

## **“Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian In The First Three Centuries?”**

For the fourth quarter of 2021 Drew Norman and I (Drew is one of our members, he teaches middle-school history here in Columbia), taught an adult class entitled: “Why Did People Became Christians in the First Three Centuries.” Despite its status as an illegal superstition and the constant threat of ridicule, harassment, and even persecution, we explored what made Christianity attractive to the people of the Empire. With a Bible and historical testimony in hand we explored how Christianity flourished in the Pre-Christian world of the Roman Empire and how we can use these same lessons to thrive in a Post-Christian America. The class was well attended each week and generated a lot of discussion (especially after class). It was a great discussion that gave everyone a fresh perspective on the power of the gospel to bring people to Christ. Topics we discussion included:

Introduction Classes:

- The Pre-Christian Greco-Roman World
- What Helped the Spread of the Gospel
- What Hindered the Spread of the Gospel
- How the Resurrection Challenged Greco-Roman Thinking

Then we explored what attracted people to Christianity. Such as:

- The High Moral Standards Demanded by the Monotheism of Christianity
- The Free Association within the Church
- The Good Works Done by Christians
- The Bookish Nature of Christianity
- The Attractiveness of Christianity for Women
- The Holiness and Love of God
- The Role Persecutions Played in Evangelizing the Roman World (or Evangelizing Through Suffering)

Several books (either in part or whole) that we used to help us with the historical aspects of this class included:

Hurtado, Larry. “Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian In The First Three Centuries?”

- This little book was the namesake for the class. It’s the manuscript of a lecture Hurtado gave on the topic. It a great primer on the subject of why would anyone convert to Christianity when they faced certain social and cultural opposition. We passed this book around the class and several people read it and enjoyed it immensely. With many footnotes, it’s a must first read when preparing for a class such as this.

Hurtado, Larry. “Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World”

- This is the expanded version of “Why on Earth...” Hurtado takes a deeper dive into a few of the aspects that he thinks helped Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Wilken, Robert Louis. “The Christians as the Romans Saw Them”

- This was a fantastic book – in fact it was Drew’s favorite. This book tells the story of the rise of Christianity from the perspective of its Roman critics such as: Pliny, Galen, Celsus, Porphyry, Julian the Apostate.

Green, Michael. "Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today"

- I so wanted this book to work but the lack of citations, end notes, and an index made this book impossible to use week to week. However, chapter two, *Bridges and Ditches* did help us with some of our introductory material.

Harland, Philip. "Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society"

- If you want a dense, nearly impossible to read book on finding your place in the Roman world then this is your book. It will cure insomnia fast! I used it for one class.

Kreider, Alan. "The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire"

- A great history on how early Christians faced the persecutions of the first three centuries. There is quite a bit of Catholicism to wade through with this book but there's some gems. Such as how Cyprian and the Carthaginian Christians responded to their community when plague hit their city.

Stark, Rodney. "Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome"

- At first I was skeptical about Stark's statistical analyses approach to explaining the spread of Christianity. But in between his charts and figures, provides some fantastic information and stories concerning the growth of the early church. I found this book to be very interesting and – all the math aside – an easy read. (This was the only book we used that's available on Audible. I listen to a lot of audio books while delivering the mail.)

Harl, Kenneth W. "The Fall of Pagans and the Origins of Medieval Christianity: *The Great Courses series* (Audio)"

- I listened to this series of lectures while delivering the mail. It was insightful and enjoyable. It too is a good starting point to the topic of the spread of Christianity – especially if you have an Audible account because many times the Great Courses are free to download as part of the Plus Catalog.

I do wish I would have purchased a copy of Rodney Stark's book "The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries." With a title that long it has to be interesting. I saw it referenced a number of times in footnotes but it was too late in my preparations to add yet another book.