

From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries

reviewed by [Robert M. Grant](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

In Review



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Peter Lampe
Fortress

Peter Lampe, professor of New Testament at Heidelberg, begins his magisterial book by giving us a definite date for the break of Christians from the Roman synagogues—49 AD, when the emperor Claudius expelled some Jews from Rome. From then on, Romans often persecuted Christians rather than Jews. Lampe locates the Jews in Rome chiefly in the southern and western sections of the city.

As these details show, he is determined to set early Christian history on a severely factual base and to reject whatever does not fit his methodology. Neither this methodology nor Lampe's most significant conclusions are new. In a chapter with the fearsome title "Fractionation, Monarchical Episcopacy, and Presbyteral Government" he makes the reasonable claim that there were no "monarchical" bishops at Rome before the episcopate of Victor toward the end of the second century. But neither this nor the idea that the church had been governed by presbyters is new. In the course of his discussion, however, Lampe illuminates countless details and settles innumerable minor controversies.

To read or write church history after this book will involve reconsidering churches outside of Rome, for Lampe does not discuss the Roman churches as if they existed in isolation. When he deals with the educational backgrounds of Justin and Tatian, for example, he transports the reader to various parts of the Mediterranean world, and to literature as much as history. Along the way, he offers many astute comments on particular Christians, the role of Christian women in the second century, education, class distinctions, doctrinal differences, Gnostic teachers at Rome (with excellent comments on method)—indeed, on almost anything related to his themes.

I miss, though, more of a sense of the ordinary, daily lives of these early Christians. What difference did calling themselves Christian make to the personal lives of Romans? What difference did the Roman Christians make in the life of the church as a whole? Despite Lampe's enormous vigor and Herculean efforts, readers don't get a fully recognizable picture of what it meant to be a Christian in Rome. Perhaps only the acts of the martyrs get us closer to such a meaning.