

ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED BY FAITH.

How far is theology an essential ingredient of religion? The answer to this question is less simple than it might appear. For though, on the one hand, all except the most extreme Agnostics would admit that religion implies worship, and that worship implies some knowledge of the object of worship; and though, on the other hand, very few nowadays would assert that except a man believe faithfully all the intricate technicalities of the Athanasian creed he cannot be saved, or would refuse, like David Deans, to consult a physician "if he didna satisfy me that he had a right sense of the right-hand and left-hand defections of the day," yet where to fix the minimum of dogmatic belief requisite to build religious faith upon, how to decide what is the amount of intellectual assent required for the spiritual life, is a very difficult and delicate inquiry, and one which would receive very different answers in different ages of the Church. There have been times when the assent of the intellect to dogmatic propositions was held to be the one thing needful; there have been times—perhaps the present age is amongst them—when the tendency was to depreciate dogma, to dispense with creeds, and to reduce religious faith to a molluscous condition, to a body without bones. The very word Faith, by the different senses in which it has been used—now for the tenacious assertion of a creed, now for the personal trust of the soul in God, and, again, for the undefinable sensations which are to some Christians the evidence and assurance of their acceptance with God, testifies to the varying importance which different theological schools have assigned

to the assent of the intellect, the affection of the heart, and the excitement of the imagination.

Of the important position of Faith in any system of religion based on the New Testament there can be no question. "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed," said our Lord, "nothing shall be impossible unto you." "Without faith it is impossible to please God," says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. "A man is justified by the faith of Jesus Christ," says St. Paul. And it was by bringing this principle of Justification by Faith that Luther gained the lever by which he became mighty to the throwing down of strongholds. But because Justification by Faith played so leading a part in the Reformation, because it was put forward as the test of vitality in the Church, for this very reason it soon lost its freshness and life, and became petrified into a mere article of belief. How Faith justifies—what is justifying Faith—what is the relation between Faith and works—such are the questions on which volumes, nay libraries, have been written, not without the result in many cases of "darkening counsel by words without knowledge." And yet if Faith is the great requisite without which all else is vain; if works, however apparently good, that do not spring out of faith are, as theologians tell us, sinful, or at least have the nature of sin, there must surely be some kind of working definition or description of faith attainable, such as shall meet the requirements of ordinary persons living in the world, without involving the intricacies and subtleties of technical theology. It is with the hope of at least indicating the possibility of such a solution of the difficulty that I now propose to discuss St. Paul's great instance and example of saving Faith.

It is obvious why, if the chronological order was to be abandoned, the Epistle to the Romans should be placed first of St. Paul's writings. For in "this precious work," as M. Renan calls it, "the basis of Christian theology," we have not only the great authoritative statement of the Apostle's master-thought, but also the expression of a great central principle to which from time to time the Church has rallied for a fresh departure, after having temporarily lost or forsaken her bearings. That the Jew, although he had great advantages, had no exclusive privileges; that Jew and Gentile alike are included under sin, because each had fallen short of the ideal set before him, the one of the law of Moses, the other of the law of nature; that, therefore, all combined are guilty before God, and must look not to their own works or merits but to his free grace and mercy; that this grace and mercy are manifested in Jesus Christ, and that therefore man is justified by faith in Christ: in other words, that man must reach his highest development not by looking at himself, but by looking out of and above himself—this is the great Pauline doctrine set forth in the Epistle to the Romans. The Jew had thought to stand right with God by keeping the law, which soon came to mean chiefly meeting certain ceremonial and ritual requirements. Doubtless the higher and nobler minds among the Jews had preserved a true and pure morality; but with the majority "the righteousness which is of the law" had come to be little more than the observance of a burdensome and meaningless etiquette the doing of things which could not profit. And therefore St. Paul had come forward to declare that man is rated in God's judgment not by what he does, but by

what he is ; that he is justified by faith without (not *ἀνεύ*, in the absence of, but *χωρίς*, *apart from*) the deeds of the law. And so in every age, whenever men have thought to stand right with God by outward acts of whatever kind, whenever they have thought wickedly that He was even such an one as themselves, and so have sought to please Him by the same kind of means by which they would please a powerful man, it has needed a John Baptist, or a Paul, or a Luther, or a Pascal, to call them to repentance, to preach Justification by Faith, and not by works, to proclaim that righteousness is not a matter of haggling and bargaining with God, but that it is the devotion of the heart to Him. Hence Luther declared most truly that Justification by Faith is the “*articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiæ* ;” because, when men turn righteousness into etiquette, and think that God is pleased with their works or their gifts without reference to the motive whence they spring, a principle of corruption is at work in the Church which, if it is not cut out by the roots, will poison the Christian life. But the doctrine of one age becomes the dogma of another ; and technical theology has long ago laid hold of the doctrine of Justification by Faith, and has analysed and defined it, until plain men have been fain to pass it by as a technicality which concerns them not—as a matter of School Divinity rather than of Religion. Let us see, then, how far the Apostle warrants this conclusion.

In writing as he did, chiefly to Jews, it was important for him to shew, if possible, that this fundamental principle of his was no novelty, but was involved in the teaching of the Old Covenant. “We have Abraham to our father” would have been the ready

answer to any teacher who proposed to bring in any new form of doctrine. "Was not Abraham our father justified by works?" is the appeal of St. James when he is setting forth the doctrine of justification under a different aspect. And so when St. Paul, himself an Hebrew of the Hebrews, himself of the seed of Abraham, had asserted that God is the God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews, and that He would justify both circumcision and uncircumcision by faith, he is met by the question, "If we establish the law through faith, if faith is, after all, the basis on which the law must rest, what advantage are we to say that Abraham our father has gained¹ in respect of the flesh? Wherein is he the better for that covenant of circumcision on which we have been taught to set so high a value?" And to this he replies, "Abraham is the first great example not only of circumcision, but also of faith. The Scripture tells us that Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. Abraham, therefore, is the father not only of the circumcision, but also of all that believe, though they be not circumcised. In exalting faith, I am, in fact, only going back to the first founder of our holy race, and raising him to a yet more glorious position as the father of a spiritual Israel, the founder of a nobler and more prolific line."

St. Paul, then, sets Abraham before us as the example of Justification by Faith. It follows that, if we wish to know what he means by Justification by Faith, we ought to inquire what is the characteristic in Abraham which St. Paul lays hold of as an illustration.

¹ This seems, on the whole, the best explanation of the ambiguous words *κατά σάρκα*.

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Let us turn to the fifteenth Chapter of Genesis, to which St. Paul refers us. The patriarch had returned from his victory over the kings, and the loneliness of his household, with none but his slaves to inherit his property, may well have made him feel bitterly that God had given him everything except the blessing he most longed for. And then it was that the word of Jehovah came to him in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward.”¹ Hereupon Abram is encouraged to speak out what is in his mind, and he says, “What wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless; and lo, one born in my house, a servant, is my heir?” Then God promised him an heir born of his own stock, and shewed him that magnificent sight, the depth of the Eastern sky, with stars whose number and brightness we in the dull West can hardly conceive; and said unto him, “So shall thy seed be.” The host of heaven, which so many Eastern tribes have been led to worship for their glory and brightness as the divinest thing they knew, was to Abraham only the sacramental pledge, the outward and visible sign, of the covenant of Jehovah with his servant. “And he believed in Jehovah; and He counted it to him for righteousness.” In the stillness of the night, beneath the star-spangled heaven, Abraham received into his soul the Divine promise, and believed, “as seeing Him who is invisible.” That multitude of stars witnessed to him of the Lord of heaven and earth, “dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen nor can see.” The order and

¹ Kalisch translates this, “Thy reward *will be* very great.”

regularity of their movements, or apparent movements, witnessed to him of the Lord of whose will all order and law is the expression; and he believed God.

This, then, seems to be the essence of Abraham's faith—the power to rise above the visible and the tangible, and to enter into a personal relation with the invisible God. God's first call to him came in the form of a command, however conveyed, to leave his country and his father's house, and to go into a land of which as yet he knew nothing. Abraham obeyed, and by his obedience he loosened the ties which bound him to the visible world. Again, God led him into solitude, into the dark and silent night, and renewed his covenant with him; and again Abraham took God at his word, and trusted Him absolutely. This belief in the invisible, then, is surely the habit of mind which God especially approves. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed," were our Lord's words to Thomas. "We walk by faith, not by sight," says St. Paul. "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." "Without faith," says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "it is impossible to please God;" and faith he has just defined to be "the evidence of things not seen."

We need not be at a loss to understand why Faith holds so high a position in the hierarchy of Christian graces. For when Christ came preaching the kingdom of heaven, He meant by this, not a kingdom that should take shape in some far-distant time and place, but a kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy *now*.

When He spoke of eternal life,¹ He spoke not merely of a life that shall have no end—though this, by the very nature of things, it must be—but mainly of a life that is above this present world, a life that is “hid in God.” And therefore the faculty which enables a man to rise from this present lower state from which Christ has delivered us² into the higher life, must be the one indispensable faculty, without which there can be no salvation. As long as a man lives in the world of sense, in the world which he can see and hear and touch, he is not yet delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. He may be, in the ordinary sense, a good man; he may abstain from all that his conscience tells him is wrong; he may be liberal, kind, thoughtful, just, temperate; but if the spiritual world is not yet real to him, nay, if it is not *more* real than the material world, he is still in the state of what St. Paul calls ψυχικός—the natural man—and is “of the world.” And this may help us to understand why St. Paul so emphatically declares that “a man is justified by faith (χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου) apart from the deeds of the law;”³ because, whereas man can only look at results, God looks at the hidden springs of action, and sees whether a man’s good works spring from a lively faith, that is, from a living and true relation between himself and God, or from a mere sense of moral fitness, or from the gross, mercantile notion that he expects to be paid for them

¹ The question how far the adjective αἰώνιος involves the idea of *time* is a more difficult one than might appear to those who have not studied it. Let it be noticed here simply that αἰών means an age or stage of existence, and that ζωὴ αἰώνιος means the life not of this lower, but of the higher and heavenly αἰών.

² Cf. Gal. i. 4: ὅπως ἐξέλθῃται ἡμᾶς ἐκ τοῦ ἐνεστώτος αἰώνος πονηροῦ—that he might deliver us from this present evil age or state of existence.

³ Rom. iii. 28.

hereafter. Viewed in this light, the doctrine of Justification by Faith becomes simply an assertion of the spiritual nature of God's kingdom, a protest against those low and carnal views of religion which Christianity was designed to supersede.

True, it may be said, Abraham's justification by faith may mean something very simple, because he lived in pre-Messianic days, and therefore his faith may well have been simply a trust in God and a right relation to Him. But we live in Gospel times, under the New Dispensation; to us Christ is known as our Saviour. Is not our faith, then, to be directed to Him as its object? Assuredly it is. And yet, if St. Paul takes Abraham as his instance of faith, it can hardly be that he would have us regard his faith as of an inferior kind to ours, or as standing on a lower level. And a little consideration may help us to see that Abraham's faith was really one with ours. For what is faith in Christ? It is accepting Him as the perfect manifestation of the Father's mind and will, according to his own words, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." And, therefore, although God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ has brought us nearer to Him, and made it more easy for us to know and trust Him, yet Abraham's faith had the same object as ours; and therefore if he, seeing God, as it were, afar off, trusted Him and obeyed his command, surely his faith was not inferior, but rather superior, to ours, in that we have received the promise which he had only seen and greeted from a distance.

Abraham's faith, then, consisted in an unswerving trust in the unseen God. It is this element in it that is brought out in the eleventh Chapter of the Epistle

to the Hebrews: "These all" (it is with immediate reference to Abraham and Sarah that the words occur), "these all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and greeted them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." It is this detachment of the soul from the visible and tangible, this power of looking not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, this capacity of living a life hid with Christ in God, that constitutes the essence of faith. And here we see the root-distinction between Justification by Works and Justification by Faith. What is it to seek to be justified by works? It is to look not at the things which are not seen, but at the things which are seen; to worry ourselves about details; to be anxious about matters of observance, of casuistry, of religious etiquette; to think that God cares for the outward act and not for the inward motive. Hence justification by works involves taking an unworthy and low idea of God; it implies that we regard Him as one like ourselves, who can judge of the inward only from the outward, and who must get at a man's character from a careful observation and comparison of his acts. Whereas if God is not only, in the sublime words of the Psalmist, "about our path and about our bed," but also, in the yet more spiritual conception of the New Testament, "a Discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart," it is certain that his judgment is formed not by our acts, but by those inner springs of thought and will which precede action, and of which we ourselves are often hardly conscious. And therefore the cleansing of the outside of the cup and platter,

which might well pass muster with a human judge, is useless with Him; to meet his judgment we must make clean that which is within, that the outside may be clean also. This is why the Pharisees, the great example in Scripture of justification by works, are so often called by the Lord hypocrites; for a man who looks at the outside, who regards acts and not motives, is exactly described as *ὑποκρίτης*—"an actor," one who sustains a part, one whose words and acts are put on, and do not spring from his heart. Whereas to be justified by faith is to have the heart right with God, to have the affections set on things above, to have the life hid with Christ in God. This is why faith can move mountains; because it looks straight to the end, and overlooks all obstacles. This is why, "being justified by faith, we have peace with God;" because, accepting with our whole hearts God's revelation of his fatherly love in Christ, we are no longer anxious and terrified about our acceptance with Him; for we know that He accepts us, not for anything in ourselves, but because of his free grace and goodness manifested in his Son Jesus Christ. This is why to seek to be justified by works must necessarily stunt and hinder the spiritual growth; because it induces a habit of stooping, of looking downwards, of grovelling in the earth instead of aspiring to heaven. And in this way the doctrine of justification by faith at once places all questions of outward observance, of ritual, of sacred days and sacred places, in their proper places; because it teaches that God desires not sacrifice, that He is not worshipped with men's hands, nor with their voices, nor with their garments; that the sacrifice of God is a humble spirit; that what He seeks is the worship of

the heart and of the life ; and that He cares nothing for the worship of the lips or of the ritual, save in so far as it is expressive of, or conducive to, the other. This, too, may enable us to understand St. Paul's very strong language respecting the law. "Christ is become of no effect to you, whosoever of you are justified by the law ; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision ; but faith which worketh by love." To seek for righteousness in works, in the deeds of the law, was, in St. Paul's conception, to be separated from Christ. "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain."

It remains to ask the further question, What did St. Paul mean by the term Justification or Righteousness ? And here we need to be on our guard against the very common mistake of interpreting a writer by a sort of *ex post facto* process, by the use of words in later writings and systems. In every subject-matter, and in theology more than in any other, words tend to become more and more technical ; new associations and new meanings gather round them ; controversies leave upon them their indelible mark ; often they become watch-words of parties, so that the very use of them inevitably recalls to our minds thoughts of heat and strife, quite foreign to the simple and unartificial sense in which they were first used. To take an example from the political vocabulary, the word "Liberal" originally meant inclining to or making for freedom. Now it is used chiefly to denote a particular set of political views, in which the original sense is not indeed entirely merged, but greatly overshadowed by number-

less details not necessarily connected with it. And in like manner in theology it was pointed out in ¹ a former number of this Magazine that such words as the Letter and the Spirit, the Law and the Gospel, and the like, have gradually accumulated secondary and technical connotations by which the original and simpler sense has been almost obscured. So also Justification (*δικαίωμα* or *δικαίωσις*—the word occurs only three times in the English Version, in Romans iv. 25 and v. 16, 18, in the first and last of which it represents *δικαίωσις*, and in the second *δικαίωμα*), meaning simply ² the making just or righteous, is by Cruden defined as “a gracious act of God, whereby He pardons and accepts of sinners on the account of Christ’s righteousness imputed to them, and received by faith.” It may be so; but this meaning is certainly not involved in the original word, nor could it be so understood by those who first read the Epistle. Nor would St. Paul’s illustration—the justification of Abraham—naturally suggest this sense. There is no allusion in Genesis to Abraham’s being pardoned and accepted on account of a righteousness imputed to him and received by faith. We are simply told that he believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness; in other words, God was well pleased with his faith. It is true that faith receives a fuller and deeper significance in the Christian Dispensation; and, in the same way, righteousness, or justification, is a more complete, a more developed conception when viewed in relation to Christ’s resurrection. “Faith,” St. Paul says, “was reckoned to Abraham for righteous-

¹ See THE EXPOSITOR, vol. ix. p. 162.

² There is no authority for understanding *δικαίω* in the sense of acquitting or considering just by a legal fiction one who is guilty. It means usually to make just, or to claim as just.

ness. But it was not written for his sake alone that it was reckoned to him, but for us also, to whom it (righteousness) shall be reckoned, if we, like Abraham, have faith; if we believe on God as he did, yet not on the same grounds as he did, but on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Abraham was justified by his faith in God, who revealed Himself to him in night visions, by dark and mysterious figures, in the guiding of his unseen hand, by promises of a far-off future; we are justified by our faith in God, who has revealed Himself to us in his Son, and who has raised that Son Jesus Christ from the dead to establish our faith and to complete our justification.

Most of us accept so slavishly the theological traditions in which we have been brought up, that many may be surprised to learn that the doctrine of "Imputed Righteousness" was not heard of for fifteen centuries after Christ. Yet it is undoubtedly true that "the notion of imputation, in the sense of a transfer, by a kind of juridical fiction, of our sins to Christ, and his righteousness to his members, was first started in the sixteenth century."¹ The notion of *imputation*, in the sense of ascribing to a person that which does not properly belong to him, probably arose from the fact that the Vulgate renders *ελογίσθη* by *reputatum est*; and the forensic theory of the Atonement doubtless found favour at the time of the Reformation by reason of the monstrous perversion by which practically salvation and remission of sins could be purchased for money, and a man's favour with God depended on his libe-

¹ See Oxenham, *Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 87.

rality to the Church. At such a time, the doctrine that works are not the cause of salvation, that a man is justified by faith only, was "a most wholesome doctrine," was, indeed, essential to the life of the Church ; and Luther's preaching could not have produced the effect that it did if he had not seized upon a root-truth. But the development of this doctrine, the carrying out into logical sequence mere imperfect and partial illustrations, produced a mass of theological minutiaë, an intricate tangle of dogmas, not unlike those which the schoolmen had busied themselves in spinning, evolving them endlessly, like silkworms, in the three centuries before the Reformation. It may be that it is the duty of this age, in view of the attacks which the Christian Faith has to sustain on this side and on that, and of the rapidly increasing indifference to dogmatic theology which is so marked a sign of the times, to seek to go back to the simpler and more rudimentary forms of belief which sufficed for the spiritual life of the earliest Christians, and which, after all, are the nourishment of all simple souls. Many a devout believer would be quite unable to formulate any consistent or reasonable theory of the Atonement, to whom, nevertheless,

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee ;

or, again—

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling,

are the very expression of the deepest and truest feelings of his heart. We do not, for the most part, form consistent theories of our relation to those who are dearest to us ; if our children love us and trust us, we are more than contented that they should not analyze and account for their feeling towards us ; and when we

believe that "when we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and that He "bare our sins in his own body to¹ the tree," we may, if we will, "being justified by faith, have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," while leaving others to formulate theories which at the best can but express a partial aspect of the truth, and which too often have been forged as weapons of theological warfare.

In one other respect the history of "the father of the faithful" may be very helpful to us in the present day. "By faith," we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "he went out, not knowing whither he went; . . . for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." Many and many an earnest Christian nowadays, to whom belief in God and the knowledge of God is the one urgent need of his soul, has had to "get him out of his country and from his kindred, and from his father's house," to leave the special theological system in which he was brought up, to break with many of the dearest associations of his youth, perhaps, alas! to part from friends who were as a second self to him, and to "go forth, not knowing whither he went." Happy he who in such a hour, though "dwelling in tabernacles," obliged to content himself with a provisional system of theology, and to "take no thought for the morrow," has yet been able to look for a city which hath foundations, and to hear the Divine promise, "Fear not; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward." Of such an one surely it shall be recorded at last, that he "believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

R. E. BARTLETT.

¹ *Ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον.*