

church-order and now living in the wilderness, awaiting the promised glory.

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*THE UNCHANGEABLENESS OF JESUS CHRIST IN
RELATION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.*

It is proposed in this paper to point out : First, with what qualifications Christians, generally speaking, regard Jesus Christ as unchangeable ; and, Secondly, that His Person, even as already imperfectly comprehended, constitutes a test of doctrine, as to whether it be in principle true or false, and that fuller comprehension of His Person embodies the line along which the true development of Christian doctrine must proceed in the future.

It may help to give our thoughts on this subject a right direction if we begin by an attempt to get a clear grasp of the exegesis of the *locus classicus* about the unchangeableness of Jesus Christ : Hebrews xiii. 8, 9. " Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, yea, and for ever."

The closing chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, from which those words are quoted, has no direct connexion with the treatise, carefully planned and elaborately worked out, which occupies the twelve preceding chapters. Bishop Westcott, in his commentary, entitles it A Personal Epilogue, and points out that it deals with three distinct topics : the social duties of the Hebrews, their religious duties, and the personal instructions of the writer.

The words we have chosen as our starting point come from the opening of the second section, that on religious duties ; and it is not very easy to trace the connexion of thought in this paragraph. The slight obscurity which we perceive is, no doubt, due to the state of things—moral and

spiritual—in which the Epistle was written, which, in fact, caused it to be written. It constantly happens in letters that the writer does not deem it necessary or prudent to give explicit expression to the thoughts which are suggesting to him what he is writing. He knows that those for whom the letter is primarily intended will be able to read between the lines, that their cognizance of the circumstances will supply what is not distinctly expressed, or not expressed at all. In the case before us, Bishop Westcott is probably right in reading between the lines “the presence of a separatist spirit among those who are addressed.”

Having said so much on the section generally, it will be sufficient for our present purposes to indicate the connexion between verse 8, and those which precede and follow it. Verse 7 runs thus : “Remember them that had the rule over you, which spake unto you the word of God ; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith.” The phrase rendered “the issue of their life” means the closing scene of their life, as public and visible to all, rather than the net result of their life taken as a whole. It suggests some scene of martyrdom in which a Stephen, or a James the Great, or a James the Just had given a public exhibition of faith triumphant over cruel ignorance. The lesson taught by such endings of life the Hebrews are bidden to observe carefully, and to imitate the faith which inspired them.

Bishop Westcott traces the connexion of the following words thus : “The thought of the triumph of faith leads to the thought of Him in whom faith triumphs,” *Jesus Christ*. “He is unchangeable,” *the same yesterday, and to-day, yea, and for ever*, “and therefore the victory of the believer is at all times assured.” Then we read, *Be not carried away by divers and strange teachings*. “The unchangeableness of Christ calls up in contrast the variety of human doctrines. The faith of the Christian is in a Person and not in doctrines

about Him." It may be added that in the term *divers*, (*ποικιλαις*, *various*, sometimes rendered *manifold*) there is a contrast implied with the one and the same Jesus Christ, while the *strangeness* of the new teachings would be evident when they were compared with that of the departed pastors, whose example the writer has just held up for imitation.

I propose to consider the affirmation as to the unchangeableness of Jesus Christ in connexion with the words that follow it ; not with the preceding context. Our reference Bibles remind us of the application to Jesus, in the first chapter of the Epistle, of the Psalmist's words : " Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands : They shall perish ; but thou continuest : And they all shall wax old as doth a garment. . . . But Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail." We are also referred to the momentous claims made by our Lord Himself, " Before Abraham was, I am," and " I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, which is and which was and which is to come, the Almighty." But in the verse now under consideration, the epithet *the same* seems to be used in a sense somewhat different from that unchangeableness so grandly predicated of Him in the passages just quoted. There it is His Person in the most absolute sense, as Creator and sustainer of the universe, that is referred to ; here, *Jesus Christ is the same* rather refers to His Person in relation to us, as revealed to us and in us, as revealed ever more and more fully, as always summing up all necessary doctrine.

Jesus Christ is the same, yet, such are the limitations of our outlook that we do not always think of Him in precisely the same way.

There are perhaps three conceptions of our Lord, in Christian theology, which may be stated here in the order in which they have been revealed : First, we have the histori-

cal Jesus of Nazareth—I use the term historical in the strict sense, i.e. Jesus as He appeared in the history of the world, born in the reign of Caesar Augustus, crucified in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, under Pontius Pilate. We have first, then, the conception of Jesus in His human activities, “going about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil,” and also fully realizing in Himself and in His work the inspired adumbrations of prophecy, and so seen to be Jesus the Christ.

Secondly, we have the spiritual conception of Jesus Christ the Son of God, as a regenerating force energizing in the world of humanity, the Life of the Church and of every member thereof. The transition from the first stage of human thought about Jesus to the second is indicated in St. Paul’s words : “Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more.”

Thirdly, we have Jesus Christ ascertained by the intellect as God the Son, the Second Person in the Trinity, coeternal with the Father, the Creator and upholder of all things, the Light that lighteth every man.

The conception of Jesus Christ as God the Son, the Creator, certainly seems to us an advance beyond the conception of Him as the Son of God, the Life of the Church ; yet possibly I have erred in speaking of them as successive revelations ; since it would be impossible to disprove that they were simultaneously grasped by such minds as those of St. Paul and St. John. They are, however, distinct conceptions, as was proved by the Arian controversy. But there can be no question as to the posteriority in point of time of the conception of Jesus Christ as the Life of the Church to the conception of Him as simply the Christ. The New Testament supplies abundant proof that a considerable section of the Jewish Christians never advanced beyond that first stage. Their failure to do so was of course illogi-

cal and inconsistent ; and also we may well believe that the Apostles and those most in sympathy with them passed at once to the fullest and most adequate conception of their divine Master ; nevertheless, the first two stages of belief are clearly marked as distinct.

And for us, as for all later Christians, the three conceptions, historical, spiritual, intellectual, remain distinct. They do not, indeed, involve to our minds any contradiction or inconsistency. Some of us have never analysed our beliefs about our Lord at all. We all, we who hold the Catholic faith, believe all three simultaneously ; but we do not *see* all three simultaneously. The Christos Pantocrator, the Almighty Christ, who looks down with a calm regard from the apse roof of a Greek or Russian Church seems to the non-Christian mind quite other from the Jesus of whose gracious words and loving deeds we read in the Gospel story ; and that picture again does not directly or obviously suggest a sentiment such as this : “ Ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory.” Nevertheless we feel as each picture passes before us, that it is true, and that “ Jesus Christ is the same ” in these varying conceptions of Him.

Keeping in mind the cautions which have been just indicated, we may say that the revelation of Jesus Christ as God the Son is logically later than the other two ; and yet it is, from the theological standpoint, logically more fundamental. Those who hold the Catholic faith as to the Person and Natures of our Lord read their Bibles by light derived from the doctrine that Jesus Christ is “ the very and eternal God.” Take away that basal belief, and the Gospel story becomes the narrative of a tragical fiasco, and the Epistles of the New Testament reflect the hallucinations of disordered imaginations.

Again, it is not a little remarkable, as indicating the intellectually or logically fundamental character of the conception of Jesus Christ as God the Son, that there is now no controversy on this point between any of the many branches of the Church Universal. Easterns, Romanists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists are unanimous in their belief in the essential Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some individuals in these different bodies may not express themselves in the theological terminology of the fourth and fifth centuries, but all recognize the finality of the decisions then reached.

The same unanimity cannot be said to exist with respect to the conception of Jesus Christ as the Life of the Church and of each individual believer. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that the intellect alone is not so exclusively appealed to in this question as in that of the Deity of Christ. Here ethical and emotional considerations play an important part. Associated with this aspect of Jesus Christ are all the controversies that harass the Church as a whole, and produce searchings of heart in individual souls; all, in a word, that concerns personal religion in theory and in practice—the forgiveness of sins, the means of grace, the ministry, the sacramental system, public worship. We are so constituted that we cannot help regarding differences on these points as of vital importance. We dare not, in regard to these matters, “sit as God holding no form of creed, but contemplating all.” And yet when we are “delivered from the strivings of the people,” and are not compelled to render a logical account of the life whereby we live, we are glad to acknowledge our real ignorance of the working of the means devised by God “that His banished be not expelled from Him”; and we appreciate the clear spiritual sight of the Apostle who could say, “What then? only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ

is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice."

Well might St. Paul say so, in a world, as he saw it, perishing for want of a firm standing-place in faith and morals. "For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Of course it is not, it cannot be, a matter of indifference whether the superstructure we build thereon—the superstructure of thought, expression, practice—be of costly stones or stubble, yet we have the Apostle's assurance that those who build anything on the one foundation shall be saved, even though it be "through fire."

But we have to recognize not merely contemporaneous differences, at times sharply antagonistic, in Christian men's conceptions of the manner in which Jesus Christ imparts His life to them, but also we have to learn that there is a development from age to age in men's apprehension of Jesus Christ in His relation to humanity as a regenerating force energizing in the spiritual, intellectual, and social world of man. The one fact, indeed, involves the other. In every department of being or of knowledge in which we observe development or evolution, e.g. civilization, there are always to be found side by side individuals or classes representative of every stage of development. There may be a general advance, but all do not advance at the same rate, or on the same level.

It is disturbing to some minds to be obliged to take knowledge of the fact that there is development or evolution in religion, as in everything else. There is a natural craving for absolute truth in matters of religion: in things that do not concern us so closely we acquiesce contentedly enough in relative truth. And yet the undoubted facts of our own personal spiritual experience ought to help us to understand that the spiritual apprehensions of humanity must become wider, deeper, loftier as the centuries pass. Jesus Christ is

the same as He was when we were children ; but our thoughts about Him, if we have thought at all, have undergone a very considerable development. Those who have not deliberately checked their spiritual life have "grown in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

It may perhaps be well to point out that the affirmation of the unchangeableness of Jesus Christ followed by the warning, "Be not carried away by divers and strange teachings," cannot be interpreted as a denial, conscious or unconscious, of the possibility of any development whatever of Christian doctrine. On the contrary, it is rather an indication of the line along which true development must proceed. The writer who, in the exordium of his Epistle, gave its classical phrasing to the doctrine of the evolution of the religion of Israel is not likely to have thought it possible to stereotype the outward expression and inward apprehension of the New Covenant, "God having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners." The divine who enriched the Church with the most elaborate treatise of constructive theology in the New Testament, and who must have been conscious, to a far greater degree than St. Paul could have been, that he was giving a permanent expression to new doctrines—he surely would have been the last to deny this privilege to others, in other ages.

In any case, whether he thought of the Church as having a long future or not, the writer to the Hebrews has in this passage given us a test by which we may distinguish true from false developments in doctrine : "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, yea, and for-ever. Be not carried away by divers and strange teachings." There is no need for a discussion as to the precise form that these "divers and strange teachings" assumed. The principle which they embodied is quite independent of the manner of its

expression. History repeats itself; not in the garb and speech and customs of men, but in the conflict, again and again, of fundamental principles of conduct. So it is in the history of religion. In the case before us "the divers and strange teachings" would lead to a reversion to the Judaism of the day, the principle underlying this reversion being a denial of the sufficiency of the finished atoning work of Jesus Christ. There was an eclectic spirit abroad; and it is probable that the most dangerous of the teachers against whom the writer warns the Hebrews gave the name of Jesus Christ an honourable place in their system, "holding a form of godliness [i.e. Christianity], but having denied the power thereof." But, in effect, they denied the present power of Jesus to deliver from sin. They denied that Jesus Christ of yesterday was the same to-day. Their development was a false one. And the same may be said of all the aberrations from the Christian faith noticed in the New Testament.

It would seem, then, that we are entitled to lay it down as a guiding principle that any teaching that can be shown to be subversive of the claims made for and by Jesus Christ in the Gospels is a false development. I am aware that this way of putting the matter involves certain large assumptions as to the Gospels. But as the whole discussion has interest only for those who make those assumptions, we may here treat them as axioms. The Gospel presentation of Jesus Christ constitutes for us Christians the root and trunk of the tree of Christian speculation. Any higher growth which can be proved to be different in kind to the nature of the root and trunk is thereby proved to be a diseased growth. In other words, we must progress consistently with what we have learnt historically and intellectually about Jesus Christ. In "going onward" we must "abide in the teaching of Christ" (2 John 9).

The line of true development in Christian doctrine, as

in personal religion, is thus from faith in Jesus Christ to faith in Jesus Christ. It is most significant that in two passages, written about the same time, in the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians respectively, St. Paul explicitly affirms this to be the direction of Christian doctrinal evolution. The starting-point is found in Colossians ii. 19, where the error of the false teacher is declared to result from his "not holding fast the Head, from whom all the body . . . increaseth with the increase of God." And the goal of Christian faith and practice alike is indicated in Ephesians iv. 13-15, where the Apostle declares the grand purpose of the gifts of grace bestowed by the risen yet indwelling Lord to be that "we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God. . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; that we may . . . grow up in all things into him which is the head, even Christ."

It may, it doubtless will, be said that this is very vague, and does not give us the positive leading which we desire in an age when "divers and strange teachings" have lost none of their power to "carry men away" from Christ. More positive leading we certainly cannot get, though it may be pretended to, in our present probation state. And yet surely we have not meditated altogether in vain, if we have reminded ourselves that the historical Jesus Christ is Himself the steady and guiding principle of all Christian teaching. "Remember," said the dying Apostle to his son Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel" (2 Tim. ii. 8). *Ubi Christus, ibi Ecclesia*. Where Christ is, there is the Church. There too is Christian doctrine, sufficient for life, if not adequate to satisfy every possible human need. And if we are able to feel, with thankfulness and humility, that our own theology is fuller and richer than that of

centuries nearer the starting-point, it is not that Jesus Christ of to-day is different from what He was yesterday, but that He has revealed to us, more fully than before, aspects of His work in the past, and has disclosed departments of His activities in the present where formerly men did not see Him working. And we look forward without misgivings to the future, assured that to other types of human mind in other lands, and to minds of our own type in the generations to come, Jesus Christ "the same for ever" will reveal knowledge of Himself to satisfy needs intellectual, spiritual, social, which have as yet formed no expression. It ought to be unnecessary, as it is in truth absurd, to say that Christians need not be uneasy about the future of the faith.

"Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Reflection on this fact ought to have power to banish from the minds of some religious persons what St. Hilary called "an irreligious solicitude for God."

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