

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

Church Association Tract 430

THE Holy Scriptures and the Creeds founded on them teach that “the Word was made flesh,” and this “for us men and for our salvation.” We may take that truth fully, and even rejoice in the bold epigram of Athanasius, “God was made man in order that we might be made God,” but we shall be far from the meaning of the Nicene Creed and of its great champion if we fail to realise the subordination of the Incarnation to the Atonement, or to avow the centrality of the Cross. Principal Grensted, whose leanings to “Modernism” are held in check by learning and fairness, has well said, “It was, indeed, by the fact of Redemption that rival doctrines of the Trinity or of the Incarnation were tested.” (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 33.) And he subjoins this important footnote:—

“This is the key to the history of the great heresies of the fourth and fifth centuries. The appeal to redemptive value as the necessary condition to be satisfied by any doctrinal theory is well shown, for example, in the writings of Athanasius against Arianism. This does not, however, mean, as Harnack would seem to suggest, that the Chalcedonian doctrine, is a Hellenistic distortion of primitive Christianity, but rather that the fact of redemption was so essentially a part of the Christian experience that no doctrine incompatible with that fact could possibly survive. Christianity was always a soteriology.”

To this we need only add what Principal Grensted in no way denies, that in theological argument Athanasius and the rest make little or no appeal to the subjective “experience value” of the Redemption (for the “feelings” of one person, however right and good they may be, cannot be a criterion for another), but to the “objective” facts of Revelation and history.

Perhaps the most compelling proof in all the Bible of the supremacy of Calvary over Bethlehem is one so simple and so familiar that few realise its force. In the Book of Revelation, the beloved disciple is privileged to gaze on the heavenly glories of his Master. The Spirit caught Apostle hearing the voice of “the First and the Last” turns and sees “One like unto the Son of Man,” and beholding the awful manifestations of proper Deity shining through the glorified Manhood, falls at His feet as one dead. Nevertheless, this “Rex Tremendæ Majestatis” is depicted not upon the Throne, but walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks of the earthly churches. (Rev. i. 10-18.)

The scene changes to the very Court of God, and Whom then does the seer behold “in the midst of the Throne,” where Jehovah Alone can be? Who is it that dares on the Throne to take the book from the right hand of Him that sitteth upon the Throne, and can loose its seals? Who is it that deals thus with that book, upon which no created being in Heaven, in earth, or under the earth, might so much as look? Who from all creation receives not only all adoration equally with the Father, but first receives it for Himself individually, showing that only by and through Him can acceptable worship be offered to the Father?

One and the same Person, no doubt. Yet now not depicted as “the Son of Man.” He is announced as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,” yet while all leads us to expect a figure of awe, impressive of the regal, yea, the Divine, dignity of our Lord, here, in this unspeakable glory, He is seen “A Lamb as it had been slain.” (Rev. v. 6.) Well did one, now in the nearer Presence of the Lamb, write: “The view even of the true humanity of the incarnate Son of God—important and blessed as that view is—is here, assuredly, made subservient (we might almost say is sacrificed here) to the imagery which represents His atoning Death.” (Dimock, *Doctrine of the Death of Christ*, p. 4.)

The mystery of the Incarnation is progressively unfolded in the Holy Scriptures, darkly indeed at

first, yet with increasing clearness, until in the Truth Himself is full revelation. The curse upon the serpent contained a promise of the "Seed of the Woman," which Eve imagined was to be fulfilled in her firstborn son. (Gen. iii. 15; iv. 1.) Two thousand years later the promise was to Abraham that in him, that is, in his seed, should all nations of the earth be blessed. (Gen. xii. 3; xxii. 18; xiii. 15,16; xv. 4.) A thousand years pass by and the promise is settled upon David and his Seed (2 Sam. vii. 12; Psa. cxxxii. 11), and the "man after God's own heart" is privileged by the Holy Ghost (Mark xii. 36, compare Matt. xvi. 17) to recognise his Lord in his Son. (Psa. cx. 1.)

The miracle of the Virgin Birth, implied in the very term "Seed of the Woman," significantly ignoring the man, is prophesied in express terms by Isaiah, "Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. vii. 14), where it is particularly to be noticed that the Hebrew and the Greek alike of the Septuagint and of St. Matthew, employ the definite article. Not "a" virgin indefinitely, but specifically "the" Virgin.

Jeremiah takes up the theme and declares that the Righteous Branch to be raised up by God to David, shall be called "The Lord our Righteousness." (Chap. xxiii. 6.) Not only "God with us," but "God for us," made our Righteousness and thus bruising the serpent's head. Zechariah speaks in no uncertain terms of the "Man" who yet is "Fellow" to the Lord of Hosts. (Chap. xiii. 7.) The last of the prophets closes the canon of the Old Testament with intimation of the day when the Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple. The Lord here is not confounded with that "Lord of Hosts" who speaks, and nevertheless is the Jehovah to whom the Temple belongs (Malachi iii. 1; iv. 4-6; compare Matt. xi. 14, 15), the "Angel" (Ex. xxiii. 20-23; cf. Gen. xlviii. 16 and Isa. lxiii. 9), or "Messenger of the Covenant" whose glory Isaiah beheld in the Temple. (Isa. vi. 1; John xii. 41.)

Accordingly when Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes, they had no hesitation in stating that the birthplace of the Messiah must be Bethlehem-Judah. (Matt. ii. 1-6.) Over thirty years later this same prophecy was still recognised as deciding the same thing. (John vii. 41, 42.) The prophecy, however, determines more than that, for it asserts that the Governor out of Bethlehem-Judah should be one "whose goings forth have been from old, from the days of eternity." (Micah v. 2, A.V. margin.)

There is strong evidence that even a century later this Scriptural doctrine of the Deity of the Messiah had not yet been rejected by the Jews. For Justin Martyr about 140 A.D. in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (chap. 68) distinctly says that the Jewish teachers in his day "agree that some Scriptures which we mention to them, and which expressly proves that the Christ was to suffer, to be worshipped and to be God, and which I have already recited to you, do indeed refer to Christ, but they venture to assert that this man (the Lord Jesus) is not the Christ. But they *admit* that He will come to suffer, and to reign, and to be worshipped, and TO BE GOD."

The Christian Church, therefore, in teaching the Godhead of Christ vends no new interpretation of Scripture, for it is only perpetuating and elucidating that old and true interpretation which it learned from the Jewish Church itself, though the Jews do not now openly hold it. Recognition of this fact explains what sometimes seems strange to the student of ecclesiastical history. The difficulty of the "modern" mind is that Christ is God, while the heretics in the earliest ages (with the somewhat dubious exceptions of Cerinthus and Ebion) found their difficulty not in His Deity, but in His proper Manhood. The explanation is that in the earliest ages, once admitted that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, His Godhead presented no great "difficulty." Allow Him to be "the Christ" and it followed that He was "the Son of the Living God." (Matt. xvi. 16.)

The multifarious sects of the Gnostics, with their "endless genealogies" of derivative and emanative deities or "Æons" from the Supreme, readily allowed our Lord to be as much of a God as their strange theosophy could allow any to be. Some were even generous enough to make "Jesus" the offspring of one God, and "Christ" of another. They could admit Him the loftiest supernatural being; it was His true Manhood they explained away. Hence, St. John, arming the Church against the

nascent error, says that the distinguishing mark of Antichrist is not denial of the Godhead of our Lord, but of His Manhood. (1 John iv. 1-3; 2 John 7-11.) That again has been a perplexity to the modern Christian, who sees to-day that error most abounds in denial of the Deity of Christ. Nevertheless, throughout history it has been true that the chief and most successful artifice of the enemy has been undermining true faith in the Lord's Manhood.

Early in the second century, the Gnostic Valentine recoiled from the idea that our Lord was properly Man, conceived, formed and born of the Virgin. He feigned that the Lord's Manhood was a special creation by the Holy Spirit, nurtured "in" the Virgin, born "by" her, yet neither conceived "of" her substance, nor yet truly born "of" her. Whatever pious delicacies this might meet, whatever metaphysical subtleties might be urged in its defence, however it might be manipulated and rendered more plausible by other heretics, it laboured under a fatal disadvantage. It could not stand with the straight-forward, circumstantial, unartificial accounts of the Lord's birth given by the evangelists. The rapidly extending Church of God met these delusions by controversial writings, by formulating simple confessions of faith like the Apostles' Creed, and most effectually of all by spreading abroad uncorrupted copies of the books of the New Testament, vernacular translations also being made, into Syriac for the East, into Latin for the West. Gnosticism withered away as the New Testament became more and more known and accessible to all.

The great controversies which rent the Church from the fourth to the eighth century centred on the Incarnation. It is the custom of "Modernists" to rail against the Great Councils and the orthodox Fathers as having corrupted the simplicity of earlier theology by dialectical subtleties, philosophical disquisitions, metaphysical distinctions and abstruse definitions unintelligible to the ordinary Christian. Nothing can be more unfair or untrue. The orthodox did nothing save guard the pure Gospel, refusing to allow heretics to confuse and distort it by the introduction of their errors, and bewildering technicalities. The Church only held by Peter's confession, answering faithfully to the Son of Man, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." That was the simple truth which all the six "General Councils" defended, adding nothing, taking away nothing from it, but when necessary defending by definition its simplicity against perverted ingenuity. For nothing in the Creeds goes beyond what is necessarily implied in Peter's, confession. He who is the "Son of Man" must be wholly and perfectly Man. He who is not merely loosely "a" son of God, but specifically "THE Son of the Living God" is of the same Nature as His Father. And the apparently unimportant words, "I am," "Thou art," in reality safeguard the profoundest part of the Incarnation, the Unity of Person. There is not one Person "the Son of Man" in whom dwells a separate Person "the Son of God." We believe in only "One Lord Jesus Christ," who is "the Son of Man" and "the Son of God," embracing in one Divine Person the two whole and perfect natures of Godhead and Manhood.

Arius denied both the true Manhood and Deity of Christ. For him the Son of God was but a creature, exalted no doubt, but a creature still; he would not, indeed, go so far as to say that "there was a *time* when He was not," his formula was "there *was* when He was not." And for him the Incarnation was in crudest form a "making flesh," mere flesh without a human soul. Plainly our Lord was not in a real sense "the Son of God" if He was of a nature different from His Father, not being of "one substance with Him." Plainly, too, if He was only of the same fleshly substance of man, without human nature itself, He was in no real sense the "Son of Man." Hence it is that the Nicene Creed guards against each error with the words, "Of one substance with the Father . . . was incarnate (*sarkothenta*, "was made flesh") . . . and was made man (*enanthro-pesanta*)." The Council of Nicea (325) added nothing to the faith handed down from the Apostles, it merely shut out errors subversive of it.

More subtle was the heresy of Apollinarius. He was an able and faithful ally of Athanasius. He admitted fully the proper Deity of Christ, and His possession of an "animating soul," yet denied to Him that higher "reasonable soul" which is the essential distinction between man and the brute creation. However thankful we are to Apollinarius for his stand against Arianism, his own error was serious, for it was to make Christ according to His humanity less than man, to place Him in that

aspect betwixt man and the beasts that perish, and so was inconsistent with confession of the "Son of Man." Therefore the First Council of Constantinople in 381, insisted that the Nicene definition "and was made man" should be accepted in its integrity, according to its natural sense.

The Nestorian heresy (though probably Nestorius did not hold it) was that the Man Christ Jesus was a distinct Person from God the Word who dwelt in him, so that there was not real union of the Two Natures. Yet Peter confessed that one Person, "Thou," calling Himself the "Son of Man," was in truth the "Son of God." Accordingly the Council of Ephesus (431) rightly determined that as we believe not in Two, but "One Lord Jesus Christ," He is One Person, God the Word, uniting in Himself Godhead and Manhood.

Eutychianism next arose, holding truly the unity of the Person, but rationalising away the truth of the Human Nature, which it held to be swallowed up in the Divine, whence it is generally called "Monophysitism," or One-Nature-ism. Against this the Council of Chalcedon (451) raised up its *Horos* or "Boundary," in which the perfection of each Nature, together with the Unity of the Person, is maintained with wondrous skill and accuracy. Nothing of this definition can be abandoned without imperilling the truth. Yet it merely safeguards the original faith that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man, is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The watchwords of the first four Councils, "Truly, perfectly, inseparably, unconfusedly," add nothing to the faith, they only preserved it from addition or diminution.

The Second and Third Councils of Constantinople, in 555 and 680, added nothing to the dogma of Chalcedon; the one protected it against Nestorian tendencies, the other against Monophysitism, in the guise of Monothelitism, the belief that there was but one will and one operation of the will in our Lord. The point may be a fine one, and indeed if operation of the will be taken to mean the resultant act, all Christians agree that there was one operation, seeing that our Lord always did the will of God. Monothelitism, properly so-called, actually meant very much more than that. It meant that the Human Nature, though "perfect," was smitten through and through with paralysis bodily, mental, and spiritual; that it was a machine or automaton working only by virtue of the indwelling Deity. The Temptation was a solemn farce, for no human will was assailed by Satan; Gethsemane was unreal, for there was no human will, seeking to avoid the Cross, yet humbly resigned to the will of God; and we have no merciful and faithful High Priest in Heaven, for Christ never truly "Himself hath suffered being tempted." Therefore we thankfully accept the decision of the last really "General" Council in its assertion that in Our Lord were two wills, the one of His Manhood, the other of His Godhead, both working in harmony because the human will, perfect and unfallen, ever of itself sought to do the will of the Father, and was assisted to that end by measureless gifts of the Spirit. (John v. 30; iii. 34.) So, and so only, can we maintain ourselves upon that Rock on which the Church is built.

Overt attacks upon the doctrine of the Incarnation by any formidable heresy practically ceased after the end of the seventh century; then indirect attack began which has been far more successful. Superstitious views of the Eucharist commenced now to harden into theories of "the Real Presence," though it was not till the sixteenth century that this name was coined. Many and satisfactory are the arguments against the doctrine, but here we would especially press Hooker's irrefragible contention:—

"The substance of the body of Christ hath no presence, neither can have, but only local. . . . There is no proof in the world strong enough to enforce that Christ had a true body, but by the true and natural properties of His body. Amongst which properties definite or local presence is chief. . . . If His majestical body have now any such new property, by force whereof it may everywhere really even *in substance* present itself, or may at once be in many places, then hath the *Majesty of His Estate extinguished the Verity of His Nature.*" (Hooker, *Eccl. Pol.*, v. 55.n.6.)

There is no denying the truth of the argument, and yet the awful fact remains that today two out of

three professing Christians, holding in words the sacred truths of the Creeds, hold along with them a doctrine which inferentially denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and so is the hallmark of Antichrist.

Where Gnosticism, Marcionism, Manichaeism, and the Christological heresies failed to effect an entry, Satan transformed into an angel of light as the "Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist," has now insinuated himself, diverting to the creature that worship which is due only to the Creator, implying that Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh, and openly contradicting the truth and perfection of the Atonement wrought by Him. Assuredly there is a Mystery of Iniquity (2 Thess. ii. 7), rival, counterpart and counterfeit of the Mystery of Godliness. Against this spiritual wickedness we should be helpless indeed were not those that be for us more than those that be against us, were our Joshua (Heb. iv. 8) not Himself also "Captain of the Host of the Lord," yea, "the Lord" in truth. (Josh. v. 13—vi. 2.) Our hope is in Him, and as we look to the "promise of His Coming" (2 Peter iii. 4) we may gain strength still manfully by His word, the "spirit of His mouth," to consume that evil which He shall utterly destroy by "the brightness of His Coming."