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THE THEOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS.

I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THERE are those to whom the title of this paper will seem to rest on a false assumption. We may speak, they will say, of the theology of Aquinas or Calvin, of the theology of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, because when these great men wrote there was a fairly defined range of subjects constituting the field of theology and inviting their attention. They gave their minds to the whole field; they defined with all the clearness at their command their intellectual and spiritual relation to all the problems it presented, and the result is their theology. But there is nothing like this in the apostolic age, and especially is there nothing like it in St. Paul. It is easy for us to put ourselves in the place of a man like Calvin, who had fifteen centuries of constructive Christian thinking behind him, who had the outlines of his *Institutes* marked out for him in the Creed, and who even in controverting his predecessors was necessarily dependent upon them; it is far harder to put ourselves in the place of St. Paul, a man who in his expositions of what Christianity is had no precedents to go upon, who had never seen a creed, who had no "authorities" either to appeal to or to protest against, and who at every step had to be independent, original, creative. Can it be fair to speak of his "theology" at all when we remember that we have only occasional productions of his pen in our hands? Can it be fair, when we remember that

his mind lived to the very last, and that the Christian life was for him a voyage of discovery in a new world, where unsuspected wonders rose on the horizon every morning? Can it be fair, when we remember that every new challenge from the world revealed to him new resources in the gospel, and that as we catch the pulse of his thought we feel as though the human mind itself were being raised to a higher power? If this is the kind of man Paul was and the kind of intellectual life he led as a Christian, can it be fair to take one of his casual writings—even the Epistle to the Romans—and to speak of its “theology”?

These are serious questions, but they are not to be answered *a priori*. No matter how creative and buoyant the mind may be, there is such a thing as its maturity. It does not cease to learn, but there is a point at which it is formed, so to speak, and ceases to go back upon itself. If it is at all a speculative mind—if it has the instinct in it to think things as a whole and to present their parts in relation to each other—no one can tell beforehand on what occasion it may do so, nor how comprehensively and adequately it may reveal itself in a very narrow compass, and on what may seem a very accidental appeal. It is not assuming anything which can be disputed to say that St. Paul's was pre-eminently a mind of this sort. Great man of action though he was—the expression is Renan's—and able to become all things to all, he never argues the smallest practical question without setting it in the light of ideal ethical principles. It is the same in doctrine. The comprehension of Christianity by the intelligence, the defining of its relations to all else that made up his world, were necessities of existence to him; there is no one of whom it could be said more truly that when you see one idea you see the whole mind and the whole man. There is nothing of the inorganic in his intelligence, no motley, nothing that simply lies there; all his thoughts are living

thoughts, and to realize one is to enter into the living mind. Hence it is possible for him to reveal more in a single document than the objections just referred to would allow. And if we look at the particular document with which we are concerned—the Epistle to the Romans—a *priori* objections to speaking of its “theology” will hardly weigh in our minds. For one thing, it stands at what may be called a provisional terminus in the Apostle’s life. He had five-and-twenty years of Christian and apostolic activity behind him, and his opportunities had been abundant of finding out what the gospel was, how it struck men of different races and antecedents when they first heard it, what was its attractive power and what its offence. He had been compelled to think out the significance of the fundamental Christian facts, and the place of Christianity itself in the providential order of the world. He had been compelled to see a preparation for it in the past of all races and of all men. He had been compelled to face the agonizing problem presented by the rejection of God’s glad tidings by God’s chosen people. But through all conflicts of thought and passion he had come into a great peace; and that peace, which rests on the Epistle to the Romans like sunlight on the sea, is itself an indication that we are getting into contact with the whole and unperturbed mind of the man. The gospel is presented here, if we will, in contrast with another religion; but except in chap. xvi. 17–20 (which probably belongs to a different epistle), there is nothing here about the dogs, the bad workers, the concision, the false apostles, the subverters of whom he speaks so bitterly in Galatians v. We move in a clear, calm air, and see far and wide. And not only does the place of the Epistle in St. Paul’s life justify us in finding in it what may fairly be called a theology; the purpose for which it was written does the same. It was meant to introduce St. Paul and his gospel to a Church to which he was yet a

stranger—a Church which, as he foresaw, was to be the most important in the world, and in which he was naturally anxious to have firm footing, as it was the indispensable base of apostolic work in the West. We do not know whether St. Paul's gospel had been previously misrepresented to this Church, or whether it was likely to be so; but he purposely writes them such a letter as shall put them in possession of his conception of Christianity as a whole. Whoever has mastered it knows St. Paul's gospel. But in the apostolic age, gospel and theology closely correspond. St. Paul's theology is not something which anybody can separate from his gospel; it is his gospel itself as his mind grasped it. The theology of Romans has always been the theology of the evangelist, and the very points at which the student thinks it hard to understand St. Paul are those at which the evangelist knows it is impossible to misunderstand him. Further, the Epistle to the Romans is unquestionably systematic in a sense in which no other book of the New Testament is. It contains what is so rare in Scripture, so unnatural apparently to the Semitic mind, a train of thought. There is a definite plan and structure in it, and one thing leads on to another till the argument is complete. And to allude to one point more, of an external sort, the circulation of the Epistle is not without significance as a mark of its systematic or theological character. A purely occasional letter would naturally be sent to that Church only whose circumstances evoked it. But the various terminations of the Epistle to the Romans afford as clear a proof as circumstantial evidence can yield—a proof supported by the various readings in chap. i. *vv.* 7 and 15—that this Epistle was treated as a circular letter by the Apostle himself. The natural explanation of this is that he felt it to possess some kind of universal significance; it was a representation of his mind on the whole subject of the Christian religion, the relevance of which was not

limited to the special circumstances of a given community. Now this is as near as we can get in a creative age and a creative mind to what is now called a "theology."

In regard to every genuine theology, that is, to every theology which is not the mere reproduction or modification of a tradition, but springs out of intellectual and spiritual necessities which require *bona-fide* satisfaction, certain preliminary questions have to be asked. The chief of these concern the materials at the theologian's disposal, the categories he can use for their arrangement and interpretation, and the impulse or challenge in response to which he theologizes. These questions may be asked in regard to Calvin or to Ritschl, and it is no less necessary to ask them in regard to St. Paul.

(a) As for the materials of his theology, they consisted of his religious experience, pre-Christian as well as Christian. Paul's life fell abruptly into two parts, which he himself often distinguishes as "now" and "then." Yet widely sundered as they were, they were intimately related to each other, and it takes both of them to explain his theology. The pre-Christian Paul had experiences into which we must be able to enter if we would understand Paul the Christian. There is in truth no "past" in the spiritual life; what we call the past lives on into the present, and if it simply ceased to be for us the present itself would be unintelligible. Unlike as Paul's pre-Christian and his Christian experiences were, it was one interest which dominated his life in both stages—the interest in righteousness. He knew, as no man ever knew better, what it is to live a life in which the aspiration after righteousness is perpetually baffled; he knew also, as no man ever knew better, what it is to be made right with God, and to find that God has put within our reach what we could never achieve alone. To use his own language, he knew what it was to live under law, and what it was to live under grace. He knew what it was to have

his whole relation to God determined by law, and what it was to have it determined by Christ. These are the fundamental experiences in relation to which everything he has to say possesses vital significance for himself and abiding value for the Church. Everything that enters into his theology in a living way enters into it through its connexion with these experiences. His thoughts of God and of His earlier revelation of Himself to Israel, his conception of Christ and of the experiences which constitute the Christian, his sense of God's love, his appreciation of God's wisdom, his faith in God's providence, his hope of glory, are all rooted here. It is only when we fail to apprehend this, and treat the most organic mind of the New Testament as if it were a heap of sand, that St. Paul is an ambiguous or baffling writer. No one who writes with his concentration and passion can really be ambiguous or hard to understand; there is but one thing he can mean, even if the attempt to utter it should sometimes miscarry—the thing which is in harmony with the all-controlling experience through which he has become what he is.

It cannot be denied, however, that in using the materials provided by his experience, St. Paul may yield to contrary impulses. Sometimes he is so possessed by the difference between the Christian and the pre-Christian states, between life under grace and life under the law, that he can only define them by contrast with each other. Christianity is all that the earlier religion was not, and is nothing that it was. It is opposed to it as life to death, as justification to condemnation, as freedom to bondage, as the abiding to the transitory glory; in a word, it is nothing less than a new creation, and the Christian is another man in another world. But at other times the thought asserts itself, that in spite of these differences, one man has come through all the experiences with one unchanging interest, the interest in righteousness; and one God, too, has been present in them all, working

toward the gracious end which has at last been reached. Hence it is not enough to define the stages in experience such as Paul's, or the stages in the history of religion which we call the Old and the New Testament, merely by contrast with each other. It is not enough to say that the one is what the other is not, and is not what the other is. True though the contrasts may be, they are not the whole truth; in some sense the early stage must be regarded as a preparation for the later; unsatisfactory and even desperate as it was at the moment, there must be a divine meaning in it, a purpose of God connecting it in a real and not an accidental way with that by which it is to be superseded and annulled. Of this St. Paul was fully conscious, and it is the explanation of the superficial inconsistencies in his treatment of the Old Testament, and of the difficulty which has been felt in understanding these from his own day to ours. On the one hand, he knows that a Jew is not a Christian, the Old Testament is not the New, law is not grace—and in all these negations he is uncompromising; on the other, he feels that the Jew ought to be a Christian, that the New Testament, new as it is, is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets, and that though the law is not grace, yet if there were no law, grace itself could have no meaning. Hence the balance of his thoughts sways according as he emphasizes the essential originality of the gospel, or the essential connexion between the various stages in the history of the true religion, and in the experience of the Christian man. But the key to all this variation of emphasis lies in what St. Paul himself had actually lived through.

(b) It is difficult, if not impossible, to speak *in vacuo* about the categories or forms of thought which a theologian has at command for the interpretation and exposition of his experience. A truly original mind, like that of St. Paul, shows its originality most of all in this direction. It is open to all influences and ideas around it, but the more central

and vital its action, the more certainly will it have a productive power of its own, and the more certainly too will it react on and to some extent transform everything it receives. Many of the great words which are the instruments of St. Paul's mind—words like law and righteousness, or like flesh and spirit—had a currency independent of him. Many of them, indeed, may be said to have had a twofold currency. They circulated among the Rabbinical teachers at whose feet he had sat; they circulated also among Greek and Jewish-Greek philosophers, with whom he may have had relations with which we are not definitely acquainted; many of them had no doubt a popular circulation as well; and in different areas they must have had very different values. How are we to determine the value they had for St. Paul? Are we to find the key to his use of such great conceptions as sin, grace, flesh, spirit, law, righteousness, death, life, in the Old Testament, or in the Rabbinical schools of later Judaism, or in the philosophy of Greece? Without questioning St. Paul's relatedness or indebtedness to any or all of these sources for his mental equipment, it is necessary to assert that in this case the mind which borrows is infinitely more important than that which it appropriates. For an intelligence like St. Paul's to touch is to transmute, to appropriate is to recreate. A dull mind can take over ideas, and manipulate them unchanged, but not a mind like his. Whatever conception he makes use of is used to interpret a vivid experience, and it is there, in the last resort, that its meaning is to be sought. Words like those cited may be Rabbinical or philosophical in other places, but they are not Rabbinical or philosophical in the New Testament. In passing through St. Paul's spirit they have been baptized into Christ; and if we leave this out of account in the interpretation of them, no investigation of their pre-Christian history will save us from misapprehension. Most of us, according to Pascal, live

mentally in furnished lodgings ; the house and the things in it are not our own. But Paul, like Pascal, is one of the magnificent exceptions, and it is to himself, and not to the Rabbis or the philosophers, we must come at last if we want to know what anything in the house means, or what it is worth.

(c) Experience supplies the materials for theologizing ; the mind receives or creates the intellectual instruments it requires ; but what of the impulse ? Why should any man theologize at all ? It is practically certain that, except in response to some challenge or compulsion from without, no one does. In other words, the motive to theologize is always in some sense apologetic. The new spiritual life is summoned to explain and vindicate itself to that which already holds the ground : it may be to an earlier or a lower form of religion, it may be to some conception of the world which makes all religion impossible. The task of theology at the present day, for instance, is to vindicate a Christian conception of the world against the sheer negations of a naturalistic one, whether it figure as materialism or idealism. In other words, the challenge comes from what theology describes as unbelief. At the Reformation, again, it was otherwise. The new evangelical life was challenged by the Latin Church, in which, under the name of Christianity, a type of religion was perpetuated which was essentially pre-Christian or infra-Christian ; a type which, as it was an obdurate relapse from Christianity, might legitimately be called anti-Christian. It is in relation to this that Reformation theology is defined, and but for the challenge from this quarter it is impossible to tell what form it might have assumed.

It was the same from the beginning. All the theologies of the New Testament are apologetic, and the variety in them, so far from proving that there is any incoherence or want of clear self-consciousness in Christianity, only

proves the magnificent courage and sufficiency with which it answered every kind of challenge. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, we see Christianity vindicating itself in relation to the religion of the Temple. That religion, for Jews, may be said to have held the field; it rested on the authority of God, and it had a *prima facie* right to demand explanations from the new religion which was treating it as a thing waxing old and ready to vanish away. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the explanations are frankly given. The new is defined in relation to the old, conceived as a way of worshipping God, and its superiority at every point is asserted. "The law made nothing perfect"; it did not bring anything in religion to the ideal goal; but Christ, "by His one offering, has perfected for ever" the people of God; the true religion is realized and guaranteed in Him as He appears in the presence of God on our behalf. Therefore "in Him the shadows of the law are all fulfilled and now withdraw." We see a still more striking instance of this theologizing in response to a summons in the great theological passage of the New Testament, the prologue to St. John. Here Christian experience is challenged, not merely by the old religion, but by the philosophy (which means, by the science and the morality) of the pagan world. And it is not afraid to meet the challenge. It defines itself as frankly, and with as simple a sense of its own triumphant inclusive superiority, in relation to the universe and to humanity with all its achievements, as it had assumed in relation to the religion of Israel. Platonic and Stoic philosophers spoke of a Logos, a word or reason, which was the divine ideal of the world, the divine law or presence in it, the source of its rationality and of all the light and goodness it displayed. There is nothing in the history of the human mind like the courage with which the Evangelist defines the relation of the Christian faith to this sublime conception. He knows that in Christ he has

found the real key to existence, the real Alpha and Omega, the ultimate truth and secret of God. It is in Him that the mystery of nature, of humanity, of history, of revelation, is to find its solution. It is only through Him and in relation to Him that it can all be made intelligible. And so he theologizes in the overwhelming sentences which have dominated Christian intelligence ever since. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through Him. . . . In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. . . . He was the light, the true light that lighteth every man, coming into the world. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." These simple sentences, in which the universe and all that goes on in it are set in relation and in subordination to Christ, are the most comprehensive statement of Christian theology ever made, and they are made in answer to a challenge. They define Christianity in an original and independent way in relation to the world as it existed in the minds of those who surrounded the Evangelist.

To this rule, that theology is a response, St. Paul is no exception. He, too, theologizes in answer to a summons. But the summons does not come to him from the Temple, or from the Logos doctrine of the universe; it comes from the Law. Christianity was everything to him because it meant Righteousness, and hence it was challenged persistently and vehemently by those who thought they had the way of Righteousness without it. In all essentials, St. Paul's theology is a definition of Christianity in relation to, and as a rule in contrast with, legal religion. Sometimes the legal religion is of what we call a ritual type (as in Galatians), though we should remember that the Jew felt a moral obligation to keep the ritual law. Sometimes (as in

Romans) it is of a moral type, and appeals to the ten commandments. In either case, it is by its relation to legalism that Paul has to define Christianity; his theology is his response to this challenge. Nevertheless, in interpreting him, we must remember what has just been said about the action of the mind upon the categories it employs. Even if there be sometimes a sense in which, in his theologizing, Paul becomes a Jew to the Jews that he may win the Jews, he is not a Jew for all that. He is a man in the first place, and a Christian in the long run, and his peculiar vocation as Apostle of the Gentiles depended on his unique capacity for eliminating the accidental and fixing the universal and permanent—that is, the human—elements in Jewish experience. To an earnest spirit, as St. Paul well knew, the net result of legal religion, in the Jewish form in which it challenged Christianity, was a hopeless and paralyzing sense of guilt; but this is not an exclusively Jewish experience; there is nothing in the world with which human nature is so familiar. Hence St. Paul's theology is not only the vindication of Christianity as against Judaism, though it was from Judaism the challenge came; it is a proclamation of Christianity as the Divine response to the spiritual need and despair of the whole race. That is why we still read St. Paul and understand him. That is why his theology is not an antiquarian puzzle, or the solution of problems which can have no interest for us, but, like the words of Jesus, a word of eternal life, in the inspiration of which we can speak to men when they cry, "What must I do to be saved?"

It is from this point we must start in the exposition of the Apostle's mind in the Epistle to the Romans. His central idea, the sum and substance of his gospel, *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*, is not to be understood by itself; it can only be understood in its relations to all the ideas which make one intellectual whole with it. The order of thought in

the Epistle itself invites us first to investigate its negative presupposition, the necessity for it in the universal prevalence of sin. Sin, again, is only one in a complex of Pauline ideas ; and if we would have the whole thought of it present to our minds as it was to the mind of the Apostle, we must define it by relation to Law, to Wrath, to Death, to Flesh, to Adam. Only when we have some adequate conception of the problem presented by sin thus defined—a problem, as Dr. Chalmers used to say, “ fit for a God ”—do we see the conditions which the *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* has to satisfy. From this the Apostle proceeds to the actual manifestation of this *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*, the setting forth of it, the putting of it within man’s reach, in the death of Christ. The death of Christ itself, it is not too much to say, must be defined in all those relations in which sin is defined ; it would not, as the revelation of God’s righteousness, meet the problem of sin as Paul himself has stated it, unless, like sin, it could be defined in relation to the Law, to Death, and to the Flesh, as well as to the love of God. From the manifestation of God’s righteousness we proceed to its appropriation and realization ; in other words, to St. Paul’s doctrine of faith and of the new Christian life. At this point many interpreters charge the Apostle with a certain incoherence or want of sequence and continuity in his thoughts. Some find that he supplements a juridical construction of Christianity, which he cannot get under weigh, with a mystical one, which is really independent of it, and should be put in its place instead of being used to make good its defects ; others, that he finds in the supernatural efficacy of the sacrament of baptism that initiation of the new life which is still to seek. I hope to show that there is no such *hiatus* in the Apostle’s intelligence, and that his real mind is both simpler and more profound than these criticisms would suggest. There have been doctrines of justification taught, so utterly out of relation to experi-

ence, that they either led to an entire indifference to the new life, or could only ascribe its appearance to some magical rite; but such doctrines find no support in the Epistle to the Romans. With the doctrine of the new life, including of course the earnest of the Spirit and the assured outlook to glory, the theology of the Epistle in the ordinary sense terminates. But the Apostle does not lay down his pen till he has vindicated the ways of God to men in face of the disconcerting historical fact that the mass of God's own people refused to submit to the revelation of His righteousness; and for him, at least, in the circumstances of the time, nothing was more essential in his theology than the daring argument of chaps. ix.-xi. The applied Christianity of the later chapters lies less in the theological field.

JAMES DENNEY.

NAZARETH AND BETHLEHEM IN PROPHECY.

THE very name of the fulfilment of prophecy has been brought into contempt by reason of the mistaken way in which the subject has been handled. Good people have erred herein in the most unfortunate manner, looking for such "fulfilments" as do not in fact exist,—or, if they do, are of very little value,—and ignoring such as do exist, and are often of superlative worth and beauty. That the Holy Ghost spake by the Prophets, they have been forward to acknowledge; but in their interpretations they have made Him speak so feebly and foolishly that men have turned their ears away and desired to hear no more. However well intended the conventional treatment of this subject may have been, it is certain (from its actual results) that it has run on altogether false lines.

A typical instance of such mistaken treatment may be