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Ordinary Christians as Miracle Workers
in the New Testament and the Second
and Third Century Christian Apologists

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Abstract

This essay considers the implications of depictions in the New Testament and other early Christian literature of ordinary Christians as miracle workers for the spread of the Christian movement. The original impetus for this essay arose during the writing of my dissertation on Mark 16:9-20, which promises that “those who believe” will perform miraculous signs (vv. 17-18). In the dissertation I seek to ascertain the extent to which Mark 16:17-18 reflects a novel or unusual formulation as compared with other Christian writings of the first three centuries. This essay will develop further some of these ideas and relate a number of depictions of apostles and other believers as miracle workers to the larger question of the expansion of the early Christian movement. I will discuss first certain early Christian writings and then return to the latter question toward the end of this presentation.

A. New Testament

The first part of this discussion is concerned primarily with three NT passages, namely 1 Cor 12:9-10, John 14:11-14 and Mark 16:17-18, 20. These three passages contrast with numerous other parts of the NT that emphasize the miracles of the apostles or other recognized church leaders. In the first of these the apostle Paul mentions that certain members of the Corinthian church as possessing “gifts of healing” and “the workings of miracles.”

1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented to the Chicago Society of Biblical Research Winter Meeting at Loyola University Chicago on January 31, 1999. My thanks to the members of the Society for their responses, which have helped me to sharpen the argument offered here.

2 My interest in this subject stems from my dissertation, which was written under the supervision of Adela Yarbro Collins: “The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20)” (University of Chicago, 1999). Many parts of this essay are taken from chapter 5 of the dissertation (“Miracle and Mission: The Expectation of Signs to Authenticate the Kerygma,” pp. 328-457).
disciples as miracle workers addressed to the eleven (14:5). Disbelief (16:16) before offering an exalted Lord will grant to the
Moreover, the important potential of all believers figuring

Ending:

John 14
- John 14 parallel
- promise of doing “greater” (v. 12a)
- explanation: “because I am the Father” (v. 12b)
- promise of answered prayer (14) and assurance of the presence (vv. 16-17)

Thus neither in emphasizing believers in general as miracle offer a completely novel experience of the apostles or certain others.
Stephen, Philip, Barnabas—
with 1 Cor 12:9-10, John 14

B. Other Early Christian Literature

This same generalization is made in John, Paul, Peter and Thomas
miracles only of an individual, conversion of outsiders. Or someone other than an apostle?
Ionnidis] 24, 46-47, 81-82. As these exceptional passages, however, giving instructions to the prayers involves the raising of a dead man.

Also contrasting with the earliest surviving Christian texts, Aristides of Athens (ca. 130) refers to miracles being performed by


disciples as miracle workers. In the Longer Ending a commissioning addressed to the eleven (16:15) mentions the implications of belief and disbelief (16:16) before offering a promise of miracles (16:17-18), which the exalted Lord will grant to those who preach the gospel (16:20).

Moreover, the importance of Jesus’ departure to the wonder-working potential of all believers figures prominently in both John 14 and the Longer Ending:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John 14</th>
<th>Mark 16:15-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• [no Johannine parallel]</td>
<td>• commissioning (v. 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• promise of doing “greater” works (v. 12a)</td>
<td>• promise of signs (vv. 17-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• explanation: “because I am going to the Father” (v. 12b)</td>
<td>• ascension/session at God’s right hand (v. 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• promise of answered prayer (vv. 13-14)</td>
<td>• the assistance of the risen Lord (v. 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• assurance of the Paraclete’s presence (vv. 16-17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Thus neither in emphasizing the departure of Jesus nor in pointing to believers in general as miracle workers does the author of the Longer Ending offer a completely novel expectation. Moreover, in associating miracles with the apostles or certain other recognized Christian leaders—as in Acts, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas—the majority of NT passages stand in contrast with 1 Cor 12:9-10, John 14:12 and Mark 16:17-18, 20.

B. Other Early Christian Literature

This same generalization applies also to the apocryphal acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter and Thomas, which, with rare exceptions, emphasize the miracles only of an individual apostle, oftentimes in connection with the conversion of outsiders. Only occasionally do these apocryphal acts portray someone other than an apostle performing a miracle (Acts of John Ieta Ioannis) 24: 46-47, 81-82; Acts of Peter Ictus Vercellenses) 25). In each of these exceptional passages, the role of the apostle is nonetheless prominent in giving instructions to the person who performs the miracle, which usually involves the raising of a dead person.

Also contrasting with the three NT passages highlighted above is the earliest surviving Christian apologistic writing, the Apology by Marcianus Aristides of Athens (ca. 125 or 140’s CE), which never mentions that miracles were performed by the first apostles or by subsequent believers.5

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5 On this point see chapter 2 in the Syriac version and chapter 15 in the Greek version of Aristides’ Apology, which appear in J. Rendel Harris and J. Armitage Robinson, The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians from a Syriac MS: Preserved on Mount Sinai with an Appendix Containing the Main Portion of the Original Greek Text (Second Edition, Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 1/1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893, reprinted, Nandemat: Kraus Reprint, 1967) 36-37 (ET of the Syriac) and 110
Perhaps also of significance in this connection is the fragment of the apologist Quadratus (120’s CE) emphasizing the miracles of Jesus rather than those of the apostles or other believers.6

Beginning with Justin Martyr, however, a number of Christian apologists of the second and third centuries emphasize the miracles of contemporary believers rather than those performed by Jesus or the first apostles. What follows I will discuss one or two representative passages from Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen before considering the implications of these witnesses, along with the three NT passages discussed above, for the spread of the Christian movement.

First, in Dialogue 30 Justin instructs Trypho “that we believers beseech him to safeguard us from strange, that is, evil and deceitful spirits” (30.2). Justin explains that the prevalence of exercisms in his own day stands as proof that God bestowed “great power” upon Christ:

We constantly ask God through Jesus Christ to keep us safe from these demons, who...were once adored by us... We call him our helper and redeemer by the power of whose name even the demons shudder. Even today they are cast out (καὶ οὐκ εἰσερχόμενα) in the name of Jesus Christ... From this it is clear to all (ὅτι καὶ ἐξ οὗ ἐπεφέρεν εὐαγγέλιον) that his Father bestowed upon him such a great power with the result that (τὸ γὰρ τὸν βιβλιακὸν ἐξαιρεῖται) even the demons are subject to his name and to his preordained manner of suffering.7

Here Justin is not interested in the activities of exercisms as such, but rather in the support they lend to his discussion about Christ, who received “great power” from the Father. Nonetheless, his argument assumes that such exercisms make “clear to all” the legitimacy of the kerygma.

Albeit in a different sort of argument, Theophilus of Antioch’s (d. 181 or 188 CE) apology addressed Ad Autolycum also assumes the prevalence of contemporary exercisms. He does so in order to support his assessment of renowned writers like Homer.

In support of these points And this, indeed, is the possessed are s true God [ης καὶ ἐξορκίζων κατ\ deception ζητομένην as former inspired πνεύματα εἰσαγαγοὶ]. B writers, wakened u to themselves and ἐπιτύπωσαν the pr God and such like.

Theophilus mentions exercism writers and their sometimes the author Mark 16:17 performed by ordinary Chri that the exercisms are the ecclesiastical leaders.

For the most part, Irenaeus very little interest in the exercism believers. Toward the end of “those who belong to Simon miracles...viritles oper... Irenaeus is not interested pit.

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6 The fragment, which may or may not bespeak the contents of the remainder of Quadratus’ otherwise lost work, is preserved by Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 4.3.2): “But the works (τὰ ἐργάτα) of our Savior were always present, for they were truly, those who were cured, those who rose from the dead, who had not merely (οὐκ...μόνον) appeared as cured and risen, but (ἄλλα καὶ) were constantly present, not only (οὐδὲ...μόνον) while the Savior was living, but even (ἄλλα καὶ) for some time after he had gone. So that (ὅτε) some of them survived even till our own time” (Greek text and ET: Kirsopp Lake, I.C.I.).

renowned writers like Homer and Hesiod. On the negative side, every wicked
thing stemming from these writers is due to the fact that they were “inspired
by the demons [πατὶ δαμούων δὲ ἐμπυευθέντες]” and “spoke with fantasy
and deception [ματαια καὶ πλάνη ἐξαλέγαν]”
8. On the positive side, however, Theophilus maintains that these same writers also bore witness to
the truth.

In support of these points he writes:

And this, indeed, clearly appears from the fact that even to this day
the possessed are sometimes exorcised in the name of the living and
ture God [καὶ γὰρ οἱ δαμούων ἐνιαστί καὶ μέχρι τοῦ δεύορ
ἐξορκίζωντα κατὰ τοῦ ὄνοματος τοῦ ὅντος θεοῦ; and the
deceiving spirits themselves confess that they are demons who also
formerly inspired these writers [καὶ ὁμολογεῖ αὐτὰ τὰ πλάνα
πνεύματα εἶναι δαμοῦν, οἱ καὶ τάτο εἰς ἑκείνους ἐνεργοῦσαι]
But sometimes some of them [that is, the ancient
writers], wakened up in soul, and, that they might be a witness
to themselves and to all people, spoke things in harmony with
[ἀκόλουθοι] the prophets regarding the monarchy and judgment of
God and such like. (Ad Autolycym, 2.8.8-9)

Theophilus mentions exorcisms to support his critique of classical Greek
writers and their sometimes demonic source of inspiration. Apparently like
the author of Mark 16:17a, Theophilus seems to refer to the exorcisms
performed by ordinary Christians in that his explanation does not indicate
that the exorcisms are the work of either apostolic figures or recognized
ecclesiastical leaders.

For the most part, Irenaeus’ well-known treatise Against Heresies shows
very little interest in the miracles of the disciples or of contemporary
believers. Toward the end of Book ii of this work, however, he takes aim at
“those...who belong to Simon and Carpocratæ, ... who are said to perform
miracles (qui...miritates operari dicitur).”
9. Throughout Adv. Haer. ii.31-32
Irenaeus is not interested primarily in the miracles of contemporary believers.

8. Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Autolycym 2.8.7. The Greek text cited was edited by
Miroslav Marcusovic, Theophili Antiocheni Ad Autolycym (Patristische Texte und
Studien 44; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995) 51. I have modified the ET in ANF 2.97.
9. Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. ii.31-2; of the pejorative descriptions of other ‘heretical’
miracle workers in 1.13-21 (esp. 13) and i.23. The Latin and Greek texts cited are
edited by Adelin Rousseau et al., Irénée de Lyon: Contre les Hérésies (SC 100
[Book iv], 152-153 [Book v], 210-211 [Book iii], 263-264 [Book i], 293-294
cited is adapted from ANF 1.315-567. Strictly speaking, Irenaeus is not typically
classified among the apologists, but Robert Grant, writing in reference to the
apologist Quadratus and to Irenaeus, notes that in the second century “[t]here
was no sharp distinction between antiheretical and apologetic writing, and
apologists like Justin and Tatian also wrote against heresies” (Greek Apologists
When he does mention these, it is to offer a foil for the illegitimate miracle workers against whom he writes, and to support the authenticity of Jesus' miracles. Moreover, Irenaeus does not deny that heretics perform miracles but, instead, questions the character of their miracles and the motivation of those who perform them. In his view, such people do not act "either through the power of God or in connection with the truth," but rather wish to lead people astray:

"For they can neither confer sight on the blind, nor hearing on the deaf, nor chase away all sorts of demons—[none, indeed,] except those that are sent into others by themselves, if they can even do so much as this. Nor can they furnish effective remedies for those external accidents which may occur. (Adv. Haer. ii.31.2; cf. ii.32.3)

Irenaeus then contrasts the heretics' inability to perform miracles with the activity of Jesus, the apostles and contemporary believers:

"And so far are they [i.e., heretics] from being able to raise the dead, as the Lord raised them, and the apostles did by means of prayer, and has been frequently done in the brotherhood on account of some necessity (et in fraternitate saepissime propter aliquid necessarium)...that they do not even believe this can possibly be done. (Adv. Haer. ii.31.3)

Irenaeus continues this contrast by observing that in the church "without fee or reward" people "are cured very frequently (saepissime)" (Adv. Haer. ii.31.3).

A little later in Adv. Haer. ii.32, Irenaeus offers two proofs in response to the charge that the miracles of Jesus were not authentic: the predictions of the OT prophets and the miracles performed also by Jesus' disciples. With regard to the latter he writes,

"Wherefore, also, those who are in truth his disciples, receiving grace [gratio; ἡ χάρις] from him, do in his name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of others, according to the gift which each one has received from him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that [ut etiam saepissime; ὅτε πολλαῖς] those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ]; and join themselves to the church [credant...et sint in Ecclesia, πιστεύει...καὶ εἰναι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ]..." (Adv. Haer. ii.32.4)

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10 Concerning the former proof Irenaeus writes, "If, however, they maintain that the Lord too performed such works simply in appearance, we shall refer them to the prophetic writings, and prove from these both that all things were thus predicted regarding him, and did take place undoubtedly, and that he is the only Son of God" (Adv. Haer. ii.32.4).

11 The word "miracles" appears in brackets because there is no object for the verb pericicum [περικείμενον]. Mention of exorcisms and other wonders later in the passage indicates that this is a reasonable inference.
Mentioning other manifestations of foreknowledge, visions, prophetic expressions, healing and raising the dead, Irenaeus argues that the church uses these gifts "day by day [per singulos dies; εἰκότης ἡμέρας] for the benefit of the gentiles," neither deceiving people "nor taking any reward." Of particular interest is Irenaeus' claim that the performance of a miracle (for example, an exorcism) on an unbeliever is a regular occurrence that often results in that person's conversion and subsequent incorporation into the church [in Ecclesia; έν τῇ ἑκάστοιᾳ].

The writings of Tertullian also emphasize the miracles of believers in general rather than those of noteworthy apostles or church leaders. For example, in his letter to the Roman proconsul Scapula, Tertullian elucidates why Christians simply pray for the emperor rather than offer sacrifices:

For God, creator of the universe, has no need of odors or od of blood. These things are the food of demons [daemonorum pabula sunt]. But we not only reject demons: we overcome them and daily hold them up to contempt [reuiünimus et coddite traducimus]; we exorcise them from people, as has been observed by multitudes [et de hominibus expellimus, sicut plurimum notum est]. So all the more we pray for the imperial well-being, as those who seek it at the hands of him who is able to bestow it. 12

His argument is that Christians cast demons out rather than participate in rites inspired by them. In so doing, Tertullian hopes that the proconsul of Carthage will agree that prayer for the emperor constitutes a sufficient expression of loyalty to Rome. In another passage addressed to Scapula, the apologist maintains that benevolent Christians do not deserve the charges that are often brought against them in court:

The clerk [notarius] of one of them, who was liable to be thrown down upon the ground by a demon, was set free from his affliction [cun a daemone praecipitaturer liberatus est], as was also the relative of another, and the little boy of a third. How many men of rank—to say nothing of common people—have been delivered from devils, and healed of diseases [et quanti honesti viri—de vulgaribus enim non dicimus—aut a demonis aut veleni negotiationi remediati sunt]! Even Severus himself, the father of Antoninus, was graciously mindful of the Christians; for he sought out the ChristianProculus...and, in gratitude for his having once cured him by anointing [per oleum aliquando curaverat], he kept him in his

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12 Tert., Ad Scapulam 2.8h-9; p. 1128, 11. 34-41. The Latin text cited for Tertullian's Ad Scapulam was edited by E. Dekkers and appears in Quinti Septimi Florentii Tertulliani Opera (2 Vols.; Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 1-2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) 2.1125-1132. Page and line numbers cited refer to this edition. English translations cited from Tertullian's works are from vols. 3-4 of the ANF. At certain points I have modified these translations to conform more accurately to the Latin.
palece until the day of his death. Antoninus, too...was intimately acquainted with this man. 13
Accordingly, the innocence of Christians in face of the frivolous charges brought against them is demonstrated by citing examples of believers who have shown mercy toward others in casting out demons and performing healings. 14

Finally, Origen’s responses to the criticisms of Celsus also betray an appreciation for the importance of miracles in converting outsiders. In Contra Celsum 7.4 Origen draws attention to contemporary exorcisms when criticizing the Pythian priestess—mentioned by Celsus—whose character must be like that of the race of demons, which not a few Christians drive out [λέγεται ὃτι γνώρισεν τοὺς ἔργα τῆς διάκονης] of those who suffer from them, without any curious magical art or sorcerer’s device, but with prayer alone and very simple adjurations and formulas such as a rather simple person could use [καὶ προσέβαιν ἐπὶ θουργοὺς ἀθρόως]. 15

Continuing the above statement, Origen also acknowledges the importance of miracles to the uneducated, who are not impressed with rational arguments:

For generally speaking it is uneducated people who do this kind of work [τὰ δὲ ἐν τῷ δόξῃ ἑώρακα] when the power in the word of Christ shows 10 the worthlessness and weakness of the demons. For it is not necessary to have someone who is wise and competent in the rational proofs of the faith, in order that they should be defeated and yield to expulsion from the soul and the body of a person.

Like Justin and Irenaeus, Origen recognizes the importance of miracles in persuading outsiders. Although his primary concern in Contra Celsum 7.4 is to discredit the evil nature of the Pythian priestess, he calls attention both to the many believers, who perform exorcisms, and to the iudaeus, who, by means of such a demonstration of Christ’s power, persuade others to abandon the deceitful ways of demons.

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13 Tert., Ad Scap. 4.5; Quinti Septimi Florentii Terulliani Opera, 1:1130-1131, 11. 23-32.
14 On this passage see also Bend Kollmann, Wundertäter, pp. 319 n. 8, 374 n. 39. Note also other discussions of the miraculous in Tert., de Praescriptione Haereticorum 41, de Testimonio Animae 3.1, Adv Marc. v.8.4-11, Apologia 23, 37; cf. Scorpiae 1.2-4a, de Orat. 29.1-3.
16 Note the genitive absolute τῆς...χάριτος in conjunction with πράττων.
C. Summary of the Primary Sources

At present it remains to reflect upon the statements of the eight early Christian writings discussed above before considering their possible relevance for contributing to an explanation for the spread of the Christian movement. More often than not, these authors do not answer every question that historians might like to ask them. For example, the apostle Paul recognizes certain Corinthian Christians as workers of miracles, including healings (1 Cor 12:9-10), but does not specify whether he understands these wonders as occurring within the church, in a missionary context aimed at outsiders, or both. His overarching concern in 1 Corinthians 12-14—namely that the various gifts be exercised for the common good of the Christian community—might suggest the first option.  

In addition, the promises of John 14:11-14 and Mark 16:17-18, 20 do not claim to report actual miracles but anticipate their occurrence at some future point. While the Fourth Gospel does not specify the context in which miracles are to occur, the Longer Ending clearly expects a setting of missionary proclamation within which the exalted Lord will grant the five signs listed in 16:17b-18 to authenticate the message.

For his part, Justin Martyr connects the “great power” given to Christ with the ability of Christians to cast out demons (Dialogue 30). Such a display of power makes it “clear to all” that the “Father bestowed upon [Christ] such a great power.” Although here and elsewhere Justin tells us nothing about the identity of these exorcists, he assumes a connection between the power of Christ, a miracle and the persuasion of outsiders. Moreover, in his selective critique of classical culture, Theophilus of Antioch also assumes the prevalence of contemporary exorcisms but, unfortunately, does not reveal anything about their socio-historical context or effects (Ad Autolycum 2.8.8-9). The antithetical treatise of Irenaeus is concerned primarily with miracles that the non-orthodox cannot perform, and rejections as a foil to his opponents’ deeds the miracles of Jesus, the first apostles and contemporary believers (Adv. Haer. ii.31.2-3). Of particular interest is his claim that “those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ] and join themselves to the church” (Adv. Haer. ii.32.4).

Likewise, Tertullian affirms that Christians contribute to “the imperial well-being” by cast out demons and should thus be exempt from participating in official sacrifices (Ad Scapulam 2.8b-9). He also claims that such deeds have been “observed multiple times” but does not, however, assert

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17 Cf. 1 Cor 12:7. On the other hand, note that Paul also acknowledges that the gift of prophecy is for the benefit of unbelievers, who can be convinced that God is in the midst of the Christian congregation when this gift is exercised (1 Cor 14:22-25). It is conceivable, but not certain from Paul’s statements, that gifts other than prophecy would also have been regarded as having benefits for outsiders.
whether anyone converted to Christianity as a result. Perhaps most specifically, Origen acknowledges the persuasive effect of miracles on those who would not otherwise have responded to rational arguments.

Accordingly, there thus remain unanswered questions for the historian to try to sort out concerning the reliability of these and other early Christian claims about believers as workers of miracles. It is perhaps evident from the individual analyses offered above that none of these eight Christian writings readily lends itself to revealing much about early Christian miracle workers. The apostle Paul is usually concerned with his own miracles and authority (1 Thess 1:5, 1 Cor 2:4-5, Gal 3:1-5, 2 Cor 12:11-12 and Rom 15:18-19), and mentions healings and other miracles only to correct a particular problem within the Corinthian church (1 Cor 12:9-10). The authors of the Fourth Gospel and of Mark’s Longer Ending reflect similar future expectations that are not verifiable. Likewise, the apologetic and antimessianic writings that have been discussed are concerned primarily with other issues and, probably as a result, obscure precious little about the miraculous. It would not necessarily follow, however, to infer that such scant testimonies point to an equally sparse social phenomenon. On the contrary, I am inclined to regard these authors’ lack of specificity concerning ordinary believers as workers of miracles as an indication that their writings preserve only an echo of what, at least in some parts of the church, was a resounding boom in the early centuries of the Christian movement.

D. Implications for the Spread of the Christian Movement

Anyone who has wrestled with this issue must take into account the work of Ramsay MacMullen, whose theses comprise largely a revival and modest revision of Adolf von Harnack’s classic work on the mission and expansion of early Christianity.18 Two drawbacks to MacMullen’s approach, however, should be mentioned. First, his treatment of the primary sources is oftentimes superficial in that he does not consistently distinguish between various kinds of literary evi
d to regard the report of a miracle as a reflection of an actual

More recently, sociologists of the early church in terms of the plagues that began in 1663 and may have influenced the spread of Christianity, stress the need for an explanation for the spread of Christianity. Stark’s analysis seeks to explain the spread of Christianity in terms of the evangelistic zeal of the apostles and their followers. This argument poses a false dichotomy of the spread of Christianity. It is perhaps an understatement to say that the spread of Christianity was not a result of a single miracle, but rather a combination of various factors.

As a result, perhaps most decisive effect of miracles on those historical arguments.

questions for the historian to these and other early Christian writings. It is perhaps evident from the eight Christian writings early Christian miracle workers. Their own miracles and authority (1 Cor 15:12 and Rom 15:18-19), and to correct a particular problem.

The authors of the Fourth Gospel’s future expectations that Christianity had and anathematised writings that are with other issues and, probably, the miraculous. It would not have to our ascetic testimonies point to an authentic, by inclination I am inclined to regard binary believers as workers of of course only an echo of what, at least, a sounding boom in the early

Movement

we must take into account the argument largely a revival and basic work on the mission and links to MacMullen’s approach, the second of the primary sources is consistently distinguish between

various kinds of literary evidence. Moreover, MacMullen is often too eager to regard the report of a miracle in, for example, the apocryphal acts and if it were a reflection of an actual historical situation.

More recently sociologist Rodney Stark has sought to explain the growth of the early church in terms of, among other things, the church’s response to the plagues that began in 165 and 251 CE; rejection of infanticide and abortion; and emphasis upon love for one’s neighbor. The *basso continuo* running through Stark’s explanations is that the church’s ministry to those in need contributed significantly to the popularity of this new religion. At least in part, Stark’s analysis seeks to dispel the traditional explanation that the church grew by means of an organized missionary movement, which included evangelistic preaching and, perhaps, miracles. In my view, Stark’s argument poses a false dichotomy between social ministry, on the one hand, and sharing the good news, on the other. His analysis also seems to overlook the fact that those benefiting from the work of a healer or of an exorcist—however such phenomena may be explained—also merit inclusion among the needy individuals to whom the early church ministered. It is perhaps an understatement to note, with Stark, that “no one thing” can

19 That is to say, the historian must assess the relative value of the various ways miracles are presented by, e.g., an outsider like Celsus, an apologist like Justin, or the authors of the literary fictions like the apocryphal acts. On these and other points see William S. Babcock, “MacMullen on Conversion: A Response,” *SecCent* 5 (1985-1986) 82-89; Mark D. Jordan, “Philosophic ‘Conversion’ and Christian Conversion: A Gloss on Professor MacMullen,” *SecCent* 5 (1985-1986) 90-96. Reflecting more sound comparative methodology in his article on conversion in the apocryphal acts, Eugene Gallagher calls attention to the ways in which each of the authors of the apocryphal acts presents a well-developed understanding of conversion (“Conversion and Salvation in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *SecCent* 8 [1991] 13-29). In addition, François Bovon discusses miracles in relation to other recurring themes in the apocalyptic acts: the apostles’ preaching, the sacraments and martyrdom (“Miracles, magie, et guérison dans les Actes apocryphes des apôtres,” *JECS* 3 [1995] 245-259).


21 R. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, pp. 3-4, 208. It is not the purpose of this essay to affirm the opposite position, however.

account for the astonishing popularity of Christianity in the early centuries of the Common Era. 23 One implication of this essay is that the role of miracle workers as depicted in the NT and other early Christian literature constitutes a necessary part of any such explanation.

23 R. Stark rightly observes, "[The question] requires many answers—no one thing led to the triumph of Christianity" (Rise of Christianity, p. 3).

Paul's Understan...