Imputed Righteousness.

A Misunderstood Doctrine.

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THE critics of Evangelical teaching have found, in the past at any rate, a favourite target in the doctrine of "imputed righteousness." If they do not shoot at it so much now, is it because they think their past assaults have left them nothing to shoot at or is it because they disdain pot-shots at a sitting bird?

When the writer, now very many years ago, was a member of the C.I.C.C.U. (Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union), he was upon one Sunday evening considerably surprised by a speaker at the old Victoria Hall referring with contemptuous disparagement to "imputed righteousness." *He* did not want "imputed righteousness"; what he was after was "imparted righteousness."

Really, of course, he should have wanted both. For no man will ever attain to "imparted righteousness" (in the sense in which the speaker used the phrase) who has not first received "imputed righteousness." Moreover, no doctrine is more dogmatically taught in Scripture than "imputed righteousness," or more clearly viewed by St. Paul as integral and even fundamental in his evangelical scheme.

The speaker, a Fellow of his college, was a very earnest man, but theologically ignorant—as ignorant on this particular point as the ordinary non-Christian caviller. He thought that "imputed righteousness" was a legal fiction, an unreality, a sham—a calling men righteous, godly, holy, who were well-known to be unrighteous, ungodly, unholy: as if God's remedy for the "ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" against which His wrath was revealed were simply to ignore them or to confound moral distinctions by arbitrarily calling white what was obviously black.

It is important to recognise at the outset that the "imputation of righteousness" is used by St. Paul in the early verses of the fourth of Romans as if it did not differ from "justification." For the argument here is that Abraham was not justified by works but by faith, as the Scripture had declared long before the theological formulation of the doctrine—"Abraham believed God, and it was counted" (reckoned or imputed) "unto him for righteousness." Whatever criticism can be levelled against "imputed righteousness" can also be levelled against justification.*

It is important to recognise in the second place that justification is not making a man just or righteous. The Greek word beyond any question signifies to account or constitute, in a legal sense, righteous.

* Too often the A.V. seeks a picturesque but misleading diversity by translating in words of different roots, Greek words that are all formed upon the same root. It would be an advantage if the great words of the third and fourth of Romans could be translated uniformly instead of being sometimes "just" or "justification" and sometimes "righteous" or "righteousness." But our language is probably not equal to this task.

The term is of forensic import. For in point of fact the sinner in the early chapters of Romans is a guilty man in a court of law. Many a theologian, when he comes to deal with justification and the Atoning work on which it rests, shies like a frightened horse at the notion of anything forensic. St. Paul did not share their timidity.

Indeed, only from the forensic view can the language of St. Paul be understood. This, of course, has been frankly recognised by some "liberalising" theologians, as *e.g.*, by Hastings Rashdall amongst Broad Churchmen and by Vernon Storr anong "Liberal Evangelicals"—men who have equally frankly expressed their disagreement with St. Paul. But many, to whom forensic interpretations are quite as uncongenial seek—with more modesty but, perhaps, less candour—to engage the Apostle in support of their own (more or less) non-forensic interpretations.

Thus Dr. Micklem in his recent booklet *The Doctrine of our Redemption*, while admitting that the sinner is "acquitted" (a term, surely, of forensic implication), contrives at the same time to render it doubtful whether his doctrine of "acquittal" is truly Pauline. "Metaphors," he says, "taken from law-courts can never be adequate to our relations with our Lord, who deals with us, not on a legal basis, but in grace." No single metaphor can, of course, be adequate to all our relations with our Lord; but the assertion that He deals with us not on a legal basis but in grace is at best ambiguous, at worst erroneous. To deny any legal basis to God's justifying action is to subvert entirely the Pauline doctrine of "acquittal." True, "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified;" but that, as we shall see, does not exclude a legal basis of justification.

That "justification" forensically understood is the "poor relation" condemned to sit "below the salt" is shown by Dr. Micklem's further remark that "'justification' means 'acquittal,' but even more it means 'deliverance'." No evidence from St. Paul's own writings is adduced in support of this view. But recourse is had to a statement of Professor Dodd's that "justification" in the *Hebrew* Bible means "an act by which a wronged person is given his rights, is vindicated, delivered from oppression."

This may be true enough. But Dr. Micklem boldly inverts the relationship of God and the sinner by assuming that it is the sinner who is the "wronged person" deprived of his rights. "Thus" he says, "when God is said to 'justify the ungodly,' this means, not, as modern usage might suggest, that He condones their ungodliness nor even that He deems them to be godly, but rather that He delivers them from the bondage of ungodliness."

On the contrary it is God who is the wronged party; whose sovereign rights have been infringed; whose honour must be vindicated. This was the natural view of the "Hebrew Bible." God was to be justified when He spoke, the Psalmist said. Elihu's wrath was kindled against Job "because he justified himself rather than God." As for the justification of man, that was an unsolved problem. "Enter not into judgment with thy servant," said the Psalmist, "for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." And wistfully Job asked, "How should a man be just with God?"

But in the covenant of grace the old "Hebrew" problem was

resolved. In the Death of the Cross God is "just"—His wrongs are triumphantly redressed and His righteous throne is vindicated; and at the same time He "justifieth"—He constituteth righteous—the sinner that believes.

Dr. Micklem's conclusion that justification means, in the greater part, deliverance from bondage to sin, seems to bring us round to the illegitimate view that δικαιοῦν does after all mean "make righteous." As Dr. Micklem would not, of course, attribute such a meaning to the Greek verb, can it be that in his view the sinner is indeed accounted righteous, but only because he has first been made righteous through deliverance from sin's bondage?

As a matter of fact the energies of the new life communicated at the same time with imputed righteousness and manifested in "yielding our members servants to righteousness" are not the subject of the first four chapters of Romans; they are dealt with later, notably in chapters six and seven. "Imputed righteousness" cancels sin; imparted life "breaks the power of cancelled sin."

In the third place, we have to inquire in what way or ways a man can be legally righteous. There are two ways: either he has not broken the law or he has paid the law's penalty. The apostle is quite clear, and the conscience of man confirms him, that the first way is closed to him—"by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified." The only other way is the payment of the law's penalty.

And that is where "the righteousness *of God*" comes in. This righteousness, being a righteous standing in the eyes of the law, is clearly not God's quality or attribute of righteousness (though it must be something consistent with it), It is a righteous standing provided by God. Weymouth well translates Romans 1. 17, "For in the gospel *a righteousness which comes from God* is revealed." He is borne out by St. Paul's words in Phil. iii 9, where for the simple genitive of Romans is substituted a prepositional phrase—ἐκ θεοῦ, "proceeding from God." That "God's righteousness" cannot be His quality of righteousness is further shown by the apostle's reference (Romans x. 3.) to the Jews as "ignorant of God's righteousness." Now God's inherent attribute of righteousness was well-known to the Jews.*

Always this "righteousness" is spoken of as something coming from "God" or imputed by "God," without any distinction of the Persons of the Trinity. The reason is simple. It is a *Divine* righteousness in sharp antithesis to that *human* righteousness which man "goes about to establish" by "the deeds of the Law." It is what God gives in contrast with what man does. It is with significant unanimity that the Scriptures speak of "the righteousness *of God*,"

The only way, as we have seen, in which a convicted sinner can be

* It might be asked why in these passages the word δικαιοσύνη—a word naturally and usually expressing a quality—should be used in preference to, say, such a word as δικαίωσις used in Rom. iv. 25 ("was raised for, or on account of, our *justification*"). It may be that St. Paul was anxious that the quality or attribute of righteousness in God should not be lost sight of in the gift or bestowment that He was offering to faith. And indeed we find the two meanings blending in Rom. iii. 26, "to declare . . . God's *righteousness*: that he might be *just* (personally righteous) and the *justifier* of (the bestower of a righteous standing upon) him which believeth in Jesus."

quit of the law is by enduring its penalty. As death—that is, exclusion from the presence of God—is the penalty of sin, we may say that it is only as a dead man that the sinner can conceivably be freed from the law. Only as a dead man can he be "righteous." We are confronted then, with the paradox that this is the "righteousness" offered by and coming from God. What is the solution of the problem?

Let us consider how this "righteousness" actually becomes operative or "available." It is on a principle of faith. And what is the hidden working of this faith? What secret springs does it unlock? That question is answered in the sixth of Romans, where the significance of the rite of baptism is unfolded. There we learn the full content of that faith—the facts that are implied and the processes that are concurrent, however little realised by the believer himself.

In a deep sense of need and with a feeling that God can meet that need, he has put his faith in God's Son. In a blind groping way he has cast in his lot with the Crucified One. In so doing, whether he realises it or not, he has identified himself with Christ crucified. In the overwhelming waters of baptism he declares himself dead—"buried with Christ by baptism into his death" (Rom. vi. 4).*

Against such an one the law has no case. As he rises from the immersing waters he declares himself risen again with Christ—"beyond the Red Sea's judgment flood." The law has no more claim upon him than upon Christ. In Christ, with whom he is identified, he has borne the penalty of his sin. Thus has "righteousness" been "imputed" to him.

That the sinner little understands the deep significance or the momentous issues of what he does when he puts his feeble flickering faith in Christ, makes no difference to the facts. What did Abraham know of the Propitiatory Sufferings by which in the end of the age sin would be put away? This question is of specific importance here; for in dealing with imputed righteousness Paul was bound to refer specifically to the case of Abraham, whose faith in God had in a classic passage of the O.T. (Gen. xv. 6.) been declared to be "counted to him for righteousness." What our Lord precisely meant when He said that "Abraham saw My day and was glad," we may not dogmatically affirm. But it does not really matter here. Justification is always by faith. But the article of Abraham's faith was not the foreseen sufferings of the Cross. It was that God would give him a son. But how pregnant of unforeseeable issues was Abraham's unstaggering faith that God would give him a son!

The justification of sinners in this full noontide of grace is associated with death—the death of the Atoning Sin-Bearer. The justification of Abraham in days of scarcely twilight revelation was, in a figure, likewise associated with *death*. His faith was in the "God who *quickeneth the dead*" (Rom. iv. 17). The son whom he believingly expected he received, as it were, from the *dead*; for "he considered

*Emphasis is here laid upon what was the primitive rite of immersion because the whole force of the Apostle's argument depends upon it. But this article is purely an essay in Christian doctrine and must not be regarded as laying down any law for modern Christian order or observance. The rubric or Baptism in the Church of England actually gives priority to "dipping", although the Church, like most Christian churches, has in practice modified the rite.

not his own body now *dead*, nor yet the *deadness* of Sarah's womb " (ib. iv. 19).

In the application that the apostle makes of the twilight type to the age of gospel light there is still the definite reference to death. For " it was not written, " we are told, " for Abraham's sake alone, but for us also to whom righteousness shall be imputed, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered for our offences." It is clear that Paul associated Abraham's justification very definitely with that death which is the wages of sin.

When, then, it is said that the faith of anyone " that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly," is imputed for righteousness, it is meant that the man who by faith identifies himself with Christ in His death is accounted " righteous " with the " righteousness " of one who has paid the penalty of his transgression.

There is no unreality or insincerity in imputed righteousness as thus scripturally interpreted. If the believing sinner is identified with the sin-bearing Christ, all the rest follows. Mystery there is, but it is the mystery of how the sinner's trust identifies and incorporates him with the One in whom he trusts—how, in fact, all the believing died in Him who died for all (11 Cor. v. 14).

It is important to note that it is in the death of Christ that our association with Him begins—an association ritually set forth in the burial of baptism. The association once formed is never severed. We rise with Him out of the waters of baptism. We are " accepted in the Beloved, " who has died and risen again. We are even now " in heavenly places in Him. " But there is no suggestion anywhere in Scripture of our being retrospectively associated with Christ in His pre-crucial life. In that life the Corn of Wheat abode alone. None shared or could share that lonely pre-eminence. Indeed—we say it with reverence—He has Himself not entered heaven on the ground of the perfection of His innocence or of the life lived stainlessly to the glory of God, but by His own blood. Made sin, the self-doomed Sin-Bearer enters heaven by the title of the blood of sprinkling. Only as the Corn of Wheat fell into the ground and died, did it bring forth much fruit. That fruit are we—fruit of His sorrow unto death. In death it is that we are first united with Him.

It is not difficult to see the bearing of this fact upon that strange doctrinal vagary known as the " imputed righteousness of Christ. " It is upon the face of it somewhat daring to substitute for the phrase " righteousness of God " which is repeatedly and uniformly used in Scripture the phrase " righteousness of Christ " which is never used. But what exactly is meant by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ? It has thus been succinctly defined : " Christ took over our guilt with a view to its expiation by the enduring of a proportionate penalty : and He makes over to us the merit He had previously acquired by keeping in our flesh the Law that we had broken. Briefly, He assumed our guilt and transferred to us His righteousness—the guilt being breach of law and the righteousness being law-keeping. The transaction becomes complete upon our faith. "

We may well ask what passage in the writings of St. Paul or of any other vessel of inspiration can be quoted for such an association of the believer with the pre-crucial life of Christ or for the transference of

Christ's law-keeping to the law-breaker. The holy harmless law-keeping life of the Incarnate Son was infinitely precious to the Father—a smell of a sweet savour to God. It also qualified the Son to be a Propitiatory Sacrifice. But our justification—that Divine righteousness in which we stand—does not lie there ; does not lie in any " works of the law, " by whomsoever performed ; but only in the Sacrificial Death of " the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." We are " justified by His blood " (Rom. v. 9)—His blood poured out, that is, by His death.

Here is no imputation of the good works wrought by Christ in His life, but a simple non-imputation of sin on the ground of His vicarious death. That Paul so regarded imputed righteousness is made crystal-clear in Rom. iv. 6-8, where he quotes David as describing the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness. The words of David are " Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. " The imputation of righteousness is, therefore, the non-imputation of sin—acquittal at the bar of God: not on the ground of innocence, but on the ground that the penalty has been paid.

But around the structure of St. Paul's inspired teaching, obscuring its fair and simple outlines, the parasitic creepers of human theology have been allowed to grow up. Thus a modern writer has said : " We are justified through Christ's righteousness. Not only have our sins been put away, but our lack of righteousness. " The idea, unscriptural and erroneous, is that whereas our sins are expiated by the *obedientia passiva* of Christ's Cross, we are also provided with a positive righteousness, the *obedientia activa* of Christ's life. " He has met the law which we could not obey and put His own merit and righteousness to our account, " says A. B. Simpson (*The Christ Life*).

The idea that our positive sins and our negative sins, our sins of commission and our sins of omission, are so radically different that they must have their own several remedies is a very strange idea, uncountenanced in Scripture. The belief that our " sins " are put away by Christ's death but our " lack of righteousness " is remedied by His life, indicates a very defective sense of what sin really is. A " lack of righteousness " *is* sin. " To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not," says St. James (iv. 17), " to him it is sin. " To do active injury to your neighbour is sin. But to fail to bind up his open wound is also sin. To hate your neighbour is a grievous sin ; but not to love your neighbour is sin, too. The fact surely is that all the Christian's sins, whether of commission or of omission, have been borne by Christ in His death. There is no need (as there is no Scriptural authority) to eke out the transcendent worth of the Cross of Christ. There is no defect in that Sacrificial Death that requires supplementing.

Hagenbach (quoted by Mozley in his *Doctrine of the Atonement*) says that the advocates of orthodox Protestantism weakened the Anselmic doctrine " by adding the *obedientia activa*, since the redeeming element was then no longer exclusively connected with the pouring out of the blood and the agony, but diffused through the whole life and only concentrated in the sacrificial death." The solitary dignity and sufficiency of the Cross are distinctly impaired by this doctrine of " active obedience. " Anselm's doctrine of the Atonement is gravely defective, but he remarked, very aptly, that Christ could not give

His own obedience for the payment of man's debt since, as man, He owed it to God already.

But it is a legitimate question, How, if the negative evidence of Scripture, that is, the entire absence of any positive or presumptive evidence, so strongly condemns the dogma of the imputed law-keeping of Christ, has it come to pass that this dogma is so widely and tenaciously held?

There is more than one answer to this question. It is easy, and perhaps tempting, to say: "He bore our sins like a garment. We are invested with His righteousness as with a robe." Rightly understood, this may be true. We are indeed "accepted in the Beloved." We are indeed "complete in Him." But we are accepted and complete in the Risen One—in Him who has risen from the dead—in Him who has "passed through death's dark raging flood" and has sunk under the judgment of our sin; not retrospectively in that "holy and harmless" One who "went about doing good," but here and now in the Risen Christ.

There is further a seductive neatness—a tidiness that appeals especially to certain minds—in transferring our law-breaking to Christ and His law-keeping to us. But this savours of ledgers and is alien from the apostle's thought. Paul's great argument in the epistle to the Romans does, indeed, deal with Law—its majesty, claims and satisfaction, but it has nothing to do with book-keeping.

In the next place, there can be little doubt that a misunderstanding, based upon the infelicitous rendering of Rom. v. 18,19 in the A.V., has contributed not a little to the vogue of the "imputed righteousness of Christ." That passage reads: "As by the offence of one judgment came upon all men unto condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

Now here, it is to be noticed, against *one* offence and *one* act of disobedience upon the part of Adam are set in contrast *one* righteous act and *one* act of transcendent obedience upon the part of Christ. This is made clear in the R.V.—"even so, through *one act of righteousness* the free gift came unto all men." The "one act of righteousness" is, of course, the Atoning Work of the Cross.* Similarly "the obedience of one" must refer to Christ's Death as the supreme act of obedience.

The doctrine of the "imputed righteousness of Christ" has been held by a great many earnest lovers of evangelical truth. It is not to be called a "heresy," but it is an error that obscures the simplicity of the gospel and exposes an undefended flank to anti-evangelical assaults.

* The Greek word used here (δικαιῶμα) is a different one from that used in Rom. 3 and 4 of the "righteousness" (δικαιοσύνη) imputed by God without works.