

Romans #1

The epistles of Paul are arranged together in the New Testament just as other books by the same author might be grouped in a library. There are 13 letters which claim to be from his hand: Romans through Philemon. Then there is one letter which follows the 13 whose author was not named but whom many believe was Paul; Hebrews.

Among Paul's letters, nine are to a congregation or groups of congregations (Galatians). All of these congregations, with perhaps the except of Colossae and Rome, had been founded by Paul. When he wrote the Romans, he wrote to a congregation which had existed already for some time. How, when and by whom the church began is not known. Some insist Peter was its founder, but there is no real evidence for this. It is possible it began shortly after Pentecost. There were sojourners from there in Jerusalem on the memorial Pentecost and they might have been converted and upon returning home, became the foundation for it (Acts 2:16). However, this is only a possibility with no certainty about it.

Still, if Paul was not responsible for the existence of the Roman church, he was familiar with many brethren there, many of them co-laborers with him in former years. Chapter sixteen identifies at least 28 different individuals whom Paul had known elsewhere. Heading the list were Prisca and Aquilla who are described as "my fellow-workers in Christ for whom for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles ..." (Rm. 16:3f). Paul had first met this couple at Corinth and worked with them for they were of the same trade (Acts 18:1-3). Neither the texts from Acts nor Romans identify the couple as "converts of Paul"; possibly they were already Christians when Paul found them in Corinth.

If, however, the origin of the Roman church is hazy and vague, there is little uncertainty of the location where Paul was when the letter was written. Nor is there much doubt about the time of its composition. The letter was written at the conclusion of Paul's third journey and corresponds to the activities recorded in Acts 20:1-3. Internal evidence from the letter sustains this. He wrote, "but now, I say, I go unto Jerusalem ministering to the saints. For it hath been the good pleasure of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for saints that are at Jerusalem" (Romans 15:25f). Paul acted as a messenger to deliver benevolence from Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians on two different occasions.

The first of these was before any of his journeys and was designated for the churches of Judaea, given and sent from the Antioch Christians (Acts 11:27-30). The second of these was raised from Galatian, Macedonian and Achaian churches; churches which did not even exist at the time of the first contribution. And, whereas the first contribution was "general" (to brethren who dwelt in Judaea), the latter contribution was specific: to the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:18; 2 Cor. 8, 9; Romans 15:25, 37). The time of that benevolence is considered to be AD 57 or 58.

Nor is there little doubt as to where Paul was when he wrote the letter. All fingers point to Corinth. He had written his second letter to the Corinthians enroute from Ephesus to Corinth, in the region of Macedonia. Anxious for word from Corinth as to how his first letter had been received, he passed an open door in Troas, hastening on to meet Titus who was bringing him word from Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1f). When Titus arrived, Paul dispatched one more letter to Corinth (2 Corinthians) in which he gave further instructions about raising the pledge for the needy Jerusalem saints (2 Cor. 8, 9). But, when Paul wrote the Romans, that contribution was complete. Achaia (Corinth) had made a "certain contribution" (Rom. 15:26). The Roman letter was apparently delivered by Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchræa, which was a seaport town for Corinth (Rom. 16:1f). Various greetings were sent to the Romans from those with Paul, one notable one being "Gaius, my host". Paul was staying with Gaius wherever Gaius lived. And while there might have been many people by that name, Gaius is remembered as being one at Corinth whom Paul acknowledged he had baptized. "I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius" (1 Cor. 1:14). There was a Gaius at Corinth, a sister from Corinth's seaport carried Paul's letter to Rome. And, added to this is the fact that Corinth was the closest location Paul reached to Rome on this journey: leaving Corinth he traveled further and further away from Rome.

And so, we commence a study of this important letter of Paul's. It was not his first letter. At least five others were written before it (1 and 2 Corinthians; 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Galatians). Yet, while not his first, it was his longest. And the letter deals more extensively with the doctrine of "justification by faith" than any of his others. Over the next several weeks, study with us this mainstay document of the Faith of Christians!

Jim McDonald