

ARTICLE II.

DR. LYMAN ABBOTT ON PAUL'S LETTER TO
THE ROMANS.

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THE most notable discussion of Paul's great Epistle to the Roman Christians which has appeared within the past six or eight years is the volume just given to the public by the pastor of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. Not as a philological commentary does it challenge attention, for it does not seem to betray the accurate scientific scholarship which is indispensable to such a work; but it deserves consideration as a suggestive treatment of the most comprehensive and profound letter known to history.

Starting twenty years ago with a conception of Paul's character quite different from the traditional view,—a conception according to which the apostle was an evangelist rather than a philosopher, and a poet rather than a scholastic,—the author now places before us conceptions of the character of God, of man, and of redemption, which also differ noticeably in some respects from the common understanding of Paul's views. It is manifest that he has not done this rashly, but has regarded the letter to the Romans as belonging to that class of literature which Bacon said should be "chewed and digested." Not only so, but the volume comes to us as one, of which the essential views have been presented "practically in sermons

and public addresses, and critically before ministerial gatherings," with this result, that the early impressions of the author have been confirmed and deepened. Thus its claim on our attention is emphasized, and at the same time a certain predisposition is established in favor of the author's results.

Dr. Abbott approaches the study of the Epistle through an appreciative estimate of the man and the life behind it. The hard lines of Paul's mental physiognomy, as they appear through the medium of many of his commentators, are softened. The philosopher's mantle is taken from his shoulders, and in its place we see the plain garb of the civilian. The atmosphere of the scholastic's study is exchanged for that which is warm with the presence of human hearts. The voice which we hear is rich in feeling, the eyes that look upon us are full of sympathy. The intensely evangelistic and practical apostle is recognized again as such. The author has rendered a grateful service in thus bringing forth into prominence a feature of the apostle's character which has often been obscured. It is to be regretted that, in emphasizing this feature, he has suffered another, equally important, to remain unemphasized. Paul was a philosopher as well as an evangelist, a profound and logical thinker as well as a man of imagination. The one fact should no more be ignored than the other.

The author has failed, we think, to give a tenable view of the conversion of Paul. He has adopted the view of Augustine, who said that, if Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul. "The first step," says the author, "in the transformation of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the apostle, was the influence exerted upon him by the martyrdom of Stephen." It is thought that Saul's anger against the Christians was converted into a passion by Stephen's address and death. He became exceedingly mad against them. It is also held that the audacious heroism of Stephen awakened all the better impulses of

Saul's kindred soul when hours of quiet came to him on the way to Damascus. Then "he needed but one striking and startling testimony to turn the trembling scales of his mind, now held almost in equipoise." So great was Stephen's influence over Paul, according to the author, that "much of Paul's theology was suggested by and providentially derived from the last speech of Stephen."

It has been common among rationalistic critics who wished to explain away the miracle at Paul's conversion, to assume that one influence or another had wrought upon him, gradually bringing him into sympathy with the Christian faith, and that little was left to be done on the way to Damascus save to take the last step and declare himself a Christian. No such motive can be attributed to Dr. Abbott; yet the result at which he arrives is essentially the same as that reached by many rationalists. Paul on the way to Damascus, he says in effect, was far along in the way to the Christian faith. "The trembling scales of the mind were held almost in equipoise." There is, therefore, no necessity for a unique and stupendous miracle, such as Luke and Paul describe as having occurred at the conversion of the notorious persecutor of Christians. Indeed, there is no necessity for a miracle at all, in the ordinary sense of that word. If the scales of the mind are almost in equipoise, it needs but a slight pressure to turn them for Christ,—such pressure as a passage of Scripture brought to Jonathan Edwards, and such as a single word or even a look has often given to a human soul. But, if there was no *necessity* of a miracle, there doubtless *was* no miracle. If only a slight pressure was needed, it is inherently improbable that the stupendous phenomenon described in the Acts ever took place. Therefore we are led logically to this result: it is inherently improbable that the book of Acts is a wholly credible historical document. This is the position of the rationalists.

The words of Paul, however, do not point in this direction. On the contrary, they are decidedly opposed to the hypothesis that Paul's conversion began at Stephen's death, and that Paul's theology was derived largely from the last speech of Stephen; for in his letter to the Galatians, Paul affirms that he did not learn his gospel from men, and that he was changed from a persecutor into a believer by the revelation of the Son of God in him. The very nerve of his argument in the first two chapters of that letter is cut if Stephen exerted such a radical influence upon him as Dr. Abbott supposes. And, further, Paul repudiates the view that in his fanatical persecution of the Christians he was struggling against "all the better impulses of his soul." He repudiates the view that his rage against the believers was to silence an accusing conscience. He says in his speech before King Agrippa: "I verily thought with myself that I *ought* to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" and in his first letter to Timothy he declares that he persecuted the Christians ignorantly in unbelief.² All this is decidedly against the view that Paul's madness toward the followers of Jesus was an attempt to fight down a growing conviction of the truth of the Christian faith. This is a fiction, without the slightest basis in the New Testament writings. "All attempts," says Weiss, "to establish the probability of a gradual psychological preparation for the sudden change in Paul's life through the influence of the more liberal tendency of Gamaliel, or through the Scripture proofs of the Nazarenes, or the joyful death of Stephen and other martyrs, are wrecked on the narrative in the first chapter of Galatians." This is the verdict of the latest scientific criticism.

In connection with the conversion of Paul, we may mention the author's position in reference to some things which he regards as consequences of the heavenly vision; not

¹ Acts xxvi. 9.

² 1 Tim. i. 13.

because the matters are very important in themselves, but because they illustrate an unexpected dogmatic tendency in the work. It is said that the apostle never entirely recovered from the physical effects of the heavenly vision. To this vision the author traces "the marks of the Lord Jesus," of which Paul speaks. The thorn in the flesh was an eye trouble caused by that noonday light on the way to Damascus. To it is due the fact that Paul wrote all his letters, with perhaps one exception, by the hand of an amanuensis.

These positive declarations occupy the place where, at the most, simple conjectures should stand. For it is a bare surmise that Paul never recovered from the physical effects of the heavenly vision. The readiness of the Galatians to pluck out their eyes and give them to him is a strong expression of their love, but by no means implies that he suffered from a trouble of the eyes; and, if it did, it would be only a conjecture that this was due to the heavenly vision which he had seen some fifteen years before. It is also a bare surmise, that "the marks of the Lord Jesus" were borne by the apostle upon his eyes. It is a surmise that the thorn in the flesh was any sort of difficulty with his eyes, not to say a difficulty caused by the heavenly vision. Finally, it is another pure surmise, that Paul wrote by the hand of an amanuensis because of bad eyes. The chief reason given by the author why weak eyes should have been a painful thorn in the flesh seems to be, that "the treasures of Greek philosophy would thus have been substantially closed against him." Now we can imagine Paul beseeching the Lord thrice for eyes to look into the face of his Philippian converts, for eyes to direct his way from city to city as he heralded the glad tidings of great joy, or for eyes to read in the Scriptures, which are able to make a man wise unto salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus; but we cannot imagine the evangelist Paul, for whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were contained in Christ, a man

who gloried in the simple word of the cross while the Greeks were seeking after wisdom, a man who knew of no salvation by good works or culture or by any system of human thought—we cannot imagine this man beseeching the Lord thrice for eyes that he might read “the treasures of Greek philosophy.”

Another point of greater importance remains to be noticed before passing to the exposition proper. How did Paul deal with circumcision when he began his work among the Gentiles? The answer is as follows: “He found in the very beginning of his mission this rite standing in the way of his work. The heathen would not submit to circumcision. It was a painful operation; it subjected them to humiliating insults in the public baths to which they were accustomed to resort. They were drawn to the new life to which they were called by Christ, towards the new manifestation of God offered by Christ; but Jews they would not be. Paul therefore abandoned all attempts to make them Jews; he discontinued circumcision. He laid no claim to any direct divine authority; he asked for no ecclesiastical authority; he discontinued it because instead of promoting, it hindered moral and spiritual life. Experience was his teacher; he accepted her teaching as the teaching of God.”

According to this statement Paul, at the outset of his work among the Gentiles, was minded to circumcise them, but soon abandoned his policy because the Gentile converts would not submit to the painful rite. This view the author wishes to be accepted as historical. It is presented in the same tone as the best accredited facts of Paul's life. But our records are uniformly and positively against this remarkable hypothesis. Paul's work among the Gentiles, as far as history has preserved any record of it, began in Antioch, where he labored with Barnabas a year.³ This was about 44 A. D. Some years later certain men came down from Judæa, and taught the brethren in Antioch, saying, “Ex-

³ Acts xi. 26.

cept ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved."⁴ Plainly at this time Gentiles were received into the church at Antioch without being circumcised. And there is not the slightest suggestion that the policy was a new one. There is a strong presumption that it was as old as the church at Antioch ; for, if there had been a change on so important a matter, we might expect some trace of it in our narrative. No such trace is found. The church seems to have been a unit against the doctrine of Judaizers, and Paul and Barnabas were firm in their opposition.⁵ Now if Paul ever altered his policy regarding circumcision it must have been prior to this date, for henceforward, to the end of his life, his view was unchanged, as his letters abundantly prove. The view which he held at the time of the controversy in Antioch, and which he presented to the brethren in Jerusalem a little later, was firmly adhered to by him through his entire career. This admits of no question. But prior to the controversy in Antioch, and after the beginning of Paul's work among the Gentiles, there is no evidence whatsoever that the apostle changed his policy. The hypothesis rests upon air.

The interpretation of the Epistle, to which we now pass, can be considered only in some of its salient points. The righteousness of God, the justification of man, and propitiation are conceptions of fundamental importance in the Epistle to the Romans, as in all of Paul's letters, and we will examine the recent volume with regard to these doctrines. We begin with the righteousness of God. It is truly said that righteousness is a key-word in Paul, and it is inferred that it must therefore always have the same substantial meaning. This inference is hardly a valid one. "Flesh" is also a key-word in the writings of Paul, but it is admitted by commentators that he uses it in at least four distinct and widely different meanings. Law and faith

⁴Acts xv. 1.⁵Acts xv.2.

and redemption are also key-words, but they do not always have the same significance.

For the meaning of righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*) we are directed to Paul himself, not to the Old Testament and not to classical Greek. Now to determine what Paul means by this phrase (righteousness of God), we have, according to the author, simply to look in the gospel. What is there revealed is not a scheme of doctrine, but a living person. The righteousness of God, as Paul uses the term, is the true character of God, as manifested to the world in the person of his Son; a character which "is affluent, out-giving, self-revealing, self-imparting, a character which perpetually comes to seek and to save that which is lost." Paul's idea of the righteousness of God is illustrated, according to the author, by the story of the sinful woman who anointed Christ's feet: his treatment of her shows what is meant by God's righteousness. The author continues: "A righteousness that builds a wall to keep sinners out, the Pharisee could understand; a righteousness that is a gateway through which sinners enter into a new and better life through blessed sympathy he could not understand Paul wrote to the Romans that Christ was set forth to show that God's righteousness is of a kind that forever goes forth to righten the unrighteous; and the great majority of Christian scholars convert this into a declaration that Christ died to enable God to righten the unrighteous, in spite of his own righteousness, which otherwise would not have permitted him to do so."

On this interpretation the following remarks may be made: (1) After declaring that Paul himself must be studied for the meaning of the righteousness of God,—a proposition with which we fully agree,—the author proceeds to pass by Paul's usage, and to set forth what he conceives to be the gospel idea of righteousness. (2) Because the gospel reveals the true character of God, and because Paul declares that the righteousness of God is re-

vealed in the gospel, the author infers that the righteousness of God is the true character of God. By this sort of reasoning well-nigh anything can be proved. But what is to be said of the conclusion itself? The righteousness of God is the true character of God. On asking, What is meant by "true character"? the answer is in such terms and figures as these: It is that which perpetually comes to seek and to save the lost; it is that which impels God toward sinful men; it is that which we see in the shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine and seeks the one lost sheep, and in the father who goes forth with gladness to welcome the prodigal son; it is a gateway through which sinners enter into a new and better life. It is noticeable, in the first place, that the passages in the Gospel narrative to which the author refers in these statements do not contain the word righteousness which is to be defined. They do not claim to illustrate the righteousness of God. Probably the great majority of readers regard them as setting forth God's love. One can hardly resist the impression that the true character of God is, in the thought of the author, the love of God, and that he consequently identifies the love of God and the righteousness of God. But this would surely be arbitrary and unbiblical. When Paul means love it is presumable that he says love, and to insert love where he says righteousness would be to make him responsible for some palpable nonsense. But whatever the author means by the true character of God, the allusions to the gospel throw no certain light upon Paul's conception of righteousness. It is an assumption to say that Paul thought of the Parable of the Prodigal as illustrating the righteousness of God. No one can show this. The author does not even make it probable, and hence he cannot elucidate Paul's conception of the righteousness of God by pointing to the father's treatment of his returning son or to Christ's treatment of the sinful woman. The language of the author concerning the true charac-

ter of God seems misleading. To say that righteousness as above defined is the true character of the Divine Being is a wholly inadequate statement. If the Bible declares that God is love, it also declares that our God is a consuming fire. If it speaks of the love of Christ, it speaks also of the wrath of the Lamb. If it magnifies God's grace and mercy, it also exalts his holy law. If some of its pages are bright with promise, others are dark with threatenings. If it shows us a David and a Peter pardoned, it also presents many an awful scene of judgment.

Intimately connected with the righteousness of God is the conception of justification. It is conceded by the author that the Old Testament uses the term "justify" ordinarily, if not exclusively, in the forensic sense. It signifies to *declare* righteous. It is also conceded that it is used in the forensic sense in the Gospels, though Dr. Abbott says it occurs but twice there, whereas it is found seven times, being used on six different occasions.⁶ The author holds—and we think with good ground—that the Bible is not written on one plane, but contains a doctrine which is developed from the seed to the fruit. Paul's doctrine of justification, it is said, is simply a development out of the Old Testament doctrine; he uses the word "justify" in a "larger and profounder meaning." This we admit in general. But when this "larger and profounder meaning" is defined, we are obliged to say that it differs in kind from the Old Testament conception, not in degree merely. It is not the flower from the Old Testament plant, or the fruit from the Old Testament seed; it belongs to a different *genus*. For, if we understand the author's language, justification is not forensic at all. It is this "one simple indivisible process,—the setting of the soul right in its relations with God, because setting it in the way of righteousness within itself, and the setting the soul in the way

⁶ Matt. xi. 19; xii. 37; Luke vii. 29, 35; x. 59; xvi. 15; xviii. 14.

of righteousness within itself, because restored to right, that is, filial relations with God." Accordingly we are to understand that justification is making the soul right within itself, and, in that very act, making it right toward God. The radical and important thing in this view is the restoration of the soul to righteousness in itself. With this restoration comes, inevitably, a restoration to God; for, according to the author, if the prodigal son repents, restoration to the father is thereby inevitably brought about. But if it is inevitably brought about, what need is there of any forensic act, indeed what place is there for any?

Hence we find ourselves critically afloat. The Old Testament use of the term "justify" is abandoned and its use in the Gospels is also abandoned. This abandonment is in itself sufficient to make a reader suspicious of the reliability of the interpretation. Paul was not the founder of Christianity. He did not proclaim a new gospel. He did not cut loose from any of the essential truths of revelation. In the very Epistle under consideration, he declares explicitly that there has been from the beginning but one way of life, and that, the way of faith in God. He does not suggest that the justification of David was different from that of any believer in his own day. He uses the word in speaking of the ancient and modern believer, without any suggestion that in one case it has a "larger and profounder meaning" than in the other, not to say a wholly new meaning. But, apart now from the method, what is to be said of the view of justification that is presented?

First, it makes a *process* where Paul has an act. The author says: "This one simple indivisible *process*." Paul says: "Now Abraham *believed* God (aorist tense) and it was reckoned unto him (aorist tense) for righteousness."⁷ He was justified then and there. Believers in Rome are exhorted to have peace with God, having been once for all (aorist tense) justified by faith.⁸

⁷ Rom. iv. 3.⁸ Rom. v. 1.

Second, the author's conception of justification seems to confound ideas which Paul discriminates. The apostle distinguishes between justification and sanctification. The latter is represented as a growth, a process, a life-work, but not the former. The latter is represented as depending constantly upon the fidelity of man, the former is always placed within the sphere of God's activity. Therefore the author's view of justification does not seem to have roots in Paul's writings. In saying this we do not wish to be understood as fully endorsing the common forensic view of justification. This is often mechanical and unspiritual; Paul's doctrine is not. But we are here concerned with the positions of another, not with the presentation of our own.

We notice finally Dr. Abbott's view of propitiation, as it is found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Two points are made. (1) Paul's treatment of the death of Christ is "simply a continuance and consummation of the constant stream of dissuasion from a merely sacrificial and ritualistic religion." Paul is regarded as the last of the Hebrew prophets (we do not see with what right), and it is thought that he uses the death of Christ to teach the lesson which, according to the author, is found in the prophets—the lesson of the slight value of sacrifice. The prophets dissuaded from sacrifice, Paul completes the argument of dissuasion. "To the silent but intense objection of the pious, whether Jew or pagan—what becomes of our sacrifice? how shall God be appeased, and devotion to him expressed? Paul's answer was ready: Christ is our propitiation. He is our passover. He is our sacrifice. . . . The drops of blood that trickled from his hands are all; there is no need of a hundred bullocks, or of rivers of blood flowing beneath the temple floor."

It seems to us, first, that at the foundation of this view lies a defective understanding of the prophetic conception of sacrifice. The prophets do not protest against the principle of sacrifice any more than the New Testament

protests against the principle of good works. They protest against formal sacrifice, against sacrifice as in itself meritorious, as the New Testament protests against relying on good works for salvation. The prophets teach that obedience is *better* than sacrifice, but that is not equivalent to saying that sacrifice is bad and should be abolished, as Dr. Abbott seems to infer. The prophets urge to a spiritual performance of the law, but it does not occur to them to discard the law. Second, this view of the death of Christ assumes that the readers of the Epistle had a "silent but intense objection" to the abandoning of sacrifice. The author's argument absolutely requires the existence of such an intense objection. But where is the proof that such a feeling prevailed among Paul's readers? There is no trace of such an "intense objection" in Rome, nor is there in the six other churches to which Paul sent letters. His readers were predominantly Gentile, and predominantly Greek, and the average Greek of Paul's day, like the average Roman, had no very intense objection to altering or abandoning anything that pertained to the worship of the gods, seeing that he had lost the greater part of his respect and his fear for the gods themselves. The fact that sacrifice is abandoned by all who accept Christ's religion does not prove that Paul presented the death of Christ as divinely purposed to do away with sacrificial and ritualistic religion. Sacrifice for sin is naturally abandoned by those who believe that Christ died for their sins. But dying for sin cannot be said to be equivalent to the superficial thought of dying for the rectification of human worship. Christ did not die, and Paul cannot be held responsible for teaching that he died, to deliver men from a "crude, barbaric, pagan conception of religion." He did not die to deliver us from a "conception," but to deliver us from sin and death.

(2) The second point which is made in regard to the death of Christ is that this death was a part of God's eternal

design—which, of course, no one will question—and that it was a necessity of his love. The author does not say that Paul explicitly teaches the doctrine of this last statement, but he “imagines” that the apostle would give this answer to any one who should ask him *why* Christ suffered. He says that Paul in reality gives no answer to this question. “The *effect* of Christ’s death he does explicitly define; the *object* of it he does not seek to probe.” But it will be affirmed by the careful student that the grammatical exegesis of Paul’s words must recognize that he gives the *object* of Christ’s sufferings as well as some of its effects. Reference may be made to a single fundamental passage in Romans. Paul says of Christ: “Whom God set forth to be a propitiation.”⁹ Now whatever may be the meaning of propitiation, it cannot be denied that it contains an object or purpose of the setting forth. This is the simple requirement of the grammar. Then, in the following clause of the same great passage, Paul affirms that the setting forth of Jesus was for the demonstration of God’s righteousness. Here again is a purpose of Christ’s death. The language requires it. So, again, in the next verse Paul gives a divine purpose in the setting forth of Christ to be a propitiation when he says it was to the end “that he [God] might himself be just.” Surely the righteousness of God is not a *result* of Christ’s death.

It is not necessary to add to these illustrations. Paul speaks of the object of Christ’s death as distinctly as he does of its results. But that object is by no means merely to show the love of God. In the fundamental passage just quoted, Paul does not make this any part of the object of Christ’s death. Righteousness is in the foreground, love is not mentioned. If righteousness means righteousness, and not love, then no interpreter has a right to “imagine” that Paul, if asked why Christ suffered, would have replied: “It was a necessity of God’s love.”

In keeping with his views of the death of Christ the

⁹ Rom. iii. 25.

author substitutes "mercy-seat" for "propitiation" in Rom. iii. 25. He does not, however, meet the great objections to this translation, nor does he advance any argument in support of his rendering. He thinks that the immediate readers would have given to the word this sense, or, at least, a sense not inconsistent with this. But that is a point for which it is vital that the author should advance some sort of proof. It is by no means self-evident that the readers of the Epistle would thus have understood the word. They were for the most part Gentiles, and as such would not have much familiarity with the ritual of the Jews. They would naturally interpret the word in keeping with the rest of the letter, in which there is surely no allusion to support the author's view, and, since the apostle did not indicate that he meant them to take the word in a peculiar sense, they would doubtless have regarded it as having its ordinary and well-known significance. The author's view of propitiation does not seem to be Paul's view. It lacks the strength and vitality and consistency of the apostle's conception because it attempts to explain propitiation without law, and confuses the righteousness of God with the love of God.

We may here conclude our discussion; not, however, without a recognition of the many true and helpful thoughts that are found in this interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans. The points which have been touched in this paper are perhaps sufficient to show the method of the author and the drift of his work. Much remains in the exposition which does not seem to us tenable. For instance, chap. i. is said to set forth "the evolution of sin," rather than, chiefly, the *fact* of sin; it is said to be a picture of the Roman world, preëminently of Rome itself, rather than of the Gentile world in general, as we hold with Meyer, Godet, and others; chap. ii. is said to concern "God's dealing with the heathen," rather than the condition of the Jews, as Meyer, Godet, and many other eminent commentators hold; the words in chap. iii. 3, translated "the faithfulness

of God" (R. V.), are said to mean "God's ability to perceive repentance and faith in a pagan" (page 112)—an interpretation which we believe to be without support; and chap. vii. is said to portray "the battle of life," the universal experience of man, a view which seems to have the simple text against it again and again. But it is not necessary to the present purpose to discuss these points or any others. We believe that the hope of the author will be fulfilled, and that his volume will lead many to a fresh study of the Epistle to the Romans. Out of this study may there come a better grounding in the strong fundamental conceptions of our Christian religion than any of us at present have.