Newly discovered letters to the Popes Stephen and Xystus

Dionysius of Alexandria (d. AD 264)

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Dionysius of Alexandria, Newly discovered letters to the Popes Stephen and Xystus, F.C. CONYBEARE, English Historical Review 25 (1910) pp. 111-114 Newly discovered Letters of Dionysius of Alexandria to the Popes Stephen and Xystus. DURING the years 254-258 there was a controversy between the see of Rome on the one hand and the Asiatic and African churches on the other as to the validity of baptisms administered by heretics. Pope Stephen maintained that those who had, in an heretical medium, been baptised either in the name of Jesus Christ alone, or in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ought, after a bishop had laid hands on them, to be admitted to communion; whereas Cyprian of Carthage and Firmilian of Caesarea maintained that heresy on the part of the baptiser rendered baptism null and void. The pope accused his antagonists of rebaptising (ναβαπτίζειν), thereby to some extent begging the question at issue, and excommunicated them both in Asia and in Africa. In this controversy Dionysius, patriarch of Alexandria, intervened, and wrote, as Euse-bius relates in the seventh book of his Ecclesiastical History, one letter to Pope Stephen and as many as three to his successor Xystus (257-8). Eusebius has also preserved to us brief extracts from the one letter to Stephen, and from the first and second to Xystus.

In the library of Valarshapat in Russian Armenia is preserved a bulky refutation of the Tome of Leo and of the decrees of Chalcedon by Timotheus (called Aelurus), the patriarch of Alexandria. The original was composed by him in exile at Gangra and Cherson about the year 460, and was translated into Armenian some time between the years 506 and 544. This version has just been edited from an old uncial codex which contains it, No. 1945 in the Catalogue of Karinian, by two of the archimandrites of Etshmiadsin, Dr. Karapet Ter-Mekerttshian and Dr. Erwand Ter-Minassiantz. The method of Timotheus is to adduce the Chalcedonian positions, and to confront them first with extracts from orthodox fathers, especially from the works of his own predecessors in the see of Alexandria ; and, secondly, with passages from writers declared by his antagonists (as he assumes) to be heretical, especially Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Nestorius, Paul of Samosata, and Diodore of Tarsus.

Among the former set of extracts we find one long fragment of Dionysius' letter to Stephen, and two from his first and third letters to Xystus, of which the following is a literal transla-

tion: I. Of the blessed Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, from the letter to Stephanus, bishop of Rome.

For as the wisdom [which is] according to the gentiles, by changing them into holy persons, constitutes them friends of God and prophets ; so, conversely, the wickedness by transmuting into unholy persons, manifests them to be enemies of God and false prophets. What one custom ever included these ? For of a custom there is in any case a single period [as cause], whereas of caprices all kinds of ages [are the causes]. And due causes must always pre-exist before the customs of the gentiles and before human laws. I say human, however, because God, as alone knowing all things before they come into being, can naturally also arrive at them by from the first enacting them as law. Men, however, when they have beforehand discerned something, and when they have first formed ideas of certain events, then and not before lay down laws, or make a beginning of customs.If then it was from the apostles, as we said above, that this custom took its beginning, we must adjust ourselves thereto, whatsoever may have been their reasons and the grounds on which they acted ; to the end that we too may observe the same in accordance with their practice. For as to things which were written afterwards and which are until now still found, they are ignored by us ; and let them be ignored, no matter what they are. How can these comply with the customs of the ancients ? And in a word I have deemed certain disquisitions about these matters superfluous ;

and I feel that to pay attention to them is noisy and vain. For as we are told after a first and second admonition to avoid them, so must we admonish and converse about them, and after brief inculcation and talk in common we must desist. On points, however, of prime importance and great weight we must insist. For if anyone utters any impiety about God, as do those who say he is without mercy; or if anyone introduces the worship of strange gods, such an one the law has commanded to stone. But we with the vigorous words of our faith will stone them unless they approach the mystery of Christ; or [if] anyone alter or destroy [it], or [say] that he was either not God or not man, or that he did not die or rise again, or that he is not coming again to judge the quick and the dead ; or if he preach any other gospel than we have preached, let him be accursed, says Paul. But if anyone despises the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, let such an one be at once ranked with the dead. For these reasons, that we may be in accord, church with church and bishop with bishop and elder with elder, let us be careful in our utterances.

Moreover in judging of and dealing with particular cases,—as to how it is proper to admit those who come to us from without, and how to supervise those who are within,—we give instructions to the local primates who under divine imposition of hands were appointed to discharge these duties ; for they shall give a summary account to the Lord of whatsoever they do.

[This account perfectly accords with what we know from other sources of this controversy. Pope Stephen, as the tract De Rebaptismate alleges, appealed to vetustissima consuetudo ac traditio ecclesiastica. Dionysius meets his appeal by asking how could the orthodox and the heretic have in common any custom? Qualis una istos circumclusit consuetudo? He

argues from Tit. iii. 10 that heretics should be left severely alone, and affirms that he has instructed the duly ordained ecclesiastical authorities of his province to treat those who ad ecclesiam advolant—to use the phrase of the De Rebaptismate—as if they came wholly from the outside or pagan world, that is to baptise them, and afterwards to watch them carefully.] II. Of the same from the first letter to Xystus, chief bishop of Rome.

Inasmuch as you have written thus, setting forth the pious legislation, which we continually read and now have in remembrance—namely that it shall suffice only to lay hands on those who shall have made profession in baptism, whether in pretence or in truth, of God Almighty and of Christ and of the Holy Spirit; but those over whom there has not been invoked the name either of Father or of Son or of the Holy Spirit, these we must baptise, but not rebaptise. This is the sure and immovable teaching and tradition, begun by our Lord after his resurrection from the dead, when he gave his apostles the command : Go ye, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This then was preserved and fulfilled by his successors, the blessed apostles, and by all the bishops prior to ourselves who have died in the holy church and shared in its life ; and it has lasted down to us, because it is firmer than the whole world. For, he said, heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

III. Of the same to the same from the third letter. If then our faith urges us to have zeal for God and with our entire heart love him ; and if we must regard as unclean only those who contemn the really one and only God, and Creator and Lord of heaven and earth and of all things, declaring that he is inferior to and less estimable than some other god ; and they attribute wickedness to the all good, or they do not believe that his Beloved is our Saviour Jesus Christ, whatever else he be; but breaking up the marvellous economy and mighty mystery, they believe some of them that he is not God nor Son of God, but others, that he never became man nor came in the flesh, but say that he was a phantasm and shadow—all these John has rightly in his epistle called anti-Christs. Moreover of these the prophet also bore witness, saying: Thy hated ones, O Lord, I have hated, and because of thine enemies I have wasted away. With perfect hatred I have hated them; they are become mine enemies. And these are all they that have among us the appellation of heretics. If however we in the least let them have their way or side with them, then no longer will the precept to love God with our whole heart be observed in its entirety, though that it is which it ever profits us to foster and increase.

[In this letter Dionysius protests against the least concession being made to the heretics whose errors he enumerates, in the way of recognising their baptisms as valid. F. C. CONYBEARE.] [Footnotes have been moved to the end. Greek text is rendered using the Scholars Press SPIonic font, free from here.]

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.