

ARTICLE III.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM
IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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THE contrast between the original form of government in the Christian church and the forms prevailing at the time of Constantine the Great strikes us, at first notice, as being a remarkably strange manifestation. When Christianity first appeared, it consisted of a group of twelve friends, rallying about one who was their leader and whom they called Master. Among themselves the disciples were all equal, and the instruction of the Master was to the effect that they should remain so; that, if any one of them should desire to be the greatest among them, the same should be the least of all and the servant of all. Therein he himself set the standard. Not only were the cares of the little band borne by him, but, in a never-to-be-forgotten scene, he had performed for them the menial task of feet-washing, in order that he might impress upon them the lesson, that, among his disciples, not the greatest acquirements, but the greatest service, should be the mark of honor. It was a purely paternal form of government,¹ and, with one exception, i. e., Judas, the disciples seem to have been fully won over to it. From the account of the church at Jerusalem we learn how they sought to introduce it into that congregation.

Three hundred years later, this form of government has been largely superseded. The organization of the church has

¹ Ritschl, *Die Entstehung der Alt Katholischen Kirche.*

been almost entirely transformed. Instead of a paternal form of government resting upon the equal suffrage of all, we have a highly developed form of aristocracy. There are three chief dignitaries,—the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria. Of these three, one, i. e., the bishop of Rome, is already obtaining a growing advantage over the other two, which eventually led to his claiming supremacy over them. Below these three are numerous other bishops; associated with these latter, and to a large degree dependent upon them, are other officials, such as presbyters, deacons, and teachers. All these officers are separated by rights and privileges from the lay members of the church. Their positions are generally held for life, or else until they take a step upward in the organization; and, while the laity still influence, both directly and indirectly, the election of these officers, yet the layman as such is not considered at all equal to even the least of these. The church has become an immense hierarchy. It has made a great departure from the Master's ideal. Yet, as we study this development closely, we find that, under the conditions of that time, it was perfectly natural, and perhaps inevitable.

The beginning of Christianity was the beginning of a revolution. Not such a revolution as affects chiefly the political life of a people, as did the English Revolution of 1648 or the American Revolution of 1776; but rather such a revolution as was the Reformation or the great French Revolution. These latter differ from the former in the respect that, while political changes may be a part of their program or may take place because of them, yet such political changes are not the principal object in view. Their purpose goes deeper than that: they seek to affect the very foundation of the social fabric. The political changes wrought by the Reformation were not at all its purpose, and do not completely measure its influence.

Rather the Reformation grew out of the fact that mankind had come to understand again the worth of the individual soul in the eyes of God; which is an entirely different thing from a political change, and is much more vital. Again, the changes in forms of state government which characterize French history from 1789 to 1815 are of themselves not sufficient to give a true idea of the importance of the French Revolution. That movement is important rather because it banished the last remnants of feudalism from Western Europe. Both these movements were the results of a social development which had been going on for generations. Both were bound to come sometime in some form or other, because the spirit which occasioned them could not find free expression in existing institutions. Hence it must modify or destroy these.

This applies even more fully to Christianity. Bringing to the world a new message, which contained as one of its principal features the fact of man's kinship to God, it must perforce build up for itself a new system of ethics. It must also make war upon all existing institutions which could not express this high ethical standard. Now, to the ancient world, the individual had no worth in himself: only as a citizen of the state did he possess real worth. Only in connection with the state could the individual claim the rights of personality: apart from the state he was despised, and considered unworthy of attention. This is the moral principle which underlay all jurisprudence, and its application for the ancient world was general. The philosophers who show us the real spirit of ancient ethics always describe the state as the highest end and purpose. All virtuous activity was included in its service: aside from such service nothing possessed moral value. This is the standard by which all actions were judged, and upon which all institutions were founded.

But, to all this, Christianity could only give its uncompromising protest. It had learned from the Master that a man made an unprofitable bargain in gaining the whole world if he thereby lost his soul. It had come to believe, that, long after the world, with all its states and their power, had passed away, the soul would still exist immortal and indestructible. It possessed a profound sense of the authority of conscience, of the reality of sin and righteousness, of the dissimilarity of Providence and Fate. Hence it could not accept the codes of ethics which had been handed down from the past. The new principles compelled Christianity to create anew the forms of human life and activity. In his thought and in his worship, at work and at business, at home and in society, in times of peace and of war, the Christian was compelled to vary his methods from the methods of those about him. At first, the importance of this change in life methods was not estimated at its real worth. But it was not long before its true significance dawned upon both the Christian and the heathen. It could not be otherwise: the cleavage was too absolute. Already we find Paul calling upon the Corinthian Christians to come out, and be separate from the uncleanness of those about them; and to the Philippians he wrote that they were in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom they shone as lights in the world. Such calls as these were repeated again and again by the successive leaders in the church.

To understand how great was the cleavage between Christian and heathen life, we need only consider the attitude of Christianity toward a few of the institutions of the times. For example, let us take the case of slavery. The lack of a proper estimate of the worth of the individual soul or of any idea of an universal humanity, and with this the utter absence of anything like international law, had, as a natural result, the cus-

tom that all prisoners of war became slaves, and all their descendants remained so. Designed for all those kinds of work of which the free citizen of the state felt ashamed, they were deprived of all rights of men. They were regarded as chattels rather than as persons; at the best as only a secondary class of persons, with which idea a classification of them with other animate and inanimate property was thoroughly compatible. These were the conceptions held by Plato and Aristotle. It is true that certain of the Stoics later modified these opinions, conceding personality to slaves, and describing their lot as accidental rather than inherent. But these conceptions never became general among the heathen, and there never was any real attempt to outline a code of duties toward slaves to be respected and obeyed by the free. On the contrary, Roman history to the very end is full of incidents showing the most cruel and inconsiderate treatment of slaves by their masters. Even men like Cicero¹ had seemingly no appreciation of the sacrilege to humanity.

Christianity found this institution full grown, yet it immediately attacked it. Not openly and directly, for that would have been to engage in a political revolution at an unseasonable time; but by the equally certain though slower and more indirect method of emphasizing the Christian principle of brotherhood. Christian masters no longer looked upon their Christian slaves as mere servants, but also as beloved brethren. Numerous instances are given of masters freeing their slaves,² "because their sonship with God put an end to their servitude to men." In all classic literature there is no analogy to Paul's letter to Philemon. Yet the early church included this letter in the canon, which proves their continued position in opposition to slavery.

¹ Sheldon, *History of the Early Church.*

² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church.*

Or let us take the question of poverty. Since, to classic thought, only those actions are virtuous which are directly connected with the service of the state, a very low estimate was placed upon the service of the common laborer. In order to find time to serve the state, a person must be largely free from the necessity of manual labor, must have leisure from petty personal cares. It is only to be expected, then, that, at the height of classic culture, we should meet with an aristocratic contempt of manual labor, as of something which made a person incapable of virtue, and darkened the mind. To be sure, the state needed farmers and tradesmen. But such persons should not have part in public affairs; they do not deserve the privilege of citizenship; their work has only indirect value. From this aristocratic notion, one can judge how little consciousness there must have been as to the duty of charity toward the poor. Poverty was considered to be an evil, against which a person must by all means guard himself. It was thought that it dishonored a person, and that only the vicious could be willing to carry the burdens it brought. The poor man was thought to be incapable of honesty and wisdom; he was expected to be a liar and a perjurer. And when it happened that the honesty and wisdom of some poor person could not be denied, the conviction still held that even the greatest virtues could not cover the shame which poverty brought.

But in Christianity this estimate is entirely subverted. It is the poor to whom the gospel is preached, and the rich will hardly enter the kingdom of heaven. A certain predisposition to trust in God is assumed when dealing with the poor; but a genuine faith in God is expected to be lacking to the rich in the degree in which they trust in their wealth. Christ himself had announced the equality of rich and poor in rela-

tion to the kingdom of God, when he declared the providing, fatherly care of God for all. His own appearance among the lowliest was proof to the church that the beggar and the emperor were equal in the eyes of the High Judge. And so the church regarded wealth as having moral value only when the power which goes with it was used in the service of God and man.

Probably the greatest divergence between Christian and heathen life is seen when we consider the relation of both to family life. In classic thought, family life was virtuous, because only thus could the state be supplied with the best citizens and soldiers. The depths of degradation to which this low conception of marriage led, are indescribable. The relations between the sexes became rotten through and through; first in Greece, and then in Rome. It could hardly be otherwise, since there was no worthy ideal. This ideal, however, was supplied by the message of Christianity. The peculiar application of the principle of love which Christ had announced, gave the marriage bond a significance in the Christian church which it never could have had under classic philosophy. In order to show the sanctity of family life with a Christian setting, Paul compares the marriage relation to the relation existing between Christ and the church. Men were to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and wives were to obey their husbands as the church obeyed Christ. The declaration of the church fathers also proves that the words of Paul did not remain empty talk; but that, under God, they became the means of a thorough reorganization of family life in the church. With this was given the foundation of a whole new system of morals.

In regard to these fundamental questions and to many common usages,—such as, emperor worship, libations, and

sacrifices to idols, public games and the bearing of arms,¹—the effect wrought by the higher conception of the worth of the individual soul can be clearly seen. The principles of Christianity were raising up a different kind of life than was lived among the heathen. Between the two systems of life there could be no compromise: they were diametrically opposite to each other.² There must be a battle to the death. Either the Christian principles must prove themselves unworkable, or the institution founded upon classic philosophy must be destroyed.

In order to be successful in this struggle, Christianity was compelled to reorganize itself. It must detail specific duties for certain persons, and then set apart fit persons to fulfill those duties. The church gradually became conscious of the task it had undertaken. It gradually came to realize that it was a world-wide movement, and must organize a world-wide system of administration. This administration gradually came to include almost every detail of life. The first officers of this administration were the apostles. The next officers after these were the seven deacons chosen at Jerusalem, whose duty it was to care for the widows and others who were specially needy. But soon other officers are needed. In order to settle the disputes to which the Christians, as human beings, were still liable, it was next found necessary to institute boards of arbitration, as Paul advises (1 Cor. vi. 1-4); for the Christians could not hope to get satisfactory decisions in a Roman court. If the judge really gave justice according to Roman law, that might still be very far removed from the Christian conception of justice, since the moral standards were so different. Then, as the church soon came to have special legislation concerning slavery, charity, marriage, worship,

¹ Tertullian, *Apologia*, xxxviii.

² Aristides: *ὅτι ἐρ τῶν τετάρων.*

and general conduct, it was but natural that these boards of arbitration should develop into regular courts, which should judge all offenses against this special legislation. Therefore we soon have the bishops, elected from out the boards of presbyters to a permanent presidency of the same, with special duties in the way of chief justice.¹ These officers were especially needed in the troublous times of the development of the church doctrine. To the bishops were also confided special duties in connection with the general education, upon which the church from the beginning placed great emphasis.

But in all this work,—charity, legislation, judiciary, and education—we have left the field which naturally belongs to the church, and have entered the domain which, by general consent, ought to be covered by the activity of the state. The germs of a state lay in the very foundations of this administrative system; and, as it was developed, the church itself developed into a semi-independent, political body, a sort of republic within, yet distinct from, the imperial government. It was the need of this extended administration in the early church which was the direct occasion of that development of political forms which is so characteristic of its later history. So perfectly were these forms of state government developed, that, when Constantine the Great decided to recognize the Christian religion officially, it was only necessary to recognize the legality of the courts, in order to embody the whole administration of the church into the machinery of the government of the Empire.

Whether or not this development of a political system was the cause of the religious decline which only a little later becomes so apparent in the life of the church, will probably always be an open question. The defenders of the system give

¹ Lightfoot, *Dissertation on Paul's Epistle to the Philippians.*

other and seemingly good reasons for this decline. On the other hand, there has always been a tendency in some circles to place great emphasis upon this development as being the cause of much evil, as being even an indication of an absence of the Holy Spirit. Thus church reformers have generally insisted upon going back to the first, or at least to the second, century, for their ideals of church government. The movement was toward those forms now characterizing the Roman Catholic Church; and many of those to whom this denomination is only the Babylon of the book of Revelation, have given to the primitive church the chief blame for all those things which they have found objectionable in Roman Catholicism. But the facts of the matter are that the church was compelled by the nature of its task to take upon itself some definite form; that nothing was more natural than that it should therein accommodate itself to the prevalent Roman forms of government, and might even do this unconsciously, as Ramsay¹ argues; that the great majority of Christians thought it necessary to organize in this manner; that they emphasized the dignity of their church officers because they thought this the best way to guard against heresy and schism; finally, that the wisdom of the plan seems to be proven by the fact, that, while there were large sections of the Christian church which would not unite organically with the early Catholic church, nearly all these have disappeared, and we owe the vital Christianity of to-day to the labors of those who labored within the main organization.

It is the common result of a thorough unprejudiced study of these times, that one leaves such study with a strong admiration for these early Christians, and a devout thankfulness to God for their self-sacrifice and work; with a more lively

¹ *The Church in the Roman Empire.*

hope for the future of the church, and a greater faith in all mankind. Says Harnack: "If one takes into consideration that the foundations for everything orthodox up to the present day were laid in the second century, one can only wonder at the magnitude of the work done. To the reproachful questions: 'How was it possible that you could depart so far from your original form? What has become of you?' the church at the beginning of the third century might have answered: 'Well, I have developed into this. I have been obliged to throw off much, and again to take much upon myself. I have been compelled to do battle; my body is covered with scars, and my robe is covered with dust. But I have won victories and have done constructive work. I have beaten back polytheism; I have shown the worthlessness of a state religion, and have almost destroyed this monster; I have not hearkened unto the seductions of a profound religious philosophy, but have opposed successfully to this last the thought of an almighty God of creation; finally, I have built a great building, a fortress with turrets and bulwarks, wherein I guard my treasures and protect the weak.' Thus she might have answered, and she would have spoken the truth."¹

The Christian church was destined to be a social power because of the contrast of her ethics to antique culture, already approaching the last stages of decay. Because of circumstances, she was compelled to establish such fixed forms as would keep her externally independent and internally harmonious. Thus, as a state within the Roman state, she came out of every persecution purified and strengthened; and she finally awakened universally the idea, already existing in the minds of Trajan and Pliny the Younger, that she must either be destroyed or else would bring about the destruction of the

¹ *Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 122.

imperial government. This thought occasioned the last and most terrible persecution, the one under Diocletian. But when this also miscarried, Constantine felt himself compelled to formally recognize the church. In doing this, he put the seal upon the most wonderful social revolution in the history of mankind. Yet it was a political idea, and not a religious conviction, which led Constantine to this step; and it was not to the church as a religious body, but to the church as a political power, to which he sacrificed the hitherto prevailing principles of imperial government.