

decided ; its adherents were enthusiastic, sure of their ground, and somewhat impatient of nice distinctions in casuistry. It pushed its propaganda with tremendous vigor, so that by the end of the first century it already had numerous adherents in almost all the great centres of the known world. So active and energetic was it that succeeding ages have been ever since disposed to regard the Apostolic period as the ideal stage of the church's existence which is to furnish the norm and standard for all others. Apostolic teaching and apostolic example are regarded as being the last court of appeal for all disputes and controversies, theological or practical.

Up to a certain point this estimate of apostolic Christianity is justified. Everything essential to the highest form of religion and morals is there. What cannot be found there, at least in germ or suggestion, can have no absolute claim on the adherents of Christianity in any subsequent age. But we must not imagine that the actual condition of the apostolic church was perfect or suppose that it could have been permanent. It at once came into contact with other forms of thought and was modified in its doctrines, or at least in the mode of stating them, sometimes for the better, often for the worse. It also had to deal in practical matters with conditions which reacted on the character of adherents and modified their interpretation of ethical principles. Every new situation they had to face made them study those principles afresh in order to see their bearings. Where erroneous, one-sided or extreme conclusions as to duty were reached as the result of this study, these were gradually in most cases corrected or modified by observation of the consequences to which they led, until a juster judgment was reached by the Church and a more comprehensive view of Christian duty came to prevail. This process of thought in the Church, slow but ceaseless, owing to the constant stimulus of actual experience, ever progressing towards greater clearness and firmness of conviction as to moral distinctions, is what constitutes the ethical development of Christianity.

Some of the earlier experiences of the church, already tolerably familiar, will serve to illustrate this process with