

This exposition of the *locus classicus* of Christian redemption, Romans 3:21-6, is contributed by the Vice-Principal of Oak Hill Theological College, North London. Mr. Stibbs is widely appreciated as a perceptive Biblical expositor.

Exposition: How Sinners are Put Right With God

by Alan M. Stibbs

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome, he seems deliberately to have determined to set out a full and systematic statement of the gospel which he preached. «It is clear,» writes a modern commentator on the epistle, «that the argument was thought out as a whole. Paul evidently gave pains, as in no other epistle, to make his statement of his position comprehensive and coherent.»¹ In such a statement of the gospel it is appropriate for us to examine the place which Paul gives to the death of Christ, and the way in which he explains its significance. The crucial passage in which he does this is easily identified. It is not of great length, but it abounds in phrases every one of which is loaded with relevant meaning. Let us seek, therefore, carefully to examine this passage and to consider its phrases in detail. This is a pas-

¹ C. H. Dodd, *Moffatt Commentary on Romans*, p. xxxi.

sage in which the Revised Version may help considerably towards a better understanding. So we here print that version.

But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood, to shew his righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the shewing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

First, let us notice the place of this passage in the sequence of the thought of the epistle as a whole. It is preceded by a long section, in which Paul indicates men's universal need of the gospel. All men are shown to be sinners in God's sight. A comprehensive indictment is brought against the human race as a whole. All the world is declared to be guilty and in danger of the righteous judgment of God against sin. Nor are men able by moral reformation to put themselves right in God's sight. Not until this has been made undeniably plain does the apostle introduce his exposition of the divine pro-

vision to meet this very situation, by which a way of righteousness is offered to sinful men. Let us seek to learn in detail from Paul's carefully phrased exposition its various distinctive characteristics. Here we shall need, for the most part, to give attention to the wording phrase by phrase, if we are to appreciate all that is here suggested.

But now is how Paul begins. These words imply both an opportunity and a contrast. What the gospel offers is, on the one hand, a present blessing, and, on the other hand, one that before was not similarly available to be enjoyed. There is a contrast here between B.C. and A.D., between the «then» of being under law, and the «now» of being under grace. This is, for all who have entered into the light and salvation which the gospel brings, one of the radical divisions in history and experience which the gospel introduces — the difference between «then» and «now».

Apart from the law.

The gospel way of righteousness is something different from, and something entirely independent of, legalism. It is not winning acceptance with God and reward from God by acts of obedience to God-given rules. How could it be? Has not the apostle already shown conclusively, so that no mouth can answer back, that by acts of law-keeping no one can win acceptance or secure acquittal at the bar of divine justice?²

² See Rom. 3:19,20.

Being witnessed by the law and the prophets. This gospel is, however, no divine afterthought, no new-fangled idea to meet an unexpected emergency. It was divinely foreshadowed and foretold in Old Testament times by the ceremonies of the law and by the predictions of the prophets. Indeed, all the Old Testament Scriptures, the law and the prophets, were inspired with this overruling intent, to bear witness to the coming day and way of divinely-provided salvation.

A righteousness of God hath been manifested. This new answer to man's need, this effective provision of righteousness or acceptance in God's sight for guilty sinners, is in the first place divine in origin. God is its author, not men. It becomes ours not by our own determination and doing, but by the will, the work and the gift of God. Also, in the second place, in His own time and way, God has disclosed it for men's appreciation and appropriation. As a plan it had existed in the mind and purpose of God since before the world was made. But it was not something which men could discover by their own investigations. Earlier prophetic awareness of some of its features was due to direct divine revelation. Now its character has been finally revealed in outworked fulfilment. It now exists as an available benefit to be enjoyed.

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The place or point of this manifested fulfilment is Jesus Christ. This new

way of acceptance with God is disclosed in Him. It is a gift made available for sinners in Jesus. It is a gift to be personally enjoyed by sinners through faith in this Jesus as God's Christ, the divinely-appointed Saviour, and the divinely-anointed King. These are the two indispensable essentials to its enjoyment — Jesus only, no one else; and faith only, nothing else.

Unto all them that believe: for there is no distinction: for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. This amazing benefit of salvation in Christ as a gift from God may equally be enjoyed by all alike on the sole condition of faith in Christ. No distinction is made on any other ground between those who believe. All are regarded, in the first place, as equally sinners who need salvation; Christ died for all alike. And, in the second place, all such sinners who believe in Christ are equally saved, and for this one all-sufficient reason common to them all that they believe in Christ.

Being justified freely by his grace. The consequent benefit thus enjoyed, namely acceptance in God's sight, is not procured by anything which the sinners themselves do. It is done for them, or conferred on them. Their «justification», to use the technical word, is a divine act not a human achievement. What is more, it costs sinners nothing. It is done for them freely, or gratis, as a sheer gift, by the absolute kindness and the undeserved mercy of God Himself.

Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Though sinners thus enjoy this salvation freely or without price, that does not mean that it costs nothing. A price had to be paid to secure such a benefit. But this necessary accomplishment of ransom and of consequent release from the judgment righteously due to sin is exactly what has been accomplished for sinners by God's decisive intervention in the earthly life and work of His promised Messiah Jesus.

Whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood. Under the law in Old Testament times a ransom was an offering made or a price paid for the release or redemption of a life otherwise forfeit. So among the Israelites the firstborn had to be redeemed. Such divinely-ordained practice provided ceremonial indication that sinners deserving judgment and death could only live in God's sight if some equivalent sacrifice of life or shedding of blood were provided to take the place of their own punishment. A substitute had to bear the penalty to provide for them a "cover" or propitiation before God; only so could their sin be expiated. In the gospel we find that, what God thus required in His righteousness, He Himself provided in His grace. Such propitiation or atonement for sinners God has provided *by his blood*, that is, by the death of Christ, particularly the kind of death which He did die, which involved violent blood-shedding, which was in human eyes the

extreme penalty due to the worst of sinners, and which, in relation to God, involved Him in the horror of great darkness through the hiding of God's face.

What is here emphasized as significant is that Christ died in this way and for this purpose by direct divine appointment. God Himself thus set Him forth to be a propitiation. The words *set forth* mean either "appointed beforehand" or "openly displayed". It means either that God foreordained in eternity that His own Son by becoming man should thus bear the penalty of sins for sinners; or that God so ordered it that this propitiatory act was an earthly historical event open to the public gaze. This latter interpretation is attractive here. It sets Christ's propitiatory act in contrast to the propitiatory act of the Old Testament high priest on the day of atonement. He sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat, or place of propitiation, in the inner shrine of the tabernacle, into which he alone was allowed to enter. So it was hidden from men's eyes. But the divine fulfilment of this figurative ritual was done openly before the eyes of men on the cross, which by its very publicity brought earthly shame and heavenly curse. So for sinners, the eternal mercy seat, the place where they may find shelter from judgment and acceptance with God, is Christ Himself, the Christ who has been crucified. And the one simple and sufficient condition of enjoying such benefit is faith. God has thus

through His death for sinners made Christ available or open to all who will but believe in Him. «He is,» as the apostle John puts it, «the propitiation for our sins.»³

To shew his righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God. The first and immediate purpose of God's act in Christ's death was retrospective and Godward in its reference. For the righteousness of God needed vindication. In the days before Christ was crucified God had clearly not acted in full judgment against sin and sinners. He had shown forbearance and restrained His wrath. He had, so to speak, put sins down as a matter to be dealt with later. Such action might easily lead some to suppose that God did not regard sin with great seriousness after all, since it could so lightly be passed over. So, before sinners could be properly justified in the sight of God, the action of God needed justifying in the eyes of men. His righteousness needed to be rescued from possible grave misunderstanding. This is the first thing that the sacrifice of Christ does. It shows that God acted rightly in not judging sinners in the days before Christ came, because He intended that in due time Christ by His one propitiatory act should fully settle

all outstanding claims for judgment upon sinners.

For the shewing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus. The complementary and ultimate purpose of God's act in Christ's death was prospective and manward in its reference. God thus intended *at this present season* (the period which we call A.D. as distinct from B.C.) to initiate a new day of grace, and justly to provide for the justification of sinners on the simple condition of faith in Christ. This God can now justifiably do because the judgment due to sin has been settled by Christ's death. So this one act of God in Christ both makes a full demonstration of God's own character as righteous, and makes a complete provision for the present and eternal salvation of all sinners from judgment. The benefit of full acceptance in God's sight can now justly be granted by God Himself to every one who enters into it through faith in Jesus. These are the two indispensable essentials; Jesus only, the Jesus who was crucified for our sins, no one else; and faith only, nothing else. This does not, however, mean that intellectual understanding and assent are all that is required. The wording here suggests personal responsive movement. Confessing his guilt, and abandoning every other confidence, the sinner must act in faith and commit himself to the one Saviour.

³ 1 Jn. 2:2

heit der Schrift missbraucht wird. Jürgen Moltmann schreibt dazu in «Theologie der Hoffnung» (S. 49): «Dieser bekannte Satz ist aber kein christlich-theologischer, sondern stammt aus der neuplatonischen Gnosis, taucht so in den mystischen Reflexionen des Mittelalters auf und findet sich auch in Hegels Religionsphilosophie. Er stellt für sich genommen die höchste Stufe der Selbstreflexion des Absoluten auf dem Boden griechischer Religionsphilosophie dar. Mit diesem Grundsatz würde aus Offenbarung und Gotteserkenntnis ein in sich geschlossener Kreis entstehen, der streng genommen nicht durchbrechbar ist. Auf jenes Bündel von geschichtlichen Nachrichten, von dem der christliche Glaube lebt, ist er nicht anwendbar, sondern eher auf eine esoterische Gnosis... Für Gotteserkenntnis auf Grund von Offenbarung müsste eher der umgekehrte Grundsatz gelten: Nur Ungleiches erkennt einander. Gott wird nur von Nicht-Gott, nämlich vom Menschen, als «Gott» und «Herr» erkannt... «Niemand kann Jesus einen Herren heissen, ausser durch den Heiligen Geist» (1. Kor. 12, 3). Aber es steckt dieser Geist im Christusgeschehen und im Wort und nicht in einem göttlichen Zirkel supra nos.»

Zu verweisen ist noch auf das Gebet des Paulus in Epheser 1 um «erleuchtete Augen des Verständnisses», ferner auf Lukas 16, 29 «Sie haben Mose und die Propheten, lass sie dieselben hören», welche Aussage nur insofern sinnvoll

ist, wenn Mose und die Propheten sich ohne geistliche Voraussetzungen bei uns durchzusetzen imstande sind. *Unser Bitten hat also nicht die Oeffnung der Schrift, sondern die Oeffnung unseres Verständnisses für die Schrift zum Inhalt.* Diese Bitte wird unser Herr Jesus Christus gern erhören, der hier allein zu öffnen vermag.

Bibelarbeit Moscia 1966. Aus der *Brüderlichen Handreichung*. Folge 41, Oktober 1966.