



# THE BEREHA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## So We Can Know God

“[T]he biblical writers measure the present in the light of their understanding of the past. The psalmist strengthens faith and builds up hope by calling to mind the great deeds of God (e.g. Psalms 105-107). . . . The history and the imagery of the past is applied to the present in order to reveal dimensions of the situation that would otherwise be concealed.”

“In so far as God is involved in an event in the past, reflection on that event is the means . . . of apprehending God in a way that reaches beyond the limits of our immediate experience.”  
- Colin Brown, *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* (Academie Books, 1987), 49, 59

A few observations . . .

- Psalms 105-107 are hymns that review Israel’s history as the way to “make known [the LORD’S] deeds among his people” (105.1).
- The psalms are framed by thanksgiving and praise, putting the focus on the LORD, not the community.
- As the community shared the hymns, the people came to “know God” which, according to Jesus, is the essence of “eternal life” (John 17.3).

## John’s Stand for Jesus (1)

David Anguish

In a statement that has become so well known that the dictionary.com website includes it in its terms to be defined, the American philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The dictionary explains, “Studying history is necessary to avoid repeating past mistakes.”<sup>1</sup>

I propose a variation on Santayana’s statement: “Christians who are not familiar with the past may be unduly alarmed about challenges in the present.” Having introduced this idea in broad terms last time, I will begin to elaborate here, focusing first on some challenges the earliest Christians faced.

In 2016, Marquette University Press published a book from a university lecture by Larry Hurtado entitled, *Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?*<sup>2</sup> Hurtado was a historian, believer, and New Testament scholar who succumbed to leukemia in November 2019.<sup>3</sup> His title is ironic, focusing on the amazing reality of Christianity’s growth in the first four centuries despite a pervasively hostile culture.

Christians were viewed with suspicion, ridiculed, and ostracized from social and civic gatherings, trade guilds, and other groups who had patron deities. Surrounded by people who scoffed at the idea that Jesus was God incarnate, they were called “atheists,” because (1) their monotheistic view of God was out of step with their world, and (2) they refused to acknowledge in any way the many accepted gods, not even to pledge allegiance to the empire. Some died for their stand.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this hostility against Christians, so many declared allegiance to the Lord Jesus that, by the 4th century, Christianity was officially tolerated by the Empire (313, Edict of Milan) and then legalized (380, Edict of Thessalonica).

Our culture has not generally been as hostile to the faith, but

## These Uncertain Times

With COVID-19 currently *the* story, our present circumstances are new and different, at least for us. Those who experienced the Spanish Flu epidemic a century ago might understand.

I've read several reflections on and lessons to take from the situation—from social media posts to more elaborate essays. In my judgment, one of the best was written by Scott Sager, Vice President of Church Services at Lipscomb University, and minister of the Church of Christ in Green Hills in Nashville, TN.

In a concise, yet still comprehensive essay, he considers the epidemic—and all disease—in light of The Fall, the expectation inherent when we meet at the Lord's Table, the Incarnation, and the influences on the outlook of many modern believers from the Reformation, Descartes, and Augustine.

Choosing one excerpt was no little task, but note this paragraph, about halfway through:

*"It all goes back to Genesis 3. We call that story, 'The Fall.' Satan tempted Adam and Eve, they fell victim to the temptation and became slaves of sin. It would be nice to say today, 'Sin deals only with our spiritual life, but doesn't affect our physical life.' But scripture makes it clear when sin entered our world—it entered ALL of our world. When sin began to ravage the world, it began to ravage our physical bodies, our emotional health, our psychological being and our spiritual standing. And sin didn't stop with the individual, but through Adam and Eve laid waste to all people and to the entire creation as well."*

Click [here](#) for the entire essay.

there is evidence that things have changed, the result of a climate where

the people whom ordinary Christians meet, to whom they must address the gospel, have been told over and over by the media, on the basis of some recent book or other, that the Jesus of the Gospels is historically incredible and that Christianity is therefore based on a mistake.<sup>5</sup>

Lest we become unduly alarmed by the changes and challenges, let us pause to recall that one of the most important factors for the influence of Christians in the second and third centuries was their use of writings that aimed "to allay rumors about Christians and . . . deflect or dampen negative attitudes and harsh treatment of them."<sup>6</sup>

In truth, this use of writings to counter the hostility was already evident in the New Testament documents in the first century. In particular, Hurtado took note of 1 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. We can add the epistles of John.

Keep in mind that the community to whom John wrote had experienced desertions (1 John 2:18-19). The deserters were influenced by false prophets (4.1) who were against Christ, that is, "antichrists" (2.18; ESV cf. vv. 22-23; 2 John 7) who refused to "confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4.2-3). Jesus' followers very much found themselves at odds with their world (4.4-6).

John's response to that challenge deserves study and emulation. We'll look at it more in part 2.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/those-who-cannot-remember-the-past-are-condemned-to-repeat-it?s=t>, accessed 3/10/20.

<sup>2</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries? The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2016* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016). Hurtado elaborated more on the ideas in *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of his life and work, see Chris Keith, "Larry W. Hurtado (1943-2019)," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 46, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 13. Available online [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> See *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2, 9.2 in Michael W. Holmes, ed. & trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 310-311, 316-317.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Hurtado, *Why On Earth*, 75-78, especially notes Justin Martyr's second century writings in this regard.

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