

## GENERAL LITERATURE.

## THE BENEVOLENCE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANS.

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(Concluded.)

BUT the primitive Christians were not content with conveying their eleemosynary aid through the public channels of the church. To them it appeared a sacred duty to countenance the poor with their presence and their purse in their own homes, where they could make more minute inquiries into their wants, and tender them the comforts of Christian sympathy and counsel, which, by the brethren both of high and low degree, were more highly prized than even the open-handed benevolence that ministered to their temporal necessities. This pious office was more especially delegated to the female members of the community; as it was thought, both from the delicate nature of the embassy, and from the jealous spirit of ancient society, they possessed facilities of access to the domestic privacy of all classes, denied to their brethren of the other sex. And exemplary was the prudence and fidelity with which they discharged their trust. Every moment they could spare from the prior claims of their own household, the Christian matrons devoted to those errands of mercy; and while they listened to the widow's tale of other days, and her traits of the friend who had gone to his rest, or saw the aged in their hut of poverty, bending under the weight of years,—or sat by the bedside of the afflicted, and those that were ready to die, or found, as was frequently the case, the helpless babe, which the frigid heart of a pagan mother had exposed and forsaken in the lonely path—they provided for the wants of each, and administered appropriate comforts both for the body and the soul. But these were light and easy attentions compared with the duties which their charitable mission frequently imposed on them. In those days there were no public institutions for the reception of the poor, and for the medical treatment of the diseased; and as there were few or none among the heathen in private life, who ever thought of entering the abodes of poverty and sickness and helping their neighbours,—such was the cold and unfeeling selfishness of the heathen world,—the Christians were never without objects, in every form of human wretchedness, towards whom their benevolence was required. Indeed, it is almost incredible to what offices the ardour of their Christian spirit led them to condescend. They, though all of them were women moving amid the comforts of domestic life, and some of them ladies of the highest rank, never inured to any kind of labour, scrupled not to perform the meanest and most servile offices that usually devolved on the lowest menial. Not only did they sit by the bedside of the sick, conversing with and comforting them, but with their own hands prepared their victuals, and led them—administered cordials and medicine—brought them changes of clothing—made their beds—dressed the most repulsive and putrefying ulcers—exposed themselves to the contagion of malignant distempers—swaddled the bodies of the dead, and, in short, acted in the character at once of the physician, the nurse, and the ambassador of God. Their purse and their experience were always ready, and the most exhausting and dangerous services were freely rendered by these Christian women. In process of time, however, as the Christian society extended its limits, and the victims of poverty and sickness became proportionally more numerous, the voluntary services of the matrons were found inadequate to overtake the immense field; and hence, besides the deacons and deaconesses, who, at a very early period

of the Church, were appointed to superintend the interests of the poor, a new class of office-bearers arose, under the name of Parabolani, whose province it was to visit and wait on the sick in malignant and pestilential diseases. These, whose number became afterwards very great—Alexandria alone, in the time of Theodosius, boasting of six hundred,—took charge of the sick and the dying, under circumstances in which, while it was most desirable they should have every attention paid to them, prudence forbade mothers and mistresses of families to repair to them; and thus, while the heathen allowed their poor and their sick to pine in wretchedness and to die before their eyes, unpitied and uncared for, there was not in the first ages a solitary individual of the Christian poor, who did not enjoy all the comforts of a temporal and spiritual nature his situation required.

It was not, however, only to the poor of their own churches that the benevolence of the primitive Christians showed itself. Never perhaps was the clear and lively principle of their character more strikingly exemplified than in the appearance of any of these calamities—famine or pestilence, with which the ancient world was so frequently visited. In the accounts that have reached us of those terrible catastrophes, mention is invariably made of a sad corruption of morals accompanying them,—the heathen became desperate and reckless amid the fearful ravages made in their ranks, their sensibilities were deadened, and a most unnatural and cold-blooded indifference was shown to the claims of their nearest relatives and friends. In the midst of all these disorders, the benevolence of the Christians exhibited an extraordinary contrast to the unfeeling selfishness of their heathen neighbours. Thus, for instance, during the plague that so long and severely afflicted Carthage in the time of Cyprian, he and the rest of the Christians were indefatigable in their exertions for the relief of the afflicted; and while the heathen abandoned the sick and dying to their fate,—while the highways were strewn with corpses which no one had the courage or the public spirit to bury, and the hardened survivors were intent on pilfering the clothes and the chests of the dead,—the Christians were constantly facing the danger, busy on the streets, or in the houses, distributing money or articles of food and clothing, and doing all in their power to alleviate the pangs of the sufferers, and soothe the last moments of the dying. Nor was their benevolence confined to the sick members of their own community,—they extended their attentions indiscriminately to all; and, while the heathen stood aloof and careless, parents deserting their children, and children trampling on the unburied corpses of their parents, the Christians were assiduously employed in the pious labour of interring them,—the rich contributing their money and the poor their labour, to clear the houses and the streets from the effluvia of the mouldering relics of mortality, and to adopt the most prudent precautions to free the city from the further ravages of the pestilence.

In like manner, when the Roman empire, especially that part of it that lay in the east, was overtaken, in the reign of Gallienus, by the simultaneous calamities of plague, famine, and earthquake, the calm fortitude and unswerving resignation of all the Christians,—their indefatigable benevolence towards all who were seized by the dreaded sickness, and the kind sympathizing attentions they bestowed on them, at the risk of their own lives, were very strikingly exemplified in Alexandria, the chief seat of the disasters.—In a letter of Dionysius, who was then pastor

of the church in that city, a most impressive account is given, of which we subjoin a translation:—"That pestilence appeared to the heathen as the most dreadful of all things,—as that which left them no hope; not so, however, did it seem to us, but only a peculiar and practical trial. The greater part of our people, in the abundance of their brotherly love, did not spare themselves; and, mutually attending to each other, they cheerfully visited the sick without fear, and ministered to them for the sake of Christ. Many of them died, after their care had restored others from the plague to health. The best among our brethren, priests, and deacons, and some who were celebrated among the laity, died in this manner; and such a death, the fruit of great piety and strong faith, is hardly inferior to martyrdom. Many who took the bodies of their Christian brethren into their hands and bosoms, who closed their mouth and eyes, and buried them with every attention, soon followed them in death. But with the heathen matters stood quite differently; at the first symptoms of sickness, they drove a man from their society; they tore themselves away from their dearest connections; they threw the half dead into the streets, and left thousands unburied; endeavouring, by all the means in their power, to escape contagion— which, notwithstanding all their contrivances, it was very difficult for them to accomplish."

In those days there were calamities of a different kind from famine and pestilence, that no less tried and displayed in a captivating light the benevolence of the primitive Christians. The land was desolated by frequent wars, the seas were infested with horrid piracies, by both of which multitudes were carried into a distant and wretched captivity.—Every fresh occurrence of such calamities moved the compassion of the Christians, and roused them to extraordinary exertions, which were often rewarded by the ransom and deliverance of thousands. It would fill a volume to describe the efforts which the benevolence of the Christians made in the cause of these unhappy exiles, and therefore we shall content ourselves with the relation of one single anecdote illustrative of them, and too romantic to be passed without notice. During the persecution raised by the Vandals in Italy, numbers of Christians, who had been carried captive in the wilds of Africa, had been redeemed from bondage by the splendid liberality of an opulent man—Paulinus. Among those whom the expenditure of his princely fortune had not been able to ransom, was the only son of a widow, who, in the bitterness of her disappointment, undertook a toilsome journey to wait upon Paulinus, and prevail upon him to bestow upon her the comparatively small sum that was necessary to purchase the freedom of one young man. With tears Paulinus was obliged to tell her that he had already parted with his all, but that he was ready and willing to surrender himself as a slave in place of her son: The resolution, strange as it was, this benevolent man lost no time in carrying into effect; he set sail in company with the widow for Africa, and made directly for the palace of the prince in whose service the woman's son was a slave, and having offered himself and been accepted in the boy's stead, the woman and her ransomed child returned to their home in Italy, while the generous deliverer remained in servitude, till the prince, discovering his real character, and admiring his extraordinary disinterestedness, at length restored him to liberty.

A good name and a good heart are two of the best items going. Young men should remember this.