



GERALD L. SITTSER

RESILIENT FAITH

How the Early Christian
“Third Way” Changed the World

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Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Abbreviations xv

1. Then and Now 1
2. Old World and New World 19
3. Fulfillment 37
4. Map 57
5. Authority 77
6. Identity and Community 97
7. Worship 117
8. Life in the World 135
9. Crossing to Safety 155

Conclusion: Now and Then 173

Annotated Bibliography 179

Notes 197

Index 219

1

Then and Now

It was known as the “Third Way.”

The phrase comes from the early Christian period. To my knowledge it first appeared in a second-century letter written to a Roman official, a certain Diognetus.¹ The author—we don’t know his name or identity—wanted to describe the peculiar nature of Christianity to a member of the Roman elite. He commended Diognetus’s curiosity and assured him that he would do his best to answer his questions about Christianity. He then referred to the Christian movement as a “new race” or “third race,” which I have chosen to identify as the Third Way.

The Greek word the author uses—*genos*—is difficult to translate. It could be rendered “race,” “tribe,” “clan,” “stock,” “family,” “life,” or even “people.” It implied a deep kinship connection, a sense of belonging to a people and, as a people, living in a distinct way, which Diognetus and other Roman officials had observed to be true of Christians. The Christian movement was forming a new community of people who claimed to believe in a new kind of God and to follow a new way of life.

I have chosen to use “Third Way” for two reasons: first, because it strikes me as less charged than “race” or “clan” or “tribe”; and second, because early on, Christians were known as followers of “the way.” This translation fits well enough, but only if we understand it as conveying a larger meaning than merely following a new and trendy way of life

that is here today and gone tomorrow.² The early Christian movement was anything but that.

Diognetus was familiar with the phrase, implying that it might have been coined by the Romans themselves to categorize three distinct and different religious ways of life: Roman, Jewish, and Christian. The author warned Diognetus that he was going to be surprised by what he learned. He exhorted him to clear out his old thoughts about religion. “You must become like a new man from the beginning, since, as you yourself admit, you are going to listen to a really new message.”³

Of course a third way implies a first and second way. The first, as Diognetus would have known, was the Roman way, which organized life around Greco-Roman civil religion and was the most ubiquitous and popular of the three. Civic life and religious life were virtually inseparable in the Roman world. Public officials were responsible for managing the religious affairs of a community, including maintenance of temples and performance of various rituals. People worshiped and sacrificed to the gods; they visited temples, shrines, and monuments; they participated in pagan feasts and festivals; they kept and cared for household deities at the family altar; they experimented with and sometimes joined mystery cults. Above all, they swore allegiance to the emperor as a god. They observed these and other rituals largely to secure Rome’s prosperity, and their own as well.⁴

Rome’s religious system was largely transactional. Romans honored the gods and goddesses, and they expected those gods and goddesses to respond in kind. Their religion was based on ritual observance more than doctrinal belief and ethical behavior. Worship was supposed to bring benefits, especially to the empire. Rome was tolerant, pluralistic, and syncretistic. It exhibited an amazing capacity to absorb new religions into its pantheon, assuming that adherents, whatever they believed and however they lived, would be subservient to Rome and swear allegiance to the divine status of the emperor. It had the most trouble with the religions that demanded exclusive commitment to one God and to one way of life. Most religions of this kind, especially Christianity, were considered by definition anti-Roman.

In the end, Rome’s religion was Rome itself.

The second was the Jewish way. Rome respected Judaism because the religion was ancient and enduring. Jews had survived opposition for over a thousand years and, in spite of that opposition, had spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Rome even showed favor to the Jews. For example, Roman authorities did not require Jews to venerate the gods (say, through sacrificial offerings in local temples) or to serve in the military, and Romans viewed and used at least some local synagogues as civic centers, which implies that Judaism served the larger Roman public, however modestly. Jews were far more integrated into Roman society than it might at first appear.

Still, there were reasons why Judaism was known as the second way, distinct from the first way. Jews worshiped one God, Yahweh, to whom they were exclusively devoted; followed a rigorous set of ethical and religious practices; and refused to participate in pagan rituals and festivals. They observed a way of life that set them culturally apart. The Jewish rite of circumcision kept Romans who were attracted to Judaism from wholesale conversion. Jewish kosher laws required that Jews shop in their own stores, their dress codes made them noticeable, and their commitment to marry only fellow Jews prevented them from assimilating into Roman culture. Such relative cultural isolation made it easy for Roman officials to identify Jews, thereby diminishing the threat or, short of that, allowing Romans to keep an eye on them, as sports enthusiasts might when eyeing fans wearing the jersey of a rival team.

However respected by the Romans and integrated into the larger Roman society, Jews were different enough to be classified as the second way.

And then there was Christianity, the Third Way. Christians appeared to live like everyone else. They spoke the local language, lived in local neighborhoods, wore local styles of clothing, ate local food, shopped in local markets, and followed local customs. “For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or custom. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life.”⁵ At a surface level Christians appeared to blend in to Roman society quite seamlessly.

Yet they were different, too, embodying not simply a different religion but a different—and new—way of life. “They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.” They functioned as if they were a nation within a nation, culturally assimilated yet distinct at the same time. “Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man’s lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth.” They constituted a new race of people—hence the Third Way. Rome could not so easily monitor and control this group.⁶

What made Christians different? What was this Third Way?

Christians believed in the reality of another and greater kingdom over which God ruled. It was a spiritual kingdom—not *of* this world, but certainly *over* this world as superior and supreme, *for* this world’s redemption, and *in* this world as a force for ultimate and eternal good. Far from being “resident aliens,” Christians thus viewed themselves as “alien residents,” members of the true and universal commonwealth, but still living within the Roman commonwealth. They believed that God’s kingdom, though transcendent over all, impinged on this world and would someday subsume it, as the rising sun overwhelms the light of moon and stars.

Early Christians confessed that this kingdom was concealed, seen only through the eyes of faith, though that faith was both informed and formed by God’s involvement in human history, a history that culminated in the coming of Jesus. But what was concealed would someday be gloriously revealed, and God would rule in mercy and justice over the entire created order. The Third Way was like a resistance movement, both subversive and peaceful, bearing witness to God’s coming kingdom. But rather than following a strategy of violent revolution, as, say, the zealots did, Christians immersed themselves in the culture as agents of the kingdom. Christians aspired to follow another way, Jesus’ way. They prayed for the emperor but refused to worship him.

The Centrality of Jesus

Jesus was at the center of this vision of the kingdom. Surprisingly so, for he was not what anyone, whether Jew or Roman, expected or wanted. As the author of this unusual letter to Diognetus argued, humanity wants—and sometimes creates—gods in its own image, gods to reinforce its idols and idolatries, gods to disguise its egoism, gods who serve the interests of the elites, gods who rule by power, but not gods who love, and especially who love the poor and powerless. But the God of the early Christians did not follow that script, because they believed God revealed himself as Jesus Christ—not as a wise man like Socrates, not as a strong man like Hercules, not as a powerful man like Augustus, not as a military commander like Alexander the Great, and not even as a Messiah, at least according to the claims and intentions of someone like Simon Bar Kokhba.

Instead, Jesus appeared to be a humble, foolish, weak man who was born in a stable and who suffered on a cross. No one expected a divine appearance (or “incarnation”) of this kind. Why would they? As Paul writes, both Greeks and Jews assumed that God is by definition bigger, stronger, and wiser than the biggest, strongest, and wisest on earth. The incarnation surprised and baffled everyone because it departed from traditional expectations of the divine. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:25 NIV).

Christians strived to live according to their master, Jesus. They wanted their way of life to align with his, which was *the* way. Jesus modeled this true way *of* life because he was first and foremost the way *to* true life. The discipline of Christians was born out of devotion to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Jesus was both center and substance of the Third Way—God come as a human, the kingdom appearing in a person.

Christians faced the unimaginable challenge of bearing witness to the kingdom in the massive expanse of the Roman Empire, and eventually beyond, functioning as suspect outsiders—or on occasion as outright enemies—for some 250 years. As Christianity began to get a

foothold in the Mediterranean world, Rome altered its response to the movement. At first it largely ignored and dismissed it, critical of its (often exaggerated and misunderstood) peculiarities. Then it ramped up opposition, which included mostly local or regional persecution of various kinds. In the end, it turned on it violently, as if blasting shrill music to drown out the new song of Christianity, only to change its mind and accept it, which led to the mutual transformation of both empire and church.

What made it so successful in spite of these inhospitable conditions?⁷

Christians had to guard the newness of the message without isolating themselves from the culture or accommodating themselves to the culture, which required them to form people in the faith and thus grow a movement of genuine disciples who could survive, and even thrive, in such a world. Rome would have ignored Christianity if Christians had been too isolated; it would have absorbed it if they had become too accommodating.⁸ For the most part it did neither.

This Third Way movement grew steadily, though unevenly, for some 250 years under Rome's watchful and sometimes hostile eye. It is impossible to calculate exact figures. But it is safe to say that Christians numbered roughly five thousand in the year AD 40 and five million by the year 300, worshipping in some sixty-five thousand house churches of varying sizes.⁹ Such an impressive growth rate would seem to require some level of state support and cultural privilege. Yet Christians enjoyed few of the benefits that Christians take for granted today, at least in the West. They did not worship in official church buildings (as we would understand them today), send their children to Christian schools, enjoy the benefits of cultural power and visibility, or flex their Christian political muscles. The Christian movement embodied a new and different way of knowing God and living in the world. It was so new and different, in fact, that it developed a process of formation to move people, slowly and deliberately, from participation in Greco-Roman religion or Judaism into the Christian fold. That was one major reason for its success. This process, as we will see, enabled the movement to adapt to many different cultural settings without losing its essential identity.¹⁰

Christendom

With the accession of Constantine to the throne of the Roman Empire in 312, the status of Christianity was forever changed. He set in motion a long process that led, first, to the legalization of Christianity *in* the Roman Empire; then, under the emperor Theodosius, to the official establishment of Christianity as the religion *of* the empire; and finally, during the Middle Ages, to Christianity's overwhelming cultural dominance *over* the empire. This arrangement shaped the entire history and identity of Europe, and later of North America. It took hundreds of years, of course. And it was never complete. Not every person living in the Middle Ages was a serious and sincere Christian, nor every institution good and just. Still, the movement was successful enough to justify the claim that the West had become Christian, and would presumably remain so.

Over time the designation "Third Way" faded as Christianity became the *only* way—that is, the dominant religion in the West. The emergence of Christendom—the symbiotic relationship between church and state, Christianity and culture—made the Third Way irrelevant. There was no need for it as long as Christianity, having no major rivals, ruled the culture. No wonder the phrase itself was largely lost to historical memory. It was forgotten because the Third Way was no longer needed. If there was an exception to this, it was the rise of the monastic movement, which kept alive the Third Way in reaction to Christianity's dominant—and compromised—role in the empire. The vision of the Third Way never died, but it certainly moved to the margins of the church as a kind of memory of an earlier, and presumably better, age.

If we could travel back in time to the year 1200 or the year 1600, we would be hard-pressed to find a person living in the West who did not claim to be Christian (except for Jews and Muslims), and we would observe the visible and concrete presence of Christianity everywhere. We would see church buildings, monasteries, schools and universities, hospitals, law courts, pilgrimage sites, religious art and texts, feasts and festivals, priests and liturgical pageantry, monks and nuns, and rites

and relics and rituals, all reflecting the dominance of Christianity as a religion and the centrality of the church as an institution.

Not that Christianity was uniform or the church united. Arguments often divided the church, sometimes irreparably. East and West split in 1054, the former becoming the Orthodox Church, the latter the Roman Catholic Church. The Western church broke apart in the wake of the Reformation, which set in motion a series of divisions that have continued to this day. Nor did Christians always conduct themselves as they should have, as the Crusades, the wars of religion, and persecution of Jews illustrate. Still, Christianity continued to dominate in the West for many centuries, with hardly a dissenting voice, except for Jews, Muslims, and a few elite deists and atheists, who functioned as an alternative to the Christian majority—influential, to be sure, but never large and dominant enough to threaten Christianity’s hegemony. The arguments that divided the church were about family matters, involving clashes of doctrine, practice, politics, and personality.

America tells a different story, though only slightly. Christendom took a peculiar turn in our nation’s history. Observing the problem of the state-established church in Europe, the founders and framers decided to create a different kind of church-state relationship. We know it as the official separation of church and state. As the First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Cut loose from state support and control, the churches in America learned to function more independently, becoming entrepreneurial and competitive.

The essential difference in the American experiment—including many of its successes—captured the attention of Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat. In the 1830s he traveled to America to discover why democracy in America was flourishing, much to the surprise of many Europeans. He observed that it was due, at least in part, to the “habits of the heart” of the American people, which kept them from exploiting and abusing the freedoms that the Bill of Rights granted to them. These habits were largely the result of Christianity’s influence.

How did it exercise so much influence? According to Tocqueville, Christianity worked at the grassroots level—in homes, public schools

and private colleges, churches, and voluntary societies (nonprofits), which served the needs of the country beyond what government was capable of doing. It functioned as a restraining influence, preventing the American people from taking advantage of the freedom they had. “Thus, while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.”¹¹

Tocqueville believed that democracy, more than any other political system, needed religion, but only if religion remained separate from the state, independent of outside interference, resistant to control, and thus free to operate on its own term. “Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot. Religion is much more needed in the republic they advocate than in the monarchy they attack, and in democratic republics most of all. How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened? And what can be done with a people master of itself if it is not subject to God?”¹²

Thus America became a *cultural*—though unofficial—Christendom. Observers took notice of this arrangement, mostly with approval. Abraham Lincoln called America “the almost chosen people.”¹³ G. K. Chesterton referred to America as “the nation with the soul of a church,” which the church historian Sidney Mead later used in the title of an essay.¹⁴

We carry this idea of Christendom in our cultural memory, almost as if it were cellular.¹⁵ It is so deeply rooted in us that we hardly think about it. We simply assume it. It is like a wedding band that never comes off, like a license carried in wallet or purse, like basic knowledge of arithmetic. We might not darken the door of churches very often; we might not read much theology; we might not know the Bible very well. Still, we know enough about Christianity to feel comfortable around it, like the home we grew up in. We attend Christian weddings and funerals, worship on Christmas and Easter (or more often), sing the first verse of “Amazing Grace” by memory, and assume—whether with pleasure or with shame—that the president will conclude major speeches with “God bless America.” Nearly 70 percent of Americans say they are Christian. The majority of those belong to a church of some kind.¹⁶

Our cultural memory reminds us that we are a Christian people living in a Christian nation.¹⁷

Post-Christendom

But is that claim still accurate? Was it ever?

First, it should be obvious that, even during the heyday of American Christendom, there were many people excluded. The postwar period marked the epitome of American cultural Christianity. I was a child then. I believed—or, better to say, assumed—that being Christian, being middle class, being white, and being American were roughly the same thing. Almost weekly I attended worship (“went to church,” as we put it back then), ate brunch after worship at the downtown men’s club, and played golf at a local country club. Our family prayed before meals, dressed up for church (I started wearing a sport coat in late elementary school), put money in the offering plate every Sunday, and celebrated holidays, both liturgical (e.g., Christmas) and patriotic (e.g., Memorial Day), as if they were all Christian events. It was the good life, the Christian life, the American way of life. It was a seamless whole, or so it appeared.¹⁸

But the “we” and “I” sprinkled throughout the last paragraph is misleading. There never was a “we” in the first place. Christendom might have existed, after a manner of speaking. It clearly made positive contributions to our society (higher education, Christian nonprofits, and the like). It no doubt brought benefits to many Americans (higher literacy)—but not to all. African Americans would tell a very different story, first of slavery and then of racism. So would some immigrant groups, many women, and other outsiders, to say nothing of Native Americans, who suffered loss of land and near genocide. The “we” did not include everyone; it often excluded large segments of the population, and did so knowingly.

Second, cultural Christianity was probably not as healthy as it seemed to be at the time, however dominant its influence in American society, for it tended to produce nominal—“in name only”—Christians who claimed Christianity as their religion for reasons other than the inherent

value and truthfulness of Christianity itself. It was good for business; it left a favorable impression on people; it was socially respectable; it established one's place in the community. In many cases it was simply what Americans were supposed to do, a matter of social habit. They "did" religion in much the same way they practiced a profession or enjoyed a hobby. Many Americans confined it to a distinct and separate sphere of life. Christendom made being Christian relatively normal, easy, and convenient.

Third, however enduring over the centuries, Christendom has more recently become fragile. Christianity in America is losing ground, no longer exercising the dominance it once did. Not that it has disappeared, of course. There are signs of vitality and creativity in many places. If anything, groups demonstrating intense and serious devotion to Christianity are holding their own, and in some cases even growing and attracting people who want more than nominal faith, though much of that growth is at the expense of other religious groups, like mainline Protestants and Catholics.¹⁹ That Christians in America are attending more conservative churches in greater numbers and with greater frequency is not in and of itself a good sign. It could mean that they are only attracting members from other churches and isolating themselves from the larger culture, not learning how to engage and win it.

The fact is: Christianity in America is declining, in both numbers and influence. The culture is changing, and we must therefore recognize that we live in a world very different from the one that existed even half a century ago during what appeared to be the "golden age" of American Christianity.

You probably sense the change and observe the trends, too. You know about the decline of mainline churches; the lack of growth in evangelical churches; the rise of "dones" (Christian dropouts) and "nones" (those people who refuse to identify with any religious tradition); the ideological division between liberal and conservative Christians, often accompanied by an unconscionable level of vitriol; the obsession with political power; the rise of Christian nationalism; the creeping loss of religious freedom; the growing dominance of secularity in the public square; the deterioration of traditional morality in the entertainment

industry.²⁰ My own profession illustrates the point. Only a century ago (even half a century ago) Christianity played a significant role in shaping the ethos and curriculum of most colleges and universities across the country, which is hardly the case anymore.²¹

Many of us have read reports and experienced the changes. *We feel it*, too, like the stuffiness and headache that warns of an oncoming cold.

At this point I probably sound like a political conservative, longing for better days. It appears to be a growing sentiment. Many conservative Christians argue that America once played a special, even divinely appointed, role in history, as if it were a “chosen nation,” and they advocate that America should step into that role once again, which leads them to impose their brand of conservative morality and politics on the nation, sometimes as brashly and bellicosely as the opponents they detest. It will not work, at least not anymore. It has probably never worked, or if it has, under terms in which the cost was probably too high, sacrificing genuine Christian influence for the sake of political power.

I am not advocating that Christians follow this strategy, any more than I would argue that Christians make common cause with left-wing politics. Either way, it is not the right way, nor the Third Way. And it is not the best way to influence society. Power at the expense of the gospel is not a power the church should ever seek. The problem we currently face is not primarily political or ideological. The problem is the compromised identity of the church itself and the compromised message of the gospel. The role of Christianity in the West has changed. It is no longer culturally dominant. A political strategy to hold on to or to regain power will only set the church back even further. It would be like a boxer swinging aimlessly at an opponent to prolong time in the ring, even though the match is nearly over and clearly lost.²²

I write this not to lament lost identity and influence, which was far more superficial than once thought, but to embrace a new challenge; not to pine for the past, which was hardly ideal anyway, but to plot a course for the future. Christian belief is far less familiar, pervasive, and persuasive than it once was, and Christian institutions and practices far less visible and dominant or, in the few cases where they still are,

often tainted with a bad reputation. Our cultural memory of the past might actually be keeping us from seeing the changes happening before our very eyes and from adapting creatively to them. The best hours of Western Christianity might be ahead of us, not behind us, assuming we dare to think differently about what it means to be Christian and to live as Christians in a culture that is changing. But our worst days could be ahead of us, too. There is no guarantee that Christianity in America will regain its strength or, even better, discover and follow a better way forward. There are other examples in history of the irreversible decline of Christianity in regions where it was once strong (e.g., the Orthodox Church in modern Turkey).

The World of Millennials

Let me attempt to put a human face on the essential situation before us.

It goes something like this: I hear from former students a few years after graduating from the university at which I teach. They tell me they are no longer Christian, which is always disheartening to hear. But it is the reason behind it that I find especially disturbing. “I can’t for the life of me think of one good reason to believe in Christianity anymore, or even God. It has become entirely irrelevant to my life.”

It seems less a choice and more a default, as if reason and debate have given way to inertia. Students these days are not usually won over to secularity by argument, as sometimes happened a generation or two ago when they read the likes of Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Russell. After moving to cities like Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco (it could be many others as well), they begin to breathe a different air, the air of unbelief and secularity. They step into a world in which Christianity seems unnecessary and obsolete, like floppy disks, VCRs, and slide rules. They don’t reject faith, as if won over to unbelief through reasoned argument. They simply and slowly drift away. Indifference—and even intellectual laziness—plays a bigger role than argument, though millennials still exhibit concern for the common good of society, as evidenced by the number of hours they devote to volunteerism.

It is the result, I think, of living in a *post-Christendom* society, where much of the cultural power, privilege, and influence of Christianity has been eroded, leaving little more than a thin layer of topsoil. Belief has become not only intellectually implausible, if that even matters anymore, but also personally irrelevant.

Such is the new state of affairs in the Western world. Which means that we as Christians can no longer do business the old way. The cultural Christianity that once had few rivals has been dethroned. During the many centuries of Christendom, belief in Christianity seemed as natural, familiar, and inevitable as immediate marriage and employment after college used to be. It was simply what people in the West did. Faith might not have been genuine or deep, but it was still widespread and established. It was a cultural habit, like wearing robes for a graduation ceremony.

That phase of history in the West is drawing to a close, as I have already argued. We see ample evidence of this erosion in Europe and on the coasts in the United States.²³ It has left the church concerned, confused, and sobered—but also curious and teachable, which is one reason why Christians are looking for new resources, movements, and models that might help us, as Christians living in the West, respond faithfully and winsomely to this new state of affairs.²⁴

Backward First

I believe one of those resources is knowledge of early Christian history. We must look backward before we can move forward. The church has been around for some two thousand years. Surely it has something to teach us. We just might find models and movements that could guide us through the troubled times in which we live and provide historical analogues that could illumine the pathway down which we should travel.²⁵

I attended seminary in the 1970s. I had to take several classes in the history of Christianity, though in those days it was called “church history.” My professor was learned and famous. He taught the course largely as a history of Christian thought. We studied orthodoxy and heresy in the early Christian period, monastic and scholastic theology in the medieval

period, the Reformation controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth century, and the liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as its major twentieth-century critics (Barth and Bonhoeffer). In general, we learned church history from a Christendom perspective. Questions of correct belief loomed largest, at least as I remember it. We studied it as a kind of history of the Christian family, which was *our* family.

In the beginning of my teaching career I taught the history of Christianity in much the same way. My primary interest was Reformation theology and the evangelical awakenings, though I never totally neglected to tell the larger story. Students seemed interested enough, at least for a while.

But then they began to change. Their interests have clearly shifted over the years. They question the excessive attention to doctrinal precision that emerged during the Reformation period. How, they ask, could the great Reformer Martin Luther split a movement over the meaning of four words: “This is my body”? They wonder about the excessive emotion of the evangelical awakenings. How, they inquire, could a person become a Christian so quickly and easily? Doctrinal faith seems too abstract and narrow, emotive faith too fragile and insecure. I was teaching a Christendom course. My students were asking for something different. I discovered that they *needed* something different because they are growing up in a world very different from the one that existed only a generation ago.

Together we—professor and students—found it in early Christianity. They began to pepper me with questions. How did early Christians start and sustain a movement over such a long period of time (some 250 years), *before* Christendom began to emerge? How did the church maintain a steady rate of growth under such difficult circumstances? How did Christian leaders make disciples without the religious benefits and privileges we take for granted today, such as the massive availability of Christian literature, the use of technology to spread the message and nurture faith, the influence of high-profile Christian leaders, and the dominance of large-scale Christian institutions like megachurches and big nonprofits? How did this minority movement influence the larger culture, even though the vast majority of people living in the Roman

Empire did *not* assume Christianity was the one true religion, Christian ethics were the best way to live, and Christian institutions were worthy of special privilege? Christians back then had every reason to fail. But they succeeded. Students wanted to know why, and how.

The success of the early church was certainly not inevitable. Christians could have accommodated to the culture to win recognition and, most likely, approval, which would have undermined the uniqueness of their belief system and way of life. In some cases they did exactly that. But for the most part they chose not to. This would have fit well with the first way, the Roman way. Christians could have isolated themselves from the culture to hide and survive, which would have kept them on the margins—safe, to be sure, but also irrelevant. In some cases, of course, they did follow this strategy. But, once again, for the most part they chose not to. This would have matched the second way, the Jewish way. Instead, Christians engaged the culture without excessive compromise, remained separate from the culture without excessive isolation. Christians figured out how to be both faithful and winsome. They followed a Third Way, living for the unseen reality of the kingdom as they saw and believed it in Christ. They immersed themselves in the culture and over time transformed it from within, though never aiming to directly.

We might be tempted at this point to idealize early Christianity, as if it epitomizes the golden age of Christianity. But such is not the case. There has never been a golden age of Christianity, not even during the apostolic period. A perusal of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth will disabuse us of that idea. Our churches look healthy and vital in comparison to that church! It is therefore not that early Christianity was better; the church had troubles then, as it does today. But the church was different. We can learn from that difference as we begin to share more in common with that early Christian period.²⁶

Forming Christians

Here is my essential argument: the early Christian movement became known as the Third Way because Jesus himself was a new way, which in

turn spawned a new movement—new in theology, in story, in authority, in community, in worship, and in behavior. Christian belief was so new, in fact, that it required Christians to develop a process of formation in the Third Way to move new believers from conversion to discipleship, from outsider to insider, from observer to full-fledged member, which produced generation after generation of believers who, established firmly in the faith, were able to grow the movement over a long period of time. Rejecting both accommodation and isolation, early Christians immersed themselves in the culture as followers of Jesus and servants of the kingdom of God.

Not that all Christians were serious about discipleship, any more than all Yankee fans are fanatics or all French people are foodies or all South Americans are nominal Catholics—or even Catholics at all. Nor, for that matter, were all ancient Romans “pagans” (a pejorative term that I will try my best to avoid). At this point I want to sound a clear note of caution. I am stating generalities. There were exceptions—and plenty of them, as scholars are quick to identify. Early Christians were different, to be sure; but they were not *that* different. All people have needs, hopes, and longings. And many turn to religion for answers, which of course includes Christianity. Still, Christianity was unique and compelling enough in the ancient world for the Romans themselves to notice—and then ignore, reject, persecute, or embrace.

Could it be that we are entering a period of Western history in which Christians will no longer be able to rely on the favor of the state, the popularity of Christianity, and the power of being the dominant majority? The premise of this book is that we, witnessing the end of Christendom, might have much to learn from Christians who lived before Christendom began. They could not rely on the kinds of cultural props that make being Christian normal, natural, and convenient. They had to choose for Christ; they had to live by conviction; they had to count the cost. Of course nominal Christians lived back then, as they do now. But on the whole, Christians living in the first few centuries were serious about discipleship. They had to be.

Of course our circumstances are clearly *not* the same as those of the early Christian period, at least not entirely. Christians once lived

in an ancient pre-Christendom world; we now live in a modern post-Christendom world. They faced the challenge of introducing Christianity as a new—and radically different—religion; we face the problem of trying to reclaim and restore a faith that is plagued by lukewarmness, division, worldliness, nationalism, and ignorance. But there is enough similarity between then and now to provide us with a model for consideration.²⁷

The ancient might not be as far removed from the modern as we think. Traveling back in time might be our best course of action as we move into the future with renewed energy, creativity, and courage.