

would if they could, an idea which our Letter writer laughs at without just cause, but that they must do it when they are able, they *must commit the weak to the executioner*, that is, in plain English, execute the Protestant when he is weak and cannot resist them.

ELECTORS OF YORKSHIRE, here is a plain case. If you would escape and be free, let those men have your votes who will oppose the claims of the Roman Catholics; and if you would have no intolerance, oppose with all your might Popish Ascendency; for by this means alone, can you hope to preserve in undiminished lustre, the glorious light of Protestantism in PROTESTANT BRITAIN.

THE END.

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AN  
HISTORICAL VIEW

OF THE

PLEA OF TRADITION,

AS MAINTAINED IN THE CHURCH OF ROME;

WITH STRUCTURES ON

A DISSERTATION UPON THE USE AND IMPORTANCE  
OF UNAUTHORITATIVE TRADITION BY EDWARD  
HAWKINS, FELLOW OF ORIEL COLLEGE, OXFORD;

AND

AN APPENDIX

CONTAINING ORIGINAL AUTHORITIES.

BY GEORGE MILLER, D. D. M. R. I. A.  
AND M. R. S. L.

LONDON:

C. AND J. RIVINGTON,

DUBLIN:

R. MILLIKEN,

1826.

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3

TO THE  
ROMAN-CATHOLIC CLERGY

OF

IRELAND

THE FOLLOWING HISTORICAL VIEW

OF A

MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

IS

RESPECTFULLY ADDRESSED

BY THE AUTHOR.

DUBLIN:—R. GRAISBERRY, Printer to the University.

433 . 10

# HISTORICAL VIEW

OF THE

## PLEA OF TRADITION.

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TO enter into the argument concerning tradition is not the object proposed by the writer of this treatise. The question concerning the authority of tradition, as a rule of faith, has, it is conceived been recently considered in all its bearings with so much distinctness of statement, and cogency of argument, first by bishop Marsh, in his Comparative View of the Churches of England and Rome, and very lately by Mr. Jackson, in his Two Main Questions in Controversy between the Churches of England and Rome, Stated and Discussed, that it may well be deemed at present superfluous for any protestant to agitate the controversy further. It has however appeared to the writer, that it would be satisfactory to examine as a question of history, the tradition alleged by the church of Rome in support of its peculiar

tenets. It has been customary to select from the works of ecclesiastical writers passages favouring the authority of scripture, or of tradition, agreeably to the view of the enquirer; but it does not seem to have hitherto occurred to any person, that it might be useful to investigate the opinions of those writers from age to age, and thus to trace the history of the plea. The whole controversy, as bishop Marsh \* has remarked, depends on the resolution of this question, do these divine and apostolical traditions exist or not?

The bishop has indeed considered the question generally, and has assigned strong reasons for disputing the assertions of those who maintain the existence of such traditions. The question however, as a question of fact, may best be resolved, like other questions of fact, by an examination of the history, in which traces of the reality of such traditions, if they be indeed real, ought to be discovered. If from such an enquiry it should on the contrary appear, that indications of their non-existence are manifest in the earlier history of the church, and even that the subsequent allegation of their existence can be so explained, that it should carry with it no authority to convince our minds, it ought surely to be inferred, agreeably to such principles of reasoning as in any other case would be

\* *Comparative View*, p. 60. Lond. 1816.

deemed incontrovertible and decisive, that the notion is a mere fiction, not warranted by historical testimony, but devised for justifying that, which could not be justified from the authentic declarations of the sacred writings.

The immediate occasion of this treatise has been furnished by a resolution, which certain roman-catholics adopted in a meeting held at Carlow in the last summer, and by an exhortation, which doctor Doyle, roman-catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, has subsequently addressed to his clergy of Carlow and its vicinity. The resolution stated, "that the scriptures alone cannot be a sufficient guide in matters of faith, but require the authority of tradition to expound their meaning." In the exhortation the bishop (1) has maintained the same principle, claiming for it the authority of Tertullian. It has thus been explicitly alleged, both that the written word is insufficient to communicate the knowledge necessary for salvation, and also that, without the aid of tradition, its own meaning cannot be understood. It has not been simply asserted, that the revelation of Jesus Christ has been transmitted to us partly by the sacred scriptures, and partly by tradition, and that therefore it is not sufficient for a christian to seek in the scriptures a knowledge of his religion; but tradition has been re-

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presented as the indispensable interpreter of those scriptures, and as giving authority to the meaning, which it shall pronounce to be true. It has therefore become at this time necessary to enquire, whether there is indeed any such tradition, or whether it is an unauthorised pretension, set up by churchmen in the ambitious desire of arrogating to themselves a dominion over the understandings and consciences of christians. If indeed there be such a tradition, then have the sacred scriptures been written in vain. The same tradition, which is indispensably necessary, not only for supplying the deficiencies, but also for interpreting the meaning of the scriptures, may more directly be regarded as the sole authority for the doctrines of our religion; and every pious christian, according to this principle, ought to submit his mind implicitly to the dictation of the clergy, withdrawing his attention from the authenticated word of our Redeemer and his apostles, and fixing it wholly upon the communications of those, who claim to be acquainted with the mysteries of this other more satisfactory exposition of the faith.

It cannot however be admitted, that the roman-catholic clergy of the nineteenth century should assert without proof, or even that the council of Trent, assembled in the sixteenth, should by its mere authority maintain, the

reality of such a tradition. Even roman-catholics themselves are bound to admit the incompetency of the council to determine such a question, for the question concerning the existence of such a tradition is a question of fact, not of doctrine, and it has never been acknowledged, as belonging to the assumed infallibility of the church, or of its governors, that it should decide a question of fact. This question therefore, like others of the same kind, must be determined by a reference to the records of history. That history is accessible to both parties. Let its records be fairly examined, and let it be thus ascertained, whether such a tradition was indeed acknowledged in the earlier ages of the church. If it can be proved from history, that such a stream did not flow from the fountain of truth, and if the true source of the stream, which claims to have flowed from it, can even be pointed out in the region of superstition, we may surely reject as false every allegation, which would maintain its pretended origin.

The very notion indeed of an oral tradition, which should be not merely coordinate with, but even paramount to, a written communication received confessedly from the same original, is so repugnant to all our conceptions of the nature of historical evidence, that the strongest proofs would be necessary for esta-

blishing its existence. It is notorious that oral tradition is subjected to disadvantages, which do not affect the validity of a written communication, and that these disadvantages are increased in every instance of its transmission from one individual to another. All the causes, which may lead one man to misconceive the meaning of a communication orally received from another, or which may dispose him to falsify that, of which no written document exists to refute his report, cooperate to depreciate it in the comparison with testimony committed to writing, and consequently permanent and invariable. That oral tradition, thus in its nature imperfect and questionable, should have been employed by the divine providence, in preference to a written communication, for conveying the truths of religion to succeeding ages, and even for furnishing the interpretation of the written word, so that the latter must be unintelligible without its aid, is a principle which can be admitted only on the most positive and explicit evidence.

Instead however of discovering such evidence in the authentic records of our religion, we find our Saviour condemning in the strongest language those Jews, who, as he \* remarked, had made the commandments of God of none effect by their traditions. Is it then to be con-

\* Matt. ch. 15. v. 6. Mark, ch. 7. v. 13.

ceived, that the divine providence would adopt in the christian dispensation of religion a mode of communication, which was thus at the very time condemned by Jesus Christ himself, as having made, in that of the Jews, the law of God of none effect? Is it at all to be imagined, that this mode of communication should be adopted, not merely as supplementary to the doctrinal instructions of the scriptures, but even as indispensable for the just interpretation of those instructions, which the scriptures actually contained? For rendering these things reconcilable to the strong censure pronounced by our Saviour on the tradition of the Jews, it would have been necessary that he should at the same time draw a line of distinction between the spurious traditions, which he condemned, and those genuine traditions, by which he proposed to regulate the opinions of the christian church. No distinction however of this kind accompanied the censure. The natural inference therefore is, that oral tradition was not contemplated by our Saviour as a mode of communication, on which a general and secure dependence could be placed for religious instruction.

It is indeed \* admitted that the unwritten word was, as Bossuet has remarked, the first rule of christianity, Jesus Christ having laid the

\* Bishop Marsh's Comp. View, p. 61, 62.

foundation of his church by preaching. "As nothing was recorded," says bishop Marsh, "at least not to our knowledge, during the life of our Saviour, the doctrines, which he taught, were, during that period, so many divine traditions. And divine traditions they remained, 'till they were recorded in the gospels. Again, as several years probably elapsed, after the apostles had begun to teach under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, before they committed their doctrines to writing, the doctrines, which they taught during that period, were so many apostolical traditions. And apostolical traditions they remained, 'till they were recorded in the apostolical epistles." But, as the bishop has in the same passage proceeded to remark, it cannot also be admitted, according to the statement of Bossuet, that the writings of the New Testament were *added* to this primitive tradition, because this statement assumes the very principle in dispute, namely, that a part at least of God's word, as delivered by Christ and his apostles, was not recorded in the New Testament. The principle of the Reformation is directly the opposite of this, the reformers having maintained, that the whole of God's word was contained in scripture, or the written word. Which of the two is agreeable to the truth, must be determined by examining the scripture and the history of the church.

In examining the scripture for a determination of this important question, we find indeed that Paul \* has enjoined, that the Thessalonians should hold the traditions, which they had been taught, either by word, or by his epistle; and the injunction is quoted in the church of Rome as decisive of the controversy. But what inference does this passage authorise beyond the admission, which has been already made, that preaching was employed by the apostles in laying the foundation of the christian church, and that the instructions so communicated continued to be traditions, until they were recorded in the scriptures? What † is there in this passage, which can warrant the belief, that the apostle has alluded to any doctrine, which was not afterwards recorded by him in any of his subsequent epistles? "His epistles to the Thessalonians," the bishop has

\* 2 Thessal. ch. 2. v. 15.

† Compar. View, p. 66, 67. The bishop has further argued, that the context of this particular epistle indicates, that the term was here used in reference to discipline, not to a rule of faith, the same term being thus applied in the sixth verse of the succeeding chapter, after an interval of only seven verses. The inference however does not appear conclusive. Macknight has accordingly referred the term in the earlier passage to the christian doctrine generally, the christian doctrines, as having been received by revelation, and so *delivered* by the apostles, being fitly denominated traditions, or things delivered. Macknight on the Epist. vol. 2. p. 571, vol. 3. p. 115, 116. Lond. 1816.

remarked, "were among the earliest, if not the very earliest, which he composed. And who will undertake to prove, that doctrines, unrecorded in the two comparatively short epistles to the Thessalonians, were not afterwards recorded, either in the epistle to the Romans, or in the epistles to the Corinthians, or in the epistles to the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians, or the epistles to Timothy and Titus?"—"There is also," he has added, "another possibility, which is sufficient to destroy the inference. They may have been afterwards recorded in other apostolical epistles; or they may have been doctrines taught by Christ himself, and recorded in the gospels."

From these observations it is concluded, that the scriptures afford no testimony, which would warrant us in maintaining, that any rule of faith, distinct from the written word, has been orally transmitted for the instruction of succeeding ages. This is of itself sufficient to destroy the authority of any alleged tradition, for, though cardinal Bellarmine, the ablest of the champions of the church of Rome, has told us, that the tradition, for which he contends, is termed *unwritten*, not because it is not any where written, but because it was not written by the original author, his explanation of the term however substitutes an uninspired

|| De Verbo Dei, lib. 4. cap. 2.

for an inspired authority, and consequently subjects tradition to all the diminution of credit, which belongs in such circumstances to merely human testimony. Even if the sacred writers had informed us, that some portion of the christian doctrine had been transmitted only by oral communication, though we should in this case have been bound to receive with reverence and attention any well attested tenet offered to us as a part of such tradition, yet, when not only the specific purport, but also the very existence and reality of such a communication, must be determined wholly by the testimony of uninspired men, the scriptures affording no information in a case, in which it might so naturally be expected, the credibility of such testimony is, in the most favourable circumstances of proximity, liable to much impeachment, and must be regarded as utterly destroyed at any distance from its alleged original.

Let the enquiry be now prosecuted among those writers, in whose works a tradition, originally unwritten, should be found according to the definition of the cardinal, and let the testimony of the existence, and of the particulars, of a traditional doctrine be fairly investigated and appreciated. When it shall have been ascertained, at what distance the written record is found from the inspired authority of the sacred writings, we shall be enabled to de-

termine, what degree of credit should be given to its testimony.

The writers distinguished by the appellation of apostolic fathers, as having conversed with the apostles, and having succeeded immediately to them in the government of the church, demand our first attention. To these men a tradition of doctrine must have been imparted by the apostles, if it was to be transmitted to succeeding ages, and we must believe that they would have taken care to announce to their fellow-christians, that they had been intrusted with the care of a deposit so important to the church. In their zealous anxiety for the maintenance and the propagation of the religion of Christ, they must naturally, if they were indeed charged with the preservation of a traditional rule of faith, indispensable for supplying the deficiency, and for interpreting the meaning of the scriptures, have been solicitous to inform christians as soon as possible, that such a tradition was in existence, and to record the particulars which it comprehended. This would have been their bounden duty, as they were successors of the apostles. It would also have been their obvious policy, as they were rulers of the church, and even their interest, as they were men, actuated by the same feelings, which ordinarily influence our nature. Policy would have impelled them to declare, that they had

received such a deposit from the apostles, as they might thus most effectually secure to themselves the reverence and submission of the church. The ordinary influence of human feelings would have disposed them to magnify their own importance by a communication, which would have placed them in the same rank with the apostles, as authorised teachers of the doctrines of religion.

The apostolic fathers were Barnabas, Clement, Hermas, Ignatius, and Polycarp. Of these the first \* was the companion of Paul, has been frequently mentioned in the scriptures, and is believed to have written his epistle, the only work ascribed to him, about the year 71, probably with a design of availing himself of the recent destruction of Jerusalem, for detaching christians from the still subsisting veneration entertained for the jewish law. Clemens, stated † by ancient writers to have been the same person, whom Paul has described as one of his fellow-labourers, is concluded to have addressed, in the year 96, an epistle to the church of Corinth, then agitated by dissension. Hermas, one † of those whom Paul, in the conclusion of his epistle to the Romans, has desired to be saluted, published about the year 100 his *Pastor* or *Shepherd*, a work consisting

\* Lardner's Works, vol. 2. p. 11 etc. Lond. 1788.

† Ibid. vol. 2. p. 22 etc. † Ibid. p. 50 etc.

of three parts, the first containing four visions, the second twelve commands, and the third ten similitudes. Ignatius, the \* second after Peter in the succession of the church of Antioch, was in the year 107 sent from Syria to suffer martyrdom at Rome, and in his progress wrote several epistles, to confirm his brethren of various churches in the true faith. Polycarp, who closed this illustrious series, wast a disciple of John, by whom he had been constituted the first bishop of Smyrna: he, we are informed by Irenaeus, wrote several epistles, of which however one only, addressed to the Philippians, probably in the year 108, is now extant, and seems to have been also the only one, which had remained to the time even of Eusebius and Jerome.

Of the curious and interesting writings of these primitive fathers, as they are now extant, it may be stated in the most unqualified manner, that they do not contain a single expression, which may be fairly understood to signify, or to suppose, any system of doctrine transmitted to them merely by oral communication. Neither has Barnabas, in his general epistle, pleaded any traditional instruction for dissolving the obligation of the jewish ceremonial; nor has Clement urged any such communication, that he might compose with more au-

\* Lardner, p. 65 etc.

† Ibid. p. 86 etc.

thority the dissensions of the church of Corinth; nor has Hermas, to pass over his visions, and his similitudes, referred to any such deposit for sanctioning his twelve commands; nor has Ignatius, in all that anxiety for the soundness of the faith of his fellow-christians, which animated him to disregard the terrors of his approaching martyrdom, ever called on them to reverence the exhortations of a man, who had received the traditions of the apostles; nor yet has Polycarp, to whom an epistle had been specially addressed by Ignatius, ever intimated, that he held those traditions in trust for the due direction of the faith of christians.

Eusebius has (2) indeed told us that Ignatius exhorted the churches of Asia to adhere firmly to the tradition of the apostles. But we should consider what signification is here attached to the term tradition. It appears from the passage itself, that it is directly opposed to heresies, then first springing up and spreading, and may therefore most naturally signify the doctrine of the apostles, as contrary to those heresies. The epistles too, in which Ignatius was said thus to have recommended the tradition of the apostles, we have at this day, and we find in them nothing, which would warrant the notion of an oral tradition, the sub-

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ject of the present enquiry. Eusebius moreover has proceeded to quote from those epistles some passages, in confirmation of his statement; and in none of these passages does any expression occur, which would favour such a notion. In one Ignatius expresses the pious resolution, with which he was prepared to undergo his martyrdom: in another he recommends the church of Antioch to the care of Polycarp: in a third indeed he introduces (3) a relation concerning our Saviour, of which the historian has said, he knew not whence it had been received; but of this relation it may be remarked, that it has not been given as an apostolic tradition, Eusebius having professed himself ignorant of its origin, and that it has manifestly confounded the weakness of Peter in denying Christ, with the incredulity of Thomas in doubting the reality of his resurrection. That the relation is erroneous, is certain, for it is not consistent with the written gospel; and even if it were true, it would not affect the question, for it professes to relate a fact, not to teach a doctrine.

But it does not appear merely from the absence of all expressions favourable to the notion of an oral tradition, that it was not entertained by the primitive fathers of the church, for a minute examination will discover various passages, which clearly imply the contrary, and

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enable us to furnish a direct proof of the negative opinion.

One of the particulars, for which the authority of an express tradition has been pronounced to be indispensably necessary, was the change of the sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week. We find however that Barnabas (4) has impliedly denied the existence of any such tradition by assigning a different reason, namely that the eighth day was the beginning of a new creation, being that on which Jesus Christ arose from the dead. Can we believe, that he would thus have reasoned about the change, if he could have urged the authority of an apostolic injunction, which must have been communicated immediately to himself? We collect from the sacred writings the practice observed in this respect by the apostles, and we explain and justify it in the same manner, in which it was explained and justified by the earliest of the apostolic fathers. Neither did Barnabas, nor do we acknowledge any traditional instruction for making the alteration. Hermas again, instead of proclaiming that he had been intrusted with a deposit of traditional truth, by which he was enabled to remove all the difficulties of the written word, refers (5) to the immediate action of the divine influence the faculty of understanding all things in religion. This agency

(4) Appendix.

(5) Ibid.

would however have been exercised without necessity, if he had been already furnished by oral tradition with all the instructions, which could be required for regulating the faith of christians; nor can we suppose that Hermas would have looked to this source of divine knowledge, if he were conscious of actually possessing in the apostolic traditions a supplement of the scriptures, and an unerring rule of interpretation of scriptural difficulties. Clement, in his anxious desire to compose the dissension of the church of Corinth, urges the male-contents to submit to ecclesiastical authority, yet without any where intimating the possession of a tradition, which should empower the superiors of the church to regulate the faith of christians. Can it be believed that a topic, so favourable to the importance and the authority of the clergy, should have been omitted on such an occasion, if it could have been pleaded consistently with truth? Ignatius (6) tells the Ephesians that, in a second epistle, which he proposed to address to them, he would more fully explain to them the doctrines of christianity, especially if the Lord should reveal them to him; he therefore could not have been acquainted with a traditional doctrine, adequate to the explanation of all christian mysteries. This, it may be remarked, is the father, con-

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cerning whom a passage has been quoted from the history of Eusebius. Polycarp, lastly, (7) tells the Philippians, that Paul had written to them epistles, into which if they would attentively look, they should be able to perfect their faith. The expression is inaccurate, in representing more than one epistle as addressed by Paul to that church; but \* it has been with probability explained to comprehend also the epistles addressed to the Thessalonians, the Philippians being included within the province of Macedonia, of which Thessalonica was the principal city. However this may have been, whether we suppose Polycarp to have committed an error, or to have been simply inaccurate, one thing is certain, that he who told the Philippians, that they might by perusing the writings of Paul be enabled to perfect their faith, could not have believed, that there was any oral tradition of doctrine necessary for that purpose.

It appears therefore, that we have not any reason whatsoever for believing, that these primitive fathers of the church, who had conversed with the apostles, and were their immediate successors in the superintendence of christians, received from them any deposit of doctrinal truths, distinct from those communicated in the records of our religion, and of in-

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\* Lardner, vol. 2. p. 92.

dependent, and even of paramount authority; but that, on the contrary, something in the recorded language of each of those fathers unequivocally indicates, that the author claimed credit for no such trust, appealing to some other principle of persuasion, and the last of them referring directly and explicitly to a diligent examination of the scripture for perfect instruction in the faith. If these patriarchs of the christian church knew no such tradition, as has been alleged in later ages, how could it have reached their successors? Can we believe that this tradition could have been orally transmitted from the apostles by inferior members of the church, when no communication of this kind had been made to Barnabas, to Clement, to Hermas, to Ignatius, and to Polycarp, men with whom the apostles were in habitual communication, men distinguished by their zeal, and eminent by their station? If the stream be cut off, where it should have flowed from the fountain, can any one reasonably claim to have drunk of the water of this fountain at a greater distance from the source?

Here, it should seem, the enquiry might cease, for, if these immediate successors of the apostles knew no distinct system of doctrinal tradition, others, who followed them, could not with any appearance of reason pretend to have received it from them. It has however

been customary to consider the authority of the fathers as of a collective body, and to search for testimonies in their writings, without any reference to that order of succession, which is indispensable to the consideration of any question of history. It may therefore be satisfactory, to prosecute this enquiry further, not only as it may discover new arguments for rejecting the pretension of the advocates of tradition, but yet more as it may conduct us to a knowledge of the manner, in which that pretension was introduced into the church, and at length constituted the guardian of the tenets and practices peculiar to roman-catholics.

The first distinguished writer of the church, who came after the apostolic fathers, was Justin Martyr, who published his treatises about the middle of the second century. The works of this father however are such, as could not be expected to have any relation to the subject now discussed. These, as we have them, consist chiefly of two apologies for the christians, addressed one of them to Antoninus Pius and his sons, and the senate and people of Rome, the other to the succeeding emperor Marcus Antoninus; and of a dialogue, in which he maintains the truth of christianity against a Jew, named Trypho. In such compositions the argument from tradition could not be expected to occur, because this argument could be addressed only

to those, who admitted the authority of Jesus Christ and his apostles, from whom that tradition claims to be derived. To pagans and to Jews the argument could not bring conviction, and therefore from the omission of it no inference unfavourable to it can be collected, as neither is any support afforded to it by these compositions. Justin employed himself in maintaining the cause of the church against its outward adversaries, not in vindicating its genuine doctrines from the misrepresentations of those who corrupted its truth.

To this other object Irenæus devoted his exertions in the latter part of the second century, and accordingly in his treatise written against the heresies of his time we find the first mention of tradition, as distinguished from the sacred writings. But, though Irenæus has in this treatise employed the argument from tradition, it appears from this very treatise, that the notion of tradition entertained by Irenæus was very different from that, which is maintained by the church of Rome; and it also appears, that the use of the argument had been forced upon him by the heretics, against whom he contended, the true inventors of the doctrine of a tradition distinct from, and independent of the written word.

Almost in the beginning of his work Ire-

næus (8) has stated the faith, which the church had received from the apostles and their disciples, and we find it, though somewhat amplified for the confutation of his heretical adversaries, yet agreeing intirely in substance with the strictly scriptural tenets of the creed ascribed to the apostles. This, he (9) adds, is a tradition, which no person has authority to enlarge, or to diminish; and the difference of the knowledge of divine things, observable in different persons, he (10) refers to wisdom employed in the study of the scriptures, not to tradition, describing it also as appertaining to a consideration of the economy of the divine dispensations. In a subsequent chapter he again (11) states the rule of faith, as opposed to heretics, in a summary of the same articles of belief, though more particularly contrasted to the tenets of the *gnostic* heretics, whom he wished to confute. In (12) another place the scripture is represented, as affording all the knowledge of divine things attainable by men, the rest being referred to God. In yet (13) another passage he describes our knowledge of salvation as received from those, who had first preached the gospel, but afterwards, by the will of God, delivered it to us in the scriptures, to be the foundation and pillar of our faith.

(8) Appendix.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Ibid.

Here then we have from Irenæus explicit declarations, in which he clearly states the genuine faith of the church to be comprehended in tenets deducible simply from the scriptures; represents this faith as a tradition, which no person could enlarge or diminish; refers any difference of knowledge of divine things only to a difference of intelligence in studying the scriptures, considering it however as not appertaining to the subject of faith, but to the conduct of divine providence in the government of the church; describes the scriptures as containing all knowledge of such matters, which is attainable by men; and pronounces that the writers of the New Testament committed to the scriptures, agreeably to the will of God, that gospel which they had previously preached, to be the basis and the support of the faith of christians, thus in express words declaring the scriptures to be the exclusive vehicle of evangelical tradition.

It may well seem surprising that a writer, who had so distinctly expressed sentiments most adverse to the romish doctrine of tradition, should have been supposed to be an authority in favour of that doctrine, as he has been frequently represented. The error however may be easily explained, and the true origin of this most unreasonable doctrine be at the same time exposed. The heretics of the time of

Irenæus, who \* had corrupted the religion of Christ by an admixture of the most extravagant notions, derived from the oriental philosophy, were easily confuted from those scriptures, from which they so widely differed. Unable therefore to deny, that their doctrines were inconsistent with the scriptures, they, says (14) Irenæus, accuse the scriptures themselves, alleging that they were contradictory, and of no authority, and, precisely as the roman-catholics of the present day, that the truth could not be discovered from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. Here then is the true origin of the pretension of the church of Rome. Heretics, whom the scriptures plainly confuted, and whose doctrine no man of whatever persuasion would now defend, pleaded it in opposition to the written revelation of God. Ire-

\* They all agreed in maintaining, though under various modifications, the doctrine of *emanations*, which appears to have been anciently taught by Zoroaster, proposing to explain the origin of evil, by referring it to a gradual deterioration in the progress of these emanations, as they receded further from the original source of all existence. In these fanciful theories the creation of the world was attributed to a being so far removed from the first cause, as to be allied to matter, and thereby qualified to act upon it. As this notion degraded the character of the second Person of the Trinity, to whom the work of creation is attributed in the christian scriptures, the fathers enlarged upon the part of the creed, to which it was opposed.

neans on the other hand, perceiving that it would be vain to argue further with such men from the scriptures, judged it necessary to meet his adversaries on that ground, which they had chosen for their defence, and challenged, as he reasonably might, the authority of tradition for those churches, which had received their doctrines through a direct succession from the apostles. That he adopted the argument merely to refute those, who had refused to be convinced by any argument drawn from the scriptures, is manifest from the conditional language, which he has employed. If, says (15) he, the apostles had known secret mysteries, which they taught the perfect separately and secretly from the rest, they would deliver them chiefly to those, to whom they also committed the churches themselves. The argument is hypothetical, and manifestly used but to retort the plea of the heretics.

On this merely defensive argument of Ireneus, though conditional in its very form and expression, and restrained and qualified by so many testimonies borne in other passages to the authority of the scriptures, and therefore evidently employed only to repel an unauthorised pretension, the romish plea of tradition is primarily founded. Roman-catholics do not find it convenient to urge the plea, as devised by

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its true authors, the *gnostic* heretics of the second century; but when Ireneus retorts on those heretics their own allegation, having found it useless to contend with them from the authority of the scriptures, which they disregarded, then tradition becomes the important secret of the christian doctrine, though Ireneus himself pleaded it only in justification of a summary of tenets manifestly scriptural.

It is admitted that Ireneus, in pressing this argument, has (16) demanded, whether a church might not be founded on tradition alone, though the apostles should not have left any record of their doctrines. But he has himself explained what he meant by such a tradition, describing certain barbarous nations of his own time as cherishing by tradition doctrines stated in the apostles' creed, which is but a summary of the obvious declarations of the written word. In (17) a subsequent passage he declares, in terms which cannot be misconceived, his opinion of the exclusive authority of the scriptures, where they are known. The true knowledge, says he, arguing against that pretended knowledge, from which \* the *gnostics* derived their assuming

(16) Appendix.

(17) *Ibid.*

\* The name had probably been borrowed by the oriental philosophers from the Greeks before the existence of the christian heresies, when the platonic philosophers of Alexandria visited the eastern schools; and the doctrine was accordingly an object of reprehension to Paul, when he cautioned Timothy against oppositions of science falsely so called; 1 Epist. to

appellation, is the doctrine of the apostles, to be found in the legitimate and diligent study of the scriptures. In (18) the conclusion also of his argument, in which he exhorts all christians to shun the doctrines of the heretics, he admonishes them, not only to fly to the church, and to be educated in its bosom, but also to be nourished in the scriptures of the Lord, comparing the church to paradise, and the scriptures to the trees, of which our first parents were commanded to eat. He has even (19) in one passage explained the term tradition to signify the written word, for he has described Clemens, the apostolic father, as a man who had yet the preaching of the apostles in his ears, and their tradition *before his eyes*.

Irenaeus, it must also be admitted, has incidentally recorded a tradition concerning the millennium, as derived directly from apostolic authority, but one which will not gain much credit for such communications, as constituting a standard for religious doctrine. He (20) has told us, on the authority of Papias, the disciple of John, from whom the tradition is alleged to have been received by Papias, that the days

*Tim. ch. 6. v. 20; and when he warned the Colossians against philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men, after the elements of the world, and not after Christ: Epist. to the Coloss. ch. 2. v. 8.*

(18) Appendix.

(19) Ibid.

(20) Ibid.

shall come, in which vines shall grow, having each ten thousand branches, and on one branch ten thousand arms, and on one arm ten thousand and twigs, and on each twig ten thousand clusters, and in every cluster ten thousand grapes, and each grape, being pressed, shall yield twenty-five vessels of wine: and when some of the saints shall have laid hold of a cluster, another shall cry, I am a better cluster, take me, by me bless the Lord: and, in the like manner, that a grain of wheat should produce ten thousand ears. These things, he added, are credible to believers: and when the traitor Judas did not believe, and asked, how then shall such productions be accomplished by the Lord, the Lord said, they shall see, who shall come to these things. It seems indeed as if the providence of God had preserved such a testimony of a tradition, represented not only as coming from an apostle, but even from Jesus Christ himself, with the express purpose of manifesting the folly of depending on tradition for doctrinal information. We are quite certain, that such a compound of folly could never have come from our Lord and his beloved disciple; and Grabe has conjectured, that it had probably been formed out of some tradition of the Jews. Even the church of Rome does not maintain its authority, though an equal appearance of authenticity cannot be claimed for

any one of those traditions, for which it now strenuously contends.

Nor is this all of the primitive tradition, which the catholic church has judged it necessary to reject. The same Irenæus has, on authority not less direct, communicated some particulars relative to the future state of the virtuous, which are not now respected by any class of christians. And as, says (21) this father, the elders say, then those who shall be worthy of the conversation of the heavens, shall pass thither; others shall enjoy the delights of paradise; but others shall possess the splendour of the city: for the Saviour shall be every where seen, as they shall be worthy who see him: but that there is this distance of the habitation of those who have borne fruit a hundred-fold, and of those who have borne sixty-fold, and of those who have borne thirty-fold: of whom some shall be taken up into heaven, others shall live in paradise, others shall dwell in the city: and that on this account the Lord hath said, that with the Father there are many mansions: for all things are of God, who affords to all a fit habitation: as his Word says, that to all was distributed by the Father, according as each is, or shall be worthy: and this is the feast-chamber, in which they shall repose, who feast being invited to the marriage: that this is the arrangement and the distribution of those

(21) Appendix.

who are saved, say the elders, the disciples of the apostles.

We even find (22) in the writings of Irenæus a difference occasioned by two contradictory traditions, each claiming apostolic authority, in regard to the day, on which the festival of easter should be observed, Polycarp maintaining one practice, as sanctioned by John and the other apostles, and the pope Anicetus a different one, as authorised by the preceding elders. Another (23) difference, relating to the mode of observing a fast preparatory to that festival, has been by Irenæus himself supposed to have arisen from simplicity and ignorance, transmitting to posterity unauthorised usages. The authority of the same father (24) has also been given for a custom, as of apostolic origin, by which the knee was not bent in prayer on the Lord's day, to express our resurrection and deliverance from sin and death.

That some traditions indeed should have been transmitted from the age of the apostles, is most natural. We naturally cherish the memory of the distinguished persons, with whom we have associated, and we are eager to communicate to the succeeding generation all the little particularities of their intercourse. Such accounts however, when orally transmitted, must in any case be subject to much uncertain-

(22) Appendix.

(23) Ibid.

(24) Ibid.

ty; and invention is but too frequently employed, to supply the want of genuine information, and even to procure a spurious credit for unauthorised practices and opinions received from other originals. Of this description accordingly we find the traditions, which have been recorded by Irenæus. That father was however too wise, to regard them as in any degree constituting the standard of the belief of a christian. He has indeed recorded them with sufficient simplicity, and we may benefit by that simplicity in the opportunity which it has afforded, of forming a judgment concerning the little dependence to be placed on traditional relations; but he has taken good care to refer all christians to the written word, as the true and only standard of their faith, and has accordingly given, as the traditional faith of the church, only such a summary of the facts and doctrines of the gospel, as was gradually formed into the creed, since distinguished by the name of the apostles.

The great reliance of the advocates of tradition is however placed on Tertullian, who has been referred to the close of the second century, having followed Irenæus at an interval of about thirty years. He, like Irenæus, combated the opinions of the *gnostic* heretics, and, like him, had accordingly occasion to speak of tradition. The course indeed, which the controversy had

then taken, led him apparently to reject, in favour of tradition, the argument from the scriptures; but it may be easily and clearly shown, that he did this without any intention of setting up an oral tradition in opposition to the written word, or as supplying its deficiency, or interpreting its meaning.

Tertullian contended with the same adversaries, who had been before encountered by Irenæus, but these appear in his time to have adopted a different mode of defence, probably because they had been unable to resist the arguments of their earlier antagonist. In the time of Irenæus, conscious of the want of all scriptural authority for their wildly extravagant opinions, they had endeavoured to justify themselves by pleading the sanction of a secret tradition. From this defence they seem to have been driven by that father, who urged against them, that whatever authority tradition could bestow, must be found with those, who could trace the history of their churches to the apostles through a regular succession. Forced from this pretension, they found it necessary to allege the authority of scripture; but to the genuine and acknowledged records of christianity they could not appeal in defence of their extravagancies. That heresy, says (25) Tertullian, rejects certain scriptures, and those which

it receives, it does not receive entire : by additions and omissions it perverts them to its own purpose ; and where it does admit them in some degree entire, it wrests them by different expositions : the adulterated sense is as adverse to the truth, as the corrupted language. They are necessarily unwilling to acknowledge those things, by which they are refuted ; they rely on those which they have fabricated, and those which they have made their own by ambiguity of interpretation.

This new mode of defence seems to have much embarrassed the champion of orthodoxy. What advantage wilt thou gain, he goes on to say, thou who art most exercised in the scriptures, when, if thou maintainest any thing, it is denied ; on the contrary, if thou deniest any thing, it is maintained ? And thou indeed wilt lose nothing, except thy voice in the contention ; wilt gain nothing, except bile from the blasphemy. But will he, if there is any person, on whose account thou enterest into a controversy of the scriptures, that thou mayest confirm him doubting, incline more to the truth, or to heresies ? Moved by this very thing, that he sees thee to have gained no advantage, the opposite party equally denying and defending, he will depart rendered more uncertain by the altercation, not knowing which opinion he should judge to be heresy. And remarking that the

heretics might retort the charge of falsification of the scriptures on the orthodox, he suffers himself to be driven to the conclusion, that no appeal to the scriptures should be allowed, nor any controversy maintained in them, in which, as he says, there is either none, or an uncertain victory, or equal to one uncertain.

In this difficulty what is the expedient of Tertullian ? He was, we \* are told, well acquainted with the roman-law, and accordingly, instead of fairly arguing the main question, he pleads that which he names a *prescription*, || and which we may perhaps name in a legal sense an *exception*. He (§6) contends that these heretics should not be admitted to argue from the scriptures, but that the authority of faith and of the scriptures should be presumed to be upon the side of those, who could trace to apostles the originals of their churches.

For doing justice to Tertullian in regard to this mode of defence it is necessary to consider, that the turn, which the *gnostic* controversy had recently taken, brought the canon of scripture and its just interpretation into dispute, so that it appeared difficult to appeal with success to scriptural authority. A more temperate dis-

\* Euseb. Hist. Eccles. lib. 2. cap. 2.

|| Cum ex prescriptione his pendet, de ipsa re queri non est necesse Quinctil. lib. 7. cap. 5.

(§6) Appendix.

putant than this impetuous African would indeed have referred his adversaries to the apostolic origin of his church, in proof of the genuine canon and text of the scriptures, and would then have confuted them from the scriptures, which he had so authenticated. Tertullian however, alarmed with the apprehension of the doubtful issue of such a contest, adopted a summary proceeding for the maintenance of his cause, by *prescribing* to his adversaries, contending that they were bound to submit without dispute to those, who could claim for their church a direct succession from the apostles.

This, as has been intimated, is not the defence, which Tertullian should have made; but the canon and the text and even the meaning of the scriptures were then recently questioned, and allowance should be made for the eagerness of an ardent spirit, perplexed by new difficulties, which he was not prepared to remove. Tertullian \* was indeed in that period the scholar of the western, as Origen was in the following century of the eastern church. His eager and uncontrollable spirit was however, before the close of his life, sufficiently manifested in his unhappy adoption of the opinions of || Montanus, an illiterate enthusiast

\* Vincentius Lirinensis, *Commonit.* 1, ch. 24. in Reeves's *Apologies*, vol. 2. Lond. 1709.

|| Mosheim's *Eccles. Hist.* vol. 1. p. 236—239. Lond. 1782.

of Phrygia, who claimed, not indeed to be the Holy Spirit, but yet to be that *Paraclete* or Comforter, who had been promised, as he taught, to the followers of Christ, for perfecting the gospel by the addition of some new doctrines, and illustrating the obscurity of those, which had been already revealed. Thus did the enlightened, and even eloquent Tertullian, stimulated, as we \* are informed, by the envy and the insults of the roman clergy, submit to become the follower of an ignorant and silly enthusiast, who in his absurd extravagance exhibited the original example, which was afterwards twice imitated by artful impostors, by Manes in the third century, when he founded the odious sect of the manicheans, and by Mohammed in the seventh, when he proclaimed himself the apostle of the koran.

Perhaps indeed the same spirit, which prompted the system of authoritative dictation, published by Tertullian under the title of "the prescription of heretics," when he refused to enter into a discussion of the scriptures, and required his adversaries to yield to the declarations of the apostolic churches, urged him onward to this other measure of embracing the pretensions of Montanus, for an infallible leader actually living would furnish a more direct and cogent authority, than a tradition even then re-

\* Hieronymus in *Catal. Script. Ecclesiast.*

quiring to be traced through more than a century. Neither is such an aberration of a vigorous and informed mind essentially different from the conduct of that church, with which we are at this day contending for the truth. Montanus, in claiming to be the *paraclete*, was but a prototype of a church arrogating infallibility; and Tertullian, in passing from his "prescription of heretics," to the pretension of Montanus, but acted like those, who in later ages have sought in such a pretension a support for the weakness of a spurious tradition.

But whatever may have been the indiscretion and the error of Tertullian, we are concerned only in endeavouring to ascertain his precise opinion concerning the nature of the tradition, by which, before his strange and unhappy apostacy from sound doctrine, he wished to have heretics at once concluded. The single question, which belongs to the present enquiry, is whether this father, whose general knowledge of the state of religion is abundantly proved by his writings, was acquainted with any oral tradition existing in his time, distinct from the written word, and by him respected as necessary to be combined with it for an adequate apprehension of religion. This question may be answered decidedly with a negative.

It has been already remarked that Tertullian, like Irenæus, has (27) explicitly stated his

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notion of the rule of faith, as opposed to the *gnostic* heretics, and that this notion comprehended only articles, of which the creed named from the apostles was at length composed. His rule of faith therefore, like that of Irenæus, was a known and specified summary of the facts and doctrines of the written gospel, not a distinct tradition deposited with the rulers of the church, to be brought forth as occasion might require, for supplying the deficiencies, and illustrating the obscurities of the written revelation.

This rule of faith is however very far from being the only indication of the opinion of Tertullian, concerning the nature of that tradition, in favour of which he *prescribed* to the heretics. It is supported by various incidental expressions, clearly manifesting the exclusive reverence, in which he held the authority of the scriptures. We, says (28) he, have no need of curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor of enquiry after the gospel: when we believe, we desire to believe nothing further; for we already believe that there is nothing further, which we ought to believe. This passage precludes the notion of any secret reservation of an oral tradition, to be communicated according to the discretion of the rulers of the church, and even points directly to the written gospel, as containing all which a chris-

(28) Appendix.

tian needs to know, in opposition to the vain pretensions of the *gnostic* heretics to a superior knowledge of divine things. In a subsequent passage he speaks more explicitly of the exclusive authority of the scriptures in determining religious doctrine. But they, says (29) he, treat of the scriptures, and persuade from the scriptures: could they indeed speak of matters of faith from any other authority than the writings of faith?

Unhappily this very appeal of the *gnostics* to the scripture, corrupted indeed and falsified to suit their defence, embarrassed Tertullian, and drove him to the compendious argument of traditional authority, though limited to doctrines obviously scriptural. When (30) he perceived that the artifices of the heretics wearied the strong, inveigled the weak, and left scruples in the minds of the intermediate classes, he resolved to refuse them admission to dispute about the scriptures, as being heretics, who were to be corrected, not to be convinced by disputation. A rule of faith was therefore proposed on the authority of apostolical tradition, and the heretics were required to submit. This was weakness; but it is manifest from the particulars of that rule of faith, that Tertullian urged his plea of tradition only to support a

(29) Appendix.

(30) *Ibid.*

system of facts and doctrines collected exclusively from the scriptures.

We can indeed prove yet more directly from the writings of Tertullian, that he rejected the notion of any secret store of theological knowledge, distinct from that which was accessible to every christian in the study of the written word, for he has expressly contended against the existence of any such store, as it was maintained by the *gnostic* heretics to justify their peculiar opinions. They, says (31) he, are accustomed to say, that the apostles did not know all things, actuated by the same folly, with which they again turn round, alleging that the apostles indeed knew all things, but did not deliver all things to all persons; in each subjecting Christ to censure, as having sent apostles either ill-instructed, or not ingenuous. Who therefore of a sound mind can believe, that they were ignorant of any thing, whom the Lord gave as masters, having them inseparably in his train, in his school, in his society; to whom he privately explained all obscurities, telling them that to them it was given to know secret things, which it was not allowed to the people to understand.—But, as we have said, there is the same folly, when they confess indeed that the apostles were not ignorant of any thing, nor disagreed in preaching, yet are willing to believe, that they did not reveal

(31) Appendix.

