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A table of contents for *Review & Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_rande_01.php

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CITY.

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If the first city mentioned in the history of the great Redemptive Plan was built by a murderer, it is significant that the last was called "the holy city" and was seen "coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God." It is easy to see in this bringing together of the first and last cities mentioned in the Bible a foretelling of the slow conquest of the murderer's rendezvous by the forces of righteousness, of the gradual transformation of the Gibraltar of vice into the stronghold of beauty and truth. And, really, to minimize the good and magnify the bad about the city as much as the narratives will at all justify, the least that can be said is that the biblical records leave us, as we trace the impact of God's renovative forces and the results thereof upon the cities of former days, no ground for discouragement in the conflict of today. There may be reason to change our present message or methods, but there can be no reason to despair of success.

THE STORY OF THE CITY.

As already indicated, the city is not a development of modern life. The earliest pages of authentic secular history present the city as already a long established institution. Babylon came into prominence c. 2300 B. C., and later assumed great size, so that today the four distinct portions of the ruins of the ancient city cover "in all a territory of about fifty square miles." Of ancient Nineveh one has said, "To judge from the ruins which still cover the ground, the circumference must have been about sixty miles, or a three days' journey." That is, the capital of the long extinct Assyrian empire occupied an area half as large as modern New York, more than one-fourth as large as modern London. How many people were to

be found in the "nameless leagues of common dwellings" which occupied much of this area, and in the finer dwellings and palaces of the remaining portion, none can tell with certainty, but the number of children as given in the book of Jonah would indicate a population of at least 600,000, possibly 1,000,000.

A recent writer in dealing with the early Christian centuries declares, "There was a constant drift to the cities. . . . In the first, and still more in the second century of the Empire, the world was studded with more beautiful cities than at the present day." Gibbon says the populousness of Rome at the beginning of the Christian era "cannot perhaps be exactly ascertained; but the most modest calculation will not reduce it to lower than a million of inhabitants." He refers to a number of things in speaking of the Syrian Antioch as "so many convincing proofs that the whole number of its inhabitants was not less than 500,000." Such details as to growth and population as can readily be gathered concerning most of the cities of today will probably never be found with respect to any ancient city, but we know enough to be sure that even the comparatively "big" city was not unknown in the centuries before Christ. And a city of a million people in those days must have presented problems as great as—should we not say even greater than—a New York or London of today.

That which ancient history strongly suggests modern history most emphatically confirms as true, viz., that there is among men everywhere a victorious tendency to congregate in villages, towns and cities. Ninety per cent. of the population of India is thus congregated. "On the whole, China is an empire of villages, three-fourths of the people dwelling in these." Similar conditions obtain even in darkest Africa. In England and Wales nearly 65 per cent. of the people live in cities of 10,000 population or upwards; in Scotland about 50 per cent. In the United States there are 299 cities having a population of 25,000

or upwards. From 1900 to 1910 our rural population increased 11 per cent., our urban population 35 per cent. In fifteen states already a majority of the people live in cities, and in eight of these the urban population is more than two-thirds of the whole. If the rate of increase in city population which prevailed from 1900 to 1910 continues until 1940, there will then be in our cities 21,000,000 more people than outside of them. The recent growth of cities in the United States is scarcely more phenomenal than in Canada and South America. Even in the old world, cities which have stood for centuries never grew so rapidly as in recent decades. London, probably two thousand years old, received four-fifths of its growth during the past century. During the forty years from 1850 to 1890 Berlin grew more rapidly than New York. Paris is five times as large as in 1800, and Rome more than fifty per cent. larger than in 1890. Odessa has stood for a thousand years, but nineteen-twentieths of her population were added during the nineteenth century. Bombay had 150,000 people in 1800 and 821,000 in 1890. Tokio gained nearly 800,000 during the last twenty years of the last century, and Osaka was nearly four times as large in 1903 as in 1872. And even in Africa, Cairo has increased her population more than 100 per cent. since 1850.

The simple fact that the urban population of the world is increasing with such remarkable rapidity gives to the municipality an added importance in the life of today, but the vital place of the city in the civilization of the present and the future can never be understood apart from a keen appreciation of that widening sweep of democracy which is so characteristic of our times. Our forefathers at Philadelphia set a great tidal wave in motion in the political life of the world which has played havoc with the supposed rights of kings and emperors everywhere. Republics in name as well as in fact have become numerous among the nations of the world, and some kingdoms and empires are such only in name while really republics in

fact. And wherever political power comes more into the hands of the people, wherever the citizens become able easily and quickly to shape the policies of the state, there great aggregations of people assume ever increasing importance.

It is not simply that there will inevitably be a large number of the vile and criminally inclined wherever thousands of people are gathered in cities. The fact that such bringing together of multitudes into small areas furnishes the vile and the criminal the finest opportunities to make their influence felt in municipal, state and national affairs stares us impudently in the face and screams defiantly in our ears. In fact, so manifest has become the power of the bad over the good in the modern city, so vital is the city becoming in national and world life, that no one can safely object to Dr. Strong's statement that the city has already become "the supreme problem of the world's future." And if the city is "the supreme problem of the world's future," it is also, by the very nature of the case, Christianity's supreme task. Is Christianity qualified to meet the demands which the modern city is making, and will hereafter make in larger measure, upon her? Neither a lightly given "Yes" nor a vociferous "No" is in order, but rather a careful weighing of facts.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CITY IN THE EARLY CENTURIES.

Some today write and speak as if Christianity were now for the first time coming in contact with the city. But there were cities in our Lord's day, some of them, as we have seen, even "large" cities, and a twentieth century sub-title to the book of Acts might very fittingly be "Christianity in Contact with the City." Organized Christianity's first great work was in a city, the city of Jerusalem. Reaching out from Jerusalem, Samaria was touched, a city two and a half miles in circumference.

Still farther north Damascus, the oldest city in the world, "the contemporary of all history," a city with a population of 150,000 today and doubtless as large or larger then, became a center of activity and the spiritual birthplace of the greatest of the apostles. Forced from the Jerusalem center by fierce persecutions the gospel heralds continued northward and founded the second great Christian center in the Syrian Antioch, a city which a little later, as we have seen, could boast of at least 500,000 inhabitants. If we could get the facts, would we not doubtless be able to tell how here Saul, who was later called Paul, either first tried his hand, or at least further developed his skill, in "city mission" work? And he must have liked it immensely, for from the time he left the city of his apprenticeship, if we may so speak, he continued to plant the cross in city after city until he surrendered his life in the largest city of his time. Possibly he gave some attention in his busy ministry to what may be called rural regions, but the narrative never permits us to lose sight of the fact that his eye is always upon the strategic centers of life—the cities. Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome—these are the centers of his ever extending labors, and in the list are found the names of most of the important cities of that day.

But this narrative of the early contact of Christianity with the city does not stop with giving us the names of the cities where Paul and his co-workers labored. Very significant statements appear from time to time as to the success attending their efforts. Within twenty-five years after the Lord's death, we are told, the Christian faith had been firmly planted in each of the cities named above, and in a number of them the churches had become remarkably large and aggressive. The church at Antioch in Syria, constituted a center from which missionary parties were sent out and to which they returned with reports of trials and successes. Increasing difficulty at

Corinth brought Paul a vision in which the Lord bade him, "Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to harm thee; for I have much people in this city." And for a year and a half Paul continued in that city preaching the word and gathering in the "much people." At Ephesus for three years he admonished "night and day with tears" and "mightily grew the word of the Lord and prevailed." So great was the success of this last campaign in Asia, when not only Ephesus was mightily moved but "all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks," that it seems to have led directly to Paul's purpose to march upon Rome.

It would be gratifying indeed if we might have statistics showing the progress of Christianity by decades during the first three centuries in such centers as Syrian Antioch, Corinth, Alexandria and Rome. For such, however, there can be no ground even to hope. But if it be said that these New Testament statements are too vague to afford any trustworthy estimate of the membership and strength of the churches established, it is only necessary to appeal to the history the next two centuries to make it very evident that the fullest meaning of the words must be well sustained rather than freely pared down. So strong had Christianity become in Pontus and Bythinia by the second decade of the second century that Pliny wrote the Emperor Trajan that the old pagan temples were almost deserted, and that sacred victims scarcely found purchasers. Under the reign of Theodosius, according to Chrysostom, the church of Antioch in Syria consisted of 100,000 members. Accepting Gibbon's estimate of the population of the city, this gives one Christian in every five of its inhabitants. Gibbon also admits that the church at Rome, about the middle of the third century, despite all the persecutions which had scattered and destroyed, numbered "about fifty thousand." As to the whole empire

he concludes: "The most favorable calculation, however, that can be deduced from the examples of Antioch and of Rome, will not permit us to imagine that more than a twentieth part of the subjects of the empire had enlisted themselves under the banner of the cross before the important conversion of Constantine." Reckoning the total population of the empire at 100,000,000, this estimate from a source which cannot be regarded as too friendly to Christianity allows to the church within three hundred years 5,000,000 souls within the empire, besides the number of converts beyond the borders of that political organization. And if, as has been suggested by a careful writer, at the close of the fourth century there were 10,000,000 Christians in the world, the number outside the Roman empire in Constantine's day must have been considerable indeed. Furthermore, inasmuch as Christianity began the conquest of the world by attacking the city, it is hardly possible to believe that any large proportion of these millions of Christians were to be found in country districts. The first point of attack continued to be the point of greatest achievement, and the New Testament statements of success in city work must ever remain indelibly underscored.

CITY WORK THEN AND NOW.

Many cities of today are larger than those of Paul's day, and in housing, media of communication, lighting and sanitation the differences are marked. But there is hardly anything that can be found in the city of the twentieth century that makes it more difficult to evangelize than the city of the first century.

The greater difficulties arising from larger numbers, if there are any, are certainly balanced by the advantages of rapid and easy communication. The steam car, the electric car, the bicycle, the motor cycle, the automobile, the telegraph, the telephone, have made it easier for

thousands of men in the same length of time to communicate with each other today than for hundreds in the first century. And what these have done for the expedition of communication between man and man, waterways, railways, motor-trucks, etc., have accomplished for the handling of the world's productions.

In the field of amusements changes have come, it is true, but it is very doubtful if the changes have brought added difficulty to Christian work. The automobile and the moving picture show are emphatically modern, and most would probably say at the first glance that these have beyond question put obstacles in the way of the Christian worker of today of which Paul never dreamed. But have they really? Does not a little careful thinking show us that these marvels of the twentieth century on the one hand but minister to the perennial desire of man for recreation and amusement, while on the other they afford hitherto unknown possibilities in Christian service? Men have always sought and found amusement and recreation and always will. But a drive in an automobile or an hour or two at the "movies" simply cannot be as morally deadening, as spiritually stupefying, as a visit to the fearful gladiatorial exhibitions of Paul's day. Nor can there be discovered in those gruesome spectacles any residuum that seems to have been favorable to Christian work, any contribution to the furtherance of the gospel. How different, however, is the situation with respect to these contrasted modern inventions. If the automobile and the moving picture offer some obstacles to Christian activity, they also offer themselves as useful evangelistic and educational agencies. And the theater, the drinking place and the gaming table, while they may have modern forms and names, are far older than Christianity, and can hardly be thought more difficult to combat today than in the first centuries of Christian history.

In fact, a careful comparison of the moral atmosphere of the cities of the apostles' day and of those of our day

cannot be to the disparagement of these last. Assuredly the moral atmosphere of the modern Christian (?) city is bad enough, and that of the heathen (?) is worse, yet it would seem to be nearly impossible to surpass the reeking filthiness of the life of the cities first reached by the gospel. In those cities Greek and Roman and Oriental lived together and blended their vices into a mixture of such delicate and diabolical foulness as the world has never seen but once. Conybeare and Howson thus speak of conditions at Corinth: "So notorious was this [the peculiar licentiousness of manners which prevailed at Corinth], that it had actually passed into the vocabulary of the Greek tongue; and the very word 'to Corinthianize,' meant 'to play the wanton'; nay, the reputation of the city had become proverbial, even in foreign languages, and is immortalized by the Latin poets." Writing of the Syrian Antioch these same authors say, "It is probable that no populations have ever been more abandoned than those of oriental Greek cities under the Roman Empire, and of these cities Antioch was the greatest and the worst."

If it must be admitted that the moral atmosphere of the cities of Paul's day was fully as bad as that of the cities of today, it must be conceded also that there was probably as much to distract attention from the truth then as now. "If any city, in the first century, was worthy to be called the Heathen Queen and Metropolis of the East, that city was Antioch." And however much time may have been given by many to that "perpetual festival of vice" which rotted the city's heart, vast business interests must have received due attention, else the "festival of vice" would soon have become impossible. Ephesus was on the great line of communication between Rome and the East, and "was one of the knots where many side roads converged to feed the main route." At the time of Paul's visit the city had become "the great commercial center of the whole country" on the Roman side of Mt.

Tarsus. She reigned in "undisputed supremacy as the sea-end of the great eastern highway." Corinth, because of its favorable location and fine harbors, was "the emporium of the richest trade of the East and the West." And when we recall the thousand devices which today expedite the business of the world, but which were then unknown, it must be admitted that the people of the cities in those days were in all probability just as busy as are we today. Business must have interfered with religion then very much as it does today.

Nor can the difference be very great in the field of thought-life. There are, indeed, today an amazing array of thought schemes about life and its duties and the hereafter, but we know also that the first century had a very adequate supply of them. In fact, if we eliminate the very large number of the thought-schemes of today which claim a common center in Christ, many of which differ but very slightly from each other, the difference in number becomes almost negligible, and the certainty of encountering all was greater in the cities of Paul's day than in those of today. In few cities of today will be found in much strength Buddhism, Brahmanism, Confucianism, Taoism, Parseeism and Mohammedanism. But in nearly every city reached by Christianity in the first century were strong groups representing Judaism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism and certain oriental cults.

At one point, however, the gospel workers of the early centuries had some advantages over the workers of today, viz., there was one language which nearly every body could understand. The Greek tongue was almost universal throughout the Roman Empire. Today, while many more people are able to understand English than were then able to understand Greek, there is no language so uniformly understood throughout the region of Christian activity as was the Greek in those days. Not only in our foreign mission fields must new languages be acquired, but even in our own American cities are to be

found thousands of people who can understand the gospel only as it is presented to them in their native tongues. That this advantage to the early Christian workers be not overestimated, however, at least three further statements should be made: (1) There were many people in the cities first reached by Christianity who understood Greek imperfectly, numbers, doubtless, who understood it not at all. (2) Today in our American cities the children of the multitudes who cannot understand English are rapidly learning our speech, and through the children the older people can be reached to some extent. (3) Everywhere the printing press has reduced to the minimum, in the proclamation of the gospel as well as in setting forth other things, the difficulties arising from differences in speech.

If, then, city work can scarcely be regarded as more difficult today, all things considered, than in the early Christian centuries, can it be said to be as successful now as then? Accurate comparisons are, of course, impossible, for the necessary data cannot be secured. Moreover Christianity's field of contact with city life is today worldwide and space will not permit the presentation of details setting forth in any adequate way the situation as it now is. A further complicating feature is the limited time the gospel has been in contact with the cities of the far East. But is it not true that the greatest victories on the mission fields have not been in the great civic centers? And is it not widely conceded that in our American cities the churches, both Protestant and Catholic, are growing, if at all, largely through accessions from rural districts, and that many of those coming from the country to the city are either at once or in the course of a few years entirely lost to the churches? In short, are we not obliged to admit that in the twentieth century Christianity is scarcely dealing as successfully with the city as in the first century? And if Christianity is less successful in dealing with the city today than in the first century,

and the work in cities cannot be regarded as more difficult today than then, where lies the heart of our failure? Have we changed our message too much, or too little? Have we departed too far from the old methods, or are we holding too closely to them? Or are we simply in the ebb of the great tide of religious interest and progress to be lifted soon upon the crest of a great revival wave which shall be world-wide in its sweep and epoch-making in its upward lift?

No attempt can now be made to answer these questions in detail, but we will be wise in proportion as we examine ourselves under the probe of the first two rather than comfort ourselves by the suggestion of the last. At least it would be great gain if city workers might again go carefully through their New Testaments with these questions in mind and sincerely desiring to know "the mind of the Spirit" as to the demands of the age.