Pauline images of salvation

Robert K. McIver

A mosaic of beauty and color marks Paul's choice of words to describe the good news of the gospel.



Robert K. McIver, Ph.D., is a lecturer in New Testament at Avondale College, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

Every so often we read or hear a phrase that at once summarizes an entire era or opens up new horizons in our thinking. Years ago, I had such an experience. My seminary professor was reminiscing at an informal get-together on the kinds of sermons he had heard during his lifetime. "Victory in Christ" seemed to dominate the pulpit during his high school and college years. Weeks of prayer, camp meetings, revivals, and major occasions involving visiting speakers underscored Christian victory as the essential theme of the gospel. In more recent years, my professor went on to say, the emphasis seemed to have shifted to "relationships."

I have thought many times about my professor's attempt to encapsule Christian preaching of many years. Reflecting on my own experience—growing up in a Christian home, attending youth meetings, studying in a Christian college, and now teaching theology—I tend to agree with my teacher, but feel tempted to add one more classification. I think I must have caught the tail end of the preachers of "victory in Christ." I can vividly remember many meetings where I responded to an altar call to rededicate my life to Jesus to gain victory over my sins. When I arrived at college to study the Bible I discovered a new theme: justification by faith. I was hardly a week at college when somebody thrust in my hand a questionnaire on justification by faith. It seemed apparent that the worth of my Christianity would be weighed by how well I answered the questions. A correct understanding of righteousness by faith, I was told, would confirm my orthodoxy, quickly finish the work, and hasten the return of Jesus. A third trend in preaching, noted more recently, emphasizes relationships.

Thus, in my experience of listening to Adventist sermons, I can trace three key themes over three periods of time in my growth and development. If I were to ask the question, "What is the essence of Christianity?" preachers of each period would provide a distinct answer.

Now, these answers are not contradictory, but they help us to understand how different emphases get the focus in Christian preaching and teaching. In this article I propose to review Paul's understanding of the gospel by looking at the word pictures he employed to describe its essence.

Paul uses a wide range of rich imagery to describe what Christianity is all about. Many of the words, now perhaps reserved for Christian theological use, were part of the ordinary scene of the first century. Paul's readers would have understood his message and its meaning without too much difficulty. Let us review some of Paul's keywords and capture the beauty and the richness of his grasp of the uniqueness and the preciousness of the gospel.

Justification/Righteousness

When Paul speaks of justification by faith in his epistles to Romans and Galatians, he is using a metaphor from the law courts. The Greek word that is translated "to justify" is *dikaioō* (*dikaiosunē*, "righteousness"; *dikaios*, "righteous"). When a person stands accused before a court and

the judge declares him not guilty, that person is declared innocent. Paul applies that forensic model to the process of salvation and asserts that because of what Jesus had done, God declares the sinner who comes to Him in faith as righteous.

While John uses a different set of words, what is described in his gospel (John 3:17-19; 5:24) is close to what Paul means by justification by faith. According to John, the one who believes in Jesus does not enter into judgment, while the one who does not believe has been judged already. The judgment comes at the end of the age, and the verdict given in judgment will determine a person's place in the new age. But the believer in Jesus already knows what that verdict will be—eternal life. Similarly in Paul: sinners are justified by faith (*pistis*, "belief"), and if they believe in Jesus and continue their relationship with Him, they have assurance as to the outcome of the final judgment. They know now (in the present) that the verdict will be "not guilty." Their status of righteousness is assured in Jesus (because Jesus is righteous). The future has become present in Christ, and can be grasped by the believers through faith.

Redemption

"Redemption" means repurchase—the act of buying back by paying the price demanded. One speaks of redeeming lost property or redeeming goods placed in a pawn shop by paying a certain amount of money. This is the meaning behind the word *apolutrōsis* that Paul uses to speak of the act of redemption in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24). A particularly striking image associated with this word in its first-century usage concerns the redemption of a slave. A slave could redeem himself and purchase his freedom by paying his owner his market value as a slave, or someone else could buy his freedom by paying the price. Thus when Paul spoke of Jesus as a redeemer, he was in effect saying that Jesus has paid the price to free us from the bondage of sin. His readers couldn't have missed the point of the movement from slavery to freedom—all as a free gift from Jesus, who indeed paid a heavy price for the salvation of the human race.

The concept of freedom in Christ is further reinforced by Paul's emphasis that the individual freed from sin has voluntarily become a slave (*doulos*) of Christ (Rom. 6:15-23). The difference is that the slave in Christ is a joyous, vibrant, living testimony to passing from the power of sin and death and becoming the inheritor of eternal life.

Reconciliation

"Reconciliation" belongs to the world of relationships. It means an end to estrangement, a restoration of strained relationships. Two persons are estranged. A gulf in relationship divides the two. One party takes the initiative, chooses to freely forgive the other, stretches out the hand across the gulf, and invites the other to accept it. The second party reflects on the magnanimous action, an act of grace, and decides to accept the offer. The gulf is bridged. The relationship is rebuilt. Reconciliation occurs. Paul utilizes this warm image to impress upon his readers the infinitely greater initiative of God through Christ in reconciling the human race to Himself (2 Cor. 5:11-21; Rom. 5:11). God's activity, Christ's role, the free provision, the need for human acceptance of what is available in Christ, the provision for spreading the good news of reconciliation, and the objective that "we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21)* are all present in the Pauline image of reconciliation.

Salvation

The Greek for "save" (*sōzō*, "save"; *sōtēr*, "savior"; *sōtēria* and *sōtērios*, "salvation") conveys at least two different meanings. Mark 5:34 provides an example of the first. A woman afflicted for 12 years with an incurable illness finds herself healed the moment she touches Jesus' robe. And Jesus told her: "Your faith has healed (*sesōken*, "saved") you." The Greek has a double meaning. The woman was not only healed by faith, but also saved by faith.

The second meaning of *sōzō* is rescue. Deliverance comes to a besieged city at the moment of its greatest need. The city is saved from destruction. It is in this sense that the thief on the cross urges Jesus to save Himself and His companions from death (Luke 23:39).

Thus when Paul says that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13), he is affirming both healing and rescue; restoration and deliverance.

Imputation

Paul also uses the word *logizomai* as part of his vocabulary to describe how God treats the repentant. The word means "reckon," or "impute." It comes from the world of business. When a certain amount of money is credited to an account, that activity is described by *logizomai*. Paul uses that word to describe justification by faith: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited [*logizomai*] to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). To the readers of Paul, familiar with the vocabulary of the day, the message was inescapable: just as a debt is canceled by a credit reckoned against that debt, so is the enormous burden and guilt of sin canceled by God when He by His grace accepts a sinner who comes to Him in faith and seeks His forgiveness. Abraham believed in God; it was counted as righteousness.

Honor

As is true in parts of the world today, the society of the first-century Mediterranean world assessed a person's worth in terms of honor.[1] But most readers of Paul who come from societies influenced by Western ideas would probably miss this dimension of his thought.

In Paul, the key terms that deal with this kind of imagery are shame (*aischunomai*, "I am ashamed"; *aischunē*, "shame," "disgrace") and boasting (*kauchaomai*, "I boast, take pride in"; *kauchema*, "ground for boasting," "pride"). The specific terms of honor/face are not as prominent, although Paul does say that there is no *prosopolempsia* (literally, "receiving face") before God in judgment, and that judgment is based on what a man has done and not his honor-status in society (Rom. 2:11).

Shame, however, the opposite of honor, does occur at some very important places in Paul's argument in Romans. In Romans 1:16, an important summary passage, Paul explains that he is not ashamed of the gospel. And he stresses several times that one who believes in Jesus will not be ashamed (e.g., Rom. 5:5; 9:33; 10:11).

The verb *kauchaomai* ("boasting") occurs in Romans 3:27 and 4:2 and in 5:2, 3. The English word "boasting" has such negative connotations that many modern versions translate the occurrences in chapter 5 with the word "rejoice." But this translation obscures the direct and intentional contrast between the two sets of occurrences of the word. In Romans 3:27 and 4:2 Paul is at pains to point out that people have no grounds for boasting before God on any basis within themselves. But in Romans 5:2, 3 he says that once declared righteous, Christians do have grounds for boasting. They have status in God's eyes. They have honor. But their

honor is entirely centered on God's righteousness and not on their own.

Grace

The word "grace" is central to Christian understanding of salvation. The Greek *charis* means "favor," or "kindness," especially unearned or unmerited. Paul uses the word to stress that God's saving activity in Jesus is absolutely unmerited by the sinner and that it is God's loving disposition toward the erring creature. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9).

Grace carries with it the imagery of gift as well. The recipient does not deserve it, but is free to accept it; he or she has no ground to boast but much to rejoice. The grace-gift image from Paul's time also suggests that the recipient pledges loyalty and service out of thankfulness to the patron.

Through Christ, in Christ, by Christ

One of Paul's brilliant arguments for the salvation of the human race through the death of Christ is found in Romans 5:12-21. Here the apostle postulates that "just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

The argument has posed continual difficulty for the Western mind. However, a little understanding of the culture in which Paul was using the argument would lead to a better appreciation of the passage. No contemporary reader of Paul would have required any particular explanation as to how one man's sin led to the condemnation of all and one man's righteousness led to the righteousness of all. In Paul's time, the individual was intimately tied to the group (for example, family or household).[2] An insult to one was an insult to all. Good fortune for one was good fortune for all. Thus the Pauline model of salvation in Romans 5 may be understood better as a participatory or a household model in which a corporate dynamic may be apparent.

Sanctification

Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul speaks of "those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy" (1 Cor. 1:2). Sanctification (*hagiazō*, "sanctify"; *hagiasmos*, "sanctification," "consecration," "holiness"; *hagios*, "holy") has strong Old Testament roots. It is equivalent to the Hebrew *qadash*, "to set apart." The word stresses the dynamic contrast between the holy and the unholy, the common and the uncommon, the clean and the unclean, particularly in reference to temple services and the priestly ministry.

As used by Paul, the concept of sanctification also belongs to this dynamic between clean and unclean, holy and unholy. By joining himself to Christ, the Christian now partakes of holiness. The Christian now is dedicated specifically to the service of God. In fact, this experience is available to Christians now, and begins when they are baptized (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:11).[3]

Atonement

In Romans 3:25 Paul uses the important word (*hilastērion*) to describe what God did through Jesus.[4] Translation of the word varies: "propitiation" (KJV), "expiation" (RSV), "sacrifice of atonement" (NIV). Paul takes a metaphor from the world of sacrifice, and uses it to portray the supreme sacrifice Jesus made in the drama of salvation. The image of sacrificial substitution suggests that when a person sinned, the sinner brought a sacrifice, effecting a reconciliation between the sinner and God.

Paul uses this imagery to show that as sinners we deserved to die; but just as the sacrificial animal took the place of the sinner and died in his or her stead, so Jesus took our place and died in our stead, and brought us release from death and reconciliation with God. By His sacrificial death Jesus accomplished propitiation, atonement, and expiation; Jesus met the penalty of sin and has made possible the reconciliation of all who have faith in Him.

Victory

Several times Paul stresses that Christ has overcome the demonic forces that have enslaved the world. In doing so, he is using the images derived from warfare. One well-known place where this imagery becomes specific is in the detailed description of the Christian's armor in Ephesians 6:11-20. Paul not only allegorizes the various elements of a soldier's weaponry and armor, but he also states that the fight is against the evil spiritual powers of the heavenly realm (verse 12). But in all this the Christian is a conqueror, and can withstand the onslaughts of angels, principalities, and powers (Rom. 8:37-39).

The image of *peace* also comes from the imagery of war. In stark contrast to the devastation of defeat in war, those who are justified have peace toward God (Rom. 5:1). They can look forward to and even now enjoy a divine rest from all the struggle of the warfare. It is the calm of peace that characterizes their existence.

To conclude: how would Paul answer the question "What is the essence of Christianity?" While it may be presumptuous to put words in his mouth, we could arrive at a composite answer from various pictures the apostle himself used to describe the saving activity of God. Christianity is the verdict "Not guilty," made possible now through the death of Jesus to all those who believe in Him. Christianity is freedom that comes as a result of being redeemed from sin by the precious price of Calvary. Christianity is reconciliation of the estranged sinner to God, the God of love who has already forgiven us. Christianity is healing from sin and rescue from certain death. Christianity is God imputing righteousness to us, and transforming us from our status of shame to a status of honor by His free gift. Christianity is God's grace in loving activity toward His erring creatures. Christianity is participation in the household of Christ; it is being set apart for holy service to God. Christianity is the provision of atonement for our sins; and it is the victory over the demonic forces of evil that Christ has accomplished and that is ours to share.

In other words, Christianity is the best news that you are ever likely to hear! It is indeed the gospel, the "good news." ■

---

*Bible texts in this article are from the New International Version.

[1] Chapter two of the book *The New Testament World: Insights From Cultural Anthropology*, by Bruce Malina (Atlanta: Knox, 1981), entitled "Honor and Shame: Pivotal Values of the First-Century Mediterranean World," gives an excellent introduction to this aspect of the sociological background of the New Testament.

[2] The chapter entitled "The First Century Personality: The Individual and the Group" in Malina's book is a helpful introduction to this concept.

[3] See also the brief but helpful discussion of sanctification in the article "Dynamics of Salvation," *Adventist Review*, July 31, 1980, pp. 6, 7.

You will readily notice that systematic theologians generally have a different concept in mind when they use the term "sanctification." Systematicians are dealing with a very important issue when they discuss sanctification, but when they do so they draw upon different New Testament terms and images than that of sanctification, terms such as growth, maturity, and perfection.

[4] I read the term as a reference to propitiation. Both the reference to Christ as redemption and the immediate insistence that the atonement is by His blood seem to demand this interpretation. The fact that substitutionary atonement is a theory of atonement that is currently largely out of favor in theological circles should not prevent the exegete from reading the text in its most natural manner.