



## Patristic Response to External & Internal Pressure

A.D. 150-325

### Introduction

- Both the external and internal threats to the church were severe. They required a response.
- One of the greatest responses came in the form of writing. Many of these writings are part of what we call *Ante-Nicene Literature*.
- This includes all orthodox Christian writings prior to the Council of Nicaea (325).
- It is everything written after the NT, but prior to the council – 95 to 325.
- It is from the texts of these periods that we learn about persecution, the struggle for the Trinity, and pagan corruption.
- This is where we learn about the church fathers who expounded upon the faith within, and defended the church from both external and internal pressure in their writings.



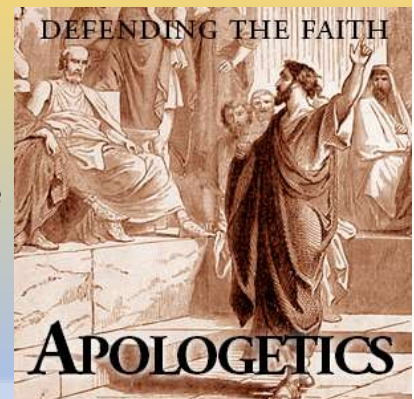
## The Need for a Response

- Christians needed to thoughtfully respond to the rumors about them.
- Christians needed to respond to heresy.
  - Gnosticism, Marcion, etc.
  - But also Christological errors like Sabellianism.
- Christians needed to make legal and logical appeals to the government for why persecution is unjust.
- Christians needed to respond to the educated cultural despisers of the faith.
- Clearly, this was a huge task.



## Need for a Response

- It's also must be noted that the response was not a coordinated response.
  - Instead, very gifted and educated Christian leaders wrote letters, dialogues, debates, polemics, and defenses (apologies).
  - They didn't always agree with each other, but they did effectively answer the challenges.
  - Collectively these writings form an important part of Ante-Nicene literature.
- We already talked about the Apostolic Fathers and other writings from their time.
  - They wrote from AD 95 to 150. The writings were practical and dealt with specific issues in specific places.
- The writing that comes after addresses these universal church issues.



## Rumors

- Rumors that Needed to be Debunked
- Many rumors stemmed from a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine and practice.
  - Christians were atheists since they rejected the pagan gods and had no images of God.
  - Love feasts were thought to be incestuous gatherings.
  - Communion was thought to be the eating of a human child sacrifice.
  - Some even claimed Christians worshiped an ass (and old Anti-Semitic trope).
- These were easy to refute.

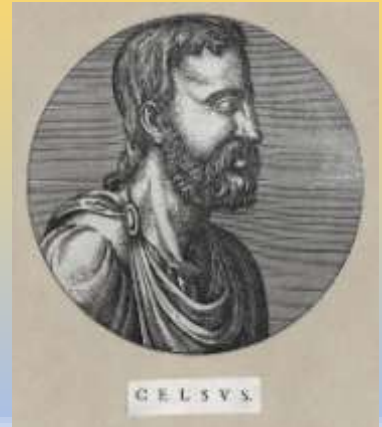


## Criticism from the Cultured Pagan Despisers

- This was much more difficult than the rumors.
- They took the trouble to learn about Christianity and made poignant arguments against it.
  - They claimed Christianity can only draw the lower social classes (women and slaves) because it is inherently contradictory and foolish.
- One such critic was Celsus.
  - He wrote *The True Word* around AD 170 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.
  - He argues only servants and women are dumb enough to believe Christian doctrine.
  - He claimed Jesus was nothing more than a sorcerer and that the apostles invented the myth of the resurrection.
- Cornelius Fronto, around the same time, also wrote similar criticisms.
- This demonstrates that much of the criticism was rooted in class prejudice.
  - The elites always look down on the working class. How could the lower rabble perceive truths that the elites could not? They were offended by the very idea.
- Additionally, Christianity came out of Judaism, and these elites thought Judaism was backward and stupid. All good comes from Greeks and Romans. Anything good from Judaism must have been copied from Greek philosophers.

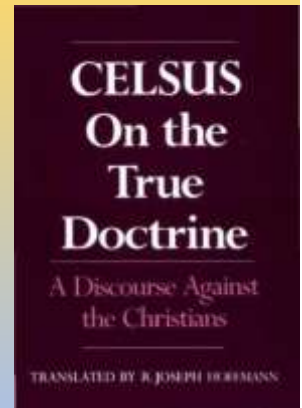
## Their Arguments Against Christianity

- The Jewish and Christian God is ridiculous.
  - He is supposedly omnipotent, but then He delves into human affairs like a busybody. He even listens into every home to see what is being cooked (a critique of Kosher food).
- Those who follow this God (both Jews and Christians) abstain from the important aspects of society. Therefore, they destroy society.
  - They claim attending pagan temple celebrations would make them complicit in idolatry, but then they say the gods of the Greeks and Romans aren't even real.
  - If they are false, why fear them? Sensible people can show up to the celebrations knowing the gods are not real.
  - The only reason the Christians abstain is because they must at the end of the day think they are real and are afraid of them.



## Their Arguments Against Christianity

- How could anyone follow Jesus? He was a Jewish teacher in a backwater part of the world that was crucified as a criminal!
  - Celsus argued Jesus was the illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier that assaulted her.
  - Furthermore, what son of God would allow himself to be crucified? Would he not instead destroy his enemies?
  - Why did Jesus even need to come? To find out what is going on among humans? Doesn't God already know everything?
- Finally, Christians believe in the physical resurrection of the dead.
  - What about those burned, or eaten by beasts? How could God resurrect them?
  - Besides this belief being absurd in the eyes of Greek philosophy, it also leads the Christians to face death with pure obstinacy.
  - This silly belief is what explains their willingness to suffer in a way that impresses pagan observers.



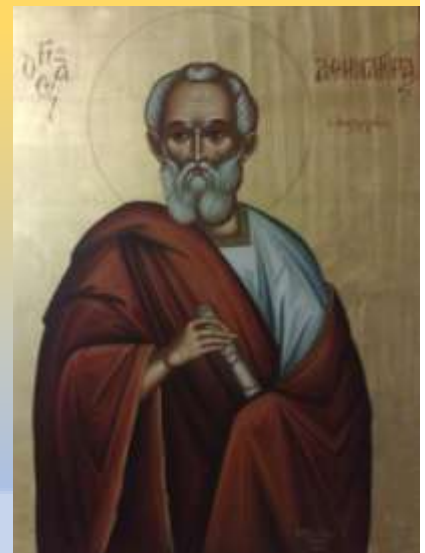
## The Second Century Apologists

- In responding to these arguments, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century fathers left us some remarkable theological works.
- The earliest was written by an unknown author, but we know to whom it was written: *To Diognetus*. It is early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- Around 138, Aristides wrote an apology to Emperor Antonio Pius.
- The most famous, however, was Justin Martyr.
  - He was executed in AD 165. He was the greatest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century apologists.
  - He was a true Hellenistic philosopher, traveling from school to school, seeing them all as lacking.
  - He was converted to Christ through a conversation with an old man in Ephesus. He settled in Rome in AD 153. He called Christianity the "True Philosophy."
  - He wrote *First Apology*, *Second Apology*, and *Dialogue with Trypho*. The first apology was dedicated to Antonius Pius and the second to the Senate.
- His disciple Tatian wrote *An Address to the Greeks*.



## The Second Century Apologists

- Around the same time Athenagoras wrote *A Plea for Christians* and *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.
  - The former was written to Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus.
  - He addressed the false accusations of atheism, cannibalism, and incest.
- Theophilus of Antioch wrote *Apology to Autolycus* around AD 180.
  - He was against Greek philosophy and argued why Christians are good citizens.
- All these apologies (defenses) were written in Greek.
- In Latin, the two earliest apologies were Minucius Felix's *Octavius* and Tertullian's *Apology*. Scholars debate which one was first, but whatever the case, the second one borrowed from the first.
  - *Octavius* set Christianity against Paganism in a dialogue. It was probably written around AD 230.



## Their Defense Summarized

- Christians do not stay away from idolatry because they fear the false gods. They stay away because the real God requires the worship of Him alone. Since most aspects of the society (celebrations, education, literature, etc.) appeals to these false gods, Christians abstained.
- In response to the charge of atheism, the apologists first said by the standard of their critics, Plato and other revered philosophers were atheists too.
  - In reality, they believed there was one supreme God that is not confused with the false pantheons.
  - They did well quoting the Greek philosophers to make this point.
  - Additionally, the idols had to be guarded from thieves. What kind of gods are these? Aristides argued that they were invented by people to justify sin.
- In response to their arguments against God being able to resurrect those burned or eaten, they simply answered that if God could create the universe out of nothing, it is no hard thing for Him to create people anew.



## Their Defense Summarized

- In response to the charge that Christians were immoral, the apologists made it clear that it is the pagans that are immoral.
  - Christians forbid sexual immorality, so how could you accuse them of incest? In fact, pagans boast in the stories of their gods committing, incest, rape, pedophilia, and group debauchery.
  - How can pagans accuse Christians of eating children in Communion? Pagans are the ones that leave unwanted children out in the elements to die, and the Christians are the ones that save them and adopt them.
- In response to the idea that only the low classes would worship Christ, the apologists pointed out that the elites themselves worship the low classes.
  - At the bottom of society were prostitutes, and yet the sculptors of goddesses would use prostitutes as their models for their sculptures. So at the end of the day, they are bowing before the images of low class women. So even if the low classes worship Christ, the high classes worship the low class prostitutes!
- In response to the idea that Christians were disloyal to Caesar, they replied that they are ones who are truly loyal. The emperor needs to be served, not worshiped.
  - We serve him by praying for him and paying our taxes. We pray for the whole empire. They even admired the empire as they prayed for it.

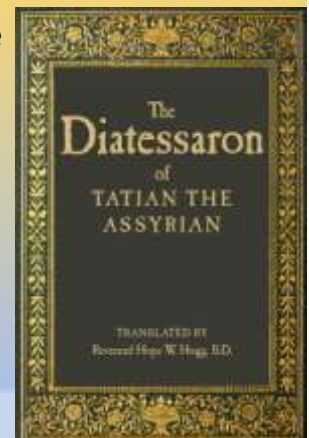
## Pagan Philosophy: Two Schools of Thought

- There were two different schools of thought as to how to respond to Greek philosophy and classical culture.
- The first response was an absolute rejection of pagan culture and philosophy.
  - Tertullian best exemplifies this. "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the Academy have to do with the Church?" Many heresies of the time were the result of trying to combine Christianity with pagan philosophy.
- Tatian, in contrast to his teacher Justin, called for a rejection of Greek culture and philosophy.
  - They claimed the barbarian origin of Christianity (i.e., Judaism) is vastly superior to Greek philosophy, and whatever the Greeks got right they stole from the Jews.



## First School of Thought

- Tatian continued.
- Moses wrote almost 1,000 years before Plato. The Prophets were written before Plato too.
- Additionally, they call everyone else barbarians for not speaking Greek as the first language, but each region had its own dialect.
  - So by their own standards, they saw native Greeks as barbarians.
- Greeks were proud of their invention of rhetoric, but Tatian pointed out that they use rhetoric to convince crowds of falsity since rhetoricians sold their talents to the highest bidder.
- Additionally, Greeks took all their best stuff from barbarians: astronomy from the Babylonians, geometry from the Egyptians, and writing from the Phoenicians.
- Greek philosophy at the end of the day is just the poor reading comprehension of Greeks as they read Moses.



## Second School of Thought

- The second response was to show that Greek philosophy contained true truth that God gave the philosophers through the Logos, and so it could be used to Christian advantage.
- Justin falls under this position. He claimed there were many points of contact between Christianity and pagan philosophy.
  - Pagan philosophers believed the universal principle of reason or order permeated all that exists. They called it the Logos, and John the apostle calls Christ the Logos.
  - Philosophers also believed in one supreme being from which all else derives its existence.
  - Plato argued for spiritual and eternal realities beyond the physical world.
  - Justin said the pagans were correct on all these points, but they misunderstood some of them incorrectly. For example, philosophers hope in the immortality of the soul, whereas Christians hope in the resurrection.



## Second School of Thought

- Justin Continued.
- For Justin, it cannot be mere coincidence that the philosophers got these issues partially correct.
  - Instead, the human mind is connected to the Logos, and that is how we are able to understand reality. Two plus two always equals four because of the Logos.
  - According to John the Logos became flesh. John said the Logos is the true light that enlightens everyone. So before the incarnation, he was still the source of all true knowledge.
  - So the pagans knew the true Logos dimly, whereas the Jews knew him more completely due to Scripture. But what the pagans knew was still true.
  - Therefore, he could say Socrates and Plato were Christian since their wisdom came from Christ, the Logos.
- Justin's argument opened the door for Christians to explain how a pagan culture produced impressive things.
- It also created a path for Christians to accept pagan philosophy they found agreeable to Scripture.



## Teachers of the Church

- Many of the writers of the second and third centuries were also teachers of the church.
- They defended true Christian doctrine from heretics.
- They defended church unity from schismatics.
- Their contribution is just as important as the apologists.
  - They refute much of the internal pressure.
  - They strengthen the church in the process.

## Irenaeus of Lyons

- Irenaeus of Lyons was a native of Asia Minor and died in AD 200.
  - He was a disciple of Polycarp and was the first great theologian of the patristic age.
  - He eventually migrated to southern Gaul (France), to Lyons.
  - He was ordained as a presbyter and later the bishop. He was less interested in philosophical speculation (even though he was well educated in both Greek philosophy and poetry), but instead was a pastor that offered a biblical theology to the church in order to understand storyline of history through Scripture.
- In *Demonstration of the Apostolic Faith* he argues that even though good, Adam and Eve were created immature and God's plan was always the incarnation. Adam and Eve would then be conformed to the perfect image bearer, Jesus.
  - Unfortunately, the Fall happened and so now the incarnation was also necessary to redeem fallen humanity and unite them with the second Adam.
- Israel serves an important role in the drama of redemption, as through them God prepares humanity for this restoration with the Word and Spirit (God's two hands).
- The goal is divinization. In Christ, we will become as much like God as a creature possibly can, though we can never become God. In the meantime, we can live victoriously because we are in Christ.

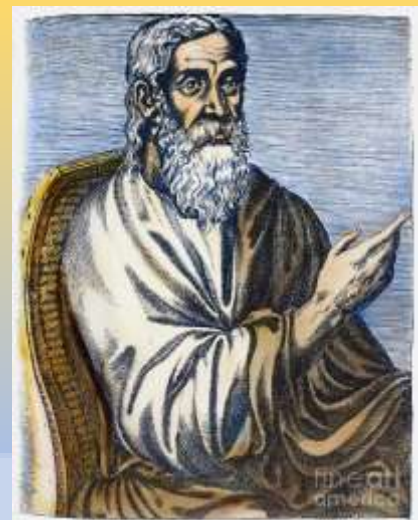
## Irenaeus of Lyons

- He also refuted the heretics.
- His famous work *Against Heresies* records the various Gnostic heresies and even accurately reproduces their arguments through quotations.
- He then refutes them with true biblical doctrine.
- This source is invaluable for understanding the nature of Gnosticism and the Christian response.



## Clement of Alexandria AD 150-215

- Clement converted at a young age, and became the disciple of a schoolmaster in Alexandria named Pantaeus.
  - When he died, Clement took his place.
- Alexandria was the intellectual center of the entire Roman Empire. His school was as much a school of philosophy as it was Christian theology.
  - He was a man that mastered pagan philosophy and merged it with his Christian doctrine. He was not a pastor, and so he was less interested in how to live. He was more interested in deeper truth—seeing beyond the literal meaning of a text.
- He wrote *Exhortation to the Greeks*, which was an apology that tried to convert Pagans to Christianity.
- He wrote *The Tutor* as instruction for new converts.
- Finally, he wrote *Carpet Bags* where he covers a variety of themes discussed in the next bullet.



## Clement of Alexandria AD 150-215

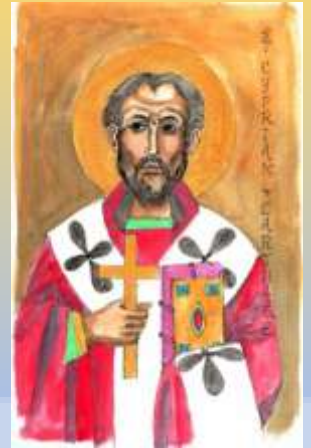
- Like Justin, he used Plato and other philosophers to show that Christianity is compatible with philosophy.
  - He argued philosophy was given to the Greeks and the Law was given to the Jews. Both lead to the ultimate truth—Jesus Christ.
  - In fact, both the Law and philosophy converge in the person of Christ, and thus we should use both.
- The way Clement would make philosophy and scripture agree was through allegorical interpretation.
  - He looked down on the person that merely has faith (i.e., the literal interpretation).
  - Instead, the person that finds the deeper meaning is the true Gnostic.
  - A closer look at his theology shows that his interpretation and doctrines are derived more from Plato than Scripture.
- Under the influence of Middle Platonism, he claims that language can only speak of God in an apophatic manner. This will become a standard rule in the development of the classical doctrine of God.

## Tertullian of Carthage (160-225)

- He converted to Christ at 40 years old.
  - He wrote *Apology* to an Emperor Septimus Severus in 196.
  - He wrote against heresy (*Against Marcion* and *Against Praxeas*).
  - He also wrote concerning internal church matters.
  - He also wrote against the use of philosophy. Rather than speculate on what God's omnipotence can do, reflect on what God actually has done. North Africans, like Tertullian were attracted to a very black and white rigorism, and that is why he was sympathetic to Montanism.
- Perhaps most significant is his contributions to Trinitarian theology.
  - In *Against Praxeas* he coined the term Trinity.
  - He also gave us some important language. God is one substance (substantia) but three persons (personas). However, he did not believe the Son always was distinct as a person, but that only happened prior to Creation. Before that, He was impersonal reason.
  - He also aided Christology by arguing that Christ was one person in whom two natures (or substances) subsist. They are not to be mixed or confused, but remain intact, simultaneously existing in the one person, Christ. These formulas became the language of orthodoxy.
- He also explained the origin of the human soul with transducianism.

## Cyprian of Carthage (200-258).

- He was a famous lawyer and rhetorician prior to conversion. Pagan society disgusted him, and so he searched for something more noble.
  - He converted to Christianity in 246. Within three years, he was elected bishop of Carthage. He was greatly influenced by Tertullian.
- Unlike Clement and Origen, Cyprian interpreted the Bible literally. He interpreted the NT through the lens of the OT, and so he saw presbyters and priests. Around this time, they started to be called priests.
- Cyprian was the first to speak of Communion as a sacrifice.
  - Afterward, it will become increasingly widespread.
  - It wasn't transubstantiation, but instead it connected you with the one-time sacrifice on the cross as well as with all the faithful departed. This idea will spread too.



## Cyprian of Carthage (200-258).

- His main focus was the unity of the church.
- In *Unity of the Catholic Church* he argued that church unity is found in the person of the bishop. "Where the bishop is, there is the Church."
  - There was no real difference between bishops and the original apostles, other than they were the first bishops. And current bishops don't have infallibility. But they possess absolute disciplinary authority and the supernatural power to administer the sacraments.
  - He held to apostolic succession in its strongest form.
  - The bishop of Rome was first among equals, but each bishop has authority over his own church, and Rome has no right to force things on other bishops. He stood his ground against Stephen.
  - His view about the importance of the bishop and the church is summed up in his famous statement, "You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church as your mother. If anyone was able to escape the flood outside of Noah's ark, then you can escape the judgment if you are outside the doors of the church."
- This insistence on apostolic succession and unity around the bishop was a powerful defense against Gnostic claims.

## Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254)

- He was Clement's greatest pupil.
- He was born to Christian parents, and when his father was martyred, he was going to join him, but his mom hid his clothes. He didn't want to die immodest.
- The bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius, tasked Origen as a teenager with instructing candidates for baptism.
- His brilliance eventually allowed him to take over Clement's school at age 17. Many famous people came to hear him teach.
- Demetrius became jealous and tried to bring the school under his authority.
  - Origen resisted and was forced out of Alexandria.
- He accepted an ordination in Caesarea. Demetrius excommunicated him, but people still sought Origen out.
- He died in 254 from the effects of torture he received in 250.



## Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254)

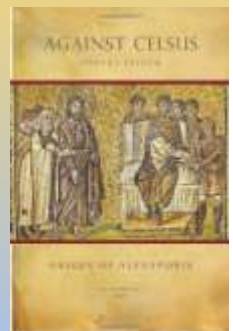
- His works are significant.
  - The *Hexapla* was an OT translation with six columns: Hebrew; Greek Transliteration; and four Greek translations.
  - *Against Celsus in 248* was an apology where he refuted Celsus's *True Word*.
  - He also produced the first systematic theology, *On First Principles*. This last book was divided into the following four sections: 1) God; 2) Creation; 3) Free-Will; 4) Scriptures.
- His theology was similar to Clement's.
- His Platonism caused him to take his speculation much further.
  - He believed Genesis 1 is the creation of only a spiritual reality. All people and angels have eternally existed as God created them eternally. Many rebelled. Some became demons, others became humans.
  - Because of the spiritual fall, God created the physical universe (Genesis 2) and placed the humans in bodies. Through Christ, God will redeem everything—even all sinners including Satan.
  - In eternity past, the Logos had already united himself with a pre-existent human soul so that he could unite humanity to God.
  - Right now, Satan has all sinners captive, so Christ's atonement was a ransom to Satan.

## Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254)

- Since he was a Platonist, he rejected the physical resurrection and a new heavens and new earth.
  - To him, resurrection was immortal redeemed souls living forever after the final redemption.
- Many church fathers admired him greatly. Where he was wrong, he was very wrong. But in his commentaries on Scripture, he does much good.
  - In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, he will be excommunicated because of some of his unorthodox views.
- Most significantly, he left the church with the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son.
  - Rejecting Modalism, he sought to show how Christ and the Father are distinct persons, but one God.
  - Thus, God eternally begat Jesus. But since it is eternal generation, there was never a time when the Son was not. The Father was always the Father because He always had the Son. And given that one can beget only of the same kind, anything the Father begets is of the same divine nature.

## Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254)

- Eternal Generation continued.
  - This is what distinguishes Christ from the pre-existent souls of everyone else. Those were created, and therefore are not of the same nature as the Father. Christ, in contrast, is eternally generated from the Father Himself, thus meaning He has an identical nature.
  - However, true to his Middle Platonist assumptions, Origen saw Christ as the Platonic middle man, which made him a degree less perfect than the Father.
- Origen also left an imprint on the church in terms of hermeneutics.
  - He believed any given text had three layers of meaning: 1) Literal (the body); 2) Moral or ethical (the soul); and 3) Spiritual or allegorical meaning (the spirit). It was based on the Platonic idea of trichotomy.



## Conclusion

- The significance of all of this cannot be understated.
- Tertullian gave the right framework to understand the Trinity, but Origen's eternal generation helped explain how three could be one.
- The different approaches to engaging the culture both worked in different ways:
  - Those that accommodated pagan philosophy won many converts, but so did those who were polemical. This argument still exists in the church today. To what extent can we resource our culture's ideologies in service to the gospel?
- The apologist's defense of Christianity against the rumors was on point—you refute lies with the truth.
  - We face a similar challenge in our day since suicide and mental health issues are blamed on Christian values. We are seen as bad for society.
- Additionally, we can learn much from the apologetic critique on society.
  - Two parts: 1) showing the truth of Christianity; 2) Showing the logical and moral failure of paganism.
- Finally, we deal with heresy by exposing it as unbiblical and excommunicating heretics.