

St. Paul's Conception of Christ.

BY THE REV. H. T. DIXON, M.A., D.D.

II.

AS St. Paul considers that Christ's work for fallen man is the creation of a new humanity which, as its life and Lord He sustains and controls, the question naturally arises, What position does he assign to Christ and God in their relation to men? He thinks of the Father as Supreme; He is the Father of all, whilst Christ is His Son. "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God." Christ, however, is not son in the sense that we are. The phrases which are applied by St. Paul to Christ, such as *τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ οὐκ ἐφέϊσατο: περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ: τὸν ἑαυτοῦ υἱόν* suggests that there was something unique in Christ's sonship: it is a Divine, eternal sonship. As Son, St. Paul does not regard Him to be unequal to God: in mind, in heart, and in will the Son is absolutely one with the Father. The very basis of His Lordship depends upon the fact that He is perfectly Son of God, and shares the very life of God. And so He is qualified to represent the Father and to be the instrument of the Father's will. He is one with God. What the Father is said to do, sometimes Christ is also said to do; but mostly it is through Christ that God works. He is the channel through whom God's gifts are bestowed: "The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ;" in prayer and in thanksgiving we approach God through Christ; and in what Christ does for us and in us God is active.

It is not therefore surprising to find that as St. Paul calls Christ the Spirit, so when he thinks of Christ's relation to us he addresses Him as God. *καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων Θεὸς εὐλογητὸς*: as to this passage it is agreed by a larger number of commentators that it entirely refers to Christ. *ὁ ὢν* represents His superior nature as one that had no commencement of existence: *ἐπὶ πάντων* His supremacy over all things:

Θεὸς designates His all-controlling power as God; and in the verse τοῦ μεγάλου Θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ there are some who also apply Θεοῦ to Christ, because of the absence of the article, and also because the reference of the context seems to them to be to Christ; but on the other hand the article is not grammatically necessary, and there is a reference to the Father a few lines above. But even if θεοῦ is not applied to Christ, but to the Father, the rendering to them the same honour and praise establishes the supreme divinity of Christ and asserts his equality with the Father. It was evidently not St. Paul's custom to address Christ as Θεὸς. Having to combat polytheism on every side, he found it necessary to be guarded in his terms. There is, however, no room for an Arian Christ in his theology; if he is careful of his terms, his whole teaching clearly shows that to him Christ was really and truly God. The risen and exalted Christ stands to him as God. He is, as it were, God's vicegerent and representative, and is therefore God to him. To Him he prayed: upon His name Christians call—"those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ:" to Him he renders worship and adoration, and in His name he sends his blessing to the Churches"; in Him he saw God manifested in the human flesh, and in His influence upon himself he felt the influence of God's Holy Spirit, and in contact with Him he was in communion with God.

It was therefore because St. Paul found in Christ the supreme and ultimate authority over his moral and religious life; because he knew Him to be his Saviour through whom his sins were forgiven: because he found in Him the source of that Divine life whereby it was possible for Him to grow in righteousness and holiness, and because in Him he obtained the hope of immortality, that he found God in Him, and He was to him truly God.

In the later epistles St. Paul's Christology expands. Christ's reign in heaven, His pre-existence and His omnipotence, form the theme of the Apostle. He was compelled to confront the teaching of the gnostics, who disparaged the work and degraded

the person of Christ. According to them Christ was only one of a multitude of æons, through whose agency the world had been created and was sustained : but St. Paul was convinced that He who was to him Lord, Saviour, Giver of Life, and in whom he found God, and who was supreme in the spiritual world, could not hold any secondary place in the physical world. He declares that Christ is supreme in the universe. He is its Creator, its Sustainer and its Goal. He is the *εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου*, and in Him alone dwells the fulness of God, and as such the sole Mediator between God and creation and between God and man. He was *ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ*, and counted it not robbery to be equal with God.

This is a great advance in St. Paul's previous teaching, but there is no inconsistency ; there is progress with continuity. The conception of Christ as the ideal or celestial Man does not exhaust St. Paul's ideas of Christ. If Christ was supreme in the moral world, it must have led on to loftier conclusions. When St. Paul places Christ on the same level with God in his greeting to the Corinthians, and when he calls Him the Spirit, and when he applies to Him the name *Θεός*, and ascribes Lordship to Him, which was an essential prerogative of Jehovah, we have the germ of his teaching, which the gnostic heresy led him to develop and express.

It was because of this gnostic teaching that St. Paul was compelled to consider Christ's relation to the universe. The first cause and primal fountain of all creative existence he conceived to be God : " All things are from God, and from Him and through Him and unto Him are all things " ; " It is God who quickeneth the dead and calleth the things that are not as though they are " ; whilst Christ was the instrument of creation— " All things are (*ἐκ*) from God, through (*διὰ*) Jesus Christ " ; " There is one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things." In Him all things were made. But Christ's work did not cease at Creation. The universe requires continual support, and this continuous preservation no less than creation St. Paul ascribes to Christ. He is its Sustainer : " All things

subsist in Him." "There is in Christ not merely the creative cause, but also the cause which brings about organic stability and continuance in unity for the whole of existing things." In Him the world finds its subsistence and its unity; and as all things find their life and support in Him, they also find in Him their perfection, for in living unto Him every creature finds at once the explanation and law of its being. And so He is Creation's goal as He was its starting-point. St. Paul teaches that the aim of God's work of redemption is to sum up all things in Him, and also through Him (and not through angels, as the gnostics asserted) "to reconcile all things in heaven and earth." He is the destined Heir, whose universal supremacy and whose claim upon their worship and obedience all things will at length acknowledge, for "all things were created unto Him."

It is to Christ, then, that St. Paul ascribes the work of creation, of preservation, and of reconciliation. It was, therefore, not the work of many, but of one, and that one was Christ. Between God, who was inaccessible, and man there was only one Mediator, who was Christ. And as the vastness of work ascribed to Christ is extended, we find a corresponding exaltation of His Person. He is the image of the invisible God, the organ whereby God, in His essence invisible, reveals Himself to creation. He is God's expression of Himself, who manifests and represents God to man. He is essentially the Mediator, the sole link between God and man, through whom alone God imparts Himself to the world, and through whom the world returns to Him. And because He is the image of God, He is the firstborn of all creation—that is, He is not the first of created beings, but one who stands apart from creation, before it and above it, its Sovereign and its Lord. And besides being the outward manifestation of the invisible God, and as such the organ of creation, since it is in creation that God is first revealed, He is "the fulness of the Godhead." Christ is the Person into whom the fulness of God is poured—"it pleased God that in Him should the fulness of God dwell"; and even when incarnate it found a place in Him, for St. Paul adds, "It

dwelt in Him bodily wise." Of the fulness Bengel says that it was "*non modo divinæ virtutes sed ipsa divina natura.*" By virtue of this gift Christ, then, becomes more than the author of creation; He is the source of its life, the centre of all its developments, the mainspring of all its motives. God fills Christ, and Christ fills and sustains the universe.

And as St. Paul contemplated the sovereignty of Christ and the greatness of His work in the universe, his ideas of Christ's influence in the moral world were enlarged. He perceived that Christ is supreme in the universe of being. The angelic agencies, who interfered, as the gnostics maintained, with the course of nature, and who were sources of dread and annoyance, Christ robbed of their power; for by His death and resurrection He showed that He alone is Lord, and that their power was unreal—"Having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show over them, openly triumphing over them in the Cross." His dominion was co-extensive with the world of nature and humanity, and all baneful influences which a belief in thrones, principalities, dominions, and powers inspired in men, gave way before Christ's triumphant love. As Head of all beings, He is clothed with ability to subdue all things for those who believe in Him.

He is also "Head of the Church." Previously St. Paul thought of Christ as the Life and the Lord over the new creation of which He was the founder and the representative man; now He declares Him to be the Head over the new creation, which is His body. The Headship implies not only the two former ideas of immanence and transcendence, but it also asserts His authority. As settled communities arose, it was necessary to insist upon the recognition by all the Churches of His all-controlling authority as well as the fact of their common life in Him. "God," he says, "hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." "He is the head of the body, the Church; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have

the pre-eminence." And from Him, the Head, the Church derives its life. He pours into it the fulness which is in Himself. Not only is the Christian in Christ, but now it can be said that Christ is in the Church. He has need of the Church in order to manifest the plenitude of life within Himself, and only a redeemed humanity is adequate to reveal the nature which is in Him; and as each individual and nation become part of His body, they will contribute and express something of what is latent in Him. Just as Christ is the plenitude and actual manifestation of God, so the Church is the body in which all the fulness of the life within Him is realized. In his Epistle to the Ephesians we have St. Paul's conception of the Church: it is a Divine universal society which draws its life from its Head, whose members are members one of another, and in whose hearts Christ dwells, and who are filled with the love, holiness, and power of their Divine Head, "in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit."

St. Paul rises to the understanding of what Christ is through the experience of what He proves Himself to be, and specially by reason of His influence upon his own inner life. Starting with Christ's life immanent in himself, he arrives at the magnificent conception of Christ as Sovereign and Lord of the Universe and Head of the Church. In both spheres he traces and perceives His work and influence. What Christ's eternal nature was before His incarnation he is not led so much to conjecture. But there are several passages here and there in his epistles which indirectly tell us what he conceived Christ's pre-incarnate condition to have been. He fully believed that Christ existed before His incarnation. His coming to earth was a mission: "God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh": it was a change of condition; "before He was rich, then He became poor": it was also an act of humiliation, "being in the form of God He humbled Himself," as well as a manifestation, "the grace which was given unto us in Jesus Christ before

time eternal hath now been manifested by the appearing of our Saviour Christ."

Like the other Apostles, it is evident that St. Paul asserts Christ's pre-existence, and accepts the belief of Christ's pre-existent state which was prevalent in the Early Church. "What strikes us in these statements," says a writer about pre-existence, "is that the Apostle nowhere really establishes or teaches the pre-existence of Christ, but especially in his earlier epistles presupposes it as familiar to his readers and disputed by no one." He may take the belief for granted on many occasions, but it is not too much to say that St. Paul's epistles contain expressions which leave it quite clear that Christ possessed a real personal existence before His incarnation: the theories which were current about the Messiah and the speculations of the Greek school of philosophy do not sufficiently account for these definite remarks about Christ's pre-existence; and, further, only the representation of Christ as eternally pre-existent, descending into a connection with us from a higher state, satisfies the mind, and is most in keeping with the conviction of His superhuman greatness and with the supreme significance of His life and death for mankind.

We can safely say, then, that St. Paul was firmly convinced of Christ's pre-existence, but of His eternal nature there is little said. We have seen that he calls Christ in a very special sense "God's own Son." And there are two expressions which, besides asserting His pre-existence, reveal to us something of His eternal nature. "Christ is the image of the invisible God," which, we saw, implied that He was the instrument whereby God in His essence invisible reveals Himself to His creatures, but which in His relation to God asserts that Christ is "the exact likeness of the Father in all things, except being the Father." And the still higher metaphysical definition, *ὅς ἐν μορφῇ ὑπάρχων*. Some maintain that in this expression St. Paul does not ascribe absolute divinity to Christ, but that there was a higher position for Him to attain, which He really did after His humiliation; before His incarna-

tion He was in the form of God, and after His self-sacrifice "God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every other name." But does St. Paul mean to teach here that there were stages of growth in Christ's personality? Is not the phrase itself "in the form of God" equivalent to a declaration that Christ was very God? How could there, then, be an increase of His glory? For *μορφή* implies not only the external accidents, but also the essential attributes. "The form of a thing is that external manifestation of its inward nature which declares it to be what it is": it therefore indicates objective reality, and therefore the *μορφή Θεοῦ*, with which is contrasted the *μορφή δούλου*, can have no other signification than that the divine status or condition of Christ was exactly the same as that of God. This equality with God Christ did not regard as robbery, because it was His own by natural right; not a thing to be eagerly prized or seized; on the contrary, He gave it up. If He were inferior, it was wrong to grasp after what did not, and could not, belong to Him. But He did not so regard it. It was His, and He was content to lay it aside and to become man, and thus to win the higher glory of being loved, honoured, and adored by all, on the ground of His service to mankind. And when He returned to heaven, we believe that He was not really more than He was before: the glory and majesty which He had laid aside were again assumed; but in one sense He was exalted, for did He not return with the possession of His human nature and with the experience of a human life, which not only added to the fulness of His own being, making Him more than He was before, but it also made Him known to and loved by men. And He sits, as before, at the right hand of God, sharing with the Absolute Deity in the majesty and glory of the Divine government. God "hath set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principalities, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come."

When St. Paul calls Christ the "image of the invisible God," the firstborn of all creation in whom the fulness of the Godhead

dwelt, and asserts that "He was in the form of God," his teaching rises to the same height as St. John's when he declares that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, all things were made by Him." Both teach the same truths : that Christ existed prior to creation, that He was the agent in creation, that He was a divine person, that He was equal with God and shared His essential life, and that He was really none other but God. But it is Christ as the God-man which best expresses St. Paul's conception of Christ. The glory and the majesty of the eternal Son of God and the vastness of His work in the universe drew out his admiration and his love ; but the aspect of Christ which is most dear to him is that of Christ as the Saviour and Restorer of men, who fills them with His own victorious life and conforms them into His own image, and who, as their Lord, guides, protects, and supports His people, and as their Mediator unites them to God.

