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## THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH.

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The mind of the Church was occupied with Christology—that is, with the attempt to comprehend and define the person of her Lord—for five hundred years—roughly speaking, from the year 200 to the year 700. During that long period decisions were reached which the Church has never since seen occasion seriously to alter and this is not to be wondered at, because plenty of time was taken to do the work, every conceivable question was asked, and every possible alternative was tried.

To the beginner, indeed, the study of these five hundred years is most exhausting; for the synods and councils are numberless, the very names of the opposing parties are a weariness to the flesh; an immense amount of human nature was developed, and the air rang with the watchwords of disputation; there was a strange mingling of worldly power and political aims with the purposes of the Church; the combatants hurled at one another the most odious charges and plotted for one another's ruin; the points in dispute seem to crop up without rhyme or reason and to undergo the strangest transformations beneath the eyes of the student.

Yet, the longer the period is studied, the more is it seen to have method in its movement; between the ap-

parently unconnected topics under discussion there is found to be an inner connection, with a natural and necessary sequence; and the arc of the truth rounds itself to a circle beneath the observer's eyes. You gradually come to think of the Church as if it had been a single living person brooding over the same transcendent subject for five centuries, and making up its mind on point after point, till the whole task of Providence was completed. Indeed, you perceive that the Church's course of thinking was precisely what your own might be if, retiring from the crowd with this high theme for meditation, you were to go on brooding on it, till the truth emerged from confusion and slowly shaped itself into assured and peaceful conviction.

The first six œcumenical councils were all occupied with the discussion of this theme—Nicæa in 325, which declared against Arianism, Constantinople in 381, which opposed Apollinarianism, Ephesus in 431, which condemned Nestorianism, Chalcedon in 451, which did the same for Eutychianism, Constantinople Second in 553, which went back on the preceding decision by affirming Monophysitism, and Constantinople Third, which decided against Monothelitism—and these may be taken as the clue for our broodings.

The discussion, indeed, had been going on for more than a hundred years before the first œcumenical council was held; how, then, did the issue stand just before Nicæa? The mind of the Church had clearly come to the conviction that Christ had pre-existed before the Incarnation. This had, indeed, been denied by Monarchianism, both Modalistic and Dynamistic—that is by both Sabellians and Samosatans—but the Church was satisfied that the teaching of Scripture on this point was conclusive, and it was deeply influenced by Origen's demonstration that fatherhood, belonging to the very nature of God, was eternal—that is, that there had never been a time when God was not a Father and had not a

Son. If, then, the Son pre-existed, what relation did He hold to the Father? was He superior, inferior, or equal? After long brooding and the testing of every alternative, the Church answered that He was of the same substance as the Father. Such was the decision at Nicæa.

But now the brooding was resumed, and the next question was, as it would be in our minds, if they were deeply considering the same subject, if He was of the same substance with the Father, how was He, in the Incarnation, related to man? Was His manhood real and complete like that of other men or was it peculiar, His divine being serving Him in the place of a soul or a spirit? This question proved far from easy; but the reply came at last with clear conviction, that He was of the same substance with ourselves—like other men in everything but sin. This was the conclusion reached at the First Council of Constantinople.

What the next question was now to be was inevitable: it must be this: Seeing that He was of one substance with the Father and, at the same time, of one substance with us, must He not have been two persons? No, was the reply of the brooding Church: to say so would disrupt the unity which marked His earthly life; for in the Gospels it is one person who is speaking, acting and suffering all the time. This was the decision of Ephesus.

Now, however, it became as inevitable to inquire in what terms justice was to be done to the quality, already acknowledged in His being, if justice to the unity forbade Him to be thought of as consisting of two persons. Theological language had not yet been found for such fine distinctions, which were new in the world and new to the mind of the Church itself. But at length the right word was found, and, while denying that there were two persons in Christ, the Church affirmed that there were two natures. This was done at Chalcedon.

The next question naturally was, what within each nature was the salient point entitling it to be called by

this name. Was it something emotional or intellectual, or voluntative? After trying several alternatives, and for a time inclining to the word "energy," the Church finally concluded that the distinctive thing in each nature was the will; and, therefore, it declared against those known as Monothelites, who held that in Christ there was only one will. This was decided at the last of the six Christological Councils, the Third of Constantinople.

It will be observed that, in this attempt to re-think the thought of the Church during five hundred years, no equivalent has been found for the step taken by the Fifth Council, the Second at Constantinople. The reason for this is that it was a step back, instead of a step forward. The utterance of the Council was very vague, and it was formulated after a long interval, during which the objectionable features of the time, such as ecclesiastical rancor, popular excitement and imperial interference had been unusually prominent; and, under a new name, that of Monophysitism, a practical return was made to the position which, under the name of Eutychianism, had been condemned at the preceding Council.

In every chain of reasoning there is some weak link, and in that which we have been reproducing it may be thought that this occurs at the point where Christ is stated to have had two distinct natures. Certainly there is difficulty in assenting to this; but it is surely lightened when we remember that in ourselves there are two distinct natures. We have a material nature, and we have a spiritual nature. How these can intercommunicate is a mystery defying the introspection of the keenest-eyed philosophy; yet every human being holds both in the unity of his personality.

And this leads to another remark of vital importance. Beginners are apt to think that in the words of creeds they are grasping and holding the very things themselves, even when these are such lofty matters as the relation to one another of the divine persons in the Trinity

or the relation to each other of the two natures in the person of Christ. But "canst thou, by searching, find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" There is a mystery here which is above us, and we ought to cherish a humble consciousness of our inability to rise so high. The terms we use, and ought to use, because they are the best the human mind has been able to discover, do not fit the things themselves closely, but only loosely; they are negative rather than positive, warning us what not to believe rather than adequately expressing what we do believe. Here we see through a glass darkly, but we hope for a fuller knowledge, and we can with patience wait for it.

To us, accustomed to a very sympathetic conception of the humanity of Christ and perhaps more or less aware of the temptation to believe that He was no more than a man, it is instructive to know that in the Ancient Church the temptation was all the other way. At a very early date Ebionism died out of the Church—for the Nestorians were by no means Ebionites—and the utmost jealousy arose of anything throwing a shadow of doubt on the deity of Christ, many asserting the deity so strongly as to fall into error on the opposite side. This is a strong proof of the impression left by Jesus in the world, as to who and what He was, and of the wonder and delight with which the thought of redeeming love had inspired the human heart. The sentiment of the time is perfectly caught in Browning's poem entitled "An Epistle containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, The Arab Physician":

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-great were the All-loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice,
Saying, "O heart, I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in Myself!
Thou hast no power, nor mayest conceive of Mine,
But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,
And thou must love Me, who have died for thee."

Yet there was a serious defect in the experience of the period of the Christological Councils. The Church is never safe or her experience healthy unless her thoughts are much occupied with the actual image of the Saviour in the Gospels and with the words of grace and truth which flowed from His lips during His days on earth. From this practice the mind of the Church at that time became more and more estranged, and it construed the Saviour not out of the actual records of His life below but out of its own conceptions of His cosmical existence. Doctrine hardened more and more into dogma, and the test of Christianity was found in the ability to utter correctly the shibboleths of party. Conduct was ignored in the interest of creed, and in its zeal for orthodoxy the Church forgot to be zealous for charity. When out of the turbulence and unfairness of the proceedings of the Councils an argument is forged to disparage the decisions at which these august bodies arrived, it is not easy to refute the imputation. Still, there was in all these councils more weight of character than a superficial acquaintance with them might lead us to suppose, and the decisions were generally formulated by minds of great perspicacity and comprehensiveness. The Church was not yet so sunk in formalism as not to possess, in all these great gatherings, a solid mass of both wisdom and godliness, and there is good reason to believe that it was this element which spoke at the critical moments.