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THE PENETRATION OF GRAECO-ROMAN SOCIETY BY CHRISTIANITY

With all our modern statistical equipment it is difficult enough to say how widely held the Christian faith is, or from what social groups its strength is mainly drawn. For the ancient world there are not even any statistics. A few census returns supply the numbers of certain sections of the population at odd times, but leave untouched women, children, foreigners, or others without civil rights. Many attempts have been made to fill the gaps by calculating from grain consumption, built-up areas, rate of burials and so on, but the very diversity of method shows how uncertain the results are. Even if we could draw a cross-section of ancient society, we should still have trouble fitting the Church membership in. Christians may have been well enough known in their own community, but usually they either felt no need or thought it unwise to leave any lasting public record of their faith. The first overtly Christian tombs that we know were set up in public are in the isolated uplands of central Anatolia. They come from the third century, and could be a cry of defiance from a Church that held passionately to the duty of open confession in troubled times. "So and so to his sweetest wife so and so, in remembrance, one Christian to another." They give us an intimate glimpse into the relations between one group of Christians and its neighbours, but their brief light only heightens the darkness around. Quite a plausible general picture of the numbers and standing of the members of the Church can be built up from the incidental information given by New Testament and patristic writers, but such impressions could be misleading if not subject to detailed testing.

There are, of course, plenty of ancient writers who comment expressly on the subject, but they are often more anxious to persuade than to inform. To the apostles, for instance, the universal preaching of the Gospel was not a question of fact so much as an article of faith. It was the precondition of the end. The more imminent they conceived the end to be, then, the more readily did they anticipate the completion of their mission. The

crowd at Pentecost from "every nation under heaven," and the detailed accounts of the conversion of an Ethiopian statesman, a Jewish religious leader, and a Roman army officer, may represent the overriding of natural barriers as the Gospel is carried to "the uttermost parts of the earth." It is to misunderstand the New Testament outlook to use statements of this kind for statistical calculations. Yet conclusions are drawn (by Harnack) about the strength of the Church in Asia Minor in Domitian's time from the vision of "an innumerable multitude of all races, nations, peoples, and tongues before the throne of the Lamb." This prophetic assurance of the first disciples was exploited by a later romanticism as the basis for legends of the apostolic foundation of many local Churches. The extent of the Church also became a matter of contention between the apologists and the critics. But all this must be elevated as debating material, not as direct historical data. So much is said out of hatred, fear and anger, that most conclusions must be tentative. The overriding consideration is that no one had any certain means of knowing the facts of the situation beyond his immediate experience. We are left with the impression of a Church that took enormous encouragement from its own consciousness of steady and irresistible growth. That is in itself a fact of great importance. With the sudden access of social respectability and the relaxation of outside pressure in the fourth century, appeared a self-consciously Catholic Church distinguished itself from groups with only local connections. The idea of universality is developed as a stick to beat ecclesiastical opponents with. Catholicity is to be the test of orthodoxy.

The geographical expansion of the Church is no longer a matter of strong feeling in any of these ways, at least as far as the early centuries go. Its main outlines are agreed upon. But the question of its penetration within the framework of society can still become the subject of tendentious treatment. A Church with its social shortcomings on its conscience has formed the habit of playing up the idea that the first congregations grew up among depressed sections of society. There are also people outside the Church who have an interest in identifying its impetus with that of social discontent. Yet the evidence is by no means unequivocal. Whatever may be concluded from Paul's remarks to the Corinthians, they were hardly meant as a plain description of that Church's social standing. Rather he wishes to clear the Gospel of any suspicion of depending for its success on human ability and qualifications. His express intention of humiliating them creates a strong presumption that in its own estimation and presumably also in that of its neighbours the Corinthian Church was anything but a collection of not very intelligent nonentities. If it were desirable to show that the Early Church was dominated by the prosperous business men of some of the leading cities of the Mediterranean world, it would be easy enough to make out a case from the New Testament writings. Paul himself has been glorified (by Deissmann) as an example of a man of humble status called to leadership. This is to misunderstand his undoubted personal humility. In fact, however, he joined the Church as a highly-respected and well-educated man with considerable experience in organising religious campaigns. He was by birth both a member of the Jewish religious aristocracy and a citizen of a Greek city and of the imperial Roman state. Only a comparatively few people in the eastern Mediterranean can have been so well equipped socially, a point which he himself makes more than once.

The purpose of these remarks is not to establish any particular view of the Church's standing in society, but to show on how precarious a basis all interpretations must be without the possibility of any full statistical analysis either of the contemporary world or of the Church's own constituency.

It may be possible to get the picture into clearer focus in contrasting two limited areas for which there is better documentations than usual. To this end a detailed geographical index of Greek-speaking Asia Minor and Roman North Africa is in preparation, and is being used as the framework for a collation of archaeological and literary evidence of all kinds for both Church and society.