

THE CHURCH AT ROME (PART 1)

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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.

Early converts from Rome

In Acts 1:8, Jesus outlined for the apostles their mission to carry the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and “the uttermost part of the earth.” There is no way that Rome could be excluded from that. Nevertheless, the New Testament does not record the precise beginning of Christianity in Rome. There were some Jews and proselytes from Rome present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Some of them may have been among the early converts to Christ, but 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).

Aquila and Priscila

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. Aquila and Priscilla had moved Rome to Corinth when the emperor Claudius evicted the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1-3). The scriptures do not reveal whether 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.

The church at Rome not started by Paul

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

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19:21). About a year later, after he had been through Macedonia and was in Achaia in the city of Corinth, Paul was inspired by God to write the 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 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). Acts 8:18 plainly states that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit only came by the laying on of the apostles’ hands. The verse also demonstrates that the apostles, including Peter himself, would purposely journey to lay their hands on new converts to give them those gifts. This would necessarily eliminate Peter as the founder of the Roman church, and thus undermines one of the central tenets of Roman Catholicism.

Christians in Rome with prior contact with apostles elsewhere

All of this evidence suggests that the church at Rome must have been established by Christians who had previously been converted through the efforts of Paul and the other apostles, but not by any of those apostles converting them in Rome itself. 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 Cenchrea (Rom 16:1). Many Christians moving to Rome from places in the empire where the gospel had already been spread seems to be the basis for the establishment of the church at Rome.