

AN EXPLORATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS ‘SCHOLASTIC COMMUNITIES’¹

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In 1960, Edwin Judge described the early Christian communities as ‘scholastic communities’.² Since then, he has continued to explore this aspect of early Christian communities. However, while his pioneering work in this field has become a standard point of departure for the socio-historical study of the early Christian movement, his ‘scholastic communities’ description has received scant attention. By contrast, scholarship on the formation and social character of early Christian communities is dominated by the search for antecedents, influences, and analogies or models from antiquity, none of which adequately accounts for the Christian communities, or recognises the priority of educational activities reflected in Judge’s characterisation. Moreover, the approach of these studies is problematic, because without a prior description of early Christian communities on their own terms, comparative approaches risk overlooking, distorting or misunderstanding aspects of early Christian communities that are not repeated in other social phenomena.

¹ Claire Seymour Smith, ‘An Exploration of Early Christian Communities as “Scholastic Communities” through a Study of the Vocabulary of “Teaching” in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Sydney/Moore Theological College, 2009), forthcoming as *Pauline Communities as ‘Scholastic Communities’: A Study of the Vocabulary of ‘Teaching’ in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (WUNT II; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

² E. A. Judge, ‘The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community: Part I & II’, *Journal of Religious History* 1/1 (1960): 4-15; 1/3 (1961): 125-37. [Repr. in E. A. Judge, *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays*, ed. James R. Harrison (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 526-52].

The thesis explores the ‘scholastic community’ description, not to shed light on other, albeit related, socio-historical issues, but to ascertain the appropriateness of the description. Rather than utilising social-scientific or comparative models, the thesis adopts an emic approach for the prior task of social description through an analysis of New Testament texts. This is done through an exhaustive, detailed and disciplined exegetical study of the vocabulary of ‘teaching’ in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

The methodology for the vocabulary study is original. A working definition of ‘teaching’ based on a simple model of communication is used to identify fifty-six verbs (and cognates) as vocabulary denoting ‘teaching’. Each of these verbs is grouped in semantic groupings determined from within the lexical base of the target literature. Ten groupings are identified: ‘core-teaching’, ‘speaking’, ‘traditioning’ (which included ‘writing’), ‘announcing’, ‘revealing’, ‘worshipping’, ‘commanding’, ‘correcting’, ‘remembering’ (which included ‘imitation’), and ‘false teaching’.

Discussion of each of the first nine semantic groupings corresponds to chapters 3–11 of the thesis. Each chapter begins with a survey of scholarship related to activities denoted by words in that semantic grouping, and then each ‘teaching’ word and all occurrences of it are studied in turn.

Every occurrence of a word is studied individually in its discourse context, and then alongside all occurrences of that word in the target literature. Following this, all words within a semantic grouping are studied alongside other words in that semantic grouping. Finally, each semantic grouping is compared with other groupings, so that the relationship between all nine semantic groupings could be explored, in order to identify overlap and distinctives. This multi-layered grouping-approach accommodated paradigmatic and syntagmatic semantic concerns, and facilitated comparison, highlighting similarities and differences between all occurrences of a word, between words within a semantic grouping, and between semantic groupings.

To ensure uniformity of method, and to determine the yield of the vocabulary for understanding the ‘scholastic’ nature of the communities portrayed in the texts, each occurrence is studied using a heuristic tool developed for the collection and analysis of data. The heuristic tool is based on the communication model that informed the working definition of ‘teaching’. It identifies each component of the

denoted activity: addresser/s, addressee/s, message, mode of communication, type of content, location, authority register of activity, agent/means, manner of activity, purpose, and result of the activity. Charts presenting the yield from each occurrence of vocabulary in all ten semantic groupings, and a chart listing all words studied and the number of occurrences that denote didactic activities, are contained in eleven appendices.

The broad definition of teaching and detailed approach of the study produces a comprehensive picture of the educational environments in the communities portrayed in these texts. The study also sheds light on related issues in current New Testament scholarship, including Paul’s understanding and use of power and authority, the participation of regular Christians in recruiting to the believing community, the role and practice of prophecy in the public gathering, the participation of women in certain teaching activities, the interplay between orality and textuality in the early Christian movement, and the authorship of the Pastorals.

The results of the study strongly support a social description of the communities that gives priority to educational concerns, and to that extent affirm Judge’s ‘scholastic communities’ description. This is demonstrated by the presence of activities that might be regarded as ‘scholastic’, the community dimension of these activities, and the prominence and significance of these activities for the life of the communities.

No aspect of the Christian life was unaffected by or quarantined from educational concerns. Educational activities were involved in initiating, creating, structuring, maintaining and protecting communities, and delineated divine and human relationships. Communities *learned* how to be Christian communities and individuals *learned* how to live and love as members of the believing community.

The detailed vocabulary analysis also enables the description to be filled out, so that it can be understood broadly, capturing the wide range of activities denoted by the ‘teaching’ vocabulary, and which occurred within relationships and communities with a divine (vertical) as well as a human (horizontal) dimension.

Indeed, the two elements of the ‘scholastic communities’ description are found to be in dialectic relationship, where educational activities shape the expression and experience of the believing community, and, reciprocally, teaching activities were shaped by and utilised existing

relationships within the communities, both locally and translocally. Moreover, the educational impact of ‘teaching’ activities and the community life was internalised (i.e. learned) by individual believers who, having been transformed by the educative process, themselves contributed to formal and/or informal teaching activities, thereby shaping the communities, and so on.

Given the extra dimensions the study adds to Judge’s ‘scholastic communities’ description, and several inadequacies and anachronisms inherent in a simplistic understanding of it, the thesis proposes the alternative description of ‘learning communities’. This description also allows for the priority of the divine dimension of educational activities, where God is the ultimate teacher and all others are learners, and where the character, work and purposes of God are seen to provide the context and contours of these ‘learning communities’.