

THE IDEA OF THE CHURCH.

The Church is built upon Jesus Christ. It has, and can have, no existence apart from Him. Hence our ultimate appeal must be to Christ's idea of the Church. But that idea has been variously understood. Divers bodies exist which profess, more or less completely and faithfully, to embody it. Amid the differences and discordances of Christendom can we find any clue to assist us in our enquiry?

TWO ANTAGONISTIC THEORIES.

If we compare the different definitions of the Church in the creeds, confessions, and theological systems of Christendom, it will be found that all agree at least in this :— That the Church is a religious fellowship, a society, company, or brotherhood of men, standing in certain defined relations to God as revealed in Christ.

But under this apparent agreement a radical difference quickly discloses itself, which separates all these definitions into two opposing classes, according as they make the ground of this fellowship to lie in one or other of the two sides of the religious life of Christendom, the ethical and spiritual or the ritual and ecclesiastical.

The one theory defines the Church by its outward characteristics of form and organization ; the other theory defines it by the inward characteristics of faith and the fruits of a living faith in the heart and life. The former theory makes the existence of the Church depend upon what is external and visible, the succession of the ministry and the due administration of the Sacraments. The latter theory makes the essential nature of the Church to consist in what is spiritual and ethical, in the great realities of truth, love, and righteousness, in the life of God in the hearts of Christians, through the presence and power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

The former theory may be called the Roman, from its chief political embodiment, or the sacerdotal, from its dominant religious conception.