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“HOLY STRANGENESS: EARLY CHRISTIAN DISTINCTIVENESS AND PUBLIC  
WITNESS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD ”

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BY TAYLOR SCOTT BROWN  
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Contact Information  
Email: [taylor.s.brown@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:taylor.s.brown@asburyseminary.edu)

## INTRODUCTION

Christian witness in the public square is a fraught topic of discussion. What does it mean to publicly witness to one's faith in a secularized sphere? In a pluralistic sphere? A pagan sphere? These are the types of questions that Christian thinkers have been asking for centuries and will continue to ask as the gospel of Jesus Christ persists, moves, and spreads throughout places and times. This is, of course, a large project, too large to tackle in one sitting. The target must be moved closer, the project particularized, the question specified. Thus, I come to my topic for this essay. How can Christians bear witness in an increasingly pluralized American public square? Particularly for those of us who identify in some way with the evangelical tradition of Protestantism, we are entering into a new state of existence, wherein the cultural capital that we enjoyed for the better part of the late twentieth-century is now dissipating. For many this strikes a chord of fear. Fear at the loss of power. Fear at the loss of cultural clout. Fear of a heavy-handed secularism crushing dearly held beliefs.

The question remains though; how do we bear witness in a pluralistic age? As I hope to show in this essay, the answer to this question comes not from becoming more relevant, seeker-sensitive, or progressive in our belief and praxis. While these may seem like viable solutions, they are, in fact, little more than short-term panaceas. It is my contention that the proper way forward is, paradoxically, not to look forward. Rather, *we must look back, very far back*. To actually witness effectively in the public square—to actually witness to Christ as Christians—we must look to the earliest Christians, our forebears in the faith. We must reclaim a Christian distinctiveness that is simultaneously *alienating* and *engaging* to those around us.<sup>1</sup> This witness is alienating by the very fact of how different it is to modern, pluralist sensibilities. How we view

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this rubric of “engaged alienation” from Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 8.

the meaning of life, sexual ethics, the rights of the unborn; these should be somewhat shocking to our non-Christian neighbors. Likewise, this witness is engaging by the very fact of how different it is. How we view and act toward the poor, the imprisoned, toward the rights of women and minorities; these should be compelling to our secular neighbors by just how beautiful and humanizing they are.

While such a view seems out of reach, it is actually quite real and has been done before. The bulk of this essay will be a historical survey, looking to the earliest Christians, those of the first three centuries, to see just how their distinctive orthodoxy and orthopraxy presented such public witness. I will look at several notable examples of early Christian strangeness and distinctiveness in both belief and praxis and analyze how such distinctive beliefs and practices were viewed in the ancient, pagan, Greco-Roman world. After this historical analysis, I will then seek to provide a brief conclusion of how this early Christian “strangeness” can be re-appropriated for our own age.

## HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE

### **A Very Different World: Contextualizing Early Christian Distinctiveness**

Imagine a world filled with many gods and goddesses. There are gods for every aspect of culture and society. There is a goddess, Roma, who is the benefactor of the imperial order. There are gods who sustain everything from crop production to the various imperial colonies. There are even divine beings known as *Lares*, who watch over households.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the whole of society is built upon a socio-religious order that interpenetrates every aspect of life, from the common citizen, up to the whole empire. As David Bentley Hart notes, the entire world and socio-cultural matrix was an interconnected web of sacral hierarchy and order:

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise summary of the various deities in the Roman world, and the aspects of life to which they were connected, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 44-49.

“...we should recall that, in late antiquity practically no one doubted that there was a sacral order to the world, or that the social, the political, the cosmic, and the religious realms of human existence were always inextricably involved with one another. Every state was also a cult, or a plurality of cults; society was a religious dispensation; the celestial and political orders belonged to a single continuum; and one’s allegiance to one’s gods was also one’s loyalty to one’s nation, people, masters, and monarchs. One could even say (to indulge in a very large generalization) that this was the sacred premise of the whole Indo-European paganism: that the universe is an elaborate and complex regime, a hierarchy of power and eminence, atop which stood the Great God, and below whom, in a descending scale, stood a variety of subordinate orders, each holding a place dictated by divine necessity and fulfilling a cosmic function—greater and lesser gods and daemons, kings and nobles, priests and prophets, and so on, all the way down to slaves. This order, moreover, though it was at once both divine and natural, was also in some ultimate sense precariously poised and strangely fragile. It had to be sustained by prayers sacrifices, laws, pieties, and coercions, and had to be defended at all times against the forces of chaos that threatened it from every side, whether spiritual, social, political, erotic, or philosophical. For cosmic, political, and spiritual order was all one thing, continuous and organic, and its authority was absolute.”<sup>3</sup>

Hart paints a startling picture of just how all encompassing the larger, socio-religious order of the ancient world was. Allegiance to the Roman state (particularly Caesar himself in eastern parts of the empire) was an act of piety. Worship of the various gods and goddesses who upheld the glory and power of the empire was viewed as an act of patriotism. There was no secular realm.<sup>4</sup>

Now imagine that a totally new movement emerges within this world of gods and emperors. This movement has its roots in the strange beliefs of an obscure people called Jews in the eastern reaches of the empire. Yet this new movement—while retaining the odd Jewish belief that there is only one true God—places at the center of its beliefs a crucified Galilean healer and prophet whose followers claim had been bodily resurrected *after* being killed via the worst form of execution imaginable: crucifixion. Even stranger, this movement claims that the plethora of gods that keep society and culture running are, in reality, lifeless statues at worst, or evil, spiritual beings at best. They are certainly not “gods”...for there is only one God.

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<sup>3</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 114-15.

<sup>4</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 47.

This movement's denial of the gods that are bound to the imperial structure and society is not simply a religious claim. To deny the gods and to refuse to worship and sacrifice to them is implicitly the denial of the very power and divine legitimacy of the empire itself. This group of people claims this crucified Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth, is *Kyrios*, Lord. But to say that this Jesus is Lord is directly to imply that Caesar—the protector of the empire, the semi-divine son of a god—is not. Such statements are not simply oddities that can be shrugged off.

Of course, the world that I am describing is not imaginary at all. It is the socio-religious setting of the ancient Greco-Roman world and the “strange,” “dangerous,” and “obstinate” new movement of Christianity into it. In our world—which has been formed in almost every way by the revolution that was and is Christianity—we have forgotten how foreign and distinct Christianity was (and is) from every other religious and philosophical worldview. Again, it is necessary to quote Hart here:

In such a world, the gospel was an outrage, and it was perfectly reasonable for its cultured despisers to describe its apostles as “atheists.” Christians were—what could be more obvious?—enemies of society, impious, subversive, and irrational; and it was no more than civic prudence to detest them for refusing to honor the gods of their ancestors, for scorning the common good, and for advancing the grotesque and shameful claim that all gods and spirits had been made subject to a crucified criminal from Galilee—one who during his lifetime had consorted with peasants and harlots, lepers and lunatics. This was far worse than mere irreverence; it was pure and misanthropic perversity; *it was anarchy*.<sup>5</sup>

It is into this world, this historical context, that we can begin to look at just how distinctive—even somewhat alienating—many of the early Christians' beliefs and practices were. It is of paramount importance to grasp this, not only in order to understand the radical and strange nature of early Christianity, but also to better help us as moderns understand what it

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<sup>5</sup> Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 115. Emphasis mine.

means to reclaim the same beliefs and practices for our own witness of Christian strangeness. That being said, we can now dive into more detail about the nature of early Christian beliefs.

### **A New Way of Believing**

#### ***Exclusivity and Cruciformity***

While theologians and scholars have long discussed the distinctive and strange character of early Christianity in the ancient world, Larry Hurtado has proven to be a key voice in moving the study forward in a powerful way with his work on early Christian monotheism and high Christology in works such as *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*<sup>6</sup> and *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.<sup>7</sup> These have proven to be seminal works in the field of early Christian studies and have reanimated a strong emphasis on early, high Christology and thus the unique character of early Christianity.

With his book, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, Hurtado has expanded his study of early Christianity even farther. In it, Hurtado seeks to correct a historical amnesia that has settled over the larger part of Western culture about the reality of early Christianity. Part and parcel of this historical reclamation is understanding just how strange the Christian view of God was. In the ancient Mediterranean world there was no shortage of odd religious groups. As noted above, there were many, many gods and they were all integrated into a larger, socio-religious hierarchy. There were even systems of thought that looked toward a metaphysically-rooted theism. Indeed, N. T. Wright notes in his survey of Greco-Roman philosophical views that, in the extant Greek corpus, it was Plato who first used the word “theology” (*theologias*) in his *Republic* to denote “correct speech about the gods”

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<sup>6</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

(*Resp.* 2.379A) and that Aristotle was, as far as we know, the first to use the verbal form of the word, *theologeō*, (*Metaph.* 1.983b.29).<sup>8</sup> However, even among the more philosophically sophisticated pagans who held to some form of this philosophical theism (one “great God” above all others, Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, the “One” of Plotinus, etc.), there was no repudiation of the worship of the many gods and goddesses and their respective cults.<sup>9</sup> As Wayne A. Meeks notes, this Hellenistic theism was quite different from the exclusive monotheism of Judaism and Christianity:

The Stoics and the middle Platonists, with their developing conception of one supreme deity synthesizing and incorporating the many gods of popular and traditional belief, provided an ideology for the genial pluralism and tolerance in cultic life that was characteristic of paganism in the imperial age. Because all gods are ultimately aspects of the One, the wise man could acknowledge them all and draw whatever benefit he might from as many of their cults as he chose.<sup>10</sup>

The very structure of Greco-Roman paganism was one that was set up to assimilate multiple gods into the larger sacral order. There were a great many religious and cultic sects in the empire, virtually none of which were exclusivist in their orientation. The only licit religion with such an exclusivist stance was Judaism, whose status was protected as long its practitioners at least prayed to their God to bless the empire, and because their monotheistic worship was tied directly to their ethnic status (as almost all religions, cults, and sects were) as an odd people from the eastern lands of the imperial realm.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the multitude of these sects and cults, as well as their understanding of a connection between a person’s ethnic background and religion, none (with the exception of Judaism) bound their adherents exclusively to one God who ruled over all. None of them

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<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 216-17.

<sup>9</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 83-94.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 165.

<sup>11</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 52-53.

declared that all other “gods” were malignant spiritual beings at best. And certainly none of these cults declared that the Creator of all reality had revealed Himself in the form of a crucified and bodily-resurrected Galilean.

This was the most shocking claim of all made by the early Christians. To be crucified was the worst death imaginable in the ancient world. It was the death reserved for slaves and the worst of non-citizen criminals. It was vile, offensive, and disgusting. Cicero famously said of the practice, “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears” (*Rab. Perd.* 5.16 [H. Grose Hodge, LCL]). Reinforcing this point, Jürgen Moltmann observes in his classic work, *The Crucified God*, just how shameful and gruesome the pagan world viewed the claims of this crucified Messiah:

To the humanism [Moltmann’s term for Greco-Roman paganism] of antiquity the crucified Christ and the veneration of him were also an embarrassment. Crucifixion, as the punishment of escaped slaves and or rebels against the Roman empire, was regarded as the “most degrading kind of punishment.” Thus, Roman humanism always felt the ‘religion of the Cross’ to be unaesthetic, unrespectable and perverse.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult for us as modern Christians—removed as far as we are from the socio-historical reality of the ancient world—to grasp just how shocking such a belief was. We must grasp that the proclamation of the crucified Christ was about as far from proper piety as one could get in the Roman world.<sup>13</sup> The cross of Christ was the most irreligious and impious aspect of the Christian *euangelion*.<sup>14</sup> Not only must we grasp this if we are to understand the

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<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974), 33.

<sup>13</sup> As Robert Louis Wilken observes, even as late as the early fourth century, pagan critics still viewed the Christian belief in the crucified Christ with disgust and disdain. Quoting the Latin apologist Lactantius (who himself is likely summarizing the criticisms leveled against Christianity by the pagan critic Porphyry), Wilken writes: “Pagans ‘cast in our teeth’ the suffering of Jesus because they say we ‘worship a man and one who was visited and tormented with remarkable punishment’ (*Div. Inst.* 4.16).” (Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984], 155.)

<sup>14</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 76. See also J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 207, whom Rutledge quotes and draws upon in her work.



distinctiveness of Christianity in the ancient world, we must do so in our current context in a pluralistic society as well. For the proclamation of the crucified Christ is still the most shocking aspect of the Gospel we proclaim and witness to.

### *The Transcendent God of Love*

In conjunction with the exclusivity and cruciformity of early Christianity, a third major factor in its strangeness was its emphasis on an utterly transcendent God who is above all, and yet who loves the world deeply and dearly as his creation. Even among the more philosophically oriented Greek and Roman thinkers who did hold to a type of metaphysical monotheism, the thought that this transcendent deity would in any way care about or be involved in the contingent realm seemed absurd. One did not have contact with this transcendent deity. Rather, it was through the worship of the lesser gods that one engaged in the sacral order of life.<sup>15</sup>

This directly and sharply contrasts with early Christian claims that placed equal emphasis on both the radical transcendence of the Creator God and on His love for, and involvement in, the world. This equal emphasis on the transcendence and immanence of the Creator God is seen in the earliest strata of Christian thought. Paul, in 1 Cor 8:4-6, is a paradigmatic example here and lays out the view quite fully:

*<sup>4</sup>Therefore concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols, we know that “an idol is nothing in the world”<sup>16</sup> and that “there is no god except One.” <sup>5</sup>For even if indeed there are so-called “gods” either in heaven or on earth (just as there are many “gods” and many “lords”), <sup>6</sup>yet for us [there is] one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we [are] unto<sup>17</sup> him, and [there is] one Lord Jesus Christ/Messiah, through whom are all things and we [exist] through him.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Here, I take οὐδὲν εἶδωλον as predicative, “an idol is nothing.” In doing so I follow the thinking of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 340, who believes that the emphasis between the two verbless sayings (οὐδὲν εἶδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ and οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς) is placed upon the nonexistence of idols on the one hand (“an idol is nothing in the world”) and the unique, real existence of the one God on the other (“there is no God except one”).

<sup>17</sup> While it makes for slightly awkward English, I have chosen to maintain the more traditional “unto” gloss of εἰς here, rather than “for.” This is done to better communicate the telic end toward which Christians are destined:

Here we see Paul do several things. First, in v. 4-5, he takes a firm stance on the sole divinity of the one Creator God. There is only one divine reality, namely the Creator God who raised Jesus from the dead. However, this does not mean that Paul believes that there is no spiritual reality connected to these idols. Later, while still on the topic of food sacrificed to idols, Paul will explicitly say that pagan Gentiles who sacrifice to idols are sacrificing to demons—malevolent spiritual beings—rather than to God (10:19-21). Thus, the “nothing” here is most likely in reference to the lack of *divine reality* of the idols, in contrast to the true divinity of the one God. Paul has reduced the “gods” of pagan worship to created beings, and malevolent ones at that.<sup>19</sup> Anthony Thiselton summarizes the matter well:

Paul states that certainly existentially, but probably also in terms of actual ontological structural forces of evil, there are genuine powers that still shape people’s lives, although they are certainly not “gods” (for there is no God but one)...<sup>20</sup>

Second, Paul is almost certainly appropriating the *Shema* of Deut 6:4 here, with its emphasis on the unique singularity of the Creator God of Israel.<sup>21</sup> What is fascinating though, is how Paul reorients the *Shema* around *both* the Father *and* Jesus as distinct persons, without sacrificing either the uniqueness or the singularity of the confession. Rather than two Gods, both

communion with their Creator. God is the source of all life and the goal toward which it is oriented. I thus follow Thiselton in his similar translation of “the goal of our existence” (Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NIGTC, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 636).

<sup>18</sup> Translation is my own based on the NA<sup>28</sup> Greek text.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 197; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 370-71. For a near-contemporary Jewish view of idol worship and polytheism as ending up being little more than a form of atheism (ἄθεότης) in that it does not acknowledge the one true God, He Who Is, see Philo, *Ebr.* 108-10.

<sup>20</sup> Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 632. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 1 Cor. 20.4* (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 12:133), holds a similar view in his exegesis of the passage: “What then? are there no idols? no statues? Indeed there are; but they have no power: neither are they gods, but stones and demons.”

<sup>21</sup> To list all of the commentators who agree with this would be redundant. However, seminal studies on it include Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 97-99, and James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 179-83. See also Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 636-37.

the Father and Jesus occupy the one, unique divine identity.<sup>22</sup> As David Lincicum rightly observes, “It is crucial to grasp, however, that Paul does not present this as a *correction* or an *addition* to the *Shema*, but as an interpretation of it that discloses its true referent.”<sup>23</sup> The radically transcendent Creator God has come so close to humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, as to take on human flesh, be crucified, and be resurrected as the “first-fruits” of the coming New Creation. In Paul’s modified *Shema* we can see in earliest Christianity both the radical transcendence and radical immanence of the Christian God. As part of the *Shema*, Jesus takes part in the same divine identity as the Father, *without* becoming simply another manifestation of the Father (or the Spirit). As Hurtado summarizes the matter:

In short, we have here a splendid and concise example of how the ancient Jewish confession of the uniqueness of the one God appears to have been adapted and widened, so to speak, to accommodate Jesus as a second distinguishable figure who, nevertheless, is uniquely linked with the one God and with a corresponding universal role...the important point to note is that Jesus is linked with God uniquely and that this distinguishes the early Jesus-movement (early “Christianity”) from other forms of ancient Jewish religion as well as from the larger religious environment of the early Roman period.<sup>24</sup>

It is only within this unique, proto-Trinitarian framework that the Creator God remains utterly distinct from his creation, while at the same time becoming human as an act of otherworldly love to rescue it.

Imagine how impious it was to claim that the transcendent and utterly unstained God would deign to even look upon the contingent realm of humanity. Think about how anarchic it was to claim that there was only one true God worthy of worship and that this meant abandoning the gods who upheld the empire. Contend with the fact of how utterly shocking it was to claim

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<sup>22</sup> For a thorough and helpful overview of this reorientation of the *Shema* and the unique divine essence around both the Father and Jesus in the context of “redoubled discourse”, see Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 112-20.

<sup>23</sup> David Lincicum, *Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter with Deuteronomy*, WUNT 2/284 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010; Repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 139. Emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 72.

that the transcendent God had acted fully and finally in the life of a backwater Jewish prophet who had been crucified by Rome, and whose followers claimed had been bodily resurrected, itself an incredulous claim in the ancient world.<sup>25</sup> These claims were not simply odd to the Greco-Roman pagan mind; they were utterly strange and even repugnant.

We can see this in the various upper-echelon pagan criticisms of Christianity. Roman historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius viewed Christians as adhering to a dangerous *superstitio*, a term that, “connoted then religious beliefs and rituals [pagans] deemed excessive, repellant, or even monstrous.”<sup>26</sup> Similar criticisms can be found in voices as diverse as the great physician Galen and the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius.<sup>27</sup> For Celsus (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD)—one of the most erudite examples of such pagan criticism—such beliefs made the Christians out to be a monstrous group who, rather than appreciating the ties that bound people, nations, and their respective gods together within the larger socio-religious hierarchy, instead viewed themselves as...

...actually *above* the temples and traditions and cults of their ancestors; they even—ludicrously enough—imagined themselves somehow to have been raised above the deathless emissaries of [the Great] God, the divine stars and all the other celestial agencies, and to have been granted a kind of immediate intimacy with God himself.<sup>28</sup>

This was the radical character of early, proto-orthodox Christian belief. It was not simply one faith among a vast swathe of other sects, cults, and religions. It was fundamentally a revolution in the very conception of the world and its inhabitants (both human and spiritual). To proclaim the good news of the crucified and risen Jesus was not merely to proclaim freedom to a humanity enslaved by “the rulers,” “the authorities,” “the world-rulers of this darkness,” and “the

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<sup>25</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 32-84.

<sup>26</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 20-36. Hurtado provides an extensive survey of prominent pagan critics and their criticisms in this section.

<sup>28</sup> Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 116.

spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). It was also to proclaim the defeat of these dark forces—of the “gods” who enslaved humanity—and the reality that “the Son of God was revealed, in order that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). And this reality, this great revolution in the conception of the cosmos, was enacted and embodied in the lives and ethics of the early Christians.

### **A New Way of Behaving**

Nearly as jarring as their distinctive beliefs about God, Christ, humanity, and the world, were the early Christians’ ethics. Many of these practices are well noted, but I will focus in on three major ones here. First, was the Christian notion that slaves were no longer simply viewed as property, but rather as persons created in the *imago Dei*, and indeed, if Christians, as brothers or sisters in Christ. Bound servitude was as common throughout the socio-cultural infrastructure of the ancient world as automobiles are in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The practice was assumed by all to be a “natural” part of the ancient economy and it was virtually impossible to imagine a world without such an infrastructure.<sup>29</sup> And yet, with the Apostle Paul’s statements to Philemon to treat the runaway slave Onesimus as “my child,” “my very heart,” and “a beloved brother” (Phlm 10-16), the very conception of an ontological distinction between slave and master is done away with. While Paul could not have feasibly commanded every one of his converts to manumit their slaves (though the overall thrust of the letter hints strongly that Paul was encouraging manumission<sup>30</sup>), he does indeed tell them to live into the reality that, even though they are still in the roles of slaves and free citizens, in the wake of the Christ-event, they are at their deepest levels brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>31</sup> This seed of freedom would eventually flourish with future

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, *Paul*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 177.

Christian voices who, following the logic of the *imago Dei*, would conclude that all slavery was sinful.<sup>32</sup>

Even more distinctive of early Christian praxis though, was the wholesale repudiation of the exposure of unwanted infants. To those of us who are heirs of Christian morality (which is to say, the whole Western world) such a practice seems horrible. In Roman culture however, this was a normal aspect of society. In a patriarchal culture like the ancient Mediterranean, this meant that it was usually unwanted baby girls who were left to die. If they were fortunate they were found and sold into slavery (usually prostitution). Again, this was a normal practice in the ancient world.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Christians expressly denounced it and forbade it among their communities. The mid-second century Christian apologist Justin Martyr delivered a powerful attack on the practice in his *First Apology* (1 *Apol.* 27). Indeed, the only other religious group that was anywhere near as strident in this refusal to engage in infanticide was Judaism, out of which Christianity emerged.

Finally—and most shocking to us—was the creation of the concept of child sexual abuse, precisely by way of the Christian repudiation of the practice. In the pagan world the sexual use of young children, particularly young boys, was not merely permitted, it was often actively celebrated. Greco-Roman poets such as Juvenal, Horace, and Strato used terms like *paiderastēs* (“a lover of boys/children”) to describe what they perceived as the good of sexual activity with children. What the pagan elite viewed as good, the early Christians saw as utter evil and coined a

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<sup>32</sup> Gregory of Nyssa is the first and most notable voice in this regard, yet it carried on through the centuries into the modern era with figures such as William Wilberforce and John Wesley, among others (Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 177-78).

<sup>33</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 144-48.

new term to describe those who did it: *paidophthoros* (“a destroyer/corrupter of children”).<sup>34</sup> As Hurtado observes in the *Didache* (ca. 100 AD) the explicit prohibition, “you shall not corrupt [sexually] children” (*Did.* 2.2) appears alongside prohibitions against murder and adultery.<sup>35</sup> Such disgust with the pagan practice of sexual use of children appears in the work of Christian writers up through the second and third centuries AD. Such prominent voices as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, among others, all condemned the practice as abhorrent.

Other examples of the distinctive nature of early Christian ethical praxis could be demonstrated here (e.g., eliminating the sexual double-standard of male extramarital sex, caring for the poor as full persons, etc.), but the overall point that I have tried to demonstrate is that the distinctive nature of Christian proto-orthodox belief naturally led to equally distinctive ethical practice. The early Christians behaved in such a way as to fundamentally upend some of the basic social structures and practices of the greater Greco-Roman world. Part of their witness to the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ was their very embodied existence and practice as a “strange people” who enacted the inaugurated eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. And in doing so they fundamentally shaped and changed the world in a way totally different from the one they entered into.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: WITNESSING TO CHRIST IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM WORLD

Many readers at this point will be wondering what the point of this historical survey has been. As noted above in the opening section, my contention is that the way forward for us as Christians witnessing to the reality of Jesus Christ is, ironically, not to continually look forward to more relevant presentations of the faith (the typical response on the “conservative” end of the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 167-68. See also John W. Martens, “‘Do Not Sexually Abuse Children’: The Language of Early Christian Sexual Ethics,” in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix, STAC 58 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 227-54, whose work Hurtado draws heavily upon.

<sup>35</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 167.

spectrum), nor to more progressive presentations that seek to align Christianity with culturally acceptable worldviews (more prevalent on the “liberal” end of the spectrum). Ironically enough, both of these impulses stem from a desire to diminish the distinctiveness and “strangeness” of Christianity.

Christianity, however, is born of, and grows as a result of, its strangeness and distinctive practices. We worship a Galilean prophet who we believe is the Word of God Incarnate, who died the most horrific and shameful of deaths so that we might not suffer the weight of our sins. We believe he was resurrected by God three days after his execution, both vindicating him and defeating death and enslaving dark powers. We believe that this Jesus ascended into heaven and will come again to finally wipe away all evil and death from the world.

We must grasp how strange these beliefs are. They are not something that our ancient forebears produced for money, sex, or power (contra Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche). They are strange precisely because they are true Reality. They are light cast into a darkened humanity, whose eyes have forgotten what the day looks like. There is a reason Paul says to the church in Thessalonica, “For you are all sons and daughters of light and sons and daughters of day. We are not of night nor of darkness” (1 Thess 5:5).

It is by this strangeness that we bear public witness to the revolutionary reality of the Christ event. This is all the more so in a pluralistic world. The world we as Christians are moving into is far more akin to the pagan world of antiquity than we realize. There are many gods: gods of money, gods of industry, gods of power, gods of self. There are many dark practices commonly accepted and called good, such as the disposal of unwanted infants behind sterilized clinic doors, the objectification of human beings, and the dark spectre of slavery persists in a world where sexual power puts price tags on those made in God’s image.



In a world that looks increasingly like the pagan world of the Roman Empire, our witness, our place in the public square, needs to be that of Christians in the truest sense of the word. It is in speaking of the reality of the Creator God that we bear witness to the goodness of creation. It is in proclaiming Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected that we bear public witness to the defeat of sin, death, and evil by the Lord of all the world. It is in proclaiming the humanity of every unborn and unwanted child that we bear witness to the fact that God's love does not extend merely to those who have voices to speak for themselves. It is in speaking against the objectification and enslavement of humans for sexual gratification that we proclaim the God who breaks the chains of bondage.

How are Christians to bear public witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic age? Paradoxically, we do so not by looking forward, but by *looking backward*. If we can understand that the distinctiveness—indeed the strangeness—of Christianity was, and is, one of its greatest strengths in bearing public witness to Christ and his Kingdom, then we might just be able to follow in the steps of our forebears, and learn what it means to be “strange” once more.

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