

Church History I

First Baptist Church Dandridge
Dr. Justin Terrell
Jterrell@fbcdt.org

Session Five

“Apologetics the Early Church”

Introduction

Throughout the first and second centuries, the church suffered many painful attempts from the enemy to derail the Christian movement. Beginning in the days following Pentecost, the Jews began persecuting the church, trying to stamp out what had become a serious threat to first century Judaism. Then, the Romans began a series of intense persecutions against God’s people, trying to remove what had become a serious threat to the political and social interests of the Roman Empire. However, through Christ’s strength, which produced a unique boldness and faithfulness in the lives of believers, the church continued to endure such attacks and expand throughout the world. But then arose a new threat that sought to diminish the church from another angle: spiritual warfare. If the enemy couldn’t destroy the church through physical pain and death, he would try to devastate the church through spiritual lies and distortions of the gospel – what is known as false teaching – which has been a standard tactic of Satan from the beginning in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). However, just as God prevented the church from being destroyed through deadly persecution, he preserved the church from spiritual destruction by raising up intellectual Christians to defend the faith from false doctrine. These spiritual defenders are known to us as the “apologists” of the early church.

A. The Apologists

1. The Ministry of Apologetics

- a. **Apologist:** The word “apologist” comes from the Greek word “*apologia*” (ἀπολογία), which literally means, “a word against,” or practically, “speaking in defense.” Thus, the theological discipline of Christian Apologetics is an effort to defend the Christian faith from attacks against its beliefs and to expose the falsehoods of opposing religions. Those who engage in this discipline are known as “apologists.”
- b. **Ministry:** In the early centuries of the church, Christian apologists were involved in defending the faith from various threats – from the most basic and frivols accusations, to the most intellectual and philosophical denials and attacks. Some apologists merely tried to convince the Roman government that Christians were good, law-abiding citizens, who paid their taxes on time. Others took on various religions and philosophies that aimed to lead people away from the true gospel. These apologists would engage in public debate and teaching, send letters to government leaders and religious teachers, or write books arguing for the authentic beliefs and doctrines handed down by the apostles, which ultimately came

from God. Many of these apologists were trained in Greek philosophy and culture, which gave them public credibility and enabled them to engage in intellectual discussion.

2. The Most Influential Apologists of the Early Church

- a. **Aristides** – A converted philosopher from Athens, who dedicated an apology to emperor Antoninus Pius in AD 140. Many apologies were directed to political leaders.
- b. **Athenagoras** – A converted Platonist philosopher, who wrote an apology to emperor Marcus Aurelius called “*Intercession on behalf of the Christians.*” He was concerned about accusations that Christians were promoting atheism, cannibalism, and incest. Athenagoras was considered one of the most forceful and persuasive of the apologists.
- c. **Melito of Sardis** – The bishop of Sardis from AD 170-180, who made special defenses regarding the unity between the Old and New Testaments. He once made a special trip to Palestine to seek information about the Hebrew Scriptures, which produced the first known Christian list of books contained in the Old Testament. This list of Old Testament books is what we find in our Protestant Bibles today.
- d. **Theophilus of Antioch** – The bishop of Antioch, who wrote his “*Apology to Autolytus*” (AD 180), a Pagan friend. His goal was to show Autolytus that idolatry is false and Christianity is true, and that Christians are good, virtuous, and law-abiding citizens.
- e. **Minucius Felix** – He wrote in Latin rather than Greek, but had a wide knowledge of Greek and Roman culture, which makes some think that he was of North African descent. He wrote an eloquent apology called “*Octavius,*” which is set in the form of a dialog between a Christian and a Pagan, and argues for why Christianity is superior.
- f. **Irenaeus of Lyons** – He was the first great Christian theologian of the patristic age. Irenaeus was Greek, born into a Christian family in Asia Minor in the early part of the second century. As a boy, he was taught by Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who had been a disciple of John the Apostle. Therefore, Jesus taught John, John taught Polycarp, and Polycarp taught Irenaeus. Following Polycarp’s martyrdom, Irenaeus moved to Lyons in southern France, where he became one of the elders in the church. Following a storm of persecution, which resulted in the death of Photinus, the bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus was elected bishop and remained until his death around AD 200. He wrote a lengthy book called *Against Heresies*, which defended the Christian faith against Gnosticism. Outside of a powerful defense, this book tells us a great deal about the beliefs of Christians in the second century.
- g. **Justin Martyr** – He is considered the greatest of the second century apologists. Justin was born to Greek parents in Palestine and studied Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism, which gave him a desire to understand eternal beauty, truth, and goodness. However, after being inspired by the boldness of Christian martyrs, he started thinking about Christianity for himself. One day, while walking along a seashore in Ephesus, he met an older man who began discussing with him the meaning of life. After introducing him to the Old Testament, explaining how Christ was the fulfillment, Justin came to faith in Jesus. He spent the rest of

his life teaching Christian Philosophy and writing apologetics. His works included: *First Apology*, dedicated to emperor Antoninus Pius; *Second Apology*, dedicated to the Roman Senate; and a book called “*Dialogue with Trypho*,” which was an academic debate between Justin and a Jew, where he explains how Christianity is the true fulfillment of the Old Testament. Justin was later executed for being a Christian in AD 165, from which he received his posthumous name, *Justin Martyr*.

B. The Attacks and Defenses

1. Gnosticism

- a. **Background:** Gnosticism proved to be the earliest and most formidable threat to the church in the first and second centuries. There’s evidence that John the apostle was writing against it in his epistle, 1 John, which came in the mid-to-late first century. The early church fathers believed that the Gnostic belief system was developed by Simon the Magician (Acts 8:9-24). Most of our knowledge of this movement was limited to the writings of the church fathers until 1945, when an Arab peasant of Nag Hammadi (Egypt) discovered a large earthenware jar buried on a mountain, containing an important collection of ancient Gnostic documents that gave us inside information about the movement. It should be noted that Gnosticism wasn’t believed by a single unified group, but there were many Gnostic groups that believed slightly different things (Justinians, Marcionites, Nicolaitans, Sethians, Valentinians, etc.).
- b. **Beliefs:** The most basic tenet of Gnosticism was that its followers possessed a special, mystical knowledge, or “*gnosis*,” from God, that was secretly given to their group(s). It was claimed that Jesus had given this secret knowledge to his apostles, which had only been passed down to the Gnostics – it was impossible to understand the gospel correctly without it. Therefore, the Gnostics had their own sacred texts containing this special knowledge, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* (AD 140), which holds over a hundred alleged sayings of Jesus.
 - **Creation:** According to the Gnostics, the universe and earth were not created by the supreme God, but by an inferior and foolish being that fell from heaven called the “*Demiurge*” (Greek for “architect”). He was one of countless “aeons” or spiritual beings that God created (generated) but fell into error and created the physical world. Thus, everything in the physical world is corrupt and evil. The Demiurge was the ruthless and unloving God of the Old Testament, which made them deny the Old Testament as a spiritual book. Thus, the supreme God and the Demiurge (creator of the physical universe) were enemies each other. Since humans have physical bodies, our bodies are considered a part of this evil and fallen creation. The only item of any value is the human soul, which was a divine spark from the spiritual world that was trapped inside the wicked bodies created by the Demiurge.
 - **Salvation:** Therefore, the goal of Gnosticism wasn’t to overcome our sinful nature and separation from God, but for our souls to break free from the sinful body and return to the spiritual realms of God – and only Gnostics had the secret knowledge of how one could do this. Everyone else is living in ignorance, without eternal hope.

- **Jesus:** God sent Jesus into the world to save a special group of elect souls from enslavement to their bodies. Jesus was not God, but the highest in rank of “aeons.” If bodies were evil, how did Jesus come in human flesh? He didn’t. Some taught that Christ descended upon a man named Jesus at his baptism, taught and worked through him, and then departed back to the spiritual realm during his crucifixion. Others taught that Jesus was not a real man at all, but only “*seemed*” (Docetism) to have a body and flesh. He was only spirit. It was said that if Jesus walked on the beach, no one would see his footprints in the sand. Jesus was the “*Heavenly Revealer*” who came down from the spirit world to give the elect the true knowledge of the way home.
 - **Heaven:** To reach heaven, the soul had to travel after death through the spiritual realms above the physical earth, and these realms were controlled by hostile and demonic stars and planets. To make the journey safe and successful, the soul needed the secret knowledge of the Gnostics to get there, including passwords and spells.
- c. **Proponents:** While there were many Gnostic teachers, such as Valentinus (AD 137-154), the most famous was Marcion of Rome (AD 140-155). He broke away from the church and established a new form of Gnosticism. He taught that the Old and New Testaments were completely opposed to each other, with the Old Testament God being the Demiurge, which was represented by Judaism; and the New Testament God was the supreme God, the heavenly Father revealed by Jesus Christ. Marcion threw out the Old Testament and produced his own version of the New Testament – removing all elements of Judaism and including only Luke’s Gospel and most of Paul’s letters. Marcion was the first one to attempt defining what constitutes the New Testament. While people followed his teaching for a few hundred years, his sect finally disappeared around the sixth century.

2. Defense by Irenaeus

- a. **Exposed the Problem of Diversity:** After researching the teachings of the many Gnostic groups, he outlined how each one had a little different twist on the supposed “secret knowledge” (gnosis). He argued that if they possessed a “secret knowledge” passed down from Jesus through the apostles to the Gnostic groups, why wouldn’t they all agree on what they secret knowledge was? He also argued that of the churches that the apostles truly planted, there is widespread agreement on the basic teachings of authentic Christianity – and none of those churches claimed to possess a “secret knowledge.”
- b. **Revealed the Consistency of the Old and New Testaments:** Irenaeus carefully argued that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same God. He demonstrated that Jesus had to become the “second Adam,” in human flesh, in order for him to live in perfect obedience (reversing Adam) and make final atonement for sin. Jesus had to be fully God and fully human to be the Savior of the world.
- c. **Defended the Goodness of Creation:** He showed that God’s original creation was perfect and good, only to be distorted by human sin – not created by a fallen aeon. However, the final element of Jesus’ mission is to recreate the heavens and the earth back into its perfect condition, where God and man will be together for eternity. Therefore, souls are not the only

part of a person than will be in heaven, but a resurrected body – which completely contradicts the claims of Gnosticism.

3. Outcomes

- a. **The Rule of Faith:** Unlike the Gnostic churches, each true church acknowledged a “*rule of faith*,” which is a summary of accepted apostolic teachings (i.e., confession of faith). This summary would later be called “The Apostles’ Creed.”

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting.”

- b. **The Catholic Church:** Since all the churches planted by the apostles were in basic agreement on the core doctrines of faith, there was a new emphasis on making sure such churches were recognized as belonging to the true order. If a church could be linked to an original apostle, it was considered to be in the “Catholic Church” – which isn’t to be confused with the Roman Catholic Church, but understood according to the Greek word “*katholikos*” (καθολικός), meaning “universal” or “throughout the world.” In essence, to be in the “Catholic Church” meant that it was founded on the teachings of the true apostles, and ultimately founded by Christ.
- c. **The True New Testament:** Following Marcion’s attempt to limit the New Testament to the Gospel of Luke and some of Paul’s Letters, while adding the false teachings of the Gnostics, the Church decided to make a definitive decision of what should be included as the truly inspired and inerrant books of the New Testament, known as the “canon” (Greek word for “rule” or “standard”). It was agreed to accept a writing if (1) it was written or dictated by an apostle (e.g., Paul, John, Peter, Matthew, etc.), or (2) it came under an apostle’s supervision (e.g., Luke, who wrote under Paul’s authority; Mark, who wrote under Peter’s authority). Most of the New Testament books in our Bibles today were accepted by the time of Irenaeus – Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2-3 John, and Revelation were approved by the fourth century. However, by the year AD 367, in his “*39th Festal Letter*,” Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, published a list of the 27 New Testament books that are found in our Bibles today. In AD 397, the Council of Carthage agreed on the same list of New Testament books, thus becoming the official New Testament canon for the church.

As a result of the false teaching of Gnosticism, the church’s defense resulted in greater unity, more precise theology, and better church organization.