

consists to some extent in the erroneous representation it insinuates of the views of Presbyterians on the topics which it includes. They dispute with him his account of the state of the question, and regard his account of it as little better than a juggle, to obscure and perplex the real merits of the controversy, or as an unmanly evasion of its real difficulties. They never imagined or asserted that Prelacy started into life fully grown, and was suddenly and all at once established over the church; on the contrary, their firm persuasion is, that it took from three to four centuries to attain to the maturity which it exhibits in modern times; and they do not need, in explaining its gradual rise and progress, in so far as they are at all called upon to explain it, to ascribe to any one generation in the church a larger measure of ignorance or sin, of indifference and unconcern about Christ's arrangements, and of love of power and pre-eminence, than is compatible with a large measure of Christian zeal and excellence, or than can be conclusively proved to have been exhibited in early times in other matters besides this.

Prelacy was not established by the apostles, for there is no proof of it in the New Testament. They established only two orders of ordinary permanent office-bearers—presbyters and deacons; and by *uniformly* using the words bishops and presbyters interchangeably, as both descriptive of one and the same class of office-bearers, and by giving us no hint whatever of any other intended permanent office, they, of course, designed that, in taking the word of God for a guide, and applying it for a standard of faith and practice, the church should adhere to the Presbyterial government which they, in accordance with their Master's directions, had established. Their immediate successors adhered to the apostolic mode, and retained their Presbyterian principles and practice. Gradually some measure of superior influence and authority came—perhaps from good motives or plausible professions of benefit to the church, and not at first from mere vulgar ambition and open disregard of Christ's arrangements—to be conceded to the presidents of the presbyters, who were also usually the pastors of the original or mother church of the district. A state of things, in some measure new, was thus introduced, which, of course, required to have some name or designation by which it might be represented and described; and this was effected by restricting, though at first without anything like regularity or

uniformity, the word bishop to the higher class, and leaving the word presbyter to the inferior.* This unquestionable deviation from the apostolic and inspired use of the words, does, according to all the recognised principles which regulate the formation of language, necessarily imply the existence of a different state of things from that which the apostles established and left. A change was made in the use and application of the words, to indicate and express a change which had previously been introduced into the actual administration of ecclesiastical affairs,—a change which, in its progressive development, required the invention of several new words and titles, until the world at length became familiar both with the name and the reality of a universal bishop,—a sovereign pontiff,—the head of the church,—the vicar of Christ upon earth. If they had adhered rigidly to the apostolic arrangements, they would not have needed to have changed the apostolic phraseology.

A great deal of ingenuity has been employed by the defenders of Prelacy, from Epiphanius down to the present day, to account for the uniform interchangeableness and manifest identity of the words bishops and presbyters in the New Testament, and the distinction afterwards introduced between them. Some half-dozen of theories, with various subsidiary modifications, have been devised to account for it, and it is not very easy to say which of them is now most generally adopted by Episcopalians. These different theories are possessed of different degrees of ingenuity and plausibility; but they are all destitute of any solid foundation, either in actual historical evidence or in intrinsic probability, as might be easily shown. The only satisfactory explanation is, that in apostolic times the *offices* as well as the *names* of bishops and presbyters were thoroughly identical, and were designed to continue so; that a difference was afterwards introduced into the actual state of matters in the government of the church; and that this difference in the things required and produced a difference in the usage of the names. The principles of human nature, the lessons of experience, the informations of the history of the church, suggest abundant materials for establishing the entire probability of such a change. There is nothing in the least unlikely about it. So likely, indeed, is Prelacy to arise in the church

* Mason on Episcopacy.

from causes which are in constant and powerful operation, that we regard it at once as a subject of surprise and gratitude, that the evil has not again found its way into the Reformed churches; and we have no doubt that this is to be explained, under God, by the deep impression produced by the history of the early church as to the imminent danger of tampering with God's appointments, and of deviating *at all* from the scriptural standard,—of yielding in any measure in ecclesiastical arrangements to the suggestions of worldly policy or of carnal ambition.

It would be out of place to be dwelling upon the general tendency of Prelacy, as manifested in history, to obstruct the welfare of the church, and to injure the interests of religion. But I must briefly advert to what are the principal direct charges which we have to adduce against it, and which we think we can fully establish.

First, it introduces a new and unauthorized order of office-bearers into the church. The church is Christ's kingdom—He alone is its sovereign—He has settled its constitution, and established its laws, and He has revealed His whole will to us concerning all these matters in His written word. No one is entitled to prescribe laws to the church, or to fix its office-bearers, except Him who has purchased it with His own blood; and all its arrangements should be regulated by the constitution which He has prescribed. He has given us no intimation of His will that there should exist in His church a distinct class of office-bearers superior to the ordinary pastors, whom He has authorized and required to feed the flocks over which the Holy Spirit hath made them overseers. And if He has given no intimation of His will that His church should have a superior order of office-bearers to pastors, then no such order ought to exist; and where it has crept in, it ought to be expelled. It is an interference with His arrangements, a usurpation of His prerogative, for any one to introduce it. Episcopacy, indeed, did not present itself as the introduction of a new order of office-bearers, to those who took the first steps that led to its establishment. It was at first merely conceding a somewhat superior measure of dignity or authority to one of the presbyters over the rest, without its being imagined that he thereby ceased to be a presbyter, or that he became anything else. But this led gradually to the notion that he held a distinct superior office, and then the word of God was perverted in order to get some countenance to the innovation. It was, as Jerome

assures us, a device of men, who, in the exercise of their wisdom, thought it well fitted to guard against schism and faction, though at first it was far from assuming that aspect of palpable contrariety to God's word which it afterwards presented. The remedy, as has happened in other cases, proved worse than the disease. Prelacy was not attended with the divine blessing, and the wisdom of man continued to make progress in improving upon God's plans and arrangements, until the great body of the professing church became an entire apostasy; Christ's authority was trampled under foot, and His great design in establishing the church was in no small measure frustrated by men who professed to act in His name, and to be administering His laws. So dangerous is it to deviate from the path of Scripture, and to introduce the inventions of men into the government and worship of the church of the living God.

Secondly, another serious ground of charge against Prelacy,—though, indeed, it is virtually the same charge in another form,—is, that it deprives the pastors of churches of the power and authority which Christ has conferred upon them. It is surely abundantly evident in Scripture that pastors have a power of ruling—of exercising a certain ministerial authority in administering, according to Christ's word, the ordinary necessary business of His church; and we have irrefragable evidence in Paul's address to the presbytery of Ephesus,* that he contemplated no *other* provision for the government of the church, and the prevention of schism and heresy, than the presbyters or bishops faithfully discharging *the duties of their office* in ruling as well as in teaching. But no sooner was a distinction made between bishops and presbyters, than the bishops began gradually to encroach upon the prerogatives of the presbyters, to assume to themselves more and more of the power of ruling or of administering all ecclesiastical affairs, until at length, though not till many centuries after the apostles' times, the presbyters were excluded from any share in it, and became the mere servants of their lords the prelates. This led also to an inversion of the scriptural views of the relative dignity and importance of the functions of teaching and ruling, and to a practical elevation of the latter above the former—Scripture always giving the first place, in point of dignity and importance, to the function of teaching. Accordingly, we now see that,

* Acts xx.

in the Prelatic Churches of England and Ireland, not only are presbyters deprived of all power of ruling, or of exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and thus stripped of privileges and prevented from discharging duties which Christ has attached to their office; but it seems, practically at least, to be generally supposed that teaching and preaching the word, which the apostles manifestly regarded as their highest honour and their most imperative duty, is beneath the attention of those dignified ecclesiastics who lift their mitred heads in courts and parliaments, and should be left to the common herd of presbyters,—the mass of the inferior clergy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

THE only topic now remaining in order to complete our proposed survey of the doctrine of the first three centuries is that of the Trinity,—a subject of the highest interest and importance. We have reserved this to the last, chiefly because it connects most closely with the subjects which must occupy our attention in surveying the doctrinal discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries—the Arian, Nestorian, and Eutychian controversies.

Sec. I.—Testimony of the Early Church on the Trinity.

When the Arian controversy arose in the fourth century, both parties claimed, in support of their opposite doctrines, the testimony of the earlier church, though the orthodox party advanced this claim with greater confidence and greater truth. And in more modern times, whenever the subject of the Trinity has become matter of controversial discussion, the question has been agitated as to what were the views that generally prevailed in the early church, or during the first three centuries, regarding it. There seems to have been something like a general feeling upon the part of theological writers, even those who in general were not disposed to attach much weight to catholic consent, that it was a matter of more importance to ascertain what were the views generally held by the primitive church on the subject of the Trinity, than upon any of the other topics which we have already considered,—a sort of general admission that the testimony of the early church would have rather more of a corroborative, though, of course, not probative, influence in support of the side which might enjoy the benefit of it, in this than in most other controversies which have been agitated. And this feeling or impression is perhaps not altogether destitute of some foundation in reason.

The doctrine of the Trinity—*i.e.*, the doctrine that there are three distinct persons possessing one and the same divine nature and essence—is one which is altogether of so peculiar a character, that we cannot help having an impression that it is in the highest degree improbable,—first, that if it had been taught by the apostles, it would have soon disappeared from the general teaching of the church; or, secondly, that if it had *not* been taught by them, it would have been afterwards devised or invented by men, and would have so widely and extensively prevailed. On the ground of the first of these positions, we concede to the anti-Trinitarians, that if it should turn out that the doctrine of the Trinity was not generally believed by the early church, this would afford a certain degree of presumption, though of course no proof, that it was not taught by the apostles; while, on the ground¹ of the second of these positions, we call upon them to admit, that a proof of its general prevalence in the early church affords at least an equally strong presumption in favour of its apostolic origin. None of the defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity imagine that men can be reasonably expected to embrace this doctrine,—which, from its very nature, must be one of pure revelation,—unless it can be clearly established from Scripture; and they are all persuaded that if the divine authority of Scripture be admitted, and if it be further admitted that the authors of the books of Scripture understood what they wrote, and meant to write so as to be understood by others, the doctrine of the Trinity can be fully established. But there is nothing unreasonable in the general idea that the prevalence in the early church of a doctrine of so very peculiar a character—so very unlikely to have been invented by man—should be regarded as affording some presumption in favour of the soundness of the conclusions that may have been deduced from Scripture. At the same time, it is true, as might have been expected, that most of those who have believed that the doctrine of the Trinity is taught in Scripture, have also believed that the testimony of the early church is in favour of it; while, on the other hand, most of those who have succeeded in persuading themselves that the doctrine of the Trinity is *not* taught in Scripture, have been equally successful in reaching the conclusion that it was not generally adopted by the early church.

Some collateral or adventitious influences, indeed, have occasionally been brought to bear upon the investigation of this subject

—of the faith of the early church concerning the Trinity—which have broken in upon the regularity with which theologians have ranged themselves upon the one side or the other, according to their own personal convictions as to the truth of the doctrine itself. More especially, the discussion of the question of the faith of the early church on the subject of the Trinity has been brought to bear upon the more general question of the respect due to the authority of the fathers, and even upon the subordinate question of the comparative respect due to the testimony of the ante-Nicene and the post-Nicene fathers; and men seem to have been somewhat influenced in deciding upon the Trinitarianism or anti-Trinitarianism of the early church by the views which they felt called upon to maintain in regard to the general question. As we cannot enter into a minute examination of the precise meaning of passages in early writers, very often obscure and confused; and as, after all, the subject is now important, chiefly, perhaps, from the prominent place it occupies in modern theological literature, I may illustrate the statement about the cross currents of influences in affecting men's opinions upon the subject by one or two examples.

Dionysius Petavius, or Denis Petau, whom I have already had occasion to mention, a very learned and able Roman Catholic writer in the early part of the seventeenth century, and profoundly versant in patristic literature, has given it as his deliberate opinion, that a clear and decided testimony against Arianism cannot be produced from the existing remains of the first three centuries; nay, that many of the fathers of that period were no better than Arians, and that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity—which, like all Romanists, he professed to believe—was first brought out fully and clearly at the time of the Council of Nice. And this declaration of Petavius has been since boasted of by anti-Trinitarians as a concession wrested from a very learned adversary by the pure force of truth and evidence. Bishop Bull, the most eminent among the champions of the orthodoxy of the ante-Nicene fathers,* after expressing his surprise and amazement that a man like Petavius—*vir magnus atque omnigena literatura instructissimus*, as he calls him—should have propounded such an opinion, intimates his conviction that he was not influenced in

* *Defensio Fidei Nicænæ*, p. 9.

adopting it by a pure love of truth, but *subdolo aliquo consilio*, and then proceeds to explain how this view was fitted to serve the purposes of Popery, in this way: First, its tendency was to elevate the authority of the post-Nicene fathers—whom Petavius and all others acknowledge to have been generally Trinitarians—above that of the ante-Nicene fathers, and thus to afford to the Papists a pretence for shifting their general controversy with Protestants, so far as antiquity is concerned, from the first three centuries, where they can find little to support them, to the fourth and fifth centuries, where there is a good deal to countenance them; and, Secondly, the establishment of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity by the Council of Nice, without its having much support from previous tradition, and its general adoption thereafter by the church, give some countenance to the principle, which has been advocated by some Popish writers, of the right of general councils to form and establish new articles of faith. The word of God and the history of the church make it manifest that there is no great improbability of finding, and no great lack of reasonable charity in expecting to find, abundance of fraud and iniquity in the defenders of Popery. But I think it must be admitted in fairness, that in this case the suspicions of Bishop Bull are far-fetched and unreasonable, and that there is no sufficient reason to doubt that Petavius may have believed what he said about the Arianism of many of the ante-Nicene fathers,—the testimony of the primitive church not being quite so clear as to exclude the possibility of an honest difference of opinion. Romish writers have not, in general, adopted this notion of Petavius; but, on the contrary, have been accustomed to adduce the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, and the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit, as instances of the obscurity and imperfection of Scripture,—instances of doctrines very obscurely and imperfectly revealed in the word of God, but clearly established by the testimony of the early church, supplying the deficiencies of Scripture. This also was the ground generally taken upon the subject by the Tractarians; and hence the real amount and worth of the testimony of antiquity to the doctrine of the Trinity, or rather the comparative clearness of the scriptural and the ecclesiastical testimony upon the subject, has come to be involved in recent controversies. Accordingly, Goode, in his *Divine Rule of Faith and Practice*, makes it his business to show that the scriptural testimony in

favour of the doctrine is clear, full, and explicit, and that the ecclesiastical testimony—which the Tractarians, following the Papists, had preferred, in point of clearness, to the scriptural proof—is confused and contradictory; and in the course of his discussion of this topic, he charges Bishop Bull with forcing some of the declarations of the ante-Nicene fathers into an orthodox sense, and censures him for his censure upon Petavius.*

When Bossuet published his great work upon the Variations of the Protestant Churches, Jurieu, who has written a great number of valuable works, especially upon the Popish controversy, but who was not free from a certain measure of rashness and recklessness, attacked his fundamental principle, that variation was a proof of error, by adducing the case of the doctrine of the Trinity, and bringing out the variations and inconsistencies of the testimony of the early church concerning it, of which, of course, he made the most; while Bossuet, in his reply, endeavoured to show that that testimony was uniform and consistent.

These may serve as illustrations of the way in which this subject of the faith of the primitive church, in regard to the Trinity, has been brought to bear upon other controversies, and of the way in which men's views regarding it have been modified by their opinions upon some other points than that of the truth of the doctrine itself. Still it is, in the main, substantially true, that those who are Trinitarians upon scriptural grounds, have generally regarded the testimony of the primitive church as corroborating their conclusions from Scripture; while those who were anti-Trinitarians on alleged scriptural grounds, have taken an opposite view of the bearing and import of the testimony of antiquity. It appears to me that the truth upon this point may

* Goode, vol. i., c. v., sec. iv.; vol. ii. pp. 1-15.

Mr Newman, when only a Tractarian (*vide* Goode, vol. i., p. 272), denounced Petavius on this ground, that he "sacrificed without remorse" the early fathers "to the maintenance of the infallibility of Rome;" but after he became a Papist, in the introduction to his essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, he adopted in substance Petavius' views upon this subject, dwelling upon their errors

and contradictions, almost avowedly out of regard to the objects the promoting of which Bull ascribes to Petavius.

Whitby's "*Disputatio de S. Scripturarum interpretatione secundum Patrum Commentarios*" illustrates the connection between the discussion of the general authority of the fathers, and their testimony on the Trinity. His three leading positions are given in the title-page.

be comprehended in these two positions: First, the testimony of the church of the first three centuries in favour of the doctrine concerning the Trinity, which has ever since been held by the great body of professing Christians, is sufficiently clear and full to afford some corroboration to the conviction based upon Scripture, that it was taught by the apostles; and Secondly, that it is not so clear and full as to be of any real service to those who would employ it for depreciating the clearness and sufficiency of Scripture; and that, on the contrary, there are much greater difficulties and drawbacks connected with it than have ever been proved to attach to the scriptural testimony. Let us briefly illustrate these positions.

The whole host of the opponents of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, assuming, though unwarrantably, the general designation of Unitarians, make common cause in discussing this question. When they profess to be interpreting Scripture, they divide into different ranks, and disagree as much with each other as they do with Trinitarians. But in discussing the testimony of antiquity they usually combine their forces, and seem all equally anxious to bring forward anything that may be fitted to afford a proof or a presumption that the early church did not generally hold the doctrine of the Trinity. This is scarcely fair, though perhaps it is not worth contending about. The three great divisions of the anti-Trinitarians—for this, and not Unitarians, is their proper generic designation—are the Sabellians, the Socinians, and the Arians. Sabellianism is now commonly used as a general designation for the doctrine of those who, admitting that a distinction in the Godhead is set forth in Scripture, deny that this distinction is a personal one, and maintain it to be merely nominal or modal;—or, in other words, who assert that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are just three different names for one and the same person, viewed under different aspects or relations. Now, it is certain that some notion of this sort was broached during the first three centuries by Praxeas, Noetus, and Sabellius, but it is not alleged that it ever had a general prevalence in the early church; in other words, it is not alleged that the testimony of the early church is in favour of Sabellianism. There never has been any considerable body of men, either in ancient or in modern times, who professed what are called Sabellian principles. There have, indeed, been occasionally individual theologians, who, while professing to

hold the orthodox and generally received doctrine of the Trinity, have given such explanations of the distinction in the Godhead, or rather have explained it so much away, as to subject themselves to the charge from other orthodox divines of advocating Sabellianism, and who may perhaps have afforded some ground for the suspicion that they virtually denied or explained away a true and real distinction of persons; just as there have occasionally been instances of theologians—orthodox, or intending to be so—who seem to have gone into the opposite extreme, and have *explained* the distinction in the Godhead in such a way as to afford some plausible grounds for charging them with Tritheism,—*i.e.*, with maintaining, not as the Scripture teaches, and as the great body of professing Christians have generally held, that there are three persons in the unity of the Godhead, possessing one and the same nature, essence, and substance, but that there are three Gods. Thus, about a century and a half ago, some discussions took place upon this subject in England, in which, on the one hand, Dr Wallis and Dr South were charged with having taught Sabellianism, or something like it; and, on the other hand, Dr William Sherlock, and Bingham, the author of the *Christian Antiquities*, who opposed them, were charged with having given some countenance to Tritheism. These were, however, not the formal and deliberate expressions of definite opinions held by bodies or classes of men, but rather incidental and personal aberrations, arising from attempting an unwarranted and presumptuous minuteness of explanation on a subject which, in many respects, lies beyond the limits of our comprehension. Socinians and Arians, indeed, are accustomed to allege that all but themselves must be at bottom either Sabellians or Tritheists; and to refer to the case of those who have been charged with Sabellianism as proof of the felt difficulty among Trinitarians of keeping up a profession of a real personal distinction, and to the case of those who have been charged with Tritheism,—*i.e.*, with holding the doctrine of three Gods, as distinguished from that of three persons in one Godhead,—as bringing out openly and plainly the real nature and practical import of Trinitarianism. This, however, is manifestly assuming the whole question in dispute; while at the same time it must be admitted, that it also illustrates the injury sometimes done to truth by the rash and presumptuous speculations of its advocates.

At present, however, it is enough to remark, that very few professing Christians, if any, have deliberately and intentionally advocated Sabellian principles, and that there is no pretence for alleging that the doctrine of the early church was Sabellian.

There remain the Socinians, who maintain that Christ was a mere man, who had no existence until He was born by ordinary generation of Joseph and Mary; and the Arians, who admit His pre-existence even before the creation of the world, but deny His proper divinity, His possession of the divine nature, His consubstantiality and co-eternity with the Father,—who, in short, represent Him as a creature, though prior in time and superior in rank and dignity to all other creatures. It is very manifest that these two classes of heretics, though both ranking themselves under the general designation of Unitarians, must put a totally different meaning from each other upon many statements of Scripture; and that, indeed, in regard to those passages which bear *merely* upon the point of Christ's pre-existence, without asserting His true and proper divinity (and there are some such), the Arians must differ wholly from the Socinians, and agree with the orthodox in the interpretation of them. It is equally plain, that when they appeal to the testimony of the early church, as many of both classes have confidently done, they must differ much from each other in the construction they put upon many of the statements of the fathers.

When the subject of the faith of the early church upon this point is started, we are fully entitled to put three distinct and separate questions, and to investigate each of these distinctly on its own proper ground: viz., first, Was it Socinian? secondly, Was it Arian? and, thirdly, Was it Trinitarian? The proof which has been adduced, that the faith of the early church was Socinian,—i.e., that Christ was then generally regarded as a mere man,—is of a very meagre and unsatisfactory description, and is a good deal involved in the obscure and perplexing distinction, originating in Gnostic views, made between Jesus and Christ. Indeed, it depends mainly upon the alleged Socinianism of the Ebionites, and upon the further allegation that the Ebionites were not reckoned heretics by the generality of the church. That the Ebionites were generally reckoned heretics, and, indeed, just a branch of the great Gnostic sect, has been proved by conclusive evidence, while it is by no means certain that they, heretics as they were, held the doctrine of the simple humanity of Christ. That they held that

Jesus was a mere man,—some of them admitting, and others denying His miraculous conception,—is certain; but it is about equally certain that, in common with the Cerinthians and other Gnostics, they held that Jesus was not Christ till a divine energy or emanation descended upon Him at His baptism, which left Him again before His crucifixion. This notion may be fairly regarded as a virtual testimony to the general doctrine of the church, that Christ was intimately connected with the divine nature—that there was in Him some combination of the human and the divine. Eusebius expressly declares, that the first who taught that Christ was a mere man, *ψιλὸς ἀνθρώπος*, was Theodotus, a currier, who flourished in the latter part of the second century; and we know also, that about the same time another person of the name of Artemon held similar opinions. There is some reason to think that both these men, as well as Paul of Samosata, about the middle of the third century, still retained something of the old Cerinthian or Ebionistic notion, that some supernatural, divine energy resided in the man Jesus, and, therefore, were not simple humanitarians, as they have been called, though they might be said to deny that Christ came in the flesh. But even if it be conceded that, in the full sense of the expression, as now commonly understood, they held Christ to have been a *mere* man, there is nothing in anything we know about them or their opinions, which affords any evidence that their opinions had any general prevalence in the early church. With respect to the personal history of Artemon we know nothing. With regard to Theodotus, we have respectable evidence that he was tempted to deny Christ by fear of persecution, and that, in order to excuse himself, he alleged that he had not denied God, but only a man; that he denied the genuineness of John's gospel, that his arguments from Scripture were directed solely to the object of proving that Christ was a man, which of course no Trinitarian disputes; and that he was excommunicated for heresy by Victor, Bishop of Rome, with the general approbation of the church.* There is no ground to believe that the views of Theodotus and Artemon were generally adopted, or had any considerable prevalence; on the contrary, they seem to have died away, until revived about the middle of the third century by Paul of Samosata,—a man noted also for that worldliness and secularity of character

* *Vide* Natalis Alexander, *sæc.* ii., *cap.* iii., *art.* x.

which has always been a leading characteristic of Socinians,—and then condemned by a council at Antioch with the general approbation of the church. And then, on the other hand, we have the whole body of the ancient fathers declaring unanimously, as a point quite certain in itself and universally acknowledged, the pre-existence of Christ, His existence before He was born of Mary, and before the creation of the universe. The God-denying heresy, then, of Socinianism, or simple humanitarianism, has nothing of weight to appeal to in the testimony of the ancient church, which, on the contrary, clearly and fully confirms what is the plain doctrine of Scripture—that the Son existed with the Father before the foundation of the world.

We are now shut up to one alternative—the faith of the early church must have been either Arian or Trinitarian. Now, on this question, it should be at once conceded that there is greater difficulty in coming to a conclusion ; that there are some anomalies at least, if not contradictions, in the proof, which are not very easily explained ; and that, altogether, there is fairer ground for an honest difference of opinion. I have no doubt that the evidence in favour of the Trinitarianism of the early church greatly preponderates ; that we are fairly entitled to hold that the doctrine of the Trinity was generally received in the church from the time of the apostles till that of the Council of Nice ; and that this affords some corroboration of the correctness of the Trinitarian interpretation of Scripture. But it is just as evident, that there are not a few of the fathers, in whose writings statements occur in regard to Christ which it is not easy to reconcile with orthodox doctrine, and which, at least, afford abundant evidence that they did not always write very clearly or consistently, and of course have no claim whatever to be received as guides or standards of faith, in preference to, or even in conjunction with, the sacred Scriptures. The orthodox writers of the Nicene age admitted that, before the Arian controversy arose, and led to a more thorough sifting of the subject, some of the fathers spoke loosely and carelessly, and in such a way as sometimes to afford a handle to adversaries ; while, at the same time, they strenuously contended that, practically and substantially, the testimony of most of them was in favour of orthodox views, and in opposition to the Arian heresy. This is very near the truth, and probably would not have been much disputed by Trinitarians, had not the foolish and indiscriminate admirers of

the early fathers refused to admit the qualifications of the statement, and represented *their* testimony in behalf of the divinity of Christ as *more* clear and satisfactory than that which we find in Scripture.

If we assume the truth of the doctrine which has been generally held by the church,—viz., that Jesus Christ is true and eternal God, and that He is also a man, a real partaker of human nature,—we have a key which, without difficulty or straining, unlocks the whole of the passages in the word of God which refer to this subject, and combines them in consistency and harmony ; while no other doctrine fairly and fully embodies the combined import and result of the *whole* of what the Scripture teaches concerning the Saviour of sinners. Now, this cannot be said of the testimony of the fathers of the first three centuries, viewed in the mass ; and it is here that, independently of the immeasurable distance between divine and human testimony in point of weight and authority, lies the difference between the testimony of Scripture and that of antiquity, in point of clearness and fulness. It can be proved that there is a great preponderance of evidence in the writings of the first three centuries in support of the truth that Christ is God, of the same nature and substance with the Father ; but there are some statements in several of them which cannot be very easily explained by being applied either to His proper divinity or to His humanity. Bishop Bull has put forth all his learning and ingenuity in labouring to explain them in accordance with orthodox views, and has certainly made out a very plausible case ; but I am not prepared to say that he has entirely succeeded. The passages here referred to are chiefly of two kinds : First, some which seem pretty plainly to deny His eternity, to ascribe an origin in time to His existence, and to represent Him as beginning to exist just before the creation of the world, immediately before what they called His *προελευσις*, or forthcoming from the Father to create the universe. This notion seems to correspond well with the Arian doctrine of His being the first and most exalted of created beings. Bull labours to show that those of the early fathers who have spoken in this strain, have also, in other places, ascribed to Him proper eternity, and of course should not be made inconsistent with themselves, if it can be helped ; and that while they held that there was a special *προελευσις*, or forthcoming of the Son from the Father, just before the creation of the world, and for the purpose of creating it, they held also that this was not

regarded as properly the commencement of His existence, but that He was begotten, as the Scripture teaches, of the Father from eternity. Much plausibility is given to this solution of the difficulty by the proof which Bull adduces, that some of the Nicene or post-Nicene fathers, undoubtedly Trinitarian, such as Athanasius himself, held a sort of triple nativity of the Son,—viz., first, His eternal generation of the Father; secondly, His coming forth to create the world; thirdly, His descending in the fulness of time to assume human nature. Still there seems good ground to believe that some of the early fathers held that, while the Son might be said to have existed from eternity in the Father as His *λογος*, or reason, His distinct *personal* existence began with His coming forth to create the world.

The other class of passages which Bull seems to have felt to be still more perplexing, are those in which some of the fathers, while maintaining that it was the Son, and not the Father, who appeared to the patriarchs in the Old Testament history, assign reasons *a priori* for its being the Son and not the Father, which are scarcely consistent with their ascribing the same nature and perfections to them, and which seem to imply a denial of the Son's invisibility and immensity, or incomprehensibility in a physical sense,—*i.e.*, omnipresence.* And to these passages he has little else to answer than that they are inconsistent with what the same fathers have taught in other parts of their works. This, we think, he has shown to be the case; and though he has in this way built up the general argument in support of the great *preponderance* of evidence from antiquity for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, he has not shown that that testimony is throughout clear and unambiguous; but, on the contrary, has been obliged virtually to admit that it is not so. I have no doubt that Bishop Bull has succeeded in the great leading object of his work,—*i.e.*, in defending the Nicene faith on the subject of the Trinity from the writings of the catholic fathers of the first three centuries; and I am satisfied, also, that the whole discussion which the subject has undergone since his time, has tended decidedly to confirm the view of the testimony of the early church which he advocates with so much learning and ability. But still I must say, that a careful perusal of Bull's work does leave the impression that he has occa-

* Bull, sec. iv., c. iii.

sionally been obliged, especially in regard to these two classes of passages to which I have referred, to have recourse to a degree of straining, and to employ an amount of ingenuity in sifting, piecing, and conjecturing, which might have modified his profound and somewhat irrational deference to the authority of the fathers.

At the same time, it ought to be remembered that these difficulties attach to the writings only of some of the fathers, and that the great body of them are full and unequivocal in asserting the proper divinity of our Saviour, as implying the consubstantiality and co-eternity of the Son with the Father, though not always with full precision of statement and perfect accuracy of language,—qualities which the history of the church seems to prove that uninspired men seldom or never even approach to, upon any topic, until after it has been subjected to a full and sifting controversial discussion. And it is to be remembered, that though Sabellianism and simple humanitarianism, or what we now call Socinianism, were somewhat discussed during the first three centuries, and were rejected by the church, Arianism did not, during that period, undergo a discussion, and was not formally decided upon by the church, till the time of the Council of Nice. In these circumstances, occasional looseness of statement and inaccuracy of expression became of little importance as affecting the general character and weight of the evidence; and the question being put on this general issue, Was the faith of the early ante-Nicene church Arian or Trinitarian?—and being brought to be decided by a combined view of the whole materials bearing upon its settlement,—it is clear that, though there is some room for ingenious pleading, and though some difficulties may be started, which, taken by themselves, cannot perhaps be all specifically and satisfactorily removed, the practical result of the whole body of proof in the mass is, that the early fathers regarded Christ, in whom they trusted for salvation, and for whose name's sake many of them were honoured to shed their blood, as raised infinitely above the highest of created beings,—as being, indeed, God over all, blessed for evermore.

Sec. II.—Nicene Creed—Consubstantiality.

We have seen that the Sabellian view of the Trinity, and the simple humanitarian or Socinian view of the person of Christ,

were broached and somewhat discussed during the first three centuries, and that they were generally, almost unanimously, rejected by the primitive church. The Socinian doctrine (for so for brevity we may call it) upon the person of Christ was defended in the fourth century by Photinus, but it was again rejected and condemned by the great body of the church, and soon disappeared. It attracted no further notice till near the end of the sixteenth century, when its revival by Socinus was represented by the Papists as one of the fruits of the Reformation, and afforded them a sort of pretence for alleging that the doctrine of the Reformers was just the revival of ancient heresies. Arianism had not been discussed or formally condemned during this early period; and, as we formally showed, there are some of the fathers of the first three centuries whose works contain statements of a somewhat Arian complexion, though the general testimony of the early church may be fairly said to be, upon the whole, decidedly in favour of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Arius seems to have been led to bring forth those views, which have ever since been called by his name, and which occupied a large share of the attention of the church during the greater part of the fourth century, in his zeal to oppose statements which appeared to him to be of a Sabellian tendency,—*i.e.*, to imply, or to tend towards a denying or explaining away of any real personal distinction between the Father and the Son. He certainly made the distinction between them sufficiently palpable; but it was by going so far as to deny any true and proper divinity to the Son, and reducing Him to the rank of a creature, produced in time, out of nothing.

The Arian positions which are expressly condemned and anathematized in the Nicene Creed, are: “that there was a time when the Son was not,” or “did not exist;” “that before He was born He was not; that He was made out of nothing, or of things that are not; that He is of a different substance or essence (*ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας*) from the Father; and that He was created, and liable to change or alteration.” These positions manifestly deny anything like true and proper divinity to the Son, and reduce Him to the rank of a mere creature, whose existence, commencing in time, was precarious, and might, of course, be brought to an end by the same power which created Him. The Nicene Council not only condemned these positions, but they further asserted positively that He was begotten, not made; that He was

begotten of the Father, of the Father's substance or essence; that He was God of God, light of light, true God of true God, or, as it is sometimes expressed, very God of very God; and that He was consubstantial (*ὁμοούσιος*) with the Father. These declarations explicitly assert the doctrines which have since been generally known under the names of the co-eternity and consubstantiality of the Son, and His eternal generation by the Father out of His own substance,—doctrines which have been held ever since by the great body of professing Christians, and which are explicitly asserted as being taught by the word of God in the standards of our Church. The name *ὁμοούσιος*, or the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, is usually regarded as the great distinguishing peculiarity of the Nicene theology in regard to the Trinity, as virtually embodying the substance of what they taught upon this subject; and in directing our attention to this topic, there are three questions which naturally present themselves for consideration: First, What is meant by the Son's being declared to be consubstantial, or of the same substance, with the Father? secondly, Was the Nicene assertion of the consubstantiality an accurate declaration of a true scriptural doctrine? and thirdly, Was it a warrantable and expedient thing, as a matter of Christian wisdom, to adopt this language as a virtual test of orthodoxy upon the subject of the Trinity? And to each of these questions we would now advert.

There is no great difficulty in understanding what is meant by the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, that is, in so far as the subject is in its own nature comprehensible by our faculties, although, by reason of the feebleness of these faculties, viewed in connection with the exalted nature of the subject, it must be explained in some measure by negatives. Negatively, it implies that the Son is not a creature, formed out of nothing by a creating power, or out of any previously existing created substance. There was, of course, a time when, upon any other theory than that of the eternity of matter, no being existed but God, the One First Cause of all. This One First Cause created all beings which have since come into existence out of nothing, either mediately or immediately; and this distinction of mediate and immediate may be applied either to the agent or the subject of the process of creation,—*i.e.*, first, God may either have created all things by His own direct, immediate agency, or He may, per-

haps, for anything which mere reason can very certainly establish, have employed creatures already formed as His instruments in the creation of others; and, secondly, He may either have formed creatures immediately out of nothing, or He may have formed them mediately out of created substances which He had previously produced. But these distinctions do not in the least affect the substance of the matter, or at all modify the real meaning of what a creature or a creation implies. Creation is still the bringing into existence out of nothing of what had no previous existence; a creature is still a being radically and essentially distinct from, and inferior to, its Creator, and dependent wholly upon His good pleasure for the commencement and continuance of its existence.

Arius admitted that the Son was produced before all other beings, and held that He was God's agent or instrument in the creation of them all; but that still, as He was produced in time and out of nothing, He was, of course, a mere creature, having only a precarious or contingent existence. His followers sometimes honestly admitted that they held the Son to be a mere creature, and sometimes they denied that they held this; but when called upon to explain in what respects, upon their principles, He differed from a creature, or what there was about Him that took Him out of that class of beings, the only answer they could give was one which amounted to nothing, and was a mere evasion,—viz., that He was produced immediately by the Father, and that all other beings were produced immediately by Him (the Son, or *Logos*), and only mediately by the Father.* There is manifestly no intelligible medium between the creature and the Creator. All beings may be ranked under the two heads of created or uncreated; and created beings are those which have been produced, mediately or immediately, out of nothing, by the mere will of the Creator, and are dependent wholly upon His good pleasure for the continuance of their existence. The Son is not a creature, but consubstantial with the Father. The word *ὁμοούσιος*, or consubstantial, does not of itself express or indicate anything about the *communication* of the divine essence or substance by the Father to the Son; and *that* we leave at present out of view, intending afterwards to advert to it under the head of

* Bull, Defensio Fid. Nic.

the eternal generation. The word expresses merely this idea, that He does in fact possess the same nature, essence, or substance which the Father has, as distinguished from any created nature or essence; or, as Bishop Bull ordinarily describes its meaning,* that the Son is “non creatæ alicujus aut mutabilis essentiæ sed ejusdem prorsus cum patre suo naturæ divinæ et incommunicabilis.” The exemption of the Son from the class of creatures necessarily implies that He is possessed of the divine nature, and, of course, has or possesses the divine essence or substance, or *that* in the one divine being which makes Him what He is, and constitutes Him the sole member of a class from which all other beings whatever are absolutely and unchangeably excluded.

In regard to the meaning of *ὁμοούσιος*, or consubstantial, we would only further remark, that there is good ground to believe that it was used by the Nicene fathers to denote something more than its mere etymology implies, and that its proper translation, as it was then commonly used, is not “of the same substance,” but “of *one* and the same substance,” “*unius ejusdemque substantiæ*.” This distinction has more immediate reference to an attempt which has been made, especially by Curcellæus and Whitby, to show that the fathers, at least before the Council of Nice, held that the identity or unity of substance which they ascribed to the Father and the Son was not a numerical, but a specific identity or unity; *i.e.*, that the substance of the Father was the same as that of the Son, not in number, but in kind or degree,—“non numero sed specie,”—was a substance of the same general class or description, but not numerically one with it. This distinction serves no direct Arian object, but it has been introduced and applied in modern times to explain the language of the fathers, merely in order to involve the whole subject in confusion and perplexity, and to afford a pretence for insinuating against the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity something like a charge of Tritheism, as if it implied an assertion of three substances, the same, indeed, specifically; *i.e.*, in kind or in specie, but not numerically one, as distinguished from the scriptural doctrine of one and the same substance; *i.e.*, of a substance or essence numerically as well as specifically one, possessed by three distinct persons.† The word *ὁμοούσιος*, or consubstantial, by itself, does not

* Bull, Defensio Fid. Nic.

† Waterland's First Vindication, Qu. 26.

necessarily imply more than a specific unity, or an identity in kind; and it might consist with Sabellianism or Tritheism, expressing in the one case a numerical, and in the other a specific, unity. It would not, however, in any sense, consist with Arianism, the heresy against which the Nicene Creed was directed; and it is plain at least, that this distinction, though employed by Curcellæus and Whitby to evade or mystify the testimony of ante-Nicene writers in favour of the orthodox doctrine, cannot be applied to the explanation or perversion of the Nicene Creed, since the Nicene fathers not only asserted that the Son was *ὁμοούσιος* with the Father, but also, moreover, that He was begotten of the substance (*ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας*) of the Father, and, of course, had a substance not only the same in kind, but numerically one with His.

The second question respects the accuracy of the Nicene phraseology, in declaring the Son to be of one and the same substance with the Father, as expounding a real scriptural truth. The substance of what we learn directly in Scripture concerning the Son is this, that the names, titles, attributes, and works of the one supreme God, are ascribed to Him; that they are ascribed to the Son in no inferior or subordinate sense from that in which they are ascribed to the Father; and that thus there subsists, in some most important and essential respects, an identity between them. This great fundamental truth is, of course, to be established only by a careful examination of the precise and exact meaning of scriptural statements,—an examination that must be conducted according to the principles and rules of sound criticism and the ordinary laws of language. *Every* thing depends upon the result of this examination—the materials which *it* furnishes. When the precise meaning of the scriptural statements bearing upon this subject has been ascertained, it is then proper to consider what is the substance of the doctrine taught upon the point, and to examine in what way, or by what propositions, the real scriptural doctrine may be most fully, most clearly, and most accurately expressed. This is, indeed, the process by which our whole system of theological opinions ought to be formed; and there is need for special care and caution in conducting this process, in regard to topics which can be known only from Scripture, and with respect to which there has been much difference of opinion as to the meaning of Scripture among those who pro-

fessedly admit its divine authority. But if it be indeed true that the names, titles, attributes, and works of God are ascribed in Scripture to the Son, and that not in any inferior or subordinate sense, but in the same sense in which they are applied to the Father; and if we find also in Scripture that the Supreme Being is jealous of His own honour, and will not give His glory to another, we are fully warranted in concluding, upon the authority of Scripture, that the Son is not comprehended in the class of creatures; that He belongs to a totally different order of beings; that He is of the same rank or order as the Father. This is just the same as saying that He has not a created nature or substance, but a divine nature or substance: or, in other words, that He possesses *that* nature or substance, because of the possession of which the Supreme Being is distinguished from, and raised infinitely above, all other beings.

The divine nature can be but one, and the Son, therefore, is possessed of the one divine nature. The unity of the divine nature, however, as distinguished from the nature of a creature, might be only a specific and not a numerical unity, and this nature might be possessed by more than one divine being; but the Scriptures plainly ascribe a numerical unity to the Supreme Being, and, of course, preclude the idea that there are several different beings who are possessed of the one divine nature. This is virtually the same thing as teaching us that the one divine nature is possessed only by one essence or substance, from which the conclusion is clear, that if the Father be possessed of the divine nature, and if the Son, with a distinct personality, be also possessed of the divine nature, the Father and the Son must be of one and the same substance; or rather,—for it can scarcely with propriety be called a conclusion or a consequence,—the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father is just an expression or embodiment of the one great truth, the different component parts of which are each established by scriptural authority,—viz., that the Father and the Son, having distinct personality in the unity of the Godhead, are both equally possessed of the divine, as distinguished from the created, nature. Before any creature existed, or had been produced by God out of nothing, the Son existed in the possession of the divine nature. If this be true, and if it be also true that God is in any sense one, then it is likewise true,—for this is just according to the established meaning