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The Social World of the New Testament

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In pursuit of answers to the question 'What was it like being an early Christian?', this article explores the household, the use of language and the social origins of the early church.

THE title may well fail to stimulate: if so, let us ignore it and start with some basic questions: What was it like, being a Christian in the time of the New Testament? Who joined—and why? How were the early churches organised? How would you find other Christians when visiting a new place? How did people from different walks of life get on with each other? How did being a Christian affect their daily life, private or communal, or how did the realities of that daily life impinge on their Christian convictions? How were leaders chosen and how did they—indeed did they—win the allegiance of those under their care?

And so one might go on. Perhaps rather obvious questions and yet questions most of us too rarely think about seriously. We come to the New Testament and ask 'What does it mean or say to me?', 'What does it tell me about God,

Jesus, my faith or my behaviour?'. Hopefully we recognise the danger of lifting things straight from the Old or New Testament about belief or behaviour and transferring them directly to our own setting. Whether we are dealing with the Ascension, with Paul's injunctions on the wearing of hats by women in church, or with some of the legal passages of the Old Testament, we interpret. In effect we try to ask, 'If that is how they expressed their belief then, how should we express it today?' We try to reach back to the people and to the community of faith of the Old and New Testaments.

Even so, those people often remain colourless and lifeless. We find it hard to imagine them living and feeling and working out their faith in an often hostile world in the way we have to. Perhaps we have rather romantic notions—Sunday School images of a stranger in a market place drawing a fish in the sand with his big toe!; leaders picked out by the unmistakeable gifts of the spirit; a sense of harmony and sisterliness or brotherhood between people of different economic, occupational or ethnic backgrounds. If our own experience tells us that that is not how it is in our own society or church, then far from starting to question our idealised picture of the early church we may only paint it in yet more glowing colours.

When we move from description to explanation, answering the question 'Why?'—an essential step in *understanding* other people, their ideas and lives—the problems multiply. We are accustomed to analyses of patterns of church membership and attendance in relation to age, sex, occupation or economic background. I know that the question why I am a Methodist—perhaps of the type I am—may receive an explanation which seems far less exalted than a simple appeal to God's call of me. So too our language may say more than meets the eye—or ear. If I say, 'I am saved; I have been washed in the blood of the lamb', I may be saying or doing a number of things, consciously or not. I may be trying to impress you, or to exclude you; drawing a sharp distinction between those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'. I may be using 'in-group' language, a signal to those among you who also use it. This may be a way for me to cope with the inequalities of life and experience here and now; such language of belief expresses something of how I see the world, both the big, outside world and the particular world which I inhabit. Such examples may be simplistic but they could be multiplied. Human behaviour can be 'understood' in terms of the social factors, manifest or latent, which have helped channel if not create it. This may not be the only way of understanding, but it is one which in part we recognise by common sense and which has been refined much further within the social sciences. If we acknowledge their application to our own lives, what about the early church?

So it is that there is a growing movement within the study of both the Old and New Testaments which says that asking questions about the content of belief is not the only approach to their writings, and that it is one which may lead to abstraction or generalisation. If we are to understand the New Testament we must look for answers to some of the questions with which we started—what was it like being an early Christian? We must recognise that in many respects we are not continuous with them—in the ordering of society, in the nature of the family, never mind our whole perception of the world around us. That is a new world for us to discover. Yet in other respects we are continuous—in our humanity, our capacity for hope and fear, our need

to make sense of the world about us and, perhaps, in the operation of the sort of 'social' factors we have already touched on.

We need the help and skills of the historian, archaeologist and classicist to discover the world which the early Christians shared with their contemporaries, especially as such specialists increasingly uncover the lives of ordinary people. We also need the insights and skills of the social scientists as they study society and interpret how it and we work. A few examples may help us begin to see what this means in practice.

The household

In Acts 16:15,30-34 we read of the conversion, or at least the baptism, of individuals—Lydia and the Philippian jailer—with their households. So too we hear of the 'church in X's house' (e.g. Philem. 2). We should not think immediately of our households—nor incidentally of house-churches with which we may be familiar. We tend to think of the so-called nuclear-family, of those bound together by kinship and marriage, perhaps with little effective hierarchy. In the first century the household could be seen in terms of responsibility and subordination. As well as those bound by kinship it would include slaves, freedmen, perhaps hired labourers, tenants, business associates, those dependent on the financial or political patronage offered; here ties were of dependence, responsibility and loyalty rather than of kinship. Such loyalty could include religious loyalties and in the conversion of the head of the household with his or her dependents inevitably there would be different levels of understanding and commitment. It is against the background of the church meeting in households, with their existing patterns of loyalty, that it has been suggested we should understand some of the divisions in the church at Corinth (see 1 Cor. 1:10-16).

As part of the wider society the household contained its own patterns of subordination with the ultimate authority of the head of the household—a strongly hierarchical pattern. Yet there was in Christianity a strong tradition critical of the hierarchical power structures of society, one which gave emphasis to equality and to humility. How did this work out in practice? For the ethic of equality we might turn to the principle laid out in Gal. 3:28 or Col. 3:11 that in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor freeman, not even male nor female. Perhaps, too, we should note those passages where women hold positions of authority (e.g. Rom. 16:1,3 (Prisca first!), 7 (Junia, not Junias)). Yet what are we to make of the way Col. 3:11 is speedily followed by the 'code of subordination' in 3:18-4:1, which seems to conform to the contemporary hierarchical patterns? Is there here a witness to how the church went the way of most 'institutions', developing structures and codes of behaviour, conforming to the ethos of society, losing its initial uncomfortable radicality? We have but to read the proper qualifications of a bishop in 1 Tim. 3:1-7, not least that *he* should manage his own 'house' well, keeping his children submissive, to suspect that the 'natural' tendency of institutions together with the household pattern of Roman society have at least begun to channel the development of the early church.

Although some would claim that social description and analysis can and should be neutral, it is difficult to avoid value judgements here. Should we see in the initial impulse to radical equality the true essence of the Christian message which we need to recover, or was the settling down process necessary

for the continued existence of the church and therefore to be given lasting validity? Social or 'sociological' description cannot answer these questions.

Turning to a different perspective, what, we may wonder, happened when the head of the household, accustomed to the loyalty of his dependents, found within the church meeting under his patronage other claimants to authority? The church at Corinth clearly gave high place to the visible gifts of the spirit; it takes little imagination to see behind Paul's response (1 Cor. 12:27-30; 14; 16:15-16; 2 Cor. 10-13) the tensions which could arise when different individuals or groups claimed or acknowledged authority on widely differing grounds; Paul lays alongside those more visible gifts the activities and forms of guidance God has established in the church; he has to commend Stephanas and his household whose claims to respect rested on their voluntary service and, perhaps, on their being among the earliest converts. Paul himself struggles to ground his authority not on the spiritual gifts which he did indeed possess but on his call by God and on his sufferings, and perhaps too on his founding of the church there. Here again imagination can be refined by more precise studies of types and patterns of leadership in society.

Away from controversy in the churches, it is against this background that we may understand the pervasive presence of imagery drawn from the world of the household—e.g. 1 Tim. 1:4 (RSV 'training'—economy/household ordering); 1 Pet. 2:5; 4:10 ('stewards'), 17. Thus patterns from contemporary society provided the early Christians with their models for understanding the church and God's activity.

Yet in contrast to all this there are passages, especially in the Gospels, which appear opposed to home and family, encouraging those who leave or lose them: Mt. 8:19-22, 10:35-37; Mk. 3:31-35. Who, living within the 'household' churches, would treasure and preserve such passages until they eventually came to be written down in the Gospels? It is attractive to see here the piety of those wandering teachers who did indeed forsake home and family, and were thereby accorded special authority in the settled congregations (see Mt. 10:41). We find references to such itinerant teachers or prophets elsewhere in early Christian writings. The special respect they received because of their life-style may often have added to the potential tensions in the early congregations before clear patterns of ministry developed. They too would not have been totally strange figures in Roman society, for there already we find itinerant philosophers and teachers, only some of whom may have been charlatans!

Language

When Christians are addressed as 'beloved', 'brethren', 'my children', we may sometimes see this 'household' image coming to the fore. The New Testament also knows other patterns of address—'saints', 'those sanctified in Christ Jesus', 'chosen by God' (1 Cor. 1:2, 27f.). We tend not to use such language in addressing our congregations or in our preaching today—or at least not in all traditions. What would be the effect of using (or failing to use) such language? No doubt it would hold the people together, emphasising their sense of difference from non-Christians. A passage such as 1 Cor. 6:9-11 does this very sharply, even though in actual manner of life the contrast with their neighbours may not always have been as clearly visible as we at first suppose. Language does not only reflect the beliefs people hold, it also

helps create a world for them. Language of election, separation and holiness may be most natural among groups who put a strong emphasis on conversion and who have a sense of isolation or of swimming against the current. It helps them cope when majority opinion puts them in the wrong.

We find something related in 1 Peter; here the language of exile is used of the readers, 1:1,17; 2:11. We may miss the point if we spiritualise this as do some N.T. translations and see all believers as exiles from their true, heavenly home. For the readers of 1 Peter these terms had a very real technical sense; they spoke of those without full citizenship of the place where they lived, with lesser rights and special obligations, perhaps likely to be blamed for any troubles and made to feel like 'second-class' citizens. We may speculate whether it was literally such who were attracted to Christianity, finding there a sense of belonging which society denied them. Perhaps many Christians came to share such experiences, finding themselves shunned—'marginalised', in modern jargon. How would they react in such a situation—opt out, emphasising their heavenly home or future restoration, become ever more exclusive, or give up and compromise in order to be accepted?

1 Peter can be read as a response to such a dilemma. It emphasises their communal identity, affirming that sense of belonging (1:2,10-12; 2:4f); it stresses internal cohesion (1:22) with its concomitant holiness and separation from Gentile behaviour (2:11; 4:2-3)—here the warfare image gives positive meaning to such separation and warns against the temptation to compromise. Distinctiveness, which could become a burden and cause for rejection, is made part of a missionary policy (2:12,15; 3:15f); for this church there can never be total isolation. The inevitable conflict and suffering becomes something positive, an opportunity to imitate Christ (3:14,17f; 4:14).

Thus behind 1 Peter we may see a church in a very precise social situation, and we may read the letter not as 'abstract' or 'timeless' theology but as a creative response which was seeking actually to change the situation by changing or directing the Christians' perceptions of and responses to their experience.

Origins

Verses over which most ink has been spilt in this approach to the N.T. are 1 Cor. 1:26f. Who were the early Christians? How many is 'not many' and if not wise, noble or powerful, what were they? Was Christianity a religion of the humble, ignorant and lower classes; was it a religion of 'the oppressed'? Before our romantic notions take over we need to establish what it meant in the time of the N.T. to be wise, powerful or noble and how education, power and birth were related to each other. The picture we gain is of a very steep pyramid. Those at the top, the senatorial and 'equestrian' classes, who were defined by birth and property-wealth, formed a minute proportion of the population; in Rome, the centre of government, they may have seemed significant, but considerably less so in the cities of Greece and Asia Minor like Corinth or Colossae. There commercial wealth may have been less despised than it was in Rome and people other than Roman citizens, despite the latters' legal privileges, could attain to positions of leadership. Among those at the base of the pyramid, it has been estimated that in a city like Corinth one third of the population may have been slaves. Yet the lot of slaves would not always have been a sorry one; the worst off, those in the

countryside or the mines, were probably little touched by Christianity for some time. Urban slaves may sometimes have been more secure in material terms than freedmen or 'the plebs', and some slaves could be highly educated.

Against this complex background we can look at the evidence of the N.T. The codes of submission or household codes already mentioned imply the presence of slaves and masters in the church. However, when in 1 Peter, 1 Timothy and Titus there are instructions to slaves but not to masters (contrast Col. and Eph.) we may wonder whether these reflect the absence or the perspective and dominance of masters in those churches. We have already noted the significance in the early church of households with their 'vertical' cross-section of society. Acts especially likes to mention highly placed converts such as the women from the upper classes in Acts 17:12, Dionysius the Areopagite (17:34) or Crispus the ruler of the Synagogue (18:8), but even in Paul we find a reference to members of 'Caesar's household' (Philipp. 4:22) who would have had influence beyond their class. People like Junia or Julia (Rom. 16:7,15) may well have been Roman citizens. Yet these are the 'named'; were they named because they were in a minority, among the 'not many', or perhaps because as in society so in the church they were among the more influential? What about all the unnamed and those who account for the language of alienation such as we found in 1 Peter? The evidence remains ambivalent.

To help us further, and to understand why as well as which particular groups may have joined the church, some have appealed to studies of the relation between social status and religious tendencies, looking not to the evidence of the ancient world but to what we may expect to be common to the ways in which we and they 'worked'. It has been argued that new religious movements or reforms are often particularly associated with groups that feel alienated from current values. This may be especially true of so-called millenarian cults, cults which offer hope of a speedy end to this order and the establishment of a new order reversing present inequalities. These cults arise among or are particularly attractive to those who are not necessarily economically deprived but who do sense a mismatch between what is available to them and what they feel should be available, between their expectations and the possibilities of satisfaction. Again, these may not be economic possibilities; there may be a mismatch between the influence or status people expect to be able to exercise and that which in practice is available to them because of the structure or values of society. Early Christianity may fit such a model; it offered a vision of a new order where the last would be first and the first last, and it claimed to provide a context where the hierarchical status norms of society no longer held sway. So we might expect to find among its members not only those who had economic cause to look for a better order or social reasons to seek a place where they could be fully accepted, but also those who felt 'dissatisfied' in this sense: those whose wealth did not open doors to advancement, women whose ability or real commercial importance (Acts 16:14) had very limited social expression or recognition. In this way we may understand and define the 'many' and the 'not many'.

Here the persuasiveness of the argument must be decided both in terms of the validity of the theory and of its applicability to Graeco-Roman society and to Christianity in particular. In fact we may well not have sufficient

information to decide the second unless we allow theory to fill the gaps in our knowledge—a dangerous undertaking. Yet both the theory and the evidence do suggest new questions in our study of the N.T. We may ask again how far the Christian church did appear a place where the restrictions of ordinary society were annulled offering possibilities to those normally excluded, not least women and slaves. How often were such hopes left unfulfilled and what were the consequences? On a different tack, when we see something of the importance given to status and honour in the Corinth of Paul's day we may read with fresh understanding his argument as it evolves in 1 Cor. 1-2. When we realise how far giving and receiving were brought into the same framework of superiority, status and obligation, we may notice more vividly how Paul avoids the language of the social obligations of friendship in his relationships with the churches.

If time permitted, further examples would show how varied are the questions we can ask of the New Testament from this perspective, and how varied the insights we may bring to bear or come away with. The examples on which I have drawn come from a growing body of literature in biblical study taking this line of approach. It is one which could give us much to think about. An underlying conviction is that even our innermost religious convictions are related to social conflicts and other experiences, and that the same must be true of the New Testament. How far should this influence our use of the New Testament in preaching as well as our understanding of our own lives as Christians within the Church? Awareness not only of the 'background' of the New Testament writings, but also of how social factors played their part in the development of early Christian belief and practice may make us more sensitive and cautious in using the New Testament to solve modern problems. Is it chance that scholars who find this approach congenial are also working in the areas of liberation theology, feminist theology and biblical study, and the origins of Christian anti-semitism?

There are, of course, pitfalls. I have touched mainly on the less controversial areas but we have already begun to see how theory can dominate the reading as well as the interpretation of facts. It has been well remarked that in the 'sixties there was a tendency to emphasise the early Christians as a relatively 'deprived' group (although not necessarily in material terms); the more 'conservative' 'seventies witnessed a tendency to 'upgrade' them as consisting of neither the very top nor certainly the very bottom of society, but a healthy cross-section. Our reading of the Bible has its own social context, is it also socially determined? Perhaps in becoming familiar with the many currents in the social world of the New Testament, we may learn to recognise those of our own more clearly.

Some suggested reading

J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (SCM, London 1982): a study of 1 Peter.
H.C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (SCM, London 1980).
B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (SCM, London 1983).
W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (Yale UP, New Haven 1983): on the Pauline churches.
G. Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus* (SCM, London 1978).
G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1982).
D. Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Paternoster, Exeter 1984).