**Belonging to a Network:**

**A Unifying Dimension across the New Testament**

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What was it like to be a Christian in the first century?

**1. The sense of being connected across a worldwide network: ‘Throughout the world’**

• Romans 1:8 “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed *throughout the world*.”

• 2 Cor 2:14: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us *spreads in every place* the fragrance that comes from knowing him.”

• Colossians 1:5-6: “You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is *bearing fruit and growing in the whole world*, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves.”

• Colossians 1:23: “provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, *which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven*. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.”

• Mark 14:9: “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed *in the whole world*, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

• 1 Peter 5:9: “Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters *in all the world* are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”  
• 1 Timothy 3:16 “[Jesus] was revealed in flesh … proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in *throughout the world*, taken up in glory.”

**2. Connections**

**2.1 Connections through travel**

•  Romans 16 – Paul sends greetings by name to 28 people in Rome.

• Bauckham: “mobility and communication in the first-century Roman world were exceptionally high. Unprecedentedly good roads and unprecedentedly safe travel by both land and sea made the Mediterranean world of this time more closely interconnected than any large area of the ancient world had ever been.”

• Travellers: Paul, Timothy, Titus, John Mark, Peter, Barnabas, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia, and Philip the evangelist and his four daughters.

**2.2 Connections through the sending of letters**• 1 Peter is written by Peter and other leaders in Rome, to churches spread throughout Asia Minor. John wrote Revelation to seven churches in Western Asia Minor. Around 95, Christian leaders in Rome sent what we call 1 Clement to the church of Corinth. Early in the second century, Ignatius wrote to six different churches, and Polycarp of Smyrna wrote to the church of Philippi. In the mid-second century, Dionysius, bishop of Corinth wrote seven letters to various churches.

• Ignatius to Smyrna: “it is fitting for the honour of God that your church elect an ambassador of God to go to Syria and rejoice with them. For they have found peace and have recovered their own greatness, and their own corporate body has been restored to them. And so it seems to me a matter worthy of God that you send one of your own with a letter, that he may exult with them in the tranquillity that has come to them from God, because they have already reached a harbour by your prayer” (Ign. *Sm*. 11:2-3).

• In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement who “will send it to the cities abroad, because this is his job” (*Vis* 2:4:3).

**2.3 What people say in Letters**

• 1 Cor 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, … called to be saints, *together with all those who in every place* call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”

• 1 Thess 2:14: “For you, brothers and sisters, *became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea*”.

• 1 Cor 7:17 we read: “let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in *all the churches*.” 1 Cor 11:16: “But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do *the churches of God*.”

• Col 4:13-16: “13For I [Paul] testify for him [Epaphras] that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. 15Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.”

• Foster writes re Epaphras: “He may have been a key ‘linking figure’ between these fledgling communities of believers, perhaps sharing news and encouraging stories about the success and reception of the gospel message.”

**2.4 Prayer for each other across the network**

• Rom 1:9: “For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers”. 1 Thess 1:2: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly”.

• Phil 1:19: “for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.”

• 2 Cor 9:14: “while they [the Jerusalem church] long for you [the Corinthians] and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you”

**2.5 A network of action and love**

• Rom 15:25-27: “25At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; 26for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 27They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.”

• 2 Cor 8:2-4 about the churches in Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica): “2for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, 4begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints”.

• 1 Peter 1:1: “To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”; 1 Pet 1:22: “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.”

• 3 John 5-8: “5Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you; 6they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; 7for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. 8Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.”

**2.6 The Language of family**

• Christians as α͗δελφοί - “brothers and sisters”; used as a term for “Christians” or “other believers” - 271 times in the NT and occurs in all NT books except Titus and Jude.

• James 1:2 and 2:1: “2My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy … 1My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

• 1 Peter 5:9: “Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your *brothers and sisters in all the world* are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

**2.7 Conflict and diversity as evidence of networking**

• Galatians and 2 Corinthians 10-13; Revelation with its reference to those who thought they are apostles but are not, or to the Nicolaitans, and to Jezebel – all travelling teachers.

**2.8 The result of networking**

• Late in the second century, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus could write: “Therefore, brothers and sister, I who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord and conversed with brothers and sisters from all over the world, and have studied all holy Scripture, am not afraid of threats, for they have said who were great than I, ‘It is better to obey God rather than men.’” (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.24.7)

**2.9 Conclusions**

**3. The Theological basis for the network**

**3.1 Jesus as the Second Adam**

• Rom 5:14, 1 Cor 15:22, 45 Paul presents Jesus as the “second” or “new Adam”.

• 2 Cor 5:19: “in Christ God was reconciling *the* *world* to himself”.

• John 20:22: “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

**3.2 Jesus is Lord**

• Phil 2:10-11: “Every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”.

**3.3 “In Christ” and “abiding” language**

• Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; *for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*.”

• Col 3:11: “In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”

• John 15:4-5: “4Abide in me as I abide in you (plural). Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you (pl) unless you (pl) abide in me. 5I am the vine, you (pl) are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you (pl) can do nothing.”

• John 15:12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

• John 17:11: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one”.

**3.4 Body of Christ language**

• Col 1:18: “He [Christ] is *the head of the body, the church*; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

• Eph 3:5-6: “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, *members of the same body*, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

• Eph 4:4-6: “4There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”  
• Col 2:18-19: “18Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, *19and not holding fast to the head*, from whom *the whole body,* nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.”

**3.5 A family through Christ**

• Mark 3:31-35 (parallels in Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21): “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is *my brother and sister* and mother”.

• Mark 10:29-30: “Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left

house or *brothers or sisters* or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—

houses, *brothers and sisters*, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions —and in the age to come eternal life.’”

• Matt 23:9: “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.” Matt 23:10-12: “10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

• Rom 8:29: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”

**3.6 Mission Commands**

• Matt 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...”; Acts 1:8: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave …” Mark 13:9-10: “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; …. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.”

**4. Conclusions and implications**

• One of the unifying dimensions across the NT was that they belonged together.

• Strong theological dimensions led to this sense of inter-connectedness.

•  small, vibrant, geographically dispersed, but forming a network of interconnected communities with a sense of participation in a global movement.

• We should not underestimate how *strange* it was for people with no *ethnic* connections to see themselves as *belonging together* in the powerful worldwide way

• The New Testament is also held together by a unity of experience, the experience of belonging together as part of a network