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ON THE

DOCTRINES, ORDER, AND POLITY

OF THE

✓
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN THE

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EMBRACING

SEVERAL ON PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

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HISTORY

OF THE

EARLY RISE OF PRELACY.

BY THE

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EARLY RISE OF PRELACY.

ONE of the most plausible arguments in favour of prelacy, is drawn by Episcopalians from the early rise of the prelatical system. The argument is thus stated—"Bishops, as an order superior to presbyters, are freely acknowledged by Presbyterians to have existed toward the close of the third, and, beyond all doubt, early in the fourth century. Now, in what manner shall we account for the introduction of such an order? Can any man believe that it was an innovation, brought in by human ambition within the first three hundred years? Is it supposable that men of such eminent piety, self-denial, and zeal as the ministers of the first two hundred and fifty, or three hundred years are represented to have been, could have been disposed to usurp unscriptural authority? But, even if they had been wicked enough to be so disposed, can we believe that any temptation to do so then existed, when it is known that, by gaining ecclesiastical pre-eminence, they only became more prominent objects to their pagan enemies, and, of course, more exposed to the fury of persecution? But, even supposing them to have been so ambitious and unprincipled as to attempt encroachment on the rights of others, and to have had ever so strong a temptation to do it, can we imagine that such an attempt could have been successful? would the rest of the

clergy have quietly submitted to such an usurpation? would the people have endured it? In a word; even supposing the clergy of that period to have been unprincipled enough to aspire to unauthorized honours, and to encroach on the rights of their brethren; and to have had the strongest inducements thus to act; is it credible that so great a change in the constitution of the church could have taken place without opposition, without much conflict and noise? And if any such conflict and noise had occurred, should we not now find some record of it? Could such an encroachment possibly have taken place without convulsion; without leaving on the records of antiquity some traces of the steps by which it was accomplished? No, say the Episcopal advocates, it is not credible; nay, it is impossible. The unavoidable inference, then, is that no such alteration ever took place; that prelates, as an order superior to presbyters, have existed in the church from the beginning; and, consequently, were of apostolical origin."

This is the substance of an argument which eminent Episcopal writers have ventured to call "demonstration," and on which great stress has been laid by them all. And, indeed, I am free to confess, that I think it is the most plausible argument they have. Their scriptural testimony amounts to nothing—absolutely nothing. Their testimony from the fathers, we have seen to be a failure. But the argument which I am about to examine, has, at first view, something like cogency. I am persuaded, however, that a very slight examination will suffice to show that this cogency is only apparent, and that it can boast of nothing more than mere plausibility.

And the first remark which I shall make on this

argument is, that it is the very same which the Papists have been accustomed, ever since the time of Bellarmine, to employ against the Protestants, and, among the rest, against Protestant Episcopalians. The Papists argue thus—"Every one grants," say they, "that the bishop of Rome claimed a certain pre-eminence over all other bishops, before the close of the third century; and in the fourth century some pre-eminence seems to have been extensively conceded to him." Now, they ask—"How could this happen? The bishops of that day were all too pious to be suspected of an attempt to encroach on the rights of their brethren. But if it were not so; if the prelate of Rome had been wicked enough to make the attempt, what inducement had he to desire such pre-eminence, since it would only expose him to more certain and severe persecution? Even supposing, however, that he was proud and selfish enough to attempt to gain such pre-eminence, and had had the strongest temptation to seek it, could he have accomplished any usurpation of that kind, without many struggles, and much opposition? What were the other bishops about? Is it credible that men of sense, with their eyes open, and 'of like passions with other men,' should be willing to surrender their rights to an ambitious individual? And even if an ambitious individual had attempted thus to usurp authority, and had succeeded in the attempt, would there not have been resistance—warm resistance—much conflict in the unhallowed struggle for pre-eminence? And among all the records of antiquity, should we not be able to find some traces of the conflict and noise occasioned by this ambitious and fraudulent encroachment? Now, since we find," say they, "no distinct

account of any such conflict and noise ; since we are wholly unable to trace the various steps by which the bishop of Rome is alleged to have gained the ecclesiastical throne on which he has been sitting for ages—we infer that he was never guilty of any such usurpation ; that his pre-eminence existed from the days of the apostles ; and, of course, is an institution of Christ.”

It is perfectly manifest that the argument of the Papists—and which they too call “demonstration”—is of the very same character with that of modern Episcopalians. It is, in fact, *mutatis mutandis*—the very same argument ; and every intelligent reader will see that it is quite as potent in popish as in Protestant hands. But, as was pronounced in the former case, it is, in regard to both, plausible—simply plausible—and nothing more. A few plain statements, and especially a few indubitable facts, will be quite sufficient to destroy its force in the estimation of all intelligent and impartial readers.

The first assumption in this argument is, that the clergy, during the first three hundred years, had too much piety, zeal, gospel simplicity, and disinterestedness, to admit of their engaging in any scheme for usurping a power in the church which Christ never gave them.

We are accustomed to look back to the early church with a veneration nearly bordering on superstition. It is one of the common artifices of Popery to refer all their corruptions to primitive times, and, in concurrence with this, to represent those times as exhibiting the models of all excellence. But every representation of this kind ought to be received with much distrust. The Christian church during the

apostolic age, and perhaps for half a century, and even a whole century afterwards, did indeed present a venerable aspect. Persecuted by the world on every side, she was favoured in an uncommon measure with the presence and Spirit of her divine Head and Lord; and perhaps exhibited a degree of simplicity and purity, which has never since been exceeded—possibly not equalled. But long before the close of the second century the scene began to change; and before the commencement of the fourth, a deplorable corruption of doctrine, discipline, and morals, had crept into the church, and dreadfully disfigured the body of Christ. Hegesippus, an ecclesiastical historian, who wrote in the second century, declares that “the virgin purity of the church was confined to the days of the apostles.” Nay, Jerome asserts that “the primitive churches were tainted with gross errors, while the apostles were still alive, and while the blood of Christ was still warm in Judea.” We know that in the very presence of the Saviour himself, the evening before he suffered, there was a contest among his disciples, “which of them should be the greatest.” The apostle Paul expressly cautions ministers of his day against attempting to be “lords over God’s heritage.” What a caution, you will say, at such a time, when they were in jeopardy of martyrdom every hour! Yet the undoubted fact is, that we read, in several of the epistles, strong indications of the ambition, the selfishness, and the encroaching spirit even of those who were set as leaders and guides of the people, and who ought to have been “ensamples to the flock.” We read of Diotrephes, who “loved to have the pre-eminence,” and who, on that account, troubled the church. In short, the apostle Paul in-

forms us, 2 Thessalonians ii. 7, that the mystery of iniquity, which afterwards wrought such an amount of corruption and mischief in the church, had already begun to work.

All this we find in the New Testament. But let us pursue the course of the church a little further, and see whether the supposition of its entire freedom from corruption, and from the influence of ambition and conflict at this early period can be sustained.

Was there no spirit of domination manifested in the fierce dispute between Victor, Bishop of Rome, and Polycrates, of Ephesus, which took place in the second century, as related by Eusebius? Was no love of pre-eminence displayed by Cerinthus and Basilides, whose burning desire was “to be accounted great apostles?” Did Montanus, in the same century, exhibit no ambition in broaching his celebrated heresy? Was Samosatenus, in the third, wholly free from the same charge? Did Demetrius of Alexandria, discover nothing of an aspiring temper, when he sickened with envy at the fame and the success of Origen? Are there no accounts of Novatus having sought, ambitiously and fraudulently, to obtain the bishoprick of Rome? Did not his contemporary, Felicissimus, make a vigorous attempt to supplant Cyprian, as Bishop of Carthage? Was not Cyprian brought in to be bishop in that city, by the influence of the people, in opposition to the majority of the presbyters, some of whom were anxious to obtain the place for themselves? And did there not hence arise frequent collisions between him and them, and at length an open rupture? I ask, are any of these things related in the early history of the church? And can any man, with such records before him, lay his hand on his heart,

and assert that there were no symptoms of a spirit of ambition and domination in those times?

But I will not content myself with this general reference to the early conflicts of selfishness and ambition. The following specific quotations will be more than sufficient, if I do not mistake, to establish all that the opponents of prelacy can need, to refute the plea before us.

Hermas, one of the earliest fathers whose writings are extant, says, in his Pastor, "As for those who had their rods green, but yet cleft; they are such as were always faithful and good; but they had some envy and strife among themselves, concerning dignity and pre-eminence. Now all such are vain and without understanding, as contend with one another about these things. Nevertheless, seeing they are otherwise good, if, when they shall hear these commands, they shall amend themselves, and shall, at my persuasion, suddenly repent; they shall, at last, dwell in the tower, as they who have truly and worthily repented. But if any one shall again return to his dissensions, he shall be shut out of the tower, and lose his life. For the life of those who keep the commandments of the Lord, consists in doing what they are commanded; not in principality, or in any other 'dignity.' " *"

Hegesippus, who lived in the second century, and who was the first father who undertook to compose a regular ecclesiastical history, writes thus. "When James, the just, had been martyred for the same doctrine which our Lord preached, Simon, the son of Cleophas, was constituted bishop with universal preference, because he was the Lord's near kinsman. Wherefore they called that church a pure virgin, be-

* Simil. 8. § 7.

cause it was not defiled with corrupt doctrine. But Thebuli, because he was not made bishop, endeavoured to corrupt the church; being one of the seven heretics among the people, whereof was Simon, of whom the Simonians.”*

Some zealous Episcopalians represent the age of Cyprian as among the very purest periods of the Christian church, and quote that father with a frequency and a confidence which evince the highest respect for his authority. The following passages will show how far the illustrious pastor of Carthage considered the bishops of his day as beyond the reach of selfishness and ambition.

“A long continuance of peace and security† had relaxed the rigour of that holy discipline which was delivered to us from above. All were set upon an immeasurable increase of gain; and, forgetting how the first converts to our religion had behaved under the personal direction and care of the Lord’s apostles, or how all ought in after times to conduct themselves; the love of money was their darling passion, and the master-spring of all their actions. The religion of the clergy slackened and decayed; the faith of priests and deacons grew languid and inactive; works of charity were discontinued; and an universal license and corruption prevailed. Divers bishops, who should have taught both by their example and persuasion, neglecting their high trust, and their commission from above, entered upon the management of secular affairs; and leaving their chair, and their charge with it, wandered about, from place to place in different provinces, upon

* See fragments of this writer preserved in Eusebius, lib. iv. cap. 22.

† They had been free from persecution a very few years.

mercantile business, and in quest of disreputable gain. Thus the poor of the church were miserably neglected, while the bishops, who should have taken care of them, were intent upon nothing but their own private profit, which they were forward to advance at any rate, and by any, even the foulest methods.”*

Speaking of Cornelius, who had been made bishop, Cyprian says, “In the next place, he neither desired, nor canvassed for the dignity conferred upon him; much less did he invade it, as some others would, who were actuated by a great and lofty conceit of their own qualifications; but peaceably and modestly, like such as are called of God to this office. Instead of using violence, as a certain person in this case hath done, to be made a bishop, he suffered violence, and was raised to his dignity by force and compulsion.”†

The same father, in the same epistle, has the following passage: “Unless you can think him a bishop, who, when another was ordained by sixteen of his brethren bishops, would obtrude upon the church a spurious and foreign bishop, ordained by a parcel of renegadoes and deserters; and that by canvassing and intriguing for it.”‡

Cyprian speaks also of a certain deacon who had been deposed from his “sacred deaconship, on account of his fraudulent and sacrilegious misapplication of the church’s money to his own private use; and by his denial of the widows’ and orphans’ pledges deposited with him.”§

Origen, the contemporary of Cyprian, more than once lashes the clergy of his day for their vices. The following passage is surely strong enough, were there no other, to take away all doubt. “If Christ justly

* De Lapsis, § 4.

† Epist. 55.

‡ Ibid.

§ Epist. 52.

wept over Jerusalem, he may now, on much better grounds, weep over the church, which was built to the end that it might be a house of prayer; and yet, through the filthy usury of some, (and I wish these were not even the pastors of the people,) is made a den of thieves. But I think that that which is written concerning the sellers of doves, doth agree to those who commit the churches to greedy, tyrannical, unlearned, and irreligious bishops, presbyters, and deacons.”* The same father elsewhere declares, “We are such as that we sometimes in pride go beyond even the wickedest of the princes of the gentiles; and are just at the point of procuring for ourselves splendid guards, as if we were kings, making it our study moreover to be a terror to others, and giving them, especially if they be poor, very uneasy access. We are to them, when they come and seek any thing from us, more cruel than are even tyrants, or the cruelest princes to their supplicants. And you may see, even in the greater part of lawfully constituted churches, especially those of greater cities, how the pastors of God’s people, suffer none, though they were even the chiefest of Christ’s disciples, to be equal with themselves.”†

Eusebius, who lived in the next century, writes in the same strain concerning the age of Cyprian. “When, through too much liberty, we fell into sloth and negligence; when every one began to envy and backbite another; when we waged, as it were, an intestine war amongst ourselves, with words as with swords; pastors rushed against pastors, and people against people, and strife and tumult, deceit and guile advanced to the highest pitch of wickedness—Our

* In Matt. p. 441.

† Ibid. p. 420.

pastors, despising the rule of religion, strove mutually with one another, studying nothing more than how to outdo each other in strife, emulations, hatred, and mutual enmity; proudly usurping principalities, as so many places of tyrannical domination. Then the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger.”*

Gregory Nazianzen, who flourished in the fourth century, at a time which many are disposed to assume as the very best model of the Christian church, speaks, in a number of places in his writings, with bitter regret of the proud and ambitious contests among the clergy of his day. His language is the more remarkable because he was himself a bishop, and of course somewhat interested in maintaining the credit of his order. Speaking of one of the most famous councils of his time, he says, “These conveyers of the Holy Ghost, these preachers of peace to all men, grew bitterly outrageous and clamorous against one another, in the midst of the church, mutually accusing each other, leaping about as if they had been mad, under the furious impulse of a lust of power and dominion, as if they would have rent the whole world in pieces.” He afterwards adds, “This was not the effect of piety, but of a contention for thrones.”—*Tom.* ii. 25. 27.

On another occasion, in the bitterness of his spirit, he expresses himself in the following strong language, “Would to God there were no prelacy, no prerogative of place, no tyrannical privileges; that by virtue alone we might be distinguished. Now this right and left hand, and middle rank, these higher and lower dignities, and this state-like precedence, have caused many fruitless conflicts and bruises; have cast many

* *Hist. Eccles. lib. viii. cap. 1.*

into the pit, and carried away multitudes to the place of the goats."—*Orat.* 28.

Nay, Archbishop Whitgift, with all his Episcopal partialities, was constrained to acknowledge the ambitious and aspiring temper which disgraced many bishops even as early as the time of Cyprian. "There was great contention," says he, "among the bishops in the Council of Nice, insomuch that even in the presence of the emperor, they ceased not to libel one against another. What bitterness and cursing was there between Epiphanius and Chrysostom! What jarring between Jerome and Augustine! Bishops shall not now need to live by pilling and polling, as it seems they did in Cyprian's time; for he complaineth thereof in his sermon *De Lapsis*."*

With Whitgift agrees his contemporary Rigaltius, who was so much distinguished for his learned Annotations on the works of Cyprian. Speaking of Cyprian's age, and of the deacon's office, he says, "By little and little, and from small beginnings, a kingdom and a love of dominion entered into the church. In the apostles' time there were only deacons; Cyprian's age admitted sub-deacons; the following age arch-deacons, and then archbishops and patriarchs."

These extracts are produced, not to blacken the ministerial character; but to establish the fact, that clerical ambition, and clerical encroachments were familiarly known, even during that period which modern Episcopalians pronounce the purest that was ever enjoyed by the Christian church. I certainly have no interest, and can take no pleasure in depicting the foibles, the strifes, and the vices of the clergy

* Defence of his Answer against Cartwright, p. 472, &c.

in any age. But when assertions are made respecting them as directly contradictory to all history, as they are contrary to the course of depraved human nature; and especially when these assertions are triumphantly employed as arguments to establish other assertions equally unfounded, it is time to vindicate the truth. To do this, in the present case, is an easy task. The man who, after perusing the foregoing extracts, can dare to say, that the clergy of the first three centuries, were all too pious and disinterested to admit the suspicion, that they aspired to titles and honours, and intrigued for the attainment of episcopal chairs, must have a hardihood of incredulity, or an obliquity of perception truly extraordinary. We have seen that Hermas plainly refers to certain ecclesiastics of his time, who had "envy and strife among themselves concerning dignity and pre-eminence." Hege-sippus goes further, and points out the case of a particular individual, who ambitiously aspired to the office of bishop, and was exceedingly disappointed and mortified at not obtaining it. Cyprian expressly declares not only that a spirit of intrigue, of worldly gain, and of ecclesiastical domination, existed among the clergy of his day, but that such a spirit was awfully prevalent among them. Eusebius gives us similar information in still stronger terms. Archbishop Whitgift makes the same acknowledgment, more particularly with respect to the bishops of that period. And even Dr. Bowden acknowledges that a number of persons, as early as the days of Cyprian, and before his time, who aspired to the office of bishop, and who used every effort and artifice to attain it, on being disappointed, distinguished themselves as heretics or schismatics, and became the pests of the church.

These extracts might be multiplied twenty-fold. If any intelligent reader will look through the pages of Clemens Alexandrinus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Chrysostom, and, above all, Basil, to name no more, he will find, within the first three hundred and fifty, or four hundred years, an amount of evidence of the depravity of ecclesiastics which will amaze and revolt him. He will find evidence, not only of selfishness, of pride, and of grasping ambition, but of voluptuous and licentious habits, with the description of which I cannot pollute my pages; and which would convince every impartial mind that not merely some, but large numbers of them were utterly unprincipled and profligate.

Now, I repeat, if any man, after reading such accounts, can lay his hand on his heart, and say, that there is no evidence that the ministers of the Christian church, even for the first two hundred years after the apostolic age, were too pious, pure, and disinterested to make any ambitious attempts to usurp power; or to pursue their own aggrandizement at the expense of the rights and claims of others; I say, if any man, after reading the foregoing statements and citations can lay his hand on his heart, and say this—he must be blinded by a prejudice of the most extraordinary kind. Nay, I will venture to assert, that, so far from having reason to doubt the possibility of the clergy of those early times striving with unhallowed ambition to gain the upper hand of each other, and to obtain titles and places; if they were really such men as their most venerable and trust-worthy contemporaries describe—it would have been something bordering on miracle, if prelacy, or some such innovation on the simple and primitive model of church order, had not arisen.

Still, however, the question recurs; What, in those days of persecution and peril, before Christianity was established, when the powers of the world were leagued against it, and when every Christian pastor especially held a station of much self-denial and danger, what could induce any selfish or ambitious man to desire the pastoral office, and to intrigue for the extension of the powers and honours of that office? When my opponents can tell me what induced Judas Iscariot to follow Christ, at the risk of his life; when they can tell me what impelled Diotrophes to desire the pre-eminence in the church; or what were the objects of Demas, Hymenæus, and Alexander, in their restless and ambitious conduct, while Calvary was yet smoking with the blood of their crucified Lord, and while their own lives were every moment exposed to the rage of persecution;—when my opponents can tell me what actuated these men, I shall be equally ready to assign a reason for the early rise and progress of prelacy.

But there is no need of retreating into the obscurity of conjecture, when causes enough to satisfy every mind may easily be assigned. If the advocates of Episcopacy do not know that there are multitudes of men, in all ages, in the church, and out of it, who are ready to court distinction merely for distinction's sake, and at the evident hazard of their lives, they have yet much to learn from the instructions both of human nature and of history. But this is not all. It is a notorious fact, that the office of bishop, even in those early times, had much to attract the cupidity, as well as the ambition of selfish and aspiring men. The revenues of the primitive church were large and alluring. It is granted that, during the first three

centuries, the church held little or no real property; as the Roman laws did not allow any person to give or bequeath real estates to ecclesiastical bodies, without the consent of the senate or the emperor. The contributions, however, which were made to the church, for the support of the clergy, the poor, &c. were immense. During the apostolic age, the proceeds of the sale of real estates were devoted to ecclesiastical and charitable purposes, and laid at the apostles' feet. We find the gentile churches contributing liberally to the relief of the churches of Judea, in Acts xi. 29. Rom. xv. 26. 1 Cor. xvi. 1, and 2 Cor. viii. The same liberality manifested itself in subsequent times.* So ample were the funds of the church of Rome, about the middle of the second century, that they were adequate not only to the support of her own clergy and poor members, but also to the relief of other churches, and of a great number of Christian captives in the several provinces, and of such as were condemned to the mines.† Such was the wealth of the same church, in the third century, that it was considered as an object not unworthy of imperial rapacity. By order of the Emperor Decius, the Roman deacon Laurentius was seized, under the expectation of finding in his possession the treasures of the

* One cause of the liberality of the primitive Christians in their contributions to the church, was the notion which generally prevailed, that the end of the world was at hand. This notion was adopted by some of the early fathers, and propagated among the people with great diligence. Cyprian taught, in his day, with great confidence, that the dissolution of the world was but a few years distant. *Epist. ad Thibart.* The tendency of this opinion to diminish the self-denial of parting with temporal wealth is obvious. See *Father Paul's Hist. of Benefices and Revenues*, Chap. II.

† *Father Paul's Hist. of Ecclesiastical Benefices and Revenues*, Chap. iii.

church, and of transferring them to the coffers of the emperor: but the vigilant deacon, fearing the avarice of the tyrant, had distributed them, as usual, when a persecution was expected. Prudentius introduces an officer of the emperor, thus addressing the deacon, *Quod Cæsaris scis, Cæsari da, nempe justum postulo; ni fallor, haud ullam tuus signat Deus pecuniam, i. e.* Give to Cæsar what you know to be his, I ask what is just; for if I mistake not, your God coins no money.*

Now the revenues of the churches, whether great or small, were at the disposal of the bishops. The deacons executed their orders. Of course they had every opportunity of enriching themselves at the expense of the church. And that they not unfrequently embraced this opportunity, is attested by Cyprian, who laments the fact, and is of opinion that the persecution which took place in the reign of Decius, was intended by God to punish a guilty people, and to purge this corruption from his church.† And yet, in the face of all this testimony, the advocates of Episcopacy permit themselves to maintain that there was no temptation, either before or during the age of Cyprian, to induce any man to desire the office of bishop. Nay, they tell us, that to suppose there was any such temptation, is, in fact, to yield the argument, because it is to concede that the office then included such a superiority and pre-eminence of rank as we utterly deny. Nothing will be more easy than to show that this whole plea is false, and every thing founded upon it worthless.

* Prudent. in Lib. de Coronis. Father Paul's History of Ecclesiastical Benefices and Revenues, Chap. iii.

† See his discourse De Lapsis, before quoted.

The love of pre-eminence and of power is natural to man. It is one of the most early, powerful, and universal principles of our nature. It reigns without control in wicked men; and it has more influence than it ought to have in the minds of the most pure and pious. It shows itself in the beggar's cottage, as well as on the imperial throne; in the starving and gloomy dungeon, no less than in the luxurious palace. Nay, it has been known to show itself with the rack, the gibbet, and the flames of martyrdom in the immediate prospect. This is wonderful; but so it is. And to attempt to set up our imaginary reasonings against the fact, is in the highest degree presumptuous and irrational.

Now, though the bishop, for the first two centuries after Christ, was, as we have seen, nothing more than a mere parochial "overseer," in other words, the pastor of a single church; yet his office was not without its attractions. It was a place of honour and of trust. He was looked up to as a leader and guide. The ruling elders and deacons of the parish by whom he was surrounded, regarded him as their superior, and treated him with reverence. And, as the bounty distributed by the deacons was, to a considerable extent, directed by his pleasure—the poor, of course, considered and revered him both as their spiritual and temporal benefactor; and gave him much of the incense of respect, gratitude, and praise. Here was abundantly enough to tempt an humble ecclesiastic in those days, or in any days. There are thousands of men—thousands of honest, good men, quite capable of being attracted by such fascinations as these. Many an humble rectory; many a plain, and even poor pastoral charge has been sought, from that time

to the present, with zeal and earnestness, for one half the temptation which has been described. But this was not all. While such were the attractions connected with the bishop's office, in its primitive parochial form, these attractions were not a little increased in the third century, when ambition sought and obtained some extension of the bishop's prerogative; and still more augmented in the fourth, when worldly pride and splendour in that office began to be openly enthroned in the church.

But still it may be asked—Even supposing the clergy of the first three centuries to have been capable of aspiring, ambitious conduct; and supposing that there were temptations to induce them thus to aspire; can we suppose that their unjust claims would have been calmly yielded, and their usurpations submitted to without a struggle on the part of the other clergy, and the great body of the people? If, then, such claims were made, and such usurpations effected, why do we not find, in the early history of the church, some account of a change so notable, and of conflicts so severe and memorable as must have attended its introduction?

In answer to this question, let it be remembered, that the nations over which the Christian religion was spread with so much rapidity during the first three centuries, were sunk in deplorable ignorance. Grossly illiterate, very few were able to read; and even to these few, manuscripts were of difficult access. At that period, popular eloquence was the great engine of persuasion; and where the character of the mind is not fixed by reading, and a consequent habit of attention and accurate thinking, it is impossible to say how deeply and suddenly it may be operated upon

by such an engine. A people of this description, wholly unaccustomed to speculations on government; universally subjected to despotic rule in the state; having no just ideas of religious liberty; altogether unfurnished with the means of communicating and uniting with each other, which the art of printing has since afforded; torn with dissensions among themselves, and liable to be turned about with every wind of doctrine; such a people could offer little resistance to those who were ambitious of ecclesiastical power. A fairer opportunity for the few to take the advantage of the ignorance, the credulity, the divisions, and the weakness of the many, can scarcely be imagined. In truth, under these circumstances, ecclesiastical usurpation is so far from being improbable, that, to suppose it not to have taken place, would be to suppose a continued miracle.

Nor is there more difficulty in supposing that these encroachments were submitted to by the clergy, than by the people. Some yielded through fear of the bold and domineering spirits who contended for seats of honour; some with the hope of obtaining preferment themselves in their turn; and some from that lethargy and sloth which ever prevent a large portion of mankind from engaging in any thing which requires enterprise and exertion. To these circumstances it may be added, that, while some of the presbyters, under the name of *bishops*, assumed unscriptural authority over the rest of that order; the increasing power of the latter over the deacons, and other subordinate grades of church officers, offered something like a recompense for their submission to those who claimed a power over themselves.

In addition to all these circumstances, it is to be

recollected, that the encroachments and the change in question took place gradually. The advocates of Episcopacy sometimes represent us as teaching that the change in question was adopted at once, or by a single step. We believe no such thing. As we have seen, Jerome expressly tells us that prelacy was brought in *paulatim*—by little and little. It was three hundred years in coming to maturity. When great strides in the assumption of power are suddenly made, they seldom fail to rouse resentment, and excite opposition. But when made artfully, and by slow degrees, nothing is more common than to see them pass without opposition, and almost without notice. Instances of this kind among nations sunk in ignorance, and long accustomed to despotic government, are numberless; and they are by no means rare even among the more enlightened. The British nation, in the seventeenth century, saw a monarch restored with enthusiasm, and almost without opposition, to the throne, by those very persons, who, a few years before, had dethroned and beheaded his father, and declared the bitterest hatred to royalty. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, one of the most enlightened nations of Europe, in a little more than twelve years after dethroning and decapitating a mild and gentle king, and after denouncing kingly government, with almost every possible expression of abhorrence, yielded, without a struggle, to the will of a despotic usurper. And, still more recently, we have seen a people enlightened and free, who had for more than two centuries maintained and boasted of their republican character, submit ignobly and at once, to the yoke of a monarch imposed on

them by a powerful neighbour. In short, the most limited knowledge of human nature, and of history, shows not only the possibility, but the actual and frequent occurrence of changes from free government to tyranny and despotism, in a much shorter period than a century; and all this in periods when information was more equally diffused, and the principles of social order much better understood, than in the second and third centuries of the Christian era.

Nor is it wonderful that we find so little said concerning these usurpations in the early records of antiquity. There was probably but little written on the subject; since those who were most ambitious to shine as writers, were most likely to be forward in making unscriptural claims themselves; and, of course, would be little disposed to record their own shame. It is likewise probable, that the little that was written on such a subject, would be lost; because the art of printing being unknown, and the trouble and expense of multiplying copies being only incurred for the sake of possessing interesting and popular works, it was not to be expected, that writings so hostile to the ambition and vices of the clergy, would be much read, if it were possible to suppress them. And when to these circumstances we add, that literature after the fourth century, was chiefly in the hands of ecclesiastics; that many important works written within the first three centuries are known to be lost; and that of the few which remain, some are acknowledged on all hands, to have been grossly corrupted, and radically mutilated, we cannot wonder that so little in explanation of the various steps of clerical usurpation has reached our times.

In confirmation of this reasoning, a variety of facts,

acknowledged as such by the advocates of Episcopacy themselves, may be adduced.

The first is, the rise of archbishops and metropolitans in the church. All Protestant Episcopalians, with one voice, grant that all bishops were originally equal; that archbishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs were offices of human invention, and had no other than human authority. Yet it is certain that they arose very nearly as soon as diocesan bishops. In fact they arose so early, became in a little while so general, and were introduced with so little opposition and noise, that some have undertaken, on this very ground, to prove that they were of apostolical origin. How did this come about? How did it happen that any of the bishops were proud or ambitious enough to usurp titles and powers which the Master never gave them? How came their fellow-bishops to submit so quietly to the encroachment? And why is it that we have quite as little on the records of antiquity to point out the arts and steps by which this usurped pre-eminence was reached, as we have to show the methods by which diocesan Episcopacy was established?

Closely connected with the introduction of archbishops, and other grades in the Episcopal office, is the rise and progress of the Papacy. It is certain that the anti-christian claims of the Bishop of Rome were begun before the close of the second century. The writings of Irenæus and Tertullian, both furnish abundant evidence of this fact. Yet the records of antiquity give so little information respecting the various steps by which this "man of sin" rose to the possession of his power; they contain so little evidence of any efficient opposition to his claims; and represent the sub-

mission of the other bishops as being so early and general, that the Papists attempt, from these circumstances, to prove the divine origin of their system. Yet what Protestant is there who does not reject this reasoning as totally fallacious, and conclude that the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome is an unscriptural usurpation? And although the most impartial and learned divines may and do differ among themselves in fixing the several dates of the rise, progress, and establishment of this great spiritual usurper; yet the fact that he did thus rise, and advance, and erect a tyrannical throne in the church, contrary to all that might have been expected both from the piety and the selfishness of the early Christians, is doubted by none.

Accordingly, this view of the gradual and insidious rise of prelacy is presented by a number of the most learned and impartial ecclesiastical historians. Of these a specimen will be given.

The first whom I shall quote is the learned Dr. Mosheim, a Lutheran divine, whose Ecclesiastical History has been for a century the theme of praise, for the general impartiality as well as erudition manifested by its author. In his account of the first century, he has the following remarks: "The rulers of the church at this time, were called either presbyters or bishops, which two titles are in the New Testament, undoubtedly applied to the same order of men. These were persons of eminent gravity, and such as had distinguished themselves by their superior sanctity and merit. Their particular functions were not always the same; for while some of them confined their labours to the instruction of the people, others contributed in different ways to the edification of the

church. Such was the constitution of the Christian church in its infancy, when its assemblies were neither numerous nor splendid. Three or four presbyters, men of remarkable piety and wisdom, ruled these small congregations in perfect harmony, nor did they stand in need of any president or superior to maintain concord and order, where no dissensions were known. But the number of the presbyters and deacons increasing with that of the churches, and the sacred work of the ministry growing more painful and weighty by a number of additional duties, these new circumstances required new regulations. It was then judged necessary that one man of distinguished gravity and wisdom should preside in the council of presbyters, in order to distribute among his colleagues their several tasks, and to be a centre of union to the whole society. This person was at first styled the angel of the church to which he belonged; but was afterwards distinguished by the name of bishop or inspector; a name borrowed from the Greek language, and expressing the principal part of the Episcopal function, which was to inspect into, and superintend the affairs of the church. Let none, however, confound the bishops of this primitive and golden period of the church with those of whom we read in the following ages. For though they were both distinguished by the same name, yet they differed extremely, and that in many respects. A bishop, during the first and second centuries, was a person who had the care of one Christian assembly, which, at that time, was, generally speaking, small enough to be contained in a private house. In this assembly he acted, not so much with the authority of a master, as with the zeal and diligence of a faithful servant. He instructed the

people, performed the several parts of divine worship, attended the sick, and inspected into the circumstances and supplies of the poor.”—*Eccles. Hist.* I. 101. 104—106. Such is the representation which this learned historian gives of the government of the Christian church during the first, and the greater part of the second century.

Of the third century he speaks in the following manner: “The face of things began now to change in the Christian church. The ancient method of ecclesiastical government seemed, in general, still to subsist, while, at the same time, by imperceptible steps, it varied from the primitive rule, and degenerated towards the form of a religious monarchy. For the bishops aspired to higher degrees of power and authority than they had formerly possessed, and not only violated the rights of the people, but also made gradual encroachments upon the privileges of the presbyters. And that they might cover these usurpations with an air of justice, and an appearance of reason, they published new doctrines concerning the nature of the church, and of the Episcopal dignity. One of the principal authors of this change in the government of the church, was Cyprian, who pleaded for the power of the bishops with more zeal and vehemence than had ever been hitherto employed in that cause. This change in the form of ecclesiastical government was soon followed by a train of vices, which dishonoured the character and authority of those to whom the administration of the church was committed. For though several yet continued to exhibit to the world illustrious examples of primitive piety and Christian virtue, yet many were sunk in luxury and voluptuousness; puffed up with vanity,

arrogance, and ambition; possessed with a spirit of contention and discord; and addicted to many other vices, that cast an undeserved reproach upon the holy religion of which they were the unworthy professors and ministers. This is testified in such an ample manner, by the repeated complaints of many of the most respectable writers of this age, that truth will not permit us to spread the veil which we should otherwise be desirous to cast over such enormities among an order so sacred. The bishops assumed, in many places, a princely authority. They appropriated to their evangelical function, the splendid ensigus of temporal majesty. A throne surrounded with ministers, exalted above his equals the servant of the meek and humble Jesus; and sumptuous garments dazzled the eyes and the minds of the multitude into an ignorant veneration for their arrogated authority. The example of the bishops was ambitiously imitated by the presbyters, who, neglecting the sacred duties of their station, abandoned themselves to the indolence and delicacy of an effeminate and luxurious life. The deacons, beholding the presbyters deserting thus their functions, boldly usurped their rights and privileges; and the effects of a corrupt ambition were spread through every rank of the sacred order.”—I. 265—267.

I shall only add a short extract from the same writer’s account of the fourth century. “The bishops, whose opulence and authority were considerably increased since the reign of Constantine, began to introduce gradually innovations into the form of ecclesiastical discipline, and to change the ancient government of the church. Their first step was an entire exclusion of the people from all part in the adminis-

tration of ecclesiastical affairs; and afterwards, they, by degrees, divested even the presbyters of their ancient privileges, and their primitive authority, that they might have no importunate protesters to control their ambition, or oppose their proceedings; and principally that they might either engross to themselves, or distribute as they thought proper, the possessions and revenues of the church. Hence it came to pass that at the conclusion of the fourth century, there remained no more than a mere shadow of the ancient government of the church. Many of the privileges which had formerly belonged to the presbyters and people, were usurped by the bishops; and many of the rights which had been formerly vested in the Universal Church, were transferred to the emperors, and to subordinate officers and magistrates.”—I. 348.

Such is the representation of Mosheim, one of the most learned men of the eighteenth century; and who had probably investigated the early history of the church with as much diligence and penetration as any man that ever lived.

The next citation shall be taken from Gibbon’s “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” The hostility of this writer to the Christian religion is well known. Of course, on any subject involving the divine origin of Christianity, I should feel little disposition either to respect his judgment, or to rely on his assertions. But on the subject before us, which is a question of fact, and which he treats historically, he had no temptation to deviate from impartiality; or, if such temptation had existed, it would have been likely to draw him to the side of ecclesiastical aristocracy and splendour, rather than to that of primitive simplicity. In fact, his leaning to the external show of

Romanism is well known. His deep and extensive learning, no competent judge ever questioned: and, indeed, his representations on this subject are fortified by so many references to the most approved writers, that they cannot be considered as resting on his candour or veracity alone.*

Mr. Gibbon thus describes the character and duties of Christian bishops in the first and second centuries: "The public functions of religion were solely entrusted to the established ministers of the church, the bishops and the presbyters; two appellations which, in their first origin, appear to have distinguished the same office, and the same order of persons. The name of presbyter was expressive of their age, or rather of their gravity and wisdom. The title of bishop denoted their inspection over the faith and manners of the Christians who were committed to their pastoral care. In proportion to the respective numbers of the faithful, a larger or smaller number of these episcopal presbyters guided each infant congregation, with equal authority, and with united counsels. But the most perfect equality of freedom requires the directing hand of a superior magistrate; and the order of public deliberations soon introduces the office of a president, invested at least with the authority of collecting the sentiments, and of executing the resolutions of the assembly. A regard for the public tranquillity, which would

* The pious Episcopal divine, Dr. Haweis, speaking of Mr. Gibbon's mode of representing this subject, expresses himself in the following manner: "Where no immediate bias to distort the truth leaves him an impartial witness, I will quote Gibbon with pleasure, I am conscious his authority is more likely to weigh with the world in general, than mine. I will, therefore, simply report his account of the government and nature of the primitive church. I think we shall not in this point greatly differ."—*Eccles. Hist.* I. 416.

so frequently have been interrupted by annual, or by occasional elections, induced the primitive Christians to constitute an honourable and perpetual magistracy, and to choose one of the wisest and most holy among their presbyters, to execute, during his life, the duties of their ecclesiastical governor. It was under these circumstances that the lofty title of bishop began to raise itself above the humble appellation of presbyter; and while the latter remained the most natural distinction for the members of every Christian senate, the former was appropriated to the dignity of its new president. The pious and humble presbyters who were first dignified with the Episcopal title, could not possess, and would probably have rejected the power and pomp which now encircle the tiara of the Roman pontiff, or the mitre of a German prelate. The primitive bishops were considered only as the first of their equals, and the honourable servants of a free people. Whenever the Episcopal chair became vacant by death, a new president was chosen among the presbyters, by the suffrage of the whole congregation. Such was the mild and equal constitution by which the Christians were governed more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles.”*—*Decline and Fall*, Vol. II. 272—275.

- Concerning the state of Episcopacy in the third century, Mr. Gibbon thus speaks: “As the legislative authority of the particular churches was insensibly superseded by the use of councils, the bishops obtained, by their alliance, a much larger share of

* Here is an explicit declaration, that the presidency or standing moderators of one of the presbyters, among his colleagues, without any claim to superiority of order, was the only kind of Episcopacy that existed in the church, until near the close of the second century.

executive and arbitrary power; and, as soon as they were connected by a sense of their common interest, they were enabled to attack with united vigour the original rights of the clergy and people. The prelates of the third century imperceptibly changed the language of exhortation into that of command, scattered the seeds of future usurpations; and supplied by Scripture allegories, and declamatory rhetoric, their deficiency of force and of reason. They exalted the unity and power of the church, as it was represented in the Episcopal office, of which every bishop enjoyed an equal and undivided portion. Princes and magistrates, it was often repeated, might boast an earthly claim to a transitory dominion. It was the Episcopal authority alone, which was derived from the Deity, and extended itself over this, and over another world. The bishops were the vicegerents of Christ, the successors of the apostles, and the mystic substitutes of the high priest of the Mosaic law. Their exclusive privilege of conferring the sacerdotal character, invaded the freedom both of clerical and of popular elections; and if, in the administration of the church, they sometimes consulted the judgment of the presbyters, or the inclination of the people, they most carefully inculcated the merit of such a voluntary condescension." I. p. 276, 277.

Dr. Haweis, an Episcopal divine, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, a late and popular work, before quoted, substantially agrees with Dr. Mosheim and Mr. Gibbon, in their representations on this subject. He explicitly pronounces with them, that primitive Episcopacy was parochial, and not diocesan; that clerical pride and ambition gradually introduced prelacy; that there was no material innovation, however, on the

primitive model, until the middle of the second century; and that after this, the system of imparity made rapid progress, until there arose, in succession, diocesan bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, patriarchs, and, finally, the Pope himself.

I shall only add one more to this class of testimonies. It is that of the celebrated Professor Neander, of Prussia, probably the most deeply learned ecclesiastical antiquary now living. And his connexion with the Lutheran Church, as before observed, exempts him from all suspicion of strong prejudice in favour of either Prelacy or Presbyterianism. His statement on the subject is so extended and circuitous, that it is necessary to present an abridgment rather than the whole, in this place. He expresses a decisive opinion, then, that prelacy was not established by the apostles; that nothing more than a moderator of each parochial presbytery existed for nearly two hundred years after Christ; that these parochial moderators or "presiding elders," had no higher office than their colleagues in the eldership, being only *primi inter pares*, *i. e.* the first among equals; and that as the first Christian spirit declined, the spirit of ambition and encroachment gained ground against the "Presbyterian system," as he emphatically styles the apostolical model. And, accordingly, in speaking of the struggle of Cyprian against his opponents, in the third century, he styles the success of the former against the latter, as the triumph of the Episcopal system over "Presbyterianism."*

The fact being thus established, that diocesan Episcopacy was not sanctioned by the apostles; that it

* History of the Christian Church, vol. i. p. 194, 238. London edition. Rose's translation.

was the offspring of human ambition; and that it was gradually introduced into the church; I shall not dwell long on the precise gradations by which it was introduced, or the precise date to be assigned to each step in its progress. Such an inquiry is as unnecessary and unimportant as it is difficult. But as it may gratify some readers to know how those who have most deeply and successfully explored antiquity, have considered the subject, I shall attempt a sketch of what appears to have been the rise and progress of this remarkable usurpation.

The Christian religion spread itself during the apostolic age, over a large part of the Roman empire. It was first received in the principal cities, Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. Here congregations appear to have been first formed, and church officers first appointed. As the places of worship were usually private houses, it follows of course that each congregation was comparatively small. And as we read of great multitudes having believed in several of the larger cities, we may infer that there were a number of these congregations, or small house-churches in each of those cities; without, however, being so distinctly divided into separate societies as is common at the present day.

Each primitive congregation was probably furnished with one or more elders, and also with deacons. The elders were of two kinds: the first class were ministers of the gospel, and therefore taught and led the devotions of the people, as well as ruled in the church. The other class assisted as rulers only. It is not certain that both these classes of elders were found in every church. We only know that they both existed in the apostolic age; and that all the elders of

each congregation, when convened, formed a kind of parochial presbytery, or church session. The teaching elders were also called bishops. Of these each congregation was always furnished with one, and sometimes with several, according to the number of its members, and other circumstances. We are expressly told in the sacred history, that in the days of the apostles there were a number of bishops in each of the cities of Ephesus and Philippi; and it is most probable that these were the pastors of different congregations in those cities respectively.

In those cases in which there were several pastors or bishops in the same church, they were at first perfectly and in all respects equal. "They ruled the church," as Jerome expresses it, "in common;" and the alternate titles of bishop and elder belonged and were equally applied to all. It does not appear, that in the beginning, even a temporary chairman was found necessary. There was probably little formality in their mode of transacting business. A large portion of the spirit of their Master supplied the place of specific rules, and of energetic government. But towards the close of the first century, when both churches and ministers had greatly multiplied; when it was common to have a number of teaching as well as ruling elders in the same congregation; when, with the increasing number, it is most probable that some unworthy characters had crept into the ministry; and when, of course, the preservation of order in their parochial presbyteries was more difficult, the expedient of appointing a president or moderator would naturally and almost unavoidably be adopted. This presiding presbyter was generally, at first, the oldest and gravest of the number; but soon afterwards, as we

are told, the rule of seniority was laid aside, and the most able, enterprising, and decisive presbyter, was chosen to fill the chair. After a while, the choice of a president was not made at every meeting of the parochial presbytery, or church session, but was made for an indefinite time, and sometimes for life; in which case the choice usually fell upon the person who had the most influence, and was supposed to possess the greatest weight of character. This chairman or moderator, who presided during the debates, collected the voices, and pronounced the sentences of the bench of presbyters, was, of course, the most conspicuous and dignified of the number. He had no pre-eminence of order over his brethren; but (to employ the illustration of a respectable Episcopal divine, before quoted,) as the chairman of a committee has a more honourable place than the rest of the members, while the committee is sitting; so a chairman for life, in a dignified ecclesiastical court, was generally regarded with peculiar respect and veneration. In conducting public worship, this chairman always took the lead; as the organ of the body, he called the other presbyters to the performance of the several parts assigned to them; and usually himself prayed and preached. When the bench of presbyters was called to perform an ordination, the chairman, of course, presided in this transaction; and in general, in all acts of the church session or consistory, he took the lead, and was the principal medium of communication.

This practice of choosing a president in the consistorial court appears to have begun in a short time after the death of the apostles, and to have been the only kind of pre-eminence that was enjoyed by any of the bishops, over their brethren, until the close of

the second century. Indeed Jerome declares, that this was the only kind of Episcopal pre-eminence that existed in the church of Alexandria, one of the most conspicuous then in the world, until the middle of the third century. That such was the only superiority which the principal pastor of each church enjoyed in primitive times, and that such was the origin of this superiority, is evident, not only from the direct testimony of antiquity, but also, indirectly from the names by which this officer is generally distinguished by the early writers. He is not only called emphatically the bishop of the church, but, as all his colleagues also had the title of bishop, he is, perhaps, more frequently styled, by way of distinction, the president, (Προεστως) the chairman, (Προεδρος,) and the person who filled the first seat, (Πρωτοκαθεδρια,) in the presbytery. Had we no other evidence in the case, these titles alone would go far towards establishing the origin and nature of his pre-eminence.

The powers of this chairman were gradually increased. In some cases his own ambition, and, in others, the exigencies of particular times and places, at once multiplied his duties, enlarged his authority, and augmented his honours. Not only the ruling elders, but also his colleagues in the ministry were led insensibly to look upon him with peculiar reverence. His presence began to be deemed necessary, at first to the regularity, and afterwards to the validity of all the proceedings of the bench of presbyters. And as his office, in those times, was a post of danger as well as of honour, the rest of the presbyters would more readily submit to the claims of a man who put his life in his hand to serve the church. This may be called the first step in the rise of prelacy. The ex-

ample once set in some of the principal cities, was probably soon adopted in the less populous towns, and in the country churches.

This measure led to another equally natural. The pastors or bishops who resided in the same city, or neighbourhood, were led on different occasions to meet together, to consult and to transact various kinds of business. Their meetings were probably at first attended with very little formality. In a short time, however, as Christianity gained ground, they came together more frequently; had more business to transact; and found it expedient to be more formal in their proceedings. A president or chairman became necessary, as in the smaller presbytery or church session. Such an officer was accordingly chosen, sometimes at each meeting, but more frequently for an indefinite period, or for life. Whatever number of congregations and of ministers were thus united under a presbytery, they were styled, (upon a principle of ecclesiastical unity which was then common,) one church. The standing moderator or president of this larger presbytery, was styled the bishop of the city in which he presided. This was a second step towards prelacy. At what precise time it was taken, is difficult to be ascertained. But before the middle of the third century, so greatly increased were the affluence and pride of ecclesiastics, that the claims of this presiding presbyter began to be large and confident. As he officially superintended the execution of the decrees of the assembly, his power gradually increased; and it was a short transition from the exercise of power in the name of others, to the exercise of it without consulting them.

In the towns where there was but one congregation,

and that a small one, there was generally but one teaching presbyter associated with a number of ruling presbyters. This was the pastor or bishop. When the congregation increased, and the introduction of other teachers was found necessary, the first retained his place as sole pastor, and the others came in as his assistants; and although of the same order with himself, yet he alone was the responsible pastor. In short, the rest of the teaching presbyters in this case, bore precisely the same relation to the bishop, on the score of rank, as curates bear to the rector in a large Episcopal congregation. They bore the same office. They were clothed with the same official power of preaching and administering ordinances with the pastor, and were capable, without any further ordination, of becoming pastors in their turn; but while they remained in this situation, their labours were chiefly directed by him. As a congregation under these circumstances increased still more, and included a number of members from the neighbouring villages, some of these members, finding it inconvenient to attend the church in which the bishop officiated every Lord's day, began to lay plans for forming separate congregations nearer home. To this the bishop consented, on condition that the little worshipping societies thus formed, should consider themselves as still under his pastoral care, as amenable to the parent church, and as bound to obey him as their spiritual guide. When the pastor agreed to this arrangement, it was generally understood, that there should be but one communion table, and one baptistery in the parish; and, of course, that when the members of these neighbouring societies wished to enjoy either of the sealing ordinances, they were to attend at the parent church, and receive

them from the hands of the pastor or bishop himself. At ordinary seasons they were supplied by his curates or assistants, who, in labouring in these little oratories or chapels of ease, were subject to his control. There was, however, but "one altar"—one communion table—one baptistery allowed in his parish. This was laying a foundation for the authority of one bishop or pastor over several congregations, which was not long afterwards claimed and generally yielded. This proved a third step in the rise of prelacy.

The progress of the church towards prelacy was further aided by the practice of convening synods and councils. This practice began at an early period, and soon became general. The Latins styled these larger meetings of the clergy Councils, the Greeks Synods; and the laws which were enacted by these bodies, were denominated Canons, *i. e.* Rules. "These councils," says Dr. Mosheim, "changed the whole face of the church, and gave it a new form." The order and decorum of their business required that a president should be appointed. The power lodged in this officer scarcely ever failed to be extended and abused. These synods were accustomed to meet in the capital cities of the district or province to which the members belonged, and to confer the presidency upon the most conspicuous pastor, for the time being, of the city in which they met. And thus, by the gradual operation of habit, it came to be considered as the right of those persons, and of their successors in office. "Hence," says the learned historian just quoted, "the rights of metropolitans derive their origin." The order of the church required, at first, the presence of the presiding bishops, to give regularity to the acts of synods and councils. In a little while

their presence was deemed necessary to the validity of these acts; and, in the third century, it began to be believed that without them nothing could be done. Such is the ordinary progress of human affairs. The increase of wealth, the decay of piety, the corruption of morals, and the prevalence of heresy and contention, were all circumstances highly favourable to the progress of this change, and concurring with Jewish prejudices, pagan habits, and clerical ambition, hurried on the growing usurpation.

That the synods and councils which early began to be convened, were, in fact, thus employed by the ambitious clergy, to extend and confirm their power, might be proved by witnesses almost numberless. The testimony of one shall suffice. It is that of the eminent Bishop Gregory Nazianzen, who lived in the fourth century, and who, on being summoned by the emperor to the general Council of Constantinople, which met in 381, addressed a letter to Procopius, to excuse himself from attending. In this letter he declares, "that he was desirous of avoiding all synods, because he had never seen a good effect, or happy conclusion of any one of them; that they rather increased than lessened the evils they were designed to prevent; and that the love of contention, and the lust of power, were there manifested in instances innumerable."—*Greg. Naz. Oper.* tom. I. p. 814. Epistle 55.

Toward the close of the third century, the title of bishop was seldom applied to any other of the presbyters, than the different classes of presidents before mentioned. The only shadow which now remained of its former use was in the case of the pastors of country parishes, who still maintained the parochial

Episcopacy, under the name of Chorepiscopi. The ordaining power, originally vested in all presbyters alike, was in the third century seldom exercised by presbyters, unless the presiding presbyter, or bishop, was present. About this time, the name of presbyter was changed into that of priest, in consequence of the unscriptural and irrational doctrine coming into vogue, that the Christian ministry was modelled after the Jewish priesthood. About this time also the office of ruling elder appears to have been chiefly laid aside, because discipline became unfashionable, and was put down, and a part of the ministry of the word bestowed upon deacons, contrary to the original design of their office, which was to superintend the maintenance of the poor. The presbytery sunk into the bishop's council. The synod subserved the pretensions of the metropolitan; and there was only wanting a general council, and a chief bishop, to complete the hierarchy: both of which were not long afterwards compliantly furnished. In the meantime, the few humble admirers of primitive parity and simplicity, who dared to remonstrate against these usurpations, were reviled as promoters of faction and schism, and either thrust out of the church, or awed into silence.

When Constantine came to the imperial throne, in the fourth century, he confirmed the usurpation of the bishops by his authority, and bestowed upon them a degree of wealth and power to which they had before been strangers. He conferred new splendour on every part of the ecclesiastical system. He fostered every thing which had a tendency to convert religion from a spiritual service into a gaudy, ostentatious, dazzling ritual; and its ministers into lords over God's heritage, instead of examples to the flock. Old Tes-

tament rites, heathen ceremonies, and institutions of worldly policy, which had long before begun to enter the church, now rushed in like a flood. And, what was worse, the great mass of the people, as well as of the clergy, were gratified with the change. The Jewish proselyte was pleased to see the resemblance which the economy of the Christian church began to bear to the ancient temple-service. The Pagan convert was daily more reconciled to a system, which he saw approximating to that which he had been long accustomed to behold in the house of his idols. And the artful politician could not but admire a hierarchy, so far subservient to the interests, and conformed to the model of the empire. Constantine assumed to himself the right of calling general councils, of presiding in them, of determining controversies, and of fixing the bounds of ecclesiastical provinces. He formed the prelatical government after the imperial model, into great prefectures; in which arrangement, a certain pre-eminence was conferred on the bishops of Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople; the first rank being always reserved for the Bishop of Rome, who succeeded in gradually extending his usurpation, until he was finally confirmed in it by an imperial decree.

Though an attempt has been made to trace some of the gradations by which ministerial imparity arose from small beginnings to a settled diocesan Episcopacy; yet, from the very nature of the case, the dates of the several steps cannot be precisely ascertained. To definite transactions which take place in a single day, or year, or which are accomplished in a few years, it is commonly an easy task to assign dates. But, in this gradual change, which was more than

three centuries in accomplishing, no reasonable man could expect to find the limits of the several steps precisely defined; because each step was slowly, and almost insensibly, taken; and more especially, because the practice of all the churches was not uniform. There was no particular time when the transition from a state of perfect parity, to a fixed and acknowledged superiority of order took place at once, and therefore no such time can be assigned. It is evident from the records of antiquity that the titles of bishop and presbyter were, as in the beginning, indiscriminately applied to the same order in some churches, long after a distinction had begun to arise in others. It is equally evident, that the ordaining power of presbyters was longer retained in the more pure and primitive districts of the church, than where wealth, ambition, and a worldly spirit, bore greater sway. In some churches there were several bishops at the same time; in others, but one. In some parts of the Christian world, it was the practice to consider and treat all the preaching presbyters in each church as colleagues and equals; in others, one of the presbyters was regarded as the pastor or bishop, and the rest as his assistants. Further, when the practice of choosing one of the presbyters to be president or moderator commenced, it appeared in different forms in different churches. In one church, at least, according to Jerome, the presiding presbyter was elected, as well as set apart, by his colleagues; in other churches, according to Hilary, the president came to the chair agreeably to a settled principle of rotation. In some cases the presiding presbyter was vested with greater dignity and authority; in others with less. In short, it is evident, that, in some portions of the church, a difference of order between

bishops and presbyters was recognized in the third century; in others, and perhaps generally, in the fourth; but in some others, not until the fifth century. No wonder, then, that we find a different language used by different fathers on this subject, for the practice was different; and this fact directs us to the only rational and adequate method of interpreting their different representations.

Such being the case, what reasonable man would expect to find in the records of antiquity, any definite or satisfactory account of the rise and progress of prelacy? If changes equally early and important are covered with still greater darkness; if the history of the first general council that ever met, and which agitated to its centre the whole Christian church, is so obscure that many of the circumstances of its meeting are disputed, and no distinct record of its acts has ever reached our times; what might be expected concerning an ecclesiastical innovation, so remote in its origin, so gradual in its progress, so indefinitely diversified in the shapes in which it appeared in different places at the same time, and so unsusceptible of precise and lucid exhibition? To this question, no discerning and candid mind will be at a loss for an answer. No; the whole of that reasoning, which confidently deduces the apostolical origin of prelacy, from its acknowledged and general prevalence in the fourth century, is mere empty declamation, as contradictory to every principle of human nature, as it is to the whole current of early history.

THE END.