Against the synousiasts (fragments)

Cyril of Alexandria (c. AD 376–444)

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CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA — FROM HIS TREATISE AGAINST THE SYNOUSIASTS
[Translated by P. E. Pusey]

of which the beginning is
A long discourse has already been made by us.

1.
A long exposition has already been wrought out by us, who desire to strive for the doctrines of the truth. For it everywhere sets forth One Lord Jesus Christ, Who proceeded forth God the Word out of God the Father Divinely, out of a woman humanly and after the flesh. And let no one say, who has a mind witting how to view each several thing, that I have been borne savagely down on them who have not such faith, seeing that a sort of sorrow sometimes invites hereto, sorrow I mean in regard to them whom we have contradicted. For the fact itself has its proof , not an idle excuse. For they indeed are already dead and departing from human affairs, have gone to another life; and it is utter folly in enmity to insult not the living but them who are now dead. Nevertheless since the Truth is dear to the lovers of right doctrine, and it needs befits them to say the truth and to be practised in the power of resisting them who are wont to utter vain things, I thought I ought, seeing that a countless multitude of brethren have suffered no slight harm from what Diodore Bishop of Tarsus and he who was Bishop of Mopsuestia, the most eloquent Theodore, have written of Christ the Lord and Saviour of us all, to say some few things on what they said and to point out to readers the hideousness of the track of both.

2.
Since then some stumble and imagine to themselves a change of the Word into blood and flesh, let them be laughed at as beside themselves and let us say to them, Wake up ye drunkards from their wine, and let us examine of what kind is the nature of the flesh, and be ye diligent to think, of what kind again is that of God Who is over all. For unbounded is the interval, and with reason may one say that to venture to compare them at all is not free from responsibility. For the One is by Nature God and Lord of all, Light and Life and Glory and moreover Power, the other is what every body who lives among men knows. When then

any affirm that there has taken place a change of the Word into this earthly body, or that the Word being God framed to Himself out of His own Essence, a body of the same nature as our bodies, let them confess first that He ceased to be what He is (He was, as I said, God and Creator, Life and Light, Glory and Power) and let them moreover affirm that to endure the liability to slip that belongs to things generate is nob alien to Him and that to be conversant with a worse condition than that wherein He is, is not untried by Him.

Yet I think one ought to investigate what it is that thrust Him down hereto: was it some necessity and tyranny of passion falling on Him? yet how is it not distraction that any should suppose this so to be? for where is the greater than He and that is able to overpass His Nature ? since how is God the Name that is above every name and Lord of Hosts? But it is not necessity (they will haply say) but that a change of His own choice invited Him hereto. But it were impossible that He should suffer this too: for how should the Divine and Untaint Nature make ought that befitted Him not, His choice?

3.

But haply they will say in their folly that the Word being God changed into flesh yet not the whole nor altogether: albeit how is it not an evident proof of utter madness, to think and say that these things are so? for first of all to say that not wholly nor yet altogether did He change or undergo turning pertains to those who mete Him and represent Him as quantitied and no longer incorporeal, yea and capable of being conceived of as in space and as become circumscribed. Next how must not the opponents consider this too, that whatever a part of a body subject to the Word suffer, this full surely the whole too will in possibility suffer? (for suffering would not befall one of the parts, unless the nature of the whole body were susceptible of suffering). Hence seeing that the test of their ideas compels us even against our wills to advance to words we would not, beseeching the Word of God to pardon us we say this: that if it is true that He possesseth not the being beyond turning neither is the suffering it impossible to Him, the force of the blasphemy will full surely reach both to the Father Himself and to the Holy Ghost, for Consubstantial is the Holy and untaint Trinity.

And then what stability look we for in God as to our own case if He too is weak as we and undergoes commotion unto what is not lawful to say, albeit we heard Him say in plain terms, Behold I am and have not been changed, the Divinely-uttering Psalmist too says that the Heavens are the works of Thy Hands: they shall perish but Thou abidest and all of them shall wax old as a garment and as a covering shalt Thou fold them and they shall be changed, but Thou art the Same and Thy years shall not fail? Consider therefore that he who in spirit speaketh mysteries and is God-taught flings turning to the nature of things generate, saying by way of illustration or demonstration that the heavens shall wax old, and hath reserved Immutability to the God Who is over all, for he hath testified to Him Ever-being and unchangeableness.

And as it has been believed to be impossible that the Nature of the Word should change into what it was not, so can it not be that the generate pass into the nature of Godhead,

lest many of Its attributes be seen to be accidents, which if it advanced so far as idea alone would have the charge of blasphemy indelible. For if ought of things generate at all change into the Godhead by Nature, one would not miss of right reasoning if one should chuse to say that It out of things that are not comes into existence and obtains that which is not its, as a sort of material of Its being, and that the body became the substance of incorporeal Essence, tangible and visible of the Invisible and Untangible. And if the Father's Only-Begotten Word is by Nature Life as being of the Father Who is Life, and by change hath admitted unto consubstantiality (as they say) that which, is of the human lump, there is great fear lest we say that He is not unmixed life, for He is not unmingled with what is apt to decay.

In another way too does the opinion of the deceived ones battle with the Economy with flesh: how, we will say. The Lord being God appeared to us that He might destroy the decay which lorded it over us, not that Himself might exhibit His own Nature partaker with decay by immingling with Himself flesh subject to death. The charge therefore is of equal force, whether one say that the Word of God have been turned into the nature of body or whether that the flesh again is transformed into consubstantiality with God. It is fit therefore that we keep away from both one and other, seeing that it is not without peril to chuse to think beside what one ought to think.

4.

That we may believe that even though His holy and all-pure Body be of same nature with our bodies, it is nevertheless august and Divine and far above our measures, as having been made His own, for He hath wrought through it, therefore was it called also bread of life, yea verily it is said both to have come down from Heaven and to give life to the world because of the Word that came down from above and out of Heaven, whose very own too the flesh has been made. Hence Divine it is (as I said), yet may one not surmise if indeed he have a mind well-established and that is versed in skill of dogma, that it has changed into the nature of the Godhead. For to the Nature that is Supreme and above all must be rigidly preserved Simplicity and absence of blending with other and of any appearance of being compounded in what belongs to It or of lacking any addition and coming into fellowship of sameness of nature or consubstantiality with ought unconnatural to It.

For come let us with acute eye of the understanding investigate the idea of the confusers. They say that His Flesh has been changed (I know not how) into consubstantiality with God the Word. Why? or what is it that brings it thereto? For of its own self it has not the impulse that would bring it thereto, and of its natural motions to admit such desires is foreign to it. It remains then to say this, that it was brought hereto by the will of God the Word. Did He then cast away the Economy which He clearly deemed worthy of all account by reason of His inherent Clemency and the Pleasure of His Father? for one may hear Him say clearly through the psalmist's voice, Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not, whole burnt-offerings and for sin Thou delightedst not in, but a Body Thou perfectedst Me, then I said, Lo, I come (in the volume of the Book it has been written of Me) to do, O God, Thy Will:

I delight to do it. The sacrifices therefore (those I mean according to the Law of Moses) were unwilled by the Father, the Incarnation of the Word or His being made Man, was rather His Choice inasmuch as it brings in the grace that is through faith to those beneath the sky, His Clemency and God-befitting gentleness making a marvellous demonstration of Itself.

What plea will there be for daring to say that He cast off (as I just now said) the august and saving Economy, if so be it be true that He put off from Him the being flesh, having changed it into the Nature of Godhead, albeit the all-wise Paul hath written of His holy Body, For wherein He hath suffered He is able to succour the tempted? But if we take away that wherein He hath suffered, with it surely will go too the means of succour given to us. For the saying that the flesh changed into the Essence of Deity, belongs to those who take from it the being what it is; which if it be admitted to be true, no longer will it be thought or said to be flesh. Since what is the change, if it have remained what it is? What profit therefore is there to our bodies from being partakers of the Mystic and holy offering? or what is the benefit therefrom? for if the Word who is united thereto willed to transform it into His own Nature, why is He found saying to us, I am the bread of Life which came down from Heaven and giveth life to the world and the bread which I will give is My Flesh which I will give for the life of the world, and again, He that eateth My Flesh and drinketh My Blood abideth in Me and I in him?

Hence if the flesh have passed into what it was not, darting up or borne up by the Will of the Word into a position above its own nature, it is time (it seems) that we ourselves too should make after other sort the power of the mystery and follows what pleases him [who thus teaches].

5.

Therefore you have the confession of the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten, from which also our faith is True. But if (as our opponents say) the Word united thereto, put off His Flesh, changing it into His own Nature, the change of the Flesh and the confession of our saving Faith will (it seems) come to an end together, and with it surely cease the justification too that is through it, we are yet in our sins, the filth of our old offences is still not cast away.

6.

If He have ceased from being as we, i.e. man, together with being also above us Divinely, the foundation of our salvation has been shaken, we unawares returned (it seems) to have to be again lorded over by death and sins. For as when the nethermost foundations of house (it may be) or wall have been shaken, the superincumbent parts too will surely subside with them: thus if the Economy with flesh of the Only-Begotten be not firm, our condition surely has tottered with it and grown weak at last; and how, we will say. For if they say that the Flesh of the Word have been changed into the Nature of the Godhead, there is every need to conceive that He has otherwise departed from His will to be son of man: then how does the all-wise Paul say, For there is one God, One Mediator too of God and men, the Man Christ Jesus Who gave Himself a ransom for us? For He mediates as being the Same, God alike and Man, reconciling us to God the Father through Himself and in Him and conjoining as it

were unto union things by their own nature parted unto generic difference by a boundless parting, yet in Christ did they come together unto an union without confusion and that cannot be plucked asunder: for He has been connected Divinely with the Father, and He was connected with us too humanly. Thus is the Man Christ Jesus conceived to be and is our Mediator.

But if the Flesh has been really (as he says) cast away by Him, He is gone surely away from mediating between us and His own Father: how therefore do we yet approach Him? who any longer brings us or mediates? For the Divine Paul said that the Mediator is Man: we remember Christ also Himself saying, No man cometh to the Father except through Me. Idle talk therefore and words full of distraction are the inventions of the Synousiasts.

7.

The Son of man when He cometh shall He find Faith on the earth ? For come let us ask our opponents what sort of faith the Son of man when He comes down out of Heaven would find in them who are on the earth, or how He would have us minded regarding Him: that He has left willing to be son of man, or that He has remained in the likeness usward? though how can one doubt that if it were displeasing to Him to be conceived of as being yet as we are, how were it meet to say, The Son of man when He comes shall He find Faith on the earth, and not rather The Word of God bare and without flesh when He comes, will He find of such sort the faith concerning Him among them on the earth? But since He clearly and manifestly calls Himself Son of man even at the time of His arrival from Heaven, it is I suppose clear that not having changed His Flesh into ought else but rather having it glorified, incorruptible and spotless and adorned with light unapproachable [will He come]: for He will come down out of Heaven, not in His former low estate (whence should He?) but in the glory of His Father with the Holy Angels.

8.

If, His Flesh changed into the Nature of the Godhead, He ceased to be Son of man too, clear would it be to every one henceforth that we too have lost the boast of sonship, as no longer having a First-born among many brethren.

9.

He is seen not trans-elementing into the Nature of Godhead that which is unalterably and without confusion flesh, but rather will He rightly be conceived of as adorning it with His own glory and filling it with God-befitting dignities: thus will He be seen in His season by them who are on the whole earth, on His return from Heaven. And verily when having accomplished full well the mystery of the Economy with flesh, He had gone up into Heaven, even though they who saw it had wondered at the thing (for a cloud received Him, as it is written): to them who then marvelled one of the holy Angels addressed him, Men of Galilee why stand ye looking into Heaven? this Man Who was received up from you into Heaven shall thus come again as ye saw Him go into Heaven. Did therefore they who were addressed see the very Word apart from the flesh going up to the Father? or [did they see Him] having cast away the likeness to us and not in a tangible and visible but transfashioned rather into

one intangible and invisible? who dares to say this? If He shall so come as He also went up, how is it not true to say that He shall come again embodied and not bare and fleshless Word?

10.

The all-wise Paul hath written of Christ, Who shall transfashion the body of our low estate conformed to the body of His glory. Then what will they say to this who say that His flesh changed into the Nature of the Word? will the bodies of the saints too pass by a change into the Nature of Godhead that they too may become conformed to the body of His glory? yet how is this not a frigid speech replete with the uttermost unlearning? for when the flesh is wholly changed (as he says) into the Nature of Godhead, what body will the Word being God use? For somewhat un-embodied is Godhead, and it is true that No one hath ever seen God.

11.

But haply they will say that the Flesh did not wholly depart from being what it was, but that it was as it were immingled with God the Word unto a natural oneness. And what do we say to this? First of all, sirs, there is full much difficulty, the reasoning hereon will be weak if ye decide to retain to the Nature of the Word Its unchangeable Being and unalterable Existence (for in no wise will it change unto what it was not): either when it has suffered this It has been shaken from Its God-befitting stability and from the settledness that is inherent in it by Nature, or howsoever one calls it: but I think that it is wise that we should in no wise be able to conceive that ought of things that are could abide in the Nature of the Godhead: for this too is likewise impossible.

Yet if they are well off in examples that can persuade that in commingling and mixture of things mentioned the inherent property of either will be wholly imparticipate of the quality of the other, let them bring forward their examples: for we say that the name corn-mixture will in no wise harm the force of the truth. But if they say that flesh and Word are mixed after the manner of liquids, how do they not know that liquids mixed one with other, say wine and honey, are no longer simply what they were, but are changed into something else by the addition of a quality of a different species?

Hence if they say that the Flesh has been commingled with the Word, there is every need of saying that each of the above-mentioned leaves being what it was, and makes up of both some one intermediate thing, of a different nature full surely from what each was individually and as yet unmingled one with other. Then what results? I would fain ask of our opponents whither matters will proceed, since they say that the Nature of God is henceforth mingled with flesh (for it hath not remained in identity, if their mixture, as has been said, is true). Either therefore they will say that He has this advance for the better, or else a sinking down to the baser, according to reasonable understanding of things. If then they say that He has been displayed superior to Himself, they have given the vote of superiority to the flesh by reason of which He is perceived to have sprung up to the higher: if they say that this was not so but rather that He sank into the worse: the flesh verily did

Him too wrong even as it does to ourselves, although we say that He let Himself down to emptiness and entered into the likeness us ward, not in order that Himself might be seen suffering somewhat in His own Nature, but that He might render us who are in flesh and blood superior to flesh and might make us, beyond the measures of human nature, sons of God.

But if as the perverted ones say He have been commingled with flesh, borne aside unto what He was not, how they say that He has not been wronged I cannot conceive ; haply He is found to have lost in addition, the very being the Form of the Father, the Likeness and Impress of His Person and to be no longer in equality with Him but rather in a depression and abasement of both Nature and glory.

12.

It were therefore nothing hard to add very many discordant things to what have been said; but I think that one ought gladly to withdraw from thoughts tending to absurdity. We must therefore eschew commixture, for thus shall wo escape the mischiefs too that come thence. But some other argument (as they say) as to these things finds its way in. For the Divine Paul is found to have written, But if we have also known Christ after the flesh yet now no more do we know Him. Hence if ye know not Christ after the flesh (they say), one must needs say that the flesh changes, so that it is the Nature of the Word Himself: as God is He known . But I suppose one would say straightway to this, 'When therefore he says of us too, But they which are in the flesh cannot please God, but YE are not in the flesh but in the spirit:----does he know that we are bare of flesh and blood? does he utter such things as though to disembodied spirits?' Yet how is it not jugglery to conceive or say this?

In regard to us then he calls by the name of flesh, the unreasonable and not irreprehensible passions of the flesh: but in regard to Christ the Saviour of us all, Who is All-Pure and knows not to transgress (for He did no sin), in other way beseems it that After the flesh be conceived of; for no longer is He in the infirmities of the flesh.

13.

He has fasted, He hungered, He waxed weary from long wayfaring, yet more He was crucified and died: He conceded that He should suffer these things, not to the Nature of the Godhead (for the Divine and Supreme Nature is conceived of as beyond suffering) but rather to His own Flesh. But when He rose again having trampled on Death and trans-elemented the nature of man in Himself unto incorruption and life: He is at length seen wholly without share in fleshly infirmity. Therefore with reason does the minister of His mysteries say that no more is He known after the flesh, i. e. in fleshly weakness.

14.

Having tasted death in the flesh for our sakes He rose again in His body. And verily, this very thing He had fore-signified to the people of the Jews saying, Undo this Temple and in three days I will raise it, for that has been raised which was dissolved, but we say that the flesh and not the Nature of the Word was dissolved: for that were impossible.

15.

Christ therefore Himself the Saviour of us all giving proof to His disciples that He rose from the dead, with flesh and hands and feet and declaring in plain words that He is not a Spirit: how will one doubt that the flesh did not change into the Nature of Godhead, either before the Passion (for He suffered in the flesh of His will) nor when having trampled on death He arose the third day and was thus seen of His disciples?

16.

Who of the holy prophets is seen uttering afore things thus hard and impracticable and impossible? who of the holy Apostles or Evangelists spake to them of these things? No one whatever. Let them therefore, speaking out of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord, as it is written, be ashamed. For WE, whose care is orthodoxy and who makest a special aim zealously to follow the right words of the holy Fathers, not the unbridled mouth and empty-speakings void of understanding of some, will not be minded otherwise than we ought to be minded, but ever going the straight way of the truth and having our mind filled with the holy Scriptures we both say that the Flesh of our LORD was ensouled with reasonable soul and believe that it is Divine and Spotless and glorified and moreover both life-giving and sanctifying, inasmuch as it became the own Flesh of the Word out of God the Father and affirm that it is not (as some have thought fit to think) of a son other than He, nor yet that it is changed into the Nature of Godhead.

17.

S. Cyril against Diodore and Theodore in his Book against the Synousiasts wrote thus , But perchance to these things some one will say, 'What then, if when contending with some of the heretics or withstanding them who confuse the Natures , they made a discourse grosser than should be?' I suppose that one would say that if the fault were in a single word, the hearers would forgive what was not far off from what is right. For that in some slight degree they sometimes err even against their will, who apply themselves to subtilty and exactitude of idea, they have some just reason for apology. But if in works thus extensive and in their whole writings so to say, they have attacked the Truth blow upon blow, every where confessing Two sons, what excuse will be sufficient for them?

18.

these things too taught S. Cyril in his discourse against those who confuse the Natures, after this sort, Receiving as a rule of right and undistorted Faith the Holy and God-inspired Scripture we say that when the Only-Begotten Word of God became First-born for us, He ceased not from being what He was and He is called, along with the title of Very God, also Son of Man: and He is not seen to have changed the Nature of the Godhead into flesh, which without change and without confusion was united to Him that He might adorn it with His own Glory: rather we must know that He filled it with God-befitting authority. Thus for a season was He seen of those in all the earth when He came from Heaven. [Running headers for the pages] Liberatus. S. Athanasius. S. Gregory of Nazianzum. 363 364 Strive for the Truth, sorrow for the strayed. Word not changed into body, nor forms body out of Himself.

365 366 If Son can change, Father and Holy Ghost can. Nought generate can become GOD. 367 368 His Body Divine, His own, in its proper nature. If It were changed, It would not profit us. 369 370 Christ not a Mediator unless both God and Man, nor the Son of Man, nor we sons of God. 371 372 He will come again as He ascended. The Flesh and the Word not commingled. 373 374 By 'after the flesh' S. Paul means 'in the weakness of the Flesh,' in which He suffered. 375 376 The Flesh of the Word Divine, yet not confounded. Christ both Very God and Very Man. 377

[Selected footnotes]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.