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Becoming Heretical: Affection and Ideology in Recruitment to Early Christianities

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A growing consensus recognizes that the differences among Christians in the late second and early third centuries were neither as obvious nor as great as representatives of later orthodoxy would have us believe, and that what divided Christians in this period were not so much different beliefs and ideas as different hermeneutical and ritual practices. This article approaches the same conclusion from a different angle: from the perspective of potential recruits to Christianity, drawing on social-scientific models of conversion. For them, the peculiarities of doctrine and even of practice that obsess ancient polemicists and modern scholars were often largely invisible. While those features could take center stage for mature converts — and hence in retrospective accounts of conversion — they seem to have played little role in bringing people to specific versions of the faith in the first place. Rather, for many Christian recruits, the road to “orthodoxy” or “heresy” began not in ideological attraction, but in attachments to family, friends, and patrons already inside the group.

The year is 257 C.E.; the place, Alexandria. The bishop, Dionysius, writes to the bishop of Rome with a problem (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.9.1–5). A long-standing member of his church (τῶν συναγομένων ἀδελφῶν πιστὸς νομιζόμενος ἀρχαῖος) has recently come to the realization that he was originally baptized by heretics (παρὰ τοῖς ἀρετικοῖς βεβάπτιστο).¹ Apparently he had never before witnessed a baptism in his current congregation, but doing so now he recognized that his own baptism “was not the same as this, nor did it have anything in common with this

¹ This man became a member before Dionysius’s ordination, and perhaps even before that of his predecessor Heraclas (πρὸ τῆς ἐμῆς χειροτονίας οἶμαι δὲ καὶ πρὸ τῆς τοῦ μακαρίου Ἡρακλᾶ καταστάσεως), which should put his original baptism in the 220s or 230s.

one, since it was full of impiety and blasphemies.”² Now he is demanding to be (re)baptized, and refuses to take communion until this is done. Stymied, Dionysius asks for advice: how should he handle this delicate situation?

For Dionysius, this is a pastoral problem, with theological overtones: he is caught between the local tradition that upholds the validity of “heretical” baptism and the evident disruption caused by his parishioner’s distress.³ For us, however, it offers a rare glimpse of a person who embraced not simply Christianity, but two distinct forms of Christianity in succession: first “heresy,” then “orthodoxy.” As such, it provides a vivid illustration of the permeability, even invisibility, of the boundary between “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” even in the middle of the third century. It also raises acutely the question of how Christians in this period came to find themselves on one side or the other of that fuzzy line. That is the question this paper seeks to explore, but unfortunately, on that subject the text is silent: Dionysius’s letter does not say what the man’s original “heresy” was, nor what led him to join a “heretical” Christian group in the first place, nor how or why, having once been involved with “heresy” (as he now understood it), he had come to be aligned with Dionysius’s “orthodoxy.” Perhaps geographic relocation forced him to join a new congregation; perhaps his original group simply stopped meeting.⁴ The only thing that does seem clear is that the reasons had little to do with the baptismal practices that distinguished the two groups, or whatever differences of doctrine were embodied in those divergent rituals, since the man evidently crossed from one to the other with no awareness of those differences.

Indeed, it is entirely possible that it was not our Alexandrian man who shifted from “heresy” to “orthodoxy,” but “orthodoxy” that shifted around him.⁵ In the first decades of the third century, Christianity in Alexandria remained highly theologically and organizationally fluid.⁶ Even with the assertion of the monepiscopate under Demetrius (203–232 C.E.), the emerging bishop-centered church coexisted with a riot of other complementary and/or competing gatherings for worship and study, of which the circles clustered around Clement, Origen, the “heretic” Paul who shared a patron with the young Origen, and the Valentinians

² μή τοῦτο εἶναι μηδὲ ὅλως ἔχειν τινὰ πρὸς τοῦτο κοινωίαν, ἀσεβείας γὰρ ἐκεῖνο καὶ βλασφημιῶν πεπληρωθῆσαι (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.9.2). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

³ The Alexandrian and Roman policy that baptism was unrepeatable, even if originally performed by heretics or schismatics, had come under fire in the 250s in the wake of the Novatianist schism. Although Novatianists cannot be the heretics in question here, that conflict adds piquancy to Dionysius’s conundrum.

⁴ See Garth Fowden, “The Platonist Philosopher and His Circle in Late Antiquity,” *Philosophia* 7 (1977) 359–83, esp. 379, on the impermanence of late antique philosophical schools, which rarely continued beyond the lifetime of their founding teacher.

⁵ I am grateful to PHEME PERKINS for this observation.

⁶ Usefully surveyed by Roelof van den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity* (NHMS 39; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 181–96.

attacked by Clement are only the best known.⁷ These circles could attract not only the already-Christian, but also pagans (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.3.1, 6.18–19), which suggests that, for some members, these gatherings provided their first real exposure to Christianity. At the turn of the century, all of these groups could fall within the loose, heterodox orbit of Alexandrian Christianity, although tensions are visible. In the 230s, Dionysius's predecessor Heraclas was still butting heads with believers who saw no contradiction in attending both common worship and the gatherings of "heterodox" teachers (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.7.4), perhaps because they did not register the differences between the two, or because theological correctness was not the primary factor in their decisions about where to worship. Heraclas's solution was to force such people into an either/or choice by expelling them from his church and readmitting them only if they made a full public exposé of what they had learned.⁸ This policy built on decades of effort, begun by Demetrius, to push certain circles out of the penumbra of the church as unauthorized and "heterodox," while drawing in others as official arms of the church. Adherents of such schools could accordingly have found themselves unwittingly drifting into or away from episcopally-defined "orthodoxy" as the third century progressed. Thus it is not inconceivable that our friend first encountered Christianity and was baptized in such a gathering, only to "wake up" in the 250s to discover that the ritual practice of Dionysius's congregation did not match that of his original group, and that his entry point into the faith now looks like "heresy," out of joint with the orthodoxy embodied by his bishop.

In seeking to understand how someone like our Alexandrian man wound up on one side or another of the boundary(s) between "orthodoxy" and "heresy," therefore, we are really asking two related questions. First, this can be framed as a question about conversion: how and why did a person convert to one brand of Christianity as opposed to another? To be sure, our Alexandrian's move to Dionysius's congregation is not what we would ordinarily call conversion: no conscious choice was made, no change in root reality or universe of discourse effected; the change was apparently one of venue, rather than of belief or behavior.⁹ Yet over

⁷ On the relation between Clement's school and the broader Alexandrian church, see Annewies van den Hoek, "The 'Catechetical' School of Early Christian Alexandria and Its Philonic Heritage," *HTR* 90 (1997) 59–87. Origen's early teaching career and prickly relationship with Paul: Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.2–3. "Heretic" (τὸν τότε ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας αἰρεσιωτῶν) is presumably Origen's judgment of Paul, which evidently was not shared by their patron or the "great multitude" of both "heretics" and "our people" (μυρίου πλήθους . . . ὁ μόνον αἰρετικῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡμετέρων) who gathered with Paul (*Hist. eccl.* 6.2.14).

⁸ The same strategy was employed 50 years earlier by Irenaeus against followers of the Valentinian Marcus (*Haer.* 1.13.7); see pp. 205–6 below.

⁹ Attempts to conceptualize conversion—what kind of change it is, how much change is required to constitute it, how it is achieved and manifested—abound. For conversion as change in "root reality" see Max Heirich, "Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1977) 653–80. Transformation of one's "universe of discourse": e.g., David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," *Annual*

time, this social change did result in a conversion of sorts, in that after decades of worshipping in Dionysius's church, the man had come to identify himself with its notions of ritual and doctrinal orthodoxy, repudiating those of the group into which he had originally been baptized. Bearing in mind the way this man's conversion emerges only in retrospect, we might more precisely, and more usefully, frame this as an inquiry not into conversion proper—that is, the “radical change in belief and personal identity” that results from mastery of a group's religious culture—but into the initial decision to become involved with a given group, more aptly termed recruitment.¹⁰ If we want to understand how and why individuals embraced distinct types of Christianity, we miss a crucial part of the story if we consider only what cemented their final commitment and not what brought them there in the first place. Second, the issue of recruitment to “heresy” is entangled with the process of becoming “heretical” in another sense: what were the rhetorical and social means by which affiliations with particular teachers or groups were figured by others as commitment to “heresy” as opposed to “orthodoxy”?

As our Alexandrian man's experience shows, the process of becoming “heretical” (in either sense) cannot be detached from the sociological realities in which it is embedded. Sociologists of religion have observed that, as a rule, people tend to convert not to religious (or other) movements as a whole, but to specific cells of those movements.¹¹ This must have been particularly true in the decentralized Christian communities of the early third century, where converting to Christianity will have entailed, above all, converting to a specific Christian congregation or congregational subgroup and its particular inflection of the faith—as was evidently true for our Alexandrian.¹² From the perspective of would-be architects of orthodoxy, this means

Review of Sociology 10 (1984) 167–90. For conversion as change in “belief, behavior, and belonging” see Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1999). For the purposes of this article, I use “conversion” simply to refer to the extended process by which individuals became (particular kinds of) Christian.

¹⁰ For a discussion of recruitment versus conversion see Robert W. Balch, “What's Wrong With the Study of New Religions and What We Can Do About It,” in *Scientific Research and New Religions: Divergent Perspectives* (ed. Brock K. Kilbourne; San Francisco: Pacific Division AAAS Studies, 1985) 24–39, at 28; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 123. Other scholars draw a similar distinction between “conversion” (the initial decision) and “commitment”: e.g., Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 72–79.

¹¹ Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine, *People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 95; James T. Richardson and Mary Stewart, “Conversion Process Models and the Jesus Movement,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (1977) 819–38, at 832.

¹² L. Michael White, “Adolf Harnack and the ‘Expansion’ of Early Christianity: A Reappraisal of Social History,” *SCent* 5 (1985–86) 97–127, at 120–2. Although no two Christian communities were exactly the same, the pluralism and institutional fragmentation of the Alexandrian church are mirrored in the other second- and early third-century churches best known to us. For a discussion of Rome see Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (2nd ed.; WUNT 18; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987) esp. 301–45; Einar Thomassen, “Orthodoxy and Heresy

that drawing the boundaries of authentic Christianity depended to a large degree on channeling and (re)interpreting the affiliations of self-identified Christians. In trying to reconstruct early Christian recruitment patterns, therefore, it may be better to think more in terms of cells than of coherently defined sects, and to take into account contingent, social factors as well as doctrinal ones, which may have been less obvious to ancient believers than they are to modern scholars. Attention to the social dimension of Christian affiliation is all the more necessary when we turn our gaze to the late second century, where, as Robert Markus aptly puts it, the burning self-definitional question is not what, exactly, the church believes, but “where, really, is the church to be found?”¹³ The half century from roughly 180 C.E. to 230 C.E., characterized by both a high degree of pluralism and increasingly intense efforts to separate “heresy” from “orthodoxy,” thus makes an apt laboratory for studying the process by which individuals became “heretical” or “orthodox” within fluid, diverse, contested Christian environments.

In this paper, then, I want to investigate the social dimension of recruitment to distinctive forms of Christianity in the late second and early third centuries. Scholars of conversion, ancient and modern, have increasingly emphasized that conversion should be understood not only in terms of ideology and psychology, but also as a social process, and have long observed that religious (and other) movements tend to spread through pre-existing social networks.¹⁴ This observation has been fruitfully applied to the study of conversion to early Christianity in general, and similar patterns have been traced in the spread of Mithraism and recruitment to ancient philosophical schools.¹⁵ So far, however, this emerging consensus does

in Second-Century Rome,” *HTR* 97 (2004) 241–56. For Carthage see the discussion in Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 80–83, 117–21. For the character and internal diversity of Christianity in Gaul, Asia Minor, and Syria, see the recent surveys by John Behr, Christine Trevett, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey in *Origins to Constantine* (vol. 1 of *Cambridge History of Christianity*; ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³ Robert A. Markus, “The Problem of Self-Definition: From Sect to Church,” in *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries* (vol. 1 of *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*; ed. E. P. Sanders; Philadelphia: Fortress) 1–15, at 5.

¹⁴ Social process: e.g., Snow and Machalek, “Sociology of Conversion,” 178–84; Eugene V. Gallagher, “Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity,” *JR* 73 (1993) 1–15; Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 20–43, 102–23; Nicholas H. Taylor, “The Social Nature of Conversion in the Early Christian World,” in *Modeling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (ed. Philip Esler; London: Routledge, 1995) 128–36; Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist, 1997); Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 114–38. Networks and conversion: John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965) 862–75, and pp. 195–201 below.

¹⁵ Christianity: e.g., Gustave Bardy, *La conversion au christianisme durant les premières siècles* (Paris: Éditions Mouton, 1949) 250–51; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 29–31, 75–77; Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100–400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 36–41; White, “Adolf Harnack,” 97–127; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist*

not appear to have penetrated discussions of affiliation with specific brands of Christianity, whether proto-orthodox or “heretical.” One reason is that the paucity of solid information in our ancient sources about individual adherents of particular varieties of early Christianity makes it difficult to assess concretely why people embraced one form—or one cell—as opposed to another. As a result, despite the wealth of scholarship on second-century “heresies,” especially “Gnosticism,” this question has received relatively little attention.¹⁶ To the extent that it has been discussed, the frequent, usually tacit, assumption is that “heretical” Christianities held a peculiar attraction for particular groups or types of people, who gravitated toward them precisely because they found their distinctive doctrinal, liturgical, and/or organizational characteristics more appealing than those of rival variants.¹⁷ Such a model of conversion informs, for example, reconstructions that locate the appeal of gnostic thought in its articulation of existential alienation and/or sociopolitical protest, a conception pioneered by Hans Jonas and still highly influential, despite vigorous recent challenges to the underlying construct of “Gnosticism.”¹⁸ Following

Reconsiders History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) esp. 3–27; Stephen Spence, *The Parting of the Ways: The Roman Church as a Case Study* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004) 227–44. Mithraism: Richard Gordon, “Who Worshipped Mithras?” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7 (1994) 459–74, at 462; Roger Beck, “On Becoming a Mithraist: New Evidence for the Propagation of the Mysteries,” in *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (ed. Leif E. Vaage; Waterloo, Ont.: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 2006), 192–3. Philosophy: Kendra Eshleman, “Affection and Affiliation: Social Networks and Conversion to Philosophy,” *Classical Journal* 103 (2007/08) 147–58; Giovanni Ruffini, “Late Antique Pagan Networks from Athens to the Thebaid,” in *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece* (ed. W. V. Harris and Giovanni Ruffini; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 241–57.

¹⁶ There are a number of valuable treatments of Sethian and Valentinian soteriologies and rituals of repentance and conversion, but these tend to skirt the question of what drew people to these forms of Christianity and the human agents involved: Paul Aubin, *Le problème de la ‘conversion’*. Étude sur un terme commun à l’hellénisme et au christianisme des trois premiers siècles (Paris: Beauchesne, 1963) 93–104; J. Zandee, “Gnostic Ideas on the Fall and Salvation,” *Numen* 11 (1964) 13–74; Anne McGuire, “Conversion and Gnosis in the *Gospel of Truth*,” *NovT* 28 (1986) 338–55; Pheme Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1993) 152–6, 162–3; Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 208–10; Alastair H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 211–99; Jean-Daniel Dubois, “La ritualisation de la repentance dans les écrits gnostiques valentiniens,” in *Retour, repentir, et constitution de soi* (ed. Annick Charles-Saget; Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998) 67–73; Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006) 122–56. Some attention has been paid to the role of networks in the spread of “heresy” in later periods: Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992) 11–42; Jason BeDuhn, *Conversion and Apostasy, 373–388 C.E.* (vol. 1 of *Augustine’s Manichaean Dilemma*; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

¹⁷ For a succinct summary and critique of views of conversion that look for correlations between converts’ personalities and problems and the religious expressions they embrace and that assume that “people convert primarily because they are attracted to particular new doctrines,” see Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 115–6.

¹⁸ Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (2 vols.; 3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and

similar logic, women are often imagined to have been attracted by the greater freedom of action and participation afforded them within gnostic or Montanist Christianity.¹⁹ Other scholars have traced the allure of gnostic Christianity to its promise of elite knowledge, its impressive rituals, or an eclecticism that made its doctrines congenial to pagan recruits.²⁰

This understanding of the motives for conversion to “heresy” fits well with two common, but otherwise quite different, reconstructions of “heretical” recruitment. The traditional heresiological view is that most “heretics” were ex-orthodox Christians, seduced away from the true church by more congenial theologies (e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.15.2), lax ethics (e.g., Tertullian, *Val.* 1.1; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.12.20–21; see also *Testim. Truth* 38.27–39.18), or organizational structures that afforded greater opportunities for advancement (e.g., Tertullian, *Praescr.* 41)—in short, by some feature that distinguished “false” from “true” Christianity. In recent years, this model has largely given way to pictures of the religious world of the early Roman empire as a crowded marketplace in which Christians competed for attention and adherents both with other cults and with advocates of rival versions of their own faith.²¹ This model rightly emphasizes that early Christianity took

Ruprecht, 1964) I:58–73, 140–227; see also e.g., Hans G. Kippenberg, “Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus,” *Numen* 17 (1970) 211–31; Elaine Pagels, “‘The Demiurge and His Archons’—A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?” *HTR* 69 (1976) 301–24; Henry A. Green, *The Economic and Social Origins of Gnosticism* (SLBDS 77; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985); Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004) esp. 244–52. Sociopolitical protest is a key note as well of King, *Secret Revelation*, esp. 157–73, although she judiciously focuses on *Ap. John*’s meaning(s) for its various reading communities, rather than the attractions of its theology for potential converts. Challenges: e.g., Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*; Michael Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism’: Analysis and Critique,” *J ECS* 8 (2000) 341–72; Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Gnostic Christianity: e.g., Madeleine Scopello, *Femme, gnose et manichéisme. De l’espace mythique au territoire du réel* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 175–7. Montanism: e.g., Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 157–73; *contra*, Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 196–7. Both the notion of women’s special attraction to “heretical” movements and the underlying assumption that converts were motivated by what religion “did for them,” are trenchantly critiqued by Judith M. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002) 83–99.

²⁰ Elite knowledge: e.g., Bardy, *Conversion*, 67–8, 122–5; Niclas Förster, *Marcus Magus: Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergemeinschaft. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 410–6. Rituals: e.g., James E. Goehring, “Libertine or Liberated: Women in the So-Called Libertine Gnostic Communities,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (ed. Karen L. King; Studies in Antiquity and Christianity 4; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 329–44, at 334–5. Eclecticism: e.g., Lampe, *Stadtrömischen Christen*, 270; Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 416. Alastair H. B. Logan combines most of these theories to suggest that the distinctive rituals and innovative, eclectic theology of the (Sethian) gnostic cult were particularly attractive to alienated intellectual elites, especially “lapsed, secularized Jews,” but that its universalist promises of salvation and supernatural rewards could appeal to people of any class (*The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006] esp. xii, 64, 114).

²¹ See recently Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological*

shape and spread in a world teeming with alternative (and overlapping) ways of interacting with the divine, and does not assume the primacy of “orthodoxy”; it also makes fewer presuppositions about the motives of recruits. Yet this view, too, tends to place the emphasis on distinctive ideological and ritual attractions: the picture of convert as consumer implicit in this model most naturally suggests an image of pre-recruits shopping among the available options for the one whose teachings and/or practices they found most satisfying. Indeed, this sort of systematic search for truth is exactly the conversion procedure recommended by Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 2–8), in agreement with non-Christian contemporaries like Lucian (*Hermot.* 30–36, 45) and Galen (*Anim. Pass.* 8 = V.41.10–43.11 Kühn).²² That image makes a poor match, however, for the experience of our Alexandrian man, who embraced two distinct forms of Christianity in a row with no apparent awareness of what set either apart.

What I propose to do here, most simply, is to demonstrate that our (admittedly very limited) evidence for patterns of affiliation with distinct forms of Christianity in the second and third centuries corroborates what modern sociology and studies of early Christian conversion generally would lead us to expect: that at the stage of recruitment, in which conversion is rooted, social connections played a greater role than a group’s distinctive doctrinal, liturgical, or organizational characteristics in determining not only who became Christian, but what kind of Christians they became. Further, I argue that this reading of the evidence should prompt us to nuance not only traditional heresiological views of “heretical” recruitment, but also the “crowded marketplace” model of ancient religious decision-making. There is no denying that variant Christianities sometimes came into direct, open competition, as the public debates described by heresiologists as well as the fierce border wars waged through their writings make clear. In many local contexts outside the urban centers of the Roman empire, however the Christian “marketplace” simply cannot have been very crowded.²³ Moreover, our Alexandrian man’s experience cautions against assuming that even in the densely crowded markets of cities like Alexandria, Carthage, and Rome, potential converts were conscious of choosing among a multiplicity of available options—or that the distinctive features that most

Factors in the Success of Early Christianity (London: SCM, 2000): Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?* 69–79; David Brakke, “Self-Differentiation Among Christian Groups: The Gnostics and Their Opponents,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 245–60; Vaage, ed. *Religious Rivalries*.

²² On the intellectual quest motif in ancient literature, see further A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 107–11; Bardy, *Conversion* 127–34; MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 30–31; Loveday Alexander, “Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen,” in *Paul in his Hellenistic Context* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 60–83, at 68–71.

²³ For the second and third centuries, when we are largely dependent on literary rather than documentary or material evidence, reconstructions of the distribution and size of Christian communities necessarily remain highly speculative: e.g., Keith Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” *JECS* 6 (1998) 185–226. One may think, however, of Dura Europus, with its rich variety of traditional cults, but only one church in the 250s.

concerned ancient polemicists weighed most with recruits when they did make such deliberate choices.

■ From Social Involvement to Ideological Commitment

In the case of our Alexandrian man, it seems clear that while conformity with the “orthodoxy” encoded and marked off by the liturgical practice of Dionysius’s congregation had come to assume critical importance for him, this “orthodoxy” cannot be what drew him to the group in the first place. A better explanation for his trajectory is supplied by modern sociological models of conversion, which have increasingly emphasized the role of affective bonds, pre-existing social networks, and intensive interaction with members, rather than ideological attraction, at least in the early stages of conversion.²⁴ As John Lofland and Rodney Stark observed in their ground-breaking study of the spread of the Unification Church (the Moonies), “rather than being drawn to the group because of the appeal of its ideology, people were drawn to the ideology because of their ties to the group.”²⁵ Evangelism that concentrates purely on ideological appeal is accordingly rare, and typically less effective than that which capitalizes on or cultivates social support.²⁶ Data

²⁴ Lofland and Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver”; cf. Arthur L. Greil and David R. Rudy, “What Have We Learned from Process Models of Conversion?” *Sociological Focus* 17 (1984) 306–23; Lorne L. Dawson, “Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?” *SR* 25 (1996) 141–61; James C. Cavendish, Michael R. Welch and David C. Leege, “Social Network Theory and Predictors of Religiosity for Black and White Catholics: Evidence of a ‘Black Sacred Cosmos’?” *JSSR* 37 (1998) 397–410, at 398–400, with bibliography. Other studies have traced the role of networks in non-religious decision-making, e.g., Carl A. Sheingold, “Social Networks and Voting: The Resurrection of a Research Agenda,” *American Sociological Review* 38 (1973) 712–20; Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, “The Collective Dynamics of Smoking in a Large Social Network,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 358 (1998) 2249–58; Rena R. Wing and Robert W. Jeffery, “Benefits of Recruiting Participants with Friends and Increasing Social Support for Weight Loss and Maintenance,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 67 (1999) 132–8.

²⁵ Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, “Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980) 1376–95, at 1378–9. In a follow-up study, Lofland found that the Moonies had taken that lesson to heart and “had learned to start conversion at the emotional rather than the cognitive level.” Even after several months in the commune, some recruits knew little about its doctrines: “Some, on being pressed explicitly with [Moon]’s beliefs and aims, declared that they did not care: their loyalty was to the family commune” (John Lofland, “Becoming a World-Saver Revisited,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 [1977] 805–18, at 809, 813).

²⁶ The chief exceptions are groups like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) which demand that members sever ties with their previous lives and must therefore concentrate on recruiting strangers: David A. Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, “Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment,” *American Sociological Review* 45 (1980) 787–801, at 791–6; but cf. E. Burke Rochford Jr., “Recruitment Strategies, Ideology, and Organization in the Hare Krishna Movement,” *Social Problems* 29 (1982) 399–410 on variation among local ISKCON cells in the 1970s, some recruiting as little as thirteen percent, others as much as seventy-three percent of their adherents from the pre-existing networks of members and sympathizers.

from Mormon missionary efforts shows that while only .1% of cold calls—when missionaries knock on strangers’ doors—result in recruitment, meetings between potential recruits and Mormon missionaries that take place in the home of a family member or friend have a success rate of 50%.²⁷ Advice to missionaries takes these statistics into account: a Mormon guide to evangelism cited in the same study outlines a thirteen-step procedure, which begins with forming friendships and delays exposure to Mormon doctrine and worship until step ten. We need not assume that early Christian missionaries were quite so sophisticated, but we should be alert to hints in our sources that for many Christian recruits, social investment in a particular cell preceded attachment to its distinctive teachings, rituals, or organization.

That social networks played a major role in facilitating the spread of early Christianity in general has been well documented already, especially in the Acts and Paul, where the household is the fundamental unit of the urban mission.²⁸ As Nicholas Taylor has argued, where entire households were converted together, social involvement must often have preceded ideological commitment.²⁹ The same patterns can be detected in second-century sources that depict the recruitment of individuals not just into Christianity writ large, but into specific inflections of Christianity. Frequently, of course, there is no difference between the two: for many people, the form of Christianity they joined will simply have been the first and only one they encountered.³⁰ Thus, to understand why individuals choose one version of Christianity rather than others, we must consider not only social and cognitive factors, but also simple historical contingencies. In larger, more diverse Christian communities, like those of late second-century Alexandria and Rome, recruitment occurred within the context of more or less open competition among adherents of different strains of Christianity for both converts and recognition of their version of the faith as authentic, and potential recruits did have choices to make. Even so we cannot assume that they decided among the available options on the basis of their unique features, or that they were conscious of making such a choice at all. Rather, our evidence for both the tactics of Christian missionaries and the motives of their recruits coheres with the patterns of recruitment to new religious movements in late twentieth-century America: even in the most crowded

²⁷ Stark and Bainbridge, “Networks of Faith,” 1385–9.

²⁸ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 75–77; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Philip A. Harland, “Connections with Elites in the World of the Early Christians,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime; Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira, 2002) 385–408, at 391–2.

²⁹ Taylor, “Social Nature,” 132.

³⁰ Although many of the specific historical arguments of Walter Bauer’s groundbreaking *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* have not held up under scrutiny (Lewis Ayers, “The Question of Orthodoxy,” *J ECS* 14 [2006] 395–8), this central premise of his work remains beyond dispute, on both the regional level with which he was concerned and the level of local church networks and congregations in which I am chiefly interested here.

religious marketplace, pre-existing social networks and affective bonds bulk larger than specific points of belief or behavior.

■ Recruitment to Distinctive Christianities: The Apocryphal Acts

Conversions to distinctive forms of Christianity stand at the heart of the second- and third-century apocryphal *Acts*. These texts represent a rich and under-utilized source of “data” on recruitment to specific versions of the faith since, despite their commonalities with each other and with the canonical Acts, each of the *Acts* has its own take on the Christian message.³¹ The *Acts of Thomas* reflects characteristic Syrian liturgical patterns and soteriology,³² while the *Acts of Andrew* imagines redemption as bringing forth the heavenly “inner man” within each person.³³ The *Acts of John* offers a docetic christology that, if not gnostic in origin, proved amenable to gnostic readings.³⁴ In places, the *Acts of Peter* echoes that christology; at other points it fits comfortably into the emerging mainstream of late second-century Roman Christianity.³⁵ Finally, a staunch anti-docetism and insistence on bodily resurrection places the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* at odds with the other *Acts*,³⁶ while its apparent openness to female ministry led Tertullian to reject it as a heretical forgery, even though its theology is otherwise close to his (*Bapt.* 17.5). In every case,

³¹ Pieter J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 74–100; François Bovon, “Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *J ECS* 11 (2003) 165–94.

³² Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 90–102; Caroline Johnson, “Ritual Epicleses in the Greek *Acts of Thomas*,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Harvard Divinity School Studies* (ed. François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999) 171–204; A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (rev. ed.; NTS 108; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 10–14.

³³ Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, “The Religious Message of Andrew’s Speeches,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 5; Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 96–103.

³⁴ Paul G. Schneider, “The *Acts of John*: The Gnostic Transformation of a Christian Community,” in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Wendy E. Helleman; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994) 241–69; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 34–38, 153–215; Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, “A Gnostic Reading of the *Acts of John*,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 1; Kampen: Pharos, 1995) 119–52. Although the only overtly gnostic section of the *Acts John* (ch. 94–102, 109) is generally regarded as an interpolation (*Acta Johannis* [ed. Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli; 2 vols.; CCSA; Turnhout: Brepols, 1983] II:581–9), docetic christology and other features congenial to gnostic interpretation appear throughout the text.

³⁵ Pieter J. Lalleman, “The Relation between the *Acts of John* and the *Acts of Peter*,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 3; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 161–77; L.H. Westra, “*Regulae fidei* and Other Credal Formulations in the *Acts of Peter*,” in *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, 134–47.

³⁶ Pieter J. Lalleman, “The Resurrection in the *Acts of Paul*,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 2; Kampen: Pharos, 1996) 126–41.

therefore, we are watching people embrace specific versions of Christianity. These accounts, while obviously fictional and idealized, are nonetheless indicative of how their second- and third-century authors thought conversion did, or should, happen.

On examination, it quickly becomes clear that what attracts people to each apostle's version of Christianity in the *Acts* has little to do with the features that distinguish them from others. Sometimes those characteristics are on display to potential recruits from the beginning, especially the ascetic strain that runs through all the *Acts*.³⁷ Aside from this, however, the apostles' initial preaching tends to be fairly minimal and generic. More detailed, and hence more distinctive, teachings emerge only gradually. The sermons in the *Acts of John* are especially instructive in this regard. Addressing non-Christian audiences in Ephesus, John focuses on the superior power of God, the coming judgment, and a call to turn from idolatry to worship of the one true God, and from transient earthly things to eternal, spiritual goods (*Acts John* 22–4, 33–6, 39–45)—points any second-century Christian would have accepted. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ do not figure in these speeches, to say nothing of the particular construction John places on those events. Only later, in a more private gathering, does John recount a version of the gospel, centering on the polymorphous unreality of the Lord's body (*Acts John* 87–93). In the redacted text, this becomes the springboard for an exposition of the spiritual, rather than physical, nature of Jesus' suffering, which even John concedes does not conform to what "the many" think (*Acts John* 94–102). The audience of this discourse has evidently been following John for some time, but the bewilderment with which they greet this information at first (ἠτόρουν, *Acts John* 87) suggests that it is new to them. In other words, in the *Acts of John*, as in the other *Acts*, the apostle's recruits do not encounter the features that set his brand of Christianity apart from others until they are well along the road to conversion.³⁸ Integral as these things may become to the faith of established believers, they do not seem to play a significant role in attracting people to the movement in the first place.

■ The Recruitment Pool: Converting Outsiders Versus Perverting Insiders

In the apocryphal *Acts*, most recruits to the apostles' distinctive forms of Christianity are simply accepting the first version of the faith they encounter: all the *Acts* except *Peter* portray their apostle recruiting exclusively among non-Christians. Whether or not these individuals are aware of the existence of alternative Christianities,

³⁷ Paul's gospel, for example, can be summed up as "the word of God concerning continence and the resurrection" (*Acts Paul* §3.5). For the *Acts of Paul*, I follow the numbering of Willy Rordorf in *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

³⁸ For multiple stages of initiation in the redacted *Acts John*, see further Lalleman, *Acts of John*, esp. 52–57; István Czachesz, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 111–5, identifies a similar theme of progressive revelation in John's commissioning in *Acts John* 113.

for the most part the contest for their allegiance is between Christianity *tout court* and traditional religion, not among rival forms of Christianity.³⁹ In intra-Christian polemic from the same period, by contrast, exactly the opposite is (alleged to be) true. The heresiologists unanimously accuse their opponents, especially Valentinians, of “not converting pagans but perverting our people” (*non ethnicos convertendi sed nostros evertendi*, Tertullian, *Praescr.* 42.1). Likewise, the author of the *Apocalypse of Peter* complains that many who had previously accepted “our” words have been persuaded by false Christians—“those outside our number who call themselves bishops and deacons”—to embrace their “heresy” instead (*Apoc. Pet.* 73.23–74.22, 79.22–80.7).⁴⁰

Such remarks have often been taken to indicate that where recruitment to “heresy” (however construed) was at issue, most recruits were already Christians. This might suggest that in such cases we are dealing with a different kind of conversion experience—reaffiliation within the same tradition, rather than conversion across traditions—and thus with a different set of motives.⁴¹ As we have seen, polemicists across the Christian spectrum concur that “heretical” recruiters ensnare weak believers by offering what purport to be more attractive versions of the true faith; recovering such “lost sheep” for “orthodoxy” requires exposing “heresy” for what it really is (e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.31.3–4 and passim; *Apoc. Pet.* 80.8–23).⁴² On this view, recruits to “heresy” are generally assumed to be aware of and motivated by differences between their original, “orthodox,” affiliation and their new “heretical” one, even if, as Irenaeus frequently laments, they failed to grasp the full import of those differences (e.g., *Haer.* 1 pr.2, 4 pr.2; see *Treat. Seth* 59.14–60.35 for similar complaints). Assessing what led people to affiliate with one form of Christianity rather than another might thus appear to be bound up with the question of recruits’ previous religious careers. Were most recruits encountering Christianity for the first time, or switching from another brand of the faith? And can that be shown to make a difference?

³⁹ In the *Acts of John*, the apostle acknowledges the existence of rival interpretations of the gospel (*Acts John* 99), although not in his public preaching. Paul meets with both personal and doctrinal opposition from disaffected followers and false teachers (*Acts Paul* §3.11–14, §10), while the *Acts of Peter* pits its hero against the arch-heretic Simon Magus, who could be a stand-in for Christians who advocated an unacceptably low christology (Roman Hanig, “Simon Magus in der Petrusakten und die Theodotianer,” *SP* 31 [1997] 112–20), or might simply represent generic rejection of the worship of Christ.

⁴⁰ See Pheme Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980) 120. All translations from the Nag Hammadi Codices are from *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin W. Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007).

⁴¹ Reaffiliation (or alternation) vs. conversion: Richardson and Stewart, “Conversion Process Models”; Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 114–5.

⁴² On the heresiological method of refutation through exposure, see Klaus Koschorke, *Hippolyts Ketzerbekämpfung und Polemik gegen die Gnostiker. Eine tendenzkritische Untersuchung seiner ‘Refutatio omnium haeresium’* (Weisbaden: Harrasowitz, 1975) 25–55.

It stands to reason that many Christian groups, whether they saw themselves as reformers, advanced believers, or members of the only true church, sought to win other Christians to their persuasion, just as the heresiologists (and some of their opponents) charge. What motivated individuals to exchange one Christian cell and/or flavor of Christianity for another is more difficult to discern. In some cases, intellectual persuasion surely played a role. In his *On Baptism*, Tertullian rails against a Cainite evangelist who had won over many Carthaginian Christians with her anti-baptism teachings (*doctrina sua plerosque rapuit*, *Bapt.* 1.2); chapters 10–14 of the treatise catalogue and counter what appear to have been her main lines of argument. Tertullian dismisses her inquiries as “quibbling—no, reckless” (*scrupulosi immo temerarii*, *Bapt.* 12.1), but they could just as well be taken as indicative of the liveliness of exegetical debate in early third-century Carthage, and there may indeed have been some who found them persuasive.

Still, such evidence does not take us as far as we might hope. If we try to probe behind Tertullian’s report to determine why exactly, or with what ecclesial results, certain individuals became interested in this woman’s teachings, we come up short. Even Tertullian’s own extensively, if indirectly, documented migration from mainstream Carthaginian Christianity toward the New Prophecy remains frustratingly elusive. Not only the sociological consequences of his estrangement from the catholic “*psychici*,” but also the means by which he encountered the New Prophecy, and what first drew him to the movement—whether the ethical and doctrinal concerns that dominate his Montanist-period works, or some personal attractions or grievances as well—are shrouded in obscurity.⁴³ Tertullian was hardly typical in any case. We should not assume that most Christian reaffiliates had his keen grasp of the differences between their old affiliation and the new one—or even registered those differences, as in the case of our Alexandrian friend, who unwittingly migrated from “heresy” to “orthodoxy,” perhaps without being aware of having moved at all.

An episode from Irenaeus’s church offers an illuminating second-century case study in how such an inadvertent slide from “orthodoxy” to “heresy” could happen (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.13.3–7). When Marcosian teachers arrived in the Rhône Valley

⁴³ Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004) 6–7. Current consensus holds that adherents of the New Prophecy had not broken with the majority Carthaginian church in Tertullian’s day; but debate continues over whether they formed an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*; so e.g., William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997) 54–55; or independent congregations that nonetheless remained in communion with the wider local church. In my view, the latter, suggested already by Pierre de Labriolle, *La crise montaniste* (Paris: Fondation Thiers, 1913) 460–65, seems likelier, since Tertullian speaks as though his group enforced disciplinary policies that conflicted with those of the local *psychici* (*Pud.* 1.20–21); cf. Trevett, *Montanism*, 73–75. On Tertullian’s conversion(s), see Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972), 427–42 (a sensitive psychological reading); Barnes, *Tertullian*, 83 (emphasizing ideological attractions); Dunn, *Tertullian*, 9 (questioning whether his embrace of the New Prophecy marked a significant reorientation at all).

and started holding gatherings for fellowship, instruction, and exploration of charismatic gifts, some women from Irenaeus's church became involved. Evidently the women were not familiar with the peculiarities of Marcosian teaching and practice at first, since these seem to have come as a surprise.⁴⁴ Once they did become aware of those features, some—the more faithful ones, according to Irenaeus—left the group.⁴⁵ Others, however, kept attending, some casting their lot exclusively with the Marcosians, others remaining affiliated with both the “heretical” group and Irenaeus's mainstream gathering (*Haer.* 1.13.7).⁴⁶ In this case, ritual and doctrinal idiosyncrasies obviously played a major role in shaping retention to the Marcosian cell, but they cannot have been the reason these women sought out the new teachers in the first place—nor, it appears, were doctrine and practice the only considerations for those women who kept a foot in both groups.

Irenaeus himself was in no doubt about what attracted such women to Marcus and his disciples: sex. The same thing had happened, he tells us, to the wife of an “orthodox” (τινα τῶν ἡμετέρων) Asian deacon who hosted the founder of the movement, evidently unaware of the irregularity of his teaching (*Haer.* 1.13.5). She was seduced by Marcus “in mind and body” and followed him for a long time; finally a difficult intervention by the local believers was required to convert her back again (ἐπιστρεψάντων). We are on shaky ground in trying to extract sociological data from such reports: complaints about the seduction of female adherents by their gnostic gurus are a running theme for Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.6.3, 13.3, 24.2), and tap into a venerable cliché that projects anxieties about the permeability of the community onto the bodies of its female members. Why this woman chose to become a disciple of Marcus, then, remains beyond recovery. We can observe, however, that overriding her new religious attachment required a countervailing activation of her relationships with non-Marcosians; as Lofland and Stark observed in their study of the Moonies, recruits with strong extra-cult bonds with people who resisted their new affiliation were unlikely to remain with the cult, even if they accepted its teachings.⁴⁷ The story also reminds us of the role of hospitality in giving dissident teachers like Marcus access to a community: as with Mormon missionaries who meet potential recruits in the home of a friend or relative, the reception of a foreign teacher by a respected member of the congregation must have been a powerful strike in his or her favor.

⁴⁴ Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 128–29.

⁴⁵ As Irenaeus tells it, the sticking point was not the mystical, numerologically-derived Marcosian cosmology described at *Haer.* 1.14–16, but the unorthodox practice of round-robin prophecy on demand, which suggested that the prophetic spirit could be subject to human control and granted unusual prominence to female prophets (*Haer.* 1.13.4).

⁴⁶ “Some have apostatized entirely, while others are ambivalent (ἐπαμφοτερίζουσι) and have had the proverbial experience of being neither outside nor inside.” The contrast between the outright apostates and the fence-sitters strongly suggests that the problem with the latter was that they maintained ties with both groups.

⁴⁷ Lofland and Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver,” 872.

Even on the most aggressive reading, however, our information about the motives of these Marcosian recruits remains extremely tenuous. In such cases, comparative studies can suggest ways to fill in the gaps. Max Heirich's 1977 study of Catholic converts to Catholic Pentecostalism offers an especially useful comparison, since it deals with reaffiliations from one strain of Catholicism to another, whose status within the wider community was then very controversial, attracting both great interest and accusations of heresy.⁴⁸ Heirich's results reveal that much the same dynamics can be at work in reorientations within a single tradition as in conversions across traditions. In particular, they confirm that even in such cases, social factors—introduction to the movement by a trusted friend, previous friendships with members, positive reactions by family and friends—play a significant role in shaping the spread of the movement. That is not to say that ideological attraction is irrelevant: Heirich found that while social influence sometimes nudged individuals who were not on an active religious quest toward or away from conversion, its impact was most dramatic on those already disposed toward active religious seeking. Still, his study should prompt us to consider the social context, as well as the cognitive content, of encounters between “heretical” recruiters and potential recruits within the broader Christian community.

At the same time, the evidence of the polemicists themselves does not bear out their allegation that “heretics” were exclusively concerned with “perverting our people.” Rather, reading between the lines of those texts suggests that at least sometimes “heretical” groups recruited among the *ethnici* as well as *nostri*. When we next meet Marcosians, in early third-century Rome, Hippolytus describes them conducting recruits through what seems to be a catechetical period leading up to baptism: “when they think that [their hearers] have been proven worthy and are able to guard their faith, then they lead them to baptism (ἐπὶ λουτρὸν)” (*Haer.* 6.41.3). That third-century Roman Marcosians were baptizing some recruits as well as ushering the already-baptized toward the more advanced rite of *apolytrōsis* suggests a growing separation between them and other local Christians: these cells seem to be no longer merely supplementing, but also duplicating, the rituals of more mainstream congregations.⁴⁹ It may also indicate, though, that these “heretics” were recruiting at least some non-Christians, who needed to start the ritual process of conversion at the beginning.⁵⁰ A similar impression of other “heretical,” especially Valentinian, groups emerges from Tertullian, who insists that although second baptism is impermissible, ex-heretics can—indeed must—be rebaptized upon conversion to “orthodoxy,” since their initial baptism was invalid (*Bapt.* 15.2; cf.

⁴⁸ Heirich, “Change of Heart,” 653–80, esp. 668–73.

⁴⁹ That second-century Marcosian rituals had sought to supplement, rather than replace, the central rituals of baptism and eucharist: Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 64–91. On the relation between the common ecclesiastical baptism and Valentinian *apolytrōsis*, see Elaine Pagels, “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and the *Gospel of John*: ‘Making a Difference’ through Hermeneutics and Ritual,” *VC* 36 (2002) 339–71, esp. 353–8.

⁵⁰ Förster, *Marcus Magus*, 155.

Pud. 19.5). His willingness to admit repentant “heretics” to baptism and communion does not extend, however, to those who turned from “orthodoxy” to “heresy”; Tertullian dismisses as ludicrous the idea that such people could ever be restored to communion (*Pud.* 19.6, cf. 9.11, 13.15–22, 22.11–5). In other words, converts from “heresy” could be accepted only if they had never gone through an “orthodox” phase; this suggests that in early third-century Carthage at least some individuals were being recruited directly into “heretical” congregations. Elsewhere Tertullian complains that, unlike authentic Christians, “heretics” throw their (faux) pearls before swine, by allowing pagans (*ethnici*) to attend their services (*Praescr.* 41.2). Again, the suggestion is that non-Christians, as well as the formerly “orthodox,” are entering “heretical” congregations. Indeed, this is exactly what we would have expected, if Tertullian and his fellow polemicists had not so strenuously insisted otherwise: “orthodox” Christians sought to evangelize pagans as well as winning over “heretics,” so why should “heretics” have been any different?

Tertullian himself thus confirms that “heretical” evangelists in his day were in the business of converting pagans as well as “perverting” other Christians. For such pagan recruits, as for the first-time converts imagined by the apocryphal *Acts*, it seems likely that “heresy” was the first Christianity that they encountered. There is no reason to suppose that these individuals were conscious of buying into a specialized or deviant version of the faith, or that they chose it because of the features that distinguished it from other varieties of Christianity. Further, ancient evidence and modern sociological data combine to suggest that the religious profile of recruits to “heresy” matters less to our inquiry than we might have expected: Christian recruits cannot be assumed to have had much more detailed knowledge of the specific doctrines, rituals, or organization of their new community than non-Christians did, and social factors can loom as large in such intra-tradition reaffiliations as in cross-tradition conversions. Moreover, as we will see, this reconstruction of “heretical” recruitment as shaped by social influence as much as ideological attraction fits not only with what we know about Christian evangelism in general, but also with our evidence for tactics for recruitment to (and between) specific forms of Christianity.

■ “Avoid Deep Subjects”: Valentinian Recruitment in Action

In the apocryphal *Acts*, as we have seen, the beliefs and practices that set the evangelists’ groups apart from others apparently did not figure prominently in their initial appeals to potential converts. This was true of early Christian evangelism in general,⁵¹ and the heresiologists unanimously confirm that advocates of “heresy” took the same approach. Far from seducing recruits with lofty cosmological speculations or promises of spiritual kingship, Valentinian evangelists—the “heretical” recruiters we know best—are repeatedly charged with dumbing down

⁵¹ MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 17–22.

their teachings to make them more appealing, and concealing their real beliefs until their adherents are already hooked. In a famous passage, Irenaeus accuses Valentinians of using what appear to be “orthodox” teachings to lead people astray (*simulantes nostrum tractatum*, *Haer.* 3.15.2); elsewhere he blasts them for luring people in with familiar philosophy, and then introducing their own incongruous and unproven doctrines about the Aeons, which is like using an animal’s accustomed food (*adsuetae escae*) to entice it into a trap (*Haer.* 2.14.8). Tertullian agrees: these “heretics” base their doctrines on popular opinion (*communes sensus*), because people are more likely to believe (*eoque fideliores existimantur*) teachings that are simple and familiar, that present what is plain and open and known to all (*Res.* 3.6, cf. 4.1, 19.6). These unexceptional teachings, then, were the public face of Valentinian Christianity, the one seen by most potential adherents. Only later, after their recruits were already committed, did Valentinian (and other) teachers unveil their core doctrines, like the “indescribable mystery of their ‘Fullness’” (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.15.2).⁵²

We may take the measure of this heresiological charge in Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*, an introductory Valentinian text that reflects explicitly on what is appropriate for beginners to learn. The addressee is probably already past the point of recruitment, but the approach Ptolemy takes at this relatively early stage in the conversion process is nonetheless revealing.⁵³ On the one hand, he openly admits—indeed, boasts—that not all Christians share his views. His teachings stand in contrast with two other views, each of which completely misses the mark (*διαμαρτόντες*): one that equates the Creator and Lawgiver with God the Father, and another that identifies him as the devil; by contrast, Ptolemy holds that the scriptural Creator is a just but imperfect deity, better than the Adversary, but inferior to the unengendered Father (*Flor.* 3.3, 7.1–7). Thus, “Flora” is being invited to embrace a distinct, avowedly non-universal brand of Christianity, and to do so on its theological merits. On the other hand, in this introductory work Ptolemy confines himself to biblical exegesis, using the savior’s words as a prism through which to refract the various layers of scripture, in order to demonstrate the nature of the God behind it. His methods, if not all his conclusions, sit squarely within contemporary Jewish and Christian tradition.⁵⁴ More advanced questions—“how from one single first principle of all, which is unengendered, incorruptible, and good, these natures, the one of corruption and <the other> of intermediateness, arose too”—are expressly reserved for a later stage of instruction, after the student has been “judged worthy of the apostolic tradition” (*ἀξιουμένη τῆς ἀποστολικῆς παραδόσεως*, *Flor.* 7.8–9).⁵⁵ The

⁵² Cf. Tertullian, *Val.* 1.4: Valentinians “do not entrust their doctrines even to their own students before they have secured them as their own (*suos fecerint*).”

⁵³ On the *Letter to Flora* as an eisagogic, rather than protreptic, text, see Christoph Markschie, “New Research on Ptolemaeus Gnosticus,” *ZAC* 4 (2000) 225–54, at 229–30.

⁵⁴ Markschie, “New Research,” esp. 233–9.

⁵⁵ Cosmogonic myth of the sort recounted by Irenaeus would be one way to answer these more advanced questions, and could form the next stage of Ptolemy’s instruction, but I am convinced by

Letter to Flora, then, does not tell us what brought people to someone like Ptolemy in the first place, but it does corroborate the heresiological report that Valentinian teachers started with relatively basic, common Christian teaching, rather than with their specifically “heretical” doctrines—and hence that those doctrines did not play a leading role in attracting individuals to Valentinian groups. The *Gospel of Truth*, with its notoriously allusive presentation of Valentinian ideas, reflects a similar handling of the common gospel tradition. Whether this text should be interpreted as an exoteric work that downplays its theology in order to appeal to non-Valentinian Christians or a sermon whose lack of systematic theology is simply typical of early Christian homiletics, it certainly indicates that exposition of specifically sectarian doctrine did not bulk large in Valentinian preaching.⁵⁶

The same sources that tell us that Valentinian (and other) recruiters did not emphasize doctrine in their appeals to new recruits give us a few hints about what they did emphasize. The *Gospel of Truth* calls its readers not only to “speak of truth with those who seek it,” but also to “steady the feet of those who stumble and extend your hands to the sick. Feed the hungry and give rest to the weary”—a ministry that could denote social services as well as care of the soul (*Gos. Truth* 32.35–6, 33.1–5).⁵⁷ Likewise, the Valentinian “serpents” against whom Tertullian rails in the *Scorpiace* employ an essentially emotional, rather than narrowly ideological, pitch: speaking to “orthodox” Christians in a time of persecution, they adopt a sympathetic tone, agreeing that the harmless Christian *secta* does not deserve to be punished and arguing that innocent people are dying for no reason (*perire homines sine causa*), since martyrdom is anti-scriptural (*Scorp.* 1.6–8).⁵⁸ Finally, both Valentinian and Sethian texts from Nag Hammadi paint a warm picture of life in the (true) church, which mirrors the perfect unity and harmony of the pre-existent Church. Where tensions with other Christians run high, these harmonious brotherhoods are placed in sharp contrast with the envious, strife-ridden, destructive, “imitation” communities

Markschies, “New Research,” that Ptolemy’s text does not necessitate that reading.

⁵⁶ Exoteric treatise: Harold W. Attridge, “The *Gospel of Truth* as an Exoteric Text,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson Jr.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986) 239–55. Esoteric sermon: Judith H. Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Truth: Early Christian Homiletics of Rest* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998) 95–99, 166–7.

⁵⁷ As Harold Attridge and George MacRae point out in *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (ed. James M. Robinson; 5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2000) *ad loc.*, instability, illness, hunger, and need for rest are all metaphors for spiritual deficiency and ignorance, but the passage could well be intended to work on both the metaphorical and the literal level; see also Attridge, “*Gospel of Truth*,” 249.

⁵⁸ This is not to dismiss the serious theological underpinnings of the controversy over the value of martyrdom: Elaine Pagels, “Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ’s Passion: Paradigms for the Christian’s Response to Persecution?” in *The School of Valentinus* (vol. 1 of *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism*; ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1980) 262–88; Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007) 43–57, 71–74. In this instance, however, Tertullian’s Valentinians appear to stress the affective, rather than the theological, resonance of this debate.

formed by the authors' opponents (e.g., *Tri. Trac.* 58.19–33, 69.7–10, 79.16–32; *2 Treat. Seth* 59.19–62.25; *Apoc. Pet.* 76.23–79.31).⁵⁹ Here we are moving away from recruitment and into self-definition: such polemic was presumably primarily directed inward, to the authors' own communities and against rival Christians; the quality of fellowship in Valentinian and Sethian groups was probably beyond the ability of most potential recruits to assess. Nonetheless, the mutual love and harmony of Christians was presented as a selling point of the faith in general (e.g., Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.6–13), and it is reasonable to suppose that promises of love, unity, and support played a part in attracting adherents to individual cells and their brands of Christianity as well. For Valentinian (and perhaps Sethian) recruiters, in other words, the proclamation of distinctive ideology was accompanied and undergirded by cultivation of affective bonds.

To anti-Valentinian polemicists, such behavior was simply one more sign of their opponents' malicious duplicity, but it could be equally well interpreted as sound recruiting technique, comparable to the Mormon procedure of putting theology second. Indeed, this advice to Mormon missionaries could have been written for a Valentinian evangelist: "Avoid deep subjects. Deep subjects or intense personal spiritual experiences, such as the concept of the three stages of glory or stories involving visions, should not be discussed at this early stage."⁶⁰ Further, many Valentinian Christians, like Ptolemy, share with the apocryphal *Acts* a keen sense that conversion is an extended, multi-stage process, in which the message must be adapted to the capacities of each hearer (e.g., *Gos. Phil.* 57.28–58.10, 60.1–6, 69.14–70.4, 74.12–24, 80.23–81.14).⁶¹ For these recruiters, beginning with the *communis fides* (Tertullian, *Val.* 1.4) was not a way of baiting the trap, but rather the necessary first step on the road to conversion.⁶²

⁵⁹ Elaine Pagels, "The Demiurge and His Archons," 315–6.

⁶⁰ Stark and Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith," 1388. Origen would endorse this advice: Christians know better than to explore "deeper subjects" (τὰ βαθύτερα) with those who are ready only for spiritual "milk" (*Cels.* 3.52). So would his compatriot Clement of Alexandria: Judith L. Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria," *J ECS* 9 (2001) 3–25.

⁶¹ Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 152–4; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 50–56. Particularly eloquent are *Acts Andr.* 44 and *Acts John* 67–69, which describe the Christian life respectively as a plant that needs constant nurture and a difficult voyage whose success can be judged only at its end. At *Acts John* 88–91, the progressive enlightenment of the disciples themselves is paradigmatic for future believers. In gnostic revelation dialogues, the disciples are similarly both model converts and missionaries: Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue*, esp. 52–54, 57–58. The dialogues typically begin with the apostle(s) perplexed and in need of further instruction (e.g., *Ap. John* II.1.1–29; *Apoc. Pet.* 71.15–72.28) or with Jesus gently informing them that even after years of discipleship they are still "apprentices" who "have not yet reached the height of perfection" (*Thom. Cont.* 138.34–6; cf. *Ap. Jas.* 2.30–4.22); at the end, some or all are commissioned to go forth and preach the word.

⁶² Klaus Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (NHS 12; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 220–8.

■ Ideology Versus Social Pressure in “Orthodox” Counter-Recruitment

For their part, proto-orthodox church leaders and polemicists developed a broad array of discursive, exegetical, and ecclesiological strategies to forestall further recruitment to what they regarded as heresies and to win “heretics” over to their own forms of Christianity. These tactics included oral and written disputation over doctrine, practice, and scriptural interpretation, as though awareness of those points of difference might be a decisive factor in recruiting individuals to their version of Christianity. Yet although this approach inevitably dominates our written sources, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus all concede that its practical efficacy was limited: the subtleties of the argument were often lost on the audience, and the debate could easily backfire, degenerating into a shouting match or leaving listeners with the impression that the opposing views were on an equal footing (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2, 4 pr.2; Hippolytus, *Ref.* 9.11.3; Tertullian, *Praescr.* 18–19).⁶³

More persuasive, one suspects, were the threat of exclusion from communion, a remedy for heterodoxy recommended already by 2 John 10–11 and Ignatius (*Eph.* 7.1; *Smyrn.* 4.1), and the deterrent force of watching repentant ex-heretics perform humiliating public penance. One wonders what kind of interventions pushed the Marcasian women in Irenaeus’s church to make an either/or choice between the two groups; Irenaeus’s insistence that those who remained affiliated with both were “neither inside nor outside” the (true) church hints at the sort of pressures that were brought to bear against “heretical” recruits. For our purposes, it is worth emphasizing that this ecclesiological approach to “heresy” was also a social one: since congregations often coalesced around households and pre-existing networks, excommunication struck not only at believers’ salvation, but also at their social existence. Especially for those whose place in the fabric of family and city had already been disrupted once by conversion to Christianity, the pressure must have been intense.⁶⁴ The case of the early third-century Roman confessor Natalius shows that for some Christians at least, activation of those social/ecclesiological commitments could be more immediately effective than theological argument. Hired by the adoptionists Asclepiodotus and Theodotus to be bishop of their *hairesis*, Natalius was persuaded to renounce them by terrifying visions that focused not on his christological error, but on the danger of (unwittingly) placing himself outside the church (ἐξω ἐκκλησίας; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.28.8–12). It is not clear that Natalius ever grasped the doctrinal issues at stake in his journey from “orthodoxy” to “heresy” and back again; for him, the decisive consideration was the threat to his status within the church, on which his salvation depended. While Eusebius’s

⁶³ For an incisive recent treatment of the issues surrounding the literature provoked by these debates, see Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) esp. 27–61.

⁶⁴ Cf. Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue*, 193 on the role of social commitments in (re)enforcing attachment to “orthodoxy.”

source for this episode attributes Natalius's reconversion to divine rather than human intervention, it is easy to imagine that Natalius's visions echoed arguments deployed by local church leaders.

It appears, then, that recruiters across the spectrum of early Christianity—both those endorsed and those excluded by later orthodoxy—did not typically spotlight the points of doctrine, ritual, or organization that set their brand of Christianity apart from others. Rather, whether addressing outsiders or competing for the allegiance of the already-Christian, recruiters tended to begin at the social and affective level, while largely confining their teaching to elements that all (or most) Christians held in common. For recruits, familiarity with the peculiar nuances of the version(s) of the faith they embraced developed only gradually, as the conversion process unfolded.

■ Social Networks and Recruitment to “Heresy”

For many recruits, then, what kind of Christians they became will have had more to do with opportunity and social influence than with ideological affinity. We have already seen the place of affection and social pressure in shaping affiliation (and disaffiliation) with particular Christian groups and their versions of the faith. What remains to be shown is that adherence to specific forms of Christianity did in fact travel through pre-existing social networks. Once again, this pattern is easiest to see in the apocryphal *Acts*, although it may not seem so at first glance. Far more prominent than either ideology or social networking in the apostles' public propaganda in the *Acts* are displays of divine power, which were indispensable in sparking interest in any new cult in the Roman world; compare, for example, the carefully orchestrated program of miracles that advertised the foundation of the oracular shrine of Glycon in Abonouteichos in just this period (Lucian, *Alex.* 10–16, 24).⁶⁵ Yet despite this pronounced emphasis on mass evangelism by miracle, conversions in the apocryphal *Acts* often turn out to follow lines of kinship and friendship, just as they do in the canonical *Acts*.⁶⁶

In the *Acts of John*, for example, John's most notable recruits are wealthy patrons who bring their spouses and households into the faith with them: Lycomedes, Cleopatra, and their household; Cleobius and his household; Andronicus and Drusiana (and her would-be lover Callimachus, but not their wicked steward Fortunatus) (*Acts John* 19–25, 59, 63–77). Household groups figure prominently too among the followers of Paul and Thecla (*Acts Paul* §3.2, §4.14, §5.1–6, §6.1, §9.11), while the ship's captain baptized by Peter in the *Acts of Peter* turns out

⁶⁵ MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 25–42. Against MacMullen's thesis that this was the primary means by which early Christianity spread, Gallagher (“Conversion and Community,” 3–7) and Finn (*From Death to Rebirth*, 29–30) have shown that in the *Acts* response to miracle is only the beginning of an extended ritual, social, and instructional process.

⁶⁶ Again, comparison to the cult of Glycon is apropos: miracles generated interest in the cult, but only because stories about them spread by word of mouth through pre-existing social networks (e.g., Lucian, *Alex.* 30–31).

to be a close friend of the Christian innkeeper Ariston; the faith of both men is bolstered by this affective relationship (*Acts Pet.* 5–6). Social networks do not appear to aid Peter’s reconversions of the Pauline converts snared by Simon Magus, but the earlier wholesale defection of Paul’s followers to Simon underscores the benefits of gaining access to a local network and the dangers of peer pressure. After advance reports of Simon’s powers spread among the Roman believers, they all go together to see him; impressed, they seem to talk themselves into apostasy by criticizing Paul to each other every day; only one presbyter and six social isolates remain immune (*Acts Pet.* 4). Simon benefits especially by winning over the local patron Marcellus, who promotes his mission by giving him a place to stay and withdrawing his material support for non-Simonian Christians (*Acts Pet.* 8–9); once converted back to Petrine “orthodoxy,” Marcellus makes his house a base of operations for Peter’s preaching (*Acts Pet.* 19–22, 29–31).⁶⁷ Peer support can also work positively, to promote and sustain recruitment. In the *Acts of Andrew*, before the ex-soldier Stratocles ever meets Andrew, recommendations from his sister-in-law Maximilla and her ally Iphidamia prime him to accept the apostle (*Acts Andr.* Gr. 2). A particularly appealing vision of the church as a mutually-supportive faith community is offered by the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, in which the apostle (as exemplary believer) and his “friends” join together to renounce the world and rest themselves “not in a casual conversation about this world,” but in “deep discussion of the faith” (*Acts Pet. 12 Apost.* 7.19–8.13).

Most striking of all, the *Acts of Thomas* traces the spread of the faith through an extended network centered on three linked households (*Acts Thom.* 62–67, 82–107, 114–70). Brought to the realm of King Mazdai by one of the latter’s generals, Thomas makes the general’s house his base of operations, eventually baptizing the entire household. There, Mygdonia, wife of Mazdai’s relative Karish, hears him preach and is quickly converted. Mygdonia in turn recruits her nurse, Marcia, and the king’s wife, Tertia; through them, the king’s son Vizan and his wife come into contact with the apostle and are also converted. Mygdonia and Tertia also try to convert their husbands, although without success, which brings their marriages under intense strain—a recurrent theme across the *Acts*.

In the apocryphal *Acts*, then, future converts to distinct forms of Christianity regularly, although not always, encounter the faith through the agency or in the company of a close friend or family member. In these cases, the cognitive and social aspects of conversion operate in tandem. Affective bonds alone do not produce recruitment: not all of those who encounter the message through their social networks find it persuasive. They are instrumental, however, in facilitating the spread of the movement, in providing material support for the apostle’s preaching

⁶⁷ On the role of patronage in conversion in *Acts Pet.*, see further PHEME PERKINS, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1994) 143; on wealthy converts as house church patrons in the *Acts* generally, see HARRY O. MAIER, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991) 151–3.

and confirming its plausibility in the mind of hearers, in bolstering the recruits' faith, and in increasing or decreasing the social costs of conversion. Connections to other converts play a greater role in bringing potential recruits to the apostle than do the attractions of the special features of his message, which, as we have seen, are rarely visible to pre-converts. Where multiple versions of the faith exist in open competition, as in the *Acts of Peter*, social networks exert significant influence over which varieties of Christianity individuals encounter, and which they find more attractive. In short, as Lofland and Stark observed of their subjects, conversion in the *Acts* frequently begins with social, rather than ideological commitment.

Unfortunately, comparable evidence for "heretical" recruitment is difficult to come by in other second- and early third-century sources. As we have seen, the heresiologists are full of complaints and theories about the motives of recruits to "heresy," but offer very little discussion of individual cases. Likewise, although many of the Nag Hammadi texts reflect deeply on the spiritual and ritual nature of conversion, they tend to be vague about the human dimension of recruitment. Virtually the only specific individual converts or missionaries who appear in these texts are primordial heroes and members of the apostolic generation.⁶⁸ Like the conversion narratives in the apocryphal *Acts*, such stories about apostolic-age evangelism are at best pointers to the way the author imagined recruitment should or did happen. Occasionally these texts do hint at the kind of social dynamics we have been describing. The opening of the *Second Apocalypse of James*, for example, sketches the transmission of James's message through a pre-existing network: a priest relates one of the apostle's discourses to his relative Theudas, James's father, inviting Theudas's wife Mary and relatives to hear as well (*2 Apoc. Jas.* 44.11–23).⁶⁹ Still, as with the *Acts*, we must be cautious in extrapolating from such accounts to historical reality.

There is one case in which the role of social connections in shaping individuals' Christian affiliation seems beyond question: congregations comprised of immigrants who continued to follow the practice of their home region.⁷⁰ The best known of these is the second-century community of Asian Christians at Rome who adhered to the Asian custom of celebrating Easter on Passover (Nisan 14), rather than on a Sunday, as was standard at Rome (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.14–17). This is the congregation with which the great Smyrnaean bishop Polycarp chose to observe Easter when he visited Rome. No doubt many of this group's members, like Polycarp, sought it out because its brand of Christianity was familiar and comfortable, but also because they had ties of ethnicity, kinship, and friendship

⁶⁸ Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue*, 11, 175; Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 280.

⁶⁹ Here I follow the reading preferred by Wolf-Peter Funk, *Die Zweite Apokalypse des Jakobus aus Nag-Hammadi-Codex V* (TU 119; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976) 88–90, who distinguishes Mareim, the scribe who recorded the discourse, from the (anonymous) priest who reports.

⁷⁰ George La Piana, "The Roman Church at the End of the Second Century," *HTR* 18 (1925) 201–77, at 215–23; Lampe, *Stadtrömischen Christen*, 322 notes that similarly geographically-based synagogues are attested at Rome.

with other members. When their presbyter Blastus was removed from office for “trying to innovate idiosyncratically about the truth” (ιδίως περὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν νεωτερίζειν περιώμενος), Eusebius tells us, many of these people went with him (*Hist. eccl.* 5.15, 20.1; Ps.-Tertullian, *Adv. Omn. Haer.* 8.1).⁷¹ For these believers, becoming “heretical” was a matter of choosing to worship in the company of their compatriots in the way that they and their families had always done; ideological and social commitment in this case went hand in hand.

■ Conclusion

The second-century physician Galen begins his treatise *On the Order of His Own Books* by complaining that most doctors and philosophers form professional allegiances without doing due diligence: instead of learning what others in their field teach and systematically distinguishing true from false, they simply join whatever *hairesis* their fathers, teachers, or friends belong to, or the one that happens to have a well-regarded teacher in their city (*Libr. Ord.* 1 = Kühn XIX.50.4–16). These intellectuals are operating in a classic crowded marketplace—a full slate of available options, the ideological differences among them clearly delineated—and yet all too often (as Galen sees it, at least) they make choices based not on those differences, but on convenience and social factors.⁷² That the process of recruitment and conversion to Christianity writ large proceeded along similar lines has long been recognized. This article has sought to demonstrate that our evidence, although limited, confirms that recruitment to distinct forms of early Christianity followed much the same pattern: for many Christian recruits the road to “orthodoxy” or “heresy” began not in ideological attraction to the distinctive doctrinal, ritual, or organizational features of a particular brand of Christianity, but in attachments to family, friends, and patrons already inside the group. Those features, embodied and inculcated through initiation rituals as well as through formal instruction, will have become more salient as the conversion process progressed, as they did for our Alexandrian man. At the point of recruitment, however, they often seem to have been all but invisible. Even where recruits were aware of choosing between rival versions of Christianity, as in the *Acts of Peter* or the case of the sometime adoptionist bishop Natalius, ideological persuasion was entwined with, and strongly shaped by, social influence. I argue, therefore, that if we want to understand how and why certain individuals came to affiliate with “heresies,” speculating about the attractions of the features that in retrospect made them “heretical” will not suffice, and indeed

⁷¹ Eusebius pairs Blastus with the presbyter Florinus, expelled at the same time for Valentinian leanings; unfortunately, Eusebius is not interested in why Florinus’s followers joined his congregation or chose to remain with him in excommunication.

⁷² Similarly, Lucian lampoons the philosophy student Hermotimus for choosing Stoicism because it was the most popular school (τοὺς πλείστους ἐπ’ αὐτὴν ὀρμῶντας, *Hermot.* 16), while Origen observes that would-be philosophers tend to end up in a particular sect either by random chance (ἀποκληρωτικῶς) or because they had convenient access to a teacher of that type (τῷ εὐπορηκέναι τοιοῦδε διδασκάλου, *Cels.* 1.10).

may point us in the wrong direction. Rather, we must consider the perspective not only of advocates and polemicists, for whom distinctive ideology was paramount, but also of recruits, and take seriously the social as well as the cognitive character of religious decision-making.