

Ancient martyrs offer lessons to modern evangelicals

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Evangelical Christians in the 21st century can learn from the example of 2nd century Christian martyrs—many of whom were female, New Testament scholar Lynn Cohick said.

“There is no pink or blue discipleship in the martyrdom accounts,” she said.

Cohick, director of Houston Theological Seminary and distinguished professor of New Testament in the School of Christian Thought at Houston Christian University, delivered the Frank and Pauline Patterson Lectures at B.H. Carroll Theological Seminary.

Cohick asserted “the lasting impact of 2nd century Christianity is found in its martyrs.”

Motherhood and martyrdom

She pointed to the story of martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas to illustrate the ironic links between motherhood and martyrdom in the theology of the early church. On the surface, they seem like polar opposites, she observed.

“Motherhood brings forth life. Martyrdom extinguishes life,” she noted.

However, mothers who died as martyrs helped the church in its process of “reconceiving the family” as based on shared faith commitment to Christ and resurrection hope rather than physical kinship.

As the church recognized the lifegiving power found in the exemplary deaths of martyrs and their identification with the Passion of Christ, they

“redefined the traditional purpose of motherhood,” she observed.

Perpetua rejected the privileges that were her birthright in a noble family, choosing instead to identify as a Christian—even when it meant her death. Felicitas, a pregnant slave girl, gave birth to a daughter just before she entered the arena to face wild beasts beside Perpetua and fellow believers.

Ancient writers who recorded the story of Perpetua and Felicitas drew theological meaning from their “embodied female experience” of labor pains, childbirth and nursing a baby, Cohick noted.

The early church saw a close connection between the selfless provision of mother’s milk to nourish a child and the martyrs’ willingness to shed their blood in the arena, she observed.

Imitation of Christ

While some historical critics suggest the martyr stories of early Christianity drew inspiration from the “noble death” of Stoic philosophy or from the Maccabean martyrs of Judaism, Cohick emphasized the way early Christians related martyrs’ deaths to the Passion of Christ and the example of the apostles.

“One cannot overstate the importance of Jesus’ death” to the ancient church’s theological understanding of martyrs’ obedience to the point of death, Cohick said. Through their deaths, the martyrs embodied their commitment to the imitation of Christ, she explained.

“Their bodies bore witness to their Christology,” she said.

Cohick contrasted the example of the ancient Christian martyrs and contemporary radical Islamist martyrs, such as Hamas.

Christian martyrs in the ancient church did not seek death—for themselves

or others—but accepted execution as a consequence of their nonviolent refusal to engage in emperor worship or other acts they equated with apostasy, she explained.

On the other hand, radical Islamists actively pursue their own deaths and the deaths of those whom they consider infidels, and if other Muslims are killed in the process, they believe it simply hastens their entry into Paradise, she said.

Both ancient Christian martyrs and modern Islamist radicals are motivated by deeply held religious views and an understanding of life after death, but the similarity ends at that point, she noted.

“Not all martyrs are the same,” Cohick said.