

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH.

BY THE REV. WM. WARE.

In his Epistles, Paul treats at large of the faith that justifies, or of justification by faith, as being the cardinal doctrine of the gospel. Such we believe it to be.

The doctrine which it is his purpose to exhibit and to enforce on the Roman converts was one which stood opposed, not to good works or holiness, but to the Jewish idea of being saved by the law of Moses,—by a careful observance of the rites, sacrifices, and minutest ceremonial of that law, denominated the *works of the law*. That was no Christianity, Paul contends, but mere Judaism. The Christian is saved or justified, he contends, not by such works or observances, but by faith,—a faith, as all his Epistles show, not which is a mere barren act of the mind supernaturally originated, but one that (in the only way possible) shows itself to be faith by its fruits. The Jew was, under Moses, justified by works; yet even he was not justified by works of the law alone. The Jewish religion was a system of morality, as well as of forms. To all his observance of the ritual, he must superadd virtue, or it was all as nothing. This everywhere appears in the Old Testament, and especially in our Lord's discourses with his countrymen in the New. But to him the works or observances of the law were absolutely indispensable; he could not, as a Jew, be justified before God, except he was faithful to the *whole* law,—to the moral law indeed, but equally so to the Levitical.

Christianity superseded the law of Moses. The ceremonial law was now dead. It was now under Christ faith simply, without rites. There was under Judaism faith in God, in his providence, in his word, in the future world,—but there were the *works of the law* also, alike imperative. Now, under Christ, there was faith, but none of those works; there was faith, as before, in God, his providence, his word, the future life, and in Jesus also, as the accredited messenger of God, and in the new forms of truth which he delivered. Justification, or salvation, now, under Christ, must come of this faith alone, without the works of the old law,—faith, I say, without those works; not without works of obedience, for then it were no longer faith at all, but without the works of the Jewish law.

This principle of faith in Christ, to the exclusion of all reliance on the observances of the Jewish law, Paul maintains to be the great principle of Christianity, as under the old law it was *faith, and the works of the law* also. Such we believe to be the great doctrine or fundamental truth or most comprehensive way of stating the Gospel. *Justification, or salvation, by faith,—justification or salvation by belief in God and Christ, and acting and living accordingly*—this we believe to be the sum of Christianity,—this, the Christian doctrine of justification by faith. It is the great natural principle of, as we may say, all good religion,—there can be no religion without this. It is all good religion with it. It was the religion of Abraham, and saved him. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness; it could not be otherwise. He stood justified by his faith. But what was the faith? It was faith which was an actuating principle of conduct, or real belief. He believed God, and the consequence was, that in obedience to the command of God he was ready to offer up his son Isaac. It was believing and doing, both in one, and he was accepted. And so everywhere, and in all times and places, he who first believes that God is, and requires a certain obedience, and gives it, is justified. Nothing else can be essential,—neither form, nor rite, nor other doctrine. Such faith is itself a complete and necessary justification. If he believed in God, and that he requires a certain obedience, and did not give it, such faith surely could never justify and save. It would be just as if he did not believe at all. It would be a faith without works of the moral law, belief, that is, without believing, and would be unavailing, or rather a damning, faith; it would be believing a truth and living a lie.

To illustrate this point. I believe, for example, that industry will save me from poverty. This is my faith. No matter what it is raises that belief in me, whether it come of instinct, or authority, or observation of life, it is enough that I believe that industry will save me from poverty. For if I am governed by that belief, if I act, that is, according to my belief, *I am saved*, or justified. If I did not act according to my faith, if I did not *work*, of course there would be no salvation: I should remain as poor as ever. Faith without works is dead. It can save neither body nor soul, neither in this world nor in the world to come. But faith that is followed or accompanied by works not only saves; it is a necessary principle of salvation; it cannot help saving you; no room remains for the operation of any other principle or doctrine. Such a doctrine as that of the Atonement [as commonly promulgated] cannot exist.

If I believe, no matter on what ground, but on some ground felt to be good and sure, that moderation and temperance will save me from disease, or, having fallen into it, will rescue me from it, and I act and live accordingly, *I am saved*; my faith is a justifying or saving principle.

And that, when the term faith is used in this way (and in the New Testament whenever this subject is spoken of), it necessarily includes the idea of a certain action consequent upon the faith, is clear from this, that by excluding it the proposition becomes a self-contradictory one. I believe, for example, being in imminent danger of death, yet earnestly desiring life, that a certain medicine will save my life. But is this belief, if I do not take the medicine? We can hardly separate the idea of acting from that of believing. Can it be said that I believe in the power of the compass to guide me over the waste of waters, and in the darkness of night and storm, and give me safe deliverance, if I did not steer my vessel as it points, but according to my own will or conjecture? But if I obey it, am I not, of necessity as it were, saved?

Such as this principle of faith is, in these several instances, is it in religion. If I believe in God and Christ, and act accordingly, —or believe them also, believe what they say,—my faith will justify or save me. I shall be held as just or right in what I have done. And here, as in the other instances, we cannot separate the idea of action from that of believing. It is a mere idle proposition to say I believe in God, or Christ, and do not act accordingly, do none of those things which I believe to be enjoined as essential; just as it would be to say, I believe that a draught of water will save my life, and yet not drink the water. My refusing to drink the water, would show I did not believe, whatever I might say; and the Christian asserting his faith, but refusing the obedience of the Gospel, shows he does not believe, whatever he may say, and that his faith cannot justify or save. And so every Christian, naming the name of Christ, but denying him in his life, shows that he does not believe, and therefore cannot be saved. He says that he believes in the waters of life, yet does not drink them. Who dare say such an one believes? He does not believe. The only faith that justifies, is the faith that obeys.

Perhaps this particular phrase, justification by faith, would never have been used, so liable as it is to misconception, had it not been for the pertinacity of the Jewish converts in adhering (though they would fain be Christians) to the law of observances also. But for the necessity of opposing the Jews in this, and insisting that faith in Christ, with its natural concomitants, was enough, without superadding the ceremonial law, Paul, like his Master, might have spoken only of faith and holiness, of belief and righteousness, as the grounds of acceptance with God, without contrasting them with the works of the Jewish law, by which no man other than a Jew could be justified, and which, through a misconception of the sense in which he used that phrase, laid the foundation of that astounding doctrine, that, in past ages, at least, has so much prevailed,—that good works, namely, virtue, or holiness, are of no avail, are but as filthy rags; faith alone, and independently of such works, justifying a man in the sight of God. But no one can read the Epistles with attention, or understand the position and feelings of the Jews of that time, and not perceive how unavoidable it was that the Apostle should come forward, not only with his authority as an Apostle, but with his arguments as a man, to defend the new church and its doctrine against their aggressions,—against their pertinacious endeavours to engraft their old law of ceremonial works upon the new law of Christian faith.

Once more, afterward, in the Middle Ages, errors again grew up around this subject, and justification by faith, not indeed in the sense in which we are now explaining it, was again the reasserted doctrine of the Reformation,—reasserted this time against the Romish dogma of merit,—of laying claim to eternal life as what was justly due, and actually purchased and paid for by alms deeds, gifts to the treasury of the church, self-inflicted penances, mortifications of the flesh, and so on. The doctrine of justification by faith lays stress, indeed, upon all sorts of good works; but it differs from the Romish doctrine in two particulars: first, inasmuch as it does not admit that, perform as many virtuous acts as we please or can, we can ever lay claim to eternal salvation as our equal due, it is still, it maintains, of grace,—a gift far exceeding any human merit; and secondly, inasmuch as it denies all merit to mere ceremonial or other acts, unless they are the fruit of a right principle. Acts of virtue flowing from any corrupt motive, outward forms of worship, how numerous soever, except they are the expression of a genuine piety, are vanity or worse. It is not and cannot be the works alone that justify or save; but good works that are the fruit of a

genuine faith, that proceed from a good principle. This is very obvious. For suppose I distributed largely of my substance to feed the poor, or was liberal in support of the church, or filled the world with the noise of my zeal, or covered the earth with missionaries of the truth, but only because in these ways I turned apparent virtues to my own worldly account, the faith that issued in such works could never justify. The root must be good, or the fruit is corrupt.

If these things are just and true, how, we may well ask, can there be any other doctrine in religion than this of justification by faith? It expresses the whole of religion in the briefest conceivable form and language. It appears to exhaust the whole of both speculative and practical religion.

How else, then, let us ask, first, than by this doctrine can a man be justified and saved? and, secondly, how can it be that he shall not be justified by faith?

I. How else can a man be justified?

How wonderful that it could ever be thought, that any other quality or possession could save the soul beside virtue, or holiness! and that, if by a divine teacher salvation were ever ascribed to faith, in a single word, without further explanation, it could be supposed for a moment to be any faith but such as comprises virtue as a part of it! How melancholy to consider that that great and blessed hope which God has set before us—of living again after death in more glorious scenes, where knowledge, and virtue, and happiness shall be experienced in measures now beyond our conception—should suffer the degradation it has, even among the followers of Jesus!—the degradation of its possession being made to depend upon every thing else almost, rather than upon that purity of heart, that solid virtue, that likeness of Christ, from which alone we are sure it can proceed. The least reflection, we should suppose, would convince the mind that, as it cannot be happy, or saved, or justified, even in this life, but through virtue; it could not, for the same or stronger reason of the same kind, in any other life. But while it has felt the truth of the first part of this proposition, and acknowledged that we are here truly blessed only as we are morally upright, spiritually risen with Christ, the future happiness has, at the same time, with a strange and unaccountable inconsistency, been made conditional upon acts or states of mind with which virtue may have nothing to do. Earth can be enjoyed and truly possessed, it is admitted, only through holiness; heaven, many ways beside. Earth can be inherited only by the meek, the peacemakers, the pure in heart; heaven, even by the violent, the unjust, the impure, provided they have conformed to certain other requirements, fulfilled certain other conditions, held certain doctrine, belonged to what is styled the true church.

And when asked, therefore, how else a man shall be saved or justified than by a genuine faith in Christ, producing the fruits which alone show it to be genuine, we answer, readily, in no other way possibly, we believe. It is justification by faith, by a faith that believes, and acts as it believes, which we hold to be the Gospel method, the Christian doctrine of life and salvation. Without hesitation, we reject all other doctrines that are ever substituted for this. In this, with joyful confidence, we place our trust. And we ask, in the last place, accordingly, in the assurance that only one answer can be returned,—

II. How can it be that a man shall not be justified by faith?

We believe he is justified by faith, and that no other conditions are imposed or necessary to be complied with. A proper faith cannot but justify and save; it achieves the whole work; no more remains for any other principle to effect. To revert, in illustration, to an example already used;—if poverty and want are evils from which I wish to be saved, and I firmly believe that industry is the principle of conduct that will save me from them, and I act accordingly, I am saved; and so far as that particular evil which I dreaded is concerned, there is no more to be done. No other doctrine, principle, or act can do more for me; the benefit is secured, the salvation is effected, the justification is complete. Nothing remains to be added; I am saved from the evil, and, by that faith I had, was necessarily saved. They are connected together as cause and consequence. To believe so was of necessity to be saved.

Is it otherwise in the matter of Christian faith? We ask if it can be otherwise than that a man shall be justified by faith? Is it not here, as in the instance just given, a necessary principle of justification? I believe in Jesus Christ, in his commission from the Father, in his authority as the Son of God. I not only believe in him, but I believe him: What he has taught and enjoined I believe. I believe that he has shown the true path to heaven. I believe that all the evils which overwhelm the soul

after death, he has shown me how to escape. I so implicitly believe in him, and believe him also, (that he is true in all he has called upon me to do as his believer,) that my actions and my whole life are in accordance with my faith. I have believed and have acted according to my belief. How can it be that I shall not be justified? I have believed the precepts of Jesus, and acted accordingly. He showed me how to walk and live; I believed him, and walked and lived accordingly. I believed in the virtues he enjoined upon me, and sought them. I believed in the destructive nature of the sins he taught me to shun, and eschewed them. I believed him when he enforced upon me the love of God and the love of man as comprising the sum of the commandments, and I fixed in my heart God's love and the love of my brother-man. I believed him, in a word, when I said, "These (the wicked) shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal," and I followed after righteousness with my whole heart. Such being my faith, shall it not to me, as to Abraham, be counted for righteousness? Has it not saved me? Has it not justified me? What can any other principle, act, or doctrine do for me more, which my faith has not already done? Is not the benefit secured, the salvation effected, the justification complete? Not that any obedience of man can be such as to lay claim to salvation. There can be no proportion whatever, any more than between finite and infinite, between man's best obedience and the recompense of eternal life; that recompense is of grace. Not that any obedience of man can be such as to lay claim to salvation; but that, by the best obedience he can give, he complies with the conditions prescribed,—prescribed not by the justice, but by the boundless compassion of God, who knows our frame and remembers that we are dust,—and so may humbly hope for a life to which merit could never lay claim, but which mercy has freely promised, and freely bestows, upon our imperfect, but sincere, obedience.

If such as has now been stated be the character of the faith to which justification is ascribed by Paul, viz: such a belief, confidence in another, as to constrain to a corresponding obedience as absolutely a part of that confidence, we cannot be surprised that often by our Lord salvation is assured to Faith alone. They who had faith in Jesus, who believed him when on earth,—see to what it led them!—to what labors, to what disinterestedness, to what sacrifices, to what sufferings,—to what deaths! Their faith was also righteousness. And now to what a high and holy life is the believer in Jesus drawn! The true believer in Jesus now, as at first, renounces all to follow Christ. He is not obliged to leave now, as at first, father or mother, or estates. He may retain them all; but he is obliged to renounce and deny himself in view of the requirements of the Gospel. If he believes not only in Jesus, but what Jesus has said, he necessarily (else he does not really believe) denies his evil desires, passions, envy, lust, and pride. He puts on the righteousness of Christ, as well as assumes his name; he receives his spirit, and it possesses and rules him wholly. Nor, to effect his salvation, is any other doctrine or principle needed. Just, precisely just, as believing in and believing the compass saves the mariner, and cannot but save him, so believing in and believing Jesus saves the sinner, and necessarily saves him; and as the seaman, in the tempest and darkness of the midnight ocean, tossing amid a thousand dangers, can be saved in no other way, so the Christian, driven about and beset by yet worse evils, can be saved in no other way; but let him only believe and he shall be saved.

Then why are we not saved? Why is it that the night has come and we are not saved?—that salvation is as far off as when we first believed? Because we have not believed. Our belief is a name, a pretence, a form, not a reality, not a faith of the heart, and so not possibly a justifying faith. Whose life almost does not show that he does not truly, fully believe in Jesus? Are these believers of Jesus whom we behold contradicting every day both his life and his spirit? who, by their vices, their sloth, their ingratitude, their worldliness, their earthly and sensual lives, crucify the Lord afresh,—are these believers? No, but the most genuine of unbelievers. They may be believers in him,—that, testimony may compel them to be,—but they are not believers of him. They give the lie to his spirit and his precepts. Let them believe with the heart, and it shall then be counted to them for righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Printed for the Committee of
THE MONTREAL UNITARIAN SOCIETY
AND PUBLISHED MONTHLY.
TERMS.—2s. 6d. PER ANNUM, exclusive of Postage.
DORRICE AND MANLY, PRINTERS.