



**Course Name:** SALT Discipleship Lesson 2 - History of the Church and The First 3 Centuries  
By Mike Vaughn

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**Course description:**

This course covers the history of the first 3 centuries of the Church established by Jesus and how disciples were made.

**Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have:**

- A. Developed an understanding of the culture during the rapid growth of the Church.
- B. Examined the background on how Christianity conquered the Roman Empire.

**Outline of the class: Divide the class into groups of three or four. Ask all the groups to spend about 5-10 minutes to write out or list answers to discussion questions. Discuss responses with the entire group.**

**Discussion question 1: Contrast the 1st century Roman culture with the culture in the U.S. today.**

**A. What was the culture within the Roman Empire during the 1st Century?**

- 1. A minority believed in the God of the Bible.
- 2. Belief in right and wrong from a single divine moral authority was viewed as a threat to the culture.
- 3. Homosexuality was considered mainstream and celebrated.
- 4. Entertainment was full of violence and sexuality.
- 5. People divorce if they aren't happy and it was common for people to be married multiple times.
- 6. Unwanted babies were aborted or killed (exposed).

**B. Why is 1st Century culture relevant for us today?**

- 1. To study the Bible, we need to understand what the hearers of the day understood in their context, what it means to us today and how we can apply it.
- 2. Helps us understand what it was like for 1st century Christians – they conquered the Roman Empire. Can we change the world today?
- 3. Today is the first time that culture in the U.S. is the same as 1st century Rome when the church was established.

**Discussion Question 2: If our culture today is similar to the 1st century culture when the Church grew dramatically, how can living as they did be successful in making disciples today?**

**C. Jesus Promised To Build His Church - “I will build my Ekklesia” Matthew 16:18**

1. What did Ekklesia mean to the hearers?
  - a. Greeks – 400 BC to 200 BC “*Ekklesia*” became group of citizens called out to set policy.
  - b. At the time of Christ, Roman emperors used the term for groups of trained citizens sent out to assimilate newly conquered territories. For example, conquered citizens were expected to get rid of their previous views and follow Roman laws on property rights, use of public baths, etc.
2. What did the hearers of His day understand Jesus was saying?
  - a. Jesus is a King.
  - b. He equips His *ekklesia* with values, mission, language, etc.
  - c. Once trained, His *ekklesia* is sent out to train and assimilate others into His Kingdom.

**D. What happened with the first century *ekklesia*?**

1. They were persecuted in an unimaginable way:
  - a. By Jewish leaders who believed in God but not Jesus.
  - b. By Roman authorities who felt that saying there is only one God was a threat to the social order. Claiming there is only one God was viewed as a threat to the Romans. Saying Jesus was the Son of God was a threat. (Today we have people saying it is wrong to share their faith as it is imposing your view on them and making them not feel safe. In U.S. culture today, people create their own “gods” - My “god” is all love and wants me to be happy so I can do whatever makes me happy.)
2. They were scattered throughout the known world

**E. What did Christ’s *ekklesia* look like in the first 3 centuries?**

1. Christians went from being fed to lions to conquering the Roman Empire by the way they lived.
2. Christianity was declared the official religion of Roman Empire in 323 AD.
3. How did Christianity conquer the Roman Empire?

- a. First century Christians stood out in lots of ways: “They were different because they had a different view of their ultimate future. The knowledge that Jesus died for us transformed their approach to life and death.” - (Timothy Keller 2013 sermon archive)

**F. What made the 1st century Christian community so different?<sup>1</sup>**

1. They adhered to the ultimate authority of scripture. They understood there would be no more revelation (see Galatians 1:8 “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”)
2. They showed grace on matters not addressed by scripture.
3. The early church was multi-racial and experienced a unity across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries that was startling.
  - a. They were extremely inclusive people with the congregants being a mix of races, rich/poor, master/slave all aided by the Roman Empire enabling a free flow of people with fewer boundaries than prior to that period.
  - b. They were extremely generous to help people with their efforts and financial resources – not just fellow Christians.
4. The early church was a community of forgiveness and reconciliation. They didn’t fight back when they were being hunted down and killed. Some were quoted as saying their blood is the seed for more Christians.
5. The early church was famous for its hospitality to the poor and the suffering. During plagues – they went to the aid of people when others (including family) were fleeing. They were different in all ways – beyond reproach in the market place, other centered, etc.
6. It was a community committed to the sanctity of life. They were known for saving babies that were discarded in the trash and discouraging abortion.
7. They were a sexual counterculture. All sexual immorality was wrong. They understood sex was for the sanctity of marriage and marriage is for life. The Romans were very promiscuous, practiced homosexuality and divorced numerous times - focusing on only what made them happy.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller from The Gospel Coalition January 10, 2020 summarizing books by Larry Hurtado: “Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?” and “Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World”.

## **G. What Kept The Early Church From Being Corrupted?<sup>2</sup>**

1. For the first 3 centuries, Church leaders and followers stayed committed to what they had learned from the apostles and the apostle's closest students.
2. There were "Walls" protecting the Church.
  - a. They were adamant there would be no new special revelation after the apostles (Galatians 1:8).
  - b. They equated any change with error and resisted any change. Peter and Paul had warned of false teachers and the resistance to change helped keep them out.
  - c. They were different from the world and in the world (John 17:14-15; Rom 12:2; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 John 3:13).
  - d. They were in the world but not of the world. Examples in the Old Testament of Daniel, Jonah, Jews taken to Babylon and Jeremiah 29 told them to go into the city and seek the welfare of the city, serving God first.
  - e. They had a voluntary practice of referring questions to elders where apostles had taught.
  - f. They held to an independence of each congregation – kept error from spreading quickly.

### **Conclusion:**

- A. The first century Christians stood out as different and we can too.
- B. "The church has been distracted, falling into the world's paradigm of conservative or liberal positions, forgetting that Jesus' body transcends it. As Christians, we believe in absolute truth and humility, bridging the gap between these two polarities, and understanding that true heart change comes through the gospel".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David W. Bercot "Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up"

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller Sermon Archives