

INTRODUCTION

JUSTIFICATION: (FROM PAUL TO AUGUSTINE)

Was Augustine a true interpreter of St. Paul's doctrine on justification? Was he in line with the exegesis of the ecclesiastical writers who preceded him? Which historical circumstances led him to face such problems as grace, nature, faith, works and free will? Unless some kind of answer is given to these queries Augustine's works, especially his later writings, on the subject will be read in a vacuum which distorts his approach to the doctrine of justification by faith.

Luther and the Reformers based their teaching on faith and works upon the letter to the Romans and to the Galatians, and appealed to Augustine as their true interpreter. This perspective provided later Protestant exegetes and theologians with a hermeneutical key to interpret both Paul and Augustine. Justification by faith as opposed to good works was considered as the core and essence of Pauline theology until the "New perspective" called it into question. While there is no denying that the Apostle's opposition to the Law played a most important part in his controversy with both Jews and Jewish Christians, Paul's sight was fixed on the centrality of Christ in God's redemptive design; justification by faith was a corollary.

To whom, however, did Paul address his letters and what was his theological environment? We should not forget that the Pauline epistles were occasional letters written in definite circumstances. His entire preaching exceeded by far what we know of his thought through his writings. Let us try to place his teaching on justification into the right historical perspective.

Paul was a Jew belonging to the pharisaic sect. In spite of its broad influence inside the synagogues, this stream of thought was only one of the various schools which composed the Judaism of the first century. Earlier studies on Paul interpreted his polemic against the Law as a polemic against Judaism in general, but since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls a new perspective has arisen, displacing the controversy within first century Palestinian Judaism itself. In the Qumran Hodayoth we find a prophetic stream with a strong accent on grace and lack of reliance on one's own works, on the confession of sins and trust in God's mercy. Pharisaism as known from later rabbinic writings, on the contrary, stressed reliance on merit and on divine justice which almost placed God as debtor to the just man who was a faithful observant of the Law, including those legal interpretations and additions

considered as a "fence around the Torah", elaborated by the pharisaic tradition in the preceding two centuries and attributed to Moses himself.

After the appearance of the Risen Christ to Paul on the road to Damascus and during his long retreat in Arabia the former Pharisee had an opportunity to rethink the message of the bible, to reconsider other points of view within contemporary Judaism itself, and hence to insert his new knowledge of Christ within God's plan of salvation. He reread the Scriptures with a Christological hermeneutical key, and discovered in them a long story of divine favours to Israel (Rom 9-11). The Law had only been a long parenthesis, a pedagogue, leading to its fulfilment in Christ. It had been given to reveal man's sinfulness and his need for forgiveness and salvation by an act of God (Gal 3.19-25). Hence, man's response should be nothing else but an act of faith, that is, thanksgiving and gratitude towards the Giver and submission to God's saving design as revealed by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Paul himself persevered in his observance of the Torah but he did not rely on its efficacy to place him in the right relationship with God, which is the essence of justification (Phil 3, 4-11). In fact, he insisted that gentile converts were exempt from such observance; their faith in Christ and the forgiveness received through baptism were enough to render them co-heirs of Israel in receiving God's promises to Abraham. The Apostle's appeal to Abraham rather than to Moses (Gal 4 and Rom 4) followed a rereading of Scripture already present within post-exilic Judaism which resulted in the composition of the Pentateuch as we have it now. Faith as opposed to Law, however, did not mean at all perseverance in sin or devaluation of good works (Rom 6, 1-14). The "ontological" transformation in Christ received in Baptism required a moral conformity animated by love. The total concept of justifying faith included the absorption of all those moral values required by the sacred writings, and now rendered operative through the indwelling efficacy of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's thesis was not received at all well by some Christian converts from Judaism who had belonged to the pharisaic sect (Gal 1, 6-10; 2, 11-12), in fact, they put up a strong opposition to his preaching in Galatia and elsewhere, insisting that Torah observance and circumcision were necessary means of salvation not only for Jewish-Christians but also for converts from paganism. This meant that gentiles had to become totally Jewish before becoming Christian. It is well known that the so-called council of Jerusalem, later revised by James and his community, reached a compromise on the subject (Acts 15).

In principle Paul's position was approved, mainly owing to the success of his mission confirmed by charismata of the Holy Spirit.

The controversy did not die out, however: in John the Seer's time many Jewish Christians who had fled the destruction of Jerusalem took refuge in Asia Minor and insisted on the enforcement of the council provisos (Rev 2, 14.20). The "catholic" position on the relationship between grace and good works cannot be concluded from Paul alone: the other writings of the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers, reflecting Matthean, Petrine and Johannine strands, and especially James' point of view, must be taken into account to complete the picture. In other words, a "canonical reading" of Paul is essential. A one-sided point of view ultimately led to Marcionism.

Fortune was no kinder to Paul after his death than it had been during his lifetime. It seems that Luke's Acts of the "Apostles", in which only Peter, James and Paul figure, was written as an apology of Paul's activity against the longed for *damnatio memoriae* of extremist Jewish Christians. The success of the book saved not only Paul's memory but the corpus of his letters as well, as did the pseudepigraphical letters composed in the Pauline tradition.

In the second century problems of free will, election, good works and revelation came to the fore in the controversy against Gnosticism. Paul and John were commented by the Gnostics, some of whom even claimed Paul as their founder. The denial of physical free will in hylics and spirituals in the Valentinian school recalled the Pauline doctrine of our loss of *moral* freedom due to "sin" within us. Christian authors, now using the instrument of Greek philosophy, vehemently asserted the freedom of the will, never denying, howbeit reducing the action of grace. Origen's commentary on Romans, a masterpiece of theology, seemed to turn Paul inside out in its effort to defend free will against the Gnostics. The Alexandrian's influence on later writers, especially on the Greek Fathers, prolonged this tendency.

Marcion's exclusive adoption of Paul did not help the Apostle in the least. The "canon" was reduced by the Marcionites to ten letters of Paul and a revised version of Luke, with the total rejection of the Old Testament. In the controversy which ensued the ecclesial consciousness of a "canon", which had lain under the skin of Christian communities, emerged openly, and Pauline theology was balanced by other New Testament writings. In the third century Jewish Christianity was on the decline, moral problems and Church discipline were in the foreground, hence Paul was read as contributor to the solution of such problems rather than as an assertor of freedom from the Law.

Justin had been the first theologian to distinguish between ceremonial laws and moral laws valid for all. He also asserted, however, that Christ himself *is* the Law. Although Paul never made any distinction between the two aspects of the Law, it is true that whatever contemporary rabbis had said about the Torah, Paul attributed to Christ: its pre-existence, the assertion that the world had been created for the Torah, as well as other topics. The Law as pedagogue leading to Christ and its aspect as prophecy was given prominence by Justin.

The subsequent exegesis of the Pauline writings leading up to Augustine's teaching on justification, in the third and fourth centuries, is not easily summarised. With the exception of some fathers, e.g. Origen, Theodore and Ambrosiaster, who tried hard to enter into the mind of Paul's argumentation, ecclesiastical writers took up certain lemmas in the apostle's vocabulary and commented them within the context of the church situation in their own days.

Paul had been in controversy against Jews and Jewish-Christians. After the second century Christians converted from Judaism were in a vast minority. This did not prevent gentile converts from being attracted to Jewish practices and sometimes converting to the synagogue, which explains the *adversus judaeos* writings. The Fathers wrote for Christians converted from paganism who needed to be educated to give an example of serious moral living to the surrounding world. No wonder, then that law was emphasised as moral observance whose merit was salvation. Of course faith was not neglected, but was it a gift of total dedication to Christ or a virtue in the realm of man's freedom which merited further grace (as the younger Augustine later thought)? Certainly, faith was now connected with the assertion of right doctrine not to be separated from good moral behaviour, but it lost much of the dynamic force it possessed in Rom and Gal. Nor did grace recede into the background; the contemporary philosophical controversies themselves helped to elucidate God's action in eliciting righteousness, but the spectre of Gnosticism's denial of man's freedom of the will had never totally vanished, and Origen's preoccupation with this problem persevered in the writings of later writers.

Original sin and its consequences, "death", and "sin" interpreted as concupiscence, appeared in commentaries on Rom 5, 12-20, with an Eastern accent on the aspect of individual trespasses. The practice of infant baptism, so prominent in Augustine's argumentation against Julian, pointed to the awareness of inherited guilt.

Hence, systematising Pauline ideas in a later Church context falls more easily into the category of *Wirkungsgeschichte* than in that of exegesis. It is only when the Pelagian controversy arose that the

wheel turned full circle and circumstances very similar to those of Paul's day arose, which compelled Augustine to delve more deeply into Pauline thought. He never commented Romans fully because of its difficulty, but comments scattered here and there in his writings show that he picked inherited the spirit of the epistle in all its dynamism.

Or course, Augustine the everyday preacher and Augustine the anti-Pelagian debater should be distinguished: the former is concerned with the problems of his predecessors, become even more acute with the entry into the Church of many pagans subsequent to the peace accorded to the Church by Constantine; the latter is more concerned with a theological problem which brought the traditional emphasis on free will to its dire consequences.

It is hardly a caricature of Pelagianism if we summarise it as the denial of original sin, which had merely served as a bad example given to posterity, the power to observe God's commandments with a free choice unaided by any internal grace or supernatural help, Christ's death as an example of martyrdom, hence a deformed concept of redemption, the superfluity of infant baptism, and lastly, insistence on the need of good works through which we merit salvation.

This was analogous to the mentality of pharisaic rabbinism which lay behind much Jewish Christian thought: Law as a source of meritorious good works and as a guide to man's freedom against the temptations of the *yetzer ha-ra*. Augustine's task was to go to the roots of Paul's theology and deepen the concept of grace, a totally free gift of God, the necessity of faith through which God's help, understood as internal illumination of the mind and strengthening of the will, is acquired to be able to observe the commandments, the regaining of true freedom of the will which had been wounded by original sin, the need for baptism and of course, last but not least, the efficacy of Christ's teaching and his redemptive death source of the outpouring of the Spirit, whose gift of love overcomes concupiscence. Augustine never denied the physical freedom of the will in spite of his assertion that it had been morally reduced to near demise through the sin inherited from Adam. In all this controversy, the African bishop may have laid more emphasis on the moral than on the Christological aspect of righteousness, and on faith as a means of obtaining grace to perform good works, but he certainly did not deviate from Paul's main intuition that our human nature is impotent against the requirements of the Law because of the power of sin which came through Adam's fall, until the Law of the Spirit of Christ restored our true freedom before God. It is in this way that Christ is our true deliverer.

It should be clear from what we have said that the Fathers interpreted Paul canonically, that is, they did not abstract his writings from the rest of the New Testament, as Marcion had done. Matthew's Gospel was very widely received and read. James was taken into consideration. A Theology of righteousness and faith, therefore, had to include all points of view in the New Testament. It was Luther who, in a certain way, returned to Marcion's selection by making the doctrine of justification by faith the centre and criterion of the whole canon. Moreover, although he came very near to understanding Augustine as an interpreter of Paul, his unbalanced interpretation of the Apostle served also as a hermeneutical key for a mistaken understanding of Augustine, hence the attribution to the Bishop of Hippo of doctrines he had never held. It is up to the contributors of the following articles in the present volume to clarify these questions.

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The arguments toughed upon in this short introduction are very numerous, it is therefore impossible to provide an adequate bibliography on the subject. I shall enumerate only a few books and articles on some selected topics for further reading.

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