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Drawn to Jesus: Pathways to Faith in a Secular Age

By
Caleb Davis

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2026

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Graduation Date May 15, 2026

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how Millennial and Gen Z adults convert to Christianity. Because of the decrease in American Christianity, the difficulty of coming to faith due to a variety of cultural factors, and Christians often disengaged from evangelism, there is a need to explore what is happening when people to come to faith.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with six Millennial and Gen Z adult converts who became Christians in the last five years. The interviews focused on understanding what led to their conversion and what changes resulted in their life.

The literature review focused on three key areas: New Testament narratives of conversion, reasons for the growth of the church in the first two centuries, and the work of modern cultural apologists.

This study concluded that a variety of factors lead adults to convert to Christianity. There is no one magic bullet. However influential relationships, evidence, teaching, community, and engaging with God in prayer were all important in the conversion process.

In light of these finding five considerations are recommended for churches: 1. The prioritization of prayer. 2. Teaching and equipping for the mission of God. 3. Developing welcoming, loving Christian community. 4. Preaching with conversion in mind. 5. Developing a strategy to be suffering sensitive.

To the People of True Life Church

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus told them. “No one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again. But as I told you, you’ve seen me, and yet you do not believe. Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out.”

— John 6:35–37

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Helping people convert to Christianity is one of the faith's core commands. Jesus commanded and modeled this (Matt 28:18-20), and the early church followed this practice (Acts 11:19). Most Christian organizations' statements of belief and most historical confessions of faith (Lausanne,¹ TGC,² BFM,³ WCF⁴) likewise affirm evangelistic outreach as their mission and a defining element of the biblical narrative.

Given this core belief, it is natural for Christians to expect results from their efforts. In the book of Acts, which catalogs the progression of the early church, the first church leaders expected that in spite of dire persecution, ongoing conversion (e.g. Acts 6:7, 12:24, 13:49) would be the norm. At times large groups of people, up to 3,000, converted, but at other times it was individuals and families. Whether the event was big or small, the refrain repeats, "The word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number." (Acts 6:7) The church grew in a context where "religious conversion was practically unknown in the ancient world."⁵ Despite all the challenges

¹ "The Lausanne Covenant," Lausanne Movement, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://lausanne.org/statement/lausanne-covenant>.

² "Foundation Documents of The Gospel Coalition," The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/>.

³ Southern Baptist Convention, "Baptist Faith & Message 2000," The Baptist Faith and Message, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

⁴ "Westminster Confession of Faith," PCA Administrative Committee, <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession/>.

⁵ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church: Lessons from the First Christians for the Church Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2024), Loc 150, Kindle.

against it, Christianity grew from a small collection of disciples until, “by the year 350, Christians were in the majority—if barely—amounting to somewhat more than 30 million who were at least nominal Christians.”⁶

This numerical spread of the gospel is both the command and expectation that Christians have still today. Most churches include evangelism as a key part of their mission statements.⁷ There are over 60,000 books on evangelism, 50,000 on church growth, and 6,000 on being missional available on Amazon. Major Christian conferences often focus on these themes,⁸ and most seminaries⁹ have departments dedicated to evangelism, apologetics, or church planting. This focus is mirrored in major Christian publications as well.¹⁰ However, over the past decade, Christianity has been steadily decreasing in America, and many in America are saying that Christianity is in crisis.

⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 156.

⁷ See “Who We Are,” Life.Church, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.life.church/who-we-are/> and “Church of the Highlands,” accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.churchofthehighlands.com>.

⁸ See: “TGCW24 Breakouts,” The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/tgcw24/breakouts>, and “Passion: A Gathering for 18–25 Year Olds & Their Leaders,” accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.passion2025.com/>.

⁹ “Doctor of Ministry,” Asbury Theological Seminary, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://asburyseminary.edu/degrees/doctor-of-ministry/>; “Academics,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.sbts.edu/academics/>; “Degrees,” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.sebts.edu/degrees/>; “School of Mission and Theology,” Fuller Theological Seminary, April 26, 2021, <https://www.fuller.edu/school-of-mission-and-theology/>.

¹⁰ Easten Law, “Evangelism,” *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/e/evangelism/> and “How to Help Our Neighbors Meet Jesus Archives,” The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/series/help-neighbors-meet-jesus/>.

The Decrease of American Christianity

Christianity in North America has lost at least 15 million people from its ranks in the last ten years. Dirk Rinker and Michael Jaffarian, leading researchers and consultants to non-profits, write, “Imagine if America’s three largest cities, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, combined, were 100% Christian in 2011 but 0% Christian ten years later. Something like that has happened.”¹¹ Conversations abound about people deconstructing¹² and choosing no longer to identify as evangelicals but rather “exvangelicals.”¹³ Rather than seeing the “Word spread” as was the norm, “In American Christianity today, there are more defections than conversions,”¹⁴ Rinker and Jaffarian state. People are more likely to lose their faith than convert to Christianity. Pew Research Center writes, “A declining percentage of people raised without a religion have converted or taken on a religion later in life.”¹⁵

Christianity is no longer America’s fast growing “religious group.” Currently, according to Gregory Smith, Associate Director of Religion Research at Pew, “Twenty-eight percent of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated, describing themselves as atheists,

¹¹ Lee Shutt, “15 Million Americans Have Left Christianity in the Past Ten Years,” American Beliefs, ACS Technologies, December 7, 2022, <https://www.acstechnologies.com/american-beliefs/15-million-americans-have-left-christianity-in-the-past-ten-years/>.

¹² Kirsten Sanders, “Wait, You’re Not Deconstructing?” *Christianity Today*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march/exvangelical-theology-wait-youre-not-deconstructing.html>.

¹³ Bradley Onishi, “The Rise of #Exvangelical,” ARC, April 9, 2019, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/>.

¹⁴ Shutt, “15 Million Americans Have Left Christianity In the Past Ten Years.”

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, “How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades,” Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/9/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.

agnostics or 'nothing in particular' when asked about their religion.”¹⁶ The “unaffiliated” are the only major religious category experiencing growth.¹⁷ Further, some projections say that the United States will possibly go from being 90 percent Christian in 1972 and 64 percent in 2020 to as low as 35 percent by 2070.¹⁸ At the same time, Pew continues, “U.S. ‘nones’ will approach majority by 2070 if recent switching trends continue.”¹⁹

The trends show more than deconversion. For those who remain, participation in church is decreasing.²⁰ Jim Davis, Michael Graham, Ryan Burge, and Collin Hansen explain this trend in their book, *The Great Dechurching*. “About 15 percent of American adults living today (around 40 million people) have effectively stopped going to church, and most of this dechurching has happened in the past twenty-five years.”²¹ This is the “largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country,” they state.²² Church attendance is also going down: “In the past twenty years of this survey effort, the median attendance size has decreased by over 50% from 137 to 65 attendees in weekly worship

¹⁶ Gregory A. Smith, “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

¹⁷ “Religious Change in America,” Religion and Culture, PRRI, March 27, 2024, <https://www.prii.org/research/religious-change-in-america/>.

¹⁸ Reem Nadeem, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

¹⁹ Nadeem, “Modeling the Future of Religion.”

²⁰ Jim Davis, Michael Graham, Ryan P. Burge, Collin Hansen, *The Great Dechurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2023), Kindle.

²¹ Davis, Graham, Burge, and Hansen, *The Great Dechurching*, 22.

²² Davis, Graham, Burge, and Hansen, *The Great Dechurching*, 22.

services.”²³ More and more churches are closing. The rate of church closure is outpacing the number of new churches being started. Aaron Earls, senior writer for Lifeway Research, writes, “In 2019, approximately 3,000 Protestant churches were started in the U.S., but 4,500 Protestant churches closed.”²⁴ Instead of churches anchoring their communities, they are vanishing. Church bells and steeples were once prominent features throughout American cities and neighborhoods, but now, as documented in multiple reports, church grounds are being bulldozed into housing developments or converted into breweries, cannabis shops, mosques, and art studios.²⁵

This disaffection from the church and Christianity is not because people have lost spiritual interest. Even while Christianity has been decreasing and churches closing, spirituality (by various definitions) has grown among Americans. Clare Ansberry, columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, notes, “About one-third of 18-to-25-year-olds say they believe—more than doubt—the existence of a higher power, up from about one-quarter in 2021.”²⁶ But this belief in a higher power doesn’t mean more are being drawn

²³ Faith Communities Today, “Twenty Years of Congregational Changes: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2021, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

²⁴ Aaron Earls, “Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in U.S.,” Lifeway Research, May 25, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/05/25/protestant-church-closures-outpace-openings-in-u-s/>.

²⁵ Linda Gyulai, “Former Westmount Church Being Converted to Housing, 7 Years after Sale,” *Montreal Gazette*, December 4, 2024, <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/former-westmount-church-is-about-to-be-converted-into-housing-7-years-after-its-sale>; T. M. Brown, “For Sale: Hundreds of Abandoned Churches. Great Prices. Need Work,” Real Estate, *The New York Times*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/25/realestate/church-home-conversion.html>; Sophia Young, “Historic SoBro Church to Be Converted into Event Venue,” *Nashville Business Journal*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2024/12/02/downtown-sobro-church-conversion-event-venue.html>.

²⁶ Clare Ansberry, “The Surprising Surge of Faith Among Young People,” *Life*, *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-surprising-surge-of-faith-among-young-people-424220bd>.

to Christianity. She explains, “Many young adults say they don’t necessarily believe in a God depicted in images they remember from childhood or described in biblical passages.”²⁷ The predominant worldview has been labeled syncretism. People take a variety of often contradictory philosophies from various religions and teachings and create their own worldview. The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, writes, “Research shows that syncretism represents 92 percent of American adults’ dominant philosophy of life, up from 88 percent in 2021.”²⁸ Even many who remain in the church hold beliefs that are not Christian. In a worsening trend, they write, “The research shows a continued erosion of biblical thinking among Christian adults.... Only 6 percent of the self-identified Christians actually possess a biblical worldview.”²⁹ Although many may claim Christianity on a survey, in reality they may not actually hold to the tenants of historic Christian belief.

This is not just a self-esteem problem for Christians. Some researchers, including Pew Research center, argue that the effects of church decline are detrimental to American society because “regular participation in a religious community clearly is linked with higher levels of happiness and civic engagement.”³⁰ Church attendance and participation contribute to longer lifespans, significantly reduced levels of depression and divorce,

²⁷ Ansberry, “The Surprising Surge.”

²⁸ CRC Staff, "CRC Survey Shows Millions in U.S. Embrace Syncretism; ‘Mixing and Matching’ Beliefs Fuels Social Turbulence, Cultural Decay," Arizona Christian University, April 30, 2024, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2024/04/30/crc_millions-in-u-s-embrace-syncretism-mixing-and-matching-beliefs-fuels-social-turbulence-cultural-decay/.

²⁹ CRC Staff, "CRC Survey Shows Syncretism."

³⁰ Travis Mitchell, “Religion’s Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World,” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/>.

lower rates of suicide, decreased smoking and substance abuse, improved survival rates for cancer and cardiovascular diseases, and more.³¹ Brendan Case, Associate Director for Research at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, says, “Religion usually figures in American public policy as a civil liberties issue. But it is also a matter of public health.”³² Ansberry points to studies showing that “those attending religious services weekly had higher 'flourishing' scores than those who never attended.”³³ When people leave Christianity and/or the church behind, they replace some aspects of purpose and happiness but struggle to find the meaningful community they once had,³⁴ according to Derek Thompson, writer at *The Atlantic*. Jerusalem Demsas, writer at *The Atlantic*, agrees, stating that happiness decreases in those leaving their churches.³⁵ The current decline of Christianity is problematic from both a Christian and sociological standpoint.

The Difficulty of Christianity

There are many reasons given for the decline in Christianity in the United States. Many have discussed the culture shifting from modern yet devout to a secular age of expressive individualism where, according to Carl Trueman, professor of biblical and

³¹ Brendan W. Case, “The Toll of Unbelief,” *First Things*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/12/the-toll-of-unbelief>.

³² Case, “The Toll of Unbelief.”

³³ Clare Ansberry, “The Mental-Health Benefits Linked to Going to Church,” *Turning Points, Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/health/wellness/church-religion-mental-health-479d612a>.

³⁴ Derek Thompson, “The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust,” *Ideas, The Atlantic*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/america-religion-decline-non-affiliated/677951/>.

³⁵ Arthur Brooks, “Can Religion Make You Happy?” interview by Jerusalem Demsas, *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/archive/2024/07/religion-happiness-faith-loneliness-spirituality-atheism/678945/>.

religious studies at Grove City College, “The dramatic changes and flux we witness and experience in society today are related to the rise to cultural normativity of the expressive individual self.”³⁶ They have researched this trend extensively. Yuval Levin, director of Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, adds that this shift has also fostered a general distrust of authority and institutions,³⁷ including organized religion. People want to express themselves, not be told who they are and what they are to do.

As the values in American culture have gotten more out of sync with Christianity, the plausibility structure of Christianity has deteriorated. Aaron Renn, author and Senior Fellow at American Reformer, writes of the “Negative World” where the culture is much more openly hostile to Christian belief. He notes, “For the first time in the history of our country, orthodox Christianity is viewed negatively by secular society.”³⁸ Thus, its historically freeing and inspiring characteristics have been hijacked and transformed wholesale into a less attractive option for people to identify with, consider, or continue in.

Author Tara Burton and others have discussed the wide range of alternative options available. People desire “religion decoupled from institutions, from creeds, from metaphysical truth-claims about God or the universe or the Way Things Are, but that still seeks—in various and varying ways—to provide us with the pillars of what religion

³⁶ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 29, Kindle.

³⁷ Yuval Levin, “How Did Americans Lose Faith in Everything?” Opinion, *The New York Times*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/opinion/sunday/institutions-trust.html>.

³⁸ Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 15, Kindle.

always has: meaning, purpose, community, ritual.”³⁹ If Christianity were the only choice, then more people would choose it. But in a pluralistic society, Christianity has become one contending voice among a cacophony of competitors. Asta Kalló, research assistant focusing on religion at Pew Research Center, writes, “Americans are far more likely to say they have become more *spiritual* than to say they have become more *religious*.”⁴⁰ Online community, literature, groups, and other sources have replaced what church and religion once supplied. Politics in America has also become a religious substitute. Perry Bacon, Jr., Kate Cohen, and Shadi Hamid, columnist for the *Washington Post*, report, “Political intensity is replacing religious intensity as the grounding force of what Americans believe in.”⁴¹ If people want community and purpose, they have found their place in political parties and movements.

Others list additional reasons for leaving the faith. Ryan Burge, political scientist, statistician, and professor of practice at Washington University, states, “The most popular reason by a significant margin was ‘religious hypocrisy.’ About 42% of the sample chose that reason for leaving.”⁴² Other reasons include bigotry, religion not making sense, not

³⁹ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022), 11, Kindle.

⁴⁰ Asta Kalló, “Around 4 in 10 Americans Have Become More Spiritual over Time; Fewer Have Become More Religious,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/17/around-4-in-10-americans-have-become-more-spiritual-over-time-fewer-have-become-more-religious/>.

⁴¹ Perry Bacon Jr., Kate Cohen, and Shadi Hamid, “Are Politics Replacing Religion in American Life?” *Washington Post*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/05/09/america-religion-impromptu-podcast/>.

⁴² Ryan Burge, “We Asked the Nones a Bunch of Questions About Leaving Religion,” *Graphs About Religion*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/we-asked-the-nones-a-bunch-of-questions>.

believing the teaching anymore,⁴³ abuse in the church,⁴⁴ and LGBTQ discrimination.⁴⁵

What is clear is that there are a variety of reasons, from personal experience to organizational distrust and rational rejection. Emotions, beliefs, and actions converge and supply the same conclusion.

The Apostle Paul, however, says, “But if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Cor 4:3–4) He is pointing to the unseen reason people reject Christianity: spiritual opposition. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin says, “The ‘secular’ society is not a neutral area into which we can project the Christian message. It is an area already occupied by other gods. We have a battle on our hands. We are dealing with principalities and powers.”⁴⁶

The Disengagement of Christians

Could it be that the reasons cited for church decline also cause Christians to disengage from evangelism? One recent study by Earls found that “66% of Americans

⁴³ “Religious Change in America | PRRI.”

⁴⁴ Kate Shellnut, “1 in 10 Young Protestants Have Left a Church Over Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2019/05/lifeway-protestant-abuse-survey-young-christians-leave-chur/>.

⁴⁵ Brandon Flanery, “I Asked People Why They’re Leaving Christianity, and Here’s What I Heard,” *Baptist News Global*, December 13, 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/i-asked-people-why-theyre-leaving-christianity-and-heres-what-i-heard/>.

⁴⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 150.

are at least open to specifically discussing the Christian faith with a friend.”⁴⁷ However, he adds, “Six in 10 (60%) Americans say many of their friends who claim to be Christians rarely talk about their faith.”⁴⁸ Many Christians even believe it is something they shouldn’t do. A Barna survey reveals, “Almost half of Millennials (47%) agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.”⁴⁹ According to another Earls study:

less than half of self-identified Christians have, at least once in the past six months, shared a Bible verse or Bible story with a non-Christian loved one (46%), invited a non-Christian friend or family member to attend a church service or other program at church (43%), or shared with a non-Christian loved one how to become a Christian (38%).⁵⁰

Many have even said, “When asked if they had previously ‘heard of the Great Commission,’ half of U.S. churchgoers (51%) say they do not know this term.”⁵¹

Why are Christians this disengaged from evangelism? It may be because Christians struggle to believe the content of Christianity themselves, they aren’t confident, they don’t want to be mean, or a variety of other reasons, according to Barna.⁵²

⁴⁷ Aaron Earls, “Most Open to Spiritual Conversations, Few Christians Speaking,” Lifeway Research, February 22, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/22/most-open-to-spiritual-conversations-few-christians-speaking/>.

⁴⁸ Earls, “Most Open to Spiritual Conversations, Few Christians Speaking.”

⁴⁹ “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong,” Barna Group, February 5, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>.

⁵⁰ Aaron Earls, “Christians Say They’re Seeking but Not Having Evangelistic Conversations,” Lifeway Research, May 24, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/05/24/christians-say-theyre-seeking-but-not-having-evangelistic-conversations/>.

⁵¹ “51% of Churchgoers Don’t Know of the Great Commission,” Barna Group, March 27, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/half-churchgoers-not-heard-great-commission/>.

⁵² “Why People Are Reluctant to Discuss Faith,” Barna Group, August 14, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/reasons-for-reluctance/>.

One study, by Right Response Ministries, finds that some Christians believe fruitful evangelism is not possible. They believe the best Christians can do is preserve the Christian heritage and denounce the evils of the age, even to leave behind cities that function with laws and policies contrary to Christian values.⁵³ Church consultant Sam Rainer summarizes their twenty-seven year longitudinal study results, saying that the American church now has “the lowest church health score across denominations” in the category of evangelism.⁵⁴

There are a variety of ways the church has historically thought through engaging culture.⁵⁵ Many approaches and strategies have been used to reach those who are not Christian, including complex activities beyond simple evangelism.⁵⁶ However, a Christianity disengaged from evangelism is not congruent with historic Christianity, nor is it in line with the commands, expectations, and promises of the Bible (Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:8). What can convince the American church to re-engage evangelism?

Throughout church history, Christianity has not merely survived but thrived and grown in difficult circumstances. Historian Larry Hurtado concludes, “For there simply is no new religious group of the time that had the same growth sustained over such a long time. And, as specialists in new religious movements have noted, it is the rare religious

⁵³ “Fight Or Flight: A Message To Christians In Hard Places,” Right Response Ministries, March 18, 2021, <https://rightresponseministries.com/articles/fight-or-flight-a-message-to-christians-in-hard-places/>.

⁵⁴ Sam Rainer, “The One Thing That Solves Most Church Problems (Only 1% of Churches Actually Do This),” Church Answers, November 1, 2023, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/the-one-thing-that-solves-most-church-problems-only-1-of-church-actually-do-this/>.

⁵⁵ “‘Christ and Culture’ - An Overview of a Christian Classic,” The Gospel Coalition, February 25, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/christ-and-culture-an-overview-of-a-christian-classic/>.

⁵⁶ Tim Keller, “How to Reach the West Again,” Redeemer City to City, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/reachthewest>.

group that becomes trans-local, and even fewer that sustain their growth beyond the first few years or decades.”⁵⁷ To understand how, in the middle of societal challenges, people are drawn into Christian faith, one must understand their contextual experiences of conversion. What do recent American adult converts say led them to Christianity? What experiences helped to compel them to come into the church?

Purpose Statement

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Millennial and Gen Z adults convert to Christianity.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do converts describe their understanding of Christianity before converting?
2. What motivated converts to explore Christianity?
3. How do converts describe what drew them to Christianity?
4. How do converts describe positive changes in their life since becoming a Christian?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for Christian pastors, leaders, and individuals who desire to see those who are not Christians come to faith in Jesus. It has bearing on how a

⁵⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2016), 45.

church can organize its activities, community, equipping ministry, and preaching to be suited for effective ministry in a post Christian culture. The study is also significant for cultural apologetics, to better address the unfulfilled and misplaced longings of non-Christians, guiding them toward fulfillment in Jesus.

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Convert – Someone who has moved from a set of beliefs, practices, and/or values that were not explicitly Christian to a conscious decision and experience of embracing Jesus in faith.

Dechurched – Someone who used to go to church monthly but now attends less than once per year.

Cultural Apologetics – The practice of presenting Christianity to be good, beautiful and satisfying, often using cultural narratives and longings.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how adults convert to the Christian faith. To gain a broader understanding of the relevant issues, three areas of literature will be reviewed. The first area will be a New Testament biblical survey of factors leading to conversion. The second area will examine literature on what led to the growth of the church in the first two centuries. A third section will cover literature on how Christian writers in the last decade are connecting themes of Christianity to the longings of the culture.

Conversion Narratives in the New Testament

To understand how the process of adult conversion to Christianity happens, this area of literature review explores the narratives of conversion in the New Testament, examining who converts, what factors precede their conversion, what truths they believe, and how God involves others in the process.

People Open to Conversion

The New Testament presents recurring categories of people who turn to Jesus. Four of these stories referenced here each demonstrate a prototypical example.

The Outcasts

In John 4 Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Even she is shocked that he would speak to her because of her status as a woman and a Samaritan. As John's

Gospel states, “‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?’ she asked him. ‘For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.’”⁵⁸ Andreas Köstenberger, biblical scholar, notes several gulfs that had to be crossed in this conversation: religious, ethnic, and moral.⁵⁹ Additionally, the timing of their meeting indicates she is likely an outcast and was there “when no one else would be at the well.”⁶⁰ Despite these barriers she is led to belief and ultimately to testify to her village, with the result that “many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of what the woman said when she testified, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’”⁶¹

Known Sinners

Luke recounts the story of Zacchaeus whom Jesus calls to himself. He records that this particular interaction brought many complaints against Jesus because, the people said, “He’s gone to stay with a sinful man.”⁶² Jesus does not deny this or defend Zacchaeus; he in fact confirms that the people are right in their interpretation of Zacchaeus but wrong in their complaint. Jesus says, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.”⁶³ As New Testament scholar Darrell Bock notes, “That one is a sinner does not cancel one’s right to appeal to God’s mercy. The crowd has misread the

⁵⁸ Jn 4:9 (CSB).

⁵⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 141.

⁶⁰ The ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

⁶¹ Jn 4:39.

⁶² Lk 19:7.

⁶³ Lk 19:10.

moment.”⁶⁴ But it is of this sinful man, who has defrauded others, and is derided by the crowd, that Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”⁶⁵

The Religious and Upright

It is not only the sinners and outcasts who convert; there are also examples of high-status individuals and religious leaders coming to Jesus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee belonging to “the preeminent Jewish sect,”⁶⁶ comes to Jesus. He appears three times in John’s Gospel, each time more closely associated with Jesus than the time before. He begins by coming to him privately in the night and asking him questions. John records three different questions Nicodemus asks Jesus: “How can anyone be born when he is old?” “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?” “How can these things be?”⁶⁷ Later when the Pharisees are debating the identity and work of Jesus, Nicodemus offers a brief defense before his peers saying, “Our law doesn’t judge a man before it hears from him and knows what he’s doing, does it?”⁶⁸ Finally, after the death of Jesus, he helps bury him by “bringing a mixture of about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes.”⁶⁹ New Testament scholar Leon Morris says, “Whereas the disciples who had openly followed Jesus ran away at the end, the effect of the death of Jesus on these two

⁶⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 1522.

⁶⁵ Lk 19:9.

⁶⁶ Köstenberger, *John*, 117.

⁶⁷ Jn 3:4–9.

⁶⁸ Jn 7:51.

⁶⁹ Jn 19:39.

secret disciples was exactly the opposite.”⁷⁰ This relational progression shows that the religious and upright also come to faith.

Desperate or Suffering

Many who come to faith do so from a context of suffering and distress. The Gerasene man described in Mark 5 fits the category of outcasts and sinners, but he is also presented as a man in deep suffering. “Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.”⁷¹ Commentator James Edwards describes this as “one of the most lamentable stories of human wretchedness in the Bible.”⁷² Jesus delivers him from his sin and suffering, and he begs Jesus that he may go with him and be one of his disciples. Instead, Jesus commissions him to back to his own town and testify to “how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 730. The two secret disciples are Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

⁷¹Mk 5:5.

⁷² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 154.

⁷³ Mk 5:19.

Summary

The New Testament illustrates that people from both genders, different ethnicities, and a variety of contexts are all able to demonstrate authentic conversion. The next section explores what circumstances prepare individuals for conversion.

Circumstances Preceding Conversion

The previous section described the categories of people who are converted using a prototype for each. In this section, the preceding circumstances of conversion are examined. Though not formulaic, these elements occur often in the narratives.

The Word of God Is Preached or Taught

In every New Testament conversion narrative, proclamation or explanation of God's Word by another person is involved. Even when supernatural elements such as visions (Acts 10) or people studying the Scriptures (Acts 8) occur, God still leads people to understand the gospel through human messengers. Conversion is preceded by hearing the message that Jesus taught. After Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, she invites him back to her village, and they say, "We no longer believe because of what you said, since we have heard for ourselves and know that this really is the Savior of the world."⁷⁴ In Acts 2, following Peter's sermon about Jesus, "they were pierced to the heart."⁷⁵ In Acts 17, after Paul preaches in Athens, though ridiculed and questioned by some, others

⁷⁴ Jn 4:42.

⁷⁵ Ac 2:37.

believe. In each case belief does not come as a solo pursuit: it follows exposure to the truth of Jesus from a messenger.

Difficult Circumstances

Conversion often happens to those experiencing crisis leading up to their belief. Paul's dramatic conversion in Acts 9 was preceded by a light from heaven, knocking him to the ground, and blindness. In Philippi the jailer encounters the gospel following an earthquake and an attempted suicide. Paul calls out, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here!"⁷⁶ The jailer then asks how he can be saved. Additionally, in Jesus' ministry, people exhibit basic faith in his power to heal, leading them to come to him. However, this initial interaction does not mean they trusted him as the Messiah. But, it often does become a precursor for an opportunity to turn to trust in him fully. One such case is the story of the ten men healed in Luke 17. They all call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"⁷⁷ But only one returns, thanking Jesus. Jesus tells him, "Your faith has saved you."⁷⁸

Miraculous Works

Miraculous events frequently provide a context for people to develop faith in Jesus. When Jesus calls his first disciples, he gives fishing instructions to Simon Peter, James, and John. They catch a miraculous number of fish, and Peter "fell at Jesus's knees and said, 'Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!'"⁷⁹ In another instance,

⁷⁶ Ac 16:28.

⁷⁷ Lk 17:13.

⁷⁸ Lk 17:19.

Jesus is approached by an official who wants him to heal his boy. Jesus tells him his son will live, and the man returns to find his son alive. When he realizes that his son was healed at the exact same time Jesus spoke, “he himself believed, along with his whole household.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Peter is asked to heal a believer named Tabitha who has died. While she is already converted, her miraculous resurrection calls others to believe: “This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”⁸¹

Spiritual Curiosity

Conversion often emerges not in the hardened skeptics but from those with a genuine spiritual curiosity. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night to ask him questions (John 3), Zacchaeus climbs a tree to try and see Jesus (Luke 19), the Ethiopian official invites Philip up in his chariot to explain Isaiah to him (Acts 8), and Paul is brought to the Areopagus because the philosophers wanted to learn more about this new teaching (Acts 17). In each of these stories, some level of spiritual interest becomes the path to belief.

God Opening the Heart

While human messengers and external circumstances often precede conversions, the New Testament also emphasizes God’s direct action in leading people to faith. Peter has already chosen to follow Jesus, but his fuller confession of faith in him as the Messiah is attributed by Jesus to the work of God. Jesus says, “Flesh and blood did not

⁷⁹ Lk 5:8.

⁸⁰ Jn 4:53.

⁸¹ Ac 9:42.

reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.”⁸² While not explicitly classified as a conversion experience, after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples accepted the Messianic prophecies as referring to Jesus of Nazareth. Luke says that after Jesus taught them and eats with them, “Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”⁸³ Later, in giving more disciples a fuller picture of who he is throughout the Old Testament, Luke says, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”⁸⁴

This response to divine revelation continues after the ministry of Jesus through the book of Acts. When Paul meets Lydia and shares the Word with her, it says, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying.”⁸⁵ Though not specifically mentioned in each conversion experience, God’s intervention is implied because in every case, Jesus’ maxim applies: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”⁸⁶

Summary

There are a variety of common circumstances that precede conversion. The Word is taught, difficult circumstances precipitate a meeting, miraculous requests are granted, spiritual curiosity elicits action, and God opens the heart. But in each experience, two elements are always present – a human messenger and God’s direct action. They work

⁸² Mt 16:17.

⁸³ Lk 24:31.

⁸⁴ Lk 24:45.

⁸⁵ Ac 16:14.

⁸⁶ Jn 6:44.

together through a range of personal narratives, and there are no examples of conversion that do not contain some pre-conditioning. That is to say, no one is recorded who, without spiritual interest or external circumstances, is shown converting. The Bible presents God as orchestrating the heart and life situation to lead people to himself. With these conditions in mind, the next section examines how God leads his messengers to participate in the conversion of others.

Patterns in the Process of Conversion

The conversion narratives show the categories of people who respond and also the patterns wherein God uses others in the process. This section explores three ways the New Testament presents God leading his people (or Jesus) to bring others to faith.

Intentional Going

Many passages in the Bible reveal the successful efforts of people serving the mission of God. After Saul is converted, Luke writes, “Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues.”⁸⁷ Later in Paul’s missionary journeys, he targets specific cities (Romans 15:20) and even smaller groups of people. Luke records how Paul’s ministry at Philippi began: “On the Sabbath day, we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.”⁸⁸ Likewise of Peter, Luke writes,

⁸⁷ Ac 9:20.

⁸⁸ Ac 16:13.

he “was traveling from place to place.”⁸⁹ After persecution breaks out in Jerusalem, those who leave “went on their way preaching the word.”⁹⁰

The same is said of Jesus. He is intentionally on mission and says, “It is necessary for me to proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because I was sent for this purpose.”⁹¹ He doesn’t wait; he has an overarching mission to fulfill and carries on with intentionality. Often when one individual is converted, that person also immediately finds others to share the good news with them. New believers go and tell their friends and family (John 1:40-44), households (Acts 16:15-34), or their villages (Mark 5:20; John 4). In all these cases, there is no waiting for a dream or providence to open a door: there is an intentionality to include others in who and what they have found. Later this intentionality is not just a desire to include others but an intentional obedience to fulfill the mission given by Jesus to his disciples to “make disciples” (Matt 28:19) and be the witnesses of Jesus (Acts 1:8) to the ends of the earth.

Divine Sending

While much of the mission flows from the commission of Jesus, some instances occur as a supernatural intervention, sending people to specific people or places. If Jesus is included as a “divine sender,” then the two largest instances of crowds coming to Jesus follow his specific commissioning. The feeding of the 5,000 follows his commissioning

⁸⁹ Ac 9:32.

⁹⁰ Ac 8:4.

⁹¹ Lk 4:43.

of the twelve to preach and heal (Luke 9), and the feeding of the 4,000 follows his sending of the Gerasene man to his hometown of the Decapolis (Mark 5).

Additionally, many examples are recorded in the book of Acts: Philip is told by an angel to go to a certain road where he ends up meeting the Ethiopian official (Acts 8), Ananias is told in a vision to meet Saul (Acts 9), and Peter and Cornelius are both given visions to meet one another (Acts 10). When the church gathers in Antioch for prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit directly speaks and sends Paul and Barnabas to their missionary post (Acts 13). The book of Acts shows that the spread of the early church was sometimes directed by visions, the intervention of the Spirit, angels, and Jesus. A general commission is carried out, but specific instructions along the way carry the mission forward at crucial moments.

Circumstantial Response

In other situations, mission emerges from unplanned circumstances seized as opportunities from God. These do not arise from an intentional plan or divine directive; rather they result from an overarching responsive posture of the missionary. Jesus' calling of the disciples is often presented as along-the-way interactions. Matthew records, "As he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter), and his brother Andrew."⁹² And again, "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow me.'"⁹³ Similarly, large numbers of people from the Samaritan woman's village come to faith,

⁹² Mt 4:18.

⁹³ Mt 9:9.

but these conversions grew from Jesus' journeying: "Jesus, worn out from his journey, sat down at the well."⁹⁴ Likewise, as Peter and John were headed to pray, they encountered a lame man and healed him (Acts 3). It was this spontaneous act that then led to their opportunity to share about Jesus. The result: "Many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand."⁹⁵

These examples are not presented as cases of intentional mission activity but rather fortunate circumstances to use for the sake of the gospel. The messengers recognize God's providence and act out of their calling. It is these opportunities that often lead to the greatest fruit.

Summary

Despite the variety of ways God leads people, in all these instances his servants are taking initiative. In almost every case the messengers are the ones to speak first. They are not passively waiting for others to come to them. They are not praying for the harvest to be brought into them; they are going into the harvest. The messengers also display a responsiveness to God. Whether responding to a broader call, a specific sending, or the circumstances God has put before them, they are living proactively. And finally, these instances show that the messengers are committed to actually speaking the message. They do not operate with a belief of "preach the gospel often and use words when necessary."⁹⁶ They speak about Jesus, often about repentance, and regularly call for some

⁹⁴ Jn 4:6.

⁹⁵ Ac 4:4.

⁹⁶ "Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary," a saying commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, though no historical evidence confirms he said it. See, for example, Glenn Stanton, "FactChecker:

kind of response (baptism, belief, following, repentance). The final section will explore the core content of their message.

Truth Claims and Conversion

While there are many different circumstances, consistent content is taught and believed, leading to conversion.

Identity of Jesus

The most consistent theme in the conversion narratives is a recognition of the identity of Jesus. Sometimes this is expressed explicitly, as when Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), or when Jesus asks the man born blind if he believes in the Son of Man and he replies, “Lord, I believe,” and worships Jesus (John 9:38). Similarly, the climax in the interaction with the woman at the well centers on Jesus being the Messiah (John 4:26).

In Acts, sermons often conclude with declarations about Jesus’s lordship and resurrection, such as Peter’s proclamation: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:36) When Paul preaches in Athens, he calls his audience to repent in light of God’s appointment of Jesus as the risen judge of the world (Acts 17:31). There are also occasions where they more generally say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” (Acts 16:31)

Misquoting Francis of Assisi,” The Gospel Coalition, July 9, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>.

Other times, belief is summarized more briefly, as in the response to Jesus's teaching: "And many believed in him there." (John 10:42) At other times the full content of their message is not spelled out but a summary statement is given: "Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture." (Acts 8:35)

Though not in the narratives, the explanations given elsewhere in the New Testament fill out the basic content of what people came to believe. John says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." (1 Jn 5:1) Paul says, "This is the message of faith that we proclaim: If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:8-9). He also lays out to the Corinthian church gospel content, citing Jesus's death for sins, burial, resurrection, and appearances (1 Cor 15:1-8).

The exact content of the message is not always given in each narrative, but it all centers on the identity of Jesus. The call is not just to faith, God, or Christian morality. It is to see and believe who Jesus is. Before the resurrection, belief centered more on his identity as Messiah; after the resurrection, the gospel includes his death and resurrection.

Summary of Conversion Narratives in the New Testament

New Testament conversion narratives reveal gospel salvation received by people of many backgrounds and circumstances, from the religious elite to the outcast. Different circumstances led to faith, but they all include a messenger and a response to that message. These narratives illustrate that people do not come to faith on their own but that through various means God sends his people to bring others to the faith. The core content that leads to belief always focuses on the identify of Jesus.

The Growth of Early Christianity

The previous section explored biblical accounts dealing with conversion and their common components. This next section will now more closely examine the factors that led to the growth of the church in the first and second centuries. It will explore what factors led people to become Christians.

The Unlikely Rise of Christianity

The rise of Christianity was a singularly peculiar occurrence and impossible to take for granted. Professor of church history Alan Kreider says, “The growth of the Christian church in the Roman Empire is mysterious. Scholars who spend their entire lives studying this phenomenon continue to find it surprising.”⁹⁷ Church historian Bruce Shelley agrees, stating, “By ordinary standards nothing could have been less likely to succeed.”⁹⁸

Among the many theories of theologians is that of theologian and author Michael Green, who writes, “Religious conversion was practically unknown in the ancient world.”⁹⁹ People would add to the gods they already worshipped or see how a new god was simply a different name or expression of one they already worshipped. Christianity’s missionary impulse was unique. Professor of the New Testament Eckhard Schnabel says,

⁹⁷ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

⁹⁸ Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 5th ed., ed. Marshall Shelley (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 36.

⁹⁹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 150.

“There is no sign of any pagan god whose cult required active evangelism; not even the emperor cult tried to change anyone’s religion.”¹⁰⁰

In addition, to convert to Christianity came with many costs. Christianity was regarded as “utterly incompatible with”¹⁰¹ the surrounding culture, which did not regard the new faith favorably. Green states, “Not only was it new, Christianity was ridiculous.”¹⁰² In addition to “the charge of atheism,”¹⁰³ Kreider lists gossip, mockery, work trouble, suspicion, jail, and death¹⁰⁴ as possibilities for Christian converts. Hurtado agrees, saying, “It was unlike the consequences of joining practically any other religious group or voluntary association.”¹⁰⁵ The unique opposition it faced makes its rise even more remarkable. Growth is difficult enough, but it did not just grow, it grew, “despite the opposition of laws and social convention”¹⁰⁶ and “despite widespread and determined efforts to eliminate the new faith.”¹⁰⁷

But it did indeed rise. “The Jesus-movement, which started in an obscure part of the Roman Empire, in a relatively short period transformed into a major religion with

¹⁰⁰ Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 760.

¹⁰¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 176.

¹⁰² Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 682.

¹⁰³ Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 761.

¹⁰⁴ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 37-38.

¹⁰⁵ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 176.

¹⁰⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*.

¹⁰⁷ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 31.

millions of followers spread out from India in the east, Ethiopia in the south to Britain in the West.”¹⁰⁸ Scholars agree it is hard to give the exact growth rate of Christianity, but sociologist Rodney Stark notes, “Forty percent per decade (or 3.42 percent per year) seems the most plausible estimate of the rate at which Christianity actually grew during the first several centuries.”¹⁰⁹ The remainder of this section of the literature review will examine what factors led to the growth of the early church in the first two centuries.

The Missionary Life of Christians

One of the earliest explanations for the growth of Christianity centers on the missionary commitment of its followers. From the beginning, the call of Jesus involved a life of radical reorientation and mission. Schnabel notes that Jesus called the apostles “to participate in his mission of rescuing the lost by devoting their entire energies (‘leaving their nets’) to get people to repent and recognize the presence of God’s reign.”¹¹⁰ They understood this task and embraced it. Green says they had a “confidence in the truth of their message,”¹¹¹ and, because of this had relentless conviction, they also possessed the passion and determination to “act as Christ’s embassy to a rebel world, whatever the consequences.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ W. A. Dreyer, “The Amazing Growth of the Early Church,” *HTS Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012), Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

¹⁰⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁰ Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 752.

¹¹¹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 74.

¹¹² Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 171.

Some scholars observe that there are not many commands for Christians to personally evangelize. Eckhard notes that Paul's exhortations "do not include appeals to be active in mission and evangelism and to work toward winning additional inhabitants of their cities and of the surrounding villages to faith in Jesus Christ."¹¹³ Kreider looks beyond the Bible's references and observes that in surviving early catechisms, "not one of them admonishes the new believers to share the gospel with the gentiles,"¹¹⁴ and in a survey of early Christian preaching, there are no instructions calling people to evangelize.

This lack of instruction might suggest that mission was not a communal expectation. However, despite the absence of such explicit commands, the missionary impulse among Christians remained. Eckhard says, "Christians continued to speak about their faith in their personal contacts with relatives, friends, neighbors and business partners, and . . . people were converted to faith in Jesus Christ as the result of such conversations."¹¹⁵ Whether through direct command or not, the missionary resolve of Christians was not confined to the original twelve apostles. Theologian David Lim relates how their enthusiastic conviction meant that in every place "they lived or migrated, the good news spread by word of mouth through their natural relationships of families, friends and acquaintances."¹¹⁶

¹¹³Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission 1 & 2*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2004), 1452.

¹¹⁴ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1526.

¹¹⁶ David S. Lim, "Evangelism in the Early Church," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 355.

Across the Roman world, early Christians shared the gospel with those around them. This phenomenon is difficult to quantify, but scholars have proposed numerical models to illustrate the potential impact of grassroots evangelism. One projection estimates that “a gifted leader can convert on average twenty-five people per year, and an ordinary cleric ten people per year.”¹¹⁷ Though speculative, such estimates underscore the plausible scope of relational mission. The result, as Schnabel summarizes, was “that the missionary work of the early believers in Jesus the Messiah in the first century led to the establishment of Christian communities in dozens of cities of the Roman Empire.”¹¹⁸ This is the evidence of a missional ethos that was remarkably effective.

Green argues that early Christian growth was not the result of sophisticated techniques or organized programs. Rather, it was the product of a shared spiritual fervor: “Neither the strategy nor the tactics of the first Christians were particularly remarkable. What was remarkable was their conviction, their passion, and their determination to act as Christ's embassy to a rebel world, whatever the consequences.”¹¹⁹ Shelley echoes this assessment, identifying the defining catalyst for Christian expansion as a deep-seated spiritual urgency. “Early Christians were moved by a burning conviction,”¹²⁰ he writes. “The Event had happened.” For both authors, it was not technique but theological

¹¹⁷ Adam M. Schor, “Conversion by the Numbers: Benefits and Pitfalls of Quantitative Modelling in the Study of Early Christian Growth,” *Journal of Religious History* 33, no. 4 (2009): 472–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9809.2009.00826.x>.

¹¹⁸ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 913.

¹¹⁹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 171.

¹²⁰ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 37.

certainty, anchored in the resurrection, that energized the church's missionary impulse and sustained its costly witness.

Open Relational Networks

While the early Christians' missionary conviction fueled gospel proclamation, the mechanism through which the faith spread was primarily relational. Stark argues that the success of conversionist movements hinges not on ideology alone but on social structure: "The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments."¹²¹ In his sociological analysis, based in part on comparisons between modern religious movements, Stark concludes that conversion rarely originates from ideological adoption. Rather, it involves aligning religious beliefs with relationships being formed. He argues that when new relational attachments outweigh previous relational bonds, people's beliefs come into alignment with their greater relationships. He says, "It is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members."¹²² This insight helps explain a counterintuitive pattern: new religious movements often thrive in areas marked by high levels of secularization. Stark says, "Religious movements do best in places where there is the greatest amount of apparent secularization."¹²³ They do not have prior strong commitments to another religious group.

¹²¹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 20.

¹²² Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 17.

¹²³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 54.

He adds, “New religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented.”¹²⁴

Professor Glenn Hinson affirms the relational conversion dynamic, observing, “Most converts became acquainted with [a new faith] through causal contacts—friendship with members of the church.”¹²⁵ Kreider reinforces this point with examples from various relational settings: “Masters interacted with slaves; residents met neighbors; and above all believers networked with relatives and work colleagues. In all these relationships, ‘affective bonds’ were formed.”¹²⁶ The open network of Christians overcame one of the primary dangers of stagnation that new religious movements face. Stark argues that most fail because they become closed off and cease “sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow.”¹²⁷

The relational nature of conversion also had a compounding effect. Stark explains that when someone joins a religious movement, they often try to bring their social circle with them. “When someone converts to a new religion, then they usually seek to convert their friends and relatives.”¹²⁸ Adam Schor, assistant professor, writes that as this happens, “a growing network develops hubs, new adherents should be attracted to them, further increasing their status.”¹²⁹ Stark suggests that this dynamic helps account for

¹²⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 19.

¹²⁵ E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 49.

¹²⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 81.

¹²⁷ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 20.

¹²⁸ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 68-69.

¹²⁹ Schor, “Conversion by the Numbers.”

Christianity's early growth rates. In his view, "the primary means of its growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the 'good news.'"¹³⁰

Together, these views point to a clear pattern of Christianity spreading through networks of relational influence continually open to outsiders.

The Quality of Community

The openness of Christian social networks was a necessary but incomplete condition for the church's growth. For networks to sustain conversion, they needed to connect people to something deeply attractive. Potential converts had to observe something in these networks that was worthwhile.

The literature widely agrees that conversion was not only driven by the content of Christian belief but also quality of Christian behavior observed in community. As Joseph Hellerman, professor of New Testament Language and Literature, says, it was "the social solidarity experienced"¹³¹ that was visible and attractive. Shelley agrees, saying that "the practical expression of Christian love was probably among the most powerful causes of

¹³⁰ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 208.

¹³¹ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 104.

Christian success.”¹³² Similarly Stark concludes, “It grew because Christians constituted an intense community.”¹³³

The quality of their community was not merely an accident or a given arising from the same core Christian doctrine. Hurtado observes that “much of early Christian exhortation is about what we might call interpersonal relations,”¹³⁴ indicating that Christians did not just spend their time discussing theology or devoting time to practices of worship. Instructions on how to live as a community were paramount. Kreider agrees, showing that these relational ethics were “taught and modeled in many areas of life.”¹³⁵ Stark lists, among many practices, charity, hope, attachment, family, solidarity, and care,¹³⁶ with Kreider adding their sexual ethic, honesty, being willing to lose, rejection of abortion and blood sports, and lack of coercion.¹³⁷ These patterns, Kreider insists, were not incidental but cultivated intentionally; the early Christians were “uncommonly committed to forming the habitus of their members.”¹³⁸

Kreider further contends that the evangelistic appeal of early Christian community was not incidental. There was an awareness that their “habitus,” as he calls it, was what “attracted people to faith in Christ and to membership in the Christian communities.”¹³⁹

¹³² Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 37.

¹³³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 208.

¹³⁴ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 167.

¹³⁵ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 99.

¹³⁶ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161.

¹³⁷ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 122-123.

¹³⁸ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 2.

¹³⁹ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 99.

He argues that they believed the way they lived was the “most authentic way of communicating their message to outsiders.”¹⁴⁰

Conversion happened because Christianity offered a community of love and because this kind of community was largely unavailable in the ancient world. It was not because Christians were so similar that people converted, but rather, Kreider says, “Some pagans found the Christians’ behavior unsettling enough to convert to Christianity.”¹⁴¹ Hurtado agrees, saying their beliefs were often “sharp departures” from the culture around them.¹⁴² Green adds that this was “unparalleled.” He explains, “Nowhere else would you find slaves and masters, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, engaging in table fellowship and showing a real love for one another.”¹⁴³ Stark describes the attractive benefits, writing, “What they brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable.”¹⁴⁴

Even scholars who emphasize public evangelism recognize that Christian lifestyle is central. While Green foregrounds evangelism in his work, he still concedes, “There can be no doubt that it was the changed lifestyle of the early Christians which made such a deep impact upon classical antiquity.”¹⁴⁵ Kreider stresses the quality of Christian

¹⁴⁰ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 95.

¹⁴¹ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 16.

¹⁴² Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 172.

¹⁴³ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 138.

¹⁴⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161.

¹⁴⁵ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 132.

community more than evangelism, concluding that while the early Christians did share their faith, they were mostly focused on their behavior and “patient”¹⁴⁶ with the results.

Response to Crisis

The early church’s love was not confined to its own members. Christians extended care beyond their community, especially in times of crisis, demonstrating a compelling witness that drove the church’s growth. During the devastating plagues that killed thousands throughout the Roman Empire, up to one-third of the population,¹⁴⁷ Christians had a prime opportunity to become markedly visible.

Stark argues that “had classical society not been disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, Christianity might never have become so dominant a faith.”¹⁴⁸ He identifies three major reasons why Christianity appealed to many. First, Christianity had better explanatory power for why these events had happened; second, because of Christians’ love for one another, their survival rates were higher; and third, as those disconnected from Christianity experienced a loss of other relational bonds, they had a “greater probability of replacing their lost attachments with new ones to Christians.”¹⁴⁹ Professor Oleksandr Kashchuk adds that Christians also had theological resources that promised hope in the middle of the plagues. He writes that Christian belief in the

¹⁴⁶ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 25.

¹⁴⁷ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. 73.

¹⁴⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. 73.

¹⁴⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. 73-75.

resurrection allowed “great hope and joy even during pestilence.”¹⁵⁰ This ideological advantage comforted more than any other teachings because, as Stark says, “The pagan teaching could not provide consolation that flowed from the belief in life after death.”¹⁵¹ This outlook created a resilience that attracted outsiders.

Christian response to crisis was also marked by action. Kreider shows how the Christian response was compelling because it was unique. While the pagans sought to appease the gods, Kreider states, “The Christian community responded to the crisis not by cultic acts to appease the gods but by practical deeds to help suffering people.”¹⁵² Their care extended not just to their own; the church also gave aid to nonbelievers.¹⁵³ Kashchuk continues, “The pagans deserted those who began to be sick and left even their dearest friends.”¹⁵⁴ It was their action in crisis and its uniqueness in the culture that allowed Christianity to flourish. Such character made Christianity not only plausible but persuasive so that, as Kashchuk concludes, “During the early Christian period every disaster entailed the pagan conversions.”¹⁵⁵ Crisis became a time for it to shine. The early church did not simply endure but stepped on to the cultural center stage.

Public Witness Through Martyrdom

¹⁵⁰ Oleksandr Kashchuk, “The Early Christians in the Face of Epidemics,” *Studia Ceranea* 11 (December 2021): 611–22, <https://doi.org/10.18778/2084-140X.11.31>.

¹⁵¹ Kashchuk, “The Early Christians in the Face of Epidemics,” 613.

¹⁵² Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 69.

¹⁵³ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 65.

¹⁵⁴ Kashchuk, “The Early Christians in the Face of Epidemics,” 617.

¹⁵⁵ Kashchuk, “The Early Christians in the Face of Epidemics,” 618.

Another crisis leading to conversion was the persecution and execution of Christians. These martyrdoms, often conducted before crowds in the thousands, became unexpected platforms for evangelistic witness. As Shelley notes, “Persecution in many instances helped to publicize the Christian faith.”¹⁵⁶ The Christian response in the face of their martyrdom was often recorded with boldness, love, and joy. Shelley records, “There are a number of cases of conversion of pagans in the very moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians.”¹⁵⁷ It displayed not only Christian courage but a radically different conception of power, hope, and belonging.

Stark shows how these execution events became opportunity for extended preaching. He recounts how Ignatius was taken to Rome on a long journey where “at each stop Ignatius was allowed to preach to and meet with those who gathered.”¹⁵⁸ But the impact came not only from the message preached but also from the manner in which Christians endured suffering. Kreider again emphasizes, “It was not primarily what the Christians said that carried weight with outsiders; it was what they did and embodied that was both disconcerting and converting.”¹⁵⁹ Christians faced death with joy, resolve, and even love to their enemies. Kreider describes how, in some cases, as the public witnessed these executions, they would initially have regarded the Christians’ behavior as

¹⁵⁶ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 38.

¹⁵⁷ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 38.

¹⁵⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 180.

¹⁵⁹ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 52.

distasteful, yet “some members of the crowd found that the Christians had jarred them loose from former ways of thinking and living.”¹⁶⁰

Stark again presents a sociological interpretation, explaining that “martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom.”¹⁶¹ The willingness of Christians to suffer and die, voluntarily and without retaliation, that functioned as powerful testimony to the authenticity and desirability of their faith. As Kreider puts it, martyrdom often became “the best advertising available.”¹⁶²

Doctrinal Attractiveness

The Christian response to crisis attracted converts; the actual content of Christian belief also proved compelling. Across the literature, doctrinal appeal emerges as a major reason why individuals converted. This doctrinal appeal appears in two primary ways: first, in the distinct theological claims made by Christians; and second, in how those claims fulfilled the religious and philosophical expectations of the culture.

Hurtado offers one of the clearest articulations of this view. After surveying various theories for why individuals converted to Christianity, he concludes that the distinctiveness of Christian belief is the most persuasive explanation for why people

¹⁶⁰ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 48.

¹⁶¹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 174.

¹⁶² Everett Ferguson, “Early Christian Martyrdom and Civil Disobedience,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 73–83, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/247271>.

made a “Christian commitment.”¹⁶³ Importantly, Hurtado stresses that this was not merely doctrinal assent but an experience of an “affective and inter-personal impact of those beliefs” and a “life relationship with God and Christ.”¹⁶⁴

Green similarly highlights that “the search for truth and the search for deliverance”¹⁶⁵ were two dominant reasons potential converts explored Christian teaching. And indeed, for those seeking truth, they found the “true philosophy, an intelligible and credible account of God, the world, and man.”¹⁶⁶ The person seeking deliverance “found in Christ the answer to his doubts, his lust, his hunger for immortality, and his longing for a coherent, simple, convincing explanation of the world.”¹⁶⁷

One particularly compelling doctrinal element was Christianity’s monotheism and inclusivity. Stark argues that monotheism was becoming increasingly attractive, and Paul’s message of a universally accessible God cut through the confusion of religious pluralism.¹⁶⁸ Kling writes, “Christianity cut through the countless options in the ancient world.”¹⁶⁹ Amidst a variety of gods and goddesses, Christianity proclaimed “one true God, Lord, and Creator of the universe who was more powerful and personal than the

¹⁶³ Hurtado, *Why on Earth*, 136.

¹⁶⁴ Hurtado, *Why on Earth*, 132.

¹⁶⁵ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 2533.

¹⁶⁶ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 2533.

¹⁶⁷ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 2566.

¹⁶⁸ Eduard Verhoef, “Why Did People Choose for the Jesus-Movement?” *HTS Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016), Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

¹⁶⁹ David W. Kling, “Conversion,” *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Conversion>.

gods and idols of the pagans.”¹⁷⁰ Professor of New Testament Joshua Jipp’s analysis of the book of Acts reinforces this, arguing that it shows “the God of Israel and Jesus the Messiah as having unrivaled power to the pagan gods, magicians, and rulers.”¹⁷¹ Another scholar summarizes the dual persuasiveness of these ideas as the claim that “there are no frontiers between people” and that “this one God has power over all things in the world.”¹⁷² Hurtado concurs, saying, “In a world of many deities, early Christianity proclaimed one almighty deity in absolute sovereignty over all, beneath whom all other beings were mere creatures, unworthy of cultic reverence.”¹⁷³

Another compelling core belief was that God loves people. Stark states, “The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs.”¹⁷⁴ Hurtado agrees that this teaching attracted converts. He writes that the love of God and the love for one another were unparalleled. He observes, “We simply do not know of any other Roman-era religious group in which love played this important role in discourse or behavioral teaching.”¹⁷⁵ While noting that “the greater similarity is with the Jewish tradition”¹⁷⁶ and citing the variety of Old Testament texts that speak of God’s love, he still contends that among Roman-era Jews, “the particular theme of God’s love for the world

¹⁷⁰ Kling, “Conversion.”

¹⁷¹ Joshua Jipp, “Acts of Persuasion: Why Did Gentiles Convert to Christianity?” Word by Word, August 15, 2024, <https://www.logos.com/grow/why-gentiles-became-christians/>.

¹⁷² Verhoef, “Why Did People Choose?”

¹⁷³ Hurtado, *Why on Earth*, 53.

¹⁷⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 86.

¹⁷⁵ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 69.

¹⁷⁶ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 69.

and humanity at large is not really emphasized with anything like the prominence that we find in early Christian texts.”¹⁷⁷ Though commonplace now, saying that God loved people and offered them “an affective life-relationship with God and Christ”¹⁷⁸ was “utterly strange, even ridiculous”¹⁷⁹ to many, but for others it played a “significant role in accounting for their readiness to take up Christian commitment.”¹⁸⁰

The appeal of Christian doctrine was also enhanced by the way it fulfilled, rather than outright replaced, certain elements of existing religious and philosophical systems. Stark identifies two primary groups as especially primed for conversion: Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora and adherents of “Oriental faith,” such as those devoted to Isis or Cybele. For the former, Christianity retained the Old Testament, allowing them to “preserve virtually all of their religious capital, needing only to add to it.”¹⁸¹ Schnabel confirms this pattern, observing, “Most if not all the churches that were established in Asia Minor, Greece and Italy started with Jews being converted to faith in Jesus.”¹⁸² For the latter group, Stark argues that they were forerunners of Christianity, paving the way, since they had a higher content of “emotionalism” and “individualism and virtue.”¹⁸³ He shows that “the geography of the spread of early Christianity through the empire closely followed

¹⁷⁷ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 69.

¹⁷⁸ Hurtado, *Why on Earth*, 132.

¹⁷⁹ Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 68.

¹⁸⁰ Hurtado, *Why on Earth*, 132.

¹⁸¹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 55.

¹⁸² Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 753.

¹⁸³ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 23.

the geography of the spread of temples devoted to Cybele and to Isis.”¹⁸⁴ Stark explains, “People are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they already are familiar.”¹⁸⁵ Shelly supports this further by saying, “The Christian gospel met a widely felt need in the hearts of people... Many people came to see that what the Stoics aimed for, the Holy Spirit produced in Christians.”¹⁸⁶ Stark cites Cyril Bailey’s conclusion as saying, “[T]he Gospel [could not] have won its way if it had not found an echo in the religious searchings and even the religious beliefs of the time.”¹⁸⁷ Conversion accounts from early apologists like Justin Martyr and Tatian support this thesis. Department chair of religious studies at the University of Miami David Kling recounts how in their personal conversion testimonies they describe being disillusioned with Greek culture but found in Christianity the true fulfillment of what they had been looking for: “They did not so much completely replace something old with something new as transform existing categories by giving them new meaning.”¹⁸⁸

Together, these insights from the literature suggest that early Christian doctrine was appealing in its distinctiveness and in its resonance with pre-existent longings. The early church sought to show what was unique and better and also how it was the true fulfillment of the themes people were already desiring.

¹⁸⁴ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 37.

¹⁸⁵ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 55.

¹⁸⁶ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 37.

¹⁸⁷ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 83.

¹⁸⁸ Kling, “Conversion.”

Miracles and God's Intervention

Finally, the literature repeatedly affirms the significance of divine power, particularly in the form of miracles and exorcisms, as a factor in conversion.

Green draws a distinction between the conversion paths of the educated and the common people, arguing that while many intellectuals came to faith through belief and observing Christian behavior, for common people their conversion “was largely brought about through the miraculous power of the gospel to set people free from the dark forces that could infest and spoil human life.”¹⁸⁹ Similarly Schnabel lists “miracles and exorcisms” as the first of the most popular explanations for the success of Christian mission.¹⁹⁰ Kreider likewise examines Origen’s teaching on exorcisms and says that “when an encounter took place between God’s power and demonic power and someone fell to the floor and people prayed—then people were converted to God.”¹⁹¹ Citing other early literature for additional support Kling states, “In twenty-two of twenty-nine conversion stories, the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (second and third centuries) highlights miracles as a stimulus to conversion.”¹⁹² While he acknowledges that many of these texts are clearly embellished, their consistent emphasis on supernatural intervention indicates the role of miracles in leading to conversion. MacMullen goes even further, arguing that this was the most important factor in the conversion of the “every man.” He

¹⁸⁹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 2612.

¹⁹⁰ Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 773; Schnabel, however, does not hold this view himself.

¹⁹¹ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 109.

¹⁹² Kling, “Conversion.”

writes, “The Church really grew in historically significant numbers through demonstrations, or the report of demonstrations.”¹⁹³

Although Stark’s sociological approach makes him skeptical of attributing growth directly to miracles, he nevertheless acknowledges, somewhat disparagingly, that many early historians treated miracle-working as a “necessary assumption”¹⁹⁴ to explain the movement’s rapid expansion.

Schnabel is perhaps most definitive. After reviewing most all of the scholarly reasons for the growth of the church, he concludes, “No combination of factors sufficiently explains the astonishing spread of Christianity,” adding, “it may be more than Christian bias if we see the growth of the church as the work of divine providence.”¹⁹⁵

Green makes a similar claim, saying, “The man who, more than anyone in the early Church, has given us his assessment of the factors in evangelism is St Luke. And for him the two main ones are the very factors which humans do not provide, namely the Spirit of God and the Word of God.”¹⁹⁶

These observations reveal a consensus in the literature that acts of divine power, or reports of those acts, served as catalysts for conversion and the growth of the early church. While not every convert was drawn by the miraculous, sources agree it is hard to dismiss divine power as a decisive factor in Christian expansion.

¹⁹³ Ramsay MacMullen, “Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 2 (June 1983): 174–92, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials PLUS.

¹⁹⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 14.

¹⁹⁵ Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 773.

¹⁹⁶ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Loc 2319.

Summary of Early Church Growth

The literature has proposed a range of factors to explain the surprising growth of Christianity in the first two centuries. This review examined key themes emphasized across the literature, including: the missionary life of Christian, the social dynamics of open networks, the quality of Christian community, Christianity's response to crises and persecution, the unique and fulfilling doctrinal beliefs of Christians, and the attribution of divine power and intervention. The literature presents all these factors, in varying degrees of emphasis, as integral to the growth and attractiveness of Christianity against the odds in a culturally hostile and religiously pluralistic world.

Jesus as the Foundation for Cultural Apologetics

The previous sections surveyed conversion narratives in the Bible and the reasons for the growth of Christianity in early church history. This section builds on that foundation by examining how four contemporary authors and cultural apologists, Tim Keller, Glen Scrivener, Daniel Strange, and Rebecca McLaughlin, present the person and work of Jesus to secular audiences. While their strategies differ, all make Jesus compelling by showing his relevance to modern cultural values and existential concerns. This literature presents Jesus in three primary ways: as the fulfillment of human longings, as the foundation of Western cultural values, and as a figure of uniquely compelling identity and character. These emphases reveal theological convictions and three strategic approaches to cultural apologetics relevant to conversion.

Jesus as the Fulfillment of Existential Longings

Each author highlights ways that the Christian faith, centered on the person and work of Jesus, answers the deepest desires of the human heart. They begin by identifying the longing present in the culture and revealing how these pursuits end in futility. From there they argue that it is only through Jesus that these longings find their true fulfillment. Four themes have been chosen to illustrate these arguments.

Meaning and Purpose

Each of these authors argues that humans long for “an overall purpose for living and the assurance that you are making a difference.”¹⁹⁷ Keller emphasizes that meaning is the desire for significance and purpose.¹⁹⁸ Strange identifies the same yearning under the theme of “totality,”¹⁹⁹ which he describes as the deep human need to understand personal identity and purpose. Scrivener notes the importance of the stories people tell. “Our lives are given meaning and perspective by the stories we tell ourselves.”²⁰⁰ Despite the variations in terminology, the authors agree that this longing is universal and that secular attempts to generate meaning are ultimately insufficient.

¹⁹⁷ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 58.

¹⁹⁸ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 57.

¹⁹⁹ Daniel Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About... And How to Connect Them to Christ* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2021), Loc 321, Kindle.

²⁰⁰ Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2022), 34.

Keller argues that the secular pursuit of meaning is “fragile and thin.”²⁰¹ McLaughlin similarly challenges how secular meaning self-generates and builds life that “orbits” its own pursuits. She calls these efforts problematic because it is only in commitment and love that people experience life.²⁰² Together these authors say that secular meaning breaks down in its pursuit.

They agree that it is in Jesus that it can be found. McLaughlin points out that by giving up one’s own life to love him one can then find life.²⁰³ Keller emphasizes that Christian meaning is found not just in submitting to Jesus but in knowing, pleasing, and emulating him.²⁰⁴ If the path to meaning comes from knowing God, then even suffering can draw people near to him, so meaning cannot be taken away.

Collectively these authors present meaning and purpose as standing on stronger ground when it is received rather than created and based on knowing and pleasing God rather than vain pursuits.

Freedom

Freedom is another central aspiration of the secular West. Keller identifies it as “perhaps the only publicly shared and acknowledged moral value of our culture.”²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 65.

²⁰² Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus: 9 Encounters with the Hero of the Gospels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), Loc 2576, Kindle.

²⁰³ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 2576.

²⁰⁴ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 73.

²⁰⁵ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 97.

McLaughlin observes, “Our culture tells us maximizing freedom is the path to joy.”²⁰⁶ Despite this cultural consensus, all four authors challenge the dominant definition of freedom as limitless personal autonomy. They argue instead that true freedom is not the absence of constraints, but the presence of the right constraints, those that align with the nature of reality and the character of God. Keller states that real freedom has to come from giving up some freedom to gain others.²⁰⁷

Strange develops this idea by showing how modern freedom becomes self-defeating and internally contradictory, demanding total autonomy and moral conformity. He notes the “insistence that the beliefs of certain individuals or groups are evil and have no place being expressed in today’s society.”²⁰⁸ Keller contends that only in Jesus can this tension be resolved. He argues that with Jesus, individuals get a creator who has the right to define them and the power to want to submit to his rule. He says, “Serving him becomes our perfect liberation.”²⁰⁹ He states that all other masters will enslave and bring exploitation, but Jesus has first sacrificed his freedom, losing his independence, making him trustworthy.²¹⁰ Strange’s approach demonstrates a different reason why freedom is found in Jesus. He highlights that only in Jesus is found a person who meets the criteria for an authority worth submitting to, perfect knowledge, ethical character, and power.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 2355.

²⁰⁷ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 102.

²⁰⁸ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 455.

²⁰⁹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 114.

²¹⁰ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 117.

²¹¹ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1311.

Keller stresses the emotional plausibility of Jesus as a liberating Lord, grounded in love and self-sacrifice.²¹² Strange emphasizes the logical coherence of Jesus as a uniquely qualified authority, someone who resolves the secular tension between autonomy and binding moral norms.²¹³

As a whole, the authors present authentic freedom being discovered not in unrestrained pursuit but in submitting oneself to someone worthy of submission. Jesus becomes the fulfillment of this because of worthy character, ability, and trust-building loss of freedom on behalf of his people.

Hope

Hope emerges as a central theme in the way each author presents the person and work of Jesus. Keller says, “No one can live without hope.”²¹⁴ Strange describes this longing as the desire for “deliverance,” the desire to find “a way out.”²¹⁵ All four authors observe that contemporary society yearns for personal and global restoration, for the brokenness to be fixed, and a future where things are better. They emphasize different facets of this longing and how it is fulfilled in Jesus. Scrivener critiques the modern narrative of progress as a false hope that often becomes destructive. When societies attempt to manufacture their own redemption through historical revolutions or utopian visions, he argues, they often unleash unprecedented violence and oppression. It becomes

²¹² Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 113.

²¹³ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1315.

²¹⁴ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 152.

²¹⁵ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 563.

“a license to make history in whatever way we choose.”²¹⁶ This is what he said led to the greatest evil, violence, and wars of the twentieth century. Keller observes this as well but focuses in more on the personal nature of hope, particularly “a human hope that can make sense of death, stand up to death, and help us face the fear of death.”²¹⁷ Both authors show that in Jesus both aspects of these desires, the personal and the global, are resolved. Keller states that believers do not have to fear death any longer because it “becomes only an entryway to eternal life with him.”²¹⁸

For Scrivener, the resurrection not only defeats death but also leads to a new kind of life marked by justice and compassion. Using Martin Luther King, Jr., as an example, Scrivener argues that Jesus empowers the kind of work for progress that secular cultural desires. The resurrection, he says, begins “the dawning of a new day,” where believers become God’s instruments of true progress in the world.²¹⁹ Strange adds a critical theological dimension by pressing deeper into the reason that hope is needed to begin with. He shows that it is not only death, suffering, and injustice that must be dealt with. He says, “It’s even worse than environmental or economic ruin, or even death itself.”²²⁰ The ultimate problem is the wrath of God. Thus, he contends that only Jesus can offer lasting hope because he satisfies God’s wrath through his death and resurrection.²²¹

²¹⁶ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 145.

²¹⁷ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 145.

²¹⁸ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 165.

²¹⁹ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, Loc 1502.

²²⁰ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, Loc 1436.

²²¹ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, Loc 1475.

While emphasizing different dimensions of Christian hope, these authors each highlight how Jesus brings the hope the culture longs for. Keller highlights Jesus' triumph over death bringing hope through suffering and death, Scrivener expands hope to include social renewal, and Strange presses into the theological with Jesus as the one who rescues from divine condemnation. Together, they present a comprehensive vision of personal and global hope.

Jesus as the Foundation of Modern Western Values

Each author argues the irrationality of trying to fulfill longings apart from the Christian faith. They show how these longings and values exist because of the Christian worldview and Jesus. Scrivener's book makes this argument especially, but all the reviewed authors make the case. Their argument is that to hold these values consistently, and find fulfillment of their longings, people must return to their origin.

Human Rights

A foundational assumption in Western society is the belief that all humans are equal and possess inherent dignity. Scrivener observes that Western culture takes it as a given that humans are equal. He says there is an "instinctive revulsion at the idea of inequality."²²² Keller agrees, saying, "Human rights is a belief of most Western, secular people."²²³ Keller also says that the same secular people also "believe that religion is one

²²² Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 30.

²²³ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 195.

of the great hindrances in the world to the pursuit of rights.”²²⁴ Yet both authors highlight the irony that this very belief, which often causes modern people to reject Christianity, is in fact derived from the Christian worldview. Keller grounds the connection in the teaching that all humans are made in the image of God.²²⁵ Scrivener agrees but deepens the case by emphasizing the incarnation. In Jesus becoming human, there is even more dignity added to the equality and value of humanity.²²⁶ McLaughlin contributes another point by connecting human rights with the fact that Jesus taught “love across differences.”²²⁷ Keller agrees with her and goes further by presenting how Jesus not only taught this but also “radically and literally God identified with the poor and oppressed” through the life of Jesus.²²⁸

Each of these perspectives shows Jesus as the one who establishes a more lasting basis for human rights and equality than secular stories do. Keller also makes the point that while universal rights are taught by Christianity, every Christian is also an oppressor who has received grace.²²⁹ The authors present Jesus as the founder and originator of human rights and the giver of grace to those who oppress these rights. They argue that this foundation creates a new motivation and power for living out this value.

²²⁴ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 195.

²²⁵ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 199.

²²⁶ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 45.

²²⁷ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 1371.

²²⁸ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 209.

²²⁹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 210.

Compassion

Contemporary Western societies widely affirm the value of compassion. Scrivener highlights how deeply this virtue is embedded in public life, noting that the UK calls its head of government a “minister”—literally, a servant. He traces the cultural prevalence of compassion through the rise of hospitals, the work of organizations like the Red Cross, and a general moral reflex to care for the poor.²³⁰ He summarizes this value by saying “kindness has caught on.”²³¹ Yet, the question arises: why has it caught on, and what sustains it?

Keller presses this question by exposing the internal inconsistency in secular moral reasoning. He says that from an evolutionary secular standpoint, “there is no reason not to act in any way we desire, if we can get away with it practically.”²³² Moral impulses such as kindness and compassion cannot be rationally grounded in a secular framework. Despite this, people still operate within a framework that assumes these values. Like Scrivener he describes this dichotomy as moral “schizophrenia,” where people affirm values that their worldview cannot justify.

However, belief in a good God makes these values consistent and lived out in relationship with him.²³³ Strange shows how seeing Jesus as the norm for morality deepens people’s understanding, focusing on the heart and compassion.²³⁴ Scrivener says

²³⁰ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 55-60.

²³¹ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 60.

²³² Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 183.

²³³ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 190.

²³⁴ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1328.

not just that Jesus taught compassion but that he is “compassion incarnate.”²³⁵ He adds, “The word that describes Jesus’ emotional life more than any other is ‘compassion.’”²³⁶ Scrivener attributes the establishing of care for the sick, poor, and wounded to Jesus’s remarkable character, a Christian global revolution with compassion at its core.²³⁷

Together, these authors agree that modern appeals to compassion, however accurate, are inextricably derived from the work and character of Jesus. The cultural commitment to kindness and mercy is neither morally inevitable nor philosophically self-sustaining. Because Christians through history have viewed Jesus as not just a teacher of compassion but as the very embodiment and origin of it, there has been a reshaping of not only private morality but also cultural values and practice.

Consent – Sexual Ethics

Consent has become a prime virtue in contemporary Western morality, particularly in matters of sexual ethics. Scrivener illustrates by referencing a high-profile legal case where a convicted sexual predator was sentenced with multiple sentences, “between 40 and 175 years, in addition to the 60-year sentence he had already received.”²³⁸ Such extreme sentencing, he notes, reflects a nearly universally accepted moral maxim of sexual consent. He notes that even among criminals, pedophilia and sex

²³⁵ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 54.

²³⁶ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 55.

²³⁷ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 57.

²³⁸ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 65.

offenders are considered the most heinous offenders. This shared hatred, Scrivener argues, signals how deeply the value of consent has taken root in the Western conscience.

Likewise in McLaughlin's discussion of sexuality, she observes that virtually every imaginable sexual behavior is tolerated and celebrated as long as the sole criteria of "consensual" is met.²³⁹ Even when the rest of the Bible's sexual ethic is thrown out, the ethic of consent is maintained. Keller refers to the "harm principle," that "everyone should be free to live as they desire as long as they do not harm anyone else."²⁴⁰

However, Scrivener points out that this would not have been assumed by the Romans. Practices now considered abusive were the norm in Greco-Roman society. People were free to use a slave's body however they wanted, and prostitution of young girls was prevalent.²⁴¹ But he says, "The Christian revolution has given us the category for sexual abuse."²⁴² What does he say led to this dramatic shift? He argues that it was Jesus adding a "vertical dimension" to how sex is viewed, in showing that what happens with our bodies is connected to God.²⁴³ Sexual acts are no longer seen as merely physical transactions but as spiritually significant realities.

McLaughlin offers another theological rationale. She argues that the Christian sexual ethic is not grounded merely in divine command or a social contract but in the

²³⁹ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 1394.

²⁴⁰ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 104-105.

²⁴¹ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 64.

²⁴² Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 65.

²⁴³ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 70.

spiritual purpose of marriage (and thus sex). She says that the “fundamental reason”²⁴⁴ for the Christian sexual ethic is to picture the covenant relationship between Christ and the church. Sex is thus a sacred picture of God’s faithfulness and oneness with his people.

Taken together, these authors contend that the primacy of consent in Western sexual ethics, while culturally celebrated, is again theologically rooted. The sexual instincts of Western culture — its revulsion at sexual predators and abusers and the high value given mutual respect and consent — are not simply intuitive or normative practices throughout time and culture. Rather, they are fruits of a distinctly Christian revolution in how sexuality and people are understood.

Jesus as Uniquely Compelling in Character and Identity

Another way these authors present Jesus is by praising his remarkable character. They name in detail the uniquely compelling aspects of his identity. McLaughlin’s approach is structured around the various roles of Jesus mostly clearly, but each author does the same.

God – Transcendence

Each author presents Jesus as not just a great moral teacher but God himself and thus the way to connect with ultimate transcendence.

McLaughlin traces portraits of Jesus’ divinity throughout the gospels, showing at his birth announcement, baptism, his actions, and teaching that he claims to be God. She says, “If you read through any of the Gospels, you’ll find there is no doubt he made the

²⁴⁴ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 1695.

claim.”²⁴⁵ But she goes further than just showing his claim: she shows why his claim is compelling. Because Jesus is God, she says, humans can be “completely known.”²⁴⁶ She explains, “The one who made us lived and died, hungered and thirsted, sweat and bled for love of us. It means the one who made the stars has wept for us. It means the one who stretched out space stretched out his arms and died for us.”²⁴⁷

Keller presents what the gospels say about Jesus and also shows his singular identity. He says, “In the whole history of the world, there is only one person who not only claimed to be God himself but also got enormous numbers of people to believe it.”²⁴⁸ Keller says that for Jesus to have convinced people he was God, “his life must have been exquisitely beautiful.”²⁴⁹ He says that the gospels present a “counterintuitive brilliance”²⁵⁰ of Jesus.

Unlike these other authors, Scrivener doesn’t spend much time on Jesus’ divinity; he simply asks non-Christians at the end of the book, after presenting where Western values have come from, “Might Jesus be what God is like: Lord of this world?”²⁵¹ Strange also mentions that this connection with God is a universal longing. He calls it the theme of “higher power” or transcendence.²⁵² He builds on this longing for connection—

²⁴⁵ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 647.

²⁴⁶ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 722.

²⁴⁷ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 722.

²⁴⁸ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 237.

²⁴⁹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 241.

²⁵⁰ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 241.

²⁵¹ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 190.

²⁵² Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 839.

whether through interest in the supernatural, camping in churches, or exploring spiritual practices—and shows how Jesus is the higher power people search for, a power who came to earth. He is not just a feeling: he is a person.²⁵³ Because he is God, the good news is that people are “not left wondering about how to connect with God.”²⁵⁴

Together, these authors present a compelling picture. McLaughlin highlights the emotional and pastoral weight of Jesus’s divinity; Keller emphasizes its historical credibility and moral brilliance; Scrivener proposes Jesus as the best candidate for what God should be like; and Strange connects the human longing for transcendence with the person of Christ.

Grace

The sacrificial love of Jesus also emerges as a worthy aspect of his unique character.

McLaughlin presents the sacrificial love of Jesus as a unique aspect of his identity. She says that for those who understand they are sinful, the idea of someone able to “take away *your* sin”²⁵⁵ is a compelling idea. She shows how since God created humans and defines their lives, forgiveness is needed from him.²⁵⁶ She argues that all humans are sinful, deserving of God’s wrath, but that “Jesus the sacrifice had made a way

²⁵³ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1720.

²⁵⁴ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1720.

²⁵⁵ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 2141.

²⁵⁶ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 2155.

for sinful folk like us to live with God.”²⁵⁷ She does not present grace as mere divine affirmation of unconditional positive regard but as deliverance and salvation through self-giving love.

Strange arrives at the same conclusion but from a different angle. He frames grace as the answer to a universal moral tension: people sense that life requires a norm, or standard of goodness and order, yet they know that they constantly fail to live up to this norm. He shows how Jesus fulfills the norm and also saves those that cannot keep the norm. He says, “Jesus is the standard we all want, and Jesus is the Saviour we all need.”²⁵⁸ He presents Jesus as someone to stand in awe of for his moral capacities and also as someone to be grateful towards for his forgiveness.

Keller argues that this grace is unique among world religions, which all stress “earning God’s blessing through moral accomplishment.”²⁵⁹ Because of this unique power, he connects the grace of Jesus to multiple themes throughout his framework. Jesus’ gracious sacrifice is often the culmination of the longings he explores, showing how it becomes the power by which people can experience the happiness,²⁶⁰ freedom,²⁶¹ identity,²⁶² and hope.²⁶³ It becomes the path and assurance that these things are possible.

²⁵⁷ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 2317.

²⁵⁸ Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, Loc 1367.

²⁵⁹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 263.

²⁶⁰ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 96.

²⁶¹ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 117.

²⁶² Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 151.

²⁶³ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 165.

Taken together, these authors offer a beautiful portrait of the grace of Jesus. McLaughlin emphasizes its necessity in the face of divine wrath; Strange highlights its ability to resolve the ache of moral failure; and Keller shows how it empowers all the longings humans experience.

Suffering

One of the most striking features of the uniqueness of Jesus, as emphasized by these authors, is that he is not distant from human suffering but willingly enters into it through his incarnation and death.

As already discussed, Scrivener connects Jesus' suffering with the birth of compassion in Western society. But he also shows how this is unique, that Jesus was "the kind of God who descends to the garbage dump."²⁶⁴ To illustrate Christ's suffering, he says, "Jesus is like an Iraqi torture victim left to rot in a forgotten hell hole."²⁶⁵ McLaughlin shows that he suffered and also took on human suffering. "He came to take our sickness, physical and spiritual, upon himself."²⁶⁶ She presents his suffering as God's means of healing. Keller discusses the suffering of Jesus as willingly embraced so that ultimately human suffering could end. "He was putting himself into our lives—our misery, our mortality—so we could be brought into his life, his joy, and immortality."²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 62.

²⁶⁵ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 54.

²⁶⁶ McLaughlin, *Confronting Jesus*, Loc 1253.

²⁶⁷ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 76.

Together these authors reveal a suffering Savior who draws other sufferers to himself through his choice to draw near them with understanding and help. As Scrivener says, “In Christianity, the Victim, Jesus, suffered redemptively and offers dignity and hope to the oppressed.”²⁶⁸

Summary of Jesus as the Foundation for Cultural Apologetics

Each author understands that only when people see the person of Jesus do they decide to follow him. Toward this end they present Jesus as the fulfillment of cultural ideals, the basis of the most prized values of Western civilization, and a uniquely compelling man of goodness and grace.

Summary of Literature Review

When asking how adults convert to Christianity, three themes have been explored to provide background: how conversion experiences are narrated in the New Testament, what fostered the growth of Christianity in the first two centuries, and how does the unique character and work of Jesus anchor cultural apologetics among prominent authors of the last decade.

The biblical literature concerning conversion narratives in the New Testament showed that a variety of people were open to conversion, including outcasts, known sinners, the religious and upright, and the desperate and suffering. It also revealed that preceding conversion people experienced a variety of factors that primed them for

²⁶⁸ Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 164.

conversion including: the Word of God being taught, difficult circumstances, miraculous works, a growing spiritual curiosity, and God directly opening their hearts. In all these circumstances the study also showed how God led his people to participate through their intentional efforts, directly sending them, or people responding to timely opportunities in front of them. Finally, it showed that the essential content of belief in conversion is the identity of Jesus.

The second literature review concerned the growth of Christianity in the first two centuries. It examined the unlikely rise of Christianity and the factors that contributed to its growth. Factors considered were the missionary life of Christians, open relational networks, the quality of Christian community, the loving response to crisis (particularly the plagues), public witness during martyrdom, the unique doctrinal attractiveness that Christianity presented, and ultimately divine intervention. These factors did not all affect each person but cumulatively explain how a small religious group launched out, defied the odds, and achieved global dominance.

The final literature area explored how four contemporary authors present the persona and work of Jesus to secular audiences, aiming for conversion. They highlight three aspects: how Jesus fulfills existential longings (including meaning and purpose, freedom, and hope), how his life and teachings have established modern Western values (human rights, compassion, and sexual consent), and how his utterly unique character and identity is displayed through transcendent grace, especially his suffering.

Together this literature provides the biblical, historical, and contemporary pastoral background needed to study and understand adult conversion to Christianity today.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore what leads Millennial and Gen Z adults to convert to Christianity. Its assumption was that the converts experienced preaching, community, and aspects of the gospel that led them to find fulfillment they couldn't find elsewhere. Their experiences provided the opportunity to review best practices for reaching people in a post Christian culture. To take advantage of these anecdotal experiences, a qualitative study was proposed to understand the convert's experience. After having been informed by the literature review, the researcher pursued basic qualitative research. The following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do converts describe their understanding or experience of Christianity and God before converting?
2. What motivated the convert to explore Christianity?
3. What drew the converts into Christianity?
4. How do converts describe positive changes in life since becoming a Christian?

Design of the Study

This study employed a basic qualitative research design, which is ideal for exploring the meanings that individuals construct from their experiences. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, describes qualitative research as being, "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to

their experiences."²⁶⁹ This approach aligns with the study's goal of understanding what leads adults to convert to Christianity.

The study's design embraced the core characteristics of qualitative research: an emphasis on understanding processes and meanings, the researcher as the primary tool for data collection and analysis, an inductive approach, and the production of rich, detailed descriptions.²⁷⁰ These characteristics made qualitative research particularly suitable for this study, as it sought to uncover the deep, personal insights of individuals who have converted to Christianity.

The study was motivated by an interest in the phenomenon of conversion, with the goal of extending knowledge in this area. As Merriam notes, "Basic research is motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has as its goal the extension of knowledge."²⁷¹ This research also has practical implications for improving practices related to cultural apologetics, preaching, and evangelism, which aligns with the applied research goal of enhancing the quality of practice within a particular discipline.²⁷²

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its ability to provide in-depth, flexible exploration of participants' experiences. This approach allowed the researcher to gain comprehensive insights into how these individuals make sense of their conversion experiences and the impact those experiences have had on their lives.

²⁶⁹ Sharan B Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2016), 6.

²⁷⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

²⁷¹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 3.

²⁷² Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 3.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who were able to communicate in depth about their experiences of converting to Christianity. Participants were selected using nonprobability sampling, which is ideal for qualitative research since "generalization in a statistical sense is not a goal."²⁷³ Instead, the goal was to gather rich, detailed insights from those who had experienced significant transformations through their conversion.

The sampling strategy employed was purposeful sampling, which "is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned."²⁷⁴ This method allowed the selection of participants who had been practicing Christians for at least, but no more than, five years and had self-reported experiencing personal and spiritual growth since their conversion. As Merriam explains, "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry."²⁷⁵

To ensure diverse perspectives, criterion-based selection was used, where participants were chosen based on specific criteria crucial to the study's purpose. This involved identifying individuals who varied in gender and previous religious backgrounds to provide a wide spectrum of experiences prior to conversion.²⁷⁶ This type

²⁷³ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

²⁷⁴ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

²⁷⁵ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

²⁷⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

of sampling provided the necessary variation to explore the different ways individuals experienced and understood their faith journeys.

Participants were identified using network sampling and were contacted through personal invitations, followed by introductory phone calls. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “minimal” to “no risk” according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by *Caleb Davis* to investigate *Conversion to Christianity* for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how adults have converted to Christianity.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include helping churches more effectively reach the unchurched, equip church members in evangelism, and equip pastors in preaching. Though there are no direct benefits for participants I hope they will be encouraged by retelling their conversion and growth experiences.
- 3) The research process will include a single, hour-long audio recorded interview with 6-8 participants.
- 4) Participants in this research will answer questions over an hour-long interview that share their experience of converting to Christianity.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: The interview may bring up past memories or experiences that were uncomfortable prior to becoming a Christian.
- 6) Potential risks: No to minimal risks due to asking participants to reveal personal experiences relating to past memories and experience.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of

interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.

- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.



9/5/2024

Caleb Davis

Date

Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Having fulfilled the IRB requirements for human rights in research and the risk assessment in the Covenant Theological Seminary’s “Dissertation Notebook,” this research, according to the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment, is “no risk” according to the Seminary’s IRB guidelines.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "most interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured,"²⁷⁷ allowing the researcher flexibility to explore participant responses more deeply. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build

²⁷⁷ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 124.

upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.²⁷⁸ This approach enabled the study to identify common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and effectiveness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from existing literature but evolved based on the explanations and descriptions that emerged from constant comparison during the interviewing process. Merriam emphasizes the importance of refining categories as they arise during data collection, noting that "coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing allows for the emergence of new sources of data."²⁷⁹

The researcher conducted interviews with six participants, each lasting one hour. Prior to the interview, participants were briefed on the study's purpose and provided with an informed consent form. To accommodate participants' schedules, interviews were conducted via video conferencing. The researcher recorded the interviews to ensure accuracy. By conducting one interview per week, the researcher completed data collection in six weeks. Immediately after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes, including both descriptive and reflective observations.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about what life was like before you were a Christian (1–2 years before).
2. Tell me about when you began to explore Christianity.

²⁷⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 125.

²⁷⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 298.

3. Tell me about some of the first Sundays you remember checking out church.
 - a. What was it like hearing about Jesus? b. What were some of the things that most connected with you? c. What elements of the church or community were attractive to you?
4. What were some things that motivated you to keep going back to church??
5. What are some aspects of your life that are different now that you are a Christian?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible, and always within one week of each interview, the researcher personally transcribed each interview using computer software to play back the digital recording. The software allowed for adjustments in playback speed, which facilitated an accurate transcription process. According to Merriam, data analysis is a process of “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting”²⁸⁰ the data. This study employed the constant comparative method of routinely analyzing data throughout the interview process. This method enabled the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of emergent categories, allowing the researcher to compare and analyze interview data progressively as they were collected.²⁸¹

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed, they were coded and analyzed using open coding. The analysis focused on identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and variations in the experiences of participants; and (2) congruence or

²⁸⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 202.

²⁸¹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 207.

discrepancy between different participant responses. These categories were then compared against existing research in conversion studies to identify alignment or divergence with established theories. Specifically, the study looked for themes related to the motivations, experiences, and perceived fulfillment of participants post-conversion, as they relate to understanding the broader process of adult religious conversion.

Coding for analysis included themes of community, spiritual fulfillment, and personal transformation, as well as unique factors in the participants' narratives. The goal of the analysis was to answer the core research questions by inductively deriving themes and categorizing the data based on recurring units of meaning, as described by Merriam: “Making meaning involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning.”²⁸²

Researcher Position

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The researcher for this study has spent most of his life as a Christian within a non-denominational but Reformed tradition. This background includes a deep engagement with biblical counseling, underscoring a belief that true change comes not merely from behavior modification but from a heart transformed by a compelling vision of the glory of God and the beauty of Jesus. The researcher’s view is that the Holy Spirit must open one’s eyes to see Jesus as better, leading to genuine change, a perspective informed by a master's degree in biblical counseling.

²⁸² Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 203.

The researcher has served as a pastor for two decades in highly secular cities. This extensive experience has shown that conversions and spiritual growth are driven by individuals being drawn to Jesus as a better alternative and experiencing this through the lived community of faith. This personal and professional background provides both affinity and insight into the experiences and perspectives of participants in the study.

The researcher's position may introduce biases related to his theological and counseling perspectives, as well as experiences in secular environments. These biases could influence data interpretation and analysis. Awareness of these biases is crucial for understanding how they may shape the study's findings. The researcher acknowledges that the framework, emphasizing a transformative vision of Jesus and experiential community, might impact the analysis but also believes that this shared perspective with participants could enhance the understanding of their experiences.

Study Limitations

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited to adults who converted to Christianity within the past five years and who are currently attending and involved in a church. Participants were selected from various church communities and were required to reflect on their recent conversion experiences. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to intentionally include individuals from various denominational backgrounds, those from different cultural or socio-economic contexts, and those of various other ages. Therefore, the findings of this study may be more reflective of the experiences of recent converts within a particular church community rather than a wider range of Christian experiences.

Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar adult converts in post-Christian or secular contexts, particularly within Western cultural settings. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the motivations and experiences of recent Christian converts should test those aspects in their specific context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for church ministries, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions that seek to understand and support new Christians in their journey of faith.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how adults convert to Christianity. This chapter provides the findings of the six interviews and reports on shared themes and significant insights related to the research questions. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do converts describe their understanding of Christianity before converting?
2. What motivated converts to explore Christianity?
3. How do converts describe what drew them to Christianity?
4. How do converts describe positive changes in life since becoming a Christian?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected six adults who converted to Christianity within the last five years, are between 20–40 years old, and have self-reported spiritual growth since their conversion. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identities. Four participants were men (Hank, Kyle, Corey, and Edward), and two were women (Tammy and Sydney).

Beliefs Before Converting

The first research question explored how adult converts describe their understanding of Christianity prior to conversion. The interview data focused around two

main categories: religious background before converting and religious belief before converting.

Religious Background Before Converting

None of the participants described their childhood as one of genuine Christian faith. Several recalled casual or cultural exposure to Christianity without personal adherence. Hank was raised by a single Christian mother and attended a Christian school in his early elementary years, but he reports little interest at the time, citing his mother's actions and "bigger fish to fry." In a volatile home environment, his immediate concerns were "where [he] would be sleeping," his mother's whereabouts, and "where the next meal would come from." Edward grew up Catholic and believed in God, yet his family attended church mainly "on the big holidays, Easter, [and] Christmas." Other participants were raised in non-Christian settings. Tammy grew up in a culturally Jewish home with virtually no "exposure to Christian ideas almost at all." Sydney was raised in an atheist household explicitly hostile to Christianity; as a child she concluded, "I don't want any part of that." Corey was baptized in a "Unitarian type vibe" church that regarded "Jesus as a teacher," and he notes that he did not "really understand what being a Christian was."

Religious Beliefs Before Converting

When asked about prior beliefs regarding God, Jesus, Christianity, and the church, participants offered varied responses. Most affirmed some notion of God while viewing him as distant or impersonal. Hank summarized his outlook as "either God doesn't exist or he doesn't care." Edward, raised Catholic, conceived of God as "the

creator of life who you don't go to" except in crisis. Tammy believed in a "higher benevolent force who's going to help me." Corey described himself as "spiritual, kind of agnostic." Tammy alone reported active exploration of alternative systems: metaphysics, astrology, tarot, New-Age and Eastern ideas, and occultism.

Perceptions of the church and Christians skewed negative to ambivalent rather than overtly hostile. Corey could not name specific grievances but recalled the general tenor of "growing up in the 90s" as unfavorable toward Christianity, coupled with "some level of discomfort" with its moral teaching, citing homosexuality in particular. Sydney said that seeing Bible verses on someone's wall prompted a scoff, "oh, come on." Hank agreed with the sentiment that "religion was the opium of the masses."

Kyle's trajectory was distinctive. He reported consistently positive experiences with church people yet personal disinterest in Christian claims. He attended church regularly with his family through adolescence into adulthood and believed he had "a full understanding" of doctrine, but it felt "like trying to speak a language I didn't know very well." He recognized, "I really am not a believer." He later "open[ly] revoked" belief and embraced atheism, expecting freedom, but found instead "self-permission to dive deeper into my sins, into my addictions," after which "things began to spiral."

Several participants also indicated that they misunderstood Christianity's core claims. Edward knew the formulas, Jesus is the Son of God who saves, but admitted, "I just didn't think about Jesus." Corey never struggled with the existence of God in the abstract yet found the Bible "a really hard book." As he aged, he thought Jesus' teachings had value, but Corey held no strong opinions. Sydney had heard that Jesus died for sins but "never even understood what it meant" and "always just brushed it off."

Summary of Beliefs Before Christianity

Across cases, participants' early exposure to Christianity ranged from purely atheistic to spiritual occultism. Most of the participants described a distant view of God and mild skepticism toward churches and Christians. One participant reported substantial doctrinal familiarity without personal belief. Overall, prior to conversion participants did not report a clear or authentic grasp of Christianity.

Motivation to Explore

The second research question sought to determine the factors that motivated participants to explore Christianity. It examined the situations, crises, relationships, and worldview shifts that prompted initial openness or investigation. Participant responses can be divided into six categories: pain and crisis, family motivation, influential relationships, profound moments, desire for community, the evidence of evil, and political shifts.

Pain and Crisis

All participants described significant distress in the period preceding conversion. Hank characterized the years before faith as “filled with a repetitive, self-induced misery.” Edward reported feeling “mentally drained, physically drained,” and unsure whom to approach for help. Kyle recalled being “ready to give up on life,” with a “manifestation of just deep dissatisfaction, loneliness, anxiety, [and] depression.”

Several noted harmful coping behaviors (e.g., smoking weed, extended gaming, drugs, pornography). Two participants described episodes they considered psychosis and/or possible demonic encounters.

Relational pain was also common. Corey described his pre-conversion life as “wonderful” by most measures, yet he and his wife experienced a persistent longing for community. Sydney recounted repeated romantic disappointments that left her “absolutely crushed,” alongside the loss of friendships when she disengaged from relationships from which she felt she was “not getting anything.” Some referenced bereavement as a salient factor. Tammy narrated a rejection that left her “shocked” and “spiritually disturbed”; she had been certain that she was going to marry this man, and his rejection left her devastated. She said this helped “open [her] heart” to consider Jesus.

For Family

Two participants indicated that parenting motivations prompted renewed religious exploration. Corey remarked, “We also wanted to raise our kids with faith.” Similarly, the birth of Hank’s son stirred a desire to “set him right and let him have a good life,” which led him to evaluate religious claims as to being true and life-giving for his child.

Influential Relationships

All participants identified specific relationships that catalyzed their exploration of Christianity. Hank pointed to a coworker who was “able and willing to answer my questions,” noting that immersion in a Christian work environment opened him to “the idea of God existing.” In later years, his wife and additional coworkers further influenced

him. Edward's girlfriend began playing sermons during their drives, and a cousin who had recently converted urged him, in the midst of personal struggles, to "talk to God about things." Corey described a woman who befriended his wife and invited their family to a church kids' camp; the invitation eventually drew them into regular church involvement. Sydney's boyfriend was being evangelized by his brother and "talk[ed] about it every once in a while"; as he grew more persuaded, she admitted, "I really like this guy... I want to be able to talk about this with him."

Profound Moments

Several participants reported a profound experience that intensified their search. Sydney recalled hearing that a police officer had been killed; when her boyfriend said the officer was "in a much better place," she realized, from an atheist frame, "I didn't even know what he was talking about," which triggered a "switch in my brain" to investigate Christianity. Hank recounted that when his son was about eighteen months old, the child unexpectedly said, "I want to go to church," a complete sentence, when he wasn't talking much. This surprised both parents and became "pretty compelling." Kyle described ingesting a large amount of marijuana edibles, after which "all of a sudden my mind snapped." He reported a vivid demonic vision, deep paranoia, and fear; family members intervened and prayed for him. He characterized the aftermath as a move "from torment to true belief overnight."

Desire for Community

Only Corey explicitly cited a community-seeking motive at the outset. He and his wife desired a fellowship that shared their “old school conservative” values and found that, even though they were not Christians, Christians were “really the people we align with the most.” That alignment led them to browse churches online and remain open to friends’ invitations.

Evidence of Evil

Several participants reported that perceived moral disorder in the wider world primed openness to Christianity. Multiple interviewees pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a trigger. Hank added that recognizing abortion as “truly abhorrent” contributed to a broader realization. He recalled, “The existence of evil really propelled me toward God.” He reasoned that “if there’s absolute evil... then there must be good,” which initiated a search to identify that good within Christian claims. During Kyle’s breakdown, he reported a figure he saw that he interpreted as either “the devil or an angel,” concluding, “if that is real, so is God.” The vividness of the experience produced intense fear of “eternal torment” and, for him, confirmed spiritual reality.

Political Shift

Some participants explicitly linked emerging political realignments with increased receptivity to a Christian worldview. Hank described moving from Idaho to Washington and perceiving that communities with “a lot more believers” seemed “better,” which “shook” his assumptions and “pushed [him] to be more conservative” and to stop denying

God's existence. As he explored, he found the coherence of conservative answers persuasive and began consuming outlets such as the Daily Wire and Charlie Kirk, which he said "had answers for everything."

Tammy likewise reported a political shift during COVID-19. Frustration with restrictions, mask mandates, and what she termed "super woke ideology" prompted her to consider conservative critiques. Observing a roommate who embraced "woke" policies yet lived, in Tammy's words, a "disordered" life led her to suspect a "flawed worldview." Increasing exposure to progressive peers felt to her "really disconnected from reality," which moved her to explore conservative thinkers (e.g., Matt Walsh, Jordan Peterson) and subsequently to engage the Bible more directly.

Summary of Motivations for Exploring

Despite a previous hostility or an inauthentic understanding of Christianity, the participants were motivated by various life factors to explore Christianity. All participants were motivated by a combination of painful life experiences and influential relationships. Pain included substance abuse, mental health crises, relational problems, and despair. Relationships, whether coworkers, spouses, family, or friends, consistently served as entry points to conversion. Several cited profound moments, such as a child's unexpected request to attend church or a disturbing spiritual encounter. Others were prompted by cultural disillusionment, political shifts, or a desire for community and shared values. While no single story matched an exact pattern, each of them had multiple influences that created openness to explore Christianity.

Drawn to Christianity

The third research question examined the reasons participants gave for ultimately becoming Christians. The analysis revealed a multifaceted process of belief formation rather than isolated events. Responses are presented under seven themes: a multifaceted process, compelling evidence, a sense of God's presence, a decisive moment of prayer, seeing God's character, compelling sermons, and welcoming community.

A Process

All participants described conversion as multifaceted, involving numerous people, events, and seasons of exploration rather than a single instantaneous moment. Hank said, "A multitude of sources brought me to Christ," adding that it was "a slow shift." Sydney spent about nine months exploring Jesus, "being really overwhelmed" and feeling "I don't even know what any of this means" and then more than a year before attending church. She moved from intellectual research to sensing, "If this is true, then this is really important." Corey accepted an invitation to church, then did not return for two years, noting progress while "still not really thinking of myself that way."

Several participants narrated a sequential progression in belief and interest. Marriage clarified for Corey that "this isn't a chemical reaction," and the birth of his first child deepened a sense that "there's more to this." Hank moved from atheism to "admitting there probably is a God," eventually searching which religion has the happiest people, which "propelled" him toward Christ. Tammy traced a long path from conservative pundits to exploring the Bible, because it has "shaped our whole civilization

and all the values of the West” beginning as an intellectual experiment before directly investigating Jesus.

For most participants, online and print exploration preceded church involvement. Corey reported many “conversations with ChatGPT about the Bible.” Tammy cited extensive podcast listening and reading on Quora, Catholic Answers, and Reddit. With minimal prior exposure, Sydney began by searching “What is Christianity all about?” which led to various online sources and books by Tim Keller. Corey added that, not having grown up Christian, it felt easier during this phase to browse churches and watch services online.

Compelling Evidence

Several participants described historical and empirical considerations as compelling factors in their journey. Hank reported that “once you start really looking into it, the evidence supports not only Jesus’ existence but also that he is truly the Son of God and God,” which was persuasive. Tammy similarly concluded that “based on his teachings and based on all the manuscripts about him, clearly he lived. We had gotten to that point of, clearly, he was a guy, a real guy.” Gary agreed, adding, “There’s more evidence of that than any other man of that time period,” and, over time, “I found the supporting evidence of the Bible and of Christian doctrine to be insurmountable.” Sydney initially resisted the biblical miracles, especially the resurrection, but through research reached the view that “it actually is very historically accurate,” at which point “my brain and my heart started to be like, okay... maybe this is more real than I have thought.”

Some participants also cited the endurance of Christianity as confirmatory. Sydney concluded that “there’s a reason that Christianity has been a thing for so long, that so many people... have this faith and have died for this faith.” Tammy echoed this, noting that because “Christianity has been going strong for 2,000 years,” there “has to be some legitimacy to the faith.”

Sense of God’s Presence

Several participants noted a sense of God’s nearness that drew them toward Christianity. Corey, “skeptical by nature,” reported that when he began attending church, “I just felt God... I know it was real,” describing it as “like an energy around me and inside me,” later as “a happiness in your gut.” Sydney recalled a worship song about making room for Jesus: “I remember feeling emotional in the song, and the lyrics were just kind of like washing over me.” Hank recounted a similar moment while listening to a Hillsong song in his car: “I had to pause the song because I was so moved by his presence, and I just felt that he was with me.”

A Decisive Moment of Prayer

All the participants mentioned a profound moment of engaging with God in prayer as the decisive moment when they made a turn in their spiritual life. In the midst of distress, Edward “just started praying,” after which he “felt... relief off my chest,” prompting him to obtain a Bible, continue listening to online sermons, and begin attending church. Over several weeks of commuting, Hank was “moved by his presence,”

convicted over “how long... I had pushed him away,” and found himself listening and praying along to a song about “the beautiful name of Jesus.”

Although already exploring Christianity, Corey “prayed non-stop” when his son became severely ill; “making it through that hard time and feeling like I wasn’t alone... solidified it for me.” While attending church and reading the Bible, Tammy reached an inflection point one night, “Jesus, you gotta help me,” which she described as the moment “everything really clicked.” She recalled, “I actually submitted my will and not just my intellect.” On her first Sunday in church, Sydney prayed and “surrendered” during the pastor’s explanation of communion and invitation to respond to Jesus. Kyle likewise linked his breakthrough to prayer in his father-in-law’s basement; having recited the Lord’s Prayer many times, he said that “that night it meant everything,” and he wanted “exactly what is in this prayer.”

Roughly half of the participants indicated that they had come to faith prior to attending church, using church involvement for further guidance. The other half located the decisive step of faith after beginning to attend services. Only Sydney attributed her moment of faith to a specific Sunday service with a traditional gospel invitation, while Edward’s analogous response occurred in his car while listening to a sermon.

Seeing God’s Character

Several participants noted that the character of God, particularly the person of Jesus, was compelling. Hank reported that his search shifted from identifying the “statistically correct” religion to “wanting to develop a relationship” with Jesus. He was drawn to Christ’s nearness, “Is he really watching me right now?” and to the reality of his

ever-presence. Edward described a similar draw: sermons emphasized that “God is behind you,” so even in fearful times “you will have that strength.” Learning that prayer is like “talking to your father” “changed everything for me,” he said, leading him to bring his struggles to God. Corey likewise said that during his son’s illness, “Jesus is beside me, helping me get up from the mud,” which “drove it home” for him.

Some participants expressed how reading the Bible showed them God’s character in a persuasive way. Hank said the words of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, drew him: “Everything you could ever need is in that sermon.” He cited the Bible’s unsurpassed wisdom as evidence of its truth, so that “it must be the Word of God.” Sydney recounted that reading the Bible and related resources exposed her sinfulness, “I wasn’t this good person I thought I was,” which clarified her “need for a Savior” and “started to speak to me the most.” Hank added that in reading the Bible he wanted to explore “what was so awesome” about Jesus that the disciples followed him and were willing to “lay down their lives,” a witness he found “extremely compelling.” Tammy, from a culturally Jewish background, found the Jewish contours of Jesus’s teaching “sin and repentance and atonement” strikingly familiar, which led her to conclude that “Jesus is legit.” Invoking C. S. Lewis’s trilemma (liar, lunatic, or Lord), she said that as she studied Jesus she became convinced he was neither liar nor lunatic.

Compelling Sermons

Several participants mentioned sermons having an impact on their conversion. Some mentioned the applicability to life. Corey recalled thinking, “That’s the exact message I needed today.” As Sydney began attending, she sensed that “there is so much

that can be applied to my life moving forward.” Edward reported, “I’m actually listening to somebody who’s getting the word from God,” adding that the preaching “gave me some guidance and some hope.” Hank emphasized that the difference was biblical proclamation: “they were preaching from the gospel, preaching from the Bible, not trying to have a motivational speech.”

Corey also noted the effect of teaching on his children. He said, “When the kids would talk about God after their classes and as they built their relationship with God, it was like, this is where we’re supposed to be, what our children need and what I want them to have.”

Tammy observed that it wasn’t merely the sermon but its constant biblical grounding, noting, “They came back to Scripture literally every thirty seconds.” By contrast, she said prior churches felt too shaped by the secular world. She explained, “I’m trying to leave the world; the secular world is what is pushing me toward church. So I want a church that looks different from that.” Gary shared a similar conviction that “pandering doesn’t help,” since “it’s the living word of God, and it will inspire and motivate all on its own.”

Welcoming Community

Most participants cited the quality of the church community as a draw and an initial hurdle. Several described social anxiety or hesitancy about belonging. Corey, a “hardcore introvert,” said “personal faith was more comfortable.” Hank agreed that “those first few Sundays were anxious,” and described visiting a first church while “looking for reasons to not like it... I did call myself a Christian... I didn’t really like that

church.” Edward kept passing the church sign and telling himself week after week, “I really need to go.”

Some participants also carried fears tied to background or lifestyle. Tammy worried that joining a church would betray aspects of her Jewish heritage and resisted being “sucked into the American evangelical gentile culture.” “It took a while for me to accept their sincerity,” she said. Sydney recalled being “so nervous, just sweating,” afraid she would be “judged” and unsure what to expect.

After overcoming these fears, many described how community became a decisive factor. Asked why he kept returning, Hank answered simply, “It was community.” Edward and Sydney described people as “friendly” and “so welcoming,” with Sydney adding that “everybody was pursuing us.” Corey was drawn to the “deep sense of faith” in certain members and gravitated toward them, noting that without solid community it would have taken “longer to become a Christian or I wouldn’t have done it at all.” Tammy pointed to the presence of “many young families and little kids” as a compelling, countercultural contrast to her peer circles, and “just seeing the difference of parenting and the prioritization of family and children.”

All the participants noted the community in general and the influence of specific individuals who initiated relationships. Kyle said his father-in-law was instrumental during his breakdown and in bringing him to church; once there, Pastor Bob “played a huge role” and met with him weekly. Sydney mentioned several people who “would not let go,” inviting her into groups and an elder who met with her and her husband biweekly. Corey said the pastor reached out for lunch. Edward mentioned a dinner invitation from

Perry and invitations to small group. Hank described meeting with a pastor. Tammy noted a pastor from outside her church who began discipling her, along with a friend. Tammy further contrasted Christian community with other networks in her life. She noted, “These people are just rational, they’re happy, and they have peace,” whereas in her political and social circles on the left, she perceived pervasive anger and irrationality.

Summary of Being Drawn to Christianity

Participants all shared being drawn to Christianity through a process. None described one moment that led them to convert. For some this process spanned several years; for others it was shortened, but for all it was a progression. Though a process, one factor held in common was the decisive turning point where they each engaged with God in prayer. Participants had a variety of additional experiences that ultimately drew them to Christianity. Many explored Christianity through online resources, books, or podcasts before entering a church. Some described irrefutable evidence, others spoke of experiencing a profound sense of God’s presence. Through online or in-person engagement, participants also described the effect of teaching or sermons in drawing them in. Once at church, most described the power of the welcoming community to further draw them in and solidify their belief.

Positive Changes as a Christian

The final research question uncovered the transformations participants identified since their conversion. Four outcomes were reported: behavioral changes, improved emotional well-being, shifts in beliefs and worldview, and enhanced relationships.

Behaviors

Some participants described clear behavioral change. Hank said, “I no longer smoke weed.” Kyle noted that many temptations remain. He said, “These desires are still hanging around,” but he now has “a plan to prevent and to entrust to God” the prior struggles with drinking, drugs, and pornography. Sydney reported discovering new biblical applications each week and thinking, “This is how God intended me to live, and I want to do that for him moving forward.” Kyle added that “almost immediately things in my life straightened out.” He linked the emotional stability that faith provided to clearer thinking. He explained, “I was using my brain again usefully, and I wasn’t hampered down by stress and depression.” He then listed tangible changes in his finances, buying a house, work ethic, and creativity.

Emotions

Most participants emphasized emotional effects after conversion. Hank described how the ability to “lean on Christ” sustains him in difficulty. Edward said, “I don’t stress about the things I used to,” continuing, “when you have God on your side you can get through anything.” Tammy agreed, saying, “Definitely the primary thing is more peace.” Kyle echoed these themes, saying his prior depression was “crushing every aspect of my personality,” but now “I have my full spectrum of emotions back.” He described Christianity as bringing balance away from harmful emotional extremes.

Beliefs

While all participants described shifts in belief, only Sydney explicitly highlighted this as a positive change since conversion. The experience of relinquishing long-held views was “shattering,” she said. “I’ve had these perspectives for so long, and I thought that they were the right way.” Through church classes and deeper study of the Bible, she saw that “my heart posture towards so many things is not what God intended it to be.” She described discovering what God actually intended in every area of her life.

Relationships

Nearly all participants reported relational impact. Hank said, “My wife and I get along way better.” Corey similarly noted growth in marriage, noting, “I can be more forgiving than I was before.” He added that conversion clarified his responsibility as a father to “fulfill his role” and “be self-sacrificing.” Tammy observed increased compassion toward those different from her. She said, “The call to love your enemy helps me... I really lean on that a lot.” Kyle highlighted the end of isolation, moving from conflict and broken relationships to “many new relationships,” expressing gratitude for the people now “walking with me.”

Many also described becoming more others-focused. Sydney said she realized “how selfish... I was being, in all of my relationships and friendships,” and now regularly asks, “does this person need help,” rather than making purely self-interested decisions. Hank similarly reported redirecting finances to those in need and deploying his gifts in service to the church. “It’s been awesome,” he added. Corey summarized, “When you become a Christian you’re no longer the center of the story.”

Summary of Changes

Interview analysis revealed that all participants reported positive transformation across multiple domains. Nearly all participants described improved relationships: stronger marriages, increased compassion, and reduced self-centeredness. They also described the positive effect on their emotional life, with increased peace and emotional balance. Several described ceasing harmful behaviors and beginning new habits that have led to greater health. Though only one explicitly highlighted a shift in worldview, all implied reoriented beliefs shaped by their conversion. Overall, participants experienced holistic life improvement, attributed to their relationship with Christ.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the process that led adults to convert to Christianity. The data was categorized according to four research questions. First, participants described their understanding of Christianity before converting. Second, the factors that motivated participants to explore Christianity were examined. Third, the reasons participants ultimately became Christians were explored. The final category examined the positive changes participants identified since conversion.

Participants reported a spectrum of religious backgrounds prior to conversion, from pure atheism and agnosticism to nominal Christian exposure, cultural non-Christian identity, and occult exploration. None described a genuine Christian faith in childhood. One participant reported substantial doctrinal familiarity without personal belief. Most viewed God as distant or impersonal and held a mildly negative perception of Christians or the church, often influenced by cultural stereotypes or personal disillusionment.

Despite varied levels of exposure, overall, prior to conversion participants did not report a clear or authentic grasp of Christianity.

Participants acknowledged several motivating factors in their exploration. Some sought benefits they believed Christianity might provide, such as a community that shared their values or a moral foundation for their children. Others described worldview changes prompted by multiple influences. As they perceived evil in the world or saw previously held ideologies fail to hold up, they began to explore alternatives. Each participant also described significant people who influenced them by answering questions, inviting them to church, or being present during difficulty. Several described catalytic, unexpected moments that triggered exploration.

Although each person described a process and progression, all identified a moment when they recognized a change had occurred. They did not simply continue to explore indefinitely; at some point each reported an actual conversion experience. This movement was influenced by a variety of elements: sensing God's presence, being convinced by evidence, the impact of teaching and community, and, ultimately, each participant pointed to a moment of prayer as a decisive turning point.

Finally, participants described their post-conversion lives positively. All reported significant effects on their thinking, feeling, behavior, and relationships. They articulated how Christian faith has brought holistic transformation and expressed a desire for others to experience similar change.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand how adults convert to Christianity. In Chapter 2, the review of literature examined the following literature areas: a New Testament survey of factors leading to conversion, factors that led to the growth of the church in the first two centuries, and how prominent Christian writers in the last decade have connected themes of Christianity to the longings of the culture. In Chapter 4, six participants were interviewed, and the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do converts describe their understanding of Christianity before converting?
2. What motivated converts to explore Christianity?
3. How do converts describe what drew them to Christianity?
4. How do converts describe positive changes in life since becoming a Christian?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from six recent adult converts. The first area of literature analysis explored conversion narratives in the New Testament. It showed that a variety of people were open to conversion, including outcasts, known sinners, the religious and upright, and the desperate and suffering. It also revealed that preceding conversion people experienced a variety of factors that primed them for conversion including: the Word of God being

taught, difficult circumstances, miraculous works, a growing spiritual curiosity, and God directly opening their hearts. In all these circumstances the study also showed how God led his people to participate through their intentional efforts, directly sending them, or people responding to timely opportunities in front of them. Finally, it showed that the essential content of belief in conversion is the identity of Jesus.

The second literature review examined the growth of Christianity in the first two centuries. This analysis revealed the unlikely rise of Christianity and the factors that contributed to its growth. The literature pointed out that multiple factors contributed to the growth including: the missionary life of Christians, open relational networks, the quality of Christian community, the loving response to crisis, public witness during martyrdom, unique doctrinal attractiveness, and ultimately divine intervention. These factors did not all affect each person but cumulatively explain how a small religious group launched out, defied the odds, and achieved global dominance.

The final literature area explored how four prominent contemporary authors present the persona and work of Jesus to secular audiences, aiming for conversion. It revealed three aspects they highlighted: how Jesus fulfills existential longings (including meaning and purpose, freedom, and hope), how his life and teachings have established modern Western values (human rights, compassion, and sexual consent), and how his utterly unique identity is displayed through transcendent grace, especially his suffering.

In addition to the literature review, the interviews provided data relevant to four research questions. First, participants described their understanding of Christianity before converting. Second, the factors that motivated participants to explore Christianity were

examined. Third, the reasons participants ultimately became Christians were analyzed. Finally, the positive changes participants identified since conversion were discovered.

Participant data revealed a spectrum of religious backgrounds prior to conversion, from pure atheism and agnosticism to nominal Christian exposure, cultural non-Christian identity, and occult exploration. None described a genuine Christian faith in childhood. One participant reported substantial doctrinal familiarity without personal belief. Most viewed God as distant or impersonal and held a mildly negative perception of Christians or the church, often influenced by cultural stereotypes or personal disillusionment. Participants all reported not having a clear or authentic grasp of Christianity.

Participants recognized several motivating factors in their exploration. Some sought benefits they believed Christianity might provide, such as community that shared their values or a moral foundation for their children. Others described worldview changes prompted by multiple influences. Some participants expressed an increased perception of evil in the world or a disillusionment with previously held ideologies that opened them to Christianity. Participants routinely acknowledged how significant people influenced them by answering questions, inviting them to church, or being present during difficulty. Several described catalytic, unexpected moments that triggered exploration.

The interviews revealed each person went through a process and progression. There was a gradual exploration and eventual identification with Christianity. All identified a moment when they recognized a change had occurred. They did not simply continue to explore indefinitely; at some point each reported an actual conversion experience. Participants described this movement as influenced by a variety of elements: sensing God's presence, being convinced by evidence, the impact of teaching and

community, and, ultimately, each participant pointed to a moment of prayer as a decisive turning point.

Lastly, participants described their post-conversion lives positively. All reported significant improvements in their thinking, feeling, behavior, and relationships. They articulated how their Christian faith brought holistic transformation and expressed a desire for others to experience similar change.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and interview research are compared to identify key issues relevant to the conversion of adults to Christianity. Overall, the research identified six areas that provide insight into the conversion process.

Identity of Converts

A key finding is that there is no single “type” who converts. In the biblical narratives, we meet known sinners, outcasts, religious insiders, and sufferers. The interviews reflected the same range, and more. Participants reported everything from some religious upbringing to complete atheism, from addictive “known sinner” patterns to various forms of suffering. Conversion is not confined to one demographic or to “likely” candidates. As the literature notes, the rise of Christianity itself was unlikely; therefore, ministry should not be limited to those who appear most promising.

Circumstances Preceding Conversion

A second area concerns the conditions that precede conversion. In the New Testament cases and the interview data, every case included preconditions. In this study,

every case also included a discernible trigger. While one might envision scenarios where a person simply hears about Jesus, is compelled by the truth, and believes, the cases here show that something typically prepares the ground.

In the New Testament and the interviews, people were found in difficult circumstances, encountered divine intervention, experienced unfulfilled desires, sought community, or developed a spiritual curiosity to investigate truth. This observation does not imply that evangelism should be restricted only to those who display “pre-qualifying” conditions, nor that spontaneous conversions never occur. Rather, the normative pattern involves motivating factors already at work. Because God is always working, Christians who desire to see conversions should cultivate awareness of where he may be preparing people to be drawn to himself.

Supernatural Power

Both the literature and the interviews indicate that conversion is frequently attributed to supernatural power. The biblical narratives include explicit miracles and, in Lydia’s case, note that after Paul shared the word with her, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying.”²⁸³ The early-church literature echoes this emphasis; as Schnabel states, “It may be more than Christian bias if we see the growth of the church as the work of divine providence.”²⁸⁴ Participants likewise attributed their conversions to God’s direct action. None reported converting apart from what they experienced as divine intervention. They described God’s involvement through providential circumstances

²⁸³ Ac 16:14.

²⁸⁴ Schnabel, “Mission, Early Non-Pauline,” 773.

(e.g., a barely verbal child unexpectedly asking to go to church), a sensed nearness of God, “like an energy around me and inside me,” “I was so moved by his presence,” and decisive moments of prayer that brought “relief off my chest” and where “everything really clicked.”

These accounts collectively suggest that conversion involves more than placing sound arguments in the mind, cultivating relationships, or even faithfully presenting biblical truth. Without the work of God, there is no conversion. Christianity is a supernatural faith, and the process of conversion requires divine initiative. This is why Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”²⁸⁵

The Word of God

The above criteria do not negate the reality that, in every conversion, the Word of God is spoken. In every New Testament conversion narrative, the proclamation or explanation of God’s Word by another person is present. Early-church growth likewise shows that compelling Christian doctrine contributed to conversion, sometimes by fulfilling cultural longings, at other times by its unique attractiveness.

Contemporary cultural apologists aim to present Jesus and the faith in these ways to secular audiences. However, I was surprised not to hear more of this reasoning in the interviews. It was present, but not predominant. Sydney was drawn to Jesus as a Savior from her sin. But other participants did not frame their stories with formulas such as, “I was longing for joy, and I found Jesus gives true joy,” or “I was longing for identity, and I found only in him could my real identity be found.” This omission does not mean these

²⁸⁵ Jn 6:44.

dynamics were absent, or are absent for others, but they were not the major way participants described their experience. Stark cites Cyril Bailey's conclusion: "[T]he Gospel [could not] have won its way if it had not found an echo in the religious searchings and even the religious beliefs of the time."²⁸⁶ The cultural apologist assumes this and seeks meaningful points of contact. Yet for many participants, the word that connected with them was described less in terms of explicit "fulfillment" and more in terms of the Bible's wisdom and applicability to life, its truth, its coherence over against crumbling worldviews, and its exposure and conviction of sin. I do wonder if, at times, the "fulfillment" narrative has been overemphasized.

I was also surprised that conversion was not primarily the domain of the Sunday service. I had imagined most cases would involve people motivated to explore Christianity, then becoming Christians after attending church for a time. But for all participants, this was not the case. Even those who converted after coming to church attributed the process to settings outside the service: online research, talking with ChatGPT, books, blogs, and online sermons. A comparison with the New Testament is instructive: the examples surveyed occur outside formal church gatherings, in individual conversations and public forums rather than within church walls.

For all the participants, as in the literature, the word spoken is significant, and we should understand that it will never be true that we can "preach the gospel often and use words when necessary."²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* 83.

²⁸⁷ "Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary," a saying commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, though no historical evidence confirms he said it. See, for example, Glenn Stanton, "FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi," The Gospel Coalition, July 9, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>.

Distinction as the Draw

Churches and individual Christians often try to appeal by maximizing common ground with non-Christians and by avoiding potentially offensive topics. Surprisingly, many participants reported that it was countercultural voices that drew them toward the Christian faith. Some were first nudged toward Christianity through conservative political commentary. Though they self-identified as liberal or progressive, they found certain conservative pundits addressed hot button issues (e.g., transgenderism, abortion, COVID, and homosexuality) persuasively. The perceived wisdom in those arguments repositioned them within a framework more open to Christian claims. I had been taught that avoiding conservative politics reaches secular people more effectively; for at least these interviewees, the opposite proved true.

The literature reflects a related dynamic. In discussing public witness through martyrdom, Kreider notes that crowds initially found Christians' behavior distasteful, yet "some members of the crowd found that the Christians had jarred them loose from former ways of thinking and living."²⁸⁸ It was not simply the fulfillment of pre-existing longings that attracted them but the challenge to those longings. Hurtado and Stark similarly emphasize that Christian monotheism and the personal love of God were "alien to pagan beliefs."²⁸⁹ This confrontation between Christian conviction and prevailing culture often becomes the point of attraction for new converts.

²⁸⁸ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 48.

²⁸⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 86.

When pastors and Christians state their convictions boldly and clearly, they present a genuine alternative. Pre-converts must decide whether that alternative is compelling, but if they are never shown a distinct counter to dominant ideologies and practices, they cannot weigh the options or perceive the distinctive wisdom on offer. This research convinces me that clarity and boldness about Christian beliefs are more attractive, and ultimately more honest, than attempts to water them down or to present them as merely an improved version of what people already believe.

The Power of Relationships

Across the research, the power of relationships is consistently evident. This appears in several forms. In the New Testament, God's people intentionally go to those who do not know Jesus and respond to the people God places before them. The early-church literature shows the same missionary posture. As Eckhard Schnabel observes, "Christians continued to speak about their faith in their personal contacts with relatives, friends, neighbors and business partners, and . . . people were converted to faith in Jesus Christ as the result of such conversations."²⁹⁰ The interviews echo this pattern: the participants had people in their life who answered questions, pursued them, invited them to church, and talked about Jesus. From family and friends to coworkers and even strangers, they encountered Christians committed to communicating the gospel and core Christian claims. This confirms Glenn Hinson's conclusion: "Most converts became

²⁹⁰ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1526.

acquainted with [a new faith] through causal contacts – friendship with members of the church.”²⁹¹

The same relational dynamic appears in the hospitality participants experienced. For some, it was the welcome they received on their first Sunday, precisely where they expected judgment and scorn. For others, it unfolded over a year or more through classes, invitations, and community life that felt countercultural and better. In every case, specific individuals invited them further in. This reflects the “open relational networks” identified in the literature as a factor in early Christian growth. Stark argues that most new religious movements fail when they become closed off and cease “sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow.”²⁹² The participants’ stories show that their conversions were, in part, the fruit of forming such attachments.

Several participants also named social anxiety or introversion as initial barriers to church involvement. Once overcome, however, they attested to the strength of Christian community. This presents a pastoral tension worth noting in the conversion process: some are drawn to Christianity because they long for community, while many are simultaneously nervous about entering one. Others prefer to investigate online and think they can maintain a purely “personal” faith; yet when they experience genuine, loving community, the draw often solidifies. The implication is to remain patient and pursue, assuming the presence of both tracks at once, and honoring slow, private exploration while persistently extending relational welcome.

²⁹¹ Hinson, *Evangelization of Roman Empire*, 49.

²⁹² Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 20.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings described above, the church is well advised to consider the following recommendations.

First, I recommend that churches and individuals take seriously the priority of prayer. The biblical survey makes it undeniable that it takes a supernatural work of God to open people's hearts. It doesn't matter how many sermons are preached, fliers are passed out, or outreach events are held if God does not awaken darkened hearts. The growth of the early church likewise attests to God's supernatural work. If we want to see people become Christians, we need more than what we can humanly do; we need God. Each person interviewed shared moments of engagement with God in prayer that finally opened their hearts to him. This consistent finding means God can save anyone, and that he is eager to involve us as we pray. I specifically recommend churches organize prayer for individuals, host prayer walks, and incorporate pre-service prayer that specifically asks God to save and to bring those who are not Christians.

Second, per the research, relationship with Christians is one of the most significant factors leading to conversion. There was not one interviewee who lacked a significant relationship with a Christian. In the New Testament conversion narratives, we see Christians sharing the gospel, and in the early church we see that it was the "open networks" of Christian community alongside personal evangelism that often led to conversion. This means churches need to do four things. First, they must teach the theology of God's mission, reminding congregants of God's heart to save, our responsibility to participate in his mission as ambassadors, and God's power to save, so that obedience, expectation, and encouragement grow together. Second, churches should

train Christians to engage in conversations with those who don't know Jesus, answering objections and presenting the attractiveness of Christian doctrine; resources like the authors examined in the literature review can help here. Third, pastors should intentionally mobilize people to engage those outside the church. As the literature showed, religious movements eventually die when they become insular. Christians need to be led outside their bubble, forming new relationships in neighborhoods, workplaces, hobbies, schools, and other avenues. Intentional effort should be given to offering ideas, creating accountability, and providing resources that help members invest in the lives of those who are not Christians and invite them into Christian community and the church. Fourth, when non-Christians come to church, Christians should be taught to welcome them warmly. Church elders and staff should prioritize personally reaching out when they know someone is not a Christian and should relentlessly pursue them. The small group ministry should make it a priority to welcome seekers and invite them to dinners and other social gatherings. This responsibility must be the expectation of all leaders. If non-Christians finally overcome the fear of coming to church and then meet coldness, or even niceness that never breaks established social circles, they will miss one of the chief ways God draws people to himself.

Third, since the attractiveness of welcoming, loving Christian community was stated in both the literature and the interviews, pastors need to focus on developing this kind of community in their churches. It cannot be assumed that simply gathering people in a room on Sunday, or in a home for small group, creates the kind of loving Christian community that authenticates the beauty of the gospel. Churches often teach Christians how to do many things: study the Bible, practice prayer, share the gospel. But it is often

assumed that we already know how to live in community. This is not the case. Sermons should be devoted to expounding core elements of Christian community and to how they can become ingrained in the habits and life of the church. Curriculum, classes, and ongoing initiatives should focus on specific elements and help catechize the church in what loving community looks like.

Fourth, pastors need to ensure their preaching highlights elements associated with conversion. To begin with, they must exalt the character and identity of Jesus. Sermons that only offer “how-to” or motivational life messages are not enough. Those may have their place, but preaching must show people who Jesus is; there is no conversion apart from seeing the beauty of Jesus. Preachers should work through every text asking, “What does this show about the character of God?” and seek to glorify him as the overflow of their own worship. Second, preaching must be boldly biblical. As many of the new converts noted, they were looking for something different when they came to church; they did not want to be pandered to or told we are all basically the same. They were not particularly looking for common ground; they were looking for what is different and better. Bold preaching does not mean chasing controversy or difference for its own sake, but it does mean not shying away from what the world rejects. It means offering clear, concise answers from the Bible without over-qualifying them, and presenting a coherent, unashamed biblical worldview. Third, pastors should regularly include brief moments that highlight evidential support for the Christian faith. As several participants noted, evidence was part of their process; pastors can weave in archaeological, logical, historical, or philosophical reasons for confidence. Finally, pastors and churches should consider their online presence and resources. Many participants searched online for

answers long before attending church. Not every church can produce extensive content, but an online evangelistic ministry, if feasible, should publish the basics with contact information, because websites are often the first place people go to explore.

Finally, churches should consider how to be “suffering sensitive.” For years, churches emphasized being seeker sensitive, attuned to those already looking for God. However, in both the literature and the interviews, a consistent theme emerges: suffering often primes people to receive the gospel. Practically, pastors can prepare sermons by routinely asking, “How does this speak to someone who is suffering?” In addition, churches can highlight the testimonies of recent converts and encourage members to leave thoughtful online reviews of their church. Such public witness helps those who are experiencing various hardships see the transforming power of God and offers a concrete picture of what is possible if they come to Jesus. Jesus does change lives, and we would do well to testify to his work.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how adults convert to Christianity. As with any study, there are limitations as to how comprehensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for pastors and individuals to consider who desire to further the present research and investigate similar questions.

First, this study focused on a specific demographic, Gen Z and Millennials. Additional cohorts could be analyzed to test for recurring patterns or divergent themes as other adult subgroups are included. For example, what characterizes conversion among those who come to faith in their 60s or 70s? Likewise, childhood or adolescent

conversion could be explored. As new generations emerge, comparative analysis across generational cohorts would benefit churches and ministry leaders.

Second, further research could examine those who had robust church exposure while growing up but did not convert until adulthood. Only one participant met this criterion, though many fit this profile. The church must grapple with the reality that numerous people raised within it leave for a time. Some later convert. Investigating the dynamics of deconstruction and reconstruction, and why some never believed initially yet later come to faith, would be valuable.

Third, studies of other historical periods or contemporary contexts would add depth. This project considered the first two centuries of church growth, but seasons of renewal and revival, such as the Great Awakenings in America, the Welsh Revivals, or current reports of campus and congregational renewal with notable conversion growth, could provide important comparisons. These periods move beyond Christianity's entry into a new cultural setting and show what conversion looks like where nominal or post-Christian cultures are already established.

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