CORPUS HELLENISTICUM NOVI TESTAMENTI *

It is said often and loudly that no institution on earth is more conservative than the university. Therefore if at this hour I should try to show that this is a superficial and unjust notion—not too difficult a task—someone might point out triumphantly that the solemnity that has brought us together here follows a traditional pattern.

It is always more maiorum, according to traditional custom, that we celebrate the birthday of the university with a public meeting of the senate, and still adhere to the ancient academic custom that the rector should give an address on a subject related to his field. At certain times, indeed, the mos reigns supreme over the university; the alumnus as doctor permanently possesses all rights "that by law or custom are connected with the doctorate". The game here goes according to the rules in the book of mores.

It is by no accident or mannerism that here we use the Latin word mos. In the ancient world, and certainly in the Roman imperial period, traditional custom played an important rôle and ordinarily regulated the conduct of society and of the individual. According to the poet Ennius "the Roman state rested on the old customs and on her man power", true piety, in the judgment of the philosopher Porphyry, consisted in honoring the gods according to traditional custom. The Jewish historian Josephus repeatedly appealed to this motive in defending those special customs in which the Jews differed from other peoples. These "unwritten laws" were often deemed of higher significance than the written ones. Whenever we thus speak of mores, a small part of the heritage for which we are in debt to the ancient world comes to light.

The question now arises whether Christianity, that other pillar on which our western culture rests to a large degree, has also made

* Address of the Rector Magnificus of the State University of Utrecht, delivered in the Cathedral on the 327th anniversary of the University's founding, March 29, 1963. Translated from the Dutch by Sherman E. Johnson, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California.
1 *Apud* Cicero, *De Rep.* v, 1; Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* ii, 21.
3 In both his Ant. and his B. F., passim.
4 Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 76.
a contribution to this. Certainly, in the course of centuries, the churches have often shown themselves to be a bulwark of conservatism and traditionalism, and one can easily assume that they have made a solid contribution to the maintenance of the mores, or, if you will, to usage. When one investigates primitive Christianity at this point, one comes to the surprising conclusion that on the whole this concept plays no part. The N.T. very seldom speaks of what is "customary", and where it does it is not met with as a motive for the moral conduct of Christians, but only as something in the past, as a definition of Jewish customs. Obviously and decidedly, linguistic usage here indicates a far-reaching difference between early Christianity and its environment.

How is one to account for this difference on a point that so dominates life? Is it accidental, to be explained because of the lacunae in our source material, or is it determined by the very ground of N.T. Christianity?

This, indeed, is one of the questions posed in the work on the so-called Corpus Hellenisticum for the N.T., the aim of which is to collate and arrange the material from the Greek and Roman world that can be useful for interpreting and understanding the N.T.

Since the end of the Second World War, N.T. study has received new impulses from several directions. Here I need only recall the discovery, known to you all, of the famous Dead Sea scrolls and the extensive and important library of Gnostic writings from Upper Egypt; even after this long time the material disclosed by these important finds has not been fully published, let alone assimilated. I think too of the discussions that have gone on, in Germany particularly, but now in America too, of the so-called demythologizing program of Bultmann; and of the strong revival of interest in biblical study in Roman Catholic circles with its resultant implications for ecumenical discussion. Yet in the midst of all these developments one should not forget what I might almost call the classical tasks. And one of these is the Corpus Hellenisticum. Since in the past few years here in Utrecht we have again taken up the thread of this work, the significance of this Corpus Hellenisticum seems to me a fitting theme for an anniversary address.

---

5 Cf. H. Preisker, s. v. θόος, in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum N.T.*, II, pp. 370 f., who nevertheless does not bring out sufficiently the significance that this word had for the ancient world.