

Unmasking Idols: Five Things the Early Church Was Known For. Life is sacred

The early church had a pretty radical view of life that directly challenged the deeply rooted, idolatrous practices of the Greco-Roman world, especially regarding the treatment of women and children.

One glaring example of this cultural mindset was the huge imbalance in the ratio of men to women. In many areas of the Roman Empire, there were about 130 men for every 100 women. This skewed ratio was largely due to practices like infanticide, sex-selective abortion, and the abandonment of unwanted baby girls. As scholars like Rodney Stark and Larry W. Hurtado point out, many Greco-Roman families favoured male children, leading to a disturbing pattern of neglect and killing of baby girls, who were often seen as less valuable. Tom Holland notes that in a society obsessed with strength and legacy, girls were frequently sacrificed, especially in poorer households where they were considered financial burdens.

In contrast, the early church took a bold stand against this devaluation of life. Tim Keller and Glen Scrivener explain that Christians believed in the *imago Dei* (the idea that everyone is made in God's image, as mentioned in Genesis 1:27), which meant that all human life—whether male or female—was sacred and valuable. This belief inspired early Christians to rescue abandoned infants, especially girls, and raise them as their own. This countercultural approach helped the early church grow, attracting women and families who were drawn to a community where everyone was treated with dignity.

By defending the sanctity of life, the early church pushed back against the idolisation of status and power that justified the oppression of the vulnerable. This revolutionary ethic laid the groundwork for a compassionate and equal society.

However, as our society increasingly sheds our belief in the *imago Dei*, we increasingly see people being valued for what they do or can do and not for an intrinsic value. Like in the early church, we need to draw on who he is and how he sees us to confront the idols of our times.

Passage. Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 6:1-7

These passages describe how the believers shared everything they had, ensuring that no one among them was in need. This communal approach affirms the value of each person. But this didn't come without its challenges, as our second passage illustrates. Luke points out the ethnic differences and suggests there was an inherent difference in valuing one group of people over another.

Howard Marshall says, "...this was but a symptom of a deeper problem, namely that the Aramaic-speaking Christians and the Greek-speaking Christians were dividing into two separate groups, the

latter being more radical in its attitude to Judaism..."¹ The way the Holy Spirit directed them upheld Jesus' alternate Kingdom that the early church became known for.

What were some of the things the early church was known for that upheld the sanctity of life?

1. Compassion and Care.

The early church's care for the sick and marginalised was evident in their practices. Acts 3 tells the story of Peter and John healing a lame beggar, reflecting the church's belief that every individual deserves dignity, healing, and hope. Paul also taught that the body of Christ consists of many parts, each with its own value (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), reinforcing the idea that all lives contribute to the whole.

2. Counter-Cultural Stance

The early Christians often found themselves at odds with the cultural norms surrounding them, which included practices like infanticide and slavery. For example, the widespread practice of exposing unwanted infants to the elements was prevalent in Greco-Roman society. The early church's teaching on the sanctity of life directly confronted this ideology, advocating for the protection and care of all lives.

3. Hope and Resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus formed the foundation of early Christian hope, affirming life over death. Paul emphasises this in his letters, teaching that death has been defeated and that believers have eternal life in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). This belief transformed the way early Christians viewed life, death, and the value of every individual.

What are some of the idols of our age that the sanctity of all life unmasks?

- * **Consumerism:** The early church rejected the idolatry of wealth and materialism, instead valuing communal support and generosity.
- * **Power and Status:** The early church challenged the idol of power by emphasising servanthood and humility, as seen in Jesus' teachings and the apostles' lives.
- * **Individualism:** The communal nature of the early church directly countered the idol of individualism.
- * **Violence and Retribution.** The early Christians advocated for peace and reconciliation rather than the idol of retaliation and violence.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, Acts: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 133.

Reflection Questions.

1. In what ways can our church prioritise shared resources and support for those in need, mirroring the communal practices of the early church? Reflect on something for us as a whole church and, specifically what your small group could do to foster a culture of generosity
2. In what ways could our church uphold the sanctity of all lives? Reflect on something for us as a whole church and specifically what your small group could consider.

Sources.

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