

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

From this impartial though imperfect survey of the progress of Christianity, 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, [183] the proportion of the faithful was very inconsiderable, when compared with the multitude of an unbelieving world; but, 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 themselves under the banner of the cross before the important conversion of Constantine. But their habits of faith, of zeal, and of union, seemed to multiply their numbers; and the same causes which contributed to their future increase, served to render their actual strength more apparent and more formidable.

[Footnote 183: Origen contra Celsum, l. viii. p. 424.]

Such is the constitution of civil society, that whilst a few persons are distinguished by riches, by honors, and by 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 superior ranks of life. This innocent and natural

circumstance has been improved into a very odious imputation, which seems to be less strenuously denied by the apologists, than it is urged by the adversaries, of the faith; that the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of 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 loquacious and dogmatical in private. Whilst they cautiously avoid the dangerous encounter of philosophers, they mingle with the rude and illiterate crowd, and insinuate themselves into those minds, whom their age, their sex, or their education, has the best disposed to receive the impression of superstitious terrors. [184]

[Footnote 184: Minucius Felix, c. 8, with Wowerus's notes. Celsus ap. Origen, l. iii. p. 138, 142. Julian ap. Cyril. l. vi. p. 206, edit. Spanheim.]

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. [185] Justin Martyr had sought divine knowledge in the schools of Zeno, of Aristotle, of Pythagoras, and of 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. [186] 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; and 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 subtile 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." [187]

[Footnote 185: Euseb. Hist. Eccles. iv. 3. Hieronym. Epist. 83.]

[Footnote 186: The story is prettily told in Justin's Dialogues.

Tillemont, (Mem Ecclesiast. tom. ii. p. 384,) who relates it after him is sure that the old man was a disguised angel.]

[Footnote 187: Eusebius, v. 28. It may be hoped, that none, except the heretics, gave occasion to the complaint of Celsus, (ap. Origen, l. ii. p. 77,) that the Christians were perpetually correcting and altering their Gospels. * Note: Origen states in reply, that he knows of none who had altered the Gospels except the Marcionites, the Valentinians, and perhaps some followers of Lucanus.--M.]

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. [188] 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 the humanity of the proconsul of Africa, by assuring him, that if he persists 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 nobles' extraction, and the friends or relations of his most intimate friends. [189] It appears, however, that about forty years afterwards the emperor Valerian was persuaded of the truth of this assertion, since in one of his rescripts he evidently supposes, that senators, Roman knights, and ladies of quality, were engaged in the Christian sect. [190] The church still continued to increase its

outward splendor as it lost its internal purity; and, in the reign of Diocletian, the palace, the 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.

[Footnote 188: Plin. Epist. x. 97. Fuerunt alii similis amentiae, cives Romani---Multi enim omnis aetatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus, etiam vocuntur in periculum et vocabuntur.]

[Footnote 189: Tertullian ad Scapulum. Yet even his rhetoric rises no higher than to claim a tenth part of Carthage.]

[Footnote 190: Cyprian. Epist. 70.]

And yet these exceptions are either too few in number, or too recent in time, entirely to remove the imputation of ignorance and obscurity which has been so arrogantly cast on the first proselytes of Christianity. [1901] Instead of employing in our defence 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 temporal condition of the first Christians, the more reason we shall find to admire their merit and success. It is incumbent on us diligently to 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; while, on the contrary, 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.

[Footnote 1901: This incomplete enumeration ought to be increased by the names of several Pagans converted at the dawn of Christianity, and whose conversion weakens the reproach which the historian appears to support. Such are, the Proconsul Sergius Paulus, converted at Paphos, (Acts xiii. 7--12.) Dionysius, member of the Areopagus, converted with several others, at Athens, (Acts xvii. 34;) several persons at the court of Nero, (Philip. iv 22;) Erastus, receiver at Corinth, (Rom. xvi.23;) some Asiarchs, (Acts xix. 31) As to the philosophers, we may add Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Hegesippus, Melito, Miltiades, Pantaenus, Ammenius, all distinguished for their genius and learning.--G.]

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, of Plutarch, of Galen, of the slave Epictetus, and of 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 sages (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 condescended 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. [191]

[Footnote 191: Dr. Lardner, in his first and second volumes of Jewish and Christian testimonies, collects and illustrates those of Pliny the younger, of Tacitus, of Galen, of Marcus Antoninus, and perhaps of 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.]

It is at least doubtful whether any of these philosophers perused the apologies [1911] 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 insist much more strongly on the predictions which announced, than on the miracles

which accompanied, the appearance of the Messiah. 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. [192] In the unskilful hands of Justin and of the succeeding apologists, the sublime meaning of the Hebrew oracles evaporates in distant types, affected conceits, and cold allegories; and 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, [193] were obtruded on him as of equal value with the genuine inspirations of Heaven. The adoption of fraud and sophistry in the defence 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.

[Footnote 1911: The emperors Hadrian, Antoninus &c., read with astonishment the apologies of Justin Martyr, of Aristides, of Melito, &c. (See St. Hieron. ad mag. orat. Orosius, lviii. c. 13.) Eusebius says expressly, that the cause of Christianity was defended before the senate, in a very elegant discourse, by Apollonius the Martyr.--G. ----Gibbon, in his severer spirit of criticism, may have questioned the authority of Jerome and Eusebius. There are some difficulties about Apollonius, which Heinichen (note in loc. Eusebii) would solve, by suppose lag him to have

been, as Jerome states, a senator.--M.]

[Footnote 192: 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, "Quae tandem ista auguratio est, annorum potius quam aut raensium aut dierum?" 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.]

[Footnote 193: 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 Sibylline verses had performed their appointed task, they, like the system of the millennium, were quietly laid aside. The Christian Sybil had unluckily fixed the ruin of Rome for the year 195, A. U. C. 948.]

But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences which were represented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, daemons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned

aside from the awful spectacle, and, pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberius, the whole earth, [194] or at least a celebrated province of the Roman empire, [195] was involved in a preternatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history. [196] 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 prodigy. Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. [197] 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 [198] is designed for eclipses of an extraordinary nature and unusual duration; but he contents himself with describing the singular defect of light which followed the murder of Caesar, when, during the greatest part of a year, the orb of the sun appeared pale and without splendor. The season of obscurity, which cannot surely be compared with the preternatural darkness of the Passion, had been already celebrated by most of the poets [199] and historians of that memorable age. [200]

[Footnote 194: The fathers, as they are drawn out in battle array by Dom Calmet, (*Dissertations sur la Bible*, tom. iii. p. 295--308,) seem to cover the whole earth with darkness, in which they are followed by most

of the moderns.]

[Footnote 195: Origen ad Matth. c. 27, and a few modern critics, Beza, Le Clerc, Lardner, &c., are desirous of confining it to the land of Judea.]

[Footnote 196: The celebrated passage of Phlegon is now wisely abandoned. When Tertullian assures the Pagans that the mention of the prodigy 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. * Note: According to some learned theologians a misunderstanding of the text in the Gospel has given rise to this mistake, which has employed and wearied so many laborious commentators, though Origen had already taken the pains to preinform them. The expression does not mean, they assert, an eclipse, but any kind of obscurity occasioned in the atmosphere, whether by clouds or any other cause. As this obscuration of the sun rarely took place in Palestine, where in the middle of April the sky was usually clear, it assumed, in the eyes of the Jews and Christians, an importance conformable to the received notion, that the sun concealed at midday was a sinister presage. See Amos viii. 9, 10. The word is often taken in this sense by contemporary writers; the Apocalypse says the sun was concealed, when speaking of an obscuration caused by smoke and dust. (Revel. ix. 2.) Moreover, the Hebrew word ophal, which in the LXX. answers to the Greek, signifies any darkness; and the Evangelists, who have modelled the sense of their expressions by those of the LXX., must

have taken it in the same latitude. This darkening of the sky usually precedes earthquakes. (Matt. xxvii. 51.) The Heathen authors furnish us a number of examples, of which a miraculous explanation was given at the time. See Ovid. ii. v. 33, l. xv. v. 785. Pliny, Hist. Nat. l. ii. c 30.

Wetstein has collected all these examples in his edition of the New Testament. We need not, then, be astonished at the silence of the Pagan authors concerning a phenomenon which did not extend beyond Jerusalem, and which might have nothing contrary to the laws of nature; although the Christians and the Jews may have regarded it as a sinister presage. See Michaelia Notes on New Testament, v. i. p. 290. Paulus, Commentary on New Testament, iii. p. 760.--G.]

[Footnote 197: Seneca, Quaest. Natur. l. i. 15, vi. l. vii. 17. Plin. Hist. Natur. l. ii.]

[Footnote 198: Plin. Hist. Natur. ii. 30.]

[Footnote 199: 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.]

[Footnote 200: See a public epistle of M. Antony in Joseph. Antiquit. xiv. 12. Plutarch in Caesar. p. 471. Appian. Bell. Civil. l. iv. Dion Cassius, l. xlv. p. 431. Julius Obsequens, c. 128. His little treatise is an abstract of Livy's prodigies.]