



Caravaggio, Conversion of Paul (detail)

Session 12: May 6: Paul; Christology

Assignment:

Ehrman, ch. 13, 14 (Afterlife of Jesus; Then and Now)

Summary of Sanders' *Paul* [[link](#)]

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 (the scenario: up to heaven)

I Corinthians 15 (the coming resurrection)

Galatians (whether gentiles must become Jews)

I Corinthians 13 (a greatest hit!)

Ehrman on Christology [[link](#)]

Roman Catholic Catechism on The Fall: condensed [[link](#)]; full [[link](#)]

Mishnah on Sexual Duties [[link](#)]

Optional Reading:

Good history of Secret Mark [[link to website](#)]

Ehrman on Morton Smith and Secret Mark [[link](#)]

Delightful general quiz about where ideas belong [[link](#)]

Ehrman on Luke [blog]

In some ways the most distinctive understanding of the crucifixion-resurrection is in the Gospel of Luke. This author eliminated all references to the atoning character of Jesus death and to the idea that Jesus died “for” others. Instead, Jesus crucifixion is

portrayed as a grotesque miscarriage of justice against an innocent man. Salvation comes when a person realizes just how unjust Jesus' execution was, feels guilt for the sin that she or he has committed, repents of that sin, and turns to God for forgiveness. The death of Jesus here is not an atonement for sin; it is the occasion for turning to God in repentance so that he might forgive.

Ehrman on the Growth of Christianity [blog]

I have been discussing the fascinating article by Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," about how many people converted to Christianity at certain points of time (say, from ten years after Jesus' death to the time the emperor Constantine converted in the year 312). As we have seen so far, the first problem Hopkins deals with is how to count – that is, who counts as a Christian? Hopkins takes the (in my opinion) justifiable and sensible view that if someone considered themselves to be a follower of Jesus (whether they were proto-orthodox, or Sethian, or Marcionite, or Ebionite, or anything else) they should be counted.

The second problem, as we have also seen, is that our sources don't give us any reliable statistics, or indeed statistics of any kind. Instead, our sources (and, by the way, without sources we have no evidence, only guess work, even if it is educated guess work) are highly prone to exaggeration. And so the book of Acts indicates that within a couple of months, some 8000 Jews in Jerusalem had converted. As I've pointed out already, that can't be right.

And so what do we do? At this point Hopkins refers to the interesting study of Rodney Stark, in his book The Rise of Christianity. Let me stress that Stark is not trained as a historian of early Christianity. He is a sociologist who studies modern religious movements, such as Mormonism. But as a sociologist he is very good at crunching numbers. And in his book he crunches the numbers, coming up with some very intriguing and somewhat mind-boggling results.

Let me say before going any farther that Stark's book was highly controversial. He tried to establish how quickly Christianity grew. That was the most compelling part, as I'll be pointing out in a moment. But most of his book was about why Christianity grew, and here he came up with some ideas and theories that simply have not seemed overly persuasive to most historians in the period, in no small measure because he did not have a very sophisticated approach to the surviving sources of the period, unlike his sophisticated approach to number-crunching.

So let me talk about the number crunching, since this also is the issue that Hopkins too wants to focus on. Stark points out that most historians who have tried to explain the growth of Christianity have taken rather wild guesses about how to make sense of it.

Here are the data: Christianity started out as a small group of Jesus' followers after his death – his disciples and a handful of women who came to believe he had been raised.

That much seems pretty certain and is what is reported in the New Testament itself. There seems no reason to question or deny it. Moreover, there is widespread agreement that even though we can't know the exact numbers, or anywhere near the exact numbers, it appears that by the time the emperor Constantine converted, maybe 10% of the empire (or 5% or 15% — let's just say 10%) was Christian. It is almost always thought that the empire comprised 60 million people (give or take 10 million) at the time. So while admitting that we're talking ballpark numbers here, let's assume that there were, say, 6,000,000 Christians at the beginning of the fourth century.

So the question is, how do we go from a handful of Christians at the beginning of the period we are interested in to 6,000,000 at the end?

Most scholars have preferred one of two options. Either the growth was completely miraculous and requires the intervention of God or (or rather and/or) there had to be massive conversions of the sort you would get at a Billy Graham crusade, where at any one moment a Christian evangelist managed to convert hundreds of people to the faith at one time. That just makes sense to most people who try to figure it out. There must have been massive conversions to explain it, right?

Wrong. Stark is a number cruncher. And he studies modern religious movements, where you can actually count the converts (roughly). And he points out that in fact it is not a matter of speculating about massive conversions. It is about math.

For his math problem, Stark points out that the book of Acts has thousands of people converting right away in the first few months. OK, that's probably an exaggeration. So let's just say that by the year 40 CE — ten years after Jesus' death — there were 1000 people who considered themselves Christian. And let's say that by the year 300 (again, we're just doing guesstimates and round numbers here for the sake of illustration) there were indeed 6,000,000. How do we get from 1000 to 6,000,000?

All we have to do is set up an equation and figure it out. We can safely assume that the rate of growth won't be steady and invariable. The rate will fluctuate over time. We'll admit that. But we'll also acknowledge that the more Christians there are, the more other people they'll be able to convert. If five Christians are able to convert five other others, then five hundred Christians will surely be able to convert a lot more than just five others — say, they'd convert roughly the same number, they'd convert 500, in *roughly* the same amount of time. So if there is *roughly* the same approximate rate of conversion over time the more Christians there are, the more converts they would be making.

And so you simply need to figure out what kind of rate of growth is needed (it will go up and down, but you only need an average). Stark crunches the numbers. If you start with 1000 Christians in the year 40 and end up with 6,000,000 Christians in the year 300, you need a rate of growth of (only) (about) 40% a decade. That is to say, the 1000 in the year 40 need to grow only by 40 by the year 50, so that then there are 1400 Christians. By the year 60, with the addition of another 40% more; by the year 70 another 40% —

keep doing the math: by the year 100 there need to be only 7400 Christians; by year 200 then there will be 210,000; and by the year 300 there will be 6,000,000.

It's not a matter of miracle necessarily. And you don't need massive conversions at any point. Assuming a steady rate of growth, where every ten years each ten Christians manage to convert, between them, only four more people to the faith, then you get to 6,000,000. Stark is a bit more precise. He concludes that you need a rate of growth of 43% per decade.

And for him, as a sociologist of modern religion, this is not at all implausible. On the contrary, it's both believable and highly interesting. As it turns out, it is the rate of growth of the Mormon church from the time of its founding until today.

It is not a matter of miracles; it's a matter of steady growth, and it can be accounted for by an exponential curve over time.

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But the numbers that Stark used have always struck me as a bit problematic, even if they are informative. The first thing is this: his first, opening number is for the year 40, when he postulates that there were 1000 Christians. To get from there to 6,000,000 in the year 300, you need only 40% growth per decade (that is, for every ten Christians you need only four more converts, over the space of ten years.) That seems plausible enough. But where does he get that 1000 starting number from?

Well, he gets it from thin air. But think about it for a second. If Christianity started the way the NT says it did, with eleven disciples and a handful of women coming to believe in the resurrection – say 20 people – in the year 30, how do we get to 1000 people a decade later? That's not 40% growth, it's 4900% growth in a decade. Woops.

The other problem is on the other end of things. The most striking thing to those of us who are not statisticians by career, choice, or ability, is the steep rise of an exponential curve. Say the growth rate of Christianity remains 40% per decade even *after* the year 300. How large would the Christian church be when the emperor Theodosius makes Christianity the official religion of the empire in the year 380? The numbers are staggering. With that same growth rate, there would be over 88 million Christians. But there's an obvious problem. The empire had only 60 million people in it, and at least half of them were still pagan in 380. Woops again.

So obviously there are different rates of growth over the period, not a steady rate. But, as I've indicated, both Rodney Stark and Keith Hopkins acknowledge this. I point it out just to stress the fact graphically.

My sense is that we need to adjust somewhat the beginning number – the number of Christians around 40 CE – and, as a result, the percentage rate of growth. But as it turns out, we don't need to adjust them all *that* much to get to slightly more plausible figures.

If you crunch the numbers a bit more realistically, there still is a sensible set of figures that emerge. If, as the NT actually indicates, Christianity started out with about 20 of

Jesus' followers soon after his death coming to believe that he was raised from the dead, and if, as historians widely assume, something like 10% of the empire was Christian when the emperor Constantine converted – so, 6 million people in the year 312 – the growth rate over the period needs to be 56% per decade. But here's the thing: even if you assume there were, say 40 people who suddenly came to believe in Jesus' death and resurrection in the year 30, the growth rate doesn't change *that* much, just from about 56% to just under 53%.

I should stress that we're talking about ballpark figures here. Suppose in fact there weren't 6 million Christians in 312 but only, say, 5 million? The percentage of growth would instead of being just under 52% would be just under 52% per decade, or 4.25% per year. That means that every year, your 100 Christians need to introduce just about four more people into their church. That doesn't seem at all implausible to me, especially for a missionary religion.

I've always said what I've always heard everyone say: the key to Christianity's success was the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 312 CE, that it was this conversion that led to the huge success of Christianity. But is that true? Was it Constantine's conversion that led to such exponential growth of the Christian church, so that it leapt from being 10% of the empire at the beginning of the fourth century to being something like 50% by its end?

Here's a little statistical nugget to think about. If we kept the *same* average growth rate for the fourth century that it had up to the fourth century, and if there were 6 million at the beginning of the century, there would be 173 million by the end (and remember, the total population was only about 60 million)! So that can't be right. To get from 6 million to 30 million you only need a growth rate of about 17% per decade. That's about 1.6% per year. In other words, every set of group of 200 Christians, among them, need to make only 3 converts a year.

That's *without* the emperor converting. You don't need Constantine. You need a steady rate of growth. That's a completely feasible one for a missionary religion.

We are dealing with a world where families all tend to embrace the same religious traditions. Mixed-religion households were extremely rare in antiquity. And almost always, the religion of the Paterfamilias, the man who was head of the household, became the religion adopted and followed by the rest of the family. So if a man converted to follow Jesus, his wife, children, slaves, and other dependents would also convert. This would counterbalance – probably more than counter-balance – the fact that people were dying. There will be natural growth along with conversions.

In fact there probably don't need to be huge numbers of conversions at all. In any city, if a few men convert, then their entire families also become Christian, and you hit your 5% growth rate without any problem at all. You just need the few men to join up now and again.

The Original Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον) with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Questions

Paul had a theology but he wasn't a theologian. Is it any surprise that in responding to individual problems in the churches he founded he was not clear and consistent in his pronouncements?

Romans is a different case. He was introducing himself to the church at Rome and to do so tried to describe his gospel. But even here he is obscure and inconsistent. Romans is probably the most studied of his letters and there is very little consensus about the result. If you're very ambitious, give it a go!