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The Evangelical Quarterly

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A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

THE pivotal, illuminating word on the meaning and purpose of the Apostle Paul in writing his letter to the Church at Rome is the word "therefore", in the first verse of the twelfth chapter: "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Therefore! Leave out that word, and you are left asking what is the connection between what follows and what has gone before: why this solemn adjuration to a consecrated life. Insert the word, and you are standing on a viewpoint from which you can look back over the way by which you have travelled and see to what it was leading. The way is summed up in the comprehensive phrase, "the mercies of God", the goal is a life solemnly presented as an acceptable offering to God. Paul here looks back over what he has been setting forth as the essentials for the building up of a Christian life. They are all that God in His mercy has done and provided for the reclamation of ruined humanity, what has been expounded in the previous chapters, the activities of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in His grace and mercy for the salvation of men. It was this Paul had started out to write about—"The Gospel of Christ . . . the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith" (i. 16, 17).

I

Here at the very outset we are up against a word that requires some explanation—"the righteousness of God". Righteousness: it is one of a group of words that play an important part in the earlier sections—especially chapters i-v of the Epistle. The words are just, justify, justification, righteous, righteousness. They are all associated with one Greek word, *δίκαιος*, and

its derivatives. To my mind the translators did an ill service to the understanding of the gospel where they translated the Greek *dikaioσ* into the Latin *justus*. There was another Latin word that would have served them better had they taken it, and that is *rectus*. Had they done so—and if translators into English had followed it out—many a difficulty about the doctrine of justification would never have arisen. The theological meaning attached to the word justification is not that of our ordinary speech. In common parlance, when we speak of justification, of a man justifying his conduct or his speech, we mean that he is showing that in what he has done or said, he was right, was not wrong. In theology it means the very reverse. It means that in what he did or said he was wrong, and needs to be put right, not to be justified but to be rectified, needs not justification but rectification. And that is what Paul is taken up with in the first five chapters of the epistle, the question how a man can get right with God. The result for the believer is that he obtains the righteousness of God; i.e., the right relationship with God, which had been lost through sin. That is what the righteousness of God means when it is used of man, the state to which he is restored. When it is used of God Himself it means God's consistency with Himself—"just and the justifier of him that believeth"—i.e., consistent with Himself and the one who sets men who believe right with Himself.

It is the way in which God does this that Paul deals with in chapters i-v. He begins by showing the terrible need for it in the hopeless and helpless state of lost humanity. It is his crushing indictment of all mankind. There is the appalling exposure of the depths of degradation and vice that prevailed in the Gentile world. If any scandalised spectator should ask how a good God could allow such a state of things to arise in His world, the answer is ready for him. It was a judgment on them, which might lead to repentance. It was because "they worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator. . . . For this cause God gave them up to vile affections . . . as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge He gave them over to a reprobate mind".

If any self-righteous Jew was tempted to say Amen to this, Paul turns on him to bring the Jews into condemnation also. He exposes the hypocrisy of those making a boast of their privilege of possessing and knowing the law of God but

dishonouring God by breaking the law. He will not listen to captious evasions and excuses. He is a Jew himself and he knows them. "Are we better than they? No, in no wise . . . both Jews and Gentiles . . . are all under sin." And from one denunciation after another from their own scriptures, he sums up the terrible tale, "there is none righteous, no, not one . . . there is no fear of God before their eyes".

How is this tragic situation to be met? How can men get right with God . . . be rectified? Paul puts it all into two cognate and complementary passages. The one is chapter iii. 19-26: Men "are justified", rectified, set right with God—"freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood to declare His righteousness (His consistency with Himself) for the remission of sins that are past through the forbearance of God that He might be just (consistent with Himself) and the justifier, the One who sets men right with Himself, of them who believe in Jesus". The companion passage which completes the story is v. 6-10: "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. . . . Much more then being now justified—set right—by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath by Him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled we shall be saved by His life."

That is God's part in the setting of mankind right with Him. What is ours? By Christ we have received the reconciliation. (It is a pity that the A.V. did not retain the same word to the end and substituted atonement.) He has done all. In the word from the Cross, "it is finished". Our part is simply to receive the reconciliation. It is a free gift, to be received by faith unto justification of life, i.e., unto setting all men right with God who simply put their trust in Jesus Christ. And it is by faith that there may be no mistake that it is entirely the gift of God's grace, due to no merit in us.

II

There then is how we are set right with God—"being set right by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ". The problem now is how can we keep right with

God. Well, just as with the setting right so with the keeping right. God must do it. We must be kept, and Paul proceeds to show how God does it. To this he devotes chapters vi to viii.

On the face of it this should not be a serious problem. Its secret is simple. It lies in two favourite words of Paul—"in Christ". For Paul himself—and he would have every believer realise it—everything is provided for in that blessed relationship. How vital it is is revealed in the pregnant verses viii. 9-11. Everything depends on men having the Spirit of Christ, Christ's alter ego, in them. But the trouble is that the life has to be lived out here on earth in these mortal bodies. Paul hints at this handicap in vi. 12, where he says, "let not sin reign in your mortal body". He goes into it at length in the well-known passage of spiritual psycho-analysis, vii. 13-25. It would be so much simpler if, when we are set right with God, we could just leave those mortal bodies behind and quit the world at once. Browning, in that inimitable poem of grim grotesque humour, "Ned Bratts", suggests it. The converted publican and murderer, with his wife Tab, all unsolicited appears before the Court of Assize. They declare their conversion, sincerely confess their crimes, and ask the judge to hang them, as they deserve, and so save their souls; for they are afraid to face the temptations to their old evil ways which they see looming all too threateningly ahead. It is a grotesque way of putting the problem which faces the man who has by faith in Christ been set right with God. How is he to be able to keep right with God while still in this mortal body with all its old habits and instincts, many of them evil?

Paul's reply to this urgent problem is threefold. First and generally, in virtue of union with Christ, the fetters of the old law, which sin took advantage of, are broken. The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made the believer free from the law of sin and death. But Paul works up to this by two steps. For one thing men must apply their minds to the matter, and see what is involved in their union with Christ. It is not a mere theory. It is a pregnant reality. It is a dying and a living again with Christ in His dying and living again. Dead and done with sin they are to walk in newness of life. "Reckon yourselves," he says, i.e., think of yourselves, apply your brains to it—"as dead unto sin and alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." That is the first step. Think aright. Then

see that the will is right. Will aright and obey. As our Lord puts it—"if ye know these things happy are ye if ye do them". That is Paul's corollary to right thinking. "Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are, whether of sin unto death or of obedience unto righteousness?" So let the will agree with the mind, and obey God alone.

Of course the question still remains where is the power to come from which will enable the mind and will to act aright. It is in the union with Christ, present with the believer, by the Holy Spirit, that the answer is to be found. As union by faith with Christ *for* us sets us right with God, so union with Christ *in* us by His Holy Spirit keeps us right with God. This is really the theme of the eighth chapter with its presentation of the Holy Spirit as He witnesses to His own presence and to the filial relation of the believer with God in the spontaneous address *Abba, Father*. He reveals Himself in the impulses He imparts and by His help in our prayers. So Paul declares again that the whole scheme for the reclamation of lost humanity has its origin in the redeeming grace of God and thus provides the heart of man with the glad assurance which Archbishop Leighton called "the Believer's Heart's Ease" (viii. 31-end).

III

Had Paul been no more than a systematic theologian presenting a scheme of Christian soteriology, his "therefore" might have come here. The fact that it does not shows that he is other than a mere theologian. He is an Apologist, and that is why chapters ix-xi appear. At first sight the reader is emptied to ask what is the meaning of this vehement outburst. What has all this to do with how to be right and how to keep right with God? Yes; but Paul was a passionately patriotic Jew. There were many Jews among the converts at Rome. He had handled the Jew and his pretensions pretty roughly at the beginning of the letter. In any case, if his presentation of the way of salvation, which made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, was correct, a question would naturally arise in the mind of the Jews: What about us? What about the Jews? What about the promises of God? Do these all go for nothing? Paul must answer that; and so we have chapters ix-xi.

Now Paul knew his Jews. He knew their privileges and he knew the offensive supercilious spirit of racial pride with

which they held them. He knew also that they were beloved of God for the Fathers' sake, and more still, that they were of an essentially religious nature. "I bear them record," he says, "that they have a zeal for God." What was wrong was that being ignorant of God's way of setting men right with Himself and going about to achieve it in a way of their own, they had not fallen in with God's way. Not only so; but they failed to recognise that privileges bestowed do not establish rights or claims upon God. They presumed that they did, and were aggrieved when they were set aside. So in these three chapters Paul tackles this matter, vindicates God's consistency, and shows the Jews where their place is in God's great scheme in Christ.

In studying these three chapters it is important to bear two things in mind. All too often chapter ix has been dealt with as if it could be treated by itself as a speculative theological discussion of the general doctrine of election and predestination to eternal life or death with implications of reprobation as involved in the references to Esau and Pharaoh. That is quite gratuitous procedure. Paul is not dealing with a general theory. He is dealing with historical events in the life of the Jewish race, among which were the passing over of Esau and the drastic treatment of Pharaoh. And it is well to remember what one writer appositely says: "It is only when men begin to philosophize that they grow narrow . . . there begins to be felt the appeal for consistency (and the drawing of supposed logical consequences) and with it the temptation to exclude truths (or facts) that will not fit in."

Then again it is important to remember that Paul is dealing with fellow Jews and on lines on which he and they are agreed. They were agreed, for one thing, on God's sovereignty. They recognised that the selection of the Hebrews was an act of pure, sovereign grace, and that there was selection not only of Abraham but among his descendants, again between the sons of Isaac, and again among the children of Jacob. It was all a matter of grace and mercy. "We are the clay and Thou our potter: we are all the work of Thy hands." If Israel, therefore, is later set aside, its privileges taken away, and others admitted to them, Israel has no grievance. For another thing Paul and those he addresses were agreed about human responsibility, the right of choice. Didn't Joshua and Elijah both challenge the people long ago in very similar terms—"Choose ye whom ye

will serve". As Paul had already said, they chose their own way and rejected God's way of getting right with Him. And when in a petulant spirit they grumbled at their consequent rejection, their own prophet is quoted against them. Their excuse is brushed aside: "All day long I have stretched forth my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people."

But is the rejection of Israel to be permanent? Chapter xi is a magnificent *tour de force* in which Paul discerns and displays in the plight of the Jews a marvellous measure of God's for the entrance of the Gentiles into favour with Himself—a privilege on which they must not presume, however, but which may awaken an envy among the Jews that will bring them back to God's favourable regard and so "all Israel shall be saved". The rejection is not final. And Paul sums up his argument in a superb outburst of admiration and adoration at the marvels of the wisdom and knowledge and judgment of God and follows it up with his irresistible conclusion from the overwhelming force of these sublime premisses—"I beseech you; THEREFORE, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service".

IV

It is worth while to notice carefully the terms of this conclusion from all, from the first chapter onwards, that has gone before. Service, reasonable service is *λογικὴ λατρεία*. So the words mean religious service, worship, which is the logical outcome, the product of a rational mind considering the truths that have been presented. Sacrifice was the common form of worship in temples Jewish or pagan. That, says Paul, is what our daily lives ought to be. What a moving conception of a believer's life in all its activities these pregnant words convey! It becomes nothing less than a continued act of worship of God—an offering well-pleasing to God.

This sheds light on the purpose Paul had in view in writing this long letter. It was not intended as a treatise in theology. It is a common mistake to treat it in this way, as if it consisted of three loosely related sections—Chapters i–viii, a study of Christian doctrine, and the really important part of the Epistle; chapters ix–xi, as we have already noted, a study of the doctrine of election, of which chapter ix is the important part; and the

remainder of the Epistle a rather irrelevant and disjointed excursus on some points in the Christian life. That way of treating the Epistle is to miss what was in Paul's mind. Remember it is a letter and not a brochure. Paul was not concerned about framing a homogeneous system of doctrine; something to satisfy the mind. He wrote for a practical purpose to warm the hearts and quicken the spiritual lives of his correspondents. He was aiming not at their heads but at their hearts. So he first has elaborated his ideas of the mercies of God and spreads them out before his readers in the first eleven chapters. Then he applies it all and sets forth what should be the manner of life of those who are the heirs of such gracious blessings.

First of all he reverts to the equipment for such a life. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit with all His varied activities. Some lives are fitted for one service, others for others. Between these there need be no claims of pre-eminence or superiority or priority. All are needed and indispensable for the good of the whole community. Then he emphasises the dominant note of the Christian life. It is love: "let love be without dissimulation" (xii. 9). From that verse on to the end of chapter xii, there is something like a companion passage to 1 Corinthians xiii, and love is seen in its various manifestations in the relations of men to friends and foes. Later on in the next chapter he reverts to it again as the solvent of every social problem: "love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore (Paul is fond of therefores) love is the fulfilling of the law." With that word he finishes a paragraph in which he has dealt first with the Christian as a citizen and his duties to the State, and then as a member of society. And it is well worth while to remember that these sane, sober counsels were given in a time when they were much needed. People were living under the reign of Nero and amid the corrupt society of his days.

The Apostle then turns to a situation which frequently arises in Christian communities, namely, strained relations between those who have realised something of the range of the freedom of a Christian man and those who are beset by an uneasy fear of too free indulgence of that liberty either by themselves or by other people; in other words between the strongminded and the weak in faith. It is the outcrop of scrupulousness and how to deal with it. The treatment is general, but it is illustrated chiefly in reference to the use of meat with an incidental reference

to the observance of days. It is not difficult to understand why the matter of meat should predominate. The Jews in the community would bring with them their old laws as to the method of butchering. The Gentiles would be faced as were the converts in Corinth with the question of food offered in sacrifice to idols. So Paul first of all lays down a broad principle of mutual considerateness. There must neither be contempt for weakness on the one hand, nor censoriousness towards the practice of liberty on the other. To his own master—and that is the Lord—each stands or falls. Having vindicated the rights of liberty with which he is in full sympathy, he pleads for concession to the weak by the strong. For a matter of meat and drink to tempt the weak by word or example, to go beyond what his faith or conscience approves is a grave fault and may be disastrous to a soul *for whom Christ died*.

Paul imagines that some in Rome may take exception to him, a stranger, writing in such an authoritative style to the community at Rome. So he turns aside, ere he closes, to explain why he does so. He has been commissioned by the Lord as the Apostle of the Gentiles. It had always been his ambition to visit Rome, the great capital of the Gentile world. Well, they might ask, why had he not done so? His reply is that it was not want of will but want of opportunity. His method as a missionary had been to avoid trenching on other men's ground and steadily to seek out untouched spheres. Only now was his way clear for a move to the west and he hoped to visit Rome in the by-going.

The letter draws to a close with affectionate messages to his many personal friends, some of them kinsfolk, perhaps, in Rome. We need not be surprised at the number of them. Travelling was far more general in those days than we often realise. Look at the number of passengers on board the ship on which Paul ultimately voyaged towards Rome—two hundred or thereby—and that ship was just one. And when we have read this list of friends it is easy to understand where the groups came from to meet Paul at Appii Forum and the Three Taverns.

There follows the massive doxology. In it Paul gathers up what he had been setting forth at length in the body of his letter. It is a great appeal to Almighty God to establish his friends in the faith and all to the glory of God, only wise, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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