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ARTICLE III.

PERSONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS.

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IN the Jewish religious thought which developed after Ezra, righteousness came to have a predominantly formal and even forensic meaning. This is eminently true of the Pharisaic theology. In the epistles of Paul, who was rigorously trained in the Pharisaic theology, there is a marked survival of this meaning,[1] alongside of a deeper, more ethical, and more spiritual meaning. From him comes the use of righteousness in a forensic sense which we find in theology from the days of Augustine down to the time of Charles Hodge.

Forensic righteousness is an objective state of freedom from the demands of law, and does not necessarily involve any consideration of character.[2] Personal righteousness, on the contrary, has nothing to do, fundamentally, with legal relations, and has everything to do with character and that conduct which is the proper result and expression of character. In Christian theology, "righteousness" has been used both in the formal and in the ethical sense. This is unfortunate, though quite explicable, and perhaps even inevitable. The earliest idea of righteousness was outward conformity to an objective law, and it had not necessarily any moral significance. With the development of moral thought and life, the deeper and essentially spiritual meaning came in. Even among the Hebrews, previous to the rise of the great prophets of the eighth cen-

[1] See, however, American Journal of Theology, January, 1897, p. 149 ff.
[2] See Hodge's Systematic Theology, Vol. iii. pp. 119, 141.

tury before Christ, there was no necessary connection between righteousness and sinlessness. For us it is difficult to conceive of righteousness as purely formal, except as we have been schooled in a certain artificial habit of theological thinking; and even those of us who have been so schooled, the moment we leave the domain of theology and pass into the realm of ethics or ordinary moral thought, instinctively drop every trace of the purely formal idea.

Much discussion and confusion of thought have been caused by the use of the same word to designate two ideas so different that they do not belong on the same plane. More than this, Christian theology has vastly suffered from the anachronism of perpetuating the archaic meaning of the word and putting it on the same plane with the later and vital meaning, thus destroying the perspective of moral progress.

Whatever merely formal meaning righteousness once may have had, its predominant, if not exclusive, meaning now is essentially moral. The righteous man is not one who is declared free from penalty, but one who does not deserve penalty, and this guiltlessness is but the negative side of a character of which the positive side is actual worthfulness.

What is righteousness? In the last analysis it must be a quality of a person. One cannot properly predicate it of a thing or of an impersonal being. The word connotes all the elements of personality. It implies also a standard to which both the actions and the nature of personality conform. Still further, it involves the idea of relation to other personalities. This must be the case even in our conception of the righteousness of God, for the relation of persons to one another is the absolutely necessary condition of moral action. I do not see how it is possible to predicate any moral quality of a person who is absolutely out of relation to other persons. If God were conceived of

as solitary in the universe, he could not be characterized as righteous. If the righteousness of God be defined as the absolute correspondence of the divine action with the perfect divine nature, it is still true that he could not be righteous, since action, to be moral at all, must terminate upon, or have reference to, other moral beings. Moral action is thinkable only in the sphere of moral relations, and moral relations necessarily imply moral beings subsisting in relation to one another. If, then, we posit the righteousness of God as the norm or standard by which to determine what is righteousness in man, it is because we conceive of God only as in relation to other persons. If we define righteousness as one's conformity to the law of his own being, we deal in pure and fruitless abstraction, save as we conceive of actual or possible relations between persons; and this is as true of God as it is of man. Practically, then, righteousness is rightness of moral relation. In God it is rightness of relation to his creatures, that rightness of relation realizing itself in the perfect conformity of his action toward his creatures with his own perfect nature. Being perfect, he must act perfectly, and in that perfect action he is righteous.

As applied to God the term "righteousness" inclusively characterizes all his actions, and consequently all his relations. Whatever he does is right, because he is in right relations to all his creatures,—in those which we define as judicial or punitive, as well as those which we define as beneficent or merciful.

Whatever theory we may follow as to the source and development of moral ideas and actions among men, if we press our inquiry far enough, we shall see that our moral progress is simply progress in the discovery of the righteousness of God. Our systems of ethics are but attempts at interpretation and application of the principles of the divine action.

Revelation is the disclosure of the divine being and nature as manifested in action toward the universe of moral beings; specifically, it is a disclosure of the divine righteousness. When we say that God is holy, we affirm that there is in him no moral imperfection, and no possibility of unrighteous moral action. When we say that God is love, we affirm that his action is perfectly beneficent. But in making these predicates of God, we assume relations between God and other things, and back of this we cannot go; for, the moment that we pass in thought back of all relations, we pass beyond the power to use moral terms at all. Having said that revelation is a disclosure of the divine righteousness, we do not really add to the thought, when we say that it is a disclosure also of the divine love; for, in the very nature of the case, love is a manifestation, or realization, of the rightness of relations which righteousness is. God is manifested to his creatures by and through his action toward them. Of course the term "action," as moral, expresses every form of movement toward other personalities, whether it be of the judgment, the feeling, or the will. The full elaboration of the divine righteousness must give us in completeness the relation of God to all moral beings.

The familiar contention as to whether love or holiness is fundamental in the divine nature has significance only for the pure metaphysics of theology. Practically, the righteousness of God is the perfect consistency of his action with his nature; and whether we define his nature as perfect holiness or perfect love is immaterial, since his nature is manifested only through his action, that is, through his relation to other beings. Most of our reasoning on the divine standard of righteousness, or the ultimate ground of moral obligation, is reasoning in a circle, since we must always go back to God for the principle of his action; which principle we can know only by means of his action.

To put the matter a little more specifically, we learn by experience, that is, the historic experience of humanity, that God is always disposed to do what is good, what is for the benefit of his creatures; and this is a fundamental element of our religious faith and moral conviction. But when we seek to define what is good, what is for the benefit of moral beings, we must return to God for our fundamental idea, and discover that through the divine action.

The righteousness of God must be all-inclusive, so that every manifestation of his will toward his creatures is some aspect of his righteousness. Nothing in the revelation of God can limit this; nothing can be other than this; which is the ever-perfect correspondence of his action with his own perfect nature.

When, then, we say that God is righteous, we declare that he is in right relations to all his creatures, and that rightness of relation is determined by himself.

When we turn to consider what is righteousness in man, our conclusion is determined by what is true of God. In man, also, righteousness fundamentally is rightness of relation. Man exists in relations to God and to his fellow-beings. In some sense, also, he exists in relation to himself, since he can, and does, act on himself; yet his relation to himself is made possible, at least in consciousness, only by the existence of others than himself, and his consciousness of them. God, the perfectly righteous being, is the ideal standard of human righteousness. Righteousness in man, therefore, is conformity to the nature of God. God, in agreement with his perfect nature, ever wills the perfectly good toward man. His righteousness is an expression of his love; his love is a manifestation of his righteousness. As Dr. Newman Smyth has phrased it, "Righteousness is the eternal genuineness of the Divine love." It "is not, therefore, an independent excellence to

be contrasted with, or even put in opposition to, benevolence; it is essential part of love."[1]

In man, righteousness is conformity to God; that is, it is conformity of action to the will of God, or the perfect law of love, and conformity of character to the nature of God, or the perfect divine holiness. To be righteous is to be like God,—in perfectly right relations to all other beings. Hence, righteousness, for man, is salvation, in the complete sense of that word.

There seem to be three stages in the development of the idea of personal righteousness: (1) In its elementary form, it is obedience to a specific divine command or law, in which emphasis is laid, mainly if not entirely, on act. More fully developed, it becomes (2) correspondence of disposition and purpose with moral requirement, in which the emphasis passes from act to spirit and motive. Finally, it becomes (3) conformity of character to a moral ideal, in which the emphasis is on the quality of the inner life and its expression in all manifestations of the inner life.

In the advance from each stage to the next, nothing real is left behind. Obedience to law is carried up to a higher plane. The interpretation of law is widened, and obedience to it is seen to involve the inner motions of the spirit which are the springs of conduct. From this the evolution proceeds naturally to the perception of law, not merely as precept but as the expression of personality, and obedience becomes response to a spiritual attraction. Formal similarity of action becomes essential likeness of moral being.

Righteousness necessarily involves, if it does not presuppose, freedom; for it is of its very essence that it shall be conformity of will, that is, of desire and purpose, of appetency and choice, to the divine nature. It is, indeed, the realization of freedom, for freedom is voluntary conformity

[1] Smyth, Christian Ethics, p. 227.

to perfect law; there is no other freedom for moral beings.

The idea of righteousness, in its primary form, we find clearly and abundantly illustrated in the Old Testament Scriptures. Apparently, before the rise of the Hebrew prophets and historians of the eighth century B.C., there was little, if any, conception of righteousness among the Hebrew people higher than that of objective obedience to specific divine command, voiced by lawgiver or seer or priest. "The ideas of right and wrong among the Hebrews," says Robertson Smith, speaking of the eighth century and preceding times, "are forensic ideas; that is, the Hebrew always thinks of the right and the wrong as if they were to be settled before a judge. Righteousness is to the Hebrew, not so much a moral quality as a legal status." Again, speaking of the time of Isaiah's ministry, he says: "Jehovah's righteousness is nothing else than kingly righteousness in the ordinary sense of the word, and its sphere is the sphere of his literal sovereignty—that is, the land of Israel."[1] The prophets, however, grasped the idea of an ethical righteousness which had in it the germ, at least, of the deeper spiritual idea that attained supreme expression in the teaching of Jesus Christ. "In the language of the prophets," says Schultz, "those Israelites are called righteous who take up a right position to God's revealed will; who, from an honest regard for God and their neighbor, obey, alike in their willing and doing, the divine commandments."[2] Similarly, Toy says: "The elements of the prophetic preaching of righteousness were two: the worship of Yahweh alone, and obedience to the rules of social ethics. This is the controlling view in the Old Testament." In the later time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he continues, "we find the first traces of a new spiritual conception of righteousness in the 'new heart'" of

[1] Robertson Smith, The Prophets of Israel, pp. 71, 245.
[2] Schultz, Old Testament Theology, p. 23.

which those prophets speak. "Deeper reflection on the inner experiences of man, and the recognition of a higher standard of life, led the better religious thinkers to the conviction that true righteousness could not be defined merely as a series of acts of obedience; that it must proceed from a heart whose impulses were in harmony with the divine standard of right."[1] This conception is deepened and intensified in later times, especially in the post-exilic period. But, it is to the New Testament and to Jesus Christ that we must look for the full spiritual idea of righteousness which lifts it to the highest plane, and makes it conformity of character to the nature of God, expressed in the ideal precept, "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In the teachings of Jesus, the principle of obedience to law or command survives, but every trace of the merely forensic idea of righteousness has disappeared. Personal righteousness fills the entire field. In his teaching, righteousness is the complete correspondence of action with the law of love, and perfect conformity of character to the nature of God. It is, indeed, through his inculcation and exemplification of the law of love as the imperative and adequate law of all human action that he most clearly and impressively reveals the truth that God is love.

Of righteousness, so conceived, the objective standard which he presents is not a law or a series of precepts, but *himself*, in whom God is revealed in terms of human action and character. To be like Jesus is to be morally like God, that is, to be righteous. Here is the perfect moral norm for humanity. Life, not precepts merely, is to be the guide of life; personality, not legislation, furnishes the molding force by which human character is to be fashioned into perfection.

It does not fall within my province to discuss the ques-

[1] Toy, Judaism and Christianity, pp. 234, 235.

tion how righteousness, thus conceived, is to be attained, at least from the point of view of theology. The theological exposition of atonement, justification, and sanctification, I willingly leave to others. The truth that I am minded to present and enforce, with such clearness and vigor as I can command, is simply this: Righteousness is conformity of conduct to the will of God, and likeness of character to the nature of God, as these are revealed in the perfect life and character of Jesus Christ. The mission of Christianity is the presentation and attempted realization of this ideal.

Sin is not an abstract, constructive depravation of human nature, and consequent subjection to the divine condemnation; it is practical and actual unconformity of man to God in disposition and action. Salvation, as a spiritual process, is becoming righteous. It is not escape from the penalty of violated law, for penalty itself is a means to righteousness, and, therefore, to salvation. Faith is not a mere means of salvation; it is the conscious beginning of salvation, for it is the voluntary movement of the soul toward God. Everything in "the scheme of redemption" is tributary to this end,—the realization and fulfilment of righteousness in the individual soul and, through it, the realization and fulfilment of righteousness in the race.

Righteousness is thus an ideal, ever pursued, and never perfectly attained; and yet always in process of attainment, as those who seek it press their way toward the goal of divine perfection. The pursuit continually raises the level of life, and makes clearer the spiritual vision. Man's moral progress is measured quite as much by his growth in capacity to apprehend the moral ideal, as it is by the efforts which he makes to realize his ideal in conduct. In a true sense, righteousness is the proper end of human endeavor. Man cannot make pleasure, or possession, or knowledge, or even power, his supreme end without fail-

ing of his highest destiny; but he finds at once inexhaustible inspiration, and the fullest scope for his entire nature, in the pursuit of likeness to God.

Personal righteousness involves, then, (1) faith in God as the perfectly good and holy One. Our conception of God is surely determinative of our conception of righteousness. Israel made a tremendous advance beyond other nations of antiquity when, through whatever means, it grasped the idea of a moral Deity. The development of man's ideal of righteousness has gone on *pari passu* with the development of his perception of the character of God; and by his faith the character of God has become in some real sense his ideal of character in himself. Morality may coexist with atheism, but atheism is not conducive to morality. The same may be said of agnosticism and righteousness, which is morality expanded and spiritualized by religion. In a sense we may say that our capacity for conceiving a moral ideal is simply our capacity for faith in God, for true faith is a perception of moral excellence as well as power higher than our own, and confidence in that superior moral excellence and power. But the heart of man cannot, and does not, repose on an abstraction. The Higher-than-we is a personality—an intelligence, a sensibility, and a will—that, just because it is both *like* and *higher*, becomes at once an ideal and an object of trust. Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the moral ideal of the prophets and of those who received their teaching, and the ideal became an efficient cause of righteousness in the people, just in proportion to their faith. It is faith in God which makes God the ideal of righteousness for man, and, at the same time, that faith is a constitutive element in man's righteousness. Now, one may have this faith, and pursue the ideal of righteousness which it apprehends, with no knowledge of Jesus Christ; but his ideal will be faint and defective without the *personal* rev-

elation of the divine character which, in a preëminent degree, is given in Christ. Christian faith grasps, not merely the being of God, but the full content of the idea of God which Christ expressed. Hence in Christian righteousness,—which is not a special kind of righteousness, but righteousness unfolded and exalted by the faith that the revelation through Christ makes possible,—faith is an essential element, because it is a vastly enlarged and exalted apprehension of the divine excellence.

Personal righteousness involves (2) the recognition of man as the child of God, and as having, therefore, his proper ideal of character and conduct in God. To the Hebrew mind, man was the subject of God; to the Christian mind, man is the son of God. In the revelation through Christ, divine Sovereignty passes into divine Fatherhood, and human subject-ship into human sonship. Whatever may have been his origin and the process of his coming into proper manhood, there must be in man the germ and possibility of a true likeness to God. The aspiration for righteousness involves the recognition of this nascent likeness as the very basis on which alone it can be rationally indulged.

As Christ has given a clear revelation of the nature of God and his disposition toward mankind, so also he has given a true revelation of the spiritual nature of man and his right relations to God. What man may be, and is divinely meant to be, is seen in the character and life of Christ. That this is true appears in the fact that man's conception of God and his ideal of human character have never advanced a hair's-breadth beyond the conception of God and the ideal of human character given by Christ. Indeed, all our moral progress has been but slow approximation to the ideal embodied in Christ.

In taking Christ as the revelation of the perfect man, we should have in mind the truth, that the entire perfection

of man involves the unfolding and fulfilment of his nature and powers on every side. This truth defines and limits the revelation. The historical Christ is not the complete man, furnished with all the culture—the arts, the sciences, the capabilities, and the skill—of the ideally complete man, the being of which even present man is but embryo and prophecy. There is, indeed, in Christ's easy mastery over nature an anticipatory hint of what man may attain to in power over his environment; but his main function, as the revealer of possible human character, is to exhibit the divine idea of the moral and spiritual man. This, however, is of preëminent significance. All culture, all arts and inventions, and powers of hand and intellect and æsthetic perception,—all that is comprised in the ideally complete man, the product of his long and varied discipline,—has its ultimate result and expression in the perfectness of his moral nature. In Christ the moral ideal is presented without a flaw: it is the unexhausted and inexhaustible ideal of the spiritual life which ever torments and entices us with its unattained excellence. In him, obedience to God, love to man, purity of desire, loftiness of thought, perfectness of moral judgment, mercifulness, justice, compassion, meekness, dignity, self-respect, and the capacity for self-sacrifice, reach their highest conceivable expression. In him, righteousness is seen to be not merely, nor mainly, negative—the absence of evil, but positive and energic—the purpose and potency of all good. The active virtues join with the passive virtues in constituting the complete moral man. Thus, in the perfect humanity of Christ, we recognize the remote but real possibility of every man, as he recognized in every soul, however debased by sin, the child and human miniature of God.

Personal righteousness involves, therefore, (3) love to God and love to man. These cannot be separated. Love

to God is affinity for, and aspiration toward, the highest excellence in quality and expression of life. It is simply inconceivable that one can really love God and not love those creatures which, like himself, and as entirely as himself, are the expressions of the divine procreative energy and the objects of the divine love. Love is the efficient motive to righteousness. By the personal revelation of God and his love to mankind we are quickened with the desire and strength to seek righteousness. In this sense only can God be said to give righteousness, for righteousness is a personal achievement, wrought out under the attraction exerted by the manifested divine nature, and through the discipline of the divine schooling of man, the norm of righteousness being not a law,—a rule of conduct, with its sanctions of reward and penalty,—but a righteous personality. The ideal of righteousness presented in Christ is commensurate with the whole of human life. We exist in many relations; we are drawn into many kinds of activity; we are subjected to many and various trials,—but, in all, the true principle of our attitude and action is found in the divine righteousness revealed in Christ.

Is personal righteousness identical, then, with morality? Yes, if our idea of morality is broad and deep enough to comprehend the whole of conduct, with its inevitable implications of character. Is it identical with religion? Yes, if our idea of religion is wide and capacious enough to include the whole of our relation to God.

"The moral life of the individual," says the most penetrating interpreter of Browning's religious thought, "is the infinite life in the finite. The meaning of the universe is moral, its last meaning is rightness; and the task of man is to catch up that meaning, convert it into his own motive, and thereby make it the source of his actions, the inmost principle of his life. This, fully grasped, will bring the finite and the infinite, morality and religion, together,

and reconcile them."[1] These words suggestively state the truth from the ethical point of view; from the religious point of view, the meaning of the universe is spiritual, and its ultimate meaning is righteousness, the integration of God and man in one moral life, and the perfect revelation of the divine holiness and love in and through the perfection of human character in likeness to God.

[1] Jones, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher, p. 74.