

PAUL AND THE CHURCH AT ROME

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The city of Rome during the First Century A.D. was the capital of one of the greatest empires this world has ever seen. Its population was greater than one million. The phrase “all roads lead to Rome” bespeaks the primacy that the city of Rome held for so many centuries. The city was already eight centuries old when Christianity began. It was inevitable that the church of Christ would spread to Rome, as Jesus outlined for the apostles their mission to carry the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and “the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). There is no way that Rome could be excluded from that.

Aquila and Priscilla from Rome

The New Testament does not record the precise beginning of Christianity in Rome. Although there were some Jews and proselytes from Rome present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and some of them may have been among the early converts to Christ, it does not appear that any of these ventured past Phoenicia and Cyprus when they were scattered during Saul’s persecution of the early church (Acts 11:19). Paul arrived in Corinth for the first time somewhere between late A.D. 50 or late A.D. 51, and first came in contact with fellow tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla, who had moved to Corinth when the emperor Claudius evicted the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1-3). There is no evidence that Aquila and Priscilla were already Christians at this time, nor is there any mention that they had been involved with the establishment of the church in Rome, though it is certainly possible.

Not established by Paul (or Peter)

In about 54-56 A.D., near the conclusion of his third missionary journey, before he left Ephesus Paul said that after visiting Macedonia, Achaia and Jerusalem, he “must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21). About a year later, after he had been through Macedonia and was in Achaia in the city of Corinth, Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans. Paul reiterated his plans and desire to come to Rome in this epistle (Rome 1:10-17). Paul said he had had a great desire for many years to come to them, but had been hindered (Rom 15:22-24). This was written to *Christians* (Rom 1:6), which informs us that: 1) the church had existed there for “many years” already, and 2) it was not started by Paul. Up to this point, the evidence suggests that no apostles had been to Rome yet, because these Christians had not yet received miraculous spiritual gifts (Rom 1:11), which only came by the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 8:18). This is also noteworthy, because that would exclude the apostle Peter from being the one to start the church at Rome. In fact, there is not one shred of evidence that Peter ever had anything personally to do with the church there. The evidence in the New Testament suggests that the church at Rome was established by Christians who had previously been converted through the efforts of Paul and the other apostles. For example, when Romans was written, Aquila and Priscilla were there again, and the church was meeting in their house (Rom 16:3-5). Epaenetus, from Achaia, was also there (Rom 16:5). Romans 16:6-15 contains a long list of others who apparently were known personally to Paul and who were in Rome at that time. Also, Phoebe was on her way there from Cencrea (Rom 16:1). Many Christians moving to Rome from places in the

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(continued)

empire where the gospel had already been spread seems to be the basis for the establishment of the church at Rome.

Paul in Rome

After Paul was taken prisoner in Jerusalem, Jesus told Paul that he would bear witness of Christ at Rome (Acts 23:11). But he was held in custody for two years by the Romans in Caesarea first (Acts 24:27). Around 60 A.D., Paul (along with Luke and Aristarchus, Acts 27:2) finally reached Rome. Brethren met Paul when he arrived in Italy at Puteoli and Paul stayed there with them for seven days (Acts 28:13-14). The brethren from Rome itself came all the way to Appii Forum and The Three Taverns to meet Paul and accompany him to Rome (Acts 28:14-15). Paul began preaching to the Jews at Rome (Acts 28:16-23), and “some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not” (Acts 28:24). In Rome, “Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (Acts 28:30-31). Paul wrote the Philippians that the things that had happened to him (i.e. his bonds) had “fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Php 1:12). One of Paul’s converts in Rome was Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon from Colossae, whom Paul sent back to his master (Phm 10-19; Col 4:7-9). Many were now preaching Christ in Rome, though some did so for envy of Paul supposing to add affliction to Paul’s bonds (Php 1:13-18). As a result of all of this, the gospel had reached the palace itself and “all other places” (Php 1:13). The brethren that were with Paul in Rome at the time he wrote Philippians included saints of Caesar’s household (Php 4:21-22). Thus, Christianity had permeated even the palace of Caesar!

Paul’s fellow-workers in Rome

Timothy joined Paul in Rome (Php 1:1; Col 1:1; Phm 1), as did Tychicus of Asia (Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:7-9), Epaphras of Colossae (Col 1:3-8; 4:7-9,12-13; Phm 23), Justus (Col 4:10), Demas (Col 4:14; Phm 24) and Mark (Col 4:10; Phm 24). Luke was always there (Acts 27:1ff; Col 4:14; Phm 24). These were Paul’s “fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God” in Rome (Col 4:11). Epaphroditus came to Rome from Philippi to bring physical provisions to him (Php 2:25-30; 4:10-18). Aristarchus of Thessalonica was a fellow-prisoner of Paul’s in Rome (Acts 27:2; Col 4:10; Phm 24).

Paul’s death in Rome

Another five or so years after he was set free from prison in Rome, Paul was back in prison in Rome, this time facing execution (2 Tim 4:6-8). Onesiphorus, a brother from Ephesus, was in Rome and helped Paul, being unashamed of Paul’s chain (2 Tim 1:16-18). When Paul first appeared before the government in Rome, no one stood with him but all forsook him (2 Tim 4:16). Only Luke was with Paul (2 Tim 4:11). By this time, Aquila and Priscilla were back in Ephesus (2 Tim 4:19). Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia and “all the brethren” in Rome sent Timothy their greetings (2 Tim 4:21). Nothing more is mentioned in the New Testament about the church in Rome.