

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

I

BECAUSE of the universal nature of the gospel which Paul was commissioned to preach, he felt under an obligation to proclaim it in as many places and to as many different kinds of people as possible. Hence his desire to preach it at Rome, where all sorts and conditions of men were to be found in abundance, Greeks and barbarians, Jews and Gentiles, wise and foolish. It is while he is expressing this desire in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that he makes in verses 16 and 17 a brief and concise, yet remarkably comprehensive summary of the nature and content of the Christian gospel. In this summary we find the first allusion in the Epistle to the basic doctrine of justification by faith.

This passage is translated in the R.V. :

For I am not ashamed of the gospel : for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God by faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.

Paul here makes a series of positive statements about the gospel, the knowledge of which completely rids him of any sense of shame in preaching it. Every statement in this tense and emphatic definition is pregnant with meaning, and no brief summary can do full justice to it. Its propositions may however for clearness be enumerated as follows:

1. The gospel is a word of *power*; a truth which the apostle was never tired of emphasizing, but which, we may conjecture, he feels compelled to underline in view of the opposition of those at Corinth, the provenance of this Epistle, and elsewhere, who saw in the crucified Carpenter of Galilee a manifestation of nothing but weakness (see 1 Cor. i. 23).

2. The gospel is a word of power, because it is concerned with an action, of which *God* is the agent. The meaning of this action it is Paul's main purpose in this Epistle to unfold; but the readers who are Christians know full well that it is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to which he is referring. Both events were originated by *God*, and both were expressions of His *power*.

3. The power of this divine action lies, it is inferred, in its ability to do something, which no effort on the part of any man could possibly accomplish, viz. “*salvation*”. Once again, the apostle does not stay at this point to examine the character of this salvation; but the readers know that what is meant is salvation from sin and its consequence, for herein lies the whole *raison d’être* of the gospel, which they have received.

4. This message of a “power of God unto salvation” must be preached to *everyone*, for all men need the salvation which it alone can effect.

5. But this salvation becomes a reality only to “everyone that *believeth*”; only to those, in other words, who give no formal, or merely intellectual assent to the divine action by which it was procured, but who respond to it with the whole of their being and rely upon it, *and upon nothing else* for their salvation.

6. The reason why the gospel can and does bring about this salvation is that in it there is continually being revealed, every time it is preached, “a *righteousness* of God”. This does not mean that the main purpose of the gospel is to proclaim that God is Himself righteous, for that had been long ago revealed to Israel. The “righteousness” of which Paul here speaks concerns others as well as God, for it is described as “a righteousness of God . . . by faith”, *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ . . . ἐκ πίστεως*. In other words, it has to be *received* by men from God by *faith*. But what is received is not righteousness as a moral attribute but righteousness as a status, in which God places every sinner who has faith in the divine act of power proclaimed in the gospel. It is a righteousness of *God*, because God, being alone entirely righteous, alone can bestow it: and it is a righteousness without which every human being stands under His condemnation. Apart from it, there is nothing for man to do except to pray the prayer of the Psalmist: “Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord; for in Thy sight shall no men living be justified” (Ps. cxliii. 2). But with it, there is absolute security, as Paul implies, when he writes in viii. 1: “there is therefore no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.”

7. The means by which the sinner must accept this righteousness is further described by the apostles as *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*. This somewhat remarkable expression “from faith unto faith” would appear to mean, not that the believer progresses from an

imperfect to a more perfect faith, for there could be no faith greater than that which leads to the original acceptance by a sinner of the gospel as something supremely relevant to himself. Nor does the phrase imply that the reality of the righteousness in any way varies with the varying intensity of the believer’s faith; for it is not his faith which *causes* the righteousness, any more than it was the faith of the sufferers or their friends which affected the cures wrought by Jesus during His earthly ministry. The phrase would seem rather to indicate that righteousness is mediated to the sinner by his faith, and *by nothing else*. But his faith is not a psychological condition which creates the status of righteousness, but the acceptance of a righteousness which is already available for him. It is only by receiving it as a gift that this righteousness can be obtained: and, if it is not obtained, the sinner remains alienated from God and deprived of eternal life.

8. For it is written in Scripture, as the apostle goes on to assert, quoting Heb. 11. 4, *ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται*, which can be translated either, as in the R.S.V., “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; or, as in the R.V., “the righteous shall live by faith”.

II

A more detailed statement of the manner in which the salvation offered in the gospel is to be obtained is found in iii. 21–26, the *locus classicus* for the doctrine with which we are at present concerned. Paul has already conclusively proved in the preceding chapters, by evidence drawn from both the heathen and Jewish worlds, that mankind has hitherto completely failed to obtain that status of righteousness, which must be obtained if men are to be saved from the wrath of the all-righteous God. Up to the time of Christ, owing to the inherent inability of fallen man to save himself, the story of the human race has for the most part been a story of failure: and men would have indeed been in the direst straits, if God in His love had not manifested another means by which He would account men righteous besides that of obedience to the dictates of the moral conscience or to the precepts of the moral law revealed to Moses. But such a manifestation *has* been made, as Paul affirms in these verses, which are translated in the R.V.:

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 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.

We may summarize the points underlined in these crowded verses as follows:

1. A righteousness of which God is the author has been manifested recently in that divine act of power proclaimed as the central fact of the gospel. Its distinctive characteristic is that it does not have to be won by obedience to the demands of the Jewish or of any other law. It is entirely *χωρίς νόμου*, “apart from law”.

2. But, although it is in this sense disconnected with Judaism as a legal system, it nevertheless has been foreshadowed in the two main divisions of the Old Testament, “the Law and the Prophets”. As Augustine said: “*novum testamentum in vetere latet.*” But hitherto this righteousness has been exhibited only in isolated instances such as that of Abraham described in detail in chapter iv of this Epistle; or else alluded to in such sayings as those quoted in iv. 7-8, “Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin” (Ps. xxxii. 1-2); and in x. 8, “the word is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart”—“that is”, Paul adds, “the word of faith, which we preach” (Dt. xxx. 14).

3. This righteousness becomes a reality to the individual sinner not merely “by faith”, as was stated in i. 17, but *διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*. The means of its appropriation is not just faith in general, but faith directed towards a certain person. The use of the genitive, and not the accusative case after *διὰ* makes it evident that faith is the means by which righteousness is obtained, but not the cause for which it is bestowed. The cause is Jesus Christ, in whom the faith of the believer must be placed, the genitive *Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* being almost certainly objective.

4. Paul re-emphasizes the truth, already stated in i. 16, that righteousness is offered to “*all* them that believe”, because all men are in the same predicament as far as their relationship with God is concerned, however much they may differ in other ways. The fall of Adam, as Paul makes explicit later in the Epistle, has constituted all of them sinners, who because of sin “fall short of the glory of God”; which may mean either that they have lost the power of reflecting the glory of God, which was the purpose for which God originally created them in His image; or else that they have lost the approbation of God and are therefore subject to His condemnation; for the word *δόξα* can mean both “glory”, and “praise” or “approval”.

5. But the wholly gratuitous character of this righteousness which is offered to “all them that believe” does not imply that the righteous God has abandoned His demand that the divine law must be obeyed. Man’s disobedience has rendered him liable to the penalties exacted by that law; and God does not and cannot remit those penalties, for to do so would be to “deny Himself” by doing something foreign to His nature. On the contrary, He has made the payment of such penalties an essential condition of His free offer to men of righteousness. Sinners, however, cannot make that payment. It is only “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” that they can be and have been “justified by His grace”. The word *ἀπολύτρωσις*, translated “redemption”, suggests by its derivation that a “ransom-price” has been paid; and the “ransom-price” consists, as the apostle states in the following verse, of the shed blood of Jesus.

6. In iii. 25, perhaps the high-light of this great passage, Paul concentrates the readers’ attention upon the unique event, in which God has manifested His power for men’s salvation, and in virtue of which He pronounces the sinner free from guilt. This event took place when God “set forth Christ Jesus to be *ἱλαστήριον . . . ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι*, words which are probably rightly taken together, as in the R.V., where they are translated “to be a propitiation, . . . by His blood”. The word *ἱλαστήριον* is best construed as a neuter adjective, with some such word *ἢ θύσις*, “sacrifice”, or *ἀνάθημα*, “offering”, understood. It thus denotes a propitiatory sacrifice, whose object was to conciliate Him to whom the sacrifice was offered, “appeasement”

or "conciliation" being the root meaning of the Greek verb from which it is derived.¹ The R.S.V. abandons the rendering "propitiation" found in both A.V. and R.V. and translates "as an expiation", presumably on the ground that the verb *ἱλάσκομαι* has this meaning in the LXX, though very rarely elsewhere. "Expiation" would signify that the stain of sin had been removed; but would not imply that a change of attitude of God to the sinner had been brought about by Christ's sacrifice. C. H. Dodd, who strongly advocates the translation "expiation", writes: "The rendering 'propitiation' is misleading, for it suggests the placating of an angry God, and although it would be in accord with pagan usage, it is foreign to biblical usage."² One cannot help feeling, however, that this is really an elimination of the doctrine of the wrath of God on insufficient evidence. It would appear to be an axiom of the Bible that the attitude of God to the unjustified sinner is and must be one of wrath.³ It would therefore seem necessarily to follow that no adequate ground for forgiveness exists unless that wrath is appeased. Here lies the whole necessity for atonement. The *primary* purpose of the death of Christ would therefore seem to be, in the light of the language used in this verse, not to effect a change in the moral condition of the sinner, on whose behalf the sacrifice was offered (though, as will become apparent, that is an inevitable secondary consequence), but rather a change in his status before God. He is still a sinner, but a *justified* sinner, who is now free, as he was not free before, to enter upon a new life of growth in holiness under the power of the divine Spirit.

That the death of Jesus has achieved this primary purpose, and "that through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life" (v. 18, R.V.), is proved by the resurrection; and it must be remembered that, when the New Testament writers speak of the death of Christ, they always associate it in thought with the resurrection, even though the

¹ See Liddell and Scott, *Greek Lexicon*, new (ninth) edition, p. 828. On the other hand T. W. Manson in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (vol. xlv, pp. 1-10) argues that the word should be treated as a noun with the meaning "the place where God shows mercy to men".

² *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 55.

³ See my monograph, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (Tyndale Press, 1951).

two may not be mentioned together in any particular passage. The bearing of their connection upon the doctrine of justification by faith is made very clear by Paul, when he speaks in iv. 25 of Jesus as "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (R.V.).

7. But the righteousness made possible because of Christ's redeeming sacrifice has, the apostle once more insists, to be accepted by faith. The words *διὰ πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι* should probably not be construed together, as they are in the A.V. "through faith in His blood", though linguistically this is possible, because the words "in His blood" would seem to be an amplification of the word "propitiation". It remains, true, however, that the foundation of the believer's confidence is not just Jesus Christ, e.g. as an example or a teacher, but the particular action performed by Him, when His blood was shed on Calvary. Faith to Paul is essentially "faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. i. 20). C. H. Dodd would seem therefore to be saying too much when he writes: "'Faith in His blood' would be an impossible expression for Paul to use."¹

8. The ultimate object that God had in view when He set forth Jesus to be a propitiatory sacrifice was to make it unmistakably clear that the "passing-over" of sins committed before the coming of Christ, in the sense that God never exacted the *full* punishment which they deserved, did not mean, as the Israelites so often imagined, that He had relaxed the claims of His justice, or that He was content with something less than full obedience to His righteous demands. On the contrary, just *because* of this "passing-over" of sins in His forbearance, it was all the more necessary that a supreme display of His justice should be made: and this was done when Jesus was set forth as a propitiatory sacrifice. The death of Christ thus completely vindicates the ways of God with man. It shows that when He exercises mercy He does so without abrogating the requirements of justice.

9. Accordingly, in the closing statement in this section, Paul maintains that the ultimate purpose of the divine action which constitutes the gospel, was the proving of God "to be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus". The words

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

δικαιον καὶ δικαιούντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ could also mean, and indeed would perhaps more naturally be translated, as R. St. J. Parry translated them, “just even when He justifies him that hath faith in Jesus”.¹ However much other modern commentators may tend to recoil from this translation in their attempt to resolve the tension between the justice and mercy of God, the fact remains that the mystery of atonement involves this tension. The paradox is that, while a human judge would be regarded as unjust if he pronounced a criminal free from guilt, in the case of the divine Judge there is no such disregard of the claims of justice when He justifies the sinner, who accepts in faith the perfect satisfaction of the claims of justice made on his behalf, and in his stead, by Jesus on Calvary. The mystery which lies at the heart of this doctrine was well expressed by Charles Hodge when he wrote: “Justice is no less justice although mercy has its perfect work; and mercy is no less mercy, although justice is completely satisfied.”

III

In iii. 27–31 Paul draws attention to some general corollaries that follow from the method of justification which he has just described. First, “the law of faith,” i.e. the principle of justification by faith, excludes any sense of boastful superiority, just because the gratuitous character of the righteousness offered to men reduces all to a common level.

Secondly, this principle establishes the universal nature of the Christian religion. The God who has manifested this particular manner of reconciling sinners to Himself must be the God of Gentile as well as Jew. He uses exactly the same method of bringing both circumcised and uncircumcised into the family of the redeemed.

Thirdly, this doctrine does not minimize, but rather substantiates the essential position occupied by law within the divine dispensation. Neither the law embedded in the human conscience which enables man to distinguish right from wrong, nor the special revelation of the divine law to Moses are in any way weakened by it. On the contrary, the payment by Christ of the penalty demanded by the law as the price of human disobedience enhances the importance of the law. Under the

¹ *The Epistle to the Romans*, Camb. Gk. Text., p. 67. I am inclined to think that the definite article would have been inserted before δικαιούντα if the expression had meant “just and the justifier. . . .”

system of justification by faith no moral obligation is in any way relaxed. Paul accordingly in the last verse of chapter three dismisses the question, “Do we then make the law of none effect through faith?” with the cry of horror “God forbid”; and maintains that the very opposite is the truth. “Nay, we establish the law.”

In v. 1–11 the apostle describes the consequences of justification in the life of the individual believer. First and foremost there is a new sense of peace born of the sinner’s certainty that he is now in a right relationship to God and no longer subject to His wrath. This peace is the peace promised by Jesus to His followers as the result of His passion and resurrection. He called it “My peace” and differentiated it entirely from any peace that the world might be able to give (see John xiv. 27). Through Jesus Christ the believer has come to have communion with God; and on this ground he takes his stand throughout the rest of his earthly pilgrimage; and joyfully builds upon it the hope that one day he will share in the glory of his Redeemer.

Moreover, whenever he finds himself in tribulation, as Jesus warned His disciples would inevitably happen, the believer looks upon such experience not as an irksome intrusion into the even tenor of his ways, nor as a temptation to distrust God, as at one time he almost certainly did. On the contrary, he finds in it fresh ground for rejoicing, for he knows that such tribulation is the divinely appointed means, whereby he, a sinner reconciled to God through the death of His Son, may become, through the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit, a sanctified sinner. He knows that his faith will be tested in the school of adversity and not found wanting: “tribulation worketh patience, and patience, probation”. His hope of final and complete salvation is rendered even more certain by such probation; and, because the life of Jesus is now a governing principle within him, he is enabled to reflect something of that divine love, which was so wonderfully shown, when “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”.

IV

It has become clear from a study of these passages that, if the doctrine of justification by faith is not to be misinterpreted, the following safeguards must be borne in mind:

1. Justification and faith must be correlated to one another. Faith must neither be so highly exalted that it comes to be an

action by which justification is merited; nor so depreciated as to lose its significance as the essential response on the part of man to the righteousness God offers him.

2. Justification must not be identified with sanctification. It must be regarded as the necessary preliminary to sanctification; and sanctification presented as its inevitable sequel.

3. The divine initiative in justification must be continually emphasized; and the whole process of salvation considered at every stage as the working of divine grace, whose blessings can be distinguished but must not be divided. Paul would seem to be underlining the truth that these blessings must inevitably follow one another when he writes in *viii.* 28–30:

And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, *even* to them that are called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also foreordained *to be* conformed to the image of His Son . . . and whom He foreordained, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.

In conclusion, we may notice that the essential place occupied by the doctrine of justification by faith in the Christian dispensation, constituting as it does the foundation of so many other doctrines, and acting as the main-spring of Christian life and practice, comes once again to the surface in the great peroration at the end of chapter eight, with which the apostle brings his main exposition of the gospel to a close. Nowhere else in the New Testament is the complete security of the justified sinner, as he lives in the sunshine of the “love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” given more eloquent expression. “It is God,” the apostle cries, “that justifieth; who is he that shall condemn? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

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