The Pauline household communities: Their nature as social entities

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ABSTRACT
This article reflects on the nature of the Pauline household communities as social entities. The first part deals with the nature, organisation and expansion of the Pauline groups within the first-century Mediterranean world. It includes a view on the network of social organisations, the character of the Pauline groups as social groups and the internal dynamics of the expansion of these groups. The second and related part concerns the relationship between the Pauline groups on the one hand and other Jewish or Jesus movement groups on the other hand. In this part the success of faction, sect and cult models for describing these relationships is evaluated.

'inthe church in Paul's letters' is synonymous with the research and teaching career of Professor Johnnie Roberts. Participation in debates on the unity of the church and on the ecumenical character of the church was a natural involvement which flowed from his research interests. I offer this essay as a tribute to his career which is marked by a zeal for New Testament Theology and involvement in debates on the character of the church as social entity. My description of the Pauline church will probably go far beyond what he envisaged it to be. It flows from the tradition which was influenced by insights from the social sciences—something which he did not explore but an avenue he never denied me as a younger colleague. I hope that this essay on the Pauline church as a social entity will add value to his insights.

1 INTRODUCTION
When writing about the church in Pauline perspective, it is apparent that Roberts (1984:287-288) describes it from a theological perspective. He maintains that it should be understood as a trinitarian, eschatological, spiritual and religious entity. What this implies is that the essence, unity and character of the church is to be described by means of theological concepts. Roberts (1984:288) is convinced that for Paul even the sociological appearance of the church is based and dependent on its spiritual character. The closest he comes to such a description of the church as a social organisation in the first-century world, is a description of its organisational structure (also in theological terms).
This viewpoint is firmly rooted in a conventional picture of Christian origins and has numerous advocates in the history of Christian scholarship. Formulated in one sentence it affirms that "it was the atemporal message of Jesus, understood rightly by Paul alone, that was at the center of the growth of Christianity" (White 1985/6:99). In the words of Mack (1995:13), the conventional picture first paints the 'miraculous and incomparable events surrounding the appearance of Jesus as the son of God, then the preaching of this gospel and the formation of the church'.

However, in the last two decades New Testament scholars have learned to bring body and soul together. Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the need to be explicit and conscious regarding the models (or lenses) used when looking at the texts and phenomena from the ancient world. It is realised that a social phenomenon, such as a new religious movement or group, originates and exists within a particular social and cultural setting. Its nature and character as well as the relationships to this environment are essentially shaped by the cultural setting. As a result the conventional picture has been taken to task and has been exposed in a large number of historical studies.

Assumptions about the social nature of the Pauline groups are not merely additional to theological perspectives about the church but are always presupposed and implied in any such perspective. That is the case with the employment of social science models or of the models assumed in the conventional picture. White (see White 1988:7) therefore quite correctly remarks that the acceptance of any model as a starting point for discussing the development of the early Christian movement will have enormous implications for historical study and theological reflection. From a perspective sensitised to the social and cultural basis of human activities and phenomena, a description of the Pauline ekklesia demands a discussion of at least two aspects.

The first deals with the nature, organisation and expansion of the Pauline groups within the first-century Mediterranean world. It includes a view on the network of social organisations, the character of the Pauline groups as social groups and the internal dynamics of the expansion of these groups.

The second and related aspect concerns the relationship between the Pauline groups on the one hand and other Jewish or Jesus movement groups on the other hand. How can the social dynamics between these groups best be conceptualised?

Although questions about both aspects are related, they will be kept apart. It should furthermore be said that this is not an attempt to deal with all these aspects in detail. Instead, by way of introducing a number of different answers to the above questions, an attempt will be made to indicate that a historically informed and culturally sensitive picture of the Pauline church will have to deal with these issues in an explicit and conscious way.
We can now turn to the first aspect: the nature, organisation and expansion of the Pauline movement groups.

2 PAULINE HOUSEHOLD COMMUNITIES AND COMPARABLE GROUPS FROM THE ENVIRONMENT

When looking through theological lenses only, the organisational nature of the church is easily reduced to theological commonplace remarks such as relate to its ecclesiastical rendering of service. However, it is to be argued that the social realities underlying its organisational nature are to be taken seriously. From this perspective it is therefore hardly possible to return to a point where the question about the organisation and development of early Christian groups can be answered without explicit and conscious attention to the principles of group formation and the dynamics of group interactions in the first-century world. Groups do not just develop out of thin air, neither in our present world nor in the first-century Mediterranean world.

2.1 Different configurations of the networks of socio-cultural interaction

Valuable information and insights are gained by comparing the Pauline communities to models from the environment. Some of these studies conclude that none of these models offers an exact parallel, although all present significant analogies. Meeks (1983:84), for example, finds that none of them 'captures the whole' of the Pauline 'churches'; the structures worked out by the Pauline communities 'may after all have been unique'. According to him, something new was emerging in the private homes where the followers of Jesus gathered. It is difficult not to take this new as unique, since he continues to define the newness: it was

all the old things that observers in the first century might have seen in it: a Jewish sect, a club meeting in a household, an initiatory cult, a school. Yet it was more than the sum of those things, and different from the mere synthesis of their contradictory tendencies (Meeks 1986:120).

Others propose alternative conclusions. For example, Wilken (1971:287) suggests that the 'combination of "philosophical school" and "association" suited the Christian community remarkably well' while Judge (1980:213) argues for a kind of 'national community' which is a combination of at least cultic, welfare and scholastic activities (see also Judge 1960:8). These

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1 Often the Pauline 'churches' are compared to philosophical schools, voluntary associations, and the synagogue to which 'they bear at least a family resemblance' (Meeks 1983:74; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:138).
proposals, however, have the same shortcoming: they ignore the fundamental issue of the social location of groups. The Pauline household communities did have features of voluntary (private) associations and ‘way of life’ (philosophical) schools, but were not simply a combination of some of their special features.

Neither of these solutions seems adequate for the simple reason that an important question is neglected in these studies. That is: what constituted groups in the first-century Mediterranean world? The question is directed at the overall social system and tries to find out something about group formation in a particular socio-cultural system.\(^2\)

My suggestion, therefore, is that non-corporate groups,\(^3\) as a dominant route to group formation in agrarian societies, should be used as a heuristic tool to explore the nature of the Pauline communities (and of other groups from the environment). Coalitions or non-corporate groups, ‘though present in all societies, play a more important part in organizing activities in some than in others where formal associations rather than coalitions organize the same activities’ (Boissevain 1974:170).\(^4\) This apparently has to do with the degree to which a nation state or community of interests has developed within a society.

An awareness of the role of non-corporate groups in the cultural systems of Paul’s world opens up some new avenues for dealing with both the Pauline communities and the comparable groups from the environment. It is to be argued that an acceptance of these groups as non-corporate groups within the context of the first-century Mediterranean world, together with their social location, explain their nature in a meaningful way.

\(^2\) Meeks (1983:74), for example, is not unaware of the question, ‘What makes a group a group?’ His answer to the question is twofold (1983:84–111). They held to a particular set of beliefs which constituted their groups and maintained the cohesiveness and boundaries needed for any group to survive. The question remains, however, whether theological convictions actually led to group formation. If so, what type of group? Secondly, he maintains that no group can persist without patterns of leadership, differentiation of roles by members, or ways of dealing with conflict, to mention only a few aspects. Unfortunately this merely explains the measures taken to maintain a group cohesion once it has been formed. The Pauline communities were not a group simply because they had boundaries and leaders—they had all these things because they were a group of some sort.

\(^3\) A more detailed discussion of corporate and non-corporate groups will be given in a following section (see §3.2).

\(^4\) Boissevain further remarks that ‘factions are conflicting units formed within a larger encapsulating social entity such as a village, association or even another coalition, which had previously been united’ (1974:195). Factions operate simply as alternative social mechanisms where the encapsulating or corporate body fails to provide protection.
This suggestion is supported by White's observation that the watertight compartments between the different groups (philosophical school, synagogue, house churches and voluntary associations) can no longer be maintained. These four models are variations on organizational networks which overlap, especially at two key points of social structure: (1) they use and adapt private, often domestic, settings; and (2) they depend on patronage for ongoing expansion (including numerical growth, architectural elaboration, and public acceptance). If the house church is related to these models it is because it, too, was operating within similar social networks (White 1985/6:120).

What this implies, is that these groups are characterised not so much by their idiosyncratic features as by their connectedness to the basic structure of the social organisation of the first-century Mediterranean world. Each group is one configuration of the first-century social network. All were particular configurations of first-century non-corporate groups constituted on a household basis and consisting of components from a variety of social networks. That is to say, they were similar in nature but different in character.

Each of these groups will be briefly analysed as particular exponents of household organisations.

2.2 Greco-Roman clubs and voluntary associations

2.2.1 What was a voluntary association?

The term voluntary association is used as an umbrella term to describe what is referred to in the literature as clubs, private cults, collegia, or burial societies. There were all kinds of associations—groups for artisans and merchants, interest groups of all sorts, burial or dining associations, mutual aid societies (Kraabel 1987:53). They can, according to Wilken, be divided into three main types:

(1) professional corporations, as for example, a guild of shipowners, fruit merchants, wool-workers, or plasterers; (2) funerary societies whose chief purpose was to provide burial expenses for deceased members and to ensure that each member received a decent burial; (3) religious societies composed of the worshipers of a particular deity, such as the devotees of Bacchus or Isis (1984:39).

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5 Although it is almost impossible to find a consistent technical meaning for the terms used to describe voluntary association in both the Greek and the Roman periods (see Malherbe 1983:87–90; Saldarini 1988:67–68), such disputes about terminology do not affect the main argument. The intention is not to argue that the different kinds of voluntary associations were in all respects the same. The gist of the argument is to point to their common nature and not to elaborate on the differences in character.
Seldom, however, were the activities of an association limited to one of these functions. Most combined several if not all of them. This state of affairs led to the growth of hundreds of voluntary associations, many of which did not have more than twenty-five members (Saldarini 1988:68). These voluntary associations complemented the political and familial spheres (which provided politeia and oikonomia) in bonding together people from different backgrounds, races and legal positions. The shared principle was koinonia, i.e. ‘a voluntary sharing of partnership’ (Banks 1980:16).

Such voluntary associations held regular meetings in private homes. Wilken’s (1984:39) description of a typical meeting gives some idea of the part they played in first-century social networks.

The regular meetings were occasions for eating and drinking, conversation, recreation. These meetings not only provided relief from the daily round of work; they also provided friends and associates for mutual support, an opportunity for recognition and honor, a vehicle by which ordinary men could feel a sense of worth. The society also gave people an opportunity for religious worship in a setting that was supportive, personal, and familiar.

Entry into voluntary association would be marked by an initiation ceremony (see Tidball 1983:87); usually baptism as the initiation rite, followed by ceremonial meals or fasting. They often made provision for burial needs also (see Judge 1960:47). It should be noted that most of these functions are perfectly commensurate with the needs and structures of the first-century agrarian world. Some of these will be listed briefly.

2.2.2 Functions and structures of voluntary associations

Firstly, non-corporate voluntary associations are a basic feature of agrarian societies. They were not marginal to mainline society but constitutive of the network of social organisations in the cities of the Greco-Roman Empire, especially the Greek areas. Although they lacked official legal and political recognition, this made them not so much illegal as unincorporated (Judge 1960:43) into mainstream political and power structures. In part they supplied what the individual had lost in the Empire, namely a sense of belonging (see Banks 1980:16; Meeks 1983:31; Wilken 1984:35–36). They furthermore fulfilled community needs such as education, wealth, politics and power at almost all levels of society (Kraabel 1987:53; Saldarini 1988:66). Sampley (1980:6–7) remarks that the atmosphere of the time was such that it could aptly be called an era of voluntary associations. In sum, voluntary associations were very popular and extremely varied in their concerns. The bulk of them were designed to meet the social, charitable and funerary needs of their members, of whom there could be any number between ten and a hundred, the average presumably being 10–35 members.
Their non-corporate nature perhaps constituted their strongest appeal and reason for existence. In a political system where the majority of citizens were excluded from power and the means to power, voluntary associations provided a channel for significant communal participation. While such voluntary associations are nowadays classified as economic, ethnic, cultural, social or religious, they were in actual fact attempts to create a small cosmos or social unit. The temptation to equate them with clubs and associations in contemporary industrialised societies should be resisted (see Saldarini 1988:61). Those who were excluded from political and economic power in the Empire had to protect their wealth and provide for their own security. Voluntary associations provided the social structures where patron-client relationships could be built up and where they could be maintained. The conventions of friendship and of patron-client relationships in particular provided the necessary symbolic culture (see Kraabel 1987:53).

Secondly, voluntary associations were structured along the lines of the social networks intrinsic to the first-century Mediterranean world. They were located for the most part in private homes, linked to household conventions and dominated by patron-client relationships and the system of honour and shame. New voluntary associations, for immigrants for example entered the social mainstream by way of conventions such as patronage and benefaction related to household networks (see Malherbe 1983:88; White 1990:59).

Thirdly, few associations were primarily religious in nature, although like most other activities in that world, they were not totally divorced from religion. ‘They all worshiped some god. The professional, social, and burial societies all adopted a patron deity, to whom sacrifice was made as a central ceremony of the regular (usually monthly) meeting’ (Stambaugh & Balch 1986:140). Most associations had a patron deity (see Kraabel 1987:52; Tidball 1983:86).

There are, furthermore, examples of small cults, both foreign and local, organised as voluntary associations (see Kraabel 1987:52; White 1990:37, 45-46). Some consisted entirely of members of one household, while others were linked to a particular profession (e.g. the cultic association set up by Tyrian merchants in the city of Puteoli in 79 CE—see White 1990:32). Even if a public or official cult already existed in a city, private cultic associations were often dedicated to the same deity. Other features of these cults were communal dining and the accepted practice of adopting a household setting (see White 1990:46-47, 59). The Jews in the Diaspora likewise formed their own communities (voluntary associations?) in the Greco-Roman world. When the early Pauline communities are discussed shortly, it should come as no surprise that in the cities of the Roman Empire they appeared, to the casual observer at any rate, very similar to these voluntary associations (see Wilken
As will be pointed out in the discussion of Jewish synagogues, they were explicitly referred to (e.g. by Josephus) in terms of concepts commonly used in the sphere of voluntary associations. In terms of the above features, several factors do point to a similarity between these associations. As voluntary associations they operated as non-corporate groups in search of power and koinonia. Fundamental features were their integration into household structures and the various conventions, such as patron-client relationships and systems of honour and shame, that directed social interaction and social structures. They were all, in short, different configurations of social networks. These features suggest that although the various associations differed in character, they were very similar in that they all had their roots in the social organisational networks of the first-century world. In so far as they did share typical traits, voluntary associations derived their character from any one or more of the different features such as occupation, patron deity or interest group. They all shared the same nature—that of non-corporate groups—in that they were situated within household structures and shared the socio-cultural codes and conventions operative within that setting.

2.3 Philosophical school or scholastic community

There can be no doubt that Paul, like other leaders in the early Christian movement, carried on teaching activities. For that reason the philosophical school has attracted scholarly attention in understanding the Pauline groups. Judge (to my mind, quite correctly) observes:

Indeed it is owing to this academic character of the Christian mission that we are so much better informed about it than about other religious movements, and the Christian literature itself is devoted almost entirely to this aspect of its affairs. We know less about the religious practices of the Christians than we do about their arguments over points of ethical and theological doctrine (1961:125).

The fact that we are so well informed about this aspect of the Pauline communities should not prevent us from examining their relative value and position within their first-century setting.

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6 These voluntary associations can hardly be described in terms of any central binding characteristic such as occupation, religion or social function. Saldarini (1988:68) warns that, given the variety of voluntary associations, no generalisations can confidently be applied to any one of them in the first-century Mediterranean world. This claim is supported by the recognition that often there is very little evidence for scholarly portrayals of typical voluntary associations (see Judge 1960:42-44).
2.3.1 Some scholarly proposals on Paul the philosopher

Visiting professional preachers, who resembled the itinerant teachers of philosophical movements played an important part in establishing and maintaining the early Jesus groups. Thus, what Paul referred to as the preaching of his gospel can easily be seen as the actions of a philosopher (see Judge 1961:125; Meeks 1983:82-83). But it is not immediately apparent with what trend in contemporary philosophical and scholastic activities Paul should be compared. It is obvious that when entering one of the Greco-Roman cities, Paul must have carried on his activities under the umbrella of some accepted social convention or institution. To resolve this dilemma, Judge (1961:127) proposes the model of the sophist:

As a Roman citizen he belonged to the social elite of the Hellenistic states. He found that the most effective way of countering the opposition of the synagogues was to create an alternative platform on the strength of this connection. His mission now has the patronage of eminent persons; he preaches under their auspices; they provided him with a retinue of assistants and with an audience, including their social dependents.

What makes Paul a sophist like Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides was, according to Judge (1961:126), that 'they were all travellers, relying upon the hospitality of their admirers, all expert talkers and persuaders, all dedicated to their mission and intolerant of criticism'.

Malherbe (1983:47-59) supports this general picture. He maintains that the kind of philosophers with whom Paul should be compared were not metaphysicians who specialized in systematic abstractions, but, like Paul, were preachers and teachers who saw their main goal to be the reformation of the lives of people they encountered in a variety of contexts, ranging from the imperial court and the salons of the rich to the street corners (1983:68).

There is, however, a point of divergence. According to Judge, while Paul entered the household of some wealthy patron and acted as the resident intellectual, Malherbe (following Hock) prefers the workshop setting for Paul's intellectual activities. At the level of Paul's provision of his own livelihood in the workshop, Malherbe (see 1983:24-27) finds some similarities between Paul and contemporary philosophers. Since Hock was the one who worked out this position in greater detail, we shall turn to his discussion on Paul's activities as an artisan.

Hock (see 1980:52-59) argues that, unlike philosophers who begged, charged fees or entered the household of a rich and powerful patron (as Judge would have it), Paul opted to earn his keep by working as an artisan (tent-maker). In that way he stayed financially independent, but still had access to members of households where he could continue the preaching of his mes-
sage. Hock's objection to Judge's view is that the latter neglects the workshop setting. Interestingly enough, this viewpoint does not affect Hock's estimate of Paul's social standing.7

Malherbe (1989:69–70) argues that as a maker of tents, 'Paul plied his trade in a workshop, probably within the setting of a household of artisans, and there offered his practice as an example to be imitated'. Paul's philosopher-like act in relying on his craft for a livelihood, finds a counterpart in the philosophical traditions. Paul adapted this Greco-Roman philosophical moral tradition to express his theological understanding and to form communities of believers. Hock (see 1980:41) argues that the artisan's workshop was a conventional social setting for intellectual discourse and philosophical discussions.

Since this point of disagreement does not affect their respective views on Paul's social status, the choice between the household setting and the workshop should not be overemphasised. In both instances the household setting served as the basis for Paul's philosophical activities.

2.3.2 The philosophical school as household institution

Meeks (to my mind, justifiably) warns that it is useful to know that there was a strong scholarly, academic, and rhetorical element in the activities of the Pauline groups, but it will not do to make those elements constitutive of the movement (1983:84).

Judge (see 1960:8), it should be acknowledged, clearly states that when he presents Paul as a sophist, he is not excluding other aspects such as cultic or welfare activities. Even so both Judge and Malherbe fall short in two respects. Firstly, the household setting of philosophical schools is not dealt with in an integrated way. The portrayal of philosophical schools as primarily institutions of learning and academic activity does not do justice to their embeddedness in this social structure. Like other groups, many philosophers and philosophical schools made use of the private homes of patrons (see Stowers 1984:66) and furthermore shared many features with voluntary associations (see Wilken 1971:279; Meeks 1983:83–84).

Secondly, Paul's academic activities are not interpreted in conjunction with the other components. For example, the fact that Paul took either the workshop or the household of a wealthy patron as his headquarters must

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7 Hock (1978:562) maintains that Paul's action in working at a trade confirms his elite status. The main evidence is that Paul shared the aristocratic view that working as an artisan was 'slavish and demeaning'.
have influenced his preaching activities. Teaching activities based on the household setting were subject to household conventions and the implied social relations, such as patron-client relationships. That is to say, Paul’s philosophical activities were subject to the social conditions of his world. The occasional nature of his teaching activities highlights the embeddedness in the conventions of the household (be it that of a wealthy patron or of a fellow artisan) where he must have been a client.

2.4 The Diaspora synagogue prior to 70 CE

In the received view it is commonplace to assert that, since Christianity is an offshoot of Judaism, ‘the urban Christian groups obviously had the Diaspora synagogue as the nearest and most natural model’ (Meeks 1983:80). The picture of the synagogue in this version therefore very much emphasises its religious and cultic functions. It was basically a place of cultic and religious assembly—thus of prayer, worship and scripture reading (see Meeks 1983:80; Kee 1990:5; White 1990:87). Not only is clerical language used when referring to the synagogue but the much later situation—where, under the tyranny of Rabbinic Judaism, women were practically excluded from the synagogue activities—is often invoked to illustrate the differences from the Pauline communities (see, for example Banks 1980:128-129; Tidball 1983:85).

2.4.1 What was a synagogue?

The term συναγωγή can refer to a place of assembly (building), a group of people (assembly), a community or a congregation (see Stambaugh & Balch 1986:48; Kee 1990:8). However, the notion that the word refers to a building set aside exclusively for community religious functions cannot be derived from the literary sources—as is done, for example, by Neal (1988:8). White (1990:61) points out that, while references to synagogues are common in late-first-century sources,

it does not appear that there was a formerly ordered rabbinical institution as such prior to the second century C.E. Moreover, there is no archaeological evidence for exclusively synagogue buildings in the Homeland dating to the first century.

Since archaeological evidence can rarely be found for any place of assembly prior to 70, ‘a synagogue could well have been nothing more than a large meeting room in a private house or part of a larger structure set apart for worship’ (Meyers & Strange 1981:141). Amongst other arguments, this leads Kee (see 1990:9) to maintain that it would be more accurate to say that synagogues met in homes and public spaces.

Secondly, the construction history, together with the epigraphic and other archaeological evidence, suggest that synagogue buildings which were
primarily places of worship and instruction did not exist until the third century. Only from the second century onwards did writers refer to the presence of sacred scrolls in the synagogue. Synagogues were Pharisaic institutions which did not fully develop as important meeting-places for worship and instruction until after 70 CE (see Gutmann 1981:3-4; Hoenig 1975:69-70; Kee 1990:10; Cohen 1987:164). In the words of Horsley (1996:146), the early synagogue 'is clearly more than a worshipping community or a place of worship'.

It is suggested that these developments probably coincided with a subtle change in religious self-definition among Jewish communities; the rabbinisation of Judaism affected the symbolic as well as the material culture of the Jews. Prior to the destruction of the Temple and the Rabbinic reconstruction of Judaism, the synagogue as the central institution in the life of Jewish communities should not be confused with the institution of later centuries. One of the consequences of this view is that room should be left for a subtle change in religious self-consciousness among the Jews. In the third to fourth centuries a more restrictive definition of synagogues, as religious institutions as opposed to collegial or voluntary associations, could have accompanied the changing circumstances under rabbinisation. Thus a synagogue during Paul's lifetime must have been quite different from a synagogue in the Rabbinic era that lay ahead (see White 1987:154; 1990:61, 87, 90; Kraabel 1979).8

Thirdly, analyses of the construction history of several synagogue buildings in the Diaspora suggest that there were great divergences in organisation and theology due to varying degrees of adaptation to local cultures. Of the eleven synagogue communities identified in ancient Rome, epigraphic remains suggest that they differed widely with respect to such features as language, social standing and organisation (see White 1990:61).9 Kee's (1990:9) conclusion as regards Jewish synagogues in the Homeland is probably truer of the situation in the Diaspora:

Thus there is simply no evidence to speak of synagogues in Palestine as architecturally distinguishable edifices prior to 200 C.E. Evidence of meeting places:

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8 It is important to realise that the rise of an institution such as the synagogue 'must be rooted in a determinate historical reality for historical silence is hardly sufficient proof of the existence of an institution, such as the synagogue' (Gutmann 1981:3). In this regard it is meaningful that the term synagogue never appears in Paul's letters (see Kraabel 1985:228 for a discussion of the issue).

9 Information about the alleged eleven Jewish synagogues in Rome, on which data are available, suggests that they were constituted along social and status lines. The spectrum varied from 'the virtually illiterate funerary inscriptions from the Synagogue of the Hebrews' (White 1985:6:110 n 61) to the Synagogue of the Augustans, which apparently owed allegiance to the Emperor.
"Yes", both in private homes and in public buildings. Evidence of distinctive architectural features of a place of worship or for study of Torah: "No".

The above three features should, however, be explored in greater detail. They are: the household setting of synagogues; the fact that in Paul's lifetime they were not yet Rabbinic institutions; and, the fact that they were highly diversified with regard to both organisation and theology.

2.4.2 Jewish synagogues as voluntary associations

Several clues, both archaeological and literary, point to the adaptation by Jewish communities in the Diaspora of 'a Hellenistic gentile social form, the private organisation, to its particular social and religious purposes' (Kraabel 1987:54).

The first clue has already been mentioned. There is widespread evidence that many new or imported religious and ethnic associations made use, at least initially, of private homes. The renovation history of the Delos synagogue, the oldest known synagogue building either in the Diaspora or in the Homeland, suggests that it probably had this kind of background. It dates from the late second century or mid first century BCE and was probably a private house at first. Since it has no permanent Torah shrine or Jewish symbols, the chances are that it was used primarily as an assembly hall and community centre (see Kraabel 1979:493). White (see 1987:153; 1990:66) adds that the nature of the renovations (which suggest similarities to the collegial halls of other foreign groups on the island) gives some indication of the nature of this synagogue establishment: it was a kind of guild or voluntary association.

A second clue comes from Caesar's ban on all collegia with the exception of 'certain long established groups' (see Meeks 1983:35). The synagogues were one of those explicitly exempted.

A further clue comes from Josephus's references to the Jewish community at Sardis. Responding to an appeal by the Jews of Sardis, the proquaestor and propraetor of the province of Asia, Lucius Antonius (49 BCE) said that (according to Josephus)

Jewish citizens of ours have come to me and pointed out that from the earliest times they have had an association of their own in accordance with their native laws and a place of their own, in which they decide their affairs and controversies with one another; and upon their request that it be permitted them to do these

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10 Whether this particular building really was a synagogue is hotly debated (see Kraabel 1979:491; White 1987).
things, I decided that they might be maintained, and permitted them so to do (Jewish Antiquities 14.235).

On another occasion the city council and citizens of Sardis, according to Josephus, decided as follows:

Whereas the Jewish citizens living in our city have continually received many great privileges from the people and have now come before the council and the people and have pleaded that as their laws and freedom have been restored to them by the Roman Senate and people, they may, in accordance with their ancestral customs, come together and have a communal life and adjudicate suits among themselves, and that a place be given them in which they may gather together with their wives and children and offer their ancestral prayers and sacrifices to God, it has therefore been decreed by the council and people that permission shall be given them to come together on stated days to do these things which are in accordance with their laws, and also that a place shall be set apart by the magistrates for them to build and inhabit, such as they may consider suitable for this purpose, and that the market-officials of the city shall be charged with the duty of having suitable food for them brought in (Jewish Antiquities 14.260-261).

These references are significant for several reasons. Firstly, Josephus calls the synagogue a synodos, which is one of the most common and general terms for a club, guild or voluntary association. For legal purposes, says Meeks (1983:35), the Romans classified the Jewish synagogues in each city as collegia (or associations). Secondly, it sheds light on some community practices. The participation of women (and children), the sorting out of legal disputes, and communal meals were often also features of voluntary associations.

The Jews, like other groups, had established ethnic associations by means of community gatherings since before the first century. Furthermore, the occurrence of θυται (houses of prayer) do not automatically guarantee the existence of the synagogue as a separate institution (Gutmann 1981:3; White 1990:66; Gutmann 1975:xi). What needs to be examined is the precise nature of these gatherings. Kraabel (1987:58) suggests that

the synagogue Judaism of the Roman Diaspora is best understood as the grafting of a biblical Diaspora theology onto a Greco-Roman social organization. The shift to minority status in places outside the Homeland led to the abandonment of many elements of the ancestral religion, a new emphasis on others, and the adoption of the new environment’s iconography, architecture, and organisational form.

This picture can be filled out in more detail by focusing on some aspects only: the role of patrons and the position of women in Jewish synagogues. Amongst other indications, the excavations at Delos and especially the inscriptions found there, do much to establish the nature of the Jewish synagogue at Delos as a kind of a voluntary association.
Honouring pagan benefactors (both men and women) in a synagogue, White (1987:154) maintains, 'reflects on both the internal order of the Jewish community and its social place within the larger environment'. More precisely, dependence on the benefaction of patrons reflects something of the nature of Jewish communities in the Diaspora as well as their gatherings. The synagogue of the Augustesians in Rome honoured the Emperor, either as a patron or for his general policy of favouring Jewish rights. In addition to many Jewish patrons—in all probability wealthy members of the community who, by virtue of their generosity, were accorded leadership roles and honoured accordingly—a number of non-Jewish patrons fulfilled the same role (see Meeks 1983:206 n 161; White 1990:78-85). At Acmonia in Roman Phrygia, a certain Julia Severa—also known to have been a priestess of the imperial cult—donated a building to the Jewish community (see White 1990:81). She was duly honoured. A second woman, Tation, at Phocaea in Roman Lydia (during the reign of Nero) built an edifice and court and donated it to the Jewish community. The inscription honouring her reads:

Tation, wife of Straton son of Empadon, made a gift to the Jews of the house and the walls of the (peristyle) court, which she had built from her own resources. The Congregation of the Jews has honored Tation, wife of Straton son of Empadon, with a gold crown and a seat of honor (translation in White 1987:143).

It seems likely that leadership roles in the synagogue, as in other religious associations, entailed benefactions.11

The position of women in the synagogue organisation is noteworthy, while the position of patrons as such discloses something about the adaptation by Jews in the Diaspora from the domestic cultures.

The role of women in earlier times (at least the first century) was evidently different from their role during the time of Talmudic supremacy. The segregated place for women in the synagogue is a feature of Galilean synagogues only from the fourth century onwards. The great diversity in Diaspora Judaism prior to the fall of the Temple, together with the open attitudes between Jews and non-Jews, probably points to a less rigid demarcation in some places. As seen from the above examples, non-Jews may even have been allowed access to the assembly and worship. The role of benefactors towards the synagogue community, especially non-Jews, undoubtedly left its mark on local conditions.

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11 Even the New Testament mentions a non-Jew as a benefactor in connection with the building of a synagogue. Luke, (7:3-6) towards the end of the first century, mentions a Roman centurion as the benefactor who sponsored the building of the synagogue.
Perhaps the most significant conclusion to be drawn from the levels of social interaction in Jewish synagogues, as reflected in the above discussion, is that although ethnicity was important, the distinction between Jew and non-Jew was drawn in different ways. Neither purely ethnic nor clearly religious reasons should be singled out as the touchstone of Jewishness. The important role of social and organisational links in Jewish synagogue communities should deter us from using unilateral categories for these distinctions.

These conditions, rather than the Rabbinic ones, should be pictured as the first-century backdrop to Paul's activities. If Paul did go to synagogues, he did not go to them as institutions in the Talmudic sense. What he encountered would most probably have resembled other voluntary associations, with an ethnic colour and Jahweh worship, which fulfilled a variety of social functions, rather than some exclusively religious ones. The social organisation was modelled on conventions of social interaction rather than on purely ethnic or religious markers; both men, women and even so-called pagans were honoured as patrons or benefactors. In short, membership, leadership and entrance requirements were largely dependent on social networks.

2.5 Pauline household communities as voluntary associations

Household structures have been pointed out as central to voluntary associations and Jewish synagogues as well as philosophical schools. There is also widespread agreement nowadays that the members of Pauline communities assembled in private homes. At least five times in Paul's letters specific households are designated by the phrase (or derivatives of it) 'the congregation who gathers in the house of so and so'—ἐν τῇ κατ’ οἴκῳ αὐτῶν ἐκκλησία (1 Cor 16:19). The other instances are Philemon 2, Romans 16:3 (only in a text-critical variant, see Nestle-Aland26), Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15 (if taken as authentically Pauline). Several other remarks indicate that Paul's congregations met in the home of a wealthy member of a community (e.g. Rm 16:3ff). That the followers of Jesus in the cities of the Greco-Roman Empire assembled in the houses of members from the earliest times is supported by evidence from Luke (e.g. Ac 2:46; 5:42; 12:12).

Paul furthermore mentions that he baptised the household of Stephen (1 Cor 1:16), which certainly implies that the whole household was converted to the religion accepted by its head (1 Cor 16:15). Although Acts cannot be taken at face value, Luke attributes to Paul as typical missionary practice that he converted whole households (e.g. Acts 10:1ff, 16:15ff, 31ff.; 17:6; 18:1-8). Given the basic features of the first-century religious structure as well as the central position of households in the Greco-Roman social structure, the following comment by Judge (1960:36) makes perfect sense:
Not only was the conversion of a household the natural or even the necessary way of establishing the new cult in unfamiliar surroundings, but the household remained the soundest basis for the meeting of Christians.

The household setting, one might say, was basic to the social fabric of the expansion of the Pauline communities and was also the centre of assembly and worship within the local group (see White 1990:107).

Taken together, all the evidence suggests that the household structure provided the basic social setting both for the expansion and for the assembly of the Pauline communities in the cities of the Greco-Roman Empire. Existing households served as nuclei for the expansion of the movement as well as for the assembly of these communities. The social organisation of the Pauline groups, it seems, was firmly embedded in existing social structures and operated on the basis of accepted social conventions.

This conclusion confirms the suspicion of White. He suggests as a possibility that we may ultimately discover that rather than creating a new or competing social structure over against the Roman environment, Christianity actually "triumphed" socially precisely because it provided avenues of access and support within the old structures of the Roman social world (White 1985/6: 126).

2.6 Summary remarks

The nature, organisation and expansion of the Pauline groups in the Greco-Roman world, seems to have followed that of many other non-corporate groups in that world. As 'unofficial' and 'unincorporated' structures on the fringes of official political power and organisation, household related groups fulfilled an important function in that society. Households, furthermore, were embedded in social conventions and customs which need to be taken into account when dealing with any of the groups which gathered in household settings and which operated from that basis.

At this point our attention can be shifted to the relationship between the Pauline groups and other Jewish and Jesus groups.

3 FACTIONS, SECTS OR CULTS IN JUDAISM?

What was the relationship between these Pauline household communities and other Jewish and Jesus groups? In a theological picture, the relationship with other Jewish groups is easily settled in terms of 'the church' as super-...
ceding the Jews as the people of God. This is, in fact, the standard answer in many treatments of the church in Pauline perspective. The origin of the church can be seen as a sui generis which constitutes the universal people of God (which has replaced the Jewish people as people of God).

In these pictures the relationship with other Jesus groups is either a non-issue or it is assumed that a straight line of continuation links Jesus, his first followers in Palestine and the Pauline (and other) groups elsewhere in the Empire. This line of development runs something like this: the church was constituted by Jesus (Mt 16:18 comes to mind) as the new people of God, it was expanded by the apostles (from Jerusalem to Samaria and further) and transplanted by followers like Paul (to the cities of the Roman Empire).

At least two aspects cast serious doubt on this picture. One is the recognition of the diversity amongst early Christian groups and the second is that there is no longer agreement that all these groups were necessarily separated from Judaism. In other words, the notion of the church as sui generis which from its inception was separated from Judaism and which developed in a straight line from Jesus to the apostles, is disputed. Not least of the obstacles to that view is the recognition of the variety amongst the early Christian groups. A large number of scholars recognise a break between at least two very significant trends amongst the followers of Jesus. A brief look at some of these suggestions will set the scene for a discussion of specific models to deal with the relationship between these 'Jewish' groups.

3.1 A diversity of early Christian groups

A basic distinction is drawn between Jesus movement groups and Christ cult groups.13 Theissen (see 1978:1) suggests that between about 30 and 70 of the common era the Jesus movement operated in Palestine and southern Syria in continuation of Jesus' own ministry. As itinerant charismatics they constituted a renewal movement internal to Judaism. These groups and leaders can be distinguished from community organisers who established Christian groups (see Theissen 1982:28, 35–40).

Malina (see 1988) argues for the existence of Jesus movement groups as person centered factions as opposed to Pauline groups as group centered factions. White (see 1988) distinguishes between a Jesus movement as one variation of the popular movement in Palestine at the time and Christ cults in the diaspora. Both these proposals will receive further attention below.

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13 It should be noted that different scholars use different terms to describe these groups. It will become apparent, however, that they share more or less the same categories for these groups.
Of particular interest are the suggestions of a variety within the Jesus movement groups. Mack (see 1995:43-73), for example, identifies five different kinds of Jesus movements which started in Galilee during the 30s and the 40s of the first century CE. They were loosely knit groups which latched onto Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God and who saw Jesus as a great teacher. To be sure, they were not religious communities celebrating the Christ myth, but developed as schools of thought about Jesus as teacher. They did not think of Jesus as a divine person or a god and did not agree on their portrayals of him as a teacher. In northern Syria (Antioch) 'the Jesus movement was changed into a cult of the god called Jesus Christ' (Mack 1995:75).

Two major differences separate these cults from the Jesus movement groups. They focussed on the significance of the death and destiny of Jesus and they formed a cult oriented towards the spiritual presence of Jesus in hymns, doxologies and rituals.

Examples from scholarly research can be multiplied. It should be apparent, however, that historical pictures of early Christianity can no longer tolerate the harmonised picture of the conventional view.

Descriptions of the church in Pauline perspective, even those with theological interests, have to deal with both the diversity in early Christianity and the relationship between the different Jesus groups and their Jewish compatriots. It should already be apparent from the above examples that these two aspects go hand in hand, and that some models are more appropriate in dealing with one aspect and other models with the other aspect.

The aim in the following sections is to introduce a number of scholarly proposals which are explicitly dealing with the variety of Christian groups and their connection to Judaism. It has become commonplace in many treatments of Christian origins to call the Christian movement a new religious movement, a renewal movement, or a reforming sect internal to Judaism (see White 1988:7; Meeks 1986:100-101; Theissen 1978:1). Malina (see 1988) argues that both sect and cult models are inappropriate as designation for the early Christian movement and prefers the concept faction. Elliott (see 1995:75-79) on the other hand argues that a sect model is indeed appropriate for describing the character and strategies of a Jewish sect. Meeks (see 1986:99) proposes (similar to Elliott) that we rely on the more inclusive sect definition of Wilson, whereas White (see 1988:14) following Stark proposes a cult model. Watson (see 1986) sees Paul as the one who transformed a Jewish reform movement into a Christian sect, whereas MacDonald (see 1988), following Elliott, describes the Pauline movement as a conversionist sect. All these proposals deal with the position of Christian (Jesus) groups vis-à-vis other similar groups and related Jewish groups.
It will become apparent that these proposals add value and insight to descriptions of the nature of the Pauline movement groups. If they were indeed faction, sect or cult groups, that insight would further illuminate the picture of these groups within their social environment. My first objective will be to establish what is going on in the employment of faction, sect and cult models for studying the Pauline movement groups respectively. In each case the question will be asked whether the specific model is appropriate for understanding the development and dynamics of the Pauline movement groups within the social network of ancient society and within the confines of first-century Judaism.

3.2 The Pauline movement groups as group centered factions

Malina (1988a:15; 1988b:19-29) argues that the 'Jesus movement group was a coalition, specifically of a type known as a faction'. To be more precise, it was a person centered faction which subsequent to the death of Jesus developed into group centered factions. This position is based on a group formation theory.

Following Boissevain (see 1974:171-173), Malina (1988:19-20) distinguishes between corporate and non-corporate groups.

The corporate group...might be defined as a collection of people forming a corporate body with a permanent existence, recruited on recognized principles, with common interests and rules or norms giving the rights and duties of the members in relation to each other and to these common interests. If property is very broadly defined as the right to something or someone in some exclusive way, then the common interests can be called property interests. Obviously such property interests are sacred by definition, and therefore are perceived as divinely sanctioned. The resultant structure is rightly called a hierarchy.

The non-corporate group is most often called a coalition. A coalition is 'a collection of people within some larger, encapsulating structure consisting of distinct parties in temporary alliances for some limited purpose' (Malina 1988:20). A faction

is a coalition of persons (followers) recruited personally, according to structurally diverse principles by or on behalf of a person in conflict with another person(s) with whom they (coalition members) were formerly united over honor and/or control of resources and/or "truth" (Malina 1988:24).

Corporate structures predominate

where the community as such can provide security and thus can protect individuals as well as their enterprises. Such protection is accorded in societies with a high level of integration, such as certain small-scale societies and some highly industrialized Western societies (Boissevain 1974:203).
Malina (1988:19) adds to that, societies 'with greater homogeneity of values and integration of institutions, and with smaller differences of relative power'. Such conditions, according to him, did not apply in the first century Mediterranean world except for 'minuscule ruling elites'. On the other hand, the non-corporate group, most often called a coalition, 'is at home in non-individualistic societies where values and experience do not match'. Coalitions thrive

where security cannot be guaranteed by the community at large. This is the case in fragmented plural societies or highly stratified societies, such as peasant societies, frontier areas and colonies, where a heterogeneity of values and great differences in relative power exist between social groups (Boissevain 1974:203).

It should be obvious that corporate and non-corporate groups are the counterparts of the other (see Seland 1987:198; Malina 1988:15). Coalitions which provide protection from psychological as well as physical threats, predominate where other means of protection such as voluntary associations, kinship groups, or other corporate entities such as the State do exist but do not guarantee protection to individuals, a certain group, or a portion of the community (see Boissevain 1974:203). To be sure, coalitions, though present in all societies, play a more important part in organising activities in some than in others where formal associations rather than coalitions organise the same activities (see Boissevain 1974:170).

We can now turn to Malina's view on the Jesus movement. He argues that the Jesus faction 'fits within the polity of Israel with its embedded religion and economics' (Malina 1988:25). The Jesus-movement group, together with other non-corporate groups such as the Baptist-movement group and Pharisee groups, were embedded or encapsulated in an overarching corporate body. The ethnos Israel structured after its leadership in the temple was the overarching corporate body (see Malina 1988:19-20).

As a person centered faction, the Jesus-movement group developed into group centered factions. Such is the case for early Pauline groups. This development must have taken place not long after the death of Jesus since, according to Malina, we already find traces of it in Paul's letters where Paul has lost allegiance to the Jesus faction and has formed challenging factions. He concentrates on the church of Acts but also refers to Matthew's group which indicates that he sees the post-70 Christian movement as group centered factions which were in continuous conflict with Jewish groups (see Malina 1988:27-29).

Thus, except for the short period prior to Jesus' death, the early Christian groups were not person centered but group centered factions. Elliott (see 1995:78-79) supports the view that the faction model can be used productively within first century Jewish society and in particular for those groups
that have not been separated from Judaism (see also Seland 1987:79). He further maintains that things changed with the death of Jesus, since he restricts the use of the faction model to Jesus’ lifetime. The faction model will not fit or account for a subsequent changing situation when the faction undergoes gradual ideological and social disengagement from its previous encapsulating structure.

Indeed Malina sees the post-70 Christian groups still as factions, but as group centered factions. Although he focuses on the Jesus movement, it is clear that the Pauline movement groups, in his view, should also be considered group centered factions. Seland (see 1987:207) follows Malina in every aspect of his analysis except, to my mind, in this. He argues that the Jesus faction and the factions established after his death and resurrection developed into corporate groups. For several decades the Jesus groups’ primary form of organisation was ‘that of coalitions, but coalitions that at least developed into corporate groups’. It is not clear, however, how many decades are several. It seems as if Malina (see 1988:25) suggests that the underlying causes for the formation of factions continued until at least the fourth century.

In my view the application of the faction model for designating the Pauline movement groups is based on at least three assumptions which need further scrutiny.

The first is that factions are taken as identifiable social organisations on the same level as other forms of social organisations. Malina (1988:19) is certainly right on target in saying that coalitions are one form of social organisation amongst others such as kinship groups, voluntary associations and local governments. However, as Boissevain points out, they are ‘highly fluid’ as social organisations. A faction comes into being as a temporary alliance of parties for a limited purpose when ‘new resources become available’ (1974:171, 198–199, 202). Furthermore, ‘factions are conflicting units formed within a larger encapsulating social entity such as a village, association or even another coalition, which had previously been united’ (Boissevain 1974:195).

Factions are forms of social organisation basic to any political process and they develop as temporary means towards power within existing organisations such as a village, a church, a sect or a political party (see Boissevain 1974:192, 197). In a sense it is an umbrella term for describing a way of gaining political power in any number of existing social organisations. Factions as a form of social organisation, it seems, do not function on the same level as kinship groups, local governments or any similar social organisations. If this is so, the explanatory power of the faction model for describing the development and expansion of the early Christian movement, to my mind, is significantly reduced.
Secondly, the assumption that the *ethnos* Israel is an identifiable social organisation within which the Jesus centered factions could originate, is problematic. The *ethnos* Israel never was a corporate social organisation for all Jews and even the Temple with its leadership and personnel was but one example of the variety of Judaisms at the time.

Even if it is accepted that all the forms of Judaism outside the official Temple religiosity were factions in opposition to the Temple worship (the *ethnos* Israel), it still does not explain anything about the kind of social organisation of the Jesus movement groups. I agree with Seland (see 1987:208) that since there was no normative Judaism in the first century we cannot use a sect model which presupposes the existence of an orthodoxy from which it has to deviate. But what is the difference between a normative Judaism from which a sect deviates and an encapsulating structure which is opposed by a faction? It still presupposes a *Judaism* and not Judaisms, and it places too much emphasis on the first century society as structured by the nation state idea or a community of interests which underlies the society—which is exactly the background of coalitions (see Boissevain 1974:170).

The same argument applies to the notion that leader centered factions may turn into group centered factions (see Boissevain 1974:198). Even if the Pauline movement groups became group centered factions challenging the leader oriented Jesus factions, it is still not yet known what kind of social organisation the Pauline movement groups consisted of. Neither their development nor their expansion is illuminated in this way.

Thirdly, it is assumed that since some of the features of the Jesus groups can be shown to fit the characteristics of a faction, the point has been established that they were indeed factions. The general methodological question of which criteria are sufficient for identifying a specific group as belonging to a particular classification is at issue here. Seland (see 1987:200-207) suggests that testing the faction model against the New Testament material may provide an answer to the question whether the Jesus groups were indeed factions.

The problem, however, is that much of the evidence cited can equally well be used to prove that Jesus was head of a philosophical school. The fact that people joined the group, were loyal to the leader, that there were personal ties with the leader, the existence of patron-client relationships between Jesus and some of his followers, etcetera can be cited in this regard. It can also be asked why some other features central to factions are excluded. The notion comes to mind that factions originate within larger encapsulating social entities, that factions are highly fluid, temporary alliances for limited purposes only (see Boissevain 1974:195-202) or that when factionalism originates it is in a small scale conflict usually on a face-to-face level (Boissevain 1977:99).
Indeed, it goes without saying that Jesus and other members of the Jesus movement groups were involved in conflicts and confrontations. It seems plausible that faction models and the process of factionalism (see Salisbury & Silverman 1977:6) can shine some light on the dynamics within the early Jesus movements. Once the development and expansion within the kind of organisations that one encounters in the Pauline movement groups have been established, a faction model may contribute to understanding their internal dynamics. I am not convinced, however, that they can be used to describe the kind of development, social organisation and expansion that marked the Pauline movement groups—even only as group centered factions.

3.3 The Pauline movement groups as sects

A chorus of voices has described the Pauline movement groups as sects in the first-century world. Some studies operate within the traditional sect-church typology, while others claim to have moved beyond that into a more ‘valid’ cross-cultural definition of sects.

The first and perhaps most common model used in New Testament studies is the traditional church-sect typology developed by Troeltsch and Weber. They used the notion of sectarianism to explain certain features of the development in Christian history. Since many studies have discussed Troeltsch’s sect-church typology and its influence on New Testament research, that will not be repeated. More important is the way in which that typology informs New Testament studies dealing with the development and expansion of the Pauline movement groups.

Watson (1986:38), for example, argues that the historical development of the Pauline movement groups can be described in sociological terms as ‘the transformation of a reform-movement into a sect’. The Jesus movement was a movement to reform Judaism, but was changed by Paul into a sect of Judaism more or less separate from the Jewish community. It is essential to his argument that a separation between the Pauline communities and the Jewish community (between church and synagogue) has already taken place in Paul’s lifetime. Despite the problem with the way in which he uses social-scientific models to explain historical data (see Craffert 1993:239–241), it is worthwhile to note that he utilises the traditional church-sect typology—the separation of a deviant group from the parent body (see Watson 1986:19–20). Watson is probably following Esler who he refers to in this regard. The latter (1987:48–49) maintains that Christianity ‘did originate from within Judaism and did

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14 For discussions of this issue see the following: Wilson (1973:11–16; 1982:89–100), Swatos (1976:130–135), Stark and Bainbridge (1979:122ff) and White (1988:7–9).
constitute, at least in part, a protest against various features of that
“church”. Regarding some of the Pauline communities, Esler (1994:69)
maintains that ‘Paul advocated a type of Christianity inevitably sectarian in
relation to Judaism’.

In a recent study Elliott (see 1995), following Meeks (see 1986), and
elaborating on his own proposal (see Elliott 1981) dismisses the proposals of
both a faction and a cult as appropriate models for understanding the Jesus
movement after his death. He argues that they were essentially sectarian in
nature. ‘It is only after the death of Jesus when there is a change in the
geographical, social and cultural conditions pertaining to the Jesus faction
that this faction gradually assumes the features and strategies of a Jewish sect’
(Elliott 1995:78).

In order to avoid the Troeltschian typology of sects, which links sects
exclusively to a sect-church typology, Elliott turns to a revised version of
Wilson’s sectarian model. In fact, he operates within a sect model displaying
21 features. He arrives at this via an expansion of the seven featured defini-
tion of Scroggs (who basically relies on the sect model of Stark), adds his own
version of Wilson’s model plus Meeks’s revised version of Wilson, plus a
number of other sect typologies, in order to compile a list of salient features
of the sect (see Elliott 1995:80–84, 93–95 n 6–27).

Elliott lists eight conditions under which this shift from Jewish faction to
Jewish sect gradually occurred. In Paul’s letters, as in some other writings,
we have a process of ‘social dissociation, reorganization, and ideological
expropriation of the identity and traditions of the parent body’ (italics mine)
(Elliott 1995:80).

It is important to note that socio-historically the Pauline movement is
seen as a reaction or protest movement within the parameters of some kind
of normative or corporate Judaism. It assumes the character and strategies of a
Jewish sect.

To my mind, a whole series of problems are involved in utilising sectarian
models for describing the Pauline movement groups. Since I have dealt with
this issue in detail elsewhere, only brief remarks will have to suffice here.

The term sect covers different phenomena in the sense that the same term
is used for different categories. These include a description of religious
organisations, religious experience, schismatic groups and attitudes towards
the broader environment. For all of these the same term is used.

Secondly, the traditional church-sect typology as a description of schis-
matic groups being separated from a parent body, has been discredited. Since
this typology breaks down as soon as it is applied to circumstances different
to those experienced by Troeltsch and Weber, contemporary researchers have
expanded the definition in a number of directions. One such example is that
of Wilson (1973) who redefined sects as different responses to evil in the world.

On top of the difficulties inherent in the church-sect typologies, the application of this typology in New Testament studies remains suspect. Despite the explicit objection to the notion of a parent body in recent sect definitions, a Jewish parent body from which Christian sects diverged is usually invented by New Testament scholars. If one accepts the growing consensus of a variety of Judaisms in the beginning of the Christian era, any such notion of a parent Jewish body becomes problematic (see Craffert 1993:245-256; White 1988:10).

The most popular sect typology employed by New Testament scholars is that of Brian Wilson. Space does not allow a full discussion of this model. Suffice it to point out that a model which is primarily designed for describing strategies for dealing with evil in the world, cannot be used for describing the dynamics of the organisational development and expansion of early Christian groups.

3.4 The Pauline movement groups as cults

A third suggestion for dealing with the development and expansion of the Pauline movement groups is that they were cults. In order to understand what is meant by the term cult in these contexts, it should be realised that these suggestions posit the cult model as something different from sect models.

In Stark's definition there are significant differences between a sect and a cult. He maintains that both cults and sects are deviant religious bodies which are in a state of relatively high tension with their surrounding socio-cultural environment.

However, sects have a prior tie with another religious organisation.... The term sect, therefore, applies only to schismatic movements.... Because sects are schismatic groups they present themselves to the world as something old. They left the parent body not to form a new faith but to reestablish the old one, from which the parent body had 'drifted'... (Stark 1979:125).

Cults on the other hand

do not have a prior tie with another established religious body in the society in question. The cult may represent an alien (external) religion, or it may have originated in the host society—but through innovation, not fission.... Cults, then represent an independent religious tradition in a society (Stark 1979:125).

Stark, a sociologist, argues that during his ministry Jesus founded a sect movement within Judaism, and even after the crucifixion there was little to separate the disciples from their fellow Jews. However, 'on the morning of
the third day something happened which turned the Christian sect into a cult movement'. The belief in the resurrected Jesus, Stark maintains, 'added too much new culture to Judaism to be any longer an internal sect movement' (1986:223). He adds a second argument. When historians talk about the early church they mean the Pauline church which eventually changed history, and there can be little doubt that this form of Christianity 'wasn't a sect movement within conventional paganism' (1986:224). Therefore, within the context of religious activities in the Roman Empire the Pauline movement groups were a cult movement.

White, on the other hand, gives the sect concept in New Testament studies a definite turn in doing two things. Firstly, following Stark he describes sects in contrast to cults and both as deviant movements, and secondly, following Meeks, he modifies the definition of sects in adding the component of worldview. For him

a sect is a separatist (or schismatic) revitalization movement which arises out of an established, religiously defined cultural system, with which it shares a symbolic worldview. A cult is an integrative, often syncretistic, (re)vitalization movement which is effectively imported (by mutation or mobilization) into another religiously defined cultural system, to which it seeks to synthesize a basically foreign (or novel) symbolic worldview (White 1988: 17).

It is important to note how the development of the early Christian groups is accommodated by these models.

Basically White shares Meeks's view on the first followers of Jesus, that is, on those claiming Jesus as the Messiah, as an apocalyptic sectarian movement within the spectrum of popular movements in Palestinian society (see White 1988:12). Then, contrary to Stark who thinks that the change from sect to cult took place three days after the crucifixion, White (see 1988:18) holds that whereas 'the Jesus movement began as a schismatic sect in the Palestinian context, the forms found in the Diaspora are likewise to be seen as cult movements, variations on an existing Jewish pattern of cult diffusion'. According to this description the Pauline movement groups would best be seen as cultic type of deviant groups within the cities of the Roman Empire.

15 In his view, the vast differences between Jewish communities in the cities of the Roman Empire warrants the conclusion that they can also be seen as cult movements (see White 1988:18).

16 It is interesting that Mack (see 1995:75), without being explicit about the features of a cult model, argues for a similar distinction between the Jesus movement groups and the Pauline cults. Amongst others, Paul turned the Jesus movement into a cult of the god Jesus Christ.
There can be no doubt that the distinction between groups sharing the same worldview and those importing a novel worldview into a dominant cultural environment is a useful one. While there are certain advantages in the use of the cult model and the distinction between sect and cult models, this suggestion is, however, not without its difficulties.

Firstly, Malina (1988:15, and see 1986:94) rejects both sect and cult models for describing the development and expansion of the early Christian movement as inappropriate, 'since both these designations come from contemporary society in which religion is conceived as separate from and independent of other social institutions'. These models are rejected not because they are contemporary modern models (since that would also be true of faction models) but because they are incompatible with the phenomenon under consideration—there is not a fit between the model and the data. Indeed, Malina's rejection of the sect and cult models is determined by a historical decision on the nature of religion in the first century world as well as his judgement that these models are too much determined by modern contemporary categories and conceptions about religion.17

This is a serious drawback in most of the above studies. Stark and Bainbridge (see 1980) clearly operate within a definition of religion which does not account for the fact that in some cultures, religion does not exist as an independent social institution. Despite himself, White has apparently been misled by their view since he treats the early Christian groups as religious groups (see White 1986:260; 1988:23). That is, he does not adjust the models to apply to the complex structure of religious life in the larger Roman Empire. It should be clear that the Pauline movement groups were religious movements or groups in a world where the religious structure was different from that presupposed by cult models.

A second, and related, problem has to do with the key defining element in sect and cult models used by Stark and White, namely, the notion of tension of the group with its environment. Sects and cults are by definition deviant movements which stand in tension with their social environment (see White 1988:17, 19). Historically, the question is whether the Pauline movement groups originated as deviant religious groups within their environment. Put differently, are the Pauline movement groups (and other Christian groups) not forced by the model into the mould of deviant groups?

17 Seland (1987:198) closely follows Malina in this argument. He argues that the 'first century world did not have our religious structures of denominations and churches which are the background for the common use today of the category "sect". Thus, the category sect 'is dysfunctional both for investigations of many non-Western societies of today, and for studies of religion in the 1st century Mediterranean world'.
Was the way in which groups were constituted in the first-century world not different from that imagined by these models? Could the message or beliefs of each Christian group or the fact that they constructed boundaries and defined themselves symbolically as, for instance, a particular household, turn them into sects or cults within their social environment? Should we not abandon models which magnify tension and deviance and adopt models which highlight the creative utilisation of cultural resources in organising and defining themselves as a group?

Thirdly, the definition of cults as 'expressing a group's self-understanding religiously and socially in relation to its larger cultural environment' (White 1988:22-23), turns out to be just as wide as Wilson's sect definition—and with equally weak explanatory powers. According to the definition as it stands, if each and every group within a dominant social system defining itself in opposition to the dominant culture (sharing the same worldview as sects, and importing a novel worldview as cults) is called either a sect or a cult, then hardly any group in a given system could either be a sect or a cult.

3.5 Summary remarks

One inevitably detects the mutual interaction between model and historical setting. For example, most of the sect models are only applicable if a parent community is imagined as part of the historical picture. It therefore goes without saying that, depending on the model used for conceptualising and describing the origin and expansion of the Pauline movement groups, different pictures emerge. Different questions are asked and different possibilities emerge with each model.

Given this mutual interaction between models and setting, the 'goodness of fit' of these models for making explicit and conscious the lenses by which means the relationships between different Jesus groups and some Jewish groups is described, becomes important. While there can be little doubt that the intricate relationships between different Jesus groups and between them and other Jewish groups can no longer be left in the hands of those drawing the conventional picture, I am not satisfied that any of the proposed social science models is entirely appropriate. Each contain certain valuable insights and in different ways each contribute to addressing this complex set of interactions between groups in the first-century world. While such an evaluation can be a significant first step in the process, there can also be little doubt that new and improved models should be employed for describing the group relationships in the early Christian movement.
4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In an earlier study on the relationship between the Pauline movement groups and first-century Judaism I (see Craffert 1993) have advocated a transformation of the received questions. A large part of my argument consisted of an attempt to point out the deficiencies of a theological (or history-of-ideas) approach to this issue. Such an approach deals with the separation between the Pauline groups and Judaism primarily in terms of opposing theological ideas. These groups were separated (or a break can be envisaged) because Paul ascribed to a different soteriology or pattern of religion: belief in Jesus as the Christ constituted a new religion.

Instead of the question: When and in what way did Paul cause a separation from Judaism?, I suggested that the interaction between Paul and other Jewish groups can be described in terms of the competition between various groups, claiming the traditions and symbols of ancient Israel in mediating the sacred and distributing divine power. Paul, similar to other Jewish groups, did not reject Judaism or try to break away from it (since for most Jews there was no normative Jewish body to break away from), but called on shared traditions and symbols in establishing household communities as the true house of Israel.

This study was an attempt to take that line of argument a step further. Instead of a theological construction which reduces the origin, expansion and organisation of the Pauline churches to single factors and to a linear process, this study suggests that the complexity of the social dynamics should be taken into account when dealing with these aspects of the Pauline groups. It has been suggested that the household setting be taken seriously as the social framework for understanding the organisational nature and expansion of the Pauline groups. These groups can be seen as non-corporate groups which utilised the household institution as the primary social structure for organisation and expansion.

In continuation of the previous argument, it is furthermore suggested that the complexity of the relationship between the various Jesus groups and between them and other Jewish groups should neither be reduced to a single factor nor be described by means of any model (faction, sect or cult) which does not adequately deal with the 'goodness of fit' between the model and the social and historical realities of these groups. The challenge is to describe the Pauline churches as real social and historical phenomena in a specific setting. The origin and expansion of these groups were intricately linked to the type of organisation they represented (and vice versa) while a host of factors contributed to the dynamics within these groups and between them and the environment—both that of other Christian groups and other Jewish groups. Their nature and organisation was not only linked to the household institu-
tion, but their connecting ties to other groups were far from uniform. One should not be surprised if it is said that the variety of early Christian groups were connected to certain personalities rather than to each other and that any kind of overarching social organisation came much later in their historical development. Was it not the unifying force under the christianising drive of the Empire which created 'the Church' out of a variety of Jesus and Christ groups, instead of assuming that these groups were a unity prior to that event? As social entities the Pauline groups, at least, were person centered non-corporate groups which utilised the household institution to their utmost benefit. With these insights in mind, it is difficult to ascribe to most of the elements of the conventional picture of the 'early church' in general and 'the Pauline churches' in particular. The church as Christian creation can hardly be found in the variety of Jesus groups which existed in the first century.

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