

“Early Christianity is marked by the good, the bad, and the (morally) ugly. And people almost never simply fall into just one of those categories, but reflect a mixture of the three. While many Christian treatments of church history tend to emphasize our ‘greatest hits’ and reflect a tinge of triumphalism, Derek Cooper’s *Sinners and Saints* recognizes the importance of being ruthlessly honest about our past. Such honesty is essential to understanding how God has worked through flawed humans in the past as well as in the present. This *Real Story of Early Christianity* is a page-turner that recognizes that authenticity in our present Christian witness begins with our willingness to tell the truth about our past. This way of telling our story is honest, compelling, and edifying!”

—Roy E. Ciampa,
Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship

“Derek Cooper has written a vibrant and energetic account of church history that usually gets forgotten or covered up. He offers no romantic narration of the good old days; instead Cooper lays out many of the absurd, embarrassing, funny, scary, and plain weird things that happened in the early church. You could just as well call it the ‘horrible history of the early church’ or ‘the underbelly of church history.’ It will make you laugh, squirm, raise your eyebrows in confusion, and even gross you out. A truly unique entrée into early church history!”

—Dr. Michael F. Bird,
Lecturer in Theology at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

“Virtually every family has an ‘interesting’ past—and the family of God is no different. Derek Cooper uses his skillful mastery of church history to shine a candid yet hope-filled light on the church, helping us catch glimpses of our brothers and sisters with their makeup off. If you want to know what the church’s past is *really* like—free from cynicism and dry academic writing—this book is for you.”

—J.R. Briggs,
founder of Kairos Partnerships,
author of *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure*

“In *Sinners and Saints*, Derek Cooper escorts the reader on a revealing journey through early church history. Lovers of history and those who find history boring will enjoy and learn alike from this engaging book. It also provides a much needed corrective for Christians inclined to idealize and idolize Christian leaders in the past, as well as Christian leaders today—all who are without exception both sinners and saints.”

—Carolyn Custis James,
author of *Malestrom: Manhood Swept into the Currents of a Changing World*
and *Finding God in the Margins: The Book of Ruth*

“Few books these days surprise me, but Derek Cooper’s *Sinners and Saints* has done just that. At times slapstick funny, at times borderline inappropriate, and at times profoundly moving, this book turns the black-and-white version of the church’s history into living color. As a lifelong reader of early church history, I learned new things on every page—things I had never read or heard before about the church I love so much. It is clear from this powerful book that Derek Cooper loves the church, the same church our Lord loves and gave his life for.”

—The Rev. David W. Peters,
author of *Post-Traumatic God: How the Church
Cares for People Who Have Been to Hell and Back*

“Finally, a book about Christian history that does not pull any punches. Many tend to view the early church through rose colored glasses, as a glorious time we should all strive to return to. Cooper’s brutally honest portrayal of early Christianity and the surrounding culture reminds the church that we are just as fragile today as the earliest Christians were centuries ago and that there is no shame in being human. Cooper presents a thorough, detailed, user-friendly, and often gritty account of early Christianity that is both highly readable and absolutely fascinating.”

—Bill Curtis,
President of Christian History Institute

REAL CHURCH HISTORY

SINNERS
AND
SAINTS

**The Real Story of
Early Christianity**

Derek Cooper

 **Kregel**
Academic

Sinners and Saints: The Real Story of Early Christianity

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**THIS BOOK IS WARMLY DEDICATED
TO FRANK JAMES III,
WHO HAS ALWAYS ENCOURAGED
ME TO TELL THE TRUTH.**

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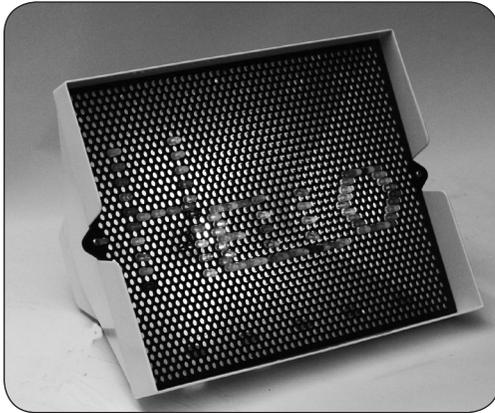
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Introduction

GETTING REAL WITH CHRISTIANITY'S PAST

If the church were a celebrity, it would have a serious public relations problem. Here are the headlines. Yesterday a prominent pastor was caught having an affair. Today an entire church board was charged with tax evasion. Tomorrow a celebrated Christian leader will be fired for racist comments. Although the church has certainly had its share of inspirational figures, ethical victories, and heroic achievements, such have often been overshadowed by unsavory characters, moral failures, and embarrassing escapades.

Despite our awareness of the church's declining public appeal today, however, many good-natured Christians are completely unfamiliar with



Lite-Brite. Courtesy of Dhscommtech.

our sinful past. We may reluctantly acknowledge the shortcomings of our most popular leaders and even confess the private sins of our own hearts, but we are not accustomed to calling into question the motives of Jesus's disciples or of interrogating our most famous forebears. To the contrary, many pious believers look back with twinkles in our eyes to the "golden age" of the early church when no one faced a hint of conflict,

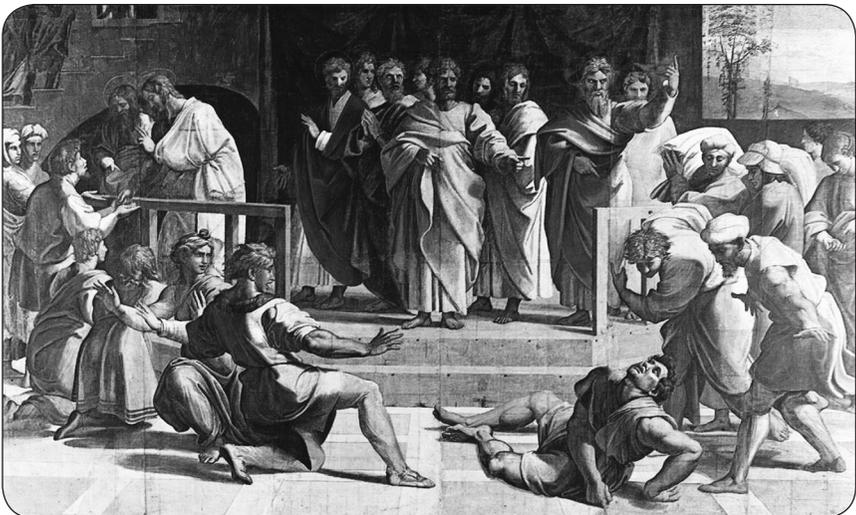
no one lacked food or shelter, and no one suffered from morning breath.

Though unintentional, part of our starry-eyed nostalgia for the past comes from an uncritical understanding of the Bible. As I often joke with my students, reading Scripture is like using the toy Lite-Brite. Depending on the template used, most any design can be made. We assume that there is only one template in the toy box, but there are actually any number of ways to make a design. For far too long we have unconsciously used the following set of verses as our sole template of the ancient church:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. . . There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feed, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32, 34–35)

If these were the only kinds of verses in the New Testament describing early Christianity, there would be nothing left to do other than complete our sublime design, turn off the lights, and stand in awe of our wonderful creation. To be completely honest, I wish things really were this simple and straightforward. However, we need not venture more than five verses from this idyllic template before we witness Ananias and Sapphira, presumably filled with the same Holy Spirit poured on all the believers in Acts 2, committing “fraud” (5:2) by lying about the land they donated to the apostles and suffering a most abrupt and shocking demise as a result—death by the Holy Spirit.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a story we don't like, but that doesn't mean we can ignore it. Despite the consternation it causes us, it balances out the better known and more benevolent retellings that Christians prefer to ponder. For as we continue to insert our plastic pegs into the black box, a more symmetrical reading of Scripture can't help but notice the heartbreaking conflicts, the questionable conduct, and the sinful actions that constantly dot our design. Whether the “sharp disagreement” (Acts 15:39) between Barnabas and Paul about whether to bring along John Mark on their missionary journeys, whether Peter and Paul's infamous quarrel about how to minister to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11–14), whether Demas's desertion of Paul because Demas “loved this world” (2 Tim. 4:10), or whether the Apostle John's public denunciation of Diotrefes for



The Death of Ananias by Raphael.

advancing “malicious nonsense” (3 John 1:10), the church is more human, and occasionally less humane, than we care to recognize or admit. Christians who do not understand this important truth run the risk of harm by not guarding our hearts against the inevitable sinfulness that resides in the core of humanity. For although we, the church, like to think of ourselves as “in” the world but not “of” it, we have to recognize that our heavenly spirits are still yoked to our earthly bodies.

But before we paint the picture of early Christians with too dark a brush, I hasten to add that the first Christians were not wholly bad or evil. Not in the least. On the contrary, the church was, and is, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “God’s handiwork” (Eph. 2:10), a masterpiece of the ages, to be marveled out and appreciated by onlookers of all backgrounds and temperaments. The church is a splendid masterwork, one painted in many beautiful hues and shades. It is beautiful and pleasing in God’s sight and surely the object of his affection. But it’s not flawless. The church, as holy and Spirit-filled as it is, will remain all too human while men and women and boys and girls dwell in this fallen world. It does the church no good to pretend that we are something that we are not—and we are neither individually impeccable nor collectively exemplary. Nor does it do the world any good to imagine that our history is nothing but admirable despite the fact that the repulsive exploits of some of our most celebrated church leaders are regularly paraded about in news reports and on social media.

WHY I AM WRITING THIS BOOK

Although unconventional, in the pages that follow I seek to offer a more balanced picture of early Christianity as a way to both strengthen the body of Christ and to offer an authentic witness to the world. Please let me explain. When I was in seminary, the most difficult class I took was not Advanced Hebrew, not Advanced Greek, nor even one curiously titled “Q”—an entire class, believe it or not, dedicated to a hypothetical document that has never been found and which many scholars believe never existed. Instead, the most difficult class I took was one innocuously entitled “Introduction to Evangelism.” In addition to the requirement of sharing my faith with thirteen different people over the course of a semester, I had to complete an “evangelistic project” that required me to survey dozens of non-Christians in my hometown. In the project, the survey question I remember most vividly asked non-Christians why they were not Christians—a pointed question if there ever was one. The majority of respondents said something to this effect: “I am not a Christian because Christians are hypocrites who cover up their past.” Among the examples cited were the Crusades, witch hunts, intellectual battles against science, support of slavery, systemic racism, justification of war, subjugation of women, collusion with the state, pedophilia, and anti-Semitism.

As a church historian and committed Christian, this resounding response along with its tangible examples is a bitter pill that I am still at-

tempting to swallow. And, unfortunately, rather than being a minority report, recent surveys corroborate my findings. According to *unChristian*, among many other sources, younger generations believe that *Christianity* and *hypocrisy* are synonymous terms.¹ It grieves me to read these surveys. I only wish everyone knew, as I do as a church historian, how much the church has blessed the world in its 2000 years of existence. It is Christians, after all, who have been at the forefront of founding hospitals, funding health clinics, starting schools, rescuing the abused, caring for the elderly, rehabilitating the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, strengthening the family, offering mental health services, providing spiritual guidance, and generally improving society. The stories of Christians standing up for justice and serving those in need are too many to mention. In fact, despite what I will do in this book, I could go on singing the praises of the church page after page. But to what avail? Why contribute more white noise to the clamor?

Part of the reason why so many non-Christians believe that Christianity is nothing but one long reign of terror is because all they hear us talk about is our triumphs, but never our defeats. Within a society that so highly values transparency, honesty, and authenticity, our reluctance to address the foibles of our fathers confirms a mounting suspicion in the minds of many that we have precious little to offer people living today. Given our current social climate, and all the undeniable scandals in which the church has been variously implicated, how can we continue to idealize biblical characters, glamorize the early years of the church, and sentimentalize our origins? Perhaps there is a better way to live in a post-Christian world; a better way to bend towards heaven while keeping our feet firmly planted in the mud; a better way to tell our story.

In this book, let's trod a different path. Unlike countless other church history books that dance around the distasteful details of our Christian past, let's humanize our history. Counterintuitively perhaps, let's emphasize as much grit as glory, let's feature as much flesh as faith, and let's showcase as many sinners as saints. It's important for you to know at the onset, however, that we are not going to do this because we think mudslinging is a spiritual discipline, but only because we believe truth-telling is. I, personally, have no desire to sully the reputation of saints, nor do I find any pleasure in wallowing in the faults of our most faithful. When I air the dirty laundry of our most hallowed heroes and heroines, I am fully aware of all the clean clothes they have neatly pressed and attractively arrayed in their dresser drawers. Because of the nature of this book, I will not usually refer to that clean laundry; but make no mistake: I know that it's there.

In short, I am imploring you, the reader, not to confuse my intention to offer a candid history of early Christianity with your impression that I have an axe to grind with the body of Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth. Truth is, my confidence in the body of believers to proclaim Christ's offer of salvation to the world does not waver, rankle, or

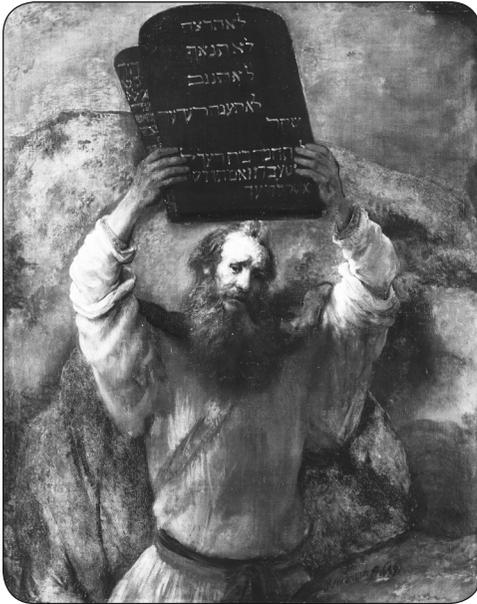
panic just because Christians are humans who err rather than gods who do not. Nor am I dissuaded from the truth of Christianity because bushes of bad apples reside interspersed among orchards of healthy ones. We need not hire a search party to find the truth when it is staring us straight in the face: I am not writing this book because I am angry, bitter, or reactionary. I am simply writing it to correct the natural tendency of all people, Christians included, to cast our history in the best possible light. Although there's nothing wrong with highlighting our predecessors' sparks of sainthood, there is danger in failing to mention their flames of failure.

LETTING GO, LOOKING FOR GOD, AND LEANING IN

Because the path we are opting to take when discussing early Christianity is uncharted and unfamiliar, I am going to suggest we keep three concepts in mind while reading this book. These concepts will lead us into a deeper learning experience as we ponder the painfully honest history about to be presented, and they will also remind us that this book is designed to serve the body of Christ rather than to subvert it. After each chapter, I suggest that you spend a few minutes reflecting and praying. Commit to asking God, "What are you teaching me through this?" "What can I learn from the broken lives of the people discussed?" "How can I incorporate the truths of church history into my everyday life and that of my faith community?"

The first concept is called "Let go." All of us have preconceived ideas

and biases. Like smudged contact lenses, these assumptions and biases color the interpretation of our environment, our social circles, and our reading of Scripture. They encourage us to see things from only our perspective, and we rarely discover how to remove the smudge so that we may see more clearly. As you read this book, pray that God will help you let go of your insistence that biblical figures and early Christian leaders have to be perfect. Instead, begin to recognize that early Christian leaders, like all our favorite characters in the Bible, were real people who mourned when experiencing loss, lashed out when



Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law
by Rembrandt.

provoked, faltered when under temptation, and crumbled when undergoing persecution. Early Christian history is nothing if it is not a story of sinful saints who got angry like Moses, lied like Sarah, cheated like David, and drifted like Solomon. The stories of their lives are designed to push us closer to Christ our refuge, not give us a false sense of human greatness. Continually ask God, "What do I need to let go of in order to see this story anew?" "How can I read the Bible and the history of the church without needing to domesticate it?"

The second concept is called "Look for God." A raging fire may consume an entire block in a city. Life is taken, possessions are lost, and we mourn the destruction. But when the flames die out and we sift through the ashes, can we see where God resides in the ruin? As the apostle Paul famously declared, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Throughout the ages we see how God and flesh dance to different tunes but intersect at certain junctures. Can we see how God is at work in spite of sin? Can we celebrate and highlight human weakness in order to see God's strength? As the Bible makes clear, God has a reputation of liking messy people and messy things, and of allowing these to frame the beautiful backdrop to his dramatic plan of salvation. As Eugene Peterson poignantly put it, "the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). While in the neighborhood of Planet Earth, Christ, as Emmanuel or "God with us," was more than content to pitch his tent among the needy, among the desperate, and among the sinners. Recognizing that church history is simply a continuation of the drama of God's redemption from the Bible, we must not alter the structure of the last two acts in the play. As you reflect upon the strange union between God and flesh, continually be on the lookout for God by asking, "Where is God amidst the clutter?" "How does the weakness inherent in this person's life or in that situation's context illustrate God's strength?"

Finally, the third concept is called "Lean in." Lean into the lives of these misfits we know as Paul, Mary Magdalene, Tertullian, Origen, Constantine, and Augustine. They're our family, and every time we familiarize ourselves with their lives, we are transcending the sands of time and learning more about ourselves—our spiritual family. And just as we learn at a family reunion how to evade Cousin Johnny's crude jokes and why to avoid Aunt Miralda's tuna casserole, we also learn how to succeed in sports by watching Uncle Joe play intergenerational baseball and we learn how to cook delicious desserts by observing Grandfather Lewis make puff pastries and plumb pie.

As we learn from our spiritual godfathers and godmothers, uncles and aunts, grandparents and great grandparents, let them caution us as much as they encourage us. Let us learn from their vices as much as from their victories. And let us critique their lives as much as we celebrate them. For like us, they slipped, they stumbled, and they sinned. Though it times they seemed to transcend their human limitations, they

never permanently surpassed their human flesh. They always remained as fragile as fine china. Nevertheless, God chose to use and work through them, just as he chooses to use and work through us. Studying their lives is our invitation to embrace our own imperfection. It is our invitation to acknowledge our brokenness. It is our invitation to be ourselves. If God uses these sinful saints, he can certainly use you, me, and many others. Let this truth bring you hope. As you attempt to lean into the lives of our ancient family members, consider asking God, “How can their lives encourage me or teach me?” “What can I learn from their stories about my own relationship with Christ?”

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

To be sure, the forthright assessment of the church’s past that we will present in this book will bruise our egos, but I believe that it will also give us hope for the future with the aim of making us more truthful and transparent reporters of the present. Christ, after all, has come to liberate us from idolatry, not to enslave us to fiction. The time has come for us to no longer overlook those parts of our past that are disgraceful to God and dishonoring to the world. The time has come for the church to give an honest evaluation of the good, the bad, and the ugly that we have done, beginning with the earliest Christians.

But how, exactly, are we supposed to candidly narrate a history that contains two millennia of skeletons in our church’s closets? Rather than shining a light into the church’s closet all at once, this initial volume illumines only the first five hundred years of Christianity’s past. Additional volumes highlighting the remaining years of the church are to follow—skeletons and all. The ten chapters that comprise this volume proceed thematically rather than chronologically, meaning that every chapter stretches from the first to the sixth century. Though slightly different from the others, the first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book. In short, as much as we envy the people living during the time of the Bible and during the first generation of the church, we really should not. It’s not just that life spans were shorter and standards of living were inferior back then; the people were just as broken as we are today. Indeed, because we are so inclined to regard the early Christians as perpetually holier and happier than we are today, attention will be drawn to how challenging life in the past really was.

The remaining chapters will likewise provide a realistic depiction of early Christian living. In the following order, each of the major features of the early Christian experience will be put into perspective: leadership, martyrdom, worship, apologetics, heresy, scripture, money, sex, and missions. Though the aim of these chapters is certainly not to blacken the cloud of witnesses surrounding the church, we will candidly discuss early Christian leaders who sometimes put their own interests before that of the church’s, martyrs who sometimes gave their lives for the wrong reasons, devotees who sometimes worshiped in bizarre ways, apologists who sometimes argued from poor and even racist logic, fundamentalists who sometimes bul-

lied fellow Christians, believers who sometimes wanted to know more about their Savior than was for their own good, aristocrats who sometimes sought to buy their way into heaven, men who sometimes denigrated women and disdained sexual intercourse, and missionaries who sometimes spread the faith with mixed motives. If these Christians of yesteryear sound like those of today, it's because they are cut from the same cloth. It's because they are you, and it's because they are me. Let's see what their lives were *really* like.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 41–60.

Chapter 1

LIVING IN THE REAL WORLD—DAILY LIFE

Despite dreamy landscapes cascading across contemporary Christmas Cards, there was nothing romantic about life in the ancient world. Life in the biblical past was laced with death, disease, and destitution. While best-selling American author Joel Osteen encourages us to “live our best life now,” many ancient Christians were simply trying to survive. The average life expectancy, after all, was in the thirties, girls were married off to older men they scarcely knew and were likely pregnant by the age of thirteen, and they delivered their babies on dirt floors in their squalid one-room tenements. There were no systems of welfare to provide for the poor, no retirement homes to accommodate the elderly, and no way to post pictures online from one’s vacation at the beach.

Truth is, the closer one gets to the “time of Jesus” or to the “age of the Bible,” the closer one gets to malnutrition, persecution, privation, patriarchy, slavery, trauma, inequality, demonic possession, rampant poverty, and a lifetime of public toilets.¹ The apostle Paul captured the spirit of his age well when he wrote: “I desire to depart [from this world]” (Phil. 1:23). And there’s little wonder why the last lines of the Bible are “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).² The early Christians ached to be rid of the death-filled, heart-rending, and back-breaking world of the Bible.

“Most persons [in the Roman Empire] lived miserable lives.”³⁰

YOUR WORST LIFE NOW

Because our tendency to romanticize the biblical and early Christian past is so rooted in our thinking, we are poised to resist this startling portrayal. We may think to ourselves, *Was life really that bad?* You tell me: How does it sound to be constantly battling tape worms, to be steadily suffering from malaria, or to be always wondering when your next meal would come? How does it sound to put your children to work before their tenth birthday, to be unable to read or write, or to have no way to advance your career? As much as we prefer this not to be true, such was life during the time of the Bible. Defying our expectations, archaeology has demonstrated that ancient

people were routinely missing teeth, that they were not getting enough protein, and that delousing—as in the stripping of lice from one’s hair with a comb—“may have been a daily routine for many people.”²³

Many of the things we take for granted in our convenience-laden lives were simply unattainable for most Christians: soap, sewage, dentistry, security, privacy, mobility, legal protection, pension, public education, electricity, kitchens, chimneys, even adequate access to food and water. And we can forget about paid vacation, emergency rooms, and three square meals a day. Bread, that high-carb temptation so often avoided by eaters today, was the staple of one’s diet, while a good cut of beef was only available at the butcher’s shop adjoining a pagan temple. Either way, according to historians, “The overwhelming majority of the population under Roman imperialism lived near the subsistence level.”²⁴ This indicates that most Christians in the Roman Empire were just managing to scrounge up enough food each day to survive. Even among the house churches that Paul led in the homes of aristocratic Christians, it’s likely that most of the saints assembled there “were poor, very poor, or desperately poor.”²⁵

“...the poor, a vast majority of the Roman population, were most vulnerable to food shortages and crises, and infectious diseases, and were subject to the shame, alienation, and the bias and indifference of the rich.”²³¹

AN URBAN AFFAIR

In addition to being paralyzed by poverty, early Christianity was also an utterly urban affair. Though most people in the ancient world lived in the countryside—naturally enough, as farming land was the only way to produce food—many early Christians still lived in the city. As one scholar explains, “peasants or country folk were not involved in the [Christian] movement until the late third or early fourth century.”²⁶ This means that Christians today have to constantly resist the temptation to visualize a biblical spirituality of sheep grazing along a meadow. To the contrary, ancient Chris-



Public Bathroom in Ostia Antica, Italy.
Courtesy of Fubar Obfusco.



Statue of Artemis.
Courtesy of David Stanley.

tianity was lived out in the hustle and bustle of city life where prostitutes were for hire, pagan temples were on every street corner, and public gym classes were conducted in the nude. We might consider the destination of Paul's biblical letters in order to form a more historically accurate image: Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica were large, pagan, impoverished, and overcrowded cities. Ancient Rome, for instance, was more densely populated than modern Mumbai. Thus when Paul preached through this "Eternal City," we have to imagine his Roman toga caked in a crust of mud, trash, and excrement. As classical historian Mary Beard explains, Paul's Rome presented "squalid

living conditions for most of the population."⁷

The cities in which Paul preached were also ones where odors assaulted one's sense of smell and sights arrested one's sense of decency. Paganism was evident on literally every street corner, and demonic possession was equally widespread. In such urban environments as the early Christian lived, whole families often lived in an unhygienic one-room tenement offering no heating, no running water, and no privacy. In the absence of public sanitation, many families defecated in pots that were tossed onto the street from an upstairs window. It was not at all uncommon for workers to live and labor in the same cramped space with other families. Some households even slept in shifts to accommodate all the people in the "crowded, poorly ventilated, and generally unhealthy conditions" in which so many Christians would have lived.⁸ Because there was no space for a kitchen, and because cooking was a fire hazard among the island of poorly constructed apartments, most meals were eaten in the streets at the equivalent of fast-food joints called *popinae*



Stele Licinia Amias Terme. Courtesy of Marie-Lan Nguyen.

popinae

in Latin or *thermopolia* in Greek. There were no sidewalks, no streetlamps, and no patrolmen.

Raising a child in the ancient city was no walk in the park. Although the birth of a child today is often an occasion of celebration, it was a source of great anxiety in antiquity, even among wealthy families that could afford the best medical treatment. Countless children died every year from lack of basic medical care, and childbirth “was always the biggest killer of young adult women,” “from senators’ wives to slaves.”⁹ Tombstones of young children and their young mothers littered the Roman Empire, leaving us a trail of tears visible to this day. On one tombstone found in ancient Rome, the inscription of a deceased four-year old girl named Ampliata attempts to offer comfort to her bewailing mother: *Noli dolere, mamma, faciendum fuit*—“Don’t be sad, mommy, it had to happen.”¹⁰

In addition to constant exposure to death, children were likewise exposed to sex at a young age, as there was virtually no privacy among adults in their one-bedroom tenements. What’s more, prostitution was not a private affair, roped off from the eyes of the innocent and carried out in a dark alley way. On the contrary, “it was a dominant institution, flourishing in the light of day.”¹¹ Prostitution was state approved, modestly taxed, and



Popina or Fast-food Restaurant in Pompeii. Courtesy of ell brown.



Mummy Portrait of Deceased Girl. Courtesy of rob koopman.

socially acceptable. Back then, a hotel bill that included lodging, food, and sex was nothing out of the ordinary. Children were regularly exposed to nude statues and artwork forever garnering the streets, walls, and temples of every Roman city. And sexually explicit images cluttered walls and filled the minds of the young. Children would have been forced to begin work at a very young age, and very few of them would have received an education. Many children were also exposed (a common practice in the ancient world where children were left out in the elements), or sold into slavery. And at least half of all children did not even survive into adulthood.

IF I WERE A RICH MAN

If I have been painting the world of early Christianity with too dark and stark a brushstroke, that's because this realistic portrait is rarely acknowledged in churches, classrooms, and textbooks. It's certainly not true that all early Christians were like characters in the movie *Annie*, but they lived much poorer and more primitive lives than we want to admit. For the sake of argument, however, we can reconstruct what life would have been like for the fabulously wealthy. Rather than constituting the more than ninety-five percent of Roman inhabitants who worked like a dog just to make ends

To give a sense of the disparity of life in ancient Rome, historian Jerome Carcopino estimates that there was “only one private house [or *domus* in Latin] for every 26 blocks of apartment houses [or *insulae*].”³²

meet, here follows the life of a true blueblood aristocrat living among the top five percent of society. (Although there were some wealthy Christians in the church from the beginning, as even the New Testament indicates, their percentages were low until the third and fourth centuries.)

As a Roman aristocrat, one's day generally revolved around bathing, eating, and accepting accolades. At some point in the day, after leading a prayer to the household gods and after receiving guests who are in his debt, a Roman *patronus* (patron) would swagger from his *domus* (large home) to the public bath house in his neatly pressed toga—clothing only allowed to be worn (of course, in a man-dominated world) by male Roman citizens. Several of his slaves and perhaps dozens of toadies, called “clients,” would accompany him to demonstrate to everyone in the overcrowded streets just how important he was. (As strange as that sounds, this, in fact, was part of their duty as a “client.”) At the public bathhouse, completely naked, the patron would lounge and converse with other rich people for hours as one of his slaves scrubbed his back with a shell while another guarded his clothing. In the afternoon, our *patronus* would return to his home, perhaps after a little time at the forum, for an elaborate meal in his *triclinium* (dining hall) with honored guests. The *triclinium* con-

tained three couches that could accommodate up to nine people, who all lay down on their left elbows and ate with their right hands from a common dish in the middle of the room served by various slaves.

After dinner and over a glass of wine with his fellow aristocrats, the conversation might turn from gladiatorial races to the merits of religion. Because he would be an intimate acquaintance, and because it is well established that conversion largely took place in the ancient world (as today) through social networks, his friend lounging next to him may confide that he has recently become a Christian believer, and that he would like his friend to attend a worship service with him. The wealthy man might demur, but will consent after a few more drinks—it is Tuscan wine, after all. He eventually decides that the Christian life is for him, and seeks to learn what is required for what we call today “church membership.” According to an early document called the *Apostolic Tradition*, he may get more than he bargained for.



Fresco from Herculaneum. Courtesy of Stefano Bolognini.

CHECKING THE ROMAN WANT ADS

While many churches today give Christian goody bags for visitors containing packets of hot cocoa, logo-laden coffee mugs, and flashlights studded with adages such as “May the light of Christ shine on you,” early Christians preferred the subtle tactic of cross examination. As the third-century document the *Apostolic Tradition* put it:

New converts to the faith, who are to be admitted as hearers of the word, shall first be brought to the teachers before the people assemble. And they shall be examined as to their reason for embracing the faith...Inquiry shall then be made as to the nature of their life; whether a man has a wife or is a slave, etc.¹²

If this man chooses to be a Christian after undergoing cross-examination without receiving chocolaty treats, he may have to change careers—though, due to his high status, he may be entitled to continue bathing and

“Most people convert to a new religion because their friends and relatives already have done so—when their social ties to the religious group outweigh their ties to outsiders.”³³

eating all day so long as he served as the patron of the local church and pulled strings for his new Christian clients when necessary.

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, “Inquiry shall likewise be made about the professions and trades of those

who are brought to be admitted to the faith.” To save ourselves from suspense, people would need to check the Roman Want Ads if they wanted to become a Christian while simultaneously being: a “sculptor or painter,” “actor or pantomimist,” “charioteer,” “gladiator or trainer of gladiators,”

Writing in the third century, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage argued that it was better for those who teach the art of acting to be jobless and supported by the church community than to “be defiled by such base and infamous contamination” as acting, in part because male actors had to play the part of a woman. If the church was financially unable to support the teacher, Cyprian said his church would gladly pick up the bill.³⁴

“military commander or civic magistrate,” “[somebody] who does things not to be named [perhaps the modern equivalent of someone who wears socks with sandals],” “magician,” “enchanter,” “astrologer,” “diviner,” “soothsayer,” or, in case that was not clear enough, “a user of magic.” Each of these professions or careers was prohibited by Christian churches. Last but not least, the profession of teaching—of young children at any rate—was highly discouraged:

“A teacher of young children had best desist, but if he has no other occupation, he may be permitted to continue.”¹³ Because teaching in the ancient world was so intertwined with pagan history, beliefs, and rituals, it was best to avoid it altogether.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A BATH-STOKER

With such a long list of unacceptable careers, one wonders what kinds of prospects were available for converts. Here the evidence is ambiguous, but it’s best not to get one’s hopes up. About ninety percent of Christians were illiterate.¹⁴ That’s right—perhaps less than ten percent of Christians could read or write in the early centuries of the church. But even if they could read, early Christians could hardly have afforded the books and scribes necessary to maintain a library—and if they suffered from near- or far-sightedness, the books would have been worthless since glasses would not be invented for more than a thousand years. Prohibitions as found in the *Apostolic Tradition* only

made matters more difficult for Christians who aspired to become Roman white-collar workers by denying teaching opportunities to adults and learning opportunities to children.

Although the feisty Christian author Tertullian boasted at the end of the second century that Christians had risen to every sector of society save the Roman priesthood,¹⁵ his contemporary Origen conceded that many Christians were “wool-workers...cobblers...laundry-workers and the most illiterate yokels [imaginable].”¹⁶In all likelihood, many Christians during the first couple of centuries “were handworkers.”¹⁷Which is to say that many Christians were uneducated and illiterate “craftspeople, artisans, and small traders.”¹⁸ For such workers, other than festival days, they toiled seven days of week, as there were no Sundays off from work until Constantine became emperor in the early fourth century. For these Christians, work began at dawn and ended at dusk. It was not generally safe to be outside alone at dark (and there were no lamp posts to light the streets), so many people would return to their tiny and mice-infested flats for the night unless business required otherwise. Their meals would have been low in calories and fat, but not because they were watching their figures—such was all they could afford.

Writing in the second half of the second century, Christian apologist Athenagoras of Athens conceded that the church was disproportionately full of “uneducated persons... artisans, and old women.”³⁵

Like Jesus the carpenter, Peter the fisherman, Simon the tanner, and Paul the tentmaker, we can envision ancient Christians such as Sabina the stoneworker, Holconius the cabinet-maker, Iris the barmaid, and Primus the bath-stoker.¹⁹ Ancient Christians were chamber servants, dealers in huts, picklers, butchers, merchants, and pig sellers. Contrary to what we so often envision of the earliest Christians, their lives were not at all glamorous. We can't really describe such laborers as “the working middle class” because that term implies more wealth, education, mobility, and security than they actually had—or ever daydreamed was possible. The lives of these early Christians were very modest, but they were not at the bottom rung of society. That category was reserved exclusively for the slave.

A SOCIETY OF SLAVES

Slavery was part and parcel of the ancient world, but it was not racially based as it was in the United States. As representatives of the Roman population in general, a good percentage of early Christians were slaves, former slaves (called *freedmen*), or masters. In fact, “There were more slaves in the Roman empire than in any previous society.”²⁰ Although we casually skim over such stories in the New Testament due to our sanitized understanding of the ancient world, Jesus and the earliest

Christians would have interacted with slaves and slave owners on a daily basis. It's hard to read a page of the New Testament, in fact, without coming across an explicit reference or literary allusion to slaves, slavery, and slave owning. On average in the Roman Empire, every fifth or sixth person was a slave, meaning that there wasn't a hamlet, village, or town in the ancient world that didn't have slaves. In Rome, however, the capital of the empire and perhaps the largest city in the world, a third of the entire population were slaves. On a given day in ancient Rome, you would have come across dozens, if not hundreds, of them.

Although some slaves lived better than free people and ascended to the heights of Roman society, let's not kid ourselves: Slavery was a living hell for countless men, women, and children—Christians included, of course. Even though those living in the city generally fared better than rural slaves, who often were forced to work in chains and were given meager rations, slaves in the city were still regarded as property and could live or die at the whims of their owners. One of the most common forms of slavery in urban environments was domestic or household slavery. Domestic

“The lowest legal status of all was the slave's. Greek philosophers considered him something less than human. Roman law regarded him as a piece of property, and the thousands of slaves who worked as chattel gangs on ships, farms, road construction, or mining were treated as nothing but a commodity.”³⁶

slaves lived in the home of their masters in close quarters with other slaves. As legally owned property, they cooked, cleaned, served, guarded the house, ran errands, fetched water, served as wet nurses, scraped the skin of their owner's backs at the baths, washed their feet, watched after their children, and sometimes balanced the books. They also accompanied the master and his family

when traveling in public in order to maintain the master's honor, which was the currency of ancient society and only available to the wealthy and powerful. (Virtually by definition, slaves had no honor.)

THE UNDERBELLY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Alongside slavery came unchecked sexual abuse. It was a normal feature of life in the Roman world for masters of the house, the *patres familias*, to demand sex from their female slaves as well as to defile enslaved boys. Although illegal and morally revolting today, Roman law sanctioned such intercourse and society did not consider it immoral. Sex between a master and his wife, after all, was designed mostly for procreation, and marriages were oftentimes unhappy political alliances that had nothing to do with emotion or love. They were primarily about preserving (and increasing) property—the principle source of wealth in the ancient world.

With his wife effectively partitioned from him, the master could easily turn to his legally owned and defenseless property for sexual gratification. The fact that master and mistress did not typically share a bedroom only made this course of action easy and inevitable.

The Romans had a rather bleak take on male sexuality. For them, the male libido was a raging river that had to be properly channeled so that it didn't inundate the countryside. For the Romans, this meant redirecting the libido away from a woman of honor and toward a woman (or man, as same-sex penetration was widespread) of no honor—usually a slave. It was a common belief that female slaves and prostitutes “drain[ed] off excess male sexual energy as a sewer drained off waste.”²¹ Accounting for more than half of the slave population, argues classicist Kyle Harper, females “were devastatingly vulnerable” and “bore the brunt of sexual abuse.”²² The prominent Christian author Jerome, the translator of the most famous biblical version in the world, acknowledged this Roman belief at the turn of the fifth century when he wrote that “men’s chastity goes unchecked...free permission is given to lust to range the brothels and to have slave girls.”²³

“It is with justice, we believe, that the condition of slavery is the result of sin. And this is why we do not find the word ‘slave’ in any part of Scripture until righteous Noah branded the sin of his son with this name. It is a name, therefore, introduced by sin and not by nature.”³⁷

In the underbelly of the ancient world, Christian slaves were not exempt from their master’s repressed sexual energy. The fact that most Roman emperors, including Tiberius—who was ruler during Jesus’s entire ministry—took out their unrestrained lust on helpless male and female slaves was no secret.²⁴ Early Christian leaders would not have been unaware that many female (and boy) slaves were the sexual targets of their masters. In fact, certain scholars believe that 1 Peter’s exhortation for slaves to “accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh” (2:18) implies a tacit acceptance of sexual slavery. Whether or not that is true, the culture of sexual slavery was prevalent: Apostles like Paul would have seen it up close while a guest at a wealthy Roman estate or while pastoring slaves and slave owners. As historian of slavery Jennifer Glancy explains, “Paul would inevitably have encountered slaves whose obligations included sexual relations with their owners and those to whom their owners permitted sexual access.”²⁵

Paul himself made frequent mention of both sex and slavery in his letters, though strangely, Glancy notes, he never explicitly condemned sex with one’s slave “to be inconsistent with the Christian ethos,”²⁶ unless one

interprets his rejection of “fornication” to include such an act. Perhaps Paul addressed this issue so decisively in person that he did not need to write about it in personal letters, perhaps he felt it unwise to teach contrary to the laws and customs of Rome, or perhaps he thought Abraham’s sexual propriety over his slave girl Hagar, among many other examples in the Old Testament, gave *de facto* approval to the practice. However we interpret this argument from silence—and we have to be as cautious as we are candid—legislation was not enacted against this practice for centuries. The eminent historian Peter Brown provides a rather dreary commentary on this issue:

The leaders of the Christian church...followed the philosophers in condemning the anomaly of the Roman ‘double standard,’ which had punished the wife for adultery while accepting unfaithfulness in a husband. But the clergy showed themselves as little prepared as the philosophers had been to overturn the institution of household slavery. By their hesitation on that issue, they doomed themselves from the outset to an honorable ineffectiveness on the issue of marital fidelity. Most infidelity took the form of sleeping with one’s own slaves: it was simply one assertion, among so many, of the master’s power over the bodies of his dependents.²⁷

It was not until around the fourth century that legislation was enacted against Christian masters having sex with their slaves.²⁸ But even then, perhaps a remnant of the church’s “honorable ineffectiveness,” the habit was too hard for many Christian Romans to break. We see an example of this in a Christian master’s reply to Bishop Augustine of Hippo after being pressed about sleeping with his slave: “Would you rather,” the man retorted incredulously, “[that] I sleep with someone else’s wife?”—as if his only options were to have sex with his wife or take the honor of another married woman, but not to divert his sexual energy away from his legally owned property. “Can I not,” he continued in disbelief, “do what I want in my own house?”²⁹ For this Christian at any rate, he was raising a question that had been safeguarded by Roman law and custom for centuries.

NOT YOUR MOTHER’S SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS

The study of the daily life of early Christianity bruises our modern conscience. Widespread malnutrition, incredibly high percentages of illiteracy, unquestioned patriarchy, sexual slavery—this was not what we were taught in Sunday school! Despite what we envision from bucolic pictures on church walls, the world of early Christianity was nothing like the modernized, secure, and convenience-laden world of today. There were no police officers to protect one’s property, no weekends to recharge one’s batteries, and virtually no way to read, let alone possess, the Bible for oneself. For many early Christians, life was unfair, labor was backbreaking,

and liberty was make-believe. While we panic in the modern world over where to take our vacations, many early Christians would have stressed over where they would find their next meal, or whether they should risk life or limb by refusing the sexual advances of their legal owner. Despite the discomfort we feel as we ponder these grim realities, let us not grow weary in coming face-to-face with our history. Instead, let it shape us in the present and mold us into people who do not naively look back to our sanitized past, but ponder how God advances his kingdom by means of the messy people and messy institution that is the church.

ENDNOTES

- 1 According to historian Carolyn Osiek, “Defecation and urination were not considered private functions.” See her “Family Matters,” in *Christian Origins*, vol. 1, *A People’s History of Christianity*, ed. Richard Horsley (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 205.
- 2 In both of these biblical quotations, there is also an element of shame and dishonor.
- 3 See “Parasites Increased during Roman Times,” *Past Horizons*, January 9, 2016, <http://www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/01/2016/parasites-increased-during-roman-times> and Piers Mitchell, “Human Parasites in the Roman Empire: Health Consequences of Conquering an Empire,” *Parasitology*, FirstView no. 1 (2016): 1–11.
- 4 Quoted in David Horrell, *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 107.
- 5 Steven Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 30.
- 6 David Fiensy, “What Would You Do for a Living?” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-Andre Turcotte (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 564.
- 7 Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015), 46.
- 8 Osiek, “Family Matters,” in *Christian Origins*, 203.
- 9 Beard, *SPQR*, 313.
- 10 Matthew Hartnett, *By Roman Hands: Inscriptions and Graffiti for Students of Latin* (Newburyport, MA: The Focus Classical Library, 2008), 61.
- 11 Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3.
- 12 Hippolytus, “The Apostolic Tradition,” in *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, ed. B. S. Easton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 42.
- 13 Hippolytus, “Apostolic Tradition 15.1–3,” in *The Apostolic Tradition*, 42.
- 14 Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 10.
- 15 See Tertullian, *Apology* 37.
- 16 Origen, “Contra Celsum 3.58,” in *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 167.
- 17 Fiensy, “What Would You Do For a Living?” in *Handbook*, 565.
- 18 Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 5.
- 19 See Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 1–45.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 113
- 21 Carter Lindberg, “Luther’s Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 169. Lindberg is speaking specifically of medieval sexual mores, which were a direct product of ancient ones.
- 22 Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 45.
- 23 Jerome, *Epistle* 77.3, quoted in Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 58.
- 24 See Suetonius’s description of Tiberius’s lust in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, ed. Thomas Hubbard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 387–388.

- 25 Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 52.
- 26 Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 70. De Wet also notes that “the New Testament is surprisingly silent on the issue of the sexual abuse of slaves,” in *Preaching Bondage*, 224. See also Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 322.
- 27 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 23.
- 28 John Chrysostom preached, “I, myself, am saying that it is adultery all the same when [a master] has sex with any woman—whether she is openly a prostitute, a slave girl, or any other woman without a husband—it is wicked and concupiscent,” in De Wet, *Preaching Bondage*, 231. See also Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 8.
- 29 Quoted in Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 296.
- 30 Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8
- 31 Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich*, 22.
- 32 Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003; 2nd ed.), 23.
- 33 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997], 133
- 34 Saint Cyprian, *Letters (1-81)*, Letter 2, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 51 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2013), 5.
- 35 See Athenagoras, “Plea for the Christians 11,” in ANCF, vol. 2, *Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, 387
- 36 John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 124.
- 37 Augustine, “The City of God,” NPNF, 2:411