

The first century Christians from the house-churches in Rome truly understood the implications of living under the influence of two cultures. The Jewish and Greco-Roman ways continuously collided and fused as new followers representing both backgrounds continued to be added to the church of Christ. The situation occurring at Rome was unprecedented. Jews and Greco-Romans were gathering in the same location to worship the same God; a beautiful image, but surely one that would entail conflict.

Both groups were attempting to hold on to a position of power and racial supremacy in the church. There were large numbers of Jews in Rome, about 50,000 as historians estimate. (H.J. Leon 135-36). Greco-Roman Christians, as citizens of the empire, could have regarded the Jews as intruders, as unwanted aliens who were taking over their city. They could have regarded their Jewish brothers and sisters as obstinate people who refused to acculturate to the Roman lifestyle and who were quick to impose their customs and way of life upon all of society. On the other hand, the Jews held tight to religious power. The Scriptures and those who taught them were Jewish. Also in their eyes, the Greco-Romans had been impure people until not too long ago. Certainly these ex-pagans would need to conform to Jewish instruction if they rightly wanted to follow the God of Jewish tradition.

Adding to the challenge of unity among these two groups, the Roman government had been creating a stigma against the Jewish people through the passage of racist and exaggerated decrees. I will be borrowing from Professor Michael R. Cosby from Messiah College to give us insight into this situation: “In 19 CE Tiberius decreed that all Jews must leave Rome because four of them swindled a wealthy Roman citizen named Fluvia out of a substantial amount of money (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.81) She had become a Jewish proselyte and had given a large gift for the Jerusalem temple, but these four used it for their own gain” (203). Certainly, something

deeper than this crime was behind the reason for this expulsion, perhaps racism. However, after a number of years, the Jews had regained their previous size in Rome. Then, in 49 CE, Emperor Claudius, who also strongly disliked the Jews, found himself in conflict with them again. Roman Historian Dio Cassius tells us that “Claudius sought to eliminate the trouble in Rome initially by forbidding them to ‘meet together in accordance with their ancestral way of life’ (*History* 60.6) About eight years after this edict, riots broke out in the Jewish sector of Rome, and Claudius issued a decree in 49 CE ordering all Jews to leave the city” (203). A couple of years after however, Emperor Nero succeeded Claudius. Nero had a wife who liked the Jews so she convinced him to allow them to return to the city. Around the year 54 the Jews were allowed into Rome again. (Cosby, 204).

All these expulsions and re-admittances of Jewish people provoked instability in the house-churches in Rome. Faithful Jewish Jesus-believers were being separated from their congregations by the government’s decrees. Brothers and sisters such as Paul’s beloved Priscilla and Aquila became unwanted aliens in Rome. On the other hand, the Greco-Roman believers were seeing these expulsions take place before their eyes. What were they to do? Should they remain quiet? Should they publically make known their disagreement with the empire’s policies? Or should they support the government and even collaborate with it to expel their brothers and sisters?

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans around the year 57 CE. (Cosby, 204). As I mentioned before, during this time the Jews had already being readmitted into Rome for the second time under the policies of Emperor Nero. At this point the church in Rome was attempting to integrate the returning Jews into fellowship. In his letter, Paul had the task of addressing a church that was

dealing with deep racial and cultural divisions that had been largely enhanced by governmental oppression and instability.

Modern-day United States of America. Professor Daniel Carroll from the University of Denver provides important information regarding Latin American immigration into the US. Even though the Mexican story is not the full Latin American story, it is central for our understanding. It could be said that migration from Mexico and Latin America began in 1848. The treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed that year ending the Mexican-American War. The defeated Mexico ceded to the United States vast territories comprising a number of today's South-Central and South-Western states in the US. (32). Among other factors, laws against Chinese workers and the high number of Americans fighting in World War I created a high demand for Hispanic labor at the end of the 1800's and beginning of the 1900's. However, as the great depression hit, the government passed hostile measures against Mexicans and deportations began. (33).

In 1942, at the verge of a new world war, the US government created the *bracero* program. Workers were needed in the agricultural sector and visas were given to Mexicans. The number of visas wasn't sufficient and the demand for workers increased, encouraging undocumented immigration. As a response, the government passed "Operation Wetback" in states like Arizona, Texas, and California to arrest all "illegals" in these states. Records indicate that over a million Hispanics were arrested. (34). However, over forty years later, in 1986, the Reagan administration allowed three million of Hispanics to receive amnesty. Many Hispanics brought their families into the US at this point, and instead of decreasing, immigration actually increased. (35-36). In the 1990's however, another backlash occurred. Among other things, social services were drastically reduced for immigrants. (36).

More recently, states and local governments such as Arizona's have begun to take matters into their own hands. The Bill SB 1070 was passed in Arizona, allowing police officer's to stop and interrogate any person for any "reasonable suspicion" that they are undocumented. If the person does not present the documentation at the moment, he/she would be arrested and deported. Even though the Supreme Court struck down this law, the government of Arizona continues to present a threat to undocumented immigrants due to its publically known anti-immigrant stands.

Today, the Hispanic church in the US is growing in large numbers. Susan Mark Landis from Mennonite Church USA tells us that "About 70 of our 930 congregations are members of Iglesia Menonita Hispana, and estimates are that up to 70% of the members and pastors of these congregations are undocumented". As the Roman authorities did with the Jewish Christians, the United States federal and state governments are clearly promoting instability and harm to our Hispanic brothers and sisters.

As in with Christians in Rome, Hispanics and American Christians are often divided by racial and cultural conflicts. Some American Christians think that Hispanics are taking over their country and imposing their Mexican ways, as some Greco-Roman Christians thought about the Jews. American Christians may also think of Hispanics as uneducated people who don't know how to interpret the Bible, just as some Jews thought about the Greco-Romans regarding their limited knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures. Notice that our Hispanic brothers and sisters find themselves in a two-sided position of weakness: whereas the Greco-Roman Christians were at home as citizens in Rome, most Hispanic Christians find themselves being considered aliens here, and as the Jews had scholarly power regarding their knowledge of Scriptures, the American Christians are largely the ones who write theology and are in charge of seminaries. Hispanic

Christians are in large numbers academically uneducated and part of Pentecostal and Catholic contexts that are at the periphery of Christian denominationalism in the United States.

For these reasons, our Hispanic brothers and sisters need us to advocate for their rights as humans before the authorities of this government. It was unthinkable for the Greco-Roman church to advocate for Jewish immigrant rights before the authoritarian Caesar, however in 21st century United States, the Christians must advocate for their brothers and sisters as tax-payers in this American republic. Also we must encourage and help our brothers and sisters to learn English to better communicate and move about in this country, as Jews also were benefited by learning Greek in Rome.

Let the fires of God's justice burn and its cry be heard in the streets of Arizona during the 2013 Mennonite Church Convention and in all the towns where loving followers of Christ Jesus reside! But do not wait until then to act. Tonight, begin developing relationships with your Hispanic brothers and sisters. Invite them and visit each other's congregations and set your tables for them. Know each other.

In the letter to the Romans, after addressing each side of the conflict between the Jews and Greco-Romans, Paul concludes by saying in Romans 15:7 "*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God*". If there was an epistle to the Americans, I believe Paul's instruction would be the same today.

Works Cited

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