

half of the third century (cf. Gager 1975). This may explain why, of the few numbers that have been offered in the literature, most are for membership in about the year 300.

Edward Gibbon may have been the first to attempt to estimate the Christian population, placing it at no more than "a twentieth part of the subjects of the empire" at the time of Constantine's conversion ([1776-1788] 1960:187). Later writers have rejected Gibbon's figure as far too low. Goodenough (1931) estimated that 10 percent of the empire's population were Christians by the time of Constantine. If we accept 60 million as the total population at that time—which is the most widely accepted estimate (Boak 1955a; Russell 1958; MacMullen 1984; Wilken 1984)—this would mean that there were 6 million Christians at the start of the fourth century. Von Hertling (1934) estimated the maximum number of Christians in the year 300 as 15 million. Grant (1978) rejected this as far too high and even rejected von Hertling's minimum estimate of 7.5 million as high. MacMullen (1984) placed the number of Christians in 300 at 5 million. Fortunately, we do not need greater precision; if we assume that the actual number of Christians in the year 300 lay within the range of 5-7.5 million, we have an adequate basis for exploring what rate of growth is needed for that range to be reached in 260 years.

Given our starting number, if Christianity grew at the rate of 40 percent per decade, there would have been 7,530 Christians in the year 100, followed by 217,795 Christians in the year 200 and by 6,299,832 Christians in the year 300. If we cut the rate of growth to 30 percent a decade, by the year 300 there would have been only 917,334 Christians—a figure far below what any-

one would rate to 37,876, Hertling (or 3.42 the rate eral cen

Rodney Stark
The Rise of Christianity
 Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986
 paperback edition: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997

TABLE 1.1
 Christian Growth Projected at 40 Percent per Decade

Year	Number of Christians	Percent of Population ^a
40	1,000	0.0017
50	1,400	0.0023
100	7,530	0.0126
150	40,496	0.07
200	217,795	0.36
250	1,171,356	1.9
300	6,299,832	10.5
350	33,882,008	56.5

^a Based on an estimated population of 60 million.

This is a very encouraging finding since it is exceedingly close to the average growth rate of 43 percent per decade that the Mormon church has maintained over the past century (Stark 1984, 1994). Thus we know that the numerical goals Christianity needed to achieve are entirely in keeping with modern experience, and we are not forced to seek exceptional explanations. Rather, history allows time for the normal processes of conversion, as understood by contemporary social science, to take place.

However, before we take up the topic of conversion, it seems worthwhile to pause and consider the widespread impression that Christian growth speeded rapidly during the last half of the third century. In terms of rate of growth, it probably did not. But because of the rather extraordinary features of exponential curves, this probably was a period of "miraculous-seeming" growth in terms of absolute numbers. All of this is clear in table