

# 9 - Early Christian Apologists - Justin Martyr

“...attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”  
~ Colossians 2:2-3 ~

“Our doctrines are not shameful, according to sober judgment,  
but are indeed more lofty than all human philosophy.”

-Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 15

## I. Early Life

Gentile, born in Samaria, around AD 114

“His father and grandfather were probably of Roman origin. Before his conversion to Christianity he studied in the schools of the philosophers, searching after some knowledge which should satisfy the cravings of his soul. At last he became the recipient of a very good education.”

“After trying all other systems, his elevated tastes and refined perceptions made him a disciple of Socrates and Plato. So he climbed towards Christ. As he himself narrates the story of his conversion, it need not be anticipated here. What Plato was feeling after, he found in Jesus of Nazareth. The conversion of such a man marks a new era in the gospel history. The sub-apostolic age begins with the first Christian author, the founder of theological literature. It introduced to mankind, as the mother of true philosophy, the despised teaching of those Galileans to whom their Master had said, “Ye are the light of the world.”

## II. His Conversion

### A. Occasion

1. Was out walking alone in order to think and reflect
2. Introduction states: He was well studied in “Stoicism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, and Platonism, ultimately adopting the tenets of the Platonists. His conversion to Christianity was sparked by a conversation he had with a wise, elderly Christian man who instructed him on how Christ had fulfilled the writings of the Hebrew prophets.” RTB (reasons to believe, Kenneth Samples)
3. He said, “I wished at one period to be filled with great quietness, and to shun the path of men, I used to go into a certain field not far from the sea. And when I was near that spot one day, which having reached I purposed to be by myself, a certain old man, by no means contemptible in appearance, exhibiting meek and venerable manners, followed me at a little distance. And when I turned round to him, having halted, I fixed my eyes rather keenly on him. “And he said, ‘Do you know me?’ “I replied in the negative. ““Why, then,’ said he to me, ‘do you so look at me?’ ““I am astonished,’ I said, ‘because you have chanced to be in my company in the same place; for I had not expected to see any man here.’

### B. Conversation

#### 1. Dialogue - 3

“Does philosophy, then, make happiness?” said he, interrupting.

“Assuredly,” I said, “and it alone.”

“What, then, is philosophy?” he says; “and what is happiness? Pray tell me, unless something hinders you from saying.”

“Philosophy, then,” said I, “is the knowledge of that which really exists, and a clear perception of the truth; and happiness is the reward of such knowledge and wisdom.”

“But what do you call God?” said he.

“That which always maintains the same nature, and in the same manner, and is the cause of all other things — that, indeed, is God.” So I answered him; and he listened to me with pleasure, and thus again interrogated me: —

## 2. Dialogue 7-8

“Should any one, then, employ a teacher?’ I say, ‘or whence may any one be helped, if not even in them there is truth?’

“There existed, long before this time, certain men more ancient than all those who are esteemed philosophers, both righteous and beloved by God, who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men, neither reverencing nor fearing any man, not influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled with the Holy Spirit. Their writings are still extant, and he who has read them is very much helped in his knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and of those matters which the philosopher ought to know, provided he has believed them. For they did not use demonstration in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to the truth above all demonstration, and worthy of belief; and those events which have happened, and those which are happening, compel you to assent to the utterances made by them, although, indeed, they were entitled to credit on account of the miracles which they performed, since they both glorified the Creator, the God and Father of all things, and proclaimed His Son, the Christ [sent] by Him: which, indeed, the false prophets, who are filled with the lying unclean spirit, neither have done nor do, but venture to work certain wonderful deeds for the purpose of astonishing men, and glorify the spirits and demons of error. But pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and His Christ have imparted wisdom.’

Dialogues VIII.

“When he had spoken these and many other things, which there is no time for mentioning at present, he went away, bidding me attend to them; and I have not seen him since. But straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable. Thus, and for this reason, I am a philosopher. Moreover, I would wish that all, making a resolution similar to my own, do not keep themselves away from the words of the Saviour. For they possess a terrible power in themselves, and are sufficient to inspire those who turn aside from the path of rectitude with awe; while the sweetest rest is afforded those who make a diligent practice of them. If, then, you have any concern for yourself, and if you are eagerly looking for salvation, and if you believe in God, you may — since you are not indifferent to the matter.<sup>17</sup> — become acquainted with the Christ of God, and, after being initiated,<sup>18</sup> live a happy life.”

## 3. The Witness of Christians

“For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death, and of all other things which are counted fearful, perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure. For what sensual or intemperate man, or who that counts it good to feast on human flesh, could welcome death that he might be deprived of his enjoyments, and would not rather continue always the present life, and attempt to escape the observation of the rulers; and much less would he denounce himself when the consequence would be death? This also the wicked demons have now caused to be done.” *Second Apology, 12*

## C. The Christian Philosopher

1. Justin’s trademark garb was the *pallium*—an inexpensive, coarse rectangular cloth that identified him as a scholar and philosopher
2. Gonzalez “While all [Christians] agreed on the need to abstain from idolatry, not all agreed on what should be a Christian’s attitude toward classical pagan culture. This included the work and thought of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, whose wisdom has been admired by many to this day. To reject 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, an inroad of idolatry into the church.” [53]

One of Justin's primary tasks was to “show and explain the connection between Christianity and classical wisdom.” [54]

He claimed there were points of contact between Christianity and pagan philosophy

1. The best philosophers spoke of a supreme being from which every other being derives its existence
2. Socrates and Plato believed in life after death
3. Plato and his forms pointed to another world of eternal realities.

He was not uncritically in agreement, for example, he insisted not on the pagan idea of the immortality of the soul (which Christians actually do believe) but upon the resurrection of the body.

“We should not idolize pagan insights; next to the Gospel they are mere glimmerings. But the wisdom of many a pagan has put to shame the wisdom of many so-called Christians. Nominal Christians have hidden the talent entrusted to them, while pagans, amidst the errors and abominations of superstition and idolatry, have turned to advantage what remained of an earlier revelation. They never sank to the depths to which modern wisdom has brought us.” [13, Van Prinsterer]

How does one explain this?

“For Justin, the answer is to be found in the doctrine of the Logos...According to a tradition of longstanding in Greek philosophy, the human mind can understand reality because it shares in the Logos or universal reason that undergirds all reality...two and two make four, the reason for this is that both in our minds and in the universe there is a Logos, a reason or order according to which two and two always makes four.

### III. His Work

#### A. Summary Thoughts

- From intro
  - “Even in Seneca we detect reflections of the daybreak. Plutarch writes as never a Gentile could have written until now. Plato is practically surpassed by him in his thoughts upon the “delays of the Divine Justice.” Hadrians’ address to his soul, in his dying moments, is a tribute to the new ideas which had been sown in the popular mind. And now the Antonines, impelled by something in the age, came forward to reign as “philosophers.” At this moment, Justin Martyr confronts them like a Daniel. The “little stone” smites the imperial image in the face, not yet “in the toes.” He tells the professional philosophers on a throne how false and hollow is all wisdom that is not meant for all humanity, and that is not capable of leavening the masses. He exposes the impotency of even Socratic philosophy; he shows, in contrast, the force that works in the words of Jesus; he points out their regenerating power. It is the mission of Justin to be a star in the West, leading its Wise Men to the cradle of Bethlehem.”

#### B. First Apology

1. RTB, “he attempts to demonstrate the moral credibility of Christianity by appealing to the state for tolerance of the fledgling Christian religion (Christians were being unfairly persecuted and falsely accused of cannibalism, for “eating” the body of Christ, and atheism, for refusing to recognize and worship the various Roman gods).”
2. My Notes
  1. Written to the emperor
  2. Appealed to justice, that is, charges against Christians need to be seriously and righteously investigated
  3. “For we have come, not to flatter you by this writing, nor please you by our address, but to beg that you pass judgment, after an accurate and searching investigation, not flattered by prejudice or by a desire of pleasing superstitious men, nor induced by irrational impulse or evil rumours which have long been prevalent, to give a decision which will prove to be against yourselves. For as for us, we reckon that no evil can be

done us, unless we be convicted as evil-doers or be proved to be wicked men; and you, you can kill, but not hurt us.”

4. His defense
  - a. 1.5 - In our case, who pledge ourselves to do no wickedness, nor to hold these atheistic opinions, you do not examine the charges made against us; but, yielding to unreasoning passion, and to the instigation of evil demons, you punish us without consideration or judgment.
    - 1.7 - Wherefore we demand that the deeds of all those who are accused to you be judged, in order that each one who is convicted may be punished as an evil-doer, and not as a Christian; and if it is clear that any one is blameless, that he may be acquitted, since by the mere fact of his being a Christian he does no wrong.<sup>10</sup> For we will not require that you punish our accusers;<sup>11</sup> they being sufficiently punished by their present wickedness and ignorance of what is right.
  - b. 1.6 - Charge of atheism: “Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow and are made like to Him),<sup>8</sup> and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to every one who wishes to learn, as we have been taught.”
5. The nature of the Christian expectation
  - a. 1.11 - And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, though they know that death is the punishment awarded to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off; since also death is a debt which must at all events be paid.

### C. Second Apology

1. Overview
  1. Justin attempts to demonstrate the intellectual credibility of Christianity by arguing that the Christian faith uniquely fulfills the insights and intuitions of classical philosophy.
    - He also appeals to the virtues that Christians exhibit even in the face of death.
2. My Notes
  - First attempt to reconcile faith and reason
    - Tried to show that they are not opponents and that they must work together
  - Concerned that Xnity not lose touch with culture
    - This leads him into problems sometimes

### D. Dialogue with Trypho

- Demonstrates that Christianity is the fulfillment of the OT over and against the claims of the Jews

The practical wisdom of Justin using the rhetoric of his times, and discomfiting false philosophy with its own weapons, is not appreciated by the fastidious Parisian. But the manly and heroic pleadings of the man, for a despised people with whom he had boldly identified himself; the intrepidity with which he defends them before despots, whose mere caprice might punish him with death; above all, the undaunted spirit with which he exposes the shame and absurdity of their inveterate superstition and reproaches the memory of Hadrian whom Antoninus had deified, as he had deified Antinous of loathsome history, — these are characteristics which every instinct of the unvitiated soul delights to honour. Justin cannot be refuted by a sneer.

## IV. Assessment

### A. Major Contributions

1. Justin insisted that the final revelation in Christ was to be preceded by the insights of classical Greek philosophy. Thus, pre-Christian cultures could recognize and embrace certain divine truths that came through the *Logos* (a reference from the Gospel of John chapter 1, where Jesus the preincarnate Word is recognized as a universal rational principle).
2. Justin viewed philosophy as a helpful tool of general revelation to guide people toward the Christ of special revelation.
3. Justin saw the courage that the persecuted Christians demonstrated as a powerful apologetic for the truth of the Christian faith.

### B. Positive Effects

1. Emphasis upon Christ as the Logos, rightly, but was this accurate?
2. Early trailblazer in developing a more systematized doctrine of the Trinity, though without using that term

### C. Criticism

1. Method
  - a. While his efforts to defend Christianity against the prevailing philosophical and political powers of the day were absolutely commendable, we must ask, was his method consistent to what it should have been.
  - b. "And when we say also that the Word, who is the first birth of God, was produced without sexual union, and that He, Jesus Christ, our Teacher, was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem sons of Jupiter."
2. There is a deficiency in his anthropology - CVT said, "The basic reason why Justin is unable to set the Christ of Scripture clearly as a challenge over against Greek philosophy lies in the fact that he has, himself, no adequately biblical view of man. The Greeks assumed that man is free, ie, autonomous. Justin should have challenged this idea in terms of the biblical teaching with respect to man's creation by God. By Justin is afraid to do this." [ 78, Christian Theory of Knowledge]
3. It is very popular to appeal to reason, to common ground, to nature, and at times this is appropriate. But this is where apologetics needs to inform all that we are doing. Our anthropology informs our evangelism. We know that fallen man, be he ever so outwardly kind, be he ever so friendly, if he is not a Christian, is at enmity with Christ. This is so important to keep in mind, because we will not win people by logic, by humanistic appeals, but by the sovereign, renewing work of the Holy Spirit.
4. "Justin's failure to set his own Christian position clearly as a challenge over against the Greeks is matched by his failure to challenge Trypho the Jew to forsake his faith in work-righteousness and accept the grace of God in Christ." [79]
  - Example, Appeal to the basis of monotheism with Muslims or Jews.
  - Example: Appeal to common morality with atheists.
5. Summary, there is always a danger in synthesizing Christianity with other religions.
  - a. "Instead of taking his views of God in his relation to man and his world exclusively from Scripture as the Word of the self-testifying Christ in order then with this system of truth taken from Scripture to challenge the wisdom of this world, Justin takes his view of God and his relation to man and his world partly from Scripture and partly from Greek philosophy. The result is that he finds no unity of outlook in his own thinking. He remains a victim of the false problematics of apostate thought and, in spite of his best intentions, compromises his Christ."
  - b. And this is what I noticed, in the relatively small portion of reading that I did in Justin's available literature: he appeals to reason before moving to exegesis;

## V. Martyrdom and Death

### Martyrdom

When offered the opportunity to recant by offering a sacrifice to the Roman gods, Justin

replied with Christian conviction and philosophical clarity, “No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false.”

<https://credohouse.org/blog/doing-philosophy-as-a-christian>

C Michael Patton

- A. Crescens, a cynic, has the ill-renown of stirring up the persecution in which Justin and his friends suffered for Christ. The story that he died by the hemlock seems to have originated among the Greeks, who naturally gave this turn to the sufferings of a philosopher.
- B. “That according to which we worship the God of the Christians, whom we reckon to be one from the beginning, the maker and fashioner of the whole creation, visible and invisible; and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who had also been preached beforehand by the prophets as about to be present with the race of men, the herald of salvation and teacher of good disciples. And I, being a man, think that what I can say is insignificant in comparison with His boundless divinity, acknowledging a Certain prophetic power,<sup>3</sup> since it was prophesied concerning Him of whom now I say that He is the Son of God. For I know that of old the prophets foretold His appearance among men.”
  - 1. Interesting correlation to conversion
- C. Rusticus the prefect said, “Do you suppose, then, that you will ascend into heaven to receive some recompense?” Justin said, “I do not suppose it, but I know and am fully persuaded of it.” Rusticus the prefect said, “Let us, then, now come to the matter in hand, and which presses. Having come together, offer sacrifice with one accord to the gods.” Justin said, “No right-thinking person falls away from piety to impiety.” Rusticus the prefect said, “Unless ye obey, ye shall be mercilessly punished.” Justin said, “Through prayer we can be saved on account of our Lord Jesus Christ, even when we have been punished,<sup>5</sup> because this shall become to us salvation and confidence at the more fearful and universal judgment-seat of our Lord and Saviour.” Thus also said the other martyrs: “Do what you will, for we are Christians, and do not sacrifice to idols.”
  - 1. Rusticus the prefect pronounced sentence, saying, “Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to yield to the command of the emperor be scourged,<sup>6</sup> and led away to suffer the punishment of decapitation, according to the laws.” The holy martyrs having glorified God, and having gone forth to the accustomed place, were beheaded, and perfected their testimony in the confession of the Saviour.