

APOLOGETICS IN THE PATRISTIC ERA:
PRE-CHRISTIAN WISDOM FOR A POST-CHRISTIAN AGE

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In the eyes of many critics, contemporary Christian apologetics is at best a modernistic endeavor,¹ an ineffective tactic to reach an increasingly postmodern culture; at worst, it is evidence of incipient secularism, indicating a desire “to ground faith in genius,”² and thus must be firmly rejected. Some may have good reason for their skepticism of modern apologetics, for example, Karl Barth.³ Weary of the nineteenth-century liberalism that still permeated European theological discourse in his era, William Edgar explains the theologian “dismissed apologetics as a weak-kneed concession to natural theology . . . As he put it in the early parts of his *Church Dogmatics*, if Christianity takes up the weapons of apologetics, ‘it has renounced its birthright. It has renounced the unique power which it has as the religion of revelation.’”⁴ Likewise, Myron Penner, in a 2013 monograph addressing the place of Christian apologetics—or lack thereof—in a postmodern context, charges that the approach of contemporary apologists may be effectively employed “only by someone thoroughly immersed in the perspective of modernity.”⁵ He also criticizes the idea of a neutral

1. For the purposes of this essay, Christian apologetics shall be defined as “*the practice of offering an appeal and a defense for the Christian faith . . . apologetics, through word and deed, answers both why a person can believe (defense) and why they should believe (appeal).*” Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 17.

2. See, for example, Enns, “Is Christian Apologetics Secular and Unbiblical?” n.p.

3. See Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*.

4. Edgar, “Foreword,” 11.

5. Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 26.

“public square,” an idea foreign to premodern Christians who had no concept of the public-private divide that is assumed in current Western society. Regarding attempts to defend the faith in this “public sphere,” a supposedly neutral location, on logical-philosophical grounds, Penner uses “the term ‘secular apologetics’ . . . because this sort of apologetics does not need to appeal to a higher transcendent ground for Christian truths and instead justifies them exclusively in immanent human reason.”⁶ It would be short sighted to merely dismiss such concerns; Christians should be wary of over emphasizing natural theology or “robbing the gospel of its inherent power” as Barth charges.⁷ Moreover, a criticism of the modern approach to apologetics should not necessarily be conflated with apologetics *per se*.⁸

Yet, even granting that certain weaknesses may be identified in the modern approach to apologetics, the basis for the practice itself seems to be established in the New Testament. On this point, one immediately thinks of the admonishment of 1 Pet 3:15 to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (NIV). Moreover, believers only need look at the Apostle Paul’s engagement with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens in Acts 17 to observe that contending for the faith in the public square was—and therefore must still be—an imperative for followers of Jesus. And, as Joshua Chatraw and Mark Allen note, the apostles frequently speak of the resurrection, the foundation on which all of Christianity stands or falls, as verifiable fact. In 1 Cor 15, in expounding principles of first importance to the faith, they argue, “Paul seems to be saying, ‘the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection abounds. Check it out. Ask the eyewitnesses yourself. They are all still alive!’”⁹ Likewise, his contemporary, Luke, in authoring his Gospel and Acts, “asserts he carefully investigated what eyewitnesses told

6. Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 36.

7. Edgar, “Foreword,” 11.

8. Penner himself makes this point in a 2017 interview (see Enns, “Is Christian Apologetics Secular and Unbiblical?” n.p.)

9. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 40.

him . . . so the reader could have confidence in what he recounted.”¹⁰

What may not be as well known to the average contemporary Christian, however, is how much the successors of the apostles, the Church Fathers, also valued this apologetic endeavor. Certainly, their battles did not concern scientific inquiry or political engagement in a democratic society, both of which feature heavily in modern debates. Yet, among the challenges facing the Fathers, few were as pressing as defending the faith within an intensely hostile culture.¹¹ It is likely for this reason that several patristic figures wrote extensively on apologetic issues, many of which remain quite relevant today. Examples of early apologies, or defences, of Christianity might be seen in Justin Martyr’s *First and Second Apologies*, his *Dialogue with Trypho*, and Tertullian’s *Apologeticus*, to name a few. Although they differed at points—Tertullian and Justin, for example, disagreed on whether philosophy should play an integral role in Christian theology or not—they shared a commitment to countering the paganism of their era. As these works of the Fathers aim to defend the gospel and explore its implications amid a culture that understood little of the faith, they devote much of their work to questions of doctrinal orthodoxy and Christian morality.

This article contends that, far from being irrelevant or outdated, the apologetic task is an essential one for the church’s mission in contemporary culture. It will draw on the works of figures such as Justin, Tertullian, Augustine, and the Eastern Fathers as examples Christians in current Western society would do well to emulate. In addition, it will note how the apologetic legacy of the primitive church is not one of bare rationalism, particularly in the East; instead, the effective witness of the church in its earliest days was characterized as much by their daily lives (and even their willingness to lay down their lives)¹² as their persuasive arguments, par-

10. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 39.

11. For a concise meaning of what is meant by the term “culture” in the context of this essay, see Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 195.

12. See Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 314. As the authors note, “It is difficult to see why Jesus’ earliest followers would have been willing

ticularly during societal upheaval. Perhaps, then, in the same way they so effectively engaged their fallen, and in some cases even pre-Christian society, believers in the West might draw on their legacy to engage their increasingly post-Christian one.

Justin Martyr: Father of Christian Apologetics

Though very term “martyr” frequently carries a connotation of intense persecution, for Christians it should also bring to mind one of the Church’s most accomplished apologists¹³—one who, having lived in the second century, did not have the luxury of building off of two thousand years of Christian theology as do modern defenders of the faith. Justin not only offers one of the earliest accounts of Christian worship, but his apologies give clear insight into both the Greco-Roman and Jewish challenges to Christianity in its infancy. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, for example, Justin lays out why Christians consider Jesus to be the Messiah promised in the Jewish scriptures. Provocatively teaching the Jews had despised the true law of God by rejecting the new covenant, he declares that the Lord took no pleasure in the outward rituals they continued to practice.¹⁴ His apology against traditional Judaism came at a pivotal point in history following the Second Jewish War, ending in 135 CE.¹⁵ Christianity had grown from a small Jewish sect to a burgeoning new faith with its own unique identity, heavily influenced by its gentile converts, hence Justin’s charge that those who reject Christ were not true sons of Abraham.¹⁶

Far from ignoring the Jewish scriptures, however, many of Justin’s key arguments are grounded in them. Michael Green explains that “whether we are looking at the sermons of Peter, the

to endure such persecution if they knew themselves to be suffering for a hoax they invented.” The willingness of the earliest Christians even to sacrifice their lives on account of the gospel is a powerful testimony to its veracity.

13. Indeed, some have identified Justin as the Father of Christian apologetics who established a pattern for subsequent defenders of the faith to emulate. See Parvis, “Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition,” 115–27.

14. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 9.

15. See Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*, 9.

16. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 26.

preaching of Paul in Romans or the Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, we find that the matter is argued and settled entirely on the basis of the Scriptures.”¹⁷ This includes Justin’s defense of Jesus as the Messiah on account of his virgin birth. He declares that the words of Isaiah:

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,” was uttered respecting Him. For if He to whom Isaiah referred was not to be begotten of a virgin, of whom did the Holy Spirit declare, “Behold, the Lord Himself shall give us a sign; behold the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son?” For if He also were to be begotten of sexual intercourse, like all other first-born sons, why did God say he would give a sign which is not common to all the first-born sons?¹⁸

In other words, Justin charges that his Jewish opponent, Trypho, is guilty of missing the significance of this prophecy as it relates to the Messiah’s miraculous birth.¹⁹ He posits that Trypho should “not suppose that it is impossible for God to do anything he wills,” and asserts that his contemporaries “pervert” this passage by arguing that the term frequently translated for virgin simply refers to “young woman” in this context. For a gentile living merely a century after the ascension of Christ, his willingness to contend for the Christian faith with his Jewish contemporaries, undoubtedly well versed in the Hebrew Bible, is no small accomplishment.²⁰

Even bolder was Justin’s willingness to forcefully challenge the paganism of Rome in his *First and Second Apologies*—the first directed at the Emperor Antonius Pius and his second to the Roman Senate. In the latter address, he offers a compelling case for bodily resurrection, drawing on analogies in Greco-Roman thought, exhorting them to “reflect upon the end of each of the preceding kings, how they died a death common to all, which, if it issued in insensibility, would be a godsend to all the wicked . . . [yet believers] expect to receive again our own bodies, though

17. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 74.

18. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 84.

19. For an overview of alternate interpretations of the passage, see Longman and Garland, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 515.

20. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 84.

they be dead and cast into the earth.”²¹ Two things should be noted. First, Justin appeals to his audience’s sense of justice by noting that the absence of bodily resurrection would be “a god-send” to evil persons.²² He does not rely only on a logical argument but appeals to the moral inclinations of his listeners. This may well have been borne out of his own personal experience. Green explains, regarding his conversion, that “The change in someone like Justin Martyr [was] outstanding. Qualitative change in character regularly followed reception of the gospel message.”²³ Second, just as he proved himself competent in the Hebrew scriptures enough to converse with Trypho, so he demonstrated the ability to engage the educated of the Roman Empire through his knowledge of their worldview. Within his argument defending bodily resurrection quoted above, he calls on his readers to grant the Christian faith the right “to inspect these things,” in the same way as “the opinions of your authors.” Justin’s apologetic endeavor was hardly an easy task given his context. The cultural climate was firmly against him, with older Roman paganism and cosmopolitan Greek ideals vying for the loyalty of its populace.²⁴ Christians, however, remained distinct by refusing to offer sacrifices to the pagan deities or demonstrate an allegiance to the state through idolatry.²⁵ Justin eventually gave his life for the faith, despite his repeated appeals for religious toleration on the basis of Roman law itself.²⁶ Despite such brutal persecution, Christianity continued to advance, prompting one Church Father to declare that the blood of the martyrs was like a seed—it only

21. Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 18.

22. For a contemporary example of this appeal, see Wright, *Simply Christian*, 4, “You don’t have to teach children,” Wright observes, “about fairness and unfairness. A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human. We know about it, as we say, in our bones.” When placed in parallel with Justin Martyr’s proposal, they seem strikingly similar in substance, even if aimed at different audiences.

23. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 14.

24. Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*, 74–75.

25. Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*, 87.

26. Winn, *Christianity in the Roman Empire*, 63.

served to spread the message of the gospel. That individual was Tertullian of Carthage, a capable apologist in his own right.

Tertullian's Apology

Raised as a pagan in the North African city of Carthage, Tertullian was converted to Christianity in Rome during his adult life.²⁷ While responsible for attacking paganism on various points and introducing much of the Trinitarian language still employed by the church today,²⁸ he is perhaps best known for his bold declaration that no amount of persecution could hinder the advancement of God's kingdom.²⁹ Owing to his flat rejection of Greek philosophy,³⁰ on the surface Tertullian may seem an unlikely candidate to serve as an apologist in his Greco-Roman culture, famously inquiring, "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?" and declaring he had "no use for the Stoic or Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research."³¹ Yet, this statement should not be taken to mean that Tertullian rejected apologetics altogether. Chatraw and Allen note Tertullian's argument is specifically concerned with the relationship between the *logos* in Greek philosophy and Christianity. While "Martyr," they note, "proposed that the Greek philosophers, enlightened by the divine *logos*, were in some sense Christians without even realizing it,"³² Tertullian rejected this position emphatically. Nevertheless, the disagreement between the two lies not in whether Christians should practice apologetics, or defend their faith, but rather in how they should do so. For Tertullian, it seems the Christian's life must be every bit as much an apologetic as their doctrine.

27. Dunn, *Tertullian*, 3.

28. Winn, *Christianity in the Roman Empire*, 110.

29. Watson, *The Christian Apologists*, 18.

30. See Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 23, as the author describes Tertullian's position as "perhaps, the most extreme example" of early Christian rejection of Greek philosophy.

31. As quoted in Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 72.

32. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 72.

In his famous work *Apologeticus*, he decries the persecution believers faced at the hands of the Empire, but also highlighted the sense of triumph with which they faced their accusers.³³ He attacked the unsubstantiated charges levelled against believers, in addition to the biased legal proceedings they were forced to endure.³⁴ They should, he argued, be allowed to speak in their own defense as any other individual accused of a crime—particularly since they were innocent of the offenses such as infanticide with which they were charged. At the very least, he submits, the alleged crimes ought to be investigated rather than assumed to be true.³⁵ Given his context, it is easy to sympathize with Tertullian's impulse to defend his brothers and sisters in the faith. He lived less than a century after Pliny the Younger decreed that Christians, while not to be sought out for punishment, must be disciplined if they refuse to offer sacrifices when brought before the authorities. Tertullian highlights the obvious injustice; if such individuals were not guilty of any offence, such as murder or treason, and thus were not to be sought out solely on account of their faith, how could it possibly be just to punish them for holding such views?³⁶ One could say that while Justin's apologies tended to focus on more doctrinal matters, Tertullian's had a stronger bent toward defending Christian morality and virtues. Indeed, Green notes that following Tertullian's adamant defense of the church's upstanding character, "Pliny the Younger came to much the same conclusion after investigating these Christian meetings for himself."³⁷ While Geoffrey Dunn explains that "In apologetic works written to imperial officials, he was not as critical of the Roman system as he was in works addressed to an exclusively Christian audience,"³⁸ Tertullian still made a point of identifying pagan beliefs as incoherent. He notes that the reason Christians refuse to offer sacrifices to the gods of Rome is because such "gods" simply do

33. Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.

34. Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.

35. Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.

36. Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.

37. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 157–58.

38. Dunn, *Tertullian*, 6.

not exist.³⁹ Since their origin cannot be known nor their existence demonstrated, why, Tertullian inquires, should Christians be expected to render them honor? In short, Tertullian stands out among the Church Fathers as the apologist who demonstrated why Christianity, far from serving as a militant threat to the state, represented innocence in the face of persecution.

Augustine of Hippo: Citizen, Subverter, Apologist

While some have labelled Augustine possibly “the greatest Christian teacher we’ve ever had,” partly due to his thoroughly Christological approach to Scripture,⁴⁰ he was a brilliant apologist as well. Unlike his predecessors Tertullian and Justin, he wrote not in an era of persecution but the early stages of Christendom—and during Rome’s debacle, including its sacking by the Visigoths in 410 CE. Unlike some contemporaries, he did not despair of this event. As Jason Byassee notes, “Jerome wept uncontrollably when Rome fell. Augustine shrugged.”⁴¹ Augustine’s refusal to grant his ultimate allegiance to the Empire is likewise highlighted by Rowan Williams, who identifies him “a subverter of the values of the classic public and political realm.”⁴² In pledging himself primarily to the kingdom of God and not the empire, however, he was quick to refute charges Rome had fallen because of some fault of the church. In *The City of God*,⁴³ he decries such an accusation by noting that disaster had fallen on Rome many times before the emergence of Christianity; why, then, should believers be charged with incurring the wrath of the gods on their society?⁴⁴ As to the charge that followers of Christ exerted a negative impact on the culture, Augustine responded by highlighting the heartfelt concern they felt for the vulnerable, noting:

39. Tertullian, *Apol.* 10.

40. Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 67, 75.

41. Byassee, *Surprised by Jesus Again*, 137.

42. Williams, *On Augustine*, 109.

43. See Williams, *On Augustine*, 107–30 for an overview and explanation of this work.

44. Augustine, *Civ.* 2.2.

When it was at the height of its opulence, Rome's citizens were so poor in private that once, when a man who twice had been consul was found to have ten pounds of silver hidden in a vase, he was accused by the censor and expelled from the Senate of those poor men. . . . Surely, Christians have a better motive for holding all their wealth in common. They have the ideal, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles of dividing "to all, according as everyone had need . . . neither did anyone say that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but all things were common unto them."⁴⁵

Augustine also appeals to the relative charity with which Christian emperors governed compared to their pagan predecessors.⁴⁶ Of Theodosius' conduct toward the children of his fallen enemies, for example, Augustine claims he "treated them with Christian charity, allowed them to keep their property and titles, and even added to them." In contrast to many of the pagan emperors of Rome, "Theodosius always began his wars with reluctance," according to Augustine, "and never ended them with rancor. . . . He was happier, in fact, to be a member of the Church than monarch of the world."⁴⁷ While his critics may well have identified this as exactly part of the problem—a higher allegiance to the church than to the state—Augustine nevertheless refutes the idea that the Christians of Rome were a detriment to the state or to society, making a respectable case that they transformed both into more compassionate entities.

Yet, the true genius of Augustine's approach in this work is that, rather than simply critique Roman culture and society, he capitalizes on its inconsistencies and shortcomings to make a positive case for the Christian gospel—not unlike the Apostle Paul's approach to the Athenians in Acts 17. As Chatraw observes, while the first half of Augustine's *City of God* critiques Roman culture directly, the second half presents the gospel as a compelling alternative that speaks to the heart's deepest longings. Augustine knew that "we're story-telling beings," Chatraw explains. So, when engaging those with a different worldview, "the goal is not just to

45. Augustine, *Civ.* 5.18.

46. Williams, *On Augustine*, 120.

47. Augustine, *Civ.* 5.26.

show them the problems . . . [but] how the gospel itself offers a deeper and more compelling way to view and live life.”⁴⁸ While critics of modern apologetics often assert that the discipline fails to engage the heart by focusing narrowly on air-tight logic,⁴⁹ Augustine’s “apologetic appeal,” as Chatraw and Allen term it, is founded on the conviction that all of humanity desires satisfaction in God.⁵⁰ His most renowned quote from his famous *Confessions* is the cry, “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.”⁵¹ This is no small admission from a man who, in his early years, rejected the faith because he considered it uncultured and therefore unattractive from an intellectual vantage point.⁵² Thus, having been converted to Christ and having his desires—not only his thoughts—transformed so radically, perhaps it is only natural that Augustine’s approach to apologetics would seek to engage both the head and the heart.

Augustine’s apologetic reached far beyond simply refuting the charge that the Christians were responsible for the downfall of the Roman Empire, and though valuing the Christian experience of God he certainly did not disdain objective truth. He was an articulate defender of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, an historical event on which the entire Christian faith stands. Gerald O’Collins points out that Augustine pointed to the resurrection as the crucial doctrine which separated Christians from pagans and Jews,⁵³ and charged that only such a miracle could embolden a group of fishermen from the Galilean countryside to carry the gospel to individuals much more educated and noble than themselves—often with striking success.⁵⁴ Just as modern apologists are keen to emphasize the importance of eyewitness testimonies in confirming the

48. Chatraw and Allen, “Doing Apologetics Like Augustine Did,” n.p.

49. See, for example, Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 26, 57, 68.

50. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 71.

51. Augustine, *Conf.* 1.1.

52. See McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, 15. One of Augustine’s initial barriers to the faith, McGrath points out, is that he did not truly understand it, having had his impression colored by other proponents of the Manichean sect.

53. O’Collins, “St. Augustine as Apologist,” 326.

54. O’Collins, “St. Augustine as Apologist,” 330.

truth of the resurrection,⁵⁵ so Augustine in his fifth-century sermons made a point of emphasizing that the disciples themselves actually touched the risen Jesus—clearly ruling out not only hoax theories concerning the resurrection, but also interpretations of the resurrection that would understand it as merely a metaphor, not a literal return from the dead.⁵⁶ In short, while Augustine’s acumen as a theologian is well documented, his standing as a capable apologist—and a model for twenty-first-century Christians in this regard—must not be overlooked. His combination of appeal to historical fact, defense of Christian virtue, and reminder that only God the creator can satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart is indeed a thoughtful alternative to approaches which emphasize strictly the intellectual or the relational approach to apologetics, exemplifying a multi-faceted outlook.⁵⁷ Moreover, his reminder that the Christian’s ultimate allegiance is never to the state is a timely one for Western Christians distressed at the collapse of Christendom that has long afforded the church substantial power in the political realm.

John Chrysostom as Apologist

Defending the divinity of Christ was no new challenge by the fourth century; however, it was during this time that perhaps the early church’s most definitive piece on the subject was penned by John Chrysostom. Consecrated Bishop of Constantinople in 398 CE,⁵⁸ he thoroughly explains this doctrine in two separate treatises dating from roughly 20 years prior. While debating his Jewish opponents, Chrysostom frequently appealed to Old Testament texts such as the Psalms and the book of Isaiah to demonstrate how their

55. A prime example of this approach can be observed in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

56. O’Collins, “St. Augustine as Apologist,” 330

57. See Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 176–77. The authors focus on the third aspect of Augustine’s approach in particular here, noting that “Modern marketing agencies have learned from practice what theologians such as Augustine and John Calvin have said for centuries: the human heart is restless, and it is a ‘factory of idols.’”

58. Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 8.

own scriptures had forecasted the coming of Christ as the Messiah.⁵⁹ He contends various prophecies such as his virgin birth, his lineage from David, and his ministry of healing—among other predictions—were fulfilled in Jesus.⁶⁰ When dealing with Jewish individuals, then, Chrysostom relied on biblical proofs to show that Christ was both God and man, and that the God of the Jewish scriptures had been incarnated as a human being. As Margaret Schatkin and Paul Harkins note, Chrysostom uses:

The Scriptures of the Jews to prove that many facts about Christ and his Church had been foretold. . . . Drawing his texts chiefly from Isaiah and the psalms, Chrysostom then shows that Christ's career from birth to death had been predicted. He would be born of a virgin; he would be of Jesse's tribe and the house of David; he would come quietly, as the Prince of Peace, to be born in Bethlehem at the predicted time, when Jewish princes were subject to Roman rule. He would come up from Egypt; he would cure the lame, make the blind to see, publish his glad tidings to the poor. His betrayal, passion, death on the cross, burial, descent.⁶¹

As Justin buttressed his case for Christianity by leaning heavily on its prophetic fulfillment of the Old Testament, so does Chrysostom. Indeed, as observed by patristic commentators, “The force of favorable testimony from one's foes,”—for Chrysostom, his Jewish contemporaries who reject Jesus as the Messiah—“Is not small nor would it be lost on the pagans.”⁶²

When addressing the pagans themselves, however, particularly of the Greek variety, Chrysostom adapted his approach and attacked the vulgarity, drunkenness, and gluttony that characterized their practices.⁶³ Thus, his argument stemmed not as much from Scripture as from the immorality of their paganism, as he attacks

59. Unfortunately, despite the apologetic value of Chrysostom's work, it must be noted that his defences of core Christian doctrines against Jewish opponents often translated into blatant antisemitism. For specific examples of Chrysostom's attacks, see Brown and Holocaust Collection, *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood*, 25–29.

60. Schatkin and Harkins, “Introduction,” 169.

61. Schatkin and Harkins, “Introduction,” 170.

62. Schatkin and Harkins, “Introduction,” 169.

63. John Chrysostom, *Bab. Jul.* 43.

their philosophers as vain and self-seeking.⁶⁴ Yet it seems Chrysostom was also keen to defend the faith from internal threats as well. Channeling Tertullian, he points out that Christianity flourished under severe persecution, proving resilient under evil emperors.⁶⁵ Perhaps an indicator of his late-fourth-century time, a post-Constantinian era, he also noted that biblical Christianity deteriorated when believers accrued political influence⁶⁶—a challenge that would only intensify in the centuries following his death. It may well have been his recognition of this problem that influenced the Bishop to confront those in the church who were attempting to integrate Christian theology with their own lavish lifestyles.⁶⁷ No doubt due to his monastic background he despised the spiritual laxity of the clergy and the materialism that embodied too many in his congregation—to the point of condemning their lifestyles from the pulpit.⁶⁸ In short, Chrysostom stands out as a key patristic apologist for defending the faith against both corrupting influences from inside the church and pagan opposition from the outside.

Peace Amid Pandemic

As mentioned previously in reference to Augustine, an integral aspect of patristic apologetics was the conviction that argumentation alone is not a sufficient basis for promoting the faith; a true apologetic, rather, values the heart, and expresses itself in love of one's neighbor. Indeed, one of the most sobering charges levelled at the modern Christian approach to apologetics is that, while it

64. John Chrysostom, *Bab. Jul.* 43.

65. John Chrysostom, *Bab Jul.* 42.

66. This influence apparently took a toll upon Chrysostom's own well-being. See, for example, Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 9. The authors explain that, toward the end of his life, "significant political events which touched upon John's life and office were beginning to occur. . . . and his stress levels were increasing."

67. John Chrysostom, *Jud. gent.* 9.

68. John Chrysostom, *Jud. gent.* 9

prides itself on compelling arguments,⁶⁹ it often fails to produce the change of heart that would make believers appear truly distinct from their culture.⁷⁰ Few events have rocked the church on a global scale like the COVID-19 crisis, and while it remains to be seen what legacy the church will leave in the long-run regarding its response, action will undoubtedly be remembered more than rhetoric. Indeed, the ancient church's response to the pandemics that impacted the Roman Empire during Christianity's infancy are a perfect example of how, at the heart of apologetics, must lay a transformed heart, not merely a sound argument. Larry Hurtado notes that Christianity was an entirely different kind of "religious movement" from all others present "in the cafeteria of religious options" during the first several centuries of its existence. He asserts that, "even among those who took the time to acquaint themselves more accurately with Christian beliefs, practices, and text, the response was often intensely negative."⁷¹ How, then, did they manage to attract so many converts in a relatively short number of years?

Part of the answer may lie in the church's compassionate response to the sick and dying, as potent an apologetic as any of the

69. This alone made the enterprise unpalatable to Karl Barth. As Clark Pinnock notes, even though the later Barth affirmed a bodily resurrection, unlike both the Church Fathers and many modern apologists "He cannot bear to think for a moment that Jesus might need a mortal man to validate or authorize his resurrection and his claim to be the Son of God, which is the work of the Spirit alone. . . . Therefore, he *must* insist that the resurrection, though historical, is inaccessible to scholarly research." See Pinnock, "Karl Barth and Christian Apologetics," 69.

70. For a modern example of such criticism, see Enns, "A Brief but Deep Thought on Defending the Christian Faith (or Not)," n.p. The concern of the author of the blog, an Old Testament scholar, is a prime example of such criticism, as he suggests that in the modern West, "The notion of 'Christian apologetics' presumes that the intellect—weighing evidence, sifting through pros and cons, rigorous analysis—is the primary arena for engaging the truth of Christianity. . . . If it works, it works among those already convinced. At its worst, it simply props up the apologist's insecurities." Enns, rather, proposes that it is the Christian's faithful life, not their persuasive arguments, which serve as the most effective apologetic, since such an outlook avoids the presumption "that the intellect is how Christianity works."

71. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 183.

arguments put forth by the patristic theologians. Rodney Stark argues for this explanation in his 2011 work, *The Triumph of Christianity*, highlighting how during the plague that struck the empire during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Christians distinguished themselves through their compassion for those affected. “During the fifteen-year duration of the epidemic,” Stark notes, “a quarter to a third of the population probably died . . . a century later came another great plague. Once again, the Greco-Roman world trembled as, on all sides, family, friends, and neighbors died horribly.”⁷² The idea of one out of every three persons in one’s locale passing away would strike terror into the heart of any individual. Yet, while the pagans fled even from their closest acquaintances in the hope of self-preservation, Christians bravely cared for outsiders as well as their own. Speaking of the second epidemic, Stark asserts that Christian concern “saved enormous numbers of lives!”; and, remarkably, most Christians who contracted the illness themselves lived, thereby “lending immense credibility to Christian ‘miracle working.’” Indeed, the miracles often included pagan neighbors and relatives. This surely must have produced some conversions, especially by those who were nursed back to health.”⁷³ One must consider the theological motivation for this posture. Not only did Christians consider it their responsibility to care for the most vulnerable as their Lord did during his earthly ministry, but their hope in a future bodily resurrection ultimately assured them that death could never have the last word—a catalyst for compassion that Roman paganism simply could not match. Green perceives this as a compelling catalyst for the early church’s evangelistic efforts, commenting that their love “overflowed to outsiders, and in times of plague and disaster the Christians shone by means of their service to the communities in which they lived,” lamenting that “Nowadays the lifestyle of Christians is hard to distinguish from those who make no such claim.”⁷⁴

72. Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 114. “Some medical historians,” Stark notes, “suspect this was the first appearance of smallpox in the West.”

73. Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 116.

74. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 14.

Some observers may survey the Christian response to pandemic and simply see it as an act of mercy rather than one part of a broader apologetic for their faith. Yet, in arguing for the importance of personal testimony in a strong apologetic, Chatraw and Allen point out that the fact believers even cared for the pagans abandoned by their families is in itself a vindication of the gospel.⁷⁵ “Our apologetic appeals,” they argue, “are most effective when they are embedded within a corporate witness marked by *long-suffering testimony*, *personal transformation*, and *holistic service*.” Indeed, the legacy of the early church seems to support this assertion; this approach to apologetics does not hinge on modernistic thought, and if the testimony of believers who weathered the pandemics of Rome proves anything, it is that turbulent times grant the church an opportunity to demonstrate Christ’s love even to ardent opponents. It is striking that those who passionately hated the church were still forced to acknowledge their inexplicable compassion. Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor of Rome, grudgingly observed how, while the pagan priests frequently ignored the cries of the poor, the “impious Galileans” showed concern.⁷⁶ As Kelly Kopic and Justin Borger note, such love for outsider “defined the church’s character for the pagans around them . . . they became the avenue by which others were received and welcomed into the hospitality of God.”⁷⁷ One wonders what sort of impact the church could have in the post-Christendom era if this were emulated in the twenty-first century.

Beyond the West

Just as the Church Fathers were tasked with defending Christian orthodoxy against the backdrop of pressing social and theological issues of their day, modern apologists must not only answer historical and rational objections to the faith, but ethical ones as well.

75. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 138–39.

76. Kopic and Borger, *God So Loved*, 204–5. The authors quote from Julian’s fourth-century *Epistle to Pagan High Priests* in which he launches a scathing attack on the Christian faith.

77. Kopic and Borger, *God So Loved*, 205.

The apologetic questions posed by contemporary skeptics, particularly among the young, will undoubtedly touch on the racial tensions that continue to plague church and society. It seems one of the most persistent, and indeed troubling, claims about the Christian faith is that it is a “white man’s religion,” a misconception in a Western culture all too familiar with the church’s past failures.⁷⁸ Yet, this misconception may stem, in part, from an ignorance of church history. Regarding the Global South’s current emergence as the epicenter of the faith, Philip Jenkins points out that, “As Christianity moves South and East, it is returning to its roots.”⁷⁹ He notes, moreover, that before Latin became the language of choice for Christian scholarship, sacred texts were quite often penned in Eastern languages such as Syriac and Coptic.⁸⁰ While some North American and European Christians boast a cursory knowledge of Church Fathers like Augustine and Tertullian who lived and wrote within a strongly Hellenized context, far fewer could demonstrate familiarity with early Christian theologians beyond the borders of the mighty Roman Empire, whose work included no small degree of apologetic value.

Vince Bantu, in his volume, *A Multitude of All Peoples*, corrects the myth that Christianity has historically belonged to those of European descent, asserting that, “Christianity is not *becoming* a global religion; it has always been a global religion.”⁸¹ While Western figures like Justin and Chrysostom interacted at length with their Jewish contemporaries, largely on account of their efforts to prove Jesus’ identity as the Messiah from the Hebrew Bible, Eastern writers toward the end of the patristic era took a special interest in defending the faith against the rising tide of

78. Unfortunately, within the North American context, Christianity has indeed been weaponized as a tool of white supremacy all too often. For a historical overview of this matter, see Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*.

79. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 21.

80. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 23.

81. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 2.

Islam.⁸² Though their efforts are unfortunately overshadowed in Western Christianity,⁸³ Bantu notes that:

In Western Mesopotamia, Christian writers such as John of Damascus and Theodore bar Konai represented a flourishing apologetic literary activity. Writing in Greek, John of Damascus wrote one of the first comprehensive summaries of the Christian faith, *The Fount of Knowledge*, with a particular focus on polemicizing Islamic theology. From the perspective of the Church of the East, Theodore bar Konai wrote a summa theologica titled the *Scholion*, synthesizing the theology of the East Syriac Church . . . the tenth chapter of the *Scholion* provides a Christian response to Muslim arguments against Christ, the Bible, and Christianity.⁸⁴

It would seem, in the increasingly multicultural West, whose major cities are now home to a multitude of creeds, ethnicities, and religions, the apologetics of individuals from the Eastern church could prove more invaluable than ever. Both Jenkins and Bantu particularly note the popularity of Islam among non-whites suspicious of Christianity on the understanding it has been a “tool of the slave-masters,”⁸⁵ or a “Western/white religion and therefore not appropriate for non-Western/white people.”⁸⁶ Bantu’s call for the “deconstruction of the Western, cultural captivity of the Christian tradition” through engaging the ancient theological works of the Eastern and African church offers Westerners an opportunity to reflect on which aspects of its apologetics are truly biblical and

82. Though considerable debate exists as to the exact parameters of the patristic era, for our purposes here it will be defined as roughly encompassing the period between 100 AD and the Second Council of Nicea in 787 AD, the last of the ecumenical councils of which both the Eastern and Western branches of the Church were a part of. See Mathewes-Green, *Welcome to the Orthodox Church*, 41.

83. There are, of course, exceptions to this; the editors of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture note that they “sought out special consultants in Syriac, Coptic and Armenian,” and “Sought an appropriate balance of Eastern, Western, and African traditions.” See Louth et al., *Genesis 1–11*, xxiii.

84. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 57.

85. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 23.

86. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 6.

which ones are poorly constructed on modernistic assumptions.⁸⁷ Not only would the its willingness to rely on such ancient figures help repudiate the erroneous notion that Christianity is inherently Euro-centric, but it may also help it better understand Christianity through non-Western eyes. Certainly, it seems John of Damascus could provide Western Christians with the necessary tools to offer an apologetic response to Islam,⁸⁸ something that has not traditionally been a focus of Western apologetics but which Bantu identifies as an urgent missiological concern.⁸⁹ Moreover, John's apologetic approach differs from Fathers of the West simply on the basis of geographical location and intended audience—neither of them hospitable to the modernistic bent that some Western theology has been criticized for displaying.

To this point, Bantu highlights another Eastern figure, Ephrem the Syriac, whose “core feature of . . . theological method is his understanding of God's self-revelation through ‘hidden meaning’ (*hayla kayza*) and discerned through the eye of faith by means of symbols (*raze*).”⁹⁰ To the average Western reader, this may seem rather mystical and subjective; however, remember that Ephrem approached the theological task outside the Roman world and therefore Greco-Roman assumptions, to which much of Western Christendom is heir to. “Like many fourth century writers,” Bantu observes, “Ephrem was critical towards Hellenistic thought and was concerned over what he saw as an unhealthy influence of Greek philosophy on the formulation of Christian doctrine.”⁹¹ Given that he and John represent means of defending the faith that have long been overlooked in the West, their voices could be particularly helpful as Christians consider how they may sharpen their approach. If there is an undue influence of Greek philosophy, modernistic thought, or other unbiblical assumptions within contemporary Christian apologetics, it seems that engaging with East-

87. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 6.

88. For a monograph addressing his apologetic work toward Islam, particularly on Trinitarian doctrine, see Janosik, *John of Damascus*.

89. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 4.

90. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 124.

91. Bantu, *A Multitude of All*, 28.

ern patristic theologians would potentially help correct some of these errors.

Conclusion

By defending the Christian faith with a winsome attitude, honorable conduct, compelling argumentation, and courage in the face of physical danger, the early apologists left a solid legacy upon which their successors could build. The three major catalysts that Green identifies for the early church's evangelistic success—personal transformation, love for outsiders, and capacity to deal with vicious persecution—should cause Christians to reflect on how such a stance may inform their apologetic task as Western society drifts further into post-Christendom. Differences over the particular approach that should be taken will no doubt remain; Christians who consider the rising popularity of postmodern thought a serious threat to the faith may stress a classical or historical approach to apologetics. Those who believe that the waning of modernity will eclipse the effectiveness of such methods may prefer a narrative approach and stress the necessity of testimony in advancing the gospel. In any case, the legacy of the Fathers reinforces that such approaches complement one another and should both be utilized by apologists today. Whatever the perceived failings of Christian apologetics in recent years, the shortcomings in one approach or another must not be allowed to obscure the need for the task altogether. In promoting the gospel within a secular society, Christians would do well to learn from the examples of Justin, Tertullian, Chrysostom, and their fellow early apologists.

The waning of Christendom will undoubtedly come with stiff challenges. Western Christians may at very least express concern over the future of their religious freedoms,⁹² and at worst dread Europe and North America will go the way of Turkey or North Africa where a once-majority Christian population has been

92. In Canada, the fairly-recent case of the Trinity Western Law School is a fine example. For a discussion of this case, see Buckingham, "Where Are the Goalposts Now?" 218–27.

reduced to a tiny minority.⁹³ Nevertheless, the legacy of the Fathers is cause for optimism, demonstrating that the Christian faith has the power to thrive even in the midst of raging opposition—and that it has the potential to do so again.

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93. See, for example, Heath, "When the Blood of the Martyrs Was Not Enough," 97–133.

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