

**CHRIST-GROUPS AS SUBCULTURAL NETWORKS:
A CASE STUDY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON**

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

This study asks whether the Christ-group reflected in Paul's Letter to Philemon may be understood as a subcultural formation within its mid-first-century setting. It considers how familiar practices and relationships were appropriated within the group and given meanings that contributed to a distinctive ethos of belonging. Paul Hodgkinson's model of subcultural substance provides the principal theoretical framework, while historical and literary analysis remains primary throughout. The discussion examines relational language, reciprocity, commitment, recognition, and network connectivity in Philemon, with supporting evidence from the other Pauline letters. The study argues that participation in the Christ-group carried an understanding of belonging sufficiently distinctive to make claims upon members and to affect how existing relationships were understood. The study then places subculture theory in conversation with network analysis, considering how people, letters, gathering places, and material support may have sustained recognition between dispersed groups and assisted the formation of new local gatherings. These wider observations remain exploratory given the partial character of the surviving evidence.

1. Introduction

Scholars of the New Testament and Greco-Roman antiquity employ a wide range of analytical lenses and theoretical frameworks in their investigations of the formation and development of the first-century Christ movement. Textual analysis and historical context have increasingly been brought into conversation with approaches drawn from the social sciences. A perspective that has seldom been explicitly applied, however, is subculture theory. Scholars occasionally use the term ‘subculture’ in a vernacular sense when characterising the early Christ movement, but sustained engagement with theories developed within subcultural studies remains rare. This study seeks to address that apparent absence by considering subculture theory as a framework for the study of the early Christ movement. Taken to its fullest, this is admittedly a task far beyond the scope of the present project. What follows is a more modest step in that broader investigation, using Paul’s Letter to Philemon as a case study and point of departure. The principal question considered here is whether the Christ-group reflected in the letter may be understood as a subcultural formation within its mid-first-century setting. The study also brings this perspective into relation with network theory, asking what analogous subcultural networks suggest about how such formations took shape, sustained intergroup connections, and expanded.

The mid-first-century Christ movement was composed of local gatherings embedded within the social world of the eastern Roman Empire. Paul’s Letter to Philemon offers a useful case through which to consider one such group and what it reveals about in-group belonging, identity, commitment, obligation, and network connectivity. The brief letter centres on an appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, an enslaved person connected to Philemon’s household, where the local Christ-group also meets. The letter implies that Onesimus became a believer in Christ while absent from his enslaver’s household and staying with the imprisoned Paul. In returning him to Philemon’s household, Paul appeals for

Onesimus to be received as ‘more than a slave, a beloved brother’ (Phlm 16).¹ Much of the underlying situation remains uncertain. The letter does not explain the circumstances of Onesimus’ separation from Philemon in sufficient detail to permit a confident reconstruction, nor does Paul clearly state his desired outcome. This study does not seek to resolve these questions.

The question asked by this study is whether the Christ-group reflected in Philemon may be understood as a subcultural formation within its mid-first-century setting. Such a reading does not depend on identifying language or practices unique to the group. Sibling terminology, reciprocity, household gatherings, and other forms of association were already part of the wider Greco-Roman world. What matters is the meaning these familiar forms acquired within the Christ-group and the extent to which they contributed to a distinctive sense of belonging with claims upon its members. The analysis considers how existing language and social relationships were appropriated and re-signified within the group’s developing ethos.

Paul Hodkinson’s model of subcultural substance provides the principal theoretical framework for this inquiry, offering the criteria through which the group reflected in Philemon is assessed as a subcultural formation. Social Identity Theory, models of reciprocity, and Small Group Formation Theory are used in more limited ways, helping clarify particular aspects of the evidence. The study also brings the subcultural perspective into relation with network analysis. The movement of people, letters, reports, and material support allowed forms of recognition to circulate through relationships glimpsed in Philemon and more fully attested in the undisputed Pauline letters.² Network analysis carries the inquiry

¹ Biblical quotations throughout this study utilize the New Revised Standard Version updated edition (NRSVUE) translation.

² This study follows the broad consensus of New Testament scholarship that the ‘undisputed epistles’ include Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The ‘disputed epistles’ include Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. The term ‘undisputed’ refers to majority scholarly consensus rather than universal agreement. Within this study, the term ‘Pauline’ refers to

beyond the subcultural character of a single group by asking how such forms of belonging and in-group identity were sustained across different locations and how existing ties may have contributed to the formation of new local gatherings. These questions are necessarily more tentative than the analysis of Philemon itself, since the surviving evidence preserves only partial traces of the wider network. These approaches remain subordinate to the historical and literary analysis of the letter.

Historical and literary analysis evidence remains primary throughout the study. Philemon and the other undisputed Pauline letters are read as artefacts of the mid-first-century Christ movement, situated within the social and cultural conditions in which they were produced rather than through the perspective of later Christian developments. Modern sociological concepts are used heuristically and analogically, without assuming that ancient participants understood themselves through these categories or that the Christ-groups corresponded directly to modern subcultures.

The study begins with a review of scholarship on Greco-Roman voluntary associations, social identity, social-scientific approaches, subculture theory, and networks. The methodology establishes the historical-critical priority of the inquiry and explains how the theoretical frameworks are used comparatively. The main analysis considers relational language, siblinghood, obligation, reciprocity, recognition, and commitment in Philemon, alongside evidence from the other undisputed Pauline letters concerning the social character of the Christ-groups. It then moves from the local gathering to the wider network, asking how people, gathering places, and forms of communication may have contributed to the circulation of subcultural belonging and the growth of the movement.

the Christ-groups associated with Paul and to the canonical writings attributed to him. Its use does not imply that these groups lacked contact or relationships with the broader Christ movement.

By bringing subculture theory and network analysis into dialogue with a historical inquiry, this study seeks to clarify both the social meaning of belonging within a Christ-group of the mid-first century and the relationships through which such belonging could extend beyond one local gathering. Philemon provides the principal case study, while the wider Pauline evidence opens further questions about how locally negotiated identities and expectations became recognisable across the early Christ movement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction to relevant scholarship

Since the 1970s, scholarship on first-century Christ-groups has moved beyond a primary focus on theological concerns to an examination of the social realities reflected in Paul's letters. A significant milestone in this development was the publication of Wayne A. Meeks' *The first urban Christians: the social world of the Apostle Paul* (1983), which demonstrated the value of situating Pauline Christ-groups within their broader social and historical context. Meeks' work, employing an 'eclectic' combination of historical and sociological approaches in the investigation of the composition, organisation, and social dynamics of early Christ-groups,³ is widely acknowledged as having influenced a subsequent generation of scholars.⁴

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly sought to understand these Christ-groups as social formations within the urban environments and culture of the first-century eastern Roman Empire. This shift has generated a diverse body of scholarship on their organisation, identity formation, social boundaries, household settings, and wider relationships. Scholars have employed comparisons with Greco-Roman voluntary

³ Meeks, 1983, p. 6

⁴ Ascough, 1998, p. 2; Kloppenborg, 2019a, p. ix; Last, 2016, p. xi; Still and Horrell, 2009, p. 1; Horrell, 2015, 155

associations, Social Identity Theory, network analysis, and other socio-historical and social-scientific perspectives to examine these dimensions of group life. Although these approaches address features relevant to the present study, Pauline Christ-groups have not been subject to a sustained analysis through the lens of subculture theory.

The following review surveys the academic works most relevant to the present study, particularly as precedents within New Testament scholarship for the heuristic application of socio-historical and social-scientific approaches to the early Christ movement. Beginning with work comparing Christ-groups with Greco-Roman voluntary associations, it then considers Social Identity Theory and selected social-scientific approaches before turning to subculture theory, the principal framework for this study, and network analysis.

2.2. *Greco-Roman voluntary associations and the Pauline ekklēsia*

In modern scholarship, the academic term ‘voluntary association’ serves as an analytical category encompassing diverse, often overlapping forms of collective organisation, and as a comparative model for studying ancient social groups.⁵ In the Greco-Roman world, voluntary associations were self-organised groups whose members gathered around shared cultic, occupational, ethnic, social, or charitable interests. The study of voluntary associations has become a widely accepted comparative framework for understanding the social organisation and practices of early Christ-groups and, in the present study, provides a contextual basis for identifying features that may be considered subcultural.

In *The first urban Christians* (1983), Meeks considered voluntary associations among several comparative models for understanding the social formation of Pauline Christ-groups,⁶ although his analysis focused primarily on the features he regarded as distinctive. Subsequent

⁵ A variety of ancient terms can be encompassed within the modern academic category of voluntary associations, including the Greek terms *koinon*, *synodos*, *thiasos*, *synagōgē*, *politeuma*, and *synergasia*, and the Latin terms *collegium* and *corpus*. Some scholars prefer simply ‘associations’, ‘elective associations’, or ‘unofficial associations’ as proposed by Last and Harland. (Kloppenborg, 2019a, p. 18-19; Kloppenborg and Wilson, 1996; 17; Last and Harland, 2020, 9–10).

⁶ Meeks, 1983, 77-81

scholarship has given greater attention to associations, which have developed into a primary historical framework for situating Christ-groups within the social and organisational life of the first-century eastern Roman Empire. John S. Kloppenborg has been central to the development of this field. *Voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world* (1996), co-edited with Stephen G. Wilson, marked an important milestone in the study of inscriptional and papyrological evidence from associations across the eastern Mediterranean. His later study, *Christ's associations: connecting and belonging in the ancient city* (2019a), engages in comparative work with early Christ-groups. Related contributions by Philip A. Harland, Richard Last, and Richard S. Ascough have further developed the use of associational evidence for understanding the social organisation and practices of Pauline Christ-groups.

These scholars use evidence from Greco-Roman associations as a heuristic for comparing early Christ-groups, setting limits on what can reasonably be inferred, while seeking to avoid exaggerated claims of early Christian distinctiveness. The different kinds of evidence available shape the comparison, since Greco-Roman associations are known mainly from inscriptions, while the Pauline epistles provide insight into the interpersonal, affective, and ideological dimensions of Christ-group life. As a result, scholars debate the extent to which associations provide an appropriate model for understanding the organisation, membership, meeting settings, forms of belonging, and translocal relationships of the Christ-groups.

Whereas Meeks emphasised the distinctive social profile of the Pauline groups,⁷ Kloppenborg places them within the diversity of ancient associations, drawing attention to shared patterns of membership,⁸ social capital,⁹ communal meals,¹⁰ ethical regulation,¹¹ and

⁷ Meeks, 1983, pp. 73, 87-88

⁸ Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp. 142-46

⁹ Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp. 91, 95, 208

¹⁰ Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp. 146-49

¹¹ Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp. 153-54

possible meeting spaces beyond the household.¹² Harland similarly complicates claims of Pauline distinctiveness by demonstrating that fictive kinship language, including *adelphoi* ('brothers'), was used by a variety of occupational and cultic associations throughout the eastern Mediterranean.¹³ At the same time, he acknowledges the difficulty of determining the symbolic meaning conveyed by such language from the primarily inscriptional evidence, which lacks the literary context of the Pauline letters. In his study of the Corinthian *ekklesia*, Last concludes that its meeting practices, financial arrangements, and recruitment strategies can be better understood in relation to a range of associational models than solely in domestic or familial settings.¹⁴

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the value of Greco-Roman voluntary associations for understanding the organisation and social practices of Pauline Christ-groups within the urban environment of the Roman Empire and the difficulties involved in making such comparisons. Comparison with ancient associations helps guard against treating familiar forms of organisation and terminology as unique to the Christ-movement, but it does not by itself explain the meanings these forms carried within the groups or their significance for identity and belonging. We should also consider that most cultic and occupational associations operated within the broader dominant Greco-Roman culture, rather than at its margins. Although the Pauline Christ-groups can be situated within the academic category of ancient associations, their construction of identity, symbolic boundaries, and patterns of belonging suggest that additional analytical categories may help explain aspects of their social formation that association *comparanda* alone do not fully address.¹⁵

2.3. Social Identity Theory in Pauline studies

¹² Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp. 104-05, 123

¹³ Harland, 2009, pp. 63-66, 80

¹⁴ Last, 2016, pp. 81-82, 147-48, 161-62, 213-19

¹⁵ McCready, 1996, pp. 63-64

Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the 1970s and 1980s within the field of social psychology.¹⁶ It examines how an individual's sense of self is shaped by perceived membership in social groups, including the value and emotional significance attached to that membership, as well as the distinctions drawn between in-group and out-group members. Turner later expanded the theory with the addition of Self-Categorisation, which considers how individuals come to understand themselves as members of a shared social category, making collective behaviour possible.¹⁷

In recent decades, New Testament scholars have used SIT as a heuristic framework for examining processes of social identification and belonging in ancient sources. Its application requires attention to differences in the construction of identity across historical and cultural contexts, as well as to the nature of the available evidence.¹⁸ Used with these qualifications, SIT provides a vocabulary for examining group formation, boundary maintenance, and the significance attached to shared belonging within early Christ-groups. Recent studies relevant to the present project include the *T&T Clark social identity commentary on the New Testament*, edited by J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (2020), containing a chapter on Philemon by Ryan Heinsch.¹⁹ Heinsch interprets Paul as an entrepreneur of identity who seeks to reprioritise the existing social identities of Philemon and Onesimus through their shared superordinate identity in Christ.²⁰ Also relevant is J. Brian Tucker's essay, 'Paul's particular problem: the continuation of existing identities in Philemon', in the *T&T Clark handbook to social identity in the New Testament*, edited by Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (2014).²¹ Tucker examines how Onesimus' social identity as

¹⁶ Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, pp. 13-39

¹⁷ Tucker and Baker, 2014, pp. 22-23

¹⁸ Tucker and Baker, 2014, pp. 43-45

¹⁹ Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, pp. 475-86

²⁰ Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, pp. 477-78

²¹ Tucker and Baker, 2014, pp. 407-24

an enslaved person continues while being recategorised within the superordinate group identity of being ‘in the Lord’ (Phlm 16).

SIT is therefore useful for considering how membership in Pauline Christ-groups was understood and how existing social identities could be negotiated within a shared in-group identity. It complements subculture theory by attending to the processes of categorisation and identity formation, while the subcultural framework considers how identity operates alongside shared distinctiveness, commitment, and relative autonomy.

2.4. Social-scientific models in the study of the New Testament world

Social-scientific approaches have provided New Testament scholars with models for interpreting aspects of historical and literary evidence that might otherwise remain less visible. Bruce J. Malina is particularly influential in the development of model-based approaches to New Testament interpretation. Central to his scholarship is the principle that the social world of the early Christ-groups differed significantly from that of modern Western societies, and that interpreters must account for this cultural distance when reading ancient texts. Applied selectively to features of the Pauline letters, social-scientific models can provide useful perspectives while keeping the historical evidence central to the analysis.

Malina’s *Christian origins and cultural anthropology* (1986) is relevant to the present study for its treatment of reciprocity as a central aspect of ancient social relations. His discussion of generalised, balanced, and negative reciprocity provides a framework for understanding the patterns of interaction reflected in Philemon.²² These distinctions are particularly useful for considering how Paul draws upon expectations of exchange and obligation, while placing the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus within the Christ-group’s claims of belonging.

²² Malina, 1986, pp. 101-107

A further example appears in Malina's chapter, 'Early Christian groups: using Small Group Formation Theory to explain Christian organisations',²³ published in Philip F. Esler's *Modelling early Christianity: social-scientific studies of the New Testament and its context* (1995). Malina applies a developmental model in which groups move through stages that include periods of conflict and the formation of shared norms.²⁴ Small Group Formation Theory provides a model for analysing situations in the Pauline epistles in which group norms were still being negotiated, and local application remained uncertain or contested.

For the present study, Malina's account of reciprocity helps examine the obligations invoked in Paul's appeal to Philemon, while Small Group Formation Theory offers a way to situate the negotiation of in-group norms within the development of early Christ-groups.

2.5. Subculture theory

Across the nearly 250 pages of *The first urban Christians* (1983), Meeks uses the term 'subculture' five times; however, only as a vernacular descriptive category rather than as a formal theoretical framework.²⁵ Despite the broadening range of theoretical approaches employed in the study of Christian origins, the application of subculture theory to Pauline Christ-groups remains largely absent.²⁶ Subculture studies emerged within American sociology but soon developed along several different lines rather than around a single settled theory or application. Questions of marginality and symbolic distinction remained important aspects. At the same time, later scholars gave greater attention to identity, belonging, and the

²³ Malina, 1995, pp. 96-113

²⁴ Malina, 1995, pp. 103-06

²⁵ Meeks, 1983, pp. 7, 104, 105 (x2), 173

²⁶ A notable exception is Rodney Stark's *The rise of Christianity: a sociologist reconsiders history* (1996), in which he explicitly draws upon Fischer's 'subculture theory of urbanism' to support his hypothesis concerning the origins and expansion of Christianity (pp. 134-35). Stark had previously applied Fischer's theory to this topic in earlier work (Stark 1991, pp. 79-80) and employed the term 'subculture' in his analysis of the participation of women in early Christianity (Stark, 1995). Although Stark does not explicitly identify the theoretical basis for the latter usage, his earlier sociological scholarship on subcultures suggests that it reflects more than a vernacular use of the term. Nevertheless, Stark's work seeks to explain the growth of Christianity in its first three centuries rather than the social formation of mid-first-century Pauline Christ-groups.

ways groups formed distinctive patterns of life while maintaining some connection to the dominant culture.

J. Patrick Williams' *Subcultural theory: traditions and concepts* (2011) revisits symbolic interactionist approaches to subculture without viewing subcultures primarily in terms of opposition or resistance.²⁷ He describes them as culturally bounded, though not closed, networks in which shared meanings are sustained through interaction and circulation, allowing participants to remain connected to wider social worlds.²⁸ A broader overview of these developments is provided by Luigi Berzano and Carlo Genova in *Lifestyles and subcultures: history and a new perspective* (2015). Tracing the development of subculture studies from the late twentieth century onwards, they note a growing interest in the ways groups establish and maintain distinction within the wider social environment. Resistance and separation remain part of the discussion, but no longer function as universal characteristics for identifying subcultures.²⁹ Instead, later approaches emphasise the relative autonomy of groups whose identities take shape through ongoing interaction with the surrounding culture.³⁰ Berzano and Genova describe subcultures in terms of shared values, knowledge, practices, and frameworks of meaning that distinguish participants from others. They also distinguish subculture from community, noting that 'community' suggests a stable population in a particular place and marked by clearer boundaries of belonging, whereas subcultures may involve different levels of participation, learned and reinforced over time.³¹ Their survey also highlights the processes of appropriation and re-signification, through which familiar symbols, practices, and forms of social organisation of the dominant culture are reordered and invested with subcultural meanings particular to the group.

²⁷ Williams, 2011, pp. 39-42

²⁸ Williams, 2011, pp. 39, 148

²⁹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 132-33, 140-45

³⁰ Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 137

³¹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 134-40

Although Berzano and Genova do not consider applying subculture theory to ancient contexts, their discussion offers a useful approach to the Pauline evidence. Philemon and the other undisputed letters reflect groups that remained embedded in their first-century Graeco-Roman world through households, occupations, and patronage relationships. Participation in these groups carried shared expectations; however, existing relationships, practices, and forms of belonging could acquire meanings shaped by the group's collective commitments. Subcultural studies provide a basis for asking whether subcultural characteristics can be identified within the Pauline evidence without treating subculture as a self-evident or rigid category. Of particular relevance to the present study is Paul Hodkinson's reformulation of subculture through the concept of 'cultural substance', assessed through the 'indicators' of identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and relative autonomy.³² The indicators are considered cumulatively and may be present to varying degrees, allowing assessment of subcultural characteristics without requiring a group to conform to a rigid definition. Although developed in the context of the study of contemporary subcultural groups, Hodkinson's model provides the principal theoretical framework for the analysis of Philemon.

2.6. Network approaches to early Christ-groups

The Pauline letters indicate that local Christ-groups were connected through the movement of people, letters, information, and material support. These connections are preserved in names and greetings, as well as references to travel, hospitality, messengers, and coworkers. John S. Kloppenborg's 'Social networks and the dissemination of elective cults' (2019b) places such relationships within the wider social world of antiquity. Korinna Zamfir's "'When he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me!'" (2 Tim 1.17): friends, foes, and networks in 2 Timothy' (Zamfir, 2022) offers a case study of how such networks

³² Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 136; Hodkinson, 2002, pp. 28-33

may be traced among early Christ-followers. ‘Social networks: theoretical orientation and historical applications’ by L. Michael White (1991) provides a broader account of how network theory may be used in the interpretation of historical evidence. Philemon provides only a partial view of the broader network of Christ-groups, but the named figures and relationships suggested between them show that the household gathering addressed by Paul did not stand alone. Such connections provide a basis for considering how a shared subcultural identity was sustained across local groups, and how the network itself may have contributed to the movement’s growth.

3. Methodology and theoretical framework

3.1. Historical-critical priority and sociological approaches

For this study, historical and literary evidence remains central. Paul’s Letter to Philemon is approached as an ancient text situated within the social and cultural realities of the first-century Roman world. The letter and the other undisputed Pauline epistles are read as artefacts of the mid-first-century Christ movement. Accordingly, the analysis seeks to understand these texts within the historical circumstances in which they were produced, rather than through the lens of later Christian developments. Historical-critical concerns, including literary context and the circumstances reflected in the text, to the extent they can be reconstructed, provide the foundation for the analysis. Although Philemon is the primary text for this case study, the other ‘undisputed’ Pauline letters and selected texts from the period provide relevant contextual or comparative perspectives.

The sociological frameworks employed in this study are used heuristically within the broader historical-critical framework. While historical evidence remains the primary point of reference, theoretical frameworks help identify and explain aspects of the evidence and prompt further questions. The use of subculture theory and related sociological approaches

does not presume that Pauline Christ-groups correspond precisely to modern sociological categories. Instead, these perspectives are employed to assess whether they provide useful language for describing and interpreting the relationships, expectations, and practices reflected in Philemon.

3.2. Comparative use of sociological theory

The sociological approaches employed in this study emerged from modern contexts quite different from those of the first-century Greco-Roman world. Therefore, their use in interpreting Pauline Christ-groups requires careful attention to historical context. The present study does not presume direct continuity between modern subcultures and the first-century social formations reflected in Philemon, nor does it suggest that ancient participants understood themselves through contemporary sociological categories. Concepts from sociological scholarship are used comparatively, providing suitable language for describing social and cultural patterns in the historical evidence.

This approach, while somewhat novel in its application to Pauline Christ-groups, is not entirely without precedent. Armand L. Mauss employed subculture theory in his study of Mormonism and the relationship between religious distinctiveness and wider society.³³ Barbara Goff applied subculture theory to the study of an ancient social group in her analysis of women's ritual practice in ancient Greece.³⁴ These examples demonstrate that concepts developed within subculture studies may be adapted to different historical settings when used with attention to context. As such, this study considers whether insights from subculture scholarship offer additional perspectives on the social dynamics reflected in Philemon, and whether analogous patterns may prove useful for broader questions of cohesion, relational development, and the diffusion of first-century Christ-groups.

³³ Mauss, 1984 ('Sociological perspectives on the Mormon subculture')

³⁴ Goff, 2010 (*Citizen Bacchae: women's ritual practice in ancient Greece*)

3.3. Defining subculture and assessing subcultural substance

The term ‘subculture’ has been employed in a variety of ways across sociological scholarship and, like ‘culture’, does not lend itself to a single, universally accepted definition. Earlier approaches to defining subcultures typically emphasised resistance, deviance, or class conflict. These concerns remain relevant within subcultural studies but are no longer treated as its primary defining characteristics. In the present study, I adopt Hodkinson’s reformulation of subculture as a workable and flexible framework for examining forms of collective identity and belonging situated within wider society, while retaining scope for dynamics of resistance, deviance, and class conflict where the supported by the evidence.³⁵ A subculture is therefore understood here as a form of collective identity and belonging characterised by varying degrees of shared distinctiveness, identity, commitment, and relative autonomy. Central to Hodkinson’s approach is the concept of ‘cultural substance’, understood through four indicators: identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and relative autonomy. Characteristics of resistance or deviance may persist as features of subcultural formations, but they are not viewed as defining criteria.³⁶ Instead, the indicators provide a way of considering whether the term ‘subculture’ is appropriate to the evidence under examination. The indicators are assessed in combination and according to the extent to which they characterise the group.

Hodkinson’s reformulation aligns well with the aims of the present study. Its conceptual clarity, balanced with analytical flexibility, makes it well-suited to the interpretation of ancient evidence, where surviving sources offer only partial insight into the identities, practices, and relationships of Pauline Christ-groups. Because the indicators may be considered cumulatively and to varying degrees, the model provides both a working

³⁵ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 137; Hodkinson, 2002, p. 29

³⁶ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 30

definition of subculture and a practical means of assessing the extent to which subcultural substance characterises the social dynamics reflected in Philemon.

3.4. Hodkinson's Four Subcultural Indicators

Hodkinson's indicators offer a framework for bringing the social dynamics reflected in Philemon into focus. The four indicators provide points of comparison, allowing evidence from the letter to be considered in relation to questions of belonging, obligation, identity, and the organisation of group life. The extent to which these features appear individually and in combination helps determine whether a subcultural perspective offers a useful way to describe the social world reflected in the letter. The four-indicator model provides a basis for assessing whether the group reflected in Philemon may be understood as subcultural and for considering what this suggests about the wider dynamics of the mid-first-century Christ movement. The following subsections provide concise descriptions of each of Hodkinson's four indicators of subcultural substance.

3.4.1. Consistent distinctiveness

Hodkinson argues that subcultures exhibit a degree of consistent distinctiveness that distinguishes them from outsiders. This distinctiveness may be expressed through language, practices, expectations, and other forms of social interaction recognised by participants and, at times, by outsiders. The indicator does not require complete separation from wider society or overt resistance. Instead, it concerns the features through which a group develops a recognisable sense of collective difference.³⁷

3.4.2. Identity

In Hodkinson's model, participation in a subculture involves more than shared practices or common interests. It also involves members perceiving themselves as belonging to a social grouping distinct from those regarded as outsiders, and a sense of shared identity

³⁷ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 30

with other in-group members. Although the strength and significance of this identity may vary between individuals, it provides a basis for recognising belonging and what that belonging means. Identities may extend beyond local settings and immediate face-to-face interaction.³⁸

3.4.3. Commitment

For Hodkinson, commitment concerns the extent to which belonging to a group becomes an important and enduring part of participants' lives. It is reflected in how individuals identify themselves and by what they are prepared to do because of that belonging. Commitment is expressed in the responsibilities people accept, the relationships they maintain, and the choices they make about how they devote their time and resources. Such involvement tends to be sustained rather than temporary, even if the degree of commitment varies from person to person. Commitment can also shape relationships within the group. The obligations and sacrifices associated with belonging may deepen commitment as people become increasingly invested in the groups to which they have devoted themselves.³⁹

3.4.4. Relative autonomy

Hodkinson acknowledges that subcultures remain embedded within their wider social, political, and economic worlds. The indicator of relative autonomy concerns the degree to which a group's relationships, practices, forms of communication, and patterns of organisation are shaped by its own networks and internal priorities rather than by external structures.

3.5. Integrating complementary frameworks

³⁸ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 30-31

³⁹ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 31

Hodkinson's indicators provide the primary theoretical framework for the present study. The perspectives discussed below are complementary, offering additional ways to understand how patterns of group belonging, obligation, and interaction may have operated within the Christ-group. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is particularly helpful for questions of identity and belonging. The language of Philemon assumes that participants recognised one another as members of a shared social world and attached significance to that membership. SIT helps explain how group identities are maintained, how boundaries between insiders and outsiders are negotiated, and how membership shapes relationships within the group. Used in this way, it complements Hodkinson's indicators of identity and distinctiveness by helping explain the social significance of belonging. In addition, Small Group Formation Theory (SGFT) provides a contextual perspective. The interaction reflected in Philemon shows established relationships alongside the negotiation of shared expectations and in-group norms. SGFT helps situate these dynamics within the development of the Christ-group, recognising that emerging groups and movements encounter situations for which established norms remain uncertain or contested. The model offers a perspective on what the interaction reflected in Philemon may suggest about the group's state of development and functioning.

Finally, network analysis provides a way of considering the Christ-group reflected in Philemon as part of a wider network of relationships extending beyond the local gathering. The identities, commitments, and obligations evident in the letter reflect connections maintained through travel, correspondence, hospitality, and ongoing personal ties. If the patterns identified in Philemon support a subcultural reading, it becomes possible to ask what this suggests about how Christ-groups related to one another, and how such relationships contributed to the development and spread of the Christ movement. Such observations necessarily remain tentative, but they point toward broader questions and possible hypotheses arising from the present study.

3.6. *Evidential scope and constraints*

The conclusions drawn in this study remain dependent upon the nature and limitations of the evidence itself. Philemon is a short, occasional letter written to address a particular situation already familiar to the sender and recipient. The letter does not provide a full account of the social life of a Pauline Christ-group, and offers only a limited view of the identities, relationships, and expectations from the perspective of its author. The perspectives of Philemon, Onesimus, and the other group members must be inferred through Paul's rhetorical presentation of events. The other undisputed letters provide some context regarding the social dynamics of the Christ-groups; however, we should not assume that individual groups were homogeneous in their organisation and practices. The Letter to the Colossians has some literary relationship with Philemon; however, since its authorship by the historical Paul is disputed,⁴⁰ it falls outside the scope of this study, along with the other deutero-Pauline letters. Acts of the Apostles is likewise excluded due to its later composition and distinct narrative function.⁴¹

The fragmentary nature of the evidence places limits on what the analysis can establish. The indicators proposed by Hodkinson can only be assessed to the extent permitted by the letter, and the absence of particular features should not be taken as evidence of their insignificance. The social-scientific approaches employed throughout this study provide perspectives for consideration of the available evidence, identifying and interpreting social patterns within the letter without claiming to explain them exhaustively. Philemon does not support broad generalisations about Pauline Christ-groups as a whole. However, as a case study, it allows an assessment of whether a subcultural perspective clarifies the social

⁴⁰ Wolter, 1993, p. 235-36

⁴¹ Pervo, 2009, pp. 5, 2

relations within one mid-first-century group and what that may suggest about the wider Christ movement.

4. Analysis: Philemon and Pauline Christ-groups as a subculture

4.1. Philemon: literary context and interpretive considerations

4.1.1. The letter and its occasion

At just 335 words in its original Greek,⁴² The Letter to Philemon is the shortest of the canonical Pauline epistles. The majority of scholars group it among the undisputed letters of the historical Paul and date it to the mid-first century CE.⁴³ In large part due to its brevity, the letter raises questions about its occasion, intended audience, and desired outcome. Although the attributed title, ‘The Letter to Philemon’, implies a personal correspondence, its opening greeting includes other named individuals and ‘the church in your house’ (Phlm 1–2), suggesting a wider intended audience.⁴⁴ The appeal is shaped by a triangulated relationship between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. The central issue is Paul’s appeal on behalf of Onesimus, whom Paul describes as having become his ‘child’ during his current imprisonment (Phlm 10). At the point addressed by the letter, Onesimus is connected to Philemon as an enslaved person, while Paul’s new relationship with Onesimus complicates his existing relationship with Philemon. The implication is that Onesimus came to believe in Christ during his time with Paul. Paul explains that although he would have preferred to keep Onesimus with him, he is sending him back to Philemon rather than acting without his consent (Phlm 12–14). In the key passage of the letter, Paul asks Philemon to receive

⁴² Philemon is 458 words in the NRSVue English translation.

⁴³ Note that Timothy is included in the salutation as co-sender (Phlm 1), although it is unclear what that means in terms of the letter’s composition. Regarding the letter’s ‘undisputed’ status: Dunn, 1996, pp. 299-300; Fitzmyer, 2000, pp. 8-9; Lohse, 1971, p. 188; Malina and Pilch, 2006, p. 321; O’Brien and Metzger, 1982, p. 269; Thurston and Ryan, 2005, p. 176; Tucker and Keucker, 2020, p. 475; Wolter, 1993, pp. 227

⁴⁴ Barclay, 1991, p. 171; Dunn, 1996, pp. 312-13; Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 8; Meeks and Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 95; Nasrallah, 2018, p. 42; O’Brien and Metzger, 1982, p. 265; Öhler, 2016, p. 543; Thurston and Ryan, 2005, p. 169; Tucker and Keucker, 2020, p. 475

Onesimus ‘no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother’ (Phlm 16).⁴⁵

Although Paul states that he could command Philemon, he chooses instead to make his appeal on the basis of love (Phlm 8-9). The letter shows Paul seeking a response shaped by the obligations and expectations he associates with those who are ‘in Christ’; however, the practical outcome he seeks is ambiguous and remains an ongoing topic of scholarly debate.

While it is possible to establish a general context of Paul’s appeal, much of the underlying situation remains unstated. In the traditional interpretation dating to antiquity,⁴⁶ Onesimus is understood to be a runaway slave whom Paul is returning to Philemon’s household.⁴⁷ This traditional reading remains widely accepted.⁴⁸ However, modern scholars have proposed several alternative scenarios for the separation between enslaved and enslaver, including the possibility that Onesimus actively sought Paul’s assistance as a mediator in a dispute with Philemon,⁴⁹ or that Philemon sent Onesimus to assist the imprisoned apostle.⁵⁰ A frequently cited *comparandum* is Pliny the Younger’s letter to Sabinianus (Ep. 9.21), in which Pliny intercedes on behalf of a man who has fallen out of favour with his former master.⁵¹ The comparison places the letter within a broader Greco-Roman tradition of epistolary appeal on behalf of those of lower social status.⁵² At the same time, differences between the two letters limit the usefulness of Pliny’s correspondence as a direct guide to interpreting Philemon.

⁴⁵ Wolter notes that, before Paul, ‘beloved’ is not attested as a form of address in non-familial relationships in secular Greek. Since the term was used primarily within familial contexts, Paul’s usage contributes to the distinctive kinship imagery through which he describes relationships among Christ-followers. Wolter, 1993, p. 244

⁴⁶ The earliest extant commentary on Philemon is Jerome’s, written c. 387, which interprets Onesimus as a runaway slave. Since Jerome is thought to have drawn heavily on an early third-century commentary by Origen of Alexandria, now surviving only in fragments, the runaway-slave interpretation likely predates Jerome. See, Jerome and Scheck, 2010, pp. 8, 370; Heine, 2000, 117-19

⁴⁷ Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 17; Lohse, 1971, p. 197; Meeks and Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 95; Seesengood, 2017, p. 40

⁴⁸ Lohse, 1971, p. 187; O’Brien and Metzger, 1982, p. 266; Thurston and Ryan, 2005, p. 181

⁴⁹ Lampe, 1985, pp. 135-37

⁵⁰ Winter, 1987, p. 3

⁵¹ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 257-58; Barclay, 1991, pp. 174-75; Callahan, 1997, pp. 7-8; Dunn, 1996, p. 304; Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 20-23; Lohse, 1971, p. 196-97; Meeks and Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 95; Seesengood, 2017, pp. 60-62; Thurston and Ryan, 2005, p. 192; Wolter, 1993, pp. 230-31

⁵² Seesengood, 2017, p. 82; Thurston and Ryan, 2005, p. 194; Wolter, 1993, p. 236

The present study proceeds on the assumption that Onesimus was an enslaved person in Philemon's household. Beyond this, the letter does not permit a confident reconstruction of its circumstances, presumably known to the parties involved but not detailed in the text. Since the focus of this study is the social dynamics reflected in Paul's appeal, especially the way Onesimus' in-group recategorisation reshapes expectations placed upon the enslaver–enslaved relationship, an exact reconstruction is not necessary.

4.1.2. Relational language, metaphor, and interpretive awareness

Despite its brevity, Philemon contains a striking number of relational designations for those connected to the letter. In the opening greeting, Timothy is described as 'our brother', Philemon as 'our beloved coworker', Apphia as 'our sister', and Archippus as 'our fellow soldier' (Phlm 1–2). In his appeal, Paul refers to Onesimus as 'my child... whose father I have become' (Phlm 10), and urges Philemon to receive him as 'a beloved brother' (Phlm 16). Paul also addresses Philemon as 'brother' (Phlm 20). Beyond simply identifying the individuals involved in the letter by their social positions, Paul repeatedly characterises them through relationships to himself and to one another within the Christ-movement. The opening address also places these relationships within a wider familial and hierarchical framework through its reference to 'God our Father' and 'the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phlm 3), with lord also carrying the sense of master. This pattern continues through Paul's appeal on behalf of Onesimus and into the closing greeting, where additional individuals are identified through their relationships within the Christ-movement. These relational terms form an important part of the letter's rhetoric, and provide an entry point for considering how relationships within Pauline Christ-groups were expressed and understood.

The frequency of kinship language in Philemon raises questions about how terms such as 'brother', 'sister', 'child', and 'father' are to be understood when applied to in-group relationships. Cognitive metaphor theory provides a useful framework for approaching such

language.⁵³ Metaphors transfer associations from one area of experience to another. Yet, in this process, not every aspect of meaning is transferred. For example, Shakespeare's observation that 'all the world's a stage' does not imply that every feature of a theatre stage is relevant to the comparison. Certain associations are transferred while others are not. The question, therefore, is which aspects of kinship relationships are relevant in Paul's usage and within the Christ-groups. In interpreting Philemon, this means identifying the kinship language used and situating it in its historical and cultural context. In their use by Paul and the Christ-groups he addresses, kinship terms such as 'brother' and 'sister' derive their meaning from the obligations, expectations, and responsibilities associated with these social relationships in the context of their first-century Mediterranean world, which differ from that of modern Western readers.

A related question concerns the distinction between literal and metaphorical language in the text. Allen Dwight Callahan proposed a novel interpretation of the letter in which Onesimus and Philemon were biological brothers rather than master and enslaved person.⁵⁴ In his reading, 'brother' is understood literally while 'slave' functions metaphorically.⁵⁵ Although Callahan's hypothesis has not received broad scholarly support, it heightens awareness of Paul's frequent use of metaphor and kinship language throughout the letter. Similarly, awareness is also needed when comparing Pauline language with evidence from first-century voluntary associations. The appearance of terms such as *adelphos* and *adelphoi* in different contexts does not necessarily indicate that they carried the same meanings or implied the same obligations within those groups as they did within Christ-groups. Similar terminology may be used by different groups and in different contexts to express different

⁵³ Littlemore and Taylor, 2014, 49-57

⁵⁴ Callahan, 1993, 369-71; Callahan, 1997, pp. 50, 54

⁵⁵ Notably, in the undisputed letters, Paul uses the term 'slave' (*doulos*) metaphorically, including referring to himself and others as a 'slave of Christ' (Rom 1:1, 12:11; 14:4; 1 Cor 3:5, 7:22; 2 Cor 2:14, 3:6, 4:5; Phil 1:1).

social relationships.⁵⁶ Determining how these metaphors and kinship terms function within the letter requires closer examination of their social and cultural context.

4.2. *Sibling terms and symbolic distinction*

4.2.1 *Sibling terms as a form of in-group address*

As previously noted, Philemon contains a dense concentration of relational language. For the present discussion, the most significant instances are Paul's repeated references to members of the Christ-group as brothers and sisters. These kinship terms are the primary way Paul describes relationships within the group, and they frame his appeal to Philemon. Although Paul uses other relational terms for particular individuals, he returns throughout the undisputed letters to the language of siblinghood as the primary form of in-group address.⁵⁷ The repeated use of sibling language raises the question of what Paul signals by addressing members of the group as brothers and sisters. In Philemon, these terms place members of the Christ-group within a shared relational framework, forming part of the distinctive social vocabulary through which Paul articulates belonging within the group.⁵⁸ The question, then, is what kind of relationship Paul seeks to construct when he addresses members of the Christ-group in these terms.

In Philemon and elsewhere in the undisputed letters, Paul addresses those in the Christ-movement as brothers and sisters rather than as 'friends'.⁵⁹ This preference may be influenced by Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, in which "brother" could denote fellow Judeans and function as a term of shared belonging.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the absence of friendship terms in the letters is notable.⁶¹ Friendship language retained its place in the first-

⁵⁶ Aasgaard, 2004, 111-12; Harland, 2005, 512-13

⁵⁷ Trebilco, 2012, pp. 22-23, 37-38

⁵⁸ Hellerman, 2001, pp. 93-94, 119-20

⁵⁹ In Greek, '*adelphoi*' (brother) and '*adelphos*' (brothers) could be used to refer collectively to both men and women, similar to the English use of 'mankind'. Trebilco, 2012, pp. 24-25

⁶⁰ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 112-115; Hellerman, 2001, p. 63 (as examples: Tob 1:16-17; Jdt 8:22-24; 2 Macc 1:1)

⁶¹ Here I refer specifically to the absence of *philos*-terms to characterize in-group relations, not to the absence of themes associated with friendship. The content of ancient discourse on friendship is closely connected with

century social world and did not carry a negative connotation,⁶² but its everyday usage had come to extend beyond earlier philosophical ideals and could include patron-client associations.⁶³ Plutarch, writing in the late first century, treats friends as external to the family and presents siblingship as a more natural and enduring bond.⁶⁴ Ancient gender conventions may also have made friendship language less suitable for addressing mixed groups of men and women.⁶⁵ These contexts suggest that Paul's preference for sibling terms does more than express affection or familiarity. In Philemon, the repeated use of sibling language identifies members of the Christ-group through a relationship grounded in familial belonging rather than the possible asymmetries that could accompany use of friendship *philos*-terms.

4.2.2. *Socio-historical context: siblingship in the first-century Mediterranean world*

From the perspective of in-group definition, Paul's preferred relational terminology suggests that siblingship, rather than friendship, provided the primary framework for the Christ-groups' understanding of shared belonging. Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions were not identical, but by the first century they shared enough assumptions about kinship for sibling language to carry recognisable expectations across the Mediterranean world.⁶⁶ Therefore, Paul's use of sibling language needs to be understood within the context of the dyadic non-individualistic character of ancient Mediterranean society, in which identity was closely aligned with social group relationships. Family was one of the main settings in which identity, obligation, honour, and security were formed.⁶⁷ As members of an extended household, adult siblings were bound by responsibilities that went beyond affection,

koinōnia, which is an important aspect of the letter. Briones, 2019, 40; Fitzgerald, 2016, pp. 351-61; Wallace, 2020, pp. 567, 576-77; Wolter, 1993, p. 252

⁶² Sandnes, 1996, pp. 99-101

⁶³ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 34; Ferguson, 2009, p. 68; Fitzgerald, 2016, pp. 342, 349; Konstan, 2005, pp. 136-37; Osiek and Blach, 1997, pp. 49-50; Osiek, 2009, pp. 144, 146-47; Sandnes, 1996, p. 98

⁶⁴ Plut. *Frat. Amor.* 479D, 482B-C, 491B; Aasgaard, 2004, p. 96

⁶⁵ Konstan, 2005, p. 146; Osiek and Blach, 1997, pp. 40-41, 53

⁶⁶ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 35

⁶⁷ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 45-49; Trebilco, 2012, 16

including loyalty, practical support in resource sharing, maintaining ancestral traditions, protection from external threats, and concern for family cohesion.⁶⁸ The responsibilities could include obligations toward one another, their siblings' children, elderly relatives, widows, or orphaned kin.

Since disputes among siblings could threaten the family's stability and damage its public reputation and honour, ancient discussions of family life often stress harmony, restraint, and the resolution of conflict within the family unit. Similar concerns appear in the writing of ancient philosophers. Aristotle treats the bond between siblings as one of the closest forms of kinship,⁶⁹ Cicero places it among the most important human relationships,⁷⁰ and Musonius Rufus praises the support offered by like-minded brothers as more dependable than friendship.⁷¹ Plutarch's 'On brotherly love' (*De Fraterno Amore*) is especially useful as the only complete surviving ancient treatise devoted to siblinghood. Written in the late first century, the treatise offers insight into the 'popular' moral attitudes and ideals surrounding sibling relationships in the period.⁷² Plutarch presents the bond between siblings as natural and enduring, grounded in shared upbringing, household life, ritual observance, and burial. For Plutarch, ideal siblinghood involved affection and emotional attachment, expressed through conduct that preserved the bond, including avoiding public quarrels, correcting with restraint, and reconciling before conflict led to estrangement.⁷³

4.2.3 Sibling metaphor and symbolic distinction in *Philemon*

Understanding Paul's use of sibling metaphors invites the reader to ask what carries over from the cultural meaning of siblingship into the situation addressed in *Philemon*.

⁶⁸ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 62-66; Hellerman, 2001, pp. 43-47; Osiek and Blach, 1997, p. 42

⁶⁹ Aristotle places siblingship next to the parent/child relationship and before those of friends and spouses, see *Arisr. Eth. Nic.* 8.12.1-6; Aasgaard, 2004, p. 61;

⁷⁰ *Cic. Off.* 1.17.54; Aasgaard, 2004, p. 61

⁷¹ *Muson. Frag. XV.*; Aasgaard, 2004, p. 83

⁷² Aasgaard, 2004, p. 93

⁷³ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 99-102, 106

Although it is not possible to confidently determine the full outcome of Paul's appeal, his language draws on recognisable expectations of siblingship to shape how Philemon and the Christ-group as a whole are to receive Onesimus. Throughout the letter, the emotional and obligational aspects of siblingship are intertwined through the repeated use of affective and kinship terms. The opening verses situate the letter within a familial framework. Timothy is identified as a 'brother', Apphia as a 'sister', and God as 'our Father' (Phlm 1–3). Before Onesimus is named, the letter creates the impression of a group of brothers and sisters whose belonging is grounded in the family of God.⁷⁴ As in Plutarch's presentation of siblingship as a natural relation received through one's parents and understood within a wider framework of divine providence,⁷⁵ siblinghood here likewise carries a moral claim on conduct.⁷⁶

As the socio-historical context suggests, siblinghood involved affection, loyalty, restraint, practical support, and care for the family bond. The term 'brother' locates Onesimus within the relational world of the Christ-group, invoking the affection and obligations associated with siblingship. Paul calls Onesimus his 'own heart' (Phlm 10, 12), before characterising the relationship with Philemon as 'more than a slave, a beloved brother' (Phlm 16). The same affective character appears in Paul's address to Philemon as 'beloved', his reference to the 'joy and encouragement' received from Philemon's love, and his appeal made 'on the basis of love' (Phlm 1, 7, 9). Paul also addresses Philemon as a 'coworker', acknowledges the support he has provided to others, and suggests that Onesimus may also be of valued service (Phlm 1, 5, 13). These expressions reflect the obligations that siblinghood could imply. Finally, as the letter concerns reception, reconciliation, and the future relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul's appeal that Philemon 'welcome him as you would welcome me' carries particular weight (Phlm 17).

⁷⁴ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 127

⁷⁵ Plut. *Frat. Amor.* 480C-F

⁷⁶ Young, 2021, p. 92

Read in its socio-historical context, Paul's sibling language draws on associations between kinship, emotional attachment, and the conduct expected to preserve the sibling bond. Paul's appeal addressed to the broader group, makes it, in this sense, a family matter concerning the whole of the Christ-group that meets in Philemon's house (Phlm 1–2) and, perhaps, also the broader network of the Christ-movement. The description of Onesimus as 'more than a slave, a beloved brother' (Phlm 16) is not detached from the reality of enslavement, but the relationship is recategorised through siblingship, with its recognised social expectations and moral claims. This reframing is especially striking in light of the enslaved person's condition of 'natal alienation,' in which the authority of the enslaver displaced ties of birth, family obligation, and kinship attachment.⁷⁷ For this reason, Paul's use of sibling language functions as a relational metaphor that reveals something of the cultural morals and obligations through which Christ-followers marked their shared identity. Through appropriation and re-signification, the use of sibling language conveys a form of symbolic distinction in which existing social relations are recategorised through the relational ideals of the Christ-group.

In Hodkinson's model of subcultural indicators, this in-group use of language exemplifies the group's shared distinctiveness, giving members a way to name their belonging and to understand the claims made upon one another. While sibling terms could appear in a variety of settings, their meaning depended on the social context in which they were used. In Philemon, this language exists within a developing or established group understanding, as part of an appeal concerning how one member is to receive another.⁷⁸ The letter conveys the affection and obligation associated with siblinghood but does so within an existing relation between enslaver and enslaved person. Through appropriation and re-

⁷⁷ Callahan, 1997, pp. 47-48; Ferguson, 2009, p. 59; Nasrallah, 2018, pp. 43-44; Osiek and Blach, 1997, p. 79

⁷⁸ Tucker and Baker, 2014, pp. 412, 423-24

signification, sibling terms provide the ‘language of belonging’,⁷⁹ through which ordinary relations are recategorised without being formally abolished.⁸⁰ In the case of Philemon and Onesimus, their identity as brothers is asserted while the enslaver–enslaved relation frames the appeal, placing pressure on the ordinary expectations of both. This symbolic distinction helps explain how in-group relationships were imagined and communicated. The Christ-group is marked by language that conveys expectations of reception, mutual concern, and obligation, while also communicating its norms, values, and beliefs.⁸¹

4.3. In-group obligation and subcultural commitment

4.3.1. Appeal, obligation, and willing action

The symbolic distinction created through sibling language comes to the fore when Paul turns from naming Onesimus’s belonging within the group to the question of how Philemon is to act towards him. That appeal carries the potential of bringing the relational language of the Christ-group into conflict with social identities governed by dominant cultural norms.⁸² Paul’s appeal for the recategorisation of Onesimus’ in-group identity places Philemon between the group’s value claims and his status in the wider social order as an enslaver and head of his household, which helps explain why Paul frames the request as an appeal rather than a direct command over Philemon’s property. Paul writes that he is bold enough in Christ to command Philemon but chooses to appeal to him ‘on the basis of love’ (Phlm 8–9). He further states that he did not want Philemon’s good deed to be ‘something forced’ (Phlm 14). The appeal, positioned as willingness, emerges from the social tension of the situation itself.

Paul positions his appeal to Philemon as one of individual choice, yet places the matter before Apphia, Archippus, the *ekklēsia* that meets in Philemon’s house, and others

⁷⁹ Meeks, 1985, p. 85

⁸⁰ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 148; Tucker and Baker, 2014, p. 415; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 477

⁸¹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 139; Tucker, 2011, p. 14

⁸² Barclay, 1991, p. 184–85

named in the greetings, situating Philemon's response within the social life of the group and broader network (Phlm 2, 23-25).⁸³ Additionally, his appeal draws weight from his self-presentation as an old man, his reminder that Philemon owes him 'even your own self', and his closing confidence in Philemon's 'obedience' (Phlm 9, 19, 21). Paul's multiple references to his imprisonment also lend support to the appeal, presenting both his authority and his commitment to the Christ mission as already marked by personal cost (Phlm 1, 9, 10, 13, 23).⁸⁴ Philemon's response, whatever the potential cost to his standing within the dominant culture,⁸⁵ is likewise placed within the obligations expected of those who share in the group's work. To receive Onesimus as 'a beloved brother' may elevate Philemon's standing as an exemplar of in-group values,⁸⁶ even as the relational obligations of the Christ-group may complicate his status within the dominant culture as an enslaver and household head.⁸⁷ In Hodkinson's terms, subcultural commitment manifests as a willingness to let the group's internal ethos shape conduct when it comes into tension with the dominant culture.⁸⁸ By acting in ways that align with those expectations, members may become more deeply invested in the group and its claims.

4.3.2. *Reciprocity beyond patronage*

Reciprocity was part of the dominant cultural setting in which Philemon, Paul, and Onesimus lived. Favour created expectation and obligation, especially in relationships marked by social inequality, in which benefaction was an aspect of informal relationships of honour and status.⁸⁹ Such exchanges could take different forms.⁹⁰ Some sought advantage

⁸³ The traditional reading identifies Apphia and Archippus as Philemon's wife and son, though some recent scholars understand them as fellow workers in the immediate *ekklesia* or broader regional network of Christ-groups. Callahan, 1997, pp. 25-27; Osiek and Blach, 1997, p. 175; Osiek, 2009, p. 148; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 475; Seesengood, 2017, pp. 19-21; Wolter, 1993, p. 249; Young, 2021, pp. 90-98

⁸⁴ Wolter, 1993, p. 261

⁸⁵ Dunn, 1996, pp. 323-24

⁸⁶ Kloppenborg, 2019a, pp 207-08

⁸⁷ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 253; Dunn, 1996, p. 327; Wolter, 1993, pp. 273-74

⁸⁸ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 31

⁸⁹ Ferguson, 2009, p. 67

⁹⁰ Malina, 1986, pp. 101-07; Osiek, 2009, p. 144

with little concern for mutual obligation (negative reciprocity), while others expected a return that roughly matched what had been given (balanced reciprocity). However, in kinship and household relations, generalised reciprocity was the ideal, with conduct shaped by an ‘altruistic’ immediate concern for the other party and the relationship itself.⁹¹ This distinction is significant because Paul places Onesimus within the group’s fictive kinship language. In an idealised sibling relationship, aspects of generalised reciprocity, including support, sharing, restraint in conflict, and reconciliation, were part of the claims made by the relationship itself. The result is a specifically subcultural form of reciprocity, in which the familiar social practice is retained but its obligations become a measure of in-group belonging.⁹²

Paul’s concern to avoid dominant cultural patterns of obligation may account for some of the letter’s rhetoric. Paul tells Philemon that, if anything is owed, it may be charged to him, adding that Philemon owes him ‘even your own self’ (Phlm 18–19). The offer of repayment could place Paul in the position of debtor, but the reminder of Philemon’s own debt reverses the direction of obligation.⁹³ Paul effectively signals that he could claim the patronal position in the relationship,⁹⁴ even while refusing to let the matter become a patron-client exchange. The sibling language helps clarify this redirection,⁹⁵ situating Paul’s expectations within the generalised reciprocity of in-group belonging rather than the more transactional obligations of patronage.⁹⁶ This awareness of reciprocity patterns may also have influenced Paul’s decision to send Onesimus back. If Onesimus remained with Paul as Philemon’s representative or gift, Paul could appear to have accepted a benefit from

⁹¹ Hellerman, 2001, pp. 47–48

⁹² Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 138–39

⁹³ Wolter, 1993, pp. 276–77. My own reading is that Phlm 18–19 may recall Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians that those who are in Christ have been ‘bought with a price’ (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23), with enslavement language used to describe belonging to Christ. If so, Paul’s reminder to Philemon carries additional weight within the letter’s negotiation of obligation and understanding of in-group belonging.

⁹⁴ Dunn, 1996, pp. 340–41; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 417

⁹⁵ Lampe, 2016, p. 221; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, pp. 414–15

⁹⁶ Lampe, 2016, p. 222; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 419

Philemon, thus placing himself under obligation to him as patron.⁹⁷ Sending Onesimus back avoids that appearance. Paul asks Philemon to act willingly, ‘on the basis of love’ and the good shared in Christ, rather than allowing the matter to take the form of a patron-client exchange (Phlm 6, 8).

The in-group recategorisation of Onesimus does not mean that Philemon’s legal authority over him has disappeared. Within the dominant social order, Philemon remains the enslaver and household head, with legal control over Onesimus’ treatment, possible punishment, continued enslavement, manumission, or future service. Even manumission would not necessarily release Onesimus from his obligation to Philemon, since a freedperson (*apeleutheros*) could remain bound to his former enslaver through ongoing duties and service.⁹⁸ As Paul’s request remains unclear, perhaps intentionally,⁹⁹ the legal and household outcome of the appeal cannot be determined with confidence. He may want Philemon to receive Onesimus without punishment, to manumit him, or to make him available to support Paul’s work. Paul’s stated desire that Onesimus might ‘serve’ him in Philemon’s place suggests that the appeal may also anticipate Onesimus’ usefulness within the work of the Christ movement.¹⁰⁰ Philemon retains social and legal power over Onesimus in such decisions, but the in-group identity of ‘brother’ carries its own obligations.

Reciprocity remains in view, but Paul redirects the obligation from that possible exchange to the generalised reciprocity of the Christ-group, where Philemon’s response to Onesimus becomes a matter of in-group standing before the *ekklēsia*. Paul’s earlier thanksgiving suggests that Philemon already has recognised standing within the group through conduct that benefits ‘all the saints’ and refreshes ‘the hearts of the saints’ (Phlm 5–

⁹⁷ Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, pp. 417-18

⁹⁸ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 253; Barclay, 1991, p. 169; Dunn, 1996, p. 335; Ferguson, 2009, p. 61; Lampe, 2016, p. 205-06; Nasrallah, 2018, p. 59; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 422

⁹⁹ Barclay, 1991, p. 175

¹⁰⁰ Wolter, 1993, p. 232

7).¹⁰¹ The appeal concerning Onesimus asks Philemon to extend that pattern of in-group obligation into a more difficult case. In this way, the in-group ethos of generalised reciprocity shared among all in-group members becomes visible as a subcultural practice, with Philemon asked to extend the obligations of belonging to a status-inconsistent relationship still under household hierarchy and dominant cultural conventions.¹⁰²

4.3.3. *Reception as subcultural recognition*

Paul's desire to keep Onesimus with him, so that he might 'serve' him in Philemon's place (Phlm 13), suggests that Onesimus is presented as more than a returned enslaved person, or even only as an in-group member. Philemon is Paul's *koinōnos*, his partner in the Christ mission, and Paul asks him to receive Onesimus as he himself would be received.¹⁰³ In the letter's setting, *koinōnia* refers to shared participation in the Christ movement, rather than simply personal friendship or goodwill.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the relationship between Paul and Philemon becomes the model for the relationship Paul now asserts for Philemon and Onesimus.¹⁰⁵ While Paul's exact expectation remains unclear, especially in light of his confidence that Philemon will do 'even more' than he asks (Phlm 21), the letter seems to lean towards Onesimus becoming 'useful' within the work of the Christ movement.¹⁰⁶ If so, Onesimus' status within the group will be measured by participation in its mission, rather than only by his place in the household hierarchy. Therefore, reception involves more than allowing Onesimus back into the household without retaliation. Philemon is asked to recognise Onesimus within the same field of partnership that connects him to Paul.¹⁰⁷ This gives further weight to Onesimus' recategorisation as 'a beloved brother', since he is presented as an in-

¹⁰¹ Öhler, 2016, p. 542

¹⁰² Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 137-39; Hodkinson, 2002, p. 31

¹⁰³ Wolter, 1993, p. 233

¹⁰⁴ Wolter, 1993, 273-74

¹⁰⁵ Dunn, 1996, p. 337; Wolter, 1993, pp. 234, 273

¹⁰⁶ Paul's description of Onesimus as formerly 'useless' but now 'useful' (Phlm 11) is a wordplay on the meaning of his name, since *onēsimos* means 'useful' or 'beneficial' in Greek and was a common name among enslaved persons. Wolter, 1993, p. 263

¹⁰⁷ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 250-52

group member and possible coworker in the group's wider mission. If Onesimus becomes available for such service, while remaining enslaved or as a freedman,¹⁰⁸ he could bring honour to the *ekklēsia* that meets in Philemon's house, but only if Philemon sees him according to his new in-group identity rather than only through the dominant cultural category of enslaved person.¹⁰⁹

The categories of 'slave' and 'brother' pull the relationship in different directions.¹¹⁰ Paul does not clearly state whether Onesimus is to remain enslaved, be manumitted, or be made available for service connected to the Christ mission. However, he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus in terms shaped by their shared work within the Christ-group, bringing the subcultural significance of the appeal into view. Philemon's response will show whether Onesimus' in-group identity has become salient enough, and Philemon's own involvement central enough, to reshape the terms by which he receives Onesimus.¹¹¹ This emphasis on shared work also gives *koinōnia* wider significance for the study. The term looks ahead to the networked life of the Christ-groups, in which shared participation depended on face-to-face involvement, hospitality, and the movement of persons between Christ assemblies. This focus on *koinōnia* may distinguish Pauline Christ-groups from some Greco-Roman associations that likewise used kinship language, but whose regular gatherings appear to have been more periodic and less central to group identity and cohesion.¹¹²

4.3.4. *Commitment and subcultural belonging*

Paul's appeal depends upon obligations already recognised within the Christ-group, yet Philemon's response is presented as something he must choose. This sense of individual

¹⁰⁸ Aasgaard, 2004, p. 253-54; Barclay, 1991, p. 172

¹⁰⁹ Wolter, 1993, pp. 233, 267

¹¹⁰ Nasrallah notes that familial and enslavement terms could overlap in the ancient record, citing a funerary inscription from Drama in northern Greece (ILS 7479) for Vitalis, described as both the home-born enslaved person and son of Gaius Lavius Faustius. Although the inscription does not allow the full social context to be reconstructed, Nasrallah suggests that such realities may have shaped the theological imagination of those who engaged with Paul's letters. Nasrallah, 2018, pp. 44-45

¹¹¹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 146; Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 419-20, 423-24

¹¹² McCready, 1996, pp. 63-64

choice gives commitment a more concrete form in the letter. In Hodgkinson's terms, commitment involves the extent to which members attach significance to the group and allow its shared meanings and expectations to shape their conduct.¹¹³ In the letter, willingness marks the extent to which obligation becomes interiorised through the group's ethos. Paul's appeal assumes this kind of commitment from Philemon. Paul avoids making a direct command but addresses Philemon as someone whose participation in the Christ-group has already placed him within forms of recognition that differ from those assigned by the dominant social order.

The emphasis on choice is significant because participation in mid-first-century Christ-groups was not inherited in the ordinary manner of household, civic, or ethnic status or association. For gentile Christ-followers in particular, entry into the group involved some measure of chosen affiliation, through which new obligations and distinctions were progressively formed. Unlike most other first-century associations, commitment to the Christ-group also carried elements of exclusivity, particularly in relation to worship and commitments associated with belonging 'in Christ'.¹¹⁴ This gave participation in the group a more distinctive claim upon its members than many forms of elective association in the dominant culture, since involvement in the Christ-group reordered existing identities and relationships. Paul's self-identification as a prisoner of Christ exemplifies reordered social values. Although imprisonment was considered dishonourable in the dominant culture, such a status could signal commitment within the in-group ethos, with Paul himself serving as a group prototype.¹¹⁵ Likewise, Philemon's response to Paul's appeal may be understood as an indicator of subcultural commitment, asking whether the ethos of the Christ-group is central

¹¹³ Hodgkinson, 2002, p. 31

¹¹⁴ Fredrikson, 2017, pp. 87-90; Öhler, 2016, p. 545

¹¹⁵ Tucker and Kuecker, 2020, p. 478

enough to shape identity and conduct within the broader social world of the dominant culture.¹¹⁶

4.4. Philemon as a case study in subcultural formation

The preceding analysis identified several features of the Christ-group reflected in Philemon that, when considered together, provide sufficient grounds for describing it as a subcultural formation. In keeping with Hodkinson's model of subcultural substance, no single feature is decisive in identifying a subculture, since the model depends upon the cumulative presence of identity, consistent distinctiveness, commitment, and relative autonomy.¹¹⁷ The brief letter offers only a partial view of a local group confronting a single ambiguous situation, in which Paul's appeal conveys an in-group ethos or ideal whose reception and practical enactment remain unknown. Despite the limitations, the letter demonstrates that participation in the Christ-group involved a form of collective identity and belonging with sufficient social distinctiveness to be understood as subcultural. The terminology used in Philemon suggests that members understood themselves as belonging to a distinct cultural grouping.¹¹⁸ Paul's use of sibling and coworker designations places those addressed in the letter within a set of relationships defined by in-group ties.

As one of Hodkinson's subcultural indicators, consistent distinctiveness refers to a shared framework of values that marks the group off from others while allowing for internal variation and change over time.¹¹⁹ Although not unique to the Christ-movement, these terms acquired consistent distinctiveness through shared usage shaped by ideals associated with belonging 'in Christ'. In Philemon, this distinctiveness appears where the relational term 'brother' and claims of belonging 'in Christ' place pressure on the expectations of the dominant culture governing the enslaver–enslaved relationship. The letter's repeated use of

¹¹⁶ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 31

¹¹⁷ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 137; Hodkinson, 2002, p. 29

¹¹⁸ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 30-31

¹¹⁹ Hodkison, 2002, p. 30

in-group terms suggests they carried particular significance and provide examples of the process by which existing social terminology was appropriated and re-signified within an understanding of belonging.

The subcultural indicator of commitment appears in Philemon in the tension between willing action and the obligations associated with in-group participation.¹²⁰ Paul makes his appeal based on love and presents it as a request rather than a command, but the letter leaves Philemon in no doubt about the claims carried by their existing and ongoing partnership. Those claims are reinforced by Philemon's standing among the saints and by Paul's own demonstration of commitment as a 'prisoner of Christ'. Since the appeal is addressed before the *ekklēsia*, Philemon's response to Paul and Onesimus will be visible within the group. In Hodkinson's model, commitment concerns the extent to which belonging becomes significant enough to influence what members are prepared to do. Philemon's response will show how far the obligations associated with the group's developing ideals have been interiorised and shaped his conduct. Participation in the Christ-groups could make a more distinctive claim upon members than other forms of association, particularly where belonging 'in Christ' affected existing identities and relationships. In this respect, commitment to the Christ-group appears as a sustained form of subcultural participation that carries continuing practical claims, rather than an occasional or limited affiliation.

In Hodkinson's model, relative autonomy concerns the ability of the group's ethos to carry social weight alongside other identities and obligations.¹²¹ Evidence of relative autonomy appears in the Christ-group's development of a framework of relationships and expectations, both connected to and demonstrating autonomy from the dominant social structures of household, status, and patronage. How far the in-group ethos shaped practice

¹²⁰ Hodkinson, 2002, p. 31

¹²¹ Hodkinson, 2002, pp. 31-32

within Philemon's household is uncertain. The broader corpus of Pauline letters suggests that in-group values were applied unevenly, perhaps becoming points of dispute within and between local assemblies. These differences are consistent with subcultural formation taking shape through negotiation in particular settings. The cumulative evidence from Philemon provides sufficient grounds for identifying these Christ-groups as subcultural. This conclusion allows the study to turn to the question of how such forms of identity and commitment were shared between dispersed local groups.

5. Subcultural network connectivity and diffusion of the Christ-movement

5.1. From subcultural classification to network questions

The preceding analysis of Philemon demonstrated that the Christ-group addressed in the letter can be understood as subcultural according to Hodkinson's model of cumulative indicators. Having established the basis for subcultural classification, this section turns to the question of how subcultural substance, including language, practices, values, and forms of in-group recognition, was diffused through network affiliation, contributing to the formation of new groups and the expansion of the network of early Christ-groups.¹²² However, this does not imply that the ideals conveyed in the texts were enacted uniformly, since participation varied and shared expectations were worked out in local settings.

Paul's letters, read within their socio-historical context, remain the primary evidence in this shift in inquiry. The discussion considers mid-first-century Christ-groups more broadly, since the letters indicate that the local groups were not confined to relationships established by Paul or isolated from the wider Christ-movement. The various ties between local assemblies cannot be fully reconstructed based on the undisputed letters alone.¹²³ The

¹²² White, 1991, pp. 35-36 (regarding application of network analysis to the early Christ movement)

¹²³ White, 1991, pp. 30-31

following discussion will therefore be more speculative than the preceding analysis and draw cautiously on analogous comparisons with other subcultural movements.

Concepts and terminology drawn from network analysis provide a means of considering how such cultural materials circulated without centralised authority or uniform application.¹²⁴ At the broadest level, a network consists of ‘nodes’ connected by ‘ties’. In this study, nodes are persons, households, or local assemblies, while ties are the social relationships through which people, information, and forms of belonging move. Ties differ in type and strength, ranging from strong to weak, depending on closeness, intensity, frequency of contact, and reciprocity.¹²⁵ ‘Strong ties’ carry greater relational weight, while ‘weak ties’ can extend a group’s reach by linking to other persons or circles. ‘Clusters’ are groups of nodes with denser internal ties than their connections to the wider network. The strength and pattern of these ties help determine a network’s ‘reach’, meaning the extent to which connections extend beyond a local setting. Some persons occupy positions of greater ‘centrality’ because their ties give them wider access and influence across the network. Others act as ‘brokers’, connecting clusters that might otherwise remain only weakly linked. The ties formed through such brokerage may be described as ‘bridging ties’, since they cross between relatively separate groups. Many relationships are also ‘multiplex’, combining more than one social bond, such as hospitality, work, kinship, travel, and in-group belonging.¹²⁶ ‘Gateways’ are persons or places through which information or new participants enter a local network. ‘Liminal spaces’ and ‘liminal relational connectors’ may function in this way when their position between established settings, groups, or status categories create opportunities for the formation of additional ties.

5.2. *Philemon and networked connectivity*

¹²⁴ White, 1991, pp. 25-29 (network analysis terminology)

¹²⁵ Kloppenborg, 2019b, pp. 131; Zamfir, 2022, pp. 67-68

¹²⁶ Kloppenborg, 2019b, pp. 130-31

Network theory cannot supply missing evidence for Pauline Christ-groups, but it can clarify how details preserved in a letter disclose patterns of shared connection, movement, and subcultural practices. John Kloppenborg's (2019b) work on ancient elective cults provides a framework for discussion of networks, while Korinna Zamfir's (2022) study of 2 Timothy shows how a Pauline letter can be read as evidence of network connectivity. Applied to Philemon, this means that the letter's names, greetings, requests, and references to service can be viewed as indicators of a household *ekklēsia* embedded within a wider subcultural network, in which shared identity moved through recognisable social ties. Paul functions as a network 'hub', through which multiple ties pass.¹²⁷ His relationship with Philemon is a 'strong tie' marked by 'multiplex' social relations: affection, shared in-group identity, commitment, and expected hospitality. As a coworker and co-sender, Timothy is an additional networked figure whose connections may have multiplied secondary ties across the wider Christ-movement (Phlm 1).¹²⁸ Archippus, identified as 'our fellow soldier', suggests he may have provided service beyond the local group,¹²⁹ and Philemon's refreshment of 'the hearts of the saints' may point to past support of the wider network (Phlm 7).¹³⁰ Paul's wish to keep Onesimus with him so that he might serve on Philemon's behalf suggests that a local *ekklēsia* could participate in the wider Christ-movement through persons serving as emissaries or envoys (Phlm 13).¹³¹ The closing greetings place the appeal within Paul's wider circle of coworkers (Phlm 23–24).¹³² The lodging request then shows how Philemon's household could function through expected hospitality as a network 'node' (Phlm 22).¹³³ In

¹²⁷ Zamfir, 2022, p. 77

¹²⁸ Seesengood, 1997, pp. 17–18; Young, 2021, p. 89

¹²⁹ Callahan, 1997, pp. 25–27; Dunn, 1996, p. 312; Seesengood, 1997, p. 20; Wolter, 1993, p. 245; Young, 2021, pp. 92–94

¹³⁰ Callahan, 1997, p. 29; Dunn, 1996, pp. 317, 321

¹³¹ Callahan, 1997, pp. 38–39; Dunn, 1996, p. 345; Wolter, 1993, pp. 266–67

¹³² Callahan, 1997, pp. 66–67; Dunn, 1996, p. 348; Seesengood, 1997, p. 25; Wolter, 1993, p. 281; Young, 2021, pp. 163, 165

¹³³ Kloppenborg, 2019b, p. 122; Zamfir, 2022, pp. 67–68

these various ways, the short letter reflects a local node participating in the wider network of the Christ-movement.

5.3. *Networked subcultural practice*

The previous subsection argued that Philemon offers a partial view of Christ-group connectivity through coworkers, hospitality, and networks of recognition. Read alongside the other undisputed Pauline letters, features of Philemon support a cautious expansion of the analysis, since indicators only glimpsed in the letter appear elsewhere as shared patterns of belonging and practice across the Christ-groups. These commonalities do not imply strict uniformity among the groups but suggest a translocal network in which shared subcultural indicators were recognised and enacted.

5.3.1. *Role of enslaved persons and women*

This project follows the majority scholarly view that the sole use of the term *doulos* (slave) in Philemon identifies Onesimus as an enslaved person, making him the only explicitly named enslaved person in the undisputed Pauline letters. Yet this is not the only indication that enslaved people were present in Christ-groups. Although Paul often uses enslavement language metaphorically, several passages refer directly to existing social status. Galatians 3:28 declares that there is ‘no longer slave or free’ among those who are ‘one in Christ Jesus’. This formulation is also stated in 1 Corinthians 12:13, paired with the image of those ‘in Christ’ as part of one body. Also in 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses those called to Christ while enslaved (7:21–24), while the mention of ‘Chloe’s people’ may refer to enslaved persons in the household of a prominent woman in the Corinthian Christ-group (1:11).¹³⁴

The Galatians formula also states that there is ‘no longer male and female’, placing gendered distinction within the same in-group reordering of status. Apphia is the only woman named in Philemon. There, she is addressed only by the in-group designation ‘our sister’, but

¹³⁴ Horsley, 2011, p. 44; Nasrallah, 2018, p. 63 (n. 83); *SBL study Bible*, 2023, p. 2025 (n. 1.11)

Paul's other letters refer to women as benefactors, coworkers, and active participants in the *ekklēsia*. Romans is especially important, naming Phoebe as deacon (*diakonos*) and benefactor; Prisca as coworker and host of a household *ekklēsia*; and Junia as 'prominent among the apostles' (Rom 16:1-4, 7). In Philippians, Euodia and Syntyche are described as having struggled alongside Paul in the gospel (4:2-3), while women in Corinth are assumed to pray and prophesy in the *ekklēsia* (1 Cor 11:5, 13). These examples do not make Pauline Christ-groups uniform in practice, wholly egalitarian, or unique within the ancient world.¹³⁵ However, when the particular case of Philemon is read alongside the wider undisputed corpus, these examples show that membership could cross cultural norms in ways that suggest subcultural distinctions in ethos and practice across the network of Christ-groups.

5.3.2. *In-group language and Christ-group identity*

Across the undisputed letters, Paul uses a recurring set of in-group terms without explanation, suggesting that the Christ-groups addressed understood their meaning and significance. This shared language did not require uniformity in the practice or composition of every local group; however, it appears to provide the interconnected network with a standard vocabulary for naming in-group belonging and identity. From the perspective of subculture theory, such terms contributed to the groups' distinctiveness by appropriating familiar language and placing it within new social and symbolic contexts.¹³⁶ Through this process of re-signification, they expressed a shared understanding of group identity and enabled members to recognise one another as belonging to the same wider movement. The discussion that follows considers each term only insofar as it helps to identify the shared language of a subcultural network, rather than attempting the fuller treatment that any one of them would require.

¹³⁵ Horrell, 2015, p. 159

¹³⁶ Berzano and Genova, 2015, pp. 148-49

5.3.2.1. *Brothers and sisters*

Philemon contains five metaphorical uses of sibling (*adelph*-root) terms, culminating in Paul's description of Onesimus as 'more than a slave, a beloved brother' (Phlm 16). This concentrated use fits a pattern across the undisputed letters, in which sibling terms occur 120 times in reference to Christ-followers individually and collectively, and is Paul's most common form of in-group address.¹³⁷ Metaphorical sibling language was already familiar in the Greco-Roman world, including use within some voluntary associations, as well as appearing in Jewish literature.¹³⁸ Therefore, its use among Christ-followers was not unique and may have pre-dated Paul. What is notable is its consistent use across letters addressed to groups from Asia Minor to Rome, without the need for explanation. This usage demonstrates that sibling terminology was part of the shared symbolic vocabulary that circulated throughout the wider network of the Christ-movement.

From the perspective of subculture theory, the use of sibling terms for Christ-followers contributed to the movement's consistent distinctiveness. The letters show the terms taking on specific in-group significance, with expectations of affection, solidarity, and harmony carried from kinship contexts into relations among members. Paul applies these terms across distinctions of Jewish and gentile background, and to both men and women, while Philemon extends this shared sibling identity to an enslaved person. Because the language was reserved for fellow Christ-followers, it also helped mark the boundary between insiders and outsiders, allowing members of different local assemblies to recognise one another as part of the same movement.¹³⁹ In doing so, it conveyed expectations about how

¹³⁷ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 3, 268; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 4, 28

¹³⁸ Aasgaard, 2004, pp. 107-16; Harland, 2005, 496-512; Harland, 2009, pp. 68-90; Kloppenborg, 2019, pp. 204-05; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 17-18

¹³⁹ Trebilco, 2012, pp. 37-38

members should receive and treat one another, further connecting the language to commitment.¹⁴⁰

5.3.2.2. *The saints*

The term *hagios* is usually translated as ‘holy ones’ or ‘the saints.’ Paul uses the term twice in Philemon, in reference to his having heard of Philemon’s love for ‘all the saints’ and of how their hearts have been refreshed through him (Phlm 5, 7). Both references concern conduct directed towards fellow Christ-followers. That Paul has received these reports again points to the circulation of information through the wider connected network.¹⁴¹ Across the undisputed corpus, the term occurs twenty-five times, appearing in all the letters except Galatians.¹⁴² Its use for Christ-followers in Rome and the ‘saints’ in Jerusalem indicates that it belonged to the wider language of the movement, not just groups established by Paul.¹⁴³

Although the term was used in the Greco-Roman world, its use in the Pauline letters likely developed from Jewish literature, in which holiness was marked by those set apart as the people of God.¹⁴⁴ Paul’s usage extends this designation to gentile Christ-followers, placing them in continuity with the scriptural people of God and making ‘saints’ a collective in-group term.¹⁴⁵ Yet, as with sibling language, Paul does not explain the theological claims carried by the term, suggesting that his recipients were already familiar with them through earlier teaching and the movement of travellers between Christ-groups. Paul contrasts the ‘unrighteous’ and ‘unbelievers’ with ‘the saints’ (e.g., 1 Cor 6:1, Rom 15:31), showing how the designation served as a boundary between insiders and outsiders.¹⁴⁶ Its recurring use across the network of geographically dispersed *ekklēsiai* meant that ‘saints’ expressed a

¹⁴⁰ Trebilco, 2012, 31-35

¹⁴¹ Dunn, 1996, p. 317

¹⁴² Trebilco, 2012, p. 128

¹⁴³ Trebilco, 2012, pp. 130-131, 146-47

¹⁴⁴ Trebilco, 2012, pp. 122-28

¹⁴⁵ Meeks, 1983, p. 85; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 133-34

¹⁴⁶ Meeks, 1983, p. 86; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 135-36; Trebilco, 2017, p. 47

shared group identity of distinctiveness among those who understood themselves to have been ‘called’ and set apart by God.¹⁴⁷

5.3.2.3. *Belonging ‘in Christ’*

The diversity of interpretations of the phrase ‘in Christ’ cannot be fully addressed here, so the present discussion focuses on how its use connects Philemon to the wider symbolic vocabulary of the Christ-movement. In Philemon, the phrase appears explicitly in Paul’s confidence to command ‘in Christ’, his request for benefit ‘in the Lord’, and the greeting from Epaphras as his fellow prisoner ‘in Christ Jesus’ (Phlm 8, 20, 23). However, the letter’s central appeal depends on Onesimus’ changed relation to Christ and, through that, his changed relation to Philemon and to Paul. Onesimus is a ‘beloved brother’, because he and Philemon now stand within the same field of belonging ‘in Christ.’¹⁴⁸ In the broader cultural context of antiquity in which relations between gods and humans were often understood through mediating figures, Paul uses ‘in Christ’ to express the relation between God, Christ, and the faithful.¹⁴⁹ Across the undisputed letters, where the phrase appears more than ninety times, this relation shapes identity, conduct, and belonging, with all of the elements of Christ’s work that matter to Paul connected in some way to participation ‘in Christ’.¹⁵⁰ The phrase marks an identity formed in relation to Christ and shared with others who belong to him, as in Galatians 3:28, where distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are said to be overcome among those who are ‘one in Christ Jesus’.

Within a subcultural framework, this language gives Christ-groups an identity marker that could cut across social categories recognised in the dominant culture. At the same time, it reinforced the boundary between those who belonged ‘in Christ’ and those outside the

¹⁴⁷ Sindo, 2024, pp. 237-38

¹⁴⁸ Nicklas and Schlögel, 2012, p. 4

¹⁴⁹ Despotis, 2020, pp. 299-302; Morgan, 2020, pp. 12, 212-213

¹⁵⁰ Sindo, 2024, p. 215

movement.¹⁵¹ Therefore, the phrase is both theological and social, giving Christ-groups across the network a way to name a form of belonging that crossed social distinctions. As with the communal language of siblings, this remained an idealised claim rather than a simple description of group practice, but it contributed to the shared vocabulary for recognising those within the movement and distinguishing them from those outside.¹⁵²

5.3.2.4. *Ekklēsia*

In Philemon, the term *ekklēsia* appears in the opening address, where Paul includes the group that meets in Philemon's house (Phlm 2). Although 'church' is the traditional English New Testament translation, 'assembly' better conveys the sense of a gathered body and avoids the later institutional associations of 'church'. The term *ekklēsia* would already have been familiar to mid-first-century Christ-followers from broader Greco-Roman cultural usage, in which it could designate a civic assembly, other forms of gathering, and an in-group designation used by some voluntary associations.¹⁵³ It also appears in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, in some contexts to describe the *ekklēsia* of God's people.¹⁵⁴ Applied to Christ-groups that included gentiles, the term could convey continuity with Jewish tradition while also redefining who belonged within that assembly.¹⁵⁵

Across the seven undisputed letters, *ekklēsia* is Paul's most frequent designation for local (individual or regional) Christ-groups,¹⁵⁶ retaining the sense of a gathered assembly while extending to members bound through social interaction beyond the meeting itself.¹⁵⁷ Within the corpus of undisputed letters, *ekklēsia* is not used as a designation for the collective translocal network; however, references to individual assemblies often place them in relation

¹⁵¹ Horrell, 2000, pp. 342-43; Horrell, 2002, pp. 320-21

¹⁵² Horrell, 2000, p. 343; Nicklas and Schlögel, 2012, p. 3; Sindo, 2024, pp. 204, 229

¹⁵³ Ascough, 1997, p. 238; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 165-66

¹⁵⁴ Meeks, 1983, p. 108; Trebilco, 2012, pp. 166-67

¹⁵⁵ Trebilco, 2012, p. 174

¹⁵⁶ McCready, 1996, p. 60; Meeks, 1983, p. 108; Trebilco, 2012, p. 170

¹⁵⁷ Trebilco, 2012, p. 172

to other Christ-groups.¹⁵⁸ For example, Paul refers to practices followed in all the *ekklēsiai* (1 Cor 7:17; 11:16), encourages hospitality for travelling members of the movement (Rom 12:13), commends one *ekklēsia* to another (1 Thess 1:7), and speaks of persons known among multiple *ekklēsiai* (2 Cor 8:18). In subcultural terms, *ekklēsia* shows appropriation and re-signification, with a familiar word becoming a self-designation through which Christ-followers could identify their own assemblies, express a shared ethos, recognise other groups, and distinguish themselves within the wider social world.¹⁵⁹

5.3.3. *Emerging norms across the Christ-group network*

Philemon also demonstrates subcultural practice in the process of in-group norm formation. The specific issue is not addressed through an already settled rule, but through Paul's attempt to guide how a local Christ-group should respond when an enslaved person is also to be received as a brother. Paul's appeal assumes that belonging 'in Christ' should affect group belonging and conduct, but the letter itself shows that the implications of this claim still had to be worked out within existing relations. The case provides a glimpse of in-group norms being negotiated in real time. Similar examples of this process appear in 1 Corinthians, where Paul addresses sexual conduct (1 Cor 5), disputes among members (1 Cor 6:1-11), marriages between believers and unbelievers (1 Cor 7:10-16), divisions at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-22), and boundaries between those inside and outside the group (1 Cor 5:9-13, 10:27-30). Paul's instructions for the 'collection for the saints in Jerusalem' offer another example (2 Cor 9),¹⁶⁰ as he guides the Corinthians in providing support for a distant group through an appeal shaped by translocal commitment and the example of the *ekklēsiai* in Macedonia.

¹⁵⁸ Trebilco, 2012, pp. 179-80

¹⁵⁹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 148

¹⁶⁰ Ascough, 1997, p. 237

Small Group Formation Theory (SGFT) helps place these letters within the developmental stage of the Christ-groups, since emerging groups often face situations in which shared expectations remain unsettled or contested.¹⁶¹ Read through the SGFT model; these examples reflect Christ-groups moving through ‘storming’ and ‘norming’ phases as Paul responds to situations for which shared group norms were unsettled.¹⁶² The letters also show the channels through which such norms could move between groups. Paul sends messengers, names coworkers, cites previous instructions, refers to customs shared among *ekklēsiai*, and compares the conduct of one group with that of others.¹⁶³ The letters and other networked exchanges suggest that in-group norms emerged locally through network ties, allowing subcultural meanings and practices to develop across the Christ-groups without eliminating local variation.¹⁶⁴

5.4. The network visible in the undisputed letters

As demonstrated in section 5.3, Philemon and the other undisputed letters suggest a dispersed movement, with locally dense clusters linked by persons whose ties connected *ekklēsiai* and regions¹⁶⁵. Some occupied more central positions and therefore had greater reach, while others acted as brokers between groups with few direct connections of their own. Many of these ties were multiplex, joining in-group belonging to relationships formed through household, occupation, hospitality, or travel. Even where individuals exercised considerable influence, however, the network retained local variation and several centres of influence. The extent of Paul’s centrality must be considered in light of the surviving evidence. The extant letters give Paul’s relationships and movements a degree of visibility that may overstate his centrality within the broader network. The letters show that his

¹⁶¹ Malina, 1995, pp. 103-06

¹⁶² Malina, 1995, p. 104

¹⁶³ Kloppenborg, 2019a, p. 203

¹⁶⁴ Dingeldein, 2014, pp. 282-87

¹⁶⁵ Collar, 2007, pp. 150-51 (regarding ‘small-world’ local nodes)

influence depended upon brokers, including hosts and coworkers, whose bridging ties connected local clusters and enabled communication across the network.¹⁶⁶

Dispersed *ekklēsiai* could recognise one another through people known within the network, who brought with them in-group terminology, reputations, and expectations of belonging. Such exchanges occurred within specific local settings. Household *ekklēsia* could serve as gateways for information and new participants, although ‘household’ could include a range of domestic spaces. Gatherings could be held in courtyards, rented rooms, or other spaces, depending on local use, availability, and resources. Workshops and leased rooms could also provide settings in which social roles were less rigidly observed than in more formal civic or household contexts. Such liminal spaces could bring together persons from different social locations and create opportunities for the formation of new ties, even though the letters rarely provide details about such settings.

Some brokers may also have stood between different status categories or relational settings. Onesimus is suggestive of this type of liminal status, connected to both Philemon’s household and Paul’s circle. Additionally, his designation as a ‘brother in the Lord’ complicates his status as an enslaved person. Such figures who moved between social locations may have been well-placed to create bridging ties and convey recognised forms of belonging. In this sense, ties and gateways that sustained existing groups may also have enabled network expansion. While the letters provide some information about the formation of new *ekklēsia*, they leave open questions about how the network’s liminal spaces, relational connectors, and local gateways may have contributed to its growth.

5.5. Analogous subcultural comparisons and questions of network growth

¹⁶⁶ Collar, 2007, pp. 151 (regarding overlapping weak and strong ties that help explain diffusion without a required centralized organization); 152 (regarding the importance of network distance over geographic distance for information transmission)

Analogous comparison cannot recover missing evidence of how the Christ-movement expanded, but it may help identify gaps in the surviving evidence. Pre-digital subcultures make visible the kinds of nodes, bridging ties, gathering spaces, and informal media through which local clusters are sustained and networks grow. When considered in the context of the undisputed letters, these features raise questions about network processes that the texts rarely describe directly. Motorcycle clubs and the ballroom house scene provide useful comparisons because both subcultures are organised as local groups that also participate in a wider network. Clubhouses and house gatherings sustain dense ties within local clusters, while regional rides, rallies, and balls bring separate clusters into contact, creating opportunities for bridging ties. The network grows as new participants join and people already connected to the wider scene establish additional nodes (e.g., chapters or houses).¹⁶⁷ Newsletters, fanzines, and other printed ephemera transmit in-group language, style, attitude, and values across the network.¹⁶⁸ Kinship and esteem within these movements can also draw others into participation.¹⁶⁹

These analogous comparisons with other subcultural movements also direct attention towards the spaces between local nodes. The undisputed letters show considerable movement between *ekklēsiai* but offer little indication of what occurred during these journeys or how contacts made along the way may have affected the network. Roads, ports, lodging places, workplaces, and commercial centres may create encounters that enable mobile participants to act as brokers, form new ties, or introduce recognised ways of belonging outside established gatherings. Beyond just serving as routes between existing nodes, such spaces may have served as gateways into the network for new participants. The comparison also helps identify additional questions about the growth of the mid-first-century Christ-movement that the

¹⁶⁷ Williams, 2011, p. 40

¹⁶⁸ Williams, 2011, p. 41-42

¹⁶⁹ Berzano and Genova, 2015, p. 146-47

surviving texts do not answer directly. New participants may have encountered the movement through existing relationships or in liminal spaces where social status was more readily renegotiable. Travel could allow brokers to form bridging ties, while letters and other forms of communication may have extended the network's reach beyond local gatherings. These connections also carried the movement's language and ethos into new settings, likely contributing to the establishment of new *ekklēsiai* as another network node.

Taken together, the use of network theory and analogical comparisons with subcultural movements shifts attention beyond the movement's religious context to the social conditions that encouraged forms of belonging to take root in new settings. In addition to contact between established assemblies, network growth would have required points of entry, people able to connect otherwise separate circles, and settings in which new relationships could form. These processes would not have produced identical groups, as language, practices, and expectations were received within local circumstances. The potential value of the comparison is in clarifying where the letters remain silent on these processes, and in identifying historically plausible mechanisms by which the network of Christ groups may have expanded.

6. Conclusion

Paul's Letter to Philemon depicts a mid-first-century Christ-group understood as a subcultural formation, within the framework adopted in this study. This conclusion rests on the cumulative character of the relationships, language, commitments, and expectations conveyed in the letter. Although the letter offers only a partial view of a single local gathering, it provides sufficient evidence of the group's ethos, symbolic distinctions, and relational expectations. The letter's appeal invokes Philemon's partnership with Paul, his recognised standing among 'the saints', and the expectations associated with receiving

another member of the group. As the letter is also addressed to the *ekklēsia* meeting in Philemon's house, the matter is situated within the collective social life of the local group rather than treated as an individual or private decision.

Participation in the group included distinctive expectations of belonging that placed claims upon members and could recategorise existing relationships. This subcultural distinction is most clearly demonstrated by the letter's central appeal concerning the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, expressed through the appropriation and re-signification of the term 'brother'. The use of sibling terms evokes forms of affection, loyalty, restraint, and mutual concern drawn from first-century cultural ideals of kinship. The metaphorical use of kinship terminology was neither unique to Paul nor inherently subcultural. However, within a shared understanding of belonging 'in Christ', the sibling terms appear to have carried distinctive relational claims shaped by the group's developing ethos, and which contrast with the relational norms of the dominant culture. The letter provides one such example, with Paul pressing the claims of in-group identity and belonging within a status-inconsistent relationship still governed by household and hierarchical norms. Although it is not possible to confidently determine the outcome of Paul's appeal, the appeal itself indicates that belonging to the Christ-group was expected to carry sufficient significance in the lives of in-group members to shape how they recognised and acted towards one another, including in ways that placed pressure upon dominant cultural norms of status, relations, and conduct.

Bringing the network perspective into relation with the subcultural character of the Christ-groups prompts questions about the formation and growth of the early Christ movement. The individual *ekklēsia* addressed in Philemon was one within a wider network of Christ-groups connected through coworkers, correspondence, and the movement of people between local *ekklēsiai*. These intergroup connections made it possible for language, forms of

recognition, and the expectations associated with in-group belonging to circulate. Network expansion depended upon relational connections, through which people encountered the movement's symbolic language, forms of belonging, and ideals of general reciprocity. Coworkers, travellers, hosts, and letter carriers linked gatherings across different locations, while households and other liminal meeting places may have served as gateways to encounter the Christ-movement. New network nodes could emerge as participants carried these ties into other social settings.

The limited surviving evidence does not allow such processes to be followed in detail. Even so, the traces in the undisputed letters suggest that the circulation of subcultural substance, the maintenance of translocal relationships, and the growth of the network were closely connected. The analogous comparison with other subcultural groups considered in this study helps bring these questions into view. These comparisons draw attention to the importance of informal gathering places, social liminality, the spread of reputation, and travellers as ties between local groups. The comparisons also demonstrate how subcultural substance produced by group members, including texts, could extend the reach of a group's language and ethos across the existing network and beyond. These analogies are not intended to suggest equivalence between ancient and modern subcultures. Instead, their value is in pointing towards relational network processes, considered in their socio-historical contexts, that the surviving evidence preserves only in fragments.

Considering subculture theory in the context of network analysis allows questions of how forms of group belonging negotiated locally became recognisable across a wider movement without relying on a formal, centralised administration or complete consistency between groups.

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