

3-1-1932

## A Note on the First Christian Congregation at Rome

E. G. Sihler

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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### Recommended Citation

Sihler, E. G. (1932) "A Note on the First Christian Congregation at Rome," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 3 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol3/iss1/24>

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## IV.

These translations, while presenting the most frequently suggested critical evasions, by no means exhaust the catalog of misinterpretations. Thus Gray, *o. c.*, offers:—

Though your sins were like scarlet (robes), they might become white like snow;

Though they were red like crimson, they might become like wool,

and claims that the argument is: "Even though the people may have committed the most flagrant sins, they may regain the highest degree of innocence," putting the whole as merely imaginary hypothesis. Cheyne similarly gives the imperfect a potential force, translating, "They may be white as snow," but palpably weakening this magnificent assurance. Moses Buttenwieser takes the inevitable recourse to emendation and changes the text, against all textual evidence and in utter disregard of the sacred prophecies.

But behind all this, directly or indirectly, is the refusal of radical scholarship to accept and believe the plain reading of a plain text that is substantiated by every aid to interpretation which we have. All arguments that have been advanced to discountenance the traditional interpretation (the assertion that "an offer of complete forgiveness is out of place in a summons to judgment"; the objection that "Isaiah nowhere so complacently offers the free forgiveness"; that this contradicts other statements of the prophet) are all easily met by sound and reverent exegesis. Once again the conviction forces itself upon the student of the text that this squirming, evasive exegesis is but the telling evidence of an inflexible desire to minimize or even to eliminate the free grace of a forgiving God. W. A. MAIER.

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## A Note on the First Christian Congregation at Rome.

Chapter 16 of St. Paul's letter to the Romans has been called in question by some of the higher critics. To one who realizes that Rome then was the center of Mediterranean civilization and that men (and women) incessantly came and went there for a multitude of motives, there is nothing wonderful in the preponderance of *Greek* names over Latin in that chapter. *Prisca* (Priscilla) and *Aquila* pursued there the manufacturing of tent-cloth; but they were natives of the province of Pontus. Paul himself, a Roman citizen by birth, was a native of *Tarsus*, capital of Cilicia. I will dwell a little on that town. Let us see what our best authority, Strabo, tells us. Strabo,<sup>1)</sup> a contemporary of Augustus and Tiberius, a native of Amaseia in Asia

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1) See my essay on Strabo in the *American Journal of Philology*, 1923.

Minor (I will here limit myself to a few relevant points given by Strabo, XIV, 673, Cramer): "So great is the zeal of the people there for philosophy and the rest of cultural education (*τὴν ἄλλην παιδείαν ἐγκύκλιον*)<sup>2</sup> that they surpass both Athens and Alexandria and whatever other place one can name in which lectures (*σχολαί*) and pursuits of philosophers have come to be." He goes on to mark the specific difference at Alexandria. Then he names eminent Stoic professors, some of whom gained the favor of Octavian Augustus and Mark Antony. Later one of these Tarsian philosophers, Nestor, became the preceptor of Marcellus, the nephew of Augustus. Many scholars from Tarsus made a professional living at Rome.

To return to Rom. 16, it would be rash to attempt a classification of Greeks and non-Greeks from the roster of names preserved for us by the great apostle. Greek are these names (we are puzzled by the detail and specifications): Epainetos (of the Roman province of Asia, of which the capital was Ephesus), Andronikos, Stachys, Apelles, Herodion, Asynkritos, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologos, Nereus; then the women: Tryphaina and Tryphosa, Persis; then those with Latin names, men and women (I have mentioned Prisca and Aquila, natives of Pontus): Junias (contracted from Junianus, as *Silas* is from Silvanus) Ampliatius, Urbanus, Julia. Maria is the only Hebrew name. No ethnical inference can be made from these names. Alexander and his successors had Hellenized everything between the Aegean Sea and the Euphrates River. A word about Corinth, from which town Paul wrote his epistle to the Christians at Rome. Gallio, a brother of Seneca, was proconsul of Achaia when Paul first came to Corinth. Another official, Erastus, clearly a Christian, sends greetings to Rome through Paul. A few years ago my friend and former student, the distinguished archeologist Dr. Th. Leslie Shear, while conducting the excavations at Corinth, came upon this inscription in a pavement going back to the times of St. Paul's stay at Corinth:<sup>3</sup>

ERASTVS·PRO·AED S. P. STRAVIT

(*Erastus, Procurator, Aedilis, sua pecunia stravit*), Erastus, Procurator and Aedile, laid the pavement at his own expense. I add the commentary of Dr. Shear (p. 526, *op. cit.*): "The archeological evidence indicates that this pavement was in existence in the middle of the first century A. D. A procurator of Corinth named Erastus, who was in office at this time, is mentioned by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, 16, 23; a Roman procurator of a great provincial city

2) Quintilian I, 10, 1: "*ut efficiatur orbis ille doctrinae, quam Graeci ἐγκύκλιον παιδείαν vocant*," viz., that which preceded a professional study.

3) *American Journal of Archeology*, second series, 1929, No. 4, p. 2.

would normally be a man of wealth and influence, and as an administrator of the city he would be opportunely situated for the execution of public works at his own expense. It is therefore most probable that the procurator Erastus who paved the "square" is identical with the Erastus who was chamberlain of the city and a friend of St. Paul."

A further point: Corinth on the isthmus was not only one of the most important commercial cities in the *Imperium Romanum*, but a general station, or stage, for travelers and trade from the East, especially from the province of Asia to Italy and Rome. Again I turn to Strabo (Cramer, p. 378): "And Corinth is called rich on account of the emporium, being situated on the isthmus and controlling two ports, of which one is near Asia and the other near Italy." From there, *i. e.*, from Lechaion, they probably sailed to Brundisium in Italy. The passage through the Straits of Messina was of ill repute, and even more so the rounding of Cape Malea, on account of the head-winds, as Strabo says. And the customs duties were heavy, of course. The cult of Aphrodite and the so-called hierodules, some of whom were actually established as a gift to Aphrodite by men and women of Corinth (*ἑταίρας, ἃς ἀντίθεσαν τῇ θεῷ καὶ ἄνδρες καὶ γυναῖκες*), this, I say, we cannot entirely pass over at this point; it helps us to understand better the world of paganism in which the great apostle labored and places in sharp contrast the origin of the institution of Christian deaconesses like *Phoibe* of Kenchreai.

The primitive Christians — whoever studies the records of Paul and Luke must pay particular attention to what I call the *pagan environment*. The Positivists like Comte, who rejected Christianity, mechanically and stupidly brought into play their maid of all work, or bootjack, *viz.*, evolution. Comte and his followers claimed that Christianity was "evolved" from Greek and Roman civilization. Well, Christianity was the greatest *revolution*, as in Corinth: the church of the Christ and the practical worship of the goddess of incontinence and lust. (Cf. *Testimonium Animae*.) But to proceed: what would the deaconess Phoibe do at Rome? Be a nurse in the families of the Christians there or minister by the designation of the church in families needing such help? We will accompany her to Rome. Neither London nor New York to-day can furnish us a parallel with the Rome of Seneca and of St. Paul. Here are some words of Seneca (*Testimonium Animae*, XVIII; L. Annaeus Seneca,<sup>4</sup>) the Versatile,

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4) A person of whom we have a record or who is referred to by Seneca and also by St. Luke: Seneca's elder brother, M. Annaeus Novatus (by adoption Gallio), proconsul of Achaia. *Ad Helviam*, XVIII, 1: "*Alter honores industria consecutus est*"; St. Luke, Acts 18, 12, "But Gallio being proconsul of Achaia," etc.

and the Rome of Seneca, p. 424), written about the same time that St. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans, according to Zahn about February, 58, A. D., from Corinth: "Behold this multitude, for which hardly suffice the roofs of the boundless capital. The greatest part of that multitude has no fatherland. From their municipal towns and from their colonies, from the whole earth, have they streamed together. Some, ambition has brought there; others, the urgency of public duty; others, some political mission; others, luxury seeking a convenient and rich place for immoralities; others, the liberal pursuit of studies; others, the public shows. Some were drawn by friendship. . . . Some brought their beauty to find a market for it; some came to sell their power of rhetorical utterance. Every class of men hastens to a city which presents large rewards both to virtues and vices." (*Ad Helviam*, 6, 2.) Paul would have gone to Rome had he not been interned at Caesarea by Felix and by Festus. Ultimately he came to Rome, after the shipwreck at Malta and a winter of waiting (60—61 A. D.), in the spring of 61, by way of Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli, where there already was a little congregation of believers. Paul's stay of seven days probably involved a service, preaching, by him, Acts 28, 14. Puteoli then was the greatest commercial harbor on all the Italian coast. Paul was acquitted the first time in Rome; this was before the terrible persecution of the Christians by Nero. (Cf. *Biblical Review*, April, 1928; also Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 44.) Now, Tacitus wrote this, the last and greatest of his works, about 115 A. D., in the latter days of Trajan, some fifty years after the conflagration and the awful sufferings of the Christians in the capital of the world. The question arises: Does the extreme bitterness of *Annals* XV, 44 represent the prevailing spirit and attitude of the pagan world in 64 A. D. or at the time when Tacitus wrote, and when his friend Pliny the Younger wrote his official letter about the Christians in Bithynia to the Emperor Trajan (X, 96)? If we may trust Tacitus (*loc. cit.*) fully, then the Christians at Rome in 64 were very much more numerous than we would have assumed if we had only Romans 16. Clearly those named there were Christians whom he knew *before* they went to Rome, and we are compelled to assume by a sober weighing of the evidence that they were but a small portion of the Roman church. Some of those named and greeted by Paul must have been among the martyrs of that terrible Neronian persecution. At all events, Tacitus somehow is one of the sources of the history of the primitive Christians. After the great fire the national gods, especially Juno, were to be appeased by the traditional "inspection of the sibylline books." Public opinion, however, was obstinate; the fire *was* designed and planned. So Nero turned public opinion against the so-called Christians, who

were executed amid unspeakable tortures. But the Christians, quite apart from, and long before, the conflagration, were "*per flagitia invisii*." Now we who can follow the annals of the Church of Christ (quite apart from Eusebius and Jerome), especially through the pen of Paul and his faithful secretary Luke; we who know of the new life of purity, charity, and virtues unknown to the pagan world, — I say, we marvel at the words of the Roman historian just quoted. The Christians were "hated on account of their shameless deeds or life." Clearly nothing was practised by them in public, nor was there anything in their lives as citizens, in the actual intercourse of life, that would justify such an accusation. The imputations in Pliny's letter are similar. The new "Society of Christ" was one of brothers and sisters, free or slaves, aristocrats or freedmen, men or women, — all were alike, something radically new, subversive, it might be claimed, of all established order and civic morality. Paul ends several of his epistles thus: "Greet one another with the holy kiss," 1 Cor. 16, 20 (*ἐν φιλήματι ἀγιῶ*). See 2 Cor. 13, 11.

We here step forward in the earlier centuries of the Church and turn to the time of the Antonines, eighty to a hundred years after the Neronian horrors, to the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, when the Church in the capital was a hundred years old; then, too, they were still "unjustly hated and treated despitefully by all mankind" (Justus Martyr, *First Apology*, IX, 2). Compare *From Augustus to Augustine*, 1923, p. 51, where the prevailing attitude of the non-Christian world, the prevailing conception about the Christians, is thus reproduced: —

"With sacred marks and badges they identify and love one another almost before they are acquainted; indiscriminately there is practised among them, as it were, a certain ritual of forbidden appetites (*quaedam libidinum religio*), and they call themselves promiscuously brothers and sisters, so that even in a customary way debauchery is done under the guise of a holy name. . . . And they who talk of a man who was punished with the severest form of execution [the cross] for crime and [who talk] of the deadly work of the cross as an emblem of their religion assign them altars which befit depraved and criminal men, so that they worship that which they deserve." And p. 53, *op. cit.*: "We, too," says the Christian Octavius (XXVIII), "have been pagans; we believed the monstrous stories about the Christians, stories which were so bruited about, but never investigated or proved."

New York, N. Y.

E. G. SIHLER.