

# CITIES OF GOD

*The Real Story of How Christianity  
Became an Urban Movement  
and Conquered Rome*



Rodney Stark

 HarperCollins e-books

# Contents



<i>List of Maps and Illustrations</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>One</i> Missions and Methods	<i>I</i>
<i>Two</i> The Urban Empire	<i>25</i>
<i>Three</i> Christianization	<i>63</i>
<i>Four</i> Cybele and Isis: 'Oriental' Forerunners	<i>85</i>
<i>Five</i> Paul and the Mission to the Hellenized Jews	<i>119</i>
<i>Six</i> Gnosticism and Heresy	<i>141</i>
<i>Seven</i> The Last Days of Paganism	<i>183</i>
<i>Conclusion</i> Why Historians Ought to Count	<i>209</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>223</i>
<i>Statistical Appendix</i>	<i>225</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>251</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>263</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>273</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	
<i>Other Books by Rodney Stark</i>	
<i>Credits</i>	
<i>Cover</i>	
<i>Copyright</i>	
<i>About the Publisher</i>	

## *Chapter One*



# Missions and Methods

**N**EW ACCOUNTS of early Christianity are everywhere. A book claiming that Jesus got married, fathered children, and died of old age has sold millions of copies. Bookstores are bursting with ‘new,’ more ‘enlightened’ scriptures said to have been wrongly suppressed by the early church fathers. Often referred to as Gnostic gospels, these texts purport to have been written by a variety of biblical characters—Mary Magdalene, St. James, St. John, Shem, and even Didymus Jude Thomas, self-proclaimed twin brother of Christ. Meanwhile, a group calling itself the Jesus Seminar receives national media attention each year as it meets to further reduce the ‘authentic’ words spoken by Jesus to an increasingly slim compendium of wise sayings.

But is any of this true? How can we know? Presumably, by assembling and evaluating the appropriate evidence. Unfortunately,

far too many historians these days don't believe in evidence. They argue that since absolute truth must always elude the historian's grasp, 'evidence' is inevitably nothing but a biased selection of suspect 'facts.' Worse yet, rather than dismissing the entire historical undertaking as impossible, these same people use their disdain for evidence as a license to propose all manner of politicized historical fantasies or appealing fictions on the grounds that these are just as 'true' as any other account. This is absurd nonsense. Reality exists and history actually occurs. The historian's task is to try to discover as accurately as possible what took place. Of course, we can never possess absolute truth, but that still must be the ideal goal that directs historical scholarship. The search for truth and the advance of human knowledge are inseparable: comprehension and civilization are one.

Fortunately, even if the complete truth eludes us, some historical accounts have a far higher probability than others of being true, depending on the available evidence. And it is in pursuit of more and better evidence that I have returned to the history of the early church. The chapters that follow present many revisions and re-interpretations of early Christian history. But the really 'new' contribution is to *test* these conclusions by analyzing quantitative data.

Early Christianity was primarily an urban movement. The original meaning of the word pagan (*paganus*) was "rural person," or more colloquially "country hick." It came to have religious meaning because after Christianity had triumphed in the cities, most of the rural people remained unconverted. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, the thirty-one cities of the empire having populations of at least 30,000 as of the year 100 are the basis for formulating and testing claims about the early church, based on *quantified* measures of various features of these cities. When was a Christian congregation established in each city? Which cities were mission-

ized by Paul? Which were the port cities? Did a city have a substantial Diasporan Jewish community? Where did paganism remain strongest, longest? Where were the Gnostic teachers and movements located? These quantitative measures make it possible to discover, for example, whether the Gnostics were clustered in the more Christian or in the more pagan cities.

It is in this spirit that missions and methods are the principal topics of this opening chapter. Nevertheless, the relatively brief quantitative aspects of this and subsequent chapters are very secondary to, and embedded in, large historical concerns.

## Missions and Monotheism

Since earliest days, humans have been exchanging religious ideas and practices. For millennia there was nothing special about the spread of religion; it diffused through intergroup contact in the same way as did new ways to weave or to make pottery. Even with the advent of cities, religion did not become the focus of any special effort to proselytize. From time to time, a priest or two probably pursued new followers, and individuals often recommended a particular god or rite to others. But since no one supposed that there was only one valid religion or only one true God, there were no missionaries.<sup>1</sup> Nor was there really such a thing as conversion.

In a religious context populated by many gods, to accept a new god usually does not involve discarding an old one. As the celebrated Arthur Darby Nock pointed out, within polytheism new gods are merely “supplements rather than alternatives.”<sup>2</sup> Nock suggested that the word *conversion* is stretched beyond any useful meaning if it is applied to such relatively trivial actions. Instead, the term should be reserved for *the formation of a new commitment across the boundaries of major religious traditions*. For example, a shift

from polytheism to Judaism, to Christianity, or to Islam is a conversion. So is a shift from one of the monotheistic traditions to another, or (rarely) from one of these traditions to polytheism. However, a shift in patronage from one god of a pantheon to another is not conversion, but *reaffiliation*. The same is true of shifts within the boundaries of a monotheistic tradition, as from Methodist to Baptist, from Orthodox to Reformed, or from Sunni to Shi'ite—these too are acts of reaffiliation. In contrast, *missionaries* are those who seek *converts*, who *attempt to get others to shift from one tradition to another*.<sup>3</sup> Some people serve as part-time, 'amateur' missionaries. Others are full-time 'professionals.' But either sort of missionary is produced only within monotheism.

Even so, not just any sort of monotheism produces missionaries, especially the rank-and-file missionaries on which real success depends. For example, once Christianity became safely ensconced as the Roman state church, its missionary activities very rapidly decayed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, what probably was the first-ever appearance of monotheism—in Egypt during the thirteenth century BCE\*—did not produce rank-and-file missionaries, and probably very few sincere professional missionaries either. Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (who adopted the name Akhenaten) attempted to establish worship of an invisible, omnipotent One True God. But he did it by edict and force—by creating a self-sufficient, state-supported religion and by attempting to suppress the other temples. Upon his death, the priests of the discarded gods combined to destroy all vestiges of monotheism—and did so without opposition, because there were few or no converts to resist them.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the world's first missionaries were Jews, and the world's first converts became Jews.

---

\*It now is the convention to substitute BCE ("before the common era") for the traditional BC.

## *Jewish Missions*

It recently has become fashionable for many secular Jews, being eager to prohibit all religious proselytizing, to deny that Judaism ever was a missionizing faith.<sup>6</sup> But, as every orthodox Jewish scholar agrees,<sup>7</sup> the historical facts are clear: Judaism was the “first great missionary religion.”<sup>8</sup> Maimonides, the famous medieval Jewish scholar, put it plainly: “Moses our teacher was commanded by the Almighty to compel all the inhabitants of the world to accept the commandments.”<sup>9</sup> It could hardly have been otherwise. The obligation to missionize is always implicit in monotheism and is explicit in the Old Testament. *Isaiah* (49:6) reads: “*I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*” Later in *Isaiah* (66:18–19) God reveals his plan to “gather all nations and tongues” and to send missionaries “to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations.” And in *Psalms* 117: “Praise the LORD, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples!”<sup>10</sup>

These and similar verses inspired the renowned third-century-CE\* rabbi, Eleazar ben Pedat, to assert that “God sent Israel into Exile among the nations only for the purpose of acquiring converts.”<sup>11</sup> Some of Pedat’s contemporaries even claimed that “converts are dearer to God than born Jews.”<sup>12</sup> Nor was it only rabbis who praised Jewish missions or noted their success. Writing in the first century CE, Josephus reported the very widespread impact of Judaism on the host cultures of the Diaspora: “[T]he multitude of mankind itself have had a great inclination for a long time to follow our religious observances.”<sup>13</sup> That same century Philo wrote at length about converts and missions to the Gentiles, even claiming

---

\*It now is the convention to use CE (“common era”) in place of the traditional AD.

that many converts left Egypt as part of the Exodus.<sup>14</sup> Like Josephus, Philo also described the widespread observance of Jewish customs, and both of them confirmed that it was common for Jews to invite Gentiles to attend services in the synagogues. This was facilitated by the fact that the language of the Diasporan synagogues was not Hebrew, but Greek, and therefore comprehensible not only to everyone residing in Hellenic regions, but also to all educated Romans, since they more frequently spoke Greek than Latin.

As the practice of inviting guests to worship makes clear, Jews in the Diaspora sought converts, and they seem to have been quite successful in doing so.<sup>15</sup> The best estimate is that by the first century, Jews made up from 10 to 15 percent of the population of the Roman Empire, nearly 90 percent of them living in cities outside Palestine.<sup>16</sup> This would have amounted to from six to nine million people. To achieve these numbers, a considerable amount of conversion would have been required. As Adolf von Harnack recognized, “[I]t is utterly impossible to explain the large total of Jews in the Diaspora by the mere fact of the fertility of Jewish families. We must assume . . . that a very large number of pagans . . . trooped over to Yahweh.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Josephus was probably accurate when he claimed: “All the time they [the Jews] were attracting to their worship a great number of Greeks, making them virtually members of their own community.”<sup>18</sup>

Christian sources also acknowledge the existence of many “God-fearers” in the synagogues, as in the case of Lydia and the women at Philippi.<sup>19</sup> Paul began his sermon in the synagogue in Antioch, “*Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen.*”<sup>20</sup> Later in the sermon he repeated this distinction: “*Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you that fear God . . .*”<sup>21</sup> The God-fearers were Greeks and Romans like the Roman soldier Cornelius,<sup>22</sup> who had embraced Jewish monotheism, but who remained marginal to Jewish life because they were unwilling to fully embrace Jewish ethnic-



ity—not only adult circumcision, but some other aspects of the Law as well.<sup>23</sup> For the fact was that *religious* conversion wasn't sufficient. Rather than letting other 'nations' extol God, the Jewish leadership demanded that all 'nations' become fully Jewish; there was no room for Egyptian-Jews or Roman-Jews, let alone Germanic- or British-Jews, but only for Jewish-Jews. Given the remarkable success they achieved, this ethnic barrier to conversion probably was the sole reason that the Roman Empire did not embrace the God of Abraham. It was not a mistake that Paul let Christianity repeat.

### *The Christian Difference*

Nearly every aspect of the early Christian church was shaped by the obligation imposed on the disciples by Jesus: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*"<sup>24</sup>

While there are good reasons to suppose that the vast majority of early Christian converts were Jews, the marginal "God-fearers" were among the first to join, once it became clear that Christians didn't have to become ethnic Jews. And there lay the monumental difference between these two great missionizing faiths. Early on, Paul had put it this way: "*Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.*"<sup>25</sup> What Christianity offered the world was monotheism stripped of ethnic encumbrances. People of all nations could embrace the One True God while remaining people of all nations.

And so Christians went out to save the world, or at least the 'world' as defined by Rome, and less than three hundred years later

they had converted millions of people and enjoyed substantial majorities in the cities. Ever since, historians have asked: How did they do it? How did this tiny messianic sect from the far eastern edge of the empire overwhelm classical paganism and come to rule triumphantly as the state church?

As will be seen, many factors were involved in the triumph of Christianity, but to begin it is necessary to ask: How does missionizing work? How does anyone actually make converts? Some dismiss such a question by calling the success of the Christian mission a miracle. If so, it was a decidedly incomplete miracle, a miracle entirely at odds with Christ's directive in *Matthew* assigning the job of converting the world to all Christians, and a miracle that is quite inconsistent with the doctrine of free will.

## Networks and Conversion

For generations it was assumed that religious conversions were the result of doctrinal appeal—that people embraced a new faith because they found its teachings particularly appealing, especially if these teachings seemed to solve serious problems or dissatisfactions that afflicted the new believers. On this, both theologians and social scientists agreed. So much so, that ‘everyone’ was content to ‘discover’ how a particular religious movement gained adherents by inspecting its doctrines and then *deducing* who converted to this group on the basis of who most needed what was offered.

It was by this method that it was taken as certain that, in the words of Friedrich Engels, “Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed peoples: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome”<sup>26</sup> After all, the Bible often directly addresses the poor and downhearted and promises

that they will be compensated in heaven, where the “*first shall be last, and the last, first.*”<sup>27</sup> Despite this ‘evidence,’ a consensus has formed among historians of the early church that regardless of biblical assurances to the lower classes, the early Christians were drawn mainly from the ranks of the privileged. E. A. Judge identified the early Christians as recruited mainly from among “a socially pretentious section of the population of big cities,”<sup>28</sup> and Abraham Malherbe concluded that the language used by early Christian writers clearly reflects a literate, educated audience.<sup>29</sup> In his detailed study of the church in Corinth in the first century, Gerd Theissen identified wealthy Christians, including members of the “upper classes.”<sup>30</sup> Many other historians of the early church have expressed similar views.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the method of correlating doctrinal appeals with a target population continued to go unchallenged, because no one ventured out of the library to watch people undergo conversions in order to discover what really was involved. When researchers finally did, what they discovered was that doctrines are of very secondary importance in the initial decision to convert.

In the fall of 1962 two sociologists began an observational study of a small religious group newly arrived in San Francisco from Eugene, Oregon.<sup>32</sup> The group was led by Dr. Young Oon Kim, a Korean woman who had once been a professor of religion at Ewha University in Seoul. She had been sent to America to seek converts to a new religious movement founded in Korea by Rev. Sun M. Moon. Moon had been trained as an electrical engineer, and one day he became convinced that God had chosen him to be the Lord of the Second Advent and to complete Christ’s mission on earth by founding a new church that would unite all of the competing denominations and finally convert the entire world. He was quite successful in attracting followers in Korea, and so after a few

years he dispatched missionaries to other nations. Dr. Kim and her followers were the very first American members of the Unification Church, often called the “Moonies” by the news media.

Moon’s claims were sufficient to place him outside the Christian tradition per se, and thus his followers qualified as converts. The sociologists, as they began to observe the group, carefully studied the Unification Church doctrines, as presented in a scripture written by Rev. Moon called *The Divine Principles*. (It had been translated into English shortly before the sociologists began to study the group.) To their surprise, as they observed several newcomers go through the process of converting, doctrine seemed of little concern to them. Instead, they talked mostly of their growing friendship with other members and of their admiration for Dr. Kim. One put it bluntly: “These are the nicest people I have ever met. What I don’t understand is why they are so wound up about this religion.” Several months later this person got wound up about the religion too, but still had only sketchy ideas about the group’s doctrines. Conversations with other members revealed that they likewise had not been much interested in religion before their conversions. As a late-twenties male told the researchers: “If anybody had said I was going to join up and become a missionary I would have laughed my head off. I had no use for church at all.”

After the sociologists watched several more conversions and reconstructed some past events, it became obvious to them that of all the people the Unificationists encountered in their missionary efforts, the only ones who converted were those *whose interpersonal ties to members overbalanced their ties to nonmembers*. This was evident when the first converts gathered in Oregon. Dr. Kim had spent her first year in Oregon visiting various Christian clubs and study groups, attempting to interest people in her message. She gained little attention and no converts. Then, to save money, she rented a

basement room in a house at the far edge of town. Her landlady was a young housewife who spent much of her time with the two housewives who lived on either side of her. None of them had children, none of them worked, and all three of them were bored. All were newcomers to Oregon, two of them had troubled marriages, and all three were very flattered by Dr. Kim's interest in them. They also were deeply impressed by her education and by her willingness to discuss serious ideas. Eventually Kim revealed her real mission in the United States, and for the first time she found a willing audience. Soon one of the husbands began to take part in evening sessions, and after a few weeks he brought his closest friend from work to participate. The friend was a single young man who had no other friends or relatives in the community. After a few more weeks these five declared themselves the American branch of the Unification Church, the two unhappy wives left their husbands, and soon the whole group moved to San Francisco, accompanied by several additional converts, all of whom had long-standing ties to group members.

One must, of course, leave room for those rare conversions resulting from mystical experiences such as Paul's on the road to Damascus. But these instances aside, conversion is primarily about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines. Of course, one can easily imagine doctrines so bizarre as to keep most people from joining. But, barring that, conversion is primarily an act of conformity—but so is nonconversion. In the end it is a matter of the relative strength of social ties.

Becoming a Unificationist violated conventional norms defining legitimate religious affiliations and identities, and to join could cost someone his or her friends. In fact, many people spent considerable time around the Unificationists and even spoke highly of *The Divine Principles*, but never joined. In every instance these

people had many strong social ties to nonmembers who did not approve of the group. Of those who converted after the group moved to San Francisco, many were newcomers to the city who formed strong ties to members of the group and whose outside attachments were all to people far away who had no notion that there was a conversion in progress. Others were isolates who quickly became deeply involved in their new friendships.

It is important to realize several important things about doctrine and conversion. After conversion has occurred is when most people get more deeply involved in the doctrines of their new group, and most conversionist groups must devote considerable time and effort to the religious education of new converts. Portions of Paul's letters are excellent examples of this activity, for as Nock tells us, the disciples baptized "all who wished to join their number . . . [and] there can have been no preliminary training as a condition of admission."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Philip Jenkins suggested that in the early church, central Christian doctrines, including the crucifixion and resurrection, were "holy truths . . . not to be lightly shared, and at least some churches prevented converts to Christianity from hearing the gospels and their mysteries until they had been formally initiated into the new religion, by means of baptism."<sup>34</sup>

Once converts learn what the doctrines are, many decide (or learn) that the real reason they joined was because the doctrines were so convincing and utterly irresistible. But these same people seldom express such views before or during their conversion. In fact, most converts are not especially interested in religion prior to their conversion. More typically they resemble the Unificationist who had "no use for church at all." Converts are rarely atheists, but most are only very weakly attached to any religion. That is, most new religious groups draw their converts mainly from the ranks of the religiously inactive or alienated: the majority of converts to American 'new' religions report that their parents had no

religious affiliation.<sup>35</sup> As will be seen, that same principle applied to converts to early Christianity.

By now dozens of close-up studies of conversion have been conducted. All of them confirm that social networks are the basic mechanism through which conversion takes place.<sup>36</sup> To convert someone, you must first become that person's close and trusted friend. But even your best friends will not convert if they already are highly committed to another faith. Clearly, these same principles applied as fully in the first century as in modern times. The portrayal in *Acts* of Paul's missionary career as well as his letters to various congregations all testify to the centrality of friendship and social networks in conversions to Christianity. These same sources also reveal the bitter opposition that Christian missionizing aroused among the most 'religious' Hellenic Jews.

## Early Christian Missions

Learning that most conversions are not produced by professional missionaries conveying a new message, but by rank-and-file members who share their faith with their friends and relatives, we discover why 'conversion' involves monotheism. Only monotheism can generate the level of commitment to a particular faith sufficient to mobilize the rank and file to engage in missionizing activities. In fact, even professional missionaries make converts only when, as in the case of Dr. Kim, they have succeeded in building personal bonds of trust and friendship with those they seek to convert. Just as it took Dr. Kim more than a year to build such bonds in Eugene, so too Paul did not rush from place to place leaving a trail of sudden converts. Instead, he spent more than two years building a Christian group in Ephesus, eighteen months in Corinth, and several years in Antioch—and many historians believe his stays in some other places were considerably longer than

has been assumed.<sup>37</sup> However, some of Paul's missionary stops did not require him to recruit a congregation, but were visits to groups of local Christians who already were meeting, as was the case even in Antioch.<sup>38</sup>

The principle that conversions spread through social networks is quite consistent with the fact that the earliest followers of Jesus shared many family ties and long-standing associations.<sup>39</sup> And it is consistent with the strategy pursued by the earliest missionaries who decided to target the Jews of the Diaspora. Not only did they share a common culture, but it seems likely that the missionaries were able to utilize many ties of family and friendship between Diasporan communities and Jews in Israel. Put another way, Paul, Barnabus, Timothy, Silas, and all the others who took Christianity to the Roman Empire traveled along social networks that gave them entry to, and credibility within, the Hellenized Jewish communities. The first paragraph of Adolf von Harnack's masterpiece notes that "the synagogues of the Diaspora . . . formed the most important presupposition for the rise and growth of Christian communities throughout the empire. The network of the synagogues furnished the Christian [movement] with centres and courses for its development, and in this way the mission of the new religion, which was undertaken in the name of the God of Abraham and Moses, found a sphere already prepared for itself."<sup>40</sup>

Although the very first Christian converts in the West may have been made by full-time missionaries, the conversion process soon became self-sustaining as new converts accepted the obligation to spread their faith and did so by missionizing their immediate circle of intimates. This offended many pagans and has confused some historians. Pagans saw something sinister in "the personal approaches made by Christians to non-Christians."<sup>41</sup> As for historians, three of the most prominent recent historians of religions in the Roman Empire find it surprising that Christianity continued



to grow, since “[a]fter Paul there seems to have been no organized or systematic programme of attracting non-believers.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps it lacked a bureaucratic structure, but personal evangelizing *was* the “programme.” Once under way, this program allowed full-time missionaries such as Paul to assume the role of advisers and visiting supervisors of local churches built by, and sustained by, local ‘amateurs,’ as is fully evident in Paul’s letters.

A later chapter will more fully explore the mission to the Hellenized Jews. Here it is sufficient to also note that many of the Jews of the Diaspora were only weakly connected to Judaism, either as a religion or as an ethnicity, and were quite available for conversion to a new religion.

## Subjective Methodology: Higher Criticism and Historical Study

During the nineteenth century, many historians, especially in Germany, began to employ various approximations of scientific methods to reconstruct the past “as it really happened,” to quote the great Leopold von Ranke. This new approach to history soon showed up in studies of early Christianity, giving special emphasis to efforts to identify Christianity’s social setting (*Sitz-im-Leben*) and the religious environment in which Christianity emerged and developed. Eventually, the ‘scientific’ approach to early church history took many variations (and names), most of them having nothing to do with science, as is evident from the fact that they soon became known as the Higher Criticism, a perspective often associated today with such undertakings as the Jesus Seminar and claims that Gnosticism represents the authentic brand of Christianity.<sup>43</sup> In fact, most of these scholars were (and are) ‘scientific’ only insofar as they misunderstood this to justify a skeptical or even an antagonistic approach to scripture: they didn’t even pretend to fulfill the standards

of objectivity that are essential to scientific inquiry. Rather, their highly biased accounts provided apt examples for the anti-scientific tirades from historians of the 'progressive' persuasion, who loudly asserted that any 'true' history is impossible and that therefore, whether wittingly or unconsciously, historians can do nothing other than interpret history to suit their preconceptions.

And it suited many proponents of the Higher Criticism to take the position that unless something reported in the Bible can be completely verified by nonbiblical sources, it must be rejected as mythical—sometimes even extending this rule to deny the historical existence of Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Over the years, *Acts* has been a central focus, and the Higher Criticism soon resembled a competition to determine who could discredit the most passages—a race won by Hans Conzelmann with his absurd claim that, from beginning to end, *Acts* is a made-up story. Paul's missionary voyages never happened! Paul's shipwreck is pure fantasy!<sup>45</sup> But, despite the immense influence of personal bias on their historical visions, not even advocates of the Higher Criticism can sustain just *any* claim. For example, in dismissing the *Acts* account of Paul's shipwreck, Conzelmann and others 'proved' that the story must be a fantasy by demonstrating that it has the boat following 'implausible' routes and otherwise goes against common sense. Fortunately for their critics, these historians knew even less about sailing than they did about science. To them the Mediterranean is like an indoor swimming pool and one would, naturally, head directly to one's destination, giving no heed to currents or to the fact that it is impossible to sail directly into the wind. When it subsequently was shown that the *Acts* account is fully in accord with meteorological and nautical conditions and principles,<sup>46</sup> the response was to grudgingly accept the account in *Acts* as accurate, but to claim that it didn't happen to Paul—rather, that the account in *Acts* must have been lifted from another unknown, but nonbiblical source!<sup>47</sup>

Examples of such militant anti-scriptural bias among putative Bible scholars fill many long books. They stand revealed as bias because it is not true that each age can write history to suit its current sensibilities and concerns. No doubt many historians attempt to write such histories, and some of them gain fame and credibility. But sooner or later most of them fall victim to incompatible facts (such as winds and weather, as above). Meanwhile, the entire basis for this book is to assemble reliable and pertinent facts and then to demonstrate that they disallow some conventional claims about early Christian history, while encouraging others.

## Objective Methodology: The Scientific Method and Historical Study

Even when historians try to be objective, the introduction of a scientific approach to Christian history often has not been very enlightening, because scientific methods have been very poorly understood and inappropriately applied, not only by historians, but equally by many social scientists who have tried their hands at history.<sup>48</sup> The original sin is to confuse naming with explaining—to mistake concepts for theories.

### *Concepts and Theories*

Scientific *concepts* isolate and identify some aspect of reality; they are names attached to carefully formulated definitions. The term *sect* is a concept. It refers exclusively to religious organizations in a high state of tension with their surrounding society. As a proper scientific concept it is abstract; it exists only in our minds. We can't observe the concept of *sect*. What we can observe are concrete instances of this concept: actual groups of people who fit the definition. It is essential to keep in mind that, because *sect* is an abstract

concept, it is *only a name*. To correctly identify some group as a sect does not explain anything about it. It doesn't tell us, for example, why this sect provokes hostility among outsiders. To say it does so *because* it is a sect is circular nonsense—true by definition.

*Theories*, on the other hand, are explanations. They are statements that link some set of concepts and say why and how they are related. Ordinarily the term *theory* is reserved for highly abstract statements that apply to many specific instances, such as a general theory of sect transformation that explains why and how sects in any society tend to move from higher to lower tension with their surroundings.<sup>49</sup> Historians often usefully apply such a general theory to illuminate a specific instance—to explain how the militant Methodist sect of nineteenth-century America became today's very liberal, low-tension religious denomination.<sup>50</sup> But often, too, historians construct explanations that are rather less general and that are more closely tied to a specific case. For the sake of clarity, such an explanation may be called a *thesis*, or, to use Robert K. Merton's label, a theory of the middle range.<sup>51</sup> An example would be the thesis that the treatment of slaves in the New World was far better in Catholic than in Protestant societies *because* of the greater liberality and intrusiveness of Catholic slave codes.<sup>52</sup> It is a thesis rather than a theory because it is not sufficiently abstract to have very general application, but applies only to a quite limited time and place.

Between the application of general theories and the formation of theses, no historical matter of much interest lacks multiple explanations. However, this proliferation of explanations is indicative of the failure to fulfill the scientific method by means of empirical testing. Not just any abstract statement that says why and how some concepts are related is a *scientific* theory. To qualify as a scientific theory the set of abstract statements must give rise to empirical consequences—to outcomes that are, at least in princi-

ple, observable. Put another way, a set of statements does not qualify as a scientific theory or even a scientific thesis unless it predicts or prohibits certain empirical states of affairs. Most scientific research is undertaken to check the predictions of a given explanation and to reject those whose predictions do not jibe with results. Contradictory theories and theses cannot all be true (although all of them could be false). Therefore, when numerous conflicting theories or theses persist, it is certain that they are not being put to adequate empirical tests. That clearly applies to historical studies of the early church. The reason most often given for this state of affairs is that the needed empirical data are long lost in the mists of the past.

### *Concepts and Indicators*

As noted, concepts are abstractions that identify some aspects of reality as forming a class, as being made up of things that are alike—or at least alike for the purposes of theorizing about them. The concept of *mammal* includes all warm-blooded animals that give birth to living young. Zookeepers are quick to point out that there is incredible variety within this biological class: mice, tigers, elephants, apes, dogs, and so on. But these variations within the category of mammal are irrelevant to many biological theories. That is, for many *theoretical purposes*, all mammals are alike! The same is true of sects. Whether a particular group consists of celibate Marcionists or promiscuous Valentinians, sects are alike in that they exist in a high state of tension with their surrounding environment and each raises the same questions about sect formation, growth, or persecution. As these examples of sects reveal, although concepts are abstract ideas that exist only in our minds and are not directly measurable, all scientific concepts have empirical (observable) instances. We cannot

see, touch, or smell the concept of mammal, but we can see, touch, and smell many animals that are classified as mammals. Likewise, we cannot see the concept of sect, but we can observe many actual sects.

An *indicator* is any *observable measure of a concept*. Thus, while scientific research is performed to test a theory or a thesis, the actual research necessarily is based entirely on the examination of indicators. Suppose we predict that sect members feel themselves to be much superior to outsiders in terms of possessing religious truth. To test this prediction we need to examine the beliefs of some appropriate group of sect members to see if they manifest feelings of religious superiority. This would be quite easy for a sociologist to do, but it usually is impossible for historians. Just as one cannot interview the dead, historians cannot go out and collect *new* data on anything! They are entirely at the mercy of the past, able to consult only those facts and observations that were gathered back then and have survived. This is an especially acute problem for those who work on the distant past, in eras from which very little data would be available even if it all had survived. For example, the emperors had only rough estimates of the population of Rome; they gathered no statistics on its ethnic or religious makeup, or on the number of slaves, let alone on more sophisticated matters such as divorce rates or the price of food.

This state of affairs is why historians have allowed their explanations to proliferate and why their disputes linger on and on. Fortunately, the available resources are not nearly as slim as has been assumed. Many adequate indicators of key concepts have been overlooked because so few scholars have been properly trained to recognize, or to draw inferences from, less obvious, less direct indicators. For example, scholars have long disputed the level of church participation prevalent among ordinary Europeans several

hundred years ago. Theses proposing either high levels or low levels of participation have proliferated, but it seemed they could not be put to the test since no records of church activity ever were kept. Then, while examining seventeenth-century parish account ledgers for some French villages, Jacques Toussaert realized he could measure levels of religious participation by estimating the percentage of villagers who took communion at Easter based on receipts for communion wine.<sup>53</sup> Calculating the maximum number of sips per bottle gave him a quite plausible indicator of the maximum number who *could* have taken part. His results favored the low-attendance thesis. Or, in an instance of central importance to the present study, Adolf von Harnack was able to gauge the “expansion” of Christianity by when and where churches appeared.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Hypothesis*

Theories and theses produce specific predictions about the relationships that will or will not exist among some set of indicators. A prediction about the relationship that exists among indicators is known as a *hypothesis*. Consider the thesis about the treatment of New World slaves and Catholic slave codes. It can be transformed into a testable hypothesis as follows: *Prior to the Civil War, the percentage of free ex-slaves was substantially higher in Catholic Louisiana than in any of the other states in the Protestant Deep South.* Knowing what indicators we should look at and what we expect to find, a brief examination of the census of 1830 will reveal strong support for the hypothesis: the percentage of free blacks was many times higher in Louisiana than in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, or other states of the Deep South.<sup>55</sup>

After all the theorizing is done, it is hypotheses that serve as the specific bases for research.

### *Quantification*

The chapters that follow will attempt to place the rise of Christianity within the appropriate social and cultural contexts, but they will do so in a more fully social scientific way than has ever been attempted. Although there will be considerable new theorizing and discussion of prominent theses, the chapters attempt to *identify adequate, quantifiable indicators* of key concepts and then to *properly test important hypotheses*. This approach is in many ways simply an extension of the *Sitz-im-Leben* approach initiated more than a century ago, albeit without the skeptical agenda. *Sitz-im-Leben* can be translated literally as “setting in life” or “life setting,” and it refers to placing the objects of study—be they texts, communities, or individuals—within their social context. Perhaps the most fundamental *Sitz-im-Leben* for Christianity was the cities of the Greco-Roman world of the first several centuries. Of course, even these ancient cities were not all alike, and some of the fundamental ways in which they differed can be measured and used to test hypotheses about the rise of Christianity. Hence, one of the very first things it will be necessary to measure is Christianization. An adequate indicator can be found in *when* the new faith was able to establish a significant congregation in each of these cities. Given this indicator, it is possible to investigate what attributes of cities influenced whether they were Christianized early or late.

### Conclusion

A major purpose of this book is to demonstrate that quantitative methods can help to resolve many debates about early church history. Even so, the heart of the book is not statistical, but theoretical and substantive. Hypotheses do not simply fall out of the sky; they ought to be derived from theories and theses; and these, in



turn, must be situated in an adequate historical context if the subsequent hypothesis-testing is to be of intellectual significance. However, given adequate contexts, testing well-formulated hypotheses through quantitative analysis of adequate indicators will put historical studies of the early church on firmer footing—even when the results show that what most historians believe about something is in fact true!