THE PATRISTICAL IDEA OF ANTICHRIST

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I. The Times of Antichrist

The Thessalonian Christians had supposed that the coming of Christ was near at hand. St. Paul writes to warn them against such an expectation. Not that he discountenances their looking out for our Lord's coming,—the contrary; but he tells them that a certain event must come before it, and till that had arrived the end would not be. "Let no man deceive you by any means," he says; "for that Day shall not come, except there come a falling away first,"—and he proceeds "and" except first "that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."

As long as the world lasts, this passage of Scripture will be full of reverent interest to Christians. It is their duty ever to be watching for the advent of their Lord, to search for the signs of it in all that happens around them; and above all to keep in mind this great and awful sign of which St. Paul speaks to the Thessalonians. As our Lord's first coming had its forerunner, so will the second have its own. The first was "One more than a prophet," the Holy Baptist: the second will be more than an enemy of Christ; it will be the very image of Satan, the fearful and hateful Antichrist. Of him, as described in prophecy, I propose to speak; and, in doing so, I shall follow the exclusive guidance of the ancient Fathers of the Church.

I follow the ancient Fathers, not as thinking that on such a subject they have the weight they possess in the instance of doctrines or ordinances. When they speak of doctrines, they speak of them as being universally held. They are witnesses to the fact of those doctrines having been received, not here or there, but everywhere. We receive those doctrines which they thus teach, not merely because they teach them, but because they bear witness that all Christians everywhere then held them. We take them as honest informants, but not as a sufficient authority in themselves, though they are an authority too. If they were to state these very same doctrines, but say, “These are our opinions: we deduced them from Scripture, and they are true,” we might well doubt about receiving them at their hands. We might fairly say, that we had as much right to deduce from Scripture as they had; that deductions of Scripture were mere opinions; that if our deductions agreed with theirs, that would be a happy coincidence, and increase our confidence in them; but if they did not, it could not be helped—we must follow our own light. Doubtless, no man has any right to impose his own deductions upon another, in matters of faith. There is an obvious obligation, indeed, upon the ignorant to submit to those who are better informed; and there is a fitness in the young submitting implicitly for a time to the teaching of their elders; but, beyond this, one man’s opinion is not better {46} than another’s. But this is not the state of the case as regards the primitive Fathers. They do not speak of their own private opinion; they do not say, «This is true, because we see it in Scripture»—about which there might be

differences of judgment—but, «this is true, because in matter of fact it is held, and has ever been held, by all the Churches, down to our times, without interruption, ever since the Apostles:» where the question is merely one of testimony, viz., whether they had the means of knowing that it had been and was so held; for if it was the belief of so many and independent Churches at once, and that, on the ground of its being from the Apostles, doubtless it cannot but be true and Apostolic.

This, I say, is the mode in which the Fathers speak as regards doctrine; but it is otherwise when they interpret prophecy. In this matter there seems to have been no catholic, no formal and distinct, or at least no authoritative traditions; so that when they interpret Scripture they are for the most part giving, and profess to be giving, either their own private opinions, or vague, floating, and merely general anticipations. This is what might have been expected; for it is not ordinarily the course of Divine Providence to interpret prophecy before the event. What the Apostles disclosed concerning the future, was for the most part disclosed by them in private, to individuals—not committed to writing, not intended for the edifying of the body of Christ,—and was soon lost. Thus, in a few verses after the passage I have quoted, St. Paul says, “Remember ye not, that when I was yet with you, I told you these things?” and he writes by hints and allusions, not speaking out. And it shows how little care was taken to discriminate and authenticate his prophetical intimations, that the Thessalonians had adopted an opinion, that he had said—

what in fact he had not said—that the Day of Christ was immediately at hand.

Yet, though the Fathers do not convey to us the interpretation of prophecy with the same certainty as they convey doctrine, yet, in proportion to their agreement, their personal weight, and the prevalence, or again the authoritative character of the opinions they are stating, they are to be read with deference; for, to say the least, they are as likely to be right as commentators now; in some respects more so, because the interpretation of prophecy has become in these times a matter of controversy and party. And passion and prejudice have so interfered with soundness of judgment, that it is difficult to say who is to be trusted to interpret it, or whether a private Christian may not be as good an expositor as those by whom the office has been assumed.

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Now to turn to the passage in question, which I shall examine by arguments drawn from Scripture, without being solicitous to agree, or to say why I am at issue, with modern commentators: “That Day shall not come, except there came a falling away first.” Here the sign of the second Advent is said to be a certain frightful apostasy, and the manifestation of the man of sin, the son of perdition—that is, as he is commonly called, Antichrist. Our Savior seems to add, that that sign will immediately precede Him, or that His coming will follow close upon it; for after

speaking of “false prophets” and “false Christs,” “showing signs and wonders,” “iniquity abounding,” and “love waxing cold,” and the like, He adds, “When ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.” Again {48} He says, “When ye shall see the Abomination of Desolation … stand in the holy place … then let them that be in Judea flee into the mountains.” (Matt. XXIV. 16, 33.) Indeed, St. Paul also implies this, when he says that Antichrist shall be destroyed by the brightness of Christ’s coining.

First, then, I say, if Antichrist is to come immediately before Christ, and to be the sign of His coming, it is manifest that Antichrist is not come yet, but is still to be expected; for, else Christ would have come before now.

Further, it appears that the time of Antichrist’s tyranny will be three years and a half, or, as Scripture expresses it, “a time, and times, and a dividing of time,” or “forty-two months,”—which is an additional reason for believing he is not come; for, if so, he must have come quite lately, his time being altogether so short; that is, within the last three years, and this we cannot say he has.

Besides, there are two other circumstances of his appearance, which have not been fulfilled. First, a time of unexampled trouble. “Then shall be great tribulation, such as was not from the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be; and except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved.” [Matt. XXIV. 21, 22.] This has not yet been. Next, the preaching of the