

THE CHURCH AT ROME

Romans 1:6

Bitny Ibrahim has been approached about a Crusade in Italy in 1973 -

Rome is a most interesting city because of its commerce, its architects, its geographical location, its political philosophy, and its religious philosophy.

Rome has been synonymous with the vast political empire. Also, with the most powerful religious empire of anywhere in the world.

The historian, Gibbon, devoted 20 years and 5 volumes to a treatment of the rise and fall of the power that headed up Rome.

Visitors go there and tarry and visit many of the history making places.

One of the most historical making events was that of a private dwelling - rented and occupied by a Christian prisoner, the Apostle Paul.

Paul, in his letters, ignored by choice the palaces, the temples, the places of the cathedrals. The troops and the splendor of Nero. And chose to discuss rather some of the most profound doctrines for the Christian church.

I discuss our church tonight under four heads. First, the foundation. Second, the exhortation. Third, the persecution. Fourth, the corruption.

I. THE FOUNDATION

Chapter 1:7 - To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints - grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the first word to this church in Rome.

At the writing of this message, the 8th verse tells us that this church had a name that was spoken of, or a faith that was spoken of, throughout the whole world.

Obscurity envelopes the ^{founding} foundation of this church which we may suppose was laid by some people from Rome who were present at Pentecost. But it is hardly that these people founded the church. They may have won some disciples. But the Gentile character of the church is against the theory that they founded it.

There is no evidence that Peter founded the church or that he was ever in the city. The tradition that Peter established the church moreover is contrary to the known facts in the New Testament. Peter was not the apostle of the un-circumcision. Gal. 2:7. This was a church of the un-circumcision. It was more likely that Cornelius established the church than Peter. Indeed, Peter was not aggressively missionary. And if he organized a church anywhere, history is silent upon the subject.

Peter appears from history at Antioch - where he was censored by Paul for his fear of the judiasing party, which led him to inconsistent conduct toward the Gentile converts.

Peter's own epistles disprove the tradition that he organized this church. They were not addressed to or from Rome. They are incompatible with tradition or the position of tradition.

In connection with this, he said, I Peter 2:16, the only cornerstone of the church is Christ. I Peter 2:25, Christ is the shepherd and over-seer of souls. I Peter 5:1, the elders are Peter's equals. He exhorts these elders to tend the sheep without exercising Lordship. And never mentions a peculiar authority over the flock. Chapter 5:2. He is conscious of no more authority over these men than Paul had over the Ephesian elders who were appointed by the Holy Spirit. Acts 20:28.

He mentions the transfiguration and does not deem the incident about the keys of sufficient importance for mention. 2 Peter 1:16. He also appeals to the writings of our beloved Brother Paul, for confirmation of his teaching. Chapter 3:15. He begins his last letter - Simon Peter. The remembrance and conscious of his frailty, he designated the whole company of worshippers as holy priesthood. I Peter 2:5. A royal priesthood. 2:9.

Paul epistles disprove the tradition - if Peter was founder and bishop of the church, or if he was in Rome at the time Paul wrote Romans from Corinth, or at the time he wrote from Rome the churches at Colossae, Ephesus, etc. - it is unbelievable that Paul would not have mentioned some way the fact.

Here is one letter addressed to the saints in Rome. And here are seven letters written from Rome to the saints elsewhere and not a reference to Peter in any of them. This is more than an arguement from silence.

Paul sends salutations to 26 people in Rome, by name, and to others who were identified but not named. It is incredible that he should not have saluted Peter had Peter been in Rome.

Paul sends from Rome to the churches and individuals, 17 people by name

and others differently identified. If Peter was with Paul in Rome, Paul's failure to refer to him is inexcusable. Did Paul ignore him. The rational conclusion is that Peter did not lay the foundation for the church at Rome during this time.

Luke, in his writings in Acts disprove the tradition that Peter founded the Roman church. He tells of Peter and his work in Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea, Antioch - and never a word about Peter being in Rome.

Now Peter had nothing to do with planting the church at Corinth. As some people later said that he did. Nor did Paul participate in planning the church at Rome. These are two errors.

The only possible justification in the inspired records for even locating Peter in Rome is the word Babylon in I Peter 5:13. And at that time it was used as a symbol. Symbolic language. There was a Jewish population at Babylon and it was perfecting natural that Peter should speak to them.

Now why did not Paul, who wrote five and possibly seven letters from Rome, use Babylon a single time. Now the Lord told Paul three times that he was to see Rome. He told Peter how he was to die - but never hinted that Rome was to be his place.

Note Paul, in person, was not the founder of the church at Rome. He announced his purpose to see Rome about the time he left Ephesus, Acts 19:21.

He had never visited Rome about the time he wrote the book of Romans from Corinth, in the year 58. Romans 1:10.

After the church had been in existence for some years, he often had longed to visit and be with them. Romans 1:13. I purpose to come unto you, but was left hitherto, that I might have some fruit among you, even as among other Gentiles.

In Romans 15:22, many times he was hindered from carrying out his desires. The vastness of his field of labors and his knowledge that the Gospel had already struck root in Rome, had kept him hitherto from visiting the capitol in 15:23. Having a great desire these many years to come unto you.

In Romans 15:23 he also intended - he said to go to Spain. When so ever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you. For I trust to see you in my journey.

They were requested to pray that he would come in joy to them through the will of God. Romans 15:31. Therefore Paul did not establish the church, he himself being the witness. He left Rome after his first trial. The idea that of tradition was put forth existing in Rome the contradiction of all the known facts.

Who then did establish the church in Rome. In all probability the converts and helpers of Paul's ministry in Asia and Macedonia were the evangelists who carried the good news to the Gentile Romans. And started the church in the then world's capitol.

Much travel went on in those days. There were splendid roads. The prestige of Rome drew travelers from afar and it was frequented by all the cities of the empire. And the Roman officials and troops were constantly going and coming from the provinces.

There was a constant stream and flow - drawn from commerce, politics, and pleasure.

Undoubtedly Christians among these crowds, converted from Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus came in and made other converts.

Certain converts and fellow workers of Paul, elsewhere in Rome - the first time we have evidence of a Christian group being in that city.

Epaenetus, the first convert under Paul's ministry, the province of Asia, Rom. 16:5, was there.

Aquila and Priscilla were converted under Paul in Corinth, on his second journey. And on his third journey, when he reached Corinth, again - they were in Rome. And a church meets in their house.

We discover this in Chapter 16:3-5 - likewise greet the church that is in their house. And V. 6 - he mentions his friends. They were well known and honored by the apostle and were Christians. And there were others like them.

V. 9 - Urbane, our helper in Christ - assisted Paul in Apostolic work, was beloved there.

V. 11 - There were three noble Christian women who Paul learned to appreciate in other days. They are there. Tryphena. They were still engaged in the work of the Lord.

V. 13-14 - of the 16th Chapter, we discover that there was possibly a second house church at Rome. From the best known members, there were five names known to

Paul.

V. 15 - There was possibly a third house church, whose five known members - 3 men and 2 women are known of Paul. At any rate, there are certainly enough of Paul's fellow workers and former members of Paul's in Rome for the house churches and the central local church there. Indeed these Christians would naturally form themselves into a church. They were sufficiently numerous and zealous. The natural thing for them to do was for them to organize a church.

Another thing about the foundation of this church, it was a mixed membership. Composed of Jews and Gentiles - with the Gentiles in the majority. And Paul had them in mind, when he said I speak to men who know the law. However, the Gentiles were in majority. And this was a broadly speaking - Gentile church. It is evident from Romans 11:13. I am speaking to you Gentiles. In as much then, as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry. Furthermore, Paul numbers his church among the Gentile churches. Chapter 1:5-7. He accepts his obligation to preach to them and his mission to the Gentiles. Chapter 1:13-15.

He tells them that he has been commissioned to do this.

II. EXHORTATION

What separated the two - the Jews and the Gentiles - is wider than what divides the whites and the blacks in the United States today. Christ pulled down the middle wall or partition. Jew and Gentile, master and slave, cultured and uneducated, high and low were on a religious equality in this new Christian church.

In the days of the old South, there were perhaps some similar conditions. And of course, today, perhaps it is worse than it was in the days of the old South.

Because in the church where there were different races, a great deal of love was between them. Somehow, Uncle Tom's Cabin, portrayed to the world a false picture of relationships generally between the races.

There are two graves at Lexington, Va. which all men need to see. Lexington is noted for the burial place of great heroes. Lee and Jackson - Lee's body rests in Washington Chapel - of Washington and Lee University. Jackson's remains in the cemetery. On the left of the gate as you enter the cemetery, is the grave of a white man over which is a marble slab - on which is inscribed, "erected to his memory by his former slave."

Just up the walk on the right and under the shadow of Jackson's monument is the grave of a ^{Negro} colored man in the lot of a white family. And over that grave is a monument which is inscribed, "he was loved and honored by three generations". No one would bring back slavery. But if we could reach back into the past and bring back the mutual love and respect between the Christians of all of both races, in the South, what a wonderful thing that would be.

Another exhortation which was given concerning their education and rank - they were not only a mixed membership - but they were also in social standing - different degrees of culture. Paul announced his readiness to preach the Gospel at Rome to the cultured and to the educated. He said once that the general experience was there was not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty - not many noble were saved. But the church at Rome was an exception to the rule. Paul was going there to pay his Gospel debt to the wise as well as to the foolish.

A universal gospel proclaimed to a universal city reached those in high stations. The hungriest, most impoverished, most neglected souls in a community

are frequently the rich, and those in high society. Our Gospel has a message for them. They need the comfort of salvation, and the idealism of Christ. We wrong them and hurt the Kingdom and dishonor our Lord and we leave them unreached and untouched, and take for granted that they do not need the church.

There is an illustration of an evangelists who was preaching to a congregation - and he started to prove that Moses wrote the first five books. And he was going to prove the basis of the Book of Jonah. The people were respectful but they were somewhat indifferent. I think many times we take for granted that people do not have a great deal of knowledge. We are too prone to think that our people have little knowledge in the church. But the church at Rome - they were well rounded and rooted in doctrines. The presence of Aquila and Priscilla largely accounts for this. And therefore, we today must acknowledge that we have people in our congregations who have been trained in college and universities and have knowledge in the basic sciences.

They were exhorted in the third place concerning their faith. Their faith was proclaimed throughout the whole world. Between Christians everywhere - it was known wherever Christianity spread, the character of this church. And it was an inspiring pattern. The preputation of the church in Rome was extensive and it was what we call world renown.

The thing that attributed to this was it was the world's capitol and it had the opportunity to be known that any other church - a city set on a hill cannot be hid. Travelers from every corner came here to meet and have meetings and conferences and to converse with their brethren in Rome. Returning to their homes, they carried information about the church in Rome, about the government, the commerce. And in a few years, many people had visited and perhaps heard of worship. And they went away with a favorable impression. This should remind us that when

people come to our church and to our city, and attend a meeting here - they are impressed as to whether or not we are friendly, as to whether or not we have the spirit of brotherly love, or whether or not we exhibit before that which inspires and what they convey away is certainly something that we ought to take stock of. When people come into a church, they carry away something of the tone of the type of music, something of the preaching, as well as the touch with the congregation.

Some months back we had the mens chorus on Sun p.m. - many letters, comments, made impression -

Now if the church is quarreling or fighting - this sort of reputation spreads also. But here at Rome, they were noted as followers of Jesus. Throughout Palestine, Egypt, and Greece - the faith of this church is talked about.

And Paul was always expressing his appreciation and rejoiced in the existence of this church with such a great reputation.

You remember when he arrived in Rome as a prisoner, the whole church talked about the prisoner and his approaching trial. And they were exhorted concerning this matter of perfection. The whole theme of the letter to the Roman Church - Paul talked about righteousness, the plan of salvation in the first chapters.

He spoke to them about justification, that God's wrath abides upon Gentiles because they refused the life given. He preached about the legalism and the failure of it. And they were exhorted to become Christians. And in Chapter 12:4, he exhorted them as being members of the body of Christ. From this idea of the body, he reminds them that they have a place just like the human body has a human hand - and it is invaluable. It is something that is useable and expressive. The body has a mind that can think - it has eyes and arms. So the church is Christ's body - it is the only instrument which he has on earth to do his work. And every believer is a member of the body. And from this idea we gather the unity of the church. It is conceived here that there may have been house churches and a unity

that exists. And God has a plan for each member in each church. If you believe that God wants you to preach, then you ought to preach. If he wants you to teach, then you ought to teach.

It is said of Gen. Geo. B. McCallan that whenever he rode into the midst of retreating or fleeing troops, they were galvanized into action, so as to be able to turn and charge the enemy. The measure of your faith will be evident by the gift which you exercise. I think of men and women who have been gifted to teach children of business men who have helped in the guiding of the business affairs of the church. Individuals who have given visions to the missionary enterprise. Many many gifts that have been manifest in the church. And these were exhorted. Too often, we as Christians, fail to comprehend that we are members of the body and that we are responsible.

✓ III. PERSECUTION

There was a matter of tolleration - that was the policy of the empire toward Christianity.

The Romans interpret Christian as a phase or kind of Judiasm. And that it was lined up with the synagogue and it was entitled to the protection of the government.

Gallio refused to hear questions about Jewish law. Festus did his utmost to avoid similar questions. The recorder invoked the fear of Roman power to quiet and disperse the rebels. The Jews perceived that Christianity was not a Jewish religion.

The Jews were the first persecutors of Christians. Stephen and James were killed by them and many others imprisoned and beaten.

The Romans did not persecute the Christians because they thought they were Jews. The Jews persecuted the Christians because they knew they were not Jews.

As soon as it dawned upon the government that Christians were not a Jewish sect, that one did not have to be circumcized to be a Christian - the Christians became subject to the penalty of an unauthorized religion. And there was a great change that occurred between Paul's appeal to Caesar during his second imprisonment when the empire persecuted him as a Christian. The whole heathen population discovered that Christianity was not a ~~religion~~ ^{Judiasm} - but was a religion different from Judiasm.

The manner of life and worship of the Christian lent itself to misunderstanding. And to misrepresentation.

The evangelistic zeal won converts. And Proselytism was forbidden by Roman law.

They organized themselves into society. And that was forbidden by Roman law.

They held unlicensed meetings and that was forbidden by Roman law. They abstained from worldly pleasures and we thought of as being unsocial.

They observed the Lord's Supper among themselves at night and were suspected of immorality.

They used no energies and were charged with atheism.

The voice of rumor accused Nero - probably falsely as being the incendiary of his own capitol. His conduct during the calamity - he was heartless enough to play the accompaniment of the fire to the tune of "The Burning Of Troy". So popular favor turned from him.

Nero in order to divert suspicion and regain his prestige, accused the Christians of burning Rome. They had predicted that the world would be destroyed by fire. Were they not the ones that attempt to fulfill their own prophesy, by kindling the fire, so the masses thought.

Therefore Nero put Christians in his own place as the culprit and caused them to suffer more than they had ever suffered.

Some Christians were dressed up in the skins of beasts, to perish either by dogs, or ^{wrongly} on crosses, or by fire, or when the daylight failed - they were burnt to serve as lights by night. Nero had thrown open his garden for the spectacle. And was giving a circus performance by driving his chariot along the lighted roadway.

The charges made upon the Christians, arson, hatred of the human race, and the people endorsed the punishment. And Nero turned the executions. And he lost his following and ended his miserable existence by his own hands. Now persecution once started by the state in Rome - spread throughout the empire. You read John's brief letters in the book of Revelation - he talks about the patience, tribulation, he himself is in exile a victim of this persecution, was Paul. And thousands of Christians suffered death.

The fortitude of these Christians reveal their heroism, awaking the executioners acts. Paul was cheerful. Yet triumphant, almost the last words we have from him - we are already being offered. The time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is layed up for me a crown of righteousness. Which, the Lord, the righteous judge shall give me that day. But there were slaunders and wide defusion of the Christians, and the message penetrated to every corner of the known world.

IV. CORRUPTION

I come to summarize - we started with the foundation, which we stated that perhaps the church was started by these Christian friends who had heard the Gospel and came there. Second, we took up the exhortations. Third, we said just a word about the persecution. Now in the (final place), let us say something about the corruption. Now no two churches are exactly alike. Jerusalem church was Jewish and very conservative. The Antioch church was Gentile and very missionary. The Galatian church was very reactionary. The Corinthian church was disturbed by internal problems. The Rome church was very heroic church. And their faith was known for at that time, Paul urged them onward. Now the matter of the corruption took place through the years. Now Paul never hinted at the existence of a cardinal or a pope in Rome or anywhere else. If Clement was bishop at Rome, you would never have guessed it in his letter to Corinth. The New Testament churches were democratic. And they were founded on brotherly equality. Call no man, your father - for one is your Master and all you are brethren. Externally with their relations, one with another, the churches were independent.

Now the corruption and development of an episcopal type, certain men who were inimate to the apostles and had eminence - there became a necessity against heresay. These leaders of the church were more sacred or they deemed them that way, and ultimately in the episcopacy, one man became the head of an universal church.

The name papa or pope applies elsewhere in the West as a title of honor. To all bishops in the East as a special title of the bishops of Rome.

Leo the Great, 440=483 may be regarded as properly the founder of the Roman papacy.

Gregory in 590, therefore was rightly regarded as the first founder of the temple power of the papacy on Italian soil.

Now the reasons for the corruption of the church at Rome are very plain and easy for us to understand.

✓ First, the city was the capitol of the world.

✓ Second, the tradition said that Peter founded the church and was its first pastor. And this tradition was passed on, one to another.

✓ Third, the bishop of Rome, because of his position and ability, was influential among the Christians everywhere. Because it was a renoun church.

✓ Fourth, the church was large and representative. If they were going to create a head - this would be the logical place. And his functions at the outset were purely religious.

The (decline of Rome's prestige) as a city by a strange combination of circumstances, enhanced the prestige of the church, and of the bishop in Rome. And when the cities power became weaker in governing the state - it became larger in governing the church. Until the time was reached, that the Pope was the maker and the unmaker of kings.

✓ Now the (reformation) gave this system a shock. From which, please God, it will never recover.

Dr. Dehoney tells about an experience he had in a Buddhist temple, in Honolulu. He said an oriental priest was speaking "many pathways lead up the mountain." We believe that all who sincerely press on the upward way arrive at the mountain top to view the same moon light together.

Now this is indeed beautiful and poetic. But is it a statement of the truth. It (assumes) that all religions are equally good. And if one sincerely follows his religion and beliefs - all will be right between him and God. If this be true, then there is no need for Christian missions. Why should we go and preach and teach.

If this statement is true, then the Bible is wrong. We believe in the Bible and we must declare the truth alone. Now (the) relics of civilization attest to the fact that in Rome, the images that have been placed there, the pagan Gods that were worshipped, throughout the empire were brought in. And divine people still have zeal for them.

Or you go to (Japan) and you find a man before an altar, claps his hands three times to attract the attention of his God before he prays.

Or you go to (India) to the muddy filthy river where it is filled with zealous worshippers of the Gods who go through the rites of religious baths.

Or you go to (Africa) and there watch a woman put the warm blood of a slain chicken over a mud idol.

Or go to a village in (Nigeria) where thousands of Mohammedans block the road as they prostrate themselves in prayer toward Macea. Now what are they doing. They are all very zealous to save their souls.

If you are driving a high powered automobile on the wrong road, the very car that takes you faster is going to take you farther from your desired destination. That is the very reason why Paul sets forth the Christian faith here at the church of Rome. And corruption set in. And so what we need is not just a simple religion, in which we believe if we press on the upward way we will eventually get there. What we need is a Saviour - the world has never been without religion. Indeed many religions block the road and hinder

multitudes from receiving Christ. *Billy Graham - Major Crusade in 1973 Committee*

But restrictions on Graham "Not have contact with The Pope or other representatives of The Catholic hierarchy before, during or after his addresses" might upstage The Pope

Now if we could somehow profit by the corruption that took place in the church at Rome that we see today, use your imagination. If you are a person familiar with the (New Testament) and you knew nothing at all about the teachings - you would not know that they were in existence. Say for example, you had no knowledge of the denominations - Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterians. Suppose all that you knew was something in the New Testament. And you came to (a city) and you began to look for a church that you thought most nearly conformed to the New Testament church - what kind of a group would you look for.

First, you would look for a performing group, who took part in public worship,

- ✓ Second, and doing so in a simple form, and spiritual fervor.
- ✓ Third, transacting it's business in the true democratic fashion.
- ✓ Fourth, having two classes of officers elected by the membership because of their special qualifications. One would be a preacher of the Gospel. The other office would be some ^{Deacon} layman to work and to lead in the administration of the affairs.
- ✓ Fifth, you would look for a fellowship which they profess to admitted people. Into membership by a profession of faith, baptism as an act of obedience.
- ✓ Sixth, celebrating the Lord's Supper as a memorial and symbolic act in which the members partake of the elements.
- ✓ Seventh, no special Holy Days or seasons for saints. But worshipping every Lord's Day as believers.
- ✓ Eighth, maintaining a separation in morals from the world while living in the midst of the world.
- ✓ Ninth, unintangled with the state and with the government.
- ✓ Tenth, fellowshipping with other groups who share the faith and hope who trust in and live for the same Saviour.
- ✓ Eleventh, co-operating with other like bodies. Missions abroad and at home.

✓ Twelfth, honoring leaders whose gifts and services had given prominence to the world and to the work.

These are the marks of a New Testament Church. And these are the sure signs that you would seek. And these are the signs that ought to be found in the New Testament Church today.