

What We Need to Learn from the Early Church

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Many say that Christians who maintain the historic, traditional doctrines are behind the times, are too exclusive, and are “[on the wrong side of history](#).” Two recent books that cast doubt on this view are from historian and biblical scholar Larry Hurtado: [Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World](#) and [Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?](#).

The earliest Christians were widely ridiculed, especially by cultural elites, were excluded from circles of influence and business, and were often persecuted and put to death. Hurtado says Roman authorities were uniquely hostile to them, compared to other religious groups.

Why? It was expected that people would have their own gods, but that they’d be willing to show honor to all other gods as well. Nearly every home, every city, every professional guild—including the empire itself—each had its own gods. You couldn’t even go to a meal in a large home or to a public event without being expected to do some ritual to honor the gods of that particular group or place. To not do so was highly insulting, at the least to the house or community. It was also dangerous, since it was thought that such behavior could elicit the anger of the gods. Indeed, it was seen as treason to not honor the gods of the empire, on whose divine authority its legitimacy was based.

Christians, however, saw these rituals and tributes as idolatry. They were committed to worship their God exclusively. While the Jews had the same view, they were generally tolerated since they were a distinct racial group, and their peculiarity was seen as a function of their ethnicity. Yet Christianity spread through all ethnic groups, and most believers were former pagans who suddenly, after conversion, refused to honor the other gods. This refusal created huge social problems, making it disruptive and impossible for Christians to be accepted into most public gatherings. If a family member or a servant became a Christian, they suddenly refused to honor the household’s gods.

Christianity’s spread was seen as subversive to the social order—a threat to the culture’s way of life. Followers of Jesus were thought to be too exclusive to be good citizens.

Three Reasons Christianity Exploded

But in light of the enormous social costs of being a Christian in the first three centuries, why *did* anyone become a Christian? Why did Christianity grow so exponentially? What did Christianity offer that was so much greater than the costs?

Hurtado and others have pointed out three things:

1. Christians were called into a *unique “social project”* that both offended and attracted people.

Christians forbade both abortion and the practice of “infant exposure,” in which unwanted babies were simply thrown out. Christians were also a sexual counterculture in that they abstained from any sex outside of heterosexual marriage. This was in the midst of a society that thought that, especially for married men, sex with prostitutes, slaves, and children was perfectly fine.

Yet Christians were also unusually generous with their money, particularly to the poor and needy, and not just to their own family and racial group. Another striking difference was that Christian communities were multi-ethnic, since their common identity in Christ was more fundamental than their racial identities and therefore created a multi-ethnic diversity, which was unprecedented for a religion. Finally, Christians believed in non-retaliation, in forgiving their enemies, even those who were killing them.

2. Christianity offered a *direct, personal, love relationship with the Creator God*.

People around the Christians wanted favor from the gods, and eastern religions spoke about experiences of enlightenment, but an actual love relationship with God was something no one else was offering.

3. Christianity offered *assurance of eternal life*.

Every other religion offered some version of salvation-through-human effort, and therefore no one could be sure of eternal life until death. But the gospel gives us the basis for full assurance of salvation *now* since it is by grace, not works, and by Christ's work, not ours.

Early Church and Today

I hope by now you can see the relevance of these studies. The earliest church was seen as too exclusive and a threat to the social order because it would not honor all *deities*; today Christians are again being seen exclusive and a threat to the social order because we will not honor all *identities*.

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Yet the early church thrived in that situation. Why?

One reason was that Christians *were* ridiculed as too exclusive and different. And yet many were drawn to Christianity *because it was different*. If a religion isn't different from the surrounding culture—if it doesn't critique and offer an alternative to it—it dies because it's seen as unnecessary. If Christians today were also famous for and marked by chastity, generosity and justice, multi-ethnicity, and peacemaking—would it not be compelling to many? Ironically, Christians were “out of step” with the culture on sex to begin with, and it wasn't the church but the culture that eventually changed.

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Another reason Christianity thrived was because it offered things no other culture or religion even claimed to have—a love relationship with God and salvation by free grace. It is the same today. No other religion offers these things, nor does secularism. Nor can the “spiritual but not religious” option really capture them either. These are still unique “value offers” and can be lifted up to a spiritually hungry and thirsty population.

The early church surely looked like it was on the “wrong side of history,” but instead it changed history with a dogged adherence to the biblical gospel. That should be our aspiration as well.

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