



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

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**Course description:**

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

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

- A. Examined the evolution of the Church through the centuries.
- B. Developed an understanding of application for the 21st century.

**Outline of the class: Divide the class into two groups. Read through the material below and then ask both groups to spend about 5-10 minutes to write out or list answers to discussion questions at the end. Discuss responses with the entire group.**

**A. What Happened After The First 3 Centuries Of The Church?**

1. In 300's Constantine tried to Christianize the Roman empire. "Helped" with Creeds and took over the Church. Created a church structure patterned after his governmental organization.
2. Constantine said Jesus gave him a revelation before battle. He led the Nicene Creed effort and said it was a revelation from God. His mother said she had a revelation on artifacts, etc.
3. Church leaders socialized with the Emperor and were appointed to key positions in government. They went from suffering to living in the palace.
4. Authorities silenced critics with violence and Church leaders didn't denounce it.
5. Vast numbers of pagans wanted to be viewed as Christians and obedience to baptism, etc. were declined. Christians weren't differentiated (~10% were Christian by 313 AD and in the next 100 years, nearly all the other 90% considered themselves as Christians). Persecution that had kept the Church strong was replaced by a watered down mainstream religion.
6. Dazzling architecture of church buildings was viewed as an evangelistic tool.
7. Assumed growth in numbers indicated God's blessings – Popularity over Doctrine.

## B. Church History

~33 AD Jesus said He would build His “*ekklesia*.”

~33 AD the church is established on the Day of Pentecost & Christians are scattered due to persecution.

~165 Antonine plague - Christians stand out caring for others.

~249 Cyprian plague - Christians stand out caring for others.

~320 AD Christianity is named official religion of Roman Empire.

~400 AD The Roman empire falls and the gospel begins to spread in Northern Europe.

1050-1300 AD The Crusades expand from Europe to the Middle East.

1517 The Reformation Effort in Europe begins.

1600’s Christianity spreads to North America as people flee religious oppression. Puritans were persecuted because they didn’t accept the King of England as the leader of the Church. King James had compelled obedience to his own rites, holidays, etc.

1800 Restoration Efforts begin based on Bible as only source.

1900 Restoration Unity fractures into different groups.

1940’s to 1950’s Post war America 2 things were true:

- Nearly 90% of Americans were going to go to church. The main question asked: Which Church should I go to?)
- Almost all evangelism was driven by personal relationships. People were committed to churches because they were connected to people.

1960’s to 1970’s Culture experienced “The Great Rebellion.”

- Church leaders couldn’t rely on personal evangelism so they pivoted to programs to attract groups of people to our churches by the programs we offered like VBS, Sunday School, Mother’s Day out, etc...
- Church leaders shifted from investing in people to overseeing programs.
- Belief: Program + Participation = Spiritual Growth.

1980’s to 2000’s The shift from personal evangelism to programs and group activities continued.

- Christians stopped developing mentor type relationships to lead people to a Christ-like life.
- As the church became more of an institution, our evangelism shifted to an attractional model of the church (worship service as evangelism).

- The gathering wasn't about equipping believers to go out. It was the place believers brought new people into so the professional could convert them.

**For the past 40 years the church service has served as the primary place of evangelism.**

- Evangelism became inviting someone to Church where they were fed a steady diet of introductory sermons. Deep discipleship was not developed.
- This culminated in the church member becoming a consumer rather than a producer of disciples.
- People fed on the religious offerings of professionals (sermons at worship).
- People decide if they like the sermon or not, leading to Church "hopping" and a lack of commitment.
- If people were really engaged, they'd participate in a program and maybe invite a friend to participate.

**2010+** Dramatic growth of Christianity in Latin America, Africa, Korea, etc.

**Group 1: Discussion Question: What are your key take-aways from this background?**

**Group 2: Discussion Question: What should you as an individual or your congregation do differently based on this background?**

**Conclusion:**

- A. The center of gospel growth has moved many times from centers of affluence and power to people who know they need a Savior. From Jerusalem to Rome to Northern Europe to America to Africa / Latin America / Korea.
- B. We must look inexplicable to the world so they notice us.

"Believing in absolute truth would have the world call us conservative. Being so humble because we know we are weak and broken makes us generous and caring and so giving to others that we are considered to be liberal by the world."<sup>1</sup>

Don't let people paint you into a classification.

**Book Recommendations**

- David W. Bercot: *Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up*
- Rodney Stark: *The Rise of Christianity*
- Kenneth Latourette: *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*
- Tim Wallingford: *Turning Church Members into Disciple Makers*

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller sermon archives