

**FROM CHRIST TO CONSTANTINE:**

**The  
Trial and Testimony  
———— of the ————  
Early Church**

Teacher's Guide  
to accompany the six-part film series

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# Table of Contents

<b>Preliminary Planning Comments</b> .....	1
Program 1 <b>Foundations:</b> Video Lesson .....	6
Optional Bible Study .....	9
Program 2 <b>Spread:</b> Video Lesson .....	11
Optional Bible Study .....	14
Program 3 <b>Accusation:</b> Video Lesson .....	16
Optional Bible Study .....	19
Program 4 <b>Persecution:</b> Video Lesson .....	21
Optional Bible Study .....	23
Program 5 <b>Testimony:</b> Video Lesson .....	25
Optional Bible Study .....	28
Program 6 <b>Transition:</b> Video Lesson .....	30
Optional Bible Study .....	33

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## Preliminary Planning Comments

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### **To the Leader:**

We commend you for selecting this series for use in your class or group. You will find it a subject area full of unusual possibilities. It should generate lively discussion among your members. It will provoke thought and reflection. It can be the occasion for seeing the Christian faith with new eyes and understanding in a deeper way the meaning of being a Christian.

So, we urge you to come to this series with great expectations. It can be a memorable time and one of the most effective series you have ever taught, if you are prepared to take advantage of the opportunity before you.

### **A word of reassurance**

Perhaps you are approaching this series with a degree of apprehension. That is normal. After all, you probably are not a scholar, historian, or specialist in this period of history. But let us put your mind at ease.

These programs and support materials are designed to introduce you and your group to the period and to the early church. You do not have to be an academician to benefit from what we can learn from the early church, and you do not need to have a degree in history to be able to lead the group in fruitful areas of exploration.

We have set our sights on what can be known and grasped about the early church. Our intent will be to take some of the main records, experiences, and events and relate them to the Scriptures and to our lives today.

You will find that basically we are dealing with people. Yes, they are from another time and, in a sense, from another world; but they are still people just like us with concerns about their families, their jobs, the future, and how to pay their bills.

As Christians, they also faced the same problems and questions we do. They wrestled with the call of God, struggled with temptation, wondered if their lives were pleasing to God, fought with doubts, rejoiced in answers to prayer on some occasions, and pondered why their prayers did not seem to be answered on other occasions. They had to put up with people in their

churches who were not living faithfully or who were just plain pains in the neck. They were concerned that their children know Christ and not be led away by the world. They lived with the knowledge that sometimes they fell short of their own expectations of how a Christian should live. They had to face the trials of standing for their faith when they knew it would mean mockery and insult. They were just people, for the most part simple and uneducated people, who had become Christians and wanted to be faithful in spite of their setbacks and weaknesses.

We encourage you to look on the experience before you as one similar to visiting family members you have not had the opportunity to meet before. Even though you haven't met, it is not as though you are strangers. You are family after all. You have a lot in common, and it's just a matter of getting acquainted.

Thus, we urge that you prepare your mind and prepare your group to approach these coming sessions not as history lessons but as a wonderful opportunity to get to meet some relatives.

Once your people see the coming sessions as a kind of family event, they will feel more at ease and come with a greater sense of expectation.

### **First take an overview**

It is very important for you as leader to have an overview of the programs in this series. This you can do by actually taking an evening to view them all. We emphasize, however, that the first viewing is not intended for you to grasp all of the material but rather to get a sense of the flow of the series and to see how one program builds upon another. Once you are familiar with the programs and have an overview, then you will be better able to deal with the contents of the individual programs and see how they fit into the larger design of the series.

### **Planning your series**

The programs and materials can readily be adapted to a number of different settings. We encourage you to use the series as it would best fit your situation. Some possible formats follow:

1. You may want to schedule six weeks in your Sunday School class or small group and show one program each week followed by discussion. Each program runs 25-27 minutes, so you would ideally have at least 50 minutes available which could be broken down as follows.

Introduction to the day's program	5 minutes
View the program	25-27 minutes
Reaction and discussion	17-20 minutes

*Perhaps you do not have 50 minutes available. We have heard from several groups who only have 30-35 minutes of actual class time that they break each video program into two sessions and show only half of a program each time. This allows time for an adequate introduction and follow-up discussion. It also stretches the six-part series to twelve parts.*

2. You can easily adapt the series to a quarter or thirteen-week series. Set aside one session for an introductory session, or leave the extra session to the end for a review and wrap up. The other twelve sessions would follow a sequence of showing the program one week and having a Bible study related to that program the following week. Your curriculum provides for this alternative with the "Optional Bible Study" sessions. (For the thirteenth week, you can add a wrap-up session to tie up the loose ends. Or use the enclosed issue of *Christian History* magazine and the discussion questions on page 38.)

3. These six programs make an excellent resource for a weekend retreat. Plan to allow at least an hour for discussion of each program. Schedule your time to allow three hours for viewing and six hours for discussion. A weekend might be structured in six 90-minute sessions as follows.

- Session 1: Friday night
- Session 2: Saturday morning
- Session 3: Saturday morning
- Session 4: Saturday afternoon
- Session 5: Saturday evening
- Session 6: Sunday Morning

4. If you are a pastor, you may wish to consider using the series as a special six-week series, showing the videos Sunday morning to the Sunday School and then tying your sermon that day to the program viewed. Or you might use the programs as a special Sunday night

series and preach on the topic of the evening's program in your Sunday morning sermon.

### **The purpose of the programs**

These programs were produced by Gateway Films for Christian History Institute of Worcester, Pennsylvania, in cooperation with EO Television in Holland (a Christian television network), to be used both on television and in local churches. The intent was twofold.

First, we prepared these programs to help Christians. The programs are intended to assist believers to get in touch with the roots of their faith, to see the glorious family of which they are a part, to realize the tremendous price that was paid to preserve the gospel and commit it to future generations, to help us see what the church was like when it did not have all of the benefits and resources of the churches today, and to look behind the forms and institutions that have grown up over the centuries to see what the central essentials of the faith really are.

Secondly, we prepared these programs to speak to those who are not committed Christians. So many have turned away from the church and Christ for the wrong reasons. Many have been offended by things that have nothing to do with the gospel itself. This series will help them see Christianity and the church at a time when it had so little of what many identify with the church today. We believe it will offer an opportunity for those who are not believers to consider the faith in a new way by getting back to what it really meant to be a church, a believer, a follower of Christ in the early period. So you may find this series the right opportunity to invite guests, inquirers, or those who have fallen away to come and engage in this captivating material.

### **The series contents**

The six programs do not have to be shown in the order that they are offered if you have reasons for rearranging them otherwise, but let us at least give you the rationale for the progression that we set forth.

The six programs are as follows:

- Program 1: FOUNDATIONS
- Program 2: SPREAD
- Program 3: ACCUSATION
- Program 4: PERSECUTION
- Program 5: TESTIMONY
- Program 6: TRANSITION

The first program, FOUNDATIONS, as you would expect, begins with Christ. It shows what we know about him and what can be affirmed about him, even by those who are not Christians. Then we proceed to look at the apostles to whom the Lord entrusted his mission, and we review what happened to each of them. Further, the program examines the beginnings of the church within the womb of Judaism and how it eventually became separate and distinct, reaching out as a universal faith for the world and all peoples.

The second program, SPREAD, shows how the church went forth from its humble beginnings to cover the entire Roman Empire and beyond. At the beginning this would have been seen as an impossible and absurd mission to the casual observer. After the Apostle Paul there were no longer great and notable evangelists that we are aware of, and the church did not have access to the public forums or festivals to preach its message. It was often the object of oppression, and we show how it was that the church spread in such an amazing way under such difficult circumstances.

Program Three, ACCUSATION, shows us that the church did not spread and prosper under favorable conditions but had to survive in a society where it was seen as a danger and a threat. Numerous accusations were hurled against the believers. Some were outright lies. Others were simply misunderstandings. But some of the accusations were right on target, for the church was indeed a threat to many of the most deeply cherished values and the basic world view of the Roman world. This program shows us why the church was so aggressively opposed.

Program four, PERSECUTION, building on the previous programs, goes period by period and gives examples of the specific persecutions that took place, what sparked them, and what they meant for the church. We see how two of the persecutions were empire-wide and intended to utterly destroy the faith. We examine the emperors who authorized or instigated the persecutions and see how, from their point of view, they were “just doing their job.”

In program five, TESTIMONY, we look in detail at two incidents from the persecutions and meet two of the greatest heroes and martyrs of the early church—Polycarp and Perpetua. We see in the lives of this old man and young girl how the Christians who were martyred did not have to die. The authorities were

actually anxious to release them. But these martyrs preferred to die rather than give in to the requirements of the authorities. We also see the tremendous role that the martyrs had in giving strength, sustenance, and direction to the young church.

Program six, TRANSITION, shows how the church eventually triumphed and overcame its enemies and went on not only to be an accepted faith but also the official faith of the Roman Empire. We see how Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity and established the church with results that were both beneficial and sadly detrimental. Then we take an overview to discern what the church was like over these first generations. We seek to understand its survival and the reasons it met the needs of so many diverse peoples throughout the vast empire. In conclusion, we observe that the church today stands on the verge of changes that are potentially every bit as momentous as the ones that came under Constantine.

As you see, we have not gone into detailed questions of theology, which have preoccupied scholars, nor gotten sidetracked in the kind of doctrinal questions that often divide churches today. The programs deal primarily with the everyday Christians, the world they lived in, the kind of lives they lived, the problems they faced, and how they met them. The progression of programs takes us from Christ to Constantine with a good taste of what happened in between, and special attention is always given to events or attitudes that are similar to what we are facing in the church and the world today.

### **About the Presenters**

Series host is Steve Bell. Steve is an experienced and respected journalist. He covered the White House and Vietnam for ABC-TV News, and you may remember him as the newsman for years on Good Morning America on ABC. Presently, he is the anchorman for KYW-TV in Philadelphia, National Correspondent for Westinghouse Television, and the News Presenter for the USA Cable Network. With such a busy life, we were extremely fortunate to get Steve, a Presbyterian layman who gave up vacation time to come and work with us, to prepare these programs.

Joining Steve are three co-hosts, Nigel Goodwin, Jane Champion, and Russell Boulter. The co-hosts were selected to provide a dimension beyond the typical “talking-head” documentary format. They are professional actors as well as committed Christians, and you

will find them slipping into different roles in the various programs. They play a diversity of characters who are essential to our story.

All three are English actors. Nigel Goodwin, in addition to his acting career where he has played Shakespearean roles, is the founder and director of the Arts Center Group, an association for Christians who work as professionals in the arts. Beginning in England, Nigel has in recent years extended this significant “behind the scenes” ministry of encouragement to several other countries as well.

The other two actors we found as young “unknowns.” We wanted these younger performers so that the series would have added appeal to your young people. After completing their filming with us, both Jane and Russell landed choice roles on the London stage. Jane played the role of Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Russell took the lead in the play *Blood Brothers*.

I think you will find that as you go through the series you will become attached to these outstanding communicators whose participation has added so much to the series.

### **Some General Observations**

As you prepare for the series, here are a few thoughts that you might find useful to keep in mind.

First of all, it is necessary to admit that we do not have all of the information that we would crave about the early church. The sources, both Christian and secular, are limited. Remember that for the period we are covering the church was illegal. So this was not the kind of movement that had records preserved in the public libraries. There were times when the church's Scriptures and literature were seized and destroyed. And, of course, they did not have the kind of modern communication tools we have today. Thus, there is so much that we do not have that we would so much like to have! The other side of the coin is that there is an amazing amount, given the circumstances, that has been preserved. We have enough to piece together a meaningful picture and general understanding of the church in the period under consideration.

Secondly, let's be clear about the nature of the study before us. We are confident that there is incredible value to be derived in studying the early Christians. Indeed we would go so far as to expect that it can

become a major spiritual experience in the lives of your participants. There is so much to learn from the courage of the early believers. When we see how they held together without church buildings, denominational structures, publishing houses, and all the other church supports that we depend upon so much today, we cannot help but rethink what is really important, central, and essential to the church. Surely this will cause us to take a much needed look at a lot of the secondary things that we have made primary. Much will be seen in a new way and put in a proper perspective. However, we are not suggesting that we should, or can, try to go back and recreate the early church. We cannot. *You Can't Go Home Again* as Thomas Wolfe titled one of his novels. The early Christians lived in a different world with different surroundings and different challenges. We cannot go back to their world (nor would we want to). The task is to see what we can learn from their lives and experiences that will help us face our situation in faithfulness to the Lord today.

Thirdly, there is no intention to romanticize the early believers and congregations and make them some kind of super-human saints. That would be a disservice to them. It would remove them from the reality of the world that we all face and make them unapproachable. Let's be clear that the churches always had their problems and their disagreements. There were occasions in the early period when Christians, even some respected leaders, renounced the faith and turned back to the world. There were opportunists and exploiters who invaded the ranks. There were those who introduced heresies and practices that threatened and disrupted the church. But the important point is that, in spite of it all, the Body of Christ managed to hold together, face its problems, and hold firm to God in a hostile and unbelieving world. When we see the early Christians as problem-laden believers just like ourselves, we are encouraged that the same Lord who preserved and guided them will be by our side as we meet our tests.

### **Preparing your group for the series**

Prior to actually beginning the series you may find it useful to have a preparatory session to prepare your participants for what is to come. We have included in this kit a questionnaire on the early church. You are welcome to use this and reproduce it if you want. It is on pages 36 and 37. If you do use it, don't make it seem like a test, but do it more in fun. It will help draw

attention to some of the themes that will be covered. You might want to add a few more questions of your own for either a written response or preliminary discussion. Here are a few more suggested questions to provoke thought and stir up interest.

- Why didn't Jesus stay on earth longer so that he could travel farther and give his apostles and followers more preparation to carry on his work?
- How many names of Christians are you familiar with who lived after the New Testament period and before the time of Constantine at about 312?
- What role did religion play in the life of the average person in the Roman Empire?
- What were the first churches probably like?
- How were they the same as our churches?
- In what ways would they be different from our churches?
- Do you think the early followers of Christ, including his apostles, would be comfortable in our congregation? Why or why not?
- We mark important days at different parts of the year in our church (Christmas, Easter, etc.--list all the ones important in your church). Which of these would the early church also have had and which ones would they not have had?
- What main questions would you like to ask believers who lived in the first generations after Christ?
- What do you think attracted people to the Christian faith who were hearing about it when it was still new and not well known in the surrounding culture?
- If a period of persecution were to come to us as it did to them, would we be prepared for it? Would we give up the faith rather than our lives?

*The purpose is not so much for anyone to get the highest score or to get the correct answers but more to stir up the pot and get everyone thinking. One suggestion. If you do begin with a selection of questions, be sure to keep a copy of them; then at the end of the series go back and throw out those very same questions and see how much the answers have changed as a result of the sessions.*

### **Some Practical Tips**

We suggest the following as routine procedures that will be well worth your effort.

1. View each program at least a day or two before your session. Look at it a second time if you feel the need.
2. At your preview time, if you are using video, set your videocassette counter to 000 at the beginning of the program. At key points that particularly interest you in the program, make a note of the counter reading. This will enable you to go directly to that point with minimal effort during the class period if there is a section that you want replayed for review.
3. Before the first class be sure to check out the equipment. If you do not feel at ease operating the equipment, then arrange for someone to come to the classes to be your assistant for this purpose.
4. Have a few introductory comments prepared to perk up interest in the day's program. You will have seen the program already and noted the points that you are particularly interested in and want to highlight for later discussion. Tell the class before viewing that you want them to take particular notice of this or that point, scene, or element.
5. Unless you need to keep to a carefully planned schedule, you will find it useful at the end of each program to pause, have a moment of quiet, while you go over and shut off the equipment, and ask class members to speak up and say what struck them most from what they have just seen. Or ask what surprised them most about the contents. This feedback will be useful in helping you to discern where the most responsive points are that will connect with the more pressing interests of the individual participants.

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# Program 1: Foundations

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## Introduction and Background

### VISUALIZE A TREE

The church is like a tree. We find ourselves, near the year 2000, out on the branches. The tree has many branches—Baptist, Brethren, Reformed, Anglican, Catholic, and so on. Each of the different branches observes different rituals, has different practices, and holds slightly different ideas.

As we trace our history, we move down the branches toward the trunk. We see that the differences between the branches started at certain moments, with certain decisions—some noble and righteous, others unwise or unholy, at least from our perspective.

Not surprisingly, those of us on *our* branch think that this is the straight and true continuation from the trunk—all the other branches have branched *off* from the truth in some way. Of course, those on the other branches feel the same way, that *theirs* is the straightest progression from the trunk. But the fact is that the trunk is very different from all of the branches.

The early church would surprise all of us, if we were suddenly thrown back in time. That does not mean that the twists and turns of *our* branch are bad. The Spirit has moved Christians to respond to changing times in various ways—ways that would be just as shocking to Polycarp or Tertullian as theirs would be to us.

We sometimes assume that the early church did everything right, that somehow in the early church we can find the pure essence of Christianity. And, yes, it seems relatively uncluttered by structures and hierarchies. But the early church came from somewhere, too. The trunk springs up from roots.

### THE ROOT SYSTEM

The church's roots are Jewish. Jesus and the apostles were Jewish. They observed Jewish rituals and studied the Hebrew Scriptures. Early Christian worship services probably borrowed the format of synagogue services, and the Lord's Supper was a modified Passover service (or Sabbath meal). It was quite controversial when the church decided to let non-Jews in. Even as Paul moved out into the Roman world, he visited the synagogue in each city first.

Largely due to Paul, the early church has Greek roots, too. Paul seized on the thoughts of Greek philosophers to express the truth of Christ. Later theologians, such as Origen, borrowed heavily from Plato. The Greek idea of the *polis*, the city, had captured the Mediterranean world, giving Christians fertile ground for evangelism. Yet the church maintained that its true citizenship was above, with Christ. A wonderful city awaited them—and that made it easier to withstand earthly opposition.

The church also had Roman roots. Their quality of life embodied many Roman virtues. They respected patience, loyalty, diligence, and ethical standards. As the church began to find its place within

the empire (for a short time in the 200s, but mostly in the 300s), it developed an order and structure that Romans could appreciate.

Looking back on those early years, we might roughly generalize and say that the first century was more Jewish, the second was more Greek and the third (and following) was more Roman. The point is that, even then, the church was responding to the culture around it, at the prompting of the Spirit. As its geographical center moved westward so did its ways of operating.

### BRANCHING OUT TODAY

We face similar challenges today. We are products of our culture, and we bring that into the church with us. Our churches must interact with society if we are to truly obey Christ, and yet we can easily be captured by the culture. We must always be alert for the Spirit's true leading as we "branch" out into more relevant expressions of God's truth.

There is much to learn from the early church. Things were simpler then. It becomes almost a laboratory situation where we can see Christianity, in its earliest forms, interacting with its world. No, those people didn't always make the right decisions. But, in spite of that, most of us would agree that the Holy Spirit was actively moving them.

### To the Teacher:

We sometimes talk about "getting back to the early church," but what do we mean? Some want to sit on the floor and sing choruses. Others want church members to share their goods freely with one another. Maybe others secretly wish they were persecuted. Who knows?

### NOT PERFECT

The early church was far from perfect. It was no pristine wonderland. Those church people were people like us. They had their hopes and disappointments, their petty rivalries, and their times of deep devotion. We see this even in the New Testament. Paul wept with the Ephesian elders but also scolded the Corinthians for bad manners at the love feast.

Although it was not perfect, the early church was *active*. The spirit was moving mightily through many believers and making things happen. The early church was also *simpler*—that is, simpler than our churches. Without buildings and vestments and radio ministries and softball teams, they had fewer things to distract them. The early church was also *in the minority*. Though the intensity of persecution varied, the church was generally under the gun, oppressed and despised. After Constantine came along in the 300s, the situation changed in the Western world forever. Individual groups of Christians have been beleaguered at various times, and some are complaining today about a general move into a "post-Christian" age. But, since Constantine, Christianity, at least nominally, has enjoyed power. How were things different when we didn't have such privileges?



## ORDINARY FOLKS

Keep reminding your students that the early Christians were not supersaints but just ordinary folks. And, like the early Christians, your students can touch their world with a simple, active, humble faith.

**Scripture:** Acts 1:8; Ephesians 2:19-22;  
1 Corinthians 3:9-16; 1 Peter 2:4-12

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**Objective:** *To introduce students to the nature of the early church and its growth and to remind them that the church consists of people, not buildings or other trappings.*

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## Introductory Questions

- What would happen in our church if we had no hymnals, if there were no musical instruments or choir? Would it still be a church? Would we still want to come?
- What would happen if there were no baptistry, no communion furnishings, no symbol of the cross? Would it still be a church?
- What would happen if we had no pastor, if we had no creeds written down for us, if we had no New Testament in writing? Would it still be the church? Why or why not?

## ●●●●●●●●●●SHOW VIDEO●●●●●●●●●●

## Video Discussion Guide

The video could be divided into three segments—the first ends with a brief mention of the cities of the Roman Empire; the second covers the apostles (including Paul); the third wraps it up. If you wish, you could stop the video after each segment and ask those discussion questions.

### SEGMENT A

1. If this church suddenly faced persecution—if it were suddenly illegal to worship Christ—what percentage of the members would renounce Christianity? (Don't use this question if it will be too divisive, but it could be a helpful way to look at your church's level of commitment. Before you start counting noses, consider this: It is often surprising who stays faithful when the heat is on. Perpetua—you'll meet her in episode 5—had every reason to recant: a new baby, a respectable Roman family, a rather recent conversion. Yet she was one of the church's most inspiring martyrs.)

2. The narrators speak of two factors that sustained the early church: faith and fellowship. How do faith and fellowship sustain this church?

3. The program presents a number of basic facts about Jesus. Do you remember some of these? (See page 2 of script.)

- **Descendant of King David, humble birth, etc.**

Do you think that even your non-Christian friends would accept these facts?

■ **They should. We took care to present these in a way that even a secular viewer could agree to. "His followers claimed that he rose from the dead..." This is not because we have any doubts about the resurrection but because we want to start from square one. We'll let the testimony of the early church's history verify the truth of their claims. This is essentially how it happened in the early church, and it can happen with your students and their neighbors today. They can say, "I believe that Jesus died for me and rose from the dead, and here's the difference it makes in my life."**

4. The program mentions that the church comes from Jewish roots. In what ways is Christianity similar to Judaism?

■ **Both believe in one God, the creator, who has certain standards by which we should live. Both accept the "Old Testament." Both worship with singing and prayers and preaching.**

How does it differ?

■ **Christians believe in Jesus, God in human form, the Jewish Messiah. Jews emphatically reject him as a divine being, though they may acknowledge him as a good teacher. Christians accept the New Testament as God's Word. Christians observe communion and baptism in their worship services.**

5. It is mentioned that the Roman Empire was filled with cities. How would this affect the spread of the gospel?

■ **Cities brought lots of people together in a small space. So, missionaries like Paul could preach to many people in a small amount of time. The generally cramped quarters also allowed people to see Christians "up close and personal." If Jesus changed someone's life, everyone knew it.**

### SEGMENT B

6. The apostles traveled far and wide, spreading the faith. How had they been prepared for this ministry?

■ **We don't know much about their preparation, except that they had been taught by Jesus. The three years or so they spent with him didn't seem to count for much—they still abandoned him at his death. But those forty days after his resurrection must have been full of powerful teaching—and receptive hearts. And then the Spirit came upon each of them. Jesus had promised that the Spirit would pick up where he left off.**

What does this tell us about the requirements for serving God?

■ **If God could use this flawed group of disciples in such powerful ways, he can surely use us. He demands willingness and faithfulness. He supplies the rest.**

7. We have seen the tireless work of Paul in spreading the faith. What motivated him?

■ **A desire to serve God. It seems that Paul was pretty passionate about whatever he did, whether arresting Christians or making new ones. It could be that he was trying to make up for all the damage he had done in his Pharisee days.**

8. What would the church be like if it weren't for Paul?

■ **It might be more Jewish. Paul fought valiantly to open the doors to the Gentiles. It might be less sure of what**

Jesus' death was all about. But the best answer might be this: If it weren't for Paul, God would have raised up some other believer to do what Paul did. God is the prime mover behind all of the church's activity. Even Paul is not indispensable.

### SEGMENT C

9. Why do you think there were no major missionaries of Paul's stature over the next 250 years (and beyond)?

■ In the face of persecution, the public proclamation of the faith was difficult. The church's growth was quiet. Evangelism shifted to the individual believer in his/her day-to-day dealings with neighbors. Another factor is that the church needed to solidify the gains it had made. In the century after Paul, bishops were needed more than apostles. They needed to instruct and disciple those who had come into the church.

10. The program shows a piece of graffiti where Christ is depicted on the cross with a donkey's head. How does this make you feel? (Encourage gut reactions. It may really bother some people, as it would have bothered early believers.)

What forms of ridicule do Christians face today?

11. Why do you think Christianity was ridiculed in those days?

■ Christians worshiped a "criminal;" they met in secret; they withdrew from the pagan rituals of society; they wouldn't go to war; they learned love and meekness from Christ, not selfishness.

Why do some make fun of Christians today?

12. How do you explain the phenomenal growth of Christianity from its humble beginnings?

■ There are numerous reasons that the Roman Empire was "ready" for Christianity, even though it opposed the faith. Yet it all boils down to the power of God. God's Spirit empowered believers and wooed others into the fold.



### Bible Capsule

All that the church is or does flows from Christ. We are witnesses of him; we are built on him and by him; we are appointed and chosen by him.

It is our mission to "declare his praises," to be "witnesses," and to show by our very lives that he has called us.

In this process, we may establish evangelism programs, teaching programs, church buildings, leadership hierarchies, colleges, publishing houses, and so on. Some of this—built on our own greed or pride or divisiveness—will burn in the final analysis. But some—rightly built on Christ's purity—will last as a testimony to him.

The trappings of the faith are not necessarily bad. They can be outgrowths of our faithful witness to Christ. But they can sometimes hide the true essence of who we are. We must never lose sight of our simple biblical calling—to "declare his praises."

### Bible Application

Ask the class the following questions and jot some of the answers on a blackboard (if available).

• In what ways have you been a "witness" for Christ in the last week?

• In what ways have you "declared his praises"?

• Has there been anything you have done in the last week or so that non-Christians may have observed—and for which they may "glorify God" (see 1 Pet. 2:12)? In addition to these things, what else have you done in the name of Christ (or "on the foundation of Christ") in the last week or so?

• What has this church done in the name of Christ (or "on the foundation of Christ") in the last week? [**Note to teacher:** You may wish to avoid the whole church discussion here. You certainly don't want people carping about this program or that. If they can handle it, this could be a healthy discussion about keeping the church well-rooted. But if they can't, it's better to forget it.]

• Of all the things that you have done for Christ in the last week or so, which of these are "silver and gold"—that is, things that will last for his glory? (The point has nothing to do with how "successful" the efforts are but more to do with motives. Remember that Paul talked about this in the context of church divisions. His point was: If Apollos or Peter or any of us is working for his/her own glory, that will burn up ultimately.)

• Of all the things that the church has done for Christ in the last week or so, which of these are "silver and gold"—that is, things that will last for his glory?

• In what ways do we as church members function as a "holy priesthood"?

■ We interact with God on a regular basis. We lead holy lives for God's glory. We bring others into relationship with God.

• Today's program presents a picture of a holy, motivated, empowered church. What can we do to come closer to that ourselves?

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### Wrap-Up (Reviewing the session and nailing it down)

What have you learned today that you can use this week? What can God do through you this week? Be specific. (If others are slow in responding, be ready to say what you yourself will do this week.)

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# Program 1: Optional Bible Study

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**Introductory Activity** (Beginning to pare down to the church's essence)

Prepare any of the following questions that apply to your church on slips of paper. Put the questions in a hat (or offering plate) and invite certain class members to draw a slip of paper and answer the question. Keep answers short.

The questions are:

**What would change if . . .**

- . . . your church had no building in which to meet?
- . . . your church had no hymnals?
- . . . your church had no musical instruments?
- . . . your church had no pastor?
- . . . your church had no communion (Eucharist) furnishings?
- . . . your church had no symbols of the cross?
- . . . your church had no baptistry?
- . . . your church had no ushers?
- . . . your church had no choir?
- . . . your church had no creeds?
- . . . your church had no New Testament?

Some thoughts to help you guide the discussion:

Without a **church building**, you would probably meet in homes, as the early church generally did, or in public buildings, which the church may have done when they could get away with it. Without **hymnals**, you would sing from memory or write new songs, as the early church did. There were some **pastors** in the early church, but the sense we get from the first century is that there were numerous lay leaders. By the second century, churches had more bishops to lead them. Obviously, you would make do with whatever **communion furnishings** you could find. The **symbol of the cross** was not used often in the earliest church, probably because it would feed into the secular charge that Christians worshiped a criminal. It would be like using an electric chair as the symbol of our faith. The fish was an early Christian symbol (its Greek word, *ichthus*, is an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior"). Without a **baptistry**, you would go out to the nearest river or body of water, as the early church did. Special **choirs** were probably not used until late in the fourth century. Without **creeds**, you would probably construct one. That's what the early church did; it was important to state their beliefs clearly. Without the **New Testament**, you would use the Old Testament Scriptures and share stories from memory about what Jesus had done and how the apostles interpreted his actions.

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**Bible Study** (Looking at the Bible's picture of the church)

Hand out copies of Program 1/Class Notes 1—Church Portrait. Divide the class into four groups. Ask group 1 to start with text #1 (Acts 1:8), group 2 to start with text #2 (Eph. 2:19-22), group 3 to start with text #3 (1 Cor. 3:9-16), and group 4 to start with text #4 (1 Pet. 2:4-12).

Ask them to read the text carefully and start filling in the chart on

the Class Notes. Give them five to ten minutes for this. (If they finish their own text, they may start on another.) Then compare notes. What are the key words and sentences they have come up with? People should be filling in their own charts as they hear from other groups. Then ask the following questions for the whole class to consider (although you may direct each group of questions at the group that concentrated on that text).

**Acts 1:8**

- What does a "witness" do?
- Of whom is the church witnessing?
- How was this text fulfilled?
  - **A witness testifies to the truth of something he or she has experienced. The church witnesses about Jesus and what it has experienced through him. The apostles did go to the "utmost part of the earth" bearing witness to Jesus.**

**Eph. 2:19-22**

- In what way are the apostles and prophets our foundation?
- Who is doing the building here?
- Who's the "you too" of verse 22?
  - **Both apostles and prophets have transmitted God's truth to future generations. In a way, the Bible is "the apostles and prophets." God builds up the church—often in Scripture when the passive voice is used, God is the understood subject. While most of the text probably refers to the worldwide church, verse 22—you too—brings it down to the local level. God builds up individual churches too.**

**1 Cor. 3:9-16**

- This follows a discussion about divisions between Paul's followers and those of Apollos. How do these verses address that situation?
- What sort of things do we modern believers build on the foundation of Jesus? Which of these will "burn"?
- What would it have meant to the Corinthians that they were God's "temple"?
  - **Paul and Apollos are both working on the same "building." In a way, modern churches build traditions and cathedrals and TV ministries and books and records—and videotape series—on the foundation of Jesus. But which of these are filled with the essence of Jesus? Our best efforts are ultimately of little value if we do them for our own glory. The pagans in Corinth worshiped at various temples for their gods. Temples were where their gods supposedly lived. Here Paul says that the church—not any building, but the *people*—are God's dwelling place.**

**1 Pet. 2:4-12**

- In what way is Christ our "living Stone"?
- According to verse 9, what is our purpose as the church?
- What sort of life is required of a "chosen people"?(See vs. 11-12.)

■ **Christ is solid, foundational, yet alive. Our purpose is to “declare his praises”—a wonderful combination of worship and evangelism. Many churches divide these, but they belong together. Chosen people are to put aside earthly desires and live the life of God—lives that are noticeably godly.**

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## **Video Connection**

The church grew by God’s power. The apostles were, as we know, common people—not exceptionally gifted. But God sent them to the corners of the world as his witnesses. In the same way, he can use us—not only through the skills we have, but through the power he has—to touch our world with his good news.

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**Creative Activity** (Thinking creatively but simply about who we are as a church and what we do)

Divide into groups of five or six. Ask each group to plan a worship service—with a few restrictions. No pastor (though there may be several lay leaders), no hymnals, no creeds, no copies of the New Testament (though you may consult the Old Testament and any of the New Testament you know by heart).

Give them about ten minutes to compose their “order of service” or liturgy. Then bring the groups together and have each give a report about their service.

Debrief by asking how each one felt about the exercise, how difficult it was, what they learned, etc.

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## **So What?**

You leave this room as Peter or John or Bartholomew left the room they were in at Pentecost. You have met with Christ. You have been empowered by the Spirit. You are part of God’s building, God’s temple, a holy priesthood. You are a witness of his greatness. As the apostles touched their world for Christ, so can you—not through your strength, but through Christ’s. Pray that God will empower each class member to serve him well in the coming week.

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## Program 2: Spread

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### Introduction and Background

“Pssst! Hey, you! You want to join a cult?” Most self-respecting citizens these days would say no. There are plenty of respectable religions from which to choose. Why go after some crazy guru?

And yet some do get involved with cults. Why? Any combination of these reasons: (1) the cult offers some view of life that the person accepts as true; (2) the cult offers some benefit—acceptance, love, a life-change—that the person lacks in his present life; (3) the cult members' lifestyle seems desirable to the person; (4) the cult leader attracts by the power of his personality.

Why are we talking about cults? Because that's what Christianity seemed to be in the eyes of the Roman Empire—a strange, new faith that was leading people away from respectable religion. The rapid spread of Christianity becomes even more amazing when Roman attitudes toward religion are understood.

We sometimes have the idea that the Romans weren't really serious about what they believed—that the old Roman gods were window-dressing, that no one really believed in them. But that's not necessarily true. Some of the philosophers may have been rethinking the traditional gods, but those deities were very much a part of everyday life for the common people. At least 50 holidays a year honored the Roman gods, and people observed “daily devotions” for various gods. The gods had their devotees—Vesta of the hearth, Asklepius the healer, or Lady Fortuna. In addition, some eastern cults had become fashionable among high society—the worship of Isis (especially popular among noblewomen), Dionysus (the wine-god), Cybele (the Phrygian Mother-goddess), and Mithras (the bull-slaying god, popular in the army).

Into this world came Christianity. It was considered another “eastern cult” in a way, but it was associated with Jews. Because the Jews were an ancient people with a traditional religion, the Romans allowed them special privileges, protecting their Sabbath and allowing Jews throughout the empire to pay the temple tax to Jerusalem. The Jewish Revolt of 66-70 A.D. caused some to be dissatisfied with the special protection given the Jews, but their political privileges remained. Christianity, for a time, shared the privileges of the Jews under the empire, but it also shared the disdain Romans would have for this foreign people. What's more, Christianity refused to be a chic, upper-class religion. It welcomed slaves as well as their masters. In class-conscious Roman society, this simply would not do.

So it was a time of religious awareness in the Roman Empire. People were very superstitious and generally open to new religions. But, to speak in modern marketing terms, Christianity was not packaging itself very well. Its egalitarianism was an affront to the upper-class, and the lower-class was generally steeped in the traditional religions of Rome.

We sometimes speak of how the “way was paved” for the spread of Christianity. This is true in a literal sense and in a number of

figurative ways. Roman soldiers had built roads throughout the empire. This, along with the navy's control of the seas, made travel rather easy. The Pax Romana (Roman Peace) meant that travelers didn't need to worry about wars breaking out on their journeys. The Greek language was spoken throughout the empire, and the Hebrew Scriptures (with their Messianic prophecies) had recently been translated into Greek. Cities were booming, offering trade opportunities for transient artisans. Most likely, it was among these artisans that Christianity got its start in most cities. Think about it: Paul made tents. Who uses tents? Travelers. Paul's day-to-day interactions would have been with transients who would carry the gospel to other cities. If you recall, those other biblical tentmakers, Priscilla and Aquila, showed up in Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. Christianity was on the move.

But mobility itself does not make converts. Once you reach people, you still have to convince them to give up their respectable, patriotic, family-based, traditional religion and follow Christ instead, risking expulsion from family and persecution by the state. How did this happen?

(1) Already some Romans were pushing the idea of a single God who ruled over other gods. Christian monotheism fit right into this view. The Christian view of death (graphically demonstrated in their willing acceptance of martyrdom) also struck a chord with many Romans. As in many cultures, the Romans' view of death was dismal. They would be moved by the Christian sense of hope.

Another element the church had was power. Remember, this was a very superstitious society. God proved himself again and again through miracles. People began to accept that the Christians' God had more power than their gods. Therefore he had to be the true God.

(2) Despite the persecution, Christianity offered some benefits that people lacked in their own worship. We have mentioned hope in the face of death. Christians also became known by the compassion and care they gave to others. This demonstration of Christ's love undoubtedly did much to woo converts into the church.

(3) Christians exhibited a lifestyle that others found desirable. Despite scurrilous rumors about them, as people got to know Christians, they found morality, love, and loyalty. These were the qualities that Roman citizens were *supposed* to have but often just paid lip-service to. Several Christian writers claimed that Christians were actually model citizens. Instead of persecuting them, the Roman authorities should have rejoiced that the Christians were there.

Someone has remarked that the Roman Empire fought a protracted civil war, over two-and-a-half centuries, against the Christians. Only one side was armed. But the other side won. And what were its weapons? A sure faith, hope in the face of death, love for others, and moral lives. It is much more dramatic to imagine scenes of Paul debating with the philosophers or a martyr

proclaiming his faith before being sent to the lions, but these were not the major ways the gospel spread. It was ordinary, everyday Christian living that won people to Christ back then—and it still does today.

## To the Teacher:

We tend to think missions and evangelism belong to professionals. We are quick to attribute special powers to the pastor (which explains why we're so upset when the pastor does not perform in a superhuman way). And missionaries hold a special place for us.

The Bible does not confirm this view. It speaks of all of us as members of the body of Christ—all necessary, complementing each other. But the Bible also gives us the example of Paul—a SuperMissionary if ever there was one. Obviously, God used this special man at a special time to do some special things. But, amazingly, we find few "Pauls" in early church history. There are pastors and theologians but no SuperMissionaries. (Except maybe Gregory the WonderWorker, who converted entire towns with his miracles, but the evidence may be embellished by tradition.) Apparently, God used a lot of ordinary folks to carry his message.

When the Bible talks about evangelism, it doesn't talk much about methods. It talks about people living the life of Christ in a watching, fallen world. The testimony of the early church also suggests that it is not only the quality of argumentation that wins people to Christ but also the testimony of one's life.

The point of this lesson is not to make your students feel guilty again about not "witnessing" enough. It is to inspire them to live as ambassadors of Christ—and to *live outwardly* so that people pay attention to what Christ is doing inside of them.

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Philippians 1:27-30; 2:14-16; Matthew 5:14-16.

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**Objective:** *To investigate the phenomenal spread of the church in the first three centuries and to recognize how God works through the everyday witness of ordinary Christians.*

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## Introductory Questions

How does Christianity spread? What methods does God usually use to get his message across? How can he use us to present his gospel?

## ●●●●●●●●●● SHOW VIDEO ●●●●●●●●●●

## Video Discussion Guide

The video can be divided into two parts. The first part ends as the map showing the church's spread as of 200 A.D. is seen. If you

wish, stop the program there and ask questions on the first section. Then resume the tape and ask the other questions at the end.

1. Why is the resurrection so important to the Christian gospel?

■ **Paul says it well in 1 Corinthians 15. If Christ was not raised, then we have no hope. Christianity makes no sense without a risen Savior. The resurrection is an indication of God's supreme power, a confirmation of Christ's divine nature, and a promise of our own resurrection to come.**

2. What limitations did the church face as it tried to spread the faith?

■ **Persecution meant they could not evangelize in the open—at least during many periods of history. In addition, numerous rumors were spreading about the supposed scandalous behavior of the Christians. Most of the people of the empire had their own religions. They might accept Christ as one god among many, but they were put off by the Christian claim to unique truth.**

3. What advantages were available for the church in the Roman Empire?

■ **Roman roads, control of the sea, and the Roman peace meant missionaries could travel rather unmolested. Virtually everyone spoke Greek, so there were no language barriers, and the Old Testament had recently been put into Greek. There was a religious hunger in the empire at the time. People were ready for new religions. Also, Judaism had won a place as an officially recognized religion and, at first, Christianity was seen as a sect within Judaism.**

4. The Epistle to Diognetus says Christians are "in the flesh, but not of the flesh." What does this mean? How well does this describe Christians today?

■ **Similar to the biblical comment that we are "in the world, but not of the world." We have bodies, and we use them for God's glory and God's service, but we do not allow our physical desires to govern our lives. The Spirit controls us. Some Christians today fall off both sides of the statement. Some are "of the flesh," indulging their physical desires, while others refuse to admit that they are "in the flesh," and instead have an other-worldly mentality that denies their physical lives.**

5. Why do you think the bread and the cup were such a universal observance so early in church history?

■ **Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper before his death with a command that the disciples continue to observe it in his honor. The entire Christian worship service grew up around this observance. The Lord's Supper was a dramatic testimony to what Jesus had done and what it meant. Wherever the church went, the Lord's Supper went.**

6. We heard one ancient writer saying, "We [Christians] used to . . . , but now we . . . ." He mentioned many life changes. What changes could you honestly say about yourself? "I used to . . . , but now I . . . ." (Get honest responses from class members.)

7. Would your neighbors get a different view of your faith if they lived in your house with you? (Remind the students that the urban nature of the ancient world meant that Christians and non-Christians lived very close together. Would that be an advantage

or disadvantage today?)

8. The drama in which the non-Christian asked the Christian to pray for his wife’s healing—how did that make you feel? (Dig for honest, gut-level responses.)

9. Were you surprised by the importance of miracles in the early church? Why don’t we see them often today? (This could open up a can of worms—or it could be a very enlightening discussion. Skip the question if you think it will sidetrack you. Different churches have different views about miracles and the modern world. Some say they were limited to those early centuries—that was a time when God was doing special things to introduce Christianity. Others say that we should seek to release that divine power within the church today. What do your people think?)

10. What qualities of the Christian life would make an impact on other people—then or now?

■ **Love touches other people as does a joyous attitude. Christians have hope in dismal situations. God teaches us patience and grants wisdom. All of these can be noticed by others. There is also a certain purity of life, a self-control, that characterizes Christians. This can also be appealing to outsiders.**

11. According to Tertullian, if all the Christians would have moved to another part of the world, what would happen to Rome?

■ **It would be shameful for Rome. They would have few people left. Their enemies would outnumber them.**

If all the Christians in America, Britain, or Europe suddenly moved to Antarctica—what would happen in those places? (Don’t just focus on the numerical changes—what kind of influence do Christians have in society? Without Christians there, preserving society, would these nations decay?)

12. How important is the concept of God as Father? What does that mean to you? (Again, ask for personal responses from the heart.)



### **Bible Capsule**

The Bible presents images of Christians as shining lights. Christ is the light, who shines in our hearts, but the light needs to shine out through us to others. We are also citizens of heaven even though we live on earth. We should live in a way that glorifies God. That in itself will make an impact on those around us. But we should take it a step farther. We should be “ambassadors” of Christ, helping the citizens of this world enter into good relationships with our Lord.

**Bible Application** (Planning ways in which we can shine to others with the light of Christ)

Present a series of statements to the class, asking whether they agree or disagree and why. (You may want to say that you do not necessarily agree with them all.)

1. The church today is too ingrown. We let our light shine among

ourselves, but it never shines out to others.

2. We Christians work too hard at evangelism. We try to make it a science and a major effort when it should be as natural as breathing.

3. The problem with most of our evangelistic efforts is that we don’t realize that our true citizenship is in heaven. As long as our first devotion is to this world, we can’t possibly speak well on behalf of God’s kingdom.

4. We are too paranoid about what non-Christians think of us. We should be more honest with them about our worries and doubts as well as our faith. If non-Christians saw us dealing honestly with our problems, they would see the power of Christ at work inside us.

5. We are just plain lazy. If we were truly obedient, we would be sharing the gospel with everyone we meet, from the clerk at the corner store to our next-door neighbors.

6. God has gifted some people with the gift of evangelism. The rest of us really don’t need to worry about it.

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**Wrap-Up** (Reviewing the lesson and nailing down some specific responses)

Ask, “How will you shine for Christ this week?” Make sure each person has some specific plan in mind. If you have time, invite some to talk about their intentions.

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## Program 2: Optional Bible Study

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**Introductory Activity** (Beginning to think about the essence of evangelism)

Announce that you are going to ask people to stand and give a testimony of what Christ has done for them and what Christ means to them. People should speak as if they are talking to a non-Christian friend. Try to get four or five people to agree to do this. (If you think you might have trouble getting volunteers, you might want to call some people in advance.)

Give the first person about a minute or two to present his/her “testimony.”

Then announce that you will be imposing time limits on the others.

Give the second person only forty-five seconds.

Give the third person thirty seconds. Take care that the mood doesn’t get silly, now. These are still honest testimonies about what Christ has done for these people. We’re just trying to pare down to their essence.

Give the fourth person twenty seconds. And if you have a fifth person, see what he or she can say in ten seconds. Then talk about the whole exercise. What happened as the time was lessened? What parts of people’s testimonies became more important?

Then ask, “Based on this exercise, can you give me a simple definition of what evangelism is?”

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**Bible Study** (Seeing what the Bible says about sharing our faith)

Hand out Program 2/Class Notes 1 and 2—Shining Citizens. (There are separate sheets in the handout, one for verbal types and one for artistic types.) Without changing seating, announce that each student may choose to be in Group A or Group B. Group A is for people who consider themselves more “artistic” than “verbal.” Group B is for those who are more verbal. Hand out a pen or pencil to anyone who needs one. Give the class about ten minutes to complete the sheet.

When all have finished, go over the sheet with them. Ask how they answered the questions—and especially ask them to share their creative endeavors from the back of the page.

As you go over the Scripture questions, here are some notes you may use.

**Matthew 5:14-16** Christ describes his followers as the light of the world. Apparently a Christian’s light can be hidden, as a lamp’s light, so that it has little effect. This “light” consists of good works done for God’s glory, but those good works are probably just the outward manifestations of an entire life of devotion. We hide our

light by getting out of touch with Christ (dimming our light) or by being ashamed of Christ and refusing to let others know of our faith.

**Philippians 2:14-16** Grumbling and complaining within the church goes against the humble spirit that Christ has exemplified (see 2:5-11). When we adopt his spirit, we stand out as different from the crowd, described here as a “crooked and perverse generation.” Against this dark background, we are “lights.” Not only do we contain the light of Christ within ourselves, we present it to others. We “hold forth” the word of life by telling others what makes us shine.

**Philippians 1:27-30** Love, humility, loyalty, and morality are all behaviors that Christ inspires and that the world (sometimes) prizes. These are “worthy” of Christ. Paul wants to hear that the Philippians are united in spirit, working together. (Apparently, there was some major bickering going on there—see 2:14 and 4:2—and Paul was afraid this infighting would hide the light of Christ.) The “sign of destruction” is probably that, as the Christians act in love toward each other, it reveals that God’s power is with them—and thus their opponents are on the wrong side. Our heavenly citizenship means that we don’t get wrapped up in the quest for money or earthly success or pleasure—we have a higher, eternal calling.

**2 Corinthians 5:17-20** Our entire way of thinking and living changes when we are remade in Christ. We are no longer just out for ourselves; we serve God. “Reconciliation” is, of course, peace-making. God has made peace with us and wants us to bring others into peace with him. (Some might say that when Paul says, “God has given *us* this ministry,” he is speaking of himself and Timothy. But the rest of Scripture makes clear that all Christians minister for Christ.) An ambassador represents a nation or a leader in another country. He speaks and acts on behalf of that nation or leader. So we are to represent Christ’s interests on earth. An ambassador also presents messages and promotes good relations. In this way, it is a step beyond citizenship. There are many British citizens in the U.S., and their behavior does represent Great Britain in some way. But there is one Ambassador that officially represents Great Britain in the U.S., delivering messages from the British leaders and promoting good relations with Americans. That is our job as God’s ambassadors.

After all the discussion, you may want to zero in on one point. Evangelism seems to have two parts as we see it in both the light image and the citizen-ambassador image. (1) Be who you are as a Christian. Shine with the light of Christ. This isn’t anything we need to manufacture on our own. He has made us new creatures. (2) Extend that to others. Make sure the light is shining outward (which light does pretty naturally). Be more than a citizen; be an ambassador.



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## Video Connection

The early church saw amazing growth. The growth came not from massive evangelistic campaigns but through the individual testimony of Christians. Despite persecution and numerous misunderstandings, the Christians proved themselves as people who loved and cared for others, who lived pure and humble lives, who trusted in the power of one supreme God, and who did not fear death. This simple testimony brought many new ones into the church.

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**Creative Activity** (Finding out just how amazing the early church's growth was)

Divide into groups of five or six. Ask each group to plan an evangelistic strategy for your community, metropolitan area, or state. (You may choose one of these or assign different target areas to different groups.) Using the resources of the churches in this area, how will you reach these target populations?

Of course, to get the feel of the early church, we'll observe certain restrictions: no public gatherings (except martyrdoms); no widespread publicity (due to persecution); your best evangelists keep getting killed; there's little money for books or writings; and no mass media.

Get back together and share your plans. How realistic are they—even with those restrictions? Is it possible that some of the things we did without (mass media, money, etc.) really aren't that necessary?

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## So What?

It's up to you. God has entrusted his ministry of reconciliation to you, just as he did to thousands of believers in the early church. And *they made a difference. They changed the world!* How? Not because of exceptional speaking skills or even exceptional boldness. They just let Christ shine through them. You can change your world in the same way. Just (1) be the Christian you are, and (2) show that to others. The Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.

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## Program 3: Accusation

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### Introduction and Background

The church can become very ingrown. We have our own culture, our own ways of speaking and thinking. It's hard for us to imagine what others think of us. We might say, "Brother, I was so blessed by your sharing. The way you witnessed about the kingdom, well, it just made me rejoice in my justification." That sounds very clear to those of us within the circle of believers. But on the outside, people are saying, "Huh? What? Does that mean anything?"

It was the same story in the early church. Christians talked about "brothers and sisters" sharing "love" with a "holy kiss"—no telling what dirty Roman minds would think. They spoke of "eating the body and blood of the Son"—and gross pictures of cannibalism were conjured.

We will never make an impact on our world until we communicate with people in their language. The early church, too, had to learn to communicate with the pagan world in which it lived.

As the Roman Empire began to understand more clearly what the church really was, two changes occurred. (1) More people were drawn to it. (2) Persecution was stepped up as authorities began to realize what a serious threat it was.

Let's backtrack. At first, Christianity was seen as a part of Judaism. As such, the authorities didn't have to pay much attention to it. And, in fact, much of the church's original growth occurred among "God fearers": Gentiles who were already drawn to the Jewish faith.

In 64 A.D., Nero (along with the rest of the empire) was beginning to see that Christianity was different from Judaism, that it was stepping out into the Gentile world. This made Christians a convenient scapegoat. For the next hundred years or so, it appears that the Romans saw Christianity as a primitive religion with strange, secret rites. Roman historians of this period, such as Tacitus and Suetonius, as well as Governor Pliny, called it a "superstition." This carries the sense of it being a bit gauche and lower-class. Pliny and others also called Christianity a "club." There were other guilds, "burial societies," and social clubs in Roman society, most of these harmless and quite patriotic, but Christians were pointedly anti-social, not participating in the public worship of Roman gods. Thus, this "club" was potentially dangerous and subversive. But, in general, Roman authorities didn't get too excited about persecuting the church. Christians were ornery children who needed a spanking. It was expected that sharp discipline would bring them into line.

Christianity may have gained some legitimacy in Roman eyes as a "burial society." The Romans themselves were very superstitious about death. (It was extremely important that everyone have a proper burial.) Thus, especially among the lower classes, people would band together, pooling their funds to pay for funerals when one of them died (something like group health insurance). The Christian view of death, as a birth into immortality, was appealing to some; therefore, their funeral services were distinctive. This no

doubt gained them adherents among the lower classes and probably gained credibility with the upper classes.

Beginning with Justin Martyr about 150 A.D. and continuing through Tertullian, Origen, and Irenaeus, the church had some dynamic spokesmen. We don't know how many in Roman society read their works, probably very few, but suddenly we have a sense that people within the church were caring about how they looked to those outside the church. They were trying to correct false assumptions the Roman world had made about the Christians.

So, toward the end of the second century, we find the Roman physician Galen speaking respectfully of Christianity as a philosophical school. In the 200's we find Origen debating in print the earlier work of the Roman philosopher Celsus. We don't have the original writing of Celsus, but some think that he was responding to arguments set forth by Justin. The point is that Christians had entered the larger arena of public debate.

Around the year 200, Emperor Septimius Severus made it illegal to convert to Christianity. This indicates that people were converting: probably the upper class, since the emperor probably wouldn't have cared that much about the lower class. Indeed, the most famous convert killed for her faith in North Africa at that time was Perpetua from an upper-class family. Twenty and thirty years later, we find members of the imperial household converting to Christianity. The mother of Emperor Alexander Severus even invited Origen to tutor her in the faith.

Now Christianity was a major force with which to be reckoned. Emperors launched two more major waves of persecution, around 250 and 300, but they weren't spanking children anymore. They were wrestling a bear.

The Romans feared the growing numbers of Christians and considered them a threat to their society, religion, and empire. The Christians rejected the pantheon of Roman gods, thus threatening the fabric of society. (Nearly every week, the Romans had a festival honoring some god.) The Christian pacifism threatened the Roman military and defense of the empire. It is possible that the Christian egalitarianism even threatened the class-consciousness of Roman society. For all of these reasons, emperors like Decius and Diocletian made well-thought decisions to eradicate Christianity—or at least to try. They recognized that Christianity could change what Rome was, if it wasn't checked. They were right. (Of course, Rome also changed what Christianity was, but that's another story. See episode #6.)

### To the Teacher:

Many Christians today feel persecuted. They sense that society has slipped away from Christian principles. Thirty years ago, they say, this country was Christian. There was respect for Christian beliefs. Now, they feel, the media laugh at the church. Politicians mouth Christian piety but do not live it. Society knows little about

Christ and doesn't want to. And courts regularly curtail the expression of Christianity in public life.

We are concerned about what happens in people's hearts and minds when they feel this way. And when Christians feel embattled and misunderstood, how do they act toward others?

There may be fear in the hearts of some of your students. There may be anger and frustration. And these negative attitudes may be spilling out to those around them—instead of the love of Christ. It is easy to stir up fear and anger. But your job as a teacher is to help people see Christ's way of dealing with these events. He speaks peace even in troubled situations.

Are Christians being persecuted in this country today? Maybe, to some extent (though nothing close to what the early church faced). Should Christians rise up and change things? Maybe. But certainly the first step is to follow biblical teaching and to develop Christ-like attitudes about oppression.

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 3:13-18

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**Objective:** *To understand how the early church was falsely accused and to learn how to deal with similar misunderstandings today.*

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## Introductory Questions

What do people accuse Christianity of today? To what extent are these accusations true?

# ●●●●●●●●●●SHOW VIDEO●●●●●●●●●●

## Video Discussion Guide

Although with other episodes the discussion may work best when the tape is stopped partway through, that is not the case here. The video flows easily through the various accusations. So show the entire tape; then ask the discussion questions.

1. What were some of the accusations against Christianity mentioned in the tape?

If you have a blackboard at hand, you could jot these down as a review.

■ **The tape mentions cannibalism, disruption of business, gross immorality, anti-family sentiment, poverty, atheism, novelty, lack of patriotism, anti-social behavior, cause of disasters.**

2. What was the basis of these accusations? Were any of them true? (You may want to ask this as a follow-up question as people originally come up with each point.)

The reasons may go something like this:

■ **Cannibalism:** A misunderstanding about "eating the body and blood of Christ." Since Christ was spoken of as the Son, some thought there was child sacrifice going on.

■ **Disruption of business:** Businesses that were based on the worship of Rome's gods, sale of sacrificial animals, for instance, would be hurt by the growth of Christianity. See also Acts 18 for the silversmiths' complaint.

■ **Gross immorality:** A misunderstanding of Christian "love." Some thought that orgies were going on.

Another popular cult at the time was the worship of Dionysus, which did involve drunkenness and immorality. Some may have assumed that Christianity was just like that other religion from the East.

■ **Anti-family sentiment:** Some Christians promoted a new family, the church. While they sought to honor family relationships, they recognized that their first loyalty was to Christ. As people converted to Christianity, they were often kicked out of their homes so, in a way, Christianity did cause family breakup.

■ **Poverty:** It is also true that Christians did not worship money, and they did welcome people of all economic classes. Some wealthy snobs thus ridiculed the church as a haven for poor people, women, and children.

■ **Atheism:** Christians did not believe in the Roman gods. Thus, they were atheists. The Romans revered tradition. They felt that Christianity was a new invention not to be trusted. There was some hypocrisy here, too, since Romans did tend to run after new cults as long as they could maintain the traditional worship as well.

■ **Lack of patriotism:** The gods of Rome had established the Roman Empire, so said the Romans. To deny their power was to betray the empire. The Christians' refusal to join the army laid them open to charges of being unpatriotic.

■ **Anti-social behavior:** The Christians generally refused to participate in the regular festivals that honored the Roman gods. These were the major social events of the time. Thus, Christians were left out.

■ **Cause of disasters:** When any disaster—plague, hurricane, fire, a military defeat—came about, it was easy to say that the gods had sent it because they were mad at the Christians.

3. As we look back over these accusations, about what percentage would you say are valid, what percentage are misunderstandings based on truth but distorting it, and what percentage are just plain wrong?

■ **It's a mix. Probably most would go into the misunderstanding category.**

4. Throughout this program, how would you describe the attitude of Caecilius, the pagan?

5. How would you describe the attitude of Octavius, the Christian?

■ **Note that he became rather forceful at times. He seemed to care deeply about presenting a true image of the church.**

6. Caecilius accused the church of meeting in secret early in the morning—therefore they had to be doing something wrong. How did Octavius answer this charge? Might there be other reasons?

■ **He said they were working people and had to meet early so they could go to their jobs. Certainly it would also be prudent to meet secretly during times of persecution.**

7. What do you think was Caecilius's real problem—spoken or

unspoken—with the church?

■ **Students may have different answers. He may have felt proud and unwilling to accept a "lower-class" faith. Or he felt threatened by the holiness of the Christians, pointing out his own unholiness. Or he was afraid of what would happen if the Roman system came tumbling down. Or something else. . . .**

8. How did Octavius respond to the charge that Christianity was a “novel” religion?

■ **He said that it was actually an ancient religion, based on Judaism. Besides, they worshiped the God who created the world to begin with.**

9. The program mentioned breaking down walls. What kind of “walls” did Christianity break down back then? What kind of walls does it confront today?

■ **Back then, Christianity broke down walls between social classes, walls between ethnic groups, and the wall between Jew and Gentile. Most importantly, it broke down the wall of separation between God and humanity. Does it do the same sort of wall-breaking today?**

10. Why would some people, then and now, find Christ offensive?

■ **There may be many answers here. Christ is not the kind of Savior some people want. Some Romans would have been put off by the fact that he was poor, Jewish, and died a criminal’s death.**



### Bible Capsule

False accusations are part of being a Christian. Even Jesus faced them. What should we do in these situations? Remember Christ’s love; consider ourselves “blessed;” be prepared to explain ourselves; give a gentle, respectful response; make sure it is righteousness for which we’re being persecuted; trust Christ to deliver us.

### Bible Application (Trying to understand the accusations we face)

This will be a discussion time, arising from people’s own experiences and thoughts. Your students may not have much to say. If so, don’t force the issue. But present the questions to get them thinking.

- What do you think people think of your Christianity? Do they see your faith as positive or negative? If we went to your closest non-Christian friend and asked, “Would So-and-so be a better or worse person if s/he were not a Christian,” how would your friend answer?
- What aspects of your faith do you think other people find appealing? What aspects do they find offensive?
- What do you think is keeping your non-Christian friends from becoming Christians? Do you think they have a fair picture of what Christianity is? Or is their image based on half-truths?

• Have you ever been “persecuted” in some way for your faith in Christ? How did you respond?

• Have you ever been asked to “give the reason for the hope that is in you”? How did you respond?

• If you could change one thing about how others see you and your Christianity, what would it be?

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### Wrap-Up (Moving into the coming week with specific goals)

First, review last week’s “Wrap-Up” activity. The class was challenged to “shine for Christ” in some specific way during the week. Ask them how they did.

Then issue a new challenge. What one way can you help someone else get a clearer picture of what Christianity really is? Plan to do something specific this week.

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## Program 3: Optional Bible Study

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### Introductory Activity (Understanding misunderstandings)

Welcome the class and announce that you're going to start with an exercise in truth-twisting. Everyone has seen the *National Enquirer* or other papers like it. (You might even want to use a copy of one of these papers as an example.) The editors of these papers insist that everything in them is true, but as you look closely, you find that most of the stories are half-true. So-and-so claims that he saw Elvis in a flying sleigh. That may be true, but the headline, Man Sees Elvis Dressed as Santa, is twisting things.

Ask the class to pair up (or triple up) and "interview" each other, asking about their lives, families, jobs, etc. They're looking for something they can twist into a *National Enquirer* scandal. For example, if someone says he's a stockbroker, the report might say, "He takes money from wealthy people and gambles with it." Give them about three minutes.

Then ask what people have come up with. This can be a fun time. Don't embarrass people, but ask some of the "victims" how they feel about these misunderstandings.

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### Bible Study (Seeing what Scripture says about facing up to accusations from the world)

Hand out Program 3/Class Notes 1—Dealing with Accusation. Then divide into three or four groups. Each group should discuss the questions on the handout sheet. After 10-15 minutes, bring all together and go over the questions as a class.

**TEXT:** 1 Peter 3:13-18

1. How would you answer the question in verse 13?

■ **The text seems to call for the answer "Nobody." But the fact is that the authorities did harm many who were "eager to do good." Move on to the follow-up.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** Consider those early Christians, facing arrest and torture for their faith. How would they answer the question?

■ **They would have to acknowledge that many had been physically harmed for their faith, but most would say it was worth it. Spiritual harm did not occur, and that's most important.**

**CROSS-REFERENCE:** Read Romans 8:38-39. Does this give a different perspective on the question here in verse 13?

■ **This seconds the motion we have just come up with. There may be painful circumstances, but nothing can separate us from Christ's love, which is all-important.**

2. How can we be "blessed" (v. 14) if we're suffering?

■ **We are blessed with the presence of Christ and a greater awareness of the sufferings he endured for us.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** Do you think the early Christians felt "blessed" as they were persecuted for their faith?

■ **They certainly did. As we read of the many martyrs of**

**the early church, we find that they went willingly to their deaths, feeling "blessed" to suffer for Christ's sake.**

**CROSS-REFERENCE:** Read Matthew 5:10-12. What did Jesus say about those who were being persecuted for the sake of righteousness?

■ **They would be "blessed," he said, because they would join a special company. Those who have stood courageously for God have always been persecuted. They will receive a great heavenly reward.**

3. According to verses 14 and 15, what should we do instead of being afraid?

■ **"Set apart" or "sanctify" Christ as Lord, and be prepared to explain our faith.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** What does this mean?

■ **If we reserve a special place in our lives for Christ as our Master, then he is the one we must please. We trust him to deal with all threats that come our way. He will then strengthen us to explain to others what's going on in our hearts.**

**CROSS-REFERENCE:** Peter is quoting from Isaiah 8:12. In that passage, Isaiah was warning King Ahaz not to cower before the threats of his neighboring nations. According to Isaiah 8:13 and 8:17, what was Ahaz supposed to do instead?

■ **Fear God and trust him. God was not very real to Ahaz; the neighboring nations were. Isaiah says that Ahaz ought to be more afraid of what God could do to him than what the nations could. For the Christian, fear of God turns to a desire to please him, which then develops into a trust. God is stronger than our foes.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** How can persecuted Christians take that advice?

■ **Polycarp said it well to his Roman accuser: "The fire you threaten me with will burn for a few hours, but the eternal fire of God's judgment burns forever." On a more positive note, Polycarp also said, "Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" The point is that God was more important, more faithful, and more powerful than the Romans. Christians can trust him on earth and in the life to come.**

4. Why does Peter use the word "hope" for the thing inside of us that gets people's attention?

■ **We have a hope of something beyond this life. In the case of martyred Christians, that's what stood out. They were not afraid of death but had hope in eternal life. Our hope can still set us apart in a hopeless world.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** Describe a modern situation when you might be asked to explain your "hope."

■ **You lose your job, and a co-worker asks how you can be so calm about it. Or, a Christian family member dies, and there is a touch of joy at the funeral, which a non-Christian finds unusual.... There may be many other examples.**

5. Why is it important to explain our hope with “gentleness and respect” and with a “clear conscience” (vs. 15-16)?

■ **Christians could seem very arrogant—in the early church and still today. We sound like we have all the answers—because we do have the most important answer: Christ. But it is possible for us to come on too strongly. We must explain our hope with Christian love, caring about how the other person is reacting. Our method must be compatible with our message.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** Describe a case where a modern Christian does not speak with gentleness and respect.

■ **There could be many instances: a tract hurriedly stuffed in someone’s hand; the classic “You’re all going to hell!” tirade. One favorite is the story of the zealous young believer witnessing to sunbathers on the beach. His opening line: “You think it’s hot here?”**

6. Can you think of something “evil” for which you might be persecuted (v. 17)?

■ **Any of the above methods of “witnessing” might qualify. Coercing or bribing someone into God’s kingdom in order to get another notch on your belt—that hardly reflects a God-pleasing attitude. We might rightly get criticized for that. In society, some churches have mis-handled funds or fought with other churches. Then they cry “persecution” when the town turns against them.**

**FOLLOW-UP:** Are there Christians today who think they’re being persecuted for righteousness when they’re really just obnoxious?

■ **Yes. In fact, it may be that some people who complain the most about persecution are the ones who deserve it most. The most faithful believers seem to bear opposition quietly, reflecting the sweet-spirited patience of Jesus.**

7. What does Christ’s example mean in a situation of persecution?

■ **It can give us strength, since his Spirit is within us. Christ’s suffering, the righteous for the unrighteous, proves that we can expect to suffer for goodness’ sake. Christ also gives us an example of the quiet, humble attitude of trusting God’s plan that should be ours when suffering unjustly.**

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## Video Connection

The Roman Empire misunderstood Christians for many reasons. They accused Christians of many false things and a number of half-true things. In general, Christians followed the advice of Peter (1 Peter 3:13-18) and responded with “gentleness and respect.” We can learn from their example.

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**Creative Activity** (Considering how those around us view our faith)

You are going to stage a debate. You will need four “volunteers.” Two of these will present the case against Christianity in modern times. The other two will respond, defending the faith. (You may wish to contact these four during the previous week, so they can prepare.) Of course, these debaters are welcome to draw ideas from the rest of the class.

Emphasize that this is an exercise. Those arguing against Christianity are just playing a role. But it helps us all to know what are the arguments against us.

Let the debate go for five or ten minutes, depending on how well it is going. If you need to help out, here are some possible attacks on Christianity.

1. Christianity is only interested in money. Turn on the TV on Sunday morning and all you see are preachers asking people to send in their gifts. It makes me sick to see a rich preacher milking the poor people like that.

■ **POSSIBLE RESPONSE:** It makes me sick, too, when that is what’s going on. But you’re missing the point. Christianity, in its purest form, doesn’t care about money. The Bible says it is more blessed to give than to receive, so we are happy to give to support a ministry we believe in. I can’t deny that there are some preachers who are greedy, but there are many, many who struggle on low pay, just because they want to serve the Lord.

2. Christians don’t want anyone to have fun. You are always trying to limit our freedom.

■ **POSSIBLE RESPONSE:** We believe in freedom. But we also recognize that people who think they’re free can easily become enslaved to sin. We’re not against fun, but we’re not sure about what passes for “fun” these days. It may be “fun” to get drunk tonight, but the car accident you may have on the way home is definitely not fun. We want people to be whole. We want them to have the joy that comes from true freedom.

3. Christians are all hypocrites. You talk about holiness, but your lives are just as corrupt as anyone else’s.

■ **POSSIBLE RESPONSE:** You’re right—to a point. We are sinners. Our lives don’t always match our words. But that’s why we need Christ. He forgives us. And if you knew us better, you’d realize that Christ is changing us. We still aren’t perfect, but we’re better than we were. He can change you, too.

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## So What?

The key to withstanding false accusations is the fact that you are a citizen of God’s kingdom. That provides a grounding for you. Even if the world hates you, your primary concern is what God thinks of you.

From that grounding, you can have the courage to present Christ to others in all honesty, giving them a clear picture of the hope you have.

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## Program 4: Persecution

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In lieu of an “Introduction and Background” section for this program, we refer you to the issue of *Christian History* magazine enclosed with this kit. This entire issue is devoted to “Persecution in the Early Church.” You will find it a valuable background source.

Take time to read the magazine before class time. It will give you a great deal of background on the subject. Feel free to quote from it in class when appropriate.

### To the Teacher:

Living in the modern Western world, Christians find freedom and even some support for our faith. Few of us face physical persecution for our beliefs (though new subtle forms of social disapproval, educational scorn, or business limitations may be encountered). We read many Scripture passages about the inevitability of persecution, and we might wonder if we’re doing something wrong when we’re not persecuted.

We could be, but not necessarily. That is, we have been blessed with a civilization that allows relative freedom of religion. We should rejoice in that blessing.

But we can get spoiled. Living in freedom, we can develop a “don’t rock the boat” attitude. We can easily let our Christianity degenerate into a bland, gutless piety. The fact is that Christianity, properly lived out, does rock the boat. It challenges individuals and society. If we lived more faithfully, more courageously, we might bear the brunt of more “persecution” (even though in our society this will not come close to the intensity of the early church’s persecution).

Your aim is not to make your students feel guilty for not being persecuted but to challenge them to live faithful lives—even if that does lead to problems. They may want you to iron out the wrinkles of Christian commitment. Don’t do it.

**Scripture:** Matthew 10:16-39; Luke 21:12-19; John 15:18—16:3.

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**Objective:** *To learn how the early church was persecuted and to see what Jesus said about the troubles his people would face.*

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### Introductory Question

What would you do if it were suddenly illegal to be a Christian?

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### Video Discussion Guide

It might be helpful to stop halfway through the program and discuss some of these questions (1 - 6) at that point; then resume the showing. If so, the best stopping point is right after the drama with Emperor Trajan getting a backrub (and after Carsten Thiede’s comment) and before Emperor Hadrian is presented.

1. Did it surprise you that Christians were not constantly persecuted in those first three centuries but only sporadically?
2. Why would some Christians seek out the “privilege of martyrdom”?  
■ **It was a chance to serve the Lord to the utmost and to testify to one’s faith before the world.**
3. In general, Rome tolerated various religions—except when they saw one as a threat to society. In what ways does that resemble our modern culture?  
■ **Toleration of different viewpoints is the official policy of most Western nations and the general consensus of society. But in some cases a religion can be seen as a threat and legislated against.**
4. Why did Nero first choose to persecute the Christians?  
■ **He probably needed a scapegoat for the burning of Rome. Some were blaming him. But he may have been following public opinion—Christians were already at odds with the Jews and misunderstood by others.**
5. Why would the Christians be accused of “hatred of the human race” as Tacitus mentioned?  
■ **This was probably a misunderstanding. The Christians claimed to worship the only true God; therefore, everyone else’s gods were false. The Christians warned of the coming judgment waiting for those who rejected Christ. There are similar misunderstandings today. People assume a person is a bigot if s/he claims there is one true way to God.**
6. What was Emperor Trajan’s policy toward the Christians, as he expressed it to Governor Pliny?  
■ **You may need to remind your students that Trajan was the one getting a backrub. He still held that Christianity was illegal, but he didn’t want the governor to go out hunting for Christians. Accusations had to be legitimate, and if Christians affirmed their loyalty to the Roman gods, they should be released.**
7. Why would the Christians be blamed for natural disasters?  
■ **As Tertullian once complained, Christians were blamed for everything. The Romans were a superstitious lot. They felt that if their gods were offended, they would take revenge. By denying the Roman gods, the Christians were being very offensive.**
8. The word martyr means “witness.” In what way did a martyr “witness” for Christ?  
■ **The martyr was often able to speak of his/her faith before leaders and crowds. But the primary one was the**

visual witness of dying, in faith, as Christ had died. The fact that people would die for their religious beliefs was shocking—but perhaps also moving—at least to some of the Romans who watched.

9. What were some of the reasons that good emperors persecuted the church?

■ They wanted to unite the empire under one religious umbrella. They wanted to assure that everyone was loyal to the state and to the emperor. The Christians were obstinately different from the Roman pagans.

10. What were some of the ways the church was restricted?

■ The restrictions varied. At times only conversions were forbidden. Later, church meetings were prohibited, and Christians were not allowed to visit their cemeteries. Property was confiscated. Bishops were arrested. Christians were put out of public office, Scriptures were taken and destroyed, and Christians could be killed if they refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

11. Why do you think the church “won” this struggle with the Roman Empire?

■ The easy answer is that God wanted it that way. The human answers are many. The Romans got tired of persecuting. Christianity gained sympathy and support. Galerius the persecutor was about to die. Etc.

12. How would you have felt as a Christian in 311 when the raging emperor Galerius suddenly issued his edict of toleration of Christianity?

■ Put your students in that situation and have them answer from the heart. Relief? Distrust? Gratitude to God? Weariness? Etc.

How do you think the believers felt about Galerius telling them to pray for him and the state?



## Bible Capsule

Jesus warned repeatedly that his disciples would face serious opposition from the world around them. He made it clear that it was opposition to him, and it was just overflowing onto his followers. He assured that he, through his Spirit, would stand with his people in their times of crisis, even giving them the words to say. He told his disciples to testify about him, to say what they knew, and not to be afraid of the world’s threats. The persecutors might kill their bodies, but Jesus had a tight grip on their souls.

## Bible Application

(Considering why we aren’t persecuted and finding ways to appropriate today’s Scripture teaching)

If you have a blackboard, draw a simple equation on it. If not, just present it verbally.

“The World Hates Christ”    X    “We Stand Firm with Christ”    =    “The World Hates Us.”

Have the students write it on the back of their “Class Notes.”

Start at the end. Ask, To what extent does your “world” hate you? Are you persecuted in any way? Are you opposed because of your faith? (Some will have instances of opposition. Take these

seriously, but expect that others of the class will not be facing serious problems.)

Ask students to put a number on this. On a scale of 1 to 100, with 100 being extreme persecution, how much does their world “hate” them. Ask them to write this down under “The World Hates Us” on their equation.

Now go back to the start. “The World Hates Christ.” Why? Ask your class to give reasons why the world hates Christ. And make sure they’re talking about the world around them, not some abstract concept. Why would their friends and neighbors “hate” Christ—or at least feel uncomfortable with him? (Answers might include these: The world runs on greed, lust, pride, and selfishness, which Jesus opposes. Christ makes them feel guilty for these things, but they are unwilling to give them up.)

Ask, “To what extent is your world opposed to Christ?” If you could put this on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “extremely opposed to Christ,” what would it be? Have them write that number down next to “The World Hates Christ” on their equation. (The fact is that many of us live in situations where the world around us is rather friendly toward Christ. Certainly that is the case officially in North America and Western Europe, where there is freedom of religion and where society has largely been developed along Christian principles. Still, the world functions according to its greed and lust, etc., so it may still have problems with Christ’s true teaching.)

Ask the class to take a look at their equation. What number needs to go in the middle to make it work? (They should divide the number at the right—“World Hates Us”—by the number at the left—“World Hates Christ.” This is not a math class, so they may round it off.)

Is that number a fair expression of how firmly they stand with Christ (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very close”)? If their other calculations are accurate, it should be. For instance, the person whose world is very opposed to Christ (at 7), but who has very little opposition him/herself (say, 20), rates only about a 3 in standing firm with Christ.

Obviously, the numbers can lie. But the fact remains: If we are standing with Christ, then we should be getting the same treatment they give him.

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## Wrap-Up

(Looking ahead to the coming week)

First, review last week’s “Wrap-Up” activity. Did anyone do something specific to give someone a clearer picture of Jesus? What was it? How did it go?

For the next week, ask class members to become aware of where and how the world around them opposes Christ and his principles. They don’t need to get paranoid and negative, but the Spirit may open their eyes to some area where they may have been unwittingly compromising their ideals. Have them keep that equation in mind, maybe adjusting the figures as they take a firm stand for their Lord.



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## Program 4: Optional Bible Study

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**Introductory Activity** (Putting the class in the shoes of the persecuted church)

After welcoming the class, announce that you are going to be talking about the persecution of Christians.

There are a couple of ways to do this. The “full drama” treatment involves setting something up with an actor or police officer that no one knows. A secondary way is to have someone from the class do this (you probably won’t fool anyone anyhow—even if you wanted to). This person barges in and announces that the meeting is illegal. The announcement might go like this:

“I’m sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but this is an illegal assembly. You will all have to leave. The town passed an ordinance last month limiting meetings of a religious nature. You should have received a notice by mail. Who is the leader of this group? I’m going to have to place you under arrest, since this meeting is in clear violation of the new law. The rest of you may go, but we will have to take your names. We want to be sure you don’t do something like this again.”

A third way to do this is merely to talk about it: What if this happened?

At about this point, you should end the drama and ask the students how they feel. How would they be feeling if this were *really* happening? Would they obey the new law and stop meeting together? Would they organize a protest to release the leader from prison? What if the opposition were stepped up and they lost their jobs, their credit rating, or their homes? At what point would they consider giving up these public meetings?

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**Bible Study** (Examining Scriptural teaching about why Christians are persecuted and what we can do about it)

Hand out Program 4/Class Notes 1—Expecting Persecution. Then have the class count off by three. Assign to all the 1’s Matthew 10:16-39. Assign to all the 2’s Luke 21:12-19. Assign to all the 3’s John 15:18—16:3. Each person should write his or her reference on top of the paper.

Give the group about ten minutes to go over the sheet. Then go through their answers passage by passage.

**Text:** Matthew 10:16-39

1. What was the occasion when Jesus said this?  
■ **Jesus was sending his twelve disciples throughout Israel.**
2. How do you think the original hearers would have responded?  
■ **Knowing the nature of the disciples, they must have been terrified. They may also have sensed that these instructions were not just for their immediate mission but for something beyond this time, something in the future.**

3. Sum up in three sentences or less the main message of this passage.

■ **Something like this: You will have a hard time as you go out and speak for me. But don’t worry because my Spirit will give you strength and protection. Yet my mission requires complete dedication.**

4. According to Jesus’ comments here, why will persecution come on believers?

■ **Because people oppose Jesus himself (v. 25). If his disciples are faithful to him, they will reap persecution just as Jesus did.**

5. What is the believer’s responsibility when dealing with persecution?

■ **Not to worry. Stand firm. Be faithful to God. Take up the cross.**

**SPOTLIGHT:** Draw special attention to Matthew 10:28. This is crucial advice for the Christian who faces persecution. The persecutors can only kill the body, but the Lord has the care of the soul. So keep your priorities straight!

**Text:** Luke 21:12-19

1. What was the occasion when Jesus said this?  
■ **Late in Jesus’ ministry, probably at the Mount of Olives, the disciples look at the splendid Temple and ask about the future. This is part of Jesus’ reply.**
  2. How do you think the original hearers would have responded?  
■ **Surprise maybe, or fear, or drummed up courage.**
  3. Sum up in three sentences or less the main message of this passage.  
■ **You will face persecution and even betrayal. But I will give you the words to say. I will also assure eternal life for you.**
  4. According to Jesus’ comments here, why will persecution come on believers?  
■ **“On account of my name”—v. 12. “All men will hate you because of me”—v. 17.**
  5. What is the believer’s responsibility when dealing with persecution?  
■ **Be a “witness.” Don’t worry. Stand firm.**
- SPOTLIGHT:** Draw attention to Luke 21:15. Jesus promises to give “words and wisdom” in the crucial moments. This is exactly what happened to Stephen (Acts 7) and many later martyrs (including Polycarp and Perpetua, whom we’ll meet next week).

**Text:** John 15:18—16:3

1. What was the occasion when Jesus said this?  
■ **At the Last Supper, as Jesus meets with his disciples.**

2. How do you think the original hearers would have responded?

■ **Dedication, love. Probably not as much fear, since Jesus couches it all in promises of his love and fellowship.**

3. Sum up in three sentences or less the main message of this passage.

■ **The world will hate you because it hates me. The Spirit will help you testify about me. Do not worry about the opposition that comes against you because you are on the Father's side and your persecutors aren't.**

4. According to Jesus' comments here, why will persecution come on believers?

■ **Because the world hates Christ. "Without reason"—v. 25. Because they [the persecutors] do not know the Father.**

5. What is the believer's responsibility when dealing with persecution?

■ **Testify of Jesus. Do not go astray.**

**SPOTLIGHT:** Take a special look at John 16:2. This is when persecution is most vicious and most demoralizing—when persecutors do it for religious reasons. Of course, the earliest persecution of Christians came from their fellow Jews, who were trying to stamp out this Christian “heresy.” But the Romans also persecuted for religious reasons, trying to reaffirm the traditional gods of Rome.

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## Video Connection

The early church faced regular persecution from the Roman Empire, beginning in 64 A.D. and continuing until 311 A.D. At first it was sporadic and localized. But as the church grew, officials lashed out against it in stronger and stronger ways, resulting in empire-wide persecutions beginning in 249 and 303. There was much violence, much pain, but the Christians were ready for it. Jesus had promised that they would have to suffer. And, as he had asked, many stood firm, testifying mightily for Christ as they went to their deaths.

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**Creative Activity** (Letting the class put themselves for a moment in the shoes of the martyrs)

Create this situation for the class:

The year is 2024. A new president, N. E. Rowe, has taken control of the government and has demanded total allegiance. Because many churches opposed his rise to power, he has prohibited all Christian assemblies. But your group has continued to meet secretly.

One meeting was raided and you were arrested. You were given a choice: You could be released if you swore never to worship Christ again and instead declared your complete loyalty to President Rowe. You refused and were declared a traitor. You are scheduled to be executed in the electric chair in a few minutes, but first a TV interviewer finds you and asks you to say a few words. What do you say? It happens so fast that you haven't had time to

prepare. So just say whatever comes to mind.

Ask for volunteers to give their replies. After four or five have spoken, wrap it up. You may want to mention that Christ promised that the Spirit would give them the words to say if that situation were real (Luke 21:12-15). Many, many in the early church faced sudden opportunities similar to that and took advantage of them.

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## So What?

Why don't we face persecution as the early church did? Partly because we've been blessed with a tolerant society, one that has been affected by Christian teaching. But we may also be slipping in our commitment to Christ. We should be willing to withstand opposition as a result of the firmness of our Christian commitment.

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## Program 5: Testimony

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### Introduction and Background

When Jesus gathered his rag-tag band of fishermen and odd-jobbers in the Upper Room, he promised that they would face persecution. “A time is coming,” he said, “when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a service to God” (John 16:2).

Within days, the disciples were in hiding. Jesus had been crucified, and they feared that they might be next. Months later, the disciples were being hunted down again. Jesus had risen and ascended. Now, filled with the Spirit, his followers boldly declared that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jewish leaders sought to arrest and imprison the proponents of this Christian “heresy.”

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it found new foes. In 64 A.D., the Emperor Nero targeted the Christians as scapegoats for a disastrous fire in Rome. He unleashed a savage program of persecution. A generation later, it was Emperor Domitian hunting down Christians, who refused to worship him as “Lord and God.”

Why? The Christian message was one of love—for enemies as well as neighbors. What would cause the mightiest empire on earth to pick on these peaceful people?

They didn’t fit in.

Rome had a very accepting culture. Worship any god you like, they said, as long as you’re a good citizen. Some eastern religions were outlawed—these were a little too bizarre for the noble Romans—but other cults were accepted, even fashionable. Noblewomen served the Egyptian Isis. The army served the bull-slayer, Mithras. The carousers partied with the Greek Dionysus. You could do just about anything as long as you paid homage to the official gods of Rome. At times you’d be required to sacrifice to the divine spirit of the emperor himself. This the Christians would not do.

They were misunderstood and became the outcasts. Rumors flew. “Those Christians drink blood and eat babies. They have inebriated orgies.” The irony is that the Christians had lifestyles far purer than most Romans.

Persecution was not constant; it erupted sporadically. The ancient historian Eusebius counted ten persecutions of the early church, from Nero to the Great Persecution of Diocletian.

Polycarp saw some of the early ones. He was probably about 20 when Emperor Domitian sent the Apostle John to an island exile. Tradition has it that Polycarp was John’s student. By the middle of the second century, Polycarp was a leader of the church, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and possibly one of the most famous of the Christians in the empire. He had written an epistle that was esteemed nearly at the level of Scripture. He was the church’s closest link to the apostles.

When the local officials stepped up persecution in his region, they went after this aged bishop. They didn’t want to kill him, but what a coup it would have been if they could have scared this old man into renouncing his faith. They couldn’t.

It was about fifty years later that Perpetua was arrested in North Africa. Christianity had taken hold along the North African coast. This was an embarrassment to Emperor Septimius Severus, an African himself. He authorized raids and arrests throughout that region.

Perpetua must have been a recent convert to Christianity as she was a *catachumen*. Her father, of the noble class, apparently was not a Christian, but she was firm in her conviction. Along with a band of other Christians (including her slavegirl Felicitas), she was arrested and imprisoned. She kept a diary in prison, recounting her visions and her talks with her father.

This feisty 22-year-old displayed an attitude that many other martyrs also developed. Faced with death and determined not to buckle under pressure, they began to look forward to their martyrdom. It was a birthday for them when they could testify openly to a crowd of people and be welcomed into Christ’s presence. Their pain would only be temporary.

Thousands of others were slain by the beasts, the gladiators, the fire. Historian Eusebius details the cruel methods the Romans used to elicit renunciations from the Christians. Some Christians couldn’t take it. They did deny their faith. (This created quite a controversy after Christianity became legal: Should the “lapsed” be welcomed back?) But many resisted to the point of death and won their heavenly rewards.

Their example shines for us, not because they were superheroes but because they were people like us who relied on God’s strength in the worst of times.

### To the Teacher:

The history of the early church gives us many examples of faithful Christians—Christians who were faithful unto death. In this program and in this lesson, we are presenting two of the most notable ones—Polycarp and Perpetua.

As we come to grips with these gruesome and remarkable stories, it is easy to come away saying, “I could never be like that!” We Christians are very prone to guilt. Your students may be impressed by these ancient martyrs but also depressed because they feel they could never live up to those great examples.

But that misses the point. It was not Polycarp’s power or Perpetua’s that helped them stand up to the beasts and fires of Rome. It was God’s power. His power works in us, too. This should be an exhilarating session for your students as they realize that God can strengthen them in their moments of greatest need.

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**Objective:** To acquaint students with two martyrs of the early church and to remind them that God gives strength in crisis times.

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**Scripture Texts:** Revelation 2:8-11; Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-60; Hebrews 11:32-40; 12:1-3

### Introductory Question

If you were arrested for being a Christian, if you were told that in one hour you would be tried and sentenced to death unless you renounced your faith—how would you spend that hour? (Press those answers as far as they will go. Many will say, “I’d pray.” Why? What would they pray about?)

## ●●●●●●●●●●SHOW VIDEO●●●●●●●●●●

### Video Discussion Guide

This video divides neatly into two parts, if you wish—first the story of Polycarp and then that of Perpetua.

1. Why would the dates of the martyrs’ deaths be celebrated as “birthdays”?

■ It was the day of their “birth” or entry into God’s kingdom.

2. What was the policy to the church leaders regarding arrest and persecution? Were they to give themselves up?

■ They were not supposed to make themselves available for martyrdom or to seek it out, but they were not to avoid it when they had no choice.

Why do you think they adopted this policy?

■ Obviously, they didn’t want to lose good church members if they didn’t have to, and some may have been overzealous in seeking martyrdom.

3. How did Polycarp respond when the soldiers showed up at his door?

■ He welcomed them as friends and fed them.

Why?

■ Christian love, testimony, reassuring the slaveboy who led them there.

4. Were the Roman leaders eager to kill the Christians?

■ Generally, no. They preferred to get them to renounce the faith.

Why?

■ They may have feared the power of martyrdom, yet they were convinced that Christianity had to be stopped. Despite their atrocities, they liked to think of themselves as civilized.

5. Do you remember any details of the martyrdom account that

especially struck you?

■ Perhaps the witty exchange (“Away with the Atheists!”) between Polycarp and the proconsul, the glowing of Polycarp’s face, the aroma when he was burned, the comparison of this fire to the fires of judgment, his refusal to be nailed in place.

6. This story was written and distributed throughout the empire. Why was this story so important?

■ Polycarp was a top leader in the church, a student of the Apostle John. He had shown God’s power in facing martyrdom. There were some miraculous details involved.

7. Perpetua used a waterpot to explain to her father why she couldn’t renounce her faith. What did she mean by this?

■ The waterpot, or any other object, is what it is, not something else. Similarly, she was a Christian. It made no sense to say she wasn’t.

8. She said at one point, “My prison seemed like a palace.” Do you remember why?

■ She was allowed to have her baby with her.

9. Perpetua’s father accused her of “pride” and said she was shaming her family. Do you think this was a valid accusation? Wouldn’t it have been more loving to give in, at least to spare her family (remember that her father was beaten because of her)?

■ This was a tough question for many in the early church, and some did give in. But even family loyalty had to take second place to one’s faithfulness to God.

10. At one point the Christians were concerned that Felicitas, Perpetua’s slavegirl, would not bear her child before the scheduled execution. Why were they so concerned?

■ They wanted to face death together. They felt she needed their support in her martyrdom.

11. Why did Perpetua object to the costumes the Romans wanted them to wear?

■ They were pagan costumes for a pagan sacrifice. Perpetua insisted that the Romans honor the Christians’ decision not to be associated with pagan religion.

12. After being thrown by the heifer, Perpetua actually fixed her hair. Why?

■ She didn’t want to appear to be in mourning. This was a happy day for her when she would meet her Lord.

13. The narrator mentions that persecution of Christians is still going on today. Where? Are you aware of places where this is true?

■ In recent decades this has been true in the USSR and Eastern Europe, although things are changing there. There are also stories of persecution from China, the Muslim world, and elsewhere.



### Bible Capsule

The Bible shows us various examples of believers who faced persecution and were faithful. One of the best examples is Stephen, stoned to death for his faith in Christ (Acts 6-7).

In Stephen's case, and in others, it was not the person's strength that got them faithfully through the crisis. It was God's strength. That strength strengthens us, too. As we learn from Hebrews 12, we need to put aside obstacles, keep living day by day to honor Christ, and keep looking to him for our power.

This is how Polycarp, Perpetua, and other martyrs of the church remained faithful. They lived unencumbered lives of devotion to Christ. (Perpetua wouldn't even let family loyalty "dissuade" her.) They didn't seek to be persecuted but lived day by day to please their Lord. And they relied on Christ for the strength to withstand persecution.

**Bible Application** (Understanding how we can use God's strength in our own lives)

Ask someone to read Matthew 5:11-12. Then ask if that has ever happened to anyone in the class—people insulting and slandering you for being a Christian. Acknowledge that we're not talking about physical persecution on the level of the early church; but in our day-to-day lives, do we encounter opposition for our faith?

Jesus says we are blessed in those situations. Do you feel "blessed"? (Probably not.) Yet Jesus says we should rejoice. Why? (Because we have a reward in heaven. The world always persecutes faithful believers.)

So what can you do in such situations? Specifically, how should you respond to insults and slander?

Ask someone to read John 16:33. Ask, "What kind of 'trouble' can we expect from the world?" (As in Matthew 5, everything from slander to violence.) What attitude should we have toward this? (We should "take heart" or "rejoice" because Jesus has overcome the world.) How has Jesus "overcome" the world? (Through his death, he has broken the power of sin. The forces of evil may continue to persecute us, but their power is limited to this world. In eternity, Jesus prevails—and we with him.)

Do these verses help us understand the attitudes of Polycarp and Perpetua toward persecution and death? (They truly seemed to "rejoice" in the opportunity to suffer for Christ.)

Hand out Program 5/Class Notes 2 and pencils and ask your students to try to think of some instance of opposition from their own lives—some insult or slander they have experienced or expect to experience because of their faith. Give them a minute or two to complete the sentence, "When people oppose me because of my faith in Christ, I will. . .," based on what they have learned today. If you have time, ask a few to say what they have written.

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**Wrap-Up** (Reviewing the session and nailing it down)

Go around the room, asking each person to say something that he or she learned from this session. It could be some detail from the video or it might be a lesson about faith. When all have spoken, take a minute to say what you yourself will do differently in the weeks ahead as a result of this lesson.

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## Program 5: Optional Bible Study

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**Introductory Activity** (Beginning to think about how we relate to the examples of Christians we admire)

Ask your students to think of two Christians they especially admire—one from the past and one from the present. After giving them a minute or two to think of them, ask people to share these with the rest of the class.

Ask what qualities they admire in these Christians. If it's not too personal, ask if they themselves mirror those qualities. At some point, ask, "What is the source of these qualities we have been admiring?" The answer, of course, is ultimately God.

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**Bible Study** (Examining the Bible's view of persecution and faithfulness)

As bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp would have been especially familiar with the message to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11. Read this passage and consider how it would have encouraged Polycarp as he faced martyrdom.

- How would the particular description of Jesus Christ found in Revelation 2:8 be an encouragement to a prospective martyr?
  - **Jesus Christ had overcome death. He was a living, resurrected Lord who would also provide new life and resurrection for his followers.**
- How can these Christians be poor and rich at the same time?
  - **Though poor in this world's goods, they had spiritual riches and were laying up for themselves treasures in heaven. Matthew 6:20.**

Suffering, tribulation, and persecution were not to be feared but were to be faced with joy. Read James 1:12 and explain why Polycarp and other Christians could be joyful under persecution.

Who was the first Christian martyr? Stephen. We can read his story in Acts 6 and 7. (Have one or more people read Acts 6:8-15; then ask the following questions.)

- How does the Bible describe Stephen?
  - **Full of God's grace and power, miracle-worker, speaker of wisdom.**
- The text says "opposition arose." Why? What do you think these people were arguing with Stephen about?
  - **About Jesus, no doubt. Stephen maintained that Jesus was the Christ and these people disputed that.**
- What was the charge against Stephen?
  - **Blasphemy against Moses, God, the Temple, and the law. Note that they said Stephen "never stops speaking" about these things, an indication of his dedication.**
- What's the significance of Stephen's appearance in v. 15?

■ **He had the "face of an angel," probably meaning that it was shining. This reflects on Moses (Ex. 34:29) and Jesus (Matt. 17:2) after encounters with God. Remember also that angels are messengers of God. Stephen was bringing God's message to the council.**

Chapter 7 consists mostly of Stephen's speech to the council. He reviews the history of Israel. We'll pick it up with the conclusion. Have one or several read Acts 7: 51-60. Then ask the following questions.

- Of what did Stephen accuse the Jewish leaders?
  - **Obstinacy, resisting the Holy Spirit, killing prophets, killing Christ, disobeying their own law.**
- It seems that Stephen didn't do a very effective job of defending himself. Wasn't he "asking for it" with this vehement speech?
  - **He probably had no chance of acquittal, since the charges were so stacked against him. But as a "messenger" of God, he could turn the tables and accuse these leaders of blasphemy. Their execution of him would just fall in line with their resistance to the prophets and to Christ himself.**
- How did Stephen's hearers react?
  - **Furious, gnashing teeth.**
- Put yourself in Stephen's sandals for a moment. The Spirit has just prompted you to make this strong speech and now tempers are flaring against you. You know your Christ—how does this make you feel?
  - **Strong. Reassured. If he had any shred of doubt in the truth of what he was preaching, it was wiped away with this vision. It would also have a sense of welcome—"you will have to endure the stoning, but soon you'll be with me."**
- How did Stephen's death resemble Jesus' death?
  - **Outside the city, since it was illegal to execute someone inside Jerusalem. "Receive my spirit"—see Luke 23:46. Forgiving his killers—see Luke 23:34.**
- One of the church fathers once wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." That is, the church eventually grows even though the loss is painful. How is this borne out in this passage?
  - **Saul witnessed the event. He later was converted and, as the Apostle Paul, preached mightily throughout the empire.**
- How does Stephen's death resemble the death of Polycarp and Perpetua?
  - **Killed for their faith; tried and sentenced in legal situations; spoke powerfully for Christ in these crisis situations; faced death confidently, testifying to**

### Christ's power even in the manner of their deaths.

Of course, such faithfulness is not limited to these three. Many others have been true to their faith under persecution. The Book of Hebrews extols some of these in its famous "Faith Chapter."

Have one or several student(s) read Hebrews 11:32-40. Then ask the following questions.

- After recounting the struggles of these people, the text says, "The world was not worthy of them." What does this mean?
  - **They were never really "at home" in the world because their faith enabled them to live by God's principles, while the world kept going its own way.**
- Verse 39 says, "None of them received what was promised." What is this talking about?
  - **Probably it means that faith often results in a good, blessed life. These people did not receive such a life on earth, but they will certainly receive "something better" in heaven.**

Have someone read Hebrews 12:1-3. Point out that although we often stop at the end of the Faith Chapter, we shouldn't. The text goes on to talk about us and how we can live by faith. Those characters from chapter 11 are not superheroes—they were people like us. They had great faith in God, and we can, too.

These verses have three commands introduced by "let us." See if your students can spot them. Jot these on a blackboard if you have one. Let us . . . throw off hindrances; run with perseverance; fix our eyes on Jesus.

- Ask: Based on verses 2 and 3, how can Jesus' example help us deal with tough times?
  - **He endured trial because he saw the glory ahead. Therefore, we should not lose heart.**

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## Video Connection

Polycarp and Perpetua, as well as thousands of other martyrs in the early church, could face death with peace and even joy because they knew that Christ had gone before them. He had broken the power of evil; and therefore, he offered them an eternal life of blessedness. That is why Polycarp could say that the fire that burned him "would burn for an hour," but the fires of God's judgment would burn forever. The earthly persecution was outweighed by the promised joys of eternity. We can face our earthly problems—even minor ones—with the same assurance.

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**Creative Activity** (Helping the students understand the power of faith in their own lives)

Divide into groups of five or six. Appoint a leader or secretary for each group. Announce that each group is going to write its own "Faith Chapter," based on the experiences of the people in that group and other people they know.

Each person should think of at least one instance from his or her

own life in which faith was important. Each group should try to include at least one "verse" on each person in the group. When that's done, they can write about others they know.

EXAMPLE: "By faith, Mary worked to send her son to college. By faith, Bob withstood the taunts of his colleagues and started a Bible study in the company cafeteria. By faith, Sheila got up the nerve to talk to her neighbor about Jesus, realizing that faithful witness was more important than temporary embarrassment."

After 10 minutes or so, bring the class together and have each class read its "chapter." Explain briefly that the point is that faith is not limited to "heroes" from the Bible or church history. God gives us all faith, and through his strength, we can meet the challenges that come our way.

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## So What?

We are all Polycarps and Perpetuas. We are Stephens. God uses us to achieve his purposes. Faithfulness does not lie in our talent or knowledge but in our trust. Let him use you. When opposition arises, he will empower you to meet it.

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## Program 6: Transition

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### Introduction and Background

It would be easy to paint Constantine's rise to power in only bright colors. After all, the church had been illegal for two-and-a-half centuries. It had just faced a decade of horrendous struggle. The legalizing of Christianity and later its official adoption as the religion of the realm must have seemed like the golden rays of dawn piercing through the oppressive darkness.

It was a great triumph. But it also brought with it new problems.

First was the problem of power. How does a religion that was incubated under the thumb of menacing rulers behave toward its foes once it comes to power? It was all too easy to use the weapons of the world—force, political coercion, terror. Remember that Constantine was a general. He proudly took the role as patron of the church.

There was also a problem of politics. Constantine was also a consummate politician. (Some cynics even say that his whole “vision” was a ploy to hitch his political wagon to the rising religious movement of the empire.) Good politics means establishing a broad power base, and that meant welcoming new converts from paganism. The problem was these pagans knew how to play the political game, too. If they'd have to convert to Christianity to keep their civil-service jobs, they would. Sure, they'd say, add Jesus to the committee of gods we worship—even make him chairman—just keep my paycheck coming in. Obviously, there were a lot of phony conversions going on.

This meant that many were mixing Christianity and paganism. Constantine himself, before his conversion, had been an ardent worshiper of the sun god, and some say he never really let go of that. Change the names a little, and you can keep your holidays. (The celebration of Christmas, for instance, developed on the day of a sun-worship holiday.)

Another set of problems might be called policy. What do you do with those who buckled under the pressure of persecution, renounced the faith, and then wanted to get back in? There were some purists who wanted to keep them out, notably the Donatist party based in North Africa. But the prevailing policy was to let them back after suitable penance was done. Constantine threw his power against the Donatists, but they continued their struggle throughout the 300s.

How do we decide what the church really believed? Under persecution, the church had developed localized leadership in certain major cities, but there was no centralized authority. Churches tried to hold to the apostles' teaching, but numerous questions had arisen in those centuries. Now, suddenly, the church could hold councils to determine these things.

The most crucial question had to do with Jesus' identity. Was he God or man or both? Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325 to decide this matter, and he used his power to back

the “orthodox” beliefs.

Another policy question was: How do you handle paganism? Paganism was deeply rooted in Roman society and difficult to eradicate. But it became a political struggle, too. Throughout the 300's, especially after Constantine's death, Christianity and paganism jockeyed for power, and a political struggle continued between the two. The pagans controlled the Roman Senate, and they even managed to put another emperor, Julian, on the throne. But Christianity was still on the upswing. By the end of the 300's, Roman paganism was clearly overcome.

What changes did Constantine make? Perhaps we can see this most clearly by looking at two young people from North Africa, before and after Constantine. The “before” picture is Perpetua, who we saw in the previous program. She was a twentyish woman from a noble family. Newly converted to Christianity, a catechumen, she was willing to die for her faith. She spoke brilliantly of her commitment before she was martyred for her faith in Carthage.

Nearly two centuries later, in the wake of Constantine's changes, a young man named Augustine came along. He grew up near Carthage and taught in that city, but his fortunes moved him to Rome and then Milan. He became caught up in the political struggle between pagans and Christians. For political advancement, he converted to Christianity, becoming a catechumen, but not yet willing to be baptized. It took a miraculous conversion experience to move him from political “Christianity” to true Christianity.

Perpetua died for her faith. Augustine lived to write about and to teach his faith to others. In that way, the world became a better place for Christians. But the Christianization of the Roman Empire also created a whole new breed: the pseudo-Christian, the convenient Christian, and the politically correct Christian. We still have many of these.

### To the Teacher:

This is a lesson about triumph. Christians were oppressed with the harshest persecution they had ever known, and suddenly God led them out into glorious freedom.

Yes, there is a down side to the legalization and officialization of Christianity. But that does not lessen the importance of the triumph. God wins triumphs for us here on earth, and that merely throws us into new battles with other foes. We won't rest until God's ultimate triumph is completed with the coming of his Kingdom.

Enjoy this session. Bolster your class members with the knowledge that God leads them to triumph. Whatever tribulation they may be facing, there is light at the end of that tunnel. Let your own joy infect the class.





that, through Christ, we have victory both over the evil forces that push us into sin and the laws that only make us feel guilty.

**COMMENT #2:** Pay attention to the picture in that verse. It's like a Roman general's triumphal procession, leading his captives in tow.

**COMMENT #3:** How does Christ's death help us? That's how we're forgiven. If there's some sin over which you need to win victory, it starts by forgiveness for it.

**COMMENT #4:** How does Christ's resurrection help us? That's proof of God's power. That same power lives in you. You have the power to withstand temptation. Or if there's some outside opposition you are struggling against, Christ's resurrection gives you power to endure.

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**Wrap-Up** (Reviewing what the group has learned throughout this series)

Ask group members what they have learned through this series. What was their general impression of the early church at the start of the series? How has that changed? In what way are the members of the early church good examples for them? What might they do differently in the next few months because of what they have learned here?

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## Program 6: Optional Bible Study

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**Introductory Activity** (Imagining what it was like for the early Christians)

After class members enter, turn the lights off. Announce that you are going to take them through a dramatic period in the church's history. Ask them to close their eyes and let their minds imagine what it was like back then. Then lead them through the following scenario.

The year is 303. You meet with your church on Sunday, as usual. Other groups have buildings, but you're still meeting in a home. Before your prayer time, you share stories of your individual struggles. One man lost his government job because he was a Christian. Another family had a piece of land seized from them by the authorities. Officials had been asking questions of various church members, learning when and where they met. Things are beginning to heat up.

The pagans are celebrating the feast of Terminus, their god of beginnings and endings. It is rumored that here they will begin to put an end to the church. You pray together for strength to survive.

Later that week, you learn the bishop has been arrested and ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods. He lies in prison, tortured and beaten. You'd like to go and visit him, but you know you would be arrested, too. On Sunday, you get a message that the church will be meeting secretly in a different home. Once there, you learn that the usual hosts have been arrested as well. Several of the people present have lost jobs that week. Some have been attacked on the streets.

It's a couple of years later. Emperor Diocletian has resigned. He was no friend to the church, but his successor, Galerius, is worse. You have continued to meet in secret in various homes. Some of the newer converts have stopped coming. The pressure was too great for them. One of your elders was arrested at his job and interrogated by soldiers. The word is that he caved in; he performed the sacrifice to the gods, and he was released. He is afraid to show his face to any church members now. The whole church is saddened by what happened to him. They have started public executions in the amphitheater with beasts and gladiators. You hear that the bishop is scheduled to be killed there soon. You pray together for him.

It is two year later. You have been living for a while now looking over your shoulder. You are always wary of soldiers who might arrest you. You are afraid of neighbors who might have reported you as a Christian. Your church tries to meet each week, but it is difficult. You remember the example of your bishop, who died valiantly before the beasts. He spoke freely of his love for Jesus before the animals reached him. You receive a letter from Christians in another district. They are going through similar struggles, but they encourage you to keep the faith. The Lord will preserve his people. You read the letter to your church when it meets together in the catacombs to celebrate the anniversary of the bishop's martyrdom.

On the way out, church members are ambushed by a group of soldiers. Some are able to run off, but you are arrested and carted off to prison. Each day you are urged to offer a pinch of incense to the gods. Then supposedly everything will be fine. Each day you refuse, and you return to your dark, rat-infested, crowded cell. The Christians there have turned their cell into a church. You know that most of you will die soon. But you encourage each other. Some are crippled from the gruesome torture. Some are suffering from disease. You share your food and water with those who need it, and you pray for God's will to be done.

[Turn the lights back on in the room.]

You hear a rumor one day. The emperor is very ill. he is angry at his gods for not healing him. You pray fervently for your God to show his power by healing the emperor, yes, even the hated Galerius.

The next day soldiers come and open the cell. You are free to go. You stand in disbelief, rubbing your eyes as they get used to the light of freedom. In the following days you learn that Galerius has signed an official decree granting Christians freedom.

It is two years later. All of Rome is in flux. There is civil war going on between two would-be emperors. Smart people stay out of the way. At your church meeting you hear the news. Constantine is marching on Rome. He had a vision. He has become a Christian. He is making Christianity totally legal. You pray then and there with great thanksgiving. God has triumphed beyond your wildest dreams.

Ask everyone to join you in prayer, thanking God for what he has done in the early church and for what he has done in your lives.

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**Bible Study** (Finding the Bible's perspective on God's triumph in physical and spiritual battles)

Have everyone turn to Exodus 15. Ask someone to read verses 1-5. Then ask the following questions.

1. What was the occasion of this song?  
■ **The Israelites had just miraculously crossed the Red Sea.**
2. How would you describe the mood of this song?  
■ **Triumphant, happy, devoted.**
3. How is the Lord described?  
■ **My strength, my song, a warrior, etc.**
4. Understanding that the name Yahweh is used in Hebrew where most of our modern translations have "the LORD," why does verse 3 make a special point of saying, "Yahweh is his name"?  
■ **The Egyptians would have had other gods that they praised. The Israelites are saying, "No, we're not**

talking about Ra or Isis —Yahweh is the one who did this. Remember also that Yahweh is related to the Hebrew word for “I am.” Yahweh had powerfully proven his existence by this mighty deed, and now the nation of Israel existed, too.

Ask someone to read verses 6-10. Then ask:

5. Doesn't it seem a bit unloving to rejoice over the destruction of these riders? Aren't we supposed to love our enemies?

■ **Yes, we are supposed to “turn the other cheek” and pray for our persecutors. But the Lord said, “Vengeance is mine.” It is his right to exact revenge; he is the arbiter of justice. We can rejoice when he enacts his perfect justice in earthly affairs.**

6. How would you describe the enemy's attitude?

■ **Boastful, greedy, violent.**

7. Twice now we have read that the enemy “sank”—like a stone (v. 5) and like lead (v. 10). Is there any significance to the fact that they sank from their own weight?

■ **Could be. The Egyptians trusted in themselves and in their horses and chariots. But it was these very encumbrances that dragged them down. Perhaps, technically, God did not drown the Egyptians. He merely worked a miracle for the Israelites who trusted him. The Egyptians, who trusted in themselves, felt they didn't need his help, so he let the sea close over them. They sank from their own weight.**

8. How does all of this compare to the situation in the Roman Empire during the Great Persecution and afterward?

■ **The Romans may have echoed verse 9. God's deliverance was somewhat different, but he did uphold his people until the persecution wore itself out. You might say that Emperor Galerius “sank like lead.” It is not hard to imagine that the ailment that put him on his death bed resulted from his years of angry frustration in combatting the Christians. At the last moment he realized his folly and asked for prayer.**

Ask another student to read verses 11-13. Then ask:

9. How is the Lord described here?

■ **Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders, etc.**

10. What does he do for his people?

■ **Leads, redeems, guides them home.**

11. How do you think Christians in the Roman Empire would react to verse 11?

■ **They'd probably like it. They too lived in the midst of other “gods.” But none of those gods had the power of Yahweh. He alone was majestic, awesome, and wonder-working.**

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**Creative Activity** (Giving expression to our sense of victory as Christians)

Divide into three or four subgroups. Each group has the task of writing a song of victory, something like the one in Exodus 15. This song can celebrate (a) the triumphs of biblical believers, (b) the triumph of the early church, (c) triumphs from their own lives, (d) future triumphs they anticipate, or all of the above.

One easy way to do the music is to borrow the tune of a well-known hymn and put new words to it. If a group decides it cannot do the music, a victory poem would be all right.

Give the groups 10 to 15 minutes to work on this; then ask each group to present its song to the others.

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### So What?

God won a mighty victory for the early church, turning its worst persecution into its greatest triumph. He wins victories for us, too. We need to trust him, be faithful to him, and, by all means, thank him for his mighty acts.

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### Video Connection

The church faced a sudden and miraculous transition in the early 300's. They had been wracked by their worst persecution yet, but the majority remained faithful. With several events, including the conversion of Constantine, Christianity became legal and ultimately the official religion of the empire. God had won a mighty victory--as he does regularly for his people.