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SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

by A. SKEVINGTON WOOD

THIS paper was read at a conference of the Biblical Theology group of the Tyndale Fellowship. The theme of the Conference was "Christian Involvement in Society"; the Gospels had already been covered, so Dr. Skevington Wood examines the subject in the light of the rest of the New Testament. From October of this year Dr. Skevington Wood is serving as Tutor in Theology at Cliff College, Calver, near Sheffield.

As Ernst Troeltsch has noted, the first social problem with which the Church had to deal was that of property.¹ In Acts 2: 44, 45, and again in 4: 32-37, we have two accounts of what some have gone so far as to describe as the Christian communism of the primitive Church. Communalism in some sense it may have been, but such "voluntary generosity", as Dean Inge rightly called it, is widely removed from any political theory.² The "togetherness" stressed in Acts 2: 44 arose from the believers' oneness in Christ and in the recent experience of the Holy Spirit. It tended rather to underline their separation from the rest of mankind than their involvement in society. The Greek implies that they "kept together" (*epi to auto eichon*)—almost that they kept themselves to themselves, as we say.

It was as an expression of this intensive fellowship that the Christians had all things in common. Possessions were treated as belonging not to the individual owner but to the whole community. According to Philo, the Therapeutae of Egypt (an offshoot of pre-Christian Judaism), also resigned the claim to property, but they voluntarily handed it over to their relatives.³ The Jerusalem Christians were evidently more like the Essenes in this respect: of them it is recorded by Eusebius (citing Philo's lost *Apology for the Jews*): "none ventures to acquire any private property at all, no house, or slave, or farm, or cattle, or any of the other things which procure or minister to wealth; but they deposit them all in

¹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (E.T., London, 1931), Vol. I, p. 115.

² Cf. William Ralph Inge, *More Lay Thoughts of a Dean* (London, 1931), p. 14.

³ Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa*, 2, 13, 18-20; cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ekklesiastikē* II.17.5.

public together, and enjoy the benefit of all in common".⁴ But whereas the Essenes formed a distinct and indeed virtually monastic community, the Christians did not actually live together in such a fashion.

Nor did they apparently pool their resources at once. The tense in v. 45 (*epipraskon*, imperfect) suggests not one big sale, but that from time to time the believers were in the habit of selling off some of their goods and distributing them (*diemerizon*, also an iterative imperfect) amongst the needy. But who were the recipients of this relief? It seems clear from the context that this was confined to the Christian circle. "Any" in v. 45 means "any amongst themselves". The indefinite pronoun *tis* is controlled by *pantes hoi pisteusantes* in v. 44.

In the second account in Acts 4: 32-37 we have what F. J. A. Hort called "a fresh impulse towards consolidation", arising out of the hostility of the Jewish authorities.⁵ Charity was centralized with the apostles as the focus. The Greek is emphatic in v. 32: "Not one of them (*oude heis*) claimed that anything he possessed was his own". There was no dissentient: all were of one heart and soul. As a result, we learn from v. 34, "there was not a needy person among them". The war on want within the Christian community was waged with complete success. Once again a present participle and two imperfects express what occurred from time to time: those who had lands or houses used to sell them and bring in the profits, so that a hand-out could take place as occasion arose. Barnabas was one amongst many. The offence of Ananias and Sapphira (5: 1-11) was not that they kept back part of the proceeds, but that they pretended to bring all when in fact it was only a part (v. 2). What Peter said, as reported in v. 4, is quite unambiguous. While the piece of property remained unsold it was still theirs. And even after it was sold, it was still at their disposal. No one compelled them to turn in the entire proceeds. It was not a matter of rules: it was a matter of willingness. Ananias was not willing, but he wanted to get credit nevertheless. Herein lay his sin.

Although, as we have seen, this distribution to the poor was made within the bounds of the Christian community, it did establish a principle which was eventually to govern Christian charity in general. "As any had need" (2: 45; 4: 35) became the accepted criterion. And whilst we cannot regard this experiment as providing

⁴ Philo, *Huper Ioudaiōn Apologia*, in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, viii, 11.

⁵ Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London, 1914), p. 46.

a blueprint for any political organization, it is worth observing the balanced nature of the Christian approach. As Hort remarked, "the Ecclesia was a society in which neither the community was lost in the individual nor the individual in the community".⁶ That has something to say to us still. It is common to dismiss these distributions as a venture that failed. That conclusion can only be reached if it is interpreted in terms of a doctrinaire sociological exercise. But if it is seen rather as reflecting the willing response of Christians to the love of God in Christ, then it has never altogether disappeared throughout the history of the Church, and supplies an incentive for today.

In Acts 6: 1 we read about a daily distribution by the Jerusalem church to the needy. Evidently the apostles had superintended it, but as numbers grew it was necessary to appoint seven men to take on their duties in this respect, so that they might concentrate on the essentials of prayer and preaching. These seven were to "serve tables" (v. 2, *diakonein trapezais*): but what sort of tables were they? They could have been the counters or benches where money was doled out, or they could have been meal tables where food was provided. In Rome such meals were often conveyed by the rich to their dependents in baskets or *sportulae*. According to Josephus, Queen Helena of Adiabene later bought supplies from Egypt and Cyprus in a time of famine and had them distributed amongst the needy, so such a thing was not unfamiliar in Jerusalem.⁷ It is unlikely that the reference is to the Lord's Supper, or the *Agapē* which may have preceded it. Amongst those who benefited by this money or food, whichever it may have been, were the widows of the church. Those who were Greek-speaking had apparently been neglected, perhaps because of the language barrier.

The comment of Professor J. Rawson Lumby in the Cambridge Bible Commentary on Acts is worth weighing:

It is deserving of notice that, before we find any special arrangements made for what we now understand by "divine service", the regulation of the relief of those in need had become so engrossing a part of the duty of the twelve as to have thrust aside in some degree the prayers and ministration of the word, which were especially their charge. In these early days they appear to have acted according to St. James' teaching (1: 27), "Pure religion (*thrēskeia*) and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world".⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, iii.15.3; xx.2.6; xx.5.2.

⁸ Joseph Rawson Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Cambridge Bible (Cambridge, 1888), p 73.

We find evidence of similar concern in the "good works and acts of charity" performed by Dorcas at Joppa (9: 36). It is not altogether clear whether the tunics and cloaks (*chitōnas kai himatia*) which she made had been given to the widows who wept around her death-bed, or whether they assisted her in passing them on to others, thus forming a kind of sisterhood of mercy (9: 39).

At the end of Acts 11 we read of a remarkable extension of this care for the needy. Thus far it has been confined to Hebrew Christian communities. But now we are told that, when Agabus forecast a serious famine in the reign of the emperor Claudius, "the disciples (in Syrian Antioch) determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judaea" (Acts 11: 29). This they duly did through Barnabas and Saul. *Diakonia* was beginning to take a technical meaning with reference to Christian aid. This is the first instance of large-scale famine relief. Barnabas and Saul were not just carriers of money. They stayed in Jerusalem, it would seem, no doubt to superintend the distribution of corn and to comfort the distressed.⁹ Only when they had fulfilled their mission (*diakonia* again) did they return (Acts 12: 25). Apparently they did not just sneak in and out, as some have rather unworthily implied¹⁰.

But of course the really significant feature of this famine relief is that the gifts came not only from Jewish but from Gentile Christians. In Acts 11: 20, 21, we learn that the gospel was preached to the Greeks, and that a great number of them believed and turned to the Lord. This was when the disciples were first called Christians (v. 26), and it is most noteworthy that the next thing Luke tells us about them is that they cooperated to launch a feed-the-hungry campaign.

None of this philanthropy, however, was directed to the secular community, or even to Judaism. It was confined to the Christian body. It could not fail to be noted, nevertheless, that these followers of Jesus knew how to look after their own. But the Book of Acts records another set of merciful works which did affect those beyond the bounds of the Church itself. These are the healing miracles performed by the apostles. They reflect the most significant involvement with society to be discovered in the narrative of the young church in action. Our Lord's own compassion for those who suffered either in mind or body found its complement in the

⁹ Sir William Mitchell Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London, 1908), p. 52.

¹⁰ On this famine, see Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London, 1893), pp. 216-217. He thought it broke out in A.D. 45.

attitude of His representatives to the sick.

The story of Pentecost is immediately followed by an account of healing. The cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the temple was enabled to walk in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, even though he had been lame from birth (Acts 3: 1-10). He was the forerunner of others who were similarly cured—exactly how many we do not know. In Acts 5: 15 we gather that they were numerous, for as the ranks of believers increased, the sick were actually carried out into the streets and laid there on beds (these would be the better-off) and sleeping-mats (these would be the poor), so that even the shadow of Peter might fall on one or other of them as he passed. The Western text adds explicitly what the *textus receptus* implies: "for they were healed from all sicknesses such as each of them had." This was still a miracle in the name of Jesus, even though Peter was the instrument. In the case of the cripple it was his hand: here it was his shadow. Then in v. 16 we learn that people flocked in from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill or demon-possessed, and all were cured without exception.

When Philip took the gospel to Samaria there were many similarly harassed by unclean spirits who were delivered, whilst many (*polloi* is repeated) who were paralysed and lame were healed. If this city was Sebaste, the capital, then it is worth noting that half its citizens were pagans. The way in which Aeneas is introduced in Acts 9: 33 as simply "a man" is thought by most commentators to suggest that he was not a Christian before he was cured of his paralysis. The cripple at Lystra is presented to us in the same manner (Acts 14: 8 ff.). No doubt he was a pagan, like the onlookers who, immediately after he had jumped to his feet and began to walk, shouted in their native Lycaonian: "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Zeus and Hermes they knew, but they had yet to hear about Jesus. The slave-girl at Philippi who had an oracular spirit was clearly not a Christian, nor is it suggested that she became one (Acts 16: 16-18). There were both Jews and Greeks amongst those who heard the word of the Lord in Ephesus, and it was amongst these that miracles of an unusual kind were worked through Paul (Acts 19: 10, 11). Sweat-rags and aprons which he used as he plied his trade as a tentmaker were taken to the sick, after being in contact with his skin (*apo tou chrōtos autou*), Luke informs us. When they touched these, their diseases left them and the demons came out of them. The last of the healing miracles reported in Acts concerned the father of Publius, the prefect of Malta. He was suffering from recurrent

bouts of fever—perhaps malaria—and dysentery: when Paul prayed with him and laid hands on him, he was healed (Acts 28: 8). After this the rest of the sick on the island came to the apostle and were also cured. A different term is used in v. 9. In v. 8 it is *iasato*, but in v. 9 it is *etherapeuonto*. The latter implies that they received medical treatment: by noting that this is one of the ‘we’ passages in Acts and that Luke the physician was present, it will be realized how they got it.¹¹

There is one more verse in Acts which must engage our attention. It has to do not with healing but with relief for the poor. We are dealing with it now, however, because it constitutes a link between our consideration of Acts and that of the epistles. In his defence before the governor Felix, Paul referred to a visit he made to Jerusalem after an interval of some years with the object of bringing alms and offerings to his nation (Acts 24: 17). It is assumed that the apostle here was speaking about the collection which he organized in Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia and no doubt in Asia as well for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. This is later than the famine relief which we discussed previously as initiated after the prophecy of Agabus (Acts 11: 27-30). It may be that further famines ensued or that they never really recovered from the first. Some have suggested that the disastrous outcome of the economic experiment described in chapters 2 and 4 reduced the church to bankruptcy, but this is unsubstantiated by actual evidence. The first famine occurred during the reign of Claudius, perhaps in A.D.45. The visit mentioned here in Acts 24: 17 probably took place in A.D. 58.

Were the alms and the offerings both connected with the collection, or were the latter of a sacrificial nature? *Prospora* is simply something which is brought, and could be synonymous with *eleēmosunas*. The meaning would then be: “I came in order to do alms, namely (*kai*) offerings.”¹² Sacrifices would be included in the worship mentioned in v. 11. On the other hand, *prospora* in the New Testament invariably alludes to sacrificial offerings: hence NEB translates: “I came to bring charitable gifts to my nation and to offer sacrifices.” But whether or not both expressions have to do with relief for the poor, the first most certainly does.

¹¹ Henry Joel Cadbury, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1926), p. 196, n. 20; Adolf von Harnack, *Luke the Physician* (E.T., London, 1907), pp. 15-16; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London, 1930), p. 289.

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus, 1944), p. 973.

The collection Paul made is not hinted at elsewhere in Acts, nor is this aspect of his visit to Jerusalem suggested in chapter 21 where we might expect it. For further elucidation we have to turn to the epistles, and this we now do.

The principal passages are I Corinthians 16: 1-3, II Corinthians 8: 1-7 and II Corinthians 9: 1-15. After the lofty disclosures of I Corinthians 15, dealing as it does with the mysteries of the life to come, chapter 16 drops right down to earth: "Now concerning the contribution for the saints." Yet there is no sense of incongruity. Help for the needy is as integral to Christian witness as is the resurrection of the faithful. In a *hapax legomenon* so far as the New Testament is concerned, the collection is here described as a *logia*. That is one of seven words Paul employs when referring to it. The others are *charis* (v. 3, and II Cor. 8: 4, 6, 7), *koinōnia* (II Cor. 8: 4; 9: 13; Rom. 15: 26), *diakonia* (II Cor. 8: 4; 9: 1, 12, 13), *hadrotēs* (II Cor. 8: 20), *eulogia* (II Cor. 9: 5), and *leitourgia* (II Cor. 9: 12). In I Cor. 16: 1-3 the apostle gives instructions as to how the collection is to be made. It is to be along the lines previously recommended to the churches of Galatia (v. 1). A certain sum of money is to be set aside each Lord's Day. The amount will vary according to means. This is to be kept until Paul himself comes to receive it: he does not want to be saddled with the fundraising himself. The gift will be taken to Jerusalem by representatives of the church in Corinth (vv. 3, 4). It is noteworthy that there is no mention of tithing. "The New Testament knows only the spirit of voluntary giving," explains Professor R. C. H. Lenski, "and its only directive as to amount is Paul's evangelical rule, which is devoid even of the appearance of legalism: 'as he may prosper.'" ¹³

In II Cor. 8: 1-7 Paul shares with his readers the news of how generous the Macedonian churches have been in their contributions to the relief fund. They themselves were far from affluent. They had received harsh treatment from their Roman conquerors, who exploited their natural resources and reserved to themselves the benefits which accrued from the felling of timber and the mining of salt. Hence it was from the depths of their poverty (*kata bathous ptōcheia autōn*, v. 2) that these commendable Christians gave with such astonishing liberality to assist their brethren in Jerusalem. They were also undergoing severe persecution for the sake of the gospel, as we learn from I Thessalonians 1: 6 and 2: 14. Yet despite all this, they gave to the limit of their resources and indeed

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus, 1937), p. 760.

beyond it (v. 3). They even pleaded with Paul for the privilege of sharing in the contribution (*tēn koinōnian tēs diakonias*). Hence Paul can call it a "gracious work" (*charis*), because it is a response to the grace that God has given in Christ (vv. 6, 7).

In chapter 9 Paul turns to the Corinthians and says that it is superfluous for him to write to them about the aid programme. He knows already how eager they are to assist. Indeed the Macedonians themselves had been fired by Paul's report of their zeal. He wants them to make sure that they live up to the reputation he has given them and that when he comes the gift will be awaiting him, not as an exaction but as a bounty (v. 5). Verse 12 indicates the distinctive character of Christian aid. It is not merely an instance of compassionate good-will. It does something more even than meet the needs of those in distress. Most important of all, it "overflows in many thanksgivings to God." "Let your light so shine before men," urged Jesus, "that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5: 16). This is what is different about Christian service.

There is a reference in Romans 15: 26 to this same collection. Galatians 2: 10 evidently has to do with an earlier period. James, Peter and John gave Paul the right hand of fellowship, along with Barnabas, and commissioned them to evangelize the Gentiles whilst they evangelized the Jews: "only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do." Although their preaching was to be addressed to those outside the commonwealth of Israel, Paul and Barnabas were not to forget the needs of their fellow-Jews in poverty. But Paul required no exhortation: he was already keen to do it. The verb *spoudazō* (to make haste, and hence to be zealous or give diligence) carries with it the implication of active engagement or involvement.¹⁴

Christian concern was not confined to the poor, however. As we read the New Testament letters, we realize that there was a wider sympathy for those in any kind of distress. The sick are included in this circle of care—we think of Epaphroditus who was on the verge of death because he had gambled his life for the gospel (Phil. 2: 26, 27), and Trophimus whom Paul left ill at Miletus (II Tim. 4: 20). In James we read of what had evidently become the practice of the church, as the elders prayed over the patient, having anointed him with the oil in the name of the Lord (Jas. 5: 14, 15). There is no report of miraculous healings like those in Acts.

¹⁴ George Simpson Duncan, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London, 1934), p. 52.

Prisoners, too, were visited and supplied with comforts. When persecution was rife, many Christians suffered such incarceration and were dependent on their brethren for food and other necessities. It would be a risky thing to go to see another believer in prison, for that would be to declare oneself in the presence of the authorities and might perhaps lead to arrest. Yet despite the cost this ministry was not neglected. "Remember those in prison," writes the author of Hebrews, "as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated since you also are in the body" (Heb. 13: 3). Some think that "the body" there refers to the church as the body of Christ, and that this concern for prisoners is an expression of the sympathy one member feels for another. Whether that is what the writer intended or not, the principle of mutual compassion is represented elsewhere in the New Testament. In Hebrews 10: 34 the readers are reminded that shortly after they were converted there was a time of severe persecution. Some were flung into prison, and the rest stood by them in their affliction: "You shared the sufferings of the prisoners" (NEB; the Greek is *tois desmiois sunepathēsate*).

Akin to this care for the poor, the sick and the prisoners was the widespread practice of hospitality. This was recognized as one of the most important of Christian duties from the beginning. It appears as an injunction in Romans 12: 13. Literally it means "pursuing the befriending of strangers" (*tēn philoxenian diōkontes*). The strangers, of course, would be Christians from other areas not known personally to those who opened their homes to them. The verb implies that such refugees or travellers were to be chased as keenly as a huntsman would go after a stag or a boar, and proudly carried home like a sportsman's 'bag'. By a curious irony, this same verb also means to pursue with violent intent and thus to persecute. Many of those who needed hospitality were victims: the authorities were hunting them, so their fellow Christians must hunt them too and bring them to the safety of their homes.

Similar commands are found elsewhere in the New Testament. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13: 2). "Practise hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (I Pet. 4: 9). One of the qualities expected in a bishop was that he should be hospitable (I Tim. 3: 2; Titus 1: 8). It lent itself to abuse. Lucian satirized the gullibility of simple-minded Christians in his day who were ready to house and feed any plausible tramp who could convince them by his pious patter that he was a fellow-believer.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ Lucian, *De Morte Peregrini*, 11, 12.

Didache contains rules for detecting such imposters.¹⁶ All this suggests that as yet there was little appreciation that hospitality might be extended beyond the Christian fold.

In his *History of Christianity*, Kenneth S. Latourette has an intriguing paragraph on the social origins of the early Christians.¹⁷ From what strata did they come? He concludes that the only safe answer is that we do not know. It is often assumed that believers were drawn from the dregs of the urban proletariat—for churches were founded first in urban areas—and that they comprised the dispossessed, the drop-outs, the slaves and the freedmen. On this assumption, Christianity has been interpreted as a channel through which the underprivileged expressed their sense of frustration and sought to overthrow the existing order of things. That is to go too far, but it is undeniable that a considerable proportion of the first Christians must have come from the deprived classes. What Paul wrote in the first chapter of I Corinthians is relevant here.

He is speaking about the Christian's call in v. 26. It is not a calling in the worldly sense, or a matter of rank. It is a divine vocation. The NEB brings that out admirably: "My brothers, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called." Then the apostle proceeds to remind them who they were not—and this negative tactic is unusually effective. Not many wise: the intellectuals were not much in evidence. Not many powerful: V.I.P.s were few and far between. Not many of noble birth: blue blood was scarce. Then Paul contrasts these item for item with what God has chosen. Not many wise, but what the world counts foolish to shame the wise. Not many powerful, but what the world counts weakness to shame what is strong. Not many of noble birth, but what the world counts as low and contemptible, mere nothings, to bring to nothing things as they now are. No passage in the entire New Testament more trenchantly exposes the fallacy of conventional judgments on society or more unambiguously indicates the difference between human standards and divine. And, what is more germane to our present enquiry, nothing could more strikingly indicate the way in which the Apostolic Church was indeed involved in contemporary society. It was there in the persons of its members. It penetrated the world around it with people. Who knows what was the witness they bore and the effect they had? The New Testament does no more than hint at it.

¹⁶ *Didache*, 11, 4-6.

¹⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (London, 1954), p. 80.

It is not to be thought, however, that Christianity was altogether unrepresented in the middle and upper strata of society. Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor. 1: 26ff. is on "not many wise . . . powerful . . . of noble birth". Then there were some—even in Corinth, and perhaps more in other places. As we list some of the names known to us through the New Testament documents we find this verified. There were slaves like Ampliatus (Rom. 6: 18), Achaicus (1 Cor. 16: 17), Fortunatus (1 Cor. 16: 17) and Onesimus (Col. 4: 9). But there were also householders like Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 4: 19), Stephanas (1 Cor. 16: 15) and Philemon. There was Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10: 1); Erastus, a city treasurer (Rom. 16: 23); Manaen, a foster-brother of Herod Antipas (Acts 13: 1); Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 13: 7—assuming that when he "sought to hear the word of God" he became a believer); Pudens, whom tradition makes a senator (2 Tim. 4: 21), and Aquila, a leatherworker like Paul (Acts 18: 3); to say nothing of women such as Lydia, the trader in purple dye (Acts 16: 14), Nympha in whose house the Christians met for worship in Laodicea (Col. 4: 15), and Priscilla wife of Aquila (Acts 18: 3). This represents a fair cross-section of the society in which the church was involved in so far as its members belonged to it. What impact it made depended on the personal witness of these people themselves.

The biblical doctrine of work, especially as it appears in the New Testament epistles, gives us some idea of the attitude which Christians assumed towards their employment, or, if they were themselves in charge, towards their employees. This change of outlook and behaviour must itself have made a considerable impression on the pagan world, where such ideals were notably absent. Whereas manual labour was regarded by the Jews as noble, it was regarded by the Greeks as degrading. This Hellenic viewpoint was common in the Roman empire. "Every Greek and Roman citizen had a certain claim to be idle", declared Döllinger. "It was counted honourable to shrink from labour and live at the public expense."¹⁸ For the Christian, toil was put on the loftiest possible plane since God Himself was one who worked, and Jesus was a carpenter. Dr. Leon Morris quite rightly sees 1 Cor. 3: 9 as "a startling expression".¹⁹ So it is, for it tells us that "we are

¹⁸ John Joseph Ignatius von Döllinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church* (E.T., London, 1877), Vol. II, pp. 275-276.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London, 1958), p. 66.

God's fellow-workers (*sunergoi*)". That seems to mean more than that as Christians we work together with one another in God's employment (RSV "we are fellow workmen for God"): surely it is rather that we are all working together along with Him.²⁰ This is the supreme dignity of work. It is what God does Himself. The allusion in 1 Cor. 3: 9 is to Christian service, but the presupposition affects work of every sort.

On this basis the New Testament sets out a rationale of work which is unique. That which is done for the sake of Christ must needs be different. But it will not only possess this mystical quality so inexplicable to the man of the world. It will also have its beneficial side-effects. Two in particular are picked out by Paul. One is that by working himself the Christian will be a burden on no one and, moreover, will have enough to help those in need. "Let the thief no longer steal", Paul writes to the Ephesians (4: 28), "but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need". Paul had a right to enjoin others in this direction, for he had taken it himself. "For you remember our labour and toil, brethren"; he could remind the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2: 9): "we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God". And again, in 2 Thess. 3: 7, 8: "For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat anyone's bread without paying, but with toil and labour we worked hard night and day, that we might not burden any of you" (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 12; Acts 20: 33-35).

That passage in 2 Thessalonians leads up to the definitive command which Paul had already issued: "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (3: 10). Adolf Deissmann thought that Paul, as he put it, was "borrowing a bit of good old workshop morality, a maxim coined perhaps by some industrious workman as he forbade his lazy apprentice to sit down to dinner".²¹ But surely there is more to it than that. As Hendriksen explains, Paul is rather "proceeding from the idea that, in imitation of Christ's example of self-sacrificing love for His own, those who were saved by grace should become so unselfish that they will loathe the very idea of unnecessarily becoming a burden to their brothers and, on the other hand, that they will yearn for the opportunity to share what they

²⁰ *Ibid.* Dr. Morris considers this to be "the more natural way to understand the Greek", and refers to Mark 16: 20.

²¹ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (E.T., London, 1910), p. 318.

have with those who are really in need".²² Indolence is not only an offence against society, but against God.

We cannot speak about the social structures of the period nor about the Christian attitude to work, without considering the question of slavery. No doubt, with the hindsight of nineteen centuries, this is the point where one might have expected to find a greater involvement on the part of the Apostolic Church. Social reformers, as well as revolutionaries, believe that in each era there is some issue which sums up the tension of the times. Looking back to the first century, they would agree that slavery was the pus-point of social malaise. This is where the Church ought to have struck, and to have struck hard. But this is, in the first place, to complain at the absence of something which the primitive Christians could hardly be expected to have possessed, namely—a sophisticated twentieth-century awareness of social injustices. More seriously, it is to assume that Christianity made little or no contribution to the abolition of slavery, which, of course, is very far from being the case.

We can only glance at one or two of the more important passages in the New Testament in which the Christian attitude to slavery is adumbrated. To see it in its proper context—namely, that of the contemporary social framework—we have to turn to 1 Cor. 7: 20-24. Every one should remain in the state or condition in which he was called (*en tē klēsei hē eklēthē*), declares Paul (v. 20). Once again, as we noted in the case of 1 Cor. 1: 26, this is a heavenly calling. It is not suggested that God necessarily called a man to occupy a certain position in society, which he held before ever he became a Christian. The reference is to the fact that, when he was called by God to a new life in Christ, he was already involved in secular society at some level. What Paul says is that there he must be content to remain. That has been stressed earlier in v. 17, where the apostle insists that each believer must order his life according to the gift the Lord has granted him and his rank when God called him. This is what Paul has taught in all the churches.

He takes two instances, one from circumcision and the other from slavery. If a man was born a Jew, then when he becomes a Christian he must not try to remove the marks of circumcision. If he was born a Gentile, then he must not seek circumcision (v. 18). Circumcision is neither here nor there: what matters is obedience to God. Precisely the same argument is used in the case

²² William Hendriksen, *Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, 1955), p. 202.

of slavery. If a man was a slave when converted, then no matter. That must not become an obsession. It is possible to be a Christian even as a slave. But, of course, if an opportunity arises for him to gain his freedom, then he should seize it. However, the essential thing is that he who is called by the Lord as a slave is now a freedman of the Lord, just as the free man becomes a slave of Christ (v. 22). Those who have been bought at a price by the Saviour cannot really be in bondage to men (v. 23). This is the realization which robbed slavery of its sting for the Christian. If a man feels free, he can endure all sorts of restrictions. This was the liberating influence of the gospel, which played a much more significant part than some imagine in the eventual overthrow of the slave system.

There are several passages in the New Testament which outline the duties of slaves. They are to be submissive to their masters (Titus 2: 9; 1 Peter 2: 18). They are to show respect (1 Peter 2: 18). They are to give satisfaction in every way (Titus 2: 9). They must be faithful and trustworthy (Titus 2: 10). They must not rebel against their master's authority, nor must they indulge in petty pilfering as most of the non-Christian slaves were in the habit of doing (Titus 2: 10). They are to behave like this not only when their masters are kind and gentle, but also when they are overbearing (1 Peter 2: 18). Those who are so fortunate as to have Christian masters are not to take advantage of them by treating them with less regard just because they are brothers. On the contrary, they must work all the harder because they know that those who receive the benefit of their service are one with them in faith and love (1 Tim. 6: 2). It is worth noting that when Paul talks about "adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour" in everything, it is in the context of slavery (Titus 2: 10).

In Ephesians 6: 5-9 and Colossians 3: 22-4: 4 the apostle deals with the duties of slaves along with the reciprocal duties of masters. This was to introduce a distinctively Christian element. It was recognized in the Roman world that a slave had obligations to his master, but not that a master had obligations to his slaves. When a man bought a slave, he could treat him as he wished. That slave was simply a piece of property. He had no legal rights. Slavery was indeed a yoke (1 Tim. 6: 1). The master was a despot. He could flog his slaves, he could brand them with red-hot irons, he could even put them to death by crucifixion if they proved recalcitrant. When Paul instructed Christian slave-owners to treat their men justly and fairly, he was lifting the whole relationship to an entirely new plane (Col. 4: 1). They were to stop using

threats—and that was a revolution in itself (Eph. 6: 9). No doubt there were pagan masters also who displayed a better spirit, but too often the slave was hardly as well off as a horse. But to a Christian master like Philemon he was no longer a slave but a beloved brother in Christ (Philemon 16). Paul's advice thus avoids extremes. As Hendriksen points out, "he advocated neither outright revolt by the slaves nor the continuation of the *status quo*".²³ By the law of indirection he aimed at destroying the essence of slavery. It was the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ working from within outward which was to bring about the transformation.

By the second century A.D. "the victory of moral ideas", as Mark Pattison put it, became decisive in this as in other departments of life, and the influence of Christian standards cannot be altogether excluded.²⁴ At last the state began to recognize that slaves had human rights which were to be protected. Hadrian deprived the masters of the power of life and death. Antoninus Pius punished the master who killed his own slave as if he had killed another's. Marcus Aurelius ensured that complaints against the service of slaves should be a matter of legal action, thus safeguarding the interests of both parties. Here is the comment of Professor John Kells Ingram:

The rise of Christianity in the Roman world still further improved the condition of the slave. The sentiments it created were not only favourable to the humane treatment of the class in the present, but were the germs out of which its entire liberation was destined, at a later period, in part to arise.²⁵

Both in Ephesians and Colossians slavery is treated by Paul within the wider context of the family. He deals with masters and servants after he has talked about husbands and wives and parents and children. We cannot go into details just now, but it was in its effect on family life that the Christianity of the Apostolic Church made its most obvious impression on society. We have only to read the last part of Romans 1 to realize that the first century was riddled with sexual immorality and that the sanctity of marriage was seriously undermined. As Seneca reported, "women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married". Aristocratic Roman matrons dated the years by the names of their husbands and not by the names of the consuls. Juvenal could not believe

²³ William Hendriksen, *Commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus* (London, 1959), p. 192.

²⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th edition), Vol. XX, p. 777; cf. Mark Pattison, *Essays*, editor Henry Nettleship (Oxford, 1889), Vol. II, p. 3.

²⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th edition), Vol. XX, p. 777.

that it was possible to have the rare good fortune to find one matron with unsullied chastity. William Barclay, who has collected these *dicta*, cites the incredible case of Messalina, the empress herself, the wife of Claudius, who at night used to leave the royal palace and go down to serve in a brothel, so eaten up was she with lust.²⁶ Nor did this galloping consumption of immorality stop at natural vice. Society was sapped by unnatural vice. No less than fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman emperors were homosexuals. Set against that background, the Christian ideals of purity and the holiness of marriage take on an enhanced significance. The Christian home in the first century must have shone like a light in a dark place. It was an unusual thing for marriage to be held in honour and the bed to be undefiled (Heb. 13: 4).

The teaching of the epistles about the state and the need for Christians to submit themselves to its authority has its bearing upon our enquiry. "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" is Peter's injunction (1 Peter 2: 13). Then he goes on to specify the emperor (*basileus*) as supreme and the governor (*hēgemōn*) as representing him in the administration of justice. Similarly Paul urges Titus to remind his Cretan congregation "to be submissive to rulers and authorities" and to be obedient to them (Titus 3: 1). In 1 Timothy 2: 1, 2 he begins his directions for public worship by requiring that prayer should be made for sovereigns and all in high office, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way". "The object of prayer for the state", explains Professor Kingsley Barrett, "is that it may duly perform its divinely appointed task, so that Christians may practise Christianity as it ought to be practised".²⁷ The crux of Paul's teaching about the state is to be found, of course, in Romans 13: 1-7. Nygren's comment is apposite as he sums up the implication of the passage.

If God has ordained that the Christian is to live his life in *this* world, in *this* aeon, the Christian must not pretend that he already lives in the glorified state of the new aeon. If God has placed him in this existence with its orders, it is not the intention that he shall set himself above them and arbitrarily claim a state of glory in advance. When at last the new aeon comes into its glory, the power of earthly authorities will be past, for it belongs to those of the old world

²⁶ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, The Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh, 1955), pp. 24-25.

²⁷ Charles Kingsley Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New English Bible, with Introduction and Commentary*, The New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, 1963), p. 50.

which will cease to be. But as long as the present aeon endures, the power and authority of government will last, for God has ordained them for this aeon.²⁸

An understanding of this biblical viewpoint will enable us to resist the pressures of those who would stampede the Church into backing revolution now. We are to leave the issue to God. However much we may sympathize with the angry young men of our distracted age, we must nevertheless give place to the wrath of God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12: 19; cf. Deut. 32: 35). This factor goes far to explain why the Apostolic Church refused to get involved in political agitation.

This brings us to our final item for examination—namely, the conception of neighbourly love to be found in the documents of the New Testament which relate to the Apostolic Church. Is it the same as that which we find in the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, or has it suffered a sea-change? This is one of the issues which is being reviewed today. It is raised, for example, by Canon Hugh Montefiore in the last chapter of his paperback, *Awkward Questions on Christian Love*.²⁹ For the Jew, the neighbour meant a fellow-Jew. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" in Leviticus 19: 18 has to do with "the sons of your own people", as the context makes clear. But Jesus disengaged the idea of neighbour from every relation of proximity, as Spicq puts it, whether of family, friendship or nationality. "The neighbour, in Christian language, is Man."³⁰ To love your neighbour may mean to love an alien and even an enemy. Now Canon Montefiore believes that when we move from the gospels to the epistles, a subtle change can be observed.³¹ The teaching of Jesus about the importance of neighbourly love is retained, but with a vital modification. The notion of neighbourly love begins to revert to the Jewish version, interpreted, of course, in terms of the New Israel. Neighbour now means primarily a fellow-member of the Christian Church. "Jesus' illustration of neighbourliness was an outcast Samaritan; but Paul's image of neighbourliness was a redeemed Christian community" (Montefiore).³² Like his Master,

²⁸ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (E.T., Philadelphia, 1949), pp. 428-429.

²⁹ Hugh Montefiore, *Awkward Questions on Christian Love* (London, 1964), pp. 97-104.

³⁰ Ceslas Spicq, *Agapé dans le Nouveau Testament. Analyse des textes*, Études Bibliques (Paris, 1966), Vol. II, p. 296.

³¹ Montefiore, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³² *Ibid.*

Paul declared that all the commandments are subsumed in the single rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Rom. 13: 9); but he made it clear that neighbour here means a Christian. "Leave no claim outstanding against you, except that of mutual love" (Rom. 13: 8 NEB). And in Galatians 5: 13, prior to the quotation of the commandment to love our neighbour, he says: "through love be servants of one another" (*allēlois* there means mutually, amongst yourselves as Christians). Montefiore does not wish to indulge in the false alternative of "Jesus or Paul" so typical of liberal Protestantism at the turn of the last century.³³ Indeed, he believes that so far as neighbourly love is concerned, the teaching of our Lord is more fully taken over by Paul than by any other of the New Testament writers. But he cannot escape what he takes to be the implications of the evidence.

How far is he correct? Is it true that in the Apostolic Church love of the neighbour is narrowed down to include only fellow-Christians? It must be admitted that there are passages which seem to substantiate this claim. A distinction is apparently made between love to other Christians and love to other men. The former is often put first, but the latter is not ruled out. "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another", Paul writes to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3: 12), "and to all men". This is an overflowing love (the second verb is *perisseuō*) which reaches outsiders as well as fellow-believers. In 1 Thessalonians 5: 19 Paul urges his readers to "do good to one another and to all". In Galatians 6: 10 he reverses the order: "So, then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." It is clear, then, that the wider reference is not absent, but it has to be conceded that priority does appear to be given to fellow-Christians. No doubt the reasoning behind it is that if Christians do not show love to one another, their overtures to those who are without will carry little weight. John, in his First Letter, adds the further consideration that if Christians do not love one another then they can hardly claim to love God. In John "neighbour" is replaced throughout by "brother", by which is meant one who belongs to the family of God. That is confirmed by 1 John 5: 2: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments."

A further factor must be taken into account. If the infant Church was to survive the hazards of the first century it needed to be a consolidated, tightly knit community, standing together against all

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

comers. What provided this cohesion was mutual love stemming from a sense of God's love to them. In the third chapter of Colossians Paul describes this *agapē* as a girdle which binds together all other qualities in the Christian character and makes it complete (v. 15). It was also the girdle which bound Christians to one another and enabled them to ward off the attacks that were so persistently made upon them. It was thus natural, and indeed almost necessary, that the utmost emphasis should be placed on the need for Christians to maintain this internal love, even if it meant that the love which moves out to all mankind figured less prominently in apostolic exhortations.

It is for the same reason that Christian involvement in society seems very limited in this initial period when judged by modern standards. In any case, as we have argued, it would be unfair to expect that the sensitivities of the twentieth century should be reflected in the first. But apart from that, the Church had to survive to be effective, and the early years were mainly occupied with a struggle for existence. It was difficult to distinguish at first between involvement and compromise. Hence the thrust of the New Testament is in the direction of avoiding contamination. "The task of fleeing from the world is the primary one", according to Gerhard Uhlhorn: "the duty of penetrating the life of the world with this new life only occurred gradually to the Christians".³⁴ Yet eventually such penetration did begin—more perhaps in the following centuries than in the first. There was no attempt to upset the current social structure. Instead, as Harnack has shown, "the Christian community adapted itself to a long process of transformation within the framework of existing conditions, or, rather, it set in motion a general process or moral development, which slowly permeated its social environment".³⁵ But this never became a programme of reform in the sense in which we understand it today, nor did the possibility of a Christian civilization present itself at this stage. Yet, according to Troeltsch, in spite of all its submissiveness, Christianity did succeed in destroying the Roman state by alienating men from its ideals.³⁶ It is in the light of this ultimate achievement that its earlier attitudes must be assessed.

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³⁴ Johann Gerhard Wilhelm Uhlhorn, *Die Christliche Liebestätigkeit in der alten Kirche* (Stuttgart, 1882), Vol. I, p. 127.

³⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *Preussische Jahrbücher* (März, 1908), p. 457; cf. 457; cf. Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

³⁶ Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, p. 82.