

Stark, Rodney, *Cities of God*, (Harpercollins: New York, 2006).

When studying significant movements, their beginnings must be taken into consideration. Although this statement may seem elementary, some movements focus on the present moment never to observe its origins. Rodney Stark examines the origins of Christianity, the greatest movement of all time. Stark displays the role of the cities in the Christianization of the western world. Broad as that may be, *Cities of God* also shows the effects of paganism (including heresy) and Paul's apostolic lifestyle on this Christianization.

Stark understands the importance of the cities, and begins by introducing the reader to several major cities in Europe. His study has a singular focus: a majority of all people went about life in the city centers. He focuses on cities like Sardis and Alexandria that had multitudes of people, which resulted in a need for the gospel message. Concerning Alexandria, Stark says, "[She] was the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world. But it was even more important as a religious center" (45). Religion thrived with ease in these cities.

Rodney Stark's approach to the subject matter is noteworthy, primarily because of scientific study methods in a non-science field. In each chapter, hypotheses are formulated based upon the facts presented within the body of the chapter. Stark's hypotheses are usually focused on the relationship between port cities and the evangelistic efforts in those cities. Finally on that point, Stark made note of whether or not a certain statistic was significant to any facts discussed in each chapter, such as goddess worship or the building up of Christian congregations.

After briefly discussing Stark's methods, let us look into this movement called Christianity which was brought about by Christianization. Keeping with the idea that church planters must focus on building relationships with individuals in their location, Stark addresses

conversions in places such as Rome. Along with other writers, Stark appears to resist the notion that mass conversions literally happened. Stark says,

“One sermon, no matter how dynamic, does not prompt the fundamental shift of identity essential to a religious conversion; even after these listeners had been baptized, there would have been a great deal still to be done before any of them could have been claimed a Christian” (65).

This quote sheds light on a major problem in churches today. Too often, the church looks to convert others, yet these new believers are left completely helpless in their efforts to live a godly life.

In order to Christianize a people group, the church planter or apostle must know what the main beliefs are in that region, otherwise known as oriental religions. Stark says that most of these religions base themselves upon the following factors: emotionalism, individualism and intellect (87-89). The two main adversaries to the spread of Christianity lay in the goddesses known as Cybele and Isis. Cybele held the title of the mother of all gods. Her followers performed bloody tasks such as castration, along with the absurd idea of cross-dressing and acting like women (92).

To conclude our discussion about Cities of God, it may be best to note how Paul interacted with a new people (as church planters often will). Paul did three major things, things which could be noted for future apostles. First, he visited communities by holding meetings with certain people within those communities, usually people of influence. Secondly, Paul had people around him when he traveled so as to be ready to begin his work wherever God called him to stay. Thirdly, he found any believers in whichever community he stayed. Finally, Paul did not wear out his welcome while remaining in close contact with the new congregations (129-30). May this serve as a brief blueprint for church planters when they visit and work in new communities.