

Lesson 4  
The Early Church To  
Early Reformation

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# Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Conflicts with the State
- 4. **Early Apologists**
- 5. Defining the Faith
- 6. Christian Life

# Early Apologists

## Lesson 4

“We do not seek to flatter you....but request that you judge on the basis of a proper and thorough investigation.”

- Justin Martyr

# Early Criticisms

- Through the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and well into the 3<sup>rd</sup>, there was no systematic persecution of Christians. It was illegal to be a Christian: but those who followed the new faith were not sought out by the authorities.
- Persecution & martyrdom depended on local circumstance, and particularly on the goodwill of neighbors. If for any reason someone wished to harm a Christian, all that had to be done was present an accusation.
- Christians felt the need to refute rumors & misconceptions regarding their beliefs & practices.
- Such was some of the ablest Christian thinkers & writers, known as the “apologists” – i.e. “defenders”

# Wild Rumors & Lofty Criticism

1. Christians gather every week to celebrate what they call a “love feast.” This was done in private, and only those baptized were admitted.
2. Christians called each other “brother” & “sister.” Many spoke of their spouses as their “brother” or “sister.”

Therefore, Christians worship was an orgiastic celebration filled with eating & drinking to excess, then extinguishing the candles, and venting their lust in indiscriminate & even incestuous unions.

Also, the Romans failed to distinguish between liberal Gnostics, who called themselves Christians & who were guilty of sexual immorality, from Christians.

# Wild Rumors & Lofty Criticism

1. Christians spoke of being nourished by the body & blood of Christ. Some spoke of Him as if He were a little child.
2. When Christians found an abandoned infant they would pick it up & take it home with them.

Therefore, they have an initiation rite, where Christians conceal a newborn in a loaf of bread, and then order the new comer to cut the loaf. When this is done, they all join in eating the warm flesh of the infant. Because the new convert is the main perpetrator of the crime he or she will remain silent.

# Criticisms More Difficult To Refute

- A number of cultured pagans who had taken the trouble to learn about Christianity claimed that it was intellectually wanting. (Celsus' *The True Word*, and Christian writer Minucius Felix quoting Cornelius Fronto's treatise against Christianity).
- The enmity against Christianity on the part of many cultured pagans was not a purely intellectual matter, but deeply rooted in class prejudice.
- The cultured & sophisticated could not conceive of the possibility that the Christian rabble could know a truth that was hidden from the studied & elite.
- One of the main objections was that Christianity came from the barbarian Jews, verses enlightened Greek or Roman philosophy.



# Intellectual Criticism

1. The Jewish & Christian God is ridiculous. It claims on one hand that God is omnipotent, high above every creature. On the other hand they depict God as a busybody who is constantly delving into human affairs. He goes from house to house listening to what was being said, and checking on what was being cooked.

This is sheer contradiction and nonsense.

# Intellectual Criticism

2. Jesus was a criminal condemned by Roman authorities.
3. If he was truly the Son of God, why did he allow himself to be crucified?

“What could be the purpose of such a visit to earth by God? To find out what is taking place among humans? Does he not know everything? Or is it perhaps that he knows, but is incapable of doing anything about evil unless he does it in person?” - Celsus, Christian antagonist

Christians could not engage in the accepted expression of political loyalty, so they appeared as a threat to the Roman state. To the Roman mind burning a pinch of incense was a very small thing to demand.

# Intellectual Criticism

4. Christians preach & truly believe that they will rise again after death. On the basis of that belief they face death with an almost incredible obstinacy.

Why would you desire to leave this life which is certain, and for the sake of another which is at best uncertain? What happens to those bodies that have been mangled or totally destroyed?

Early Apologist

# Primary 2<sup>nd</sup> & Early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Apologists

- **Justin** – the most famous early apologist – *Dialogue with Trypho* - earliest source on Christian worship
- *Letters to Diognetus* – **author unknown**
- **Aristides** (before 138 A.D) – only recovered in modern times
- **Tatian** – *Address to the Greeks*
- **Athenagoras** – *A Plea for the Christians*, and *Three Books to Autolycus*
- **Minucius Felix** – *Octavius*
- **Tertullian** – *Apology*
  
- These apologists help us discern the main objections that pagans raised against Christianity, as well as the manner in which the most cultured members of the church responded to them, and how Christian theology developed in the very act of responding to pagan objections.

# Christian Faith & Pagan Culture

- To be a Christian required a commitment to the sole worship of God and any deviation from that commitment was a denial of Christ.
- All Christians agreed that the worship of the gods (including the Emperor), & anything related to that worship, must be rejected. This is the reason why they abstained from many civil ceremonies, in which sacrifices & vows were made to the gods.
- Christians also objected to the study of classical literature, where the gods played an important part, and where all sorts of immorality was ascribed to them.

# Christian Faith & Pagan Culture

- While all agreed on the need to abstain from idolatry, not all agreed on what should be a Christian's attitude toward pagan culture.
- This included the work & thought of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, & Stoics, whose wisdom was admired by many.
- To reject all of this would be to set aside some of the highest achievements of the human intellect: to accept it could be seen as a concession to paganism, and the inroad of idolatry into the church.

# Two Ways of Dealing with Pagan Culture

- Some insisted on a radical opposition between Christian faith & pagan culture.
- The full on resisters appear to be convinced that many of the heresies that circulated were the result of attempts to combine pagan philosophy with Christian doctrine.
- Tatian, Justin Martyr's most famous student, wrote *Address to the Greeks*. This work was a frontal attack on all that the Greeks considered valuable, and a defense of the barbaric Christians.



# Two Ways of Dealing with Pagan Culture

- Tatian pointed out that Greeks had learned:
- Astronomy from the Babylonians
- Geometry from the Egyptians
- Writing from the Phoenicians
- The same was true of philosophy & religion, since the writings of Moses are much older than those of Plato, or even Homer (cir. 12<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).
- To make matters worse the Greeks, in reading the wisdom of the barbarians, misunderstood it, and thus twisted what the Hebrews knew as truth.
- Tatian also asked why anyone would want to worship gods that were so morally corrupt themselves.

# Two Ways of Dealing with Pagan Culture

- Justin did not share Tatian's negative attitude toward philosophy. Justin worked to show & explain the connection between Christianity & classical wisdom.
- This did not mean he was willing to compromise his faith.

# Two Ways of Dealing with Pagan Culture

- Justin claimed several points of contact between Christianity & pagan philosophy:
- A supreme being of which every other being derives its existence.
- Socrates & Plato affirmed life beyond physical death.
- Plato knew that there are realities beyond those of the present world, and thus theorized another world of eternal realities.
- Justin did disagree on the manner in which some philosophies were interpreted: i.e. Christian hope was not based on the immortality of the soul, but rather on the resurrection of the body.

# Two Ways of Dealing with Pagan Culture

- How, then, can one explain this partial agreement between the philosophers & Christianity? Justin's answer is to be found in the doctrine of the Logos.
- Logos is a Greek word meaning both "word" & "reason."
- According to a long standing Greek tradition the human mind can understand reality because it shares in the Logos or universal reason that undergirds all reality.
- John's Gospel affirms that Jesus, the Logos, or Word, became flesh. Thus, according to Justin, what has happened in the incarnation is that the underlying reason behind the universe, the Logos or Word of God, has come in the flesh.
- Justin added that there were also among the pagans those who knew the same Logos, however remotely. Philosophers of old knew the Logos "in part," but those who have seen Jesus in His incarnation know Him "fully."
- What Justin did was open the way for Christianity to claim whatever good it could find in classical culture.

# Arguments of the Apologists

- Pagans called Christians “atheists” because they had no visible gods -
- Christians responded that in that case many of the greatest philosophers & poets were also atheists.
- Some ancient writers had affirmed that the gods were human invention, and that their vices were worse than those of their worshipers.
- Some idols were made of gold & precious stones, and had to be guarded against thieves. Why couldn't the gods protect themselves?

# Arguments of the Apologists

- Objection raised against the final resurrection-
- If God made all bodies out of nothing, why would it be impossible for the same God to create them anew? Even after they had been dead & scattered.

# Arguments of the Apologists

- Accusations that Christians were immoral -
- How can anyone believe that our worship is orgiastic & incestuous, when the rule of our conduct is such that every evil thought must be cast aside? Some pagan worship is fraught with immoral acts.
- Christians are subversive –
- They do refuse to worship the emperor or any other creature, but in spite of that they were very loyal citizens.
- The Emperor needs to be served, not worshiped. Those who serve him best are those who pray for him and for the Empire to the only true God.

# Arguments of the Apologists

- Christians were subverting the very fiber of society by withdrawing from its main civic & religious functions, and thus acting as if they were not valid or even evil –
- Christians were creating an empire wide network at a time when the government was very suspicious of all societies or gatherings not organized by the state.
- These subversive undertones of Christian teaching & practice formed the basis of continued persecution by some of the most able emperors of the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. This may explain the fact that as Roman officials attained a fuller understanding of Christianity, persecution rather than declining became ever fiercer.



# Conclusions

- The writing of the apologists witness to the tensions in which early Christians lived.
- While rejecting paganism, they had to deal with the valuable elements the culture had produced. While accepting the truth to be found in the philosophers, they insisted on the superiority of Christian teachings.
- While refusing to worship the Emperor, and even while persecuted by the authorities, they continued praying for the Emperor & admiring the greatness of the Roman Empire.

- Address to Diognetus – author unknown
- “Christians are no different from the rest in their nationality, language or customs.... They live in their own countries, but as sojourners. They fulfill all their duties as citizens, but they suffer as foreigners. They find their homeland wherever they are, but their homeland is not in any one place.... They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey all laws, but they live at a level higher than that required by law. They love all, but all persecute them.”



# Bonus Notes

2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Century

Teachers of the Church

# 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Teachers of the Church

## Bonus Notes

“Ours is the great Teacher of all wisdom, and the whole world including Athens and Greece, belongs to Him.”

- Clement of Alexandria

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Teachers

- During the early decades of the life of the church, most of what Christians wrote addressed a concrete problem or a specific issue. Not unlike some of Paul's Epistles.
- Ignatius of Antioch – a series of letters – 1<sup>st</sup> to deal with the “Docetists” who said, “Jesus only seemed to appear truly human.”
- Clement of Rome – late 1<sup>st</sup> century – *Epistle of the Corinthians*
- *Didache or Teachings of the Twelve Apostles* - author unknown – gave guidelines for Christian life & worship
- *Shepherd of Hermas* – brother of a bishop in Rome – mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century – deals with forgiveness of sins after baptism

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Teachers

- Toward the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the challenges of Marcion & the Gnostics required a different response. The heretics had created their own systems of doctrine, and to this the church at large had to respond by having some of its teachers offer equally convincing explanations of orthodox belief. Because the speculations of the heretics were vast in scope, the response of Christian teachers were equally vast. This gave rise to the first writings in which one can find a complete description of Christian truth.

# Irenaeus of Lyons

- Born around 130 in Asia Minor
- Died in 202, probably as a martyr
- Two surviving works
- *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*
- *Exposure and Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So-Called* (also known as *Against Heresies*)
- Writings of Irenaeus are an excellent witness of the faith of the church toward the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century



# Clement of Alexandria

- Probably born in Athens
- His parents were pagans
- Became a Christian as a young man
- Due to his desire to find deeper instruction in the Christian faith, he became a student of Pantaenus in Alexandria
- After his teacher's death he became the primary Christian instructor in Alexandria.
- His goal was to convince pagan intellectuals that Christianity was not the absurd superstition that some claimed it was.
- Died in 215 while traveling in Asia Minor
- *Exhortation to the Pagans*
- Was the author of the oldest Christian hymn whose authorship is known. Translated by Lowell Mason in 1831 – *"Shepherd of Tender Youth, Guiding in Love and Truth"*

# Tertullian of Carthage

- Appears to have been a native of Carthage in North Africa
- Traveled to Rome & was converted at about 40 yr of age
- Returned to Carthage
- Appears to have been a lawyer, or at least well trained in rhetoric
- First Christian to write in Latin
- *On Baptism* is the oldest existing paper on the subject
- *To His Wife* gives us an interesting glimpse into marriage among 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians
- *On the Witness of the Soul*
- *Prescription Against the Heretics*

# Origen of Alexandria

- A student of Clément's
- From Christian parents, father was martyred while he was a young man or teenager
- Later settled in Caesarea
- Martyred in Tyre at about the age of 70
- *The Hexapla* – the Hebrew OT written in 6 columns with the Hebrew text, a transliteration to Greek, and 4 Greek translations – That allowed a reader who did not know Hebrew to at least have some idea of its pronunciation.
- *Against Celesus* – Celesus was a Christian antagonist
- *De Principiis (or On First Principles)*
- Wrote numerous commentaries on the books of the Bible