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THE INFLUENCE OF ROMAN LAW ON
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AND ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE
CHURCH

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PREFACE

It is to St. Paul we owe that body of doctrine which has exerted the most profound influence on the thought of the Christian Church. Though the foundation of Christianity rests upon the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of the Divine Redeemer, the details of which are preserved for all time by those who wrote the Gospels, yet it was not from those records, or their authors, that the greatest impulse was derived for the propagation of the new religion: that came from St. Paul. A new conception as to the import of Christ’s death was introduced by his teaching, which marked an advance upon the views prevailing amongst his predecessors. It involved the recognition of Jesus, rather as the Divine Redeemer than the Messiah, disclosing a deeper significance in His death and risen life, and unfolding new aspects of His personality and mission.

Such differences have prompted some to insist that the grandly simple Gospel of
Jesus has been misrepresented and obscured by the Pauline teaching. But while there are differences, there is no contradiction in the revelation proceeding from the Master and His servant. The earlier conception was inadequate, and in St. Paul, God was continuing to complete the revelation of His Son.

As his doctrine differs in type from that of other apostles, so St. Paul's method differs for the propagation of what he terms 'my gospel,' and in the following chapters an attempt is made to outline some of those methods whereby he utilised the Roman system of law—either in its pure form, or modified by contact with Oriental customs—and the Imperial administration as an auxiliary to his aim. Principles of contemporary law supplied him with not a few terms and figures whereby he could translate into current speech some of those profound spiritual conceptions for which those to whom he preached possessed no corresponding terms; this, too, whether he was engaged in controversy for the defence of Christian principles, or stimulating the spiritual aspirations of his converts.

There is an aversion on the part of some to the 'forensic type of thought,' in connec-
tion with the phenomena of the spiritual life, but its use is a marked feature of the Pauline writings and its study well repays investigation. Professor G. B. Stevens observes (Pauline Theology, p. 46): “When the interpreter permits his distaste for legal analogy to lead him to deny its predominance in St. Paul’s doctrine, and to explain away the natural force of his words in accordance with that denial, he is but conforming his interpretation to theological prepossession and making impossible a sound and impartial exegesis of the Apostle’s writings.”

Owing to the fact that the major portion of the following pages was written before the author had opportunity to consult Professor Deissmann’s recent book, Light from the Ancient East, only a very limited use of that work was possible. But in view of the design which prompted these chapters, it is important to observe the convincing proofs Deissmann has adduced, that many hitherto unsuspected passages have, as a background, an intimate connection with contemporary law and usage, especially conceptions relating to ‘freedom,’ ‘redemption,’ and ‘deliverance’ from sin and the law. The author’s object is to exhibit certain aspects of St. Paul’s teach-
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ing as they appealed to the minds of his contemporaries. Though often overlooked, their recognition frequently discloses an underlying import, even in passages which by reason of their familiarity fail to convey the original significance. This is well illustrated by Deissmann’s remark on the Pauline metaphor of slavery: “To the total effacement of its ancient signification, in our Bibles, is owing the fact that one of the most popular appraisals of the work of Christ by St. Paul and his school has been, I think, only vaguely understood by us” (p. 323).

It is true that it was St. Paul “who, after Jesus, laid firm the foundation of the Churches that are in Christ”; but, in the Divine Providence, Rome was ordained to be an unconscious agent to minister to that end. That he was able to testify “from Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum, I have freely preached the Gospel of Christ,” was in no small measure due to Imperial influences. Had Rome realised that she was permitting the growth of a society destined to challenge her supremacy, the history of the early Church would have been very different. But before Rome really comprehended the meaning and issues of