

# Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME XVIII

OCTOBER 1966

No 44

## *JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN ST PAUL*

### *I. Covenant and Law?*

The two important Covenant traditions in the Old Testament were those which were made between Yahweh and Abraham on the one hand, and on the other the one made between Yahweh and Moses. The harmonization of the covenant traditions meant that great emphasis had to be placed on the divine forgiveness, and this becomes the foundation of the New Covenant predicted by Jeremiah. Only this divine forgiveness could harmonize the human breach of the covenant with the divine promise to protect and preserve Israel. It is this forgiveness which is placed at the centre of both Judaism and the New Testament religion. The 'New Covenant' of Christianity continued the tradition of the Abraham-Davidic covenant with its emphasis on the Messiah, son of David. But, as Mendenhall so rightly remarks, "Paul uses the covenant of Abraham to show the temporary validity of the Mosaic covenant, but in spite of this, the basic structure of New Testament religion is actually . . . the continuation of the Mosaic religion."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, both traditions were carried over into the New Testament, even though it would seem that the early Christian reaction, both on the part of Christ and the Apostles, was against that sort of Mosaic legalism which was practised by the Pharisees. Having seen the evil effects of legalism in the Old Testament, we may well ask why was it necessary for Christ and the early Christians still to retain this dangerous tradition.

Mendenhall has remarked in connection with this question in the Old Testament that "in early Israel history, cultus and law were inseparable, and the history of Israelite religion is not the history of the gradual emergence of new theological concepts, but of separation and recombination of these three elements so characteristic of their religion."<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest that something similar has occurred in the New Testament. In the cultic setting the covenant was to receive a new meaning because of its sealing by the blood of Christ; but we will not

<sup>1</sup> "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition", by G. E. Mendenhall, *Bibl. Arch.* Sept., 1954, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

dwell on this aspect as it is a very wide subject and demands more detailed treatment than can be given to it here. The elements of most interest to us here are the historical and the legal which play a big part in the formation of the New Covenant. We see from the study of the Old Testament that the heart of the Law is the relations that are to exist between Yahweh and Israel, and between Israel and the individual.<sup>3</sup> (It is well to note that the law does not merely refer to the commandments given at Mount Sinai but refers to the books of the Old Testament—almost exclusively the Pentateuch—which contain an abundance of laws, developed mostly out of the juridical thought of the Ancient East).

Since the Old Testament conceives these relations as salvific, the Law which lays them down is also held to be the gracious gift of Yahweh and is extolled in hymns (e.g., the long and often puzzling Ps. 119). It was considered illicit to add anything to the Law which had been faithfully preserved, even during the exile, or to omit anything from it, at least from the time when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return from the Babylonian captivity. Therefore it is understandable that the Law—which was synonymous with the will of God—was esteemed above all the holy books of Israel, being preferred to the Prophets and the later writings. Late Judaism develops its own theology of the Torah.

It became the very Wisdom of God, immortal, the glory of Israel, and that which sets her apart from the heathen. On the other hand, he who does not know the Law is lost, and not alone he who disobeys it. There were parties within Judaism who would receive or accept nothing but what was in the Torah, e.g., the Sadducees and Samaritans. Sometimes the extreme legalism, prominent in Judaism during the life of Christ, is identified with Pharisaism. However many scholars are having second thoughts about the Pharisees and the one-sided presentation of their doctrine in the gospels.

It is admitted now that Judaism was deeply enriched by the standards set by the Pharisees, but still they are and must be criticised for their over-emphasis on the legal aspect of religion, which eventually led to a rigid formalism.

Rahner puts this well when he remarks: "In the theological sphere, Pharisaism does not mean hypocrisy or a double standard of morality, but refers primarily to a party of Jews at the time of Christ who were patriotic . . . and morally austere, faithfully observed the Law and had a great reverence for post-biblical tradition (the opposing party were the Sadducees). When the negative features of this party are systematized

<sup>3</sup> For further details see, for example, pages 55-57 of *The Living World of the Old Testament*, by B. W. Anderson.

the result is Pharisaism in the proper sense, which Jesus combats and which occurs in every age as a corruption of all institutional religion: a preoccupation with the externals of religion, zeal for the letter of the law with no understanding of its spirit, the dominance of casuistry in moral theology, above all a righteousness of good works by which man expects, of himself, to establish calculable good relations with God . . . to put God in his debt so that he will have to reward good deeds which are not themselves divine grace."<sup>4</sup> I make no excuse for dwelling so long on the importance of the Law and Jewish attitude to it because of its critical effect in primitive Christianity. It seems to me that the formal concept of the Law in the New Testament is taken over from the Old Testament, but it is expounded by Jesus, who knows himself to be the master of the Law (cf. Mt. 5, 23-48; 7, 12; 22, 34-40). But from the moment when the disciples began to preach the gospel of Christ, conflict between the primitive Church and Judaism was inevitable. Who was better qualified to meet the challenge of the champions of the law than the one-time Pharisee, Paul?

## 2. *The Crisis at Galatia and the Letter to the Romans*

It is well to remember that the primitive Church at Jerusalem was entirely Jewish, and its members continued to live as devout Jews. They not only scrupulously observed the dietary and other prescriptions of the Mosaic Law, but they kept apart from the Gentiles and went regularly to the temple at the hours of prayer and sacrifice. The first indication we have from the Early Church that the gospel message was not to be confined to the Jews comes to us from the long account of Cornelius's conversion in Acts (10-11, 18). Co-ordinated with the angel's advice to Cornelius to send for Simon Peter was the vision that came to Peter in which he was instructed to accept the invitation sent to him. It may seem to us that Peter was extremely hard to convince, but when we recall the age-old tradition of Jewish separatism and also the reluctance of Jesus himself to mingle freely with the Gentiles (Mk. 7, 24-30; Mt. 10, 5), Peter's hesitancy is easy to understand. Both the bizarre nature of the visions (Acts 10, 9-16) and the amount of space devoted to them, serve to point out how crucial the question was of the shift of audience for the gospel from Jew to Gentile. However, at first, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem continued to look upon themselves as the new Israel, the Israel of the last days. Apparently they took for granted that in a short time the whole population would join them. This did not happen. A big persecution took place only five years after Pentecost, and as a result a dispersal followed: some of the Christians went to Samaria and Syria, and others went to Antioch

<sup>4</sup> *Concise Theological Dictionary*, by K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, p. 355.

where for the first time the universality of Christianity—and its freedom from the ethnic and historic limitations of Judaism—was demonstrated. It showed itself to be a new religion, no longer appearing as just another sect within Judaism; hence the new name, “Christians”, which was now to mark them off from both Jews and pagans. Furthermore, away from Jerusalem and the prestigious presence of the Temple, the Church developed her own liturgy; the meal of the new covenant, which renewed the presence of the glorified Christ among his followers, became the focus of the community’s religious life. At Antioch the Christians abandoned any scruples they may have had concerning the observance of the Law and the avoidance of Gentiles: Jew and Greek shared the outward observances of the one Christian life. It was not long before an open conflict on this matter nearly split the Christian community. The crucial problem confronting the community in Antioch—and ultimately the major issue throughout the entire Christian community—was therefore the question of the basis for the admission of Gentiles into the fellowship. This was the big issue concerning which the Council of Jerusalem was convened. Even when it was accepted in principle that the Gospel was to be announced to the Gentiles—as we have seen already in the Cornelius incident—there was still one group at least, called the “Judaizers”, who maintained that in order to be Christians the pagan converts had to be circumcised and taught to observe the ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15: 1, 5). The Hellenist Christians had entered the Christian community by way of Judaism, and the question was now asked: should all converts be expected to meet the requirements for becoming a Jewish proselyte before being admitted to the Christian community? This, then, is the big problem that arose not only at Antioch but in an alarming way in Galatia. What had occurred among the Galatians was that a group of the so called “Judaizers” went around Paul’s territory preaching the necessity for conformity with the full demands of Judaism in order to be received into the Christian community. One has only to read the Epistle to the Galatians to see how violently Paul reacted against these perverters of the gospel message.

He saw immediately that what was involved in this dispute was something which had plagued Judaism in one form or another throughout its long and stormy history. This was the old danger of equating the law with the covenant, thereby making the latter irrelevant and meaningless.<sup>5</sup> But for Paul it did not mean merely the repetition of an old and dangerous heresy; it further implied for him the denial of Christ’s true position. If salvation of the Christian can be achieved by

<sup>5</sup> For a good treatment on this point confer Paul Tremblay, “Towards a Biblical Catechism of the Decalogue”, in *Theology Digest*, Summer 1965, pp. 112-115.

conforming to a number of rigid legal standards, then the death and resurrection of Christ would seem to be unnecessary. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, tells them about the crisis that has just developed at Antioch, and how he has denounced Peter publicly for having gone back on the agreement between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles. As Peter's actions in Antioch have demonstrated, he can for a time forget the regulations of the Torah and live in a manner indistinguishable from that of the Gentiles, but when the issue is raised, he insists that Gentile converts must submit themselves to the requirements of the Law. Such a double standard—of strictness when the issue was pressed and of leniency when it was not—is hypocritical. As a result, Paul says Peter and the others stand condemned.

It might be well to mention here that Paul in order to give authority to his teaching, appeals to the Abraham covenant which existed long before the time of Moses. This is where Paul appeals to the historical element in the covenant in order to correct the exaggeration of the legal element. In his reply to the 'Judaizers', Paul says that a man is justified by faith alone—faith in Jesus Christ—just as Abraham had put his faith in God and was justified. We might say, then, that the basic question underlying the whole controversy was: how can a man come into a right relationship with God? McCarthy, commenting on the connection between law and the covenant rightly remarks: "law is not something which earns God's grace, it is rather a result of grace and the definition of one's relationship to God."<sup>6</sup> This has to be borne in mind when we discuss the whole question of justification in Paul, because he challenges the Judaizers by asking them how they came into the right relationship with God in which they now know themselves to stand. The best way Paul saw to express this relationship, so as to carry weight with his audience, was to show how the covenant relationship was first made with Abraham.

It was the common assumption of all schools of Jewish thought that "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in his righteousness all the days of his life" (*Book of Jubilees*). In other words, he 'kept the Law of the Most High' (Sir. 44, 20). At the same time, the Old Testament laid stress on his 'faith'. "But while they recognised the place of 'faith' in religion, as belief in the one God and fidelity to Him," says Dodd, "they were at pains to make it clear that such fidelity could only be expressed in the keeping of the commandments."<sup>7</sup> And to the question of how Abraham could keep the law at the same time, since there was no written law until Moses, the

<sup>6</sup> "Covenant in the Old Testament: The Present State of Enquiry", *CBQ*, July, 1965, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, by C. H. Dodd, p. 90.

reply was given that he kept it in anticipation. But Paul attacks this attitude as contrary to Scripture, which says: "Abraham believed God, and this was counted righteousness in him" (Gen. 15, 6; Rom. 4, 3). In other words, Paul stresses that belief in God was the means of his justification, and not any adherence to external or written laws. Further, the stress on the Abraham covenant had the added advantage, for Paul, of counteracting the stress of the Judaizers on the need for circumcision. Since Abraham was justified through faith in God and not through carrying out external laws, then circumcision cannot have been the means of justification. For, says Paul, the promise to Abraham, and the faith by which he accepted it, are recorded in Genesis 15, while his circumcision is in Genesis 17. At the moment he was counted righteous, he was uncircumcised. Dodd points out that the "early-prophetic stories of Abraham know nothing of his circumcision, which is mentioned only in the late priestly document."<sup>8</sup> Paul's aims in the epistle to the Galatians and the doctrine outlined more fully in his later epistle to the Romans may be summed up thus: "In the circumstances, circumcision and the Mosaic law must be discredited at all costs, and so his vituperative rhetoric is aimed at them with all the force he can muster. There can be no more powerful weapon than the Old Testament itself, for the prophets had constantly upbraided the Israelites for their complacency in the observing of the law whilst all the time they were displeasing to God. Texts had already been gathered for this purpose before Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, and his extensive use of them there is to some extent dictated by this Christian practice. Paul's vehemence is demanded by the circumstances, and if we forget this and fail to take into consideration his rhetorical style, we shall misunderstand his remarks about circumcision, the law, and by implication, the meritorious value of good works."<sup>9</sup>

We see here, then, the background to the battle, the weapons to be used, the issues involved and their importance for the survival of Christianity. These same issues and much the same weapons were used to fight another great battle against the background of a changed world in the 16th century, the result of which is still unsettled among a divided Christendom. Hence, the importance of this question, not alone for Paul and the Church of the Reformation, but for us to-day.

### 3. *Justification through Faith*

We have seen from the great controversy outlined above that the central question was: how can man come into a right relationship with God? Or, to put it another way, is a man "justified" by faith or

<sup>8</sup> *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, by C. H. Dodd, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> *The Psalms are Christian Prayer*, by T. Worden, pp. 122-123.

by his adherence to the Law? Paul leaves us in no doubt whatever as to the answer to the question: man is justified by faith alone. But what does Paul mean when he says that a man is justified? This is by no means an easy question to answer because of the ambiguity of the term. In fact, if we examine the notion of the Justice of God in the Old Testament, we find that it can have four different meanings: it could be a divine attribute, a divine gift to man, that by which God punishes sinners and that by which He saves his people (salvific). Which of these meanings does Paul intend in his epistle to the Romans? Fr. Lyonnet says that "it is a justice which we call 'salvific' by which God justifies man in virtue of the promises He himself made. Hence we have the parallelism between the justice of God and the fidelity of God."<sup>10</sup> Different images were used in the Old Testament to describe this fidelity of God to the covenant He had made with His people and these were in constant use because of the community's need to emphasise and re-express the "loving-kindness" of God (His *hesed*). But this relationship of God with His community takes on a new note when the sin of the nation was seen in all its seriousness as a breach of faith which can never be made good, "as something which destroys the bond of fellowship beyond hope of redemption."<sup>11</sup> The amazing thing for the community was that God still did not withdraw His help and protection because, in fact, He allowed His *hesed* to continue in operation towards the sinner. Therefore, *hesed* became transformed and its place was taken by the word *rahim* (mercy), a spontaneous expression of love, evoked by no kind of obligation. Now one expression of God's covenant-love is His righteousness. Just as the loving-kindness which God desires from His people includes the practice of righteousness, so God shows His favour by doing justice and being righteous. This justice God manifests in the history of his people, but it is not merely a legal type of justice. Eichrodt says that "with an insight of genius, H. Cremer described *sedeq* as a concept of relation referring to an actual relationship between two persons and implying behaviour which corresponds to . . . the claims arising out of such a relationship."<sup>12</sup> It may therefore be said that in the case of God, His justice or righteousness implies the same kind of right conduct which in Israel upholds the law by means of judicial procedure; whereas in the case of Israel, her justice is determined by her position as the covenant people, in virtue of which she can count on the divine assistance in any danger which threatens her position. But the difficulty in Israel's view of the covenant was that they gave more attention to God's maintenance of their

<sup>10</sup> *Introduction to the New Testament*, by A. Robert and A. Feuillet, p. 832.

<sup>11</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, by W. Eichrodt, p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 240.

rights as a covenant people than they did to God's righteousness. As we can see, it is still a very legalistic self-centred view of the covenant, and the prophets reacted against it. They foretold the giving of a new covenant by Yahweh which would consist of righteousness and judgment and these would establish god-like features in the inner life of Israel (e.g., Is. 9, 7; 11, 3-9). Deutero-Isaiah was the first to elevate the concept of God's 'righteousness' to the status of being the key to an understanding of the whole work of salvation. He taught men to see the operation of Yahweh's 'righteousness' in the redemptive acts by which He proposed to restore the covenant people, "and to this end he coupled the concept of 'righteousness' with those of God's covenant loyalty, loving-kindness, and succour."<sup>13</sup> The decisive element of God's righteousness was, therefore, his *gift of salvation*, not alone to Israel but to the whole Gentile world by setting up the covenant response to this by man. The relation of Creator to his creatures is now drawn into the sphere of the covenant. Fr. Lyonnet summarises for us the essential content of the notion of God's justice when he says that it is not so much a question of a "divine attribute as the divine *ACTIVITY* which works the restoration of Israel in vitrue of God's '*emet* (translated in the Septuagint often by *aletheia*) which includes truth, faithfulness, constancy. The concept is essentially positive; it implies a change in Israel's condition, and at the same time affirms the gratuitousness of the divine gift."<sup>14</sup>

We have seen from our study of the Old Testament that the term justice or righteousness is not an easy one to define, and when we come to the New Testament, the Greek word *dikaiosune*, which is used to translate it, is equally complex. As in the Old Testament, we find in the New Testament the purely legal usage on the one hand, and on the other a moral usage. In the Septuagint, *dikaiosune* sometimes translates *sedeqah* (righteousness or justice) and at other times *hesed* (alternatively *eleos*, mercy). Therefore in the work of salvation, the justice of God was seen in two ways: His justice by which He punishes men for their transgressions (which for Paul is equivalent to His 'anger') and rewards them for fidelity, and His mercy by which He spares sinners. Salvation in the bible presupposes the termination of the divine anger (Mich. 7, 7-9; Ps. 85, 4-6). Therefore, for Paul God's anger is revealed in the very sin of man and its consequences (Rom. 1, 18 ff); but God's justice is revealed in Christ who effects our salvation by his death and resurrection (Rom. 3, 21 ff). However, Paul's notion of God's 'justice' does not allow us to eliminate the notion of God's 'anger'—as we see when he deals with this question in Rom. 3, 5, and 3, 9-11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 246.

<sup>14</sup> *Introduction to the New Testament*, by A. Robert and A. Feuillet, p. 834.

The adversaries of Paul, according to Lyonnet, "tried to eliminate the notion of God's anger because of God's justice; they imagined themselves protected against God's judgement (Rom. 2, 3), and his anger (Rom. 3, 5-6), because they were the object of his salvific justice by virtue of their election and the promises made unconditionally to the people of Israel. God's anger was reserved for the heathen."<sup>15</sup> Here, then, was the centre of the whole controversy: Can a man come into right relationship with God (i.e., be justified) by carrying out the law? Or is man justified through faith alone without the law? For Paul, as well as for the Judaizers, the Law reveals God's will (Rom. 2, 27 and 7), but the Law was given because of sin (Gal. 3, 19) and was therefore only our pedagogue until Christ should come (Gal. 3). However, when we look on the law as a means of salvation, it is a curse: salvation is not to be gained by human efforts and the observance of the letter, but comes only from the grace of God (Rom. 3 and 4) which is given in Jesus Christ. In the cross of Christ and in Baptism as a dying with Christ, we are delivered from the law (Rom. 6, 1-6; Gal. 2, 19). The Judaizers by stressing the law as a means of justification were not alone talking about how man could bring about his own salvation but were, in fact, hitting at the very heart of Christian belief, namely, that justification has come to us through the death and resurrection of Christ.

If men could be saved through the law, Christ would seem to be an unnecessary addition. Hence Paul's volcanic eruption concerned the very foundation or basis of the Christian faith. Here is a brief excerpt from his epistle to the Romans which was written in his more tranquil moments and it shows how Paul saw our justification:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested *APART FROM THE LAW*, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through *FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST* for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are *JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS A GIFT*, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by *FAITH.*" (Rom. 3, 21-25).

We have seen already how Paul uses the Abraham covenant to show how a man is justified by *FAITH* alone and the reason why he uses it can be seen now to its fullest extent from the doctrine outlined in the above passage. But the question then arises: is the law useless and unworthy of honour? While Paul puts a very one-sided case for justification through faith, he nevertheless admits the law is holy (Rom. 7, 12).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 835.

Dodd remarks on this point that "Jesus himself had insisted on the continuity of his own work with that of the prophets, and had deliberately set the prophetic conception of religion over against the Pharisaic, and in this Paul follows him."<sup>16</sup> There was, therefore, in the prophets, in the Psalms, and even embedded in the Pentateuch itself, a conception of God in His relation to men which goes far beyond the merely legal conceptions of orthodox Judaism of Paul's time, and is in the most real sense the direct antecedent of Christianity. (This is a striking reminder that Paul's doctrine is not something concocted by his own genius but is, in fact, centred on Christ's understanding of the Old Testament revelation. This is no attempt to belittle Paul's ingenuity in presenting the Christian message, but is only a reminder of how orthodox his message was—a claim in which he took great pride—and how deep his understanding of the Old Testament was.) We see from an examination of the Old Testament that the prophets stressed the need for personal renewal and response to God as opposed to the purely juridical notion which had turned religion into a mere formalism.<sup>17</sup> But for Paul, the Law did not just mean the Mosaic Law from which the Christian was now delivered, but any law whatever, because the Christian was now free from the law. Lyonnet shows this clearly when he says: "The Christian who is led by the Spirit finds himself freed, in Christ, from the law of Moses; he is freed from it not only as the Law of Moses, *BUT AS LAW*."<sup>18</sup> Why is he free from all law? Because if a person has found faith in Christ, then he is no longer governed by a whole series of rules and regulations, he is now led by the Spirit: "If you are led by the spirit, you are not under the Law" (Gal. 5, 13). Salvation is not to be gained by human efforts and the observance of the letter, but comes only from the *GRACE OF GOD* (Rom. 3 and 4) which is given in Jesus Christ.

In the cross of Christ and in Baptism we are delivered from the law, but this stress on the need for faith in Christ as the sole means of justification must not blind us to the fact that 'works' are necessary also. Rahner stresses this fact when he says: "the theological refutation of the idea of the law as a means to salvation must not be interpreted as a denial of the necessity of faith to be realized in every human dimension and therefore to express itself *IN OBEDIENCE AND LOVE (WORKS)*."<sup>19</sup> As a result of man's justification a new creation (2. Cor. 5, 17) comes about, according to Paul, but, as we know, Protestants at the time of the Reformation denied any 'interior' change resulting from

<sup>16</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, by C. H. Dodd, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> See fuller account of this in *Theology of the Old Testament*, by W. Eichrodt, p. 51 ff.

<sup>18</sup> "St Paul: Liberty and Law," by S. Lyonnet, *Theological Digest*, 1963, Spring, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Concise Theological Dictionary*, p. 257.

justification. This seems still deeply embedded in Protestant theology, as can be seen in Bultmann's remark: "As the unity of the divine will is clear, so is the unity of man's existence clear as he moves from the situation under the law to the situation under grace. No break takes place; no magical or mysterious transformation of man in regard to his substance, the basis of his nature, takes place."<sup>20</sup> Bouyer counteracts any such notion when he says: "Without doubt, grace, for St. Paul, however freely given, involves what he calls 'the new creation', the appearance of the 'new man' in us, created in justice and holiness."<sup>21</sup> It might be well to remark that 'extrinsic' justification in an isolated sense is no longer held by many prominent Protestant exegetes. For example, J. Jeremias states clearly: "To isolate the forensic image would lead to a misunderstanding. It would lie in the conclusion that the grace of God given in baptism is merely forensic, that we are dealing with a mere 'as if': God acquits the ungodly and treats him as if he were righteous . . . But justification is forgiveness in the full sense. It is not only a mere covering up of the past. Rather, it is an antedonation of the full salvation; it is a new creation by God's Spirit; it is Christ taking possession of the life already now, already here."<sup>22</sup>

It would be erroneous, therefore, to put all Protestants into the same category as rigid 'extrinsicists' because they are by no means unanimous in their views. The Catholic doctrine holds that justification is the event in which God, by a free act of love, brings man into that new relationship with Him. He does this by giving man a share in the divine nature. According to Rahner, "this happens when God causes the Holy Spirit, to dwell efficaciously in the depths of man's being as the spirit of the adoption of sons (Rom. 8, 15), of freedom (2. Cor. 3, 17) and of holiness, divinizing him, and gives him proof of this new creation . . . through the word of faith and the signs of the sacraments (Baptism)."<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. *The Law and Liberty in St Paul:*

That St Paul found himself the object of latent hostility, or at least of a painful lack of understanding from the very beginning of his missionary activity to his last days, was mainly due to his attitude towards the Law and his preaching of Christian liberty. Paul was unyielding whenever the principle of Christian liberty was at stake. We have seen already the vehemence with which he attacks the heretics who dare to oppose this principle. As a result of our justification we are no longer under the law because now we are led by the Spirit. But does this mean

<sup>20</sup> *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1., by R. Bultmann, pp. 268-69.

<sup>21</sup> *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, by L. Bouyer, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> *The Central Message of the New Testament*, by Joachim Jeremias, pp. 61 and 66.

<sup>23</sup> *Concise Theological Dictionary*, p. 247.

that the Christian is not subject to any law: This is where Paul met with so much trouble and why he encountered so much opposition. In our own time, the Bishop of Woolwich Dr. Robinson, has encountered some violent opposition to his views on law and love: "Phrases like 'the Cambridge antinomians' and 'South Bank religion', with both of which brushes I have the misfortune to be tarred, are further evidence of the slogan-thinking with which the press has fed us this year."<sup>24</sup> To show how very anxious some people are on this question, let me quote from the Bishop of Llandaff on the New Morality in *Honest to God*: "The chapter on the 'New Morality' is particularly disquieting. One feels that a careful study of the troubles that befell St Paul in Corinth, as a result of misunderstanding of his teaching that the following of Christ means freedom from the Law, would be profitable to the Bishop."<sup>25</sup> I quote this to show that the problem we are examining is not one which has no relevance to the present. To-day, as in Paul's day, the battle is raging again between those who see the law as the perfection of the Christian life, and those who see it as an obstacle to true Christian living. One great modern writer who feels the burden laid on him by the law—used here in its widest sense—is led to cry out: "Lord, you have abrogated the Old Law, 'which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.' (Acts 15, 10). But you have established rulers in this world, both temporal and spiritual, and sometimes it seems to me that they have diligently set about patching up all the holes that Your Spirit of freedom has torn in the fence of rules and regulations by His liberating Pentecostal storm."<sup>26</sup> This, therefore, is not a merely academic question, it is one which is intimately tied up with the daily life of every Christian, and unless one knows the true Pauline doctrine—which, of course, is the Christian one—life can be full of unnecessary tensions. These tensions occur in the lives of most thinking Christians because while they admit the truth of their being freed from the law and now led by the Spirit, they find, in practice, that there are a whole series of laws and rules which have to be adhered to if one is to be considered a good Christian. Chapters five, six and seven of the Epistle to the Romans contain the conditions necessary for the Christian to be saved: deliverance from sin, from death, from the flesh, and the final deliverance, from the law. They show that each successive deliverance is secured for the Christian *IN CHRIST*. Then chapter eight begins with a cry of triumph: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus . . . For the *LAW OF THE SPIRIT*, (giving) life in Christ Jesus, has delivered me

<sup>24</sup> *Christian Morals To-day*, by J. A. Robinson, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Honest to God Debate*, by J. A. Robinson and D. L. Edwards, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> *Encounters with Silence*, by K. Rahner, p. 36.

from the law of sin and death." (8, 1-2). So man is delivered from the Law which, according to the incontestable testimony of the Bible, has, in fact, been the instrument of sin and death, by something that St. Paul also calls a law: the law of the life-giving Spirit. The question may here arise: can Christ have been satisfied with substituting for the Law of Moses another code, less complicated perhaps, but of the same nature, which would thereby keep the Christian under legal rule? If this was true, then all that Paul had proposed before this would seem to be contradicted because he had opposed the Law of Moses not to another law, but to GRACE. But Christ has not replaced the unbearable yoke of the law of Sinai with an easy morality. No, the law of the Spirit is radically different from any kind of exterior code of laws because it brings about what no legal code, as such can perform, namely a new, inner source of spiritual energy. But why, then does Paul use the term 'Law' to refer to the spiritual energy rather than the term 'grace' which he uses elsewhere (Rom. 6, 14)? He probably does so because of Jeremiah's prophecy announcing the New Covenant in which he makes reference to the law: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel . . . I will place my Law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (31, 33). The Christian who receives the Holy Spirit as an active force within him, becomes capable of 'walking according to the Spirit', i.e., walking according to what the Old Law, spiritual though it was, demanded in vain. But as Fr. Spicq points out: "The Christian life is a continual tension between the demands of the flesh and the will of God (Spirit), between enslavement to sin and filial love."<sup>27</sup> If this tension still exists then can we really say we are free from the law? Again Rahner's cry voices the disquiet of many: "There are the 2414 paragraphs of the Church's law-book. And even these haven't sufficed: how many *responsa* to inquiries have been added to bring joy to the hearts of the jurists! . . . In order to praise you in the Breviary 'in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs', in order to 'sing and make melody in the heart', I need a road map, a directorium, so intricate and elaborate that it requires a new edition every year! . . . What incredible zeal Your servants and stewards have shown in Your absence, during the long period while You have been away on Your journey into the distant silence of eternity! And yet, according to Your own word, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the seeming contradiction is best answered by an example which Fr. Lyonnet uses.<sup>29</sup> He shows that the Law governing Easter Communion for all the faithful will not affect the Christian led by the

<sup>27</sup> *St Paul and Christian Living*, p. 64, by C. Spicq.

<sup>28</sup> *Encounters with Silence*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>29</sup> "St Paul: Liberty and Law," by S. Lyonnet, *Theology Digest*, Spring, 1963, p. 17.

Spirit because he normally goes once a week or every day on account of that inner need which is felt as a result of the presence of the Spirit. If all Christians were just, there would be no need to restrain them by laws and it is only when this inner need—which is the fruit of the Spirit—no longer makes itself felt that the law is introduced to constrain him and warn him that he is no longer being led by the Spirit. The law, therefore, while it does not affect the Christian led by the Spirit, is there to protect the weakness of every Christian, like an alarm-bell when a robbery takes place.

The thing to remember, however, is that the full liberty of the Christian is not impeded by the continuity of law which is necessary still for those who are imperfect. The whole law is fulfilled in one word according to Paul, "the law of Love" (Gal. 5, 14). "Love is life," says Spicq, "because it springs from within the soul. It does not command; it attracts and quickens." Here we also remember Augustine's remark: 'Love and do what you will.' Charity as understood by the Christian faith is not a love which we might claim as our own independent accomplishment, but rather the love by which God has loved us first, and by which he makes us capable of returning that love to him in Christ. "The secret of the divine plan is, in a word, grace. By the word 'grace', biblical language designates both the prevenient and generous love of God and His completely free gift. When we say that God gives His grace, we understand that He takes the initiative in granting favours. When He shows mercy, it is His goodness pardoning sinners. All His kindnesses are graces because they are granted through His love, which has an inexhaustible capacity for giving."<sup>30</sup> This is where grace must be seen, namely in the context of God's free and prevenient love. Häring develops this beautifully when speaking on the subject: "In this love, which God showers on our hearts through his Holy Spirit, God glorifies himself. He is love. His love is a colloquy between the divine persons, a colloquy which He wishes to share with men. For the Christian, love of God and fellow-men is not simply a means to secure his own happiness. The love which has its source in God is the basis of the dialogue: 'I-Thou-We'. Our fellow-man is essentially included in the love by which God loves us and by which we love Him in return. For it is in one and the same love that God loves you and me, that He loves us, His family, His chosen people."<sup>31</sup> All this brings out very forcibly something that is all too often forgotten in the daily life of the Christian, namely that grace is not a thing. For St. Paul, grace was never seen as a thing because he saw it as God's divine self-

<sup>30</sup> *St Paul and Christian Living*, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> "A Modern Approach to the Ascetical Life", by B. Häring, *Worship*, December, 1965, p. 636.

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN ST PAUL

communication, or as Spicq calls it, 'His relationship of charity and generosity with men.'<sup>32</sup>

The following passage from an article by Fr. Häring<sup>33</sup> may serve as a conclusion.

"To love God means basically also to love his commandments, for his commandments are an expression of his love and guideposts to a perfect love. Growth in love, therefore, involves a constantly more joyous "yes" to the ethical obligations under the unifying principle of love. It is this love which leads man to pray throughout the entire course of life: "How can I repay the Lord for all that he has done for me?" Next to the emphasis on the service-orientated character of the hierarchy and the whole Christian life, there is probably nothing more characteristic of the theology of the Second Vatican Council than this search for synthesis. This synthesis between the celebration of the mystery and one's daily life, between Gospel and law, is crucial to the understanding of Christian morality. By its solemn teaching on the general vocation to sanctity, consisting in love of God and neighbour, the Council has made utterly impossible any disjunction between moral theology and asceticism. Ascetical discipline is not something apart from moral theology; it rather underscores an essential characteristic of moral teaching, namely, the law of growth, the constant need for effort, purification, and self-analysis."

With all this in mind, we must try to walk in the Spirit, as Paul advises us, because we have been freed from the law. The tensions still exist but we have confidence that the God of love who has called us to Himself, to share His life, will overcome.

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<sup>32</sup> *St Paul and Christian Living*, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> "A Modern Approach to the Ascetical Life", by B. Häring, *Worship*, December, 1965, pp. 636-637.