

# *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*

by

**Charles Hodge**

**Special Note:** Charles Hodge was one of the greatest theologians this country has produced, and his commentary on the Book of Romans is a classic. Here we have reprinted Hodge's introduction to Romans at the beginning of his commentary. However, Hodge was not premillennial, and although he agrees that many Jewish people will be saved, he did not see a future millennial reign of Jesus the Messiah with the restoration of ethnic, national Israel. A few of his comments here will reflect those views, with which this Web site disagrees. Nevertheless, this is an excellent introduction to Romans and reflects the great scholar that Charles Hodge was.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Apostle Paul**

When Paul and the other apostles were called to enter upon their important duties, the world was in a deplorable and yet most interesting state. Both Heathenism and Judaism were in the last stages of decay. The polytheism of the Greeks and Romans had been carried to such an extent as to shock the common sense of mankind and to lead the more intelligent among them openly to reject and ridicule it. This scepticism had already extended itself to the mass of the people and become almost universal. As the transition from infidelity to superstition is certain and generally immediate, all classes of the people were disposed to confide in dreams, enchantments, and other miserable substitutes for religion.

The two reigning systems of philosophy, the Stoic and Platonic, were alike insufficient to satisfy the agitated minds of men. The former sternly repressed the best natural feelings of the soul, inculcating nothing but a blind resignation to the unalterable course of things and promising nothing beyond an unconscious existence hereafter. The latter regarded all religions as but different forms of expressing the same general truths and represented the whole mythological system as an allegory, as incomprehensible to the common people as the pages of a book to those who cannot read. This system promised more than it could accomplish. It excited feelings which it could not satisfy and thus contributed to produce that general ferment which existed at this period.

Among the Jews, generally, the state of things was hardly much better. They had, indeed, the form of true religion, but were in a great measure destitute of its spirit. The Pharisees were contented with the form, the Sadducees were sceptics, the Essenes were enthusiasts and mystics.

Such being the state of the world, men were led to feel the need of some surer guide than either reason or tradition, and some better foundation of confidence than either heathen philosophers or

Jewish sects could afford. Hence, when the glorious gospel was revealed, thousands of hearts in all parts of the world were prepared by the grace of God to exclaim, This is all our desire and all our salvation.

The history of the apostle Paul shows that he was prepared to act in such a state of society. In the first place, he was born, and probably educated in part, at Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a city almost on a level with Athens and Alexandria for its literary zeal and advantages. In one respect it is said by ancient writers to have been superior to either of them. In the other cities mentioned, the majority of students were strangers, but in Tarsus they were the inhabitants themselves.

That Paul passed the early part of his life here is probable, because the trade which he was taught, in accordance with the custom of the Jews, was one peculiarly common in Cilicia. From the hair of the goats, with which that province abounded, a rough cloth was made which was much used in the manufacture of tents. The knowledge which the apostle manifests of the Greek authors (1 Cor. 15:33, Titus 1:12) would also lead us to suppose that he had received at least part of his education in a Grecian city. Many of his characteristics as a writer lead to the same conclusion. He pursues, far more than any other of the sacred writers of purely Jewish education, the logical method in presenting truth. There is almost always a regular concatenation [progression/linking] in his discourses evincing the spontaneous exercise of a disciplined mind, even when not carrying out a previous plan. His epistles, therefore, are far more logical than ordinary letters, without the formality of regular dissertations. Another characteristic of his manner is that in discussing any question he always presents the ultimate principle on which the decision depends.

These and similar characteristics of this apostle are commonly, and probably with justice, ascribed partly to his turn of mind and partly to his early education. We learn from the Scriptures themselves that the Holy Spirit, in employing men as his instruments in conveying truth, did not change their mental habits. He did not make Jews write like Greeks or force all into the same mold. Each retained his own peculiarities of style and manner and, therefore, whatever is peculiar to each is to be referred not to his inspiration but to his original character and culture.

While the circumstances just referred to render it probable that the apostle's habits of mind were in some measure influenced by his birth and early education in Tarsus, there are others (such as the general character of his style) which show that his residence there could not have been long, and that his education was not thoroughly Grecian. We learn from himself that he was principally educated at Jerusalem, being brought up, as he says, at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

This is the second circumstance in the providential preparation of the apostle for his work which is worthy of notice. As Luther was educated in a Roman Catholic seminary and thoroughly instructed in the scholastic theology of which he was to be the great opposer, so the apostle Paul was initiated into all the doctrines and modes of reasoning of the Jews, with whom his principal controversy was to be carried on. The early adversaries of the gospel were all Jews. Even in the heathen cities they were so numerous that it was through them and their proselytes that the church in such places was founded. We find, therefore, that in almost all his epistles the apostle

contends with Jewish errorists, the corrupters of the gospel, by means of Jewish doctrines.

Paul, the most extensively useful of all the apostles, was thus a thoroughly educated man; a man educated with a special view to the work which he was called to perform. We find, therefore, in this, as in most similar cases, that God effects his purposes by those instruments which he has in the ordinary course of his providence specially fitted for their accomplishment.

In the third place, Paul was converted without the intervention of human instrumentality and was taught the gospel by immediate revelation. "I certify you, brethren," he says to the Galatians, "the the gospel which was preached of me was not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." These circumstances are important, as he was thus placed completely on a level with the other apostles. He had seen the Lord Jesus, and could therefore be one of the witnesses of his resurrection; he was able to claim the authority of an original inspired teacher and messenger of God. It is obvious that he laid great stress upon this point, from the frequency with which he refers to it. He was thus furnished not only with the advantages of his early education, but with the authority and power of an apostle of Jesus Christ.

His natural character was ardent, energetic, uncompromising, and severe. How his extravagance and violence were subdued by the grace of God is abundantly evident from the moderation, mildness, tenderness, and conciliation manifested in all his epistles. Absorbed in the one object of glorifying Christ, he was ready to submit to anything and to yield anything necessary for this purpose. He no longer insisted that others should think and act just as he did. So that they obeyed Christ, he was satisfied; and he willingly conformed to their prejudices and tolerated their errors so far as the cause of truth and righteousness allowed. By his early education, by his miraculous conversion and inspiration, by his natural disposition, and by the abundant grace of God was this apostle fitted for his work and sustained under his multiplied and arduous labors.

### **Origin and Condition of the Church at Rome**

One of the providential circumstances which most effectually contributed to the early propagation of Christianity was the dispersion of the Jews among surrounding nations. They were widely scattered through the East, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, especially at Rome. As they were permitted throughout the wide extent of the Roman Empire to worship God according to the traditions of their fathers, synagogues were everywhere established in the midst of the heathen. The apostles, being Jews, had thus always a ready access to the people.

The synagogues furnished a convenient place for regular assemblies without attracting the attention or exciting the suspicion of the civil authorities. In these assemblies they were sure of meeting not only Jews but the heathen also, and precisely the class of heathen best prepared for the reception of the gospel. The infinite superiority of the pure theism of the Old Testament Scriptures to any form of religion known to the ancients could not fail to attract and convince multitudes among the pagans, wherever the Jewish worship was established. Such persons became either proselytes or "devout," that is, worshippers of the true God. Being free from the inveterate national and religious prejudices of the Jews, and at the same time convinced of the falsehood of polytheism, they were the most susceptible of all the early hearers of the gospel. It

was by converts from among this class of persons that the churches in all the heathen cities were in a great measure founded.

There is abundant evidence that the Jews were very numerous at Rome, and that the class of proselytes or devout persons among the Romans was also very large. Philo says that Augustus had assigned the Jews a large district beyond the Tiber for their residence. He accounts for their being so numerous from the fact that the captives carried thither by Pompey were liberated by their masters, who found it inconvenient to have servants who adhered so strictly to a religion which forbade constant and familiar intercourse with the heathen.

Dion Cassius mentions that the Jews were so numerous at Rome that Claudius was at first afraid to banish them, but contented himself with forbidding their assembling together. That he afterwards, on account of the tumults which they occasioned, did banish them from the city is mentioned by Suetonius and by Luke (Acts 18:2). That the Jews, on the death of Claudius returned to Rome is evident from the fact that Suetonius and Dion Cassius speak of their being very numerous under the following reigns; and also from the contents of this epistle, especially the salutations (ch. 16) addressed to Jewish Christians.

That the establishment of the Jewish worship at Rome had produced considerable effect on the Romans is clear from the statements of the heathen writers themselves. Ovid speaks of the synagogues as places of fashionable resort; Juvenal (Satire 14) ridicules his countrymen for becoming Jews; and Tacitus refers to the presents sent by Roman proselytes to Jerusalem.

The way was thus prepared for the early reception and rapid extension of Christianity in the imperial city. When the gospel was first introduced there or by whom the introduction was effected, is unknown. Such was the constant intercourse between Rome and the provinces that it is not surprising that some of the numerous converts to Christianity made in Judea, Asia Minor, and Greece should at an early period find their way to the capital. It is not impossible that many who had enjoyed the personal ministry of Christ and believed in his doctrines might have removed or returned to Rome and been the first to teach the gospel in that city. Still less improbable is it that among the multitudes present at Jerusalem at the day of Pentecost, among whom were "strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes," there were some who carried back the knowledge of the gospel.

That the introduction of Christianity occurred at an early period may be inferred not only from the probabilities just referred to but from other circumstances. When Paul wrote this epistle, the faith of the Romans was spoken of throughout the world, which would seem to imply that the church had already been long established. Aquila and Priscilla, who left Rome on account of the decree of Claudius banishing the Jews, were probably Christians before their departure. Nothing at least is said of their having been converted by the apostle. He found them at Corinth, and being of the same trade he abode with them, and on his departure took them with him into Syria.

The tradition of some of the ancient Fathers, that Peter was the founder of the church at Rome, is inconsistent with the statements given in the Acts of the Apostles. Irenaeus says that "Matthew wrote his gospel while Peter and Paul were in Rome preaching the gospel and founding the church there." And Eusebius says, "Peter, having founded the church at Antioch, departed

for Rome preaching the gospel." Both these statements are incorrect. Peter did not found the church at Antioch, nor did he and Paul preach together at Rome.

That Peter was not at Rome prior to Paul's visit appears from the entire silence of this epistle on the subject, and from no mention being made of the fact in any of the letters written from Rome by Paul during his imprisonment. The tradition that Peter ever was at Rome rests on very uncertain authority. It is first mentioned by Dionysius of Corinth in the latter half of the second century, and from that time it seems to have been generally received.

The account is in itself improbable, as Peter's field of labor was in the East about Babylon, and as the statement of Dionysius is full of inaccuracies. He makes Peter and Paul the founders of the church at Corinth and makes the same assertion regarding the church at Rome, neither of which is true. He also says that Paul and Peter suffered martyrdom at the same time at Rome, which, from the silence of Paul respecting Peter during his last imprisonment, is in the highest degree improbable. History, therefore, has left us ignorant of the time when this church was founded, and the persons by whom the work was effected.

The condition of the congregation may be inferred from the circumstances already mentioned and from the drift of the apostle's letter. As the Jews and proselytes were very numerous at Rome, the early converts, as might be expected, were from both these classes. The latter, however, seem greatly to have predominated, because we find no such evidence of a tendency to Judaism as is supposed in the Epistle to the Galatians. Paul nowhere seems to apprehend that the church at Rome would apostatize as the Galatian Christians had already done. And in chapters 14 and 15 his exhortations imply that the Gentile party were more in danger of oppressing the Jewish than the reverse. Paul, therefore, writes to them as Gentiles (1:13) and claims, in virtue of his office as apostle to the Gentiles, the right to address them with all freedom and authority (15:16).

The congregation, however, was not composed exclusively of this class. Many converts, originally Jews, were included in their numbers, and those belonging to the other class were more or less under the influence of Jewish opinions. The apostle, therefore, in this (as in all his other epistles addressed to congregations similarly situated), refutes those doctrines of the Jews which were inconsistent with the gospel and answers those objections which they and those under their influence were accustomed to urge against it.

These different elements of the early churches were almost always in conflict both as to points of doctrine and discipline. The Jews insisted, to a greater or less extent, on their peculiar privileges and customs; and the Gentiles disregarded, and at times despised, the scruples and prejudices of their weaker brethren. The opinions of the Jews particularly controverted in this epistle are, (1) that [their] connection with Abraham by natural descent and by the bond of circumcision together with the observance of the law is sufficient to secure the favor of God; (2) that the blessings of the Messiah's reign were to be confined to Jews and those who would consent to become proselytes; (3) that subjection to heathen magistrates was inconsistent with the dignity of the people of God and with their duty to the Messiah as King.

There are clear indications in other parts of Scripture, as well as in their own writings, that the Jews placed their chief dependence upon the covenant of God with Abraham and the peculiar rites and ordinances connected with it. Our Savior, when speaking to the Jews, tells them, "Say

not, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Luke 3:8). It is clearly implied in this passage that the Jews supposed that to have Abraham as their father was sufficient to secure the favor of God.

The Rabbins taught that God had promised Abraham that his descendants, though wicked, should be saved on account of his merit. Justin Martyr mentions this as the ground of confidence of the Jews in his day: "Your Rabbins," he says, "deceive themselves and us in supposing that the kingdom of heaven is prepared for all those who are the natural seed of Abraham, even though they be sinners and unbelievers." They were accustomed to say, "Great is the virtue of circumcision; no circumcised person enters hell." And one of their standing maxims was, "All Israel has part in eternal life."

The second leading error of the Jews was a natural result of the one just referred to. If salvation was secured by connection with Abraham, then none who were not united to their great ancestor could be saved. There is no opinion of the Jews more conspicuous in the sacred writings than that they were greatly superior to the Gentiles; that the theocracy and all its blessings belonged to them; and that others could attain even an inferior station in the kingdom of the Messiah only by becoming Jews.

The indisposition of the Jews to submit to heathen magistrates arose partly from their high ideas of their own dignity and their contempt for other nations; partly from their erroneous opinions of the nature of the Messiah's kingdom and partly, no doubt, from the peculiar hardships and oppressions to which they were exposed. The prevalence of this indisposition among them is proved by its being a matter of discussion whether it was even lawful to pay tribute to Caesar; by their assertion that, as Abraham's seed, they were never in bondage to any man; and by their constant tumults and rebellions, which led first to their banishment from Rome and finally to the utter destruction of their city.

The circumstances of the church at Rome -- [1] composed of both Jewish and Gentile converts, [2] surrounded by Jews who still insisted on the necessity of circumcision, of legal obedience, and of connection with the family of Abraham in order to salvation, and [3] disposed on many points to differ among themselves -- sufficiently account for the character of this epistle.

### **Time and Place of its Composition**

There are no sufficient data for fixing accurately and certainly the chronology of the life and writings of the apostle Paul. It is therefore, in most cases, only by a comparison of various circumstances that an approximation to the date of the principal events of his life can be made. With regard to this epistle, it is plain from its contents that it was written just as Paul was about to set out on his last journey to Jerusalem. In the fifteenth chapter he says that the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia had made a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, and that he was on the eve of his departure for that city (v. 25). This same journey is mentioned in Acts 20 and occurred most probably in the spring (v. 16) of the year 58 or 59. This date best suits the account of his long imprisonment, first at Cesarea and then at Rome, of four years, and his probable liberation in 62 or 63. His subsequent labors and second imprisonment would fill up the intervening period of two or three years to the date of his martyrdom towards the close

the reign of Nero.

That this epistle was written from Corinth appears [1] from the special recommendation of Phebe, a deaconess of the neighboring church, who was probably the bearer of the letter (16:1); [2] from the salutation of Erastus and Gaius, both residents of Corinth, to the Romans (16:23; cp. 2 Tim. 4:20 and 1 Cor. 1:14); and [3] from the account given in Acts 20:2,3 of Paul's journey through Macedonia into Greece, before his departure for Jerusalem for the purpose of carrying the contributions of the churches for the poor in that city.

### **Authenticity of the Epistle**

That this epistle was written by the apostle Paul admits of no reasonable doubt.

1. It, in the first place, purports to be his. It bears his signature and speaks throughout in his name.

2. It has uniformly been recognized as his. From the apostolic age to the present time it has been referred to and quoted by a regular series of authors, and recognized as of divine authority in all the churches. It would be requisite, in order to disprove its authenticity, to account satisfactorily for these facts on the supposition of the epistle being spurious. The passages in the early writers, in which this epistle is alluded to or cited, are very numerous and may be seen in Lardner's *Credibility*, Vol. II.

3. The internal evidence is no less decisive in its favor.

(a) In the first place, it is evidently the production of a Jew familiar with the Hebrew text and the Septuagint versions of the Old Testament; because the language and style are such as no one, not thus circumstanced, could adopt, and because the whole letter evinces such an intimate acquaintance with Jewish opinions and prejudices.

(b) It agrees perfectly in style and manner with the other epistles of this apostle.

(c) It is, in the truth and importance of its doctrines and in the elevation and purity of its sentiments, immeasurably superior to any uninspired production of the age in which it appeared. A comparison of the genuine apostolic writings with the spurious productions of the first and second centuries affords one of the strongest collateral evidences of the authenticity and inspiration of the former.

(d) The incidental, or undesigned, coincidences as to matters of fact between this epistle and other parts of the New Testament are such as to afford the clearest evidence of its having proceeded from the pen of the apostle. Compare [1] Rom. 15:25-31 with Acts 20:2,3, 24:17, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8:1-4, 9:2; [2] Rom. 16:21-23 with Acts 20:4; [3] Rom. 16:3 et seqq. with Acts 18:2, 18-26, 1 Cor. 16:19 &c (see Paley's *Horae Paulinae*).

4. Besides these positive proofs there is the important negative consideration--that there are no grounds for questioning its authenticity. There are no discrepancies between this and other

sacred writings; no counter testimony among the early Fathers; no historical or critical difficulties which must be solved before it can be recognized as the work of Paul. There is, therefore, no book in the Bible, and there is no ancient book in the world, of which the authenticity is more certain than that of this epistle.

### **Analysis of the Epistle**

The epistle consists of three parts. The first, which includes the first eight chapters, is occupied in the discussion of the doctrine of justification and its consequences. The second, embracing chapters 9 through 11, treats of the calling of the Gentiles, the rejection and future conversion of the Jews. The third consists of practical exhortations and salutations to the Christians at Rome.

**THE FIRST PART** - The apostle commences by saluting the Roman Christians, commending them for their faith and expressing his desire to see them, and his readiness to preach the gospel at Rome. This readiness was founded on the conviction that the gospel revealed the only method by which men can be saved, viz., by faith in Jesus Christ, and this method is equally applicable to all mankind, Gentiles as well as Jews, chapter 1:1-17. Paul then introduces the two leading topics of the epistle.

In order to establish his doctrine respecting justification, he first proves that the Gentiles cannot be justified by their own works, 1:18-32, and then establishes the same position in reference to the Jews, chapters 2, 3:1-20. Having thus shown that the method of justification by works is unavailable for sinners, he unfolds that method which is taught in the gospel, 3:21-31. The truth and excellence of this method he confirms in chapters 4 and 5. The obvious objection to the doctrine of gratuitous acceptance, that it must lead to the indulgence of sin, is answered, and the true design and operation of the law are exhibited in chapters 6 and 7; and the complete security of all who confide in Christ is beautifully unfolded in chapter 8.

In arguing against the Gentiles, Paul assumes the principle that God will punish sin, 1:18, and then proves that they are justly chargeable both with impiety and immorality, because though they possessed a competent knowledge of God, they did not worship him but turned unto idols and gave themselves up to all kinds of iniquity, 1:19-32.

He commences his argument with the Jews by expanding the general principle of the divine justice, and especially insisting on God's impartiality by showing that he will judge all men, Jews and Gentiles, according to their works and according to the light they severally enjoyed, 2:1-16. He shows that the Jews, when tried by these rules, are as justly and certainly exposed to condemnation as the Gentiles, 2:17-29.

The peculiar privileges of the Jews afford no ground of hope that they will escape being judged on the same principles with other men; and when thus judged, they are found to be guilty before God. All men therefore are, as the Scriptures abundantly teach, under condemnation, and consequently cannot be justified by their own works, 3:1-20.

The gospel proposes the only method by which God will justify men--a method which is entirely gratuitous; the condition of which is faith; which is founded on the redemption of Christ; which

reconciles the justice and mercy of God; humbles man; lays the foundation for a universal religion; and establishes the law, 3:21-31.

The truth of this doctrine is evinced from the example of Abraham, the testimony of David, the nature of the covenant made with Abraham and his seed, and from the nature of the law. He proposes the conduct of Abraham as an example and encouragement to Christians, 4:1-25.

Justification by faith in Christ secures peace with God, present joy, and the assurance of eternal life, 5:1-11. The method, therefore, by which God proposes to save sinners is analogous to that by which they were first brought under condemnation. As on account of the offense of one, sentence has passed on all men to condemnation, so on account of the righteousness of one all are justified, 5:12-21.

The doctrine of the gratuitous justification of sinners cannot lead to the indulgence of sin, because such is the nature of union with Christ and such the object for which he died that all who receive the benefits of his death experience the sanctifying influence of his life, 6:1-11. Besides, the objection in question is founded on a misapprehension of the effect and design of the law and of the nature of sanctification. Deliverance from the bondage of the law and from a legal spirit is essential to holiness. When the Christian is delivered from this bondage, he becomes the servant of God and is brought under an influence which effectually secures his obedience, 6:12-23.

As, therefore, a woman, in order to be married to a second husband, must first be freed from her former one, so the Christian, in order to be united to Christ and to bring forth fruit unto God, must first be freed from the law, 7:1-6.

This necessity of deliverance from the law does not arise from the fact that the law is evil but from the nature of the case. The law is but the authoritative declaration of duty, which cannot alter the state of the sinner's heart. Its real operation is to produce the conviction of sin, 7:7-13, and in the renewed mind to excite approbation and complacency in the excellence which it exhibits. But it cannot effectually secure the destruction of sin; this can only be done by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, 7:14-25.

Those who are in Christ, therefore, are perfectly safe. They are freed from the law; they have the indwelling of the life-giving Spirit; they are the children of God; they are chosen, called, and justified according to the divine purpose; and they are the objects of the unchanging love of God, 8:1-39.

**THE SECOND PART** - The Second part of the epistle relates to the persons to whom the blessings of Christ's kingdom may properly be offered and the purposes of God respecting the Jews. In entering upon this subject, the apostle, after assuring his kindred of his affection, establishes the position that God has not bound himself to regard as his children all the natural descendants of Abraham but is at perfect liberty to choose whom he will to be heirs of his kingdom. The right of God to have mercy on whom he will have mercy, he proves from the declarations of Scripture and from the dispensations of his providence. He shows that this doctrine of the divine sovereignty is not inconsistent with the divine character or man's responsibility, because God simply chooses from among the undeserving whom he will as the

objects of his mercy and leaves others to the just recompense of their sins, 9:1-24.

God accordingly predicted of old that he would call the Gentiles and reject the Jews. The rejection of the Jews was on account of their unbelief, 9:25-33, 10:1-5. The two methods of justification are then contrasted for the purpose of showing that the legal method is impracticable, but that the method proposed in the gospel is simple and easy, and adapted to all men. It should, therefore, agreeably to the revealed purpose of God, be preached to all men, 10:6-21.

The rejection of the Jews is not total. Many of that generation were brought into the church who were of the election of grace, 11:1-10. Neither is this rejection final. There is to be a future and general conversion of the Jews to Christ, and thus all Israel shall be saved, 11:11-36.

**THE THIRD PART** - The third or practical part of the epistle consists of directions, first, as to the general duties of Christians in their various relations to God, chapter 12; secondly, as to their political or civil duties, chapter 13; and thirdly, as to their ecclesiastical duties, or those duties which they owe to each other as members of the church, chapters 14, 15:1-13.

The epistle concludes with some account of Paul's labors and purposes, 15:14-33, and with the usual salutations, chapter 16.

This Introduction is from *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* by Charles Hodge, D.D., LL.D., (New York, A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1896). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.