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The Earliest Christian Congregations at Rome and at Antioch.

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The very first congregation which was founded after the coming of our Lord was that at Jerusalem. Not, indeed, as though there had not been a congregation in the sense in which He speaks of it, Matt. 18, 19, 20, before. Just as soon as the Lord called His first disciples, John 1, 35—51, He had a small congregation of believers, which had all the rights and privileges of a regular congregation. This band of believers, moreover, during the time of the Lord's ministry, grew in numbers to embrace a total of more than five hundred for the entire country of Palestine, 1 Cor. 15, 6, and some 120 in Jerusalem alone, Acts 1, 15. Yet the formal organization of the first Christian congregation may be said to have taken place on and after the first Day of Pentecost of the New Testament Church. The date of this event may be fixed, with a fair degree of certainty, on the basis of a few passages, one of which is Luke 3, 1, 2. Since Tiberius, who became emperor of Rome in the year 14 A. D., had been coregent of Augustus for a few years, the fifteenth year of his reign was the year 27 A. D. This date agrees with the other facts which are noted by Luke; for Pilate became procurator of Judea and Samaria in the year 26 A. D., being subject to the legate of Syria. The ministry of Jesus, therefore, began in the year 27 A. D., shortly before the Passover; for John describes his first journey to Jerusalem after his baptism in chapter 2 of his gospel. It is now generally assumed that the Passover-festival at which Jesus suffered death was the fourth of His public ministry. It was, therefore, in the year 30 A. D. that the first Christian congregation was established at Jerusalem. The history of this congregation up to the outbreak of the Jewish war has been described quite frequently. But concerning two of the other early congregations of the apostolic age conditions are not quite so favorable, and much contradictory material has been published. It may be

well for this reason to give a short summary of the history of the congregations at Rome and at Antioch till about the end of the first century.

With regard to the church at Rome it is a matter of common knowledge that the Roman Catholic Church insists that the congregation was founded by Peter and that Peter was its first bishop, being followed in this office by Linus and then by Clement. However, historical evidence in support of this claim is entirely lacking. Concerning Peter we have the information contained in the first part of the Book of Acts, chapter 12 telling us that Peter, after his miraculous liberation from imprisonment at Jerusalem, departed from the city and went into another place. From Gal. 2, 11—14 we learn that Peter made a visit to Antioch sometime between 33 and 49 A. D. From the two letters of Peter we may draw the conclusion that he had visited all the provinces of Asia Minor, 1 Pet. 1, 1, and we may assume that at the time of writing his two letters he was at Rome, for so the word Babylon, 1 Pet. 5, 13, is now generally understood. But this was in the early sixties, and it is hardly believable that Peter had labored in Rome in the interval, especially since Paul, about the year 57 A. D., addressed his letter to the Roman Christians. In this letter we find no reference to Peter, and we know that Paul was very careful not to build upon the foundation of another man. The instruction which he gives in his letter to the Romans is evidently the first apostolic instruction which the Christians of that city received. That the church of Rome was not founded by Peter seems to be evident also from the fact that we have no Petrine Liturgy, for the Roman Liturgy does not go back to the early decades of the first century. Both external and internal evidence with regard to this liturgy indicate that it is younger than the liturgy of St. James and that of Ephesus (Paul and John). How, then, was the church at Rome established? If we look over the list of names given in connection with the people who were present at the first celebration of Pentecost after the death of Jesus, we find that there were present strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes. Rom. 2, 10. There is no evidence of any kind connecting the founding of the church at Rome with any of the twelve apostles. Paul is excluded by his own testimony. Rom. 15, 22. 23. It is safe to conclude, therefore, that the congregation at Rome was founded by some of the Jews from the capital who had been in Jerusalem when the great Pentecost miracle took place. These people, who may have been both men and women, were

evidently Jews, who, after their return to Rome, began to make known the great and wonderful works of God, especially the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. Thus, in the course of the next few years, a small congregation may well have been established. The movement seems to have received further impetus on account of the dispersion which took place after the murder of Stephen. Acts 8, 4. The congregation at Rome, at this time, seems to have been composed largely of Jewish Christians, who lived in the Jewish quarter of the capital. Whether the congregation at this time became very large and influential or not, does not appear in any manner.

The next historical tag which will serve to direct us in our investigation is that which we find in the Roman historian Suetonius, who writes: "*Judaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit.*" This is said of Claudius Caesar, and the decree, according to other information, chiefly that of Orosius, was issued in the ninth year of this emperor or in the year 49 A. D. This note from Suetonius is interesting from a number of angles. This information, of course, was inexact, since he speaks of Chrestus, or Christus, as being the instigator of the tumult. The obvious conclusion is this, that there was some difficulty in the Jewish quarter of Rome, very likely along the same lines which we find indicated in Acts 28, 22, where the leaders of the Roman Jews tell Paul concerning "this sect" (the Christians) "that everywhere it is spoken against." Very likely the congregation, having become a little stronger in the course of the years, had been doing some aggressive mission-work, the result being that the Jewish leaders of that time instigated a persecution of some kind, which resulted in a tumult. The emperor, receiving only inadequate information concerning the situation, regarded it as a bit of Jewish foolishness, and since he did not care to have his city made a scene of rioting, he simply expelled all the Jews from the city. It was at this time that Aquila and Priscilla came to Corinth, since they also were included in the decree of Claudius. Acts 18, 2. The expulsion of the Jews seems to have interfered very decidedly with the further growth of the congregation, if it did not end its life for the time being.

However, Claudius Caesar died in the year 54 A. D., and the decree was therefore no longer in force. Accordingly we find that Aquila and Priscilla, who had accompanied Paul to Ephesus and remained there for a number of years (four or five), returned to

Rome in order to save their business or to reestablish it. This is clear from Rom. 16, 3—5, where Paul sends greetings to Priscilla and Aquila at Rome, and greets also the church in their house. Evidently these two staunch helpers of Paul, having returned to the capital about the year 55, had lost no time in once more establishing a congregation at Rome, and they had already had sufficient success, so that at least a small congregation was once more in existence in the year 57, when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. It is all the more plausible that this congregation consisted of Jews and proselytes who had been dispersed on account of the decree of Claudius, since Paul was acquainted personally with so many of them; for his list of friends to whom he sends greetings in chapter 16 is the longest in any of his letters.

Matters seem to have gone ahead without much difficulty until the early sixties of the first century. For eight or nine years the congregation had grown inwardly and outwardly, until the number of adherents of the Christian sect, as it was called, was quite large. Not only in Rome itself was there a congregation of some size, but the Christians of Rome had done mission-work also in the suburbs and elsewhere in the neighborhood; for Luke speaks of brethren whom they found at Puteoli, Acts 28, 13, 14. Between the years 61 and 63 A. D. Paul himself could preach to the congregation. After he had been set free, at the end of his first imprisonment in Rome, he very likely left for Spain, then for Crete and the eastern provinces. It was during his absence from Rome at this time that the sudden persecution of Nero took place. In July of the year 64 a large part of the city of Rome was destroyed by a terrible conflagration, and when the people of Rome began to mutter, accusing Nero of having caused the fire, he placed the blame on the Christians, whose number evidently was large enough at that time to make them conspicuous even in the capital of the world. Not only Suetonius and Tacitus refer to this persecution, but also Juvenal and Martial, as well as Dio Cassius. Owing to the circumstances connected with the accusation against the Christians the persecution was extremely severe, the Christians being hunted down like wild beasts. They were sewed in the skins of animals to be torn by wild beasts; they were soaked with oil and other inflammable material and then elevated on poles in the parks of Nero, where they were set on fire in the evening to serve as torches for the raving populace. All this was done because they were accused

of a new and malicious superstition and of hatred of the entire generation of man. The melancholy spectacle was accompanied with a horse race and honored with the presence of the emperor himself, who mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer.

Just how far this persecution affected the existence of the congregation at Rome cannot definitely be stated, but undoubtedly the effect was quite severe. Not only do we find Paul complaining that he had no one to take care of him in his second imprisonment, 2 Tim. 4, 11—17, but other information which we have likewise shows that the congregation was pretty well dispersed. And it was only after the fury of the people had been appeased by the death of Paul and Peter, and very likely by that also of other leaders of the Christians, that they permitted the believers again to establish themselves in Rome. During the following three or four decades the congregation became very well established indeed, with not only one place of meeting, but a number of them in various sections of the city, so that the congregation at Rome at this time became one of the largest and most influential of any in the large cities of the empire. —

The city of Antioch, the metropolis of Syria and the third city of the Roman Empire, is very interesting to us on account of the fact that the Christian congregation which was there established about the middle of the third decade of the first century was founded by laymen. We are told that the members of the church at Jerusalem who had been scattered abroad on account of the persecution which arose about Stephen traveled about as far as Phœnicia and Cyprus and Antioch. Acts 11, 19. Now, it had been stated before, Acts 8, 1, that the believers of Jerusalem who were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria did not include the apostles. All these disciples preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, at first to the Jews only. But we are told that some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, evidently Jews from the Dispersion, who were somewhat more liberal in their views. These men, when they were come to Antioch, spoke the Word to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. Acts 11, 20. The result of their preaching was apparent at once; for the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number of their hearers "believed and turned unto the Lord." Although no exact date is given, it is safe to assume that the founding of the church at Antioch took place in the latter part of the third decade of the first century.

The establishment of this congregation was plainly a miracle of the Lord, as was that of the founding of the Corinthian church some ten or twelve years later. Antioch was known throughout the Orient for the licentiousness and the open immorality of its citizens. Groves of Daphne were freely given over to the most shameful vices, and the great majority of the citizens of Antioch and the visitors in the Syrian metropolis felt free to join the immoral element at any time, their attitude being made easy by the immense wealth of the city. The description of the city given by various secular writers shows that, far from being ready to receive the Gospel of the humble Prince of Peace, the people of Antioch, by reason of their environment and training, were utterly and violently opposed to a religion which makes purity an essential virtue.

And yet the Word of God was established in the midst of this wicked city. Nor were the lower classes, especially the slaves, the only ones to accept the Gospel of the redemption through Jesus Christ; on the contrary, the history of the congregation shows that people of the upper classes likewise became interested in the story of the Atonement. When Barnabas of Jerusalem was sent to Antioch to gain some personal knowledge of the situation there, he found the grace of God apparent in the work of the church, and he therefore exhorted the believers to cleave to the Lord with steadfast purpose. Evidently the congregation still grew and prospered, especially since they had the advantage of having in their midst, among other great teachers, the great Apostle Paul himself. Their influence upon the other citizens of the city must have been considerable, for it was here that the disciples were first called Christians. Acts 11, 26.

We find two interesting facts stated concerning the congregation at Antioch, even in the first decades of its existence. The one is that the Christians of this congregation were filled with the proper spirit of charity from the beginning. When there was a famine in Judea during the early years of Claudius Caesar, the Christians of Antioch sent relief to the brethren in Judea, the collection being delivered by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. The other outstanding event in the early history of the congregation at Antioch was the sending of the first heathen missionaries. The story is recorded in the first verses of Acts 13. The Holy Spirit directed, through the leaders of the church, that Barnabas and Saul should be sent abroad for missionary work among the Gen-

tiles. Accordingly they were solemnly ordained for this office, the congregation as such being present at their installation.

The interest of the congregation at Antioch in foreign mission work did not wane for the next decade or two. We find that at the end of the first missionary journey Paul and his companions returned to Antioch, where they gathered the congregation together and rehearsed to its members all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Acts 14, 27. At the end of the second missionary journey we likewise find Paul returning to Antioch and spending some time there. Acts 18, 22, 23. After this there is no special mention of the church at Antioch, for Paul could not return there the third time, since he was made prisoner in Jerusalem and from there taken down to Caesarea.

That the church at Antioch was influential from the beginning appears not only from the passages which have been quoted above, but also from the fact that the delegates from this congregation were very respectfully received at Jerusalem, when they came to place an important question before the apostles and the church of Jerusalem. Acts 15. Moreover, the church at Antioch was regarded as being on a level with that of Jerusalem. This we see from the action of Paul in reproving Peter when the latter, upon the occasion of a visit to Antioch, dissembled with some of the Jewish Christians, thereby giving great offense to some of the brethren from the Gentiles. Gal. 2, 11—14.

Of the history of the church at Antioch between the fifth and the ninth decade of the first century but little is known. The discovery of the so-called "chalice" of Antioch has caused some interesting speculation. It seems certain that the beautiful chalice belongs to the Augustan age of Roman art and must be definitely placed in the first century. The fact that we have a picture of Christ without a halo seems to confirm this supposition. The heads of the five chief men of the congregation at Antioch also confirm the historical facts which we know from the Bible. The number of loaves shown on the sides of the chalice corresponds with that of the two feedings of Jesus, thus furnishing a corroboration of the gospel account also in this instance. If the chalice was actually in the possession of the congregation at Antioch, it indicates a wealth which was quite unusual for a congregation at that time. But, at the same time, it shows that the Christians from the beginning were not opposed to beautiful ornaments in their churches

and meeting-places. The congregation at Antioch, up to the Council of Nicaea and beyond, held a very prominent place in the early Church, furnishing some of the outstanding teachers of the Orient. It was a center of Christianity not only for Syria, but for the entire eastern part of Asia Minor as well.