

## The Apologists

This lesson is entitled, “Athens and Jerusalem: The Apologists.” I want to begin with prayer from one very famous apologist whom we will talk about in this lecture, Clement of Alexandria. The prayer that I will use is a hymn, “Shepherd of Tender Youth.” Clement wrote this, we think, around 200 AD. This is one of the earliest Christian hymns we have, and it is a very beautiful hymn and prayer. As I pray it you will notice several references to children. There is reference to children in stanza one and to infants in stanza three. There are more stanzas, but we will use only three. I think this is a wonderful hymn to use in services of infant baptism. As I pray this, I want you to name some children you want to pray for in your own heart. You could name your own children or relatives or friends. We will pray for our children today and those of our family and friends. Think of names of several children, it should be easy. Let us pray.

Shepherd of tender youth, guiding in love and truth  
 Through devious ways: Christ, our triumphant King,  
 We come Thy Name to sing;  
 Hither our children bring, to shout Thy praise.

Thou art our holy Lord, the all-subduing Word,  
 Healer of strife: Thou didst Thyself abase,  
 That from sin's deep disgrace,  
 Thou mightest save our race, and give us life.

So now and till we die, sound we Thy praises high,  
 And joyful sing: infants, and the glad throng,  
 Who to Thy church belong,  
 Unite to swell the song to Christ our King. Amen.

Christianity not only suffered physical opposition in the persecutions. From the very beginning Christianity was opposed intellectually by people who attempted to show that it was wrong and to destroy it by intellectual arguments. The first opposition to Christianity on this level, as on the level of physical persecution, came from the Jews. We have to look for a moment at Christianity and Judaism. In the New Testament itself there are answers from Christians to the Jewish attacks on Christianity. These answers generally are along these lines: “Christianity is a continuation of Judaism, it is the true fulfillment of Judaism, Christ fulfills the law, and the church is the new Israel.” We see that throughout the New Testament. One of the primary places in the New Testament where we see Christian apologists at work is in Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7. The whole book of Hebrews takes up that theme as well. So in the New Testament there are several examples of the apologists answering the attacks of Judaism on the Christian faith.

As we move outside of the New Testament into church history those Christian apologies against Judaism continue. The most outstanding of those is a book written by the church father, Justin Martyr, called *The Answer to Trypho*. Perhaps a better title would be *A Dialogue with Trypho*, because it is really a debate between a very educated, Hellenistic Jew whose name is Trypho and the church father Justin Martyr. In the debate Justin Martyr has two main points he wants to get across to his Jewish friend. First he gives his personal testimony, telling how he became a Christian. That is a very important part of the apologists’ work, not only as they speak to the Jews but also as they speak to the pagans. Justin tells how he searched for many years for true faith. He explored the Greek philosophies and

finally came to Christianity in which for the first time he found something that truly satisfied him. Trypho said it was unfortunate that Justin gave up following Plato, a man of great repute, to cast his lot in with a group of rather insignificant and unimportant people like the Christians. The other part of Justin's argument had to do, as you would expect, with Justin attempting to show from the Old Testament (since the Jewish Scriptures were the Bible they could agree on) that the Old Testament itself predicted the coming of Christ. Justin becomes quite enthusiastic about this and begins to heap up texts that he hopes will overwhelm Trypho and convert him to Christianity. One of the texts that Justin was particularly proud of is Psalm 96:10, which he read as, "The Lord reigns from the tree." Trypho did not recognize this verse and could not find it in his Bible. They then realized that Justin was using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament while Trypho was using the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible those words, "from the tree," are not there. It says, "The Lord reigns," but not "The Lord reigns from the tree." Apparently a Christian scribe had added those words as he was copying the Septuagint, thinking it would be a nice idea to make that prophecy more explicit. Thus on that score Justin was wrong. He did counter by saying, "I think the rabbis took it out because they do not want prophecies of Christ in their Bibles," but that was not what happened at all. The Christian scribe had added it. On stronger ground Justin argued that to see Christ in the Old Testament at all is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. In saying this Justin was reflecting the teaching of 2 Corinthians 3:16, "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." There he did present the Gospel, I think, in a very clear way to Trypho. According to Justin's book the debate went on for two days, and neither one was able to convince the other. But it is a very impressive debate because it is so courteous. The church father and the Jewish scholar argue back and forth but without calling each other names—in fact they argue with much politeness. Finally Trypho ends his part of the debate this way: "I confess I am delighted with our discussion. We have found more than we expected, more indeed than we possibly could have expected. And if we could do this more frequently we should be greatly helped in searching the Scriptures themselves. But since you are on the eve of departure and expect to sail any day, please remember us as friends when you are gone."

That was a very beautiful conclusion to this Jewish man's argument. Justin is polite as well, though he does want to get in one more word before he leaves. Justin prays for Trypho and his friends, saying, "I could wish nothing better for you than this, gentlemen, that you may come to the same opinion as ourselves and believe that Jesus is the Son of God." That is probably one of the most famous apologies written by Christians countering or answering the attacks of Judaism on the early church. It is unfortunate that the high level of respect did not continue in later centuries. The Babylonian Talmud added anathemas, curses against Christians. And Christians, including the great teacher Chrysostom of Constantinople, began to think of Jews as Christ-killers. Thus the level of debate degenerated significantly in following years, which produced great problems both for Christians and for Jews.

But in the second century the real opponent was not Judaism but paganism, just as by the second century the persecutions were coming not from the Jews but from the Romans. There were many anti-Christian writings. Some of those were very crude, and some were very sophisticated. There were crude examples of graffiti drawn on the walls of the cities attacking Christianity. One example of such graffiti, which I have, shows the cross, the Christian symbol, and Christ on the cross but drawn in the form of a donkey. It says in Greek, "Alexander worships his God." It is interesting that this piece of graffiti comes from the city of Rome. It shows that even people involved with graffiti in Rome in the first and second centuries were using Greek rather than Latin. Greek was commonly spoken even in Rome in the first century and into the second century before it was generally replaced by Latin. This kind of opposition and persecution was certainly there. We do not know anything about the Alexander mentioned in the piece of graffiti, but someone disliked him and his God. So they drew this crude figure in Rome on the wall of a building in order to put down Alexander and his God. There were also some very sophisticated attacks

on Christianity. The most important, I think, was a book written by a man named Celsus. His book was called *True Reason*. It is the oldest literary attack on Christianity. It comes from the second century. Celsus depicts himself in the book as a detached pagan, a kind of neutral observer. He is interested in religion but does not have any strong feelings about it. But obviously his real purpose in writing the book is to try to give what he would present as an objective evaluation of Christianity. He uses practically every argument that has been invented up to the modern time against Christianity and does it well. We do not have a copy of *True Reason* by Celsus; they have all been lost. But the church father Origen in the next century answered Celsus' writing and thereby preserved about nine tenths of it. Origen quoted Celsus rather frequently in his rebuttal. Thus by reading Origen's *Contra Celsum* (Against Celsus) we can get a good idea of what Celsus was saying.

Let me talk about some early apologists like Origen, but even before him. These apologists wrote books to give a defense for the faith. I will mention three of those, all from the second century. The first is *The Epistle to Diognetus*. That is an anonymous letter; we do not know the author. He was writing to someone named Diognetus. He invites this man to consider the superiority of Christianity to both Judaism and paganism. It is really a very beautiful letter. It is one of the most beautiful and moving writings from the period of the church fathers. If you have the opportunity to read it I recommend it as something I think you will enjoy. This letter describes Christians as "the soul of the world." God has put them in the world, and there they exist, rather like the soul, to bring truth, light, and honesty into the world. It is disappointing in reading the church fathers, as I will point out in later lectures, that there is so little about grace in their writings. Grace seems almost to go underground in the post-apostolic period, only to reappear with Saint Augustine. When we do find some exception to that it is very satisfying. The epistle to Diognetus comes closer, I think, to a real understanding of the Pauline doctrine of grace than any document I have yet read prior to Saint Augustine.

Another writing from this period is *The Octavius* by Minucius Felix. This is also a conversation, a dialogue, between a Christian whose name is Octavius and a Roman pagan whose name is Caecilius. The pagan argues against Christianity intellectually, and the Christian refutes his argument point by point. *The Octavius* is rather sharply reasoned but it is also rather winsome. Again the level of courtesy is high in this writing. It is fascinating to read *The Octavius* by Minucius Felix to see how almost all of the arguments that have been used through the years against the church were already there and how pertinent the replies to those arguments really are. This book could be entirely fiction and it probably was, though it may have been based on some true incident. In this book the Roman pagan Caecilius is finally converted by the arguments of Minucius Felix and becomes a Christian. The third example I would like to give here are the writings of Justin Martyr. So we have Justin in both sections, with his answer to Trypho against the Jews and his first and second *Apologies*, which he wrote to defend Christianity against the pagans. I think most people would say Justin Martyr is the most outstanding of all the apologists.

I want to think now about two widely different approaches that emerged in the church as to how to answer attacks on Christianity, and particularly how to understand the relationship of Christianity and culture. This will bring us into two other apologists, Clement and Tertullian. The question that the church faced very early on was this: how is Christianity to be presented in the Greco-Roman world? Christianity had moved out of the Jewish world in that first great cultural move into the Greco-Roman world. And how should Christians think about this culture? Was it all bad or all good, or was it somewhere in between? The Christian connection with Judaism was clear but it was not clear at first as to what the Christian connection was to be with pagan philosophers and pagan culture. It is interesting to see the church in certain parts of Africa wrestling with the same problem today as first and second generation Christians try to decide how to view their African past, the ancestors and the traditional

African religions. Should there be a clean break with and total rejection of all of that? Or was there something there that in a sense pointed toward Christianity and was fulfilled in Christianity? This same issue that the church in the Greco-Roman world faced in the second century our brothers and sisters face today. Two quite different answers were given to this question, what do we do with the culture? These two answers were illustrated by two very different men who both lived in North Africa at about the same time. Both were passionate with a determination to defend the Gospel against its enemies and to extend it through evangelism.

One of those men was Clement. We call him Clement of Alexandria since there was a Clement of Rome who lived earlier, and so it is important to distinguish between them. And I think the “of Alexandria” in Clement’s name is important also because it gives us some understanding of Clement’s origin, where he came from. He came from Alexandria, which was the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world at this time. It was a great Greek city founded back in the days of Alexander. A great intellectual capital of the Hellenistic world, it was the city where the Septuagint had been translated. This was the first major translation project in history, when Jews who were then speaking Greek translated their Scriptures into Greek so that those who did not know Hebrew, both Jews and others, could read the Scriptures. Alexandria was the home of Philo, the great Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who attempted to accommodate Judaism to Hellenistic thought. And it was a place of continuing philosophical discussions. Neo-Platonism arose here in the generation or two after Clement of Alexandria as the major intellectual force in the Greco-Roman world. Alexandria had the world’s greatest library. This library was later destroyed, unfortunately, and much of the collection of great books of antiquity was lost due to the destruction of the library of Alexandria. But during the days when Clement lived that great library flourished. Thus Clement was part of that very intellectual center.

When the question was asked, “Should Christians repudiate all this or embrace it?” Clement’s answer was pretty clear. He said this, “If someone needs food, let him milk the sheep. Let him shear the wool if he needs clothing. In this way let me benefit from the fruit of Greek erudition.” He liked it. He loved it. And he was not about to abandon it. “If this learning is of benefit to me then it is important not to lose it.” He tried to make that point not only for himself but also for the whole church. That was a very bold move on his part. It was not completely new; we can find something of the same sentiment in Justin Martyr who said, “Wherever there is truth it comes from Christ and so it belongs to us.” But it was Clement who really took hold of this and began to crusade for it. Clement took over for the church not only the Jew’s Old Testament—the Christians said, “That is ours. It is part of the Christian canon.”—but Clement also says, “Great philosophy is ours too.” This was a kind of “take over” movement, when the Christians rather than rejecting learning and culture took it over and viewed it as their own. Of course it was not of equal value with the Scripture, but it was of real value. Philosophy was for the Greeks what the Law is for the Jews: a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. Thus it has great value in leading people toward the truth, and it has great value for Christians to study as well, to see what pagans really did know and to understand that as part of God’s gift to the church as well. Of course, worldly philosophy is incomplete. True and full wisdom is found only in Christ. Henry Chadwick puts it in his book, *Early Christian Thought in the Classical Tradition*, “Clement’s reverence for the greatest and noblest achievements of Greek humanism is never unqualified [he understood that it did not stand with the Bible]. He loves Plato and Homer but he does not read them on his knees.” He studied Plato and Homer, but then he would get on his knees to read Scripture. So often in Clement’s writings he talks about “that which the chiefs of philosophy only guessed at, the disciples of Christ have both apprehended and proclaimed.” Philosophy is very rudimentary, it is very preparatory, it is very partial, it is mixed with error, but it has value, and Christians should receive it as something of value.

This was a bold move and an important one, but of course it was not without its dangers. When men like Clement and later Origen began to talk like this in the intellectual center of Alexandria, there was always the danger that too much of the pagan past would somehow get mixed up with the understanding of Christianity. The danger of syncretism is always there on that side of thinking. That danger was something that would cause great distress to the church. In Alexandria before much longer there developed the Valentinian Gnosticism that we will look at later, which was a kind of amalgamation of Hellenistic-Greek thought and Christian thought. This became the intellectually respectable form of Christianity for many people in Alexandria. Thus the danger of syncretism was there and proved to be disastrous for the church for a certain period of time. The tradition that Clement represented also continued in Origen and in Eusebius of Caesarea, and we will also see it later in church history.

Let me now go to the other side. There was a very strong voice in opposition to all this about 1000 miles west of Alexandria in another African city, Carthage. Carthage was the very wealthy capitol of the province of Africa. A man whose name was Tertullian lived there at about the same time as Clement was in Alexandria. Tertullian was a very forceful individual and a very important one. He had been converted in his middle-age years; I think he was about 40 years old. He was a lawyer and a gifted speaker. He was a very dogmatic individual who saw things very clearly, and he did not see things the way Clement did. Let me read you his most famous quotation on this topic, and you will see exactly where Tertullian is coming from: “What then has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the academy to do with the church? What have heretics to do with Christians? Our instruction is from the porch of Solomon who himself handed down that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with those who produce Stoic, Platonic, and Dialectic Christianity. We have no need of curiosity after we have Christianity, nor of inquisitiveness after we have the Gospel. Since we believe we desire nothing else to believe. For the first thing we believe is that there is nothing else we ought to believe.”

Clement was trying to bring Athens and Jerusalem close together, but Tertullian did not like that. It is pretty clear that he was not going to be tempted by syncretism. He was a combative personality, and I think you can see that as you read him if you are able to access some of his writings. But the church in Carthage was facing some serious problems. It was a church where there was a great deal of persecution and where syncretism was already a problem. There were all sorts of Eastern religions there and it was all too easy for Christians to slip over into one of those or to agree to worship the emperor in order to escape persecution. Later, as we come to the Donatists’ problem, we will see that centered right in this area because many, many Christians were tempted and fell and denied Christ to worship another religion or to worship the emperor. Therefore Tertullian took a very strong stance against all of that. The temptation to apostatize or compromise was great, and Tertullian was determined to stand against that temptation. He thought that since the spirit of the world is so opposed to that of the Gospel the Christian should withdraw from the world as much as possible.

There is a danger on that side too, of course. The danger is an almost total isolation from culture. In the book by Celsus, *True Reason*, he caricatures Christianity, but he may be reflecting some of this Tertullian attitude when he says, “Christians say, ‘Do not ask questions, just believe.’” That was the way Celsus depicted Christianity. It was almost what Tertullian was saying: “Do not ask questions, just believe.” We should not think of Tertullian, though, as an obscurantist individual who takes this stand because he does not know anything himself. He was not anti-intellectual. He was a great scholar and theologian. We will see that some of our language for the Trinity and for the two natures of Christ that we finally come to at Nicea and Calcedon, much of that language comes first from Tertullian. He was one of the most significant and important church fathers. But we will also see Tertullian becoming a Montanist for reasons that we will talk about later. Tertullian knew that, as he put it, “Philosophers knock at the gate of truth”—this sounds almost like Clement. But the way Tertullian explained it was

that they stole any truth they had from the Scriptures, and our reason is limited anyway, so we must accept what God has made known. Thus his attitude was, “We do not need them. We have it all in the Bible. And we cannot reason our way into an understanding of Christian truth.” Tertullian gloried in the unreasonableness of his faith.

Tertullian is on one side and Clement is on another. Clement wants to show some continuity with culture. Tertullian wants to make a complete break with culture and with human reason. You may know this famous quotation from Tertullian: “I believe because it is absurd. [People have puzzled over that ever since he wrote it]. God’s Son has died. That is credible because it is foolishness. And He was buried and is risen. That is certain because it is impossible.” He loved that sort of paradox, and he loved that way of saying things. The tradition that Tertullian represents also continued. It continued in Tatian the Assyrian—to an extreme extent. I wondered if anyone could be more extreme than Tertullian, but Tatian was. And it continued in early Monasticism as Christians were fleeing the world and everything about the world and isolating themselves in the desert in order to be pure and untainted by both sin and worldly thought. And it continued, I think, in certain forms of later Monasticism even up into the Middle Ages. Umberto Eco’s novel, *The Name of the Rose*, revolves around a monk’s hatred for the writings of Aristotle. This monk believed that Aristotle and the study of Greek philosophy could so corrupt the church that he was willing to do anything including murder to prevent a book by Aristotle from being available in the monastic library where he lived in northern Italy. That is a very interesting novel with much church history in it, if you can struggle through all the different languages that come up including one that is a mixture of all languages. One of the monks had learned so many languages that he got them all mixed up and could not speak any of them.

What will we make of all this? I wish I could give you an answer here and tell you that Clement is right or that Tertullian is right, or both are right, or neither one is right. But let me try to answer that by referring to a book you may be familiar with, *Christ and Culture*, by the American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. His father was the pastor of an Evangelical Reformed church, a German Reformed congregation. That denomination is now part of the United Church of Christ. Niebuhr’s book is very important and helpful. It gives us paradigms we can use as we go through church history and come to this particular theme. It also raises more questions than it answers, so even Niebuhr will not give us a final answer. Look at the paradigms he creates for us. How do we think of the church and the world, or Christ and culture? We know that we are to be “in the world but not of the world,” but what does that mean practically?

Niebuhr presents five ways the Christian church has tried to answer that question. The first is Christ against culture. His primary example there is Tertullian. Christ against culture—they are two different things, and they are in opposition to one another. The opposite view of that is the Christ of culture. That is when Christianity and culture come so close together that there is really no way to separate them. They are completely made one. I suppose the greatest example of that would be Eusebius of Caesarea. We will study Eusebius when we come to Constantine because Eusebius saw in the victory of Constantine the Christianizing of the Roman culture, which to him was then totally equivalent to the church. We will see Saint Augustine trying to separate those two again in *The City of God*. With Eusebius of Caesarea they had come very, very close together. So far we have Christ against culture, two completely different things, and Christ of culture, one thing. Then the other three ways Niebuhr presents show some tension between Christ and culture but also some connection. There is the Christ above culture view, and Clement of Alexandria is the primary example here from the early church. Saint Thomas Aquinas is the example of this from the medieval church. This view says that there is Christ and there is culture, and Christ is above culture. There is a definite link between Christ and culture, but there is not a total syncretism or mixture. There is always Christianity or Christ or the church standing above

culture, lifting it up and pulling it on. Then there is the view, Christ and culture in paradox. This view says that we are to be in the world and not of the world and until the eschatology we just live in the tension of that situation. We cannot understand it or fully embrace it. Niebuhr thinks that is Luther's view; it is also the view of some of the late medieval scholars. We will study them later as well. This view was basically "Just put up with a bad situation. You have to be in the world but you have to be Christian and it is paradoxical." Then the final view laid out in *Christ and Culture* is Christ the transformer of culture. This view says that the church, Christ, Christianity, is in the world to transform the world, to convert the world. Of course in the early church Saint Augustine is the primary example of this view. In the Reformation period I think John Calvin is an example of this view. Niebuhr finishes by saying, "I cannot choose one above the others. Each one has something to be said for it, some more than others." It is hard. I find myself theologically with the last view, Christ the transformer of culture, because I am a Calvinist. Often I find myself emotionally agreeing with the first view, Christ against culture, because the world looks so bad and I do not see much conversion or transformation happening. So I cannot give a final answer either. But at least we have our five categories now. Keep those in mind, because as we go through the rest of church history there will be occasions when I will refer to views using these titles.

Let me clarify some points. Tertullian was one of the great intellects of the early church and a fine speaker and debater. It was not that he was some obscurantist who was mad at smart people. Rather, he had intellectually made the decision that Clement's view would not work. Bringing in all that learning from the world would not help but would actually undermine the church. Now, Clement did want to sift through the learning of the world, rejecting what was wrong and only accepting what was right. So in theory he was willing to do that as was Origen. But somehow they did not do that very well, especially Origen. We see him bringing in all kinds of Greek thought so that he can often sound almost like one of the Gnostics. These people too would write books like *The Christian Gnosticism*, using the language or the cultural context of the Greek world to present a "higher" form of Gnosticism.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).