THE SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTION OF REFERENCES TO CHRISTIANS IN THE PAULINE LITERATURE

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Introduction

Most of the letters of the Corpus Paulinum are directed to a particular, clearly-identifiable local church in the ancient Mediterranean world. Even the letters which are directed to individuals (Philemon, Timothy, Titus) were probably read before particular churches\(^1\) in circumstances that might have been analogous to the reading of official Roman mandata principii before a wider audience.\(^2\)

Yet there are some exceptions: Galatians is addressed to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2). Some have argued that Ephesians is a circular to several churches as some of the oldest manuscripts do not contain the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ in 1:1.\(^3\)

In his letters to individual churches, Paul on several occasions refers to all the Christian churches, to the churches of a particular region, or to one local church. Paul refers in the same manner to “the brothers,” “the believers” or “the saints” irrespective of whether he has in mind an encompassing sense or a sense restricted to a particular region or place.

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1 Titus ends with the benediction “Grace be with you all” (3:12).
3 Cf. the text critical discussion in H.W. Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 145–48. However, some care is needed, as the letter to the Colossians, clearly addressed to that particular church (“To the saints and faithful brothers in Colossae”), was also to be read before the church in Laodicea (4:16: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea”). The letters must have been distinct enough from each other to make such an exchange worthwhile. At the same time both letters where relevant to both congregations. Is this an exception or should we expect that such interchange also happened when it is not particularly mentioned?
If these references to Christians other than the addressees in Pauline literature are studied at all, they usually appear in discussions of Pauline ecclesiology, so for example in the major volumes of J.D.G. Dunn, F. Hahn and P. Stuhlmacher. They mention these references in the context of Paul’s use of and understanding of ἐκκλησία. Their main quest is Paul’s understanding of the nature of the church. Do these references suggest (or even demonstrate) that Paul had something larger in mind than individual congregations or the churches of a particular area? Do “all the churches” form an entity greater or other than the sum of many individual congregations? We limit our survey to four senior experts in Pauline Studies.

Stuhlmacher asserts, without further argument, a universal perspective: “Für das Kirchenverständnis des Apostels ist charakteristisch, dass die konkreten Ortsgemeinden im Mittelpunkt seines Interesses stehen, diese stets aber als Erscheinungsformen der gesamten Kirche angesehen warden.”

Hahn offers a brief survey of the terms used by Paul for believers and then discusses “Die Glaubensgemeinschaft als Volk Gottes und als Einzelgemeinde.” He starts the discussion as follows: “Paulus verwendet ἡ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεου ebenso wie das absolute ἡ ἐκκλησία für die Gesamtheit der an Christus Glaubenden, das Wort ist daher im Sinn von ‘Gottesvolk’ bzw. von ‘Kirche’ zu verstehen … Daneben begegnet aber auch der pluralische Gebrauch ….” Hahn gives a brief survey of the material we will examine here and concludes:

Der Befund ist insgesamt nur so zu erklären, dass Paulus von der Bedeutung von ἐκκλησία im Sinn von “Gottesvolk” ausgeht, wie die häufige Verwendung des Genitivs τοῦ θεου zeigt. Er hält damit jene Grundbedeutung des Wortes fest, die seit Jesu eigener Verkündigung zentrale Bedeutung hatte. Er kennt daneben aber auch die im hellenistischen Bereich des Urchristentums übliche Verwendung von ἐκκλησία zur Bezeichnung einer konkreten

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4 *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 533–64.
7 *Theologie I*, 355. Stuhlmacher’s main emphasis is to show “dass Paulus die Kontinuität zum Kirchenverständnis der Urgemeinde in Jerusalem gewahrt hat” (356).
8 *Theologie*, 273–74 (“Die Glaubenden als Berufene und Geheiligte”).
9 *Theologie*, 274–75.
10 *Theologie*, 274–75.