

## The Epistle to the Colossians and its Christology.

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### II.

THE Epistle begins with a salutation; and a thanksgiving follows, from which we learn that the Colossians had not been personal disciples of the Apostle himself, but had been won to Christianity by Epaphras. St. Paul gives thanks for their progress in the Christian faith, and this leads on to a prayer for their advance in knowledge and good living through Christ. This occupies the first thirteen verses, and forms the introduction to the whole Epistle. It also leads on to the description of Christ as the only path of progress. The prayer for progress, and the statement of the fact that Christ is the only path to progress, lead on to a fuller statement of the significance of Christ. The doctrine of Christ is set forth in 1<sup>13</sup>-2<sup>3</sup>. The doctrine is so stated as to refute the errors of thought and practice described in the polemic which follows (2<sup>4</sup>-3<sup>4</sup>). The errors are described and condemned, and their inconsistency with faith in Christ and obedience to Him is set forth. The fourth part (3<sup>5</sup>-4<sup>6</sup>) is hortatory, and sets forth the practical consequences of the identification of the Christian with Christ in His death and resurrection. The concluding part (4<sup>7</sup>-1<sup>8</sup>) is personal, consisting of explanations relating to the letter itself, and containing also salutations from and to divers persons. A fuller analysis will be found in Lightfoot's *Colossians*, and need not be given here. Our aim is to use the Epistle in order to show what Apostolic Christianity was in the closing years of the life of the Apostle Paul. For this end we shall look at the doctrine of the person, office, and work of Christ as delineated here; at the errors which seem to have called forth this great exposition; and at the function of the Church in relation to both of these situations.

In the forefront of the statement of doctrine is placed the fact of redemption. This always, in every Epistle, is in the foreground. It is the first and most significant part of the gospel of St. Paul. Through the Son we have our deliverance, our redemption: 'Giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance

of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins' (1<sup>12-14</sup>). This redemption and this forgiveness are guaranteed in all their fulness and completeness by the fact of Christ. In relation to the Father, the Son is the image of the invisible God, and in Him dwells all the fulness of God. In Him the invisible had become visible, the transcendent had become immanent, the eternal had become temporal, and being had attained to a becoming. For, while God is, the Son in a true sense became; and in the Incarnation these antinomies and many others are reconciled. He is the Mediator between God and man, in Him God reveals Himself to the world, and in Him the world speaks to God.

Having in one phrase indicated the relation of the Son to the Father, the Apostle immediately sets forth the unique pre-eminence of the Son. We must quote the passage: 'In him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist' (1<sup>16f</sup>). There are other statements in the Pauline Epistles which approximate to this, or, at all events, which imply this, as their justification and explanation, e.g. 1 Co 8<sup>6</sup>: 'To us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him: and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him.' In this passage there is affirmed the absolute universal mediation of the Son, yet it is in some measure indefinite, or, at all events, its fulness of meaning is not explicitly set forth. Whether the occasion for further statement was not felt by the Apostle, or whether the situation did not call for a more explicit declaration of the fulness of Christ, the statement in 1 Co is not detailed, nor is the cosmical significance of Christ unfolded. But in the passage in Colossians the cosmical significance

is deliberately and in detail set forth. He is the head of the universe. He is the agent, the source, the goal of Creation. The redemptive work of Christ follows on, and is the culmination of, His creative and administrative work. The relation of God to the world, according to the teaching of the Apostle, has always been maintained in and through the Son. He is the meeting-place of God and the world, He represents the world to God, and He represents God to the world. As He is truly God, so also, it may be truly said, He is the world. Beyond His influence there is nothing; apart from Him there is nothing. He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 'He is the principle of cohesion in the universe. He impresses upon creation that unity and solidarity which makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos. Thus (to take one instance) the action of gravitation, which keeps in their places things fixed and regulates the motions of things moving, is an expression of His mind.'<sup>1</sup>

The principle which makes things work together, and the bond which binds them into a unity—so briefly may be put the conception which the Apostle has of the place and function of Christ in the cosmos. But the mediatorship of Christ, as the meeting-place of God and the world, needs a still closer definition. For this relationship is still a distant one, and a closer bond must be found. This is found in the statement, 'And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have pre-eminence' (1<sup>18</sup>). The mediatorship, which, since the world began, had been exercised by the Son, obtained a closer form, and a new definition when the Son became incarnate. By His incarnation and death Christ identified Himself with the world in a new and more intimate way. He became the world, attained to the experience which created life has, and came to know, by living it, what were the conditions and the possibilities of created life. So He is the First-born from the dead, and knows by experience what it is to live, and what it is to die. But it is true also that in His experience the world attained to a larger life and entered on a new experience. The relation between God and the world obtained a new expression, since Christ had identified Himself with the world. The old cosmical position of the Christ in His relation to the world was changed

from what might be regarded as external to a new relation which was from within; and the Christ became the sharer of the life of creation. No longer mere direction, mere rule, or mere superintendence, but identity with created life became the relation of the Christ to the world. This relationship indicated the possibility of a new departure in the life of the world. It placed the world in a new relationship to the Father. For the Son is now really the life of the world. He can speak to the Father on the part of the world, can make up for the failures, sins, and defects of the world, and express the sorrow of the world for its failure to meet the Divine purpose, and for its refusal to meet the aims of Divine love: 'For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens' (1<sup>19f</sup>). It was the delight of the Father that in Him should all the fulness dwell; yes, for in Him all that fulness was handed over to the world, so that the world should be able to respond to the Divine love, and thus might become a world to which the Father could give Himself without reserve. Creation needed to be reconciled, and it needed to be raised to its ideal, that is, to be made fit for the reception of the Divine indwelling; and, to make it fit, the Son was given by the Father to it. The Son is the head of the body, the Church.

Corresponding to the breadth of the new conception of the cosmical position of the Christ, is the breadth of the new conception of the Church unfolded in this Epistle and in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The progress of the Pauline thought in relation to the doctrine of the Church may be summed up in two sentences. In the Epistle to the Romans St. Paul had arrived at the thought of the unity of the Church, and had said: 'Even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another' (Ro 12<sup>4f</sup>). In 1 Co the Apostle again takes up the thought of the unity of the Church, and, in relation to the selfishness of the individual which threatened to disrupt that unity, takes occasion to unfold the dependence of each member upon the life of the whole Church, and urges each member

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, *Colossians*<sup>3</sup>, 1879, p. 156.

to realize that dependence. In one verse he advances beyond the position of Romans. There the Church was one body in Christ; but in 1 Co he affirms: 'Now ye are the body of Christ, and severally members thereof' (1 Co 12<sup>27</sup>). This remains a simple statement, and its contents are not unfolded. But in the Epistles of the Captivity the one body in Christ becomes the body of Christ, and the difference is great. The union between Christ and His Church becomes closer, more defined, and new metaphors are introduced in order to make the unity more apparent. If the Church is the body of Christ, it follows that the body is incomplete, and will not be complete until the work of Christ is complete. The fulness of Christ is a fulness which is being made complete, and part of the function of the Church is to make complete the body of Christ. So we obtain an interpretation of the following verse which does not require us to attribute anything like expiatory merit to the sufferings of the Church: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church' (Col 1<sup>24</sup>). While in one sense the work of Christ is complete, in another sense it is incomplete, and will remain incomplete until the body is made up to its fulness. So the Church has a function to perform, and the work of every man in Christ, whether in his own life or in feeding the life of the Church, is a supplying of what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for the sake of the body of Christ. But, ere a man can supply what is lacking in the work of Christ, he must himself be in Christ, a real member of the body of Christ, in vital relation both to the head and to the members of the body.

Before speaking of the supply of what was wanting in the building up of the body of Christ, the Apostle had spoken of the way by which he had been brought into the Church: 'And you, being in time past alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish and unproveable before him: if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven' (Col 1<sup>21-23</sup>). St. Paul was a minister of the gospel (v.<sup>23</sup>), he is also a minister of the Church (v.<sup>25</sup>).

In both relations his work is to unfold the riches of the mystery of Christ, for the reconciliation of the alienated and for their upbuilding. As a minister of the gospel he has to win the world for Christ, as a minister of the Church he has to 'fulfil the word of God, even the mystery which hath been hid from all ages and generations' (v.<sup>26</sup>). But this mystery which had been hidden is 'manifested to his saints' (v.<sup>27</sup>). It was the delight of God to make known 'what is the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v.<sup>27</sup>). This is the work of St. Paul, the minister of the Church: he admonishes, he teaches in all wisdom, he unfolds the meaning of the mystery in ever-enlarging fulness, for in so doing he feels that he is on the way to present every man perfect in Christ.

In all these statements the Apostle seems to have in mind the particular state of the Colossian Church. He unfolds the mystery of Christ in His relation to the world and to the Church in order that the unfolding may at once set them right with regard to their relation to God, to the world, and to their fellow-men. In their relation to God they must learn that they need no other mediator save Him who has redeemed them, accepted them, and taken possession of them. In Christ are 'all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge hidden' (2<sup>2</sup>). This is the mystery of God, now made manifest and open to all who are in Christ. It only remains that those who have 'received Christ Jesus the Lord' should 'walk in him, rooted and builded up in him, and stablished in faith' (v.<sup>7</sup>). This is the sum of the whole matter; but, as questions have been raised and difficulties set forth by the Colossians, the Apostle proceeds to deal with them. These questions refer, as said above, to their relation to God, to man, and to the world. Summarized under the rubrics of 'philosophy and vain deceit,' 'the tradition of men,' 'the rudiments of the world,' are the errors of speculation which the Apostle proceeds to root out and destroy. What these were in particular we need not minutely investigate, for the main issue is plain. It refers to those speculations current in the tradition of Asia Minor, from the time of Heraclitus onwards. More particularly the reference is to those intermediate beings between God and the world with which subsequent Gnostic speculations have made us familiar. From the classic age of Greek philosophy down-

wards the problem was to establish some intelligible relationship between the unmoved Mover of all things and the moving world. Philosophy, and the tradition of men, and the rudiments of the world—how much of the course of human speculation for more than half a century can be included in them! Here we may not dwell on them. For the Apostle they are all set aside by the fact that the relation of God to the world is a relation in Christ: 'In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power' (2<sup>9f.</sup>). There is no need of any other relationship, for the fulness of the Godhead is in Him, and from the side of the world He is the head of all principality and power.

But next there arises the thought of the Christian's relationship to the world and to man. As there had been many speculations regarding the relation of God and the world, so closely connected with these are the speculations regarding the nature of the world, and man's relation to it. Is the world essentially evil? Or, to go further back, is evil essentially material? And does contact with matter entail evil? Is matter the principle of evil? An affirmative answer led to practical consequences. On the one hand, the essential evil of matter led to asceticism of a very drastic kind. On the other hand, it led to unrestrained licentiousness. In either case the Apostle says that life must be *κατὰ Χριστόν*, 'after Christ.' In Christ there is deliverance both from asceticism, and from self-indulgence. There is deliverance also from mere rules and observances. It is evident that here we are in a more advanced stage than we were in the direct controversy with Judaism. It is no longer a question as to the standing of Gentiles within the Christian Church. The Gentiles are within the Church. But are they using all the means by which perfection is to be won? While circumcision is no longer indispensable, is there not something lacking if circumcision in its higher meaning is not attained? Apparently these Jewish Christians insisted on rules, ordinances, feast-days, new moons, and sabbath days, as observances without which a Christian could not attain to perfection. Without entering into detail, we may note the wide sweep of the apostolic teaching. In Christ the middle wall of partition has been broken down, and Gentile and Jew are one in Him, the relation to

the world has been changed, and the Christian need not subject himself to ordinances: 'If he died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances?' (2<sup>20</sup>). Ordinances, after the precepts and doctrines of men, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (v.<sup>28</sup>). Merely negative rules do not avail for the maintenance and the growth of Christian life, for life is not offered merely to our acceptance, it is offered to our acquisition. Not abstinence, not indulgence, not mystic immersion into an external symbolism, as in the mysteries of Eastern Greece—not in these, but in the appropriation of Christ in His person and His work does the Christian life consist. The Christian must live over again the experience of the Christ; he must die with Him, rise with Him, live with Him in an endless, ever-growing life.

'If ye were raised with Christ, if ye were translated into heaven, what follows? Why you must realise the change. All your aims must centre in heaven, where reigns the Christ who has thus exalted you, enthroned on God's right hand. All your thoughts must abide in heaven, not on the earth. For, I say it once again, you have nothing to do with mundane things: you *died*, died once for all to the world: you are living another life . . . for it is a life with Christ, a life in God. But the veil will not always shroud it. Christ our life shall be manifested hereafter; then ye also shall be manifested with Him, and the world shall see your glory.'<sup>1</sup>

So Lightfoot felicitously paraphrases the beginning of the third chapter. Everything inconsistent with this risen life must be sternly repressed. It is no longer a question of rules, observances, or rites; it is something deeper far that is here taught. What is taught is the freedom of a Christian man, who in Christ has become master of himself in order that he may do efficient service to Christ, and so help to build up the body of Christ. Not in bondage to an alien external standard, but in the service of an ideal, revealed to him, is the Christian to realize his calling. In the opening discussion the Apostle had reminded the Colossian Church that the Father had 'delivered us out of the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the son of his love: in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins' (1<sup>13</sup>). But redemption and deliverance are only preliminary to the exercise of freedom. These removed the disabilities under-

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, *Col.*, p. 208.

which man lay—disabilities which frustrated all attempts of his towards a real life. But having been delivered, having been redeemed and forgiven, the believer has now to live. So he must strive to appropriate salvation, must make it his very own. So freedom comes, and in the exercise of freedom he has to realize the ideal of the Christian life. No doubt it is Christ that has made him free. No doubt also it is Christ that has led the way in His living, dying, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God. But these experiences of the Christ, the Apostle teaches, must be repeated in the life of the Christian. In order to do so the Christian must put off more and more what was characteristic of the merely natural life: 'Mortify, therefore, your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, the which is idolatry: for which things' sake cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience; in the which ye also walked aforetime, when ye lived in these things' (3<sup>5<sup>th</sup></sup>). After further directions the paragraph ends with the significant declaration: 'Christ is all, and in all' (v.<sup>11</sup>).

The characteristic of Christian life is not external rules, not times and seasons, not a state to be acquired by initiation into mysteries. It is the appropriation of Christ by faith, love, and obedience that makes a man a Christian. He must make Christ's ideal his own ideal, but in such a way that Christ continues to be all, and in all. But the distinctive characteristic of Christianity is that its ideal is a realized historical ideal. Other ideals, fashioned by the best thought and activity of men, have the disadvantage of being only ideal, for no concrete embodiment of them has occurred in history. Great ideals of human worth have been drawn by the poets, the philosophers, and thinkers of the past and present, but they are only ideal, and remain as a mere counsel of perfection. But for St. Paul there exists a realized ideal of what man may become. Jesus Christ is real, and it remains for the Christian to make Christ his own ideal. Nor is this all that the Apostle has to say. Christ is no mere ideal which a man has to follow and to imitate. The Christ as set forth in this Epistle is a living, energetic, working factor

in human life, who actively works in order that men may see Him as He is, and actively transforms them after the type of the ideal which He has enabled them to see.

In what remains of the Epistle, the Apostle enforces in practical ways the great theological and ethical teaching which has gone before. Practical precepts addressed to all sections of a community—to husbands and wives, to children and parents, to servants and masters—illustrate what St. Paul means by a life lived with Christ in God. It is characteristic of his ethical teaching that he brings every precept into living relation to Christ: note the references, 'as is fitting in the Lord' (3<sup>18</sup>); 'this is well-pleasing in the Lord' (v.<sup>20</sup>); 'fearing the Lord' (v.<sup>22</sup>); 'as unto the Lord, and not unto men' (v.<sup>23</sup>); 'ye serve the Lord Christ' (v.<sup>24</sup>); 'knowing that ye also have a master in heaven' (4<sup>1</sup>). So he brings the ethical Christian life not under a categorical imperative, or under an abstract rule, but under the charm of loyalty and obedience to a personal Master. How great an influence loyalty is we need not stay to delineate. But in whatever form loyalty to a person or to a cause appears in history, it nowhere has the potency and the living influence which it has in the teaching of the N.T. Love of country, devotion to the fatherland, loyalty to a great cause, or to a great leader, are pale and colourless in comparison with the power of loyalty to Christ. Whatever motives enforce the power of loyalty in other cases are also here, and they are blended in a unity which at once compels a man to follow, but also gives him strength to follow.

We need not wonder, then, that any attempt to introduce alien factors into this personal relationship of a man to Christ, should be resented and frowned upon by the Apostle. He is impatient with everything, no matter what it may be, which would interfere with the relation of a man to his Master. Rules and the like tend to erect a barrier between Christ and His follower. They tend also to interfere with the freedom of the Christian man. For in the exercise of his freedom the Christian man comes to see his ideal, makes it his own, and consciously sets himself free from all influences from within and from without which hinder him in his efforts to realize that ideal.