

LECTURE III.

The insinuation of Gibbon, that the Church was recruited, 1°. By abandoned characters, suggested by Celsus, inconsistent with the primitive discipline, the probation before Baptism, the responsibility attaching to the sponsors, the appeal of the Apologists to the pure morality of the Christians, their charges of laxity against the heretics and the philosophers, the treatment of the lapsed, the frequency of excommunication : 2°. By mercenary persons, repudiated by Origen, inconsistent with the precautions used against mercenary motives and the maladministration of the Church fund, and with a passage in the Constitutions : 3°. By foundlings, incapable of being substantiated by any positive evidence. Probability that it might happen occasionally. Negative proof that it did not happen systematically. How the Church fund was really expended.

I CONTINUE my investigation of the character of the early Christians, as discoverable in the writings of the early Fathers—a topic bearing upon the *Evidences* in various ways, and at the same time tributary to the history of the Primitive Church. I have shown that their numbers were much more considerable, and their condition much less exclusively mean and low, than the enemies of Christianity have represented them to be. But there are some other arguments to their disparagement which I have not yet noticed, that touch upon these two features of the Primitive Church, though in a manner still further to misrepresent it. It is said, that you may account for such numbers of Christians as there were, 1st, by the free invitations that were given to the most abandoned characters to join their ranks ; and 2nd, by the bribes that were held out to all. I will take these two objections in their order ; and I am the more disposed to examine them, as in so doing, I shall incidentally have to lay before you much of the discipline of the early Church.

You will remember, no doubt, a remarkable passage in the History of the Decline and Fall, in which the first of these insinuations is thus insidiously conveyed. “It is a very ancient reproach, suggested by the ignorance or the malice of infidelity, that the Christians, allured 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 honour, as it did to the increase of the Church."¹ This accusation, that the Christians in the first instance swelled their ranks by very readily admitting into them the outcasts of society, who on a slight persuasion were prepared to express a touch of remorse, and be baptized, appears to have been suggested to this author by a hint from Celsus, which transpires in Origen's treatise against that unbeliever,² and to have been improved by Gibbon. There is, indeed, a history told of St. John, by Clemens in his "Quis dives salvetur,"³ which tradition, he says, had preserved; that St. John, after his return from Patmos visited the Churches in the neighbourhood of Ephesus—that on that occasion he consigned to the care of the Bishop of one of those Churches (Smyrna, it is supposed) a youth, whom he had met with, of some promise—that the Bishop undertook the charge—received him into his house—nurtured, trained, and finally baptized him—that after this, the Bishop having lost sight of him, the youth got into bad company, and became eventually a captain of banditti—that after a season St. John returned to those parts—inquired after the young man—heard his history—reproached the Bishop with neglect—and went in pursuit of him—that the youth on recognising him at first fled from him, but persuaded to stay and implored to turn again to Christ, he at length consented with bitter tears, baptized by them, as it were, a second time—that accordingly the Apostle, after praying, and after frequent fastings with the penitent, restored him to the Church before he went away; and left him a signal example of genuine repentance. But this case does not support Gibbon's reproach, if, indeed, it occurred to him; for the party was not received into the Church at first till after due examination and instruction, and was at that time of irreproachable character; nor is he reported to have been reconciled with the Church, even by an Apostle, till after deep and protracted humiliation.

¹ Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 316.

² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 59.

³ Clem. Alex. *Quis dives salvetur*, § xlii. pp. 959, 960.

The truth is, the whole stream of primitive testimony runs counter to this hypothesis of the sceptic. If the Church was so anxious to multiply her members at any rate; and provided she had recruits cared not to what class they belonged, how came she to insist on so much probation, as she did, before she admitted them? The barriers she set up were many; and were evidently constructed for the express purpose of keeping improper persons out. Candidates for Baptism were most carefully prepared. There seems to have been an interval even before they were allowed to become catechumens: an interval, during which they were called "auditores," hearers,¹ or "novitioli," novices²; and a Lector or Reader was appointed to teach them.³ After this, they were pronounced catechumens; but before admission even into this humble class they had to make a profession similar to that now made at Baptism,⁴ a profession in which they declared a belief in the words of the Christian law, and in which they renounced the devil and his pomp and his angels (the very phraseology, you see, still in use⁵). Then, whilst they were in the condition of catechumens, *oral* and other elementary instruction was regularly imparted to them, as the very name implies; and allusions to the practice abound in the Fathers; indeed, this quiet, but laborious process it was, that no doubt under God laid the foundations of the Church; and is one which can never safely be dispensed with in any age of it—γάλα μὲν ἢ κατήχησις, οἶονεὶ πρωτῆ ψυχῆς τροφὴ νοηθήσεται,⁶ "milk must be understood to be catechizing, the soul's first food, as it were," is the language of Clemens Alexandrinus. The period during which the catechumen continued in that state, was in the time of the Constitutions three years⁷; and it is not improbable that the interval during which the catechumen was undergoing preparation for Baptism is implied in the expression in the Epistle to the Hebrews,⁸ μὴ πάλιν θεμέλιον καταβαλλόμενοι . . . βαπτισμῶν διδαχῆς—not as our translation has it, "laying again the foundation . . . of the doctrine of Baptisms," but of the "teaching of Baptisms;" the previous instruction, which might well be called "the

¹ Tertullian, De Pœnitentiâ, c. vi.

² Ibid. ³ Cyprian, Ep. xxiv.

⁴ Tertullian, De Coronâ, c. iiii.

⁵ De Spectaculis, c. iv.

⁶ Clem. Alex. Stromat. V. § x. p. 685.

⁷ Τρία ἔτη κατηχέσθω.—Constit. VIII. c. xxxii.

⁸ Heb. vi. 1, 2.

principles of the doctrine of Christ,"¹ or "the foundation."² Then after being thus maturely prepared for Baptism, he was called upon to make the same profession of faith and duty as before, a second time, previous to the administration of the Sacrament itself.³ What could be more remote from a precipitate canvassing for recruits of any description, however abandoned, than all this? Neither were these all the precautions observed. Sponsors were required, who should look to the parties fulfilling their promises; and should vouch for their character and circumstances. Tertullian evidently considers the office as one of great charge: so much so, that on one occasion, he urges some delay in the administration of the rite of Baptism to children, on the ground that sponsors ought not to be loaded with needless responsibility; seeing that having so long time to continue in the office (supposing the party baptized to be an infant), they might die before they could fulfil the duties they had undertaken; or might be deceived in the disposition of the child.⁴ And the Apostolical Constitutions regard these sponsors as provided in a great measure to afford guarantees for the character of the catechumen.⁵ "Let those who first come to the holy mystery be led by the Deacons to the Bishop or to the Presbyters; and let them examine into the reasons wherefore they are come to the Word of the Lord. And let *those who bring them bear witness unto them, knowing accurately what concerns them.* And let their manners and life be examined into, and whether they be slaves or freemen." Whence could all this precaution have originated, but from a very anxious wish on the part of the authorities of the Church to keep it pure, rather than to keep it full? And how well these prudential measures answered is testified by the fact of which the Apologists repeatedly boast, and challenge their adversaries to dispute it, that Christians were never found in the calendar of criminals.⁶ But is it credible that such a character could have been maintained by them as a body, had they consisted in any consider-

¹ Heb. vi. 1.

² Ibid. See Bp. Pearson's Minor Theological Works, vol. ii. p. 45. Concio. IV.

³ Tertullian, De Spectaculis, c. xiii. and De Corona, c. iii.

⁴ Quid enim necesse est, sponsors

etiam periculo ingeri? quia et ipsi per mortalitatem destitute promissiones suas possunt, et proventu malæ indolis falli.—De Baptismo, c. xviii.

⁵ Constitut. VIII. c. xxxii.

⁶ Tertullian, Apol. c. xlv.; Minucius Felix, Octav. c. xxxv.

able proportion of such converts as is here alleged? Would there not of necessity have been many backsliders in such a community? And, indeed, Origen flatly denies the fact, affirming expressly, that it was not true that the majority of Christian converts consisted of reformed rakes; but on the contrary, that those whose consciences were clearest were best disposed to accept a Gospel, which held out such rewards for the good.¹ Besides, so far from exhibiting a desire to catch recruits by any unworthy concessions, the early Christians betray the very contrary tendency. Irenæus makes it a matter of charge against the Valentinians, that they grafted their religion on heathenism, in order to win proselytes.² Would he have ventured on this reproach, had the Church itself beat up for converts, by offering Baptism upon easy terms to every outcast? Tertullian is singularly animated against the heretics for the latitudinarian and popular arts they exercised in order to swell their congregations. "Nowhere is promotion more easy than in the camp of the rebels; for to be found there is enough to secure advancement;"³ with much more to the same effect. He would scarcely have spoken thus, had he felt that the heretics could recriminate. Indeed, Origen himself, in animadverting upon this and similar charges advanced by Celsus, appeals, as I have been doing, to the cautious discrimination used by the Christians in their admission of candidates to their assemblies, the classes into which they divided them, and the exceptions they made to them: their practice in this respect, says he, contrasting remarkably with that of the Grecian philosophers, who were only too ready to welcome to their benches all who would present themselves.⁴

Again, the rigour with which the early Church treated the lapse of those she had succeeded in securing to herself as members; the severity with which she excluded them from her body after delinquency, argues that she was not intent upon improving her nominal muster-rolls, but upon having all who belonged to her faithful and true. How easily does she allow the communion with her, which Baptism established, to be forfeited; and the relation accordingly to cease—public

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 65.

² Irenæus, II. c. xiv. § 8.

³ Tertull., *De Præscript. Hæret.* c. xli.

⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 51.

absolution of the Church to be conceded but once,¹ if, indeed once, after deadly and wilful sin²—no encouragement offered to accept it, till after severe mortification undergone. Cyprian is most resolute upon this point: keenly reproves certain Presbyters, who, from a desire to be popular, had received again the Lapsed, prematurely as he thought.³ They were unmindful, says he, of the Gospel, who so acted.⁴ He reproaches the heretics with this facility of restoring to their favour parties who had disgraced themselves.⁵ He would have obstacles thrown in the way of their reception as penitents. They must wait till the Bishop, Clergy and people had been convened.⁶ He would relax so far as that they should not be suffered to *die* without the Pax of the Church being conceded to them.⁷ And in one place he speaks incidentally of this probation having lasted three years⁸; as Origen does of its extending to a longer period than that assigned to the first process of conversion to Christianity.⁹ Even then, and when all this preliminary ordeal had been gone through, the confession exacted was a public and most humiliating act¹⁰; the penitent placed in the vestibule of the Church, previous to readmission, a spectacle to others¹¹; clothed in sackcloth¹²; at length introduced within the walls; prostrated before the congregation; and the Priest charged to deliver over him an admonitory lecture for the edification of all present; a moral dissection of a living subject¹³; and after all, the party never again to be admitted to any office or dignity in the Church.¹⁴ All this was a discipline calculated to deter many from seeking restoration; and, as we know in fact, did deter many: and the whole, I repeat, is utterly inconsistent with a disposition to receive into the Church with open arms persons of previous vicious lives, simply with a view to numerical display.

Then the many offences against which excommunication was levelled by the laws and regulations of the Church tend to

¹ Tertullian, De Pœnitentiâ, c. ix. and c. vii.; Hermas, II. Mandat. iv.; Clem. Alex. Stromat. II. § xiii. pp. 459, 460.

² Tertullian, De Pudicitâ, c. xviii.

³ Cyprian, Ep. ix.

⁴ Ep. xi. § 2. ⁵ Ep. lv. § 12.

⁶ Ep. xiii. ⁷ Ep. xiv. § 3. *et alibi*.

⁸ Ep. liii. § 1.

⁹ Origen, Contra Celsum, III. § 51.

¹⁰ Tertullian, De Pœnitentiâ, c. xi.

¹¹ c. vii. ¹² c. xi.

¹³ De Pudicitâ, c. xiii. and c. iii.

¹⁴ Origen, Contra Celsum, III. § 51.

prove the same point, and to show that the Church never thought of governing herself by calculations of how this or that would tell upon her numerical strength. It was not for direct immorality merely that this judgment of the Church was pronounced, though for that it was pronounced¹; but for other matters also; as under some circumstances for marrying a Gentile²; for making idols³; for selling incense for the temples⁴; perhaps for teaching the art of fencing.⁵ It is obvious that all this arrangement is that of a Church which was not engaged in counting its rank and file, but in securing good soldiers and servants of Jesus Christ, at whatever apparent cost. Nay, it should seem that the penalty of excommunication had been inflicted too freely in the early Church, and withdrawn too grudgingly; insomuch that one of the Constitutions⁶ is expressly framed for the purpose of mitigating an evil which was proving itself of such magnitude as to call for interference. That Constitution begins with recommending the Bishop to be gentle, "not to be overhasty to thrust out and eject . . . not to be content with the testimony of less than three witnesses against the accused; and to examine the character and motives of those witnesses: for there are many," it adds, "who hate the brethren, and make it their business to scatter the flock of Christ; to receive the evidence of such men without sifting it, would be to break up the fold, to deliver it over as a prey to wolves, *i. e.* to evil spirits and to evil men, to Gentiles, Jews, and godless heretics; for ravening wolves instantly assail one who is cast out of the Church, counting his destruction their gain . . . and he who through a want of discrimination has been unjustly excommunicated, through despondency and dejection will either stray away to the heathen, or will get entangled in heresy, and become alienated altogether from the Church and from hope in God; fast bound in ungodliness; and thou all the while" (the Constitution is addressed to the Bishop), "the author of his ruin: for it is not right to be overready to cast a sinner out, and to be slow to receive him again on his repentance; to be prompt to cut off, but reluctant to heal . . . Be assured, that he

¹ Tertullian, *Apol. c. xlvi.*; *Ad Nationes, I. § 5.*

² *Ad Uxorem, II. c. iii.*

³ *De Idololatria c. v.*

⁴ § xi. ⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Constitut. II. c. xxi.*

who casts out a brother wrongfully, or who does not admit him again on his turning back, is the murderer of his brother, and sheds his blood, as Cain did Abel's, and it will cry out against him to God . . . And so is it with him who is unjustly excommunicated by the Bishop" . . . with more to the same effect. From all which it should appear, that so far from the Primitive Church augmenting her forces by an array of atrocious criminals, persuaded to express penitence and receive Baptism, she was rather falling into the opposite extreme, of sometimes expelling, upon doubtful testimony, members that were really blameless.

To advert to the second insinuation respecting the expedients resorted to by the Christians to attach to themselves converts—the bribes they dispensed in the shape of alms. In speaking of the distribution of the revenues of the early Church Gibbon, you will recollect, remarks, "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, while they derided the doctrines, acknowledged the benevolence of the new sect. 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*, of sickness, and of old age."¹ Before I offer you any other remarks on this question, I must observe that Origen in his work against Celsus repudiates this insinuation in a manner which must satisfy us he had no fear of it. "No man can say that the early teachers of Christianity undertook their task for the sake of lucre. For sometimes they would not accept so much as their food; and if they were occasionally compelled to do so through want, they were content with mere necessaries, although there were many who would have been willing to furnish them with more."² No doubt the Fund of the Church, devoted as it was in great measure to relieving the indigence of members of the Church, might offer a temptation to the poor to avail themselves of it if they could. It would be idle to deny it. And though the objec-

¹ Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 347.

² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 9. } treatise of Origen's for purposes of his
Gibbon knows how to refer to this } own.

tion comes with an ill grace from those who would represent the Christian congregations as composed pretty exclusively of the lowest of the people, who could not therefore be supposed to possess an exchequer that would furnish much means of corruption ; still if the early Christians were not so entirely of that class (which I have shown was the case), they might possibly have a public purse which would prove a decoy to some. But those who managed the affairs of the early Christians were perfectly aware of this danger ; were quite alive to the necessity of guarding the Church from an influx of mercenary converts. Thus Clemens Alexandrinus,¹ after having cautioned the teacher against acting on his part for the sake of lucre, or from any lower motive than a desire for the salvation of his hearers, goes on to say of the taught, " On the other hand, they who participate in the Divine Word must look to it, that they do not search it for curiosity's sake merely ; approaching their subject as they might approach the edifices of a city ; nor yet for the sake of *getting a share in this world's goods* ; and under the knowledge that those who are consecrated to Christ, *are ready to communicate to others the necessaries of life*. But," adds Clemens, " such persons are hypocrites, and so let us pass them by "— a paragraph, which shows that the Christians of those days were on the alert against the abuse, and prepared to investigate the real object the novice had in view in professing himself a Christian. And the same fact we gather from a passage in Cyprian. It appears that one Fortunatianus, once a Bishop of Assuræ, but who had fallen away, having yielded to the temptation of sacrificing to the idol and so saving his life, after the danger was past, claimed to be admitted again to his Bishopric. Cyprian addresses a letter on this occasion to Epictetus apparently the successor of Fortunatianus, and to the people of Assuræ, in the course of which he remarks, " What wonder is it that those make light of our admonitions " (which seems to have been the case with Fortunatianus) " who have denied the Lord ? They are bent " (the letter continues) " on *lucre*, and even at this moment are given to debauch, thus making it manifest that even formerly it was not religion they were looking to, *but their belly and their gain*. Therefore, God has applied to them this touch-

¹ Stromat. I. § i. p. 319.

stone, in order that they may no longer serve at the altar which they disgraced. We must watch, therefore, with all diligence, that these men act no more as Priests, who have fallen to a depth even beyond the lapsed laity themselves.”¹ Here, again, you see the jealousy with which the Church guarded its own revenues. An unworthy person might, no doubt, introduce himself into it, nay even into the ministry of it, for the sake of a maintenance. St. Paul had himself foreseen the danger, when he required that the Bishop should “not be greedy of filthy lucre;” but then you observe, by the instance before you, what a scandal it was considered; how sure of a repulse the party would have been at the first, could the thoughts of his heart have been discovered; and how effectual an obstacle to his re-admission it was considered to be, in case he forfeited his position in the Church, as such a person would be very likely to do. In short, you perceive, that the authorities of the Church were as well aware of the snare, as we are ourselves; and as much bent upon protecting the Church from suffering by it, as we could ourselves be. And, therefore, we may safely conclude that no such result did practically ensue from the action of this fund, as Mr. Gibbon would persuade us, did. It might scarcely seem needful to say more in vindication of the Primitive Church from the suspicion of drawing her members by the tooth. But there is a case recorded by the same Cyprian, which very distinctly proves how considerately the Church was wont to proceed in the administration of this fund; how solicitous she was to protect herself from being imposed upon by pretenders to religion, whilst they were in reality seeking after the loaves and fishes. I had occasion to refer to this case before for another purpose. It had been submitted to Cyprian as a matter for his judgment, whether a player who still exercised his calling and taught it others, should be allowed to communicate with the Christian congregation to which he belonged. Cyprian decides against it, but adds, “if, however, he alleges that poverty drives him to this, his necessities may be relieved amongst those of others who are supported by the alms of the Church, only he must be content with frugal, howbeit with innocent victuals, (*frugalioribus sed innocentibus cibis.*) Nor *must he imagine that he is to be bought off* from

¹ Cyprian, Ep. lxiv. § 3.

his sins by a salary, (*nec putet salario se esse redimendum ut a peccatis cessat,*) when the gain is to be his, not ours. Withdraw him however, if possible, from this wicked course to better things; and let him be content with poor but honest provision, which the Church will offer him, (*ut sit contentus ecclesiæ sumptibus, parciorebus quidem sed salutaribus.*) Or if the Church with you" (he says to his correspondent) "has not the means, he may transfer himself to us, and receive with us such food and clothing as is necessary, and learn what is edifying in the Church, instead of teaching others what is deadly out of it."¹ Again, on another occasion, Cyprian writes to the Presbyters and Deacons in his absence to have a care of the poor. But what poor? "Such as have stood fast in the faith." And with what particular object? "That means may not be lacking unto them; and so *necessity* subdue those whom persecution has not shaken"² —the parties, you observe, to be kept just above want, lest that temptation should drive them astray. It should seem too, as we learn from the same author, that some little addition was occasionally made from this fund to eke out the scanty wages of one, who, whilst he exercised some subordinate office in the Church, still continued to follow a trade.³ But surely no reasonable fault can be found with the administration of a fund conducted upon such principles as are here discovered; nor can any suspicion attach to it of being made an instrument for purchasing proselytes. But here again there is a Constitution to our purpose; for these Constitutions in many cases are very valuable as pointing out the issues of precepts and practices, of which we see the beginnings in passages of the Primitive Fathers; or at least they often exhibit the ends toward which they are practically tending. Thus the seventh chapter of the third book of the Apostolical Constitutions is on the subject of the widows of the Church; some of whom it censures, because instead of staying at home and conversing with God, they were running about in search after gain; and they had begged so shamelessly and been so successful in their mendicancy, "that they had caused people in general *to be more slow to contribute to the ecclesiastical fund.*"⁴ For they ought to be satisfied,"

¹ Cyprian, Ep. lxi.

² Ep. v. § 2.

³ Ep. xxxviii. § 1.

⁴ So I understand *καὶ ἐξ ὧν ἀραι-*

the Constitution continues, "by reason of the moderation of their wishes with the ecclesiastical allowance; whereas, they were gadding about, making for themselves a handsome purse, lending money at high interest, and thinking of nothing but Mammon." Here, therefore, it once more appears, that the dole of the Church was a bare maintenance and nothing more: nay, so small that those who were known to receive it, were still regarded by many as objects of charity; for otherwise, they could not have begged with the advantage they are here represented to do; people would have at once closed their doors against widows already well provided for. Moreover, the Constitution shows that the managers of the ecclesiastical fund were acting under a strong politico-economical check, even if no higher motive had influenced them; seeing that any abuses in the administration were sure to recoil upon the treasury, and reduce its amount; just as the notion which some time ago had obtained in this country, that Briefs were farmed and otherwise mismanaged, eventually almost dried up the supply, and naturally, though unhappily, perhaps, as events have since turned out, paved the way for their abolition.

There is yet another surmise of Gibbon's with respect to the materials of which the early Church was composed, akin to these last we have been considering, and meant, like them, to depreciate its character: and as the consideration of the fiscal question enters into this also, it may be convenient to mention, and reply to it here—the Fathers, you will observe, still furnishing us with the means of doing so: for I am engaged in representing to you the use of the Fathers, and at present, as it exhibits itself in the service they do on the *Evidences*, enabling us to supply arguments for the truth of Christianity, or to meet objections against it. "There is some reason likewise to believe," continues Gibbon, "that great numbers of infants, who, according to the inhuman practice of the times, had been exposed 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"¹—as though the Christian body, already described as replenished by atrocious criminals, who found more ready

σχύντως αἰτοῦσι καὶ ἀπλήστως λαμβάνουσι ἢ δὲ καὶ ὀκνητέρους τοὺς πολλοὺς | πρὸς τὸ δίδοναι κατέστησαν.

¹ Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 347.

admission to the Church, than to the heathen temple itself, and by needy persons disposed to swallow the bribe which the Church's exchequer furnished, found another supply in a quarter no less humiliating to contemplate, in the infants that had been abandoned, and whom the Christians adopted, and quartered upon the ecclesiastical exchequer. Gibbon's authority for this is analogy—similar conduct of modern missionaries may be observed under the same circumstances—and he names those of China.¹ It is dangerous to charge one's memory with the contents of many volumes, and some of them ample ones, but I do not remember the slightest ground for this suggestion of Gibbon's in any Ante-Nicene Father whatever; nor do I believe, that any hint to that effect can be met with in any one of them. Whereas, I can bring several passages from them which would seem to be inconsistent with such a fact; I mean inconsistent with the fact that the Church was sensibly recruited from this source: for it is likely enough that a foundling or two might be reared by humane Christians under particular circumstances; as they occasionally were, even by humane heathens. Of course, in what I am about to say, I am not careful to clear the Christians from the charge of rescuing exposed infants from death, baptizing and rearing them, as though the thing was a reproach, whereas it would really have been an act of signal charity; but I am simply speaking to the fact, and replying to Gibbon, who would have his readers believe that Christianity, instead of making progress on adult minds by the force of evidence and reason, did in truth advance by catching its converts, and those, too, outcasts in their tenderest years, feeding and appropriating them, and so breeding them into Christians when they had no will or judgment of their own. Now I find Justin Martyr, when engaged in defending the Christians from the calumnies vulgarly circulated against them—one of which was, that in their secret assemblies they devoured the flesh of infants—I find him, I say, contending that so far were Christians from doing any such deed, that they taught the great sin of exposing children; and I further find him alleging, in aggravation of this sin, that the fate of these children commonly was, not to be rescued by Christians, but to be picked up by their fellow-heathens and reared for

¹ Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 317, note 144.

prostitution.¹ Is it credible that, had the Christians been in the habit of saving them from death for the purpose of raising up seed for the Church, he would have made no mention of the practice on an occasion which so strongly invited him to advert to it? a practice which would have placed the Christians in such an advantageous contrast with the heathens; the ordinary humanity of the Christian actually protecting the child from the unnatural barbarity of the heathen parent in abandoning it, or the baser cruelty of the heathen pander in preserving it. Again, I find Tatian assigning as a reason for quitting the heathens and uniting himself with the Christians, the superior morality of the latter; and in enumerating the vices of the former, which had inspired him with disgust, I hear him speaking of the exposure of their children and of the fate which usually awaited them, and which he represents to be the same as Justin does.² But neither does he drop the least allusion to any interference of the Church for the preservation of these infants; though, I repeat, his argument would naturally have led him to speak of it, had any such practice prevailed. It would have been making out a very strong case if he could have said, that whilst heathen parents left them to perish, or heathen panders saved them for the brothel, the Christians interposed to repair the mischief, and cherished them for the fold of Christ. There were many reasons why the Fathers should have claimed the merit for the Christians had it belonged to them, especially when writing Apologies for them; and none, why they should have suppressed it. Tertullian also reproaches the heathen with the crime of exposing their children, and dwells on the incestuous consequences which often resulted when they chanced to be picked up and reared through the compassion of some passing stranger,³ contrasting such defilement with the purity which characterised the Christians; but he does not hint that the compassionate stranger was usually a Christian, or that in these children there was provided a nursery for the Church. Yet, had such been the case, it would have been precisely according to the style of Tertullian to make the very utmost of such an antithesis; the unnatural barbarity on the one side, the gratuitous humanity on the

¹ Justin Martyr, Apol. I. § 27.

² Tatian, Oratio Contra Græcos, § 28. |

³ Tertullian, Apol. c. ix.

other. It would have been a subject which Tertullian above all the Fathers would have delighted to enlarge upon, and would have lavished upon it with a relish his most impassioned rhetoric. Yet he is silent. I could produce other testimony to the same effect,¹—negative testimony, it is true, but the case does not very well admit of any other. You cannot expect the Fathers to make positive affirmation that the Church did not recruit its numbers from this source, if the practice never existed in their day; and they could not, of course, divine that it would be ever imputed to the Church. Nor is this all. There is an incident recorded by Cyprian which has been often quoted for other purposes, but which bears also on the question before us—the case of a little child, whose parents had fled in haste, (apparently from persecution, being Christians,) and left it in the hands of a nurse. The nurse took the deserted infant to the magistrates, (*relictam nutrix detulit ad magistratus*,) who administered to it bread steeped in wine, the remains of an idol offering. The tale goes on to tell of the mother of the child at length returning, resuming the care of her child, and carrying it with her to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when, on the cup being given the child, it rejected it, the Eucharist not being found to remain in a body which had been defiled by having partaken of an idolatrous sacrifice.² Such is the history. But the feature of it to which I advert is this—that the deserted infant was not taken to the Church, to be supported out of the Church fund, even though it was the child of Christian parents, or at least of a mother who was a Christian, but was taken to *the magistrates*. This, I think, is an incident which, though not conclusive of the question, rather tends to show that the Christians were not disposed to appropriate deserted children to themselves, and in default of other converts make Christians of them. Then there is a Constitution which exhorts one or other of the brethren, who might happen to have no child of his own, to adopt an orphan child³; and another, which encourages the Bishop to cherish and protect such children, and have them taught a trade⁴—the provision in the latter case to be made for them, no doubt, out of the Church's fund, of which the Bishop was the chief admini-

¹ Clem. Alex. Pædag. III. c. iii. p. 265. | ³ Constitut. IV. c. i.

² Cyprian, De Lapsis, § xxv. | ⁴ c. ii.

strator. But these regulations are still unpropitious to Mr. Gibbon's theory, for they serve to prove that the Church had enough to do, and apparently much more than enough, in taking care of the orphans even of Christian parents, and never contemplated laying itself out for systematically gathering other outcast children about her. Indeed, such a drain upon her treasury would soon have become quite exhausting; for had parents, in that state of society, and in that condition of public feeling on the subject of the exposure of children, once found out that they might cast out their children with impunity, seeing that the Christians would not let them die, there is no telling the extent to which the abuse might not have proceeded.

In conclusion, I submit that the Fathers are *of use*, when they thus put us in possession of an intimate knowledge of the condition of the early Church, and thereby furnish us with the means of neutralizing the mischievous insinuations of an unscrupulous but wary assailant of the truth of that Gospel we desire to live and die by.