

apostolic fathers do not give, and do not profess to give, us any information as derived from the apostles about the meaning of scriptural statements, or the true import of Christian doctrines; and secondly, that in the writings and transactions of the second century we have the most conclusive proof that there was then no apostolical tradition not contained in Scripture (for the fathers of that age usually meant by *tradition* what was actually contained in the Bible) on which *any reliance* could be placed,—positions which, if true, utterly subvert the notion that any very *material* assistance of a peculiar kind is to be derived from the fathers either of the earlier or of subsequent centuries. But enough has been said upon this subject; more, perhaps, than its importance deserves.

Whatever weight may be ascribed to the opinions of the fathers, and on whatever grounds the weight that is ascribed to them may be made to rest, no one disputes the propriety and the importance of ascertaining, as far as we can, what their views really were; and most theologians in modern times, whatever opinions they may entertain upon the general question of the deference to be paid to the fathers, have shown some desire to exhibit in their own behalf the testimony of the early church, whenever it could with any plausibility be adduced; and this has given rise to a great deal of learned, voluminous, and often intricate and wearisome discussion. We have seen that in the third century, and even before the end of the second, there were controversies in the church as to what were the doctrines and practices of the apostles upon some points; and that both parties appealed to the tradition of the church, as well as to Scripture, without being able to convince each other by the arguments derived from the one source any more than by those derived from the other. This was still more extensively the case in the fourth and fifth centuries, when, in the Arian and Pelagian controversies, both parties appealed to the testimony of the primitive church. Both in these more ancient and in more modern times, men have acted upon a notion, more or less distinctly conceived, and more or less earnestly maintained, that the fact of a doctrine or system of doctrines having been held by the early church, afforded *some* presumption that it had been taught by the apostles. As a general position, this may, perhaps, be admitted to be true; but it needs to be very cautiously applied, and to be restricted within very narrow limits. Could we fully

and exactly ascertain, *as we certainly cannot*, the doctrine that generally prevailed in the church at large in the age immediately succeeding that of the apostles, we would confidently expect that it would be to a great extent the same as that which they taught; and could the prevailing views of that age be distinctly and unequivocally ascertained upon some particular point in regard to which Scripture had spoken so obscurely that we had great difficulty in making up our minds as to what is really taught, we might be disposed to allow the testimony of the immediately post-apostolic age, if we had it, to turn the doubtful scale. This may be admitted to be true abstractly; but it does not, in point of fact, apply to any of the actual realities of the case. And when we look more at things as they are, we see the necessity of much caution and circumspection in this matter.

The history of the church abundantly confirms what the Scripture gives us reason to expect, viz., that errors and heresies may creep in *privily*,—the enemy sowing the tares while men are sleeping. The history of the church fully proves, moreover, that very considerable changes may be effected in the prevalent opinions of a church or nation, and of course of many churches or nations, in a comparatively short period of time; and without, perhaps, our being able to trace them to any very definite or palpable cause. Many instances might be adduced of the prevalent theological views of a church or nation undergoing a very considerable change, even in the course of a single generation, and this too without calling forth much public opposition; and considering how very scanty are the remains we now have of the writings and documents of the first three centuries,—what a contrast there is in this respect between the first three centuries of the Christian era and the last three,—it is by no means certain that important changes of doctrine may not have taken place in what is called the early church, without our having any very specific evidence regarding them.

Indeed, it is certain, in point of fact, that there was a gradual change going on more or less rapidly in the church, even from the time of the apostles, in regard to matters of doctrine, as well as of government and worship. It is not possible, with the evidence before us, to believe that the views of the apostolical fathers were in all respects precisely the same as those of the second century, or those of the second precisely the same as those of the third.

We can trace a progress,—and the progress is generally in an unsound direction,—in the direction of greater deviation from Scripture, of adding what Scripture wants, and of keeping back or perverting what Scripture contains. It is not, as Papists allege, a fuller development,—a bringing out more fully and explicitly, as circumstances demanded,—of what is contained in Scripture, and was taught at least in its germs or rudiments by the apostles. The actual features of the progressive change are inconsistent with this theory. We see scriptural principles more and more cast into the background. We see many things brought out, professed, and practised, which not only are uncountenanced by Scripture, but are plainly inconsistent either with its express statements or with its general spirit and principles. That a change was going on, and that this was its general character, is too obvious and certain as a matter of fact to admit of its being disproved, either by the general theory of the Papists as to Christ's promises and His superintendence over His church, or by general presumptions founded upon the character of the men, and their supposed means of acquiring an accurate knowledge of divine things. If we are to take the word of God as our standard, and if it be at all fitted to serve the purposes of a rule or guide, this is a conclusion which may be fully established, and which we are not only warranted, but bound, to hold fast. Still, with all these drawbacks, and with very great practical difficulties, in regard to many questions, of arriving at a very satisfactory result, it is important and interesting to ascertain, as far as we can, what was the system of doctrine, government, and worship that prevailed in the church in early times. The chief discussions which have taken place in modern times with respect to the views of the early church, and which are still carried on in the present day, have been directed to the objects of ascertaining what were the opinions that then generally prevailed in regard to what are commonly called the doctrines of grace; in regard to the multifarious topics involved in the controversy between Protestants and Papists, and the government of the church in general; and in regard to the doctrine of the sacraments and worship, and to the testimony of the primitive church upon these different subjects. And to the discussions which have taken place in more modern times with respect to the true import of that testimony, I propose now to advert in succession.

Sec. I.—The Doctrines of Grace.

By the doctrines of grace are commonly understood those great fundamental truths in which churches, usually reckoned evangelical, agree; and more especially the doctrines of the entire corruption and depravity of man by the fall; justification by faith alone without works, on the ground of what Christ has done and suffered in our room; and regeneration and sanctification by the special operation of the Holy Ghost. The doctrines of absolute personal election and the perseverance of the saints, are sometimes spoken of as peculiarities of the Calvinistic system, as distinguished from the more general system of evangelical truth; and it is no doubt true, in point of fact, that many men have held—though, as we think, inconsistently, and without following out their own professed principles to their proper legitimate results—the doctrines usually called evangelical, without admitting what have been described as Calvinistic peculiarities. But in speaking of the doctrines of grace in connection with the testimony of the primitive church, we take the expression in the wide sense of the doctrines of the Reformation, or the Calvinistic system; especially as it will scarcely be disputed that the testimony of the early primitive church is as favourable to the Calvinistic peculiarities, as they are often called, of predestination and perseverance, as to any of the other doctrines commonly designated as evangelical,—with the exception, perhaps, of the doctrine of original sin, the evidence for which in antiquity is usually admitted to be strong, even by those who deny the force of the evidence adduced from this source in favour of any of the other doctrines of the evangelical system. Calvinists and anti-Calvinists have both appealed to the early church in support of their respective opinions, although we believe it cannot be made out that the fathers of the first three centuries give any very distinct deliverance concerning them. These important topics did not become subjects of controversial discussion during that period; and it holds almost universally in the history of the church, that until a doctrine has been fully discussed in a controversial way by men of talent and learning taking opposite sides, men's opinions regarding it are generally obscure and indefinite, and their language vague and confused, if not contradictory. These doctrines did not become subjects of controversial discussion till what is

called the Pelagian controversy, in the beginning of the fifth century. At that time, Augustine, the great defender of the truth against Pelagius and his followers, while appealing to the early writers in support of the doctrines which he had established from Scripture, and which he has the distinguished honour of having first developed in a connected and systematic way, admitted that many of them had spoken without due care and precision upon these points, but contended that in the main they concurred in his opinions. It is very certain that they were not Pelagians, for they almost universally admitted that there was a corruption of man's moral nature introduced and spread among mankind by the fall, which Pelagius denied. That they were wholly free from what was afterwards called semi-Pelagianism, or that they held fully and explicitly the Augustinian or Calvinistic system, is not by any means so clear.

The substance of the matter is this: The apostolical fathers generally use the language of Scripture upon these subjects, while they scarcely make any statements which afford us materials for deciding in what precise sense they understood them. They leave the matter very much where Scripture leaves it, and where, but for the rise of errors needing to be contradicted and opposed, it might still have been left. He who sees Augustinian or Calvinistic doctrines clearly and explicitly taught in the Bible, will have no difficulty in seeing also plain traces of them at least in the works of the apostolic fathers; and he who can pervert the statements of Scripture into an anti-Calvinistic sense, may, by the same process, and with equal ease, distort the apostolic fathers. This at least is certain, that while it has been often asserted with great confidence, that Calvinistic principles are utterly opposed to the doctrine of the ancient church—that they were never heard of till invented by Augustine—there is nothing in the writings of any of the immediate successors of the apostles in the least opposed to them; nothing which, even abstracting from the clear testimony of Scripture in their favour, affords any presumption that they were not taught to the churches by the apostles. There is, to say the least, nothing whatever in this primitive antiquity, in the writings of those who associated with the apostles, to weaken, even if we were to admit that anything derived from any other source could weaken, the testimony which they have given in their own inspired writings. If corruption was to find its way into the

church, *these*, it might be expected, would be the doctrines which it would first assail, more openly or more covertly, because they are most decidedly opposed to the leading tendencies of man's natural character, to the ungodliness and pride of the human heart. These were the doctrines which were most thoroughly expelled from all the pagan religions, even although in some other points they retained some traces of the religion of nature, or some remnants of a primitive revelation; and they were the doctrines which were most thoroughly corrupted in the system of later Judaism,—the Judaism of our Saviour's days,—and so, accordingly, we find it to have been in the Christian church.

We have already had occasion to notice that the point where erroneous and defective views upon the doctrines of grace seem to have first insinuated themselves, was in regard to the freedom of the human will, explained and applied in such a way as to lead ultimately at least to an obscuration, if not a denial, at once of the doctrine of the total depravity of man, and of the necessity of the special operation of the Holy Ghost, in order to the production in man's character or life of anything spiritually good. There is some difficulty, as I have mentioned before, in understanding precisely what is the full bearing and import of many of the statements of the fathers of the second and third centuries upon this subject, because they occur commonly in the course of observations directed against the fate or stoical necessity which was very generally advocated by the Gnostic sects. This circumstance renders it very difficult to determine whether at first, at least, they really meant to ascribe to free will an *αὐτεξουσίον*, more than Calvinistic divines have generally conceded to it. But there can be no doubt that error steadily increased in this direction, and that many of them came to entertain views upon this subject plainly inconsistent with what the Scripture teaches as to the natural impotency of man, and the necessity of divine agency; and that, though never wholly abandoning the doctrine of original sin, they soon came to overlook two distinctions of fundamental importance on this subject,—*viz.*, *first*, the distinction between the power or ability of man in his fallen and in his unfallen condition; and, *secondly*, the distinction between man's power or ability in matters external or merely moral, and in matters purely spiritual; that is, which have respect to real obedience to the law which God has imposed, and to the doing of those things which He re-

quires, that we may escape His wrath and curse due to us for our sins. These two distinctions, I have said, are of fundamental importance. They were, however, generally overlooked by the early fathers. Augustine, of course, understood them, else he could never have rendered such important services as he did to the cause of sound doctrine. They were brought out fully and prominently by the reformers. They are distinctly set forth in the standards of our church; and I am persuaded that, where they are not distinctly admitted and fully applied, it is impossible to give a complete and accurate exposition of the system of Christian theology, as taught in the sacred Scriptures. Some modern writers have contended, not only that the fathers of the second and third centuries taught anti-Calvinistic doctrines, but also that the Gnostic heretics against whom they contended, taught Calvinism. This, however, proceeds upon a misrepresentation of Calvinistic doctrines, as if they really made God the author of sin, and took away from man that freedom of will which is necessary to moral agency,—charges which have been often adduced against them, but have never been established.

On most of the other points involved in the evangelical or Calvinistic system, it can scarcely be said that the fathers of the second and third centuries have given any very distinct or explicit testimony. That these great doctrines were not very thoroughly understood, were not very prominently brought forward, and were not very fully applied, is but too evident. That they had been wholly laid aside, and that an opposite set of doctrines had been substituted in their room, is what cannot be established. Calvinists and anti-Calvinists have produced sets of extracts from the writings of the fathers, professing to find in them full support for their respective opinions.* But upon a careful and impartial survey of this matter, it is evident that all that these collections of extracts, when taken together and viewed in combination, really prove, is that these fathers had no very clear or definite conceptions upon the subject, that they did not very well understand *what* they meant to teach, and that from ignorance and confusion they not unfrequently fell into contradictions. All this, however,—which is clearly the true state of the case as a matter of fact,—

* Whitby on the Five Points, and Gill's Cause of God and Truth. Tomline; Scott.

does really, when viewed in connection with the fact that, with the progress of time, the Calvinistic testimonies became less full and clear, and the anti-Calvinistic ones more so—*i.e.*, till we come down to the era of the Pelagian controversy—furnish presumption in favour of Calvinism; for there can be no doubt that the tendency, from the apostolic age downwards, was to corrupt the simplicity of the Gospel, to introduce into the doctrines of the church mere human speculations, and to accommodate them to the tastes and prejudices of irreligious men.

The process was somewhat similar to what took place in the Church of Scotland, and in other churches, in the course of last century, when personal religion was decaying, when sound evangelical doctrine was disappearing, and when very defective and confused notions of scriptural principles were extensively prevailing; while, at the same time, it must be observed, that the general opposition which Pelagianism encountered, and the general favour which Augustinianism met with, even in the early part of the fifth century, afford satisfactory proof that the progress of erroneous and defective views in regard to the doctrines of grace was not in the early church so rapid and so complete as it has sometimes been in modern churches. I have no doubt that, towards the middle or end of last century, a majority of the ministers of the Church of Scotland were quite prepared to have adopted a Pelagian creed, had it not been that a Calvinistic one was established by law, and that therefore the adoption of a different one might have endangered their State connection, and the enjoyment of their temporalities; while the church of the fifth century, under the guidance of Augustine, decidedly rejected Pelagianism.

The testimony, then, of the church of the first three centuries cannot be said to be very clear or explicit either for or against the doctrines of grace. But these doctrines are far too firmly established by the testimony of God's own word, and by the experience of His people, to be affected by a circumstance so insignificant as this. In place of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the testimony of the early church, with regard to the doctrines of grace, shaking our confidence in their truth, it only proves that no reliance is to be placed upon the testimony of the fathers, and of the early church, as a rule or standard in the formation of our opinions; for, finding clear evidence in Scripture that these doctrines were taught by our Lord and His apostles, and finding clear evidence

in ecclesiastical history, viewed in connection with Scripture, that they have been embraced in substance by the great body of those who, in every age and country, have given the most satisfactory evidence that they were living under the influence of personal religion, we are fully warranted in holding that the measure of the extent to which men individually or collectively have enjoyed the teaching of the Holy Ghost, and have been guided to a correct knowledge of God's revealed will, is to be tested substantially by the clearness, fulness, and firmness with which they have maintained these fundamental doctrines.

Sec. II.—The Sufficiency of Scripture.

In explaining the general subject of the deference due to the sentiments of the fathers, and of the church of the first three centuries, I had occasion to refer to the fact—of essential importance upon this question—that a process of declension or deterioration, both in respect of soundness of doctrine and purity of character, commencing even in the apostles' days, continued gradually to advance; and that it met with no effectual or decided check during the first three centuries, though there were occasionally individuals, such as Cyprian, who rose somewhat above its influence. This fact, when once fully established, is fatal to the authority, properly so called, of the fathers, and of the pretended catholic consent, as it is designated. The only thing that gives any plausibility to the claims set up on behalf of the fathers and of the early church, whether by Papists or semi-Papists, is the imagination—for it is nothing else—that there was a constant unbroken tradition, or handing down of sound doctrine and sound practice in regard to the government and worship of the church, carried on, according to the Papists, in the Church of Rome till the present day; but according to the Tractarians, stopping—*i.e.*, becoming somewhat corrupted—about the fifth or sixth century. When it is once ascertained that there was a gradual but unceasing change in matters of doctrine, government, and worship, this at once overturns the only ground on which any claim can be put forth on behalf of the early church to anything like authority, properly so called, in regulating our opinions or our practices, even without taking into account—what, however, is also important, and can be easily established—*viz.*, that the change was

wholly in a direction that was not only unsanctioned by Scripture, but opposed to it.

There is, however, a remarkable exception to this constant tendency to deterioration observable during the second and third centuries, to which, before proceeding further, I think it right to direct attention: I mean the constant maintenance, during the first three centuries, of the supremacy and sufficiency of the sacred Scriptures, and the right and duty of all men to read and study them. There is no trace of evidence in the first three centuries that these scriptural principles were denied or doubted, and there is satisfactory evidence that they were steadily and purely maintained.

The fathers of that period were all in the habit of referring to the sacred Scriptures as the only real standard of faith and practice. They assert, both directly and by implication, their exclusive authority, and their perfect sufficiency to guide men to the knowledge of God's revealed will. They have all more or less explicitly asserted this, and they have asserted nothing inconsistent with it. There are men among them who have, in point of fact, given too much weight, in forming their opinions, and in regulating their conduct, to oral traditions, and to the speculations of their own reason; but, in so far as they did so, they were acting in opposition to their own professed principles,—they were disregarding or deviating from the standard which they professed to follow. Whatever may be said of their practice in some instances, we have certainly the weight of their judgment or authority, so far as it goes, in support of the great Protestant principle of the exclusive supremacy and sufficiency of the written word. This, of course, is denied by Papists and Tractarians; but we are persuaded it can be, and has been, proved, that while they appeal to the authority of the fathers and the early church in support of the authority which they ascribe to them, these parties themselves disclaim all such pretensions advanced on their behalf, and give their testimony in favour of the exclusive authority of Scripture.

We cannot enter into the detailed evidence of this position. It is adduced at length, cleared from every cavil, and established beyond all fair controversy, in the very valuable work to which I have had occasion to refer,—Goode's "Divine Rule of Faith and Practice." In the writings of the fathers of the first three centuries—and the same may be said of the writings, without excep-

tion, of many succeeding centuries—there is not the slightest trace of anything like that depreciation of the Scriptures, that denial of their fitness, because of their obscurity and alleged imperfection, to be a sufficient rule or standard of faith, which stamp so peculiar a guilt and infamy upon Popery and Tractarianism. There is nothing in the least resembling this; on the contrary, there is a constant reference to Scripture as the only authoritative standard. There are many declarations to the same effect, not indeed expressed *always* with such fulness and precision as to preclude the assaults of cavillers, just because these topics were not then subjects of controversial discussion, but sufficiently full and explicit to satisfy every impartial person as to what their views really were. They speak, indeed, often of tradition, and traditions; but then it has been conclusively proved, that by these words they most commonly meant the sacred Scriptures themselves, and the statements therein contained. They sometimes appealed, in arguing against the heretics, to the doctrines and practices which had been handed down from the apostles, especially in the churches which they themselves had founded. But besides that there was more, not only of plausibility, but of weight, in this appeal in the second century than there could be at any subsequent period, it is evident that they employed this consideration merely as an auxiliary or subordinate argument, without ever intending, by the using it, to deny, or cast into the background, the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture; and that they employed it, not so much to prove the absolute and certain truth of their doctrines, as to disprove an allegation very often made then, as now, in theological discussion, that they were new and recently invented.

It has, indeed, been alleged by Papists,—and the allegation has been repeated by Tractarians,—that it was the heretics of the early ages who were accustomed, like Protestants, to appeal to the Scriptures; and that the orthodox fathers, in opposition to this, appealed to tradition, in the modern sense of the word. But it has been proved by evidence that is unanswerable that this allegation is wholly false in fact: it has been proved that the heretics were accustomed to decline or evade an appeal to the Scriptures, by denying their genuineness and authenticity, or by alleging that they were corrupted or interpolated; and that, besides this, they were accustomed to appeal to a secret tradition which they alleged had been handed down from the apostles, and gave their

views more fully and correctly than the received Scriptures. All this has been demonstrated, and the proof of it not only disproves the Popish allegation, but throws back upon themselves the charge of treading in the footsteps of the ancient heretics; and moreover explains fully the real import and foundation of the appeal which the orthodox fathers sometimes make to tradition as well as to Scripture. They sometimes appealed to tradition, *because* the heretics refused to acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures; they appealed to the public tradition of the apostolical churches, *because* the heretics appealed to a private tradition, alleged to have been secretly handed down from the apostles. About the end of the fourth century, in the writings of Jerome and Augustine, we find some traces of a sanction given to an appeal to tradition on points of ceremony and outward practice, though these fathers, in common with all those who preceded them, are full and explicit in asserting the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture in all matters of faith or doctrine. We have already admitted that, long before this time, many ceremonies and practices had been introduced into the worship and government of the church which had no foundation or warrant in Scripture; but the introduction of these seems to have been based upon the alleged power of the church to decree rites and ceremonies, rather than upon any allegation that they had been authentically handed down by tradition from the time of the apostles. At any rate, we have no clear indication, till the end of the fourth century, of its having been held by any orthodox writers as a doctrine or principle, that the Scripture was not the sole and sufficient standard in matters of ceremony and ecclesiastical practice, as well as in matters of faith or doctrine; and even then the statements made to this effect by Jerome and Augustine are not very full and explicit, and are not easily reconciled with declarations they have made in other parts of their writings, in which they have recognised the exclusive supremacy and perfect sufficiency of Scripture in matters of practice as well as of opinion. The principle that the church has power to decree rites and ceremonies which have no warrant or sanction in the sacred Scriptures, as maintained and acted upon by Lutheran and Prelatic churches, we believe to be erroneous in itself, and dangerous in its application,—a principle which the word of God contains sufficient materials to disprove, and which can appeal to no more ancient authority in its support than that of Jerome and Augustine

in the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century. But still it must not be confounded with the denial of the supremacy and sufficiency of the Scripture as the only rule of faith, especially as it does not set up tradition as a rival standard, does not assume that the rites and ceremonies adopted are to be received as having come down from the apostles, and does not even impose an obligation to adopt all which have been so handed down, but merely vests in the church of any age or country a certain measure of authority to introduce some rites and ceremonies, which it may judge to be for edification.

There is one other topic of some interest and importance connected with the right appreciation and application of the word of God, in which there is no trace of deterioration or corruption during the first three, nor indeed for several subsequent centuries, and with respect to which there lies especial and pre-eminent guilt upon the apostate Church of Rome, and upon its modern imitators, the Anglican Tractarians. The fathers of the third, and even of the fourth and fifth centuries, zealously inculcated, without any exception and without any reserve, upon all the ordinary members of the church the duty, as far as they had the means and opportunity, of reading and studying the sacred Scriptures; and exerted themselves to afford to them the means of discharging this duty and enjoying this privilege, by getting the Scriptures translated into different languages, and diffusing them as widely as the circumstances of the time, when printing was unknown, admitted of it. The Tractarians, indeed, have attempted to make something of the obscure and perplexing topic called the *disciplina arcani*, as practised in the ancient church, to defend their own doctrine of *reserve* in the communication of religious knowledge, just as the Papists assign it as the reason why we find no trace of a great number of *their* doctrines and ceremonies during the first three centuries. This principle does not seem to have been originally anything else than the exercise of a reasonable discretion in the exposition of the doctrines of Christianity, with a due regard to circumstances and to men's capacities; and to have been gradually, from a foolish affectation of imitating the heathen mysteries and the practice of heathen philosophers, corrupted into something like an exoteric and esoteric doctrine. But whatever it may have been, and in whatever way it may have been practised, at different times,—and on these points **our** information is very meagre and

defective,—however objectionable it may have been, and however injurious may have been its consequences, the fact is unquestionable, that all the fathers continued, even in the fourth century, to urge upon all their hearers to read and study the sacred Scriptures; and that no restraint or discouragement was put upon the possession, the use, and the circulation of them.

The early church, then, down even to the Nicene and the immediately post-Nicene age, with all the errors and corruptions which had by this time infected the body of professing Christians, has escaped the special and peculiar guilt of the apostate Church of Rome, and is free from the fearful responsibility of professedly and avowedly labouring to withhold and withdraw from men that word which God has given them to be a light unto their feet and a lamp unto their path; and has transmitted a clear and unequivocal testimony in favour of the right of all men to have free access to the sacred Scriptures, and of their obligation to study them for themselves, with a view to the formation of their opinions and the regulation of their conduct.

Sec. III.—Rights of the Christian People.

Another topic, forming a remarkable exception to the progressive declension of the early church in point of doctrine and soundness of ecclesiastical practice, even during the first three centuries, is not one of such comprehensive magnitude and such commanding importance as that which we have already considered; still it is one of no small moment, not only in its bearing upon the right constitution and administration of the affairs of the church, but also, as experience proves, upon the interests of spiritual religion and vital godliness: I mean the steady maintenance, both in doctrine and in practice, of the right of Christian congregations to an effective and decisive voice in the appointment of their own pastors. Here, as in the former case, it is to be observed that the topic did not become a subject of formal controversial discussion during the first three centuries, nor for many centuries afterwards; and that, therefore, the testimonies upon the point are not so specific and precise as to preclude all cavilling, though quite sufficient to satisfy any honest inquirers after truth. Indeed, I know very few questions in regard to which more elaborate and unceasing efforts have been employed to silence or pervert the

testimony of Scripture and of primitive antiquity, as well as of the Reformers, than on this subject of the appointment of ministers. Papists, Prelatists, and Erastians have all laboured with unwearied zeal in attempting to overturn the evidence in support of the rights of the Christian people in the appointment of their pastors. Some Papists and Prelatists have brought no small share of learning and ingenuity to bear upon this subject, though without success; while it is more gratifying to notice that not a few even of these men have yielded to the force of truth and evidence, and have, in argument at least, abandoned the cause which their principles and position naturally inclined them to support.

The main direct and formal proofs of the doctrine and practice we have ascribed to the primitive church upon this subject, are to be found in the testimonies of Clemens Romanus, the friend and companion of the apostles, in the first century; and of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, soon after the middle of the third. These testimonies are full and satisfactory: there is not a vestige of evidence to be produced from the first three centuries that even seems to point in an opposite direction; while there are many collateral statements and incidental notices of the ordinary practice of the church to be found in the authors both of the intervening and subsequent periods, which decidedly confirm them. The testimony of Clement is very brief, but altogether conclusive: it is, that the apostles were accustomed to settle ministers—*συνευδοκησασης πασης τῆς ἐκκλησίας*—with the cordial consent of the whole church; and the statement, moreover, is adduced by Clement as a reason why the people should submit to the authority of their pastors, and not endeavour factiously to remove or expel them, since they had themselves consented to their appointment. There is no fair or even plausible method of explaining away this statement. It unequivocally implies that, at the very least, the deliberate opposition of the congregation to the person, who might have been suggested or recommended as their pastor, was held by the apostles as of itself quite a sufficient reason why his appointment should not take place. There is not the slightest ground to doubt that this practice of the apostles was uniformly observed, not only during the first three centuries, but for several centuries afterwards; and, on the contrary, there is a great deal that confirms it.

In the apostolical constitutions,—which, of course, are not the

work of Clement, to whom they have been ascribed, but which have been thought by many to have been compiled about the end of the third century, and are universally admitted to contain many interesting notices of the practices of the early church,—there is a minute account of the procedure usually adopted in the appointment of a bishop, in which precisely the same place and influence are assigned to the people as to the clergy, and in which not only the word *συνευδοκέω*, but several others of similar import,—some of them perhaps more strong and specific, such as *ἐκλέγω* and *αἰτέω*; and others of them somewhat more vague and indefinite, such as *ἐπιπεύω* and *ἀρέσκω*,—are all equally applied to the joint or common acts of the clergy and the people in this matter. Blondell, who in the latter part of his great work, entitled “*Apologia pro sententia Hieronymi*”—usually reckoned the most learned work ever written in defence of presbytery—has collected all the evidence bearing upon this subject, and proved that the people continued generally to have a real and effective voice in the appointment of their ministers for nearly 1000 years after the foundation of the Christian church. After quoting this remarkable passage from the so-called apostolical constitutions, he adds the following inference as manifestly established by it, and confirmed by all other collateral authorities: “*unde constare potest Clerumque plebemque convenire, eligere, nominare, gratum habere, postulare, testari, annuere, rogari, consensus decretum edere, ante Constantini Magni tempora ex æquo consuevisse.*”*

The testimony of Cyprian is to the same effect. He was consulted by some people in Spain, whether they might forsake or abandon their bishops who had fallen into heresy: he answered that they might; and one reason he assigns for this is, “*quando ipsa plebs maxime habeat potestatem vel eligendi dignos sacerdotes, vel indignos recusandi;*”† and then he proceeds to prove that this is a principle fully sanctioned by the sacred Scriptures, and based *jure divino*. These scriptural principles continued to be professed and acted on long after a large amount of error and corruption had been introduced into the church; and this, too, although the whole tendency of the changes which were going on in every other department of ecclesiastical administration ran in the opposite direction,—*i.e.*, tended to depress the influence of the people and

* P. 392.

† Blondell, p. 381.

to exalt the power of the clergy, and latterly of the civil authority, until in the dark ages they, too, were brought into almost entire subjection to the Papacy. The preservation in purity of this doctrine and practice for so long a period, in opposition to the whole stream of influences which was sweeping over the church and polluting it, affords a strong confirmation of the position, that it was firmly grounded on scriptural authority and apostolic practice.

We have some traces of the system of patronage, or of something like it, in the fifth and sixth centuries, in country parishes, though not in towns, originating as it did in the practice of landed proprietors building and endowing churches for the accommodation of their dependants, and then, upon this ground, claiming some influence on the appointment of the ministers (a statement, however, let it be observed, not in the least inconsistent with Beza's account of its origin—viz., that it was concocted in Satan's kitchen). Patronage, even in its infant form, seems soon to have led, through the corruption and subserviency of the clergy, to the intrusion of ministers upon reclaiming congregations; and, in consequence, we find that in the fifth and sixth centuries enactments were passed by councils and other eminent ecclesiastical authorities against intrusion contrary to the will of the people; and it is very remarkable, and quite conclusive, that all of them contain, *in gremio*, clear and explicit proof that the principle of non-intrusion was then understood in the same sense in which we understand it,—viz. this, that the opposition of a congregation in the full enjoyment of church privileges was of itself quite a sufficient reason why the person proposed should not be settled as their pastor. These enactments were embodied in the canon law—the law of the Church of Rome—and statements and practices founded upon them continued to hold a place in the public rituals of that church till the time of the Council of Trent, when it was proposed, though not agreed to, that they should be expunged, as giving a handle to the Reformers, who had restored, not only the doctrine, but, so far as they could, the practice of the primitive church on this subject, and were all strenuous supporters of the rights of the Christian people.

Perhaps it may be asked, What do Papists, Prelatists, and Erastians, who withhold from the Christian people their lawful rights in this matter, make of these facts—of all this evidence?

The more candid among them admit that it cannot be answered; and then, if their other principles allow of it, assert that the authority of the primitive church is not binding, or that the practice followed in this respect was not one that could not be changed. The defenders of the Gallican liberties—the most respectable class of writers, along with the Jansenists, whom the modern church of Rome has produced—concur with the Greek Church in maintaining theoretically, upon grounds of Scripture and primitive antiquity, the same principles, so far as intrusion is concerned, as we do. Many of the most able and learned writers of the Church of England have admitted—and their admissions may be fairly regarded as the concessions of opponents wrung from them by the force of truth—that these were sound and primitive principles. It is sufficient to mention the names of Hooker, Bishop Wilson, Bishop Andrews, Dr Field, and Mr Bingham.*

But still it may be asked, What is said by the more bold and unscrupulous, who do not admit that the doctrine and practice of the primitive church were as we have described them? They have laboured to the best of their ability in obscuring and perverting the testimony of the primitive church, and especially by trying to show that it does not necessarily mean what they can scarcely deny that it naturally and obviously means. Cardinal Bellarmine has attempted it, and the substance of his evasion is just that which has been employed ever since, down to our own day, in all the efforts which have been made to pervert or set aside, not only the testimony of the primitive church, but that

* Dr Waddington, now Dean of Durham, and the latest Episcopal historian of the church, most fully concedes this. He says (p. 40, 2d ed.): "The choice of a successor devolved on the members of the society. In this election the people had an equal share with the presbyters and inferior clergy, without exception or distinction; and it is clear that their right in this matter was not barely testimonial, but judicial and elective." He adds, in a note to this sentence: "This is made very clear, from the comparison of much contradictory evidence by Bingham, B. iv., c. ii. There were some variations in the mode of elec-

tion, according to times and circumstances, since no rule is laid down in Scripture upon the subject; but there is a great concurrence of evidence to show that no bishop was ever obtruded upon an orthodox people without their consent."

He speaks here of Bingham's comparing much contradictory evidence; but there is no contradictory evidence in ancient times upon this subject. Waddington was evidently confounding the contradictory views (referred to by Bingham) of modern authors, in regard to the import of the ancient evidence, with contradictions in the ancient evidence itself.

also of the Reformers, upon this question. The one point which they all—Papists, Prelatists, Erastians, and Infidels—labour to establish is this, that the power or influence which the testimonies quoted ascribe to the people, is merely a right of stating objections to the person proposed, of the validity of which another party is to judge; this other party, whether bishops or presbyteries, being entitled ultimately to dispose of the matter, *i.e.*, to settle the person or not, according to *their* own judgment of the validity of the people's objections; and *the one process* by which they all strive to effect it is this: they select the weakest and vaguest term which any of the authors quoted has employed in describing what the people do, or are entitled to do, in this matter; they pare down this term to the lowest sense of which, *in any circumstances or in any connection*, it is capable; and then they put forth this diluted and perverted sense of the weakest and vaguest word employed as being the true and real meaning of the far stronger, more definite, and more specific words which are also employed. Thus Cyprian, in discussing the question, happens in one sentence to speak of the necessity of the people being present, and giving their testimony. This is immediately laid hold of, and is said to mean merely, or not necessarily to mean more than, a right of stating objections; and then at once the inference is drawn, that the *power of choosing and rejecting* which Cyprian unequivocally ascribes to them must also mean this, and nothing more than this. This, of course, is in plain contravention of the most obvious principles of sound and honest interpretation; but this one artifice, variously modified, according to the ingenuity, the learning, the sense, or the courage of the men who may have been tempted to employ it (from Cardinal Bellarmine to Sir William Hamilton), is *all* that has ever been brought to bear against the clear, unequivocal, unassailable testimony, at once of the primitive church and the whole body of the Reformers, in favour of the right of the Christian people to a real, honest, and effective voice, as opposed to a mere right of stating objections, in the appointment of their pastors.

Such is the testimony of the primitive church in regard to these two important principles. Almost everything else in the profession and practice of the primitive church, with the exception of the doctrine of the Trinity, underwent changes and modifications even during the first three centuries; and the tendency of

the changes was almost universally to the worse—to a greater deviation from apostolic doctrine and practice. But, while almost everything else was changing, and changing for the worse, and while there was even a strong under-current running against the Bible and against the people, it is interesting and encouraging to see that these great Protestant principles of the supremacy and sufficiency of the Scriptures, and the rights of the Christian people in the choice of their pastors, continued to be openly and universally professed, and that no one ventured to deny them, or to propose to lay them aside. We do not, of course, attach anything like authoritative or binding weight to this consideration. We believe these great Protestant principles on the testimony of God's word; and upon that ground we would have believed them as firmly as we now do, even though, as was not improbable, they had been as much corrupted in primitive times as were some other departments of the doctrine and practice of the church. But the fact which we have established, is at least sufficient to disprove the charge of novelty, which, strange as it may seem, Papists, Prelatists, and Erastians have sometimes ventured to adduce against the holders of one or both of these principles; and considering the peculiar circumstances of the case, and the general tendency of the influences then undoubtedly at work, the professed maintenance of them for so long a period in purity, may be reasonably regarded as of itself a presumption—were presumptions needed when we have proofs—that, by divine authority and apostolic influence, they were deeply wrought into the ordinary train of men's thoughts, into the constitution of the church, and the administration of ecclesiastical affairs. Their influence was no doubt salutary and beneficial. They did not, indeed, prevent, though we are persuaded they retarded, the growing corruption of the church; and the whole subsequent history of the church proves that, whenever the Lord has been pleased to send times of reviving and refreshing, He has also brought out into prominence these great principles, where before they had been overlooked and disregarded. So it was at the period of the Reformation; and so it has been in our own church, and in our day: and most assuredly we are honoured by God to tread in the footsteps of the primitive church, and to take up an important branch of the testimony of the Reformation from Popery, when we are called upon, as we have been, by His Spirit and in His providence, to

contend for the exclusive supremacy of His word as the only law or rule by which the affairs of His church ought to be regulated, and for the right of Christian congregations to a real and important influence,—an effective and decisive voice,—in the appointment of their own office-bearers.

Sec. IV.—Idolatry.

We proceed to consider the testimony of the church of the first three centuries—the bearing of the information which the writers of that period afford us—on some of the topics involved in the controversies between Protestants and Papists. We have already explained the nature and bearing of the testimony of the early church upon the subject of the doctrines of grace; and these doctrines form an important part of our controversies with the Church of Rome, which has grievously corrupted them.

The adherents of the Church of Rome are the greatest admirers of the fathers, and profess implicit deference to their authority. Their controversial works abound in quotations from ancient writers, in support of all their peculiar opinions, and in opposition, as they allege, to all the doctrines of Protestantism. It is the universal practice, indeed, of Popish controversial writers to produce extracts from the writings of the fathers, very much as if they were texts of Scripture, and possessed of conclusive weight in proving or in disproving doctrines. Bellarmine, for instance, through the whole of his great work on the controversies against the heresies of the time, labours to establish all his leading positions—first, from Scripture, then from the decisions of councils; next, from the statements of the fathers; and he commonly proceeds continuously from the Scriptures to the councils, and from the councils to the fathers, just as if proofs from all these different sources were possessed, indiscriminately, of equal validity. Papists have been in the habit of boasting that all their peculiar opinions are supported by the fathers, and are confirmed by the catholic consent of the early church; and they wish this to be received as proof that, though not all originally committed to writing, or found in the canonical books, they were handed down by tradition from Christ and His apostles.

Protestants have been accustomed, on the other hand, to maintain that the fathers of the first three centuries do not coun-

tenance the leading peculiarities of the Popish system, and afford sufficient evidence that these were not then generally held by the church. This has led to a great deal of wearisome and unprofitable discussion, turning often upon the precise meaning of obscure and ambiguous phrases, of clauses and sentences frequently involved in gross darkness and inconsistency. There have been long and learned discussions between Protestants and Papists about the meaning of passages in the writings of the fathers, with respect to some of which it is more than probable that even their authors, if we could subject them to interrogation, would be unable to tell us what they meant when they wrote them! A great deal too much importance has been attached to the testimony of the fathers; and a great deal of talent and learning has been wasted in investigating the precise import of their statements. But still, as these discussions form a considerable department of theological literature, and as the adduction of authorities, in the shape of extracts from the fathers and other ancient writers, commonly enters largely into theological controversies, it may not be unprofitable to make a remark or two upon this topic.

The common practice of controversialists, and especially Popish ones, in adducing authorities from the fathers, is just to collect brief extracts from their works, which, taken by themselves, and apart from the context or scope of the passage, seem to countenance the principles they advocate. This process is, however, in its general character, unfair, and in its ordinary results, unsatisfactory and deceptive; inasmuch as experience abundantly proves that it is an easy matter to produce from the writings of almost any author, brief and garbled extracts, which, taken by themselves, would ascribe to him views which he never entertained. The objects to be aimed at, in adducing the testimony of the primitive church, or the authority of the fathers, are these two: to ascertain, first, what was the mature and deliberate judgment of the men upon the point under consideration; and, secondly, what can be clearly learned from them as to the general belief and practice of the church in the age and country in which they lived.

These are two distinct objects, which ought to be separately considered, and require distinct evidence applicable to the precise point to be established. Now, to ascertain the mature and deliberate judgment of an author upon a particular point that may be controverted, is, as experience proves, a very different thing

from producing from his writings one or two brief extracts that may have dropped from him inadvertently, or when the topic in regard to which his authority is adduced was not present to his thoughts, or was not fully and formally considered. The first thing, therefore, which in fairness ought to be attended to, in an investigation of this sort, is the question, whether or not the author ever had the precise point controverted present to his mind—whether or not he has really formed and expressed a deliberate judgment regarding it. If the precise point under consideration was never really present to his thoughts, or if it was not formally and deliberately entertained by him, then, as experience proves, it will probably be no easy matter to ascertain with certainty what his views regarding it were; and, even if they could be certainly ascertained, they would be entitled to no weight or deference as an authority, while they might still be of some value, indirectly, in ascertaining, in combination with other evidence, the views that then generally prevailed. This obvious dictate of common sense, confirmed by manifold experience, has been far too much overlooked, especially—though not exclusively—by Papists in adducing the testimony of the fathers; and, in consequence, there has been a great deal of most unprofitable and frequently most unfair discussion about the meaning of many obscure and confused passages, often terminating without leading to any very satisfactory or decisive result on either side. When Papists have adduced passages from the fathers in support of their tenets, the way in which Protestants have usually met them is by laying down and establishing such positions as these: that the words adduced do not *necessarily* require the sense which the Papists put upon them; that a careful examination of the context and scope of the passages proves that *this* was not in fact their meaning; and then particularly, that, from an examination of the whole writings of the author adduced, it can be proved that he held, not the Popish, but the Protestant view upon the point—or, at least, that he has given no clear or explicit deliverance regarding it. Protestants have fully established these positions, *or some of them*, in regard to a very large proportion of the passages commonly quoted by Papists from the writings of the early fathers; though the labour that has been spent upon this subject has been immeasurably greater than its intrinsic importance deserved, and though in this way a vast amount of learned lumber has been

bequeathed to the world, especially by divines of the Church of England.

These observations, however, apply chiefly to the fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, or the Nicene age; which principally forms the debateable ground in this controversy with the Church of Rome. It is not till the fifth century, or the end of the fourth, that the Popish writers can find materials for making out a case that has anything like plausibility in support of almost any of the definite peculiarities of the Romish Church; and a large portion of what they commonly adduce from writers of these two centuries is but plausible, rather than solid. The Protestants have in the main successfully established, in regard to most of the writers of that period, one or more of the positions formerly stated. There is, however, good reason to believe that some of them have gone further than the evidence warranted, in denying that the germs or rudiments of many Popish doctrines were sown in the Nicene and immediately subsequent age, though they were not yet fully expanded and developed. But it is with the first of these centuries that we have at present to do; and here it has been established, upon a full and deliberate investigation of the whole materials, that the cause of Popery has nothing solid, scarcely anything even plausible, to rest upon; while, on the other hand, it cannot be fairly disputed that even in that early period there are plain traces of the “mystery of iniquity” being at work—indications of some of the germs of the system which was afterwards fully developed, and which operates so injuriously both on the temporal and spiritual welfare of men.

We cannot enter into a minute and detailed discussion of the various points involved in the Popish controversy, or into an investigation of the particular testimonies from early writers, which have been the subjects of so much useless discussion. We can merely state briefly and generally how the case stands. With respect to the worship paid to angels, saints, and images, and the adoration of the host, on which Protestants have based the heavy charge of idolatry against the Church of Rome, it is a matter of unquestionable certainty, and is admitted by learned Papists, that there is no authority to be produced for their doctrine and practice during the first three centuries. Thus one most important department of the mystery of iniquity is at once cut off from all pretence to the countenance and support of primitive antiquity.