard but used what had come to be the accepted Christian approach to Gentiles.”

<sup>28</sup> Tannehill 1990, p215 notes: “Starting from a cultural value acknowledged by the audience enables Paul to engage them.”

<sup>29</sup> See 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 1:10; 4:1, 8; Tit 2:13 and the associated verb “to appear” in Tit 2:11; 3:4.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall (1988, p169) sees the concept of epiphany as “the controlling factor in the christology of the Pastorals.” See also Lau 1996; Marshall 1999, p287-96.

<sup>31</sup> See 2 Tim 1:10, and Tit 2:11.

<sup>32</sup> See 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1; 4:8; Tit 2:13.

Christ as a divine figure who is the manifestation in this world of the unseen and transcendent God.<sup>33</sup>

What can we say about the use of the concept of epiphany? Firstly, ἐπιφάνεια occurs elsewhere in the NT with this sense only in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, and the verb ἐπιφάνω has a different sense in its other two occurrences.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, while the verb is found in the LXX and the noun in 2 and 3 Maccabees, and similar ideas are found in Jewish apocalyptic,<sup>35</sup> the concept of ἐπιφάνεια cannot be said to be important in Jewish literature.

By contrast, in Greco-Roman religion, ἐπιφάνεια is often used of the self-manifestation of a divine being in this world, with appropriate signs of majesty and power. It can refer to the appearance of a god during processions or to help people in time of need, or as the motivation for the foundation of a temple.<sup>36</sup> It can also be used to refer to the emperor. For example, both the noun and the verb are found in Ephesian inscriptions honouring Julius Caesar as “the manifest (or appearing) god”, or honouring Artemis as “the most manifest goddess”.<sup>37</sup>

It is significant then that the author uses the concept of epiphany. Given the prominence of this concept in Hellenistic religions, and its comparative unimportance in Jewish literature, a strong case can be made that here the concept of epiphany, and the associated epiphany scheme, has been adopted from the sphere of Hellenistic religions and used by the author as a vehicle for the expression of his Christology.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, it is a clear example of *local* language and thought forms – in this case from Ephesus - being used as a vehicle for the expression of the Gospel. Note too that Howard Marshall argues that the translation of Christology into this language of epiphany has *not* changed the essential teaching of the older, traditional material about Christ.<sup>39</sup> Here then we clearly see the concern to *address* a particular local context in relevant and meaningful ways, in this case concerning Christology. This is a true *local* embodiment of early Christian preaching. The Gospel preached by the author of the Pastorals *belonged* in Ephesus. It would have had meaning elsewhere

<sup>33</sup> Marshall (1988, p170) notes “Christ is seen as reflecting God and is understood in relation to God who thus occupies the central position.” See also 1 Timothy 6:14-16.

<sup>34</sup> See Lk 1:79 and Acts 27:20.

<sup>35</sup> See Marshall 1988, p169.

<sup>36</sup> See Lau 1996, p182-9; Stevenson 2001, p52-4.

<sup>37</sup> This is important since the Pastorals were probably written in Ephesus. Both the noun “appearance” and the verb “to appear” are also found in Ephesian inscriptions. In 48 BCE the cities of Asia set up an inscription at Ephesus in which they honoured Julius Caesar as “*the manifest god* descending from Ares and Aphrodite”; see SIG 760. An inscription of 104 CE speaks of a person’s decision: “to adorn and reverence the religious and public realms of your greatest and most notable city, for the honour and reverence of the *most manifest goddess* Artemis”; see IvEph 27, lines 384-5; translation from Rogers 1991, p173. An edict of 162-4 CE speaks of temples being founded and altars dedicated to her among both Greeks and barbarians “because of the visible *manifestations* effected by her”; see IvEph 24B, lines 13-14; see also Horsley 1987, p75-6.

<sup>38</sup> See Marshall, 1988, p168-9.

<sup>39</sup> See Marshall, 1988, p169-75.

too, but the way the Gospel was expressed and the language that was used, definitely reflects the local, contextual embedding of Christian faith.

We could go on to a number of other examples, such as the way in which the book of Revelation picks up the local Leto-Apollo myth in Revelation 12, or uses local terminology from Greco-Roman magic to proclaim the supremacy of Christ in Western Asia Minor.<sup>40</sup> Or the way in which Ignatius uses local language to speak of what it is to be a Christian.<sup>41</sup> But I hope enough has been said to show that in a number of instances the language of the Christian faith has a strong *local* dimension, and was at home in a particular place. Expressions of Christianity that were truly local developed.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.3 Critique of local society

The area of study which could be called “the New Testament and Empire” has been developing quickly in recent New Testament Studies. This deals with the critique of society, made in Christian preaching. This is in many ways an essentially *local* phenomenon – when it is expounded that “Jesus is Lord”, and the Emperor is not, then clearly this impacts above all on the *local* situation.

Recently scholars have begun to speak of “the political Paul”.<sup>43</sup> Here, I want to highlight Paul’s polemic against the Emperor in a Gentile context.<sup>44</sup>

Imperial ideology was all-pervasive; it was to be found everywhere - on coins, in inscriptions, during festivals and in the market place.<sup>45</sup> Yet note Philippians 3:20-21:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

This language gains a powerful polemical thrust when we realise some of the way language was used in the Imperial Cult. This usage suggests that there is a comparison going on in Philippians between Christ and the Emperor. I am not suggesting that Paul *intended* this critique;<sup>46</sup> my point is that readers in Philippi – a Roman colony – would have *heard* this language in their local context as making particular polemical points against the ruling ideology of the Imperial Cult. We note firstly that the Philippian Christians are said to belong to another state – and have another citizenship – for “our citizenship is in heaven”. In the first century, this would be heard as *political* language.

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<sup>40</sup> See Trebilco 2004, p395-400.

<sup>41</sup> See Harland 2003, p481-499.

<sup>42</sup> On this area see in particular Flemming 2005.

<sup>43</sup> For important contributions in this area see Horsley 1997; 2000; 2004; Oakes 2001; Wright 2002, p173-93; 2005, p59-79.

<sup>44</sup> Here I am particularly indebted to Oakes 2001.

<sup>45</sup> See Klauck 2000, p288-330; see also Friesen 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Note here the critique of some work in this area by Barclay 2007.

Secondly, note the use of the title “σωτήρ - Saviour”, a title often given to the Emperor. Julius Caesar was called “the common Saviour of human life”, and Augustus was spoken of as “a Saviour who put an end to war and established all good things”.<sup>47</sup> Claudius was hailed as “Saviour of the world” and a “god who is Saviour and Benefactor”.<sup>48</sup> Hence the title “Saviour” was *clearly* associated with politics, and with the Emperor.

Thirdly, Philippians 3:21 speaks of the power of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus: he will transform our bodies “by the *power* that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” Similar things were said of the Emperor, for we regularly read of the *power* of the Emperor to save his people.<sup>49</sup> Oakes notes: “In the first century AD, the one whom most people would see as saving in accordance with his power to subject all things to himself was the Emperor.”<sup>50</sup>

In Philippi, we can thus suggest that Phil 3:20-1 would be heard as polemical. The Emperor claimed to be “Saviour and Lord”, and to have the power to save. But the true Saviour and Lord is Jesus Christ; he has power not only to transform our bodies, but also has “the power that also enables him to make *all things* subject to himself.”<sup>51</sup> All things – the emperor included.

This contrast between the Emperor and Christ can also be heard in Phil 2:6-11. Again, as well as being a powerful expression of the incarnation of Christ, this passage has a forceful political dimension, for the Philippians would have heard a comparison being made here between Christ and the Emperor. For in Phil 2:9-11 Christ, not the Emperor, is given “the Name above every name”, the name of Lord.<sup>52</sup> Every knee is said to bow to Jesus, and every tongue is to confess him as Lord. People in Philippi would hear this as a comparison with the Emperor, for the Emperor claimed universal authority. For example, on a coin Nero was said to be “Lord of all the world”,<sup>53</sup> and the Emperor “regarded every knee on earth as bowing to him”.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, in Phil 2:9-11 Paul writes that every knee – by implication, including the Emperor’s own – should bow and give homage to *the Lord Jesus*. Christ has a still wider sphere of authority: under the earth and in heaven. Christ is an Imperial figure, but with far wider authority than the Roman Emperor. So a clear “Imperial shape”<sup>55</sup> can be

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<sup>47</sup> See Oakes 2001, p139, for both inscriptions, with references.

<sup>48</sup> Oakes 2001, p140.

<sup>49</sup> This is clear for example, at the time of the accession of Tiberius; see Oakes 2001, p142.

<sup>50</sup> Oakes 2001, p145.

<sup>51</sup> Wright (2000, p174) comments with reference to Phil 3:20-21: “What was the immediate significance of this Jesus-and-Caesar contrast? It was a challenge to an alternative loyalty. Jesus was the reality, Caesar the parody. It was the legitimation of the Christian church as the true empire of the true Lord.”

<sup>52</sup> For example, in an inscription, Nero is called “Lord of all Lords”; see Oakes 2001, p172.

<sup>53</sup> Oakes 2001, p149; the coin (which is Ditt. Syll<sup>3</sup>, no 814, 31) is from Acraephiae in Boeotia.

<sup>54</sup> Oakes 2001, p149.

<sup>55</sup> Oakes 2001, p174.

discerned in the Philippian hymn. The one to whom universal submission and universal acclamation as Lord was due was *not* the Emperor, but the Lord Jesus.

This passage is deeply theological – Jesus, the pre-existent one, now comes to share the very name of God, because he has always shared the very being of God. But the passage is also deeply *political*, although of course politics and religion were intimately intertwined in the first century. Christ’s victory is not just over cosmic powers, but also over the Emperor. Thus, proclaiming Christ as Lord in the first century in Philippi involved a very real, and a very *local* critique.<sup>56</sup>

I have dwelt on Paul. But the same could be said of other NT books. Recent studies have highlighted Matthew’s critique of the Roman Empire,<sup>57</sup> and the vigorous polemic in the book of Revelation against all things Imperial.<sup>58</sup> My point is that the critique of the imperial power is a very *local* matter, for the imperial cult was in town, and it was in the public square that one encountered its officials. The local aristocracy in society would often be enthusiastic supporters of the imperial cult; a critique of the cult did not first of all get you in trouble in Rome – it got you in trouble at home! Again, early Christianity has a strong, local dimension.

#### 2.4 The theological importance of the local

I want to briefly note that just as “world-wideness” was very important *theologically* to the early Christians, so too the “local” was crucial in early Christian *theology*. This comes through in a number of ways.

Firstly, in Matthew 18:20 we have the promise of Jesus to his disciples: “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Clearly, this would be a very significant promise to the early Christians in the first century. They need not be a huge group - two or three are all that is needed – and the risen Lord will be “there among them”, wherever they are. This underlines the significance of the “local”, for, according to Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Lord is in *each* place where there are “two or three”.

Secondly, the importance of the “local” is clearly expressed in theological terms by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: “Do you not know that you [plural] are God’s *temple* and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s *temple*, God will destroy that person. For God’s *temple* is holy, and you are that *temple*.”<sup>59</sup>

Paul is here talking about the whole community in Corinth as “God’s temple”.<sup>60</sup> This is an astounding thing for a Jew to say; the rather motley collection of Christians in

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<sup>56</sup> To readers in Philippi, who would have been used to following society’s imperatives, Paul presents “Christ as the one who outdoes the lord of the political and social sphere.” (Oakes 2001, p205). Christ replaces the Emperor’s political and social lordship.

<sup>57</sup> See Riches and Sim 2005; on John and Empire see Carter 2008.

<sup>58</sup> See Trebilco 2004, p398-400.

<sup>59</sup> Note also 2 Corinthians 6:16: “What agreement has the *temple* of God with idols? For we are the *temple* of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

<sup>60</sup> By contrast, in 1 Cor 6:19 he talks of each individual as God’s temple.

Corinth are actually “God’s temple”. Of course, the Jerusalem Temple was the locus of God’s dwelling on earth for Jews and *the* centre of the theological universe. Yet Paul can say that the Corinthian Christians were *now* a locus of God’s presence, for “God’s Spirit dwells in you”, and you are hence “God’s temple”. It is the presence of the Spirit in their midst which makes them God’s Temple. Of course, Paul would have said the same about the Christian gathering in other places. The vital point was that they were the *location* where God’s presence was focussed in Corinth. This is one of the key reasons why Paul was so upset at the Corinthians as he writes to them – they should be God’s *alternative* to the Temples of Aphrodite, Asclepios and Apollo in Corinth. They should show forth the presence of the True God. As it was, they looked far more like Corinth than they did like the True God’s temple in Corinth.

Thirdly, note Paul’s use of “body of Christ” language. In 1 Corinthians 12:27 we read: “Now you are the *body of Christ* and individually members of it.”<sup>61</sup> The focus on such language in contemporary discussion is often in connection with spiritual gifts or ministry. But note in particular that each community to which Paul writes is said to be “the body of Christ” – whether they are in Rome, or Corinth, or Colossae or Ephesus. Each community is “*the* body of Christ” – not five percent of the body, or a tiny fragment of the body – but “the body”. Again, this is to bestow astounding theological significance on each *local* Christian community. It is very powerful theological language.<sup>62</sup>

Hence we can see *why* the “*local*” church mattered so much, and why it was so valued. We could see the same phenomenon in 1 Peter, or in Revelation.<sup>63</sup> The “local” church is not a small and incomplete fragment of a larger whole. It is, in itself, crucial, vital. The community is God’s temple in that place, God’s gathering in that place, the body of Christ there. Hence, each small house church matters.

As God’s people in *that* place they had a calling – to localise the Gospel there, so that it “belonged”, and to critique in the name of the Gospel what happened in *that* place, whilst never forgetting that they belonged to a worldwide movement. I suggest “local” was a very important dimension of earliest Christianity.

### 3. Conclusions and implications

This dialectic between *world-wide connectedness* – the Holy Internet, with a vision of the impact of their faith for all – and the *local* – with an intense experience of community, and a strong sense of local imbedded-ness and belonging, is one of the

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<sup>61</sup> See also Eph 4:12 “for building up the body of Christ”); Rom 12:5 (“one body in Christ”); 1 Cor 10:17 (“We who are many are one body”); 12:12 (“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are *one body*, so it is with Christ”); 12:20 (“As it is, there are many members, yet *one body*”); see also Eph 1:22-23; 2:15-16; 4:4, 12, 15-16; Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15; and Dunn 1998, p548-552.

<sup>62</sup> Of course, language about being “the body of Christ”, also had “world-wide” significance. As Branick (1989, p96) notes “The sense of being ‘the body of Christ,’ ... carried the Christian beyond the house church, even beyond the local church, to the perspective of a world-wide people.”

<sup>63</sup> See 1 Peter 2:4-5; Revelation 1:20.

key dynamics of earliest Christianity. The local was vital – but so was worldwide connectedness, and global vision.

What conclusions can we draw from this? Firstly, it is easy to see all early Christian communities as roughly the same, and to homogenize them. The emphasis on the *local* should underline the importance of a geographical approach to NT study – what was it like to be a Christian in Rome, or Antioch, Ephesus or Jerusalem? A number of such studies have been undertaken showing that communities were somewhat different in different places. Communities will have been founded under different circumstances, the reaction of the local Jewish community and the wider city to their presence will have been different, they will have been shaped by different experiences, their theology – whilst sharing many features – will be expressed in different – and local – language and have different nuances or accents. Their ways of doing things will be different. All of this emphasises that earliest Christianity entered into a dialogue with culture and context, employing some facets of culture, critiquing others. Christianity looked somewhat different in different places, whilst, I suggest, seeking to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in each place, and to proclaim his Lordship where they were.

Secondly, we tend to view New Testament churches as small and isolated groups. Small yes – isolated no. We need to see them as small but vibrant; intense but embedded within each location; geographically dispersed, but forming a network of interconnected communities with a sense of participation in a global movement. They belonged locally, whilst also having a vision of the worldwide-ness of early Christianity which was, I think, quite amazing, given that it was held by people who belonged to a minute group, and that they met in people's small lounges.

Thirdly, we should not underestimate how *strange* it was for people with no *ethnic* connections to see themselves as *belonging together* in the powerful worldwide way I have suggested, particularly when they were from ethnic groups which viewed each other so negatively. Bridging the Jew-Gentile divide in the ancient world was hugely significant. This testifies to what they saw as the reconciliation that had been achieved by Jesus Christ, overcoming enmity and creating unity between peoples locally and worldwide. Here we see the creation of a new community –with its faults, yes – but still with a powerful sense of belonging and unity.

Fourthly, New Testament scholars have often sought to find the *unity* of the New Testament at a doctrinal level; I think such doctrinal unity in the New Testament is real *and* important. But the material I have discussed suggests that what holds the New Testament together is *also* a unity of experience, the experience of local engagement, and of belonging together as part of a network. One factor then that unifies our New Testament is that it bears witness to the life of different communities that were embedded locally, but also formed a world-wide network – and so saw themselves as committed to one another as brothers and sisters. We should not think of the New Testament then simply as a set of documents to geographically widely scattered groups – but rather to groups that saw themselves as cohering with one another, as belonging together in a real world-wide family.

Finally, perhaps at times in its history, the church has concentrated on *either* the global, *or* the local. I suggest it is the dialectic between the two that is crucial.

Concentration on the local alone may suggest that an individual community can be autonomous and self-contained; it also neglects the New Testament's affirmation of the universality of Christian faith and overlooks the belief that Christ has founded a new humanity. Concentration on the global alone overlooks the need for local embedding of the gospel, and for local critique. Both dimensions are essential for Christian faith, if it is to be rooted in the New Testament.

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