

## THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY FATHERS.

### GENERAL THOUGHTS.

Having now examined all the early Christian writings of the first and second centuries, we propose in this article to give some of the general facts learned thereby.

If the reader is somewhat startled by them, he may know that he simply illustrates our feelings of surprise as we apprehended them.

Baptismal regeneration was accepted by the Church as a doctrine so early in its history that its origin cannot be traced.

About the end of the second century Tertullian gives a minute description of baptism, and in this essay he writes about the matter as if the description given by him was universal in the Church at the time; and, indeed, needed no defence concerning any of the details, because of any difference of opinion existing anywhere, and, moreover, he writes as taking it for granted that they were simply carrying out apostolic precedents.

Generally stated, the following was his teaching. The candidates for baptism were supposed to repent of past sins, but these sins, as a rule, were not forgiven and washed away until the rite of baptism was received, then they were cleansed away, and the subjects of baptism were forgiven and regenerated. After this the bishop laid his hands upon them, and they received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

This was the uniform belief and practice in what was called the orthodox Church. In the writings, still earlier than those of this author, we found no minute description of baptism; but the incidental allusions to it do not imply anything different or antagonistic to this general description.

It is evident, then, that in all the early centuries Christians emphasized these two facts of Christianity, viz., forgiveness of sins or regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Even when the substance was lost in the shadow, still the shadow corresponded, in shape at least, to the original substance.

Again, we look in vain through all these writings for the slightest trace of the modern doctrine which makes cleansing from inbred or birth sin a distinct second blessing or crisis in the Christian's experience. There is no ceremony or rite or doctrine, which, as a lingering shadow, points to such a doctrine as the original substance once existing in the Church's creed or life.

Hence the inference is absolute, that if it ever existed as an accepted doctrine in the days of the apostles, it has so completely disappeared that not a solitary monument or inscription, or even tradition, however distorted, has survived.

Suffer repetition here for the sake of emphasis. These voluminous writings show everywhere that the Church as a whole, and in its individual members, during all these generations perpetuated the teaching of Christ and the apostles concerning regeneration and the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the Pentecostal sense, and even when the glory of these experiences had departed they retained monuments erected to their memory, in the distinct and separate rites of baptism and laying-on of hands, but neither doctrine, experience nor monument appear with reference to the distinctive modern creed concerning cleansing from inbred sin as a definite experience after regeneration.

Cleansing from inborn, original sin, however, was not left out of their creed, but was distinctly connected with baptism by water; and it was universally taught, in theory at least, that the penitents were so cleansed at baptism that the Holy Ghost might come in and abide with them.

Another fact stands out most prominently, viz., that the experience, or rather practice, of the Galatian Christians, whom Paul criticises so sharply, became the universal practice of the orthodox Church so early in its history that its beginning cannot be traced, unless we place it where Paul does, in the churches in his day—this mystery of iniquity having already begun to work before Paul and his contemporaries were off the stage.

The obscure passage in the epistle of