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THE THEOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE
ROMANS.

V.

FAITH AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.

THE righteousness of God, which for St. Paul is equivalent to the gospel, is hardly presented to us, in the Epistle to the Romans, as a thing in itself. No doubt there is a sense in which it is independent of the relation of any man to it; it is *there*, there in Jesus Christ set forth by God as a propitiation in His blood, whether men look that way or refuse to look. It is as real as the presence of the Son of God in the world, as real as His death upon the Cross, whether men comprehend it and appropriate it or not. But although the *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* must have this outwardness and independence, since otherwise the Evangelist would have nothing to preach, St. Paul habitually thinks and speaks of it in relation to that human act or experience in which it becomes man's. That act is faith. Apart from faith, the revelation of God's righteousness is nothing to us; through faith, all that it is and means becomes ours. Hence it is a Divine power to save in the case of every one who has faith (chap. i. 16); it is revealed "from faith to faith"; that is, according to the most probable interpretation, faith is from first to last the condition on which we appreciate the revelation, and make its blessings our own (chap. i. 17); the end of an apostolic ministry is to produce among men that submission to God's way of salvation which can be described as the obedience of faith (chap. i. 5):

even the propitiation which Christ is in His blood is expressly characterized as a propitiation "through faith" (chap. iii. 25), as though the Apostle would warn us against ascribing any magical virtue to the propitiatory death where faith in it was wanting. The subject of this paper is faith in relation to the righteousness of God, as St. Paul exhibits it in the Epistle to the Romans.

St. Paul himself nowhere gives a definition of faith, the reason being presumably, as Pfeiderer suggests, that he does not employ the word in any other than the current sense, or at least is not conscious of doing so. Where the gospel is spoken of as a message which the Apostle delivers, to believe naturally means to accept his testimony, to receive his message as true; where it is identified with a person, with God as its source, or with Christ as its mediator, then the acceptance of the message is elevated into some kind of trust reposed in God or in Christ. In a sense religious faith always has God as its object, and means reliance upon Him in the character in which He has revealed Himself. It may be reliance on a word which God has spoken, holding fast to such a word as the one thing which cannot be shaken in a world of unrealities: such was the faith of Abraham, who lived as if the only reality in the universe were this, that his seed should inherit Canaan, and that through him all the families of the earth should be blessed. It may be reliance on a deed which God has done, a deed in which His character is so exhibited as to evoke the confidence of men. If we regard the presence of the Son of God in the world, including His death and resurrection, as one such great revealing act of God, we can understand how Peter speaks of Christians as those who "believe in God through Christ" (1 Pet. i. 21). Such faith might be indefinitely rich in content, as rich as the life of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and as the innumerable impulses to trust which spring out of it. If, again, the

act of God is that central and decisive one—the setting forth of Christ as a propitiation in His blood—in which He deals with the sin of the world for man’s salvation, then the corresponding faith is that sinner’s faith on which Paul concentrates attention as the condition of being right with God. It is really this last which we have to consider. The generic use of the terms “faith” or “believing” by the Apostle may be disregarded; the point of interest is his specifically Christian use of them—that is, his use of them in relation to the revelation of the *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* in the propitiation of Christ.

The first point to notice is that such faith only becomes possible when the object which evokes it is presented to the sinner. There must be an exhibition, through the preaching of the gospel, not merely of Christ, or even of Christ crucified, but of Christ as in His death a propitiation for sin. Without this, there is not, for the Apostle, any possibility whatsoever of faith, or salvation, or even of what some people would call Christianity. This is the one and indispensable foundation for everything Christian. It is sometimes asserted that there are really two ways of putting the gospel in Paul: first, a forensic or judicial way; and second, an ethical or mystical way. To the forensic gospel, Christ is in some sense man’s substitute, and faith means the acceptance of what He has done for us; to the mystical or ethical, He is in some sense man’s representative, and faith means identification with Him in His death and life. Often, it is added, the “forensic” is the inferior type of gospel, a type in which the form, borrowed from Pharisaism, does great injustice to the Christian contents; it is the ethico-mystical gospel which really answers to the experience of Christian men. The conception of faith, too, which answers to the forensic gospel, and to the substitutionary Christ of the propitiation, is indefinitely empty and unreal—it is a mere abstraction; the faith, on the other

hand, which corresponds to the gospel of ethical identification with Christ, is the rich and powerful moral force in which the Christian actually lives and moves and has his being. The same criticism, too, is passed on the issues of faith in the respective cases. The righteousness of God in the "forensic" gospel is only, it is said, an imputed righteousness; some sort of unreality clings to it; to build our life on it is to build on a false bottom, and in point of fact it has constantly led to moral disasters; whereas the divine righteousness of the ethico-mystical gospel is as real as the union with Christ, and if at any given moment defective enough, it has yet the promise and potency of perfection in it.

This whole line of argument seems to me not only mistaken in itself, but conspicuously and even wantonly unjust to St. Paul. That the Apostle in the Epistle to the Romans says all that has been said above about union with Christ through faith is not to be questioned; but (1) he does not say it as a substitute for what he has said before about faith in Christ set forth by God as a propitiation in His blood; nor (2) does he say it in blank forgetfulness of this, or in no relation whatever to it. It is assumed in all such criticism of the Apostle that in Christ on His Cross, *independent of His propitiatory character*, there is that which will draw sinful souls into mystical union with Him. This, it is very safe to say, the Apostle would at once have denied. And he would have been in the right in denying it. There must be something in the death of Jesus on the Cross, more than in other deaths, which draws men into union with Him; what is it? In what does the attractive, subduing, constraining power of that death lie? Those who set the ethico-mystical theory of faith and salvation against what they call the forensic, or who make the two independent of each other, have no answer: the power of the death of Jesus to draw men into mystical union with Him

is merely impressionist ; the rationale of it is to seek. But Paul *has* an answer. The death of Christ has power to draw sinners into union with Him because it is in point of fact—such is the marvellous love embodied in it—*their* death which He dies. The seat of the attraction in Christ, in virtue of which sinners are drawn into ethico-mystical union with Him, the point of contact which sinners have in the Sinless One, is nothing else than this, that He has come into our place, that on the Cross He is taking our responsibilities, bearing our sins, dying our death. Here is the love of Christ which takes hold of men, and draws them into the ethico-mystical union. But put this aside, and there is no force to produce this union, in the case of Christ, any more than in the case of other sufferers for righteousness' sake, whose story impresses our hearts. The union with Christ in His death, therefore, which is represented as an alternative to Christ's propitiation for our sins and the acceptance of it by faith, is in reality no such thing ; neither is it a thing independent of the propitiatory death ; it is its effect, or rather its fruit. It is Christ our Substitute, Christ who bore our burden, Christ who made our sins His own when He died our death upon the tree, it is that Christ and no other in whom the power dwells, and by whom it is exercised, to draw sinners to Himself and make them one with Him in death and life. The sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters of Romans are not a new gospel for those who do not care for the third, fourth and fifth ; they are not an accidental, or a much needed, supplement to those chapters, having yet no organic connexion with them ; they are vitally involved in them, *and in nothing else*. Apart from the significance of Christ's death, as exhibited in chaps. iii.–v., the power of it as exhibited in chaps. vi.–viii. is baseless, inexplicable, incredible. All Christianity, including the mystical union with Christ, has the atonement and faith at the foundation of it, and it can

have no other foundation. To St. Paul there is only one gospel, and his construction of it is one: it is no thing of shreds and patches, but a seamless garment. The true connexion of his ideas is perfectly put in the glorious lines of that great mystic, St. Bernard—

*Propter mortem quam tulisti
Quando pro me defecisti;
Cordis mei cor dilectum,
In te meum ser affectum!*

As a comment on the connexion between Romans iii. iv. v. and Romans vi. vii. viii.—on the relation of the substitution of Christ to ethical identification with Him—of Christ for us to Christ in us or we in Him—this for truth and power will never be surpassed. But blot out the first two lines and the inspiration of the third and fourth is gone. Precisely so, I venture to say, blot out the “forensic” representation of St. Paul’s gospel, and the “ethico-mystical” one has the breath of its life withdrawn. There is no regeneration if you give the go by to the atonement; it is the atonement received by faith—that is, it is justification—which regenerates.

But to return. If faith is only possible when the object which evokes it is presented to the sinner, it is no less true that the object presented to the sinner in the gospel is fitted to evoke faith. There is nothing arbitrary in making faith the condition of salvation. When a sinner knows what Christ on the Cross means—when he accepts the apostolic testimony that this is not merely a murder or a martyrdom, but a propitiation—when he recognises that in Jesus Christ as set forth in His blood the love of God is bearing the sin of the world—when it comes upon him that *this* is the revelation of what God is in relation to sinful men; then he understands also that there is only one act and attitude by which the sinful man can properly respond to God, that, namely, in which he gives himself up un-

reservedly to the love demonstrated in Christ. If he had another hope, he cannot keep it; he lets everything go, that he may unconditionally surrender to this. If he had no other hope, then this is his refuge from despair; a love to which sin is as tragically real as it is to him, and which makes his sin its own. Can a man with a bad conscience buy that? Can he earn it? Can he pay for it? Can he do anything but commit himself unconditionally to it, knowing that only so can he be right with God? Can he think that there is anything else in the world on which a sinner may hope to build up a good life than this assured love of God bearing the world's sin? The questions answer themselves. To St. Paul faith, in the specifically Christian sense, is the act, or if we prefer it the state, of the soul in which the appropriate response is being made to the revelation of God's righteousness in the propitiation of Christ. For such a soul, that propitiation, or the revelation of God which is made in it, is the universe; nothing else counts. The soul is given up to it; it is absorbed, overcome, determined through and through by it; its past does not count; its future is divinely assured; in the great renunciation and abandonment of faith it is at last right with God; it counts on Him, and He undertakes for it. This is the experience which St. Paul has in mind when he speaks of justification by faith. The justified man is one whose relation to God is determined not by sin, or by the law, but by Christ who died for sin, and by faith in Him and His atoning death.

The criticisms of the Pauline gospel of justification by faith, ancient and modern, are innumerable, but in the main they are of two kinds. First, it is asserted that the whole conception of propitiation (to which faith is here made relative) implies a "legal" and therefore a false conception of God's relations to man. This has been already considered in the papers on sin and law. Secondly, it is asserted that the "legal" justification of man, secured

through the substitution of Christ, is without moral contents, and contains no moral guarantees for the sinner's future life. This is in effect answered in the representation given above of what justifying faith truly is, and it will be more fully dealt with below when we consider what St. Paul himself says about faith establishing the law. To get a more adequate idea of the faith through which man becomes right with God it is only necessary to study the passage in Romans iii. 27 ff. in which the Apostle, at the close of his demonstration of the significance of Christ's death, points out the characteristics of the Christian religion as based upon faith in it.

"Where," he asks, "is boasting, the boasting with which Pharisaism is so familiar? It is at once shut out. How is the religion—the Divine institute—to be characterized, which so summarily excludes it? Is it to be characterized by works? No. It is to be characterized by faith. For our conclusion is that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." It is implied in this, of course, that faith is not a work of law. There is nothing meritorious in it, nothing on the ground of which the believing sinner may claim acceptance with God as his due. It implies a relation to God into which such ideas cannot possibly intrude. But although boasting (*καύχησις*) in this sense is excluded, it is introduced in another, and introduced through faith. The believing man, justified by his faith, makes his boast in the Lord (chap. v. 1-3). *Καυχᾶσθαι* is a favourite Pauline word; and exultation, triumphant assurance, glorying in God, are the characteristics of the Apostle's faith. He knew perhaps better than any one who has ever lived what that word means: The joy of the Lord is your strength.

There has been much theological discussion as to the relation of assurance to faith, and the motives of the usually meticulous treatment of the problem (the desire not to wound tender, timid consciences, not to encourage presump-

tion, not to blunt the zeal for sanctification) are honourable enough; but it is certain that out of regard for them the apostolic mood has often been completely lost. When a man has his eye fixed on Christ, set forth by God as a propitiation in His blood, is it a sin for him to be *sure* of God's love to the sinful? Can he be *too* sure of it? Is it presumptuous of him to be *perfectly* sure? Is not the presumption rather in doubting it? All great evangelists have felt that without an *initial assurance* of God's love, an assurance which is not so much an added perfection of faith as the very soul of faith, the sinner never does justice to God, never is truly made right with Him, never gives the gospel a chance, or gets for himself the inspiration the gospel can give. What Paul means when he cuts faith off completely from works is to emphasize its sole sufficiency for the religious life, a sufficiency of course conditioned by its object, but once its object is apprehended, unconditional. As long as the sinner holds on, though it were but with his finger-tips, to something in which the initiative and the credit are his own, he does not abandon himself unreservedly to the mercy of God in Christ; and until he does this he can never know what incomparable impulses of strength and gladness dwell in the atonement. Yet it is in these alone that his hope of a future life of virtue lies. This is the answer to all the timid qualifications of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Reduced to their simplest terms, and exhibited in their true meaning, they are neither more nor less than attempts to take moral guarantees from the sinner *before* he is allowed the benefit of the gospel. But the very meaning of the gospel—and here we see with what propriety justification by faith is treated as identical with the gospel—is that the sinner is not in a position to give any such guarantees. Allow him unconditional access to Christ the propitiation, allow him an initial unconditioned assurance of the sin-bearing love of God, and all

moral guarantees will be found in that. The gospel does not demand such guarantees, because it is its business to provide them.

This truth, which is often missed by moralizing critics of St. Paul, has been grasped in some fashion by every branch of the Christian Church. The moralist is apt to be a legalist without knowing it, and he is slow to understand that morality may be transcended without being endangered; or rather that, in the case of men who have a bad conscience through sin, morality *must* somehow be transcended by an unconditional grace, if such men are ever to have the chance of being moral again. But this unconditional grace—this grace which is here, antecedent to any moral guarantee the sinner can offer, requiring of him nothing but that he abandon himself to it, and giving him the assurance that if he do so all will be well—this unconditional grace is what is represented alike in the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone, in the Calvinistic doctrine of sovereign electing grace, and in the Romish doctrine of the grace contained in the Sacraments. All these doctrines mean, at bottom, the same thing. They mean that in the work of man's salvation an unconditioned initiative belongs to God, and that all that is required of man is the unreserved abandonment of himself to what God has done. That is faith in the sense of St. Paul, and it contains everything because it contains God the Saviour in the revelation of His grace. Faith is the abandonment of the soul to that revelation in the assurance of its utter truth. It is not an antecedent condition, a work of law which a man must make good out of his own resources before he can receive the Gospel; it is nothing else than the acceptance of the Gospel. That is why it puts a man right with God, and has all joy, and all moral possibilities, in it.

Next to the all-sufficiency of faith—for this is what is

really meant by the exclusion of "works" from the initiation of the Christian life—St. Paul insists on the universality of it as a religious principle. The inseparable association of "faith" and "all" is very striking in the Epistle. The obedience of faith is to be won among all the nations (Rom. i. 5); the gospel is the power of God to every one who has faith (i. 16), to Jew first and also to Greek; the righteousness of God is through faith in Christ Jesus, upon all that believe, without distinction (iii. 22); any Christian is adequately described as one who has faith in Jesus (iii. 26). It is in this line that St. Paul asks, when he has finished his exposition of propitiation and faith in their relations to each other, Is God—that is, the God who has set forth Jesus as a propitiation in His blood—a God of Jews only? Does that great demonstration of love appeal to something national, so that only those born in a certain line, and trained in a certain tradition, can respond to it? Far from it. That to which the great propitiation appeals is neither Jewish nor Greek, neither ancient nor modern, neither oriental nor occidental; it is simply human. God in His propitiation undertakes for sin, and appeals to the sinner for unreserved trust: that is the whole matter. As a religious principle the faith which is the response of the sinful soul to the atonement abolishes all national distinctions; the only realities in its world are the Redeemer God, and the soul in which His love evokes the response of faith. Paul was conscious of this inference from the very hour of his conversion: it pleased God, he says, to reveal His Son in me, *that I might preach Him among the nations* (Gal. i. 16). It was not a Jew who was saved on the way to Damascus, but a sinner; and the same appeal, made to the same necessity, and evoking the same response, was independent of all national limitations. The Cross, as St. Paul interprets it, speaks a language to which conscience gives every man the key; if we make it out at all, we see this,

and know that there is but one way in which circumcision and uncircumcision alike, or ancient and modern alike, or cultured and uncultured alike, can become right with God, and face life with assurance and joy.

It might seem an immediate inference from this that all that was Jewish passed out of religion, or, to use words that were natural then, though in some respects too big for this meaning, that faith abolished the law (chap. iii. 31). No doubt the inference is in some sense, or even in various senses, just. As it has been put above, the revelation of God made in Christ the propitiation is the whole world to the sinful soul, and the response of faith which it evokes is the whole of religion. As far as the law means anything that is national, historical, statutory, it is made void by faith: Christ is the end of it to every one who believes (chap. x. 4); the Jewish religion is superseded. We are not under law any longer; it is not a system of precepts and of prohibitions by which our life is ruled; we are under grace; the life we live is that which grace calls into being through faith; not restraint but inspiration is the Christian's watchword, not Sinai but Calvary is his holy mount. But where Paul discusses the connexion of faith and propitiation, what he is concerned to maintain is that faith does *not* annul the law, but rather sets it on its feet. What is the conception of law implied here?

It may be plausibly argued, if we look to the sequence of chaps. iii. and iv., that what Paul wishes to prove is that the way of being right with God which we discover in the Old Testament, which in a large sense may be called Law, is not subverted but confirmed under the Christian dispensation. In other words, he wishes to prove that in all ages men have been justified in the same way—that Abraham, for instance, the father of the Jews, is the spiritual ancestor of all believers, the type of that attitude to God which has

its final and perfect exemplification in Christian faith, because that faith is a response to the final and perfect revelation of God. There is a great truth in this. God has one people through all the ages, and at bottom their attitude to Him is one. That is why we can understand the Old Testament and use it as a religious book. In this sense, an argument that faith does not annul but confirm the law would be an argument in support of our Lord's words, I came not to destroy, but to fulfil. But if we consider both what precedes (chap. iii. 21-26), and what comes after (e.g. in chap. viii. 4), we shall probably be inclined to the conclusion that what St. Paul means in chap. iii. 31 is something quite different. Law to a Jew, and for that matter to most men, is a symbol of the distinction between right and wrong, a guarantee of righteousness; and what he asserts is that faith is so far from annulling that distinction (as some of his adversaries asserted then and have asserted ever since), that it actually establishes it. There is nothing, the Apostle maintains, to which the distinction of right and wrong is so inviolable as faith; there is nothing which does such signal justice to that distinction; there is nothing which is so productive of genuine righteousness; nay, there is nothing else which can produce righteousness at all.

One could conceive the Apostle challenging his opponents to look at an empirical proof of this. The only good man, he might say, is in point of fact the pardoned man, the man whose heart has been made tender, and his conscience sensitive, by submitting to have his sins forgiven for Christ's sake. To humble oneself to receive the reconciliation which comes at the cost of the atonement is to pass through the only experience in which one becomes a new creature; and short of becoming a new creature, no man ever does justice to the demand of the law. You may think you are fulfilling the law while the hardness of your

heart leaves you insensible to what it is; it is only when the great appeal of Christ's propitiation melts your heart and casts it into a new mould that you begin to see what goodness is, and to be a good man. Faith in the atonement is not hostile to righteousness; it is the fountain of all righteousness worthy of the name. Religion, it might be otherwise put, though it transcends morality, does not extinguish it; on the contrary, the only genuine morality is born of it.

Again, we might conceive the Apostle, when accused of annulling the law by faith, pointing to Christ Himself, and to His undisputed character. Sainte Beuve quotes some one who says that the last enemy to be overcome by the believer is the great God Pan. He means that sense of the unity of all things in which the sense of their differences is lost. Nature and spirit, necessity and freedom, the personal and the impersonal, even good and evil, are fluctuating and evanescent distinctions; they shade off into each other by imperceptible degrees, and even the critical line which marks off good and evil wavers and vanishes as we try to fix it. This is the mood which really annuls "law," and makes righteousness not a reality or a hope, but an illusion and a despair. And in the very world in which this mood overcomes men, and they say it is all one, we come suddenly upon Christ crucified, dying to establish the difference which their minds are weariedly giving up. Whoever else may ignore the claim of righteousness, the just demand of law, the believer in Jesus dare not: for Jesus resisted unto blood, striving against sin, and showed us in doing so that righteousness is as real as His passion, and the demand of the law more sacred than life itself. How can faith in Him make Law void?

But the conclusive argument of the Apostle would certainly be an appeal to his doctrine of propitiation. The faith which is charged with subverting the law of God is a

faith which has Christ set forth in His blood as its object and inspiration. Now what is the meaning of that object? According to the Apostle, it is Christ bearing sin, Christ accepting and making His own in all their tragic reality the responsibilities in which sin had involved us. How, then, can the faith which such a Christ evokes but have the moral characteristics of that propitiation in its very substance? How can it do anything else than treat as absolutely real that righteousness of God to which the propitiation which is its abiding source is the most signal homage? Faith begotten by Christ, set forth as a propitiation in His blood, is faith to which sin is all that sin is to God, holiness all that holiness is to God, law all that law is to God; it is so far from subverting morality that in a world of sinful men it is the one guarantee that can be given for a genuinely good life. It is with such an impression of it on his heart that St. Paul writes: I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is a Divine power to save in the case of every one who has faith; for in it a Divine righteousness is revealed of which faith is the very element.

JAMES DENNEY.

THE LAW OF RECIPROCITY IN RELIGION.

THERE is a natural world and there is a spiritual world. Both these worlds are governed by constant and unresting laws. In many ways, as we should reasonably expect seeing that the same Creator formed them both, the laws of these two worlds closely resemble each other. The principal difference is that in the working out of spiritual laws, will and affection and faith play a larger part than in the laws of the lower sphere. With this exception the two sets of laws are so nearly alike that they who rule