

## **Walking the Romans Road ....? Sin, salvation & justification**

I've entitled this paper 'Walking the Romans Road', and I will begin by explaining that phrase for anyone who may not have heard it. The 'Romans Road' is an evangelistic tool, a way of outlining the good news of salvation by using a sequence of verses from the Letter to the Romans. It claims to explain why human beings need salvation, how God provided it, how we can receive it, and what results we get. As one website says, 'If you walk down this road you will end up understanding how to be saved.'<sup>1</sup> It's an alternative to using 'the Four Spiritual Laws' approach, but all the verses are in one book of the Bible. Apparently this is an advantage if you don't want to flip through a lot of pages.

There are several different versions of the Romans Road, with slight variations in which verses are used and in which order, but the basic trajectory is the same.

- 1 Romans 3:23 All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God
- 2 Romans 3:10-18 As it is written: 'There is no one who is righteous, not even one ...
- 3 Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- 4 Romans 10:9, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
- 5 Romans 10:13 for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
- 6 Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we are justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 7 Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
- 8 Romans 8:38-39 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>2</sup> [NRSV]

Lying behind this approach is the idea that has been around since at least Melancthon in the 1520s that Romans is a 'compendium of Christian doctrine'.<sup>3</sup> The disadvantage of this way of thinking is that it can easily reduce our reading of Paul's letter to a series of propositions and, as in the case of the 'Romans Road', to our being asked to give intellectual assent to these. One of the dangers here is its oversimplification. As one commentator has noted, 'you can hardly call it a road. Someone has dug up half-a-dozen paving stones from Paul's argument and laid them in a line. That's not a road. It's not even much of a path.'<sup>4</sup> Another inherent problem with the 'Romans Road', as well as the fact that it leaves out a lot of what Paul was saying, is that it focuses everything on the individual (the individual who

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.contenderministries.org/romanroad.php> accessed 24.10.13

<sup>2</sup> See : <http://www.gotquestions.org/Romans-road-salvation.html#ixzz2ibapobfp> accessed 24.10.13

<sup>33</sup> A Katherine Grieb, *The story of Romans: a narrative defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: 2002, John Knox Press), xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Perriman, 'P.ost: evangelical theology for the age to come' <http://www.postost.net/2012/05/what-s-wrong-romans-road-salvation#sthash.W9CXQIoR.dpuf> accessed 24.10.13

will 'be saved' as a result of working through the sequence of verses), whereas Paul is often thinking in a collective sense, looking both at people as a community and at how they interact with the whole of creation.

What Paul is doing in Romans is telling a story – the 'big story' of what God has done in and through Christ. He is writing to people to help them find their place in this story, and he begins by telling some of his own story and how he fits in. (Rom 1:1-15) Then he sets out (in chapters 1-3) the story of a world gone wrong. Part of this is the story of all of us, both Jews and Gentiles – the universal human story, and part of it is the specific story of God's people the Jews, the story of Israel.<sup>5</sup> As with all good stories there is a disaster: something has gone badly wrong and needs repairing. The problem is sin.

What is sin? Paul sees two aspects to sin: it's something we do by choice, a voluntary action, and it's also a power that has us in its grip. It's both our own responsibility and something we cannot help.<sup>6</sup> We are thus burdened by two things: guilt and slavery. We're stuck – not just as individuals but as members of the human race and of our own particular part of it, Jew or Gentile.<sup>7</sup> As Tom Wright puts it, God's people 'were in trouble and needed rescuing'.<sup>8</sup>

So we need to be released from this guilt and slavery, and brought back into relationship with God. This release, this rescue, is what we tend to call salvation – though that word also includes elements of healing. Paul says the gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom 1:16). This is about a new chapter in the story, involving life and freedom: a new life under God both now and in the future, and freedom from the power that oppresses and enslaves us.<sup>9</sup> There is a bigger dimension to all of this than its implications for you and me as individuals. We are saved for the world of creation, saved to take care of the world that God has created and given to us to manage.<sup>10</sup> (But that leads into another part of the story.)

So, we are in trouble and need rescuing. Something is broken and requires fixing, people are enslaved and need liberating – for themselves and their relationship with God, and for their relationships with other people and with creation. How, and why, is this repair possible? How did it happen?

God's original plan – what Tom Wright calls the 'single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world'<sup>11</sup> was not working, because Israel, the original people of God, was not living the life for which God created them. But even though humanity in general and Israel specifically repeatedly broke faith, God did not. So part of the how and why of salvation is tied up with the character of God.

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<sup>5</sup> (Grieb 2002), 19.

<sup>6</sup> John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford: 1990 ed, Oxford University Press), 75.

<sup>7</sup> 'There is a good case for seeing Rom 1:16 – 3:20 as aiming to demonstrate not so much the sinfulness of every single individual as that sinfulness is endemic among all peoples, Jews as much as Gentiles.' (Ziesler 1990 ed), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: 2009, SPCK), 52.

<sup>9</sup> (Ziesler 1990 ed), 73.

<sup>10</sup> (Wright 2009), 207.

<sup>11</sup> (Wright 2009), 74 and *passim*.

Now we come to one of those linguistic tangles which remind us that we tend to read the Bible in translation. When we speak of the character of God in this context, are we talking about the righteousness of God, the justice of God and/or the covenant faithfulness of God? The tangle happens because, where both Greek and Hebrew have one set of words (as nouns, verbs and adjectives) for these concepts English has two sets: we can say just / justice or right / righteousness. So when Paul says in Greek *δικαιοσύνη θεού* (in Romans 1:17 and in several other places) what does he mean?

Much scholarly ink has been spilled here! Sometimes people go for words in the justice / justification group, others opt for righteousness. Tom Wright, looking at the big picture which starts with the Old Testament, uses 'God's covenant faithfulness'. Some commentators say there is a distinction between justice/ justification on the one hand and righteousness on the other, and so use different words in different places. This is the approach many Bible translations take. Others (Stephen Need among them) find this view hard to sustain.<sup>12</sup> I rather like the approach of Katherine Grieb who considers that when Paul says (1:17) 'the righteousness of God is revealed' he is probably drawing on *all* these meanings of God's righteousness: God's righteousness as the Creator to the entire creation, God's special covenant relationship with Israel, God as the impartial judge who will put things right especially for the poor and oppressed, and God's saving faithfulness which will restore everything to right relationship in the End Time.<sup>13</sup> Justice, and restoration of right relationship, and faithfulness to that covenant relationship are bound up with one another.

Why, then, does this matter? Two reasons, I believe. First, it gives us a fuller picture of the character of God, of who this God is in whom we live and move and have our being. This is a good and righteous God who values relationship and who cares about justice for the oppressed. Second, because it gives us a fuller picture of humanity's place in the story. Because the crunch comes when we start to wonder – from the human end of this – about what is happening to get us out of this fix. When Paul is talking not only of God's character (as a noun) but about what God does (as a verb) to rescue us, what is he actually saying? When he says in 5:1 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand' what is the process? How are we 'justified'? Are we 'made righteous' or 'declared righteous'? When we use the word 'justification' do we know what we mean?

The context of those questions is the law court – Paul is here using judicial imagery, taking a metaphor from the law courts of ancient Israel to talk about the relationship between God and humanity and how Jesus comes into this. There are other images, as well as the law court, that Paul uses, and we will get to those in a moment. For now, humanity (both Jew and Gentile) is charged with offences and is in the dock, God is the judge. The evidence has been presented and it is clear that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (3:23). But something happens: humanity is released from the dock, 'justified by his grace as a gift' (3:24). What then of the justice (or righteousness) of God, since letting someone off who is patently guilty doesn't seem at all right? Has God set aside God's justice in order to grant mercy?

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen W Need, *Paul Today: Challenging Readings of Acts and the Epistles* (Lanham: 2007, Cowley) 128-9.

<sup>13</sup> (Grieb 2002), 21-25.

Is it that humanity is justified by being ‘made righteous’? This is the line taken by Augustine, and by Luther and others of the Reformers, that God infused sinful humanity with Christ’s righteousness, thereby making it possible for us to leave the dock and get on with a new sort of life.<sup>14</sup> This implies a connection between the final verdict and the character of the accused. What most commentators are saying is that ‘justification’ is not about character: when God declares humanity ‘justified’ it does not mean ‘morally virtuous’. What has changed is status, not moral character or any sort of infused virtue: humanity has been declared ‘in the right’, ‘acquitted’, ‘cleared’, ‘justified’.<sup>15</sup> And this is because of Christ. God has acted in covenant faithfulness in the death of Jesus Christ to restore the right relationship with Israel and with the world as a whole.<sup>16</sup> The new status we have – as those who are ‘justified’ – leads to a new, restored, relationship, and to a new existence.<sup>17</sup> We are declared ‘right’ and then there is, through the Holy Spirit, the possibility of a new way of living, a transformed life in which we increasingly choose to act in ways which reflect God’s image and reveal God’s glory.<sup>18</sup>

Paul, as we noted earlier, uses other images to talk about how our relationship with God is restored. As Katherine Grieb notes,

We hear the dramatic rescue story through Paul’s three powerful metaphors: *justification* (What will become of the prisoners condemned to death?); *redemption* (Will the lost family members be ransomed from their kidnappers?) and *atonement* (Will the sins of the people separate them from God’s forgiveness?)<sup>19</sup>

We use the language of redemption ourselves, in terms of a precious item being bought back from the pawn shop, or when we speak of paying a ransom to secure someone’s release from a kidnapping or hostage situation. This is what Paul means in 3:24 when he notes ‘the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’: we have been rescued from bondage and brought home again, by someone making a payment. Then he adds that Christ was ‘put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood’. The image here refers to the sacrifice or to the place of atonement in ancient Israel, to the ritual of sprinkling blood on the ‘mercy seat’, the lid of the ark of the covenant. Christ is the place where sins are forgiven or the means by which sins are forgiven: Christ is the place or the means of reconciliation or atonement (at-one-ment).<sup>20</sup>

It helps enormously that the Church has kept all these different images (and there are others still, in the Bible and elsewhere), instead of settling for just one: it adds richness and it prevents us from thinking we have all this tied down tight. But one thing is clear: it all depends on Christ’s death and resurrection. What had gone wrong with (to use Tom Wright’s phrase again) ‘the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world’ was that Israel had not offered the obedience that was required. What was needed was ‘a faithful Israelite, through

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<sup>14</sup> (Need 2007), 135.

<sup>15</sup> See (Wright 2009) 69, 180; (Need 2007), 134-35.

<sup>16</sup> (Grieb 2002), 38.

<sup>17</sup> (Ziesler 1990 ed), 95.

<sup>18</sup> See (Wright 2009), 168.

<sup>19</sup> (Grieb 2002), 35.

<sup>20</sup> (Grieb 2002), 40.

whom the single plan can proceed after all.<sup>21</sup> There was no Plan B. God's own faithfulness to that plan meant that 'the righteousness of God has been disclosed' (3:21) through the faithful obedience of Jesus. It was his redeeming death that made it possible for sinners to be justified, not because of any moral character or virtue but because Jesus, as that faithful Israelite, had done what Israel had proved unable to do.<sup>22</sup>

And so Jesus was 'handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (4: 25).<sup>23</sup> This is how God can declare Abraham and other believers, including us, to be 'acquitted' in spite of our so-obvious lack of virtuous moral character. 'For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.' (5:10) Paul is reminding his audience that, while our sins (in both the guilt and the slavery aspects) were the reason for Jesus' death, the story did not end there. The resurrection demonstrates that our 'trespasses' were dealt with on the cross – as Paul had earlier written to Corinth 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins'. (1 Cor 15: 17)<sup>24</sup> Christ's death means liberation: 'We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.' (Rom 6:6) We are incorporated into Christ's death (through baptism), and so we can look forward to being part of his resurrection: 'we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.' (6:4) Because of Christ we can live out a new and glorious chapter in the story.<sup>25</sup>

So what is our role in all of this? Humanity was in need of rescue and God, in Christ, stepped in to bring this about. Is there any place for some action of our own? 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ', says Paul at 5:1. We are justified, declared 'right', by faith – but whose faith is this? Here we have another of those translation quandaries, for the phrase that Paul uses in a number of places – *πιστις χριστου* – can, quite legitimately, be translated as 'faith *in* Christ' or the 'faith – or faithfulness – *of* Christ.' For many years 'faith in Christ' was the common reading: we are saved by the faith that we have in Christ, and/or by our believing specific things about him. Luther in particular, reacting in his context to having to perform a whole collection of actions in order to be put right with God (something he termed 'justification by works'), proclaimed that we are justified by faith, and by faith alone (*sola fide*).

The problem with this is that 'justification by faith' seems to suggest that it is up to us to have faith, that it depends on something we do: 'Salvation by good works has slipped in through the back door, faith being the ultimate good work.'<sup>26</sup> The dangers compound, for faith has either been downgraded into intellectual knowledge or assent to propositional

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<sup>21</sup> (Wright 2009), 83.

<sup>22</sup> (Wright 2009), 178.

<sup>23</sup> Wright here sees echoes of Isaiah 53:5 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.' (Wright 2009), 196.

<sup>24</sup> (Wright 2009), 196.

<sup>25</sup> Brendan Byrne, SJ comments that Paul here isn't seeking to provide instruction on baptism, he is simply making a passing allusion to this rite of Christian initiation which he assumes they are as familiar with as the communities he had founded himself. *Romans Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: 1996, Liturgical Press), 189.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, 'What's His Is Ours' *Christianity Today*, Sept 2013, 32-35, at 34.

statements (which boxes can I tick?) or it has gone to the other extreme where, as Wilson puts it, 'I am saved only if I believe enough, and then I doubt that I believe at all.'<sup>27</sup> In the Pietist/revivalist tradition, the doctrine of justification by faith was run together with Jesus' statement in John 3:7 about being 'born again'. Justification was equated with being 'born again' and with a specific experience of conversion occurring at a particular moment in time.<sup>28</sup> Wright describes this phenomenon as something 'that appears to regard strong emotional certainty of being saved as the criterion for being saved in fact.'<sup>29</sup>

More recent scholarship (since at least the 1980s) translates the phrase as 'the faith (or the faithfulness) of Christ'. We are justified by the faithful obedience of Christ, and his faithfulness to God's plan: it is something that he did, not something that we do.<sup>30</sup> But is there anything that we need to do to take hold of this justification? Where do we fit into this story? After all, in his introductory statement Paul has said 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'. (Rom 1:16-17) Wright sees this as Paul hinting that 'when God's covenant faithfulness / justice is unveiled, this is done *on the basis of the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah*, on the one hand, and *for the benefit of those who believe*, on the other.'<sup>31</sup> There is a role for believing humanity.

Perhaps some analogies might help: I can go to the supermarket, buy food, prepare it and serve it, but I haven't fed my family unless and until they put it in their mouths. I can choose a gift, wrap it and present it, but the gift still needs to be received. Our faith, the faith which receives the gift, is our response to the faithfulness of God, the acknowledgement of God's power and glory revealed on the cross. This is not, says Wright, a 'work', or an 'achievement' for 'it consists simply of looking away from oneself to God the creator and lifegiver'.<sup>32</sup> Wilson has an interesting take on this: 'all of us depend on a righteousness not our own ... any faith we have is Christ's own faith, not an accomplishment we can credit to ourselves.'<sup>33</sup>

Having, then, looked away from ourselves towards God and received the gift of our 'justified' status, we are invited into a new way of life. This new life is not an individualistic affair, for salvation is not just for 'me' – it is 'bigger than me'. Justification is not only about an individual being saved, having their sins forgiven. It is, to quote Wright again, 'about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of his spirit, a single family ... through whom his purposes can now be extended into the wider world'.<sup>34</sup> There are horizontal as

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<sup>27</sup> (Wilson 2012), 35.

<sup>28</sup> See William G Witt, 'Anglican Reflections on Justification by Faith' *Anglican Theological Review* 95/1 57-80, at 60.

<sup>29</sup> (Wright 2009), 210.

<sup>30</sup> There is still a lively scholarly debate on 'faith of' vs 'faith in' but there is a notable shift towards the 'faith of' position. See, for example *Pauline Theology Vol IV Looking Back, Pressing On*, E Elizabeth Johnson & David M Hay eds, SBL Symposium Series (Atlanta: 1997, Scholars Press).

<sup>31</sup> (Wright 2009), 157. The italics are Wright's.

<sup>32</sup> (Wright 2009), 196.

<sup>33</sup> (Wilson 2012), 35. Wilson considers, therefore, that 'there is no competition between "the faith *in* Christ" and "the faith *of* Christ" They are the same reality.' *ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> (Wright 2009), 219.

well as vertical dimensions to Paul's theology of reconciliation: we do not just have peace with God, but we are called into the ethics of living peaceably with all people, just as there is to be peace between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>35</sup>

This gets us back to the question about where we find our place in this ongoing story, because it is bigger than us as individuals and longer than a single moment of tracking through to the end of the 'Romans Road' and praying a prayer. In telling the 'big story' as he does, Paul invites us to understand where sin, salvation, justification and the new life in Christ touch our own stories.

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### Questions:

- 1) Romans 3;21-26 gives three different ways of thinking about how God rescues humanity: the law court (defendants acquitted from the death penalty), redemption or ransom (a payment that frees someone), or Israel's sacrificial system (forgiveness of sins and renewed relationship with God through sacrificial ritual). Which metaphor connects best with your own experience of having your relationship with God restored? Or is there another metaphor that connects with you?
- 2) 'Faith *in* Christ' or 'faith *of* Christ' – what difference does it make to you which it is?

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<sup>35</sup> Haddon Willmer, 'Vertical' and 'Horizontal' in Paul's Theology of Reconciliation in the Letter to the Romans' *Transformation* 24/3 & 4 2007, 151-160.