

PREFATORY NOTE

There is a pregnant and striking passage in one of the charges of Bishop Horsley, which may be said to embody the substance and intimate the scope of the following work on justification, — a work which has been esteemed one of the best productions of Dr. Owen. “That man is justified,” says Horsley, “by faith, without the works of the law, was the uniform doctrine of our first Reformers. It is a far more ancient doctrine, — it was the doctrine of the whole college of apostles; it is more ancient still, — it was the doctrine of the prophets; it is older than the prophets, — it was the religion of the patriarchs; and no one who has the least acquaintance with the writings of the first Reformers will impute to them, more than to the patriarchs, the prophets, or apostles, the absurd opinion, that any man leading an impenitent, wicked life, will finally, upon the mere pretense of faith (and faith connected with an impenitent life must always be a mere pretense), obtain admission into heaven.”

Dr Owen, in the “general considerations” with which he opens the discussion of this momentous subject, shows that the doctrine of justification by faith was clearly declared in the teaching of the ancient church. Among other testimonies, he adduces the remarkable extract from the epistle to Diognetus, which, though commonly printed among the works of Justin Martyr, has been attributed by Tillemont to some author in the first century. Augustine, in his contest with Pelagian error, powerfully advocated the doctrines of grace. That he clearly apprehended the nature of justification by grace appears from the principle so tersely enunciated by him, “Opera bona non faciunt justum, sed justificatus facit bona opera.” The controversy, however in which he was the great champion of orthodox opinions, turned mainly upon the renovation of the heart by a divine and supernatural influence; not so directly on the change of state effected by justifying grace. It was the clear apprehension and firm grasp of this doctrine which ultimately emancipated Luther from the thralldom of Romish error, and he clung to it with a zeal proportioned to his conviction of the benefit which his own soul had derived from it. He restored it to its true place and bearings in the Christian system, and, in emphatic expression of its importance, pronounced it “*Articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae.*” It had to encounter, accordingly, strong opposition

from all who were hostile to the theology of the Reformation. Both Socinus and Bellarmine wrote against it, — the former discussing the question in connection with his general argument against orthodox views on the subject of the person and work of Christ; the latter devoting a separate treatise expressly to the refutation of the doctrine of the Reformed churches regarding justification. Several Roman Catholic authors followed in his wake, to whom Dr. Owen alludes in different parts of his work. The ability with which Bellarmine conducted his argument cannot be questioned; though sometimes, in meeting difficulties and disposing of objections to his views from Scripture, he evinces an unscrupulous audacity of statement. His work still continues, perhaps the ablest and most systematic attempt to overthrow the doctrine of justification by faith. In supplying an antidote to the subtle disquisitions of the Romish divine, Dr. Owen is in reality vindicating that doctrine at all the points where the acumen of his antagonist had conceived it liable to be assailed with any hope of success.

To counteract the tendency of the religious mind when it proceeded in the direction of Arminianism, Calvinistic divines, naturally engrossed with the points in dispute, dwelt greatly on the workings of efficacious grace in election, regeneration, and conversion, if not to the exclusion of the free offer of the gospel, at least so as to cast somewhat into the shade the free justification offered in it. The Antinomianism which arose during the time of the Commonwealth has been accounted the reaction from this defect. Under these circumstances, the attention of theologians was again drawn to the doctrine of justification. Dissent could not, in those times, afford to be weakened by divisions; and partly under the influence of his own pacific dispositions, and partly to accomplish a public service to the cause of religion, Baxter made an attempt to reconcile the parties at variance, and to soothe into unity the British churches. Rightly conceiving that the essence of the question lay in the nature of justification, he published in 1649 his “Aphorisms on Justification,” in opposition to the Antinomian tendencies of the day, and yet designed to accommodate the prevailing differences; on terms, however, that were held to compromise the gratuitous character of justification. He had unconsciously, by a recoil common in every attempt to reconcile essentially antagonistic principles, made a transition from the ground of justification by faith, to views clearly

opposed to it. Though his mind was the victim of a false theory, his heart was practically right; and he subsequently modified and amended his views. But to his "Aphorisms" Bishop Barlow traces the first departure from the received doctrine of the Reformed churches on the subject of justification. In 1669, Bishop Bull published his "Apostolical Harmony," with the view of reconciling the apostles Paul and James. There is no ambiguity in regard to his views as to the ground of a sinner's acceptance with God. According to Bull "faith denotes the whole condition of the gospel covenant; that is, comprehends in one word all the works of Christian piety." It is the just remark of Bickersteth, that "under the cover of justification by faith, this is in reality justification by works." A host of opponents sprung up in reply to Baxter and Bull; but they were not left without help in maintaining their position. In support of Baxter, Sir Charles Wolsley, a baronet of some reputation, who had been a member of Cromwell's Council of State, and who sat in several parliaments after the Restoration, published, in 1667, his "Justification Evangelical." In a letter to Mr. Humfrey, author of the "Peaceable Disquisition", published subsequently to Owen's work and partly in refutation of it, Sir Charles, referring to Dr. Owen, remarks, "I suppose you know his book of Justification was written particularly against mine." There is reason to believe that Owen had a wider object in view than the refutation of any particular treatise. In the preface to his great work, which appeared in 1677, he assures the reader that, whatever contests prevailed on the subject of justification, it was his design to mingle in no personal controversy with any author of the day. Not that his seasonings had no bearing on the pending disputes, for, from the brief review we have submitted of the history of this discussion, it is clear that, with all its other excellencies, the work was eminently seasonable and much needed; but he seems to have been under a conviction, that in refuting specially Socinus and Bellarmine, he was in effect disposing of the most formidable objections ever urged against the doctrine of justification by grace, while he avoided the impleasantness of personal collision with the Christian men of his own times whose views might seem to him deeply erroneous on the point; and the very coincidence of these views, both in principle and tendency, with Socinian and Popish heresies, would suggest to his readers, if not a conclusive argument against them, at least a good reason why they should be carefully examined before they were embraced. His work,

therefore, is not a Meager and ephemeral contribution to the controversy as it prevailed in his day, and under an aspect in which it may never again be revived. It is a formal review of the whole amount of truth revealed to us in regard to the justification of the sinner before God; and, if the scope of the treatise is considered, the author cannot be blamed for prolixity in the treatment of a theme so wide. On his own side of the question, it is still the most complete discussion in one language of the important doctrine to which it relates. Exception has been taken to the abstruse definitions and distinctions which he introduces. He had obviously no intention to offend in this way; for, at the close of chap. 14, he makes a quaint protest against the admission of “exotic learning,” “philosophical notions,” and “arbitrary distinctions,” into the exposition of spiritual truth. In the refutation of complicated error, there is sometimes a necessity to track it through various sinuosities; but, in the main, the treatise is written in a spirit which proves how directly the author was resting on divine truth as the basis of his own faith and hope, and how warily he strove and watched that his mind might not “be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ”.

“A curious fact”, says Mr. Orme, “respecting this book, is mentioned in the Life of Mr. Joseph Williams, of Kidderminster: —’At last, the time of his (Mr Grimshawe’s, an active clergyman of the Church of England) deliverance came. At the house of one of his friends he lays his hand on a book, and opens it, with his face towards a pewter shelf. Instantly his face is saluted with an uncommon flash of heat. He turns to the title-page, and finds it to be Dr. Owen on Justification. Immediately he is surprised with such another flash. He borrows the book, studies it, is led into God’s method of justifying the ungodly, has a new heart given unto him; and now, behold, he prays!’ Whether these flashes were electrical or galvanic, as Southey in his Life of Wesley supposes, it deserves to be noticed, that it was not the flash but the book which converted Grimshawe. The occurrence which turned his attention to it, is of importance merely as the second cause, which, under the mysterious direction of Providence, led to a blessed result.”

Analysis. — The causes, object, nature, and use of faith are successively considered, chap. 1-3. The nature of justification is next discussed; —

first, under an inquiry into the meaning of the different terms commonly employed regarding it; and, secondly, by a statement of the juridical and forensic aspect under which it is represented in Scripture, 4. The theory of a twofold justification, as asserted by the Church of Rome, and another error which ascribes the initial justification of the sinner to faith, but the continuance of his state as justified to his own personal righteousness, are examined, and proved untenable, 5. Several arguments are urged in disproof of a third erroneous theory, broached and supported by Socinians, that justification depends upon evangelical righteousness as the condition on which the righteousness of Christ is imputed, 6. A general statement follows of the nature of imputation, and of the grounds on which imputation proceeds, 7. A full discussion ensues of the doctrine that sin is imputed to Christ, grounded upon the mystical union between Christ and the church, the suretiship of the former in behalf of the church, and the provisions of the new covenant, 8. The chief controversies in regard to justification are arranged and classified, and the author fixes on the point relating to the formal cause of justification as the main theme of the subsequent reasonings, 9.

At this stage, the second division of the treatise may be held to begin, — the previous disquisitions being more of a preliminary character. The scope of what follows is to prove that the sinner is justified, through faith, by the imputed righteousness of Christ. This part of the work embraces four divisions; — general arguments for the doctrine affirmed; testimonies from Scripture in support of it; the refutation of objections to it; and the reconciliation of the passages in the Epistles of Paul and James which have appeared to some to be inconsistent.

Under the head of “general arguments”, he rebuts briefly the general objections to imputation, and contends for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as the ground of justification; — first, from the insufficiency of our own righteousness, or, in other words, from the condition of guilt in which all men are by nature involved, 10; secondly, from the nature of the obedience required unto justification, according to the eternal obligation of the divine law, 11; and, as a subsidiary and collateral consideration, from the necessity which existed that the precept of the law should be fulfilled as well as that atonement should be rendered for the violation of it, — in

short, from the active as well as the passive righteousness of Christ; and here the three objections of Socinius, that such an imputation of Christ's obedience is impossible, useless, and pernicious, receive s detailed confutation, 12; thirdly, from the difference between the two covenants, 13; and fourthly, from the express terms in which all works see excluded from justification in Scripture, 14; while faith is exhibited in the gospel as the sole instrument by which we are interested in the righteousness of Christ, 15. The "testimony of Scripture" is then adduced at great length, — passages being quoted and commented on from the prophets, 16; from the evangelists, 17; and from the epistles of Paul, 18. The "objections" to the doctrine of justification are reviewed, and the chief objection, — namely, that the doctrine overthrows the necessity of holiness and subverts moral obligation, — is repelled by a variety of arguments, 19. Lastly, the concluding chapter is devoted to an explanation of the passages in Paul and James which are alleged to be at variance but which are proved to be in perfect harmony, 20. — Ed.