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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

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Section V.

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SECTION V.

- I. *The learned Pagans had means and opportunities of informing themselves of the truth of our Saviour's history;*
- II. *From the proceedings,*
- III. *The characters, sufferings,*
- IV. *And miracles of the persons who published it.*
- V. *How these first Apostles perpetuated their tradition, by ordaining persons to succeed them.*
- VI. *How their successors in the three first centuries preserved their tradition.*
- VII. *That five generations might derive this tradition from Christ, to the end of the third century.*
- VIII. *Four eminent Christians that delivered it down successively to the year of our Lord 254.*
- IX. *The faith of the four above-mentioned persons, the same with that of the Churches of the East, of the West, and of Egypt.*
- X. *Another person added to them, who brings us to the year 343, and that many other lists might be added in as direct and short a succession.*
- XI. *Why the tradition of the three first centuries, more authentick than that of any other age, proved from the conversation of the primitive Christians.*
- XII. *From the manner of initiating men into their religion.*
- XIII. *From the correspondence between the Churches.*
- XIV. *From the long lives of several of Christ's Disciples, of which two instances.*

I T now therefore only remains to consider, whether these learned men had means and opportunities of informing themselves of the truth of our Saviour's history; for unless this point can be made out, their testimonies will appear invalid, and their enquiries ineffectual.

II. As to this point, we must consider, that many thousands had seen the transactions of our Saviour in *Judæa*, and that many hundred thousands had received an account of them from the mouths of those who were actually eye-witnesses. I shall only mention among these eye-witnesses

nesses the twelve Apostles, to whom we must add St. *Paul*, who had a particular call to this high office, though many other disciples and followers of *Christ* had also their share in the publishing this wonderful history. We learn from the ancient records of Christianity, that many of the Apostles and Disciples made it the express business of their lives, travelled into the remotest parts of the world, and in all places gathered multitudes about them, to acquaint them with the history and doctrines of their crucified Master. And indeed, were all Christian records of these proceedings entirely lost, as many have been, the effect plainly evinces the truth of them; for how else during the Apostles lives could Christianity have spread itself with such an amazing progress through the several nations of the *Roman* empire? how could it fly like lightning, and carry conviction with it, from one end of the earth to the other?

III. Heathens therefore of every age, sex, and quality, born in the most different climates, and bred up under the most different institutions, when they saw men of plain sense, without the help of learning, armed with patience and courage, instead of wealth, pomp, or power, expressing in their lives those excellent doctrines of Morality, which they taught as delivered to them from our Saviour, averring that they had seen his miracles during his life, and conversed with him after his death; when, I say, they saw no suspicion of falshood, treachery, or worldly interest, in their behaviour and conversation, and that they submitted to the most ignominious and cruel deaths, rather than retract their testimony, or even be silent in matters which they were to publish by their Saviour's especial command, there was no reason to doubt of the veracity of those facts which they related, or of the Divine Mission in which they were employed.

IV. But even these motives to Faith in our Saviour would not have been sufficient to have brought about in so few years such an incredible number of conversions, had not the Apostles been able to exhibit still greater proofs of the truths which they taught. A few persons of an odious and despised country could not have filled the world with Believers, had they not shown undoubted credentials from the Divine person who sent them on such a message. Accordingly we are assured, that they were invested with the power of working miracles, which was the most short and the most convincing argument that could be produced, and the only one that was adapted to the reason of all mankind, to the capacities of the wise and ignorant, and could overcome every cavil and every prejudice. Who would not believe that our Saviour healed the sick, and rais-

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ed the dead, when it was published by those who themselves often did the same miracles, in their presence, and in his name! Could any reasonable person imagine, that God Almighty would arm men with such powers to authorize a lye, and establish a religion in the world which was displeasing to him, or that evil spirits would lend them such an effectual assistance to beat down vice and idolatry?

V. When the Apostles had formed many assemblies in several parts of the *Pagan* world, who gave credit to the glad tidings of the Gospel, that, upon their departure, the memory of what they had related might not perish, they appointed out of these new converts, men of the best sense, and of the most unblemished lives, to preside over these several assemblies, and to inculcate without ceasing what they had heard from the mouths of these eye-witnesses.

VI. Upon the death of any of those substitutes to the Apostles and Disciples of *Christ*, his place was filled up with some other person of eminence for his piety and learning, and generally a member of the same Church, who after his decease was followed by another in the same manner, by which means the succession was continued in an uninterrupted line. *Irenæus* informs us, that every church preserved a catalogue of its Bishops in the order that they succeeded one another, and (for an example) produces the catalogue of those who governed the Church of *Rome* in that character, which contains eight or nine persons, though but at a very small remove from the times of the Apostles.

Indeed the lists of Bishops, which are come down to us in other churches, are generally filled with greater numbers than one would expect. But the succession was quick in the three first centuries, because the Bishop very often ended in the Martyr: for when a persecution arose in any place, the first fury of it fell upon this Order of holy men, who abundantly testified by their Deaths and Sufferings that they did not undertake these offices out of any temporal views, that they were sincere and satisfied in the belief of what they taught, and that they firmly adhered to what they had received from the Apostles, as laying down their lives in the same hope, and upon the same principles. None can be supposed so utterly regardless of their own happiness as to expire in torment, and hazard their Eternity, to support any fables and inventions of their own, or any forgeries of their predecessors who had presided in the same church, and which might have been easily detected by the tradition of that particular church, as well as by the concurring testimony of others. To this purpose, I think it is very remarkable, that there was not a single Mar-

tyr among those many Hereticks, who disagreed with the Apostolical church, and introduced several wild and absurd notions into the doctrines of Christianity. They durst not stake their present and future happiness on their own chimerical imaginations, and did not only shun persecution, but affirmed that it was unnecessary for their followers to bear their religion through such fiery tryals.

VII. We may fairly reckon, that this first age of Apostles and Disciples, with that second generation of many who were their immediate converts, extended it self to the middle of the second Century, and that several of the third generation from these last mentioned, which was but the fifth from *Christ*, continued to the end of the third Century. Did we know the ages and numbers of the members in every particular church, which was planted by the Apostles, I doubt not but in most of them there might be found five persons who in a continued series would reach through these three centuries of years, that is till the 265th from the death of our Saviour.

VIII. Among the accounts of those very few out of innumerable multitudes, who had embraced Christianity, I shall single out four persons eminent for their lives, their writings, and their sufferings, that were successively contemporaries, and bring us down as far as to the year of our Lord 254. *St. John*, who was the beloved Disciple, and conversed the most intimately with our Saviour, lived till *Anno Dom. 100*. *Polycarp*, who was the Disciple of *St. John*, and had conversed with others of the Apostles and Disciples of our Lord, lived till *Anno Dom. 167*, though his life was shortened by martyrdom. *Irenæus*, who was the Disciple of *Polycarp*, and had conversed with many of the immediate Disciples of the Apostles, lived, at the lowest computation of his age, till the year 202, when he was likewise cut off by martyrdom; in which year the great *Origen* was appointed Regent of the Catechetick school in *Alexandria*, and as he was the miracle of that age, for industry, learning, and philosophy, he was looked upon as the champion of Christianity, till the year 254, when, if he did not suffer martyrdom, as some think he did, he was certainly actuated by the spirit of it, as appears in the whole course of his life and writings; nay, he had often been put to the torture, and had undergone tryals worse than death. As he conversed with the most eminent Christians of his time in *Egypt*, and in the East, brought over multitudes both from heresy and heathenism, and left behind him several Disciples of great fame and learning, there is no question but there were considerable numbers of those who knew him, and had been his hearers, scholars,

cholars, or profelytes, that lived till the end of the third century, and to the reign of *Constantine* the Great.

IX. It is evident to those, who read the lives and writings of *Polycarp*, *Irenæus*, and *Origen*, that these three Fathers believed the accounts which are given of our Saviour in the four Evangelists, and had undoubted arguments that not only *St. John*, but many others of our Saviour's disciples, published the same accounts of him. To which we must subjoin this further remark, that what was believed by these Fathers on this subject, was likewise the belief of the main body of Christians in those successive ages when they flourished; since *Polycarp* cannot but be looked upon, if we consider the respect that was paid him, as the representative of the Eastern Churches in this particular, *Irenæus* of the Western upon the same account, and *Origen* of those established in *Egypt*.

X. To these I might add *Paul* the famous hermite, who retired from the *Decian* persecution five or six years before *Origen's* death, and lived till the year 343. I have only discovered one of those channels by which the history of our Saviour might be conveyed pure and unadulterated, through those several ages that produced those *Pagan* Philosophers, whose testimonies I make use of for the truth of our Saviour's history. Some or other of these Philosophers came into the Christian faith during its infancy, in the several periods of these three first centuries, when they had such means of informing themselves in all the particulars of our Saviour's history. I must further add, that though I have here only chosen this single link of martyrs, I might find out others among those names which are still extant, that delivered down this account of our Saviour in a successive tradition, till the whole *Roman* empire became Christian; as there is no question but numberless series of witnesses might follow one another in the same order, and in as short a chain, and that perhaps in every single Church, had the names and ages of the most eminent primitive Christians been transmitted to us with the like certainty.

XI. But to give this consideration more force, we must take notice, that the tradition of the first ages of Christianity had several circumstances peculiar to it, which made it more authentick than any other tradition in any other age of the world. The Christians, who carried their religion through so many general and particular persecutions, were incessantly comforting and supporting one another, with the example and history of our Saviour and his Apostles. It was the subject not only of their solemn assemblies, but of their private visits and conversations. *Our virgins*, says *Tatian*, who lived in the second century, *discourse over their distaffs*

on divine subjects. Indeed, when religion was woven into the civil government, and flourished under the protection of the Emperors, men's thoughts and discourses were, as they are now, full of secular affairs; but in the three first centuries of Christianity, men, who embraced this religion, had given up all their interests in this world, and lived in a perpetual preparation for the next, as not knowing how soon they might be called to it: so that they had little else to talk of but the life and doctrines of that divine person, which was their hope, their encouragement, and their glory. We cannot therefore imagine, that there was a single person arrived at any degree of age or consideration, who had not heard and repeated above a thousand times in his life, all the particulars of our Saviour's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

XII. Especially if we consider, that they could not then be received as Christians, till they had undergone several examinations. Persons of riper years, who flocked daily into the Church during the three first centuries, were obliged to pass through many repeated instructions, and give a strict account of their proficiency, before they were admitted to Baptism. And as for those who were born of Christian parents, and had been baptised in their infancy, they were with the like care prepared and disciplined for confirmation, which they could not arrive at, till they were found upon examination to have made a sufficient progress in the knowledge of Christianity.

XIII. We must further observe, that there was not only in those times this religious conversation among private Christians, but a constant correspondence between the Churches that were established by the Apostles or their successors, in the several parts of the world. If any new doctrine was started, or any fact reported of our Saviour, a strict enquiry was made among the Churches, especially those planted by the Apostles themselves, whether they had received any such doctrine or account of our Saviour, from the mouths of the Apostles, or the tradition of those Christians, who had preceded the present members of the Churches which were thus consulted. By this means, when any novelty was published, it was immediately detected and censured.

XIV. St. *John*, who lived so many years after our Saviour, was appealed to in these emergencies as the living Oracle of the Church; and as his oral testimony lasted the first century, many have observed that, by a particular providence of God, several of our Saviour's Disciples, and of the early converts of his religion, lived to a very great age, that they might personally convey the truth of the Gospel to those times, which were

were very remote from the first publication of it. Of these, besides St. *John*, we have a remarkable instance in *Simeon*, who was one of the seventy sent forth by our Saviour, to publish the Gospel before his crucifixion, and a near kinsman of the Lord. This venerable person, who had probably heard with his own ears our Saviour's prophecy of the destruction of *Jerusalem*, presided over the Church established in that city, during the time of its memorable siege, and drew his congregation out of those dreadful and unparallel'd calamities which beset his countrymen, by following the advice our Saviour had given, when they should see *Jerusalem* encompassed with armies, and the *Roman* standards, or abomination of desolation, set up. He lived till the year of our Lord 107, when he was martyred under the Emperor *Trajan*.

SECTION VI.

- I. *The tradition of the Apostles secured by other excellent institutions;*
- II. *But chiefly by the writings of the Evangelists.*
- III. *The diligence of the Disciples and first Christian converts, to send abroad these writings.*
- IV. *That the written account of our Saviour was the same with that delivered by tradition:*
- V. *Proved from the reception of the Gospel by those Churches which were established before it was written;*
- VI. *From the uniformity of what was believed in the several Churches;*
- VII. *From a remarkable passage in Irenæus.*
- VIII. *Records which are now lost, of use to the three first centuries, for confirming the history of our Saviour.*
- IX. *Instances of such records.*

I **T**HUS far we see how the learned *Pagans* might apprize themselves from oral information of the particulars of our Saviour's history. They could hear, in every Church planted in every distant part of the earth, the account which was there received and preserved among them, of the history of our Saviour. They could learn the names and characters of those first missionaries that brought to them these accounts, and the miracles by which God Almighty attested their reports. But the Apostles and Disciples of *Christ*, to preserve the history