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Departure of "Christendom" from the True Doctrine of Deity

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CHAPTER VI.

DEPARTURE OF "CHRISTENDOM" FROM THE TRUE DOCTRINE OF DEITY.

In nothing perhaps was there a wider departure from the real truth of Christianity than in the doctrine concerning God defined by a general council of the Church held within the life time of Constantine, and which council, in fact, he assembled upon his own authority. This was the celebrated Council of Nicea in Bithynia, Asia Minor, held in 325 A. D. The main purpose for which this first general council of the church was assembled was to settle a dispute between one Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, and his bishop, Alexander, of the same city, respecting the doctrine of the Godhead. The dispute proved to be far-reaching in its effects, and for three hundred years the rivalry of the contending factions disturbed the peace of Christendom. We shall have clearer conceptions of the subject, however, and be better able to judge of the extent to which there was a departure from the true doctrine respecting the Godhead, by the definitions formulated and enforced upon the church by the council of Nicea, if we first consider the doctrine of the Godhead as found in the Testament.

The Christian Doctrine of God.

The existence of God both Jesus and the apostles accepted as a fact. In all the teachings of the former he nowhere seeks to prove God's existence. He assumes that, and proceeds from that basis with his doctrine. He declares the fact that God was his Father, and frequently calls himself

the Son of God.^a After his resurrection and departure into heaven, the apostle taught that he, the Son of God, was with God the Father in the beginning; that he, as well as the Father, was God; that under the direction of the Father he was the Creator of worlds; that without him was not anything made that was made.^b That in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;^c and that he was the express image of the Father's person.^d Jesus himself taught that he and the Father were one;^e that whosoever had seen him had seen the Father also;^f that it was part of his mission to reveal God, the Father, through his own personality; for as was the Son, so too was the Father.^g Hence Jesus was God manifested in flesh—a revelation of God to the world.^h That is, a revelation not only of the *being* of God but, of the *kind* of being God is.

Jesus also taught (and in doing so showed in what the "oneness" of himself and his Father consisted) that the disciples might be one with him, and also one with each other, as he and the Father were one.ⁱ Not one in person—not all merged into one individual, and all distinctions of personality lost; but one in mind, in knowledge, in love, in will—one by reason of the indwelling in all of the one spirit, even as the mind and will of God the Father was also in Jesus Christ.^j

The Holy Ghost, too, was upheld by the Christian religion to be God.^k Jesus ascribed to him a distinct person-

^aJohn x; Matt. xxvii; Mark xiv: 61, 62.

^bFor all of which see John :: 1-4; Heb. i: 1-3.

^cCol. i: 15-19, and ii: 9.

^dHeb. i: 2, 3.

^eJohn x: 30, xvii: 11-22.

^fJohn xiv: 9.

^gJohn xiv: 1-9; John i: 18.

^hI Tim. iii: 16.

ⁱJohn xiv: 10, 11, 19, 20; also John xvii.

^jEph. iii: 14-19.

^kActs v: 1-14. To lie to the Holy Ghost is to lie to God, because the Holy Ghost is God.

ality; as proceeding from the Father; as sent forth in the name of the Son, as feeling love; experiencing grief; as forbidding; as abiding; as teaching; as bearing witness; as appointing to work; and as interceding for men. All of which clearly establishes for him a personality.

The distinct personality of these three individual Gods (united however into one Godhead, or Divine Council), was made apparent at the baptism of Jesus; for as he, God the Son, came up out of the water from his baptism at the hands of John, a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Ghost was given in the sign of the dove which rested upon Jesus, while out of the glory of heaven the voice of God the Father was heard saying, "This," referring to Jesus, "is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The distinctness of the personality of each member of the Godhead is also shown by the commandment to baptize those who believe the Gospel equally in the name of each person of the Holy Trinity. That is, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.^l And again, also, in the Apostolic benediction, viz., "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."^m

These three personages constitute the Christian Godhead, the Holy Trinity. In early Christian theology they were regarded as the Supreme Governing and Creating power in heaven and in earth. Of which Trinity the Father was worshiped in the name of the Son, while the Holy Ghost bore record of both the Father and the Son. And though the Holy Trinity was made up of three distinct persons, yet did they constitute but one Godhead, or Supreme Governing Power.

This outline of the doctrine of God derived from the

^lMatt. xxviii: 19, 20.

^mII Cor. xiii: 14.

New Testament represents him as anthropomorphic; that is, like man in form or, rather, it re-affirms the old doctrine found in the book of Genesis, viz., that man is created in the image of God, and after his likeness. The outline of New Testament doctrine of God also ascribes to him what are called human attributes and feelings; but as in the foregoing we first say that God is represented as being in human form, and then to get the exact truth say: "Or, rather, man was created in the image and likeness of God," so in this latter case, when we have said that the doctrine of the New Testament ascribes human attributes and feelings to God, to get the exact truth we should say: "Or, rather, man possesses the attributes of God—" the attributes of knowing, willing, judging, loving, etc.—though it should be stated, of course, that man does not possess these attributes in their perfection as God does. The same may also be said of the physical perfections. While man has been created in the image and likeness of God, yet our bodies in their present state of imperfection—sometimes stunted in growth, diseased, subject to sickness, wasting, decay, and death—cannot be said to be like God's glorious, perfect physical body, yet we have the Divine word that our bodies shall be like his:

"For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself."^a

So also the attributes of the spirit of man—the attributes of the mind—now imperfect, impure, unholy, and limited in the range of vision and apprehension of things, owing largely to the conditions in which man finds himself placed in this

^aPhil. iii: 20, 21.

earth-life (and all for a wise purpose in God's economy) ; yet the time will come that it will be with the spirit as with the body ; for God shall change our vile spirit that it may be fashioned like unto his own glorious spirit, "according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." That whereas now we see only as through a glass, darkly, then we shall see as we are seen ; that whereas now we know but in part, then we shall know even as we are known.^o

The foregoing doctrine of God, taught to the Christians in Apostolic times, awakened their pious reverence without exciting their curiosity. They dealt with no metaphysical abstractions, but were contented to accept the teachings of the Apostles in humble faith, and believed that Jesus Christ was the complete manifestation of Deity, and the express image of God his Father ; and hence a revelation to them of God ; while the Holy Ghost they accepted as God's witness and messenger to them.

Paganization of the Christian Doctrine of God.

But Christianity, as is well known, came in contact with other doctrines concerning Deity. It was almost immediately brought in touch with the mysticism of the Orient and also with the philosophy of the Greeks, who took so much delight in intellectual subtleties. In the Oriental philosophies, and in the Greek, there was conceived the idea of a trinity in Deity ; an idea which possibly may have come down from the doctrines revealed to the patriarchs concerning the Godhead, but which had been corrupted and rendered unintelligible by the vain philosophizings of men. In some of the Oriental systems the trinity or Trimurti consisted of Brahma, the Cre-

^oI Cor. xiv.

ator ; Vishnu, the Preserver ; and Siva, the Destroyer. It will be seen, however, that this trinity is not necessarily one of persons, or individuals, but may be one of attributes, qualities, or even a trinity of functions in *one being* ; and in this way it is usually understood.^p

Plato's trinity is sometimes stated in the terms, "First Cause ; Reason, or Logos ; and Soul of the Universe ;" but more commonly in these : "Goodness, Intellect, and Will." The nature of the Greek trinity has long been a matter of contention among the learned, and one indeed that is not settled to this day. Is there indicated in his system "a true and proper tri-personality, or merely a personification of three impersonalities," a trinity of attributes or functions ? The answers to these questions are varied, and would require too much space for consideration here. Christians having been taught to accept the New Testament doctrine of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as constituting one Godhead. Christianity no sooner came in contact with the philosophies of the Greeks and Egyptians than there was an effort made to identify the Christian trinity with that of the Greek and other philosophies. The temptation to do this was very great. Christianity was a proscribed religion and its followers detested. Whenever it could be shown, therefore, that under new symbols the Church really taught the same doctrines that the old philosophers, which were held in esteem, it was regarded as a distinct gain to Christianity. The mere fact of Christianity teaching a trinity of any kind was a sufficient basis of comparison under the temptation offered, and hence in a short time we have the alleged followers of Christ involved in all the metaphysical disputations of the age. The chief difficulty in those speculations was to define the nature

^pSee Shedd's History of Christian Doctrine, vol. i, p. 342, et seq. and note.

of the Logos, or Word of God; a title that is given to our Savior by the Apostle St. John,⁹ be it remembered. Adopting absolute being as the postulate of their conception of God, absolute oneness, and therefore absolute singleness, their difficulties arose in trying to reconcile the existence of three persons in the Godhead to the postulate of unity. The disputations were carried on chiefly concerning Christ, the "Word" in his relationship to the Godhead; and the disputants concerned themselves with such questions as these: "Is Jesus the Word?" "If he be the Word, did he emanate from God in time or before time?" "If he emanated from God, is he co-eternal and of the same, that is identical, substance with him, or merely of a similar substance?" "Is he distinct from the Father, that is, separate from him, or is he not?" "Is he made or begotten?" "Can he beget in his turn?" "Has he paternity, or productive virtue without paternity?" Similar questions were asked as to the other Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. These questions were violently agitated at Alexandria by the bishop of that city, Alexander, and one of the presbyters, Arius, 318-321 A. D.; thence spread throughout Christendom, and culminated finally in the Council at Nicea, 325 A. D. Arius held the doctrine that the Logos or Word was a dependent or spontaneous producton created out of nothing by the will of the Father, hence the Son of God, by whom all things were made, begotten before all worlds; but there had been a time when the Logos was not; and also he was of a substance, however similar it might be, different from the Father. This doctrine, in the minds of the opponents of Arius, detracted from the divine nature of Christ, denied him true Deity, in fact, and relegated him to the position of a creature, against which the piety of a large number of Christians rebelled. After six years of hot disputation and

⁹John i: 1-5; 14.

frequent appeals by the contestants to the Emperor, the council of Nicea was assembled and the mysteries of the Christian faith submitted to public debate, a portion of the time, at least, in the presence of the emperor, who, to some extent, seemed to exercise the functions of president over the assembly. The doctrine of Arius was condemned, and after "long deliberations, among struggles, and scrupulous examinations," the following creed was adopted:

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, only-begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of the same substance with the Father, by whom all things were made in heaven and in earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made man, suffered, rose again the third day, ascended into the heavens, and he will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost. Those who say there was a time when he was not, and he was not before he was begotten, and he was made of nothnig (he was created), or who say that he is of another hypostatis, or of another substance (than the Father), or that the Son of God is created, that he is mutable, or subject to change, the Catholic church anathematizes."^r

Arius himself was condemned as a heretic and banished into one of the remote provinces, Ilyricum, his friends and disciples branded by law, with the odious name of "Porphyrians," because it is supposed that Arius, like Porphyry, had sought to injure Christianity. His writings were condemned to the flames and a capital punishment was pronounced against those in whose possession they should be found. Three years later, however, through the influence of the women at the imperial court, Constantine softened in his demeanor towards Arius and his followers. The exiles were

^rHist. Christian Councils (Hefele), p. 294.

recalled and Arius himself was received at court and his faith approved by a synod of prelates and presbyters at Jerusalem; but on the day that he was to be publicly received in the cathedral church at Constantinople, by the order of the emperor, who, by the way, received the sacrament at the hands of Arians, he expired under circumstances which have led many to believe that other means than the prayers of the orthodox against him were the cause of his death. The leaders of the orthodox party, Athanasius of Alexandria, Eustathius, of Antioch, and Paul, of Constantinople, were now to feel the wrath of the first Christian emperor. They were deposed on various occasions and by the sentence of numerous councils, and banished into distant provinces. In fact, so far from the adoption of the Nicene creed ending the conflict which had arisen, it was more like the opening of that controversy which agitated Christendom for so long, and resulted in so many shameful conflicts. Councils were arrayed against councils, and though they never could convince one another of error, they never failed, in the spirit of such Christian charity as was then extant, to close their decrees with curses. Votes were bartered for and purchased in those councils, and the facts justify the latent sarcasm in Gibbon's remark, that "the cause of truth and justice was promoted by the influence of gold." There were persecutions and counter-persecutions, as now one party and then the other prevailed; there were assassinations and bloody battles over this doctrine of Deity, the accounts of which fill, as they also disgrace, our Christian annals. The creed which was adopted at Nicea, however, became the settled doctrine of orthodox Christendom, and remains so to this day.

It is difficult to determine which is really the worst, the creed itself or the explanations of it. At any rate, we do not clearly see the impiety of its doctrines until we listen to the

explanations that have been made of it. Athanasius himself has left on record a creed explanatory of the one adopted at Nicea. True, among the learned, many doubt Athanasius being the author of the creed which bears his name; but, however much doubt may be thrown upon that question, no one hesitates to accept it as the orthodox explanation of the doctrine of Deity, and, in fact, it is accepted as one of the important symbols of the Christian faith, and is as follows:

“We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet there are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreate, but one uncreate and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty; and yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God.”

As already stated, this creed of St. Athanasius is accepted as one of the symbols of the orthodox Christian faith. It is understood that these two creeds teach that God is incorporeal, that is to say, an immaterial being. The Catholic Church says: “There is but one God, the creator of heaven and earth, the supreme incorporeal, uncreated being who exists of himself and is infinite in all his attributes.”^s While the Church of England teaches in her articles of faith “that

^sCatholic belief (Bruno), p. 1.

there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts,^f or passions, of infinite power, wisdom and goodness." This view of God as an incorporeal, immaterial, bodiless, partless, passionless, being is now and has been from the days of the great apostasy from God and Christ, in the second and third centuries, the doctrine of Deity generally accepted by apostate Christendom. The simple doctrine of the Christian Godhead, set forth in the New Testament is corrupted by the meaningless jargon of these creeds, and their explanations; and the learned who profess a belief of them are wandering in the darkness of the mysticisms of the old pagan philosophies. No wonder that Athanasius himself, whom Gibbon with a quiet sarcasm calls the most sagacious of the Christian theologians, candidly confessed that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate on the divinity of the Logos (and which, of course, involved the whole doctrine of the Godhead), his "toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts!" It is a fine passage with which Gibbon closes his reflections upon this subject, and hence I shall give it place here:

In every step of the inquiry, we are compelled to feel and acknowledge the immeasurable disproportion between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind. We may try to abstract the notions of time, space, and of matter, which so closely adhere to all the perceptions of our experimental knowledge; but as soon as we presume to reason of infinite substance, or spiritual generation; as often as we deduce any positive conclusions from a negative idea, we are involved in darkness, perplexity, and inevitable contradiction.⁴

^fi. e, without materiality.

⁴Decline and Fall, ch. xxi.

Recurrence to the New Testament doctrine of God, and a comparison of it with the doctrine of Deity set forth in the Nicean and Athanasian creeds, will exhibit the wide departure—the absolute apostasy—that has taken place in respect of this most fundamental of all doctrines of religion—the doctrine of God. Truly “Christians” have denied the Lord that bought them,^v and turned literally to fables. They have enthroned a conception of a negative idea of “being,” which can stand in no possible relationship to man, nor man to it; and to this they ascribe divine attributes and give it title, knee and adoration which belong to God alone.

^vII Peter ii: 1.