

*THE THEOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE
ROMANS.*

VII.

THE NEW LIFE AND THE SPIRIT.

THE conception of the Spirit is by far the most difficult thing to master in the theology of St. Paul. Partly this may be due to the fact that the word is sometimes used in a more popular, at others in a more specific, not to say technical sense; partly to its meaning being determined, here by Old Testament associations, there by the ecstatic accompaniments of primitive Christianity, and yet elsewhere by some Hellenic or semiphilosophic influence; partly to the Spirit's having in one place a physical or hyperphysical mode of manifestation, and in another being purely ethical. But all these difficulties and many others are covered if we say that in St. Paul Spirit is in the last resort coextensive with Christianity. It is one of the ways in which anything and everything Christian can be described—all such things are experiences of a man who is in the Spirit, or who is led by the Spirit, or who walks after the Spirit. To describe them in this way is to describe them by reference to God, or to the Divine power which is their source. Of course God in this case is not conceived abstractly or *in vacuo*; the God whose Spirit is the explanation of all things Christian is the God who has been manifested for our salvation in Christ, and the Spirit to which all that is Christian is due is not an undefined Divine power, it is definitely Christ's Spirit. St. Paul identifies the two, when he says to the Corinthians, The Lord is the Spirit; just as our Lord Himself identifies them, when with reference to the mission of the Comforter, He says, I will not leave you bereaved: I come to you. The difficulty of dealing with St. Paul's mind on this subject is that spirit is not the only term he

uses with this universal scope. Just as everything Christian can be defined in terms of Spirit, when we refer it to God as its source, so everything Christian can be defined in terms of Faith, when it is referred to man's response to God as its condition. It is natural, when we think (as we habitually do) of man's responsibility to God in connexion with the gospel, to put faith in the forefront, and to make the reception of the Spirit depend upon faith, and often St. Paul himself does so. But, on the other hand, it is through the Spirit that the love of God which in Christ crucified makes its appeal to man is shed abroad in our hearts, and to that love faith is only the response. Hence it is hardly real to argue about the relations of faith and the Spirit. They are alternative ways of describing all Christian experiences, according as we regard them as explicable through man's abandonment of himself to God, or through God's gracious and powerful operation on and in man. The only difference, so far as the Epistle to the Romans is concerned, is that Paul gives the primacy to faith in speaking of justification, probably because at the initial stage of Christianity the emphasis has to be laid on the sinner's assuming or refusing to assume, by a free act of his own, the proper relation to God; while a similar primacy is given, when the subsequent life is dealt with, to the Spirit, probably because the dominant consciousness of the believer is that all his experiences now originate in a power which he can only call Divine.

To say that faith and the Spirit are co-extensive terms, each covering the whole area of Christian experience, though looking at it in different relations, is as much as to say that no one could write fully of either without bringing under review all that St. Paul would have acknowledged as Christian. It is not the purpose of this paper to do anything so far reaching, but to examine the subject of the Spirit so far as it is presented in the first eight chapters of Romans.

The one point of supreme importance is, that to St. Paul, as to all early Christians, the Spirit was not a subject of doctrine, but of experience. A doctrine of the Spirit is an anachronism in the New Testament, in a sense in which the doctrine of atonement is not. The apostolic question is not, Do you believe in the Holy Ghost? but, Did you receive the Holy Ghost? To appreciate the experience which the Apostle designates on every occasion on which he uses the word, or indicates that the thought is in his mind, may be difficult, but it is only in so far as we do so that we do anything at all. Of all trivialities which vex the mind of man, few are more distressing than those which are sometimes made to pass muster as a doctrine of the Spirit.

St. Paul first uses the word—in the part of the Epistle which deals with the life of the justified—in chapter v. 5. “The love of God,” he says, “has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us.” The experience here ascribed to the Spirit is that assured triumphant consciousness of God’s love which enables the Christian to glory in tribulations. It is of God that we have such a conviction about God as this; He has wrought it in us by His own Divine power; we could never have attained it otherwise. The love of God referred to, as the Apostle immediately goes on to explain, is the love manifested in Christ’s death for sinners; it is in making this live, and in enabling us to realize that it is ours—actually bestowed by the Father on us—that the Divine power of God reveals its presence in our hearts. The connexion of ideas here is precisely that which we find in our Lord’s own teaching in John (chaps. xiv.–xvi.). There is no ministry of the Spirit outside of Christ. The Spirit does not speak of Himself. His work is witness bearing, and it is in giving the soul the sense of what Christ’s death means for sinners—in other words, by making the atonement live as the Alpha

and Omega of all we mean when we say God—it is by this, and not by any mystical, blankly or vaguely super natural process, that He gives us a Divine assurance of God's love.

It is the experimental character of all St. Paul has to say about the spirit which in all probability explains its absence in chapter v. 12–21. In the famous parallel between Adam and Christ we have a theological interpretation of history on the grandest scale; but though there are points of attachment to experience in it—as in the words “all have sinned” in v. 12; or, “they that receive the abundance of the grace” in v. 17—it is on the whole speculative rather than experimental. The Apostle's intellect is stirred by the vast conceptions of the unity of the race in sin and in redemption, in Adam and in Christ, and it is his own experience, and still more his own hope, as a Christian man, which turns the parallel into a contrast, and annuls the reign of sin in the surpassing glory of the reign of grace; but in spite of this experimental prompting, and this Spirit-born assurance, there is something in this passage which is at least as much philosophical as it is divine, and the want of any reference to the Spirit is not surprising.

It is in proportion the more surprising when we find the Spirit absent throughout chapter vi. It may, indeed, be questioned whether it is absent. Does not the use made of Baptism, it may be asked, in the beginning of that chapter, necessarily involve the introduction of the Spirit? Is not the connexion between baptism and the Spirit normal throughout the New Testament, so that whenever the first is mentioned we are not only entitled but obliged to assume the second? Without questioning this in the least, it must be pointed out that it is not on any such relation between baptism and the Spirit that the Apostle's argument proceeds. As has been explained in a previous paper, he refers to baptism, not because it enables him to bring in the

Spirit, but because it enables him to bring out what is involved in faith. The idea underlying all he says is not that baptism brings the gift of the Spirit and so of a divine life which must expel sin, but that baptism exhibits to the very senses the truth that the faith which is declared in it involves a death to sin, with which continued life in sin is irreconcilable. Paul refrains from speaking of the Spirit in this connexion because in the first instance he is not going to speak of the death to sin from the point of view of Christian privilege, but from that of Christian responsibility. This death to sin is involved in faith, the great free act of surrender, on the part of man, to the sin-bearing love of God in Christ crucified; to take this act seriously, to *live* by faith, faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us—the whole security of Christian morality lies for St. Paul in that. No doubt he could have put this in another light, and explained the Christian's freedom from sin by reference to the Divine Spirit dwelling in him. But that does not prove that we have a right to introduce the Spirit here, where St. Paul does not. It only proves that he has various ways, which have an independence of their own, of interpreting or rendering the same experience. He can be theological, or religious, in a strict sense, and then he speaks of the Spirit; he can be psychological, or ethical, and then he speaks of faith, or love, or even of gratitude. That in which all his thoughts, and all his modes of expression unite, is Christ. Faith and Spirit alike are words which have no meaning but in relation to Him, and He gives what is to all intents and purposes the same meaning to both. The faith which abandons itself to Christ is at the same time a receiving of the Spirit of Christ, or of what to experience is the same thing, Christ in the Spirit; there are not two things here but one, though it can be represented in the two relations which the words Faith and Spirit suggest. Where human re-

sponsibility is to be emphasized, it is naturally faith which is put to the front; where the gracious help of God is the main point, prominence is given to the Spirit. But whether we say faith or Spirit, we say something which derives its whole meaning from Christ. It is He who evokes faith, and who in evoking faith becomes a divine spiritual presence in man.

It is the essential relation of the Spirit to God which probably explains the fact that in almost every passage in which it occurs, in the seventh and eighth chapters of Romans, there is a contrast expressed or implied to some condition or experience which is merely human. It has always to be defined by contrast. It is power as opposed to weakness, freedom as opposed to bondage, adoption as opposed to servitude, holiness as opposed to the flesh of sin, life as opposed to death. The very fact that the Spirit is co-extensive with Christian experience makes vain any attempt to be systematic in the treatment of it within narrow limits; but a survey of the relevant passages in Romans vii. and viii. will serve to bring out those characteristics of Christian experience in which the Apostle was most vividly conscious of the presence and power of God.

The first is chapter vii. 6: we serve in newness of the spirit, not in oldness of the letter. The *καινότης*, newness or freshness, is that which belongs to or is characteristic of the Spirit, and in the experience of the Christian it is due to the Spirit. It is because he possesses the Spirit that the Christian does not find the service of God stale. In his pre-Christian days it was otherwise. When God was represented for him by "the letter," there was no freshness in His service; it sank into the heavy routine of custom, or into a punctilious and scrupulous conformity to law, in which spontaneity, and with it life, was lost. But the Spirit is characterized above everything by moral originality and freshness. Under its influence conscience

becomes not the recorder, nor the avenging angel, nor the worm that never dies, but a kind of *genius*; the moral world becomes all of a sudden vast, real, enchanting. In a higher sense than that of the Psalmist the word comes true, "Thou sendest forth Thy Spirit, they are created, and Thou renewest the face of the ground."

When we consider the contrast in this passage between spirit and letter, it is a little surprising to find St. Paul say in v. 14: We know that *the law is spiritual*. Law and Spirit, we are apt to think, are mutually exclusive terms. The Christian lives in the Spirit, and therefore he is *not* under the law. But with all his disparagement of the law in certain relations or for certain purposes St. Paul never forgets that the law is of God. That is what he means here by calling it *πνευματικός*. It is spiritual in its essence, though not in its form, and hence there can be none but a spiritual fulfilment of it. A creature like man, who is *σάρκινος*—a creature of flesh sold under sin—can make nothing of it. If his vocation is expressed in the law, then his nature stands in no proper proportion to his vocation; the position is one in which he is doomed to endless defeat. The law which is "spiritual" in essence has its spiritual virtue neutralized by the form in which it addresses itself to man. It may be in itself spiritual, but it does not come to him with the power which properly belongs to spirit. Spirit, according to Paul, is essentially life-giving (*ζωοποιούν*): but, as he says elsewhere, no such thing has been given as a law able to give life (*νόμος δυνάμενος ζωοποιήσαι*, Gal. iii. 21). Had there been such a thing, had there been a law which brought along with it the power to fulfil its own requirements—in other words, had there been a law which was "spiritual" in the full sense of the term—righteousness would no doubt have come by it; man would not have been left to fulfil his vocation alone; as it rose before his mind the power of God would have

risen simultaneously in his heart to realize it. But with all his recognition of the fact that the law came from God and enshrined His will, St. Paul had no experience of this kind to connect with it; life under the law, spiritual as he acknowledged the law to be, and delighting in it as he did "after the inner man," had been for him a life of uninterrupted frustration, ending in despair; all his experience of Spirit as the divine power through which the law is accomplished dates from his acquaintance with Christ.

This is the point to which we are brought at the beginning of chapter viii. The Spirit is here described in *v. 2* as "the Spirit of life," or perhaps as "the Spirit of the life in Christ Jesus." This latter way of connecting the words, though it is supported only by a minority of scholars (including Pfeleiderer and Lipsius), seems to me, grammatically speaking, far more Pauline than the other; but in respect of meaning there is no appreciable difference. When Paul says "the Spirit of life," he has in a manner said everything he has to say on the subject. That the life in question is one with Christ's life is involved in all that has already been said about the relations of Christ and the Spirit. "Spirit," standing by itself, is a blank unintelligible form; whatever meaning and content it has in the New Testament must be derived from Christ. If it is to be characterized as "the Spirit of life," because through it life has come to us in divine power (as it had to St. Paul), then whether the very words of the passage connect that life with Christ or not we can only hold that it is the same life in which the Son of God triumphed over sin and death. And the gift of the Spirit means our participation in His triumph. "The law of the Spirit of the life in Christ Jesus set me free from the law of sin and death."

We have seen already that the Spirit is essentially opposed to anything legal; no contrast in St. Paul's mind is sharper than that of *πνεῦμα* and *γράμμα*, spirit and

letter. Yet the Spirit is not antinomian. There is a *law* of the Spirit. It does indeed transcend everything statutory. To its inexhaustible originality in discovering the will of God all legal enactments are inadequate. But it legislates, nevertheless. It lays down at every moment and at every step the proper course of conduct for man to follow. It can do this because of its relation to Christ. It is His Spirit, and the law of His life is inherent in it. Hence there is nothing mystical in the Spirit any more than there is in the Gospels, nothing in it which opens the door to antinomianism or to moral anarchism any more than there is in the history of Jesus. It is so far from the possibility of any such perversion that justice is done to the law by those and by those only who walk after the Spirit. It is in them that the righteous demand of the law is fulfilled. The law, which is spiritual, never gets justice done to it till man becomes the possessor of the Spirit, and then it gets justice done to it, not by any legal exertions of man, not by "works of law" which he achieves, but by the divine impulse of the Spirit which brings his natural impotence to an end, and carries out the mind of Christ in his life. The just demand of the law, as St. Paul finally puts it, is fulfilled *in* those who walk after the Spirit, *in* them, not *by* them. The sense of debt to God, the consciousness that it is to the life and power He has given that this change is due, is conveyed not only by the reference to the Spirit, but by this self-denying choice of the preposition.

It is not necessary to enter here into an examination of the difficult and complicated sentence in chapter viii. 3. Thus much is certain, apart from details: it is the Spirit which does for man what the law could not do, and the Spirit can only be given through the life and through the atoning death of Jesus. In that life and death the dreadful problem of man's sin was effectually dealt with, and it is on the basis of this effectual dealing, or, to use the old expression, it is on

the ground of Christ's finished work that the divine power is given which brings life and righteousness to men. It brings life and righteousness to men just because the virtue of that finished work is in it; separate "spirit" from this, and it is an empty word; you may say what you please of it, for you are dealing with an unknown quantity in an empty space. All the legitimate meaning of spirit lies in Christ and His atonement, and in the experiences begotten through them in believing souls.

The Spirit, throughout the eighth chapter, is contrasted sharply with the flesh. It is as though the two could not be defined at all except by antagonism to each other. Those who are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh; those who are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. The mind of the flesh means death, the mind of the Spirit life and peace. The mind of the flesh means enmity against God; the mind of the Spirit means God's own mind in man. I have explained in a former paper the sense in which "flesh" is to be understood in such passages as these. On the one hand it includes a reference to man's nature, in which there is no special moral emphasis; man as *σὰρξ* is *σάρκινος*, a creature of flesh, a weak and ineffective creature, who has a task before him too great for his powers. On the other hand, it includes a reference to man's nature in which there is a special moral emphasis; man as *σὰρξ* is not only *σάρκινος*, a creature of flesh, but *σαρκικός*, a creature abandoned to the flesh and enslaved by it. "Flesh" not only suggests the inadequacy of his nature to his calling, but at the same time the depravation of his nature through the engrossment and absorption of it all in its lower elements, a depravation by which sin has become virulent and so to speak constitutional in him, so that the disproportion between what he is and what God meant him to be grows continually greater and more desperate. At one point or another, flesh may be used in one or other of these

references mainly, or its meaning may be coloured by the consciousness of both; but over the whole area in which it can be spoken of it is confronted, defeated, and annulled by Spirit. When God comes to us through the Spirit, all that we were without God comes to an end; all that we were striving in vain to become for God is assured of consummation. As against the sinfulness of the flesh, the Spirit is a Divine power which ensures righteousness; as against the death which is all that sinful flesh has to look forward to, the Spirit is the Divine power which brings the earnest of immortality.

To enter into the details by which St. Paul illustrates his faith and experience in this connexion would carry us too far. But it is well worth while to notice the verses (chap. viii. 9-11) in which his whole mind upon the subject is condensed. "You," he says to believers, "are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if, as I assume, the Spirit of God dwells in you." "The Spirit of God" is the simplest description which can be given of the Spirit; it is indeed so simple as to be almost tautological, for the Spirit in experience is nothing but God powerfully and effectively working upon man. But for those who have received the gospel, God is not undefined; He has been revealed in His Son, and "the Spirit of God," as the Apostle proceeds, becomes almost without his noticing it "the Spirit of Christ." "If any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." Nothing could show more clearly than this how the Godhead of Christ, as the Lord and giver of the Spirit—that is, of Divine life and power—was assumed by the Apostle. But at the next turn of the sentence, the Spirit disappears, and we come upon "Christ in you," which is evidently to be taken as precisely the same thing. Of course Christ *can* only be in us through the Spirit, but it is equally important to remember that that which is in us through the Spirit—the Spirit of God—can be nothing but Christ. This Divine

Presence and Power in the soul makes all that is Christ's ours. It does not, indeed, save the body from dying: the doom of sin is not retracted within this area, though it is ultimately reversed. But it is stronger than all the weakness, and than all the badness of human nature. It puts to death the doings of the body. The malignant powers of Sin and Death, which had so long imposed their will on wretched men, are deprived of their sovereignty. The law of God, which is holy and just and good, instead of encountering in human nature nothing but the malignant flesh, which it provoked to greater malignity, or the approving but impotent reason, is borne to its fulfilment on the flood of a new life quickened in the believer by the power of God. If the grave is not shut, it is opened. "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised from the dead Christ Jesus shall make also your mortal bodies live through His Spirit dwelling in you."

The Spirit is connected with immortality, in the Epistle to the Romans, in yet another way. Not only as a spirit of life, or as the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead and gave Him glory, but as the spirit of sonship, it has this forward look. Sonship, or adoption, of course includes far more than this. It is defined at first by contrast with *δουλεία* and *φόβος*, servitude and fear. It is the spirit which breaks out in the loud and joyful cry, unheard from human lips, in the glorious confidence and liberty of the New Testament, till the Spirit of Christ taught it, Abba, Father. But in the filial relation there is an infinite hope, and St. Paul rarely dwells on the one without glancing at the other. "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God; and if children, then heirs." In this sense the Spirit itself is the firstfruits, or the earnest of the inheritance to be revealed. It is not in spite of having it, but because of having it, that Christians sigh in themselves, waiting for the adoption—that is, for

the fulfilment of all it means—even the redemption of the body. The Spirit, in spite of all that is said about its immanence and its essentially ethical character, always represents in St. Paul what we mean by the supernatural. It represents not only what God is as a presence in man, but what God is as a power transcending all that man's experience has yet disclosed. The Spirit is as completely supernatural as the Lord of Glory from whom it comes, and the issue of its indwelling is not only victory over sin, but conformity to the image of the Son. The Spirit is life, and all that is called death is swallowed up in its victory. St. Paul did not and could not make our distinctions between ethical and physical, or ethical and transcendent, or ethical and supernatural, or however otherwise we may phrase them. He did not distribute the working of the Spirit along these as along different lines. For him "spiritual" was a word which had only one synonym—"divine"; and in the Divine will and power, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all such distinctions were transcended. No one can apply them to the manifestation of Christ as that stood present to the mind and faith of St. Paul, and therefore it is equally impossible to use them to any real purpose when we are trying to grasp his conception of the Spirit. Some Christians seem to have the idea that if you ignore heaven you can lay greater stress on holiness; the New Testament does not favour the idea. To St. Paul, at all events, holiness and heaven, the ethical and the transcendent, are one in Christ and in His Spirit; and to an adequate sense of what Christ and His Spirit are—in other words, to an adequate apprehension of the Divine—the mode of being in which Christ now lives and reigns is as real as sanctification; indeed, for St. Paul there is no such thing as sanctification except through a power which is in every sense of the term supernatural. The light of heaven, using the term heaven as a little child uses it, lies on every

particle of genuine Christian morality. And it does so because all such morality is produced by the Spirit of Him who raised up Christ from the dead, and who is making us heirs together with Him.

The last reference to the Spirit in this part of the Epistle is that which connects it with prayer. The new Christian life is a mystery even to him who lives it. There are depths in it which he cannot fathom; he cannot tell whence it comes and whither it goes; sure as he is that it is of God, it brings a vocation and a responsibility with it which exceed his grasp; even when he would commend himself to God for help and guidance he does not know how to begin; his mind will not concentrate itself on anything, and words desert him. This incapacity, which comes with the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit itself relieves. "In like manner the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity; for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Perhaps there may be a reference in these words to the speaking with tongues, when men prayed in the spirit while the understanding was unfruitful; but I can hardly think so. Such speaking with tongues seems to have been usually of an ecstatic or rapturous character, a thanksgiving to which others might say Amen, or a declaration of the mighty works of God; here, on the contrary, we seem to be in a region where there is not indeed less intensity but surely less liberty in utterance. The only passage in Scripture which occurs to me as a parallel to this is the one in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah: "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." The prophecy had its supreme fulfilment in Christ, and it is by reference to Christ that we must interpret all that is said of the Spirit. Through the Spirit, as it is spoken of here, we can see something of what Christ's soul travail means. St. Paul knew himself what it was to enter with measureless passionate

sympathy into the difficulties of the new life in inexperienced souls, who were finding the new life itself the most baffling, unmanageable thing in the world. "My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." It is this same passionate sympathy with the same baffled inexperience, lost in the very wonder and mystery of that divine life into which it is being initiated, that Paul here, out of his own experience, ascribes to the Holy Spirit of God. Is not such sympathy "the love of the Spirit" (chap. xv. 30), by which most surely "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts" (chap. v. 5), so that, as the Apostle goes on immediately to say, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love Him"? It is through an experience of God's presence and power like this—so intimate, so condescending, so sympathetic, yearning so to take care of us when we cannot take care of ourselves, to inspire us when we cannot think, to intercede for us when we cannot pray, to undertake for us when consciousness and will fail—that we catch something of the breadth and length, and depth and height, and of the love which passes knowledge.

JAMES DENNEY.