



HEROES + HERETICS

NEW NUCLEUS SERIES: **Alex Bunn** encourages us to learn from history

HERO 1: HIPPOCRATES

We evangelicals rarely know much history. We are wary of venerating the lives of 'saints', but as a result we forget the trail blazers and role models, who fought key battles for gospel truth and values. The Bible encourages us to learn from history, as often 'these things happened as examples and were written down as warnings for us'.¹

I have called this series *Heroes and Heretics* because we need to celebrate the heroes, but also to oppose heresy. You may think that heresy is too strong a word, but the stakes are high. Jesus himself warned against the false teachers and bad shepherds of his day who 'shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces'.² Maybe the concept of heresy is shunned due to the violence of the medieval church, which at times hunted down the unorthodox. Whilst not every cherished Christian belief or church tradition is a gospel truth worth fighting

over, there are primary issues,³ such as the lordship of the risen Christ,⁴ on which the church stands or falls. More subtly, there are heretics who distract us from gospel priorities⁵ which can be equally damaging. So I am not advocating witch hunts, simply pointing out that the Lord and his Apostles warned us to be alert, to 'test everything', but also to 'hold on to the good',⁶ to be critical of heresy, but also to applaud and emulate the heroes.

Let's start with a hero from the pagan context into which Jesus and his followers launched the church. Imagine you are a medical student doing your paediatric attachment in the ancient Roman Empire. As you do your newborn baby checks, you are guided by the authorities of the day. You have read the textbook by Soranus, the top Roman physician who describes the routine for a baby check:

*'The newborn infant is examined to see if it is perfect in all its parts, members and senses; that its ducts, namely of the ears, nose, pharynx, urethra and anus, are free from obstruction; that the natural functions of every member are neither sluggish nor weak; that the joints bend and stretch; that it has due size and shape and is properly sensitive in every respect...'*⁷

So far so good. You will have identified any significant anatomical, neurological or developmental abnormalities. But the purpose of the exam was very different to today:

*'...and by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant not worth rearing is recognised.'*⁸

Screening for abnormalities was performed not to identify need, but to weed out defective children to be discarded. The ancient pagans had little regard for human life until it had proved its worth to society.

heroes + heretics

If the child was disabled in any way, it was regarded in the same way as a troublesome animal:

*'Mad dogs we knock on the head; the fierce and savage ox we slay; unnatural progeny we destroy; we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal.'*⁹

Infanticide was so accepted as to be routine. Here is a letter from a travelling father to his expectant wife at home, in which his command to kill is quite casual:

*'If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy, keep it, if a girl, discard it. You have sent me word "don't forget me". How can I forget you? I beg you not to worry.'*¹⁰

The modern equivalents to pagan attitudes are clear; much prenatal screening can be defined as a 'search and destroy' policy. Those humans who are least developed are sacrificed for the interests of the strong. Peter Singer has even revived the idea that infanticide is merely an ethical extension of modern abortion policy.¹¹ The assumption underlying this is that the value of human life is on a sliding scale (see diagram).

THE PAGAN SCALE OF HUMAL VALUES

INTELLECTUAL



ATHLETE



SICK OR DISABLED



HEALTHY ANIMAL



INFANT OR
FRAIL ELDERLY



LIFE IN THE
WOMB



HERO 1: Dr Hippocrates

Dr Hippocrates made a radical departure from pagan tradition. His now famous oath bound doctors to show unconditional respect for all human life, wherever it was on the scale of pagan value. His followers swore that they would never abort or intentionally kill their patients, which would have been totally unnecessary had not the contemporary culture practised this routinely:

*'I will not give poison to anyone, though asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a plan. Similarly I will not give a pessary to a woman to cause abortion.'*¹²

Interestingly, our first hero was not a Christian. There was no way he could have been, as he was born 400 years before Christ. So it is strange that the idea of the sanctity of life is now seen as religious dogma, when it was a pagan medic who first taught it! This should not surprise Christians, though, as the God of the Bible gives all men 'general revelation', in the form of conscience, so that we all recognise what has been called 'natural law':

*Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.*¹³

Doctors no longer swear oaths, preferring instead to recognise merely a code. But Hippocrates recognised the need for 'transcendent values', accountability to a higher power than themselves:

*'I swear by Apollo, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath.'*¹⁴

The church later embraced Hippocrates' ethics as fitting with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hippocrates was simply recognising the image of God in man that separates man from other animals:

*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*¹⁵

What did it cost Hippocrates personally to practise a radical new ethic? Did he lose business by rejecting the standard business model of the ancient physician? Was he pressurised by relatives with an interest to break his oath? Was he ridiculed by the establishment? We will never know, but we can thank him for laying the foundations of Western medical ethics for over two millennia. His ethical code transformed Western medical practice to become distinctively patient-centred, professional, radically egalitarian and compassionate. His ethical code and personal example is still a high standard for Christians to aspire to. But thanks to this Greek physician who followed his conscience against the prevailing culture, our profession today mostly practises medicine fitting with the image of God in each of our patients.

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SUMMARY

HIPPOCRATES'
RADICAL CONTRIBUTION

- Recognised the doctors' accountability to a higher power
- Rejected the pagan scale of human value
- Introduced the sanctity of life into medical practice
- Made the patient's interests his first concern

REFERENCES

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