

✦ Preface ✦

I HAVE ALWAYS been a history buff, but for most of my career I never really considered working with historical materials myself. I was content to be a sociologist and to spend my time trying to formulate and test more rigorous theories concerning a range of topics—most of them involving the sociology of religion. Then, in 1984, I read Wayne Meeks's *The First Urban Christians*. I bought it on impulse from the History Book Club, and I liked it very much. I was extremely impressed, not only by the many new things I learned about the subject, but also with Meeks's efforts to utilize social science.

Several months later I got lucky again. I came across a religious studies book catalog. In addition to Meeks's book, it listed other new titles in early church history. Here are the three new books I ordered that day: *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, by Ramsay MacMullen; *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, by Robert L. Wilken; and *Miracle in the Early Christian World*, by Howard Clark Kee. It would be hard to select three better books on the early Christian era. And, along with Meeks, these authors convinced me that what the field really needed was a more up-to-date and more rigorous brand of social science.

A year later, when I sent off a paper entitled "The Class Basis of Early Christianity: Inferences from a Sociological Model," I informed the journal editor that my primary purpose was to discover whether I was "good enough to play in the Greco-Roman League." Thus I was delighted when several historians of the New Testament era responded so favorably to the essay that they invited me to write a paper that would serve as the focus of the 1986 annual meeting of the Social History of Early Christianity Group of the Society of Biblical Literature. That paper laid out my heretical view that the mission to the Jews had been far more successful and long-lasting than the New Testament and the early church fathers claim. After formal responses to the essay by John Elliott, Ronald Hock, Caroline Osiek, and

cially true as I wrote about abortion, birth control, and sexual norms in chapter 5; whenever the church fathers wrote candidly on these matters, the Roberts and Donaldson version translated the original Greek into Latin rather than into English. Reading Clement of Alexandria, for example, one encounters frequent blocks of type in Latin. From Jaroslav Pelikan (1987:38) I discovered that this was a very old tradition. Hence Edward Gibbon reported in his *Autobiography* that "my English text is chaste, all licentious passages are left in the obscurity of a learned language" (1961:198). Fortunately for those of us for whom learned languages are obscure, there exist more recent translations, written by scholars having less refined sensibilities than Gibbon or the Victorian gentlemen from Edinburgh. In all, it was a most instructive experience.

This book was a long time coming. From the start I have tested the waters by publishing early versions of many of these chapters in various journals—as is noted at the start of appropriate chapters. Moreover, this project was never my principal undertaking. Since early 1985, when I completed the initial version of what is now chapter 2, I have published a number of books (one of them an introduction to sociology that I have subsequently revised five times). In the midst of these other activities, my effort to reconstruct the rise of Christianity has been a cherished hobby—a justification for reading books and articles that now fill an entire wall of my study. It would be impossible to express adequately how much pleasure I have gained from these authors. I am convinced that students of antiquity are on average the most careful researchers and the most graceful writers in the world of scholarship. Sadly, this concludes my hobby and ends my visit to their domain.