Constitutions of the Holy Apostles Book 1

Apostolic Constitutions (c. AD 380)

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Concerning the Laity. — Sec. I.-General Commandments.

The apostles and elders to all those who from among the Gentiles have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; grace and peace from Almighty God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, be multiplied unto you in the acknowledgment of Him. The Catholic Church is the plantation of God and His beloved vineyard; containing those who have believed in His unerring divine religion; who are the heirs by faith of His everlasting kingdom; who are partakers of His divine influence, and of the communication of the Holy Spirit; who are armed through Jesus, and have received His fear into their hearts; who enjoy the benefit of the sprinkling of the precious and innocent blood of Christ; who have free liberty to call Almighty God, Father; being fellow-heirs and joint-partakers of His beloved Son: hearken to this holy doctrine, you who enjoy His promises, as being delivered by the command of your Saviour, and agreeable to His glorious words. Take care, ye children of God, to do all things in obedience to God; and in all things please Christ our Lord. For if any man follows unrighteousness, and does those things that are contrary to the will of God, such a one will be esteemed by God as the disobedient heathen.

Concerning Covetousness.

I. Abstain, therefore, from all unlawful desires and injustice. For it is written in the law, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his field, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's; " for all coveting of these things is from the evil one. For he that covets his neighbour's wife, or his man-servant, or his maid-servant, is already in his mind an adulterer and a thief; and if he does not repent, is condemned by our Lord Jesus Christ: through whom glory be to God for ever, Amen. For He says in the Gospel, recapitulating, and confirming, and fulfilling the ten commandments of the law: "It is written in the law, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that is, I said in the law, by Moses. But now I say unto you myself, Whosoever shall look on his neighbour's wife to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. Such a one is condemned of adultery, who covets his neighbour's wife in his mind. But does not he that covets an ox or an ass design to steal them to apply them to his own use, and to lead them away? Or, again, does not he that covets a field, and continues in such

a disposition, wickedly contrive how to remove the landmarks, and to compel the possessor to part with somewhat for nothing? For as the prophet somewhere speaks:

"Woe to those who join house to house, and lay field to field, that they may deprive their neighbour of somewhat which was his. Wherefore he says: "Must you alone inhabit the earth? For these things have been heard in the ears of the Lord of hosts. And elsewhere: "Cursed be he who removeth his neighbour's landmarks: and all the people shall say, Amen. Wherefore Moses says: "Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmarks which thy fathers have set. Upon this account, therefore, terrors, death, tribunals, and condemnations follow such as these from God. But as to those who are obedient to God, there is one law of God, simple, true, living, which is this: "Do not that to another which thou hatest another should do to thee. Thou wouldst not that any one should look upon thy wife with an evil design to corrupt her; do not thou, therefore, look upon thy neighbour's wife with a wicked intention. Thou wouldst not that thy garment should be taken away; do not thou therefore, take away another's. Thou wouldst not be beaten, reproached, affronted; do not thou, therefore, serve any other in the like manner.

That We Ought Not to Return Injuries, Nor Revenge Ourselves on Him that Does Us Wrong.

II. But if any one curse thee, do thou bless him. For it is written in the book of Numbers: "He that blesseth thee is blessed, and he that curseth thee is cursed." In the same manner it is written inn the Gospel: "Bless them that curse you." Being injured, do not avenge yourselves, but bear it with patience; for the Scripture speaks thus: "Say not thou, I will avenge myself on my enemy for what injuries he has offered me; but acquiesce under them, that the Lord may right thee, and bring vengeance upon him who injures thee." For so says He again in the Gospel: "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; and ye shall be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to shine on the evil and on the good, and raineth on the just and unjust." Let us therefore, beloved, attend to these commandments, that we may be found to be the children of light by doing them. Bear, therefore, with one another, ye servants and sons of God.

Sec. II.-Commandments to Men. Concerning the Adornment of Ourselves, and the Sin Which Arises from Thence.

Let the husband not be insolent nor arrogant towards his wife; but compassionate, bountiful, willing to please his own wife alone, and treat her honourably and obligingly, endeavouring to be agreeable to her; (III. not adorning thyself in such a manner as may entice another woman to thee. For if thou art overcome by her, and sinnest with her, eternal death will overtake thee from God; and thou wilt be punished with sensible and bitter torments. Or if thou dost not perpetrate such a wicked act, but shakest her off, and refusest her, in this case thou art not wholly innocent, even though thou art not guilty of the crime itself, but only in so far as through thy adorning thou didst entice the woman to desire thee. For thou art the cause that the woman was so affected, and by her lusting after thee was guilty

of adultery with thee: yet art thou not so guilty, because thou didst not send to her, who was ensnared by thee; nor didst thou desire her. Since, therefore, thou didst not deliver up thyself to her, thou shalt find mercy with the Lord thy God, who hath said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and, "Thou shalt not covet.

For if such a woman, upon sight of thee, or unseasonable meeting with thee, was smitten in her mind, and sent to thee, but thou as a religious person didst refuse her, if she was wounded in her heart by thy beauty, and youth, and adorning, and fell in love with thee, thou wilt be found guilty of her transgressions, as having been the occasion of scandal to her, and shalt inherit a woe. Wherefore pray thou to the Lord God that no mischief may befall thee upon this account: for thou art not to please men, so as to commit sin; but God, so as to attain holiness of life, and be partaker of everlasting rest. That beauty which God and nature has bestowed on thee, do not further beautify; but modestly diminish it before men. Thus, do not thou permit the hair of thy head to grow too long, but rather cut it short; lest by a nice combing thy hair, and wearing it long, and anointing thyself, thou draw upon thyself such ensnared or ensnaring women. Neither do thou wear over-fine garments to seduce any; neither do thou, with an evil subtilty, affect over-fine stockings or shoes for thy feet, but only such as suit the measures of decency and usefulness. Neither do thou put a gold ring upon thy fingers; for all these ornaments are the signs of lasciviousness, which if thou be solicitous about in an indecent manner, thou wilt not act as becomes a good man:

for it is not lawful for thee, a believer and a man of God, to permit the hair of thy head to grow long, and to brush it up together, nor to suffer it to spread abroad, nor to puff it up, nor by nice combing and platting to make it curl and shine; since that is contrary to the law, which says thus, in its additional precepts: "You shall not make to yourselves curls and round rasures. Nor may men destroy the hair of their beards, and unnaturally change the form of a man. For the law says: "Ye shall not mar your beards. For God the Creator has made this decent for women, but has determined that it is unsuitable for men. But if thou do these things to please men, in contradiction to the law, thou wilt be abominable with God, who created thee after His own image. If, therefore, thou wilt be acceptable to God, abstain from all those things which He hates, and do none of those things that are unpleasing to Him.

That We Ought Not to Be Over-Curious About Those Who Live Wickedly, But to Be Intent Upon Our Own Proper Employment.

IV. Thou shalt not be as a wanderer and gadder abroad, rambling about the streets, without just cause, to spy out such as live wickedly. But by minding thy own trade and employment, endeavour to do what is acceptable to God. And keeping in mind the oracles of Christ, meditate in the same continually. For so the Scripture says to thee: "Thou shalt meditate in His law day and night; when thou walkest in the field, and when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up, that thou mayest have understanding in all things." Nay, although thou beest rich, and so dost not want a trade for thy maintenance, be not one that gads about, and walks abroad at random; but either go to some that are

believers, and of the same religion, and confer and discourse with them about the lively oracles of God:-

What Books of Scripture We Ought to Read.

V. Or if thou stayest at home, read the books of the Law, of the Kings, with the Prophets; sing the hymns of David; and peruse diligently the Gospel, which is the completion of the other.

That We Ought to Abstain from All the Books of Those that are Out of the Church.

VI. Abstain from all the heathen books. For what hast thou to do with such foreign discourses, or laws, or false prophets, which subvert the faith of the unstable? For what defect dost thou find in the law of God, that thou shouldest have recourse to those heathenish fables? For if thou hast a mind to read history, thou hast the books of the Kings; if books of wisdom or poetry, thou hast those of the Prophets, of Job, and the Proverbs, in which thou wilt find greater depth of sagacity than in all the heathen poets and sophisters, because these are the words of the Lord, the only wise God. If thou desirest something to sing, thou hast the Psalms; if the origin of things, thou hast Genesis; if laws and statutes, thou hast the glorious law of the Lord God. Do thou therefore utterly abstain from all strange and diabolical books. Nay, when thou readest the law, think not thyself bound to observe the additional precepts; though not all of them, yet some of them. Read those barely for the sake of history, in order to the knowledge of them, and to glorify God that He has delivered thee from such great and so many bonds. Propose to thyself to distinguish what rules were from the law of nature, and what were added afterwards, or were such additional rules as were introduced and given in the wilderness to the Israelites after the making of the calf;

for the law contains those precepts which were spoken by the Lord God before the people fell into idolatry, and made a calf like the Egyptian Apis-that is, the ten commandments. But as to those bonds which were further laid upon them after they had sinned, do not thou draw them upon thyself: for our Saviour came for no other reason but that He might deliver those that were obnoxious thereto from the wrath which was reserved far them, that He might fulfil the Law and the Prophets, and that He might abrogate or change those secondary bonds which were superadded to the rest of the law. For therefore did He call to us and say, ”Come unto me”, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will dive you rest. When, therefore, thou hast read the Law, which is agreeable to the Gospel and to the Prophets, read also the books of the Kings, that thou mayest thereby learn which of the kings were righteous, and how they were prospered by God, and how the promise of eternal life continued with them from Him; but those kings which went a-whoring from God did soon perish in their apostasy by the righteous judgment of God, and were deprived of His life, inheriting, instead of rest, eternal punishment. Wherefore by reading these books thou wilt be mightily strengthened in the faith, and edified in Christ, whose body and member thou art.

Moreover, when thou walkest abroad in public, and hast a mind to bathe, make use of that bath which is appropriated to men, lest, by discovering thy body in an unseemly manner

to women, or by seeing a sight not seemly for men, either thou beest ensnared, or thou ensnarest and enticest to thyself those women who easily yield to such temptations. Take care, therefore, and avoid such things, lest thou admit a snare upon thy own soul.

Concerning a Bad Woman.

VII. For let us learn what the sacred word says in the book of Wisdom: "My son, keep my words, and hide my commandments with thee. Say unto Wisdom, Thou art my sister; and make understanding familiar with thee: that she may keep thee from the strange and wicked woman, in case such a one accost thee with sweet words. For from the window of her house she looks into the street, to see if she can espy some young man among the foolish children, without Understanding, walking in the market-place, in the meeting of the street near her house, and talking in the dusk of the evening, or in the silence and darkness of the night. A woman meets him in the appearance of an harlot, who steals away the hearts of young persons. She rambles about and is dissolute; her feet abide not in her house sometimes she is without, sometimes in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner. Then she catches him, and kisses him, and with an impudent face says unto him, I have peace-offerings with me; this day do I pay my vows: therefore came I forth to meet thee; earnestly I have desired thy face, and I have found thee. I have decked my bed with coverings; with tapestry from Egypt have I adorned it. I have perfumed my bed with saffron, and my house with cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning; come, let us solace ourselves with love," etc. To which he adds:

"With much discourse she seduced him, with snares from her lips she forced him. He goes after her like a silly bird. And again: "Do not hearken to a wicked woman; for though the lips of an harlot are like drops from an honey-comb, which for a while is smooth in thy throat, yet afterwards thou wilt find her more bitter than gall, and sharper than any two-edged sword. And again: "But get away quickly, and tarry not fix not thine eyes upon her: for she hath thrown down many wounded; yea, innumerable multitudes have been slain by her. "If not," says he, "yet thou wilt repent at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed, and wilt say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart has avoided the reproofs of the righteous! I have not hearkened to the voice of my instructor, nor inclined mine ear to my teacher. I have almost been in all evil. But we will make no more quotations; and if we have omitted any, be so prudent as to select the most valuable out of the Holy Scriptures, and confirm yourselves with them, rejecting all things that are evil, that so you may be found holy with God in eternal life.

Sec. III.-Commandments to Women. Concerning the Subjection of a Wife to Her Husband, and that She Must Be Loving and Modest.

VIII. Let the wife be obedient to her own proper husband, because "the husband is the head of the wife. But Christ is the head of that husband who walks in the way of righteousness; and "the head of Christ is God," even His Father. Therefore, O wife, next after the Almighty, our God and Father, the Lord of the present world and of the world to come, the Maker of everything that breathes, and of every power; and after His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus

Christ, through whom glory be to God, do thou fear thy husband, and reverence him, pleasing him alone, rendering thyself acceptable to him in the several affairs of life, that so on thy account thy husband may be called blessed, according to the Wisdom of Solomon, which thus speaks: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for such a one is more precious than costly stones. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that she shall have no need of spoil: for she does good to her husband all the days of her life. She buyeth wool and flax, and worketh profitable things-with her hands. She is like the merchants ships, she bringeth her food from far. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth" meat to her household, and food to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She tasteth that it is good to labour;

her lamp goeth not out all the whole night. She stretcheth out her arms for useful work, and layeth her hands to the spindle. She openeth her hands to the needy; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the poor. Her husband takes no care of the affairs of his house; for all that are with her are clothed with double garments. She maketh coats for her husband, clothings of silk and purple. Her husband is eminent in the gates, when he sitteth with the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it to the Phoenicians, and girdles to the Canaanites. She is clothed with glory and beauty, and she rejoices in the last days. She openeth her mouth with wisdom and discretion, and puts her words in order. The ways of her household are strict; she eateth not the bread of idleness. She will open her mouth with wisdom and caution, and upon her tongue are the laws of mercy. Her children arise up and praise her for her riches, and her husband joins in her praises. Many daughters have obtained wealth and done worthily, but thou surpassest and excellest them all. May lying flatteries and the vain beauty of a wife be far from thee. For a religious wife is blessed. Let her praise the fear of the Lord: give her of the fruits of her lips, and let her husband be praised in the gates. And again: "A virtuous wife is a crown to her husband. And again: "Many wives have built an house.

You have learned what great commendations a prudent and loving wife receives from the Lord God. If thou desirest to be one of the faithful, and to please the Lord, O wife, do not superadd ornaments to thy beauty, in order to please other men; neither affect to wear fine broidering, garments, or shoes, to entice those who are allured by such things. For although thou dost not these wicked things with design of sinning thyself, but only for the sake of ornament and beauty, yet wilt thou not so escape future punishment, as having compelled another to look so hard at thee as to lust after thee, and as not having taken care both to avoid sin thyself, and the affording scandal to others. But if thou yield thyself up, and commit the crime, thou art both guilty of thy own sin, and the cause of the ruin of the other's soul also. Besides, when thou hast committed lewdness with one man, and beginnest to despair, thou wilt again turn away from thy duty, and follow others, and grow past feeling; as says the divine word: "When a wicked man comes into the depth of evil, he becomes a scorner, and then disgrace and reproach come upon him. For such a woman afterward being wounded, ensnares without restraint the souls of the foolish. Let us learn,

therefore, how the divine word, triumphs over such women, saying: ”I hated a woman who is a snare and net to the heart of men worse than death; her hands are fetters.

And in another passage: ”As a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout, so is beauty in a wicked woman. And again: ”As a worm in wood, so does a wicked woman destroy her husband. And again: ”It is better to dwell in the corner of the house-top, than with a contentious and an angry woman. You, therefore, who are Christian women, do not imitate such as these. But thou who designest to be faithful to thine own husband, take care to please him alone. And when thou art in the streets, cover thy head; for by such a covering thou wilt avoid being viewed of idle persons. Do not paint thy face, which is God’s workmanship; for there is no part of thee which wants ornament, inasmuch as all things which God has made are very good. But the lascivious additional adorning of what is already good is an affront to the bounty of the Creator. Look downward when thou walkest abroad, veiling thyself as becomes women.

That a Woman Must Not Bathe with Men.

IX. Avoid also that disorderly practice of bathing in the same place with men; for many are the nets of the evil one. And let not a Christian woman bathe with an hermaphrodite; for if she is to veil her face, and conceal it with modesty from strange men, how can she bear to enter naked into the bath together with men? But if the bath be appropriated to women, let her bathe orderly, modestly, and moderately. But let her not bathe without occasion, nor much, nor often, nor in the middle of the day, nor, if possible, every day; and let the tenth hour of the day be the set time for such seasonable bathing. For it is convenient that thou, who art a Christian woman, shouldst ever constantly avoid a curiosity which has many eyes.

Concerning a Contentious and Brawling Woman.

X. But as to a spirit of contention, be sure to curb it as to all men, but principally as to thine husband; lest, if he be an unbeliever or an heathen, he may have an occasion of scandal or of blaspheming God, and thou be partaker of a woe from God. For, says He, ”Woe to him by whom My name is blasphemed among the Gentiles; ” and lest, if thy husband be a Christian, he be forced, from his knowledge of the Scriptures, to say that which is written in the book of Wisdom: ”It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman.” You wives, therefore, demonstrate your piety by your modesty and meekness to all without the Church, whether they be women or men, in order to their conversion and improvement in the faith. And since we have warned you, and instructed you briefly, whom we do esteem our sisters, daughters, and members, as being wise yourselves, persevere all your lives in an unblameable course of life. Seek to know such kind of learning whereby you may arrive at the kingdom of our Lord, and please Him, and so rest for ever and ever. Amen.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and

Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.