CHAPTER VI
THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTOLOGY

1. One-sided Solutions

The problem of Christology, in the narrow sense of the word, is to define the relation of the divine and the human in Christ. For a full-dress attack on the issues involved we must wait until the fourth century; it was the decision; promulgated at Nicea, that the Word shared the same divine nature as the Father, that focused attention upon them. Nevertheless the all but universal Christian conviction in the preceding centuries had been that Jesus Christ was divine as well as human. The most primitive confession had been 'Jesus is Lord'¹, and its import had been elaborated and deepened in the apostolic age. The two-fold order of being, 'according to the flesh' (κατὰ φύσιν), i.e. as man, and 'according to spirit' (κατὰ πνεῦμα), i.e. as God. So deeply was this formula embedded in their thinking that F. Loofs justly labelled it 'the foundation datum of all later Christological development'. As this contained all the elements of the Christological problem, thoughtful Christians could scarcely ignore it. We shall find that they did not do so, and that while most of the solutions proposed by the pre-Nicene Church were necessarily tentative, there were some which foreshadowed the mature discussion of later centuries.

In this book we are primarily concerned with the progress of doctrine within the central Christian tradition, i.e. in the Catholic Church. Here the double premiss of apostolic Christology, viz. that Christ as a Person was indivisibly one, and that He was simultaneously fully divine and fully human, was taken as the starting-point, the task of theology being to show how its two aspects could be held together in synthesis. In the first three centuries, however, the frontiers of orthodoxy were not so rigidly demarcated as they later became, and important currents of thought flowed outside the main channel. Certain of these 'heretical' trends have considerable Christological interest, and we shall glance briefly at a few of them before concentrating on the orthodox movement of thought.

First, then, we hear in the second century of a type of Christology, known as Ebionism, which solved the problem by denying the divinity altogether. The Ebionites were an offshoot of the specifically Jewish form of Christianity which was a potent force in the apostolic age, when it was only prevented with difficulty from saddling the Church with the full observance of the Jewish law. The rapid expansion of Gentile Christianity meant that its influence was bound to diminish, and the dispersal of the main community from Jerusalem to Transjordan on the outbreak of the Jewish war (A.D. 66) completed its isolation. After that date we only catch fleeting glimpses of Judaizing Christianity, and indeed it seems to have dissolved in splinter groups. Some of them, often called Nazaraeans, while strictly obeying the law and preferring a Judaizing gospel of their own, were perfectly orthodox in their belief that Jesus was the Son of God. In distinction from these the Ebionites rejected the virgin birth, regarding the Lord as a man normally born from Joseph and Mary; He was the predestined Messiah, and in this capacity would return to reign on earth. This at any rate was the core of their teaching, which in some quarters seems to have had a pronounced Gnostic colouring. Hippolytus² and Tertullian³ connect their name with one Ebion, presumably the apocryphal founder of the sect; but in fact it derives from the Hebrew for 'poor', no doubt recalling

¹ Justin, dial. 47; cf. Hegesippus (in Eusebius, hist. eccl. 4, 22, 2 f.); Jerome, ep. 172, 13; Epiphanius, haer. 29, 7.
² Justin, ib.; Irenaeus, haer. 1, 26, 1; 3, 11, 7; 3, 28, 1.
³ Ref. 7, 35, 1.
⁴ De peccator, 33.
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Thirdly, a diametrically opposite Christological tendency, effectively eliminating the Lord's humanity, was a factor to be reckoned with from apostolic times onwards. Known as Docetism, the distinctive thesis which gave it its name (δοκεῖν = 'to seem') was that Christ's manhood, and hence His sufferings, were unreal, phantasmal. Clearly its ultimate roots were Greco-Oriental assumptions about divine impassibility and the inherent impurity of matter. The first expressly to mention 'Docetists' (δοκεῖν) is Serapion of Antioch (f. 200). But Docetism was not a simple heresy on its own; it was an attitude which infected a number of heresies, particularly Marcionism and Gnosticism. This attitude is crystallized in a remark of Justin's (?), 'There are some who declare that Jesus Christ did not come in flesh but only as spirit, and exhibited an appearance (φαντασίαν) of flesh'. Traces of teaching like this are visible in the New Testament itself, and very early in the second century we find Ignatius protesting against 'godless' people who claimed that Christ had suffered in appearance only. By itself this might imply simply the theory, common enough at the time, that someone else was crucified in Christ's stead. But the vigour with which Ignatius defends the actuality of all Christ's human experiences, as well as the hint that his opponents declined to admit that He was genuinely 'flesh-bearing' (σαρκοφόρος), suggests that their Docetism went the whole way. Shortly afterwards Polycarp was anathematizing the refusal to 'confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh'; and the apocryphal Gospel of Peter was to state that the Saviour on the cross had 'kept silence, as feeling no pain', implying that His bodily make-up was illusory.

The Christologies of Gnosticism transport us into a bizarre world of cosmic speculation. The burden of the myth of redemption, it will be recalled, was the liberation of the divine element, the fragment of spirit, in fallen humanity, and this

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1 E.g. Rom. 15, 26; Gal. 2, 10. 2 See above, pp. 116-19. 3 Eusebius, hist. eccl. I. 30, 4; 17, 16. 4 Ibid. 2, 27, 2. 5 Epiphanius, herr. 65, 1, 5-8. 6 For these fragments and a recent discussion accepting their authenticity, see H. de Riedmatten (op. cit. in Bibliography).
was accomplished by the bestowal of knowledge. There was a great variety of Gnostic systems, but a common pattern ran through them all. From the pleroma, or spiritual world of aeons, the divine Christ descended and united Himself for a time (according to Ptolemy, between the baptism and the passion) to the historical personage, Jesus; and according to most accounts the latter’s body was formed, not out of ordinary flesh, but of ‘psychic’ substance. Thus the Gnostics’ Christology tended to be pluralist; Christ Jesus on their view, as Irenaeus pointed out, was compounded by two distinct substances (σωματα), being at once the heavenly Christ and Jesus, the Son of the Demiurge, in a loose sort of liaison. It was also docetic, either as teaching that the heavenly Christ was invisible, impalpable and impassible, or as implying that the lower Christ himself, with whom the heavenly Christ joined Himself, was not real flesh and blood. Marcion’s Christology, too, was docetic at any rate as regards the Lord’s body; inconsistently, he treated His sufferings and death as real and as effecting the redemption. Christ was not for him the Messiah foretold by the prophets, nor was He son of Mary, having neither birth nor growth, He suddenly appeared on earth as an adult man. Virtually modalist, Marcion conceived of Jesus as manifesting in human form the invisible good God.

2. The Spirit Christology

These were tendencies on the fringe, yet Gnosticism at any rate came within an ace of swamping the central tradition. The fact that it did not do so was in large measure due (apart from an astonishing feat of pastoral care on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities) to the unwavering insistence in the rule of faith, as expressed in liturgy, catechetical teaching and preaching, that the Son of God had really become man. This fundamental datum ensured that the Christological scheme of the primitive

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1 Irenaeus, het., 1, 7, 2. 2 Eph. 1, 16, 5. 3 cf. Tertullian, de calle Chr., 3-5; Origen, frag. in Luc. 1 (Rauv., 237). 4 See above, pp. 94 E. 5 cf. Tertullian, c. Marc., 1, 19. 6 cf. Tertullian, c. Marc., 1, 19.
to the underlying conception. The idea seems sometimes to have been that the pre-existent Christ-Spirit indwelt the man Jesus, sometimes that He actually became man. Barnabas provides an example of the former, with his statement that the Son of God 'came' or 'manifested himself' in flesh, or in the form of flesh, and that the body which Christ offered in sacrifice was 'the receptacle of spirit'. An even more impressive illustration is Hermas's theory that 'God caused the holy, pre-existent spirit which created the whole of creation to dwell in flesh that He desired', i.e. in the human Jesus, who cooperated with it meritoriously.

On the other hand, the Christology of the Ignatian passage cited above clearly conforms to the second type. Belonging first to the supernatural order (cf. πνευματικός, ἐν θεῷ, etc.), Jesus was fully and characteristically human. He was born 'of the seed of David, but also of holy spirit'; He was 'of the seed of David as regards His flesh, but Son of God according to God's will and power'. In agreement with this approach 2 Clement declares that 'Christ the Lord, Who saved us, being first of all spirit, became flesh'; while in 1 Clement we read that Christ addresses us in the Psalms 'through holy spirit'. To pass beyond the second century, the same theory, it is plain, lay behind Callistus's doctrine that what became incarnate of the Blessed Virgin was 'holy spirit'. Both Hippolytus and Tertullian, as we shall see, were exponents of the Spirit-Christology; and Cyprian's statement that at the incarnation God's Son 'descended into the Virgin and as holy spirit clothed Himself with flesh' illustrates its persistence. It is noteworthy that the all but unanimous exegetical tradition of Luke 1:35, equated 'the holy spirit' and 'the power of the Most High', which were to come upon Mary, not with the third Person of the Trinity, but with the Christ Who, pre-existent as spirit or Word, was to incarnate Himself in her.

3. The Apologists and Irenaeus

Little enough can be gleaned from the Apologists, Justin apart, about Christology. Preoccupied with the Logos, they evince surprisingly little interest in the Gospel Figure. Tatian, it is true, speaks of Him as 'God in the form of a man'; while Aristeides, using language coloured by the Spirit-Christology, states that 'it is confessed that this Son of the most high God descended from heaven as holy spirit (τὸ πνεύμα ἀγίον) and took flesh from a virgin'. For Melito He was 'by nature God and man'; He had 'clothed Himself with the man'. His divine element being described as 'spirit'. Though sometimes coming close to it, Melito steered clear of modalism, clearly distinguishing the Word from the Father. Justin himself was usually content to reproduce the familiar affirmations of the rule of faith. He is satisfied that the Word became man by being born from the Virgin. As he expresses it, 'He Who was formerly Logos, and appeared now in the semblance of fire, now in incorporeal fashion, has finally by God's will become man for the human race'. He pre-existed as God, and was made flesh of the Virgin, being born as man. His incarnation involved the assumption of flesh and blood; and Justin insists, in spite of the scandal thereby occasioned to Jewish critics, on the reality of the Messiah's physical sufferings. Yet he did not cease to exist as Word, being in fact at once 'God and man'.

Passages like these emphasize the reality of the two natures, but throw no light on their co-existence in the
one Person of Christ. The only explanation Justin hints at is one suggested by his doctrine of the germinal Logos (λόγος σπερματικός). Since we agree, he argues, that the Logos manifested Himself in various forms to Abraham, Isaac and Moses (he is thinking of the Old Testament theophanies), why should we shrink from believing that He could be born as a man from the Virgin? The Logos, moreover, has been active in all men, imparting to them whatever goodness and knowledge they possessed. The idea lurking in his mind seems to be that His presence in Jesus Christ should be understood as similar in kind to this universal presence, though much greater in degree. Yet he does not follow up or develop the idea, and in any case leaves the presence of the Word in other men in all ages itself unexplained. Sometimes he speaks of His dwelling in them or being implanted in them like a seed, sometimes of them as living with the Logos, sometimes of their having a share or portion of Him.

There is, however, one crucial passage which has often been pointed to as providing an answer. This is Justin's statement that Christianity is manifestly superior to all other human teaching: 'for the reason that the rational principle in its entirety became the Christ who appeared because of us, body and Logos and soul' (διὰ τοῦ τὸ λογικὸν τὸ ὄν τὸ φανέρωσιν ἔμειναι τὸν Χριστὸν γεγονέναι, καὶ σῶμα καὶ λόγος καὶ ψυχή). The implication of the final clause, it has been suggested, must be that on Justin's view the Logos took the place in the man Jesus of the human rational soul (νοῦς or πνεῦμα). If this interpretation is correct, Justin must have been a pioneer exponent of the 'Word-flesh' type of Christology which we shall later be studying; and it is certainly the case that, one or two passages excepted, he shows little or no interest in Christ's human soul. The Stoic influences in his environment must have prompted him to regard the Logos as the governing principle, or ἡγεμονικός, in the God-man. On the other hand, the whole

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7 See above, p. 96.  
8 Dial. 75, 4.

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1 Dial. 105, 3; 103, 7 f.  
2 E.g. haer. 3, 16, 8.  
3 E.g. ib. 7, 9, 3; 3, 16, 2 f.; 3, 16, 6; 3, 17, 4.
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reality of Christ's corporeal nature. He was 'truly God' and 'truly man'; if His flesh had differed in any respect (sinlessness excepted) from ordinary human flesh, the parallel between Him and the first Adam would not have been valid, and man's sinful nature could not have been reconciled to God.² The Word Himself fashioned His own humanity in the Virgin's womb; and if He asked why He did this instead of creating some altogether novel substance, the answer is that the humanity which was to be the instrument of salvation had to be identical with that which needed to be saved.

Thus Irenaeus, even more emphatically than Justin, is a representative of the view that at the incarnation the pre-existent Logos, Who revealed Himself in the creation of the world and in the Old Testament theophanies, actually became man. The difference between them is that, while Justin accentuates the distinction between the Logos and the Father, even calling the former a 'second God', for Irenaeus (here he is akin to Ignatius) He is the form in which the Godhead manifests itself. A rather different Christology has been suspected to lie behind his habit of referring to 'the God' and 'His man' (e.g. 'both confessing the God and firmly accepting His man'), as if the humanity were an independent person vis-à-vis the Word. But expressions like these do not betoken an incipient Nestorianism; they are simply examples of the vividly concrete language which Irenaeus was obliged to use because of his lack of abstract terms for 'divinity' and 'humanity'. Two further points of interest deserve to be noticed. First, while it is not absolutely clear whether he attributed a rational human soul to the incarnate Lord (the question had not been posed in his day), the probability is that he did in so far as he thought about the matter at all. At any rate he was satisfied that human nature in its completeness includes such a soul, and that the Word became whatever human nature is. Secondly, there are passages in his writings which suggest that he was aware of some at any rate of the problems involved in the union of divinity and humanity. For example, he states that when the Lord was tempted, suffered and died, the Word remained quiescent (ἡ ὁμοιότητος), but cooperated (συνεργασιά) with the humanity in its victory, endurance and resurrection.

4. The Western Contribution

In the pre-Nicene era the West was quicker in formulating a mature Christology than the East. In part its success was due to its possessing theologians of the calibre of Hippolytus and Tertullian. If we concentrate on the latter in this section, the reason is that the pattern he shaped was to prove of lasting significance. Yet certain features of Hippolytus's Christology call for mention.

First, like his teacher Irenaeus, Hippolytus looked to the Johannine model, 'The Word was made flesh'. Some of his utterances seem at first sight to imply that the Logos simply assumed human flesh as an outward habitation, as when he compares Christ's humanity to a bridegroom's robe. Again, like Irenaeus, he sometimes speaks of it as 'the man', as if it constituted an independent person. His true meaning, however, comes out in the statement that 'the Logos became flesh and was made man', that entering into the Virgin He took flesh from her and 'became everything that a man is, sin excepted', and that (as against the Docetists) 'He became man really, not in appearance or in a manner of speaking'. Like St. John and Irenaeus, he used 'flesh' to connote human nature in its integrity, without raising the question of a rational soul, and referred to the divine element in Christ as 'spirit'. Secondly, he had a firmer grasp than most of his predecessors of the duality of natures in Christ as attested by the difference of operation and manifestation. More than once, in passages packed with eloquent antitheses, he contrasts the weakness of the humanity

¹ Ib. 3, 19, 3. ² De antichr. 4. ³ Ib. 4, 6, 7. ⁴ E.g. ib. 5, 14, 1; 5, 14, 4; 5, 21, 3. ⁵ Ib. 3, 22, 1; cf. 5, 9, 7.