

A RE-EXAMINATION OF 1 CORINTHIANS 14, 23–24 IN LIGHT OF ROMAN CENSUS DECLARATIONS

Joel A. Weaver

Introduction

In his discussion of speaking in tongues in *1 Corinthians* 14, 23–24, Paul writes : « If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders (ἰδιῶται) or unbelievers (ἄπιστοι) enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind ? But if all prophesy, and if some unbeliever or outsider enters, that person is reproved by all and called to account by all. » Paul's treatment of speaking in tongues in *1 Cor.* 14 presents a number of difficult interpretative issues, and these have indeed garnered much attention. This paper, however, will examine an aspect of the text about which many commentators make no remarks at all. Thus, the focus of this study is on the reason for the presence of these unbelievers in early Christian worship.

Modern readings of ἰδιῶται and ἄπιστοι

As previously mentioned, a number of prominent scholars do not discuss the possible identity of these « unbelievers » who enter into Christian worship ; they simply identify these ἄπιστοι as non-Christians, while focusing their interpretative efforts instead on Paul's perplexing rhetorical strategy¹. Those commentators who do address the issue usually provide only a cursory list of options. These ἄπιστοι could be invited guests, an unbelieving spouse, unconverted slaves, or friends of the family². Other identifications of these unbelievers are based upon the pairing of ἄπιστος with the word ἰδιώτης, which will be treated briefly here.

The term ἰδιώτης, according to Ruth Kritzer, can refer to a private or common person, as opposed to one engaged in public affairs. It is also used for one without professional knowledge ; it can thus refer to a layperson in a religious context. In the majority of the uses in the documentary papyri from the Roman period, ἰδιώτης refers to one without a concrete occupation, that is, an unskilled worker³. It seems likely that Paul uses the term in this fashion, referring to one who is untutored or ignorant regarding Christianity in general, and the practice of speaking in tongues in particular.

In providing this hypothetical example in verses 23 and 24, Paul links the terms ἄπιστος and ἰδιώτης. Some interpreters view these terms as referring to two separate groups⁴. In verse 16, Paul refers to « one who fills the place of the ἰδιώτης » (ὁ ἀναπληρῶν τὸν τόπον τοῦ ἰδιώτου). Some scholars suggest that this is a technical term referring to a member of the Christian community who holds the position of a layperson, a proselyte, or perhaps even a catechumen⁵. As a result, the understanding of the term in verses 23 and 24 is colored by this reading of verse 16. In such cases a distinction tends to be made between a generic unbeliever and one, the ἰδιώτης, who has an interest in the faith⁶. Along these lines, Alan F. Johnson uses the term « seeker » for ἰδιώτης⁷.

¹ See Bruce (1971) 133 ; Conzelmann (1975) 243 ; Fitzmyer (2008) 521 ; Talbert (2002) 111.

² Invited guests : Barrett (1968) 326 ; Garland (2003) 651. Unbelieving spouse : Fee (1987) 685 ; Hays (1997) 238 ; Garland (2003) 651. Unconverted slaves : Garland (2003) 651. Friends of the family : Robertson / Plummer (1986) 318.

³ See Kritzer (2006) 455–456.

⁴ See Sampley (2002) 965 ; Verbrugge (2008) 284.

⁵ See Moffatt (1938) 220 ; Héring (1964) 151.

⁶ See Brown (1970) 379.

⁷ See Johnson (2004) 264 ; Mare (1976) 274 identifies this person as an « inquirer ».

Most scholars and translators, however, treat the terms as synonyms. Hans Conzelmann asserts that « no difference of meaning is perceptible between ἰδιώτης and ἄπιστος »⁸. Gordon Fee also views them as complementary, translating them as « untutored » and « unbeliever ». A number of American and British scholars, following the lead of the *New Revised Standard Version*, refer to them as « unbelievers » and « outsiders », which is an increasingly more popular English rendering of ἰδιώτης⁹. Along similar lines, others render this construction as a *hendiadys*. C.K. Barret translates the phrase as « unbelieving outsiders », and David Garland speaks of an « untutored unbeliever »¹⁰. It seems best to understand these terms in 1Cor. 14, 23–24 as mutually glossing.

The openness of Christian worship

Paul clearly exhibits concern in 1 *Corinthians* about the presence in worship of those who are not believers. As to the reasons for their presence, the aforementioned options – invited guests, unbelieving spouses or slaves – are all certainly credible. It seems likely that Paul could have had such instances in mind. Still, a few New Testament scholars have made tentative suggestions as to the openness of Christian worship. Barret suggests they may have met outside, allowing visitors to arrive by chance¹¹. Garland mentions the possibility of « the curious who might wander in », and Richard Hays states that Paul « evidently thinks of the house church meetings as open to nonbelievers ; his argument assumes that their presence in worship might be a normal event in the community’s life. »¹² What is required is further information as to the extent and nature of the openness of early Christian worship. Data from the census declarations of Roman Egypt may help shed light on this issue.

Evidence of shared house ownership in Roman Egypt

A search of the *Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis* yields a total of 333 census documents. In examining these declarations, I focused solely on the matter of house ownership. After removing documents that are duplicates, and after setting aside those that do not mention house ownership at all (often due to the fragmentary nature of the papyri), the results are as follows.

There are 71 instances in which the person registering appears to own the house outright. The typical formula is something like this : « Those who dwell in the house belonging to me » εἶεν | [οἱ] καταγεινόμενοι ἐν τῇ ὑπαρχο[ύσῃ μοι οἰκίᾳ (P.Oxy II 255, 5–7) ; or « I register (...) for the house by house census the house belonging to me in the quarter of Temgenuthis (...) » ἀπογράφομαι πρὸς τῆ[ν το]ῦ διελθόντος κδ (ἔτους) | [τοῦ κυρίου] ἡμῶν Αὐτοκράτορος Μάρκου Αὐρηλ[ί]ου | [Cεουήρου] Ἀντωνίνου Εὐσεβοῦς Εὐτυχοῦς Cεβατοῦ | [κατ’ οἰκίαν] ἀπογρα(φὴν) | [τὴν ὑπάρχουcά]ν μοι ἐπ’ [ἀ]μφόδου Τεμγε[ν]οῦθ[εω]ς | [οἰκίαν (P.Oxy XLVII 3347, 6–11).

On the other hand, there are 119 instances in which a person is said to own a part or a share of a house. Sometimes it simply says « a share of a house » : ὑπάρχει μοι ἐπ’ ἀμφόδου Μοήρεως μέρος οἰκίας (P.Tebt. II 322, 8–9). At other times a fraction is expressed, such as one half, ἡμι|cu μέρος οἰκίας καὶ αἰθρίου (P.Oxy III 481, 7–8), or one third, τρίτον μέρος οἰκίας καὶ ἀλλῆ[c] (P.Strasb. IV 257, 19). In P.Tebt. II 322, two different persons are indicated as owning a share of a house ; in such cases, each reference to partial ownership is counted separately since they pertained to different houses. In another instance, there

⁸ See Conzelmann (1975) 243.

⁹ See Bruce (1971) 133 ; Fitzmyer (2008) 521 ; Talbert (2002) 111. Hays (1997) 238 and Schrage (1999) 411 also view the terms as synonyms.

¹⁰ See Barrett (1968) 324 ; so also Murphy-O’Connor (1979) 130 ; Garland (2003) 651.

¹¹ See Barrett (1968) 326.

¹² See Garland (2003) 651 ; Hays (1997) 238.

was one registrant who owned a share of several houses (SPP XX 29 V). Again, we counted each of these as a separate case of shared ownership of a single house. In the final result, the occurrences of shared ownership outnumbered those of individual ownership 119 to 71, which is a ratio of roughly 1.7 to 1.

Before drawing any conclusions from this data, the appropriateness of its application to Pauline house churches must be addressed. Can documents from Egypt be used to shed light on the housing situation in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy? In *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier state that « we should be duly cautious in extrapolating from Roman Egypt to the remainder of the Roman world (...). Nonetheless, the basic demographic attributes of Roman Egypt are, at the least, thoroughly at home in the Mediterranean; they tend to recur in historical Mediterranean populations with considerable regularity. Nor is there any strong a priori reason why most of these attributes should be regarded as unique to Egypt among Roman provinces.»¹³ Thus, it is not unreasonable to suppose that what is found in Roman Egypt could also be found in other Roman provinces. Yet, again, we must use caution, particularly given the small sample of data with which we have to work.

Since the Pauline churches were located in urban areas, it is necessary to inquire about the geographic distribution of the papyri. According to Bagnall and Frier, the declarations are proportionally more urban than rural; whereas 35–40 % of the Egyptian population was urban, 49 % of the census declarations come from nome *metropoleis*; thus, the cities are overrepresented¹⁴. The two most represented cities in the census declarations are Arsinoe and Oxyrhynchos. Arsinoe had a population of about 44 000, while the estimates of Oxyrhynchos range from 20 – 40 000¹⁵.

It seems that from every bit of ancient information uncovered we derive more questions than answers. In the case of these jointly owned homes, no information is given regarding the residency of the other joint-owner's household. One could own half of a house and be the sole occupant (along with his or her household). And of course, we have examples of people owning a portion of a house in which they do not live¹⁶. Yet it stands to reason, given the large number of jointly owned houses, that multiple households shared these structures. Furthermore, absent from the declarations of these shared houses is an interesting statement often found in the documents indicating outright ownership. After the enumeration of the household members, a formulaic oath states that « no one else was living in the house, neither a stranger, nor an Alexandrian, nor a freedman, nor a Roman, nor an Egyptian » μηδένα ἕτερον οἰκεῖν παρ' ἐμοῖ | μήτε ἐπ[ί]ξ[ενον μή]τε Ἀλεξανδ(ρ)έα | μηδὲ ἀπελεύθερον μήτε Ῥωμα<ί>ο>ν | μηδὲ Αἰγύπ[τιον ἔ]ξω τῶν προ|γεγραμμένων (P.Oxy II 255, 19–23).

It must be noted that the semantic range of ὑπάρχω may be broader than ownership and could perhaps refer to persons renting space in a house or building. Likewise, the question of what kind of structure constitutes an οἰκία when filing a census declaration needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, the more important information for the purpose of this paper is that which indicates a sharing of space.

Conclusion

The evidence of shared housing from the Egyptian census declarations may suggest the need to reformulate at least one model of the early Christian house church. The often-

¹³ See Bagnall / Frier (1994) 172–173; also Lewis (1984) 1077–1084.

¹⁴ See Bagnall / Frier (1994) 6.

¹⁵ See Tacoma (2005) 41–43. Roman Corinth had an urban population of around 80 000 and a surrounding rural population of about 20 000; see Engels (1990) 84.

¹⁶ In P.Tebt. II 322, 27, Tapesouris, who is registered as a member of the household of Apollonios, owns in the same quarter of the city a sixth share of a house which formerly belonged to her mother.

repeated picture of a wealthy patron hosting early Christian worship in his or her home suggests a rather modern and anachronistic image of privacy¹⁷. Not only could a Christian house church be hosted by multiple patrons ; it is certainly possible that a Christian household could have shared a house or living space with a non-Christian household. A document from Tebtunis serves as an excellent example due to the mention of shared common space : ὑπάρχει μοι ἐπ’ ἀμφόδου Μοήρεως μέρος οἰκίας καὶ αἰθρίου καὶ αὐλ(ῆς) | καὶ ἐξέδρα (P.Tebt. II 322, 8–10). A Christian worship service held in such space, *i.e.* a shared « house, area / atrium, courtyard, and hall », would be susceptible to the frequent entrance of unbelieving outsiders due to the simple exercise of the daily tasks required for running a household. Justin Meggitt declares that the occupants of a house « were not necessarily a socially cohesive group, and we do better to talk of “housefuls” rather than “households” when examining the occupancy of many of these structures. »¹⁸

In *1 Corinthians* Paul demonstrates particular concern for the orderliness and intelligibility of Christian worship for non-believers. As noted earlier, Richard Hays suggested that Paul’s « argument assumes that their presence in worship might be a normal event in the community’s life »¹⁹. Shared housing with non-Christians, and the resulting interaction of operating households, provides a plausible reason for the regular presence of unbelievers in early Christian worship, particularly if meetings were held in shared common space. Thus, the high percentage of shared house ownership in the census declarations of Roman Egypt supplies evidence indicating precisely how early Christian worship might have been open.

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¹⁷ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1994) 103–108 first challenged the assumption that *domus* were inhabited exclusively by individual wealthy owners and their households.

¹⁸ See Meggitt (1998) 65.

¹⁹ See Hays (1997) 238.

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