

THE ARTICLES OF THE APOSTLES' CREED.

XII. "THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS."

"THE forgiveness of sins," the greatest of the gifts of grace, and that which presupposes all others, has stood in this place from time immemorial. It describes the present state of salvation, in opposition to the state of guilt before believing, and outside the Holy Church, as well as in opposition to the state of perfection, in which no sin and no more remembrance of sin affecting the life of men will exist. Certainly where "forgiveness of sins" is there is also life and blessedness, and as certainly the new life, belonging to this present time, of the justified and reconciled longs for and reaches forth to its completion. Therefore the Confession cannot end better than with the attestation of this hope. But every one must also acknowledge that our Creed is to be preferred to the Roman, because it does not end with the attainments of "the resurrection of the dead" but with "eternal life." Those also who adhere to the Roman Creed, which has not got this beautiful conclusion, have endeavoured in many ways to supply the deficiency.¹ This conclusion is not original, for then it would be inexplicable why it should have been cut off in Rome. However it is immaterial that we do not know when and where it was added. "The resurrection of the flesh," which gives to the Christian hope of an everlasting life its peculiar character, has, so far as we know, never been wanting. We cannot well contradict our great Reformer when he says in the long Catechism that this is not well

¹ So Marcellus (see p. 390 n. 1, vol. vii.); so Augustine twice in commentaries on the Milanese form, *i.e.* the Roman Creed; so also many creeds which in other respects are essentially identical with the Roman, or are more nearly related to it than to our Apostles' Creed, such as that of Ravenna (Hahn, p. 25) the African (Hahn, pp. 31, 33, 34); also a similar one in the Appendix to the Sacramentary of Bobbio (see p. 141, n. 4, *supra*).

expressed in German, and when he goes on to say: "In good German we should speak of the resurrection of the body or of the corpse, but this is of no great importance as long as we understand the word rightly." It is to be noticed that Luther as a translator of the Bible did not hesitate to write "flesh"¹ in countless passages where the Bible, like the Creed, uses the Semitic word "flesh" in a sense which deviates much more from the common German and the Western mode of speech in general. Further, it is obvious that Luther's scruple has nothing to do with criticisms of the hopes of the resurrection of the flesh which have been founded on the Resurrection of Christ and before that on Christ's word and deed. They raise the question on their own account. The plain and unequivocal expression of it had already in Apostolic times been very needful. Where heathen views, as in Corinth, still exercised power over the modes of thought of the newly converted, natural reflection, after their first acceptance of the Gospel, immediately withstood this portion of it. They acquiesced in the Resurrection of Christ, and without exactly disputing life after death they denied the future resurrection of the dead. We know from St. Paul's refutation that this expectation was looked upon as absurd. Others were more careful in their opposition to the Christian Confession. They gave out that they also on their side believed in a resurrection of the dead, only it must be rightly understood. The resurrection of the dead had already taken place,² clearly not in the special sense which the preaching of Jesus and His Apostles connected with the words, "the dead will rise again." This was only a figurative expression for an event of quite another nature, which often repeated itself.

¹ E.g. John 8. 15; 17. 2; Romans 3. 20; 11. 14. Elsewhere he translates it "man," e.g. Matt. 24. 22.

² 2 Tim. 2. 18. On the misinterpretations here supposed, cf. *Hist. of the Canon*, II. 901 f.

Early enough we hear of allegorical misinterpretations by which this marvellous statement was justified. The dead were raised when unbelieving heathen attained to a Christian confession of God, and a certain kind of resurrection from the dead is experienced by many men who beget children ; while they themselves are tottering to the grave they live again, and when they are dead they live on in their children. There was thus a resurrection of the flesh side by side with a resurrection of the spirit. Marcion had already before him the testimony of Jesus and of the Apostle Paul, which had been committed to writing. He remodelled both from what was, according to his idea, an uncorrupted gospel, but it was one which had never been written before his time. He disputed the resurrection of the flesh, that is of the body, and maintained that the soul only would be saved. St. Paul's judgment (1 Cor. 15. 50) that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"¹ furnished him and others with their chief argument, but it was one which had been used by others before Marcion to controvert the real Resurrection of the buried Body of Jesus.² In the time of Irenæus all the opponents of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection appealed to this statement.³ It was also the hobby-horse of the Manicheans.⁴ But many who pretend to be theologians in the nineteenth century ride it still more proudly than their predecessors, when they maintain that the confession of "the resurrection of the flesh" is in direct opposition to the doctrine of St. Paul. The Fathers of the Church from Justin to Augustine have already given the right answer : Only that

¹ Tertull. *de carne Christi*, 48 ; *c. Marc.* V. 9, 10. Cf. *Hist. of the Canon*, I. 615, and the fragment of Justin's work on the Resurrection in Methodius, *Zeitschr. f. Kirchengesch.* VIII. 6 ; Bonwetsch, *Methodius*, p. 232.

² Iren. 1, 30, 13. The disciples are said to have misinterpreted the appearances of the Risen One from ignorance of this saying.

³ Iren. V. 9, 1 ; Tertull. *de carne Christi*, 48.

⁴ August. *c. Faustum*, XVI. 29 ; *c. Adimantum*, 12. 4 ; *c. advers. legis*, 6. 22 ; cf. *de agone christi*. 31. 33 ; *retract.* I. 17, 22 ; II. 3.

which has fallen can rise again. It is therefore meaningless to talk of the resurrection of the dead when all that is meant by it is a continuation of the life of the spirit when freed from the body by death. As Augustine says, with reference to St. Paul's statement, the chapter in which it is found should be read right through instead of deceitfully tearing a sentence from the context and holding fast to that alone. "Only read it through," says Augustine; "a commentary is needless, for the matter is not obscure." "Flesh and blood" here, as everywhere else in the Bible, means man as he is by birth and nature. Since such an one, as Jesus Himself taught, cannot inherit the kingdom of God, St. Paul exhorts all to bear the likeness of the second Adam, the risen and glorified Saviour, in this life.¹ But on this same truth is also founded the confident hope that the bodily life, which Christians shall win again through the resurrection, will not be a repetition of that which became theirs by birth, but will be like unto the Body of the Risen Jesus, transformed, spiritualized, transfigured, and yet a bodily life and therefore flesh. The verse 1 Corinthians 15. 39 shows that St. Paul includes in the expression "the flesh" the spiritual body of the Risen Christ and that of the Christians who attain to the Resurrection. For he shows by examples taken from ordinary natural history that "all flesh is not the same flesh," in the very passage in which he opposes the absurd consequences which would arise from the complete identity and similarity of the present body with the future. He then exchanges the word "flesh" for its synonym "body," and shows how, even in this world, the most varied degrees of glory may exist in bodily appearances. All this must be taken into account in speaking of the resurrection of the dead. A

¹ Thus especially Tertullian *c. Marc.* V. 10, on the ground of the right reading (*portemus, inquit, non portabimus, præceptive non promissive*). Cf. Col. iii. 9 Eph. iv. 22 ff.

spiritual body, a body of flesh that has been changed and transfigured by the spirit, is, according to St. Paul, to be looked for at the return of the Lord for those Christians who shall be living upon the earth as well as for the dead. These are in substance the thoughts with which the Fathers from the second to the fifth century opposed the attempts that were made to set aside by means of Biblical words the doctrine of the Bible on the resurrection of the dead. They still suffice to-day.

It cannot be said that the expression "resurrection of the flesh," which is founded on the Bible,¹ and which is familiar in the Creed and in early Church literature, ever gave rise to serious misapprehension. The Church of Lyons records, with the calmness born of the faith which has overcome the world, that in the year 177 the heathen persecutors burnt the bodies of the martyrs and threw their ashes into the Rhone. The chroniclers add only: "This they did as though they could overcome God and rob the martyrs of the new birth (of their bodies). They did it, as they say, that they might have no hope of the resurrection, in the confidence of which they have introduced a new and a strange religion amongst us, despising torments and ready to face death with joy. Now let us see whether they will rise again, and whether their God will help them and deliver them out of our hands."

It was the custom in some Churches, when the baptismal confession was made, to say, "I believe in the resurrection of this flesh."² The confessor made at the same time the sign of the cross on his forehead or his breast, meaning

¹ Cf. Luke 24. 39; Acts 2. 26, 31; Clem. I. Cor. 26 (in which a quotation from Job 19. 26 is introduced); Herm. *Sim.* V. 7, 2 (This thy flesh, the same); Clem. II. Cor. 9; Ign. *Smyrn.* 3; Justin, *dial.* 80 *extr.*; the fragments of a genuine history of his on the resurrection, c. 2 ff. (Otto II.³, 214 ff.).

² Rufinus, c. 36, 41, 43, 45-47; Nicetas (Caspari, *Anecd.* p. 357 f.); *Pseudo-aug. Sermo* 242; *Liturgia Mozar.* (Hahn, p. 36); *Missale Florentinum* in Caspari, IV. 302 (n. 73).

thereby: This my mortal body shall be made worthy of eternal life. That might have given rise to misconceptions, but I do not know that the literature of the early Church contains any words on the resurrection so ambiguous as those contained in one verse of the glorious hymn on the resurrection composed by the Electress Louisa Henrietta. The preachers who accept that formula and comment on it do not neglect to remind us that the body which we hope for is a spiritual body, raised above all the meanness and weakness of this present life. Only the fervour of the personal appropriation of the confession of the community could find expression in this definition of the Creed. If ever the danger should arise that the faith of the confessing community were to draw unwholesome nourishment from the words "resurrection of the flesh," which degenerated into the superstition, that our life in eternity would be similar to our life on earth, there would be nothing to prevent the substitution of "a resurrection of the body" for these words, as Luther wished; or, as is the practice of many Eastern creeds, "the resurrection of the dead." It is even quite possible that the latter expression in the Creed was the original one, and was only later explained by the plainer expression, "resurrection of the flesh," in opposition to the various misinterpretations which have been cropping up ever since the days of S. Paul.¹ But I have never seen the slightest sign of that danger, and I imagine that in this and many other respects we find ourselves in a similar position to the Christians of the second century, who expressly confessed "the resurrection of the flesh" in order that they might not give up that which was peculiar to their Christian hope.

The results of this investigation may be summed up as

¹ Cf. the reflections of Caspari, III. 154-161, which do not exhaust the subject.

follows. Judging from its contents our Creed has a full right to the title Apostolical. It does not contain one sentence which cannot be well derived from the history and teaching of Jesus and the explanatory and illustrative teaching and preaching of the Apostles. It answers also in a remarkable manner to its original use as a baptismal confession, and as a plain, popular confession of the Christian faith of the community. For it does not contain a single sentence which does not correspond with an event in the historical revelation of God essential for sanctifying faith. It contains in classic brevity, in rhythmic melody, and with a completeness attained by no other confession, all that a Christian ought to remember if he would find all his consolation and his joy in that which God has done through Christ,—in this must be included the creation,—and in all that He has promised yet to do for our complete redemption through Christ. The picture of Jesus going in and out amongst His people as teacher and benefactor has been found wanting. Must a confession that is used at Baptisms and Confirmations relate Bible history? This history will not admit of a compendious abridgment in a few words. Its charm and its winning credibility are found in its epic breadth. Surely a "character sketch" of Jesus does not belong to a formula of confession. Who could draw it so that all would believe in it? What has already been said in olden times of the pictorial representation of Jesus applies also here: "It is well that the painters have not been able to paint a single picture of the Lord that is satisfactory to all."¹ Jesus Himself has made known His character for us as far as was necessary, above all in the good confession which He witnessed, suffering before Pontius Pilate, and through the sacrifice of His life on the Cross, to which His whole life of service pointed

¹ Cf. my *Acta Joannis*, p. 214, 7.

from the very beginning.¹ The Cross is the best compendium of the Gospel history. St. Paul as a mission-preacher at times confined himself exclusively to this compendium of the Gospel (1 Cor. 2. 2). Whoever has taken the story of the Cross to heart will also know how to value the history which took place between the Virgin birth and the Crucifixion, and will willingly listen to the Evangelists, while they relate it to him again in its manifold fulness of life. Neither will he find fault with the Evangelists because they are almost silent on the first thirty years of the life of Jesus, on "the formation of His character" and His "moral development."

It has been said that an instructive explanation of the deeds recorded and the expression of their evangelical meaning are wanting. But is not this supposed deficiency in the Creed really an advantage? As long as our Gospels (Evangelien) bear this name we may call the simple recital of facts Evangelical (evangelisch), instead of framing them with wordy reflections. For the educational purposes for which the Creed still serves it is really an advantage that it allows the teacher freedom of movement. Also for the continual liturgical use of the Creed it is a great blessing that it does not express reflections resting on instructive thoughts, which we should be obliged to make our own in thought and word, but that it places before our eyes in broad outline the wonderful works of God. As long as we cherish these in faith and appropriate them to ourselves they are as little likely to grow old and wearisome as the rising and setting of the sun every day on which God permits us to behold the beauty of His works. How many priceless productions of Christian thought we owe to this quality of our Creed! To mention only one example, which has not yet grown

¹ Matt. 20. 28; cf. John 1. 29; 2. 17-22.

old. L. A. Petri's meditations on the Creed,¹ according to my view contain infinitely more understanding of Christian truth and experience of the heights and depths of human life and the strength of healthy, sound thought, than all the literature as yet produced by the advanced theological school of the present day, and that too in language which derives its strength and dignity from its truthfulness.

When we consider the importance of the Creed as "a rule of truth" for the community and its teachers, the matter-of-fact nature of its contents is another advantage over which we may well rejoice. The more reflections on the nature of faith that a creed contains the more it bears traces of the common modes of thought, the theological culture and the ecclesiastical conflicts of the period in which it arose. The more transitory it is in its nature the less does it serve as the suitable expression of Christian faith for all times, which the Lord when He comes again hopes to find, not in many, it is true, but in some. The later Church confessions were an historical necessity in order to preserve the faith against distortion and misrepresentation. But higher than all these formulæ of Christian truth as opposed to error stands the ancient, simple confession of Christianity. It states what God has done for us in Christ, what He daily does in us and will yet do if we cast not away our trust but hold fast to our confession.

Finally, the Creed has one advantage over most of the other confessions, which divide those who bear the name of Christians, in that it unites them. The Creed maintains in Western Christendom the same out-and-out predominating superiority over all others as a popular confession that it does with us. It is not even true that the Greek Church has never acknowledged the Western Creed, nor allowed the Apostolic origin of their own baptismal confession.

¹ Dr. L. A. Petri, *The Faith in Short Meditations*, 3rd ed., Hanover, 1872.

The fable of the composition of the original Creed by the united deliberations of the Apostles¹ was certainly not invented by Ambrose and Rufinus and other men of Latin speech, who may have related it before them, but was brought over from the East. We find its characteristic features in a treatise of the third century, originally written in Greek, which is called *The Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and Holy Disciples of the Redeemer*. It is described as a work composed by the Apostles themselves very soon after the Council of the Apostles A.D. 5. This book, commonly called the "Didascalia," does not contain the exact words of a fixed baptismal confession as it had been composed by the Apostles, only many points of agreement with such a confession.² But the germ of the fable is to be found in the following narrative in the Didascalia: "We, the Apostles, gathered ourselves together in Jerusalem and consulted what should be done. We agreed unanimously to write this Catholic Didascalia for the strengthening of you all in that which we hold fast. You must honour God the Almighty and Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, and you must exercise yourselves in the Holy Scriptures and believe in the resurrection of the dead, and use all creatures with thanksgiving." The confession of the Triune God is placed foremost among the doctrines enumerated by the Apostolic Council. I am unable to trace back the further development of this idea in the Greek Church. Nevertheless it lived on there. In the letter of Leo the Great to Flavian, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Roman Creed of that time is spoken of as "the purest source of the Christian faith." It is praised as the common confession of all the baptized on earth, quoted in sections word for word, solemnly approved

¹ Cf. pp. 4, 10 n. 1, Germ. ed.

² Cf. p. 47, n. 1 (Germ. ed.). I have translated Lagarde's text, p. 102 ff., without giving the additions of the second hand.

and formally canonized by the fourth General Council of Chalcedon (451). The Greek Bishops at the Council exclaimed directly after it had been read: "This is the faith of the Fathers. This is the faith of the Apostles."¹

Even more than this was done at the Trullan Council of the year 692, the so-called *Concilium quini-sextum*. The fathers of this council in their first canon confess "that which was delivered by the eye-witnesses and servants of the Word, the Apostles of the Church chosen by God. They then acknowledge the faith more exactly determined by the 318 fathers of Nicæa against Arius, as well as the five Œcumenical Councils which followed."² We can only understand by this that the Greeks wished to point to that confession which was in use among them as a baptismal confession, before and for a considerable time after the Council of Nicæa, as an inheritance from the times of the Apostles, even as a work of the Apostles. This opinion of the bishops in the year 692 is of as little importance as the Eastern legend of the composition of the Creed from the contributions of the twelve Apostles. But both views are nevertheless embodiments of the historical truth that the first outline of the Creed arose in the time of the Apostles, and therefore most certainly not without their aid. History, not legend, gives us a right to the ennobling thought that in and with our Creed we confess that which since the days of the Apostles has been the faith of united Christendom.

THEOD. ZAHN.

¹ Hefele, *Hist. of Councils*, II.², 440 ff., 453 f., 547. The scruples of some bishops did not refer to this.

² Bruns' *Canones apost. et conc.* I. 34. Professor Fr. Nieldson, of Copenhagen, was kind enough to point this out to me. No other explanation is satisfactory. Cf. Hefele, *Conciliengeschichte*, III.² 330. "The declaration of their adherence to the Apostolic Creed," etc. The difference between this canon and the first canon of the Council of Chalcedon should be noticed. Bruns, p. 25; and also Hefele, II. 505.