

JESUS CHRIST THE SAME YESTERDAY, AND TO-DAY, AND FOREVER

(Heb. xiii. 8)¹

THE nature of the unchanging Christ is revealed in the Christian Scriptures. From this holy deposit of truth the ancient Church through four centuries of careful work formulated her God-given faith. The First Œcumenical Council declared that Christ is eternal God, the Second that He is also complete man, the Third that He is one person, the Fourth that this One Person is in two natures, the Fifth that the Person is Divine and that the human nature became personal in union with the Eternal Word, the Sixth that in Christ there are two wills or willings, the human following the Divine. In this long process one group magnified one set of facts, another a different emphasis until each aspect had found its true niche and the whole picture was set so simply that even childhood can apprehend it. Christ, "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". "Christ, the Son of God, became man by taking to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin."

I

In distinction from the Church's doctrine many circles of theological thought have been dominated by a "liberalism" which denies Christ's Virgin Birth and presents Him as merely a human, temporal person. W. P. Paterson points out that for the Ritschlians Christ is not the God-man, but only a godlike man. Some speak of exchanging the divine-human Christ for a human-divine Jesus, a contrast which means changing from an *eternal* to a *temporal* person. Often these men seek to bring God into the life of this human person as far as their premises permit. They say that God was as personally present in the

¹ Opening Address delivered at Columbia Theological Seminary by Dr. Wm. C. Robinson, Professor of Historical Theology.

life of this temporal person as He could be in the life of any man of Galilee in the period of the Roman Empire. While this reference to "personally present" looks in the Nestorian direction, it can scarcely be designated a repristination of Nestorianism. It does not reach beyond an adoptionist Christology, and generally speaking is what we call a humanitarian Christology, but what the more exact Greeks called a *psilanthropist* (mere man) doctrine.

Signs are not lacking, however, that orthodox Christology is shining out from behind this "liberal" eclipse and once again demonstrating its survival value. The recently organised World Council of Churches certified its Christian Faith by inviting to membership only those bodies which confess Christ as God and Saviour. The newest theology describes itself as "the theology of the Word" and consequently accepts the Word made flesh according to the orthodox Christology as the rule of faith, the touchstone by which to test every doctrine. The eternal Son who is of the same self-existent essence as the Father became man for us men and for our salvation. The Incarnation is a human episode in the life of a Divine Person. In His Divine power Christ was swinging Orion and the Pleiades while in His human weakness He hung upon a mother's breast and later upon a cruel cross.

II

Last summer, one of our graduates was faced with another problem. Starting with the Deity of Christ and the text *God cannot be tempted of evil*, one of his elders insisted that Christ was not really tempted. But Christ was truly man as well as very God. Accordingly, the Gospels and Hebrews represent Him as tempted like as we are yet without sin. How was it possible for Him to be tempted? To begin with, we accept the fact whether or not we can offer the explanation. The last of the Princeton Hodges suggested that it was metaphysically possible for Him to have sinned in His human nature, but by virtue of the Virgin Birth, the godly rearing, the union of the Divine with the human, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human nature it was morally impossible for Him to have sinned. The Sixth Œcumenical Council said that in Him there were two wills or willings, a human and a Divine, the human so following the Divine that He did always those things

that pleased the Father. In our temptations we have a Saviour who can sympathise with us, for like us He was tempted, and One who is mighty to save, for He is the Lord of Hosts. He is able to save unto the uttermost all those who come unto God by Him seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.

III

Another man starts with our Lord's Divine knowledge. No one knows completely the Father save the Son, and as He knew the Father and as the Father knew Him, so He knew His sheep. He knew all men and needed not that any should testify of man; for He Himself knew what was in man. Peter well said unto Him, "Lord, Thou knowest all things". If one infers from this, however, that there was no growth in or limitation of the knowledge of His human nature, he finds himself confronted with other texts which assert that He increased in wisdom, that He learned obedience by the things which He suffered, and that He knew not the day or the hour of His Coming in Glory.

According to the analogy of the Church's decision at the Sixth Œcumenical Council, we may put together these two sets of texts by saying that there were in our Lord two consciousnesses, the Divine and the human, the human following the Divine. Because the human did follow the Divine we are delivered from a sea of uncertainty with no bottom for the anchor of truth to grip, no rest upon which the fulcrum of life may stand.

In God's wisdom, however, He has not left this important truth to be decided either by analogy or by inference. When Jésus asked the Twelve if they would also leave Him, Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life". When the disciples questioned our Lord's teaching concerning His death, He said, "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man also shall be ashamed of him, when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels". Immediately following this solemn statement in the Synoptic record is the Transfiguration on the holy mount when our Saviour received from the Father honour and glory and a Voice came out of the cloud saying: "This is My beloved Son, hear ye Him." This is God's own Amen to the Saviour's

mighty words and His reinforcement to the Great Commission that we are to teach all things whatsoever He commanded us.

Christ kept assuring the disciples that He had been "sanctified" and "sealed" and "sent" into the world to do the works of the Father and to speak the words of the Father.¹ Whatsoever He spake and whatsoever He did, it was "as the Father had given Him commandment" (John xiv. 31; xii. 48-50; cf. xvii. 4, 8; xii. 49-50; vii. 16-17). "I spake not from myself; but the Father that sent me, He hath given me a commandment, what I should say and what I should speak . . . the things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto me, so I speak." "The words which Thou gavest me, I have given them." "My teaching is not mine, but His that sent me. If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself."

In the limitations of His human knowledge He walked among us by faith in God as we must walk; but in His teaching He spake from the Father and thus gave us a foundation of rock on which we may, nay on which we must, build if the structures of our lives are to stand the storms that beat against them. "If ye abide in Me and My Words abide in you, ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you."

IV

Ever and anon the different dispensations in the unfolding of the one covenant of grace are exaggerated into differing covenants with the result that the law of God drops wholly out of the picture. A full apprehension of the work and of the person of the Redeemer is not without light on this difficult matter. In the completeness of His redemptive work for us, Christ forever freed us from the law as a covenant of life. When we are clothed in His righteousness, bound up in the covenant of grace and the bundle of life with Him, members of the body of which He is the Head, we have the Righteousness of God—a righteousness we can never supplement.

But it is also true that we love Him who first loved us. And the love of Christ constrains us to love God because He is God and to love man because He is man. Now the moral law which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments

¹ Hugh Martin, *The Atonement*, p. 38.

is just a statement of the way in which our loving heavenly Father wills that we should love God and love man. Love is the fulfilment of the law. Thus when we accept the work of Christ as the end of the law for righteousness, we accept Him whose Divine-human Person binds us in gratitude and love to God and to man. And so in the new covenant the Person of Christ, the Mediator, writes the law of God upon our hearts and upon our minds (cf. Heb. viii. 10; x. 16). Loving Him means loving the Father who so loved us and loving our neighbour. Inasmuch as we do it unto one of the least of these His brethren we do it unto Him who loved us and delivered Himself up for us.

V

When I entered Columbia as a student, one of our professors drew two heavy parallel lines from top to bottom of the blackboard. "One of these", he said, "represents Divine sovereignty, the other human responsibility. You may not be able to see how they fit together, but life and Scripture teach both, consequently we accept both." At the present time this duality is leading to debate concerning the relation of God's immutable decrees to a free offer of salvation. Perhaps a re-phrasing of the question in terms of the covenant of grace would be more expressive of the Divine affection as well as more central to our Confession of Faith and more acceptable to those who are troubled by the paradox. Only by standing within the covenant can one invite others to enter. Then we are to govern our lives by God's revealed will, not by the secret counsels He has veiled from our eyes.

Ultimately our human reason cannot resolve the antinomy of the certainty which goes with Divine sovereignty and the natural ability with which God has endowed man. Indeed in the nature of the case we have only experienced natural ability—and that in a fallen state without ability to will spiritual good accompanying salvation—and have never exercised infinite sovereignty, therefore we cannot be expected to fit the two together. And any harmonisation derived from our human speculation can only be a misstatement. But while human reason cannot solve the antinomy, Christian faith can relieve the antinomy.

There is one Person who in Himself knew and exercised both the sovereignty of God and the liberty of man. Hence we

can enquire of our Lord, and walking by faith accede to His answer. In His discourse on the bread of life, our Lord coupled together assertions of God's sovereign action in the Covenant of Grace with a free and gracious offer to sinners. "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him." "Every one that hath heard from the Father and hath learned (from His teaching) cometh unto me." "All that which the Father giveth me shall come unto me; and him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out."

In the Jubilation Passage which follows the Matthean account of our Lord's rejection by the large Galilean cities, Jesus did not remove the sovereignty of God as though that were necessary in order to make a free offer of the Gospel. Rather, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit He confessed the good pleasure of the Father as the reason why some are obdurate and others believe in order that from the ocean of Divine sovereignty the waves of a free Gospel invitation might break upon our needy shores.

"At that season, Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding and didst reveal them unto babes; yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight. All things have been delivered unto me of my Father; and no one knoweth the Son, save the Father: neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal him. Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me: for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

VI

Most of all we need to take the Person of Christ into His offering up of Himself a sacrifice to satisfy Divine justice and reconcile us to God and in His rising from the dead for our justification. As God He cannot die, and only as man can He be a substitute and surety for man.

So man as is most just,
Shall satisfy for man, be judg'd and die,
And dying rise, and rising with him raise
His brethren, ransomed with His own dear life.
So Heav'nly love shall out do Hellish hate.

On the other hand, only God has the might and the power to endure the wrath of the Almighty, only God can do the priestly act of offering an infinite sacrifice. Only God could endure what He endured, only God could do what He did.

Only the energies of the Godhead were sufficient for the agonies of Calvary. Only the satisfaction of an infinite Person could atone for the infinite demerit of our sin.

For granting we have sinn'd, and that the offence
Of man is made against Omnipotence,
Some price that bears proportion must be paid,
And infinite with infinite be weigh'd. . .
His justice makes the fine, His mercy quits the score.
See God descending in the human frame;
The offended suffering in the offender's name;
All thy misdeeds to Him imputed see,
And all His righteousness devolved on thee.

Thus Christ must needs be God and man, that as man He may die and that as God He may offer in suffering an infinite satisfaction and by a death of infinite worth expiate the infinite guilt of sin.

Then He must be God and man to rise from the dead. The resurrection is the raising again of the man Jesus Christ. Here we are dealing not with a Platonic idea, but with an actual event. Jesus Christ is risen as man, therefore He is risen visibly and corporeally. No doubt He is risen in glory. His risen body is so glorious that He must take food and eat with them and bid them handle Him to be sure that He is flesh and bone and not an incorporeal ghost. He rose, however, not by the power of humanity but by the power of God. Because He is God, the eternal Son, therefore death cannot hold Him. The power of God is neither diminished nor destroyed by the humiliation and death, but death for Him is the gateway to life and to the majesty of sitting in our human nature at the right hand of God.

When an empty scabbard is hanging at the side of a knight and a flashing sword is swinging in his hand, both scabbard and blade are still bound to the person of the knight. So in our Lord's death both the spirit which He committed to the Father and the body which was laid in the tomb were still united to the Divine Person. The separation of soul and body demonstrated that this Man was a dead man and satisfied all the claims of death. But this Man is not a mere man for "His disembodied soul and dead body remain in a certain glorious union with each other, through the intermedium of that Godhead with which, in the Person of the Son, who is this dead Christ, they are each of them in immediate and direct

union, although severed from each other.”¹ And this bond of union subsisting in spite of death brings the victory over death for Him and robs death of its sting for us. It is the assurance that first for Christ and then for His people, body and soul are re-united through the intervention of the Divine Person of Christ. As in His Resurrection the Divine Person brought together His human body and spirit that had been separated in death, so our bodies that in their graves are still united to Christ shall be raised and re-united to our souls when we share the glory of His Resurrection.

The Church which conquered the ancient Roman Empire and ascended the throne of the Caesars in less than three centuries was not a Church that gave forth an uncertain sound concerning her Redeemer. Neither half-truths nor ambiguities, but unwavering convictions and clear-cut declarations gave the early Christians the mastery of the centuries. Christian certitude makes the pulpit a flame and the pew a power. The trumpets of God’s dawn are the glories of His Christ.

“Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man, Thou didst humble

Thyself to be born of a virgin.

When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death Thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.

Thou sittest at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.

We believe that Thou shalt come to be our judge.”

May the bugles of victory sounding again from this ancient fortress of the Faith blast the strongholds of Satan and overturn the gates of Hell. When the colours of the King are flying from the citadel and Jehovah Saba’oth goes before His people in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, *vexilla Dei prodeunt*.

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¹ Hugh Martin, *The Atonement*, p. 84.