

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

CHAPTER XVII

The Theme of Romans

Leon Morris

[p.249]

To the question "What is Romans all about?" a variety of answers might be given, and, in fact, have been given. Most students see the Epistle as concerned basically with the salvation of man. Sometimes this is understood in general terms,¹ sometimes in terms of the gospel,² or perhaps with specific reference to justification.³ The same essential point may be made by suggesting that Paul wished to put before the Roman church the essence of the gospel he preached.⁴ Some see the Epistle as concerned basically with the problem of the Jew, regarding chapters 9-11 as the very core,⁵ though others see these chapters as little more than a parenthesis. For some the letter is about the Christian life as a whole, and they pay special attention to the ethical exhortations which begin at chapter 12.⁶ Others again are impressed by the tremendous scope of this

[p.250]

¹ This appears to be the meaning of W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam's view that "the main theme of the letter is the gathering in of the harvest, at once of the Church's history since the departure of its Master, and of the individual history of a single soul, that one soul which under God had had the most active share in making the course of external events what it was" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC [Edinburgh, 1907], p. xliv).

² Cf. Martin Luther's classic statement, "This Epistle represents the fundamental teachings of the New Testament and is the very purest Gospel" (*Luther's Preface to Romans*, trans. A. G. H. Kreiss [San Diego, 1937], p. 9). F. F. Bruce cites William Tyndale, "Forasmuch as this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament, and the most pure Euangeion, that is to say glad tidings and that we call gospel..." (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, TNTC [Grand Rapids, 1966], p. 9).

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse gives as his reason for choosing to take Romans as the basis of a series of radio addresses that it "has the most complete diagnosis of the plague of man's sin, and the most glorious setting forth of the simple remedy of justification by faith apart from the works of the law" (*Man's Ruin* [Grand Rapids, 1952], pp. ff.).

⁴ Cf. C. H. Dodd, "With this before them, the leaders of the church of Rome will be able to judge for themselves whether Paul is the dangerous innovator he was represented to be by his Jewish-Christian opponents, or a missionary whose work they can heartily support" (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, MNTC [London, 1944], p. xxv). C. K. Barrett sees the Epistle as "Paul's exposition of 'his' Gospel to the Gentile churches which had come into existence independently of his efforts" (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, BNTC [London, 1957], p. 7).

⁵ F. J. Leenhardt emphasizes the importance of this section of the Epistle: "What we do about these three chapters is the touchstone of our interpretation of the entire work" (*The Epistle to the Romans* [London, 1961], p. 20). He sees in them support for his contention that the central theme of Romans is "the problem of the church", a view which he admits seems paradoxical (*op. cit.*, p. 19).

⁶ Cf. V. P. Furnish, "God's righteousness, revealed in the event of Christ's coming, death, and resurrection, made real for the Christian in the event of his baptism into Christ, is also revealed in the claim God makes for the believer's obedience. This obedience is expressed as man places himself at God's disposal, 'presents' himself for service. The exhortation of Rom. 12:1-2 and the specific appeals which are thus introduced summarize and focus the whole preceding argument" (*Theology and Ethics in Paul* [Nashville, 1968], p. 7).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

Epistle and see it as in the nature of a compendium of Christian doctrine.⁷ There is something to be said for each of these views. The variety of suggestions is noteworthy, but understandable in view of the complexity of the Epistle. And since this writing has shown a remarkable power to revitalize the Christian church, the subject is plainly well worth pursuing.⁸

I STATISTICS

An interesting point emerges if we approach the Epistle statistically. I am aware that Paul's is not a personality to be coldly dissected, nor his writings to be treated as if there were no problem that could not be solved by mathematics. His is a fiery spirit, and the unpredictable grammar of Romans is in itself a warning that we must not try to force its author into a mould. Yet for all that something can be learned by studying the words Paul uses and the way he uses them.

It comes as no surprise that the word he uses most frequently is some form or other of the definite article (1105x).⁹ Nor that this is followed in order by *καὶ* (274x), *ἐν* (172x) and *αὐτός* (156x). These are all common words and are bound to occur frequently. But not everybody would expect that Paul's next most frequent word in this Epistle is *θεός*, "God", which is found no less than 153x. We may gauge something of the significance of this by noting that even some very common words do not occur as often. Thus *δέ* is found but 147x, the verb *εἶναι* in its various forms 113x, and the preposition *εἰς* 119x. When Paul uses "God" more often than such routine terms, then clearly God is very much in his mind. Apart from prepositions, pronouns and the like no word in Romans approaches the frequency of "God". The next most common word with what we might call theological significance is *νόμος* "law" (72x), after which come "Christ" (65x), *ἁμαρτία*, "sin" (48x), *κύριος*, "Lord" (43x), and *πίστις* "faith" (40x). It is clear that in Romans Paul speaks of God so often that no other subject comes even remotely near it.

[p.251]

The same essential point is made by another set of statistics. We may wonder whether Paul's emphasis on God is perhaps the typical New Testament position. The answer is that it is not. The word "God" occurs in Romans more often than in any other book in the New Testament except Acts where it is found 166x. Luke has it 122x and 1 Corinthians 105x, but no other book exceeds the century. As Acts is so much longer than Romans the word turns up more frequently in the latter. In Romans *θεός* occurs on an average once in every 46 words, in Acts

⁷ Thus Boyce W. Blackwelder says, "It is so profound in content and so systematic in presentation that it may be classified as a theological treatise", and again, "With but brief if any negative argument Romans is a positive presentation of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian message." He quotes approvingly A. M. Hunter's verdict: "In Romans we have the answer to the question, 'What is Christianity?' by the strongest thinker in the early church" (*Toward Understanding Romans* [Anderson, Ind.], 1962, pp. 37, 38).

⁸ Cf. Anders Nygren, "The history of the Christian church is consequently witness to the fact that the Epistle to the Romans has in a peculiar way been able to supply the impulse for the renewal of Christianity. When man has slipped away from the gospel, a deep study of Romans has often been the means by which the lost has been recovered" (*Commentary on Romans* [Philadelphia, 1949], p. 3).

⁹ I take this and the other statistics in this article from Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des Neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zürich, 1958).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

once in 110. Romans occupies a volume of about 11½ per cent of the total length of the New Testament, but it has about 114 per cent of the occurrences of "God", more than twice the number we would expect from its size.

No other book in the New Testament has this same concentration on the God-theme. Thus of the Gospels Matthew refers to God 51x, but to Jesus 150x, while the figures for Mark are 48 and 81, for Luke 122 and 89, and for John 83 and 237. Luke is thus the only one to use "God" more than he does "Jesus". But here other factors are to be borne in mind. Thus he speaks of man exactly the same number of times as he does God (ἄνθρωπος 95x, ἀνὴρ 27x), while verbs like εἶπεῖν "to say" (294x), and εἶναι "to be" (361x) are considerably in excess. There are no comparable phenomena in Romans. Perhaps we should point out here that while, as we have seen, Acts has θεός more often than any other book, and more often than any other theologically significant word, yet if we combine the totals for "apostle" (28x), and for two only of the apostles named, Paul (128x) and Peter (56x), we come to 212. In "The Acts of the Apostles" there is much about God, but, as the name of the book implies, more about God's apostles.

It is not otherwise in the Epistles generally. Sometimes these refer to God quite often. But usually they refer to Christ more often still. For example, Galatians, often thought to be very close to Romans in subject matter, uses "God" 31x, and "Christ" 37x, while for Ephesians the figures are 31x and 46x, and for Philippians 24x and 37x. Sometimes there is a greater emphasis on God, as in 1 Corinthians, but even here if we add "Lord" and "Jesus" to "Christ" we get a total of 155x as against 105x of "God". Hebrews appears to be an exception to this tendency, and, like Romans, it has a marked concentration on God, the term occurring 68x. But, while Hebrews does not use other theological terms as often as this, it employs θεός only once in 73 words, which does not approach the figure in Romans (once in 46 words, as we have already noted). Only 1 John uses θεός more often than Romans (once in 34 words). But here the shortness of the sample makes reliance on statistics a trifle more hazardous. It is also the case that in this Epistle ἡμεῖς is used nearly as often as in θεός, but there is nothing comparable in Romans.

When full allowance has been made for all this, it is clear that Paul's

[p.252]

concentration on "God" in Romans is remarkable. No book in Scripture is as God-centred as is this. Fundamentally Romans is a book about God.

II THE NATURE OF GOD

What then does Paul tell us about this God on whom he concentrates so much? First, he says something about the kind of Being he is. He speaks of "the glory of the uncorrupt God" (1:23), and he tells us that there is but one God and that he is not a God of Jews only (3:29 f.). In the doxology¹⁰ we find that God is eternal (16:26) and that he is wise (16:27; cf. "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God", 11:33).

¹⁰ The authorship of the doxology is, of course, disputed. If it be rejected, then the point will not stand. But it is part of the text of the Epistle as we have it, and I have noticed it accordingly.

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

Or again, Paul can speak of such attributes as the love of God (5:5, 8; 8:39¹¹), or his faithfulness (3:3), or his truth (1:25; 3:7 15:8; cf. "let God be true", 3:4). Sometimes such qualities are along the line of goodness (2:4; 11:22) or forbearance (2:4; 3:26), sometimes of severity (11:22) or wrath (1:18; 3:5 9:22). God may be characterized as "the God of hope" (15:13), or "the God of peace" (15:33; 16:20).

III GOD SAVING MEN

But it is not with abstract qualities that this Epistle is primarily concerned. It is indeed a book about God, but it is about God in action, God saving men in Christ.¹² Here we should take notice of the fact that it speaks much of Christ. We have already noticed that this name occurs 65x, which is the highest total in any New Testament book. Next is 1 Corinthians with 62x, while the highest total in any non-Pauline book is 25x in Acts (though we should perhaps notice that the short 1 Peter has the word 22x). It is not in any way to belittle Paul's interest in Christ to say that these figures show there is not the same emphasis in Romans on Christ as on God.¹³ No one in his right mind would wish to maintain that Paul is any other than deeply concerned about the Person and the work of Christ. But in this Epistle

[p.253]

Paul's real emphasis is on God, on God working through Christ, it is true. But still God.¹⁴

The sphere in which God works is indicated by another batch of statistics. Paul has an interesting concentration, for example, on a series of words which deal with sin. Thus in Romans there occur 28 per cent of all the New Testament occurrences of the noun ἁμαρτία, and 164 per cent of those of the corresponding verb ἁμαρτάνειν. This Epistle likewise contains 28 per cent of the occurrences of ἀδικία, 30 per cent of those of κακός, 47 per cent of those of παράπτωμα. With this we should take the death words, for Paul sees sin and death as linked in the closest of fashions ("the wages of sin is death", 6:23). He has the verb ἀποθνήσκειν in 20 per cent of its occurrences, the noun θάνατος, in 18 per cent, and the adjective νεκρός, in 12½ per cent. Paul is greatly concerned with the fact that men have sinned against God, and that this has resulted in death.

There is a similar concentration, perhaps we should say an answering concentration, on the righteousness words. Thus Romans has 36 per cent of the occurrences of the noun

¹¹ Possibly we should add 8:35 with *Aleph* B Or, etc., but the better reading appears to be Χριστοῦ.

¹² Cf. F. Amiot, "Salvation, as we have seen, is always presented as the work of the Father and the Son in common, or rather as the work of the Father through the Son" (*The Key Concepts of St. Paul* [Edinburgh, 1962], p. 59).

¹³ The point can be made that Romans, with 5 per cent of the volume of the New Testament yet has 12 per cent of the references to "Christ". But we should bear in mind that the Gospels greatly prefer the name "Jesus" whereas Paul prefers "Christ" (the Pauline corpus contains 379 out of the total of 529 New Testament references to Christ). If we combine the figures for "Jesus" with those for "Christ" as referring to the same Person, the percentage in Romans goes down to 7 per cent.

¹⁴ This is missed in such a work as M. Bouttier's, *Christianity according to Paul* (London, 1966). This is a valuable study, illuminating much, but it concentrates on Paul's view of Christ. It is true that in one short section of the work the author recognizes that "God is the ground of every action in Christ" (*op. cit.*, p. 50). But he does not give this anything like the emphasis it receives in Romans.

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

δικαιοσύνη, 38 per cent of the verb δικαιοῦν, and 50 per cent of the noun δικαίωμα. It similarly rates high with words like "condemnation", "judge", and "judgment". The salvation of which Paul writes takes account of these realities.

Especially noteworthy is his use of the term νόμος, "law". As we have already seen, he uses this word 72x, which is about 38 per cent of all its New Testament occurrences. We get some idea of the emphasis on this term from the fact that the next highest number in any New Testament writing is 32 in Galatians, followed by 17 in Acts. Paul employs the term in a bewildering variety of ways¹⁵ and we have expressions like "the law of faith" (3:27), "the law of her husband" (7:2), "the law of my mind" (7:23), "the law of sin and death" (8:2). The most frequent use of the term, however, is for the law of Moses which appears to be in mind in more than 50 cases (there must remain an uncertainty on several occasions whether Paul is thinking of this law or of some wider application of the term). Paul, of course, regards this law as taking its origin in God. Sometimes he directly associates "law" with God, speaking of "the law of God" (7:22, 25; 8:7), though these passages do not necessarily refer to the Mosaic

[p.254]

law. There can, however, be no doubt at all but that Paul regards God as the originator of the Mosaic law. He repudiates the law when it is regarded as a means of salvation, but he just as emphatically accepts it when it is seen as part of God's gracious provision for the working out of his purpose (7:12).¹⁶

IV RELATION TO GOD

It is clear that in this writing Paul is greatly concerned with sin and righteousness and judgment. But in each case he is concerned with the topic not for its own sake, but as it relates to God. Take, for example, his treatment of sin. He does not speak of this simply as an ethical problem or an ethical horror. It is an offence against God. Sinners are those who dishonour God (2:23), they blaspheme the name of God (2:24). They are men who do not seek after God (3:11), who have no fear of God (3:18). Being under the control of "the mind of the flesh" they are at enmity with God (8:7), indeed they cannot please him (8:8). The implication clearly is that they ought to please him. But the tragedy of the fleshly life is that in its very nature it is unable to do the things that please God. It is thus in that state of hostility to God which can also be described as death (8:6). Sinners have disobeyed God (11:30).

Or this may be expressed in terms of the knowledge of God. There is dispute as to the extent of the revelation of God which Paul sees in nature and the like. But it cannot be denied that he says that God has manifested to men what can be known of him (1:19). The result is that there

¹⁵ D. E. H. Whiteley sees "four basic convictions" in the "substructure of the Apostle's thought about the Torah": "The first, shared with all Jews, was that the Law was God's gift and therefore good. The second, shared with many Jews, was that no one in fact obeyed the Law. The third, which a significant minority of the Jews also accepted, was that God's plan included the good of the Gentiles as well as that of Israel. The fourth, which cut him off from Judaism and made him a Christian, was that God had raised from the dead the Messiah of Israel, whom the rulers of the nation had given over to be crucified" (*The Theology of St. Paul* [Oxford, 1964], p. 79).

¹⁶ C. Hodge maintains that Paul sees the law as "the will of God revealed for our obedience; commonly, however, with special reference to the revelation made in the Scriptures" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [New York, 1896], p. 81).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

is a sense in which men knew him (1:21). But the really significant thing is that they refused to have God in knowledge (1:28), an unusual expression which emphasizes that the crux of human sin is the alienation of the sinner from real knowledge of God. This knowledge, moreover, is a knowledge which the sinner refuses to have. It is not something which God withholds. Paul has already said plainly that God has made known what could be made known. The God of whom he writes so movingly is not a God who is trying to reject men. He is a God of hope (15:13 Romans has more than 24% of the New Testament references to hope), and a God of perseverance and encouragement (15:5). Men are culpable when they reject such a God and put the knowledge of God away from themselves. Paul brings out something of the heinousness of all this by pointing out that it means exchanging the glory of God for the likeness of created being (1:23), or again exchanging the truth of God for the lie (1:25). So do men degrade themselves when they reject God. But notice that throughout Paul is concerned with men's Godward relation. It is the glory of God that men reject, the truth of God that they abandon. This general

[p.255]

attitude may be found even among the religious. Paul can speak of the men of his own nation as having a zeal for God, but a zeal which lacks knowledge. They do not know the righteousness of God nor submit to it (10:2 f.). Again there is a refusal to take God's way and the assertion of men's own ideas as the right way.

V PUNISHMENT AND GOD

Since men thus make the essence of their sin a wrong attitude to God, it is not surprising that their punishment is thought of as coming from God. In the very section of the Epistle in which Paul brings out the point that sinners refused the knowledge of God he has the solemn, thrice-repeated "God gave them up" to the consequences of their sin (1:24, 26, 28). He could have said that there is a natural process of cause and effect which works itself out. He could have said that to take up a position which rejects the knowledge of God means inevitably to live with all the implications of ignorance of God. But instead Paul prefers to stress that God is not inactive when the consequences follow. It is not that he pictures a vindictive God who reacts sharply to sin, lashing out against those who refuse to give him his due. It is rather that God pays men the compliment of taking their freedom seriously. He does not constrain them to serve him. But when they choose the wrong he sees to it that they go along with their choice and that they experience what that choice means.

Again, Paul can speak in terms of the wrath of God (1:18; 3:5; 9:22; about one third of all the New Testament occurrences of ὀργή are in this Epistle). C. H. Dodd and others have made much of the thought that this is an archaic idea¹⁷ and that we should not take it too seriously in days like our own, when we have come to see that the love of God is such that wrath is excluded. But this is not grappling with either the teaching of Romans or the facts of life. Paul's words are not those of a man describing an impersonal process of cause and effect. As

¹⁷ Dodd expresses a preference for the translation "the Wrath of God" over Moffatt's "God's anger" on the grounds that "such an archaic phrase suits a thoroughly archaic idea" (*op. cit.* pp. 20 f.). He thinks that Paul retains the expression "not to describe the attitude of God to man, but to describe an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe" (*op. cit.*, p. 23). I have elsewhere criticized this idea (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*³ [London, 1965], pp. 155 ff., 179 ff.).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

we have just seen, he goes out of his way to bring in the notion of the divine intervention in a situation where it would have been easy to say, "They exchanged the glory of the uncorrupt God for images of created being. And they suffered the inevitable consequences". But Paul is not talking about an absentee God who leaves his world to go on under natural laws without him. He is talking about a God who is very much involved. And this is a necessity for our thinking. If God created a moral universe then God is implicated when moral purposes and principles work out. It is difficult to see what meaning an

[p.256]

impersonal process of cause and effect can have in a genuinely theistic universe.

VI GOD, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND JUDGMENT

More important than the fact that sinners sin against God is that other fact that God takes action to bring men salvation.¹⁸ Paul sees this as taking place because God set forth Christ as a propitiation (3:25). He sees the same process from another angle as redemption (3:24), or as reconciliation (3:24), or enjoying peace with God (5:1). It is connected with God's raising of Christ from the dead (10:9). It may not be out of place to notice that Christ is closely linked with the Father. He is at the right hand of God (8:34), and he is spoken of as "Son of God" (1:4), while there is also the disputed passage in which he may well be saluted as "God" and as "blessed for ever" (9:5).¹⁹ When God works salvation through Christ he is not working through a lowly intermediary.

But in Romans the characteristic way of viewing God's saving work is through the righteousness terminology. It is a process of justification, of acquittal. This is sometimes dismissed as a concept of little account. Thus Albert Schweitzer long ago spoke of the doctrine of righteousness by faith as "a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater — the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in Christ".²⁰ This estimate, or something like it, has been made by many who prefer to concentrate on Paul's experience of fellowship with Christ. This is certainly not the way it is in Romans.²¹ Here Paul has a good deal to say about judgment and the necessity for judgment, and about the way God saves men in agreement with judgment and not in defiance of it.²²

¹⁸ Cf. William Barclay, "As Paul saw so vividly, it was God who was behind the whole process of redemption. It is God's love, God's desire to save which dominates the whole scene. The initiative is the initiative of God. Behind every act of Jesus is God" (*The Mind of St Paul* [New York, 1958], p. 41).

¹⁹ Barrett sees it as "grammatically easier" to take the words in the sense, "From them... springs the Christ himself, who is God over all, blessed for ever." The objection to this is theological: "Nowhere else in any epistle does Paul call Christ, God." He thinks, however, that perhaps "Paul wishes to say that Christ was in human terms a Jew, but in fact God." But in the end he has to leave it an open question whether the reference is to Christ or to the Father (*in loc.*).

²⁰ *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York, 1931), p. 225. He also says that this doctrine "is something incomplete and unfitted to stand alone" (*op. cit.*, p. 226); and he has other similar statements.

²¹ H. Conzelmann strongly asserts the centrality of justification for Paul (*Interp.*, 22 [1968], pp. 171-86). V. P. Furnish holds that for Paul justification is not at the periphery. "Rather, because his concept of justification is related first of all to his affirmation of the righteousness and power of the covenant God who creates, upholds, and redeems, it stands at the very center of his gospel" (*op. cit.*, p. 146).

²² Cf. Markus Barth, "Paul speaks of justification. By this he means an act of judgment — not a judgment which men might pass over themselves or over one another, but an act of God — by which God proves that our affairs

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

[p.257]

Paul is clear that all men will stand before God's judgment seat and he cites Scripture, his way of clinching an argument, to prove it (14:10 f; he is quoting Isa. 45:23). Every man will give an account of himself to God (14:12). None will escape (2:3) that even-handed judgment which will be "according to truth" (2:2), and again it will be a "righteous judgment (δικαιοκρισία)" (2:5). It will also be a thoroughgoing judgment for God will judge even men's "secret things" (2:16). Privilege will not count in that day, for it is not those who have heard the law, but those who have kept it who will be just before God (2:13). Paul has a very revealing passage when he is discussing God's wrath. He asks whether God is unrighteous (ἄδικος) when he brings on (ἐπιφέρων) the wrath. His answer is a vigorous repudiation, with the question, "Otherwise how would God judge the world?" (3:6). Judgment is not something which has to be established by reasoned argument. That God will judge the world is such a fixed point in Paul's horizon that he can take it for granted and argue from it.

The God Paul knows is a righteous God and final judgment is part of the way his righteousness works out. Paul can ask, "Is there unrighteousness (or injustice) with God?" (9:14), where the rhetorical question brings out the impossibility of our seeing God as anything other than completely righteous (or just). It is in line with this that he speaks several times of the righteousness (or justice) of God (1:17; 3: 5, 21, 22; 10:3, *bis*). When a God like this saves men, he does it in accordance with right. He does not ignore right in the way he saves. This has been missed by too many scholars. They appear to have been obsessed with the errors, as they saw them, of those in the reformed tradition who emphasized the penal theory of the atonement. It is possible to state this theory in a way which makes God less than loving. He appears then to be a stern judge, who insists that the law's penalty be inflicted, though apparently he is not too particular on whom. In trying to uphold a theory which stressed justice, those who put it forward in this way pictured a God who was far from just. They let Jesus Christ appear as the real Saviour, who intervened between the stern judge and hapless humanity. All this was so hopeless that men were glad to turn to such a theory as Aulén's view that on the cross all the forces of evil were defeated, and that this must be seen as a divine action.

But just as the penal view lends itself to the kind of caricature just outlined, so does that of Aulén to the charge that it proceeds from the basis that "Might is right". God saves men, on this view, not by upholding moral principles, but by overriding the opposition. We cannot do without Aulén's exultation in the victory. But we cannot do either without Paul's concern for the right. With all its bungleings the penal view at least sets out to give due recognition to what is clearly a basic fact for Paul, namely that God acts rightly. If he saves men, then he saves them in accordance with justice. No theory of the atonement will be ultimately satisfactory

[p.258]

which fails to do justice to this aspect of the truth. God is righteous. If men are to be saved at all, it will be in a way which accords with this and not in a way which ignores it.

are in his hands. By this act of judgment God sets right what has gone wrong because of good and evil human intentions and achievements" (*Interp*, 22 [1968], p. 148).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

There is a well-known difficulty as to whether Paul means by "the righteousness of God" righteousness as an ethical quality in God, or whether it signifies rather a righteousness which God gives to men. There seems no real doubt but that the answer must be "Both". The former meaning is clearly in mind when the Apostle speaks of our unrighteousness as commending the righteousness of God (3:5). Or when he speaks of God's righteousness as being shown in the cross (3:25, 26). But equally clearly it is the right standing which God gives to sinful men which is meant when Paul speaks of "a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (3:22).²³ That the latter meaning must accord with the former should surely be obvious. God does indeed convey to men a righteousness they lack. But he does not do it in an unrighteous way. His righteousness is involved in the bringing of this salvation.

Because in his forbearance he had not in the past always punished sinners, there was the possibility that he might be thought not just (3:25 f.). But not now. In the light of the cross, God is seen to be both just and the justifier of the believer (3:26).²⁴ This does not mean that God saves men who are really righteous, for Paul says explicitly that he reckons men as righteous quite apart from works (4:6), and even that he justifies impious men (4:5; "acquits the guilty"). But he has regard to the moral law in the means by which he saves them. Traditionally this has been taken to mean that Christ paid the penalty sinners had incurred. It seems to me that this is what Paul means. If, however, some prefer to reject this interpretation, let them remember that Paul is certainly saying that there is right, there is justice in the means whereby God brings about salvation. God does not push aside inconvenient moral considerations. He respects the moral law as he saves. This is an insight of Paul's that we cannot do without.

VII GOD IS IN OUR RESPONSE

It is, of course, important that men make the right response to this saving deed of God in Christ. Paul does not envisage a divine activity which

[p.259]

operates completely apart from human response. We need only remember how naturally we follow "justification" with "by faith" to see how integral the response is. The Christian is characterized in the most natural way in terms of his faith (1:16; 3:22; 4:5, etc.). It should, perhaps, be stressed that it is always a faith directed to God (or God in Christ) that Paul thinks of. He is not interested in a general trustfulness, or a faith with no specific object. In the case of Abraham, for example, Paul more than once tells us that the patriarch believed God (4:3, 17). When he directs the strong brother to exercise his faith "before God" (14:22), the

²³ R. Bultmann stresses the divine activity: "The reason why 'righteousness' is called '*God's righteousness*' is just this: Its one and only foundation is God's grace — it is God-given, God-adjudicated righteousness." He quotes Rom. 10:3 and Phil. 3:9 and proceeds, "As 'their own' or 'my own' means the righteousness which man exerts himself to achieve by fulfilling the 'works of the Law,' so 'God's righteousness' means the righteousness from God which is conferred upon him as a gift by God's free grace alone" (*Theology of the New Testament I* [New York, 1951], p. 285).

²⁴ Cf. F. F. Bruce, "This, then, is the way in which God has demonstrated His righteousness — He has vindicated His own character and at the same time He bestows a righteous status on sinful men... this demonstration shows us how God remains perfectly righteous Himself while He pardons those who believe in Jesus and puts them in the right before His judgment bar" (*op. cit.*, p. 100).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

meaning is somewhat different. He is concerned with the outworking in daily life of the trust in God which is the basic Christian attitude. But for our purpose the important thing is the centrality of God. Important though the treatment of the weak brother is, even here Paul can find no better way of putting it than making the life of the strong God-centred. Faith in God is the significant saving attitude.

An interesting feature of this book about God is the way it continually sees God in the response to the saving act. Faith is never regarded, of course, as a meritorious work. It is a simple reliance on God. But even so, it is sometimes thought of not in purely human terms but as coming from God. He it is who divided to men their measure of faith (12:3).

This is implied in other expressions. Thus the saving message is called "the gospel of God" (1:1; 15:16). Grammatically this might mean "the gospel which tells us about God", but surely it must be taken in the sense "the gospel which comes from God", "the gospel of which God is the originator". The good news of salvation is not something which just "happened". God brought it about. The gospel is in fact "the power of God issuing in salvation" (1:16).²⁵ It is in line with this that God gives grace (15:15), and peace as well (1:7). Promise is an important concept — Romans has over 15 per cent of the New Testament occurrences of the noun. So also is mercy, for Romans has 28 per cent of those of the verb ἐλεεῖν. In all these ways Paul stresses that it is God who brings about salvation. This is the thought also when the saved are spoken of as God's "elect" (8:33). This thought stresses the divine initiative as does the cognate thought of "call" (1:7; 8:30, etc.). Men are not saved because they think it a good idea. They are saved because God chooses them and calls them.

This is brought out in an emphatic way in the sequence in which Paul tells us that "whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, so that he should be the firstborn among many brothers; and whom he predestined these he also called; and whom he called these he also justified; and whom he justified these he also glorified" (8:29 f.). The whole sweep of salvation is brought out in an eloquent

[p.260]

rhetoical passage and at every stage the emphasis is on what God does. The salvation which means so much to Paul is a salvation brought about by God.

Repentance is an attitude which we most naturally think of as our part in the salvation process. But in Romans it is a response which takes place because God leads men to it (2:4). It is he who induces good dispositions in those who naturally are inclined to sin. So salvation is thought of as God reckoning righteousness (4:6). We could not attain righteousness by any "works of law" (3:20). The saved, even though weak brothers, are not to be regarded as other than "the work of God" (14:20).

This profound conviction of Paul's underlies the difficult discussion of the problem of Israel in chaps. 9-11. Indeed, it is only because Paul sees God as so central to all of life that the problem exists at all. If God had simply set before men the right way and left it to them to choose whether to walk in it or not, it would have been a matter for regret that Israel had not

²⁵ Cf. William Baird, "The gospel is itself God's powerful act which brings about the very salvation which it proclaims" (*Paul's Message and Mission* [New York, 1960], p. 65).

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

responded in the way they should, but there would be no real problem. Why should they not respond by rejecting God? What for Paul makes the situation so tremendously difficult is that he is talking about a God who works out his purposes and who called Israel to be his people. So he does not ask, "Did Israel reject God?" but rather, "Did God reject Israel?" (11:1). Not content to let the rhetorical question speak for itself, he goes on to say, "God did not thrust away his people whom he fore-knew" (11:2). Israel's obduracy took place not because the people, freely choosing, rejected God. No. They "were hardened" (11:7). God gave them "a spirit of stupor" (or "numbness", 11:8). What happened can be put in the form "God did not spare the natural branches" (11:21), or "God shut them up to disobedience" (11:32). We should immediately add that Paul goes on in each case to see more than divine severity. In the former passage he notes that God is able to "graft them in again" (11:23), and in the latter that God's purpose is that he might "have mercy on all" (11:32). This latter thought leads Paul into a rhapsody as he exults in "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (11:33 ff.). Notice that his theme is not the bliss of the redeemed or the wonder of restored Israel or the like, but the wonder of the excellence of God. It is God and not Israel that is his theme. Perhaps we should add the point that the God we see in Romans is interested in all mankind. Just as Paul wrestles with the problem of Israel, so does he with that of the Gentiles, and in Romans we find 18 per cent of all the New Testament occurrences of ἔθνος.

VIII GOD AT THE CENTRE OF LIFE

When he gets past the initial process whereby God makes a man a Christian into the way that man should live out his life, not surprisingly

[p.261]

Paul still sees God at the centre. Perhaps the simplest and most comprehensive way of putting it is that in which he implores his correspondents, "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God" (12:1; he puts "pleasing to God" ahead of "approved to men" in 14:18). He has a number of other expressions which emphasize the truth that the Christian must be utterly dedicated to God. He is to reckon himself as dead to sin, but "alive unto God" (6:11). Paul urges believers, "present yourselves to God as alive from the dead, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (6:13). He uses strong language in speaking of them as "enslaved to God" (6:22). The verb δουλεύειν is another of the words found disproportionately frequently in Romans. In all 28 per cent of the verb's New Testament occurrences are found in this epistle as Paul brings out his point that the bondage to sin must be broken and has been broken by God. Now those thus set free must be wholly yielded, even "enslaved" to God. As he speaks of freedom from evil, Paul uses the verb to free, ἐλευθεροῦν, in this Epistle in four out of its seven New Testament occurrences. He looks for his readers to "bear fruit for God" (7:4). He distinguishes between "children of the flesh" and "children of God" (9:8), the implication being that believers display a character quite distinct from that of those whose horizon is bounded by this world. Elsewhere he uses the expression "children of God" again (τέκνα θεοῦ, 8:16, 21), and sometimes "sons of God" (υἱοὶ θεοῦ, 8:14, 19), and for emphasis, "sons of the living God" (9:26). Or again he may speak of "heirs of God" (8:17). The thought in this latter passage and probably also in some at least of the others, is that of privilege rather than responsibility. But this privilege is conceived in terms of relationship to God. It is this which matters right through Romans.

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

It is more usual to characterize Christians in terms of their faith in God than of their love to him, but the latter does occur when Paul speaks of them as "them that love God" (8:28). More characteristic perhaps is the reverse procedure whereby Christians are God's beloved ones (1:7).²⁶ In line with this God works out all things for good for them (8:28).

Arising from this is Paul's attitude to prayer. This must, of course, always be directed to God, but Paul goes out of his way three times to speak of "prayer to God" (10:1; 11:2; 15:30). Sometimes also he speaks of giving thanks to God (1:8; 6:17; 7:25; 14:6) or of making confession to God (14:11). Clearly God is at the centre of the life the Christian lives.

It is also true of secular life. It is no coincidence that it is in Romans that there occurs the passage in which Paul lays it down that there is no power

[p.262]

except under God (13:1) adding "the powers that be have been appointed by God."²⁷ He does not shrink from carrying this through to its logical conclusion. To resist authority is to resist a divine ordinance (13:2), and governmental authorities are God's servants. Paul can describe them as God's "ministers" (λειτουργοί, 13:6), and he speaks of the authority as God's "deacon" (διάκονος, 13:4). There must have been difficulties quite early in the church's history in relating this to the persecuting state, and again in modern times many have found the concept far from easy. But our concern is not with how we should interpret such passages in the light of the non-Christian character and actions of many states. It is rather with the fact that Paul had no hesitation in referring to a heathen state as owing its position and functions to God. The God of whom Paul writes in Romans is a God who is ceaselessly active and that in all of life. There is no "sacred" sphere to which he is confined or "secular" sphere from which he is absent.

This all-pervasive divine activity must be stressed over against the contention of some that Paul's overriding interest was the transforming experience that he experienced on the Damascus road or the like. Chester McCown can say, "Paul's mystical experiences were to him the very essence of his religion."²⁸ Paul does make some appeal to his own experience in

²⁶ In the face of those who set love and justice (which we have seen this Epistle to stress) in antithesis, we need Wolfhart Pannenberg's dictum: "Love is not opposed to justice, but rather constitutes the kernel of justice itself" (*Jesus — God and Man* [Philadelphia, 1968], p. 194). Without love there is no real justice. But, also, without justice love degenerates into sentimentality.

²⁷ A number of scholars, notably Oscar Cullmann, have put some emphasis on Paul's use of ἐξουσία to denote spirit forces. Thus, Dr Cullmann concludes his discussion this way: "The two-fold interpretation of the ἐξουσία of Rom. 13:1 as referring to the State and to the angel powers which stand behind it is thoroughly justified as an hypothesis, from the standpoint of philology, Judaistic concepts and the early Christian and Pauline theology" (*The State in the New Testament* [New York, 1956], p. 114 he adds that it is an hypothesis, not a final certainty). Clinton D. Morrison has discussed the question in some detail with copious references to the literature, citing authorities both pro and con. His own view is that there is a reference to spirit powers (*The Powers That Be* [London, 1960]). For our present purpose the resolution of the question is not important. Whatever the nature of the secular authorities they are subject to the God of whom Paul writes.

²⁸ *Contemporary Thinking about Paul*, Thomas S. Kepler ed. (New York, 1950), p. 114. It is perhaps significant that while some of the essays in the anthology have titles like "How Paul Thought of Christ", and "Paul and Jesus" (two have this title), none link Paul and God. There is an emphasis throughout on Christ. So also A. Schweitzer, "the Christ-mysticism is the centre of his thought" (*op. cit.*, p. 22); "Pauline personal religion is in its

Leon Morris, "The Theme of Romans," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.249-263.

Romans, but it is by way of showing his inadequacy to live a life pleasing to God. He does not dwell on what God has enabled him to do and be now that he has been converted. In fact throughout this Epistle he is not saying anything like, "On the Damascus road I had a tremendous experience. I saw Jesus Christ and my life was transformed. Come and share this experience." Rather he is saying, "God acted in Christ to bring men salvation." It is what God has done for the salvation of all men whoever they may be that is Paul's theme, with some concentration on this salvation viewed as justification. God's action, not man's experience, receives all the emphasis.

[p.263]

IX CONCLUSION

Thus throughout the Epistle there is a tremendous concentration on God. Sometimes Paul gives information about the kind of God God is, but mostly he is concerned with what God does. Paul's treatment of themes like justification or sanctification or predestination have so caught the imagination of scholars and others that they have tended to concentrate on them and to overlook the dominance of the God-theme. Partly, too, this has been helped by the fact that of necessity God is prominent throughout the New Testament. The whole Bible is a book about God. We tend to think that Romans in this respect is just like any book in scripture.

The point I have been concerned to make in this essay is that it is not. God comes more prominently before us in Romans than in any other part of the New Testament (with the possible exception of 1 John). Elsewhere Paul dwells on Christ and what Christ has done for men. This theme is not absent from Romans; but as long as we concentrate on it to the overlooking of the stress on God, we do not get quite what Paul is saying to us. Romans is a book about God and we must bear the fact in mind in all our interpretation of what it says. Otherwise we shall miss some of the wonderful things it says.

© 1970 The Paternoster Press. Reproduced by kind permission of the publisher.

Converted to PDF by Robert I Bradshaw in May 2005.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

fundamental character mystical. It can no doubt find expression for its thought in the eschatological and juridical doctrines of salvation, but its own essential life lies in the mystical" (*op. cit.*, p. 25).