

CT 130

THE ATHANASIAN CREED:

A PLEA

FOR ITS DISUSE IN THE PUBLIC WORSHIP
OF THE NATIONAL CHURCH.

BY THE REV. J. W. LAKE.

“Perplexed in faith, yet pure in deeds,
At length he beat his music out,
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.”—TENNYSON.



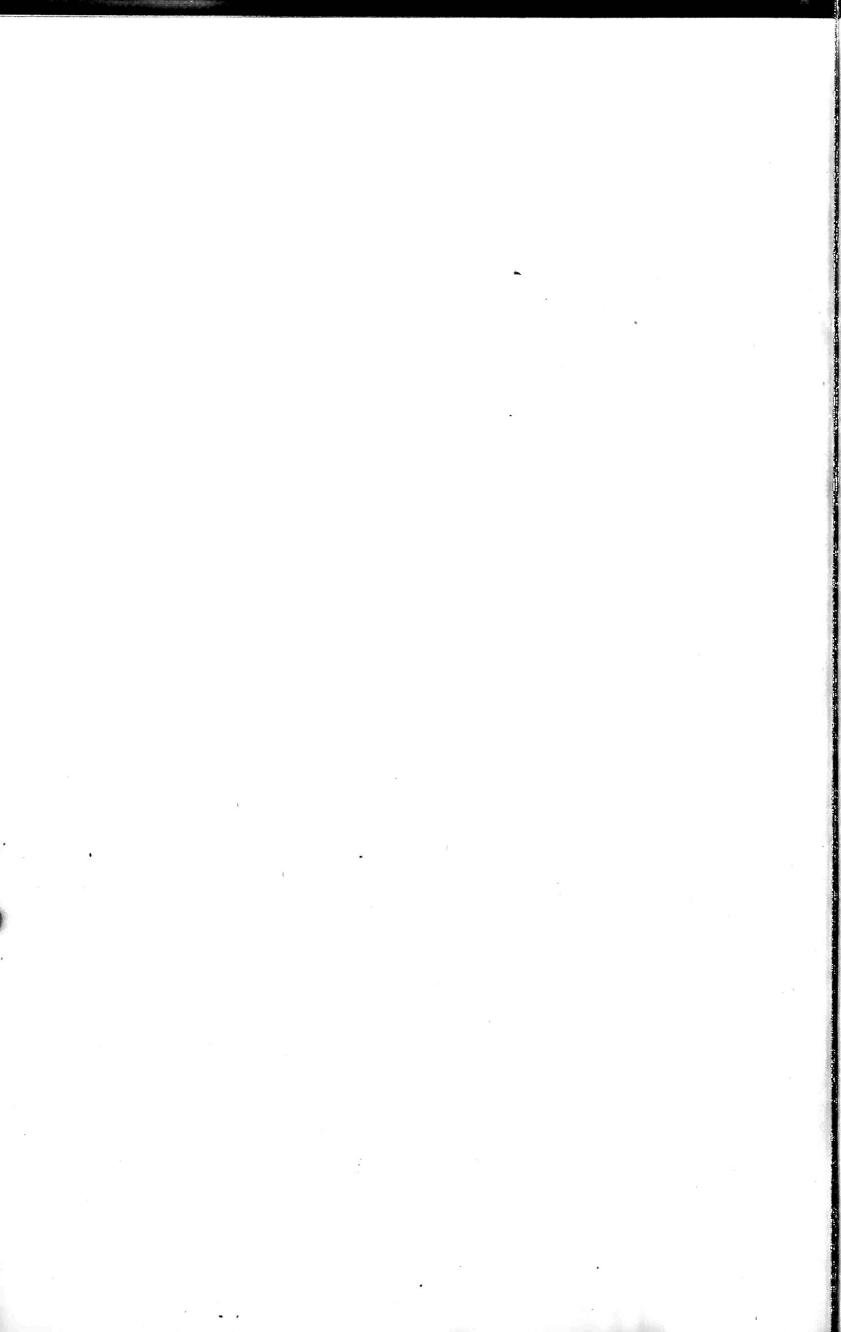
PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,

NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,

UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

1875.

Price Sixpence.



THE ATHANASIAN CREED.

“THE language of a healthy theology is like that of Lord Bacon, ‘if a man begins with certainties he shall end in doubts, but if he begins with doubts he shall end in certainties.’” So writes Dean Stanley in his letter addressed some years back to the then Bishop of London (now Archbishop Tait) on the folly and evil of the system of exacting a rigid subscription to a code of dogmas from the young men who were entering the ministry, and certainly the reverent hesitations of the wise and thoughtful pay a truer homage to Religious Truth than do the fancied certainties of inexperienced and thoughtless minds. Doubt is often the readiest portal by which the Temple of Truth is entered, certainly it is the surest if not the only road by which its innermost shrine is reached. The doubter is one who holds God’s Truth in such high esteem that he refuses to accept *as such*, whatsoever does not bring with it satisfactory credentials.

The Athanasian Creed breathes throughout its entire extent a malediction on this doubting spirit, and exalts a blind and thoughtless and unquestioning belief to the rank of highest virtue. It formulates ideas concerning the divine nature which were the outcome of at least one thousand years of intense and abstruse metaphysical speculation, which, though always earnest and passionate, was yet very often ill-regulated, blind and fanciful. During the progress of this speculation, the strained intellect soared often so far beyond its proper powers

that the language of theology became largely destitute of definite meaning, and yet the tabulated results of this intricate speculation are in the creeds of the Church of England forced on the profession and acceptance of every worshipper, and men who have not cared to give the subject an hour's serious thought are summoned on pain of everlasting perdition to express themselves concerning the constitution of the Godhead and the mode of the divine existence in language of assured certainty, and to dogmatise without the slightest hesitation concerning matters whose comprehension is far beyond the utmost powers of human thought.

A revised Bible, if it should adopt the approved and accepted results of biblical scholarship, (and rumour asserts that in many particulars it will do this,) will take from the Athanasian Creed the main and almost the sole biblical authority it asserts for the triune delineation of the divine nature which it sets forth, by expunging from the revised version the celebrated text of the 'three witnesses,' viz., 1 John v. 7, "there are three that bare record in heaven,—the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one;" this being now universally surrendered as a fraudulent interpolation.— True, the Athanasian Creed is essentially an *ecclesiastical* formulary, but its retention by a Protestant Church implies that it does but epitomise biblical teaching, and with its loss of biblical sanction it must cease to exist as an authoritative formula, even if it be retained for the convenience of those who still choose to adopt it as an exposition of their faith. But even under these circumstances this creed must lose what some have considered to be its most essential, and others its most offensive, feature, viz., that damnatory clause by which all who do not accept its statements are consigned to everlasting perdition. The utmost that any member of a Protestant Church can claim as a privilege of worship is the right of stating his own formularies of religious belief, even if these should include clauses that con-

demned himself to perdition for non-belief, but here his rights terminate, here his liberty ends. He must not be allowed to claim the right of publicly condemning others because they do not accept the essentials of his own belief. The creed might therefore be retained for private use, or, (without the offensive damnatory clauses) it might even be permitted to form a portion of the public worship of such congregations as desired to use it.

ORIGIN OF THE USE OF CREEDS IN PUBLIC WORSHIP.

A question here arises as to the desirability of retaining the recitation of formularies of dogmatic theology as a necessary part of public worship. Of Protestant Churches this is the peculiarity of the Church of England alone, and as in this church the articles and creeds are only to be accepted as they are seen to be in harmony and agreement with the teachings of Scriptures, it follows that the Bible is the container of the essentials of all creeds, seeing that from its pages they are presumed to have been first of all compiled. Dean Milman, in his "*History of Christianity*," Book 3rd, chap. 5, gives the following explanation of the introduction into the Christian Church of such documents as the Athanasian formulary:—

"Though nothing can contrast more strongly with the expansive and liberal spirit of primitive Christianity than the repulsive tone of this exclusive theology, yet this remarkable phasis of Christianity seems to have been necessary, and not without advantage to the permanence of the religion. With the civilisation of mankind Christianity was about to pass through the ordeal of those dark ages which followed the irruption of the barbarians. During this period Christianity was to subsist as the conservative principle of social order and the sacred charities of life . . . But in order to preserve its own existence, it assumed of necessity another form. It must have a splendid and imposing

ritual to command the barbarous minds of its new proselytes . . . It must likewise have brief and definite formularies of doctrine. As the original languages, and even the Latin, fell into disuse, and before the modern languages of Europe were sufficiently formed to admit of translations, the sacred writings receded from general use ; they became the depositaries of Christian doctrine totally inaccessible to the laity, and almost as much so the lower clergy. Creeds therefore became of essential importance to compress the leading points of Christian doctrine into a small compass. And as the barbarous and ignorant mind cannot endure the vague and the indefinite, so it was essential that the main points of doctrine should be fixed and cast into plain and emphatic propositions. The theological language was finally established before the violent breaking up of society ; and no more was required of the barbarian convert than to accept with unenquiring submission the established formulary of the faith, and gaze in awe-struck veneration at the solemn ceremonial.”

From this it would appear that the reasons which necessitated the first use of creeds being no longer in existence, and a totally opposite condition of matters prevailing, the creeds of the Church of England Prayer Book should long since have been withdrawn from use, and have been preserved simply as curious mementoes of the past. At all events it is fitting that their compulsory recitation should at once cease.

We now have the Scriptures translated into every known tongue, both barbaric and civilised, we have societies for their dissemination, so that Bibles are now found in the home of every poor man and in the hands of every child, while the machinery of tracts and Sunday schools has of late been in ceaseless and ubiquitous operation. Moreover, the great fundamental ideas and doctrines of religion find adequate expression in the *legitimate* acts of public worship, in the hymns and prayers alike of petition and of praise, so that, as a

rule, these utterances suffice in the nonconformist churches to keep the foundation principles of religion well in sight without the repetition of creeds at all. True, these principles find an expression tinged with vagueness and variety. But with the growth of intelligence this vagueness and variety are necessary in order to comprehend the varied forms of thought to which intelligence ever gives rise. Hence the creeds that have done such signal service for rude and ignorant ages are anachronisms in an age in which people have intelligence and schools abound.

Of the three creeds of the Church of England Prayer Book that attributed to Athanasius, and generally known by his name, has long lost all power of useful service, and exists only as a source of bigotry, dissension and strife. Many of the best and purest minds leave the Church of England, and turn their backs upon her services, because it does violence to their consciences to participate in worship which the insoluble enigmas and the cruel denunciations of this creed deface.

It is the proud but hardly correct boast of the best minds among the English clergy, that of all churches, the Church of England is most tolerant and comprehensive. But this is said by men who have so long accustomed themselves to regard this creed as an antiquated and obsolete formulary that they have grown oblivious of its existence, and of the fact of the weighty sanction that still invests the lightest of its utterances as they periodically fall on the ears, or are spoken by the voices of the English people. As the strength of a chain is measured by its weakest link, so the tolerance and comprehensiveness of a church is tested by the narrowest and most exclusive of its dogmas. And so tested, the Church of England becomes a narrow and an intolerant church, and must of necessity continue so to be while this creed is made to represent its most solemn confession of faith. The *occasional* use of this creed, (it being recited only at

about half a dozen Sunday services throughout the year), points a strong argument, either for its optional use on these occasions, or rather for its total disuse. If, say for nine services out of ten, this creed can be omitted and not missed, the element of worship which its use supplies can scarcely be of sufficient importance to warrant its continuance as a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to the thousands to whom it represents a faith alien to the spirit and teachings of Jesus and wholly unwarranted by the authority of Scripture.

It should suffice for a church that its members were in general agreement as to certain great principles or aims, and that consequently, in their several ways, they were disposed to work heartily in sympathy with, or in support of, these. The attempt to define the forms of religious thought with too great exactitude, turns that which should be a bond of harmony and union into a source of discord and division. This is the fatal error of the Athanasian Formulary. It may command a blind allegiance, but in a thoughtful and enlightened age it never can win an intelligent and unanimous belief.

An objection of some considerable force lies against the authoritative use in public worship even of the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds, seeing that the truths which these contain would live and be revered apart from the expression which they here find. And surely, if held and revered for their own intrinsic worth, these truths would rest on the firmest basis.*

* "It was observed of the oracle of Delphi that, during all the ages when the oracle commanded the real reverence of Greece, the place in which it was enshrined needed no walls for its defence. The awful grandeur of its natural situation, the majesty of its Temple, were sufficient. Its fortifications, as useless as they were unseemly, were built only in that disastrous time when the ancient feeling of faith had decayed, and the oracle was forced to rely on its arm of flesh, on its bulwarks of brick and stone, not on its own intrinsic sanctity. May God avert this omen from us!"—Letter of Dean Stanley, when Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, to the Bishop of London on the state of Subscription in the Church of England.

An especial objection, however, lies for several reasons against the Athanasian Creed. Its assertions are not only open to grave doubt, but are so worded as to be *suggestive* of this doubt, while, as though its compilers were conscious of its untenable assumptions, they have thought fit to seek to enforce them by the most awful threats that the human mind could conceive, or human lips could utter.

That in which the Athanasian differs from the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds consists in the elaborate definitions which it puts forth as to the constitution of the Divine Nature, and the anathema it hurls against those who either will not or cannot accept its statements. Now it has been said in praise of Christianity that, as a religion, it won the willing allegiance of its votaries and made its conquests by love while Mahomedanism adopted the opposite principle of compulsion and violence, and made many of its conversions at the sword's point. But surely a church which adopts the Athanasian Creed as its central symbol of Faith cannot be said to work by love. For the awful threat of everlasting perdition which this Creed denounces against all who decline to accept its dogmas is, by the mass of mankind who are weak enough to be impressed by it, far more to be dreaded than even temporal death. The latter portions of the Athanasian Creed deal with doctrinal questions that find expression also in the Nicene and Apostles' symbols. These matters are understood in different senses by the varied schools of 'High,' 'Low,' and 'Broad' Church. The earlier portions of the Creed, however, deal with speculations concerning the Divine Nature which are not only most difficult of comprehension, but which, to the few minds that should attempt this task, would open a field for abstruse and interminable discussion. To demand a belief in this creed is thus virtually to demand from the members of the Church of England an assertion of knowledge of that which is unknow-

able! Men may *thoughtlessly* make this confession, but they cannot afterwards comply with the Apostolic injunction of 'giving to him that asketh a reason of the hope that is in them,' and on the same ground that they have accepted the statements of this creed, they may, in all logical consistency, accept the Romish Sacrament of the Mass. Of late years this further step has been repeatedly taken.

THE EXTRA SCRIPTURAL CHARACTER OF THE ATHANASIAN CREED.

In the Church of England the Holy Scriptures are made the ultimate test of Faith. 'So that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of Faith.'—*6th Article of Church of England Prayer Book.* In the 8th article, which ordains the use and belief of the three creeds, it is asserted 'that they may be proved by most certain warrants of scripture.' The proof, however, is not given, and men are thrown back upon their own efforts to find it. Apologists have not been wanting who have endeavoured to set forth such scripture proof as they could find, but this has ever been miserably insufficient, and passage after passage of the sacred writings has been wrested from its proper meaning in order to furnish it. The doctrine of the Trinity, which this creed aims to establish, was only formulated as an article of religious faith some centuries after the New Testament was penned. It was for the express purpose of supplying this want of Biblical authority, and providing at least one scripture sanction for the doctrine of the Trinity, that the celebrated verse of the three witnesses was interpolated in the 1st Epistle of John. But the fraud has been detected, and valuable as its evidence could have been made to appear on behalf of the threefold being of God, even the committee of Revisionists have,

it is currently reported, made full surrender of it, and with its absence, the doctrine of the Trinity rests entirely upon the foundation of church authority, and loses all clear, and definite, and undoubted scripture proof. This is freely admitted by some of the leaders of thought among the church clergy, especially those of the High or Sacramental school. Dr Irons in his little book, '*The Bible and its Interpreters*,' has the following observations:—

"Let any one look at the Scripture proofs alleged for the TRINITY. The expression, 'three persons in one God,' appears not in Scripture. The text concerning 'THREE that bear record in heaven,' has been much doubted; and no one could rest proof of the TRINITY on a suspected verse not found in ancient manuscripts. It becomes then a necessary work of labour to bring together the texts which appear, on the whole, to suggest the threefold nature of the Godhead. During this examination, there arise texts of a contrary kind, at least in appearance; e.g., 'No man knoweth of that Day,'—(words of Christ himself speaking of the day of Judgment,) 'no, not the Son, but only the FATHER.' Upon this, the Arian has asked, Is the SON equal to the FATHER?' Again, if, strictly, HE and the FATHER 'are one,' where is the sonship? if in some sense 'the FATHER is greater than the SON,' where is the Unity and Equality? Of course there are orthodox explanations of such texts. The Oneness is in the Divinity or 'Substance,' the distinction lies in the 'Persons;' and so on. But these are not *Bible* explanations. . . . We have no doubt whatever that the church's doctrine of the TRINITY is the Doctrine of Holy Scripture, but we say that the church alone proves it to be there. Look solemnly at the New Testament, and see whether you might not, if you went purely by your own judgment, arrive at a different doctrine of the TRINITY from ours?"

This is a candid admission of the large room there

is for a different view to be taken of this abstruse subject than that set forth in the Athanasian creed. If the creed be so obscurely expressed in the Scriptures, which alone are recognised as the fount and sanction of religious truth, that the uninstructed *lay*-mind cannot find it there, surely the church goes a long way too far when it finds not only the items of the creed to be therein stated, but also the threat of everlasting perdition against all who will not accept them. The truth is that the Athanasian creed is, to a large extent, extra scriptural; is the product of thought-currents which arose outside the pale of Biblical literature, and which, in their course and progress, have only imparted to it a slight and adventitious tinge.

ORIGIN OF THE CREED.

This it is easy to trace to the efforts of the Neo-Platonic schools of Alexandria to find some precise and satisfactory definition of the nature and being of God. The Religious Systems of the Eastern world were in Plato's era dominated by conceptions of the purely spiritual nature of God that were altogether foreign and unacceptable to the tone of Western thought. Here God was personified, conceived of and worshipped as though he bore a human form, while in the East, the more imaginative order of mind that there prevailed, regarding all forms of matter as being inherently and essentially vile, *fashioned* speculations as to the *immaterial* nature of God. This pure Being, they held, could not come into contact with matter, even for the purpose of creating and forming the world, so this, they thought, had to be done by a secondary and inferior God. Out of the essence of the Pure Spirit, therefore, they conceived of emanations being evolved termed 'Æons,' and from these sprung other and still inferior beings, till at length evil spirits were produced. One of the chief of these Æons, proceeding immediately

from the Divine essence, viz., the 'first-born' or 'only begotten' of God, was the embodiment, or, in the earlier stages of the conception, the personification of Divine Wisdom, the 'Logos,' 'Word,' or Reason of the divine mind. This Being, it was held, made the world, and was the actual Creator, and thus stood midway, as it were, between its vileness and the divine purity. Such was the position occupied by Mithras in the Persian religion; by the 'Logos' in Plato's philosophy; by 'Memra' or 'Wisdom' among the Jews, and the impress of this thought is plainly to be discerned in the commencing verses of the Fourth Gospel, and in the formularies of the Athanasian creed. The difficulty was how to conceive of God without degrading Him by our imperfect conceptions. In the Eastern religions, the idea of a pure and pervading spirit practically sublimated the idea of God into airy nothingness. Such a Deity was practically inconceivable by the human mind, and unapproachable by the thought of human worship. An unknowable God came very near to an actual negation of God, and Pantheism was scarcely to be distinguished from Atheism. On the other hand, the anthropomorphic ideas of the early Jews, were scarcely less degrading and idolatrous than the idol worship of Egypt, and Greece and Rome, and the problem to be considered, was how to find some intermediate conception of Deity, which should avoid extreme vagueness on the one hand, and gross crudeness on the other.

About four hundred years before the Christian Era Plato grappled with this difficulty, and attempted to frame an intelligent conception of Deity. "It is difficult," he says, in his dialogue *the Timæus*, "to discover God, and when found it is impossible to make him known to the vulgar," so he set forth his conception that the Godhead was of threefold character, or presented three aspects to our thought, viz., the Father or the Good One (ΠΑΤΗΡ or ΑΓΑΘΟΣ): the Wisdom or Word or Worldmaking

God, (the ΛΟΓΟΣ, or ΔΗΜΙΟΥΡΓΟΣ); and the spirit or soul of the world (ΨΥΧΗ του ΚΟΣΜΟΥ), conceptions which, developing through centuries of speculative thought, became eventually embodied in the scholastic theology of the third and fourth centuries of our era as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost of the Christian Trinity.

It would be far too foreign to our present undertaking to trace these conceptions through the neoplatonic schools of Alexandria, thence into the Hebrew Apocrypha and even into the Hebrew Canon,* and so into the realm of Jewish thought. Suffice it to say that, under the influence of this philosophy, the Jews, in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era, gave up their old ideas of Jehovah as a being in human form, who walked in the garden with Adam, and visited Noah, and dined with Abraham, and conversed with Moses, and they said now, that it was 'the Memra or Angel, or Messenger or personified wisdom of God that did this; and just before the Christian era, a learned Jew, Philo of Alexandria, wrote copious commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures, explaining all the divine manifestations there recorded by the aid of Plato's 'Logos,' or intermediate, or secondary God. This bent of Philo's thought is well shewn in the following extracts from one of his treatises, 'De Confusione Linguarum,' or the Confusion of Languages,

* See as an illustration of this the 8th chapter of the Book of Proverbs (written about the era B.C. 250) where wisdom is thus spoken of as a Divine personality having only a confused identity with God.

'I Wisdom dwell with prudence and find out knowledge of witty inventions. Counsel is mine and sound wisdom. I love them that love me, and they that seek me early shall find me. Jehovah possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning or ever the earth was. When He prepared the Heavens I was there, when he set a compass upon the face of the deep, there was I by Him as one brought up with Him, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him.

'Whoso findeth me findeth life and shall obtain the favour of Jehovah.'

stated to have occurred among the builders of the Tower of Babel.

“The statement,” he says, “The Lord went down to see that city and that tower, must be listened to altogether as if spoken in a figurative sense, for to think that the Divinity can go towards, or go from, or go down, or go to meet, is an impiety, . . . all places are filled at once by God, to whom alone it is possible to be everywhere and also nowhere. Nowhere, because He himself created place and space . . . The ‘Divine,’ being both invisible and incomprehensible, is indeed everywhere, but still in truth is nowhere visible or comprehensible.” (*Bohn’s Edition, Vol. II., p. 29*). According to Plato the ‘Logos,’ or secondary God, shared the moral nature as well as partook of the physical attributes of Deity. In a passage of his ‘Epinomis’ he says “The Logos or Word, divine above all other Beings, fashioned and rendered the heavenly bodies conspicuous in their various revolutions. This being, a happy man will principally reverence, while he may be stimulated by the desire of learning whatever is within the compass of human understanding; being convinced that he will thus enjoy the greatest felicity in this life, and that after death he will be translated into regions that are congenial to virtue.”

Philo is evidently imbued with the same idea, and as in his age a high estimate was cherished of the *moral* nature of God, so this character is also imparted by him to his conception of the ‘Logos,’ or personified wisdom of God. In the treatise above alluded to Philo says, that “they who have real knowledge of God are properly called ‘sons of God,’ and that elsewhere Moses so entitles them;” and then he adds;—

“Accordingly it is natural for those who have this (virtuous) disposition of soul to look upon nothing as beautiful except what is good And even if there be not as yet any one who is worthy to be called

a son of God, nevertheless let him labour earnestly to be adorned according to His first-born Word (Logos), the eldest of His angels, as the great archangel of many names; for He is called 'the authority' and 'the name' of God, and 'the Word,' (Logos) and 'man according to God's image' and 'He who sees Israel.' For even if we are not yet suitable to be called the 'sons of God,' still we may deserve to be called the children of His eternal image, of His most sacred Word (Logos,) for the image of God is His most sacred Word." (*Bohm's Edition of Philo, Vol. II., p. 31.*)

Such were the prevailing thought-currents of Jewish teaching just antecedent to the Christian era. Paul, we know, was early instructed in the wisdom of the Jewish schools, learning it at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel, the grandson of the celebrated Hillel, who was the friend and relation of Philo. Dr Keim in his 'Jesus of Nazara,' tells us, "that the teachings of both Hillel and Gamaliel were tinged with Philonism; and that from this time forward, every material image of God in the Old Testament, such as the mention of His countenance, His mouth, His eye, His hand, &c., were carefully converted into conceptions of the divine glory, of the indwelling presence of the Logos or Word of God."

As the Jewish conception of the Messiah became more spiritualised in its character, so it became associated with this conception of the Logos or Divine Word. The mind of Jesus was devotional rather than metaphysical, practical, not speculative. These recondite controversies and theories exercised but small influence upon his teaching, and possibly he knew but little of their existence. It was very different with Paul, whose education was steeped in Jewish tradition. He never knew Jesus in the flesh, but he accepted him as the spiritual Messiah, as being one with the Logos or Divine Word. Hence the phraseology which Philo so largely applied to the Logos, Paul applies to

Christ; calls him 'the image of the invisible God,' 'the first-born of every creature,' says that 'all things exist by him.' 'The Apostle Paul,' says Dr Keim, 'a disciple of Gamaliel in Jerusalem, was essentially imbued with Alexandrine ideas, which he has evidently transferred to the heart of Christianity in his teaching concerning Christ.' (*Jesus of Nazara, Vol. I. pp. 292, 293—English translation*).

In the commencement of the Fourth Gospel, we have these ideas carried a step further. There we read that "the Word ('Logos') was in the beginning, was with God, and was God," "that the world was made by him," and finally, that "the 'Logos' or Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the Father." From this period there commenced a controversy in the Christian Church respecting the relation in which Jesus stood to God, or in other words, the position which the Son held with regard to the Father, whether he was the equal, or in any sense the inferior. In the fourth century this controversy blazed with fierce bitterness, and interested all classes of society. Arius championed the subordinate character of the Son, and Athanasius, a rival Bishop, asserted his full equality with the Father, as a proper part of the Godhead. The result was that a council of bishops was convened at Nicæa in Bithynia, at which the Emperor Constantine presided, and Athanasius assisted as secretary, when, after a fierce, and stormy, and protracted disputation, the Athanasian party triumphed, and the Nicene creed, asserting the co-equality of the Son with the Father, was compiled. Here, too, the Holy Ghost was invested with a distinct personality, and the doctrine of the Trinity fully formulated.* Not till three centuries after this period was the creed, that in the Book of Common Prayer is

* For the fuller elucidation of this subject, see a Pamphlet by the present writer published in Mr Scott's series, "Plato, Philo, and Paul."

ascribed to Athanasius, known to the church, and it was then introduced in a *Latin* form: Athanasius having been a *Greek* bishop speaking and writing in that tongue! In the Athanasian creed, however, the doctrines of the Deity of Christ, and of the triune character of the Godhead, are asserted with such emphatic and minute delineation, that few thoughtful men, who know the fierce, and violent, and abstruse controversies out of which these formularies sprung, can now accept them as full, and complete, and undoubted statements of eternal fact, much less are they prepared to breathe the terrible malediction which this creed calls upon them to pronounce against all who refuse to accept its statements.

Gibbon, in reviewing the history of the times, just prior to the Nicene council, when these controversies with regard to the constituents of the Godhead were so prevalent, states that "the most sagacious of Christian theologians, the great Athanasius himself, has candidly confessed that, whenever he forced his understanding to meditate on the divinity of the *Logos*, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he apprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts." This uncertainty, however, did not hinder Athanasius and his party from dogmatically asserting their views and assuming for themselves a virtual infallibility by persecuting all opponents in this world, and condemning them to eternal perdition in the next!

Perplexed as were many of the advocates of the Athanasian dogmas as to the correctness of their own formularies, there were many who could not in any sense receive them, and those who did receive them, understood them in such various senses, that little or no uniformity of opinion prevailed. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers, who lived at this period and wrote twelve books in defence of the Trinity, writes as follows:—
"It is a thing equally deplorable and dangerous, that

there are as many creeds as opinions among men, as many doctrines as inclinations, and as many sources of blasphemy, as there are faults among us, *because we make creeds arbitrarily, and explain them as arbitrarily.* The partial or total resemblance of the Father and of the Son, is a subject of dispute for these unhappy times. Every year, nay every moon, we make new creeds to describe invisible mysteries. We repent of what we have done, we defend those who repent, we anathematize those whom we defended. We condemn either the doctrines of others in ourselves, or our own in that of others: and reciprocally tearing one another to pieces we have been the cause of each other's ruin." (*Hilarius ad Constantinum, quoted by Gibbon, ch. 21.*)*

It is impossible in the limited space of a pamphlet, to give more than the faintest indications of the abstruse speculations, the confused thought, and the fierce dogmatic strife out of which the formularies of the Athanasian creed were evolved. As the creed of the dark ages, it served possibly the useful purpose of quieting a strife of thought that was trampling real piety underfoot, and ended a controversy for which the intelligence of the age was wholly unfitted, and which had already gone very far into the realm of wild and heated imagination. Through the long centuries in which the asserted infallibility of the Church of Rome kept the thoughts of men dormant, these fossilized results of the early speculative controversies were comparatively innocuous. But these were times of ignorance and spiritual serfdom, and to-day we live in an age of intelligence, and of asserted spiritual freedom. Christ's religion has to-day reached to a richer fulness of growth, and worship, to be acceptable to God or

* A namesake of Hilary's who lived in the succeeding century, has been credited by Dr. Waterland, with the authorship of the Athanasian creed. This, however, is more generally ascribed to Vigilius of Tapsus, who lived half-a-century later. Its first appearance, however, is in the Services of the Gallican church, at the close of the seventh century.

useful to man, must be offered 'in spirit and in truth !' The creed we repeat to-day should represent the highest attainable truth, and the worshipper's deepest and most assured convictions. If it does not do this, it is an empty mockery, and if it neither represents the convictions of the worshipper, nor the truth of God, its utterance becomes a blasphemy. Fallible men may fall into sincere errors, but it is needless wilfulness on their part to assert the tremendous judgments of heaven against all who refuse to endorse them. To those who know the origin and history of the speculative propositions of the Athanasian creed, its acceptance as a summary of revealed truth becomes increasingly difficult, while those who have no knowledge here, and who are simply bewildered by the ponderous perplexities of its statements, and wonder how, if God did not reveal them, man could have ever come to imagine them ; even these who might be willing to constrain themselves to a formal acceptance of the creed as a statement of Divine incomprehensibilities on which they were unable to fashion any opinion of their own, would yet, if they exercised any thought at all, shrink from endorsing those damnatory clauses that consigned unbelievers in these incomprehensibilities, to an eternal and hopeless doom.

The tendency, however, of the compulsory and habitual use in public worship of complex and abstruse formularies on questions concerning which it is impossible for the human mind to frame any intelligent convictions ; for which implicit belief is demanded, and from which thoughtful criticism is warned, is to render such worship formal and insincere. The mind which, by habit and custom, is deadened to the deformities that mark its utterances, is also deadened and unimpressed by the beauties and the truths which this worship also speaks. The ear which is attuned to enjoy the grand harmonies of music, cannot endure to listen to notes of jarring discord, is inexpressibly pained by these ; so the eye trained to appreciate forms

of beauty, cannot look with complacency upon the distortions of ugliness, is inexpressibly pained by false principles of art; and the taste is only healthy when it is thus sensitive. So worship that can tolerate the recitation of the Athanasian creed has lost all the healthy and living spirit which true worship should possess. It is a poor apology to say that the worshippers in our churches are often better than the creeds which they repeat, for it is true only in a very limited sense. The damnatory clauses of the Athanasian creed are cruel and ferocious, while the people who repeat them, are kind and gentle; would not willingly harm a brute beast, much less utter sentence of eternal damnation against an immortal soul! But in another and a more important sense, these people are much worse than the creed which they repeat. This creed at least has the virtue of being open and honest, of meaning what it says; but the people who glibly profess a belief in it which they do not at heart feel, and which they never think of realising to their thought, are not *open* and *honest*, but are mean, and pitiful, and insincere. These men are not better but worse, much worse than their creed, and they receive to themselves greater damnation than that which they denounce upon others. Worship of which antiquated and traditional creeds are made to form an essential part, soon becomes mere formal worship, and those who habitually take part in services of this kind, increasingly lose the faculty of real and true worship, and words of hope, and assurance, and penitence, and trust, fall as thoughtlessly from their lips, as do the denunciations which they heedlessly utter. They say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," but in their hearts they do not feel the beautiful trust this language expresses, for they do not mean this either; they are unmindful of what it is they do say, their heart is not in their words, so their worship brings no strength, and imparts no blessing. Such are the dangers consequent upon giving a thoughtless credence to the Athanasian

Creed, and of uttering, as meaningless sounds, the terrible denunciations which it breathes. Well would it be if, ere they consented to do this, men would ponder on the truly Christian spirit which breathes in Pope's 'Universal Prayer,'

"Let not this weak, unknowing hand
Presume Thy bolts to throw,
Or deal damnation round the land
On each, I judge Thy foe."

Again this theological condemnation which marks the public worship of the church of England sets unconsciously a very evil example. The profane language of the streets, the swearing and cursing that there so often offend our ears, and that constitute the customary language of the drunken and dissipated, are indirectly learned and imitated from the public cursing of our churches, and while the evil habit is fostered by the church, it will be almost impossible to eradicate it from the masses of the people. Church cursing was the origin of street swearing, and the terrible and offensive adjectives with which some classes of society disfigure their common talk, are merely *theological* phrases translated into the vulgar tongue. Disguise it as you may in the conventional language of the church, if there be any meaning to be attached to the threat of everlasting perdition the common mind will come to see that it breathes the reverse of a loving spirit, and that it is rather the embodiment of the most cruel and malignant hatred. Scarcely less edifying is the attempt which some clergymen make to explain this creed in a non-natural sense, and to make it imply the reverse of what it plainly says. Such explanations carry dishonesty and insincerity on their very face. And the public see and feel this, so that the moral sanctions of society are weakened, and truthfulness and sincerity are seen to be least regarded in the place where, of all others, they should be most highly revered.

"Some of our ablest men," says Sir John Duke Coleridge, late Solicitor-General, "are relinquishing

their orders, finding the burden which our documents impose on the conscience, too great to be borne: many more, as our bishops tell us, will not undertake them. Many sign these documents, and, at least outwardly in some sense or other, profess to hold them, whose real agreement with them must be of the vaguest kind, and whose whole position is inconsistent with a delicate sensibility to the claims of simple truth, and a considerable scandal to those who have such sensibility, I do not much wonder that a distinguished man told a public meeting the other day, that he believed our public morality and our national sense of truth and honour, had suffered seriously from our system of imposing religious tests to an extent which rendered evasion of them practically necessary." (*From a Paper on "The Freedom of Opinion necessary in an Established Church in a Free Country." Macmillan's Magazine, March 1870.*)

The Church of a country should be beyond the barest suspicion of insincerity or falsehood. The Church of England however by the maintenance of the Athanasian Creed in her public services, or as the pillar and ground of her faith, is placed on the horns of a most awkward dilemma. Either her ministers believe this creed, and, so doing, profess and teach a religion which does rude violence to any conception of Christianity which would entitle it to be regarded as the Gospel of a God of love;—or they do not believe it in its plain natural sense, in which case they set a sad example of insincerity to the nation.

Well might Archbishop Tillotson say of this creed that "he wished the Church were well rid of it." And since his day many of the highest minds among the clergy have either tacitly or openly endorsed his desire. The first use which the newly emancipated Irish Church has made of the partial freedom with which she has found herself invested has been to successfully protest against the continued use of the damnatory clauses,

and the welfare and stability of the Church of England is largely dependent on her speedily following so excellent an example.

It would be very easy to quote a large number of clerical protests against the assumption of infallibility which this creed asserts, as well as against the speculative propositions it contains. In a speech in the House of Lords on subscription, a late Bishop of Norwich, Dr Stanley, spoke as follows, "Let me ask, deliberately and solemnly, whether there is a single clergyman living who believes that every individual not keeping whole and undefiled the Catholic faith as it is minutely defined and analysed in the Athanasian Creed, 'without doubt shall perish everlastingly'?" and after pointing out the hundreds of millions of human beings whom the anathema of this creed includes and condemns, he adds "I repeat solemnly that I never met with a single clergyman who believed this in the literal sense of the words, and for the honour of human nature and Christianity, I trust that not one lives in our enlightened age who would deliberately avow that such was his belief!!

We have seen that this creed, so far as its intricate speculations on the Divine Personality are concerned, is extra-scriptural, that its origin lies in the thought-currents of so-called heathen faiths. We have shewn its gradual growth and have glanced at the fierce controversies amid which it was finally, though far from unanimously, formulated. And by so doing we have set forth the large and reasonable ground that exists for questioning and disputing its dogmatic positions. Never has its represented the *universal faith* of Christendom, never has it won the general assent of the clergy or laity of the English Church. From the days of Tillotson downwards it has been an increasing rock of offence, till at length it threatens to make complete shipwreck of the church. The time has therefore fully come, if not for its total abandonment at least for the

removal of its most obnoxious clauses. It may live as a curious specimen of antique theology, but no authority should enforce its recitation, and the removal of its damnatory assertions would then go far to render it a *harmless* as well as an antique formulary. At present however it keeps the best and truest minds of the country out of the ministry of the Church of England, and it drives not a few of the laity into open revolt against the church's public services: while those who do take orders, and bind themselves to the acceptance of this extravagant formulary, do, by so doing, taint themselves with insincerity and disparage their office in the public sight.

The Houses of Parliament however share largely in the responsibility, for the creed is used by virtue of their sanction and authority. It is therefore time for them to act with promptness and with firmness; it is their duty to call upon the Church authorities to remove this stumbling-block from the path of a true religious freedom; to memorialise the Queen as the legal Head of the Church to effect at least this small measure of Church Reform, by directing the Houses of Convocation to take this creed into their consideration, and to make such modifications in the rubric which relates to its public recitation, as shall effectually remove the scandal it now constitutes.

The Athanasian Creed is no true or proper representative of Christianity, the fundamental essence of which lies not in abstruse speculations regarding the being and constitution of God, but in living a pure and godly life; in catching the spirit and obeying the teachings of Christ. Christianity is not a creed but a life, not belief but duty. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the true sons of God.

“The Divine life of the Gospels, which is the centre of almost all modern religious speculations, must be that by which, in the last resort, Christianity will stand or fall. Dr Wette, the most honest, critical and keen-sighted

of commentators, has said, 'The Historical Person of Christ is the one unchangeable element in Christianity.' Dean Milman has said at the close of his masterly survey of the first fifteen centuries of the church, 'as it is my confident belief that the words of Christ and His alone, the primal indefeasible truths of Christianity, shall not pass away, so I cannot presume to say that men may not attain to a clearer and at the same time more full and comprehensive and balanced sense of those words than has yet been generally received in the Christian world.' (*The Theology of the 19th Century* by Dean Stanley. See *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1865.)

"The words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life." These, and not the formulated creeds of churches, which expressing often the heated fancies of one age do violence to the calmer and clearer thought of subsequent times,—these are the true foundations of the Christian Church, for men of most varied thought can reach without difficulty to a general agreement here. The great moral principles that should govern and regulate the conduct of human life come as matters of instinctive perception to all, so that when these are made the fundamentals of a Christian faith it becomes an easy matter for 'all sorts and conditions of men,' 'to profess and call themselves Christians,' and the doors of the Christian Church are then as widely open as are the gates of God's Heaven.

