

COMMENTARY ON ROMANS

3:1 f.: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way."

In this profound passage, Paul gives an unexpected, but absolutely necessary, answer to the question, "Then what advantage has the Jew?" Instead of replying, "He has no advantage" (In vs. 9 below this is precisely the answer he does give!), he answers, "Much in every way." The significance of his reply is that it points to the curious relationship between the sovereign and transcendent God who refuses to be bound and the instruments which He employs to bring men to Himself. When, as a matter of plain historical fact, some thing, event, or person becomes the means whereby God lays His hand upon us, nothing subsequent to such a happening can undo that fact. Even though afterwards the particular vehicle of His grace be absolutized, even though men actually use it to their own condemnation and by its means separate themselves from Him, from their neighbors, and from themselves, the fact still remains that God has met men therein and still does so to the extent that the means of grace in question is truly and appropriately received. Paul rightly says (vss. 3 f.) that the faithlessness of men cannot affect the fact that the latter abides as a token of the unconditioned (i.e., "prevenient") love of God by means of which He has spoken and also now seeks to speak to them.

On the other hand, the negative answer to this same question which Paul gives in vs. 9 and which seems quite at odds with the one given in vs. 2 is clearly intended to point to the fact that the advantages of the history of revelation accrue only to one who inwardly (i.e., "existentially") appropriates that history and thereby submits to the judgment which it implicitly contains. Because men fail to do this--either by disobeying the particular commandments of the law, or by seeking to establish their own righteousness precisely by means of it (what we may call, following Bultmann, "radical disobedience"!)--Paul can also reply to the question, "What then? Are we Jews any better off?" by saying, "No, not at all . . . all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin."

4:13-15: "The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression."

Above (2:17-25), Paul clearly seems to see salvation as contingent upon obedience to the Law, while here he seems to contradict this by saying that "the promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the Law." The apparent contradiction is to be resolved, not, as Knox suggests, by treating 2:17 ff. as the discussion of a "largely hypothetical" case (although it is that!), but rather by interpreting Paul as saying that, although the fulfilment of individual life does turn upon obedience (i.e., "radical obedience"), it does not depend upon the

performance of certain works of obedience for the simple reason that the attempt to provide the latter is itself simply another form (the "radical" form !) of disobedience. In other words, the Law is in itself ambiguous, i.e., it may be understood in two senses: 1) as requiring "radical obedience" (or "faith"; cf. 1:5, 16:26); and 2) as requiring the realization of certain "works" which are in themselves unconditionally and unambiguously good. It is Paul's profound doctrine that insofar as man is a sinner he inevitably understands the Law in the latter sense, and it is for this reason that he can say "the Law brings wrath" (vs. 15) and, in general, can speak of "bondage to the law" as equivalent to "bondage to the sin," etc. On the other hand, he sees that insofar as the Law is understood in the first (i.e., in its intended or authentic) sense--insofar, in short, as one sees it demanding faith or trust in God's unconditional love and a radical turning away from oneself to Him who is the Creator of all good--one must reply to the question "Do we then overthrow the Law by this faith?" with an emphatic "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Law" (3:31). Thus Knox rightly observes that "there can be no question that the Pauline emphasis upon humble trust in God's mercy and power, as distinguished from reliance on good works, is in line with the deepest element in Hebrew-Jewish life and thought, and that the attitude of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:9-14) is as false to the true spirit of Judaism as it is to Christ's own teaching or to the gospel of Paul" (IB, ix, 447).

5:1: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we [or alt. "let us"] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The resolution of the textual problem, i.e., whether we are to read $\epsilon\chi\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu$ ("we have peace") or $\epsilon\chi\omega\mu\epsilon\nu$ ("let us have peace"), cannot affect the obvious intent of the Apostle. He certainly does not intend an independent or ungrounded imperative. However, the imperative emphasis (say, e.g., as it is conveyed by Moffatt's translation: "Let us enjoy the peace we have with God") is not without significance for Paul's total view. For, as he understands it, "faith" is not something we have once and for all (as a matter of fact, this is precisely what he understands the term "work" to describe!). It rather is something which lays hold of God's present offering by submitting ("obediently") to His present demand. It literally "enjoys" what God, in His infinite goodness and apart from all considerations of merit or worth, has prepared for those who love Him.

6:14a: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

It is by no means necessary to assume that the use of the future tense here (or, for that matter, in vss. 5 and 8!) points to a future "eschatological" state of affairs. For, quite apart from the prospects of a remote future, the future tense (like the imperatives in vss. 12 ff.) is appropriate simply because the unconditional gift of grace offered in justification is not a secure

possession, but something which must be laid hold of in every concrete situation. God wills to give us life and does give us life quite independently of our goodness or our merit. We are called upon simply to accept His gift, to submit ourselves to Him as the Creator, to let Him be God for us. Because of our capacity for self-transcendence, or for "otherness" present and future are for us indissolubly linked. To live as a creature (or as a "new creature") always means to be disposed in a certain way towards the future--and, in a genuine sense, what the present is is only realized in the future. It is by no means possible to eliminate the "futuristic" eschatological elements from Paul's thought without doing violence to it. On the other hand, however, a too facile use of the "in principle, but not in fact" formula tends always to give more weight to the "futuristic" elements than Paul himself is disposed to give to them. This verse should not be interpreted to mean: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not (= "will not be") under law but under grace." Rather, it should read: "For sin will have no dominion over you (now--in this now which is always also future!), since you (now!) are not under law but under grace." Knox's suggestion that Paul can speak in the indicative about the present primarily because he sees the future to be so imminent as to be in some sense already real stands in irreconcilable tension with his other profound insight that hope with respect to the future is so certain for Paul precisely because of God's (past-present!) deed in Christ and the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (5:5).

6:15-19: "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification."

In these verses, the difficulties which are involved in stating the precise relation between law and Gospel abound to the embarrassment and confusion of interpreters; but in that strange way which the Bible so often has the complex and profound truth of the matter here receives one of its classic statements. Because "faith," as Paul understands it is obedience (Bultmann), and, moreover, is precisely the obedience which the Law itself requires, it is impossible for him not to speak of it in ways which seem only to describe a new legalism. The attempt to write off Paul's analogy as "not too fortunately chosen [because] the natural opposite of slavery to sin is emancipation" (Knox, IB, ix, 484) overlooks the profound insight that emancipation in any true sense (and anything less than emancipation in this sense is in reality still slavery to sin!) is, paradoxically, also slavery--namely slavery

to God (or to "obedience" [vs. 16], or to "righteousness" [vs. 18]). But precisely because emancipation is slavery, Paul rightly sees that it may (and indeed must!) also be described as "obedien[ce] from the heart to the standard of teaching [i.e., the Law] to which you were committed." The important thing about such obedience, however (and this is why the obedience of faith is not a new legalism and is not "impersonal and sub-Christian" [Dodd]) is that it is "from the heart," i.e., is in every sense of the word "radical" (Bultmann).

The problem which bewilders Knox as to how Paul can, on the one hand, constantly speak in the indicative and, on the other hand, also exhort his readers to become what they are (!) arises only if one fails to understand what Paul is actually saying. For, according to his understanding of the Gospel, insofar as one is a Christian, one is (now!) "dead to sin," is (now!) a "slave of righteousness," is (now!) "not under law but under grace." However, it lies in the nature of the case that this Christian status (thus to speak of it is to contradict oneself!) can only be realized in the future --not, to be sure, in some more or less remote "eschatological" future, but in the immediately impending future of the concrete moment of decision. In other words, "faith" is not something which precedes "love." (In the last analysis, it is precisely this fact which makes the Niebuhrian formula, "in principle, but not in fact" inadequate.) Rather are they one decision--faith expressing itself in love, and love revealing the presence of faith. (This is the profound insight of Luther: "Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith." [W.A., viii, 361].) In this connection, it may also be observed that insofar as the formula, "in principle, but not in fact," has any value, it consists solely in the fact that it may be used to refer, on the one hand, to the possibility (actualized--not as an actuality, but as a possibility!--by God's love in Christ) for new life ("in principle"), which, insofar as it is unconditionally offered, may in some sense be said to be already real, and, on the other hand, to the realization of that possibility through faith (= "existential appropriation" = "radical obedience" = "letting oneself be crucified with Christ") in the concrete life of the believer ("in fact"), which, because it is never a static condition, but a matter of the existential moment (i.e., je mein Augenblick!), must in the nature of the case appear under the aspect of the imperative ("not yet") as well as the indicative. Knox's comment in relation to vs. 22, that the slavery of which Paul speaks here ("You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God") is "vastly different from slavery to a 'standard of teaching' or to 'righteousness' [vss. 17 and 18], and comes, we may be sure, much nearer to saying what Paul wanted to say" (IB, ix, 486) betrays his failure to see the ultimate coincidence of law and Gospel in Paul's thought and the essential harmony of all of the phrases which he can use to describe the condition of one who is "in Christ."

7:7 ff.

The solution of the age-old problem as to whether Paul is here describing his--and, by implication, also all other men's--pre-Christian or post-Christian experience, can in no way affect our understanding of the human situation which these vss. actually define. (I may remark, parenthetically, that for my own part it seems clear that, while there may be some reference to the tension which is undoubtedly characteristic of the latter, i.e., our post-Christian experience, it is the former which Paul is principally concerned to describe.) The problem to which Paul here directs our attention is not (as both Dodd and Knox assume) the problem classically formulated in Ovid's line: Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor. On the contrary, although he was, as he says elsewhere, "as to righteousness under the law blameless" (Phil. 3: 6), still he was constrained to cry out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" It is not the man who cannot realize his highest ideals who utters this desperate cry; rather is it the man who, having realized those very ideals, knows that he is still (and, more terrifyingly, perhaps even more emphatically) estranged from God, from his neighbor, and from his own true life. It is not so much that being righteous "by works of the law" is "impossibly difficult" (Knox [IB, ix, 556]), as it is that it is in itself self-contradictory. In other words, the interpretation of vs. 15 in terms of Ovid's line completely overlooks the truth which Luther grasped when he wrote at the beginning of his commentary on Romans, "the sum of this epistle is to destroy, root out, and extirpate all the wisdom and righteousness of the flesh . . . and to implant, establish, and magnify sin."

March 9, 1955