

Book Review

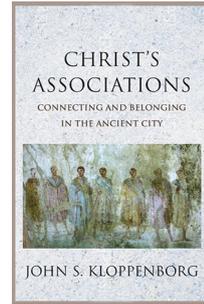
John S. Kloppenborg.
Christ's Associations:

Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City.

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What were ancient churches like? How many members did they typically have? Where would they have met? What were the logistics of a common meal or funding the business of the church? These seemingly basic questions are all essentially unknown about the church from the first century because of a paucity of data from the churches themselves. John S. Kloppenborg's most recent work, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*, seeks to provide a framework with which we might be able gain possible answers to these questions by comparing them to the epigraphic, literary, and archaeological data we currently have about Greco-Roman associations.

These associations, small face-to-face groups which could be organized around an occupation, family, ethnic group, or cult are organizations for which scholars have a wealth of data. This data includes membership lists, fee structures, details of banquets, bylaws, and more. Kloppenborg posits that by using this data we can create a conceptual framework for understanding the characteristics of the early church. He is quick to emphasize that this does not provide any new information, but rather that by using data from similar groups we have more information about, we can make reasonable assumptions about what may have been possible for early churches (5). Nevertheless, having laid out his rather chastened set of expectations,

Kloppenborg amasses a stunning amount of data to suggest how the early church may have functioned.

Each chapter addresses a specific aspect of the early church which can be illuminated through comparison to other Greco-Roman associations. While some material is repetitive, each additional chapter can be profitably read on its own if the reader only has interest in a particular topic. Several examples of the value of this comparative analysis serve to demonstrate the validity of Kloppenborg's method.

First, how large were the congregations of a typical early church? Kloppenborg theorizes that churches had roughly fifteen to thirty members each (110-111). He arrives at this conclusion by examining membership lists over time for various occupational guilds, as well as the physical spaces which were likely to be rented out by such guilds. In commenting on the meal practices of early Christians, particularly 1 Cor 11:17-24 he bucks against the notions that one or a few wealthy patrons would have subsidized the entire cost of a church's meals, or that everyone would have brought some food (an ancient potluck). Rather based on the practices of other associations, he posits that the Corinthian, and other churches, would have paid for their meals through membership dues or a rotating responsibility for a member to provide for one meal (232-234).

One of his most tantalizing suggestions comes in his final chapter dedicated to

recruitment of members. Generally speaking, Christianity did not offer much to the rich by way of social capital or prestige, as he notes that cultic associations rarely had anyone of rank patronizing them. He suggests that the appeal Christianity may have been its book culture emphasizing literacy and the interpretation of Scripture. The ability to not only to read, but to understand and discuss complex texts was highly valued by the upper crust of Roman society. Given that Scripture and its attendant interpretation form the bedrock of Christianity, it makes sense that this would appeal to such a culture (335-337). These are but a few of the suggestions, Kloppenborg offers, but all are grounded in copious comparisons with extant data about various Greco-Roman associations.

While offering a number of possible scenarios of church life and logistics, Kloppenborg does leave some questions unanswered. Kloppenborg opens Chapter 10 with the example of a 4th century Christian guild of fullers who dedicated a mosaic. He uses this opportunity to discuss the language used by the association but moves on without comment on any other facet of the association's life or organization. Upon reading about a 'Christian' guild a number of questions came to mind, what was the relationship between the guild and a local church? Did members of the guild pay dues, participate in funerary rites, etc. in the church as well? Was it financially feasible to be a member of two associations at the same time? What does it mean for his general thesis if guilds could be 'Christianized'? Despite the potential significance of a Christian guild, these additional line of inquiry are left untouched.

A major issue present throughout the book is not so much Kloppenborg's approach as with his accepted range of evidence. Kloppenborg out of hand rejects the historicity of the

majority of Acts as well as the Pastoral Epistles. For a person with Evangelical presuppositions about Scripture, this would be problematic, but it is also problematic for purely historical reasons. Regarding Acts, Kloppenborg simply asserts that it is "utterly unreliable" (98). No attempt is made to defend this or other assertions. Admittedly, given the topic of the book, it is understandable that Kloppenborg would not launch into an extended critique of the historicity of the New Testament, however by dismissing these sources, Kloppenborg's conclusions are unnecessarily impoverished.

His hermeneutics of suspicion are not just theoretical or academic as he raises them throughout the book. In asking the question of whether early churches had membership lists, he answers that there is not enough evidence to make a conclusion. He acknowledges that in 1 Tim 5:9 that at least widows are enrolled on some type of list, but views the letter as a non-Pauline 2nd century writing. While accepting the authenticity of the Pastorals would not conclusively answer the question, Kloppenborg's dismissal of it renders his final conclusion more ambiguous than the evidence would suggest. In his discussion of the demographics of the Thessalonian church, he discounts Luke's account that presents it as being mixed between Gentiles and Jews and as counting leading women of the city as members. Rather, Kloppenborg asserts that the church was homogenous both in ethnicity and gender as a church of Gentile males. He bases this reasoning off both the lack of references to the Old Testament and direct addresses to women in the Thessalonian letters. This leads Kloppenborg to assert that while some churches could be semi-diverse (Corinth and Philippi) there were also those which would very homogenous. Without discounting the possibility that some churches

were homogenous, the evidence from Acts suggests a greater diversity among churches than Kloppenborg allows. Despite these reservations about the scope of acceptable data, it cannot be denied that Kloppenborg's work opens up new vistas for understanding the early church.

As for who might benefit most from these new vistas, it is clear that the book is aimed at fellow members of the academy. Prior understanding of Greco-Roman society is necessary to make sense of his arguments. Despite this, the conclusions drawn can still be profitable for the pastor or educated lay person. That being said, the reader has to wade through page after page of membership rosters, lists of patrons and their gifts to certain associations, and much more. It may be more fruitful however to skip these sections, and focus on the conclusions he draws from their cumulative weight.

At the current time we do not have data from either the New Testament occasional letters or Acts to make extensive conclusions one way or the other about how the early churches functioned on a practical level. By using careful comparison of Greco-Roman associations, Kloppenborg allows sets up reasonable parameters around what may have been, drawing us closer to an understanding of the lives of our earliest brothers and sisters.

