

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Christian Apologetics in the Early Church:

Christian Apologists Who Had the Greatest Impact on Modern Apologetics

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Survey of the History of Christianity

by

Stuart D. Smith

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Introduction

Since the very beginning of the Christian faith, its adherents have been dealing with challenges to the truths of Christianity. These challenges have come from both within the Christian faith through heretical teachings and from without through pagan challengers, atheists, and those of other religious convictions. These challenges have existed since the first century. Many of the same anti-Christian arguments, all of which have been soundly defeated, are still being used today. The Greek word *apologia* is the derivative of the word apologetics, which is translated as “defense” or “vindication.”¹ In the context of the NIV translation of 1 Peter 3:15, “answer” is an *apologia*.² Apologetics is a branch within theology that endeavors to provide reasons and justification, based on rational beliefs, for the truth of the Christian faith.³ Human beings, created in the image of God, are naturally inclined to demand evidence to support their beliefs. Christians can have faith the Christ not in spite of the evidence, as some would think, but *because of* the evidence. “God wants us to take a step of faith in the light of evidence, rather than a leap in the dark.”⁴ The early Christian apologist recognized this, as do apologists today. They wrote extensively on a range of apologetic issues. Of all the time periods of church history, none have more of an impact on the modern church more than the apologists of the early church.

1 Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 24.

2 The Apostle Peter encourages believers to “[a]ways be prepared to give an *answer* [apologia] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis added).”

3 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Weaton: Crossway, 2008), 15.

4 Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 38.

The Early Apologist

The early Christian church faced challenges to the faith in the form of many different heresies over multiple years. Overcoming these required clear thinking on the part of godly men who stood strong on the Word of God. Heresies such as ebionism threatened the beliefs about the nature of salvation. Whereas the heresies of monarchianism, Arianism, and semi-arianism threatened the very core of Christianity by bringing into question the very nature of Christ. Additionally, false teachings espoused by Apollinarius, Nestorius, and others centered on the nature of Christ and did not follow Christian doctrine which stated that Christ was fully God and fully man, begotten and not created, eternal and one in nature with the Father. The early apologists addressed these, and other matters through various writings that made an *apologia* (defense) for Christianity.

Justin Martyr: Reason and Rationality

Justin Martyr was a prolific second century apologetic writer, with such works as *First Apology*, *Second Apology*, *Dialogue with Trypho*, and others. Born around AD 100, Justin flourished during the reign of Roman emperor Antonius Pius, yet died as a martyr about AD 165 after being condemned for his Christian faith under Iunius Rusticus.⁵ Justin “was born to pagan parents in Samaria” and became a Christian in AD 130.⁶ His *First Apology* was written to the

⁵ Simon Hornblower, Anthony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), s.v. “Justin Martyr.”

⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 395.

Emperor Titus, his sons Verissmus and Lucius, and the whole Roman Senate.⁷ The purpose of his appeal was “a request for a change in legal procedure, so that Christians [would] be tried on specific charges rather than for the name alone.”⁸ In his treatise, Justin makes an appeal to reason and truth to the Emperor. Despite his appeal to reason, Justin should not be considered a rationalist; something of which he was wrongly accused.⁹ He writes, “Reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honour and love only what is true.”¹⁰ Justin goes on to provide a defense for Christians unjustly condemned (Chapter 4), Christians charged with atheism (Chapters 5 and 6), and an appeal that Christians must be tried based on their actions (Chapter 7). He writes of the rationality of the Christian faith when he says that we should use the “rational faculties He [God] has...endowed us with” in determining how to serve God.¹¹ In writing on the rationality of Christian service to God, he states, “What sober-minded man, then, will not acknowledge that we are not atheists, worshipping as we do the Maker of this universe, and declaring, as we have been taught, that He has no need of streams of blood and libations and incense.”¹² Justin’s *Second Apology* was addressed to the Roman Senate.¹³ Herein, some in Rome seemed to say, perhaps sarcastically, that Christians should simply commit mass suicide so that they could be with God and no longer trouble the Empire. Justin addresses this by stating

7 Justin Martyr, trans., *First Apology*, trans. Roberts-Donaldson English Translation (n.p.: n.d.), 1, accessed August 3, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>.

8 Paul Parvis, “Justin Martyr,” *The Expository Times* 120, no. 2 (2008): 57.

9 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 721.

10 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 2.

11 Ibid., Chapter 10.

12 Ibid., Chapter 13.

13 Justin Martyr, trans., *Second Apology*, trans. Roberts-Donaldson English Translation (n.p.: n.d.), 1, accessed August 3, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-secondapology.html>.

that Christians “fearlessly confess” that God did not create the world without purpose, and that Christians would be acting contrary to God’s purposes if they killed themselves.¹⁴ He goes on to explain that God is withholding judgment and destruction of the world, despite the evil in the world, because of Christian presence in the world.¹⁵ Justin espoused the superiority of Christian doctrine over other human teachings by writing, “Our doctrines, then, appear to be greater than all human teaching.”¹⁶ Overall, Justin Martyr had a strong believe in the rational and reasonable nature of the Christian faith. His appeals to Roman authorities were based on a Christian worldview, which certainly conforms to the reality of the world.

Tatian: Defense of Christianity Through Attacks on Paganism

Tatian was a Mesopotamian Christian apologist and pupil of Justin Martyr between AD 150-165.¹⁷ In AD 172, Tatian left the Roman church and returned to his homeland to establish his own school.¹⁸ It was most likely during this time that he wrote *Diatessaron*, a compilation of the four canonical Gospels.¹⁹ He is also known for his work *Oratio ad Graecos* (Address to the Greeks).²⁰ In *Oratio ad Graecos*, Tatian describes Christians as “barbarians” because of their separation from culture, and implores the Greeks not to be hostile to Christians or “look with ill

14 Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, Chapter 4.

15 Ibid., Chapter 7.

16 Ibid., Chapter 10.

17 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. “Tatian.”

18 M. Whittacker, ed., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), s.v. “Tatian,” accessed August 4, 2014, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/ps/i.do?action=interpret&id=GALE%7CCX3407710886&v=2.1&u=vic_liberty&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&authCount=1.

19 Ibid.

20 *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “Tatian.”

will on their opinions.”²¹ He goes on to point out the problems with Greek philosophy and writes, “I could laugh at those also who in the present day adhere to his [Aristotle’s] tenets... for those who have neither beauty, nor wealth, nor bodily strength, nor high birth, they have no happiness, according to Aristotle.”²² Tatian continues his scathing ridicule of Greek philosophers. He shows disdain for Heraclitus, whom he calls “arrogant” and “stupid” for accidentally killing himself by covering his body with cow dung in order to attempt to cure dropsy.²³ He adamantly disagrees with the philosopher Zeno who claims God is the author of evil.²⁴ He laughs at the “old wife’s talk of Perecydes, and the doctrine inherited from him by Pythagoras, and that of Plato...”²⁵ Following these critiques, Tatian spends some time actually defending Christianity. He writes of Christian worship of God alone (Chapter 4), the Christian doctrine of creation (Chapter 5), the fall of man (Chapter 7), and the believer’s union with the Holy Spirit (Chapter 15). Interspersed throughout these doctrinal statements, Tatian continues pointing out the flaws of the Greek philosophers. For example, he notes that the Christian view of resurrection is counter to the Stoic beliefs of reincarnation and universal salvation.²⁶ He shows contrast between Christian beliefs and “heathen divinities” writing about the Greek gods who take on different physical forms: Rhea a tree, Zeus a dragon, Leto a bird, etc.²⁷ Tatian defends the incarnation of Christ by writing, “We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle

21 Tatian, trans., *Tatian's Address to the Greeks*, trans. J.E. Ryland (n.p.: n.d.), 1, accessed August 3, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tatian-address.html>.

22 Ibid., Chapter 2.

23 Ibid., Chapter 3.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., Chapter 6.

27 Ibid., Chapter 10.

tales, when we announce that God was born in the form of a man.”²⁸ In his closing chapters, Tatian espouses the credibility of Moses over and above the “heathen heroes” and that Moses is “not only older than Homer, but than all the writers that were before him.”²⁹ In his concluding statements, Tatian identifies himself as a “disciple of the barbarian philosophy” and says he is ready for any challenges to the doctrines that he has set forth in *To the Greeks*.³⁰ Tatian’s apologetic methods make use of both defensive and offensive apologetics. In some instances, he offers logical statements in defense of Christian doctrine; and in others, he points out flaws or errors in the thinking of Greek philosophers. However, his writing style is “painted as almost un-Christian by modern scholars, although it seems at least no stronger than the Reformers’ rhetorical style.”³¹

Tertullian: Reason and the Art of Asking Questions

Tertullian was a second and third century Christian apologist and theologian.³² Born about AD 160 in the city of Carthage in North Africa, his formal education was in the legal field.³³ Tertullian was one of the most prolific early church authors, with some thirty-one works attributed to him.³⁴ One of his most well know, *The Apology*, is similar in nature to Justin

28 Tatian, *Address*, Chapter 21.

29 Ibid, Chapters 30 and 31.

30 Ibid., Chapter 32.

31 Grant Van Leuven “Tatian, His Works, and His Theology” (master’s thesis, Pittsburgh Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 2008), 2.

32 "Tertullian." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. <http://www.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/content/entry/columency/tertullian/0> (accessed August 10, 2014.)

33 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 721.

34 Everett Ferguson, “Tertullian,” *The Expository Times* 120, no. 7 (2009): 314.

Martyr's apologetic works. *The Apology* was written to the rulers of the Roman Empire and was an appeal to justice for Christians facing accusations for their faith. In this work, Tertullian makes a very elegant defense of Christianity, with a strong appeal to reason and truth. He writes, "if, finally, the extreme severities inflicted on our people in recently private judgments, stand in the way of our being permitted to defend ourselves before you, you cannot surely forbid the Truth to reach your ears by the secret pathway of a noiseless book."³⁵ Given his legal background, Tertullian understood the value of human reason as it related to the defense of Christianity.³⁶ In a style reminiscent of Proverbs, he anthropomorphizes "Truth" when he writes, "She [Truth] has no appeals to make to you in regard of her condition, for that does not excite her wonder. She knows that she is but a sojourner on the earth, and that among strangers she naturally finds foes; and more than this, that her origin, her dwelling-place, her hope, her recompense, her honours, are above."³⁷ Tertullian shows his skill in legal argumentation when he points out the inconsistency in how the Roman authorities treat Christians differently than other criminals. Interestingly, he does this through a question. He asks, "If, again, it is certain that we are the most wicked of men, why do you treat us so differently from our fellows, that is, from other criminals, it being only fair that the same crime should get the same treatment?"³⁸ This skill at making a point by asking a question is found throughout *The Apology* with Tertullian asking over two hundred questions in this work. In many of his other writings, he also uses this technique. In *On Idolatry*, he asks some eighty questions; in *An Answer to the Jews*, he

35 Tertullian, trans., *The Apology*, trans. Rev. S. Thelwall (n.p.: n.d.), 1, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html>.

36 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 722.

37 Tertullian, *Apology*, Chapter 1.

38 Ibid., Chapter 2.

asks over fifty questions; and he makes over seventy interrogatives in *The Prescription Against Heretics*. In the true style of a lawyer, Tertullian does not ask a question he cannot answer. In *Prescription*, he asks, “Who that asks such a question does not in fact reply to it himself...?”³⁹ Tertullian’s longest work was *Against Marcion*, which is comprised of five different books. This work “shows by the care and thoroughness of his argument that after two generations the teachings of Marcion were still a threat to the church.”⁴⁰ Tertullian’s emphasis on faith was balanced by his belief that “there was a significant role for human reason.”⁴¹ His sharp, lawyer’s mind and his eloquent writing style was indicative of his education. Tertullian was one of the most impactful early church apologists.

Conclusions

The Apostle Paul was known for “reasoning” from the scriptures. He used logical conclusions to dialog with his audience; yet he kept the focus on Christ. The early church apologist also placed an emphasis on reason and truth. They understood that Christianity, unlike the Pagan religions, was not based on myth and legend; but was instead based on historical evidence and reason. These themes are found in the writings of the early apologist, and these same ideals have been carried through the generations to modern Christian apologists. It cannot be overstated the vital role the Holy Spirit plays in the Christian’s faith. In the Gospel of John, Christ says, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of

³⁹ Tertullian, trans., *The Prescription Against Heretics*, trans. Rev. Peter Holmes (n.p.: n.d.), 1, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian11.html>.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 314.

⁴¹ Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 722.

truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me (John 15:26).”⁴² But the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not the only way by which the Christian can know that Christianity is true. “Reason is a tool to help us better understand and defend our faith.”⁴³ The early Christian apologists knew this. Their themes and styles of invoking reason, logical arguments, and asking questions to point out flaws in another’s view are still widely used today. As did Justin Martyr, apologists such as Alvin Plantinga, Ravi Zacharias, and William Lane Craig place a premium on the reasonableness of the Christian faith. Frank Turek and Greg Koukl often use Tertullian’s technique of asking questions to point out flaws in thinking. While most modern Christian apologists would not be as scathing as Tatian in their critique of others, there is still a tremendous value in offensive apologetics when dealing with the arguments of the so-called new atheist. The apologetic techniques of the early church have stood the test of time, and their value to and impact on the modern church is still as important today as it was in the first three centuries of Christianity.

42 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

43 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 48.

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