

This brief Summary of a long Study was read at the Corinth Congress on “The Apostle Paul and Corinth” under the aegis of the Bishop and Mayor of Corinth and organized by members of the University of Athens

## A House Church in Corinth? An Inquiry into the Structure of Early Corinthian Christianity

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### *1. Introductory*

The present paper is a summary only of a part of a 50-page study written for this Congress. In the larger study I set myself the task of inquiring into the nature and structure of Corinthian Christianity during its early years.

The impetus to this study was given by recent reconstructions of Corinth’s Church situation, made in the light of Social Science theory and history. Expressed in a nutshell, this reconstruction holds that Corinthian Christianity consisted of a very small group of believers—a House Church—that met for worship and the celebration of the Eucharist in the house of a well-to-do member. The Corinthian Church’s situation reflected the Roman stratification as well as the Roman patron-client institution. The Church’s problems were social conflicts arising from the patron’s discriminating treatment of the poorer members of the Church.

Although this reconstruction makes use of data from many areas such as archeology and philology, the most decisive factors in interpreting this data seem to be three assumptions: (a) Corinth was a Roman, not a Greek city, (b) Corinth’s social stratification reflected Rome’s stratification, and (c) the Corinthian Church’s dependence upon a Christian *patronus* after the Roman fashion. The time limits allow only for a brief treatment

of these three assumptions, but without the evidence I present in the larger study.

## *2. The Population of Corinth and Its Alleged Romanitas*

Taking their cue from the fact that after laying almost waste for 102 years, Corinth was refounded by decree of Julius Caesar in the year of his death (the Ides of March 44 B.C.) as a Roman colony, many scholars regard the city that Paul visited a “*Roman Corinth*” in contradistinction to the “*Greek Corinth*” of B.C. times or to any other contemporary Hellenic city. Strabon’s description of the settlers of Corinth as freedmen (ἐποίκους τοῦ ἀπελευθερωτικοῦ γένους πλείστους) in contradistinction to the settlers of Carthage, who were predominantly Romans (ἐποίκους Ῥωμαίων τοὺς προαιρουμένους καὶ τῶν στρατιωτῶν τινας), has not been given its due weight, with the result that an unhistorical foundation has been laid. However, evidence from archeology, traditions in vogue, and language speaks decisively for a Greek Corinth. Naturally, since Corinth was ruled by the Roman regime, it was ‘Roman’ in the sense of its being a part of the Roman empire. Nevertheless, its people lived in the Hellenic spirit: traditions, *paideia*, athletics, cultural, religious and philosophic activities, all were clearly Greek. This can be exemplified by the following three points:

1. **Monuments.** The main monuments, such as the archaic temple, the Peirene, the stoas, the theater, the temples of Zeus, and Athena, as well as very many others had been built in early times and been rebuilt or restored during the Roman occupation.

2. **Traditions.** Each of the above-mentioned monuments was the bearer of an old tradition which was very much alive to the Corinthians of Paul’s day.

3. **The Greek Language.** Much has been made of the fact that of the inscriptions found in the excavated municipal center of Corinth 128 are in Latin, 29 in Greek and three in Latin and Greek. But this is exactly what was to be expected. Since these inscriptions were found in the administrative center of Corinth, and, in addition, are concerned with Roman administration and not with the anonymous populace, it was

quite natural that they were written in Latin. The ordinary people, who went about their business, their shops and their fields, had no need to carve on stone or marble their trivial achievements. Thus, the inscriptions cannot tell anything about the language of the Corinthian population. That the language of Corinth was Greek rather than Latin may be gathered from the following data:

a. Since Corinth was settled chiefly by Greeks, it would be natural for them to use their mother-tongue. Nor is there another example of a Greek city preferring Latin to Greek.

b. That Latin compared unfavorably with Greek is admitted by such Roman authors as Cicero and Suetonius. Is it then likely that the Corinthians, who had a flair for rhetoric and stylishness, would ever exchange Greek for Latin?

c. The Greek attitude to the Latin language in general may be gauged from the fact that while Greek literature was being at this time translated or copied wholesale or imitated by the Latin authors, the Greeks, on their side, for hundreds of years did not consider it worth their while to quote any Latin authors.

d. No Roman who did not know Greek could be considered educated. All of their great men (such as the Scipios, Antonius, and Caesar) had studied at the schools of Greek masters. No doubt some Greeks, too, had an interest in learning Latin, but this would hardly apply to the population of a whole city and especially in Greece!

e. How precarious the situation of Latin in Corinth was can be gauged from the fact that a few decades after Paul, it began to disappear even from the administration.

f. Finally, Paul writes his letters to the Corinthian Church in Greek, not Latin, simply because the population of Corinth, a small part of which had become Christian, had Greek as its mother tongue.

The evidence on the Greek character of Corinth is so compelling that the so-called “*Romanitas* of Corinth”, advocated by the recent sociological revision, might be characterized as a “Roman Phantom”.

### 3. *The Social Stratification of Corinth*

This interest goes back to the nineteenth century, receiving its ultimate impetus from industrial capitalism and marxist theories. One of the earliest scholars to apply social stratification was A. Deissmann. From the 1970's on there has been an upsurge in sociological interest (Judge, Malherbe, Grant, Meeks, Theissen, Esler, Horrell, Meggitt, Friesen, *et al.*). Some of these scholars thought of Deissmann as representing the "old consensus", that is, that Paul's assemblies were composed of the poor and marginalized inhabitants of the Roman empire, in contradistinction to the so-called "new consensus", which holds that the early Christians came from all sections of society except the very top, and that conflicts in the Church are to be explained by social tensions. However, Friesen has demonstrated that Deissmann has been misunderstood; his position was similar to the so-called "new consensus".

In its analysis Sociology applies both models and criteria. For example, Greek and Roman societies have been interpreted by the models of thirteenth century Florence as well as primitive African tribes. The inapt comparisons, naturally, betray a lack of historical perspective. As for criteria, two of its most important are: "dissonance of status" and "social deviance". The first works on the idea that the empire's population was categorized according to language and provenance, formal *ordo*, being free or slave, wealth, occupation, age, and sex. The problem with this set of sub-criteria is that according to some of them a person might qualify for upper class, while according to others he might not. The second criterion, "social deviance", implies that even if Christians had high status, they were liable to be "stamped ... [as] a socially deviant minority"! How problematic these criteria are, can be gauged from the circumstance that a king of distinguished pedigree who had been defeated by an upstart Roman general and was used to grace the latter's triumph, would be regarded as socially inferior to his conqueror. And a Greek with nobler ancestry, higher education, and more sophisticated culture, would be considered inferior to a Roman because the latter had won the battle. The bottom line is that, according to current criteria, anyone who is not a Roman rich, is inferior by default.

Thus, although sociology as a whole has brought to our attention important side information, the use of such models and criteria for

interpreting the Corinthian letters is quite problematic, since they are contradicted by the historical and philological data. It would, then, appear that the sociological interpretation of the structure of the Corinthian Church appears to be the second “Roman phantom”.

#### 4. *The Patronus-Clients Relationship*

The Roman Patron-client relationship has played a very large role in recent interpretations of the Corinthian correspondence. Indeed, the impression from some New Testament scholars is, that this Roman institution was so widespread that just about every one of the 99% of the population of the empire was a client to a member of the 1% of the top row. This exaggerated claim has been rightly criticized by Meggitt.

Roman patronage, according to Dionysios Hal. and Ploutarchos, had its origin in the legislation of Romulus, which attached the poor Romans to the rich Romans. This institution in time deteriorated and the clients were often reduced to abject dependence on their Patronus. This is exemplified by the Roman ἀνδράποδα Martial and Juvenal, who had abjectly surrendered their freedom for a ‘loaf of bread’. And although even some Greeks accepted the relationship, this institution never found a real foothold on Greek soil. Citizens of the Eastern empire like Loukianos, did not hesitate to caricature the institution; though his various stories are artistically narrated, they cannot but be a true reflection of this despicable institution. We must not forget that this was the time of the Atticist Revival, when the Greeks’ national consciousness was reawakened and they resisted things Roman in whatever direction the opportunity presented itself.

Linguistically, too, the Greek terms often cited as equivalent to Latin *patronus* have very different meanings: the Greek term πάτριον is used already by Herodotus in the sense of ‘uncle’. In later times only an insignificant 34 instances are translations of the Latin term. The other terms, προστάτης, χορηγός, and εὐεργέτης are all used with different content than the Latin *patronus*.

In the light of these historical facts, the claim of some New Testament scholars that Roman patronage occurred freely in Corinth may be

deemed groundless, while their identification of Hellenic προστάτης (cf. προστάτις in Rom 16:2) with Roman *patronus* confuses practices of quite dissimilar nature.

It should be clear by now that there was no Hellenic tradition similar to the Roman *patronus-clientis* and that the Hellenic mind-set was basically inimical to such ideas and practices. The claim that this Roman institution was rife at Corinth and that the Corinthian church enjoyed the ‘benefits’ of patronage, is no doubt the third Roman phantom in the sociological reconstruction of Corinthian Christianity.

### 5. *The Size, Stratification, and Economical Capability of the Corinthian Ekklesia*

Rejecting the three Roman assumptions as mere phantoms, my investigation came to the following results:

1. *Size*. The claims of recent investigations that the Corinthian Church numbered 30-50 members (Murphy O’Connor) or even under 100 (Blue) are far from persuasive. The conditions in Paul’s correspondence (which are not contradicted by what is otherwise known of Corinth) demand a membership of several hundreds.

2. *The Stratification*. The concerns of Paul’s letters and what is generally forthcoming from a historical and archeological investigation of Corinth, leads to the conclusion that Deissmann and the “new consensus”, as opposed to the ‘pauperistic’ standpoint of some researchers, have correctly interpreted the evidence: the Corinthian Church was composed of all strata of society except the top.

3. *Economic Capability*. Not only are there clear references to persons of economic capability and independent means, but the Corinthians seems to have been more affluent than the Macedonian Churches. They were, in fact, capable of sending of their affluence to the poor of Judea, a request that Paul would never have made if the Corinthian Christians were reduced to the abject poverty of certain sociological reconstructions.

We may, thus, conclude that recent reconstructions of the Corinthian Church as meeting in the *triclinium* and *atrium* of a well to do Christian

patron, who laid a sumptuous table before the high class Christians in the *triclinium* but fed those in the *atrium* the miserable food known from other Roman patrons, is not borne out by the facts. Neither the letters of Paul, nor the literary documents, nor the archeological evidence support such a reconstruction. This imaginary reconstruction seems to be the result of the three Roman phantoms, which have been allowed decisive importance in the matter at the expense of archeology, the literary evidence and Paul's explicit information.

## 5. Epilogue

As indicated above, social science and history have enhanced our sociological consciousness by posing insistent questions. The insights sociology has given have come to stay; its contributions can no longer be ignored. At the same time, it has also become obvious that sociology has not been content with supplying the background against which we should understand early Christianity: its life, beliefs, hopes, aspirations, problems, and conflicts. It has increasingly claimed autonomous status; no longer as a subservient discipline to New Testament Exegesis, but as an alternative to it. The question, therefore, arises, Can sociology, whose sphere of interest is the body, adequately deal with theological problems? Take, for instance, Jesus's statement in Mt 16:26: τί γὰρ ὠφεληθήσεται ἄνθρωπος ἐὰν τὸν κόσμον ὅλον κερδήσῃ τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ζημιωθῇ; Can sociology really deal with such a text, which turns upside down its values and principles and models?