

CHAPTER XV

The Progress of the Christian Religion, and the Sentiments, Manners, Numbers, and Condition of the Primitive Christians

Importance of the Inquiry

A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman empire. While that great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the Capitol. Nor was the influence of Christianity confined to the period or to the limits of the Roman empire. After a revolution of thirteen or fourteen centuries, that religion is still professed by the nations of Europe, the most distinguished portion of human kind in arts and learning as well as in arms. By the industry and zeal of the Europeans, it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chili, in a world unknown to the ancients.

But this inquiry, however useful or entertaining, is attended with two peculiar difficulties. The scanty materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the cloud that hangs over the first age of the church. The great law of impartiality too often obliges us to reveal the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel; and, to a careless observer, their faults may seem to cast a shade on the faith which they professed. But the scandal of the pious Christian, and the fallacious triumph of the Infidel, should cease as soon as they recollect not only by whom, but likewise to whom, the Divine Revelation was given. The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings.

The Growth of Christianity

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But truth and reason seldom find so favorable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose; we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church. It will, perhaps, appear that it was most effectively favored and assisted by the five following causes:

- I. The inflexible zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and antisocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses.
- II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that Important truth.
- III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church.
- IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians.

V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire.

Zeal of the Jews; Its Gradual Increase

We have already described the religious harmony of the ancient world, and the facility with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected, each other's superstitions. A single people refused to join in the common intercourse of mankind. The Jews, who, under the Assyrian and Persian monarchies, had languished for many ages the most despised portion of their slaves,¹ emerged from obscurity under the successors of Alexander; and as they multiplied to a surprising degree in the East, and afterward in the West, they soon excited the curiosity and wonder of other nations.² The obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and antisocial manners, seemed to mark them out a distinct species of men, who faintly disguised their implacable hatred for the rest of humankind.³ Neither the violence of Antiochus, nor the arts of Herod, nor the example of the surrounding nations, could ever persuade the Jews to associate with the institutions of Moses the elegant mythology of the Greeks.⁴ According to the maxims of universal toleration, the Romans protected a superstition which they despised.—Cicero pro Flacco, c. 28. The polite Augustus condescended to give orders that sacrifices should be offered for his prosperity in the temple of Jerusalem;⁵ while the lowest of Abraham's posterity, who should have paid the same homage to the Jupiter of the Capitol, would have been an object of abhorrence to himself and to his brethren. But the moderation of the conquerors was insufficient to appease the jealous prejudices of their subjects, who were alarmed and scandalized at the ensigns of paganism which necessarily introduced themselves into a Roman province.⁶ The mad attempt of Caligula to place his own statue in the temple of Jerusalem was defeated by the unanimous resolution of a people who dreaded death much less than such an idolatrous profanation.⁷ Their attachment to the law of Moses was equal to their detestation of foreign religions. The current of zeal and devotion, as it was contracted into a narrow channel, ran with the strength, and sometimes with the fury, of a torrent.

Their Religion

This inflexible perseverance, which appeared so odious or so ridiculous to the ancient world, assumes a more awful character, since Providence has deigned to reveal to us the mysterious history of the chosen people. But the devout and even scrupulous attachment to the Mosaic religion, so conspicuous among the Jews who lived under the second temple, becomes still more surprising, if it is

¹ Tacit. Hist. v. 8. Herodotus, who visited Asia while it obeyed the last of those empires, slightly mentions the Syrians of Palestine, who, according to their own confession, had received from Egypt the right of circumcision, ii. c. 104.

² Latin text omitted.

³ The letter of this law is not to be found in the present volume of Moses. But the wise, the humane Maimonides openly teaches that if an idolater fall into the water a Jew ought not to save him from instant death. Basnage, Histoire des Juifs, l. vi. c. 28.

⁴ A Jewish sect, which indulged themselves in a sort of occasional conformity, derived from Herod, by whose example and authority they had been seduced, the name of Herodians. But their numbers were so inconsiderable, and their duration so short, that Josephus has not thought them worthy of his notice. Prideaux's Connection, ii. p. 285.

⁵ Philo de Legatione. Augustus left a foundation for a perpetual sacrifice. Yet he approved of the neglect which his grandson Caius expressed toward the temple Jerusalem. Sueton. in August. c. 93, and Casaubon's notes on that passage.

⁶ Josephus Antiq. xvii. 6, xviii. 3. De Bel. Jud. i. 33, ii. 9.

⁷ Tacit. Hist. v. 9. Philo and Josephus gave a very circumstantial, but a very rhetorical, account of this transaction, which exceedingly perplexed the governor of Syria. At the first mention of this idolatrous proposal, King Agrippa fainted away; and did not recover his senses till the third day.

compared with the stubborn incredulity of their forefathers. When the law was given in thunder from Mount Sinai; when the tides of the ocean and the course of the planets were suspended to save the Israelites; and when temporal rewards and punishments were the immediate consequences of their piety or disobedience, they perpetually relapsed into rebellion against the visible majesty of their Divine King, placed the idols of the nations in the sanctuary of Jehovah, and imitated every fantastic ceremony that was practiced in the tents of the Arabs, or in the cities of Phoenicia.⁸ As the protection of Heaven was deservedly withdrawn from the ungrateful race, their faith acquired a proportional degree of vigor and purity. The contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles. Under the pressure of every calamity, the belief of those miracles has preserved the Jews of a later period from the universal contagion of idolatry; and in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that singular people seems to have yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors than to the evidence of their own senses.⁹

The Jewish religion was admirably fitted for defense, but it was never designed for conquest; and it seems probable that the number of proselytes was never much superior to that of apostates. The divine promises were originally made, and the distinguishing rite of circumcision was enjoined, to a single family. When Abraham's posterity had multiplied like the sands of the sea, the Deity, from whose mouth they received a system of laws and ceremonies, declared himself the proper and, as it were, the national God of Israel; and with the most jealous care separated his favorite people from the rest of mankind. The conquest of the land of Canaan was accompanied with so many wonderful and with so many bloody circumstances, that the victorious Jews were left in a state of irreconcilable hostility with all their neighbors. They had been commanded to extirpate some of the most idolatrous tribes, and the execution of the Divine will had seldom been retarded by the weakness of humanity. With the other nations they were forbidden to contract any marriages or alliances, and the prohibition of receiving them into the congregation, which in some cases was perpetual, almost always extended to the 3rd, 7th, or even 10th generation. The obligation of preaching to the Gentiles the faith of Moses had never been inculcated as a precept of the law, nor were the Jews inclined to impose it on themselves as a voluntary duty. Abraham's descendants believed that they alone were the heirs of the covenant, and were apprehensive of diminishing the value of their inheritance, by sharing it with the strangers of the earth. A larger acquaintance with mankind extended their knowledge without correcting their prejudices.¹⁰ The religion of Moses seems to be instituted for a particular country as well as for a single nation; and if a strict obedience had been paid to the order that every male, three times in the year, should present himself before the Lord Jehovah, it would have been impossible that the Jews could ever have spread themselves beyond the narrow limits of the promised land.¹¹ That obstacle was indeed removed by the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem; but the most considerable part of the Jewish religion was involved in its destruction; and the pagans, who had long wondered at the strange report of an empty sanctuary,¹² were at a loss to discover what could be the object, or what could be the instruments, of a worship which was destitute of temples and of altars, of priests and of sacrifices. Yet even in their fallen state, the Jews, still asserting their lofty and exclusive privileges, shunned the society of strangers instead of courting them. They still insisted with inflexible rigor on those parts of the law which it was in their power to practice. Their peculiar distinctions of days, meats, and a variety of observances, were

⁸ For the enumeration of the Syrian and Arabian deities, it may be observed that Milton has comprised in 130 very beautiful lines the two large and learned syntagmas which Selden had composed on that abstruse subject.

⁹ "How long will this people provoke me? And how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shown among them?" (Numbers 14:11)

¹⁰ All that relates to the Jewish proselytes has been very ably treated by Basnage, *History of the Jews*, vi. c. 6, 7.

¹¹ Exod. 34:23; Deut. 16:16. The commentators, and a very sensible note in the *Universal History*, i. p. 603, edit. fol.

¹² When Pompey, using or abusing the right of conquest, entered into the Holy of Holies, it was observed with amazement, "There is no idol here. Its seat is vacant. This is a crazy mystery." Tacit. *Hist.* v. 9. Latin text omitted.

so many objects of disgust and aversion for the other nations to whose habits and prejudices they were diametrically opposite. The painful and even dangerous rite of circumcision was alone capable of repelling a willing proselyte from the door of the synagogue.¹³

The More Liberal Zeal of Christianity

Under these circumstances, Christianity offered itself to the world, armed with the strength of the Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its fetters. An exclusive zeal for the truth of religion and the unity of God was as carefully inculcated in the new as in the ancient system. Whatever was now revealed to mankind concerning the nature and designs of the Supreme Being was fitted to increase their reverence for that doctrine. The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of Christianity. From the beginning of the world an uninterrupted series of predictions had announced and prepared the long-expected coming of the Messiah, who had been more frequently represented under the character of a King and Conqueror, than under that of a Prophet, Martyr, and Son of God. By his expiatory sacrifice, the imperfect sacrifices of the temple were at once consummated and abolished. The ceremonial law, which consisted only of types and figures, was succeeded by a pure and spiritual worship, equally adapted to all climates as well as to every condition of mankind; and to the initiation of blood was substituted the doctrine of baptism. The promise of divine favor, instead of being partially confined to Abraham's posterity, was universally proposed to the freeman and slave, to the Greek and barbarian, to the Jew and Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte from earth to heaven, that could exalt his devotion, or secure his happiness, was still reserved for the members of the Christian church; but at the same time all mankind was permitted, and even solicited, to accept the glorious distinction, which was not only proffered as a favor but imposed as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be severely punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful deity.

Obstinacy of the Believing Jews

The liberation of the church from the bonds of the synagogue was a work, however, of some time and of some difficulty. The Jewish converts, who acknowledged Jesus in the character of the Messiah foretold by their ancient oracles, respected him as a prophetic teacher of virtue and religion; but they obstinately adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors, and were desirous of imposing them on the Gentiles, who continually augmented the number of believers. These Judaizing Christians seem to have argued with some degree of plausibility from the divine origin of the Mosaic law, and from the immutable perfection of its great Author. They affirmed that if the Being, who is the same through all eternity, had designed to abolish those sacred rites which had served to distinguish his chosen people, the repeal of them would have been no less clear and solemn than their first delivery. Instead of those frequent declarations, which either suppose or assert the perpetuity of the Mosaic religion, it would have been represented as a provisionary scheme intended to last only till the coming of the Messiah, who should instruct mankind in a more perfect mode of faith and of worship¹⁴ The Messiah himself,

¹³ A second kind of circumcision was inflicted on a Samaritan or Egyptian proselyte. The sullen indifference of the Talmudists, with respect to the conversion of strangers, may be seen in Basnage, *History of the Jews*, 1. vi. c. 6.

¹⁴ These arguments were urged with great ingenuity by the Jew Orobio, and refuted with equal ingenuity and candor by the Christian Limborch. The *Amica Collatio* (*friendly combination*) (it well deserves that name), or account of the dispute between them.

and his disciples who conversed with him on earth, instead of authorizing by their example the most minute observances of the Mosaic law,¹⁵ would have published to the world the abolition of those obsolete ceremonies, without suffering Christianity to remain during so many years obscurely confounded among the sects of the Jewish church. Arguments like these appear to have been used in the defense of the expiring cause of the Mosaic law; but the industry of our learned divines has abundantly explained the language of the Old Testament, and the conduct of the apostolic teachers. It was proper gradually to unfold the system of the Gospel, and to pronounce, with the utmost caution and tenderness, a sentence of condemnation so repugnant to the inclination and prejudices of the believing Jews.

The Nazarene Church of Jerusalem

The history of the church of Jerusalem affords a lively proof of the necessity of those precautions, and of the deep impression which the Jewish religion had made on the minds of its followers. The first 15 bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the congregation over which they presided united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ.¹⁶ It was natural that a church founded 40 days after the death of Christ, and governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostles, should be received as the standard of orthodoxy.¹⁷ The distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of their venerable Parent, and relieved her distresses by a liberal contribution of alms. But when numerous and opulent societies were established in the great cities of the empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, the reverence which Jerusalem had inspired to all the Christian colonies diminished unawares. The Jewish converts, or, as they were afterward called, the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church, soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes that from all the various religions of polytheism enlisted under the banner of Christ. The Gentiles, with the approval of their peculiar apostle, had rejected the intolerable weight of Mosaic ceremonies. At length they refused to their more scrupulous brethren the same toleration which at first they had humbly solicited for their own practice. The ruin of the temple, city, and public religion of the Jews, was severely felt by the Nazarenes. In their manners, though not in their faith, they maintained so intimate a connection with their impious countrymen, whose misfortunes were attributed by the Pagans to the contempt, and more justly ascribed by the Christians to the wrath, of the Supreme Deity. The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan, where that ancient church languished more than 60 years in solitude and obscurity.¹⁸ They still enjoyed the comfort of making frequent and devout visits to the Holy City, and the hope of being one day restored to those seats which both nature and religion taught them to love as well as to revere. But at length, under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities; and the Romans, exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the rights of victory with unusual rigor. The emperor founded, under the name of Ælia Capitolina, a new city on Mount Sion,¹⁹ to which he gave the privileges of a colony. Denouncing the severest penalties against any of the

¹⁵ Latin text omitted.

¹⁶ Latin text omitted.

¹⁷ *Mosheim de Rebus Christianis ante Constantinum Magnum*, p. 153. In this masterly performance, which I shall often have occasion to quote, he enters much more fully into the state of the primitive church than he has an opportunity of doing in his General History.

¹⁸ Euseb. iii. c. 5. Le Clerc, Hist. Eccles. p. 605. During this occasional absence, the bishop and church of Pella still retained the title of Jerusalem. In the same manner, the Roman pontiffs resided 70 years at Avignon; and the patriarchs of Alexandria have long since transferred their Episcopal seat to Cairo.

¹⁹ Dion Cassius, l lxix. The exile of the Jewish nation from Jerusalem is attested by Aristo of Pella (Euseb. iv. c. 6), and is mentioned by several ecclesiastical writers; though some of them too hastily extend this interdiction to the whole

Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders. The Nazarenes had only one way left to escape the common ban, and the force of truth was on this occasion assisted by the influence of temporal advantages. They elected Marcus for their bishop, a prelate of the race of the Gentiles, and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion, the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic law, in the practice of which they had persevered above a century. By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices, they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian, and more firmly cemented their union with the Catholic church.²⁰

The Ebionites

When the name and honors of the church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Sion, the crimes of heresy and schism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes which refused to accompany their Latin bishop. They still preserved their former habitation of Pella, spread themselves into the villages adjacent to Damascus, and formed a small church in the city of Boerea, or, as it is now called, Aleppo, in Syria.²¹ The name *Nazarenes* was deemed too honorable for those Christian Jews, and they soon received from the supposed poverty of their understanding, as well as of their condition, the contemptuous epithet of Ebionites.²² In a few years after the return of the church of Jerusalem, it became a matter of doubt and controversy whether a man who sincerely acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, but who still continued to observe the law of Moses, could possibly hope for salvation. The humane temper of Justin Martyr inclined him to answer this question in the affirmative; and though he expressed himself with the most guarded diffidence, he ventured to determine in favor of such an imperfect Christian, if he were content to practice the Mosaic ceremonies without pretending to assert their general use or necessity. But when Justin was pressed to declare the sentiment of the church, he confessed that there were very many among the orthodox Christians who not only excluded their Judaizing brethren from the hope of salvation, but who declined any intercourse with them in the common offices of friendship, hospitality, and social life.²³ The more rigorous opinion prevailed, as it was natural to expect, over the milder; and an eternal bar of separation was fixed between the disciples of Moses and those of Christ. The unfortunate Ebionites, rejected from one religion as apostates, and from the other as heretics, found themselves compelled to assume a more decided character; and although some traces of that obsolete sect may be discovered as late as the 4th Century, they slowly faded away either into the church or the synagogue.²⁴

country of Palestine.

²⁰ Euseb. iv. c. 6. Sulpicius Severus, ii. 31. By comparing their unsatisfactory accounts, Mosheim (p. 327, etc.) has drawn out a very distinct representation of the circumstances and motives of this revolution.

²¹ Le clerc (Hist. Eccles. pp. 471, 535) seems to have collected from Rusebius, Jerome, Epiphanius, and other writers, all the principal circumstances that relate to the Nazarenes or Ebionites, The nature of their opinions soon divided them into a stricter and a milder sect, and there is some reason to conjecture that the family of Jesus Christ remained members, at least, of the latter and more moderate party.

²² Some writers have been pleased to create an Ebion, the imaginary author of their sect and name. But we can more safely rely on the learned Eusebius than on the vehement Tertullian or the credulous Epiphanius. According to Le Clerc, the Hebrew word *Ebjonim* may be translated *Pauperes* into Latin. Hist. Eccles. p. 477.

²³ Dialogue of Justin Martyr with the Jew Tryphon. The conference between them was held at Ephesus, in the reign of Antoninus Pius, and about 20 years after the return of the church of Pella to Jerusalem. For this date consult the accurate note of Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. ii. p. 511.

²⁴ Of all the systems of Christianity, that of Abyssinia is the only one which still adheres to the Mosaic rites (Geddes's *Church History of Ethiopia*, and *Dissertations de la Grand sur la Relation du P. Lobo*). The eunuch of the queen Candace might suggest some suspicions; but as we are assured (Socrates, i. 19. Sozomen, ii. 24. Ludolphus, p. 281) that the Ethiopians were not converted till the 4th Century, it is more reasonable to believe that they respected the Sabbath, and

The Gnostics

While the orthodox church preserved a just medium between veneration and contempt for the law of Moses, the heretics deviated into equal but opposite extremes of error and extravagance. From the acknowledged truth of the Jewish religion, the Ebionites had concluded that it could never be abolished. From its supposed imperfections the Gnostics as hastily inferred that it never was instituted by the wisdom of the Deity. There are objections against the authority of Moses and the prophets, which present themselves to the skeptical mind, derived from our incapacity to form an adequate judgment of the divine economy. These objections were eagerly embraced and as petulantly urged by the vain science of the Gnostics.²⁵ The conquest of the land of Canaan, and the annihilation of the unsuspecting natives, they were at a loss how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice.²⁶ Passing from the sectaries of the law to the law itself, they asserted that it was impossible that a religion which consisted only of sacrifices and ceremonies, and whose rewards as well as punishments were all of a temporal nature, could inspire the love of virtue, or restrain the impetuosity of passion. The Mosaic account of the creation and fall of man was treated with profane derision by the Gnostics.²⁷ In the God of Israel they could discover none of the features of the wise and omnipotent father of the universe.²⁸ They allowed that the religion of the Jews was somewhat less criminal than the idolatry of the Gentiles; but it was their fundamental doctrine that the Christ whom they adored as the first and brightest emanation of the Deity appeared upon earth to rescue mankind from their various errors, and to reveal a *new* system of truth and perfection.

The Sects, Progress, and Influence of the Gnostics

It has been remarked, with more ingenuity than truth, that the virgin purity of the church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about 100 years after the death of Christ.²⁹ We may observe with much more propriety, that, during that period, the Messiah's disciples were indulged in a freer latitude, both of faith and practice, than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages. As the terms of communion were slowly narrowed, and the spiritual authority of the prevailing party was exercised with increasing severity, many of its most respectable adherents, who were called upon to renounce, were provoked to assert their private opinions, to pursue the consequences of their mistaken principles, and openly to erect the standard of rebellion against the unity of the church. The Gnostics were distinguished as the most polite, most learned, and most wealthy Christians. The title *Gnostic*, which expressed a superiority of knowledge, was either assumed by their own pride or ironically bestowed on them by their adversaries' envy. They were almost without exception, Gentiles. Their principal founders seem to have been natives of Syria or Egypt, where the warmth of the climate

distinguished the forbidden meats, in imitation of the Jews, who, in a very early period, were seated on both sides of the Red Sea. Circumcision had been practiced by the most ancient Ethiopians, from motives of health and cleanliness, which seem to be explained in the *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Americains*, ii. p. 117.

²⁵ Beausobre, *Histoire du Manicheisme*, l. i. c. 3, has stated their objections, particularly those of Faustus, the adversary of Augustin, with the most learned impartiality.

²⁶ Surely Tacitus had seen the Jews with too favorable an eye. The reading of Josephus must have destroyed the contradiction.

²⁷ Dr. Burnet (*Archaeologia*, l. ii. c. 7) has discussed the first chapters of Genesis with too much wit and freedom.

²⁸ The milder Gnostics considered Jehovah, the Creator, as a Being of a mixed nature between God and the Demon. Others confounded him with the evil principle. Consult the second century of the general history of Mosheim, which gives a very distinct, though concise, account of their strange opinions on this subject.

²⁹ Hegesippus. ap. Euseb. l. iii. 32, iv. 22. Clemens Alexand. *Stromat.*, vii. 17.

disposes both the mind and the body to indolent and contemplative devotion. The Gnostics blended the faith of Christ with many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from Oriental philosophy. They even mixed Christian doctrine the religion of Zoroaster, which concerned the eternity of matter, the existence of two principles, and the mysterious hierarchy of the invisible world.³⁰ As soon as they launched out into that vast abyss, they delivered themselves to the guidance of a disordered imagination. As the paths of error are various and infinite, the Gnostics were imperceptibly divided into more than 50 particular sects,³¹ of whom the most celebrated appear to have been the Basilidians, the Valentinians, the Marcionites, and, in a still later period, the Manichæans. Each of these sects could boast of its bishops and congregations, of its doctors and martyrs.³² Instead of the four gospels adopted by the church, the heretics produced a multitude of histories, in which the actions and discourses of Christ and of his apostles were adapted to their respective beliefs.³³ The success of the Gnostics was rapid and extensive.³⁴ They covered Asia and Egypt, established themselves in Rome, and sometimes penetrated into the provinces of the West. For the most part they arose in the 2nd Century, flourished during the 3rd, and were suppressed in the 4th or 5th, by the superior ascendant of the reigning power. Though they constantly disturbed the peace, and frequently disgraced the name of religion, they contributed to assist rather than to retard the progress of Christianity. The Gentile converts, whose strongest objections and prejudices were directed against the law of Moses, could find admission into many Christian societies, which did not require any belief of a previous revelation from their untutored mind. Their faith was insensibly fortified and enlarged, and the church was ultimately benefited by the conquests of its most inveterate enemies.³⁵

Abhorrence of the Christians Towards Idolatry, Ceremonies, Arts, and Festivals

But whatever difference of opinion might subsist between the Orthodox, the Ebionites, and the Gnostics, concerning the divinity or the obligation of the Mosaic law, they were all equally animated by the same exclusive zeal, and by the same abhorrence for idolatry, which had distinguished the Jews from the other nations of the ancient world. The philosopher, who considered the system of polytheism as a composition of human fraud and error, could disguise a smile of contempt under the mask of devotion, without apprehending that either the mockery, or the compliance, would expose him to the resentment of any invisible, or, as he conceived them, imaginary powers. But the established religions of Paganism were seen by the primitive Christians in a much more odious and formidable light. It was the universal sentiment, both of the church and of heretics, that the demons were the authors, the

³⁰ In the account of the 2nd and 3rd Century Gnostics, Mosheim is open and candid; Le Clerc is dull, but exact; Beausobre is almost always an apologist; and it is much to be feared that the primitive fathers are very frequently slanderers.

³¹ Catalogues of Irenæus and Epiphanius. It must indeed be allowed that those writers were inclined to multiply the number of sects which opposed the *unity* of the church.

³² Euseb. iv. c. 15. Sozomen, ii. c. 32. Bayle, in the article of *Marcion*, has a curious detail of a dispute on that subject. It should seem that some of the Gnostics, (the Basilidians) declined, and even refused, the honor of martyrdom. Their reasons were singular and complex. Mosheim, p. 359.

³³ Origen (Proem. ad Lucan.). That indefatigable writer, who had consumed his life in the study of the Scriptures, relies for their authenticity on the inspired authority of the church. It was impossible that the Gnostic could receive our present Gospels, many parts of which (particularly in the resurrection of Christ) are directly, and as it might seem designedly, pointed against their favorite tenets. It is therefore somewhat singular that Ignatius (Epist. ad Smyrn. Pair. Apostol. ii. p. 34) should choose to employ a vague and doubtful tradition, instead of quoting the certain testimony of the evangelists.

³⁴ In the time of Epiphanius (advers. Hæreses, p. 302) the Marcionites were very numerous in Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, and Persia.

³⁵ Augustin is a prime example of this gradual progress from reason to faith. For several years, he was engaged in the Manichæan sect.

patrons, and the objects of idolatry.³⁶ Those rebellious spirits who had been degraded from the rank of angels, and cast down into the infernal pit, were still permitted to roam upon earth, to torment the bodies and to seduce the minds of sinful men. The demons soon discovered and abused the natural propensity of the human heart toward devotion, and, artfully withdrawing the adoration of mankind from their Creator, they usurped the place and honors of the Supreme Deity. By the success of their malicious contrivances, they at once gratified their own vanity and revenge, and obtained the only comfort of which they were yet susceptible: the hope of involving the human species in the participation of their guilt and misery. It was confessed (or at least it was imagined), that they had distributed among themselves the most important characters of polytheism, one demon assuming the name and attributes of Jupiter, another of Æsculapius, a third of Venus, and a fourth perhaps of Apollo;³⁷ and that, by the advantage of their long experience and aerial nature, they were enabled to execute, with sufficient skill and dignity, the parts which they had undertaken. They lurked in the temples, instituted festivals and sacrifices, invented fables, pronounced oracles, and were frequently allowed to perform miracles. The Christians, who, by the interposition of evil spirits, could so readily explain every preternatural appearance, were disposed and even desirous to admit the most extravagant fictions of the Pagan mythology. But the belief of the Christian was accompanied with horror. The most trifling mark of respect to the national worship he considered as a direct homage yielded to the demon, and as an act of rebellion against the majesty of God.

In consequence of this opinion, it was the first but arduous duty of a Christian to preserve himself pure and undefiled by the practice of idolatry. The religion of the nations was not merely a speculative doctrine professed in the schools or preached in the temples. The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or of private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of society.³⁸ The important transactions of peace and war were prepared or concluded by solemn sacrifices, in which the magistrate, senator, and soldier were obliged to preside or to participate.³⁹ The public spectacles were an essential part of the cheerful devotion of the Pagans, and the gods were supposed to accept, as the most grateful offering, the games that the prince and people celebrated in honor of their peculiar festivals.⁴⁰ The Christian, who with pious horror avoided the abomination of the circus or the theatre, found himself encompassed with infernal snares in every convivial entertainment, as often as his friends, invoking the hospitable deities, poured out libations to each other's happiness.⁴¹ When the bride, struggling with well-affected reluctance, was forced in hymeneal pomp over the threshold of her new habitation,⁴² or when the sad procession of the dead slowly moved toward the funeral pile;⁴³ the

³⁶ The unanimous sentiment of the primitive church is very clearly explained by Justin Martyr, *Apolog. Major*, by Athenagoras *Legat. c. 22*, etc., and by Lactantius, *Institut. Divin. ii. 14-19*.

³⁷ Tertullian (*Apolog. e. 23*) alleges the confession of the Demons themselves as often as they were tormented by the Christian exorcist.

³⁸ Tertullian has written a most severe treatise against idolatry, to caution his brethren against the hourly danger of incurring that guilt. *De Corona Militis*, c. 10.

³⁹ The Roman senate was always held in a temple or consecrated place (Aulus Gellius, *xiv. 7*). Before they entered on business, every senator dropped some wine and frankincense on the altar. Sueton. in *August. c. 35*.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*. This severe reformer shows no more indulgence to a tragedy of Euripides than to a combat of gladiators. The dress of the actors particularly offends him. By the use of the lofty buskin, they impiously strive to add a cubit (18") to their stature, c. 23.

⁴¹ The ancient practice of concluding the entertainment with libations may be found in every classic. Socrates and Seneca, in their last moments, made a noble application of this custom. Tacit. *Annal. xv. 64*.

⁴² Hymn of Catellus, on the nuptial, of Manlius and Julian.

⁴³ The ancient funerals (in those of Misenus and Palls) are no less accurately described by Virgil than they are illustrated by his commentator, Servius. The pile itself was an altar, the flames were fed with the blood of victims, and all the

Christian, on these interesting occasions, was compelled to desert the persons who were the dearest to him, rather than contract the guilt inherent to those impious ceremonies. Every art and every trade that was in the least concerned in the framing or adorning of idols was polluted by the stain of idolatry (Tertullian de Idololatria, c. 11). This was a severe sentence, since it devoted to eternal misery the far greater part of the community, which is employed in the exercise of liberal or mechanic professions. If we cast our eyes over the numerous remains of antiquity, we shall perceive that, besides the immediate representations of the gods and the holy instruments of their worship, the elegant forms and agreeable fictions consecrated by the imagination of the Greeks were introduced as the richest ornaments of the houses, the dress, and the furniture, of the Pagans.⁴⁴ Even the arts of music and painting, of eloquence and poetry, flowed from the same impure origin. In the style of the fathers, Apollo and the Muses were the organs of the infernal spirits, Homer and Virgil were the most eminent of his servants, and the beautiful mythology which pervades and animates the compositions of their genius is destined to celebrate the glory of the demons. Even the common language of Greece and Rome abounded with familiar but impious expressions, which the imprudent Christian might too carelessly utter or too patiently hear.⁴⁵

The dangerous temptations which on every side lurked in ambush to surprise the unguarded believer assailed him with redoubled violence on the days of solemn festivals. So artfully were they framed and disposed throughout the year, that superstition always wore the appearance of pleasure, and often of virtue.⁴⁶ Some of the most sacred festivals in the Roman ritual were destined to salute the new calends of January with vows of public and private felicity, to indulge the pious remembrance of the dead and living, to ascertain the inviolable bounds of property, to hail, on the return of spring, the genial powers of fecundity, to perpetuate the two memorable eras of Rome, the foundation of the city and that of the republic, and to restore, during the humane license of the Saturnalia, the primitive equality of mankind. Some idea may be conceived of the abhorrence of the Christians for such impious ceremonies, by the scrupulous delicacy which they displayed on a much less alarming occasion. On days of general festivity it was the custom of the ancients to adorn their doors with lamps and with branches of laurel, and to crown their heads with a garland of flowers. This innocent and elegant practice might perhaps have been tolerated as a mere civil institution. But it most unluckily happened that the doors were under the protection of the household gods, that the laurel was sacred to the lover of Daphne, and that garlands of flowers, though frequently worn as a symbol either of joy or mourning, had been dedicated in their first origin to the service of superstition. The trembling Christians, who were persuaded in this instance to comply with the fashion of their country, and the commands of the magistrate, labored under the most gloomy apprehensions, from the reproaches of their own conscience and the censures of the church.⁴⁷

Such was the anxious diligence which was required to guard the chastity of the gospel from the infectious breath of idolatry. The superstitious observances of public or private rites were carelessly practiced, from education and habit, by the followers of the established religion. But as often as they

assistants were sprinkled with lustral (purification) water.

⁴⁴ Montfaucon's Antiquities. Even the reverses of the Greek and Roman coins were frequently of an idolatrous nature.

⁴⁵ Tertullian de Idololatria, e. 20, 21, 22. If a Pagan friend (on the occasion perhaps of sneezing) used the familiar expression of "Jupiter bless you," the Christian was obliged to protest against the divinity of Jupiter.

⁴⁶ Consult the most labored work of Ovid, his imperfect *Fasti*. He finished no more than the first six months of the year. The compilation of Macrobius is called the *Saturnalia*, but it is only a small part of the first book that bears any relation to the title.

⁴⁷ Tertullian has composed a defense, or rather panegyric, of the rash action of a Christian soldier, who, by throwing away his crown of laurel, had exposed himself and his brethren to the most imminent danger. By the mention of the emperors (Severus and Caracalla) it is evident, notwithstanding the wishes of M. de Tillemont, that Tertullian composed his treatise *De Corona* long before he was engaged in the errors of the Montanists. Mem. Eccles. iii. p. 384.

occurred, they afforded the Christians an opportunity of declaring and confirming their zealous opposition. By these frequent protestations their attachment to the faith was continually fortified, and, in proportion to the increase of zeal, they combated with the more ardor and success in the holy war which they had undertaken against the empire of the demons.

The Doctrine of Immortality of the Soul Among the Philosophers

The writings of Cicero⁴⁸ represent in the most lively colors the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul. When they are desirous of arming their disciples against the fear of death, they inculcate, as an obvious, though melancholy position, that the fatal stroke of our dissolution releases us from the calamities of life; and that those can no longer suffer who no longer exist. Yet there were a few sages of Greece and Rome who had conceived a more exalted, and, in some respects, a juster idea of human nature; though it must be confessed that, in the sublime inquiry, their reason had been often guided by their imagination, and that their imagination had been prompted by their vanity. When they viewed with complacency the extent of their own mental powers, when they exercised the various faculties of memory, of fancy, and of judgment, in the most profound speculations or the most important labors, and when they reflected on the desire of fame, which transported them into future ages far beyond the bounds of death and of the grave, they were unwilling to confuse themselves with animals, or to suppose that a being, for whose dignity they entertained the most sincere admiration, could be limited to a spot of earth, and to a few years of duration. With this favorable prepossession they summoned to their aid the science, or rather the language, of Metaphysics. They soon discovered that as none of the properties of matter will apply to the operations of the mind, the human soul must consequently be a substance distinct from the body; pure, simple, anti-spiritual, incapable of dissolution, unsusceptible of a much higher degree of virtue and happiness after the release from its corporeal prison. From these specious and noble principles the philosophers who trod in the footsteps of Plato deduced a very unjustifiable conclusion, since they asserted not only the future immortality but the past eternity of the human soul, which they were too apt to consider as a portion of the infinite and self-existing spirit which pervades and sustains the universe.⁴⁹ A doctrine thus removed beyond the senses and the experience of mankind might serve to amuse the leisure of a philosophic mind; or, in the silence of solitude, it might sometimes impart a ray of comfort to desponding virtue; but the faint impression which had been received in the schools was soon obliterated by the commerce anti-business of active life. We are sufficiently acquainted with the eminent persons who flourished in the age of Cicero, and of the first Caesars, with their actions, their characters, and their motives, to be assured that their conduct in this life was never regulated by any serious conviction of the rewards or punishments of a future state. At the bar and in the senate of Rome the ablest orators were not apprehensive of giving offence to their hearers, by exposing that doctrine as an idle and extravagant opinion which was rejected with contempt by every man of a liberal education and understanding.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ In particular, the first book of the *Tusculan Questions*, and the treatise *De Senectute*, and the *Somnium Scipionis*, contain, in the most beautiful language, everything that Grecian philosophy, or Roman good sense, could possibly suggest on this dark but important object.

⁴⁹ The pre-existence of human souls, so far at least as that doctrine is compatible with religion, was adopted by many of the Greek and Latin fathers. Beausobre, *Hist. de Manicheisme*, vi. C. 4.

⁵⁰ Latin text omitted.

The Pagans of Greece and Rome

Since, therefore, the most sublime efforts of philosophy can extend no further than feebly to point out the desire, the hope, or, at most, the probability, of a future state, there is nothing, except a divine revelation, that can ascertain the existence and describe the condition of the invisible country which is destined to receive the souls of men after their separation from the body. But we may perceive several defects inherent to the popular religions of Greece and Rome which rendered them very unequal to so arduous a task.

1. The general system of their mythology was unsupported by any solid proofs; and the wisest among the Pagans had already disclaimed its usurped authority.
2. The description of the infernal regions had been abandoned to the fancy of painters and poets, who peopled them with so many phantoms and monsters, who dispensed their rewards and punishments with so little equity, that a solemn truth, the most congenial to the human heart, was oppressed and disgraced by the absurd mixture of the wildest fictions.⁵¹
3. The doctrine of a future state was scarcely considered among the devout polytheists of Greece and Rome as a fundamental article of faith.

The providence of the gods, as it related to public communities rather than to private individuals, was principally displayed on the visible theatre of the present world. The petitions which were offered on the altars of Jupiter or Apollo expressed the anxiety of their worshippers for temporal happiness, and their ignorance or indifference concerning a future life.⁵² The important truth of the immortality of the soul was inculcated with more diligence as well as success in India, in Assyria, in Egypt, and in Gaul; and since we cannot attribute such a difference to the superior knowledge of the barbarians, we must ascribe it to the influence of an established priesthood which employed the motives of virtue as the instrument of ambition.⁵³

The Barbarians and the Jews

We might naturally expect that a principle so essential to religion would have been revealed in the clearest terms to the chosen people of Palestine, and that it might safely have been entrusted to the hereditary priesthood of Aaron. It is incumbent on us to adore the mysterious dispensations of Providence,⁵⁴ when we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted in the law of Moses. It is darkly insinuated by the prophets, and during the long period which elapsed between the Egyptian and the Babylonian exiles, the hopes as well as fears of the Jews appear to have been

⁵¹ The eleventh book of the *Odyssey* gives a very dreary and incoherent account of the infernal shades. *Virgil* and *Virgil* have embellished the picture; but even those poets, though more correct than their great model, are guilty of very strange inconsistencies. *Bayle, Responses aux Questions d'un Provincial*, part iii. c. 22.

⁵² Sixteenth epistle of the first book of *Horace*, the thirteenth *Satire of Juvenal*, and the second *Satire of Persius*. These popular discourses express the sentiment and language of the multitude.

⁵³ If we confine ourselves to the Gauls. we may observe that they entrusted not only their lives, but even their money, to the security of another world. (Latin text omitted) The same custom is more darkly insinuated by *Mela*, iii. c. 2. It is almost needless to add that the profits of trade hold a just proportion to the credit of the merchant, and that the Druids derived from their holy profession a character of responsibility which could scarcely be claimed by any other order of men.

⁵⁴ The right reverend author of the *Divine Legation of Moses* assigns a very curious reason for the omission, and most ingeniously retorts it on the unbelievers.

confined within the narrow compass of the present life.⁵⁵ After Cyrus had permitted the exiled nation to return into the promised land, and after Ezra had restored the ancient records of their religion, two celebrated sects, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, gradually arose at Jerusalem.⁵⁶ The former, selected from the more opulent and distinguished ranks of society, were strictly attached to the literal sense of the Mosaic law, and they piously rejected the immortality of the soul, as an opinion that received no countenance from the divine book, which they revered as the only rule of their faith. To the authority of Scripture the Pharisees added that of tradition, and they accepted, under the name of traditions, several speculative tenets from the philosophy or religion of the eastern nations. The doctrines of fate (predestination), angels and spirits, and of a future state of rewards and punishments, were in the number of these new articles of belief. By the austerity of their manners, the Pharisees had drawn into their party the body of the Jewish people, the immortality of the soul became the prevailing sentiment of the synagogue, under the reign of the Asmonaeon princes and pontiffs. The Jewish temper could not accept such a cold and languid assent as might satisfy the mind of a Polytheist. As soon as they admitted the idea of a future state, they embraced it with the zeal which has always formed the characteristic of the nation. Their zeal, however, added nothing to its evidence, or even probability. It was still necessary that the doctrine of life and immortality, which had been dictated by nature, approved by reason, and received by superstition, should obtain the sanction of divine truth from the authority and example of Christ.

The Christians

When the promise of eternal happiness was proposed to mankind, on condition of adopting the faith and of observing the precepts of the gospel, it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the Roman empire. The ancient Christians were animated by a contempt for their present existence, and by a just confidence of immortality, of which the doubtful and imperfect faith of modern ages cannot give us any adequate notion. In the primitive church the influence of truth was very powerfully strengthened by an opinion, which, however it may deserve respect for its usefulness and antiquity, has not been found agreeable to experience. It was universally believed that the end of the world and the kingdom of Heaven were at hand. The near approach of this event had been predicted by the apostles. Its tradition was preserved by their earliest disciples. Those who understood in their literal sense the discourses of Christ himself were obliged to expect the second and glorious coming of the Son of Man in the clouds, before that generation was totally extinguished which had beheld his humble condition upon earth, and which might still be witness of the calamities of the Jews under Vespasian or Hadrian. The revolution of 17 centuries has instructed us not to press too closely the mysterious language of prophecy and revelation. But as long as, for wise purposes, this error was permitted to subsist in the church, it was productive of the most salutary effects on the faith and practice of Christians, who lived in the awful expectation of that moment when the globe itself, and all the various race of mankind, should tremble at the appearance of their Divine Judge.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Le Clerc (*Prolegomena ad Hist. Eccles. sect. 1, a 8*). His authority seems to carry the greater weight, as he has written a learned and judicious commentary on the books of the Old Testament.

⁵⁶ Josephus *Antiquities*, xiii. c. 10. De Bell. Jud. ii. 8. According to the most natural interpretation of his words, the Sadducees admitted only the Pentateuch; but it has pleased some modern critics to add the prophets to their creed, and to suppose that they contented themselves with rejecting the traditions of the Pharisees. Dr. Jortin has argued that point in his *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History*, ii. p. 103.

⁵⁷ This expectation was expressed by the 24th chapter of Matthew, and by Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Erasmus removes the difficulty by the help of allegory and metaphor; and the learned Grotius ventures to insinuate that, for wise purposes, it was permitted to take place.

Doctrine of the Millennium

The ancient and popular doctrine of the Millennium was intimately connected with the second coming of Christ. As the works of the creation had been finished in six days, their duration in their present state, according to a tradition which was attributed to the prophet Elijah, was fixed to 6,000 years.⁵⁸ By the same analogy it was inferred that this long period of labor and contention, which was now almost elapsed,⁵⁹ would be succeeded by a joyful Sabbath of a thousand years. With the triumphant band of the saints and the elect who had escaped death, or who had been miraculously revived, Christ would reign upon earth till the time appointed for the last and general resurrection.⁶⁰ The assurance of a Millennium was carefully instilled by a succession of fathers from Justin Martyr⁶¹ and Irenaeus, who conversed with the immediate disciples of the apostles, down to Lactantius, who was teacher of Constantine's son.⁶² Though it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers. The doctrine of Christ's reign upon earth was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism.⁶³ The Apocalypse, which still forms a part of the sacred canon, but which was thought to favor the exploded sentiment, has very narrowly escaped the ban of the church.⁶⁴

Nero's Arson of Rome

While the happiness and glory of a temporal reign were promised to the disciples of Christ, the most dreadful calamities were denounced against an unbelieving world. The edification of the new

⁵⁸ Burnet's *Sacred Theory*, part iii. c. 5. This tradition may be traced as high as the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, who wrote in the first century, and who seems to have been half Jew.

⁵⁹ The primitive church of Antioch computed almost 6,000 years from the creation of the world to the birth of Christ. Africanus, Lactantius, and the Greek church have reduced that number to 5,500, and Eusebius has contented himself with 5,200 years. These calculations were formed on the Septuagint, which was universally received during the first 6 centuries. The authority of the Vulgate and the Hebrew text has determined the moderns, Protestants as well as Catholics, to prefer a period of about 4,000 years; though, in the study of secular antiquity, they often find themselves straitened by those narrow limits.

⁶⁰ Most of these pictures were borrowed from a misinterpretation of Isaiah, Daniel, and the Apocalypse. A summary image may be found in Irenaeus (1. v. p. 455), the disciple of Papias, who had seen the apostle John.

⁶¹ See the second dialogue of Justin with Tryphon, and the seventh book of Lactantius. It is unnecessary to allege all the intermediate fathers, as the fact is not disputed.

⁶² The testimony of Justin, of his own faith and that of his orthodox brethren, in the doctrine of a Millennium, is delivered in the clearest and most solemn manner (*Dialog. cum Tryphonte Jud.* pp. 117, 118). If in the beginning of this important passage there is anything like an inconsistency, we may impute it, as we think proper, either to the author or to his transcribers.

⁶³ Dupin, *Biblioth. Eccles.* i. p. 223, ii. p. 366, and Mosheim, p. 720; though the latter of these learned divines is not altogether candid on the occasion.

⁶⁴ In the council of Laodicea (about the year 360) the Book of Revelation was tacitly excluded from the sacred canon by the same churches of Asia to which it is addressed. We may learn from the complaint of Sulpicius Severus that their sentence had been ratified by time greater number of Christians of his time. From what causes then is Revelation at present still received by the Greek, Roman, and Protestant churches? The following ones may be assigned: 1. The Greeks were subdued by the authority of an impostor, who, in the 6th Century, assumed the character of Dionysius the Areopagite. 2. A just apprehension that the grammarians might become more important than the theologians engaged in the Council of Trent to fix time seal of their infallibility on all the books of scripture contained in the Latin Vulgate, in the number of which the Apocalypse was fortunately included. (Fra. Paolo, *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, 1. iii.) 3. The advantage of turning those mysterious prophecies against the pope of Rome inspired the Protestants with uncommon veneration for so useful an ally. See the ingenious and elegant discourses of the present bishop of Litchfield on that unpromising subject.

Jerusalem was to advance by equal steps with the destruction of the mystic Babylon. As long as the emperors who reigned before Constantine persisted in the profession of idolatry, Babylon's epithet was applied to the city and to the empire of Rome. A regular series was prepared of all the moral and physical evils which can afflict a flourishing nation: inner discord, the invasion of the fiercest barbarians from unknown regions of the North, pestilence and famine, comets and eclipses, and earthquakes and floods.⁶⁵ All these were only so many preparatory and alarming signs of the great catastrophe of Rome, when the country of the Scipios and Caesars should be consumed by a flame from Heaven, and the city of the seven hills, with her palaces, temples, and triumphal arches, should be buried in a vast lake of fire and brimstone. In the opinion of a general conflagration, the faith of the Christian coincided with the tradition of the East, the philosophy of the Stoics, and the analogy of Nature. Even the country which had been chosen for the origin and principal scene of the conflagration was the best adapted for that purpose by natural and physical causes. It had deep caverns, beds of sulfur, and numerous volcanoes, of which those of Ætna, Vesuvius, and Lipari, exhibit a very imperfect representation. The calmest and most intrepid skeptic could not refuse to acknowledge that the destruction of the present system of the world by fire was in itself extremely probable. The Christian expected it with terror and confidence as a certain and approaching event. As his mind was perpetually filled with the solemn idea, he considered every disaster that happened to the empire as an infallible symptom of an expiring world.⁶⁶

The Pagans Often Converted By Their Fears

Because of their ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth, the condemnation of the wisest and most virtuous Pagans seems to offend the reason and the humanity of the present age.⁶⁷ But the primitive church, whose faith was of a much firmer consistence, delivered over, without hesitation, to eternal torture the far greater part of the human species. A charitable hope might perhaps be indulged in favor of Socrates, or some other sages of antiquity, who had consulted the light of reason before that of the gospel had arisen.⁶⁸ But it was unanimously affirmed that those who, since the birth or the death of Christ, had obstinately persisted in the worship of the demons, neither deserved nor could expect a pardon from the irritated justice of the Deity. These rigid sentiments, which had been unknown to the ancient world, appear to have infused a spirit of bitterness into a system of love and harmony. The ties of blood and friendship were frequently torn asunder by the difference of religious faith. The Christians, who, in this world, found themselves oppressed by the power of the Pagans, were sometimes seduced by resentment and spiritual pride to delight in the prospect of their future triumph.

“You are fond of spectacles,” exclaims the stern Tertullian, “expect the greatest of all spectacles, the last and eternal judgment of the universe. How shall I admire, laugh, rejoice, and exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness.

⁶⁵ Lactantius (Institut. Divin. vii. 15, etc.) relates the dismal tale of futurity with great spirit and eloquence.

⁶⁶ On this subject every reader of taste will be entertained with the third part of Burnet's *Sacred Theory*. He blends philosophy, Scripture, and tradition into one magnificent system. In the descriptions he displays a strength of fancy nearly equal to Milton.

⁶⁷ And yet, whatever may be the language of individuals, it is still the public doctrine of all the Christian churches. Even our own refuse to admit the conclusions which must have been drawn from the 8th and 18th of her Articles. The Jansenists, who have so diligently studied the works of the fathers, maintain this sentiment with distinguished zeal, and the learned M. de Tillemont never dismisses a virtuous emperor without pronouncing his damnation. Zuinglius is perhaps the only leader of a party who has ever adopted the milder sentiments, and he gave no less offence to the Lutherans than to the Catholics. Bossuet, *Histoire des Variations des Eglises Protestantes*, ii. c. 19—22.

⁶⁸ Justin and Clemens of Alexandria allow that some of the philosophers were instructed by the Logos; confusing its double signification, of the human reason, and of the Divine Word.

So many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red-hot flames with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians, more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings. So many dancers—!”

But the humanity of the reader will permit me to draw a veil over the rest of this infernal description, which the zealous African pursues in a long variety of affected and unfeeling witticisms.⁶⁹

Doubtless there were many among the primitive Christians of a temper more suitable to the meekness and charity of their profession of faith. There were many who felt a sincere compassion for the danger of their friends and countrymen, and who exerted the most benevolent zeal to save them from the impending destruction. The careless Polytheist, assailed by new and unexpected terrors, against which neither his priests nor his philosophers could afford him any certain protection, was very frequently terrified and subdued by the menace of eternal tortures. His fears might assist the progress of his faith and reason; and if he could once persuade himself to suspect that the Christian religion might possibly be true, it became an easy task to convince him that it was the safest and most prudent party that he could possibly embrace.

Miraculous Powers Claimed By The Christian Church

The supernatural gifts, which even in this life were ascribed to the Christians over the rest of mankind, must have conduced to their own comfort, and very frequently to the conviction of infidels. Besides the occasional prodigies which might sometimes be effected by the immediate interposition of the Deity when he suspended the laws of Nature for the service of religion, the Christian church, from the time of the apostles and their first disciples,⁷⁰ has claimed an uninterrupted succession of miraculous powers: the gift of tongues, vision and prophecy, the power of expelling demons, healing the sick, and raising the dead. The knowledge of foreign languages was frequently communicated to the contemporaries of Irenaeus, though he himself struggled with the difficulties of a barbarous dialect while he preached the gospel to the natives of Gaul.⁷¹ The divine inspiration, whether it was conveyed in the form of a waking or of a sleeping vision, is described as a favor very liberally bestowed on all ranks of the faithful, on women as on elders, on boys as well as upon bishops. When their devout minds were sufficiently prepared by a course of prayer, fasting, and vigils, to receive the extraordinary impulse, they were transported out of their senses, and delivered in ecstasy what was inspired, being mere organs of the Holy Spirit, just as a pipe or flute is of him who blows into it.⁷² We may add that the design of these visions was, for the most part, either to disclose the future history or to guide the present administration of the church. The expulsion of the demons from the bodies of those unhappy persons whom they had been permitted to torment was considered as a signal though ordinary triumph of religion, and is repeatedly alleged by the ancient apologists as the most convincing evidence of the truth of Christianity. The awful ceremony was usually performed in a public manner, and in the

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, c. 30. In order to ascertain the degree of authority which the zealous African had acquired, it may be sufficient to allege the testimony of Cyprian, the doctor and guide of all the western churches. (Prudent. Hymn. xiii. 100.) As often as he applied himself to his daily study of Tertullian's writings, he was accustomed to saying, "Give me my master." (Hieronym. de Viris Illustribus, i. p. 284.)

⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the evasions of Dr. Middleton, it is impossible to overlook the clear traces of visions and inspiration which may be found in the apostolic fathers.

⁷¹ Irenaeus adv. Haeres. Proem. p. 3. Dr. Middleton (Free Inquiry, p. 96, etc.) observes that, as this pretension of all others was time most difficult to support by art, it was the soonest given up. The observation suits his hypothesis.

⁷² Athenagoras in Legatione. Justin Martyr, Cohort, ad Gentes. Tertullian advers, Marcionit. 1. iv. These descriptions are not very unlike the prophetic fury for which Cicero (de Divinat. ii. 54) expresses so little reverence.

presence of a great number of spectators. The patient was relieved by the power or skill of the exorcist, and the vanquished demon was heard to confess that he was one of the fabled gods of antiquity, who had impiously usurped mankind's adoration.⁷³ But the miraculous cure of diseases of the most inveterate or even preternatural kind can no longer occasion any surprise, when we recollect that in the days of Irenaeus, near the end of the 2nd Century, the resurrection of the dead was very far from being esteemed an uncommon event. The miracle was frequently performed on necessary occasions by great fasting and the joint supplication of the church of the place, and that the persons thus restored to their prayers had lived afterward among them many years.⁷⁴ At such a period, when faith could boast of so many wonderful victories over death, it seems difficult to account for the skepticism of those philosophers who still rejected and derided the doctrine of the resurrection. A noble Grecian had rested on this important ground the whole controversy, and promised Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, that if he could be gratified with the sight of a single person who had been actually raised from the dead, he would immediately embrace the Christian religion. It is somewhat remarkable that the prelate of the first eastern church, however anxious for his friend's conversion, thought proper to decline this fair and reasonable challenge.—Theophilus and Autolycom, 1. i. p. 345. Paris, 1742.

Use of the Primitive Miracles

The miracles of the primitive church, after obtaining the sanction of ages, have been lately attacked in a very free and ingenious inquiry.⁷⁵ Even though miracles have favorably received by the Public, they appear to have excited a general scandal among ministers Protestant churches of Europe.⁷⁶ Our different sentiments on this subject will be much less influenced by any particular arguments than by our habits of study and reflection; and above all, by the degree of the evidence which we have accustomed ourselves to require for the proof of a miraculous event. The duty of a historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgment in this nice and important controversy. However, he ought not to conceal the difficulty of adopting such a theory as may reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason. He must make a proper application of that theory, and precisely define the limits of that happy period exempt from error and from deceit. Ultimately, we might be disposed to enlarge the gift of supernatural powers. From the first of the fathers to the last of the popes, a succession of bishops, saints, martyrs, and miracles, has continued without interruption, and the progress of superstition was so gradual, and almost imperceptible, that we know not in what particular link we should break the chain of tradition. Every age bears testimony to the wonderful events by which it was distinguished, and its testimony appears no less weighty and respectable than that of the preceding generation, till we are insensibly led on to accuse our own inconsistency. In other words, do we deny that the venerable Bode, or the holy Bernard did not perform them in the 8th or 12th Century, while liberally admitting that Justin or Irenaeus did perform them?⁷⁷ If the truth of any of those miracles is

⁷³ Tertullian (Apolog. c. f 3) throws out a bold defiance to the Pagan magistrates. Of the primitive miracles, the power of exorcising is the only one which has been assumed by Protestants.

⁷⁴ Irenaeus adv. Haereses, 1. ii. 56, 57, 1. v. c. 6. Mr. Dodwell (Dissertat. ad Irenaeum, ii. 42) concludes that the 2nd Century was still more fertile in miracles than the 1st Century.

⁷⁵ Dr. Middleton sent out his *Introductions* in the year 1747, published his *Free Inquiry* in 1749, and before his death in 1750, prepared a vindication of it against his numerous adversaries.

⁷⁶ The university of Oxford conferred degrees on his opponents. From the indignation of Mosheim (p. 221), we may discover the sentiments of the Lutheran bishops.

⁷⁷ It may seem somewhat remarkable that Bernard of Clairvaux, who records so many miracles of his friend St. Malachi, never takes any notice of his own, which, in their turn, however, are carefully related by his companions and disciples. In the long series of ecclesiastical history, does there exist a single instance of a saint asserting that he himself possessed the gift of miracles?

appreciated by their apparent use and propriety, every age had unbelievers to convince, heretics to confute, and idolatrous nations to convert. Sufficient motives might always be produced to justify the interposition of Heaven. And yet since every friend to revelation is persuaded of the reality, and every reasonable man is convinced of the cessation of miraculous powers, it is evident that there must have been some period in which they were either suddenly or gradually withdrawn from the Christian church. Whatever era is chosen for that purpose—the death of the apostles, the conversion of the Roman empire, or the extinction of the Arian heresy⁷⁸—the infatuation with miracles by the Christians who lived at that time will equally afford a just matter of surprise. They still supported their pretensions after they had lost their power. Credulity performed the office of faith. Fanaticism was permitted to assume the language of inspiration, and the effects of accident or contrivance were ascribed to supernatural causes. The recent experience of genuine miracles should have instructed the Christian world in the ways of Providence, and habituated their eye (if we may use a very inadequate expression) to the style of the divine artist. Should the most skilful painter of modern Italy presume to decorate his feeble imitations with the name Raphael or Correggio, the insolent fraud would be soon discovered and indignantly rejected.

Whatever opinion may be entertained of the miracles of the primitive church since the time of the apostles, this unresisting softness of temper, so conspicuous among the believers of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, proved of some accidental benefit to the cause of truth and religion. In modern times a latent and even involuntary skepticism adheres to the most pious dispositions. Their admission of supernatural truths is much less an active consent than a cold and passive acquiescence. Accustomed long since to observe and to respect the invariable order of Nature, our reason, or at least our imagination, is not sufficiently prepared to sustain the visible action of the Deity. In the first ages of Christianity, however, man's situation was extremely different. The most curious, or the most credulous, among the Pagans were often persuaded to enter into a society which asserted an actual claim of miraculous powers. The primitive Christians perpetually trod on mystic ground, and their minds were exercised by the habits of believing the most extraordinary events. They felt or fancied, that on every side they were incessantly assaulted by demons, comforted by visions, instructed by prophecy, and surprisingly delivered from danger, sickness, and from death itself, by the supplications of the church. The real or imaginary prodigies of which they so frequently conceived themselves to be the objects, instruments, or spectators, very happily disposed them to adopt with the same ease, but with far greater justice, the authentic wonders of the evangelical history. Miracles that did not therefore exceed the measure of their own experience inspired them with the most lively assurance of mysteries which were known to surpass the limits of their understanding. It is this deep impression of supernatural truths which has been celebrated under the name of faith. This state of mind was described as the surest pledge of God's favor and future joy, and recommended as the Christian's first entitlement. According to the more rigid doctors, the moral virtues, which may be equally practiced by infidels, are destitute of any value or efficacy in the work of our justification.

Virtues of the First Christians

But the primitive Christian demonstrated his or her faith by their virtues. It was very justly supposed that the divine persuasion which enlightened or subdued the understanding, must, at the same time, purify the heart and direct the actions of the believer. The first apologists of Christianity who justify the innocence of their brethren, and the writers of a later period who celebrate the sanctity of

⁷⁸ The conversion of Constantine is the era which is most usually fixed by Protestants. The more rational bishops are unwilling to admit the miracles of the 4th Century, while the more credulous are unwilling to reject those of the 5th Century.

their ancestors, display, in the most lively colors, the reformation of manners which was introduced into the world by the preaching of the Gospel. As it is my intention to remark only such human causes as were permitted to second the influence of revelation, I shall slightly mention two motives which might naturally render the lives of the primitive Christians much purer and more austere than those of their Pagan contemporaries, or their degenerate successors. They were (1) repentance for their past sins, and (2) the admirable desire of supporting the reputation of the society in which they were engaged.

Care of Their Reputation

It is a very ancient reproach, suggested by the ignorance or the malice of infidelity, that the Christians lured into their party the most atrocious criminals, who, as soon as they were touched by a sense of remorse, were easily persuaded to wash away, in the water of baptism, the guilt of their past conduct, for which the temples of the gods refused to grant them any expiation. But this reproach, when it is cleared from misrepresentation, contributes as much to the honor as it did to the increase of the church.⁷⁹ The friends of Christianity may acknowledge without a blush that many of the most eminent saints had been the most abandoned sinners before their baptism. Those persons who in the world had followed, the dictates of benevolence and propriety, albeit imperfectly, derived such a calm satisfaction from the opinion of their own morality as rendered them much less susceptible to the sudden emotions of shame, grief, and terror, which have given birth to many conversions. After the example of their Divine Master, the Gospel missionaries did not ridicule the society of men, and especially of women, oppressed by the consciousness, and very often by the effects, of their vices. As they emerged from sin and superstition to the glorious hope of immortality, they resolved to devote themselves to a life, not only of virtue, but of penitence. The desire of perfection became the ruling passion of their soul. It is well known that while reason embraces a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us, with rapid violence, over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes.

Principles of Human Nature

When the new converts had been enrolled in the number of the faithful, and were admitted to the sacraments of the church, they found themselves restrained from relapsing into their past disorders by another consideration of a less spiritual, but of a very innocent and respectable, nature. Any particular society that has departed from the great body of the nation, or the religion to which it belonged, immediately becomes the object of universal as well as malicious observation. In proportion to the smallness of its numbers, the character of the society may be affected by the virtue and vices of the persons who comprise it. Every member is engaged to watch with the most vigilant attention over his own behavior, and over that of his brethren, since, as he must expect to incur a part of the common disgrace, he may hope to enjoy a share of the common reputation. When the Christians of Bithynia were brought before the tribunal of the younger Pliny, they assured the proconsul that, far from being engaged in any unlawful conspiracy, they were bound by a solemn obligation to abstain from the commission of those crimes which disturb the private or public peace of society—theft, robbery, adultery, perjury, and fraud.—*Pun. Epist. x. 97.* Near a century afterward, Tertullian could proudly boast that very few Christians had suffered by the hand of the executioner, except on account of their religion.⁸⁰ Their serious and sequestered life, opposed to the joyful luxury of the age, inured them to chastity, temperance, economy, and all the sober and domestic virtues. As the greater number were of

⁷⁹ The imputations of Celsus and Julian, with the defense of the fathers, are very fairly stated by Spanheim, *Commentaire sur les Caesars de Julian*, p. 488.

⁸⁰ Latin text omitted.

some trade or profession, it was incumbent on them, by the strictest integrity and the fairest dealing, to remove the suspicions which sinners are too apt to conceive against the appearances of sanctity. The contempt of the world exercised them in the habits of humility, meekness, and patience. The more they were persecuted, the closer they adhered to each other. Their mutual love and unsuspecting confidence has been remarked by infidels, and was too often abused by treacherous friends.⁸¹

It is a very honorable circumstance for the morals of the primitive Christians that even their faults (or rather errors) came from an overabundance of virtue. The elders and teachers of the church, whose evidence attests, and whose authority might influence, the professions, principles, and even the practice of their contemporaries, had studied the Scriptures with less skill than devotion. They often interpreted the rigid teachings of Christ and his apostles in the most literal sense, while succeeding commentators applied a more figurative mode of interpretation. Ambitious to exalt the gospel's perfection above philosophy's wisdom, the zealous fathers have carried the duties of self-denial, purity, and patience to a height which it is scarcely possible to attain, and much less to preserve, in our present state of weakness and corruption. A doctrine so extraordinary and so sublime must inevitably command the veneration of the people. But it was not designed to obtain the agreement of those worldly philosophers who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society.—Barbeyrac sur la Morale des Peres.

There are two very natural propensities which we may distinguish in the most virtuous and liberal dispositions: the love of pleasure and the love of action. If the former is refined by art and learning, improved by the charms of social interchange, and corrected by a just regard to economy, health, and reputation, it is productive of the greatest part of the happiness of private life. The love of action is a principle of a much stronger and more doubtful nature. It often leads to anger, ambition, and revenge. But when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence it becomes the parent of every virtue. If those other virtues are accompanied with equal abilities, a family, state, or empire may be indebted for its safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man. To the love of pleasure we may therefore ascribe most of the agreeable; to the love of action we may attribute most of the useful and respectable qualifications. The character in which both the one and the other should be united and harmonized would seem to constitute the most perfect idea of human nature. The indifferent and inactive disposition, which would be destitute of both, would be rejected by the common consent of mankind. It is utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to the world.

The Primitive Christians Condemn Pleasure and Luxury

The acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation, may employ the leisure of a liberal mind. Such amusements, however, were rejected with abhorrence, or admitted with the utmost caution, by the severity of the fathers, who despised all knowledge that was not useful to salvation, and who considered all flippant communication as a criminal abuse of the gift of speech. In our present state of existence the body is so inseparably connected with the soul that it seems to be our interest to taste with innocence and moderation, the enjoyments of which that faithful companion is susceptible. Very different was the reasoning of our devout predecessors. Vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of angels, they disdained every earthly and corporeal delight.—Lactant. Institut. Divin. 1. vi. c. 20, 21, 22. Some of our senses indeed are necessary for our preservation, others for our subsistence, and others again for our information, and thus far it was impossible to reject the use of them. The first sensation of pleasure was

⁸¹ The philosopher Peregrinus (of whose life and death Lucian has left us so entertaining an account) imposed, for a long time, on the credulous simplicity of the Christians of Asia.

marked as the first moment of their abuse. The unfeeling candidate for Heaven was instructed not only to resist the more common attraction of taste or smell, but even to shut his ears against secular music, and to view with indifference the most finished productions of human art. Cheerful apparel, magnificent houses, and elegant furniture were supposed to unite the double guilt of pride and sensuality. A simple and repentant appearance was more suitable to the Christian who was certain of his sins and doubtful of his salvation. In their censures of luxury, the fathers are extremely minute and circumstantial.⁸² Among the various articles which excite their pious indignation we may list wigs, garments of any color except white, musical instruments, gold or silver vases, downy pillows (Jacob laid his head on a stone), white bread, foreign wines, public salutations, the use of warm baths, and the practice of shaving the beard, which, according to the expression of Tertullian, is a lie against our own faces, and an impious attempt to improve the works of the Creator.—Tertul. de Spec. c. 23; Clem. Alex. Paedagog. iii. c. 8. When Christianity was introduced among the rich and the polite, the observation of these singular laws was left, as it would be at present, to the few who were wanted to be “super saints.” But it is always easy, as well as agreeable, for the poor to claim merit from the contempt of that pomp and pleasure which fortune has placed beyond their reach. The virtue of the primitive Christians, like that of the first Romans, was very frequently guarded by poverty and ignorance.

The chaste severity of the fathers, in whatever related to the commerce of the two sexes, flowed from the same principle. Their abhorrence of every enjoyment which might gratify the sensual and degrade man’s spiritual nature. It was their favorite opinion that, if Adam and Eve had remained obedient to the Creator, they would have lived forever in a state of virgin purity, and that some harmless mode of vegetation might have populated Paradise with a race of innocent and immortal beings.⁸³ Marriage was permitted only to their fallen posterity, as a necessary expedient to continue the human race. The hesitation of the orthodox misconception on this interesting subject betrays the perplexity of men unwilling to approve an institution which they were compelled to tolerate.⁸⁴ It was their unanimous sentiment that a first marriage was adequate to all the purposes of nature and society. The practice of any subsequent marriage was branded with the name of a legal adultery. Any who were guilty of so scandalous an offense against Christian purity were soon excluded from the honors, and even from the arms, of the church.⁸⁵ Since desire was seen as a crime, and marriage was tolerated as a defect, it was consistent with the same principles to consider a state of celibacy as the nearest approach to the divine perfection. It was with the utmost difficulty that ancient Rome could support the institution of six vestals.⁸⁶ but the primitive church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual chastity. Among the Christian ascetics, however (a name which they soon acquired from their painful exercise), many who were less presumptuous probably had more success. Even the multitude of Pagans were inclined to estimate the merit of the sacrifice by its apparent difficulty. It was in the praise of these chaste spouses of Christ that the fathers have poured forth the troubled stream of their eloquence.⁸⁷ Such are the early traces of monastic principles and institutions, which, in a subsequent age, have counterbalanced all the temporal

⁸² Consult a work of Clemens of Alexandria, entitled *The Paedagogue*, which contains the rudiments of ethics as they were taught in the most celebrated of the Christian schools.

⁸³ Beausobre, *Hist. Critique du Manicheisme*, l. vii. c. 3. Justin, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustin, etc. strongly inclined to this opinion.

⁸⁴ Some of the Gnostic heretics were more consistent; they rejected the use of marriage.

⁸⁵ See a chain of tradition, from Justin Martyr to Jerome, in the *Morale des Peres*; c. iv. 6.—26.

⁸⁶ See a very curious Dissertation on the Vestals, in the *Memoires de l’Academie des Inscriptions*, iv. pp. 161—227. Notwithstanding the honors and rewards which were bestowed on those virgins, it was difficult to procure a sufficient number; nor could the dread of the most horrible death always restrain their lack of self-control.

⁸⁷ Dupin (*Biblioth. Eccles.* i. p. 195) gives a particular account of the dialogue of the ten virgins, as it was composed by Methodius, bishop of Tyre.

advantages of Christianity.⁸⁸

Their Aversion To Government Business and War

The Christians hated the business world as much as worldly pleasure. They did not know how to reconcile the defense of persons and property with the doctrine of forgiving past injuries, and which commanded them to invite the repetition of fresh insults. Their simplicity was offended by the use of oaths, the pomp of magistracy, and the day-to-day competition of public life. Nor could their humane ignorance be convinced that it was lawful on any occasion to shed the blood of man, either by the sword of justice or by that of war; even though criminal or hostile attempts should threaten the peace and safety of the whole community.⁸⁹ It was acknowledged that, under a less perfect law, the powers of the Jewish constitution had been exercised, with Heaven's approval, by inspired prophets and by anointed kings. The Christians felt and confessed that such institutions might be necessary for the present system of the world, and they cheerfully submitted to the authority of their Pagan governors. But while they instilled the maxims of passive obedience, they refused to take any active part in the civil administration or military defense of the empire. Some indulgence might perhaps be allowed to those persons who, before their conversion, were already engaged in such violent and sanguinary occupations.⁹⁰ However, it was impossible that the Christians, without renouncing a more sacred duty, could assume the character of soldiers, magistrates, or princes.⁹¹ This indolent or even criminal disregard to the public welfare exposed them to the contempt and reproaches of the Pagans, who very frequently asked, what must be the fate of the empire, attacked on every side by the barbarians, if all everyone adopted the cowardly sentiments of the new sect?⁹² To this insulting question the Christian apologists returned obscure and ambiguous answers, as they were unwilling to reveal the secret cause of their security—the expectation that, before the conversion of mankind was accomplished, war, government, the Roman empire, and the world itself, would be no more. It may be observed that, in this instance likewise, the situation of the first Christians coincided very happily with their religious scruples, and that their aversion to an active life contributed rather to excuse them from the service than to exclude them from the honors of the state and army.

The Christians Active in Church Government

But the human character, however it may be exalted or depressed by a temporary enthusiasm, will return by degrees to its proper and natural level, and will resume those passions that seem the most adapted to its present condition. The primitive Christians were dead to the business and pleasures of the world. But their love of action, which could never be entirely extinguished, soon revived, and found a new occupation in the government of the church. A separate society, which attacked the established religion of the empire, was obliged to adopt some form of internal policy, and to appoint a sufficient number of ministers, entrusted not only with the spiritual functions, but even with the temporal

⁸⁸ The Ascetics (as early as the 2nd Century) made a public profession of mortifying their bodies, and of abstaining from eating meat or drinking wine. Mosheim, p. 310.

⁸⁹ *Morale des Peres*. The same patient principles have been revived since the Reformation by the Socinians, the Anabaptists, and the Quakers. Barclay, the Quaker apologist, has protected his brethren by the authority of the primitive Christians, pp. 542—549.

⁹⁰ Tertullian, *Apolog.* c. 21. *De Idololatria*, c. 17, 18. Origen *contra Celsum*, v. p. 253, vii. p. 348, viii. pp. 423—428.

⁹¹ Tertullian (*de Corona Militis*, c. 11) suggests to them the expedient of deserting; a counsel, which, if it had been generally known, was not very proper to conciliate the favor of the emperors toward the Christian sect.

⁹² As well as we can judge from the mutilated representation of Origen (viii. o. 423), his adversary, Celsus, had urged his objection with great force and candor.

direction of the Christian commonwealth. The safety of that society, its honor, its aggrandizement, were productive, even in the most pious minds, of a spirit of patriotism, such as the first of the Romans had felt for the republic, and sometimes of a similar indifference in the use of whatever means might probably conduce to so desirable an end. The ambition of raising themselves or their friends to the honors and offices of the church was disguised by the laudable intention of devoting to the public benefit the power and consideration which, for that purpose only, it became their duty to solicit. In the exercise of their functions they were frequently called upon to detect the errors of heresy or the arts of faction, to oppose the designs of traitorous brethren, to stigmatize their characters with deserved infamy, and to expel them from the bosom of a society whose peace and happiness they had attempted to disturb. The ecclesiastical governors of the Christians were taught to unite the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove; but as the former was refined, so the latter was insensibly corrupted by the habits of government. In the church as well as in the world, the persons who were placed in any public station rendered themselves considerable by their eloquence and firmness, by their knowledge of mankind, and by their dexterity in business; and while they concealed from others, and perhaps from themselves, the secret motives of their conduct, they too frequently relapsed into all the turbulent passions of active life, which were tinged with an additional degree of bitterness and obstinacy by the infusion of spiritual zeal.

Its Primitive Freedom and Equality

Church government has often been the subject as well as the prize of religious contention. The hostile disputants of Rome, Paris, Oxford, and Geneva, have all struggled to reduce the primitive and apostolic model⁹³ to the respective standards of their own policy. The few who have pursued this inquiry with more candor and impartiality are of opinion⁹⁴ that the apostles declined the office of legislation, and rather chose to endure some partial scandals and divisions than to exclude the Christians of a future age from the liberty of varying their forms of ecclesiastical government according to the changes of times and circumstances. The scheme of policy which, under their consent, was adopted for the use of the 1st Century, may be discovered from the practice of Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Corinth. The societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire were united only by the ties of faith and love. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. The lack of discipline and human learning was supplied by the occasional assistance of the prophets,⁹⁵ who were called to that function without distinction of age, sex, or natural abilities. As often as they felt the divine impulse, these prophets poured out the Holy Spirit on the assembly of the faithful. But these extraordinary gifts were frequently abused or misapplied by the prophetic teachers. They displayed them at an improper season, presumptuously disturbed the service of the assembly, and by their pride or mistaken zeal they introduced—particularly into the apostolic church of Corinth—a long and melancholy series of disorders.⁹⁶ As the institution of prophets became useless and even damaging, their powers were withdrawn and their office abolished. The public functions of religion were solely entrusted to the established ministers of the church: the bishops and the elders. In the beginning, these two positions appear to have distinguished the same office and the same order of persons. The title *elder* was expressive of age, or rather their gravity and wisdom. The title *Bishop* denoted their inspection over the faith and manners of the Christians who were committed to their pastoral care. In

⁹³ The French aristocracy, as well as in England, strenuously maintained the divine origin of bishops. But the Calvinist elders were impatient of a superior; and the Roman Pontiff refused to acknowledge an equal. Fra Paolo.

⁹⁴ In the history of the Christian leadership, I have, for the most part, followed the learned and candid Mosheim.

⁹⁵ For the prophets of the primitive church, see Mosheim, *Dissertationes ad Hist. Eccles. pertinentes*. ii. pp. 132—208.

⁹⁶ Epistles of St. Paul, and of Clemens, to the Corinthians.

proportion to the respective numbers of the faithful, a larger or smaller number of these episcopal elders guided each infant congregation with equal authority, and with united counsels.—Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity, 1. vii.

Institution of Bishops

But the most perfect equality of freedom requires the directing hand of a superior magistrate; and the order of public deliberations soon introduces the office of a president invested at least with the authority of collecting the sentiments and executing the resolutions of the assembly. A regard for the public tranquillity, which would so frequently have been interrupted by annual or by occasional elections, induced the primitive Christians to constitute an honorable and perpetual magistracy, and to choose one of the wisest and most holy among their elders to execute during his life the duties of their ecclesiastical governor. It was under these circumstances that the lofty title of Bishop began to raise itself above the humble title of *elder*. While the latter remained the most natural distinction for the members of every Christian senate, the former was appropriated to the dignity of its new president.⁹⁷ The advantages of this episcopal form of government, which appears to have been introduced before the end of the 1st Century,⁹⁸ were so obvious, and so important for the future greatness as well as the present peace of Christianity, that it was adopted without delay by all the societies which were already scattered over the empire. It had acquired in a very early period the sanction of antiquity,⁹⁹ and is still revered by the most powerful churches, both of the East and of the West, as a primitive and even as a divine establishment.¹⁰⁰ It is needless to observe that the pious and humble elders who were first dignified with the title could not possess (and would probably have rejected), the power and pomp which now surrounds the Pope's crown, or the miter of a German prelate. But we may define in a few words the narrow limits of their original jurisdiction, which was chiefly of a spiritual—though in some instances—a temporal, nature.¹⁰¹ It consisted in the administration of the sacraments (the Lord's Supper) and church discipline. They oversaw religious ceremonies, which imperceptibly increased in number and variety. They supervised the consecration of ecclesiastical ministers, to whom the bishop assigned their respective functions. They managed the public funds, and also determined differences that Christians were unwilling to expose to the tribunal of an idolatrous judge. During a short period, these powers were exercised according to the advice of the presbyteral college, and with the consent and approbation of the assembly of Christians. The primitive bishops were considered only as the first of their equals, and the honorable servants of a free people. Whenever the elder's chair became vacant by death, a new president was chosen among the elders by the vote of the whole congregation, every member of which supposed himself invested with a sacred and priestly character.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Jerome ad Titum, c. 1, and Epistol. 85, and the elaborate apology of Blondel, pro sententia Hieronymi. The ancient state, as it is described by Jerome, of the bishop and elders of Alexandria, receives a remarkable confirmation from the patriarch Eutychius (Annal. i. p. 330. Vers. Pocock), whose testimony I know not now to reject, in spite of all the objections of the learned Pearson in his *Vindiciae Ignatianae*, part i. c. 11.

⁹⁸ See the introduction to the book of Revelation. Bishops, (called "angels" in chapters 2 and 3) were already instituted in seven cities of Asia. And yet the epistle of Clemens (which is probably of as ancient a date) does not lead us to discover any traces of elders either at Corinth or Rome.

⁹⁹ *Nulla Ecclesia sine Episcopo*, (No church without elders) has been a fact as well as a maxim since the time of Tertullian and Irenaeus.

¹⁰⁰ After we have passed the difficulties of the 1st Century, we find the episcopal government universally established, till it was interrupted by the republican genius of the Swiss and German reformers.

¹⁰¹ Mosheim, 1st and 2nd Centuries. Ignatius (ad Smyrnaeos, c. 3, etc.) is fond of exalting the episcopal dignity. Le Clerc (Hist. Eccles. 569) very bluntly censures his conduct.

¹⁰² Latin text omitted.

Provincial Councils

Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles. Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic. Although the most distant of these little states maintained a mutual as well as friendly interchange of letters and delegations, the Christian world was not yet connected by any supreme authority or legislative assembly. As the numbers of the faithful were gradually multiplied, they discovered the advantages that might result from a closer union of their interest and designs. Toward the end of the 2nd Century, the churches of Greece and Asia adopted the useful institutions of provincial synods, and they may justly be supposed to have borrowed the model of a representative council from the celebrated examples of their own country, the Amphictyons, the Achaean league, or the assemblies of the Ionian cities. It was soon established as a custom and as a law that the bishops of the independent churches should meet in the capital of the province at the stated periods of spring and autumn. Their deliberations were assisted by the advice of a few distinguished elders, and moderated by the presence of a listening multitude.¹⁰³ Their decrees, which were styled Canons, regulated every important controversy of faith and discipline; and it was natural to believe that a liberal pouring out of the Holy Spirit would be poured on the united assembly of the delegates of the Christian people. The institution of synods was so well suited to private ambition and to public interest that in the space of a few years it was received throughout the whole empire. A regular correspondence was established between the provincial councils, which mutually communicated and approved their respective proceedings; and the Catholic church soon assumed the form, and acquired the strength, of a great federative republic.¹⁰⁴

Union of the Church—Seeds of Catholicism

As the legislative authority of the particular churches was gradually superseded by the use of councils, the bishops obtained by their alliance a much larger share of executive and arbitrary power. As soon as they were connected by a sense of their common interest, they were enabled to attack with united vigor the original rights of their clergy and people. The prelates of the 3rd Century imperceptibly changed the language of exhortation into that of command, scattered the seeds of future dissension, and used scriptural allegories and declamatory rhetoric as their deficiency of force and reason. They exalted the unity and power of the church, as it was represented in the office of the elder, of which every bishop had previously enjoyed an equal and undivided portion.—Cyprian, in his admired treatise *The United Church*. pp. 75-86. Princes and magistrates, it was often repeated, might boast an earthly claim to a transitory dominion. It was the episcopal authority alone which came from God and extended itself over this and over another world. The bishops were the vicegerents of Christ, the successors of the apostles, and the mystic substitutes of the high priest of the Mosaic law. Their exclusive privilege of conferring the sacerdotal character invaded the freedom both of clerical and of popular elections. If, in the administration of the church, they still consulted the judgment of the elders or the inclination of the people, they most carefully imparted the merit of such a voluntary condescension. The bishops acknowledged the supreme authority which resided in the assembly of their brethren. But in the government of his peculiar diocese each of them exacted from his flock the same implicit obedience as

¹⁰³ Acta Concil. Carthag. apud Cyprian. Edit. Fell, p. 158. This council was composed of 87 bishops from the provinces of Mauritania, Numidia, and Africa; some elders and deacons assisted at the assembly.

¹⁰⁴ Tertullian calls the Catholic church a recent and foreign institution. The coalition of the Christian churches is very ably explained by Mosheim, pp. 164—170.

if that favorite metaphor had been literally just, and as if the shepherd had been of a more exalted nature than that of his sheep.¹⁰⁵ This obedience, however, was not imposed without some efforts on one side, and some resistance on the other. The democratic part of the constitution was in many places very warmly supported by the zealous or interested opposition of the inferior clergy. But their patriotism received the disgraceful epithets of faction and schism. The episcopal cause was indebted for its rapid progress to the labors of many active prelates, who, like Cyprian of Carthage, could reconcile the arts of the most ambitious statesman with the Christian virtues which seem adapted to the character of a saint and martyr.¹⁰⁶

Progress of Papal Authority; Pre-Eminence of the Metropolitan Churches; Ambition of the Roman Pontiff

The same causes which at first had destroyed the equality of the elders introduced among the bishops a pre-eminence of rank, and from thence a superiority of jurisdiction. In spring and autumn, when they gathered together, the difference of personal merit and reputation was keenly felt among the members of the assembly, and the multitude was governed by the wisdom and eloquence of the few. But the order of public proceedings required a more regular and less offensive distinction. The office of perpetual presidents in the councils of each province was conferred on the bishops of the principal city, and these aspiring pontiffs, who soon acquired the lofty titles of Metropolitans and Primate, secretly prepared themselves to usurp every preacher's authority which the bishops had so lately assumed above the college of elders.—Mosheim, 269, 574; Dupin, *Antiq. Eccles. Discip.* 19, 20. Nor was it long before an emulation of pre-eminence and power prevailed among the metropolitans themselves, each of them affecting to display, in the most pompous terms, the earthly honors and advantages of the city over which he presided. Among the particular benefits: the number of Christians and how much money they had; the saints and martyrs who had arisen among them; the purity with which they preserved the tradition of the faith as it had been transmitted through a series of orthodox bishops from the apostle, or the apostolic disciple (Peter), to whom the foundation of their church was ascribed.¹⁰⁷ From every cause, either of a civil or of an ecclesiastical nature, it was easy to foresee that Rome must enjoy the respect, and would soon claim the obedience, of the provinces. The society of the faithful bore a just proportion to the capital of the empire, and the Roman church was the greatest, most numerous—and with regard to the West—most ancient of all the Christian establishments, many of which had received their religion from the pious labors of her missionaries. Instead of one apostolic founder, the utmost boast of Antioch, Ephesus, or Corinth, the banks of the Tiber were supposed to have been honored with the preaching and martyrdom of the two most eminent among the apostles.¹⁰⁸ The bishops of Rome very prudently claimed the inheritance of whatsoever prerogatives were attributed either to the person or to the office of St. Peter.¹⁰⁹ The bishops of Italy and of the provinces were disposed to allow them a

¹⁰⁵ We may appeal to the whole tenor of Cyprian's conduct, of his doctrine and epistles. Le Clerc, in a short *Life of Cyprian* (Biblioth. Univ. xii. pp. 207—378), has laid him open with great freedom and accuracy.

¹⁰⁶ If Novatus, Fellicissimus, etc., whom the bishop of Carthage expelled from his church, and from Africa, were not the most detestable monsters of wickedness, the zeal of Cyprian must occasionally have prevailed over his truth. For a very just account of these obscure quarrels, Mosheim, pp. 497—512.

¹⁰⁷ In a distinct treatise, Tertullian has pleaded against the heretics the right of instruction, as it was held by the apostolic churches.

¹⁰⁸ The journey of St. Peter to Rome is mentioned by most of the ancients (Euseb. ii. 25), maintained by all the Catholics, allowed by some Protestants (Pearson and Dodwell de *Success. Episcop. Roman.*), but has been vigorously attacked by Spanheim (*Miscellanea Sacra*, iii. 3). According to Father Hardouin, the monks of the 13th Century, who composed the *Æneid*, represented St. Peter under the allegorical character of the Trojan hero.

¹⁰⁹ It is in French only that the famous allusion to St. Peter's name is exact. *Tu es Pierre et sur cette pierre.* —The same is

primacy of order and association (such was their very accurate expression) in the Christian aristocracy.¹¹⁰ But the power of a monarch was rejected with abhorrence, and the aspiring genius of Rome experienced from the nations of Asia and Africa a more vigorous resistance to her spiritual dominion, more so than under her temporal rule. The patriotic Cyprian, who ruled the church of Carthage and the local assemblies with absolute control, opposed the Roman pontiff's ambition with resolution and success. He artfully connected his own cause with that of the eastern bishops, and, like Hannibal, sought out new allies in the heart of Asia.¹¹¹ If this Punic war was waged without any bloodshed, it was because of the weakness of the contending prelates rather than moderation on their part. Abusive language and excommunication were their only weapons. They hurled such words against each other with equal fury and devotion during the progress of the whole controversy. The hard necessity of censuring either a pope, or saint and martyr, distresses modern Catholics whenever they have to relate the particulars of a dispute, in which the champions of religion carried on like worldly men of power.¹¹²

Laity and Clergy

As this battle for ecclesiastical authority progressed, it created the distinction of laity and clergy, something heretofore unknown to the Greeks and Romans.¹¹³ The laity made up the body of Christians; the clergy—according to the signification of the word—was appropriated to the chosen ones who had been set apart for the service of religion. They were a celebrated order of men which has furnished the most important, though not always the most edifying, subjects for modern history. Their mutual hostilities sometimes disturbed the peace of the infant church, but their zeal and activity were united in the common cause, and the love of power. Under the most artful disguises, this sin could insinuate itself into the hearts of bishops and martyrs. It drove them to increase the number of their subjects, and enlarge the limits of the Christian empire. They lacked any real worldly authority, and were discouraged and oppressed for a long time, rather than assisted, by the civil authorities. However, they had acquired and employed within their own society, the two most useful instruments of government: rewards and punishments. The former was derived from pious liberality, the latter from devout fears of the faithful.

Offerings and Revenue of the Church

The community of goods, which had so agreeably amused Plato's imagination,¹¹⁴ and which subsisted in some degree among the austere sect of the Essenes (Josephus, Antiq. xviii. 2; Philo, de Vit. Contemplativ.), was adopted for a short time in the primitive church. The early Christians' fervor prompted them to sell those worldly possessions which they despised, to lay the price of them at the feet of the apostles, and to content themselves with receiving an equal share out of the general distribution.¹¹⁵ The progress of the Christian religion relaxed, and gradually abolished this generous

imperfect in Greek, Latin, Italian, etc., and totally unintelligible in our Teutonic languages.

¹¹⁰ Irenaeus adv. Haereses, iii. 3. Tertullian de Praescription. c. 36, and Cyprian Epistol. 27, 55, 71, 75. Le Clerc (Hist. Eccles. 764) and Mosheim (558, 278) labor in the interpretation of these passages. But the loose and rhetorical style of the fathers often appears favorable to the pretensions of Rome.

¹¹¹ Epistle from Firmilianus, bishop of Caesarea, to Stephen, bishop of Rome, ap. Cyprian Epistol. 75.

¹¹² Concerning this dispute of the rebaptism of heretics, see the epistles of Cyprian, and the 7th book of Eusebius.

¹¹³ For the origin of these words, Mosheim, 141, Spanheim, Hist. Eccles. 643. The distinction of *Clerus* and *Laicus* was established before Tertullian's time.

¹¹⁴ The community instituted by Plato is more perfect than that which Sir Thomas More had imagined for his Utopia.

¹¹⁵ Acts of the Apostles, c. 2, 4, 5, with Grotius's Commentary. In a particular dissertation, Mosheim attacks the common

institution, which, in hands less pure than those of the apostles, would too soon have been corrupted and abused by the returning selfishness of human nature. The converts who embraced the new religion were permitted to keep their homes and land, receive legacies and inheritances, and to increase their separate property by all the lawful means of trade and industry. Instead of an absolute sacrifice, a moderate proportion was accepted by the ministers of the gospel. In their weekly or monthly assemblies, every believer, according to the exigency of the occasion, and the measure of his wealth and piety, presented his voluntary offering for the use of the common fund.—Justin Mart. Apol. Maj. c. 89; Tertul. Apol. c. 39. No gift was refused, however small. But it was diligently impressed that, in the article of Tithes, the Mosaic Law was still of divine obligation. Since the Jews had been commanded to pay a tenth part of all that they possessed under a less perfect covenant, it would flatter the disciples of Christ to distinguish themselves by a superior degree of liberality.¹¹⁶ They would also reap a bigger heavenly reward by resigning a worldly treasure which would soon be burned up with the world anyway.¹¹⁷ It is almost unnecessary to observe that the revenue of each particular church, which was of so uncertain and fluctuating a nature, must have varied with the poverty or the wealth of the faithful, as they were dispersed in obscure villages or collected in the great cities of the empire. In the time of the emperor Decius, it was the opinion of the magistrates that the Christians of Rome were possessed of very considerable wealth. Vessels of gold and silver were used in their religious worship, and many among their number had sold lands houses to increase the public riches of the sect. Unfortunately, their children became beggars because their parents became saints.¹¹⁸ We should listen with distrust to the suspicions of strangers and enemies. On this occasion, however, they receive a very misleading and probable bias from the two following circumstances, the only ones that have reached our knowledge which define any precise sums or convey any distinct idea. Almost at the same period the bishop of Carthage, from a society less opulent than that of Rome, collected 100,000 sesterces (more than £850), on a sudden call of charity, to redeem the brethren of Numidia, who had been carried away captives by the barbarians of the desert.—Cyprian. Epistol. 62. About a hundred years before the reign of Decius, the Roman church had received, in a single donation, the sum of 200,000 sesterces from a stranger of Pontus who proposed to fix his residence in the capital.—Tertullian de Prescriptione, c. 30. These oblations, for the most part, were made in money. Nor did the Christian society desire or have the ability to acquire to any considerable degree, the burden of property. It had been provided by several laws, which were enacted with the same design as our real estate statutes, that no property should be given or bequeathed to any corporate body without either a special privilege or a particular dispensation from the emperor or from the senate.¹¹⁹ They were reluctant to grant them in favor of a sect at first the object of their contempt and at last of their fears and jealousy. A transaction, however, is related under the reign of Alexander Severus, which discovers that the restraint was sometimes eluded or suspended, and that the Christians were permitted to claim and to possess lands within the limits of

opinion with very inconclusive arguments.

¹¹⁶ Irenaeus ad Haeres. iv. c. 27, 34. Origen in Num. Hom. ii. Cyprian de Unitat. Eccles. Constitut. Apostol. ii. c. 34, 35, with the notes of Cotelerius. The Constitutions introduce this divine precept, by declaring that priests are as much above kings as the soul is above the body. Among the tithable articles, they list corn, wine, oil, and wood. On this interesting subject, consult Prideaux's History of the Tithes, and Fra. Paolo delle Materie Beneficarie; two writers of a very different character.

¹¹⁷ The same opinion, which prevailed about the year 1,000 AD, produced the same effects. Most of the donations express their motive.

¹¹⁸ The subsequent conduct of the deacon Laurence only proves how proper a use was made of the wealth of the Roman church. It was undoubtedly very considerable. But Fra. Paolo (c. 3) appears to exaggerate when he supposes that the successors of Commodus were urged to prosecute the Christians by their own avarice, or that of their Pretorian prefects.

¹¹⁹ Fra. Paolo (c. 4) thinks that these regulations had been much neglected since the reign of Valerian.

Rome itself.¹²⁰ Christianity's progress and the civil confusion of the empire helped relax the severity of the laws. Before the close of the 3rd Century many large estates were bestowed on the opulent churches of Rome, Milan, Carthage, Antioch, Alexandria, and the other great cities of Italy and the provinces.

Distribution and Misuse of Church Money

The bishop was the natural steward of the church; the public stock was entrusted to his care without account or control. The elders were confined to their spiritual functions, and the more dependent order of deacons was solely employed in the management and distribution of the ecclesiastical revenue.—Constitut. Apostol. ii. 35. If we may give credit to the vehement declamations of Cyprian, there were too many among his African brethren who, in the execution of their charge, violated every precept, not only of evangelic perfection, but even of moral virtue. By some of these unfaithful stewards the riches of the church were lavished in sensual pleasures. By others they were perverted to the purposes of private gain, fraudulent purchases, and predatory greed.¹²¹ But as long as the contributions of the Christian people were free and unconstrained, the abuse of their confidence could not be very frequent, and the general uses to which their liberality was applied reflected honor on the religious society. A decent portion was reserved for the maintenance of the bishop and his clergy. A sufficient sum was allotted for the expenses of the public worship, of which the feasts of love—the *agape*, as they were called—made up a very pleasing part. The whole remainder was the sacred heritage of the poor. According to the discretion of the bishop, it was distributed to support widows and orphans, the lame, the sick, and the aged of the community; to comfort strangers and pilgrims, and to alleviate the misfortunes of prisoners and captives, especially when their sufferings had been occasioned by their firm attachment to the cause of religion.—Apologies of Justin, Tertullian, etc. A generous exchange of charity united the most distant provinces, and the smaller congregations were cheerfully assisted by the alms of their more affluent brethren.¹²² Such an institution, which paid less regard to the merit than to the distress of the object, very materially conduced to the progress of Christianity. The Pagans, who were actuated by a sense of humanity, ridiculed the Christian doctrines, yet had to acknowledge the benevolence of the new sect.¹²³ The prospect of immediate relief and of future protection allured into its hospitable bosom many of those unhappy persons whom the neglect of the world would have abandoned to the miseries of want, sickness, and old age. There is some reason likewise to believe that great numbers of infants, who, according to the inhuman practice of the times, had been left to die in ditches by their parents, were frequently rescued from death, baptized, educated, and maintained by the piety of the Christians, and at the expense of the public treasure.¹²⁴

Excommunication

It is the undoubted right of every society to exclude from its communion and benefits such among its members as reject or violate those regulations which have been established by general consent. In

¹²⁰ Hist. August. p. 131. The ground had been public; and was now disputed between the society of Christians and that of butchers

¹²¹ Cyprian de Lapsis, 89. Epistol. 85. The charge is confirmed by the 19th and 20th canon of the council of Illiberis.

¹²² The wealth and liberality of the Romans to their most distant brethren is gratefully celebrated by Dionysius of Corinth, Euseb. iv. c. 23.

¹²³ Lucian in Peregrin. Julian (Epist. 49) seems mortified that the Christian charity maintains not only their own, but likewise the heathen poor.

¹²⁴ Such, at least, has been the laudable conduct of more modern missionaries, under the same circumstances. More than 3,000 new-born infants are annually left in the streets of Peking. Le Comte Mem. sur la Chine, and the Recherches sur les Chinois et les Egyptiens, i. p. 61.

the exercise of this power, the censures of the Christian church were chiefly directed against scandalous sinners, and particularly those who were guilty of murder, fraud, or drunkenness. This disapproval was also against the authors or followers of any heretical opinions which had been condemned by the judgment of the church order. They also chastised those unhappy persons who, whether from choice or from compulsion, had polluted themselves after their baptism by any act of idolatrous worship. The consequences of excommunication were of a temporal as well as a spiritual nature. The Christian against whom any of these was pronounced was denied any part in the offerings of the faithful. Both religious and private friendships were dissolved. He or she found themselves the profane object of abhorrence to the persons whom he the most esteemed, or by whom he had been the most tenderly beloved. As far as an expulsion from a respectable society could imprint on their character a mark of disgrace, they were shunned or view with suspicion by everyone. The situation of these unfortunate exiles was in itself very painful and sad. But, as it usually happens, their apprehensions far exceeded their sufferings. The benefits of the Christian communion were those of eternal life. Nor could they erase from their minds the awful opinion that the church leaders who had condemned them, God had given the keys of Hell and of Paradise. The heretics might be supported by the consciousness of their intentions, and by the flattering hope that they alone had discovered the true path of salvation. These tried to regain those worldly and spiritual comforts in their own assemblies which they no longer received from the great society of Christians. But almost all those who had reluctantly yielded to the power of vice or idolatry realized their fallen condition, and anxiously desired to be restored to the benefits of the Christian communion.

With regard to the treatment of these penitents, two opposite opinions divided the primitive church—the one of justice, the other of mercy. The more rigid and inflexible legalists refused them, forever and without exception, the lowest position in the holy community which they had disgraced or deserted. Leaving them to the remorse of a guilty conscience, they indulged them only with a faint ray of hope that their repentance might possibly be accepted by the Supreme Being.¹²⁵ A milder sentiment was embraced in practice as well as in theory by the purest and most respectable of the Christian churches.—Dionys. ap. Eoseb. iv. 23; Cyprian, de Lapsis. The gates of reconciliation and of Heaven were seldom shut against the returning penitent. However, a severe and solemn form of discipline was instituted, which, while it served to forgive his crime, might powerfully deter others from imitating his example. Humbled by a public confession, emaciated by fasting, and clothed in sackcloth, the penitent lay prostrate at the door of the assembly, imploring with tears the pardon of his offences, and soliciting the prayers of the faithful.¹²⁶ If the sin was serious in nature, years of penance were seen as inadequate to satisfy the Divine Justice. And it was always by slow and painful gradations that the sinner, heretic, or apostate, was readmitted into the bosom of the church. A sentence of perpetual excommunication was, however, reserved for some crimes of an extraordinary magnitude, and particularly for the inexcusable relapses of those penitents who had already experienced and abused the clemency of their church leaders. According to the circumstances or the number of the guilty, the exercise of the Christian discipline was varied by the discretion of the bishops. The councils of Ancyra and Illiberis were held about the same time, the one in Galatia, the other in Spain. But their respective canons, which still exist, seem to breathe a very different spirit. The Galatian who, after his baptism, had repeatedly sacrificed to idols, might obtain his pardon by a penance of seven years, and if he had seduced others to imitate his example only three years more were added to the term of his exile. But the unhappy Spaniard who had committed the same offence was denied any hope of reconciliation, even in death. His idolatry was placed at the head of a list of 17 other crimes against which a sentence no less terrible

¹²⁵ The Montanists and the Novatians, who adhered to this opinion with the greatest rigor and obstinacy, found themselves at last in the number of excommunicated heretics. Mosheim. *Secul. ii. and iii.*

¹²⁶ Cave's *Primitive Christianity*, part iii. c. 5. The admirers of antiquity regret the loss of this public penance.

was pronounced. Among these we may distinguish the unforgivable sin of insulting a bishop, elder, or even a deacon.¹²⁷

The Dignity of Episcopal Government

The well-tempered mixture of liberality and rigor, the judicious dispensation of rewards and punishments, according to the maxims of policy as well as justice, made up the human strength of the church. The bishops, whose paternal care extended itself to the government of both worlds, were aware of the importance of these matters. Concealing their ambition with a pretense of the love of order, they were jealous of any rival in the exercise of a discipline so necessary to prevent any Christians from leaving their flock, whose numbers every day became more considerable. From the imperious declamations of Cyprian we should naturally conclude that the doctrines of excommunication and penance formed the most essential part of religion. It was much less dangerous for the disciples of Christ to neglect the observance of the moral duties than to spurn the censures and authority of their bishops. Sometimes we might imagine that we were listening to the voice of Moses, when he commanded the earth to open and to swallow up in consuming flames the rebellious race which refused obedience to the priesthood of Aaron. The following is a quote by the bishop of Carthage against Cyprian's leniency concerning church discipline, declaring his inflexible resolution to enforce the rigor of the laws.

"If such irregularities are suffered with impunity, if such irregularities are suffered, there is an end of *Episcopal vigor* (Cyprian Epist. 69) (i.e., *church vitality*); an end of the sublime and divine power of governing the church, an end of Christianity itself."

Cyprian had renounced those temporal honors which it is probable he would never have obtained; but the acquisition such absolute command over the consciences and understanding of a congregation, however obscure or despised by the world, is more truly grateful to the pride of the human heart than the possession of the most despotic power imposed by arms and conquest on a reluctant people.

Summary of the Five Causes of Christianity's Growth

In the course of this important though perhaps tedious inquiry, I have attempted to display the secondary causes which so effectively assisted the truth of the Christian religion. If among these causes we have discovered any artificial ornaments, any accidental circumstances, or any mixture of error and passion, it cannot appear surprising that mankind should be the most skillfully affected by such motives as were suited to their imperfect nature. It was by the aid of these causes, exclusive seal, the immediate expectation of another world, the claim of miracles, the practice of rigid virtue, and the constitution of the primitive church, that Christianity spread itself with so much success in the Roman empire. To the first of these the Christians were indebted for their invincible valor, neglecting to submit to the enemy whom they were resolved to vanquish. The three succeeding causes supplied their valor with the most formidable arms. The last of these causes united their courage, directed their arms, and gave their efforts that irresistible weight which even a small band of well-trained and intrepid volunteers has so often possessed over an undisciplined multitude, ignorant of the subject, and careless of the event of the

¹²⁷ Dupin. Biblioth. Eccles. ii pp. 304—313, a short but rational exposition of the canons of those councils, which were assembled in the first moments of tranquillity, after the persecution of Diocletian. This persecution had been much less severely felt in Spain than in Galatia; a difference which may, in some measure, account for the contrast of their regulations.

war. In the various religions of Polytheism, some wandering fanatics of Egypt and Syria, who addressed themselves to the credulous superstition of the populace, were perhaps the only order of priests¹²⁸ that derived their whole support and, credit from their priestly profession, and were very deeply affected by a personal concern for the safety or prosperity of their deities. The ministers of Polytheism, both in Rome and in the provinces, were for the most part men of a noble birth, and of an affluent fortune, who received, as an honorable distinction, the care of a celebrated temple, or of a public sacrifice, exhibited very frequently at their own expense the sacred games.¹²⁹ With cold indifference they performed the ancient rites according to the laws and fashion of their country. As they were engaged in the ordinary occupations of life, their zeal and devotion were seldom animated by a sense of interest, or by the habits of an ecclesiastical character. Confined to their respective temples and cities, they remained without any connection of discipline or government; and while they acknowledged the supreme jurisdiction of the senate, of the college of pontiffs, and of the emperor, those civil magistrates contented themselves with the easy task of maintaining, in peace and dignity, the general worship of mankind. We have already seen how various, how loose, and how uncertain were the religious sentiments of Polytheists. They were abandoned almost without control to the natural workings of a superstitious fancy. The accidental circumstances of their life and situation determined the object as well as the degree of their devotion. As long as their adoration was successively prostituted to a thousand deities, it was scarcely possible that their hearts could be susceptible of a very sincere or lively passion for any of them.

Weakness of Polytheism; the Pagan's Skepticism

When Christianity appeared in the world, even these faint and imperfect impressions had lost much of their original power. Human reason, which by its unassisted strength is incapable of perceiving the mysteries of faith, had already obtained an easy triumph over the folly of Paganism. When Tertullian or Lactantius employ their labors in exposing its falsehood and extravagance, they are obliged to transcribe the eloquence of Cicero or the wit of Lucian. The contagion of these skeptical writings had been diffused far beyond the number of their readers. The fashion of incredulity was communicated from the philosopher to the man of pleasure or business, from the noble to the plebeian, and from the master to the menial slave who waited at his table, and who eagerly listened to the freedom of his conversation. On public occasions the philosophic part of mankind affected to treat with respect and decency the religious institutions of their country. Their secret contempt, however, penetrated through the thin and awkward disguise. When they discovered that their deities were rejected and derided by those whose rank or understanding they were accustomed to reverence, even the people were filled with doubts and apprehensions concerning the truth of those doctrines to which they had yielded the most implicit belief. The decline of ancient prejudice exposed a very numerous portion of humanity to the danger of a painful and comfortless situation. A state of skepticism and suspense may amuse a few inquisitive minds. But since people embrace superstition so much, even if they are convinced of its nonsense, they still regret letting it go. Their love of the marvelous and supernatural, their curiosity with regard to future events, and their strong propensity to extend their hopes and fears beyond the limits of the visible world, were the principal causes which favored the establishment of Polytheism. So

¹²⁸ The arts, manners, and vices of the priests of the Syrian goddess are very humorously described by Apuleius, in his eighth book of *Metamorphosis*.

¹²⁹ The office of Asiarch was of this nature, and it is frequently mentioned in *Aristides*, the *Inscriptions*, etc. It was annual and elective. None but the vainest citizens could desire the honor; none but the most wealthy could support the expense. See, in the *Patres Apostol.* II. 200, with how much indifference Philip the Asiarch conducted himself in the martyrdom of Polycarp. There were likewise Bithyniarchs, Lyciarchs, etc.

urgent on the common folk is the necessity of believing, that the fall of any system of mythology will most probably be succeeded by the introduction of some other mode of superstition. Some deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence had not interposed a genuine revelation fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, while at the same time it was adorned with all that could attract the people's curiosity, wonder, and adoration. In fact, many were almost disengaged from their artificial prejudices, but equally susceptible and desirous of a devout attachment. An object much less deserving would have been sufficient to fill the vacant place in their hearts, and to gratify the uncertain eagerness of their passions. Those who are inclined to pursue this reflection, instead of viewing with astonishment the rapid progress of Christianity, will perhaps be surprised that its success was not still more rapid and still more universal.

Historical View of the Spread of Christianity

It has been observed with truth as well as propriety that Rome's conquests prepared and facilitated the spread of Christianity. In the second chapter of this work we have attempted to explain in what manner the most civilized provinces of Europe, Asia, and Africa were united under the dominion of one sovereign, and gradually connected by the most intimate ties of laws, of manners, and of language. The Jews of Palestine, who had fondly expected an earthly deliverer, received the miracles of Christ so coldly, that it was found unnecessary to publish, or at least to preserve, any Hebrew gospel.¹³⁰ The authentic histories of the actions of Christ were composed in the Greek language, at a considerable distance from Jerusalem, and after the Gentile converts had grown extremely numerous.¹³¹ As soon as those histories were translated into the Latin tongue, they were perfectly intelligible to all the subjects of Rome, excepting only to the peasants of Syria and Egypt, for whose benefit particular versions were afterward made. The public highways, which had been constructed for the use of the legions, opened an easy passage for the Christian missionaries from Damascus to Corinth, and from Italy to the extremity of Spain or Britain. Nor did those spiritual conquerors encounter any of the obstacles which usually retard or prevent the introduction of a foreign religion into a distant country. There is the strongest reason to believe that, before the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, the faith of Christ had been preached in every province and in all the great cities of the empire; but the foundation of the several congregations, the numbers of the faithful who composed them, and their proportion to the unbelieving multitude, are now buried in obscurity or disguised by fiction and declamation. Such imperfect circumstances, however, as have reached our knowledge concerning the increase of the Christian name in Asia, Greece, Egypt, Italy, and the West, we shall now proceed to relate without neglecting the real or imaginary acquisitions which lay beyond the frontiers of the Roman empire.

In the East

The rich provinces that extend from the Euphrates to the Jordan Sea were the principal theatre on which the apostle of the Gentiles (Paul) displayed his zeal and piety. The seeds of the gospel, which he had scattered in a fertile soil, were diligently cultivated by his disciples; and it should seem that, during the two first centuries, the most considerable body of Christians was contained within those limits. Among the societies which were instituted in Syria, none were more ancient or more illustrious than

¹³⁰ The modern critics refuse to believe what the fathers almost unanimously assert, that St. Matthew composed a Hebrew gospel, of which only the Greek translation is extant. It seems, however, dangerous to reject their testimony.

¹³¹ Under the reigns of Nero and Domitian, and in the cities of Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, and Ephesus. Mill. Prolegomena ad Nov. Testament, and Dr. Lardner's fair and extensive collection, vol xv.

those of Damascus, of Berea or Aleppo, and of Antioch. The prophetic introduction of the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) has described and immortalized the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira,¹³² Sardis, Laodicea, and Philadelphia. Their colonies were soon spread over that populous country. In a very early period, the islands of Cyprus and Crete, the provinces of Thrace and Macedonia, gave a favorable reception to the new religion. Christian republics were soon founded in the cities of Corinth, Sparta, and Athens.¹³³ The antiquity of the Greek and Asiatic churches allowed a sufficient space of time for their increase and multiplication, and even the swarms of Gnostics and other heretics serve to display the flourishing condition of the orthodox church, since the class of heretics has always been applied to the less numerous party. To these domestic testimonies we may add the confession, complaints, and apprehensions of the Gentiles themselves. From the writings of Lucian, a philosopher who had studied mankind, and who describes their manners in the most lively colors, we may learn that, under the reign of Commodus, his native country of Pontus was filled with Epicureans and Christians.¹³⁴ Within 80 years after the death of Christ,¹³⁵ the humane Pliny laments the magnitude of the evil which he vainly attempted to eradicate. In his very curious epistle to the emperor Trajan, he affirms that the temples were almost deserted, that the sacred victims scarcely found any purchasers, and that the superstition had not only infected the cities, but had even spread itself into the villages and the open country of Pontus and Bithynia.—Plin. Epist. x. 97.

The Church of Antioch

Without delving into a minute scrutiny of the expressions or motives of those writers who either celebrate or lament the progress of Christianity in the East, it may in general be observed that none of them have left us any grounds from whence a just estimate might be formed of the real numbers of the faithful in those provinces. One circumstance, however, has been fortunately preserved, which seems to cast a more distinct light on this obscure but interesting subject. Under the reign of Theodosius, after Christianity had enjoyed the sunshine of Imperial favor for over 60 years, the ancient and illustrious church of Antioch consisted of 100,000 persons, 3,000 of whom were supported out of the church treasury.—Chrysostom, Opera, vii. 658, 810. The splendor and dignity of the queen of the East, the acknowledged overpopulation of Caesarea, Seleucia, and Alexandria, and the loss of 250,000 souls in the earthquake which afflicted Antioch under the elder Justin,¹³⁶ are so many convincing proofs that the whole number of its inhabitants was not less than 500,000. The Christians, however multiplied by zeal and power, did not exceed a fifth part of that great city. How different a proportion must we adopt when we compare the persecuted with the triumphant church, the West with the East, remote villages with populous towns, and countries recently converted to the faith with the place where the believers first received the appellation of Christians! It must not, however, be disguised that, in another passage, Chrysostom, to whom we are indebted for this useful information, computes the multitude of the

¹³² The Alogians (Epiphanius de Haeres. 51) disputed the genuineness of the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation), because the church of Thyatira was not yet founded. Epiphanius, who allows the fact, extricates himself from the difficulty by ingeniously supposing that St. John wrote in the spirit of prophecy. Abauzit Discours sur l'Apocalypse.

¹³³ The epistles of Ignatius and Dionysius (Euseb. iv. 23) point out many churches in Asia and Greece. The one in Athens seems to have been one of the least flourishing.

¹³⁴ Lucian in Alexandro, c. 25. Christianity, however, must have been very unequally diffused over Pontus; since in the middle of the 3rd Century there were no more than 17 believers in the extensive diocese of Neo-Caesarea. M. de Tillemont, Mem. Eccies. iv. 675, from Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, who were themselves natives of Cappadocia.

¹³⁵ According to the ancients, Jesus Christ suffered under the consulship of the two Gemini, in the year 29 of our present era. Pliny was sent into Bithynia (according to Pagi) in the year 110.

¹³⁶ John Malela, ii. p. 144. He draws the same conclusion with regard to Antioch's overcrowded population.

faithful as even more than that of the Jews and Pagans.¹³⁷ But the solution of this apparent difficulty is easy and obvious. The eloquent preacher draws a parallel between the civil and the ecclesiastical constitution of Antioch; between the list of Christians who had acquired Heaven by baptism, and the list of citizens who had a right to share the public liberality. Slaves, strangers, and infants made up the former. They were excluded from the latter.

The Church In Egypt

The extensive commerce of Alexandria, and its proximity to Palestine, gave an easy entrance to the new religion. It was at first embraced by great numbers of the Therapeutae, or Essenians of the lake Mareotis, a Jewish sect which had given up much of its reverence for the Mosaic ceremonies. The austere life of the Essenians, their fasts and excommunications, the community of goods, the love of celibacy, their zeal for martyrdom, and the warmth (though not the purity of their faith) already offered a very lively image of the primitive discipline.¹³⁸ It was in the school of Alexandria that the Christian theology appears to have assumed a regular and scientific form. When Hadrian visited Egypt, he found a church, composed of Jews and of Greeks, sufficiently important to attract the notice of that inquisitive prince.—Letter of Hadrian, Augustan History, 245. But Christianity's progress was for a long time confined within the limits of a single city, which was itself a foreign colony. Until the close of the 2nd Century the predecessors of Demetrius were the only bishops of the Egyptian church. Three bishops were consecrated by the hands of Demetrius, and the number was increased to 80 by his successor Heraclas.¹³⁹ The body of the natives, a people distinguished by a sullen inflexibility of temper (Ammian. Marcellin. xxii. 16), entertained the new doctrine with coldness and reluctance. Even in the time of Origen it was rare to meet with an Egyptian who had overcome his early prejudices in favor of the sacred animals of his country.—Origen contra Celsuni, i. 40. As soon as Christianity ascended the throne, the zeal of those barbarians obeyed the prevailing impulsion. The cities of Egypt were filled with bishops, and the deserts of Thebais swarmed with hermits.

The Church In Rome

A perpetual stream of strangers and provincials flowed into the capacious bosom of Rome. Whatever was strange or odious, whoever was guilty or a suspect in some crime, might hope to elude the law's vigilance in the obscurity of that immense capital. In such a various conflux of nations, every teacher (either of truth or falsehood), every founder (whether of a virtuous or a criminal association), might easily multiply his disciples or accomplices. The Roman Christians, at the time of the accidental persecution of Nero, are represented by Tacitus as already amounting to a very great multitude (Tacitus, xv. 44), and the language of that great historian is almost similar to the style employed by Livy, when he relates the introduction and the suppression of the rites of Bacchus. After the Bacchanals had awakened the severity of the senate, it was likewise apprehended that a very great multitude, as it were

¹³⁷ Chrysostom, i. 592. I am indebted for these passages, though not for my inference, to the learned Dr. Lardner, *Credibility of the Gospel History*, vol. xii, 370.

¹³⁸ Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs*, 1. 2, c. 20, 21, 22, 23, has examined, with the most critical accuracy, the curious treatise of Philo, which describes the Therapeutae. By proving that it was composed as early as the time of Augustus, Basnage has demonstrated, in spite of Eusebius (ii. 11), and a crowd of modern Catholics, that the Therapeutae were neither Christians nor monks. It still remains probable that they changed their name, preserved their manners, adopted some new articles of faith, and gradually became the fathers of the Egyptian Ascetics.

¹³⁹ For the succession of Alexandrian bishops, consult Renaudot's *History*, p. 24, etc. This curious fact is preserved by the patriarch Eutychius (*Annal.* i. 334. Vers. Pocock), and its internal evidence would alone be a sufficient answer the objections which Bishop Pearson has urged in the *Vindiciae Ignatianae*.

another people, had been initiated into those abhorred mysteries. A more careful inquiry soon demonstrated that the offenders did not exceed 7,000, a number indeed sufficiently alarming when considered as the object of public justice.¹⁴⁰ It is with the same candid allowance that we should interpret the vague expressions of Tacitus, and in a former instance of Pliny, when they exaggerate the crowds of deluded fanatics who had forsaken the established worship of the gods. The church of Rome was undoubtedly the first and most populous of the empire. We have an authentic record which attests to the state of religion in that city about the middle of the 3rd Century, and after a peace of 38 years. At that time, the clergy consisted of a bishop, 46 elders, 7 deacons, as many sub-deacons, 42 acolytes (altar boys), and 50 readers, exorcists, and porters. The number who were widowed, sick, and poor, who were maintained by the church treasury, amounted to 1,500.¹⁴¹ From reason, as well as from the analogy of Antioch, we may venture to estimate the Christians of Rome at about 50,000. The population of that great capital cannot perhaps be exactly ascertained. However, the most conservative number would not be less than a million, of whom the Christians might have made up one-twentieth.¹⁴²

The Church in Africa and the Western Provinces

The western provincials appeared to have derived the knowledge of Christianity from the same source which had diffused among them the language, sentiments, and manners of Rome. In this more important circumstance, Africa, as well as Gaul, was gradually fashioned to the imitation of the capital. Yet, notwithstanding the many favorable occasions which might invite the Roman missionaries to visit their Latin provinces, it was late before they passed either the sea or the Alps.¹⁴³ Nor can we discover in those great countries any assured traces either of faith or of persecution that ascend higher than the reign of the Antonines.¹⁴⁴ The slow progress of the Gospel in the cold climate of Gaul was extremely different from the eagerness with which it seems to have been received on the burning sands of Africa. The African Christians soon formed one of the principal members of the primitive church. It was a common practice to appoint bishops to the smallest towns, and very frequently to the most obscure villages. This helped multiply the splendor and importance of their religious societies, which during the course of the 3rd Century were animated by the zeal of Tertullian, directed by the abilities of Cyprian, and adorned by the eloquence of Lactantius. But if, on the contrary, we turn our eyes toward Gaul, we must content ourselves with discovering, in the time of Marcus Antoninus, the feeble and united congregations of Lyons and Vienna. Even as late as the reign of Decius, we are assured that only in a few cities—Aries, Narbonne, Toulouse, Limoges, Clermont, Tours, and Paris—some scattered churches were supported by the devotion of a small number of Christians.¹⁴⁵ Silence is indeed very consistent with devotion, but as it is seldom compatible with zeal, we may perceive and lament the languid state of Christianity in those provinces which had exchanged the Celtic for the Latin tongue. For the first

¹⁴⁰ T. Liv. xxxix, 13, 15, 16, 17. Nothing could exceed the horror and consternation of the senate on the discovery of the Bacchanalians, whose depravity is described and perhaps exaggerated, by Livy.

¹⁴¹ Euseb. vi. c. 43. The Latin translator (M. de Valois) has thought proper to reduce the number of elders to 44.

¹⁴² This proportion of the elders and of the poor, to the rest of the people, was originally fixed by Burnet (Travels in Italy, p. 168) and is approved by Moyle (ii. p. 151). They were both unacquainted with the passage of Chrysostom, which converts their conjecture almost into a fact.

¹⁴³ These were celebrated martyrs of Lyons. According to the Donatists, whose assertion is confirmed by the tacit acknowledgment of Augustin, Africa was the last of the provinces which received the Gospel.

¹⁴⁴ With regard to Africa, see Tertullian ad Scapulam, c. 3. It is imagined that the Scyllitan martyrs were the first (*Acta Sincera* Ruinart. p. 34). One of the adversaries of Apuleius seems to have been a Christian. Apolog. pp. 496, 497, edit. Delphin.

¹⁴⁵ There is some reason to believe that, in the beginning of the 4th Century, the extensive congregations of Liege, Treves, and Cologne, made up one group, which had been very recently founded. Mem. de Tillemont. vi. part. i. pp. 43, 411.

three centuries, they failed to give birth to a single ecclesiastical writer. From Gaul, which claimed a just pre-eminence of learning and authority over all the countries on this side of the Alps, the light of the Gospel was more faintly reflected on the remote provinces of Spain and Britain. If we may credit the vehement assertions of Tertullian, they had already received the first rays of the faith when he addressed his Apology to the magistrates of the emperor Severus.¹⁴⁶ But the obscure and imperfect origin of the western churches of Europe has been so negligently recorded that if we would relate the time and manner of their foundation we must supply the silence of antiquity by those legends which avarice or superstition long afterward dictated to the monks in the lazy gloom of their convents.¹⁴⁷ Of these holy romances only the apostle James can, by its single extravagance, deserve to be mentioned. From a peaceful fisherman of the lake of Genesareth, he was transformed into a valorous knight, who charged at the head of the Spanish chivalry in their battles against the Moors. The gravest historians have celebrated his exploits. The miraculous shrine of Compostella displayed his power. The sword of a military order, assisted by the terrors of the Inquisition, was sufficient to remove every objection of profane criticism.¹⁴⁸

Beyond the Roman Empire

Christianity's progress was not confined to the Roman empire. According to the primitive fathers, who interpret facts by prophecy, within a century after the death of Christ, the new religion had already visited every part of the globe. Wrote Justin Martyr,

“There exists not a people, whether Greek or Barbarian, or any other race of men, by whatever label or manners they may be distinguished, however ignorant of arts or agriculture, whether they live in tents, or wander about in covered wagons, among whom prayers are not offered up in the name of a crucified Jesus to the Father and Creator of all things.”¹⁴⁹

But this splendid exaggeration, which even now would be extremely difficult to reconcile with the real state of mankind, can be considered only as the rash sally of a devout-but-careless writer, the measure of whose belief was regulated by that of his wishes. But neither the belief nor the wishes of the fathers can alter the truth of history. It will still remain an undoubted fact that the barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who afterward subverted the Roman monarchy, were involved in the darkness of paganism. Even the conversion of Iberia, Armenia, or Ethiopia was not attempted with any degree of success till the scepter was in the hands of an orthodox emperor.¹⁵⁰ Before that time the various accidents of war and commerce might indeed diffuse an imperfect knowledge of the gospel among the

¹⁴⁶ The date of Tertullian's Apology is fixed, in a dissertation of Mosheim, to the year 198.

¹⁴⁷ In the 15th Century there were few who had either inclination or courage to question whether Joseph of Arimathea founded the monastery of Glastonbury, and whether Dionysius, the Areopagite, preferred the residence of Paris to that of Athens.

¹⁴⁸ The stupendous metamorphosis was performed in the 9th Century. See Mariana (Hist. Hispan. 1. vii. c. 13. i. p. 285, edit. Hag. Com. 1733), who, in every sense, imitates Livy, and the honest detection of the legend of James by Dr. Geddes, *Miscellanies*, ii. p. 221.

¹⁴⁹ Justin Martyr, Dialog. cum Tryphon, p. 341. Irenaeus adv. Haeres. 1. i. c. 10. Tertullian adv. Jud. C. 7. Mosheim, p. 203.

¹⁵⁰ Fourth century of Mosheim's *History of the Church*. Many though very confused circumstances that relate to the conversion of Iberia and Armenia may be found in Moses of Chorene. 1. li. c. 78—89.

tribes of Caledonia,¹⁵¹ and among the people of the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates.¹⁵² Beyond the last-mentioned river, Edessa was distinguished by a firm and early adherence to the faith.¹⁵³ From Edessa, the principles of Christianity were easily introduced into the Greek and Syrian cities which obeyed the successors of Artaxerxes. However, they do not appear to have made any deep impression on the minds of the Persians, whose religious system, by the labors of a well-disciplined order of priests, had been constructed with much more art and solidity than the uncertain mythology of Greece and Rome.¹⁵⁴

The Christian-Pagan Ratio

From this impartial though imperfect survey of Christianity's progress, it may perhaps seem probable that the number of its proselytes has been excessively magnified by fear on the one side and by devotion on the other. According to the irreproachable testimony of Origen (*Origen contra Celsum*, l. viii. p. 424), the proportion of the faithful was very small when compared with the multitude of an unbelieving world. However, as we are left without any distinct information, it is impossible to determine, and it is difficult even to conjecture, the real numbers of the primitive Christians. The most favorable calculation, however, that can be deduced from the examples of Antioch and of Rome, will not permit us to imagine that more than a twentieth part of the subjects of the empire had enlisted themselves under the banner of the cross before the important conversion of Constantine. But their habits of faith, zeal, and union, seemed to multiply their numbers. The same causes which contributed to their future increase served to render their actual strength more apparent and more formidable.

Rejection of Christianity By the Wise Men of the 1st and 2nd Centuries

Such is the constitution of civil society that while a few persons are distinguished by riches, honors, and knowledge, the body of the people is condemned to obscurity, ignorance, and poverty. The Christian religion, which addressed itself to the whole human race, must consequently collect a far greater number of proselytes from the lower than from the upper ranks of life. This innocent and natural circumstance has been refined into a very detestable insinuation, which seems to be less strenuously denied by the apologists, than it is urged by the adversaries of the faith. They accused that the new sect of Christians was almost entirely made up of the dregs of society, peasants and mechanics, boys and women, beggars and slaves, the last of whom might sometimes introduce the missionaries into the rich and noble families to which they belonged. These obscure teachers (such was the charge of malice and infidelity) are as mute in public as they are talkative and dogmatic in private. While they cautiously avoid the dangerous encounter of philosophers, they mingle with the crude and illiterate crowd, and insinuate themselves into those minds whom their age, sex, or education has the best

¹⁵¹ According to Tertullian, the Christian faith had penetrated into parts of Britain inaccessible to the Roman armies. About a century afterward, Ossian, son of Fingal, is said to have disputed with one of the foreign missionaries in his extreme old age. The dispute is still extant, in verse, and in the Erse language. Macpherson's *Dissertation on the Antiquity of Ossian's Poems*, p. 10.

¹⁵² The Goths, who ravaged Asia in the reign of Gallienus, carried away great numbers of captives, some of whom were Christians. These became missionaries. Tillemont, *Mem. Eccles.* iv. p. 44.

¹⁵³ The legend of Abgarus, fabulous as it is, affords a decisive proof that, many years before Eusebius wrote his history, the greater part of the inhabitants of Edessa had embraced Christianity. On the contrary, their rivals, the citizens of Carrhae, adhered to the cause of Paganism as late as the 6th Century.

¹⁵⁴ According to Bardesanes (*Euseb. Praspar. Evangel.*) there were some Christians in Persia before the end of the 2nd Century. In the time of Constantine (*Epistle to Sapor*, Vit. 1. iv. c. 13) they composed a flourishing church. Consult Beausobre, *Hist. Critique du Manicheisme*, 1. p. 180, and the *Biblioth. Orient. of Assemani*.

disposed to receive the impression of superstitious terrors.¹⁵⁵

This unfavorable picture, though not devoid of a faint resemblance, betrays, by its dark coloring and distorted features, the pencil of an enemy. As the humble faith of Christ diffused itself through the world, it was embraced by several persons who derived some consequence from the advantages of nature or fortune. Aristides, who presented an eloquent apology to the emperor Hadrian, was an Athenian philosopher (Euseb. list. Eccies. iv. 3; Hier. Epist. 83). Justin Martyr had sought divine knowledge in the schools of Zeno, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Plato, before he fortunately was accosted by the old man, or rather the angel, who turned his attention to the study of the Jewish prophets.¹⁵⁶ Clemens of Alexandria had acquired much various reading in the Greek, and Tertullian in the Latin language. Julius Africanus and Origen possessed a very considerable share of the learning of their times. Although the style of Cyprian is very different from that of Lactantius, we might almost discover that both those writers had been public teachers of rhetoric. Even the study of philosophy was at length introduced among the Christians, but it was not always productive of the most salutary effects. Knowledge was as often the parent of heresy as of devotion, and the description which was designed for the followers of Artemon may, with equal propriety, be applied to the various sects that resisted the successors of the apostles.

They presume to alter the Holy Scriptures, to abandon the ancient rule of faith, and to form their opinions according to the subtle precepts of logic. The science of the church is neglected for the study of geometry, and they lose sight of Heaven while they are employed in measuring the earth. Euclid is perpetually in their hands. Aristotle and Theophrastus are the objects of their admiration; and they express an uncommon reverence for the works of Galen. Their errors are derived from the abuse of the arts and sciences of the infidels, and they corrupt the simplicity of the Gospel by the refinements of human reason.¹⁵⁷

Nor can it be affirmed with truth that the advantages of birth and fortune were always separated from the profession of Christianity. Several Roman citizens were brought before the tribunal of Pliny, and he soon discovered that a great number of persons of every order of men in Bithynia had deserted the religion of their ancestors.¹⁵⁸ His unsuspected testimony may, in this instance, obtain more credit than the bold challenge of Tertullian, when he addresses himself to the fears as well as to the humanity of the proconsul of Africa. Tertullian promised Pliny that if he persisted in his cruel intentions he must decimate Carthage, and that he will find among the guilty many persons of his own rank, senators and matrons of noblest extraction, and the friends or relations of his most intimate friends.¹⁵⁹ It appears, however, that about 40 years afterward the emperor Valerian was persuaded of the truth of this assertion, since in one of his letters he evidently supposes that senators, Roman knights, and ladies of quality were engaged in the Christian sect.—Cyprian. Epist. 79. The church still continued to increase its outward splendor as it lost its internal purity. During Diocletian's reign, the palace, courts of justice, and even the army, concealed a multitude of Christians, who endeavored to reconcile the interests of the present with those of a future life.

And yet these exceptions are either too few in number, or too recent in time, to entirely remove the arrogant supposition that the early Christians were ignorant and obscure. Instead of employing in our

¹⁵⁵ Minucius Foelix, c. 8, with Wowerus's notes. Celsus ap. Origen, l. xii. pp. 138, 142. Julian ap. Cyril. l. vi. p. 206. Edit. Spanheim.

¹⁵⁶ The story is prettily told in Justin's *Dialogues*. Tillemont (Mem. Eccles. ii. c. 334), who relates it after him, is sure that the old man was a disguised angel.

¹⁵⁷ Euseb. v. 28. It may be hoped that none, except the heretics, listened to the complaint of Celsus (ap. Origen, l. ii. p. 77), namely, that the Christians were perpetually correcting and altering their Gospels.

¹⁵⁸ Latin text omitted.

¹⁵⁹ Tertullian ad Scapulam. Yet even his rhetoric rises no higher than to claim a tenth part of Carthage.

defense the fictions of later ages it will be more prudent to convert the occasion of scandal into a subject of edification. Our serious thoughts will suggest to us that the apostles themselves were chosen by Providence among the fishermen of Galilee, and that the lower we depress the earthly condition of the first Christians, the more reason we shall find to admire their merit and success. It is incumbent on us to diligently remember that the kingdom of Heaven was promised to the poor in spirit, and that minds afflicted by calamity and the contempt of mankind cheerfully listen to the divine promise of future happiness. On the other hand, the fortunate are satisfied with the possession of this world, and the wise abuse in doubt and dispute their vain superiority of reason and knowledge.

We stand in need of such reflections to comfort us for the loss of some illustrious characters which in our eyes might have seemed the most worthy of the heavenly present. The names of Seneca, of the elder and the younger Pliny, of Tacitus, Plutarch, Galen, the slave Epictetus, and the emperor Marcus Antoninus, adorn the age in which they flourished, and exalt the dignity of human nature. They filled with glory their respective stations, either in active or contemplative life. Their excellent understandings were improved by study. Philosophy had purified their minds from the prejudices of the popular superstition. And their days were spent in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue. Yet all these wise men (it is no less an object of surprise than of concern) overlooked or rejected the perfection of the Christian system. Their language or their silence equally discover their contempt for the growing sect, which in their time had diffused itself over the Roman empire. Those among them who condescend to mention the Christians, consider them only as obstinate and perverse enthusiasts, who exacted an implicit submission to their mysterious doctrines, without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning.¹⁶⁰

Rejection of Prophecy and Miracles

It is at least doubtful whether any of these philosophers read the apologies which the primitive Christians repeatedly published in behalf of themselves and of their religion. But it is much to be lamented that such a cause was not defended by abler advocates. They expose with superfluous wit and eloquence the extravagance of Polytheism. They interest our compassion by displaying the innocence and sufferings of their injured brethren. But when they would demonstrate the Divine origin of Christianity, they rely more strongly on the Old Testament predictions which announced Christ, rather than the miracles which He performed. Their favorite argument might serve to edify a Christian or to convert a Jew, since both the one and the other acknowledge the authority of those prophecies, and both are obliged, with devout reverence, to search for their sense and their accomplishment. But this mode of persuasion loses much of its weight and influence when it is addressed to those who neither understand nor respect the Mosaic dispensation and the prophetic style.¹⁶¹ In the unskillful hands of Justin and the succeeding apologists, the sublime meaning of the Hebrew oracles evaporates in distant types, affected conceits, and cold allegories. Even their authenticity was rendered suspicious to an unenlightened Gentile, by the mixture of pious forgeries which, under the names of Orpheus, Hermes, and the Sibyls,¹⁶² were obtruded on him as of equal value with the genuine inspirations of Heaven. The

¹⁶⁰ Dr. Lardner, in his first and second volume of Jewish and Christian testimonies, collects and illustrates those of Pliny the younger, Tacitus, Galen, Marcus Antoninus, and perhaps Epictetus (for it is doubtful whether that philosopher means to speak of the Christians). The new sect is totally unnoticed by Seneca, the elder Pliny, and Plutarch.

¹⁶¹ If the famous prophecy of the Seventy Weeks had been alleged to a Roman philosopher, would he not have replied in the words of Cicero, "Who finally predicted the existence of the age rather the month and date?" *De Divinatione*, ii. 30. Observe with what irreverence Lucian (in *Alexandro*, c. 13) and his friend Celsus (ap. Origen, L vii. p. 327) express themselves concerning the Hebrew prophets.

¹⁶² The Philosophers, who derided the more ancient predictions of the Sibyls, would easily have detected the Jewish and Christian forgeries, which have been so triumphantly quoted by the fathers, from Justin Martyr to Lactantius. When the

adoption of fraud and fallacious reasoning in the defense of revelation too often reminds us of the injudicious conduct of those poets who load their invulnerable heroes with a useless weight of cumbersome and brittle armor.

But how shall we excuse the lazy inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses? During the age of Christ, the apostles, and their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable miracles. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the wise men of Greece and Rome turned aside from all of these, and, pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared oblivious to any change in the moral or physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberius, the whole earth,¹⁶³ or at least a celebrated province of the Roman empire,¹⁶⁴ was involved in a supernatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, curiosity, and devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history.¹⁶⁵ It happened during the lifetime of Seneca and the elder Pliny, who must have experienced the immediate effects, or received the earliest intelligence of the miracle. In a laborious work, each of these philosophers has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which their indefatigable curiosity could collect.¹⁶⁶ Both the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe. A distinct chapter of Pliny (*Natural History*, ii. 30) is designed for eclipses of an extraordinary nature and unusual duration. However, he contents himself with describing the singular defect of light which followed the murder of Caesar, when, during the greater part of the year, the orb of the sun appeared pale and without splendor. This season of obscurity, which cannot surely be compared with the preternatural darkness of the Crucifixion, had been already celebrated by most of the poets¹⁶⁷ and historians of that memorable age.¹⁶⁸

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Sibylline verses had performed their appointed task, they, like the system of the millennium, were quietly laid aside. The Christian Sibyl had unluckily predicted the ruin of Rome in the year 195.

¹⁶³ The fathers, as they are drawn out in battle-array by Dom Calmet (*Dissertations sur la Bible*, pp. 295—308), seem to cover the whole earth with darkness, in which they are followed by most of the moderns.

¹⁶⁴ Origen on *Matthew*. c. 27, and a few modern critics—Beza, Le Clerc, Lardner, etc.—are desirous of confining it to the land of Judea.

¹⁶⁵ The celebrated passage of Phlegon is now wisely abandoned. When Tertullian assures the Pagans that the mention of the miracle is found in Arcanis (not Archivis) vestris (see his Apology, c. 21), he probably appeals to the Sibylline verses, which relate it exactly in the words of the Gospel.

¹⁶⁶ Seneca Quaest. Natur. i. 1, 15, vi. 1, vii 17. Pliny Hist. Natur. 1. ii.

¹⁶⁷ Virgil Georgic. i. 466. Tibullus, l. i. Eleg. v. ver. 75. Ovid Metamorph. xv. 782. Lucan. Pharsal. i. 540. The last of these poets places this prodigy before the civil war.

¹⁶⁸ See a public letter of M. Antony in Josephus' *Antiquities* xiv. 12. Plutarch in Caesar. p. 411. Appian, Bell. Civil. 1. iv. Dion Cassius, l. xlv. p. 431. Julius Obsequens, c. 128. His little treatise is an abstract of Livy's miracles.