

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN THE NON-PAULINE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

I

“Two men,” said our Lord, “went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed by himself as follows: ‘O God, I thank thee that I am not like the rest of men, extortioners, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all my income.’ But the tax-collector stood at a distance and would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but kept on beating his breast and saying, ‘O God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am!’ I tell you, this tax-collector went home justified rather than the other man; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the man who humbles himself will be exalted.”¹

This parable, recorded by the Third Evangelist, will serve to introduce our consideration of the doctrine of justification in the non-Pauline parts of the New Testament. The Evangelists mention six occasions on which our Lord used the verb “to justify”,² but this is the one which is most relevant to our general theme. The incident of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, Luke indicates, was related with special reference to people who had implicit confidence in their own righteousness and despised everybody else. And its point is clear enough, though it is sometimes missed.

The Pharisee was not a hypocrite in the modern sense of the word. He was deeply concerned about his religious duties, and carried them out punctiliously. There is no suggestion that the account of himself which he gives to God is not the literal truth. His fault lay, not in the performance of these duties, but in his confidence that by their performance he had satisfied God’s requirements and might approach Him without any misgivings. What more was necessary for his acceptance by God? Of course he was not as other men were, and he might well thank God that this was so. And yet—there is a real difference, if a subtle one, between the Pharisee’s thanksgiving and the attitude which found expression in “There, but for the grace of God, goes

¹ Luke xviii. 10–14.

² The others are: Matt. xi. 19=Luke vii. 35; Matt. xii. 37; Luke vii. 29; x. 29; xvi. 15.

John Bradford". That was not the Pharisee's attitude as he glanced at the tax-collector. The grace of God did not enter his mind. And exactly there we have the reason why he did not go down to his house justified, as the other man did.

Let us not deceive ourselves about the tax-collector. He was not a decent fellow at heart, sorely misjudged by the godly folk. He "was a rotter; and he knew it. He asked for God's mercy because mercy was the only thing he dared ask for."¹ Wrongly, perhaps, but none the less sincerely, the Pharisee expected the divine approval because he believed he deserved it. The tax-collector knew what *he* deserved; and for that very reason cast himself upon the grace of God.

Some exegetes wish to press the passive force of *ἰλάσθητι* in the tax-collector's prayer, and render it "Be propitiated". This emphasis, however, is not suggested by the context: and in fact it is not in keeping with Biblical usage, where the action indicated by this verb is not something of which God is the object, but something in which He Himself takes the initiative (To say this, of course, is not to evacuate *ἰλάσκομαι* of any propitiatory meaning.)² The Septuagint usage, as C. H. Dodd has made clear, presents the distinctively passive forms of *ἰλάσκομαι* as synonymous with *ἰλεως γίνομαι* or *ἰλεως εἶμι* when employed as equivalents of Hebrew *sālah*, *niham* and *kipper*.³ The only other New Testament occurrence of *ἰλάσκομαι* is in Heb. ii. 17, where Christ as His people's high priest is the subject, and His people's sins are the object.

It is wholly improbable that the tax-collector in his prayer had any particular thoughts about the sacrifices offered day by day in the temple. His trouble is one which demands direct appeal to God, apart from ritual mediation. We conclude that *ἰλάσθητι* on his lips means "Be propitious", "be merciful", "be gracious".⁴ He invoked the grace of God, and went home justified, *δεδικαιωμένος*, "in a state of justification". The

¹ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (1949 edn.), p. 312.

² Cf. L. Morris, "The Use of *ἰλάσκεσθαι*, etc., in Biblical Greek," *Expository Times*, May 1951 (Vol. lxii, pp. 227 ff.).

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (1935), pp. 84 ff., and especially pp. 93 f. See also W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, iii (1940), pp. 62, 223 f.; and B. F. Westcott on Heb. ii. 17; 1 John ii. 2.

⁴ The expression *ἰλάσθητί μοι* is, in fact, practically identical in sense with Heb. *honnēni* ("be gracious to me"). Delitzsch translates the verb here by *sēlah* ("forgive"), Salkinson by *rahem* ("have compassion").

first principle of justification, that it is *sola gratia*, could not be more plainly taught. And here it is, in Luke's report of our Lord's teaching. There is no reason to suspect Pauline influence here. But here in a nutshell is the doctrine elaborated by Paul.

If, according to the Biblical doctrine, justification is *sola gratia* on God's side, it is *sola fide* on man's. There is no express mention of faith in this parable; but if the word is not there, the thing itself is. For where is justifying faith more evident than in the trustful and repentant attitude of mind which, completely divested of self-satisfaction and self-reliance, eagerly seeks and gratefully accepts that pardoning mercy which is the free gift of God's grace? That was the tax-collector's attitude; that was what distinguished him from the Pharisee as they both stood in the temple court. "The decisive thing is not the past record, whether good or bad, but the present attitude towards God."¹

If the word "faith" is not actually used of the tax-collector's attitude in this parable, it is prominent enough elsewhere in the Gospel record. Faith, not as a meritorious work, but as an attitude of personal trust in God, is inculcated by our Lord as the indispensable condition for receiving the best blessings of heaven. These were not in any sense the reward of faith; they were free gifts of divine love, but the absence of faith prevented men from receiving and enjoying them. The same principle is illustrated time and again in the record of our Lord's active ministry. He could not withhold His mercy from those who were outside Israel's national covenant when they manifested such powerful faith in Him as put true-born Israelites to shame;² on the other hand, true-born Israelites all too often failed to avail themselves of the blessings He brought through their lack of faith. Among his fellow-citizens of Nazareth "He could perform no mighty work . . . and He marvelled because of their unbelief."³

The righteousness that really matters is not the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees; their righteousness—a matter of meticulous compliance with the divine law, interpreted, expanded and applied by the tradition of the elders—can never qualify for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.⁴ What does

¹ T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

² Mark vii. 29=Matt. xv. 28; Luke vii. 9=Matt. viii. 10.

³ Mark vi. 5 f. ⁴ Matt. v. 20.

really matter is that right relationship with God which surpasses scribal righteousness—that relationship which is enjoyed by those who qualify for admittance to the kingdom of heaven by executing a right-about-turn and becoming as little children¹—in other words, by a simple trust in God.

It would be historically unwarranted to read into these utterances the whole doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ. It was impossible for Jesus to develop this doctrine with any degree of explicitness, because it was to be based on his own atoning death, which still lay in the future. Our Lord speaks of a state of righteousness before God to be conferred as a part of the coming kingdom. How far this will be done by imputation, how far it will also be done by changing the heart and life of men so as to produce works which God will be able in principle to approve in his judgment, which of these two will be the basis of the other is not clearly explained. Our Lord's doctrine is the bud in which the two conceptions of a righteousness imputed and a righteousness embodied in the sanctified life of the believer still lie enclosed together. Still it should not be overlooked, that in more than one respect Jesus prepared the way for Paul by enunciating principles to which the latter's teaching could attach itself. He emphasized that in the pursuit of righteousness the satisfaction of God should be man's supreme concern. This, carried out to its ultimate consequences with reference to sinful man, could not but lead to the conception of a righteousness provided by God himself in the perfect life and atoning death of Christ.²

II

Let this sketchy survey suffice for the doctrine in the Gospels.³ We turn to the Acts of the Apostles. Here the outstanding passage which bears upon our subject can hardly be included among the non-Pauline parts of the New Testament, because it occurs in Luke's report of Paul's sermon delivered in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. Towards the end of the sermon Paul says: "Be assured of this, brethren, that through this man remission of sins is announced to you, and in Him every one who believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by Moses' law."⁴

¹ Matt. xviii. 3 (cf. Mark x. 15 = Luke xviii. 17).

² Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (1951 edn.), p. 65.

³ Reference should be made to Alan Richardson's argument that "the whole Pauline doctrine of justification by faith is expounded" in the narrative of the healing of the leper (Mark i. 40-45); cf. *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (1941), pp. 60 f.

⁴ Acts xiii. 38 f.

As this statement stands, it contains a formal ambiguity. As the Tyndale New Testament Lecture for 1942 put it:

It may mean: Believers in Christ are justified from all things; no such justification (if indeed any real justification at all) is provided by Moses' law. This is the way in which the words have usually been taken; Tyndale, for example, has a marginal note here: "Fayth iustifieth and not the lawe." And the question will very reasonably be settled for most readers by the not irrelevant consideration that this is the way in which justification is presented in Paul's epistles. However, it is *grammatically* possible to take the words as meaning: Moses' law can justify from some things (perhaps from most things); but as regards those things from which it cannot justify, faith in Christ will justify from them.¹

B. W. Bacon was quoted as upholding the second of these interpretations:

The language of xiii. 39 is claimed as Pauline because of the single word "justify". The doctrine is exactly that which Paul fundamentally repudiates, and which in Gal. ii. 15-21 he demonstrates against Peter to be untenable, namely, that a man may rest upon the works of the law for his general justification, and rely on the death of Christ to make up the deficiencies.²

I see no reason to change the opinion which I expressed ten years ago; but if the second interpretation be preferred, it is still possible to envisage Paul himself as arguing somewhat as follows: Even if you expect to enjoy a right relationship with God on the basis of Moses' law, remember that Moses' law makes no provision for sins committed "with a high hand". For these, by contrast with sins of ignorance, Moses' law prescribes nothing but the full penalty. Why, then, go on hoping to establish a right relationship with God in this way, now that you have presented to you a Saviour who assures justification from all sins and complete acceptance before God to all who put their faith in Him?

It is no harmonistic determination, but the straight exegesis of this text, that suggests the conclusion that it is in perfect agreement with what Paul teaches on the subject in his epistles.

Although the verb *δικαίωω* is not used in the other reports of the *kerygma* in Acts, the doctrine we are considering is found

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale Press, 1942), p. 12.

² B. W. Bacon, *The Story of St. Paul* (1905), p. 103 n.

in Peter's preaching as well as in Paul's. A remarkably comprehensive summary of Peter's preaching is the report of his speech in the house of Cornelius, which concludes with the affirmation concerning Christ: "To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts x. 43). Similarly the doctrine is implied if not formulated in Peter's first epistle, where we are told, for example, that Christ died as a sin-offering, *δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων* (1 Pet. iii. 18)—a statement which explains how *ἄδικοι* can become *δίκαιοι* before God—and that our faith in Christ has complete salvation as its issue (i. 9).

III

We pass next to the Epistle to the Hebrews. This document's teaching on justification by faith, like Paul's teaching in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans, adopts as the basic text the words of Habakkuk ii. 4. Unlike Paul, however, the writer to the Hebrews quotes these words along with part of their context:

For yet a very little while,
He that cometh shall come, and shall not tarry.
But my righteous one shall live by faith;
And if he draw back, my soul hath no pleasure in him.¹

This is a free quotation of Hab. ii. 3 f. in the Septuagint:

If he delay, wait for him,
For he will surely come and will by no means tarry:
If he draw back, my soul hath no pleasure in him;
But my righteous one shall live by faith²—

preceded by words drawn from the Septuagint of Isa. xxvi. 20, *μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον* (where R.V., translating M.T., has "for a little moment"). The Septuagint reading of the Habakkuk passage marks an intermediate stage between the original text and the use which the writer to the Hebrews makes of it; where Habakkuk is told to wait patiently for the fulfilment of his vision of hope, the Septuagint makes the object of his waiting personal ("wait for *him*" instead of "wait for *it*"). Our author, thinking of the return of Christ, and wishing to encourage his readers to have that consummation in view, finds the

¹ Heb. xi. 37 f.

² So Cod. Alex. The other LXX authorities read "But the righteous one shall live by faith in me (*ἐκ πίστεως μου*, taking *μου* as objective genitive).

Septuagint text of Habakkuk admirably adapted to his end. But, in the context of Habakkuk which he quotes, the words "My righteous one shall live by faith" also occur, and they provide a convenient transition to the discourse on faith which follows in chapter xi.

Faith, therefore, is defined at the outset of that discourse as "that which gives substance to things that are hoped for, the proof of things that are not seen". The element of hope, the confident expectation of the fulfilment of God's promise, the patient waiting for the appearance of things not seen as yet, is very prominent in the conception of faith as illustrated here from a variety of Old Testament characters. Noah's faith was manifested in the building of the ark when God warned him of the coming deluge—something quite outside his experience thus far. Abraham's was manifested in his setting forth at the divine command for a country which was one day to be his, and by his readiness to offer up in sacrifice the son whose life was necessary for the accomplishment of that promise. Isaac in turn blessed his sons "concerning things to come". These patriarchs continued to manifest faith like this to the end of their days, and died without seeing the promises fulfilled; yet faith made their fulfilment as real to them as if it had taken place before their eyes. Joseph similarly looked forward to the return of the Israelites from Egypt to the land of promise, and instructed them to carry his bones back there when the time for that return should come; while Moses, looking still farther ahead, valued "the reproach of the Messiah" more highly than anything that Egypt had to offer him as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. And if those who died without seeing the accomplishment of the promises showed such patient faith, how much more should we do so, asks the writer, we who have entered into the actual enjoyment of blessings which the patriarchs could only greet from afar? Did not Jesus Himself, Pioneer and Perfector of faith, show us the supreme example of such believing endurance when He endured the cross, counting its disgrace as naught in view of the joy that was set before Him as His goal?¹ If we consider Him, we shall be less inclined to grow weary and faint-hearted.

At first sight, the faith of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks may seem to have little in common with that on which

¹ For the use of *ἀντι* in Heb. xii. 2 cf. its use in verse 16.

Paul lays such emphasis. Further reflection may lead to a different conclusion. Professor Tasker has pointed out that "the writer is in effect illustrating the thesis set forth by Paul in Rom. viii. 20 that 'by hope we are saved',¹ for the apostle, who was the great exponent of the doctrine of justification by faith, was also the preacher of salvation by hope. Faith is indeed the primary Christian virtue, but it is so, to our writer, not merely because it enables the believer to make real in himself the righteousness freely offered to him in the grace of the Lord Jesus, a sense which the word has so conspicuously in the Pauline letters and with which there is no reason whatever for thinking that our writer would not be in entire agreement, but also because it sustains and gives substance to hope and demonstrates the reality of the invisible."²

If there is no reason to think that the writer to the Hebrews would have disagreed with Paul's teaching about faith, there is equally no reason to think that Paul would have disagreed with the view of faith expressed in Hebrews, especially as summed up in Heb. xi. 6: "without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing [to God]; for the man who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who seek after Him." The reward, of course, is the only reward that such people desire: the fulfilment of the words of Christ, "Seek and ye shall find". But this quotation expresses clearly and emphatically what all the New Testament teaches, that faith in God is the one thing needful for a right relationship with Him. And while there is a difference of emphasis between "faith" in Hebrews and "faith" in the Pauline letters, it is a difference of emphasis and not one of substance.

IV

In the arrangement of New Testament books most familiar to us the Epistle to the Hebrews is followed by that of James. On the surface there is a wide disparity between these two epistles in several respects, and yet there may be a closer link between them than is generally realized. However, it is not

¹ Alongside this suggestion that "faith" in Hebrews corresponds to "hope" in Paul may be set a further suggestion by Denney, that "in the Epistle to the Hebrews the word ἀγιάζειν corresponds as nearly as possible to the Pauline δικαιοῦν" (*The Death of Christ* [Tyndale Press edn., 1951], p. 126).

² R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Tyndale Press, 1950), p. 60.

with Hebrews, but with the Pauline letters, that James is commonly compared—or rather contrasted. It was the apparent absence from James of the distinctive Pauline emphasis on justification by faith—or indeed James's apparent contradiction of this doctrine—that made Luther speak so disparagingly of it as a “right strawy epistle”.¹ We may as well quote right now the crucial passage in James.

What use is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but has no works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say to them, “Go in peace; be warmed and fed”, without giving them the things that the body requires, what use is it? In the same way also faith by itself is dead unless it is accompanied by works. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you mine by my works.” You believe that God is one? Well done! The demons believe that too—and they tremble. But will you recognize, you foolish man, that faith apart from works is null and void? Take Abraham our father; was it not by works that he was justified, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see, his faith co-operated with his works, and by his works his faith was perfected, and so was fulfilled the scripture which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness”, and he was called “the friend of God”. You see that it is by works that a man is justified, and not by faith alone. In the same way also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she harboured the spies and sent them off another way? For as the body is dead apart from the spirit, so also faith is dead apart from works.²

It is not surprising that at first blush this passage has seemed to many to be a deliberate attack on the Pauline doctrine. While Luther admired the Epistle of James because “it lays down no teaching of man, and presses home the law of God”, and found “many good sayings in it”, yet he could not ascribe to it apostolic authority, or include it among the “true capital books”—first and foremost, because “it contradicts St. Paul and all other Scripture in giving righteousness to works”.³ With those who tried to show that there was no contradiction between James and Paul he had little patience. In two passages from his *Tischreden* he says:

¹ Preface to translation of Bible, 1st edn. of 1522.

² James ii. 14–26.

³ B. F. Westcott, *Canon of the New Testament* (ed. 3, 1870), p. 450, quoting from preface to Luther's Bible translation.

Many sweat to reconcile St. Paul and St. James, as does Melancthon in his *Apology*, but in vain. "Faith justifies" and "faith does not justify" contradict each other flatly. If any one can harmonize them, I will give him my doctor's hood and let him call me a fool.¹

Let us banish this epistle from the university, for it is worthless. It has not a syllable about Christ, not even naming Him except once at the beginning. I think that it was composed by some Jew or other, who had heard of Christ but not joined the Christians. James had learned that the Christians insisted strongly on faith in Christ, and so he said to himself. "Well, you must oppose them and insist only on works." And so he does. He says not a word of the passion and resurrection, the theme of all the other apostles. Besides, he has neither order nor method. He speaks now of clothes and then of wrath, always turning from one to the other. He gives a simile—"As the body without the soul is dead, so faith is nothing without works". Marry, what a poor simile! He compares faith to the body, when faith should rather have been compared to the soul. The ancients saw all this and did not consider the epistle canonical (*catholica*).²

Luther would have been right in saying that "faith justifies" and "faith does not justify" contradict each other flatly, *if* the substantive "faith" and the verb "justify" had the same meaning in the one proposition as in the other. But in fact James in this passage uses neither term in the regular Pauline sense.

As regards the term "faith", it has recently been pointed out³ that James in his epistle uses it in two senses without making the distinction explicitly clear. There is the sense in which faith is necessary to make prayer effective (Jas. i. 6; v. 15, and cf. ii. 1, 5). And there is the sense in which it is a purely intellectual assent to truth such as demons may render without being anything bettered thereby (ii. 19). This latter kind of faith is dead, says James. And Paul would have agreed. The faith which, in Paul's teaching, is indispensable for right relations with God is a personal and confident trust in God, not barrenly intellectual but spiritually dynamic—"faith that works through

¹ *Tischreden*, § 3292 b; Weimarer Ausgabe III (1914), pp. 252 f.

² *Tischreden*, § 5443; Weimarer Ausgabe V (1919), p. 157.

³ C. H. Powell, "'Faith' in James and its Bearings on the Date of the Epistle", *Expository Times*, July 1951 (Vol. lxii, pp. 311 ff.).

love", as he calls it.¹ And Paul's intensely practical conception of Christian love is made plain in 1 Cor. xiii. 1-3 (cf. also Eph. ii. 10).

Then, as regards the term "justify", James is not thinking, as Paul is, in terms of Job's question, "How should man be righteous in the sight of God?" What James emphasizes when he speaks of justification in this passage is rather that works show the quality of the faith. A man's claim to have faith is not justified until he shows his faith by means of his works.

For if Abraham, with all his faith in God, had refused to offer his son Isaac, he would not have been justified. And on the other hand, works alone without faith would not have justified him. For, if he had offered his son without faith in God, without believing in God's infinite power, and ability to raise Isaac from the dead, he would not only have been a murderer, and a defiler of the altar, but in his heart must have accused God of a violation of His word, in first promising to bless Isaac's posterity, and then commanding him to be sacrificed before he had children.²

To be sure, we do not find justification by faith taught in this epistle as we find it taught by Paul. But we do not find in this epistle any contradiction of the Pauline teaching, whether deliberate or undesigned. There is no evidence that James had read the epistles to the Galatians or to the Romans. The illustrative incident which he takes from Abraham's career is not adduced by Paul; on the other hand, it *is* adduced by the writer to the Hebrews as an example of Abraham's faith (xi. 17 ff.). The case of Rahab, similarly, while not found in Paul's writings, is common to James and the writer to the Hebrews.³ According to that writer, Abraham's faith was manifested (*inter alia*) by his readiness to offer up Isaac, and Rahab's by her reception of the spies; and that is the point which James makes. Not that this implies any direct connection between the two epistles; no doubt these and similar incidents formed the common material of synagogue homilies on the subject of faith.

¹ Gal. v. 6, taking *ἐνεργουμένη* as middle, with Lightfoot, *ad loc.*, rather than passive, with J. A. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (1914), p. 246. (Robinson translates Gal. v. 6 "faith is made operative through love", which comes to much the same thing.)

² J. D. Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Eng. tr., iv (1801), p. 305.

³ Heb. xi. 31.

V

In the Johannine writings, the righteous man (*ὁ δίκαιος*) is no more one who seeks righteousness by the deeds of the law than he is in the Pauline writings; the righteous man—the man who “is righteous even as Christ is righteous”—is “he who practises righteousness”¹ and this is a description of the regenerate man: “everyone who practises righteousness is begotten of God.”² This regeneration, moreover, is secured by faith—faith in Christ.³ That this faith is no barren assent but that dynamic faith which operates through love is immediately apparent from such a passage as 1 John v. 1: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God; and everyone who loves his Begetter loves the one who is begotten of Him.”⁴ Or compare 1 John iii. 17: “If anyone has this world’s livelihood and sees his brother in need, but closes his heart against him, how does the love of God dwell in him?” This comes very close to James’s remark that it is useless to say “Go in peace; be warmed and fed”, to a naked and destitute friend without helping him to get food and clothing.

While it is true that John thinks of the initial work of God in the believer mainly in terms of regeneration, whereas Paul thinks of it mainly in terms of justification, yet the forensic category is very evident in John’s thought, although negatively rather than positively. The believer in Christ has life, John tells us; but instead of saying that conversely the unbeliever is dead, he says: “He that believeth not hath been judged already . . . the wrath of God abideth on him” (John iii. 18, 36). To be born from above therefore is practically tantamount to being justified by faith, since the alternative to life is condemnation.

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¹ 1 John iii. 7; cf. Rev. xxii. 11 (*ὁ δίκαιος δικαιοσύνην ποιᾷ ἅτῳ ἔτι*).

² 1 John ii. 29.

³ For a study of the meaning of “belief” in the Johannine writings, see W. F. Howard, *Christianity according to St. John* (1943), pp. 151 ff. Jesus has come as the Divine Word to reveal God to men; “faith is the response of the human soul to the appeal and demand made by this revelation.” “The object of faith in the Johannine, as in the Pauline, message is nearly always Jesus” (*op. cit.*, p. 158).

⁴ Cf. 1 John iii. 14.