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Could Jesus Err?

BY THE REV. THOMAS WHITELAW, D.D., KILMARNOCK.

IV.

THE third branch of Professor Schwartzkopff's undertaking, which aims at explaining how error on the part of Christ was inseparable from His humanity, calls for no extended refutation. Running through it all is the assumption that Christ was a mere man—godlike perhaps, confessedly sinless—but yet only, like His contemporaries, an individualised and personalised specimen of humanity; and this assumption vitiates his whole reasoning. For if Jesus was an ordinary member of the race, however exalted in goodness or exceptional in talent, whose individual personality was (and *ex hypothesi* must have been) subject to the observed laws of mental growth, it demands no protracted or elaborate dissertation to demonstrate that, like other members of the race, He must have lived under such limitations in knowledge as must have unavoidably involved Him at least in occasional mistakes, and these not simply in perception as to matters of fact but also in judgment, as to inferences based upon correct enough apprehensions. But if Christ, as a *verus homo*, a true man and personalised individual, in this way took up by a sort of natural necessity the intellectual mistakes of his age, how can it be shown that He did not also absorb some of its 'moral defects'? Experience, which knows of no descendant of Adam who has not at some time or another been the victim of intellectual error, has as little acquaintance with an individual who has never been chargeable with moral defalcation. But in this case what becomes of the sinlessness of Jesus, which is over and over again declared to be indispensable to Christ's vocation as a Saviour? Dr. Schwartzkopff affirms that by the quality of sinlessness Jesus was differentiated from common men, lifted out of the category of ordinary human beings. If so, it is pertinent to remark that His appearance in the midst of a sinful race was as much a miracle as the preservation of Jonah in the interior of the sea-monster,—at which the Professor stumbles,—with only this difference, that the former was a moral (and perhaps on that account the greater) miracle, while the latter was a physical (and

possibly on this ground the lesser) miracle. Moreover, if Christ's development was that of a sinless soul, one may reasonably inquire how an exact parallel can be established between it and the development of ordinary persons whose souls are not sinless but sinful? Although of fallen men it is undeniable that they grow from error to truth, can it be asserted with equal confidence that He, being sinless, did not grow only from truth to truth—that His mental course must have been from truth to error and from error to truth? Then the notion, much insisted on, that Christ, if a true man, must have possessed a human personality—even were this correct—does not of necessity entail as a consequence subjection to error, unless it can be proved that this personality in no respect differed, either as to nature or as to condition, from that of an ordinary member of the race. If it did not, *i.e.* if Jesus was the child of two human parents, then, as already mentioned, its liability to error goes without saying. But if it did,—if, for example, it was supernaturally produced, as the virgin birth implies,—and if it stood in any relation of union with the personality of the Word, how can it be made good that its development ran on exactly parallel lines with that of common men whose personalities come into existence in accordance with natural law, and stand in no such relation to God as New Testament Scripture assigns to Jesus? Besides, if the human nature of Jesus was not merely the finest specimen of its kind, the topmost twig from the tree of humanity, but represented the whole Adamic race in the totality of its individuals,—which seems to be the teaching of the Gospels and Epistles,—how can one be sure that nothing may be predicated of it that is not also predicable of the individual? Considerations such as these make it perfectly apparent that no middle course is possible between reducing Christ to the level of an ordinary man, liable at once to intellectual error and moral defect, and exalting Him to the throne of supreme divinity. Hence it is that the Christian Church, believing as she does that the human nature of Jesus Christ was impersonal (or,

if personal, that its Ego was so related to that of the Divine Son as to form a unity which in some mysterious fashion served on the one hand as an 'I' to the divine, and on the other hand as an 'I' to the human nature), cannot assent to the accuracy of any reasoning which starts from the assumption that Jesus possessed only one nature, that of humanity, which unfolded itself in precisely

the same fashion, and with the same results as does that of ordinary people. Were she to do so, she would find herself constrained to admit the possibility not of intellectual fallibility alone, but also of moral peccability in the Person of her Lord, and sooner or later would be obliged to renounce faith in His divinity, and with that of confidence in His redeeming work.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL.

JOHN xii. 32.

'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself' (R. V.).

EXPOSITION.

'And I.'—The opposition to the *prince of this world* (of the previous verse) is made as emphatic as possible—'and I (καγώ) . . . unto Myself.'—WESTCOTT.

'If I be lifted up from the earth.'—If these words had stood alone in the Gospel without any accompanying explanation, it might—it would—have been natural to understand them wholly or mainly of our Lord's Ascension into heaven. Not to dwell on His own reference to that event, it is observable that St. Peter is reported to have applied the exact expression of the text—'*lifted up*'—on two distinct occasions to that event. On the day of Pentecost he told the assembled multitude that the Jesus who had been crucified was now by the right hand of God—'*lifted up*' to a sphere of glory, from which He had poured out upon the earth the gifts of the Holy Ghost. A little later this same apostle was arrested for teaching publicly in the temple, and was cross-examined by the High Priest at the bar of the Sanhedrin. He seized the opportunity to explain that the apostles had absolutely no choice about witnessing the two facts respecting Jesus who had been crucified; first, that He had really risen from the grave; secondly, that God had '*lifted Him up*,' that is to say, into heaven, to be the Prince, to be the Saviour of the new Israel. But this is not the meaning of our Lord Jesus Christ in the words before us; for, after reporting the words, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me,' St. John adds, 'This He said, signifying what death He should die.' We are not, then, left in any sort of doubt as to our Lord's meaning; and this meaning is in keeping with other words which St. John has recorded. Such is His saying to Nicodemus, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' Such is His mysterious prediction to the irritated Jews, 'When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He.'—LIDDON.

'From the earth'—is added to mark the contrast between the kingdom of the prince of this world which is to be overthrown and that of the Prince of Light which takes its place. The one is of the earth earthy; the other is not of this world (xviii. 36) but *over* it, a kingdom lifted up from the world but dominating over it. In each individual soul the kingdom of God begins, as it began in the world of humanity, in crucifixion. When we take up our cross and follow Christ, we are lifted up from the earth, and in us the prince of this world is cast out.—ABBOTT.

'I will draw.'—This expression is applied elsewhere to the Father's work of grace, which conveniently prepares men to come to Christ. In these words we learn that the attraction of the Cross of Christ will prove to be the mightiest and most sovereign motive ever brought to bear on the human will, and, when wielded by the Holy Spirit as a revelation of the matchless love of God, will involve the most sweeping judicial sentence that can be pronounced upon the world and its prince. In chap. xvi. 11 the belief or the conviction that the prince of this world has been already condemned, is one of the great results of the mission of the Comforter.—REYNOLDS.

'All men.'—The universality of the saying is limited by the general New Testament doctrine, that the actual effects of Christ's work are conditioned by the spiritual attitudes of men. It is limited by the occasion, which suggests a ministry confined no more to the Jews, but extending to all without distinction of nationality. For this visit of the Greeks, the first fruits of a mighty harvest, opened up to our Lord's view the destined turning of the Gentile world to Himself. And there is the further limitation which lies in the nature of the action here ascribed to Himself by Christ. It is a *drawing*, not necessarily a *bringing in*, not an irresistible attraction. The words, in short, mean that by His death upon the cross He is to exert over Jew and Gentile alike an influence which will draw men to Him, and, so far as men yield to it, will gather them within His kingdom.—SALMOND.

'Unto Myself.'—Emphatically as the one centre of the Church, in whom all find their completeness.—WESTCOTT.