

The Churches of Christ Salute You

Lesson Fifteen

(Romans 16:16)

October 12, 2008

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT ROME

Overview:

1. Paul wrote to the Romans about the “churches of Christ.”
2. A plurality of churches did not mean a number of different denominations.
3. Instead, each was a local body of believers that belonged to Christ.
4. Since we also are a church of Christ, there are many lessons to be learned from these early churches.

Introduction:

1. We have studied fourteen churches in the New Testament.
2. The final congregation to consider is the church at Rome.
3. This study will bring us full circle – from the beginning of the church at Jerusalem to the great apostasy that begins in Rome.

I. The Founding of the Church at Rome

- A. It is not known who founded the church in the city of Rome.
- B. It is known who did not found this congregation.
 1. Paul was not responsible for the beginning of this church.
 - a. Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans around AD 60.
 - b. In it, he indicates that he had never visited the church in Rome (Romans 1:9-13; 15:22-24).
 - c. It was not until AD 62-64 that Paul first came to Rome.
 - d. Yet, by this time (in fact, by the year AD 58), the church in Rome was already well established.
 2. Peter was not responsible for starting this church.
 - a. By the time Paul wrote to the Romans, the church in that city was well known throughout the world (Romans 1:8; 16:19).
 - b. Yet, during the time from AD 33-60, the Bible indicates exactly where Peter was working and preaching.
 - i. AD 33 – in Jerusalem (Acts 2)
 - ii. AD 44 – imprisoned in Jerusalem (Acts 12)
 - iii. AD 50 – at council in Jerusalem (Acts 15)
 - iv. AD 50-60 – in Antioch and traveling (Gal. 2; 1 Cor. 9:5)
 - v. AD 65 – in Babylon (1 Peter 5:13)
 - vi. AD 67 – (approximately) Peter martyred
 - c. The Catholic Church teaches that Peter was in Rome from AD 42-67; however, this does not match what the Bible says.
 - d. If Peter were the founder and head of the church at Rome and present in the city during this time, why does Paul never mention him?
 - i. Paul wrote to the Romans around AD 60.
 - ii. He wrote 6 letters from Rome from AD 62-64.
 - iii. He wrote his final epistle (2 Tim.) from Rome in AD 68.
 - iv. Yet, in none of these does he mention Peter!
 - e. Furthermore, if Peter had been to and established the church in Rome, Paul would not have desired to go and preach there (cf. Romans 15:20).
 - f. Also, Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, not Peter (Gal. 2:7-8)

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3. No apostle was responsible for founding this church.
 - a. Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome to impart unto them spiritual gifts (Romans 1:11).
 - b. Spiritual gifts were miraculous powers used in the early church.
 - c. Only an apostle of Christ could give a Christian such gifts (2 Corinthians 12:12; Acts 8:12-18).
 - d. Had an apostle been responsible for founding the church at Rome, they would have been given spiritual gifts already.
 - C. There are some interesting possibilities as to how this church began.
 1. Some who became Christians on the day of Pentecost had traveled from and would return to Rome (Acts 2:10).
 - a. Aquila and Priscilla are an example of this (Rom. 16:3; Acts 8).
 - b. This possibility reminds us of the importance of every Christian working to evangelize wherever he or she may be.
 2. It is possible that Christians traveling to or through Rome may have planted the seed which became the church. *{How do you conduct yourself on vacation?}*
 3. The church at Rome may have been started by Christian evangelists (Acts 11:19-22).
 - D. It does not take an apostle or a “professional preacher” to start a congregation of the Lord’s people.
 - E. Whoever founded the church in Rome, their name is known to God.
- II. The Faithfulness of the Church at Rome
- A. Persecution of Christians throughout the Roman Empire occurred sporadically throughout the early years of the church.
 1. There were about 10 major persecutions.
 2. The first was under Nero beginning around AD 64.
 3. The tenth was around AD 250. *{There were others following this, but of a different nature.}*
 - B. However, in the city of Rome itself, the persecution of the church was constant.
 1. There were many “local” persecutions that affected Christians in the city of Rome but did not reach far outside its borders.
 2. John describes Rome as “drunken with the blood of the saints” (Revelation 17:6; 18:24).
 - C. Yet, in the face of such persecution, the Christians at Rome remained faithful – even unto death (Revelation 6:9-10; 12:11; cf. 2:10, 13).
- III. The Falsehood in the Church at Rome
- A. Paul writes to the Romans to prove to them that salvation is found only in Christ.
 - B. Furthermore, that salvation is obtained only by the Gospel (1:16).
 1. Chapters 1-3 - Everyone needs salvation
 - a. Chapter 1 – The Gentiles need it for they are sinners
 - b. Chapter 2 – The Jews need it for they are sinners
 - c. Chapter 3 – All men need it for they are sinners
 2. Chapter 4 - How to appropriate salvation
 3. Chapter 5-6 - The blessings of salvation
 4. Chapter 7 - Salvation by the Gospel not the Law of Moses
 5. Chapter 8 - The hope and victory of salvation
 6. Chapter 9-11 - How Israel can obtain salvation

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7. Chapter 12-16 - Living in salvation
 - C. All Christians need to be reminded that our only hope is in Christ through the Gospel.
- IV. The Failure of the Church at Rome
- A. God had given clear warning that apostasy would come to the church.
 1. Acts 20:26-32 – *warnings of the origin of error*
 2. 1 Timothy 4:1-3 – *warnings of specific doctrinal error*
 3. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 – *warnings of the extent of error*
 - B. Paul warned the church at Rome against such apostasy (Rom. 16:17-18).
 1. The remedy for such error was to preach the Gospel of Christ.
 2. It requires practicing discipline against those who apostatize.
 - C. Sadly, the church at Rome did not heed the warnings, choosing rather to become a leader in the apostasy from the Truth.
 1. One of the earliest errors that led to apostasy in the church was a change in the organization of the church.
 2. For various reason, one elder was given (or began to assume) more authority than the other elders.
 3. This elder became known as the “Bishop” or “President” of the church.
 4. By the year AD 150, the monarchical bishop was common in the church.
 5. Rome was not exempt from these departures from the faith.
 - D. Larger, city congregations began to assume authority over smaller (usually rural) congregations.
 1. Often, the larger churches were responsible for establishing the smaller ones.
 2. Thus, there was sometimes a feeling of dependence upon and submission to the city churches.
 3. The “Bishops” encouraged this thinking by meeting together in synods to discuss and, eventually, dictate the business of the churches.
 4. The largest and most prominent city in the Roman Empire was Rome itself.
 5. Naturally, as this way of thinking developed, many churches were content to look to Rome for guidance and instruction.
 - E. By the year AD 190, the Bishop of the church in Rome claimed to be the “universal bishop.”
 - F. In order to support this claim – and of the primacy of the church at Rome – some began to teach doctrines foreign to the New Testament.
 - G. They taught that Peter had supremacy and authority over the other apostles.
 1. This idea is based upon Matthew 16:16-19.
 2. However, it is clearly a misinterpretation and misuse of the passage.
 3. Peter never claimed such a position and Paul forever refuted the notion when he rebuked Peter to the face (Galatians 2:11; cf. chapters 1-2).
 - H. They taught that Peter’s supreme authority was passed down to the Bishop of the church at Rome.
 1. This was based upon the false assumption that Peter founded and worked with the church in Rome (see point I, above).
 2. Further, it is a false teaching that such authority can be passed on to another.
 3. The “Bishops” are not successors to the apostles.
 4. The apostles were Jesus’ appointed ambassadors – and, there are no others (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20; Acts 1:20-26 [*qualifications*]).

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- I. Thus, to many it seemed logical that the Roman church and her Bishop should be followed in matters of religion.
- J. However, this was just the first of many departures from truth that would come from the church at Rome.
 - 1. AD 120 - The concept of "holy water" for baptism
 - 2. AD 140 - The observance of Lent
 - 3. AD 157 - The doctrine of Penance
 - 4. AD 220 - The doctrine of Purgatory
 - 5. AD 250 - The practice of sprinkling as a mode of baptism
 - 6. AD 390 - The practice of confessing to a priest
 - 7. AD 431 - The title "Mother of God" for Mary
 - 8. AD 434 - The title "Pope" for Leo I
 - 9. AD 450 - The practice of infant baptism
 - 10. AD 500's - The worship of images and icons
 - 11. AD 606 - The rule of Boniface III (the first strong Pope)
 - 12. AD 666 - The introduction of instrumental music in worship
 - 13. AD 709 - The doctrine of kissing the Pope's toe
 - 14. AD 787 - The doctrine of transubstantiation
 - 15. AD 869 - The belief that tradition was equal in authority to scripture
 - 16. AD 1190 - The sale of indulgences
 - 17. AD 1229 - The forbidding of the Bible to the laity
 - 18. AD 1870 - The doctrine of papal infallibility
 - 19. AD 1953 - The "discovery" of Peter's bones in the Basilica
 - 20. AD 1999 - Consideration of naming Mary as co-redemptrix
- K. Clearly, the Christians in Rome failed to remain faithful and true to God and His Word.

Conclusion:

- 1. May we learn from the church at Rome the importance of every Christian serving and working for the kingdom.
- 2. May we imitate their faithfulness in persecution.
- 3. May we learn from their mistakes and determine to hold to God's Word.

Review:

The church at Jerusalem taught us about unity in truth and love.

The church at Antioch taught us about service in both benevolence and evangelism.

The churches of Galatia taught us about standing for Truth in the face of opposition.

The church at Philippi taught us about flourishing in the Lord's work through faithfulness.

The church at Thessalonica taught us about patiently waiting for the hope of Heaven.

The church at Corinth taught us about love, repentance and forgiveness.

The church at Colossae taught us about Christ as the Head of the church.

The church at Ephesus taught us about the church as the body of Christ and how she must confront the culture in which she lives.

The church at Smyrna taught us about true riches and the crown of life.

The church at Pergamos taught us about the danger of compromise with error.

The church at Thyatira taught us about the danger of compromise with sin.

The church at Sardis taught us about the deceptiveness of outward appearances and the danger of pride.

The church at Philadelphia taught us about victory when we are on the Lord's side.

The church at Laodicea taught us about the danger of growing lukewarm in our service.

The church at Rome taught us about apostasy that results from a failure to stand firm.