THE THEOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS.

III.

The Doctrine of Sin.

Thus far we have been concerned with sin and law as generalized ideas which in their relations to each other fill an essential place in the theology of St. Paul. But we do not really appreciate what he meant by them till we can trace their interaction in his experience, and the moment we attempt to do so the difficulty recurs by which we are so often haunted in the study of the Epistles. St. Paul had his experience of the law under the definite form of the law of Moses; that was for him the most obvious—we are tempted at first to say the only—embodiment of the concept. But the law of Moses cannot be reproduced by us. We cannot put ourselves into the position of a person brought up in a Pharisaic environment, and confronted with the statutes of the Pentateuch and the traditions of the elders; we cannot imagine ourselves called, out of our own resources, and without becoming God's debtors, to achieve by the perfect observance of all these traditions and statutes a righteousness of our own for which we might challenge the approval of God. We cannot imagine this, nor is it needful that we should do so. Life under the law is for us an untried and alien thing, and therefore (so it is argued) the experience of Paul under these conditions, and the theology which he based upon it, can hardly be intelligible and are certainly not authoritative for us.

The answer to this difficulty has already been suggested. That there is an answer is involved in the fact that, peculiar and peculiarly conditioned as the experience of Paul might be, he had been able to eliminate its peculiarities, to universalize it, and on the strength of it to address himself with victorious assurance to the common conscience of

mankind. That universal law, which in a previous paper was shown to determine for him all the relations of God and man, and by doing so to make them relations of moral import, takes shape variously, according to their circumstances and history, for the imagination and conscience of men. For Paul the law took shape—it defined itself with Divine authority, we may say—in the law of Moses: for other men it took other, yet analogous, shapes. But all its forms, whatever their adequacy, or inadequacy, owed their authority to representing law in its eternal and unchanging import. Every law, in other words, appealed to men because somehow or other the authority of God was felt through it. It is this which gives sin essentially the same character, no matter what its particular content may be. No things could be more unlike than the hideous vices of paganism which are pilloried in the first chapter of Romans, and the pretentious self-righteousness of the Jews which is exposed in the second; but there is one relation in which they are identical—their relation to the eternal law of God. Unless Paul had been able to generalize both sin and law in such a way as to express this, he would have had no universal gospel to preach, and no theology of it to construct; he would only have had a curious spiritual autobiography to record. But the mere fact that he could so generalize proves that his experience under the Mosaic law is in its very nature akin to something which belongs to human experience in general. Accordingly we do not expect to find what he says unintelligible or unreal; on the contrary our anticipation, to borrow Bunyan's expression about Luther on Galatians, is that what he writes will be as though it were written out of our own hearts.

What, then, does Paul say about the relation and interaction of sin and law in his own (and therefore in all human) experience?

He has to say much which implies that there is a close connexion between them, much which may seem unflattering to the law, and he takes care to make plain that for the law in itself he has nothing but the most religious respect. It is ἅγιος, holy; that is, it is *God's* law. The commandment in which it is expressed on any given occasion is holy and just and good. The natural and proper end of the commandment, that which God has in view in bringing it into man's consciousness, is life (vii. 10). If the law given by God had only been able to give life, righteousness would no doubt have been of law, and there would have been no need of the gospel (Gal. iii. 21). Nor does Paul say that it is the fault of the law that this result was not attained. On the contrary the law's incapacity is not to be referred to itself, but to the subject with which it has to deal (Rom. viii. 3). The one thing that has to be borne in mind at every point is that the law of God, defining itself variously to conscience according as the past of men or their surroundings vary, is always conceived as *confronting* those who are to keep it. It is of its nature to be a demand—an absolutely righteous demand, yet in the last resort a demand—not an inspiration.

When a man lives under law in this sense, the first result of it is that he comes to the consciousness of sin. When Paul pronounces the sentence διὰ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας, he pronounces it, no doubt, as a Christian. His Christian intelligence enables him to focus the meaning of his pre-Christian experiences as he might not have been able to do in his pre-Christian days. We cannot deny that there is such a thing as blind, Pharisaic self-righteousness produced under the law; but the law does not produce this, any more than it produces sensuality or other sins. Its true result is an ever deepening consciousness—ἐπίγνωσις is full or adequate knowledge—that the life is not in relation to God what the law demands. It is not right with God; it is

wrong with God, and no divine righteousness is realized in it. The Jews had the law of God made real to them, through their Scriptures and their history, with a vividness to which no other nation presents a parallel, and hence it is in Jewish, not in ethnic religious literature, that we find the consciousness of sin most acute. But everywhere the great experiment has the same issue: the law, however our consciousness of it come to us, convicts us of failure.

But it reveals its power in another way; as St. Paul puts it, it works wrath (Rom. iv. 15, ὀργὴν κατεργάζεται). Through it, somehow, the holiness of God, of which it is the expression, reacts against sin; the man who has set himself against the will of God, as it appeals to him through the law, does not discover that the law gives way to him; on the contrary, it abides, and asserts itself against him. The consciousness that God is against us because we have been and are against Him, is the consciousness of His wrath; and there is nothing more real. It is quite true that ὀργὴ in the New Testament is predominantly an eschatological idea: God's wrath is something that is almost appropriated to the great Day. But eschatological ideas do not arise out of nothing: they are at least the projection in imagination of something which the conscience knows to be real. The manifestation of God's wrath in all its force is by His mercy deferred for a time; but His wrath itself has workings of which the sinner may be painfully conscious long before the last Judgment. Even if the sinner is unconscious, the spectator of his life, who is alive to God and to His working in the world, may see the stern and ominous reaction of His violated law—in other words, the wrath which it works—in the debasement and degeneration of the sinner himself. "With the perverse Thou wilt show Thyself froward": this is the truth which receives such appalling illustration in Romans i. 18–32, and which justifies us in regarding the phenomenon

there described as a manifestation of the wrath of God. Such wrath is wrought by the law. It is because men are under law and disregard it that it reacts so terribly in their life. The power of God is in it, and it never grows old.

Through the law, then, we get the consciousness of sin; as the rule of the Divine reaction against sin, the law works wrath; and the end of the life in which sin and wrath express man's relation to God and God's relation to man cannot be doubted: that life is doomed to death. There is probably no question on which more that is utterly misleading has been written than the question, What did Paul mean by death? Modern minds make distinctions, such as spiritual, temporal, eternal death, and give answers to the question which imply that Paul also had such distinctions present to his mind. There is no indication that he had. Man was man to him, an indivisible whole, and to introduce such distinctions in the interpretation of his writings is only to mislead. It is equally misleading to suggest that the connexion of sin and death for St. Paul rested on a literal interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis, and that we are only at his point of view when we assume that death was attached to sin in the same way as any penalty is attached by a human legislature to the violation of its laws, and that but for this statutory arrangement man's relation to death might have been quite other than it is. In spite of the references to the third chapter of Genesis in Romans v. 12 ff., I venture to maintain that St. Paul never raised the abstract questions here suggested. The story of the Fall and its consequences, including the connexion of death and sin, produces no impression at all until it produces an impression on the conscience, and that impression is one which attests itself. It is not through the study of natural history, but through experience of sin and law and wrath, that we learn the meaning of the words, "The wages of sin is death." The

mortality of man is pathetic, but the end of the sinner is tragic. It is not to be assimilated to any natural event; its real nature is only to be discovered in conscience, and to conscience it is never anything but a doom. It has to be interpreted in relation to sin and law, and in this relation it cannot shut out from itself the awful judgment of God. Thoughts and experiences like these, and not reminiscences of the opening pages of the Bible, give authority and poignancy to all St. Paul says of death in connexion with sin. What he says is verified not by appeal to Genesis, but by appeal to the conscience of sinful men.

It is quite unmeaning to say that the theology which rests on the apprehension of truths like these is Paulinism: it is doing even Paul too great an honour to appropriate to him, by such a designation, experiences which every man can verify in his own life. Sin, wrath and death, in their relations to one another and to the holy law of God, are not Pauline, nor Pharisaic, nor Jewish, nor even "legal"; they are human and universal. We know what they mean as well as Paul; and Paul knew that his own experience was not a mystery nor a private property, but something which when uttered would wake echoes in every conscience. He lays great stress on the universality of sin—in other words, on the negative presupposition of the gospel; and in the Epistle to the Romans he has at least four ways of proving it.

(*a*) First, there is the empirical proof which is worked out in chaps. i. and ii. In chap. i. Paul adduces evidence of the sinfulness of the Gentiles; in chap. ii. he demonstrates that no appeal to his historical privileges can exempt the Jew from the same condemnation. Strictly speaking, no empirical proof can establish a universal conclusion, but Paul assumes that no serious person will say, Not guilty. He charges all, as he expresses it in chap.

iii. 9, with being under sin, and he is confident that conscience must give the verdict in his favour.

(*b*) To this there is added a Scriptural proof in chap. iii. 10 ff. Formally, this proof is as inadequate as the other. The passages quoted do not refer to all men or to all times, but only to ages in the history of Israel when tyranny or corruption prevailed. But Paul does not think of what they refer to as originally written. It is his own mind he is expressing by them, the mind of a Christian and an Apostle about the condition of the human race, and the significant thing is that such a judgment can be expressed in Scripture words. Logically, it may be said, the quotations prove nothing. True; but they are not addressed to the logical faculties, but to the conscience; and the Apostle believes that in every man conscience will assent to the impeachment. If everybody who reads the indictment pleads guilty—and that is what he has a right to expect—it does not matter whether there is a logical flaw in it or not.

(*c*) But Paul has a religious argument for the universality of sin. This is expressed in chap. iii. 23 f., "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace." There is an inference *backward* from the one mode in which men can be put right with God to the antecedent condition in which they find themselves. If the only mode of justification is the one which Paul had experienced and which he preached—justification for nothing by the grace of God—then plainly there can be no such thing as a justification by works of law; in other words, the true and normal relations of God and man, as the law determines them, have nowhere been satisfied. It may be said that this is reasoning in a circle. "All men have sinned, and therefore justification must be by grace; and again, justification is by grace, and therefore all men must have sinned." But reasoning in a circle is not always

wrong. It is not wrong when the circle in which we reason is one which includes within it the whole world of realities with which we are for the time being concerned. Now this is the case here; and when Paul, starting with the primary certainty of his Christian experience, that there is only one way of sălvation and that a gracious one, argues to the universality of sin, his circle is quite legitimate. It simply means that the various aspects of reality which make up his spiritual world are consistent with each other, and apart from this it is not easy to see how there could be any assurance of their truth. If there is one gospel to be preached to everybody—and to Paul nothing was more certain—it is an immediate inference that everybody is in the condition which makes that gospel necessary.

(*d*) But besides his empirical, Scriptural, and religious arguments for the universality of sin, Paul has another, which may perhaps be called a metaphysical argument—the flesh. One is almost afraid to write the word which has been the subject of such rigorous and vigorous treatment, but it cannot be avoided. Whatever else the flesh may be, it is at least something which is common to all men, and which to human experience is universally associated with sin. Whoever says flesh says sin; the flesh is flesh of sin; the works of the flesh are moral horrors, and everybody in some shape or degree knows what they are. The flesh, it is not too much to say, represents for Paul the virulence and constitutional character as well as the omnipresence of sin; it carries in it always the emphasis of despair. It must be admitted that this is curiously unlike the way in which the flesh is spoken of in the Old Testament. There it is a graphic expression for the natural weakness of man; it does not aggravate the sinfulness of sin, but is rather put under the head of extenuating circumstances. "He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not; yea, many a time turned

He His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath. And He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again." How could any one deal rigorously with such creatures? This is the tone, too, in which Jesus speaks, extenuating the fault of the disciples, who slept through His agony in the garden: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." But if Paul's conception of the flesh cannot be explained from the Old Testament, or from the words of Jesus, just as little can it be traced to a dualistic psychology of Hellenic origin. What we find in such dualistic psychologies is the antithesis of the material and the intellectual; it may be felt as a burden, or a limitation, or in some other way a restraint on man's becoming what he would become; but nothing is more remote from such philosophical dualism, even in the finest moral natures, than the passion of abhorrence, condemnation, and despair with which Paul speaks of the flesh. The truth is that when he speaks of the flesh, it is not an antithesis that he is dealing with, but an antagonism; the flesh belongs not to his psychology—he has no such thing—but to his moral and religious experience; it is that in him which does not subject itself to the law of God, and cannot, but lives in the perpetual revolt of sin. That there is that in him which can be so characterized is as sure to him as that he is a human being, and it is as sure for others as for himself. Just because a man is what he is he finds himself in standing antagonism with the law of God. That is what Paul means by being in the flesh; and it is a conclusive demonstration of the universality of sin. For a man to say he knew no sin would be as much as to say that he had no part in the nature common to man.

It may be objected here that this, as an argument for the universality of sin, begs the question. So it does, if a man has no conscience. But if a man recognises in himself

what Paul is talking about when he talks of the flesh—and it is assumed by the Apostle, and surely with reason, that men *will* recognise it, not indeed as psychological theory, but as moral fact—then it does not beg the question. It wakes up in the conscience, the only place in which it can be felt, a sense of the dreadful, inevitable, pervasive, constitutional antipathy of man to the law of God; it gives him a new revelation of the depth and intensity of sin; the *misera necessitas peccandi*, as Augustine called it, closes in on him and all his kind. It is in expounding the law and the flesh in their interaction that Paul says the most daring and paradoxical things about sin. The law, he indirectly suggests in Romans viii. 3, might have done something great for man, but it was weak through the flesh; the flesh disabled it. Instead of subduing the flesh, the law irritated it. It acted, in point of fact, in a way that seemed to defeat its own end. All that its "Thou shalt not" produced from the flesh was "I will." The forbidden fruit is the very fruit we want to eat. Paul does not hesitate to say—what must have seemed impious to a Jew, and is startling even for him—that this was God's intention in the reign of law. He meant it, by evoking the instinctive antipathy of the flesh, to multiply transgressions, and so to bring man to despair. No doubt it is the Mosaic law of which Paul says this, both in Romans v. and Galatians iii.; but that does not make it meaningless for us. The instinctive revolt against the law which imposes its restraint on our nature is not a Jewish but a human experience; and whatever the law be which brings this characteristic of our nature into consciousness, it does for us what the Mosaic law did for Paul, and we undestand his experience through our own. For us, as for him, such an experience is God's way of shutting us up to another mode of attaining righteousness than that of works of law. Such a nature stands in no proportion to our calling; it leaves us face to face with an impossible problem, sold under sin.

It is common to ask at this point how Paul conceived man's nature to have become what it is, or whether he conceived it to have been what it is from the beginning. These are questions to which no answer is supplied; they are questions, indeed, which it would have been as impossible for Paul to answer as it is for us. We never knew ourselves to be anything else than what we are, and we cannot go out of our nature as it is to scrutinize it in assumed antecedent conditions. In man as he is—and that is man in the only sense in which we know anything about him—there is that which reacts instinctively against the law, that which is stimulated by the law into persistent and determined revolt, that which under such stimulus reveals to man the exceeding sinfulness of sin. This is what Paul means by the flesh, and it has simply to be taken as it stands. Its origin is not explained by such propositions as chap. v. 12, "Through one man sin entered into the world"; or chap. vii. 9, "I was alive apart from law once, but when the commandment came sin sprang to life, and I died." These propositions have precisely the same value: the first applies to humanity, individualized in its natural head, the same mode of conception which the second applies to the life of the writer himself. But in both cases it is a mode of conception which may be said to belong to ideal biography. We cannot go back in our life to a happy time when we had no conscience of sin, and no idea of what the flesh means; we know what the flesh means as soon as we have a conscience at all, and memory reaches no further, if indeed it reaches as far. Similarly we cannot go back in the history of man to a paradisaical condition in which sin had not entered and in which there was no trace of antagonism to law, no disproportion between man's nature and his vocation; as far as history is concerned, it has nothing to say of any such state. Alike in the individual and in the race the moral state has simply

to be accepted: questions of origins are hopelessly beyond our reach.

But by St. Paul it is accepted, and this is the point to be emphasized, *as a moral state*. Its moral character is of the very essence of it. It never occurs to the Apostle that because man is what he is, and because his nature, so far as it is known in experience, betrays uniformly this antipathy to the law, therefore man is discharged of all moral responsibility. The facts for him have their whole being and meaning in the moral sphere; to say "the flesh" is not to pronounce man's acquittal, it is to exhibit the profound and hopeless character of his sin. To know what the flesh means does not prompt self-exculpation: it wrings from the sinful soul the cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?"

One can imagine beforehand a way in which deliverance might come. If the law lost its external provocative character—if it ceased to be, as something which merely confronted man with its demands, and became instead a *νόμος δυνάμενος ζωοποιῆσαι*, an inspiring force; or if man's nature was changed—if the flesh ceased to be, and instead of ruling man and making the law ineffective was itself reduced to impotence, then the deliverance might come. In the Christian experience of possessing the spirit both these results are combined. The spirit is, in a word, a *νόμος δυνάμενος ζωοποιῆσαι*, or what is the same thing, a *δύναμις* through which the law passes into act; it is the union of law and impulse, in which the strife of sin is finally overcome. But this is anticipating. In the end the law as an external thing does pass, and its place is taken, and the ends it vainly sought to secure are secured, by the spirit. But it does not pass unhonoured. Even in its external and imperfect forms, of which the Mosaic law is the highest example, it represented the will of God; and it is the will of God to which (in reacting against the law) human nature has shown

itself opposed. It is impossible for any one who sees this to believe that God can ignore it. It is impossible for him to believe that God asks men to forget it without more ado, and to dismiss from their life, not understood and not used, the painful experiences of sin, law, wrath, the flesh, death. The law as an outward thing passes, but between its passing and the coming of the spirit stands the whole body of Christian facts centring in the death and resurrection of Jesus. These facts are the condition of the spirit's coming; its coming is not direct, but mediated through them. The power to live a holy life is not poured into a sinful nature claiming immediate fellowship with a holy God; it is bestowed on such a nature, according to Paul, only through Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The righteousness of God, which is the answer to the whole necessities of the sinful world, is not revealed *in vacuo*. It is not transmitted into human nature by the vibrations of some sort of spiritual ether, as one might infer from the comparisons which are sometimes used to illustrate it; it is demonstrated in Jesus Christ set forth as a propitiation, through faith, in His blood. It is this which we have next to study in all the relations suggested by what we have seen of sin, the flesh, and the law.

JAMES DENNEY.

SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

III.

THE DIVINE WILL IN NATURE.

THERE is one thing about the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament which has often struck me as peculiar. Although from beginning to end they are pervaded by the action of a designing God, they never state that the world was created with any extraneous design—for any purpose