

# WERE THERE HOUSE CHURCHES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TIMES?

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## Abstract

It has long been conjectured that worship among the first Christians took place largely in private houses, and hence that domestic dwellings were informal proto-churches. This assumption has recently been challenged by a bullish thesis of the German scholar Stefan Heid, who argues that the sacraments always required an altar and that only one altar ever existed in any given local community. Heid believes that there is no such thing as a house church and that they are a scholarly fantasy of a naive reformed cast. This article examines the archaeological and philological evidence and suggests that (a) Heid's assertion that a permanent altar was always used in the sacraments among the first Christians is uncertain; (b) the difficulty of accommodating hundreds of souls in houses is not an argument against the effectiveness of house churches, since they could have proliferated in proportion to the number of converts; (c) the furniture, posture, and density of worshippers in private houses are unknown but in all events adequate for proto-liturgical sacraments; and (d) the biblical formula of "church in the house" (ἡ ἐκκλησία κατ' οἶκον) can indeed mean house church, especially as it embraces the concept of a "tenement church." The article concludes that while Heid has some useful arguments, they provide no proof that house churches did not flourish in the early Christian period against much evidence that they did.

## Keywords

house church, tenement church, early church, altar, sacrament, eucharist, worship, sacred space archaeology

Until recently, it has been assumed that the first Christians worshipped mainly in private houses. The motif is suggested in key biblical places, like the apostles "breaking bread from house to house,"<sup>1</sup> where pious people perform a sacramental ceremony in a domestic circumstance, as instigated by Christ at the Last Supper. For convenience, the intimate rooms and the people who gathered there for sacred purposes have been called "house churches." More recently, however, scholars have pondered the question of whether early Christians met and worshipped in other

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1 κλῶντές τε κατ' οἶκον ἄρτον, Acts 2:46.

places. Edward Adams, for example, agrees that house churches existed but not in the widespread or dominant mode that has been assumed: he does not believe in the “almost exclusively houses” model (AEH, as he calls it) and investigates the evidence for meeting in shops and workshops or inns and gardens.<sup>2</sup> Although confirming the existence of house churches in the first centuries of Christendom, Adams’s identification of other sites of worship and assembly has drawn a stark refutation from Jan Bremmer, who considers that the evidence of such gatherings is flimsy.<sup>3</sup> Between the publication of Adams (2016) and Bremmer’s review (2020), a further intervention was made in radical denial of house churches entirely. Beginning with an article in 2018,<sup>4</sup> the ecclesiastical historian Stefan Heid argued that the idea of a house church is a modern phantom, artificially produced by scholarship.<sup>5</sup> His argument is integral with the claim that from the beginning a specific holy table was used for the sacraments, rather than a secular table blessed for the occasion and subsequently reverting to secular status after its ceremonial use. Heid consolidated his polemic in a large book from 2019, *Altar und Kirche: Prinzipien christlicher Liturgie*, which has more recently been printed in an English translation, *Altar and Church: Principles of Liturgy from Early Christianity* (2023), and has attracted strikingly positive reviews.<sup>6</sup> Heid’s thesis does not depend uniquely on textual sources and breaks new ground in its focus on furniture, posture, and space, which helps triangulate facts that otherwise come solely from the biblical record, early Christian letters, Acts of uncertain date, and from later liturgical texts. The early liturgies, whose elaboration from the third century onward has been well studied by scholars such as Enrico Mazza, Paul Bradshaw, and Andrew McGowan, do not give us a clear picture of sacramental practice before their evolution. The development of liturgies is linked to practices in an established church with clergy, and does not necessarily bear witness to less institutional practices that might have flourished before their adoption as the performative framework of the sacramental rites. Potentially, therefore, Heid’s consideration of the furniture and spatial configuration of early assemblies is valuable.

The present article is not a review of Heid’s learned book but concerns only the

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- 2 Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 6–8.
  - 3 Jan N. Bremmer, “Urban Religion, Neighbourhoods and the Early Christian Meeting Places,” *Religion in the Roman Empire* 6, no. 1 (2020): 48–74, <https://doi.org/10.1628/rre-2020-0005>.
  - 4 Stefan Heid, “Gab es ‘Hauskirchen’? Anmerkungen zu einem Phantom,” *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 38, no. 1 (2018): 13–48, <https://doi.org/10.25167/RTSO/38>.
  - 5 Stefan Heid, *Altar und Kirche: Prinzipien Christlicher Liturgie* (Schnell und Steiner, 2019), 70. Heid’s publications do not feature in Bremmer’s article “Urban Religion,” already mentioned.
  - 6 For example, Peter Doll: “Heid displays an exhaustive familiarity with the scholarly literature and the available evidence, drawn from Scripture and literary sources and from art, architecture and archaeology. His thesis is overwhelmingly persuasive,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* (2025), 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174035532400069X>.

assertion in the first three chapters (which closely follow the original article “Gab es ‘Hauskirchen?’” of 2018) that house churches never existed. The first stage of my inquiry will be to represent what Heid actually says in the relevant chapters. Second, I ask if there is a threshold of how sacred a space and table have to be in order to qualify respectively as a church or altar. Third, what were the practical constraints for gathering in domestic circumstances and how large would a house have to be to accommodate a sacramental ritual? Fourth, what kind of posture did people adopt in domestic meals and what furniture supported them? Fifth, how does the Roman development of the urban tenement complicate the dichotomy of house church and church proper? Sixth, can philological evidence be used to transcend the problem of definitions, where the existence of house churches simply depends on how we define a house church? Seventh, is Heid’s interpretative history of the altar credible? And finally, does the sympathy for house churches reveal assumptions derived from the Reformation, as Heid suggests? Based on the review of Heid’s material, I conclude that house churches cannot be dismissed as a historical reality and were integral to the development of the church proper.

## 1. Stefan Heid’s Theory of the Altar and Church

Heid’s argument probes the necessary conditions of sacred offices from the beginning of the Christian cult. He believes that it was always necessary to have a table or altar specifically dedicated to perform holy communion. Rejecting the idea that just any table (*beliebig und profan*) could be temporarily consecrated for the purpose, Heid introduces a helpful perspective. We conceptualise altars and tables according to a simplistic dichotomy: either we see a mighty block of ornamental stone for gruesome slaughter or we see a relatively light wooden table propped up on legs that we know from daily use. To this awkward binary of architectonic slab versus practical utility, Heid introduces a third classification, the holy table (*Sakraltisch*).<sup>7</sup> It is the kind of platform on which the shewbread was placed in the temple, not the altar as such but an elevated plane reserved for sacred offerings, which is evoked in Hebrews (ἡ τράπεζα καὶ ἡ πρόθεσις τῶν ἁγίων).<sup>8</sup> Holy tables have the virtue of a uniquely pious dedication but also handy flexibility, being light and transportable. Based on archaeological evidence that holy tables were used alongside common meals in antiquity, Heid believes that such a table would have been brought to the room where Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

Heid quotes numerous authorities from twentieth-century ecclesiastical history in telling instances, where the supposition of house churches appears to rest on the assumption that there was no dedicated altar. If there is no need for an altar (traditionally defined), there is also no need for a temple or church traditionally

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7 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 19.

8 Heb 9:2.

defined. Heid, on the other hand, finds no basis for these symbolic acrobatics, where an imaginary domestic church is conjured for the occasion. Further, Heid observes how the Bible is emphatic that “we have an altar” (ἔχομεν θυσιαστήριον).<sup>9</sup> Because there is an intermediate holy table (*Sakraltisch*) or table of the Lord (τράπεζα κυρίου),<sup>10</sup> the words “table” and “altar” are to some extent interchangeable; but the expression “we have an altar” eliminates doubt, where the word for altar is not to be confused with a potentially profane table. In its roots, we could add, the altar (θυσιαστήριον) undeniably declares itself as a station of sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

Heid is unequivocal that there was no such thing as a house church. They never existed and are a “scholarly phantom, a paper construct that belongs in the waste-paper basket.”<sup>12</sup> First, Heid argues, there is no textual evidence for their existence. Second, there was always a church for each congregation, which also had an altar; and there was only ever one altar in one community supporting one chalice, overseen by one bishop. Third, the dissemination of an organised religion through a ramshackle bunch of autonomous privately determined house churches runs counter to the systematically unified church.<sup>13</sup> Apart from envisaging doctrinal discrepancies within such heterogeneous circumstances, Heid also highlights the structural shortcomings of a network of uncoordinated house churches, which would always operate along family and friendship lines, thus creating enclaves rather than an inclusive cross-demographic omnibus, which characterised Christianity from the outset. And finally, Heid points to the material difficulty of finding so many rich Christians who could regularly play host in rooms sufficiently large for even a modest congregation.

The textual evidence that scholars have previously drawn upon in supporting the idea of house churches is the term the “church of the house” or “gathering at the house” (ἡ κατ’ οἶκον ἐκκλησία).<sup>14</sup> Heid does not believe that Paul ever meant “church” when he uses the broad term for an assembly (ἐκκλησία). Meanwhile, he indicates that whatever early Christians did in their private houses by way of prayer, they also went to church. This is apparent when Paul deplores the randomness of folk coming to church and eating their own food.<sup>15</sup>

However, eating in the sense of a dinner would not have worked with a whole congregation. Archaeologists believe that domestic meals (including the love feast,

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9 Heb 13:10.

10 1 Cor 10:21.

11 From θύω, sacrifice; cf. the Slavic calque жертвенник.

12 “Ein papiernes Konstrukt, das in den Papierkorb gehört,” Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 89.

13 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 89.

14 Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phil 2.

15 1 Cor 11:20–22.

ἀγάπη) were eaten lying down or reclining, and the kind of dining couch from antiquity (*triclinium*) is well known. However, a lying body occupies more space than a seated body, which in turn occupies more space than a standing body. Just as there is pressure on space with the recumbent meals of Graeco-Roman tradition, there is pressure on a theory that suggests that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in domestic circumstances.<sup>16</sup> The advantage of an altar is that it presents as a vertical form with a horizontal platform at which nobody lies down. The altar is approached on foot and is attended by ministers who also stand upright. The idea that an altar was used for the distribution of Holy Communion therefore presents a practical solution, with the benefit of symbolic integrity. The verticality of humans in a tight space not only makes a welcome spatial economy but standing up straight—like the gesture of opening the arms and looking upward—itself constitutes a prayerful attitude.<sup>17</sup>

To support Heid, we could add that Jewish practice at the Passover was not meant to be a relaxing feast. You are restricted to unleavened bread and bitter herbs, “with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste.”<sup>18</sup> Thus we already have an authoritative template for the paschal celebration where food is not eaten in Roman comfort but standing up with unsettled nerves. Finally, though he vehemently denies the existence of house churches, Heid concedes that sacred things may have happened in private houses. But if this is self-evident (*selbstverständlich*) Heid nevertheless insists: “the assertion that the eucharist was celebrated in such private houses is not supported by anything.”<sup>19</sup> Heid believes that all the spontaneous or makeshift arrangements that we read about in the New Testament from the Last Supper onward did not involve domestic space but neutral rented upstairs rooms.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. How Sacred Do the House and Table Have To Be?

Insofar as the development of Christianity merges Jewish tradition with Graeco-Roman tradition, the coalescence naturally invites us to think of the house as sacred, following long Roman traditions of domestic piety as well as religious celebratory meals in Hebraic practice such as the improvisatory Birkat ha-Mazon, which functioned as a scaffold for communicating with God.<sup>21</sup> As Jenn Cianca has

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16 See David G. Horrell, “Domestic Space and Christian Meeting at Corinth: Imagining New Testament Context and the Buildings East of the Theatre,” *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 3 (2004): 349–69, who also makes use of the calculations of Carolyn Osiek and David Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches: The Family, Religion, and Culture* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

17 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 218–22.

18 Exod 12:11.

19 *Durch nichts belegt*, Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 77.

20 Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12; Acts 1:13; 9:37; 9:39; 20:8.

21 The improvisatory basis of such rituals is a necessary backdrop to consider with the development

pointed out,<sup>22</sup> Roman houses have ritual built into their fabric of niches and tripods, shrines and portable altars that made them places of piety; certain meals also had ritual significance and a holy vernacular, so to speak, was embodied in the domestic dwelling. Greek religion also had its place in the home, as Festugière pointed out and contemporary scholars like Julia Kindt have explored in detail;<sup>23</sup> and Harry Maier has thoroughly connected domestic piety to the development of house churches.<sup>24</sup> As Christianity spread into the Graeco-Roman world, it entered household cultures already sympathetic to religious rites. But of course this domestic alignment with the liturgical needs of the first Christians would not prove to Heid's satisfaction that there were house churches. It only points to a tempting likelihood: it accords with a comforting transition narrative, where the first Christians translated and adapted certain symbols already venerated in pagan culture, such as vines, the lamb, or wine. According to a narrow technical definition, however, we could possibly exclude all houses from being house churches if they were not consecrated in the way that a church is. This absolutism, however, is arbitrary and makes us incurious as to the sacramental rituals that evidently took place in houses.

As we learn from Acts, the first Christians worshipped in a temple (ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ).<sup>25</sup> However, the access to the Hebraic temple does not prove that there were no house churches specifically for Christian worship. Heid's text *Altar und Kirche* does not envisage a spread of options across which, at one extreme and in various phases, there might have been a plurality of house churches, even if the only alternative was the Hebraic temple. Heid acknowledges that sacred things happened in houses but he does not consider them sufficiently sacramental to merit any kind of analogy to a real church. There seems little doubt that the author of Acts contemplates a sacrament in describing three thousand souls being baptised in one day;<sup>26</sup> and those

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of the Eucharist. See Enrico Mazza: "all'interno del modello, l'orante è libero di dare forma alla sua preghiera, creandone il testo che, quindi, risulterà improvvisato al momento. Di conseguenza risulta difficile avere testimonianze precise sul testo della *Birkat ha-Mazon*." *La Celebrazione Eucaristica: Genesi Del Rito E Sviluppo Dell'Interpretazione* (Bologna, 2003), 22; "La norma liturgica stava in un testo canovaccio che, spesso, era trasmesso solo per via orale," 87. See the same author's article, "A Propos de la Dérivation de L'Eucharistie Chrétienne de la 'Birkat Ha-Mazon' Juive," *Questions Liturgiques* 83 (2002), 233–39.

22 Jenn Cianca, *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

23 André-Jean Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (University of California Press, Sather Lectures, no. 26, 1954); Julia Kindt, "Personal Religion: A Productive Category," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015): 35–50; and Kindt's edited volume, *Personal Religion in the Ancient Greek World: A Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), with excellent chapters by Jan Bremmer, Lin Foxhall, and Kindt herself.

24 Harry O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius*: Studies in Christianity and Judaism 11 (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002).

25 Acts 2:46. They also preached in the temple, Acts 5:42.

26 Acts 2:41; cf. "many others also were sealed (or stamped, ἐσφραγίσθησαν)" in a non-church setting,

same converts “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread, and in prayers . . . continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house (κλῶντές τε κατ’ οἶκον ἄρτον).”<sup>27</sup> This rich passage links a sacrament (baptism) and worship in the temple to the sacramental act of breaking bread in various houses. Given that the narrative refers to a period where little if any independent infrastructure existed, the temple must be the synagogue;<sup>28</sup> but even so, the apostles break bread in houses; and it is difficult *not* to read this action as sacramental, with the house acting in some capacity as a domestic church. Temple and house church appear to be simultaneous and compatible phenomena. The existence of one does not invalidate the existence of the other. It is true that a permanently consecrated altar would not have lain to hand in a modest house; but it is unlikely that any kind of proto-Eucharist could have been performed in the synagogue. Even if we could imagine that the apostles had the resources to procure a rented space for a sacramental breaking of bread on their own altar, the secular rented room is unlikely to have had a consecrated altar within it. There is no evidence of the consecration of altars in the first centuries; but even if a holy table were perchance brought into such a rented space for the event, it must have been domiciled in private quarters in the meantime, unless it were borrowed from the synagogue.

There is neither a theological nor archaeological basis for Heid’s assertion that the eucharistic sacrament had to be performed on a permanently consecrated holy table. The evidence lies to the contrary. In the third-century Acts of Thomas, we find the apostle on the road, where he encounters a woman who has been possessed by the devil. He baptises her (seals her, ἐσφράγισεν αὐτήν) and prepares the Lord’s supper:

the apostle bade his minister (or deacon) to set forth a table (παρθεῖναι τράπεζαν); and he set forth a stool which they found there, and spreading a linen cloth upon it, he set upon it the bread of blessing; and the apostle stood by it and said: Jesus, you who have counted us worthy to partake (κοινωνῆσαι) of the eucharist of your holy body and blood, behold, we are emboldened to draw near to your eucharist and to invoke (ἐπικαλεῖσθαι) your holy name: come and communicate with us.<sup>29</sup>

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*Acts Thom.*, 28.

27 *Acts* 2:41–47.

28 Alexander Golubtsov, *Readings in Church Archaeology and Liturgy* (Голубцов, А.П., Из чтений по Церковной Археологии и Литургике, Ч 2, Сергиев Посад, 1918), 50. The no. cited is that of the pdf at [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr\\_Golubcov/iz-chtenij-po-tserkovnoj-arheologii-liturgike-arheologija-mesta-molitvennyh-sobranij-istorija-tserkovnoj-zhivopisi](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr_Golubcov/iz-chtenij-po-tserkovnoj-arheologii-liturgike-arheologija-mesta-molitvennyh-sobranij-istorija-tserkovnoj-zhivopisi), not the original text; sighted April 2024, 1918, pp. 50–51.

29 *Acts Thom.*, 48.

The table that the deacon lays out (παρέθηκαν) is not even described as a table, much less a sacred table: it is a stool or flat bench (συμψέλλιον, from Latin *subsellium*, from *sella*, the seat); and the author specifies that it is one that was found there (ὁ εὔρον ἐκεῖ); in other words it was sourced at random. Making it holy, as one might expect, involves spreading a linen cloth (ἀπλώσας σινδόνα) upon it, whereupon Thomas himself set the bread of blessing (ἐπέθηκεν ἄρτον τῆς εὐλογίας) upon it, where the repetition of the phrase “upon it” (ἐπ’ αὐτὸ) endows the humble surface with a naive fondness, as if itself expressing an act of caring. There can be little doubt that this bread is the oblation. In his appeal to Christ, Thomas expresses gratitude that one may communicate or partake (κοινωνῆσαι) of the Eucharist (τῆς εὐχαριστίας) of Christ’s holy body and blood. The act is further specified as awesome, because “we are emboldened (τολμῶμεν) to draw near to your eucharist (προσέρχεσθαι τῇ σῇ εὐχαριστίᾳ) and to call upon Christ’s holy name.” It is clearly Holy Communion, because Thomas further bids the Saviour: “come and communicate with us (κοινωνήσον ἡμῖν).” And in the next paragraph, the verbs are repeated for “this eucharist (ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ εὐχαριστίᾳ) which we celebrate in your name (ἣν ποιῶμεν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί σου) and in the love (τῇ ἀγάπῃ, or love feast) in which we are gathered together (ἧ συνήγμεθα) at your calling (ἐπὶ τῇ κλήσει σου).” The text then describes incising the loaf with the sign of the cross and breaking it (κλάσας), whereupon Thomas began to distribute it (ἤρξατο διαδιδόναι). The ceremony is solemnly performed for the remission of sins (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν).<sup>30</sup>

The stool or bench that clearly functions as a holy altar was a secular workday platform upon which people had only recently rested their bottoms. Despite its immediate past, the stool was not deemed indecorous or unseemly. If this incidental and relatively undignified table (or stool) can be repurposed by a sacred invocation—plus the pious gesture of laying out a tablecloth and then the bread—to become a suitable support for the Eucharist, there seems little doubt that the prior status of a table is irrelevant. If it has been suitably reinterpreted for the occasion, it is serviceable for the sacrament.

### 3. How Roomy Did a House Church Have To Be?

Heid is right to imagine the difficulty of handling great numbers in flux. But the three thousand converts in Acts make more converts not by being entrepreneurial event managers renting city buildings for large crowds but by modestly breaking bread in houses, following the example of their teachers. Temples are inflexible and the idea of hiring a building for rent seems to defy the very idea of a temple.<sup>31</sup> The

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30 Acts Thom., 49.

31 Much scholarly pressure is put upon the motif of hire or rent, because it literally makes room for gatherings in places other than houses; however, beneath such pressure, many strange claims have

paucity of physical opportunities evidently did not discourage the first Christians from making ground with the most modest resources. In the same way, one can imagine that breaking bread was sometimes done without wine. Not everyone has wine at home; but unless they are starving, they do have bread. If bread is mentioned more often than wine,<sup>32</sup> the practical is in accord with the symbolic because, of the two elements of the Eucharist, the bread betokens the presence of Christ, whereas the wine as the sacrificial blood has an expiatory dimension that is harder to understand without special study of the explanation in Hebrews. The sacrificial principles clarified in that text do not have a significant profile in early Christian literature.<sup>33</sup>

Heid is scornful of the cost of each imaginary house church suddenly needing a library of all the most necessary books of the Old Testament.<sup>34</sup> But of course the worshippers would have got by without them; nor would the library have existed in a rented upper room either.<sup>35</sup> As Paul says, it matters more what is written in the heart.<sup>36</sup> Of course the wrong things can also be written in the heart; and great efforts were needed to correct them. The earliest writings, notably the Epistles of the New Testament and those of Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome, indicate plenty of contention; and perhaps it is fair to assume that the more autonomous nodes there are in a network, the more scope for chaotic heterodoxies. Heid makes much of this point, imagining that the relatively unified development of the Christian religion depended upon centralisation. But heresies were promulgated by priests rather than laity throughout the organised phases of Christianity. It is a mistake to consider that because of their relative economic autonomy, houses or apartments would have caused an unruly proliferation of dangerous religious

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been made. See Bremmer's concern: "It is typical of Adams' minimalism that he suggests that the passage could also refer to a 'hired dining room' as 'such space would still count as *sub tecto eius* understood more loosely.' This is obviously special pleading, as this is not implied by the Latin." "Urban Religion," 53. Further, "Adams produces no evidence for Christians meeting in rented dining rooms," 56.

32 The greater frequency of bread relative to wine in early writings is not telling on its own, because bread is also food and is repeated often as such, e.g. in the Lord's prayer. However, religious practice also functions through bread rather than wine: "And on each day of the Lord, when you are gathered together, break bread and give thanks (κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε)," Did., 14:1.

33 There are spiritual as well as practical reasons for the absence of wine in many records of the Eucharist: see Andrew McGowan, "Bread and Water in Early Asian and Syrian Christianity," *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals*, Oxford University Press (1999), e-version (2011), 143–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198269724.003.0004>.

34 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, "Wieviel mag das gekostet haben? Wie viele Jahrzehnte mag es gedauert haben, bis sich jede Hauskirche eine solche Bibliothek erworben hatte?," 76.

35 In Acts 20:8–10, we hear of Paul giving a long oration in a loft (ἐν τῷ ὑπερώῳ) at Troas three storeys up (ἀπὸ τοῦ τριστέγου) where people were gathered (συνηγμένοι). The text mentions the lights that were on but is silent about books or furniture.

36 Rom 2:15 and esp. 2 Cor 3:2–3.

follies. The house church practice would have been simple, concerned mostly with prayer and breaking bread in memory of Christ—as suggested in the Didache<sup>37</sup>—and not weaponised with ambitious and divergent theories. Nor does the existence of house churches negate the authority of bishops.<sup>38</sup>

Informal prayer gatherings and the haphazard proliferation of domestic nodes may explain the appeal to God in the same Didache to “remember, O Lord, your church, to deliver her from all evil and . . . gather her together (σύναξον αὐτήν) from the four winds (ἀπὸ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων).”<sup>39</sup> According to Mazza, a large part of the development of liturgy is concerned with unity in a theological sense,<sup>40</sup> following Paul’s exhortation that the faithful are one bread.<sup>41</sup> Unity meant not just unity with one another but unity in God. Against this aspiration, there would inevitably have been a degree of turmoil with any structure, whether centralised or distributed or a matrix of both. It is true that sporadically burgeoning house churches would have been hard to coordinate; but it would have been equally difficult to organise access to prayer halls or suitably large upper rooms all around the Mediterranean to cater for fluctuating numbers of participants. In any case, churches in the sense of bricks and mortar dedicated uniquely to the Christian God may not have existed before the third century.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, worship in houses would have been less conspicuous and therefore safer than visibly operating as a sect; and a similar motif of discretion applies to groups like Manichaeans.<sup>43</sup>

Just as the house church phenomenon helped to spread the religion by rhizomatically accommodating influxes of converts, it helped ensure a diverse demographic. Heid’s observation that the church has a “catholic” structure—taking

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37 Did., 9.

38 I agree with Heid that the oversight by bishops, broadly defined, was necessary and well attested but I do not see this authority as compromised by proto-Eucharistic practices in a domestic circumstance.

39 Did., 10:5.

40 “Lo Spirito è in funzione dell’unità e questa è in funzione della lode divina,” Mazza, *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 56; “Dunque la terza strofa della *Birkat ha-Mazon* cristiana, *Didachè* 10, chiede il raduno della Chiesa nel regno di Dio. Questo è già un fatto di salvezza, ed effettivamente la Chiesa così radunata è chiamata santificata,” 75; “Il *radunare* comincia a delinarsi come atto di salvezza,” 76; “per Giovanni, dire che Gesù muore per la nostra salvezza e dire che Gesù muore per l’unità, sarebbe dire la medesima cosa,” 81.

41 “ὅτι εἷς ἄρτος, ἐν σώμα οἱ πολλοί ἐσμεν,” 1 Cor 10:17.

42 See Bremmer: “this would already presuppose separate Christian churches in the later second century, which does not seem very plausible,” “Urban Religion,” 54. Further, Bremmer observes that the lack of building stock was considered a badge of honour: “It is clear that the early Christians were proud of the fact that, unlike their pagan contemporaries, they did not have proper buildings,” 58.

43 Bremmer rightly suggests that we consider “the Manichaeans, who frequently met in houses and whose precarious situation can reasonably be compared with that of the early Christians.” “Urban Religion,” 55.

in all kinds of people from all social strata—is correct;<sup>44</sup> and he is also correct in thinking that families would only tend to welcome people in their own image. But given that the population can support any number of house churches, any number of social levels would also have been cultivated. Even allowing for the natural tendency of cliques to self-select along class lines and thus form their own coteries, the self-spawning plurality of house churches across different levels of income and influence would have guaranteed diversity. Yet in exclusively conceptualising house churches as large and extravagant, Heid makes a straw man of them, because they would have to belong exclusively to the wealthy elite.<sup>45</sup> Heid ignores the possibility that any house or apartment at any social level would enable bread to be broken in remembrance of Christ.

Heid arrives at the conclusion that the existence of house churches is pure theory but he does not consider that the absence of house churches is also pure theory. He too has a theory of house churches, even though he denies their existence. They are opulent villas owned by prosperous burghers. And so, imagining an enclave of luxurious mansions, house churches indeed appear to be an anachronistic phantom. But whose fantasy is it? Why do the houses need to be so grand? To observe a shortfall in sumptuous townhouses does not prove that there is no such thing as a house church. When Heid finds a mention of people breaking bread in a house for obviously sacramental purposes, he feels that this function does not make the house a house church. Why? It seems that the definition of a house church is that it must replicate all the functions of the organisational church *post pacem*; and so the house used for sacramental purposes cannot be anything like a real church and is therefore not a house church either. It must have a permanently consecrated altar and it must be the only altar found in the region under one bishop, because that is how Heid sees a true church.<sup>46</sup> The same logic applies to all the appurtenances like the altar and the ritual. If there is no altar, how can the Eucharist be performed? If an apostle goes to a house to break bread, “it is not clear that breaking bread means the eucharist.”<sup>47</sup> And technically, he would be correct if we think of the Eucharist by all the conventions that it accrued in subsequent centuries and not as a salvific kind of thanksgiving in memory of Christ, which is conveyed in the origins of the word (εὐχαριστία).

If the Eucharist must be understood as an expiatory oblation—of which there

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44 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 78.

45 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 89.

46 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 97. In these struggles for a favourable definition to suit the argument, we could apply to Heid the same judgement that Bremmer levels at Adams: “he applies a minimalist interpretation to every passage that might plausibly suggest a house church, but a maximalist interpretation to all other kinds of possibility,” 57.

47 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 78.

is little uptake in the early centuries<sup>48</sup>—perhaps it follows that there must always have been an altar. But in identifying the altar with a permanently consecrated holy table (*Sakraltisch*), Heid does not strengthen his case. Where was this essential holy object normally kept, such that it was brought to the Last Supper? Who is in the habit of secreting such an object in a profane circumstance? Was it borrowed from the synagogue? Or if in fact it was common for Jews (and hence the first Christians) to have such a holy table in the house, what prevents us from calling the house a house church if the table were used in the same house for the sacramental breaking of bread? In this circumstance, the domestic dwelling would have had, by Heid’s definition, a permanently consecrated altar.

Admittedly the definition of a house church is murky. Heid is not alone in interpreting the house church in an unwieldy way. Other scholars also put the house church in a category that makes it expensive and therefore uncommon. Sticking to the idea that the gathering (ἐκκλησία) involves a large number of people—which is also implicit in our word “assembly” or “congregation”—one might imagine that the visitors to the house church are numerous, like a little community. The corollary is that the house must be spacious and modified. It cannot be an ordinary house or apartment like yours or mine, because a large gathering would have trouble squeezing in, again with the assumption that “no true church” would not have a liturgy analogous to that in *post-pacem* churches. At best, a pre-existing house would have to be remodelled. By implication, it must belong to a rich person. This view of a house church with an implicit threshold of scale and prosperity is unnecessary: it muddies the archaeology and is an artifice of scholars.<sup>49</sup> Any house will suffice for attracting the number of people who are invited. There is no need to renovate a house or apartment in order to break bread and remember Christ doing the same,<sup>50</sup> even if this clearly sacramental activity is demoted to a love feast (ἀγάπη) or saying of blessed words (εὐλογία).

#### 4. Posture and Furniture

The archaeological evidence concerning the posture of eating meals in Hebraic and Graeco-Roman antiquity is obscure. Heid follows the prevailing view that the ancients ate lying down, thus greatly limiting the number of participants at any given meal; so the recumbent habit of eating reinforces the assumption that houses, unless lavish, would have been unsuitable for eucharistic gatherings. But how universal was this spacious style of dining? The consensus that meals were eaten with recumbent postures is based on iconography as well as philology; but I

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48 Nothing of that tenor appears in the *Didache* or early letters of the church fathers.

49 Kristina Sessa, “*Domus Ecclesiae*: Rethinking a Category of *Ante-Pacem* Christian Space,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (April 2009), 92.

50 Sessa, “*Domus Ecclesiae*,” 93.

remain skeptical of the premises, and I am not alone in my doubts.<sup>51</sup> It is true that most cases of eating in the New Testament use the verb “to recline” (ἀνάκειμαι),<sup>52</sup> but this lexical pattern is not uniform, as Paul tells us: “The people *sat down* to eat and drink (ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πεῖν).”<sup>53</sup> A single eating habit was not necessarily universal across all demographics, because working-class realities have seldom been celebrated in art or literature, and there is little evidence either way in centuries when *any* form of furniture was rare. How would anyone know how fishing families or farm labourers ate in small cottages or day workers ate in crowded urban tenements, to say nothing of slaves? It seems likely that peasant and proletarian meals, consisting of little but bread,<sup>54</sup> would not have required much furniture; because such meagre rations do not take long to eat. In both the Septuagint and Vulgate, Ruth sat (ἐκάθισεν, *sedet*) to eat with the reapers.<sup>55</sup> Many people would have eaten leaning against walls or squatting or kneeling or sitting on the floor or even standing. And even if we did know how the Greek and Roman proletariat ate, it does not tell us how urban Jews ate. I do not think that we can afford to be precious about dining etiquette in any theory of how large a room would need to be for any given meal.

In regard to numbers, Jesus himself is emphatic about what constitutes a congregation: “where two or three are gathered together (συνηγμένοι) in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”<sup>56</sup> One cannot dismiss this resonant sentence as merely a colourful way for Jesus to reaffirm the power of faith even in a small gathering. He says that “I am there” (ἐκεῖ εἰμι) among them. The verb that he uses for gathering together (συνάγω) is not incidental, because it describes a meeting by being convoked: the root is “to lead” and the compound is the basis of the noun “synagogue.” So these two or three people who come together in his name satisfy

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51 “It seems very unlikely that Christian gatherings would really have involved reclining just as at a proper symposium or convivium. This would fit poorly with what we know about the varied social nature of the membership of these groups, which included both men and women (although Roman women could be present at the convivia), slaves and free.” Jan N. Bremmer, “Urban Religion,” *Religion in the Roman Empire* 6, no. 1 (2020), 53.

52 E.g. Matt 9:10; 14:9; 26:7; 26:20.

53 1 Cor 10:7; cf. the similar phrase in the Septuagint, “ἐκάθισαν δὲ φαγεῖν ἄρτον,” Gen 37:25, and Exod 32:9, from which Paul’s phrase is quoted.

54 It is sometimes difficult for us to detach our terms from our own experience of eating, where we expect two or three meals a day and each with several ingredients. So when we speak of a separation of “meal” *qua* nourishment and bread *qua* sacrament, the dichotomy risks anachronism. I feel uneasy when this assumption is made even by Mazza: “Tuttavia si deve rilevare che l’eucaristia della Chiesa è ben diversa dal rito dell’ultima cena; infatti l’ultima cena è anche un pasto a tutti gli effetti, nel quale i partecipanti si nutrono come in ogni altro pasto, mentre nella messa, già dal secondo secolo, non c’è più alcun rapporto con la cena e il rito eucaristico è separato dal pasto.” *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 26. What if bread is also the principal form of nutrition?

55 Ruth 2:14.

56 Matt 18:19–20.

the Lord's condition; and if Jesus is among them then nothing prevents the Holy Spirit from effecting the transubstantiation of the elements. Most importantly, Jesus encourages a feeling of autonomy in those two or three people who gather in his name. If according to Jesus, those two or three people are in a house, they enjoy full authority in recognising his presence in their midst.

But our historiographic problem is that this argument, even if logical, may merely reflect a modern wish, an idealistic construction of the early church that arose through the Reformation and which is subsequently disposable to anyone's fantasy. Further, we have warm incentives to see house churches in the bosom of the religion, because domestic space is a woman's domain; and through this gendered motif, recent scholarship has been keen to recognise the likelihood of active female involvement in shaping early Christianity.<sup>57</sup> One must have a certain sympathy for Heid who, at the very least, causes us to wonder when the clergy achieved its exclusive hold on the sacraments. Perhaps the ecclesiastical proprietorship of the Eucharist was consubstantial with the development of the liturgy. My feeling is that calls to restrict administration of the rites—which arose already from Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyon<sup>58</sup>—indicate that the rites must have been commonly presided over by laity, else why would an interdiction be necessary? It would seem pointless to ban a process unless it had been in practice.

## 5. Beyond the Dichotomy of House and Church

Perhaps the final obscurity in Heid's analysis is a false dichotomy between a house church and an established church or dedicated prayer hall. Heid does not contemplate that there is something in between these poles, because our image of a house makes us think of a freestanding Roman villa, as in the archetype of luxurious dwelling in Pompeii. As we are reminded by Billings,<sup>59</sup> however, the majority of the population lived in apartment blocks (*insulae*) in crowded city centres. Billings observes two striking features of such tenements. First, they tended to concentrate

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57 See Carolyn Osiek, Margaret MacDonald, and Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2006); also Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Woman's Ministry in the Early Church* (Fortress Press, 1989).

58 Ignatius of Antioch: "It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast (οὔτε βαπτίζειν οὔτε ἀγάπην ποιεῖν)," Ign. *Smyrn.*, 8:2, which equates the *agape* with the Eucharist; cf. Jude 1:12. One should also concede that the Old Testament restricts the places where the holocaust can be offered: "Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you," Deut 12:13–14.

59 B. S. Billings, "From House Church to Tenement Church: Domestic Space and the Development of Early Urban Christianity: The Example of Ephesus," *Journal of Theological Studies* 62 (2011): 541–69. The term "tenement church" was already in use with Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23–43.

people with something in common, accommodating people related by work or confraternity or collegium, whose members had a sense of solidarity and common purpose. As Billings says, “whether organized around a trade, commercial venture, religious allegiance, or ethnicity, the recurring feature of these groups is that the pattern of association tends strongly towards ‘social homogeneity.’”<sup>60</sup> Second, the architecture of the tenement provided a central common area that afforded association. Based on structures of networking, Billings observes that such spaces could easily be used for worship.

Today we assume that individual apartments have many facilities like kitchens equipped with sink and oven; but it would have been an unusual luxury to find such resources in each apartment of early high-rise buildings. Space and utilities could be economised if functional rooms were communal. Toilets and ovens were not private; and shared facilities extended to common rooms to gather and eat, like the *medianum* or *coenaculum*.<sup>61</sup> These spaces were ideal for worship. Between house church and established church, therefore, there is the tenement church, a naturally socialised space, controlled by an association of members. Unlike whatever Heid imagines as a “house church,” the “tenement church” is already communal: its spatial and social organisation reflects a collective structure that facilitated assembly. Through the shared amenities in the apartment block, the tenement inherently creates a mixture of private dwelling and social interaction, where the inhabitants have close trade or spiritual associations as well as physical interaction over food.

In function, the tenement church would also have been a compromise between the two extremes that it stands between: on the one hand dominated by a need for simple sacramental pieties and on the other hand an embryonic organised liturgy. As with the house church, the tenement church would not be entirely autonomous but subject to oversight.<sup>62</sup> Its practices may have been monitored by overseers and it would have conformed, by and large, to the biblical narrative of Christ and his message of salvation. Again, the existence of a tenement church does not negate the existence of either smaller house churches or the possibility of dedicated and

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60 Billings, “House Church,” 555.

61 See G. Hermansen, “The Medianum and the Roman Apartment,” *Phoenix* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 1970): 342–47, who explains how the risk of objects falling from upper-floor apartments caused legal provisions to be enacted: blame for damage was apportioned to individuals in any apartment, but to *all on the level* if the object fell from the *medianum*. The responsibility was shared because the space was shared.

62 Caution is needed in how we translate the term for overseer (ἐπίσκοπος), lest we impute to the original the full hierarchical meaning of “bishop.” Senior people with that title existed from earliest times, since *Philippians* is addressed to bishops and deacons (ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους), though the expression could also be rendered more informally as “overseers and ministers,” Phil 1:1. The degree of institutionalality and control remains unclear. See also the lines that identify elders (πρεσβυτέρους) with the title in question (ἐπίσκοποι), Titus 1:5–7.

consecrated churches: all three may have coexisted at different times according to different needs and circumstances. Just as they must all have been valid expressions of early Christian piety, they are likely to have been in sympathetic conversation with one another.

Importantly, the tenement church matches the biblical expression of church-in-the-house (ἡ ἐκκλησία κατ' οἶκον) which presently deserves our attention. In many ways, the difficulty of naming anything in the early Christian epoch is that we are often seeking to identify things that were relatively new at the time, for which the existing vocabulary had to be stretched. New types of accommodation are a case in point. There is no archaic archetype for city apartment, because large tenements (*insulae*) appear to have developed only in the Roman period; and so there is no indigenous Greek word to describe them, and the Latin word itself seems anomalous in its application to architecture. Among Greek speakers, all such buildings would have been referred to by the traditional term for “house,” which people still use today to describe the collective structure. Modern languages have words like “apartment” (*Wohnung*, διαμέρισμα, квартира, or “flat”) to describe the private unit within the block; but both the individual flat and the aggregated domestic building are still often referred to as a house (*maison*, *casa*, *Haus*, σπίτι, дом). The tenement would always have been understood as a house (οἶκος) because there was no other suitable word in the vocabulary.

## 6. Philology beyond the Semantic

The claim that there was no such thing as a house church is at its weakest in arguing that there is no philological evidence for them.<sup>63</sup> There is plenty of evidence for house churches, as when Paul spontaneously (εὐθέως) takes Xanthippe's hand and goes to the house of Philotheos (ἦλθεν ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ Φιλοθέου) in the third- or fourth-century Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxene. There she is baptised (or sealed) and given holy communion in familiar language: “and taking bread of the eucharist (ἄρτον λαβὼν εὐχαριστίας) he gave it to her . . . for the remission of sins (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν) and the renewal of her soul.”<sup>64</sup> But Heid rests most of his philological case on the four instances in the New Testament that might suggest house church

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63 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, esp. 80–82.

64 *Xanth.* 1:4. Bremmer has further examples with better dates: “In the *Acts of John* (46) . . . the apostle . . . not only preaches in the house of Andronicus on Sunday but also performs a prayer, celebrates the Eucharist and lays hands on all those present. In the *Acts of Peter* (20) of the 180s, the apostle preaches in the house of the senator Marcellus, and in the *Acts of Paul*, of about 190–200, Paul preaches in Iconium in the house of Onesiphorus (III.5–7, ed. Rordorf) and in Ephesus in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (IX.1–2). But we do not have to rely on fiction only, as the historical *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* (2.6) reports that, in the winter of 303–304, a group of about fifty Christians was surprised in ‘the house of Octavius Felix,’ evidently a private house, where they were celebrating the Eucharist.” “Urban Religion,” 64.

(ἡ ἐκκλησία κατ' οἶκον).<sup>65</sup> I understand that he might be unhappy if translators compress this formula for “gathering in the house” to “house church” but Heid is also not satisfied if the phrase is rendered as the “community that is gathered in the house.”<sup>66</sup> “The texts render nothing of the kind.”<sup>67</sup> “The *New Testament* knows no house churches.”<sup>68</sup> “It is an academic artificial word of recent times.”<sup>69</sup> Then we hear that translators have “succumbed to the fallacy that ἐκκλησία (similar to συναγωγή), before any religious colouring, simply means the ‘assembly,’ namely both the city assembly and simply an assembly of people, the scope of which may be specified by an attribute.”<sup>70</sup> Where this fallacy (*Trugschluss*) arises is still unclear. Then Heid says, “But Paul uses ἐκκλησία in different contexts sometimes like this and sometimes like that (*mal so, mal so*).”<sup>71</sup> Heid insists: “In the four aforementioned ‘house church formulae,’ on the other hand, Paul quite banally means with ἐκκλησία an assembly, specifically the members of a private house: patrons, matrons, clients, slaves and family members.”<sup>72</sup>

Even though Heid demotes Paul’s greeting<sup>73</sup> as merely a thing of courtesy which does not discriminate between faithful and heathen,<sup>74</sup> he has not explained what is inadequate in the translations that he dislikes. Moreover, his definition that the assembly (ἐκκλησία) includes household members with no religious calling lacks probity. From its very roots (ἐκ + καλέω) the word for assembly that we know best as church (ἐκκλησία) arrived at its institutional Christian meaning because it intrinsically carries the quality of being called, called to assembly, called to participation, called from the wider community to take part in the closer community. We need to recognise in the assembly (ἐκκλησία) exactly that dimension of the calling. You cannot consider your relatives or staff or slaves as somehow “called” to the place. The same is true of clients, because they come to your house on business with a material motive. The idea that they could be people of any religious persuasion—that is, they are not called—defies the sense of the word. As if to denude the household of the title of “house church” in our modern languages, Heid cancels the group of believers with whom the hosts have shared

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65 Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15, Phil 2.

66 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 80.

67 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 80–81.

68 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 81.

69 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 81.

70 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 81.

71 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 81.

72 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 82.

73 “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house (τὴν κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν),” Rom 16:3–5.

74 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 82.

their faith. So zealous is Heid to discredit the motif of a house church that the only people whom he recognises around these exemplary devotees are those who have no choice but to be under the same roof at any given time.

It may be helpful to remove ourselves momentarily from the greetings that contain the formula most closely resembling “house church” and consider what might have transpired in private houses by whatever name. For example, we know that the apostles each day visited houses and broke bread there.<sup>75</sup> If this action were not sacramental and the breaking of bread simply means eating a meal, why would the writer of the Acts even report it in such an earnest account? Further, there was a plurality of houses; and the biblical phrase—“by house” (κατ’ οἶκον, “from house to house” in the KJV)—conveys the wonderful apostolic energy in visiting them and performing the salvific remembrance in each of them. If this sacramental motif holds for the line in Acts, why would it not for the various domestic nodes around the Mediterranean in Paul’s salutations and those of Ignatius, who even hails them in the plural?<sup>76</sup>

## 7. The Institution of the Altar

The emphasis that Heid gives to the altar is valuable. But I remain uncomfortable with the insistence on the absolute centrality of an altar in early Christian sacramental practice when we have not yet established what took place on these early altars (*if* there was always an altar). After almost two millennia, different Christians still have different experiences with the Eucharist. Some ingest a wafer only, some take both elements discretely and sequentially, some take them simultaneously by eating sourdough dunked in wine; others pass a chalice around and so on. They are all valid practices in their context; for as Paul says, “there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord.”<sup>77</sup> But while today we might have a clear understanding of the efficacy of Holy Communion, we cannot project this clarity onto early Christian practice, as numerous scholars like Enrico Mazza have explained.<sup>78</sup> Following the symbolic limitations suggested above, one notes from the Didache the total absence of any expiatory dimension in the small section devoted to the Eucharist, in spite of Christ telling us at the Last Supper that his blood washes away the sins of the world. Rather, the Eucharist is interpreted simply as thanksgiving, as expressed in the prescription: “Concerning the eucharist [or the thank-offering], give thanks

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<sup>75</sup> Acts 2:46.

<sup>76</sup> Ign. *Smyrn.* 13:1; Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 97.

<sup>77</sup> 1 Cor 12:5.

<sup>78</sup> Mazza begins his book with the statement that anyone used to a rite such as that of the Last Supper would have difficulty recognising himself or herself (*farebbe fatica a ritrovarsi*) in a contemporary liturgy, Mazza, *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 5.

thus (Περὶ δὲ τῆς εὐχαριστίας, οὕτως εὐχαριστήσατε).<sup>79</sup> Other parts of the Didache suggest a pattern of latitude consistent with practical flexibility in the performance of sacraments, such as baptism.<sup>80</sup> The regulatory impulse seems minimal. One does not gain any sense of jealousy over correct practice.<sup>81</sup> There is little in this early text that could not be satisfied by pious folk in a domestic environment. The only office that lies outside the capabilities of discrete house churches or collective tenement churches is the election or ordination of bishops and deacons; but even in this communal matter, the Didache exhorts us to caution, with the implication that prudent choices are in the hands of people who are not clergy.<sup>82</sup> So vague are the references to hierarchy that a minister of the church is described as a prophet; the word prophet is used many times and the equivalence with priest is suggested with the instruction to “give the first-fruit of the produce . . . to the prophets; for they are your chief-priests.”<sup>83</sup> There must have been many itinerant religious freelancers; and so moral diagnostics are proposed for how one might distinguish between good ones and false ones, with the assumption that ordinary folk ought to discriminate between the genuine and the impostors. An ecclesiastical system for authorisation that warrants the theological reliability of ministers does not seem yet to have been established. The criterion for bishops and deacons described in the Didache specifies that they be tested or approved (δεδοκιμασμένους) as people known to be gentle and truthful men who are not greedy (πραεῖς καὶ ἀφιλαργύρους καὶ ἀληθεῖς), rather than by any theological attainments.<sup>84</sup> These qualities belong to a character reference gleaned through community acquaintance rather than official qualifications issued by a central authority; and although my interpretations may seem obvious, Heid’s thesis does not take account of the great latitude of early Christian practices. Compared to later developments, even the most hierarchical arrangements of the early centuries are informal; and for that reason, I feel uncomfortable with the assumption that an elder or presbyter (πρεσβύτερος) should be equated with a priest.<sup>85</sup>

The altar as centrepiece of the early church remains uncertain. At some stage, the altar was established as necessary church furniture; but Heid’s contention

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79 Did. 9:1.

80 Did. 7.

81 Nor is there great anxiety about any rapprochement with Hebraic tradition: “Nella stessa strofa (*Didachè* 9,2) anche Gesù viene chiamato *pais*, dato che è attraverso l’opera di Gesù che Dio ha rivelato la vite di Davide. Gesù è il profeta escatologico che porta a compimento la figura di Davide e la sua opera per il popolo. In questa prospettiva, il cristianesimo è ancora uno sviluppo e un’esplicitazione del giudaismo, all’interno del quale esso rimane.” Mazza, *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 72.

82 “Χειροτονήσατε οὖν ἑαυτοῖς ἐπίσκοπους καὶ διακόνους ἀξίους τοῦ κυρίου,” Did. 15:1.

83 “δώσεις . . . τοῖς προφήταις· αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσιν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς ὑμῶν,” Did. 13:3.

84 Did. 13:3.

85 E.g. *presbyterium* = *Priesterkollegium*, Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 86.

that it featured from the very beginning (and only one per local community) is not persuasive. His case rests upon the mention of the altar (θυσιαστήριον) as a physical object rather than a metaphor. The writer of Hebrews, Heid believes, is talking of a concrete object when he says “we have an altar” to which the Mosaic Jews have no rights of access.<sup>86</sup> I am not convinced. New Testament writing uses metaphor to dazzling effect, such as circumcision of the heart, where the material reality is clearly overtaken by the spiritual.<sup>87</sup> The phrase “we have an altar” works well either as a literal description or as a metaphor; but in other instances when there is yet more doubt about how tangible the altar is, Heid stretches the case beyond credibility. Ignatius of Antioch, he thinks, is a realist who does not deal in metaphor when he speaks of the altar.<sup>88</sup> But there is plenty of metaphor in Ignatius, because when he exhorts the Trallians, for example, to be “within the altar” (ἐντὸς θυσιαστηρίου), the discourse throughout the Epistle is about respecting the bishop, to guard against believers acting out of line or listening to heretics, and to be obedient to the authority of clergy: “He who is within the altar is pure, but he who is outside is not pure; that is, he who does anything apart from the bishop and presbytery and deacons, such a man is [not] pure in his conscience.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, being “inside the altar” means adhering to the dictates of clergy. Similarly, when speaking to the Ephesians, Ignatius wants the faithful to be “within the altar” in the sense of belonging to a collective that is mightier than all the individuals within it: “do not be drawn astray (μηδεὶς πλανήσθω): if someone is not within the altar (ἐντὸς τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου) he or she is deprived of the bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two has such force . . . how much more would that of the bishop and the whole church [be]?”<sup>90</sup> Straining to find something realistic about this obvious metaphor, Heid says that “the expression ‘within the altar’ also loses all its oddity when the altar table is entirely covered with a cloth and is thus cubic in shape”;<sup>91</sup> and a little later, he reiterates: “The expression ‘within the altar’ becomes clear when the altar-table is covered by a cloth.”<sup>92</sup> Heid’s suggestion appears to be that because the altar is a four-legged table draped with textile, it has an internal volume of somewhat cubic proportions and therefore has a physical—rather than metaphorical—“inside.” But what is the corollary? If I am “inside the altar,” does that mean that I should crawl under the furniture like a child hiding there? The idea that the cubic effect of a tablecloth reinforces the reality (and hence displaces the metaphor) pushes literalness to the point of the grotesque.

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86 Heb 13:10.

87 “περιτομή καρδίας,” Rom 2:29; cf. Phil 3:3, Col 2:11.

88 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 51.

89 Ign., *Trall*, 7.2.

90 Ign., *Eph*. 5:2.

91 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 51.

92 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 60.

With all textual sources, we face a persistent issue of methodology. Many of the records that we rely on were written by clergy who had no interest in cultivating house churches. The early writers want to impress the several Christian communities around the Mediterranean with the need to adhere to an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Ignatius of Antioch implores us to follow the bishop as God's proxy; "for there is a need," he says, "for you to do nothing without the bishop."<sup>93</sup> Heid does not see how any writer like Paul could ever have promoted house churches but then despise them as unworthy of the record.<sup>94</sup> I, on the other hand, see no incongruity between cultivating house churches but then failing to make fanfares over them. Paul's topic concerned spirituality, not real estate. At first, when the key apostolic mission was to create faith in Christ and little real estate availed, there was a natural enthusiasm for house churches. Later, when the communities spread and emerging factions began preaching disparate beliefs, the need for a single dogmatic sway overtook the affection for the first havens. But this neglect of house churches (or tenement churches) in the record is an inadvertent consequence of centralisation. It is not a sign that house churches did not exist. Why would Paul need to mention them? House churches were always harmless, in the same way that saying grace at table never posed a threat to church unity or dogma in any period.

There is no doubt that early Christian writers directed much energy to the unification of the church. The theme features in the *Didache* and in liturgies.<sup>95</sup> Unity also took up the attention of Paul when, in a metonymic flourish that typifies apostolic literature, he pronounced that we are "one bread."<sup>96</sup> Heid supports his case with the writings of Ignatius, as with his *Epistle to the Philadelphians*: "Take care, then, to enjoy one eucharist; for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup for the unity of his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants."<sup>97</sup> But such texts do not necessarily support claims to the existence of a single local altar. They do not necessarily mean one physical altar per local community. Technically, there are many altars and bishops and celebrations all around the Mediterranean; and so the word "one" means unique in the sense of a single symbolic integrity: a defined Eucharist and

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93 Ign., *Trall*, 2:2.

94 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 77, all assuming that ἡ ἐκκλησία κατ' οἶκον does not mean house church.

95 As in the exhortation to God, already noted, to gather his church "together from the four winds (σύναξον αὐτὴν ἀπὸ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων)," Did. 10:5. See also Archimandrite Kyprian's analysis of the kiss of peace (Целование мира) in John Chrysostom's liturgy: it symbolises the unity of the church and unified belief in its doctrine. Confessing one's unanimity (исповедания своего единомыслия) is an essential element of the rite: Kyprian, K. *The Eucharist* (Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission, 1946) (Архимандрит Киприан [Керн], *Евхаристия*), [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian\\_Kern/evharistija](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian_Kern/evharistija); cf. Mazza, "L'eucaristia dunque è il sacramento dell'unità: unità della Chiesa in quanto corpo di Cristo." *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 78.

96 1 Cor 10:17.

97 Ign. *Phld*, 4; Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 49, and 9.

altar and bishop, each with the same determined meaning and power, the same in Ephesus or Antioch, in Tralles or Jerusalem or Philippi. In this context, it would be dogmatically feasible to enjoy that “one altar” at your home or apartment building because your table accords with all the others and does not depart—simply by its domesticity—from a shared sacramental aspiration. If its purpose is at any point to support the eucharistic recall of Christ and his instructions, the appointed surface remains “the one altar” in the same way that there is only one *Pater noster* and, as Paul says, “one bread.”<sup>98</sup> As Mazza has pointed out, the uniqueness of the bread designates unity on a mystical plane,<sup>99</sup> which by implication transcends time and place. To reinforce the non-literal character of the “one bread,” we could also add that bread on any given day was not limited to a single loaf, since pious laity brought their sourdough offering (*prosphoron*) to church, which would be blessed and sliced by clergy for the oblation, as in Orthodox churches still today.<sup>100</sup>

## 8. Is My Perspective Overwritten by Reformation Assumptions?

This argument will not convince Stefan Heid because it would appear to march in lockstep with a theology closer to Protestantism than that of the early church.<sup>101</sup> I confess that whenever I think about why house churches are dogmatically compatible with the earliest writings, the logic could easily be interpreted in the way that Heid suggests, that is, a wishful mixture of the Reformation and later naive liberal traditions that (i) idealise the spiritual autonomy of the non-institutional believer and (ii) devalue the organisational structure of the traditional church. One can always find support for this persuasion in ancient sources, which sometimes emphasise the individual’s private spiritual effort, as if we might separately constitute a temple in our own right. As Barnabas says, “let us become spiritual in character (γενώμεθα πνευματικοί); let us become a perfect temple to God,”<sup>102</sup> where the perfect temple (ναὸς τέλειος) that we figuratively become is the building rather than the congregation. So when a person becomes this consecrated chapel, she or he also possesses an internalised altar and is, if you like, a kind of priest.<sup>103</sup> Or is

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98 1 Cor 10:17.

99 “Il pane è comunione del corpo, e allora coloro che mangiano del pane spezzato diventano il corpo di Cristo. Il pane spezzato è unico, e allora coloro che ne mangiano sono un solo corpo. Si tratta del corpo di Cristo che è la Chiesa, la quale, a causa di questo fondamentale rapporto, è una, ossia ha l’unità come suo attributo essenziale. L’eucaristia dunque è il sacramento dell’unità: unità della Chiesa in quanto corpo di Cristo.” *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 78.

100 See my book, *A Visceral History of Bread: from First-Nations Australia to Byzantium* (Museum of Innocence, 2023), [https://www.academia.edu/104057468/A\\_visceral\\_history\\_of\\_bread\\_from\\_First\\_Nations\\_Australia\\_to\\_Byzantium](https://www.academia.edu/104057468/A_visceral_history_of_bread_from_First_Nations_Australia_to_Byzantium), 82–118.

101 Heid, *Altar und Kirche*, 13.

102 *Barn.* 4.11.

103 My case is complicated, however, by the fact that this internalisation motif was itself absorbed into the emerging liturgy: “Questo tema sarà poi sviluppato da Paolo che, alla teologia del nome, fa

this just a fanciful interpretation to empower the modern spiritualist? Other texts could be adduced to offset its individualism with a typically collectivist appeal to hold strong as a community or, as we have seen in Ignatius, to aggregate voices in prayer.<sup>104</sup>

To check the robustness of a difficult claim where history and theology overlap, another lens is helpful. So far, there are two: first, a liberal mainstream of ecclesiastical history that recognises house churches as a significant apostolic reality; and second, there is Heid who says that there were no house churches. We can appeal to another tradition that has nothing to do with the Reformation, and also neither sides with “romantic” nor “revisionist,” namely the Orthodox East, whose perspectives are frequently ignored. Sometimes understood as conservative, the Orthodox scholarly tradition is not receptive to enthusiasms of personally revealed post-institutional radical contact with divinity. Orthodoxy does not spawn individualist fancies. But one finds in this independent scholarly heritage ample acceptance of house churches. The question for writers like Alexander Golubtsov in the early twentieth century was not whether or not there were house churches—because doubt about them seems not to have arisen—but rather, what was the liturgy like in the apostolic period? His studies concerning *Liturgy in the First Century of Christianity* (anticipating Enrico Mazza’s by many decades) derive overwhelmingly from the primary literature and owe little to Western trends. Golubtsov believes that in the early days of the church, the Eucharist was combined with the *agape* and constituted one integral act, with the rite being performed at the end of the meal.<sup>105</sup> In his book *Readings in Church: Archaeology and Liturgy*, Golubtsov considers the likelihood that the first Christians used the synagogue for some of their worship but that it necessarily receded to domestic secluded meetings (в домашних закрытых собраниях).<sup>106</sup>

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succedere la teologia dello Spirito: ‘Poiché siete figli, Dio mandò lo Spirito del suo Figlio nei vostri cuori, che dice “Abba, Padre”’.<sup>13</sup> *Didachè* 10,2, dunque, afferma che la novità portata da Cristo consiste nella rivelazione di un nuovo luogo di culto e di una nuova liturgia: il tempio non è più un edificio, ma è il cuore dei fedeli, e la nuova liturgia, conseguentemente, consiste nell’azione di invocare Dio.” Mazza, *La Celebrazione Eucaristica*, 73.

104 Ign., *Eph.* 5:2.

105 Alexander Golubtsov, *Liturgy in the First Century of Christianity* (Голубцов А.П. Литургия в первые века христианства. Богословский вестник. 1913. т. 2. № 7–8. 621–43; т. 3. № 10. 332–56; № 12. 779–802), [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr\\_Golubcov/liturgija-v-pervye-veka-hristianstva](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr_Golubcov/liturgija-v-pervye-veka-hristianstva). The text (sighted April 2026) is unpaginated but places are easy to find with the search facility on azbyka.ru by keying in the quoted words.

106 Alexander Golubtsov, *Readings in Church Archaeology and Liturgy* (Голубцов, А.П. Из чтений по Церковной Археологии и Литургике, Ч 2, Сергиев Посад, 1918), 50. The no. cited is that of the pdf at [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr\\_Golubcov/iz-chtenij-po-tserkovnoj-arheologii-i-liturgike-arheologija-mesta-molitvennyh-sobranij-istorija-tserkovnoj-zhivopisi](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Aleksandr_Golubcov/iz-chtenij-po-tserkovnoj-arheologii-i-liturgike-arheologija-mesta-molitvennyh-sobranij-istorija-tserkovnoj-zhivopisi), not the original text; sighted April 2024.

Golubtsov does not deny that the first Christians sometimes gathered in larger numbers in a non-domestic circumstance; but it is precisely the volume of people that encourages him to posit an inevitable spillover that created patterns of celebration beyond the more organised assembly: when a single place, “no matter how spacious it were, was not enough, believers began to gather for prayers and breaking bread at home in groups or social circles.” It is a mix of private and public. “These first Christian gathering-places were prayer temples, chapels in private homes (в частных домах) and not churches in the strict sense of the word.”<sup>107</sup> Golubtsov emphasises the relative absence of formal liturgy. We think of the liturgy in Orthodox and Latin traditions as a highly codified affair; but “among the first Christians . . . there was no such desire. What is now called worship service (богослужением) was so unpretentious and uninflected among them that it was easy to get by with simple home resources (простыми домашними средствами).” As in “any newly emerging religious community, in which worship is still in its infancy,” Christianity did not at first “require complex accommodations (сложных приспособлений) for its performance”; “the external situation is not secured, and the material means are not great, so that even if there were a desire to develop a more complicated ritual environment there would have been insurmountable obstacles (непреодолимые препятствия).”<sup>108</sup>

A similar position is adopted by Archimandrite Kyprian, whose study *The Eucharist* was published in 1946.<sup>109</sup> Kyprian observes that the temple would not have accommodated the Christian breaking of bread, which instead took place in houses. Kyprian also acknowledges that sacramental rituals took place in the home still in the time of Tertullian and Basil.

The faithful often took the Holy Gifts home with them; and at home there was a custom of communion themselves with these spare Gifts. We are told about such communion at home: Tertullian (*Ad uxorem*, 2.5), St Cyprian of Carthage (*De lapsis*, cap. 26), St Basil the Great (*Epist.* 93), Rufinus (*Historia monachorum*) and John Moschus in his *Spiritual Meadow* (ch. 29, 30).<sup>110</sup>

In short, the Orthodox tradition recognises the charismatic informality of the early church. One might also note that in Russian the expression “house church” is more or less synonymous with marriage, where the union typically creates Christian

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107 Golubtsov, *Readings*, 51; cf. 62.

108 Golubtsov, *Readings*, 51.

109 Kyprian, K., *The Eucharist* (Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission, 1946) (Архимандрит Киприан [Керн], Евхаристия), [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian\\_Kern/evharistija](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian_Kern/evharistija).

110 The text is unpaginated; however the site azbuka.ru has an efficient search facility. To find the place, type “Ad uxorem.”

children.<sup>111</sup> In this tradition, there is no subversive thought that the house church might overtake official services and make them redundant. On the contrary, Orthodoxy encourages house churches to assist in the interpretation of doctrine. As a Russian Orthodox website says: “Each person has a different set of questions, and it is unlikely that a preacher will be able to cover every one of them in our Sunday meetings. Therefore, it is very important (очень важно) that a person have the opportunity to raise their issues in meetings with brothers and sisters in house churches (в домашних церквях).”<sup>112</sup> On the strength of this evidence from robust Eastern traditions, I do not credit Heid’s belief that the house church is an imaginary confection of reformists.

## Conclusion

An easy way out of our conundrum of whether or not there were house churches would be to settle the issue with semantics: it depends on how a house church is defined. I would like to avoid a conclusion that leaves us with this frustrating equivocation. Heid already acknowledges that holy things happened in houses but he does not feel that houses by that fact alone can assume the title of churches. Yet given the charismatic looseness with which sacraments were performed in the first centuries, it seems irrefutable that domestic dwellings were used for the emergent Eucharist. Breaking bread with conscious devotion to Christ—with or without wine—is the antecedent to the Eucharist in its later codifications in a church with a permanently consecrated altar. The argument that there is no such thing as a house church depends upon anachronistically narrow definitions of the sacraments and their furniture and staff. It would be temerarious to deny that domestic rituals did not contribute to the trajectory of the liturgy. The domestic configurations that afforded the development should therefore be considered precursors to the church proper at a time when the church proper did not exist in the way that it did *post pacem*; and it seems peremptory to dismiss house churches as a fantasy. If sacramental rituals occurred with sufficient sanctity and piety within domestic spaces, the houses and tenements that accommodated them should be considered an early form of the church itself.

In support of this conclusion, an insight from Jan Bremmer is particularly helpful. We clearly face a paucity of evidence for the physical details of Christian worship in the early centuries. But that absence of detail, in itself, is telling. Up to a point, the early Christians did not care about where they worshipped: it was

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111 Gleb Kaleda, *House-Church: Essays on the Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Creating and Building a Family in Modern Conditions* (Глеб Каледа, Домашняя церковь: Очерки духовно-нравственных основ созидания и построения семьи в современных условиях, Изд. 3-е [Москва 2001]), [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Gleb\\_Kaleda/domashnjaja-tserkov](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Gleb_Kaleda/domashnjaja-tserkov).

112 “Хочу На Домашнюю Церковь!,” Служение каждому, [https://servevery.com/2018/07/23/hochu\\_na\\_domashnyuyu\\_cerkov](https://servevery.com/2018/07/23/hochu_na_domashnyuyu_cerkov).

an affair of no fixed address.<sup>113</sup> The reason that the record is so patchy is that the participants did not consider it especially important to describe the place or stipulate the protocols in any detail. If it had been considered important—or for Heid, essential—that worshippers gather before a consecrated altar in a unique hall in each local community, such imperatives might have rated a higher profile. Instead, we find relative indifference to the formalities, to the point (as noted) that the altar could be a humble stool that in any other circumstance supported someone's posterior. The absence of further evidence points to comfort with the most informal arrangements. Beyond the demand for unity, there is little sense of anxiety over etiquette. Certainly, dishonourable freelancers were seen as a risk but no one demanded proof of sanctity in the walls or the furniture or the land beneath them. It follows that nothing prevented earnest sacramental worship in houses and relatively little favoured worship in larger public configurations. Heid's theories make little sense and his arguments are not persuasive; but for all that, I would not go so far as to suggest—as he contemptuously declares of the house church theory—that his thesis belongs in the wastepaper basket.

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113 "This absence of a fixed place of worship may have had its advantages. For example, the Christians did not have to struggle or wait a long time to acquire land for building, as was famously the case with the Sarapis worshippers on Delos. Consequently, the actual places in which they met were not considered to be particularly notable, either by the Christians themselves or by their neighbours." Bremmer, "Urban Religion," 63.