



5 Christian Distinctions

Tim Keller, one of my favorite authors/preachers wrote an article in 2020 called, “*5 Features That Made the Early Church Unique*”. This is a large excerpt of it.

In the first three centuries, Christians were persecuted more than any other religious group. Because they refused to honor other gods or worship the emperor, they were seen as too exclusive, too narrow, and a threat to the social order.

So why, if Christians were seen as offensive and were excluded from circles of influence and business and often put to death, did anyone become a Christian? Larry Hurtado explores this question in two books, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* and *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*.

One main reason, Hurtado explains, was that the Christian church was a unique “social project.” They were a contrast community, a counterculture that was both offensive and yet also attractive to many.

But what made the Christian community so different?

New Identity

Hurtado points out that the basis for this unusual social project was the unique religious identity of Christians. Before Christianity, there was no distinct “religious identity,” since your religion was simply an aspect of your ethnic or national identity. If you were from this city, or from this tribe, or from this nation, you worshiped the gods of that city, tribe, or people. Your religion was basically *assigned* to you.

Christianity brought into human thought for the first time the concept that you *chose* your religion, regardless of your race and class. Christianity also radically asserted that your faith in Christ became your new, deepest identity, while at the same time not effacing or wiping out your race, class, and gender. Instead, your relationship to Christ demoted them to second place. This meant, to the shock of Roman society, that all Christians—whether slave, free, or highborn, or whatever their race and nationality—were now equal in Christ (Gal. 3:26–29). This was a radical challenge to the entrenched social structure and divisions of Roman society, and from it flowed at least five unique features.

1. The early church was *multi-racial* and experienced a unity across ethnic boundaries that was startling.

See the description of the leadership of the Antioch church as just one example (Acts 13). Throughout the book of Acts we see a remarkable unity between people of different races. Ephesians 2 is testimony to the importance of racial reconciliation as a fruit of the gospel among Christians.

2. The early church was a community of *forgiveness and reconciliation*.

As we have said, Christians were often excluded and criticized, but they were also actively persecuted, imprisoned, attacked, and killed. Nevertheless, Christians taught forgiveness and withheld retaliation against opponents. In a shame-and-honor culture in which vengeance was expected, this was unheard of. Christians didn’t ridicule or taunt their opponents, let alone repay them with violence.

3. The early church was famous for its *hospitality to the poor and the suffering*.

While it was expected to care for the poor of one's family or tribe, Christians' "promiscuous" help given to *all* poor—even of other races and religions, as taught in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)—was unprecedented. (See Gary Ferngren's essay "The Incarnation and Early Christian Philanthropy.") During the urban plagues, Christians characteristically didn't flee the cities but stayed and cared for the sick and dying of all groups, often at the cost of their own lives.

4. It was a community committed to the *sanctity of life*.

It wasn't simply that Christians opposed abortion. Abortion was dangerous and relatively rare. A more common practice was called "infant exposure." Unwanted infants were literally thrown onto garbage heaps, to either die or be taken by traders into slavery and prostitution. Christians saved the infants and took them in.

5. It was a *sexual counterculture*.

Roman culture insisted that married women of social status abstain from sex outside of marriage, but it was expected that men (even married men) would have sex with people lower on the status ladder—slaves, prostitutes, and children. This wasn't only allowed; it was regarded as unavoidable. This was in part because sex in that culture was always considered an expression of one's social status. Sex was mainly seen as a mere physical appetite that was irresistible.

Christians' sexual norms were different, of course. The church forbade any sex outside of heterosexual marriage. But the older, seemingly more "liberated" pagan sexual practices eventually gave way to stricter Christian norms, since the "deeper logic" of Christian sexuality was so different. It saw sex not just as an appetite but as a way to give oneself wholly to another and, in so doing, imitate and connect to the God who gave himself in Christ. It also was more egalitarian, treating all people as equal and rejecting the double standards of gender and social status. Finally, Christianity saw sexual self-control as an exercise of human freedom, a testimony that we aren't mere pawns of our desires or fate (see *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*).

Loving Challenge

It was because the early church didn't fit in with its surrounding culture, but rather challenged it in love, that Christianity eventually had such an effect on it.

Could essentially the same social project have a similar effect if it were carried out today?

From My Heart,

Billy