

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE
ROMANS.

II.

THE DOCTRINE OF SIN.

THE central theological conception of the Epistle to the Romans is that of the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God, however, as the sum and substance of the gospel, is essentially related to sin, and we follow the Apostle's order in making sin our first subject of study.

It will not be questioned that the Epistle to the Romans contains a doctrine, or, at least, much of the material for a doctrine, on this subject. The Apostle speaks continually in it of "sin" in the singular, and in all sorts of relations. Out of forty-eight cases in which the word *ἁμαρτία* is used in the Epistle, only three are in the plural; and of these, two (chaps. iv. 7, xi. 27) are quotations from the Old Testament. In the synoptic Gospels, on the other hand, the word is never found in the singular, except in Matthew xii. 31, where *πᾶσα ἁμαρτία* does not form a real exception; it is not sin, but sins, of which Jesus speaks. This of itself is sufficient to show that St. Paul's attitude is that of one who is generalizing on the subject; what Jesus addresses Himself to in the concrete, as it comes before Him in its particular workings, in the lives of individual men, His Apostle is trying to grasp in its nature and significance as a whole.

This does not mean that in St. Paul there must necessarily be some loss in truth or reality. A generalization is only unreal to a person who approaches it from the outside; it is not unreal, empty, or unimpressive, to the person who has digested his experience and observation into it. This last is the case in the Epistle. There is no abstract doctrine of

sin in it; everything it contains is written out of the Apostle's heart; it is profoundly, even passionately, experimental. It is proper to insist on this, because it is sometimes overlooked. The process of generalization is a difficult one, and the forms in which the mind makes its first attempt to express its perception of a universal truth may not be quite adequate to the burden laid on them. One of the most obvious of these forms is personification. Wishing, for instance, to say something which is true not of this or that sin, but of sin in general, the mind projects sin, as it were, to a distance at which it can focus it, and then makes its assertions *as if* sin actually had such an independent existence of its own. It generalizes by the simple process of writing Sin with a capital S, and lending it a quasi-personality. St. Paul himself often does this. He does it, possibly, when he says that Sin entered into the world; he does it certainly when he says that Sin reigned in death, or that there is such a thing as a Law of Sin—a law which Sin enjoins as opposed to the law enjoined by God. But it is a misconception of his mind altogether—a failure to appreciate the psychological conditions under which he worked—when we distinguish on this ground, as many scholars do, an “objective” as opposed to a “subjective” doctrine of sin in certain passages of the Epistle. Perhaps these are words one ought not to use at all; but if they are to be used, we ought to recognise clearly that an “objective” which is not also “subjective” does not belong to science or to experience, but to mythology. Now there is nothing about sin in St. Paul (as I hope will become apparent) which cannot be verified in experience; and the places in which there is even the appearance of an objective conception of Sin, as a power *in rerum natura* but not in this or that human will, are only those in which the Apostle, *on the basis of experience*, generalizes by the primitive method of poetic personification. It is needlessly rash to

say that in these cases he did not know what he was doing.

Yet everything is not made clear when we say that St. Paul's doctrine of sin was experimental. The question is at once raised, What was the experience in which he gained the insight generalized in this Epistle into a doctrine of sin? Was it his experience as a Pharisee in quest of a righteousness of his own? or his experience as a Christian in possession of the righteousness of God? Or can we perhaps distribute it between the two stages of his life, and maintain that he learned some things about sin by being a sinner, and others only by being saved? The true answer to such questions depends on a perception of what experience is. It is not a *quantum*, but a process, and what it amounted to at any particular moment, supposing it could have been arrested there, changes meaning and value and aspect continually as life moves on. It is not at the instant of doing anything that we know what we have done; it may only be long afterwards, and in the light of very different experiences. This has to be considered especially in such a writing as the Epistle to the Romans. The writer is a Christian Apostle. He cannot be anything else; we cannot even imagine him for an instant divesting himself of this character. When he writes of sin, he writes, of course, on the basis of experience; no honest man could do otherwise. But he does not write his autobiography. He does not tell that he stole apples, like Augustine, or that he blasphemed, like Bunyan. He only tells the universal truth about sin, as through experience he has come to know it. But the experience is that of a saved man. At a later point we shall have occasion to consider the teaching of the Epistle about sin and the Christian life, and the attempts to distribute some things the Apostle says of sin between the unregenerate and the regenerate man; here it is sufficient to point out that it is the regenerate

man who is speaking all the time, and showing us what sin in the light of God universally and essentially is. The doctrine of sin, in other words, is Christian, not pre-Christian or Pharisaic; the whole meaning and issues of sin are not discovered at the feet of Gamaliel, but at the cross of Jesus. Hence St. Paul's writings, intensely personal as they are, do not enable us to reconstruct the Pharisaic consciousness of the man; we know only his Christian consciousness, and how sin and other things were seen and understood there.

St. Paul nowhere gives a formal definition of sin: it was too well known in all its modes to need that. But it is apparent from such passages as Romans iii. 20 (*διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας*) and v. 13 (*ἁμαρτία δὲ οὐκ ἔλλογέται, μὴ ὄντος νόμου*) that it has to be defined in the first instance by relation to law. "I had not known sin," he says elsewhere (chap. vii. 7), "except *διὰ νόμου*." No doubt, if we go back to St. Paul's experience as a Pharisee, and the failures of those days (which are surely not excluded by the boasting of Philippians iii. 6, "touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless"), the law referred to here is the law of Moses. It was in the form of the law of Moses that law first proved a reality for the Apostle. Not, we may suppose, because it was Moses' law; on the contrary, it was the law of God.¹ Formally, Paul made no distinctions in it: he was under obligation to God to keep it all. What we call ritual and what we call moral were alike binding on him. But if we confine ourselves to the Epistle

¹ A curious attempt is sometimes made to represent Paul as disparaging the law, the reason alleged being that he never expressly connects it with God as he does the promises. This is very misleading. It is natural for Paul to speak of the promises of God with the emphasis he uses, because it is on the fact that the promises are God's that their inviolability, for which he is arguing, depends. It is natural, too, because as manifestations of His grace the whole explanation of the promises lies in God. But the law has another, though not a less divine, standing. It belongs not to God only, but to the whole constitution of things. It is the law of man and of the world as well as of God.

to the Romans, we see that for the conscience of the Christian Apostle—for the doctrine of sin, as it is of interest to a Christian man—that which is moral alone comes into view. The ceremonial part of the law has, in point of fact, lapsed: on what principle it is not here needful to enquire. Sin means the violation of the commandments in which the law is unfolded, the neglect or the transgression of its “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” In particular, or so at least it seems on the first retrospect, it means doing what God in His law has forbidden.

To define sin, however, simply as the violation of the law given by Moses would have carried the Apostle but a little way in his vocation. He had such a conception both of sin and of righteousness as impelled him to preach the gospel to all men, Gentiles as well as Jews. He brought against all the charge that they were under sin (chap. iii. 9). But if sin can only be defined by relation to law, and is, in point of fact, defined for Jews by relation to the Mosaic law, then, in order to put Jews and Gentiles on the same footing as sinners to whom a righteousness of God is essential, Paul must be able in some way to strip law in its Mosaic embodiment of all that is accidental to it; he must be able to generalize the conception of law, and to show that all that is vital in it, everything in virtue of which sin has to be defined in relation to it, has existence among, and validity for, Gentiles as well as Jews. In the Epistle to the Romans this is definitely, though it might seem incidentally, done in various ways.

It is done, for instance, in the passage beginning with chap. i. 19, “That which may be known of God is manifest in them.” Here the Apostle argues that, in the constitution of nature and in man’s relation to it, there is such a revelation of God given as puts man under religious and therefore under moral obligations to God, and renders him inexcusable—we may even say, from the theological stand-

point of the Apostle, was meant to render him inexcusable—if he failed to satisfy these obligations. It is true that the word *law* is not used in this section. But when we are confronted with a revelation of God's eternal power and divinity, binding man to a life of adoring gratitude, and when we see that infidelity to that revelation issues in unutterable moral debasement, how else can we describe the conditions under which men live than by saying that they live under law? True, it is not the Mosaic law. It is not an institution or a code. But it is a Divine law, and the Mosaic law can be no more. It connects the life of men as effectively as the Mosaic law with responsibility to God. It produces as surely in the conscience the conviction that they who live in wanton defiance of it are unworthy to live at all (i. 32). Hence the Gentile understands as well as the Jew that the wages of sin is death. This is no survival of primitive mythology, but a spontaneous and universally intelligible expression of the one truth on which all morality rests. The man who is not good—the man whose being does not respond to the revelation of God and fulfil the law involved in that revelation—has no right to *be*. But I repeat, to say this is to say that Law is real for all men.

It is a more explicit generalizing of the idea of law which we find in chap. ii. 14 ff. : "When Gentiles who have not law (or the law) do by nature the things of the law, these having not the law are a law to themselves," etc. An attempt is made by Feine, in his treatise *Das gesetzesfreie Evangelium des Paulus*, to show that this passage can only refer to Gentile Christians, who are a law to themselves because they have received the Spirit of Christ, in which the law is sublimated and made more potent than the flesh; but both *φύσει* in v. 14 and *κατηγορούντων* in v. 15 are inconsistent with such an idea. The Jew rested on his Law, and the point of this passage is that what the law ought to have produced among the Jews and did not was

sometimes produced among the Gentiles, where the law of the Jews had never been heard of. The only possible explanation of this is that the law must have some other mode of being besides that with which the Jew was familiar. It must be written elsewhere as well as on the tables of stone or the parchments of the scribes. It must speak from other shrines as well as from the ark or from the cloud on Sinai. It must, in a word, belong to Nature, as well as to history: it must be universal as well as national. This is what Paul is explaining here. There are Gentiles who do "by nature" the things of the (Jewish) law. They have "the work which the law prescribes written on their hearts." They have a conscience which passes judgment on their actions—a conscience which assents to the law of God. Their life is full of moral exercises; their thoughts bring accusations against each other, or make defences. Paul cannot interpret the phenomena of Gentile any more than of Jewish life without subsuming it under the category of Law; but in the very act of doing so, Law loses its limited, Jewish, historical character; it becomes a conception of universal import.

It may also be said that the passage at the end of chap. ii., in which Paul distinguishes the Jew outwardly from the Jew inwardly, rests upon this enlarging and spiritualizing of the conception of Law. The Jew inwardly is in truth a person to whom that which is simply Jewish in the law has no longer importance; it is not its historical but its eternal content, not its national but its divine and human significance, which has justice done to it in his life. The same justice, however, may be done to it in the life of the Gentile: and accordingly, so far from Law being that which separates the Gentile from the Jew, it is, in this its true and abiding meaning, the ground on which Jew and Gentile meet. All men without distinction have such a revelation of God as implies moral obligations toward Him—that is,

all are under law. All men, also, have failed to meet these obligations—that is, all are under sin. It is from the last proposition St. Paul starts, and it is in working out its presuppositions that he attains to the universal conception of law.

Nothing is of greater importance for the understanding of the Apostle's theology than a correct estimate of this conception. It underlies all his thinking. The moral world would be to him an unintelligible and incoherent place without it; to be more accurate, there could be no moral world without it at all. To banish this generalized conception of law from the relations of God and man is to make religion and morality impossible together. This truth is often overlooked, and the doctrine of the Apostle, in consequence, misrepresented or misread. It is asserted that Paul inherited from Pharisaism a certain legal conception of the relations of God and man, a conception essentially false, and that, though he rose above this conception in his spiritual experience, he was never able dialectically to transcend it in his thoughts. In his theologizing, it is said, he always starts from a forensic and judicial basis. It is this leaven of Pharisaism which puts out the maturer Christian at every turn. It is this which necessitates the peculiar Pauline theory of the atonement—a theory which is but an unreal answer to a question which would never have arisen if Paul had started in his thinking with a Christian instead of a Pharisaic idea of the relations of man and God.

I venture to say that this whole line of thought is both unjust to the Apostle and untrue in itself. It is unjust to the Apostle, for it has been shown above that the historical Jewish conception of the law was not that on which his theology was based. That conception, in the form it had assumed in the Rabbinical schools, might fairly be said to represent the relations of God and man as "forensic."

The case between them could be stated in terms of statute, and decision given by reference to the code. But Paul, we have seen, had clearly transcended this conception even intellectually. He had been able to generalize the idea of law as something determining the relations of man and God universally, something without which the moral life of man cannot be construed at all. But in this generalized sense law is not open to be characterized by those invidious epithets with which we are so familiar. It is not "forensic," it is not "judicial," it is not even "legal." These question-begging epithets, as Bentham calls them, are irrelevant to it. It is universal, it is human, it is divine. As the form in which the will of God presents itself to the consciousness of man, it has an inevitable, searching, individualizing power of self-application to persons and circumstances to which there is nothing analogous in the "judicial" or "forensic" sphere. As the moral obligation to which man's consciousness bears witness in the presence of God, it is free from that element of the arbitrary and conventional which attaches to the noblest statutes and institutes of man. It is quite unreal to contrast *legal*, as is habitually done, with *personal*, and to say that the relations of God and man are personal, not legal. It is true they are not "legal" in the question-begging sense referred to above, but they are at once personal and determined by law. Apart from their determination by law, which introduces into personal relations a universal element, these relations would be a mere caprice, having no moral meaning or value. It is the determination of the personal by something having universal significance—the combination, in other words, of personality and law—which constitutes the ethical, and it is this on which St. Paul builds. The relations of God and man are ethical—this is his fundamental truth; they are personal relations which live and move and have their being in eternal law; if it were not so,

nobody could think of them, and it would not be worth while for anybody to speak of them. But because it is so, law in the universal sense to which Paul has raised it in the interpretation of his gospel is something from which we can never escape. It is the permanent element in all religious dispensations, to which justice must always be done. It is the only principle of moral valuation which the Apostle knows. We may exclude from Christianity with the utmost decision all that is legal and Pharisaic, all that is statutory, forensic, judicial, or otherwise opprobrious, but the fact remains that the chief end of Christianity itself is that the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us (chap. viii. 4). It is not robbing God of His freedom or of His grace, it is not exalting an abstraction of our own minds above the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to say that God Himself must in all things do right by this law. He must do right by it even when He works the moral miracle of justifying the ungodly; He must be just Himself in justifying believers in Jesus. And He must do right by it again, and surely will, when He judges men at last according to their works, *i.e.* according to the manner in which they have in their life responded to and satisfied that law in virtue of which their relation to Him is capable of having moral worth.

JAMES DENNEY.