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THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SHORTER CATECHISM.

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FEW productions of uninspired men have received higher encomiums, and few, if any, deserve them better than the Shorter Catechism prepared by the Westminster Assembly of Divines. Had nothing more than the framing of this little manual for the instruction of the young, or rather, as its title almost ironically bears, this "directory for catechizing such as are of weaker capacity," been accomplished by that Assembly, not in vain would the money, time and energy expended in its meeting have been spent. Presenting, as it does, in terms admirably concise and exact, a well-knit system of theology, this catechism is fitted to train its students to precision of expression and of thought, and as an instrument of merely intellectual culture would merit attention. Unlike the books commonly prepared for children, it never can appear childish, even though scrutinized by the eyes of mature manhood or of hoary old age. Its statements of doctrine are so lucid, guarded and complete, that Dr. Charles Hodge, one of the greatest theologians with whom America or the world has been blest, has gratefully availed himself of its aid in formulating the teachings of holy writ. Indeed, the chief objection urged by those in sympathy with its doctrines against putting it into the hands of the young to be committed to memory, is that it is too abstract and deep to suit the juvenile mind. To this objection, however, we attach little importance; for, while the Catechism transcends in many respects the comprehension of the young, and, it may be added, of many of the old, it presents much which any of these may understand or apprehend; and, besides, contains mystery enough to stimulate inquiry and afford room for the expansion of the faculties of its students, so that none of them shall ever attain in this life to a position to look down upon this companion of their youth as a childish thing. Of signal advantage is it to have the weighty and clear-cut propositions of this little question-book lodged in the mind at an early age, ready for use as occasion may require; even as it is of great practical utility in the common business of life to have the multiplication table at command. The objection just stated proceeds in part from a misconception as to the order in which the powers of

the human mind develop, and, carried out logically, would lead to the conclusion that the Bible itself must be, in a great degree, a sealed book to multitudes of both old and young. The books which lift us up must be above us, while, in some respects, level to our capacity, and this is one respect in which the Psalms have the advantage of uninspired hymns as a manual of praise. Far distant be the day when the Psalter and the Catechism shall be forced in our church to give way in their respective spheres to any competitors, however soft and plausible.

Among the merits and attractions of the Catechism may be reckoned its wealth in historic allusions; a feature of which comparatively little notice has been taken, but to which it is our immediate aim in this paper to direct attention.

The answers given in this little formulary present not only the results of profound investigation, but also a tacit antagonism to the errors broached in by-gone days. Almost every word is the monument of a struggle or the grave-stone beneath which lies buried a heresy. How few of those who glibly repeat those concentrated answers have any adequate idea of the conflicts they echo, and through which they have been reached! To those who traverse the field embraced in this Catechism, the poet's apostrophe may not unaptly be addressed,

> "Stop! for thy tread is on an empire's dust,
> An earthquake's spoil is sepulchred below."

By way of illustrating and confirming what has now been said as to the historical allusiveness of the Catechism, we select for scrutiny the following question and answer: "Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever."

Passing by some incidental, though important, hints involved in the words, "only," and "elect," and surveying the answer rather with respect to its Christology than its Soteriology, we shall notice in detail the phraseology in which it is couched.

1. "The Son of God." In declaring the Saviour to be the Son of God, the framers of the Catechism designed not merely to present in part what the Scriptures say of him, but also, there is reason for thinking, to repudiate and repel a notion which in the early ages found numerous advocates among those who claimed the Christian name, to the effect that the Saviour was not the Son of God in the special and emphatic sense in which he is so styled in the Scriptures, but an emanation from God. In the first and second centuries the church was invaded by a flood of speculations, of which this was one, under the name of Gnosticism, traceable largely to an effort on the part of the human mind to account for the existence of evil, both physical and moral. This standing problem, it was thought, might be solved by the assumption that there are two eternal, independent beings, God and matter, the former being essentially pure, the latter essentially evil. Then it was conjectured that between these

mutually antagonistic existences, a certain connection was formed through the medium of "aeons," that is beings somewhat like angels, emanating from God and endowed with the power of reproduction. At every remove in the reproductive process from God, the primal source of life, the aeons, it was supposed, became less god-like, until at length one of them, with a diminished affinity for God and a proportionately increased affinity for matter, joined himself to it or fell into it, and became its captive. The result of this untoward conjunction is the life which this world contains; a life in thralldom to matter, yet, as if mindful of its celestial origin, ever struggling to be free. Hence this world presents the appearance of a conflict between light and darkness, matter and spirit, life and death. For the deliverance of the celestial thrall, it was necessary that another aeon should come into the world, and, by teaching men, lead such as are not too gross, to victory over the sensual and material influences which enslave them. This is the Redeemer according to the Gnostic notion, a mere creature, or, more accuratety speaking, an emanation from God.

With their eyes directed to the Bible and with the remembrance of this fantastic system with which the Church was at one time so grievously harassed, the authors of our Catechism affirm indirectly that the Redeemer is the "Son of God." That they had the Gnostic heresy in view when they inserted this clause, may be reasonably presumed from the fact that in other parts of this answer manifest allusions to other errors touching the person of the Redeemer which were broached and combated in the early centuries of our era occur.

2. "The eternal Son of God." The epithet, "eternal," employed to characterize the Son, is another discriminating mark of the Redeemer. While many may be called "the sons," or "children of God," there is only one who with warrant of Scripture can be styled "The eternal Son of God."

In asserting the eternity of Christ's Sonship, the Westminster Divines, thoroughly conversant with the controversies of the ages, raised a protest and a barrier against Sabellianism, Arianism and Socinianism, the respective peculiarities of which, especially in regard to this point, we must indicate.

About the middle of the third century Sabellius, a presbyter of Egypt, or at least of North Africa, working upon certain heretical notions which were circulating in his time, reduced them to the system which from him is designated Sabellianism. This system was in reality the fruit of an effort to bring the doctrine of the Trinity within the compass of human reason, or rather to discard that doctrine, while plausibly accounting for the language employed by the sacred writers. In other words, it was the product of rationalism. The Sabellian heresy was in brief this: That God is one, both as to essence and as to person; that the so-called persons of the Godhead are but one person revealed in different aspects or relations—in the Old Testament age as the Father, at the period of the incarnation as the Son, and in the New Testament dispensation as the Holy Spirit. The Sabellian could consistently say that the Son was an eternal person, but he could not consistently say that as Son he was eternal, or in other words, that this one eternal person had from eternity sustained the relation of Son. According to the Sabellians, Sonship was

only one of the three great modes in which the one divine being and person has revealed himself within the limits of time.

Now, our Catechism, in alleging that Christ is the "eternal Son of God," excludes Sabellianism. We may add that the expression in question forms a barrier against Swedenborgianism, a heresy of later origin than the Catechism, but in which Sabellianism is perpetuated.

The Arian heresy arose in the early part of the fourth century, and is so named from Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria. In A. D. 318, this man, while listening to a discourse by the bishop of Alexandria, in which the speaker characterized Christ as "the eternal Son of God," expressed his dissent from the statement. He maintained that the Son of God was a creature, the product of the optional will of God, and, therefore, not eternal, although the first and greatest of all the creatures of God. To settle the questions raised by Arius, the first Council of Nice was convened in A. D. 325, and by it the doctrine which we hold to be orthodox was affirmed, and the doctrine of Arius condemned.

Socinianism, substantially the same system as that which in our day is styled "Unitarianism," derives its name from two Italians, Laelius and Faustus Socinus, uncle and nephew, who, in the 16th century, renounced Popery, but unhappily did not accept the Reformed faith. In the Socinian creed, Christ ranks as a mere man, although richly endowed with wisdom and other qualities, fitting him to be, in word and deed, the greatest spiritual teacher that has ever appeared in the world. It is obvious that in no proper sense could the Socinian or Unitarian admit that Christ is the "eternal" Son of God. On this point the Catechism presents in this answer a barrier to the Socinian heresy. Even among Trinitarians are found some who dispute the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ. Even so acute a defender of the doctrine of the supreme deity of Christ as the late Moses Stuart of Andover, denied the doctrine of his eternal Sonship. The Trinitarian opponents of this doctrine, when asked to explain the ground on which the title, "Son of God," is in Scripture applied to Christ, give different replies; some maintaining that he is so called because of his resurrection from the dead; others, that he receives this title on account of his incarnation; while others, still, assign as the reason for this designation the fact of his mediatorial appointment. It would be a digression from our theme to engage in any formal refutation of these methods of accounting for the application of the title "Son of God," to Christ; but we may express the conviction that against each of them there lie serious, nay insuperable, objections. The Sonship of Christ is no more the fruit of any transaction in time, or even of any divine decree or volition, than is his omnipotence or his deity itself. The doctrine rightly formulated stands thus: Christ is the Son of God by natural, necessary and eternal generation, or, in more condensed form, Christ is the eternal Son of God.

3. "Became man." In these words the fact of the incarnation of the Son of God is asserted, to the exclusion of sundry heretical sentiments with which the early church was troubled. One of these was that of the Docetae, who

taught that the Redeemer did not really become man, but only assumed the appearance of a man. This notion grew out of another false principle already referred to, namely, that matter is essentially evil. Those who accepted the principle just enunciated deemed it derogatory to the Redeemer's character to suppose that he had actually assumed a human nature, inclusive, of course, of a material body. Hence it was contended that he did not come in the flesh, but that he assumed merely a phantom body, or the semblance of a man. This Docetic doctrine was broached, there is good reason to believe, even in Apostolic days, and it seems almost certain that the Apostle John had an eye to it when he wrote his Gospel and Epistles, wherein occur such expressions as these: "And the Word was made flesh;" "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of anti-christ whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world."

The strong language employed in the quotation just made, will not appear too strong to apply to Docetism, if it be duly considered that, if Christ assumed only the semblance of humanity, he offered only the semblance of a sacrifice, and the doctrine of a proper vicarious atonement therefore falls to the ground.

A kindred notion to that of the Docetae was the doctrine of Cerinthus, who, before the close of the first century, taught that Jesus of Nazareth was a mere man, on whom at the time of his baptism by John, an aeon called "Christ" descended, and that this aeon qualified him for instructing men, and remained with him till, and only till, the time of his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. The crucified One was, according to this wild speculation, not Christ, but the mere man, Jesus of Nazareth. Against this crude conception, as well as against the closely allied Docetic fancy, the words, "became man," are a protest.

These words, moreover, are a virtual, and doubtless an intentional condemnation of the doctrine advocated in the 4th century by Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea. This man was a zealous champion of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, in opposition to Arius; but, through the desire to get rid of the objection that if Christ was God and also man, he must be two persons instead of one, he ran into the error of denying in effect the full and proper humanity of the Saviour, maintaining that the divinity of Christ performed the functions of a soul in his humanity. From this, as well as from the graver error of Arianism, the church recoiled, and in the Council of Constantinople, held A. D. 381, gave decision against it. The next question in the Catechism calls forth a more explicit statement of orthodoxy on this point, as well as on the two others which have just been noticed; yet the declaration that the Son of God "became man," implies that he took to himself "a true body and a reasonable soul."

4. "And so was and continueth to be God and man." These words are fitly introduced to guard against a misunderstanding of the assertion that the

Son of God became man. It is highly probable, also, that such a clause as this was inserted the more readily in consequence of a controversy which had agitated the Lutheran church in the early part of the 17th century. The controversy referred to is that known as the "Kenotic controversy," which was waged particularly between the divines of Giessen and those of Tübingen. One point maintained by the former school of theologians was that the Son of God, in humbling himself, absolutely divested himself of divine attributes, although in some inexplicable sense still retaining the right to have and use them. The opposing school held that even during the period of humiliation, Christ continued not only to be God, but also to use in some respects his divine prerogatives; although they connected with this the notion that even to his humanity he freely imparted the divine attributes of omnipresence and omnipotence. To some extent the controversy was a mere war of words; yet neither party seems to have been free from error; and, well acquainted as the Westminster Divines were with religious movements on the Continent of Europe, they sought, there is reason for thinking, by the introduction of this clause to guard against the extremes into which the contending Lutheran theologians had run. The assertion is made that the Son of God became man in a sense compatible with his continuing to be God, and without the deification of his humanity.

5. "In two distinct natures." This clause is added to emphasize and render more explicit the preceding clause, which has just been under consideration. As the background of this affirmation, and as the occasion for it, we recognize at once the Eutychian heresy, to the effect that in Christ humanity and divinity are fused together, either by the absorption of the humanity in the divinity, or by the communication of divine attributes to the humanity, or by such a coalition or blending of the two as results in a new nature specifically different from either constituent. Eutyches, an Abbot in Constantinople, from whom this heresy, of which there were different shades, received its name, was led through his repugnance to a heresy which we shall presently notice, called Nestorianism to the extreme and erroneous view with which his name is identified. No lesson, it may be remarked in passing, is more emphatically taught in the history of theology, and of philosophy too, than the tendency of one extreme to beget another. Error produces error, both by attraction and by repulsion.

The Eutychian, called also the Monophysite, heresy was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon, A. D. 451; but it lingered on under different modifications, and is maintained at this day in the East, particularly by the Armenians and the Copts, with the latter of whom our missionaries in Egypt have so much to do. There is some ground also for alleging that the Romish and Lutheran doctrines as to the nature of the Lord's Supper, rest ultimately on a Eutychian basis. Both theories involve the idea that the divine attribute of omnipresence attaches to the human nature of Christ, and this logically leads to the conclusion that his humanity was converted into deity. The orthodox doctrine, as affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon, is asserted in the clause under consideration, and more explicitly expressed in our Confession of Faith, when, in regard to the Mediator, it says "that two whole, perfect and distinct natures, the God-

head and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man."

6. "And one person forever." This clause, which debars the notion that in the Mediator there are two persons, a divine and a human, embraced, points plainly to the Nestorian heresy which was condemned by the Council of Ephesus, A. D. 431. The heresy is named from Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, who was charged with originating it. It would seem that if Nestorius did actually maintain the heresy in question, he was led to do so through his aversion to the idolatrous honor which in his day was beginning to be paid to the Virgin Mary. It was customary to style her, "The Mother of God," a phrase to which Nestorius objected. His resistance to the popular spirit drew upon him the bitter hostility of superstitious zealots, particularly of the monks; and it is certain that he was driven to the use of at least improper language in speaking of Christ, possibly even to the heretical position signalized since his time by his name. He, however, who makes the wrath and the errors of men to praise him, provided that through immense agitation and discussion a pernicious error should be condemned, and the contrary truth distinctly apprehended and for all after ages formulated.

The doctrine thus reached is, that from all eternity Christ was a divine person; that in assuming our nature he took to himself a "true body and a reasonable soul;" but not a human personality, the united body and soul which he took never having any subsistence apart from his divine person; and that his divinity is the proper seat and centre of his personality. In virtue, however, of the intimate and mysterious union, commonly called "the hypostatic union," between his two natures, what is true of either nature may be ascribed to his whole person; yet on this ground what is true of one nature may not be ascribed to the other nature. Thus it is said that men "crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. ii. 8), that is one who was and is the Lord of glory, but not that the divine nature of Christ was crucified.

Let it not be thought that the doctrine now stated, is a mere metaphysical abstraction, devoid of any practical importance. In reality it underlies the doctrine of the atonement. Although Christ obeyed and suffered in his human nature only, the sacrifice thus rendered is, by virtue of the union we have spoken of, attributable to his divine person, and, therefore, acquires an infinite value. Had he assumed a human personality, as well as nature, the obedience and suffering would have been those of a mere human person; while, besides, this person would have owed for himself perfect obedience to the law, and, therefore, could have merited nothing in behalf of others.

The survey which has now been taken affords, we think, satisfactory evidence that the framers of our Catechism gathered into it the theological acquisitions of the ages, and shaped its calm, judicial statements with reference to the errors which, during long centuries, had emerged. These statements, also, are beacon-lights to bid us beware of the rocks and quicksands on which others have foundered. Modern errors will be seen on careful inspection to be in

most cases only ancient ones revived, and, hence, he who is familiar with this Catechism is provided with a ready touch-stone, always, however, subordinate to Scripture, by which to test any new theories or sentiments which claim his attention.

VERSIONS AND THE REVISION OF THE BIBLE.

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AS the Bible is unquestionably the Book of God for good to man, it was to be expected that it should be given to the world in all the varied languages of men. Accordingly, from time to time, almost from the completion of the Old and New Testament Canon alike, translations have been made of it from the original tongues.

First among these was the *Septuagint*, which was a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament into the Greek tongue, and is supposed to have been made in the reigns of the Ptolemies, at Alexandria, in Egypt, and was completed about the year 280 or 285 before Christ. It took its name, Septuagint, probably from the reported fact that seventy or seventy-two persons were employed in the translation. Philo professed to believe that it was inspired. Josephus, the Apostles, and the early Christian fathers, largely used it when quoting the Old Testament Scriptures. Origen spent twenty-eight years in preparing an elaborate edition of it, and though it has many mistakes and is far from being perfect, yet it is of inestimable value to any person carefully studying and seeking rightly and fully to interpret the Word of God.

The *Peschito* was another work of early times, and has ever been regarded as of great interest. It was a translation of the Old and New Testaments, from the originals into Syriac, and was probably made near the end of the second century. It was called the Peshito or "literal" because of its closeness to the original text. Though defective on many points, it is a valuable work to every critical student of the New Testament Scriptures.

Later than this was the *Vulgate*. This was a version or translation which was made during the twenty years from A. D. 385 to A. D. 405, by the memorable Jerome. It was made from the original Hebrew and Greek into Latin, and has ever been called the Vulgate, because it contained the only text or form of the Scriptures that was then in common use among the people. At first it was greatly opposed, but being favored at length by Pope Gregory I., who entered upon his Pontificate in 590, it came to be as it has been, since the seventh century, the received or accepted version of the Scriptures in the Roman Catholic Church. So high did it rise in the estimation of that Church that the Council of Trent which convened in 1545 and continued its sittings until 1563, decreed that it should be deemed authentic for use, and that no one should dare to reject it.