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GIBBON MISCONSTRUED

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The following question appeared in Billy Graham’s newspaper column “This Is My Answer”:
I heard a public speaker mention the five reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire. Could you tell me what these were and from what source they came?
My answer:
These are found in Edward Gibbon’s *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This is a standard work tracing the Roman empire from the second century A.D. to Constantine. You can find it in any library. The reasons are 1. Breakdown of the family and rapid increase in divorce, 2. Spiraling rise of taxes, 3. Insatiable craze for pleasure, 4. Mounting production of armaments, 5. Decay of religion. History is a great schoolmaster. We learn by the mistakes of past civilizations.

Mr. Graham’s answer is interesting on several points. First, the name of Gibbon’s “standard work” is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, not the “Rise and Fall.” Secondly, the complete history covers the period from the second century A.D. through the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. And lastly, in contrast to Mr. Graham’s list, Gibbon provides only four reasons for Rome’s fall:

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2 In this matter Graham is in exalted company. Recently [April 27, 1995] in a speech given on the campus of Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas, former Prime Minister of England Lady Margaret Thatcher referred to Gibbon’s work in precisely these terms. There appears to be some confusion between Gibbon’s work and William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. 
1. Injuries of time and nature, 2. Hostile attacks of the barbarians and Christians, 3. Use and abuse of the materials [resources], 4. Domestic quarrels of the Romans. Mr. Graham's errors illustrate the extent of misinformation which exists among the general public concerning Gibbon and his famous history. As with many classic works, it is praised, much quoted, often attacked—but seldom read.

Billy Graham is, regretfully, also typical of the general ignorance of Gibbon to be found among Christians. While many educated Christians are aware of Gibbon's great history, they are probably not aware of how his history has contributed to our understanding of Christian history. Gibbon's exhaustive history is more than an account of the disintegration of the Roman Empire; for the Christian reader, it offers an explicit description of the deterioration of the Roman church and the collapse of the Christian Byzantine Empire. Because of Gibbon’s unvarnished treatment of the often harsh realities of church history, some Christian leaders have branded Gibbon an unbeliever, deist, or, at best, a skeptic. In response to Gibbon’s clear, methodical recitation of embarrassing, unpleasant facts which many churchmen do not want to acknowledge, his detractors have sullied his reputation, and, as a result, his insights are today often maligned, ignored, or misappropriated.

Gibbon's life and the major themes of his work do not demonstrate a calculated hatred of Christianity. Gibbon's criticism of historical Christianity arises not from hatred but from profound disappointments in the promise and potential of the Christian movement the author experienced in his life and observed in history. Further, it is not the failure of Christianity Gibbon documents, but the failure of its followers to achieve the noble goals of their faith. Gibbon's voluminous history speaks warnings to any religious movement which concentrates upon secular issues and materialistic goals, sacrificing its spiritual focus and direction. Further, the criticism Gibbon suffered during his life and what his history has suffered since vividly illustrate how willing guardians of religious dogma are to protect their sectarian goals at the expense of historical truth.

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Gibbon’s history challenges all Christians to face their past, exercise their faith, and redeem their future through actions worthy of their founder.

Gibbon’s Life

Gibbon’s historical philosophy reflects his life, a life religion was to dominate. Descendant of a long line of squires, Edward Gibbon the Younger was born in the Thames-side village of Putney, Kent, just southwest of London, on April 27, 1737. Edward was the first and only sibling of seven to survive infancy and was himself a puny and unhealthy child who suffered for many years from several infantile disorders. His father too busy and his mother too ill to care for him, a doting aunt, Mrs. Catherine Porten, raised him. Gibbon later remembered his aunt as one “who indulged herself in moral and religious speculation” and encouraged him to do the same. When young Edward was ten, his mother died, and his father entered into a period of dark isolation. The boy Gibbon was shuttled between several boarding schools, while often sent home to recover from illnesses. At age fourteen, he was abruptly enrolled at Magdalen College, Oxford, with minimal academic preparation and no warning from his capricious father. Again, Gibbon was ill for most of his fourteen months at Oxford, experiencing little of college life. His weak constitution prevented any athletic endeavors. No friends or outside activities broke the monotony of his existence.

During these empty days at Magdalen, Gibbon filled his life with the intricacies of religious speculation. He read deeply in theology and disputed points of doctrine in letters to his aunt. Eventually, after study with a Jesuit priest, Edward entered the Catholic Church in June 1753. Both father and university looked unkindly upon this development. Expelled from Oxford, Gibbon was sent out of England in disgrace.

Young Gibbon was sixteen when he arrived an exile in Europe. Proceeding to Lausanne, Switzerland, to the school of a noted Calvinist minister, his new tutor, the disgraced Gibbon remained there for nearly five years, living on a pitiful allowance from his father. He was a forlorn and solitary youth, too poor to make any kind of advantageous appearance.

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in the company of other young English gentlemen visiting the city. So Gibbon immersed himself in reading (his dearest pastime), studying French, Latin, Greek, and moral philosophy, and devouring the classics. Gibbon was exiled to a Europe aglow with the Enlightenment. Advances in scientific knowledge during the 1700s strongly influenced European thought. All of man's institutions were being reexamined in the light of pure reason, and accepted ideas were being called into question. The Enlightened Age produced much destructive criticism; but on balance, a healthy skepticism and realistic humanitarianism also emerged. Gibbon read the works of the French Enlightenment, especially Montesquieu, and attended plays, where he met Voltaire and began reading his works. He corresponded with Francois-Louis Allamand, an obscure and enigmatic Swiss religious thinker who impressed upon him the ironic contrast throughout history of men's expressed religious beliefs and their actions. With his tutor, Gibbon pursued an intense study of theology which resulted in his return to Protestantism on Christmas Day 1754, at age seventeen. So even though the prodigal Gibbon returned, he was imbued with the new Enlightenment perspective.

The reconversion failed to move his father, and Gibbon remained in Switzerland, albeit with a slightly larger allowance. Then Gibbon fell in love with Mademoiselle Suzanne Curchod. When Gibbon informed his father of these feelings, he was immediately summoned home. The elder Gibbon welcomed his son but forbade the proposed marriage. This was the young Gibbon's one brush with love; he never married. Subsequently, his father enrolled him in the South Hampshire Regiment of the English militia. Edward obediently fulfilled his term of service from 1759 to 1762. During these years he regularly attended the local chapel where his family

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historically maintained their pew. Twice a week he heard the reading of
the lesson and listened to the sermon. This he did not do casually but
followed the reading in his Greek Bible and made notes in his journal as
to the content and quality of the sermon.\textsuperscript{13} When his military service
ended, Gibbon expressed himself glad to see the end of the obligation and
left for a two-year tour of the continent.\textsuperscript{14}

While on this Grand Tour, Gibbon turned 27 and experienced a
fateful epiphany of his life’s future work:

It was at Rome on the fifteenth of October 1764, as I sat
musing amidst the ruins of the capital, while the barefooted
friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the
idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to
my mind.\textsuperscript{15}

How ironic that a mystical, almost religious experience inspired a work
considered a classic of the rational Enlightenment.

After the death of his emotionally unstable father in 1770, Gibbon
was able to perfect his vision. Free at last from his father’s caprice, he
settled in London with his inheritance to enjoy a bachelor’s life. By 1773,
at age 36, Gibbon was into his life’s work, the composition of the \textit{Decline
and Fall}.\textsuperscript{16}

During this period of intense work, Gibbon was not a social hermit.
On the contrary, he entertained his close friends John Baker Holroyd, Lord
Sheffield, and Lady Sheffield, in his townhouse at No. 7 Bentinck Street,
London, and made frequent visits to the Sheffield’s country manor house,
Sheffield Place, in Surrey. When Gibbon dined out, it was often among the
literary greats of his day. At one such dinner in 1776, Samuel Johnson was
also at the table, and a young George Colman recorded his impression of
Johnson and Gibbon:

Johnson’s style was grand, and Gibbon’s elegant; the
staleness of the former was sometimes pedantick, and the
polish of the latter was occasionally finical. Johnson march’d

\textsuperscript{13} Edward Gibbon, “1 August 1762,” Gibbon’s Journal to January 28th,
1763 (ed. D.M. Low; London, 1929) 107; \textit{The Autobiographies of Edward
Gibbon . . . Printed from hitherto unprinted manuscripts} (ed. John Murray;
London, 1897) 248–9; David Dillon Smith, “Gibbon in Church,” \textit{JEH} 35 (July
1984) 454.

\textsuperscript{14} Quennell, \textit{Four Portraits}, 76–131.

\textsuperscript{15} Gibbon, \textit{Memoirs}, 136; see also Patricia B.Craddock, \textit{Young Edward
Gibbon} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 222.

to kettle-drums and trumpets; Gibbon moved to flutes and haut-boys; Johnson hew’d passages through the Alps, while Gibbon levell’d walks through parks and gardens.\textsuperscript{17}

Colman was much impressed with Gibbon because he took the time to engage the young man personally in conversation. Gibbon made a more fantastic impression upon London. Barely five feet in height, he made up for his diminutive stature by dressing ostentatiously and effecting elaborate manners. While some found this aspect of his personality humorous, Gibbon was still much in demand as a dinner guest.\textsuperscript{18}

Gibbon’s work progressed even though a relative, Edward Eliot, bought him a seat in Parliament in 1774. Always unpolitical, Gibbon took no interest in the rapidly worsening American colonial situation other than to faithfully support the Tory government. Oblivious to the historic events swirling about him, Gibbon published the first volume of \textit{Decline and Fall} in February 1776, with a first edition of 1,000. To his publisher’s surprise (and Gibbon’s) the first edition was sold out by March. A second edition was issued in June and a third in early 1777. Gibbon’s Roman history became the talk of London and soon of the Continent.\textsuperscript{19}

Although the Enlightenment leaders Horace Walpole and David Hume praised Gibbon’s history, members of the religious establishment, such as the Reverend Henry Edward Davis, took issue with chapters fifteen and sixteen and in 1778 launched a bitter attack.\textsuperscript{20} The two offending chapters covered “the progress of the Christian religion, and the sentiments, manner, numbers and condition of the primitive Christians” and “the conduct of the Roman government towards Christians, from the reign of Nero to that of Constantine.”\textsuperscript{21} Davis blasted Gibbon for inaccuracy, misrepresentation of sources, and even plagiarism. “It is not the business of the historian to profess himself a skeptic in matters of religion,” wrote Davis.\textsuperscript{22} In response, Gibbon published \textit{A Vindication} in 1779, in which he defended the accuracy of his facts and quotations. If the

\textsuperscript{17} As quoted by Frank Morley, \textit{Literary Britain} (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) 125.
\textsuperscript{18} Morley, \textit{Literary Britain}, 124–27.
\textsuperscript{19} Mowat, \textit{Gibbon}, 162–78.
\textsuperscript{20} Mowat, \textit{Gibbon}, 180; Durant, \textit{Rousseau and Revolution}, 800.
\textsuperscript{21} These two quotations are from the chapter subscripts, Gibbon, \textit{Decline and Fall}, 2:1, 76.
\textsuperscript{22} Henry Edward Davis, \textit{An Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History, 1778, & A Reply to Mr. Gibbon's Vindication, 1779} (London: Garland, 1974) i.
facts of history anger the reader, is the historian at fault for reporting the facts? This was the thrust of his defense.

Further, Gibbon remonstrated his critics for not following the spirit of “the unreserved sincerity of the four Evangelists,” who, instead of confining their narrative to those things which are virtuous and of good report . . . the inspired writers have thought it their duty to relate the most minute circumstances of the fall of St. Peter, without considering whether the behaviour of an Apostle, who thrice denied his Divine Master, might rebound to the honour or to the disgrace of Christianity.23

And specifically to a Dr. Watson, one of his critics, he pleaded, “I shall be satisfied, if he will consider me as a sincere, though perhaps unsuccessful, lover of truth, and as a firm friend to civil and ecclesiastical freedom.”24

Thereafter, Gibbon remained silent, even though opposition to his view of Christian history increased. The Reverend James Chelsum, bishop of Llandoff, accused Gibbon of “fallacious usages, fictitious descriptions, misrepresentations, and unjust censure of the Church.”25 Joseph Milner, master of Kingston School, pointed to Gibbon’s “obvious” prejudice against Christianity.26 Two vicars, a rector, and a knight of the realm voiced similar accusations.27 Regardless, Gibbon did not answer.

More importantly, Gibbon also refused to accept the title “unbeliever.” When in 1783 the famous Dr. Joseph Priestly, who denied the divinity of Christ, asked Gibbon to support him in this position, Gibbon refused, writing to Priestly:

That public will decide to whom the invidious name of Unbeliever more justly belongs: to this historian who, without interposing his own sentiments, has delivered a

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24 Ibid., 99.


simple narrative of authentic facts, or to the disputant who proudly rejects all proofs of the immortality of the soul, overthrows the inspiration of the apostles, and condemns the religion of every Christian nation as a fable. During the last decade of his life, Gibbon kept a Bible at his bedside, and toward the end of his life he wrote to his aunt Hester Gibbon, "I can assure you with truth, that I consider religion as the best guide of youth and the best support of old age." When his dear aunt Catherine Porten died, Gibbon confessed to his friend Lady Sheffield, "I will agree with my lady that the immortality of the soul is, on some occasions, a very comfortable doctrine." Leaving the controversy and success of the first three volumes of the Decline and Fall behind him, Gibbon, now 50, returned to Lausanne in June of 1787 to live in quiet isolation while he finished the final three volumes of his history. Upon completion of the monumental work in 1788, he wrote,

A sober melancholy was spread over my mind, by the idea that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that whatsoever might be the future fate of my history, the life of the historian must be short and precarious.

In November 1793, the French Revolution and ill health forced Gibbon’s return to England. During these last months, Gibbon visited friends and

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28 A further note on Gibbon and divine inspiration, "However, as no Christian can dispute the reality of Divine Inspiration, nor any philosopher deny the possibility of it. . . ." Gibbon, “Letter to Richard Hurd, D.D., August 1772,” Letters, 1:527, letter #196.


32 Gibbon, Memoirs, 180.

33 As a response to the beginning of the French Revolution, Gibbon had started writing a genealogical history of the important dynasties of Europe, but he soon abandoned this project when the revolutionary violence in France made it possible to misinterpret his ideas as an attack on the royal house of Britain. David Womersley, “Gibbon’s Unfinished History: The French Revolution and
prepared for a continued quiet retirement. However, after the new year, his health steadily worsened. While enduring this period of protracted suffering, Gibbon is remembered to have repeatedly evoked God’s mercy.  

Death came quietly on January 16, 1794, and his last reported words were “Mon Dieu, Bon Dieu.” Gibbon was 56.  

Gibbon’s Life Work

Upon hearing of Gibbon’s death, Hannah More, an English evangelist, proclaimed, “How many souls have his writings polluted! Lord preserve others from their contagion!” Thus have generations of offended Christians viewed Gibbon and his history, ignorant of the forces which molded the man and the historian. Gibbon’s life does not mark him as an adversary of Christianity, but rather as a man struggling with the historical disparity between faith and practice.  

In life, Gibbon struggled with his personal belief in God which, though mangled by the interference of others, was apparently never lost. Intellectually converted to the Enlightenment concepts of seeking rational truth and skepticism towards religious fanaticism and superstition, he did not embrace unbelief, “. . . the infidelity of Gibbon was nothing more than what he himself called it . . . only supposed infidelity.” But having experienced the hurt of religious controversy in his life, Gibbon sought with Enlightenment dispassion to examine the unsavory facts of visible Christian history. Working from the known facts, Gibbon uncovered clues, discerned patterns, made observations, all the while avoiding any conclusion about absolute truth in the history he reported. “It was plausible, relevant, and interesting, rather than true.” Regardless, the religious
establishment was unimpressed with Gibbon’s dispassionate approach and saw in the *Decline and Fall*, not a struggle for faith, but a lack of it.

Gibbon’s critics were blind to his life perspective which effused a historical philosophy where the primary interest was in the fragile nature of all civilizations and institutions, the inevitability of decay, the sense of inescapable loss, and failed potential. In fact, Gibbon did not offer an analysis of the decay of Rome, but rather a description. He resisted exhausting his readers with arguments; instead he conveyed a sense of the multiplicity of causes surrounding the decline and fall, first of pagan Rome and then of the Christian Rome which replaced it, avoiding the finality of a “last judgment.”

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness... and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressures of its own weight: and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it subsisted for so long.

If, then, Gibbon made no final judgment as to who or what caused the fall of Rome, what did he mean by his famous statement “I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion”? Atheists and skeptics have made much of this statement, even though in the *Decline and Fall* Christianity and the barbarians play no significant role in Rome’s fall until the fourth century when Rome was already doomed to extinction. But if Gibbon did not “blame” the fall of Rome on barbarians and Christians, he did paint them as opportunists into whose arms the collapsing empire fell. According to Gibbon, external pressures from confrontations with the barbarians and the internal disruption of the empire, which the “Spirit of Christianity” abetted, only served to hasten Rome’s fall. A Rome weakened from the inside was open for conquest from the outside. Having established this, Gibbon turned to describe the rise, from the resulting ruin, of a new civilization, a triumphant, Christianized barbarism, the internal and external heirs merging to create a new order. And, even

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42 Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 7:321.
44 McCloy, *Gibbon’s Antagonism*, 17.
though Christianity effectively helped administer the *coup de grace* to an ancient Rome Gibbon viewed as superior, he offered this credit:

If the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors.\(^45\)

If it was Gibbon’s fascination with decay which inspired him to write (instead of a panorama of Roman civilization) an account of its fall, this same fascination, this time with the success-failure of Christianity, carried him beyond the fall of the pagan Roman Empire to examine the thousand year decay of the Roman Church and the eventual destruction of Christian Byzantium at the hands of the new religious force of Islam.\(^46\)

In so doing, Gibbon led historians into new and formerly sacred territory. He was the first secular historian to treat Christian history as an evolutionary, intelligible, historic phenomenon.\(^47\) Cutting through devotional feelings, Gibbon placed church history within the framework of historic causation, treating the Roman Church as a temporal power subject to the forces and disciplines of secular history.\(^48\) Gibbon, in his disputed chapter XV, “deferentially and indeflectibly leads the reader to a position from which he can see Christianity in history, as opposed to history in Christianity.”\(^49\)

To treat divine history as mere history was dangerous in Gibbon’s environment. The Catholic and Anglican churches wielded great power and exacted heavy penalties from anyone questioning the validity of their faiths or their historical foundations.\(^50\) Because of these powerful threats, eighteenth century humanists learned to disguise their doubts and

\(^{45}\) Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 6:175.


criticisms in irony. Gibbon also used irony to express some of his more caustic criticisms. In spite of this establishment pressure, Gibbon brought Christian history out of the clouds and down to earth. He did not seek to understand God’s intent or to write a history of the invisible church, but he concentrated on secondary and natural forces, human desires and schemes which shaped the Kingdom of God’s Son. He separated theology from history.

Critics have suggested Gibbon’s analysis is pregnant with latent sarcasm revealing his hatred of Christianity. To the contrary, while he invested his history with a frank distaste of the Roman Church and its corrupt hierarchy, its venial monks, its paganized pageantry and, most of all, its intolerance and fanaticism, it was these perversions as popularly practiced, and not Christianity itself, against which he deployed the whole anti-clerical tradition of the Enlightenment.

Gibbon wrote at a crisis point in the history of Christianity. The conflicting forces of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation provided the rationale for his history. While both Catholics and Protestants engaged in examining the history of the early church to justify their separate points of view, Gibbon sought to investigate the subject dispassionately. If neither side felt it could afford to doubt itself during an age of religious zealotry, then Gibbon did their doubting for them. Although Gibbon possessed a definite Protestant slant, using Protestant historians and sources extensively and denouncing Catholic authorities for being credulous about miracles, relics, and providence, he

52 Womersley, Transformation, 110, 265. Womersley decodes Gibbon’s irony with the effect of making Gibbon an enemy of Christianity. The amount of malice behind Gibbon’s irony, I believe, is not as deep as Womersley would have us accept.
53 Braudy, Narration, 217, 229; Durant, Rousseau, 801; Fuglum, Edward Gibbon: View of Life, 124.
54 Gibbon described the Catholic practice of inculcating paganism into Christian ritual in these terms, “... and the spirit of the Gospel had evaporated in the pageantry of the church.” Decline and Fall, 5:369. He also contrasted the success of Christianity with Islam this way, “But the triumph of the Koran is more pure and meritorious, as it was not assisted by any visible splendor of worship which might allure the Pagans by some resemblance of idolatry.” Decline and Fall, 6:242.
displayed unveiled disgust for what he viewed as both positions’ greatest failures—intolerance and fanaticism.56

Christians made great store of the martyrdom of early adherents, too much in Gibbon’s opinion. He insisted Christian claims of large numbers of martyrs were overstated. “Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels,” Gibbon pointedly observed.57 To his mind, the Romans were mild and rational compared to raving, fanatical Christians seeking martyrdom. To impress Gibbon, one had to appeal to reason, not emotionalism. He did not empathize with Christian leaders of the early church or Middle Ages and the issues they were arguing and fighting over. To him, it all seemed inconsequential; Christians should agree in conduct, if not in doctrine. Unimpressed with Christian moralizing, Gibbon used the example of the church fathers to teach his age the futility of intolerance. In this Gibbon was not criticizing just Christianity, but was assaulting the unrestrained fanaticism which afflicts all religions. He was not willing to accept excess in any, including Islam and Zoroastrianism, which received similar treatment from his pen.58

Gibbon acknowledged the great debt modern Europe owed Christianity—for preserving agricultural techniques, traditional crafts, and ancient manuscripts. Further, he evidenced high regard for the person of Jesus,59 the benevolent temper of the Gospels60 and the stern morals of early Christians, a virtue which disappeared very quickly in his estimation:

After the extinction of paganism, the Christians in peace and piety might have enjoyed their solitary triumph. But the principle of discord was alive in their bosom, and they were more solicitous to explore the nature, than to practice the laws, of their founder.61

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57 Gibbon, Decline and Fall, 2:147.
58 J. Cotter Morison, Gibbon (New York: Macmillan, 1904) 172; Chadwick, “Church Historians,” 118–20; Joyce, Gibbon, 144; Parkinson, Gibbon, 61–3; Black, Art, 176.
60 Gibbon, commenting to Lord Sheffield concerning news about an unexpected change of government in Bern, Switzerland, said it was “true as the Gospel.” Gibbon, “Letter to Lord Sheffield, Sat. 7/8/1790,” Letters, 3:149, letter #762.
61 Gibbon, Decline and Fall, 5:103.
Observing the simple teachings of a suffering Messiah rapidly convert into numerous dogmatic theologies and degenerate into implacable superstition disgusted Gibbon, and the crimes and hatreds which the disciples of the Prince of Peace engendered in defense of the Holy Trinity revolted him.\textsuperscript{62} He observed, “The church of Rome defended by violence the empire which she had acquired by fraud.”\textsuperscript{63}

Gibbon paralleled the fate of pagan Rome and Christian Rome. Both Rome and Christianity descended from a golden age as they were enticed by political expediency in which public perceptions became more important than intrinsic truth, and thus outward ritual bore no relation to private motives seething beneath the surface.\textsuperscript{64} The similarity of Christian Rome’s decline became especially pronounced after Christianity became the state’s official religion:

As time went on, Christianity stiffened into rigid dogmas. A powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy grew up, and lust of power, corruption and intolerance increased . . . the history of Christianity is one long tale of decadence, a decadence going on parallel with the decline of the empire.\textsuperscript{65}

**Gibbon Redivivus**

What is to be learned from the life and work of Edward Gibbon? First, he was not an avowed enemy of Christianity, but was sharply critical of how its followers had used and abused it. Secondly, Gibbon pursued with like dispassion the rise and decline of Christian Rome, which took the place of Classical Rome, his original subject. Thirdly, in writing a history of Christianity devoid of devotional trappings, Gibbon broke new ground, daring Christians to take a candid look at the historical record of their movement. Next, Gibbon established a high standard for scholars of religious history to emulate, for if his Enlightenment point of view was not unique to his age, the massive scope of his work and his tremendous disciplined research were.\textsuperscript{66} Lastly, Gibbon was and is an example of

\textsuperscript{63} Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 2:148.
\textsuperscript{64} Noonkester, “Gibbon and the Clergy,” 402.
\textsuperscript{65} Fuglum, *Edward Gibbon*, 126.
\textsuperscript{66} Ferguson, “Gibbon on Christianity,” 396.
courage. He straightforwardly recorded unpleasant, unpopular facts and events clearly and honestly even though doing so exposed him to hot blasts of criticism. While such criticism stung and besmirched his reputation, he bore it, although he could not understand why people were angry with him for reporting the truth.67 This last characteristic best defines Gibbon, his history, and the place they should hold in the general Christian conscience.

To Gibbon, Christianity was originally victorious because it offered to replace the abuses of pagan Rome with a kingdom founded upon higher principles. He showed how the heirs of Christ’s kingdom failed to keep the promises of its spiritual vision and instead came to emulate pagan Rome in organization, corruption, violence, and decline. As a result, Gibbon’s history became an honest, if painful, record of what happened when fallible humans took over what was intended to be a spiritual kingdom with lofty dreams and turned it into a secular empire with worldly power and materialistic goals. Regardless, Gibbon’s view of history, Roman and Christian, was not from the vantage of hatred, but from deep disappointment and disillusionment. Gibbon in life and in history sought heroic men of deeds and faith, but in both he confronted the reality of finding everywhere feet of clay.68 He criticized Imperial Rome for its excesses and Christian Rome for its failure to provide the promised better world. The actions of Christian religious and secular leaders failed to match the example of Jesus or the profoundness of His teachings. They preached the words of Christ but did not obey them. Instead of a new world of peace, tolerance, and brotherly love, Gibbon documented a civilization which descended over a millennium into superstition, ignorance, intolerance, fanaticism, and violence.69 As D. M. Low so ably observed,

67 "... my book has been well received... except perhaps by the Clergy who seem (I know not why) to shew their teeth on the occasion." Gibbon, “Letter to Dorothea Gibbon, Tues. 26/3/1776,” Letters, 2:95, letter #334.
69 Gibbon wrote of the Catholic worship of relics, “Irony of ironies was it that Christians, who in their pristine days were so fanatically hostile toward anything savoring of a materialistic representation of the Divine, should in the course of a few brief centuries convulse and divide the great Empire of the Romans in a controversy over icons and relics, and make such reverence and traffic of them...” Decline and Fall, 6:429.
If Christianity has ever been a system founded on superstition and privilege, which puts influence above truth and defends nonsense with cruelty, intrigues with inexhaustible duplicity and buys power with gold and blood, which bullies and cringes by turns, preaches peace and enjoys war, demands the blind obedience of the reason, and approves a cynical disparity in morals between profession and act, then indeed Gibbon may be said to be its implacable enemy and veracious historian.70

Gibbon weighed the evidence in the scales of history and found historic Christianity wanting.

Tragic as his conclusion may be, Gibbon was not an enemy, but an honest, if blunt and occasionally cynical, critic of a Christian epoch which, while making important contributions to humanity’s progress, failed to fulfill the potential of its envisioned goals. While recognizing Christianity’s historical importance and significance, Gibbon refused to give it any preferential treatment. And although respectful of some of Christianity’s historic accomplishments, he rejected its self-righteous claims of sacrificial superiority, commenting, “The loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride,” words which carry the sharp bite of truth.71 The truth may hurt, but it also serves to instruct, purify, and warn.

Gibbon’s treatment of the historical facts of Christianity in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire provides a sobering lesson in the importance of examining and facing honestly the facts of any movement’s or any individual’s past. By confronting the truths of history, personal or collective, one is freed to pursue the future with clearer vision and a lighter heart. Gibbon’s life and work vividly demonstrate that this process is often unpleasant and unappreciated, but Gibbon might very well voice the feelings of Paul the apostle, “Have I become your enemy because I tell you the truth?”72

71 Gibbon, Decline and Fall, 2:40.
72 Gal 4:16.