

Studies in Romans.

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

I.—THE PURPOSE.

WHY did St. Paul write the Epistle to the Romans? It was not to a Church of his own founding, nor was it to a place with which he was personally acquainted. The Christians there were possessed of a quite definite spiritual experience (chap. xv. 14), who might therefore be thought to be independent of his teaching, and yet it is to such a Church that he sends his most elaborate Epistle.

The variety of views among even the ablest commentators on this subject of the purpose of the Epistle is striking and perplexing. Some think that the purpose was polemic, in view of the Apostle's recent controversies with the Judaisers. Others are of opinion that he had an apologetic aim, endeavouring to vindicate his position, and to obtain the support of the Church of Rome. Others, again, consider that the main object of the Epistle was didactic without any personal or polemical object. Then again, some writers emphasize chaps. i.-viii. as containing the heart of the Epistle, and indicating the Apostle's main and supreme purpose. Others, however, lay stress on chaps. ix.-xi. as revealing the very core of this great writing. Amid these conflicting opinions we may almost despair of arriving at a proper conclusion, and yet we will again make the attempt to discover the purpose of St. Paul in writing one of the most important of his Epistles.

The Apostle at the time of writing Romans was just closing his work in Asia Minor, and the time seemed to have come to review and discuss the general position in view of his completed tasks and the circumstances awaiting him in Jerusalem. He was naturally, and rightly, desirous of winning the sympathy of the Roman Christians for his Gospel, and for his plans in furtherance of it. He wished to obtain their support for the

further operations contemplated by him, and so he writes this comprehensive letter, stating fully his position. It is scarcely possible to omit the further consideration that he evidently looked forward to serious difficulties, and even dangers, in Jerusalem, and that this might therefore easily be his last Epistle.

One crisis in his strenuous life was over, but another was now upon him. The problem of the Gentile reception of the Gospel had necessarily forced the doctrine of Justification into prominence, and that had been definitely settled in connection with the Churches of Galatia, but now Jewish unbelief was becoming specially prominent. The relation of the Gospel to the Jews and the Gentiles respectively was pressing upon the Apostle. To the Gentile he had preached a free, full, and universal message, and yet there was the enigma of Jewish unbelief and rejection facing him and his fellow-Christians. How was it that in spite of everything the Jews were still rejecting Jesus Christ? St. Paul could not, and had no wish to, ignore the Jew, and now he takes up the great question of the relation of the Jew to Christ and His salvation. He points out that the Gospel was for the Jew "first," and yet "also to the Greek," and that though the Jew is now outside the Gospel, owing to his rejection of it, there is a future for him which is divinely certain and assured. He desired to show Gentile believers in Rome and elsewhere that his Gospel did not ignore the Jew, but that, on the contrary, it regarded him as either occupying a definite place in the Christian Church, or else as constituting a large unbelieving section outside it. Sanday and Headlam thus clearly and convincingly state the problem which faced the Apostle after his victory over the Judaisers in Galatia :

"This battle had been fought and won ; but it left behind a question which was intellectually more troublesome—a question brought home by the actual effect of the preaching of Christianity, very largely welcomed and eagerly embraced by Gentiles, but as a rule spurned and rejected by the Jews—how it could be that Israel, the chosen recipient of the promises of the Old Testament, should be excluded from the benefit now that those

promises came to be fulfilled. Clearly this question belongs to the later reflective stage of the controversy relating to Jew and Gentile. The active contending for Gentile liberties would come first; the philosophic or theological assignment of the due place of Jew and Gentile in the Divine scheme would naturally come afterwards. This more advanced stage has now been reached. The Apostle has made up his mind on the whole series of questions at issue, and he takes the opportunity of writing to the Romans at the very centre of the Empire to lay down calmly and deliberately the conclusions to which he has come" (Introduction to "Romans," p. xliii).

In view of these important considerations, it will be readily seen that chaps. ix.-xi., which deal specially with the subject of the Jew, are an integral and necessary part of the Epistle, and in our judgment no view of the Apostle's purpose in writing Romans can possibly be right which ignores or minimizes the importance of this section, which is essential to the true understanding of his attitude. In some respects the closing verses of chap. xi. are the culminating part of the Epistle. God's attitude to the two divisions of mankind, Jew and Gentile, is there stated with special reference to the future salvation of both. Indeed, the entire Epistle is full of "the Jewish question," as may be seen from the earliest reference in chap. i. 2, and a careful study of the allusions in chaps. ii., iii., iv., xiv. and xv.

The peculiar position of the Apostle at the time of writing, as he reviews the past and anticipates the future, enables us to understand the absence of controversy in this Epistle, as well as the conciliatory attitude, and the didactic and apologetic elements which are all found combined herein. Both of the great doctrinal sections, chaps. i.-viii. and ix.-xi., are absolutely essential to the full understanding of the Apostle's purpose, and there is no necessary contradiction between the various elements of the apologetic and didactic which are found in Romans, for, as Dr. Denney well says, these are not by any means mutually exclusive. Dr. Barmby ("Pulpit Commentary," p. 10) rightly remarks that this Epistle is

"In its ultimate drift a setting forth of what we may call the philosophy of the Gospel, showing how it meets human needs and satisfies human yearnings, and is the true solution of the problems of existence, and the remedy for the present mystery of sin. And so it is meant for philosophers

as well as for simple souls ; and it is sent, therefore, in the first place to Rome, in the hope that it may reach even the most cultured there, and through them commend itself to earnest thinkers generally."

Dr. Elder Cumming some years ago (*Life of Faith*, Sept. 19, 1894) made a suggestive contribution to the consideration of the purpose of Romans. He thought that we have in it the record of the personal mental history of the Apostle, in which, after his conversion, he worked his way from the old Jewish standpoint to his standpoint under the Gospel. In writing he takes himself as a representative of all his fellow-countrymen who had accepted Christ, and, putting his own process of thought into general terms, makes it applicable to all. As he went along, working from principle to principle in his own case, he discovered that the Gentiles also had had to face the same problems, and go through with necessary modifications the same process. Hence, Dr. Cumming argues, the entire Epistle bristles with personal allusions which we can read between the lines, and for the same reason the Apostle is never really out of sight of Jewish questions. And so, as the light into which he himself came was clear and cloudless, he endeavours to lead all his readers into the same. Dr. Cumming points out that it is not without weight that in the closing chapter we have more information given about the family and relatives of St. Paul than in all other places put together. In Rome itself there were three kinsmen, who had been converted to Christ while he himself was still a persecutor (vers. 7, 11), and in Corinth there were three other kinsmen who joined him in greeting relatives and others in Rome. So the man Paul "really pervades the whole Epistle ; going back over the road he once trod so slowly and carefully, and taking us with him as our guide."

We believe that this suggestion is a very fruitful one, and may well prove the unifying factor which will bring together the various elements in the Epistle which, if considered by themselves, do not satisfy all the requirements of the situation. The contents of the Epistle seem to fit this view and to open the door to a number of difficult places, especially the references to

sin, righteousness, union with Christ, the fight with self, and the law; the references to "Abraham our father," and the touching personal mention of Israel and his brethren according to the flesh. When thus considered, we can the more readily understand the fulness and depth of meaning of the Apostle's significant phrase, "My Gospel," for Romans then reveals to us what the Apostle himself had received, what he was proclaiming, and what he wished to commend to Jew and Gentile everywhere as "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."



A Seventeenth-Century Irreconcilable.

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A RECENT number of THE CHURCHMAN contained an interesting sketch of the character and career of the saintly Archbishop Leighton. A short account of the Archbishop's father, though less edifying, may be no less interesting to the readers of the magazine.

In Alexander Leighton, the writer of "Sion's Plea against the Prelacy," we have a notable specimen of the Puritan controversialist. A Scotchman by birth, a Presbyterian by education and conviction, he was a man of one idea; his energy was directed towards one supreme object. Wholly persuaded that episcopal government is contrary to the Divine will, he set himself to convince his fellow-citizens that the State must inevitably suffer shipwreck, and sink beneath the waters of Divine judgment, unless episcopacy were seized by the strong hand of the law and thrown overboard.

A glance at Leighton's portrait will show to some extent the man he was. Stern, implacable, morose, is the countenance that looks out upon you from a rare print. A massive lower jaw may remind of his great contemporary, the Earl of Strafford, and is suggestive of drastic measures pursued with no unnecessary scruples. A high and narrow forehead, set off by