

Chapter XV: Progress Of The Christian Religion.--Part VI.

V. 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, intrusted not only with the spiritual functions, but even with the temporal 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 perfidious 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. If 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 from the infusion of spiritual zeal.

The government of the church has often been the subject, as well as the prize, of religious contention. The hostile disputants of Rome, of Paris, of Oxford, and of Geneva, have alike struggled to reduce the primitive and apostolic model [104] to the respective standards of their own policy. The few who have pursued this inquiry with more candor and impartiality, are of opinion, [105] 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 approbation, was adopted for the use of the first century, may be discovered from the practice of Jerusalem, of Ephesus, or of Corinth. The societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire, were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence

and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. The want of discipline and human learning was supplied by the occasional assistance of the prophets, [106] who were called to that function without distinction of age, of sex, [1061] or of natural abilities, and who, as often as they felt the divine impulse, poured forth the effusions of the Spirit in 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 train of disorders. [107] As the institution of prophets became useless, and even pernicious, their powers were withdrawn, and their office abolished. The public functions of religion were solely intrusted to the established ministers of the church, the bishops and the presbyters; two appellations which, in their first origin, appear to have distinguished the same office and the same order of persons. The name of Presbyter was expressive of their age, or rather of their gravity and wisdom. The title of Bishop denoted their inspection over the faith and manners of the Christians who were committed to their pastoral care. In proportion to the respective numbers of the faithful, a larger or smaller number of these episcopal presbyters guided each infant congregation with equal authority and with united counsels. [108]

[Footnote 104: The aristocratical party in France, as well as in England, has strenuously maintained the divine origin of bishops.

But the Calvinistical presbyters were impatient of a superior; and the Roman Pontiff refused to acknowledge an equal. See Fra Paolo.]

[Footnote 105: In the history of the Christian hierarchy, I have, for the most part, followed the learned and candid Mosheim.]

[Footnote 106: For the prophets of the primitive church, see Mosheim, *Dissertationes ad Hist. Eccles. pertinentes*, tom. ii. p. 132--208.]

[Footnote 1061: St. Paul distinctly reproveth the intrusion of females into the prophets office. 1 Cor. xiv. 34, 35. 1 Tim. ii. 11.--M.]

[Footnote 107: See the epistles of St. Paul, and of Clemens, to the Corinthians. * Note: The first ministers established in the church were the deacons, appointed at Jerusalem, seven in number; they were charged with the distribution of the alms; even females had a share in this employment. After the deacons came the elders or priests, charged with the maintenance of order and decorum in the community, and to act every where in its name. The bishops were afterwards charged to watch over the faith and the instruction of the disciples: the apostles themselves appointed several bishops. Tertullian, (*adv. Marium*, c. v.) Clement of Alexandria, and many fathers of the second and third century, do not permit us to doubt this fact. The equality of rank between these different functionaries did not prevent their functions being, even in their origin, distinct; they became subsequently still more so. See Plank, *Geschichte der Christ. Kirch. Verfassung.*, vol. i. p. 24.--G. On

this extremely obscure subject, which has been so much perplexed by passion and interest, it is impossible to justify any opinion without entering into long and controversial details.----It must be admitted, in opposition to Plank, that in the New Testament, several words are sometimes indiscriminately used. (Acts xx. v. 17, comp. with 28 Tit. i. 5 and 7. Philip. i. 1.) But it is as clear, that as soon as we can discern the form of church government, at a period closely bordering upon, if not within, the apostolic age, it appears with a bishop at the head of each community, holding some superiority over the presbyters. Whether he was, as Gibbon from Mosheim supposes, merely an elective head of the College of Presbyters, (for this we have, in fact, no valid authority,) or whether his distinct functions were established on apostolic authority, is still contested. The universal submission to this episcopacy, in every part of the Christian world appears to me strongly to favor the latter view.--M.]

[Footnote 108: Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity, l. vii.]

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 of 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 presbyterians 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 appellation of Presbyter; and 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. [109] The advantages of this episcopal form of government, which appears to have been introduced before the end of the first century, [110] 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, had acquired in a very early period the sanction of antiquity, [111] 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. [112] It is needless to observe, that the pious and humble presbyters, who were first dignified with the episcopal title, could not possess, and would probably have rejected, the power and pomp which now encircles the tiara of the Roman pontiff, or the mitre 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 of a temporal nature. [113] It consisted in the administration of the sacraments and discipline of the church, the superintendency of religious ceremonies, which imperceptibly increased in number and variety, the consecration of ecclesiastical ministers, to whom the bishop assigned their respective functions, the management of the public fund, and the determination of all such differences as the faithful were

unwilling to expose before the tribunal of an idolatrous judge. These powers, during a short period, 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 episcopal chair became vacant by death, a new president was chosen among the presbyters by the suffrages of the whole congregation, every member of which supposed himself invested with a sacred and sacerdotal character. [114]

[Footnote 109: See Jerome and Titum, c. i. and Epistol. 85, (in the Benedictine edition, 101,) and the elaborate apology of Blondel, pro sententia Hieronymi. The ancient state, as it is described by Jerome, of the bishop and presbyters of Alexandria, receives a remarkable confirmation from the patriarch Euty chius, (Annal. tom. i. p. 330, Vers Pocock;) whose testimony I know not how to reject, in spite of all the objections of the learned Pearson in his *Vindiciae Ignatianae*, part i. c. 11.]

[Footnote 110: See the introduction to the Apocalypse. Bishops, under the name of angels, were already instituted in the 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 episcopacy either at Corinth or Rome.]

[Footnote 111: *Nulla Ecclesia sine Episcopo*, has been a fact as well as

a maxim since the time of Tertullian and Irenaeus.]

[Footnote 112: After we have passed the difficulties of the first century, we find the episcopal government universally established, till it was interrupted by the republican genius of the Swiss and German reformers.]

[Footnote 113: See Mosheim in the first and second centuries. Ignatius (ad Smyrnaeos, c. 3, &c.) is fond of exalting the episcopal dignity. Le Clerc (Hist. Eccles. p. 569) very bluntly censures his conduct, Mosheim, with a more critical judgment, (p. 161,) suspects the purity even of the smaller epistles.]

[Footnote 114: Nonne et Laici sacerdotes sumus? Tertullian, Exhort. ad Castitat. c. 7. As the human heart is still the same, several of the observations which Mr. Hume has made on Enthusiasm, (Essays, vol. i. p. 76, quarto edit.) may be applied even to real inspiration. * Note: This expression was employed by the earlier Christian writers in the sense used by St. Peter, 1 Ep ii. 9. It was the sanctity and virtue not the power of priesthood, in which all Christians were to be equally distinguished.--M.]

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; and although the most distant of these little states maintained a

mutual as well as friendly intercourse of letters and deputations, 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. Towards the end of the second century, the churches of Greece and Asia adopted the useful institutions of provincial synods, [1141] 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 presbyters, and moderated by the presence of a listening multitude. [115] Their decrees, which were styled Canons, regulated every important controversy of faith and discipline; and it was natural to believe that a liberal effusion 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 foederative republic. [116]

[Footnote 1141: The synods were not the first means taken by the insulated churches to enter into communion and to assume a corporate character. The dioceses were first formed by the union of several country churches with a church in a city: many churches in one city uniting among themselves, or joining a more considerable church, became metropolitan. The dioceses were not formed before the beginning of the second century: before that time the Christians had not established sufficient churches in the country to stand in need of that union. It is towards the middle of the same century that we discover the first traces of the metropolitan constitution. (Probably the country churches were founded in general by missionaries from those in the city, and would preserve a natural connection with the parent church.)--M. ----The provincial synods did not commence till towards the middle of the third century, and were not the first synods. History gives us distinct notions of the synods, held towards the end of the second century, at Ephesus at Jerusalem, at Pontus, and at Rome, to put an end to the disputes which had arisen between the Latin and Asiatic churches about the celebration of Easter. But these synods were not subject to any regular form or periodical return; this regularity was first established with the provincial synods, which were formed by a union of the bishops of a district, subject to a metropolitan. Plank, p. 90. Geschichte der Christ. Kirch. Verfassung--G]

[Footnote 115: Acta Concil. Carthag. apud Cyprian. edit. Fell, p. 158. This council was composed of eighty-seven bishops from the provinces of Mauritania, Numidia, and Africa; some presbyters and deacons assisted at

the assembly; praesente plebis maxima parte.]

[Footnote 116: Aguntur praeterea per Graecias illas, certis in locis concilia, &c Tertullian de Jejuniis, c. 13. The African mentions it as a recent and foreign institution. The coalition of the Christian churches is very ably explained by Mosheim, p. 164 170.]

As the legislative authority of the particular churches was insensibly superseded by the use of councils, the bishops obtained by their alliance a much larger share of executive and arbitrary power; and 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 third century imperceptibly changed the language of exhortation into that of command, scattered the seeds of future usurpations, and supplied, by scripture allegories and declamatory rhetoric, their deficiency of force and of reason. They exalted the unity and power of the church, as it was represented in the Episcopal Office, of which every bishop enjoyed an equal and undivided portion. [117] Princes and magistrates, it was often repeated, might boast an earthly claim to a transitory dominion; it was the episcopal authority alone which was derived from the Deity, 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; and if, in the administration of

the church, they still consulted the judgment of the presbyters, or the inclination of the people, they most carefully inculcated 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 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. [118] This obedience, however, was not imposed without some efforts on one side, and some resistance on the other. The democratical 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 ignominious epithets of faction and schism; and 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. [119]

[Footnote 117: Cyprian, in his admired treatise *De Unitate Ecclesiae*. p. 75--86]

[Footnote 118: We may appeal to the whole tenor of Cyprian's conduct, of his doctrine, and of his epistles. Le Clerc, in a short life of Cyprian, (*Bibliothèque Universelle*, tom. xii. p. 207--378,) has laid him open with great freedom and accuracy.]

[Footnote 119: If Novatus, Felicissimus, &c., 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 veracity. For a very just account of these obscure quarrels, see Mosheim, p. 497--512.]

The same causes which at first had destroyed the equality of the presbyters introduced among the bishops a preeminence of rank, and from thence a superiority of jurisdiction. As often as in the spring and autumn they met in provincial synod, the difference of personal merit and reputation was very sensibly 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 invidious distinction; the office of perpetual presidents in the councils of each province was conferred on the bishops of the principal city; and these aspiring prelates, who soon acquired the lofty titles of Metropolitans and Primates, secretly prepared themselves to usurp over their episcopal brethren the same authority which the bishops had so lately assumed above the college of presbyters. [120] Nor was it long before an emulation of preeminence and power prevailed among the Metropolitans themselves, each of them affecting to display, in the most pompous terms, the temporal honors and advantages of the city over which he presided; the numbers and opulence of the Christians who were subject to their pastoral care; the saints and martyrs who had arisen among them; and 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, to whom the foundation of their church was ascribed. [121] 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, the most numerous, and, in regard to the West, the 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, of Ephesus, or of Corinth, the banks of the Tyber were supposed to have been honored with the preaching and martyrdom of the two most eminent among the apostles; [122] and 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. [123] The bishops of Italy and of the provinces were disposed to allow them a primacy of order and association (such was their very accurate expression) in the Christian aristocracy. [124] 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, than she had formerly done to her temporal, dominion. The patriotic Cyprian, who ruled with the most absolute sway the church of Carthage and the provincial synods, opposed with resolution and success the ambition of the Roman pontiff, artfully connected his own cause with that of the eastern bishops, and, like Hannibal, sought out new allies in the heart of Asia. [125] If this Punic war was carried on without any effusion of blood, it was owing much

less to the moderation than to the weakness of the contending prelates. Invectives and excommunications were their only weapons; and these, during the progress of the whole controversy, they hurled against each other with equal fury and devotion. The hard necessity of censuring either a pope, or a saint and martyr, distresses the modern Catholics whenever they are obliged to relate the particulars of a dispute in which the champions of religion indulged such passions as seem much more adapted to the senate or to the camp. [126]

[Footnote 120: Mosheim, p. 269, 574. Dupin, *Antiquae Eccles. Disciplin.* p. 19, 20.]

[Footnote 121: Tertullian, in a distinct treatise, has pleaded against the heretics the right of prescription, as it was held by the apostolic churches.]

[Footnote 122: The journey of St. Peter to Rome is mentioned by most of the ancients, (see Eusebius, ii. 25,) maintained by all the Catholics, allowed by some Protestants, (see Pearson and Dodwell de Success. *Episcop. Roman.*) but has been vigorously attacked by Spanheim, (*Miscellanes Sacra*, iii. 3.) According to Father Hardouin, the monks of the thirteenth century, who composed the *Aeneid*, represented St. Peter under the allegorical character of the Trojan hero. * Note: It is quite clear that, strictly speaking, the church of Rome was not founded by either of these apostles. St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans proves undeniably the flourishing state of the church before his visit to the

city; and many Roman Catholic writers have given up the impracticable task of reconciling with chronology any visit of St. Peter to Rome before the end of the reign of Claudius, or the beginning of that of Nero.--M.]

[Footnote 123: 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 imperfect in Greek, Latin, Italian, &c., and totally unintelligible in our Teutonic languages. * Note: It is exact in Syro-Chaldaic, the language in which it was spoken by Jesus Christ. (St. Matt. xvi. 17.) Peter was called Cephas; and cepha signifies base, foundation, rock--G.]

[Footnote 124: Irenaeus adv. Haereses, iii. 3. Tertullian de Praescription. c. 36, and Cyprian, Epistol. 27, 55, 71, 75. Le Clerc (Hist. Eccles. p. 764) and Mosheim (p. 258, 578) labor in the interpretation of these passages. But the loose and rhetorical style of the fathers often appears favorable to the pretensions of Rome.]

[Footnote 125: See the sharp epistle from Firmilianus, bishop of Caesarea, to Stephen, bishop of Rome, ap. Cyprian, Epistol. 75.]

[Footnote 126: Concerning this dispute of the rebaptism of heretics, see the epistles of Cyprian, and the seventh book of Eusebius.]

The progress of the ecclesiastical authority gave birth to the memorable

distinction of the laity and of the clergy, which had been unknown to the Greeks and Romans. [127] The former of these appellations comprehended the body of the Christian people; the latter, according to the signification of the word, was appropriated to the chosen portion that had been set apart for the service of religion; 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, which (under the most artful disguises) could insinuate itself into the breasts of bishops and martyrs, animated them to increase the number of their subjects, and to enlarge the limits of the Christian empire. They were destitute of any temporal force, and they were for a long time discouraged and oppressed, rather than assisted, by the civil magistrate; but they had acquired, and they employed within their own society, the two most efficacious instruments of government, rewards and punishments; the former derived from the pious liberality, the latter from the devout apprehensions, of the faithful.

[Footnote 127: For the origin of these words, see Mosheim, p. 141.

Spanheim, *Hist. Ecclesiast.* p. 633. The distinction of Clerus and laicus was established before the time of Tertullian.]