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Why a Note to the Athanasian Creed?

A LETTER

SUGGESTED BY THAT ON THE ADMONITORY CLAUSES OF THE
CHURCH'S HOMILETICAL CREED.

ADDRESSED, BY PERMISSION, TO
THE VEN. THE ARCHDEACON OF EXETER.

BY

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A LETTER,

&c.

MY DEAR ARCHDEACON FREEMAN,

In thanking you for the copy of your letter to the Master of the Temple, with a hardly needful assurance of how cordially I agree with its affectionate appeal, I crave leave to follow up an opening it seems to leave for a few additional words, which I have not as yet heard in the sense in which I deeply feel them, and for which I trust I may be pardoned in desiring to obtain a hearing. You are good enough to say you will gladly accept my addressing them to you, and in a shape which may obtain for them a portion of the quiet consideration which it will be too late to seek when the time has come for the next session of the Lower House of Convocation.

You have set yourself to correct certain grievous misapprehensions (not to say misdescriptions) of what you name, as justly as lovingly, the Admoni-

tory clauses of the Church's Homiletical Creed. With both logical and historical truth, you repudiate the assertion that they are 'hurled at' any of them "that are without;" pleading the impossibility of their being intended to 'thunder forth anathemas in God's holy place against the absent;' that so far from meaning to 'inflict mortal injury' on any human being, they are properly like the humane use of cautery to a dangerous gangrene; and that, instead of speaking in any tones of human wrath, they are in very fact as a father's tenderest warning to a son of the peril of his evil courses:— a task, God knows, as hard and trying as any that can fall to human charge! And, in further example of that Charity which "beareth all things and hopeth all things," you express yourself ready to admit fully that the fact of this Creed's having given so much umbrage (however without real reason) to so many good men is a ground for endeavouring to remove their misapprehension; concluding, "If its language can, without lowering its steadfast affirmations, be made more clear, more gentle, more visibly expressing what it was certainly meant to be, let it by all means be done."

It is at this point that I venture to ask consideration for a few thoughts that have gathered and consolidated in my own mind during years of hard, though often thankful experience among both "them that are without," and "them that are within." Not a few eventually happy dealings

with Unitarians and Rationalists, and varied instances of the faithful who were still weak, lead me to take up this link of your affectionate readiness to make the language of admonition more visibly what it was certainly meant to be, without lowering its steadfast affirmation. I do not touch now the language of the subject-matter of the Confession of Faith itself. I should like just to bear a passing witness to the extraordinary increase of concurring voices of sober, earnest, thoughtful laity, who devoutly express themselves more than content with its terminology, who set the highest price on its expository power, and deprecate any change in it but such as might better subserve distinctness and fidelity to original expressions. And, from among clerical brethren, I am permitted to quote the following remarkable words, written to me during last session, by an able and laborious colleague in the Ministry, attached for years to what is called the Evangelical school: "I do hope the Convocation will keep safely the Athanasian Creed. I owe a great deal to it. It cleared up, when I was at College, some trying Socinian doubts I had, as it was read in the Service of the College Chapel."

But to proceed. I suppose most of us whose lot God has cast with those who "are weak in the faith," and stumble at what they think these "doubtful disputations," must have felt that the first of the Admonitory Clauses contains the

crucial difficulty. It recurs, of course, in modified form, at the twenty-eighth and last verses. But they must clearly be kept together, *pari passu*; adhering to the legitimate sense of the second verse. Whatever that second verse means, they must consistently mean too; they must be construed rigidly together; so that for all practical purposes our immediate concern lies with the phraseology of the verse which says, "Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly."

I cannot remember the time when I ever imagined this verse to mean what we hear so often urged it must mean, and must be taken as meaning by persons of ordinary understanding. Many others, too, I have known, not disposed to take words in a loose, popular, secondary acceptance, but reading them after their proper and grammatical force, who have always understood that the words, "except every one do keep whole and undefiled," must exclusively define those who have been baptized into, who have in all reality *received*, and have come wilfully to *violate* and *defile* the Catholic Faith. They can conceive no other alternative than that what a man is called upon to *keep*, he must first have consciously, fully, responsibly *received*. The charge to keep any deposit whole and undefiled, can only stand on the absolute fact of such deposit having been *bonâ fide* received by him, and they take it as of course that to *no other than*

him can words, declaring the penalty of not keeping whole and undefiled, by any legitimate construction of the words apply. So that the fearful idea of fulminating such words against the ill-trained and ill-taught, the “ignorant and out of the way,” the helpless children of any form of mankind’s unbelief or misbelief, must arise somehow, more or less, directly or indirectly, out of either the natural infirmity of all human language, or the infirmity in which language is so often used and applied.

Still, the infirmities remain ; in the language, or in those who use it ; perhaps in both. And the inward struggle they cause is often hard ; such as I remember watching in two especial instances : one a high-minded Unitarian gentleman ; the other, a keen and sensitive Spanish lady, baptized and brought up a Roman Catholic, but lapsed into Rationalistic depths under the hands of guardians in England. As they came gradually to see the great verities of the Faith, and to feel the power of their Scriptural definition, discerning between the Divine teaching and the figments of man, in the clear lines of the Athanasian Creed, then arose the mind-trouble—those damnatory clauses, as they called them—the words that seemed to deliver over to certain perdition all their own life might have been, all who might yet be thinking as they once did, all who from whatever cause could not or would not think with them now ! And if this, the sorest grief, could not have been proved groundless

(as in their case it happily was), the words might ever have stood an impassable barrier between their hearts' best love and the profession of their at length enlightened faith. And if there be such kind of distress in the way of truth-loving and truth-seeking minds, what are we sure it must be to those of less intelligent order? to the many who cannot enter into any science of words? to the mass of those who cannot get beyond the meaning which their mental powers or habits force them to attach to words? If, in spite of its clear affirmation to us, it conveys inevitably the damnable sense to them, ought we not as much in wisdom as charity to make the Admonitory sense as distinct as possible? The more surely it is pointed only at rejecters and depravers of the Faith, is it not the more a duty to let it say so as plainly as terms will allow? Since it does certainly leave untouched "them that are without," and only faithfully repeats Holy Scripture's own condemnation of the inner poisoning and outer propagandism of a corruption of the Faith, is it not worth our best and most prayerful endeavour to enforce that conviction by the terms of the Admonition itself?

I would humbly ask leave to submit, then, is it not possible to do so? I feel the overwhelming weight of the reproach, *if it were incurred*, Who and what are we, in our place in the nineteenth century, that we should change the Faith of so many

Christian ages and generations? and would not touch the Faith, nor alter the least of its stated conditions. My sole suggestion is, might not the precise and logical equivalent of the second verse of the Athanasian Creed be so stated as to be beyond doubt or misapprehension, and in terms supplied by Holy Scripture itself?

The two cardinal forms of error against which this verse warns are as old as the history of man; the two ways in which a rebellious mind has ever struggled against God's plain teaching. It crept into the human spirit with that first artful insinuation, "Yea, hath GOD said?" True, GOD hath spoken; but did He really mean *all*, or *just that*, which you suppose? The same thing rankly germinated and grew at the call of the chosen people; the solemn warning over and over again appended to the Mosaic revelation being "Thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." And the same subtle poison of four thousand years spread and circulated in the life-blood of Christian times: no bold, direct denial of a Divine revelation, but a human gloss, a tampering with terms; a wilful corruption, whether in the way of addition to, or subtraction from, the substance of what GOD had revealed. So that, after all the eventful work of the first Christian century, the beloved Disciple who closes its Canon of Scripture closes it with a repeated form, only more full and solemn, of the first Prophetical warning: "I testify unto every

man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life."

Now, as many of us know so well, and labour to impress on our people, these closing words of the Apocalypse hold up the precise warning upheld by the second verse of the Creed. The verse implicitly asserts this warning to the full, and asserts no more. It speaks to "every man that heareth" (in the Scripture sense), and charges him to *keep*, without adding to or diminishing from, what he heareth. It sums up the issue of all the Church's long struggles with those who from earliest Christian times have "departed from the Faith;" departed, in one or other of those two old constant forms, by either humanly adding thereto, or humanly diminishing from it. The more rigorously we examine the terms, the more perfectly does this identity of defined warning come out; and the more demonstrably do the two forms of admonition stand out as one and the same.

For speaking in no general or popular way, but in the accurate and guarded sense in which lawyer or philologist would read any documentary terms, what can be marked out by the obligation to *keep whole*, but the preserving of a thing in its absolute integrity?—neither attempting nor allowing detraction, or loss, or fining away, of any

matter whatever belonging to its real and perfect essence. As applied to the Faith, it must mean an unswerving will to be true to every revealed particular in which that Faith consists; to do nothing, and knowingly admit of nothing, which aims at lessening or lowering its plain authentic statements, as written in and ever held by the Church on sure warranty of Holy Scripture; to resist against making the Scripture's teaching mean something less or other than it really declares on the deep transcendental truths revealed by God concerning Himself to man: inso-much that they only who refuse this obedient will, and make these rebellious attempts, are they who do *not keep whole* the Faith, and are defined as those in peril of the penalty of such presumptuous guilt.

In like manner the strict and proper scope of the obligation to *keep undefiled*, must be to preserve the substance of a thing in its own essential purity; neither attempting nor allowing its admixture with any foreign or defiling element. And this as applied to the Faith must distinctly mark out the mischief of a corrupt will working in the old line of defilement by means of human additions; by an evil desire to make the terms of Revealed Truth declare what men's own fancies, purposes, or prejudices want the terms to declare; by colouring Scripture through an alterative process of modifications, inferences, suggestions; describing Myste-

ries so as to be on a level with human intelligence or experience; building up self-conceived arguments on the nature, acts, and attributes of God, the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY GHOST, until the purely written teaching of the everlasting WORD is developed into an earthly superstructure of what men have reasoned out and concluded for themselves. They only and such as they, who thus add of their own weakness or waywardness to the terms in which Holy Scripture writes down "the deep things of God," are defined as those who do not *keep undefiled* the Faith, and are included under the words that warn them of such sin and mortal danger.

Here I might stop; because I believe the gain would be immense if the warning of the second verse, "without doubt, he shall perish everlastingly," were exclusively predicated of such as thus wilfully, and impenitently, diminish from or add unto the Catholic Faith. But I would rather be allowed to go on a step farther. Without at all entering into what we were intended to conceive as the awful state of "perishing everlastingly," which our Lord only describes under type and figure, while He afterwards names it "everlasting punishment," in contrast with "Life eternal," I would only submit that its true and entire equivalent must be contained in St. John's expression, "God shall take away his part out of the book of life." Whichever expression be used, the thing signified must be one and the same. And it must be firmly,

plainly asserted; both in fidelity to Holy Scripture, and because there is too good reason to fear that much of the antipathy and onset against this Creed has its root in a desire to disbelieve altogether the eternity of future punishment, and to explain it away from being an article of the Faith. Still to make the firm assertion using the *ipsissima verba* of the Apocalyptic sentence, could but arm it with additional power, while it would disarm many a hard or shrinking feeling against it. Any careful student of the Bible would read in the expression of the Apocalypse a perfect equivalent to the expression in the second verse of the Creed; while at the same time the warning being wholly cast in Scripture phrase, would destroy the ground for its painful repudiation as “an hard saying,” on the part of Church authority.

When therefore in as true a tone of Churchmanship as of charity you write to the Master of the Temple—‘If the language can, without lowering its steadfast affirmation, be made more clear, more visibly what it was certainly meant to be’—I feel constrained to supplement the ‘if,’ and in a like depth of affection for the Creed itself to suggest a way, if only as suggestive of a more wisely amended way, by which I believe it might be done. If, in proceeding to speak of the Catholic Faith, instead of saying “except every one do keep whole and undefiled,” we say ‘whoso shall presume to diminish from or added unto,’ I submit that we

use a phrase of more than the same intention, of the same verbal force and definition; the only thing excepting it from actual identity being that we speak in exclusive, not inclusive sense; that instead of apparently including the whole mass of the unwitting, or inactive, or helplessly misguided, in the matter of the Faith, we definitely include those only who wilfully, and so criminally, diminish from or add unto it. Truly indeed 'to diminish from' may be no critically allowed translation of "non integram servare;" nor 'to add unto' of "non inviolatam servare;" but the two are surely sufficiently accurate equivalents of the existing translation and of the originals. And though "absque dubio in æternum peribit" has no verbal identity with "God shall take away his part out of the book of life," yet according to the whole mind and diction of Holy Scripture wherever it touches that awful subject, the two things signified are so closely the same, that the expressions become virtually and practically the counterparts of each other. So that the question I venture to build on these premises, many years diffidently pondered in my own mind, is whether the opening verses of the Athanasian Creed, on full consideration of their real affirmation and certain meaning, might not be allowed to be written in such form as this:—

WHOSOEVER WILL BE SAVED, BEFORE ALL THINGS
IT IS NECESSARY THAT HE HOLD THE CATHOLIC FAITH.

WHICH FAITH WHOSO PRESUMETH TO DIMINISH FROM OR ADD UNTO, GOD SHALL TAKE AWAY HIS PART OUT OF THE BOOK OF LIFE.

At all events, to any of us who are yearning for a satisfactory outcome from this trying question, I would fain hope that some such form of the first admonitory clause may offer matter for patient thought. It would seem in all charity to meet the well-known objections of earnest and tender minds; while it would in nothing lower the tone of the Creed's steadfast affirmation. It would let the clause visibly say what it implicitly means; and also bring its most solemn predication under shelter of Holy Scripture's most direct statement. All persistent objections must then stand, not against these words of the Creed, but against words in which the Holy Spirit has declared the critical guilt of tampering with the Faith revealed. It would be a step, as years of converse with men of all minds and tempers have shown me, most likely to satisfy the feelings of those whose hearts go with the Creed, but not with the *form* of the admonition—to remove an offence at which nothing will save weaker brethren from stumbling—to destroy a bar of prejudice which stays many not yet of our Communion from a profession of the Catholic Faith they might yet be brought to make in the doctrinal sentences of the 'Quicumque vult.' When a devoutly converted Unitarian says, as such a one said to me, 'O that my father and mother

could have read this sentence as I can read it now! they would have thought and taught me as I rejoice to believe now'—it seems to put beyond price the wisdom and duty of saying wholly what we mean, and nothing but what we mean, in holding up the Gospel warning to the eyes of "whosoever will be saved."

There remains the question of whether such cleared form of expression should be allowed to stand as the second verse itself, or ought rather to be embodied in a Note preceding or following the place of the Creed in the Prayer Book. My strong persuasion is that a Note would not practically answer its purpose. There is truly the precedent of a Note in the case of the two Sacraments; but in this it would too probably be inoperative, being either neglected or ignored. The generality of minds would not be able to get away from the words they join in rehearsing; and to know that the words were explained, however carefully, in a preceding or following Note unspoken, would be felt as but a distant relief, with a residuum of pain always left in using words that needed modification or defence. And there would still be an opening left for that plausible and supposed trenchant question of opponents—a question often put with great energy from influential quarters, why would you say one thing in the Creed, and another in a Note? Why—as is asked in the Report of the Royal Commissioners on Ritual—

would you perplex people's minds with what is plainly a contradiction in terms? If what you explain in the Note is really the mind of the Church in Her warning, why not write the warning so plainly that "he may run that readeth"? We might not appreciate such objections; but they would be so widely felt and urged as to be a continual detriment to the worth of a Note, if it were elected as better than the safest re-casting of the phraseology of the second verse. I would certainly vote for such Note, if that only were obtainable; but I would infinitely rather abide by such suggestion as I submit for the equivalent rendering of the Admonitory Clause itself.

There would have to be considered farther the harmonizing of the clause so rendered with the twenty-eighth and last verses of the Creed. These might be rested, indeed, on the principle well known in interpreting the language of any document, that mutually referring and dependent clauses must be interpreted together; that the sense of one must be held to consist especially with the more fully defined meaning of another; that therefore the sense of the second verse must govern its minor reiteration in the twenty-eighth, or its more solemn repetition in the last. But we should hardly have to rely on this principle. The twenty-eighth verse need present no difficulty when the imperative *sentiat* is correctly understood

as conveying monitory injunction rather than penal compulsion, rendered as “let him thus think of the Trinity.” And with regard to the last, if the second verse could be allowed to be written as aforesaid, I do not see why its solemn repetition might not form the closing verse of the Creed. The latter word of warning is of less awful extent than the former. It is surely a much less thing to say, “salvus esse non poterit”—he cannot be in the way, or state of salvation—than to say “absque dubio in æternum peribit;” and also the sense of “nisi quisque fideliter firmiterque crediderit,” lies altogether within the terms “nisi quisque integram inviolatamque servaverit.” So that if, instead of the form put forth by the Committee of Bishops, “This is the holy and Catholic Faith, which every man who desireth to attain to eternal life ought to know wholly, and to guard faithfully,” it might be thought good and right to allow such a form as has been submitted of the second verse, as an equivalent to the old statement of the warning of the Universal Church, This is the Catholic Faith, which whoso presumeth to diminish from, or add unto, God shall take away his part out of the book of life,—it would once more visibly say what we most certainly mean, and set a solemnly faithful and loving seal to this Confession of our Christian Faith.

This, my dear Archdeacon, is the little contribution I crave to make towards the great

matters for thought before us. I make it in respectful affection to the Sacred Synod of the Province; in deeper love to the Church, in whose name the Synod must act, when the safe keeping and the due place in Holy Worship of this symbol of the true Faith will be at issue; and according to our dealing with which, much more than can now be contemplated of the whole heritage of the Church's Faith and Worship may hereafter be at issue too. The question may be long, and I hope it will be; if it extend to the sessions of this and even another year, no time, no patience, no amount of suppliant pondering and thought could be too much to devote to it, considering all it directly and indirectly involves. The sole aim of these few words is to secure one tiny step on my own part towards discharging a trust committed to us all; in token of but an individual heart's desire and prayer, that we may not even seem to come short of the Apostolic model of charity to all men, nor fail in fully obeying the Apostolic injunction to "contend earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints."

Believe me to remain,

Sincerely and faithfully yours,

JOHN PUCKLE.





