

TOWARDS A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF 'OIKOS'

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1 Introduction

It has been said that “theology determines methodology”² and theology flows out of scriptural interpretation. The Apostle Paul’s injunction given to his under-study Timothy to literally ‘use utmost diligence to present/prove yourself before God as one tried and true, an unashamed worker, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15) has the same urgency today as when it was written. Today’s age of relativism demands the need for proper handling of the word “in accord with its intention and to communicate properly its meaning.”³ This study will focus on the concept of ‘oikos,’ to examine its Biblical background and consider the question: Can the ancient ‘oikos’ serve as a model for formulating contemporary mission strategy?

The word ‘oikos’ meaning house or household, has come into the fore on a number of fronts. It is being advanced as a conceptual model for the house-church movement,⁴ the insider movement,⁵ people group movements,⁶ an evangelism methodology⁷, the ecumenical movement⁸

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² Robert Lescelius, ‘The Second Great Awakening: The Watershed Revival’, *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997), p. 29

³ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 412.

⁴ Ken L. Davis ‘An Evaluation Of The House Church Model For North American Church Planting’, Part 2, *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, 11:1 (Spring 2007), p. 92

⁵ John Ridgeway, ‘Insider Movements in the Gospels and Acts’, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24:2 (Summer 2007), p. 86, see www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_2_PDFs/24_2_Ridgeway.pdf.

Rebecca Lewis, ‘Insider Movements: The Conversation Continues: Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities’, in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24:2 (Summer 2007), see www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_2_PDFs/24_2_Lewis.pdf;

Common Ground Consultation, Atlanta, January 2009, and response by Jay Smith, ‘An Assessment of the Insider Movement Principle Paradigms’, in *St. Francis Magazine* 5:4 (August 2009), p. 22.

⁶ D.W. Fowlkes and P. Verster, ‘Family (oikos) evangelism for reaching forward caste Hindus in India’, in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, vol. 27, (no. 1, 2006), pp. 321-338. [http://www.journals.co.za/ej/ejour_verbum.html]

⁷ Also known as the ‘household principle’ of evangelism See J. Hampton Keathley, III ‘The Stewardship of God’s Truth Through Evangelism (Part 2)’, on www.bible.org.

a renewed emphasis on the metaphor of the church as God's household⁹ and even an 'oiko-theology' which deals with earth-keeping in South Africa.¹⁰ The volume of material on the subject will necessitate a survey overview.

2 Background

The confluence of a number of factors serves to heighten the awareness of the 'oikos' model. A heightened interest in the social milieu of the first and second centuries of Christianity has produced a plethora of studies.¹¹ A re-discovery of the corporate aspects of Christianity seems to be a mostly healthy pendulum swing away from individualistic model of the 'lone-ranger' Christian.¹² This has been informed by interest in family dynamics, sociological studies on the group dynamics of conversion, and by the interaction of North and South in the global village, where the South has historically been much more community oriented.¹³ The World Council of Churches brought the term "household of the world" or *oikoumene* to the fore and in 1991 its former general secretary Konrad Reiser, suggested that the word 'oikos' connotes

Also, Win and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Church Growth Press, Pasadena, CA, 1982).

⁸ Ernst M. Conradie, "The Whole Household of God: The Use of the Oikos Metaphor in the Built and the Non-Built Environment", in *European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment*, and Sigurd Bergmann, *Nature, Space, and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, 2008).

⁹ David J Feddes, "Caring for God's household: a leadership paradigm among New Testament Christians and its relevance for church and mission today", in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 43 no 2 (2008), pp. 274-299.

¹⁰ Conradie, 'The Whole Household of God', p. 31, citing Andrew Wambach's unpublished 2006 doctoral thesis, 'Constructing an Oikothelogy: The Environment, Poverty and the Church in South Africa' (Pietermaritzburg, 2006).

¹¹ Notably for this study: Roger W. Gehring 's *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 408 pp.), Feddes op cit. David Horrell, "From adelphoi to oikos theou: social transformation in Pauline Christianity", in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 120 no 2 (Summer 2001), pp 293-311 and David deSilva's *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture* (Downer's Grove, IL. IVP, 2000).

¹² See Leith and Andrea Gray, "Paradigms and Praxis: Part II Why are Some Workers Changing Paradigms", in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:2 (Summer 2009).

¹³ See for instance, Brenda B. Colijn, "Family in the Bible: A Brief Survey", in *Ashland Theological Journal* 36:0 (2004).

“community, webs of relationships, belonging, and with life together.”¹⁴

In what might be more of a mixed blessing reaction, the spirit of the age (or *Zeitgeist*) in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has also played its role.¹⁵ It might be said to be suspicious of institutions and bureaucracy and more trusting of relationships, prone to question authority and prefer democracy to hierarchy, focused on the immediate, rather than delayed gratification, stresses empathy over truthfulness, is pain adverse, likes to be liked and likes to know it is doing well by measuring its own results. Novelty and innovation are prized, history is for dinosaurs, image is king and relationship triumphs over rules. Many of these represent excessive pendulum swings due to abuses and absolutizing of what might have started out as legitimate, God-ordained structures.

Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck in their timely book, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*, summarize the above by stating that in the current climate: ‘spirituality is hot; religion is not. Community is hip, but the church is lame. Both inside the church and out, organized religion is seen as oppressive, irrelevant, and a waste of time.’¹⁶ They then take great pains to show that those parroting the “deed, not creeds” or “they like Jesus, but not the church” mantras, unfortunately, have a minimalist view of both history and the doctrine church.

Positively, as well, there has been a rediscovery of the corporate household of God aspects of covenant theology. I use the word rediscovery, as this emphasis can be found in the likes of Herman Witsius's (1636-1708) *The Economy of the Covenants* (1693), the 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Each of these authors was intimately

¹⁴ K. Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), pp. 87-88.

¹⁵ “All that floating mass of thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims, aspirations, at any time current in the world, which it may be impossible to seize and accurately define, but which constitutes a most real and effective power, being the moral, or immoral atmosphere which at every moment of our lives we inhale, again inevitably to exhale.” Robert Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* Vol 2, (New York: Scribner, 1864), p. 40.

¹⁶ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 13.

aware, as well that Christianity in the book of Acts was a household phenomenon (Acts 10:1–2; 16:13–15; 31–34; 18:18); conversion was personal but not individualistic.¹⁷

3 Contemporary terminology

Contemporary definitions of the word ‘oikos’ vary. Jay Smith gathered from proponents of the insider movement among Muslims that they define an insider as “one who embraces Jesus, yet remains as a light in his ‘oikos’ (household) so that as many as possible might be saved.”¹⁸ He interprets this to mean “one’s biological Muslim family”. In the house-church movement, Ken Davis notes that “the early church grew because they understood and practiced whole household (oikos) evangelism” and suggests that this is precedent setting.¹⁹ Concerning Biblical words for family, Brenda Colijn notes that neither Hebrew nor Greek has a word that exactly denotes the word in English. She suggests that “the closest word could be translated “house” or “household”: *bayit* in Hebrew and *oikos* or *oikia* in Greek, and that the term “focuses on the household as a social and economic unit.”²⁰ Tom Wolf in “Church Growth America”, which the WCC definition echoes, broadens the ‘oikos’ concept to “one’s sphere of influence” which included one’s “family, friends and associates.” He suggests that it was through these circles of association and influence that the early church spread.²¹ With yet another widening circle, Verlyn D. Verbrugge, suggests that the text of Hebrews refers to the covenant people of God as a “community rather than to individual believers” and calls this the ‘oi-

¹⁷ See Scott Hahn’s bibliography and comments on the state of research in his “Covenant in the Old and New Testaments: Some Current Research” (1994–2004), in *Currents in Biblical Research*, Vol 3 No 2(2005), pp. 263-292.

¹⁸ Smith, ‘An Assessment of the Insider Movement Principle Paradigms’, pp. 22-23. The definition that Smith used, originated with John Travis [architect of the C-1 to C-6 grid for analyzing contextualization] has also been proposed by Rebecca Lewis, and John Ridgeway.

¹⁹ Davis, ‘An Evaluation Of The House Church Model’, p.118.

²⁰ Brenda B. Colijn, “Family in the Bible: A Brief Survey”, in *Ashland Theological Journal* 36:0 (2004), p. 73.

²¹ Tom Wolf, “Church Growth America,” (Jan/Feb. 1978), p.13, cited by J. Hampton Keathley, III “The Stewardship of God’s Truth Through Evangelism (Part 2)” <http://bible.org/seriespage/stewardship-god%E2%80%99s-truth-through-evangelism-part-2> (2009/12/08).

kos concept'.²² This idea would appear to stem from the 'oikos formula' which refers to the phrase "he and his (whole) household."²³

Collectively we see an emphasis on family, whether biological or spiritual, with some emphasizing biological ties more strongly than others, on entire households (to be defined later), on circles of association and influence or relational networks, and on "the communal identity, unity, intimacy, and loyalty of the believers in relation to God, Jesus Christ, and one another".²⁴ Fowlkes summarizes the same under the rubric of common kinship, common community, and common interests.²⁵

4 Biblical terminology

According to W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAGD), 'oikos' can, in some cases, simply be translated as "family".²⁶ To the contemporary mind, the idea of family, however, is largely determined by the context. David Horrell's well-documented definition which includes both testaments may be more helpful. He states:

The Greek terms οἶκος/οἰκία and the Hebrew term *bāyit* ...are wide-ranging in meaning and use. In both languages the terms are used for both the building (part or whole) in which people live and the human members or material contents that make up the household. *Bayit* and οἶκος may thus

²² V.G. Verbrugge, 'Toward a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6', in *Calvin Theological Journal* (1980), pp. 61-73.

²³ Lee Irons, 'The Oikos Formula' (2007), see www.upper-register.com/papers/oikos_formula.pdf (2009/12/08) summarizes the data of Joachim Jeremias, who uses the "oikos-formula" as a defense of infant baptism, 'Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries' (Eng. trans., London: SCM, 1960), and Gehring sees this occurring in Acts (10:1-2, 22; 11:12b-14; 16:14-16; 16:30-34; 18:8), p. 369.

²⁴ Feddes, p. 281, quoting John H. Elliott, 'The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented', in *Biblical Interpretation* Vol 11, No. 2 (2003), pp. 204-205.

²⁵ Fowlkes, p. 329. Bruce Waltke in his "The Inruption of the Kingdom of God", in *Criswell Theological Review*, Vol 2 No 1 (Fall 2004), p. 5, shows that the nation of Israel was a "common people normally sharing a common land, submissive to a common law, and led by a common ruler."

²⁶ Bauer, Walter, William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*, 4th Rev. and Augm. Ed., 1952 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 560-561.

designate physical locations such as house, palace, and temple, or rooms or halls within these, and also human groups ranging in scope from the immediate or extended family to the clan, dynasty, tribe, or tribal league.²⁷

Spiros Zodhiates complements Horrell's synthesis and simplifies BAGD for non-Greek readers in his *Complete Word Study Dictionary* under the heading 'oikos':

(I) Generally (Mat 9:6, 7; Mark 5:19; Luke 1:40; John 7:53; Acts 10:22). With the preposition *en* (1722) in, *en oikō*, at home (1 Cor.11:34; 14:35; Sept.: Gen 39:2, 16); with the prep. *katá* (2596) with the acc., possessing a distributive meaning, *kata oikon*, from house to house, in private houses (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:3; 20:20; Rom 16:5, the church at a private home). Spoken of various kinds of houses or edifices, such as the house of the king or the chief priest, a palace (Mat 11:8; Luke 22:54; Sept.: Gen 12:15; 2 Kings. 20:18; Dan 1:4). A house of commerce, meaning a bazaar (John 2:16). Specifically, house of God, meaning the tabernacle or temple where the presence of God was manifested and where God was said to dwell, e.g., the tabernacle (Mat 12:4; Mark 2:26; Luke 6:4); the temple at Jerusalem (Mat. 21:13; John 2:16, 17; Acts 7:47, 49); for *ho naós*, with a def. art. (Luke 11:51 [cf. Mat 23:35]); the house of prayer (Mat 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). A room or part of a house, e.g., the dining room (Luke 14:23), the upper room as a place of prayer (Acts 2:2; 10:30; 11:13). Figuratively of persons, Christians as the spiritual house or temple of God (1 Pet. 2:5). Of those in whom evil spirits dwell (Mat 12:44; Luke 11:24).
(II) In a wider sense, a dwelling place, habitation, abode, as a city or country (Mat 23:38; Luke 13:35).

²⁷ Horrell, p. 297. Horrell acknowledges the following sources for his definition: C. Osiek and D. L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 6; H. A. Hoffner "bayith in Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Trans. John T. Willis Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp.107-16; Otto Michel 'oikos' in Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.); Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.); Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976, S. 5), pp. 129-131. Compare this with Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon which states that oikos has three primary meanings: 1. "a house", which may mean "an inhabited house", "any building whatever", or "any dwelling place"; 2. "the inmates of a house, all the persons forming one family, a household"; 3. "stock, race, descendants of one" J. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1979), p. 441.

(III) Metonymically, a household, family, those who live together in a house (Luke 10:5; Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:16; 2 Tim 1:16; Titus 1:11). Including the idea of household affairs (Acts 7:10; 1 Tim 3:4, 5, 12; Sept.: Gen 7:1; 12:17). Metaphorically, *oikos tou Theou*, the household of God, i.e., the Christian Church, Christians (1 Tim 3:15; Heb 3:6; 10:21; 1 Pet 4:17); the Jewish assembly (Heb 3:2, 5; Sept.: Num 12:7).

(IV) Metonymically, family, lineage, posterity, descended from one head or ancestor (Luke 1:27, 69; 2:4; Sept.: Ex 6:14; 1 Kings 12:16, 19). A whole people or nation as descended from one ancestor such as the house or people of Israel (Mat 10:6; 15:24); the house of Jacob (Luke 1:33); the house of Judah (Heb 8:8; Sept.: Ex 19:3; Lev 10:6; Judg 1:23; 1 Kings 12:23; Jer 31:31).²⁸

Both Horrell's and Zodhiates' definitions would cause us to think in terms that are wider than a nuclear family, might extend over multiple generations, has definite structures, and has multiple shades of meaning.

David Feddes, citing Wayne Meeks, in his study *The First Urban Christians*, broadens the definition of the Graeco-Roman household to include immediate family plus "slaves, former slaves who were now clients, hired laborers, and sometimes business associates or tenants". He observes that to be part of a household was "part of a larger network of relations".²⁹

5 From the house [hold] of Israel to the house [hold] of God

In order to avoid the charge of a "word study fallacy" as D.A. Carson put it in his *Exegetical Fallacies* text, one must look at the immediate, and then the much wider context of the use of a word.³⁰ In order to do that, the place of the word or concept, even extending to its larger semantic domain in the larger body of Biblical revelation is critical. Thus

28 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN : AMG Publishers, 2000, c1992, c1993), S. G3624 See also P. Weigandt 'oikos' in Robert Balz Horst and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, Translation of: Exegetisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-c1993), 2:500-503.

²⁹ Feddes, p. 275 quoting Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 29-30.

³⁰ Chapter 1 in Don A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Mi. Baker Academic, 1996), pp. 27-64.

we will examine its place among NT images for church, and trace the history of the household concept through the scriptures.

5.1 An image among others

In the NT a number of metaphors or images are used for the church. They include “The people or household of God” (1 Tim 3:15, 1 Pet 2:19) “the temple and fellowship of the Holy Spirit” and “the Body of Christ”.³¹ Each metaphor has its unique contribution. The structure and sacred space of a temple where the Deity is in residence and the living and organically interconnected Body metaphor serve to complement the living family who has a Divine progenitor and Master of the compound. Although Paul Minear cautions against “the futile effort to choose one image as the key to the others”, David Feddes argues that the household metaphor is a leading one.³² The household metaphor, especially, is strongly rooted in the Old Testament.³³

More than just exhibiting a Trinitarian model, each of the metaphors uses the seemingly insignificant word “of”. Known as the genitive it packs a lot of punch in determining the meaning of the word it modifies. It can mean the X that belongs to Y, or it can mean the X that is identified with Y.³⁴ Thus the household of God could mean the household that belongs to the God, or to the household that identifies with the God.

³¹ This is derived from Edmund Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downer's Grove, IL., IVP, 1995), pp. 28-29. See also his synopsis “The Biblical Theology of the Church” in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, D. A. Carson ed. (Baker/Paternoster, 1987, 1993), pp. 13-87, 303-07, Available on-line www.beginningwithmoses.org .

³² Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2004), p. 222; Feddes, p. 282.

³³ The bridging of the concept between Old and New Testaments is shown by G. W. Grogan, “The Old Testament Concept of Solidarity Hebrews”, in *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol 49 No 1 (1998), pp. 159-173.

³⁴ Known as the objective (obj.) or subjective (subj.) genitive. Take for instance the phrase “the fear of the Lord”. The objective asks if the action of fear is directed towards the Lord and subjective asks if the fear comes from the Lord who possesses it. Also: “the sign of Jonah”, -Obj. = the sign which Jonah experienced, or Sub. = the sign which Jonah gave; or “the gospel of God” - Obj.= the gospel about God; Subj. = the gospel which God brings.

5.2 Households in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible the expression "house of Israel"(Ex 16:31; Lev 10:6; Num 20:29; Josh 21:45; Isa 5:7; Jer 2:4) is a common expression. Originally it referred to the immediate family and those associated with the compound of Israel [Jacob] and where it was physically located. Later became the name of the entire people who God had chosen to be his 'nation of priests'. (Ex 19, c.f. Rev 1) It might be said that the term could apply to the house (hold) that lived with Israel its patriarch, and equally to the house (hold) that as history went on, collectively identified with Israel their ancestor. More than biological descent, however, the house of Israel was called "God's possession" (Ex 19:5), and the prophets refer to Israel as the "*house of Yahweh*" (Hos 8:1; 9:8, 15; Jer 12:7; Zech 9:8). As well, God's house--his dwelling, and his presence are intimately linked in the temple, with Christ being the fulfillment of the temple in the NT.

5.3 Households in the NT

Christians in the New Testament era have a dual household identity as well. They might be called members of the household of "X" such as Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); Philemon (Philemon 2); Cornelius (Acts 11:14); Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Crispus (Acts 18:8), and due to the close association of gatherings of believers and a person's house, might be called the "church that meets at the house of X" (Col 4:15).

The NT moves beyond the identification only with a single dwelling to use the household metaphor of the church much more broadly. Paul describes the Galatian Christians as "those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). He addresses the Christians at Ephesus as "members of God's household" (Eph 2:19) and "his family in heaven and on earth" (Eph 3:15), and calls the church the "household of God"(1 Tim 3:15). Two other NT epistles addressed to members under pressure to dissociate with their brothers and sisters in the faith also refer to the church as the "the household of God" (Heb10:21; 1 Pet 4:17).

Thus, in a similar development to "the house of Israel" the NT church has a dual identification. It identifies with its physical location denoted by the head of the house where they happen to meet. Much more, however, it identifies with the Master of the house of whom it is its possession. Thus we read in 2 Tim 2:20–21 that God is the

‘despotes’ [=master, ruler, one possessing supreme authority] of the great house, which is his church.³⁵ It is the household that belongs to Him. As with Israel, the idea of possession and separateness moves in a straight line to the concept of the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit; His place of dwelling.

6 What is this house built on?

Some proponents of the ‘oikos’ model seem to exhibit an anti-institutional bent. A dichotomy, which to this observer is a false one, is set up between organic relations and structure. Catch phrases such as “artificial aggregate groupings” are pitted against “pre-existing social networks turning to Christ?”³⁶ In the same vein another suggests that the word church should be discarded as it connotes “a building or pattern of organized worship” and would replace it with “a living *oikos* (household) gathering of the people of God manifesting the Kingdom of God in their daily lives”.³⁷ One wonders if God’s arbitrary and artificial choosing of Israel as his separate group/people who would worship him, and who prescribed definite patterns of organized worship in exacting detail has been overlooked. One wonders if an overly-idealized view of the early church informs these descriptions.³⁸

The not-so subtle dismissal of tradition and institution by two authors who work for institutions with tradition is disconcerting. Paul could not have responded better: “You are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household [‘oikos’] of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, in whom Jesus Christ is the head of the

³⁵ Compare this with the concept of the ‘master of the house’ *oikodespótēs* (Mat 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; 24:43; Mark 14:14; Luke 12:39; 13:25; 14:21; 22:11).

³⁶ Lewis, p. 76, fn 1. Could this be an example of a “straw-man argument” where a person simply ignores someone’s actual position and substitutes a distorted, over-simplified, exaggerated or misrepresented version of that position.

³⁷ Abdul Asad, Unpublished paper, 2009. This is in the same vein as John Ridgeway’s presentation where he pits the church as “an organizational or structural entity” against the “the people of God in vital relationships with one another” Reported by Mack Harling ISFM News, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (2005), p. 134, see www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/22_4_PDFs/134%20ISFM.pdf

³⁸ See DeYoung and Kluck, p. 212, describing a number of authors who resort to the same re-writing of history in order to promote their anti-church, anti-clergy, anti-institutional bent

corner; in him you are built up to be a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19–22).³⁹

Paul continues to tie together architectural images and church order in 1 Tim 3:15: “In case my coming is delayed, you should know what should be the order in the house [‘oikos] of God, that is, in the church of the living God, which is the pillar and bulwark of truth.”

Order, affirmation of the institution of the church, foundations of truth conveyed through God’s instruments all appear in these two passages. The Westminster Confession similarly, affirms:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; (1 Cor 1:2, 1 Cor 12:12–13, Ps 2:8, Rev 7:9, Rom 15:9–12) and of their children: (1 Cor 7:14, Acts 2:39, Eze 16:20–21, Rom 11:16, Gen 3:15, Gen 17:7) and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, (Mat 13:47, Isa 9:7) the house and family of God, (Eph 2:19, 3:15) out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. (Acts 2:47)⁴⁰

7 Built for what?

“Come to him (Christ), the living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, and build up yourselves as living stones to be a spiritually wrought house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:3 ff.). “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Pet 2:9)

The OT antecedents could not be clearer. God demanded that Pharaoh “Let my people go so that they may worship me in the desert” (Ex

³⁹ J. Goetzmann shows that Paul is using a ‘tour de force’ in this passage of derivatives of the word ‘oikos’ and that no less than six words are employed. The spiritual community is referred to ‘paroikos’ (vs 19, stranger, hence: foreign), oikeios (vs 19, members of the household; cf. Gal 6:10), epikodomeo (vs 20, build on; cf. 1 Cor 3:10, 12, 14; 1 Pet 2:5; Acts 20:32; Col. 2:7; Jude 20), oikodomeo (vs 21, building, structure; cf. 4:12, 16, 29; see oikodomeo below), synoikodomeo (vs 22, build together), and katoiketerion (vs 22, dwelling-place; cf. Jer 9:10; Rev 18. “House”, in Colin Brown ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1971), p. 249.

⁴⁰ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Chapter XXV, p. 2.

7:16b) as a specific gathering for worship called a ‘feast unto me’, i.e. to YHWH. (Ex 5:1) It was God’s choosing, his liberation, his gathering, and his affirmation of Israel as a nation set apart for his worship that created the ‘assembly in the desert’. (Acts 7:38)

This one people of God, now is gathered in the New Testament to be God’s house where his glory dwells, and that those who are outsiders to it might declare, “God is with you indeed!” (1 Cor 14:25; cf. Isa 45:14; Zech 8:22, 23).

8 Can the ancient oikos serve as a/the model for formulating mission strategy? Are there limitations?

The importance of the ‘oikos’ in the foundation of the early church cannot be overstated. Gehring states: “Scarcely anything determined daily life more than the ‘oikos’ with its network of relationships...the significance of the ‘oikos’ for the establishment and organization of early Christian church life can hardly be overemphasized.” He draws this conclusion from a statement by another NT scholar named Luhrmann who stated, “The ancient ‘oikos’ is not just one social and economic form among others but rather the basic social and economic form not only for the ancient world and the New Testament but presumably for every pre-industrial sedentary culture as well.”⁴¹ On the contemporary scene, the anthropologist Peter B. Hammond observes that “in most cultures the social systems of greatest importance are based on kinship” and Fowlkes refers to these as “kinship webs”.⁴² Roger Greenway states: “It is easily proved from history that the great advances of the Christian faith have generally occurred along the lines of natural kinship relationships.”⁴³

When we examine data that the likes of Peter Wagner used in formulating his Homogenous Unit Principle or, where 36% of converts from Islam cited family relationships as a critical factor in their conver-

⁴¹ Gehring, p. 17.

⁴² P. Hammond, *An Introduction to Cultural and Social Anthropology*; second edition. (London: MacMillan Publishing Company. 1978), pp. 145-46, cited by Fowlkes, p. 324.

⁴³ Roger Greenway, *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*; second edition (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Publishing Group, 1992), p. 4, cited by Fowlkes, p. 330.

sion,⁴⁴ it would appear that the case is closed and modern evangelism strategy should simply duplicate the oikos model.⁴⁵ Might we have the cart before the horse, however? Might this be an observation in search of a theology? Might this quick just reflect the modern penchant to make a rather quick jump from description to prescription? Consider the voice of the Latin American theologian Rene Padilla. Commenting on some abuses of the homogenous unit principle he stated:

Its advocates have taken as their starting point a sociological observation and developed a missionary strategy; only then, a posteriori, have they made the attempt to find biblical support. As a result the Bible has not been allowed to speak.⁴⁶

Padilla's observation would push us to consider a more multi-faceted approach that starts with theology first, and subjects observations to such. His probing leads us to consider some vital questions.

9 Some questions for consideration

9.1 Does the model do justice to the multi-faceted dimensions of the scriptural portrayal of church and what it means to be church?

Consider the metaphors or images for the church in the New Testament:

“flock”, “living stones”, “temple of the Holy Spirit”, “the bride of Christ”, “the called out ones”, “the assembly”, “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”, “a city on a hill”, “disciples of Christ”, “vine”, “saints”, “holy brothers/sisters”, and “field”. To do justice to a theology of church, one must consider the images as facets of a diamond and their OT antecedents must be examined. It seems that proponents of the ‘oikos model’ have emphasized one metaphor at the cost of the others.

⁴⁴ P.I. Barnabas, “A Handful from an Unreached MegaPeople”, p. 193 in David H. Greenlee ed, *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Authentic, 2006).

⁴⁵ Note how Fowlkes, p. 329, moves from description to prescription, in almost the same breath.

⁴⁶ C. Rene Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle”, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January, 1982), p. 29.

9.2 Does the model subconsciously buy into the Zeitgeist [=spirit of the age] of the day?

Consider the following line of logic, which might be accused of exaggeration:

Our mission will good when we can show lots of numbers. People prefer to take the route of least resistance. If we offer a route of least resistance for people coming to the Lord, our mission will look good with lots of numbers. How can we find this route? Voila, let's look for every sociological barrier to the adoption of the gospel, whether that be family, culture or religion or all three combined. Maybe if we can use some words that sound theological or even Greek that will make us look even more legitimate. Great! It worked, so they said, in country X, so it must be good. Let's make an airtight theology around this and dismiss any questioning to the contrary as opposing a work of God.

Where are the faulty premises of this picture? How many of them are informed by the "spirit of the age"? I would suggest the following:

1. The idolatrous need to please people or ourselves.
2. The tinkering with the gospel as it panders in a humanistic way to what people, not God, wants.
3. Lowering the bar for entrance into the Kingdom.
4. Thinking sociologically first, and theologically second. This underscores a human-centered, rather than God-centered approach to evangelism.⁴⁷
5. The danger of infusing new meanings into theological terms when they are used loosely.
6. An appeal to pragmatism. "If it works it must be good."
7. A theology derived from the methodology, not a method that is based on solid Biblical exegesis.
8. A likelihood of neglecting to ask hard questions about how the spirit of the age is influencing the reading of the Scriptures and a dismissive posture to those who might ask hard questions.

⁴⁷ For a helpful synopsis of Wil Metzger's *Tell the Truth*, entitled "Two views of the Gospel", see www.the-highway.com/2views_Metzger.html (8 January 2010).

9.3 *The model has a skewed emphasis*

9.3.1 “Paroikos’ - “.....therefore as aliens and strangers”

For those who would only stress, the ‘at-homeness’ of the ‘oikos’ model, there is another word derived from ‘oikos’ which plays an important role in the entirety of Scriptural revelation. It is the word ‘paroikos’ which derives from the word *para* - alongside of - and *oikos*, house. It has the idea of someone who lives alongside of the people who belong. King David (1 Chron 29:15; Ps 39:12) and Peter (1 Pet 2:11) talk about these kinds of people as aliens and strangers.⁴⁸ They simply do not belong. Abraham, the said father of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, himself is said to be a “stranger and a sojourner” (Gen 23:4; Heb 11:9,13) - someone with no rights, no full citizenship, a foreigner in a land not their own, someone who is passing through.⁴⁹

This “unnatural” ‘paroikos’ concept must temper the strong push toward “natural relational networks” that comes with the ‘oikos’ model. It was these aliens who received the highest commendation in the book of Hebrews, namely that the world was not even worthy of them. (Heb 11:38) Abraham and Moses were shown to be their chief earthly exemplars, with Jesus being the chief God-Man exemplar.

Inadvertently the ‘oikos’ model could be on a search to make the world, especially family and those in one’s orbit of influence, to esteem one to be worthy. It was the appeal of this sub-standard “court of opinion” that the author of the book of Hebrews attempted to correct. He directed them to a surrounding cloud of witnesses (12:1-2), and to the example of the Son whose humiliation led to exaltation.

9.3.2 Searching for belonging “A new creation, the old has past...”

The oikos model seems to have a subtext that would read, ‘belonging is everything’. In a natural sense to be a member of a household suggests that within the capacity of the master of the household, one is assured protection and provision. It also provides a sense of security, identity

⁴⁸ Moses Chin, “A Heavenly Home for the Homeless: Aliens and Strangers in 1 Peter”, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.1 (May 1991), pp. 96-112.

⁴⁹ Conradie, p. 33, fn 9, citing Muller-Farenholz, *God’s Spirit Transforming a World in Crisis*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 110, who state “the notion of *parokoi* is useful in underscoring that the followers of Christ can only be strangers in a world that rejects them.”

and belonging.⁵⁰ These are all very strong appeals. Any system would be wise to use some continuity from these realities, but as Colijn points out, there are also strong discontinuities in the New Testament. In Christ a person's citizenship is no longer on earth. (Phil 3:20) Their permanent residence is no longer on earth. (Heb 13:14) Their ultimate affection no longer is attached to their biological family, but to the new family into which they are adopted. (Mark 3:35; Rom 7:4) Peter goes as far as to say that prior to their conversion, his audience was a "non-people" (1 Pet 2:10), but now their sense of belonging and identity comes not from their physical kin, but from their spiritual kin, and this especially from the Master of the new house to which they belong.⁵¹ Their provision and protection are assured by the new Master of the household, and not by their former. Their honor is tied up in the honor of the Householder. One must ask if the lines between biological family and this new family of God have not been excessively blurred by the *oikos* model

9.3.3 A spiritual house - '*oikos pneumatikos*'

"You are being built into a spiritual house" was the words addressed to the audience of 1 Peter. This same audience was referred to as a new people of God, (1 Pet 2:9), "a holy priesthood" (2:9) who were formerly "aliens and strangers" (2:11) and "ignorant" (1:14). Their existence was anything but natural. It is a new spiritual grouping, with hearts that have been changed from stone to living ones. It transcends biological roots, while still honoring them.

It seems that this spiritual house motif is required to inform the 'natural church development' motif that the '*oikos*' model leans toward. In some way this is the most un-natural family in existence. It is

⁵⁰ Compare and contrast this with Fowlkes, p. 325, citing the purely sociological stance of McNee: "McNee has pointed out a significant truth related to people movements. He indicates that the unity and solidarity of the clan is uppermost in the minds of all its members. Though this may be a hindrance in the early introduction of Christianity into clan life, as increasing numbers of individuals make Christward decision the momentum shifts toward Christianity, motivating others to consider the Christian faith in order to maintain and enhance clan unity. Clan members do not want to be left behind and endanger solidarity." (McNee, 1976, p. 72)

⁵¹ Colijn refers to this as 'fictive-kinship'. See also deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity*, pp. 165–173, 212–225 for a more complete description of sibling relationships in the world of the early church, and how that was revolutionized by its fictive kinship group.

composed of a collection of rebels, brought to life from death in sin, from disparate social and economic backgrounds, even with slaves who love the masters who love them. It is the spiritual house motif, then, that informs the natural house of the audience, and not the other way around.

9.3.4 The reality of two houses

When it is all said and done people are either “in Christ” or “outside of Christ”; “covenant keepers” or “covenant breakers”; “the seed of the woman” or the “seed of the serpent” and “children of God” or “children of the devil”. In short they belong either to the household of God the Father, or the household of Satan.⁵² It appears that the antithesis between the two houses has been blurred at times. This does lead to the question about the potential for a divided house. Luke 11:17 states, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls”. A household pitted against itself will certainly self-destruct. Jesus saw the potential for division. Might the ‘oikos’ model as some propose it, be an attempt to mix water and gasoline in the same house?

(A point to ponder is the fact that Islam has recognized the existence of antithesis with its own two household/territory division of the world. It has divided the world into the “household of war” (*Dar al Harb*), and “the household of peace” (*Dar al Islam*) and makes no pretense about its “kingdom expansion” plans.⁵³)

9.4 A new common kinship, new common community, and common interests. How are these reflected by the model?

9.4.1 New common kinship.

Since all the descendants of a common ancestor are called ‘the house’ of such and such, (Ps 115:10; Ex 16:31), then it must be asked what is the primary identification of those who are adopted children of the Father in Heaven, “living stones” that have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, brothers [and sisters] of Christ their older brother, those born from above, by the Word of God and members of the royal dynasty of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah? This question is not just theory, as the

⁵² For example: “your father the devil” (John 8.44); “children of the devil” (I John 3.10).

⁵³ Arabic ‘dar’ means the household/ abode/entire compound/territory/realm.

Christianity Today headline for the December 2009 “conversation” regarding the insider movement referred to “Muslim followers of Jesus” who were ‘forging a new identity.’ Another contributor to the same entitled his contribution “The Main Question is Identity”. This does raise a question, about who should be forging what, if Another has given a new identity.”⁵⁴

9.4.2 New common community

The book of Hebrews was a call to mobilize a group with the potential for disintegration, under a call to galvanize themselves with a “positive identity as a community of outsiders”.⁵⁵ In this new economy (Gk. oikonome) individuals are now part of the universal collective people of God, the Body of Christ as the clan of the redeemed and the Temple of the Holy Spirit which is the dwelling place of the Jealous God.

9.4.3 New common interests

Whereas those who are not in Christ are described as walking in the futility of their minds (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:17) and living in passions of lust and sensuality (1 Thes 4:5; 1 Pet 4:3) and according to the flesh, the new household has a new *raison d'être*. It exists to sanctify Christ in its heart, to do all to the glory of God, to set its mind on the things that are above, to be holy and perfect as the Father in Heaven is perfect and holy, to collectively run the race with endurance, and to see the edification (Gk. oikodomein) of the saints.

9.5 Some areas for further reflection

In order to do justice to the whole counsel of God it is necessary, as Rene Padilla wisely observed, to start with a Biblical theology and work towards a methodology, which will influence observation, rather than the other way around.

54 John Azumah, “The Main Question is Identity” in Joseph Cummings ed., “Muslim Followers of Jesus”, in *Christianity Today: The Conversation for December 2009* | The Global Conversation, see

www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/december2009/index.html

55 Grogan, p. 169, quoting J. Dunnill, *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp. 17-18.

9.5.1 The new things in common

Starting with the attributes of the new common community, kinship and interests, one can start to ascertain if these are being compromised or reinforced by different methodologies. These attributes will construct a Biblical grid for scrutiny.

9.5.2 Sacred trust

Those who are entrusted with the mysteries of the gospel are called stewards (oikonomos) or managers over the house (1 Cor 4:1). They neither own the house nor are its architect. This should temper any overzealous tinkering with how to extend the household, while having a weighty knowledge that each steward carries delegated responsibility and will need to make an accounting to the Master of the house who is both King and Judge. Faithfulness is the concept that links the stewards of Jesus' parables and the idea in Paul. (Luke 12:42; 16:10 f.; Mat 25:21, 23) In 1 Tim 1:4, Paul contrasts faithful stewardship and false teaching.

9.5.3 The Householder's definite plan

The plan of salvation or plan (oikonomia) is mentioned in Eph 1:10 and 3:9 as something in the mind of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no doubt as well that God worked through family units in salvation history, with examples like Noah, Abraham, David, Lydia and the jailer, and will continue to so in history.

9.5.4 The Householder's dwelling place

The householder chooses who will be in his compound, and how they will show honor to Him as this is home for Him. This is not a subject for experimentation or novelty. In the OT we read of the "house of Rimmon" meaning the temple consecrated to the deity called Rimmon. In a strange 'about face' when the ark of God was moved into the house of Dagon, another deity of the area, the living God of Israel showed who was "King of the house," as Dagon was found prostrate before the symbol of the presence of the Living God (1 Sam 5).

9.5.5 Adoption as a key

Given the global importance of family and of belonging, a greater appreciation of the theology of adoption is needed. This would be especially true for those coming out of Islam which has been dubbed the "ultimate fatherless religion." This would also serve to show that there

is an alternate ‘ummah’ or community of faith. The honor of this community is based on the honor of the older brother, Jesus, who has the title of highest honor, namely Son of God. It is the honor of the Heavenly Father, then that offers his adopted children dignity without compare, and the ultimate ground for self-respect.

9.5.6 Household manners

“Say not,” says Gurnall, “that thou hast royal blood in thy veins, and art born of God, except thou canst prove thy pedigree by daring to be holy.”⁵⁶ To be holy is to be set apart and consecrated for the service of a God who is wholly other. Yet it is these royal and adopted children of the King, who exercise the effect of salt and light as “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom ...[they] shine as lights in the world (Phil 2:15). What might distinguish the children of a King’s household from those outside of it?

9.5.7 First stop judgment

1 Pet 4:17: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” The standard used for discrimination begins with the household of God.

9.5.8 Ashamed of the family

When ‘Caleb’ was adopted into the Sesay family, he did not have a choice as to who his siblings were, or even his family name. Just as the Sesay family is not ashamed to call him ‘son’, so he is not ashamed to name himself by his new family name. Jesus said, “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation....” (Mark 8:38) His stern warning is for those whose actions exhibit the same infidelity and disloyalty as the generation or society around them. Household loyalty is not negotiable. The book of Hebrews even casts boasting of being in God’s house in a tentative light, “...unless we keep the confidence and boasting of our hope firm to the end”. (3:6)

⁵⁶ Cited by J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1879), p. 32. Pagination from online version, which is found at www.preachtheword.com.

9.5.9 House rules

Included in the concept for marriage in OT and other ANE cultures is the action of a husband or his representative coming to a bride's house and bringing her back to his own house. (Ex 24:1; Judg 14:3; 1 Sam 25:25-39; 2 Sam 11:27) A bride price would have been paid prior to departure. God is described as bringing Israel, to whom he married Himself (Ex 6:7) out of the house of Egypt and to Canaan (Deut 4:3).⁵⁷ In the NT this same metaphor is used to describe the relationship of the church as the bride of Christ. He paid the bride price with his own blood and the New Jerusalem represents the final consummation of the marriage and the lodging of Christ's bride with him for eternity. In the OT and NT the concept of covenant loyalty was the first and foremost house rule. One must submit any methodology to the scrutiny of whether it prizes the exclusiveness of the husband's house in this "marriage".

9.5.10 The household inheritance

David deSilva, drawing on concepts of shame and honor in the Graeco-Roman world, shows that one's honor was greatly increased by being the potential heir of a huge fortune, or actually receiving it.⁵⁸ He demonstrates that the book of Hebrews uses the word "inheritance" much more frequently than other NT writers, and suggests that this is due to the exhorter's plan to move the audience from judging their honor by the court of reputation of the society around them, to that of God who has bequeathed them a huge inheritance to be shared by the Christian community. He contrasts the selling out of the birthright by Esau (12:17) as a shortsighted. A question of any 'oikos' theology must be asked if the honor associated with being heirs of Christ is being sold out for short term gain, like Esau.

9.5.11 Going home

The sense of ultimate home, will determine the actions of those in this temporary home. "In my Father's house are many mansions, I am going to prepare a place for you" (John 14.2). What greater security

⁵⁷ For various marriage terms employed in the OT see Seock-Tae Sohn, *The Metaphor of Marriage between YHWH and Israel: YHWH, The Husband of Israel* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002), pp. 5-21.

⁵⁸ David Arthur DeSilva, *Bearing Christ's Reproach: The Challenge of Hebrews in an Honor Culture* (North Richland Hills, Tex: BIBAL Press, 1999), pp. 110-111.

could there be than the knowledge of a permanent home, with the Father as its head? To round out the entirety of Biblical revelation, this same covenant making God who said, “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12), closes his word with the statement “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Rev 21:3)

10 Conclusion

The strength of the ‘oikos model’ is its rediscovery of the corporate, relational and organic aspects of Christianity. It has suffered in some cases, from severe myopia, however in that it fails to adequately consider the Old Testament antecedents of a biological household being transformed into a spiritual household, with its fulfillment in the NT. In these cases, as with the insider movement among Muslims, the ‘oikos’ model is somewhat stuck in the physical kinship of the old and is unwilling to take the radical steps of the new and better spiritual kinship.

As much as the ‘oikos’ model has given a listening ear to the sociological milieu of the ANE, the Graeco-Roman world, and the findings of contemporary sociologists, and has learned some valuable lessons along the way, it seems crippled in that it seems more informed by the social sciences than good Biblical hermeneutics. One wonders if sociology drives its methodology more than theology drives its methodology.

Some Biblical truths need to be held in paradoxical tension, like the “already - not yet” dynamic of the Kingdom of God. One might ask if the ‘at-homeness’ of the ‘oikos’ model has been over-emphasized at the expense of the ‘stranger and alien’ motif which also needs to inform those with the dual citizenship of heaven and this world.

The ‘oikos’ model would have done well to have learned the lessons of church history as well, with its earlier focus on the covenant people of God. Fortunately there is resurgence in interest in this covenant dynamic, and it seems that those promoting the ‘oikos’ model would do well to tap into that rich tradition of the church.

Whether the proponents of the ‘oikos’ model would be willing to admit the influence of the Zeitgeist on the anti-institutional leanings of the movement, is to be seen.

The 'oikos' model may suffer from an overly idealized view of Christian community this side of heaven. Some seem rather content to bash the institutional church when convenient, and seems to want Christ the head, without His body. A minimalist ecclesiology might lie behind this thinking. DeYoung and Kluck have done an admirable job to correct some of the cliché mantras that have come with the "spirituality is hot, religion is not" package. They provide a corrective balance by stating, "Christians need structure and spontaneity, form and freedom, rules and relationships."⁵⁹

Sound methodology requires sound theology. Correctly handling the word of truth, it would seem would keep the 'oikos' model from either a skewed view of what it means to be the household of God, or from an overly zealous adoption of prescriptions that flow out of descriptions.

Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house (LXX 'oikia'), we will serve the Lord. (Josh 24.15)

⁵⁹ DeYoung and Kluck, p. 181.