



Church History, The Contenders for the Faith: the Apologists and Polemicists

The Apologists:

Sought to refute false claims of cannibalism, incest, indolence, anti-social actions. They developed a constructive approach by showing that in contrast to Christianity, Judaism and pagan religion and state worship were foolish and sinful.

Eastern Apologists:

Aristides: Was a Christian philosopher. Wrote comparing Christian, Chaldean, Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish forms of worship to show the supremacy of the Christian form of worship. This was done in 140 AD.

Justin Martyr: 100-165 AD. His first apology: Urged the emperor to examine charges against Christians and free them from legal disabilities if innocent. It contained morals, dogmas, Christ's superior life and an exposition of the worship of Christians. His second apology: He sets forth that the good in men is due to Christ. Relation of decline of the law to rise of the Gospel. Linking of the Logos, Christ, with God. Calling of the Gentiles as people of God.

Titian: Denounced Greek pretensions to cultural leadership. Christianity superior to Greek religion and thought. Compares Christianity with Greek mythology and thought. Has the earliest harmony of the Gospels called the Diatessaron. Athenagoras: professor of Athens.

He wrote Supplication for the Christians 180 AD. Stated the charges made against Christians. Refuted the charge of atheism made against the Christians because they would not go along with the pagan gods. Set forth that the pagan gods were merely human creations and were guilty of things like as their worshippers. Sets forth the plea for clemency from the emperor because the claims made against the Christians were false.

Theophilus of Antioch: 180 AD. Was converted by reading the Scriptures. Wrote the Apology to Autolycus in 180 AD. Autolycus was a pagan magistrate whom Theophilus wrote concerning the Christian faith. This work attempted to win this magistrate to the Christian faith through reasoning. It contained several books: The first book discussed the superiority and nature of God. The second book compared the weakness of the pagan religions with the strength of Christianity. The final book contained the answers to the objections of Autolycus to the Christian faith.

Western Apologists:

The emphasis was more on the distinctiveness and finality of Christianity rather than comparative as was the Eastern Apologists.

Tertullian: He was a Roman and trained in Greek and Latin. He knew the Classics and was a proficient lawyer. He taught public speaking and practiced law. He became a Montanist in 202 AD. He gave himself to write a sound theology and refute the pagan false philosophy set against Christianity.

Tertullian's Apologeticus: Was written to the Roman governor of his province. Argues that Christians are loyal citizens. Argues that persecution doesn't work but seems to cause the Christians to multiply. Argued that the state was attacking the Church on shaky legal grounds because the standard of belief and life of the Christians was higher than the surrounding nations. The Christians were embarrassing and exposing the others.



Observation: The basic contribution of the Apologists whether Eastern or Western was to shed light upon the Christian thought of the middle of the second century.

The Polemicists:

The basic difference between the Apologists and the Polemicists was in their purpose. The Apologist sought to give a rational explanation of Christianity to the authorities present. The Polemicists sought to challenge and refute the false teachings, teachers, and heresies. The eastern mind gave itself to speculative theology. The western mind, more pragmatic, gave itself to problems of policy in the church and problems related to more practical theology.

Irenaeus, the anti-gnostic Polemicist:

Was bishop of Gaul. 180 AD and after. Wrote *Adversus Haereses* in five books to refute gnostic teaching. Book #1: This is the best source of teaching of Gnosticism, written to Valentinian, head of the Egyptian gnostic school.

Book #2: Emphasized the unity of God in distinction to the demiurge idea of God. Book #3: Refutes Gnosticism by the Scriptures and tradition in this book. Emphasizes the organic unity of the church through a “succession of leaders from Christ.”

Book #4: This book condemns the teaching of Marcion by the use of the words of Christ. Book #5: This is vindication of the doctrine of Resurrection against which the gnostic were united because of their concept that matter is evil. They had no room for another body in eternity.

The school of thought and instruction, eastern and western:

The Alexandrian School: eastern thought, in Alexandria.

Their objective was to give to Christianity a system of theology by philosophical method. Their leaders were trained in literature and philosophy. They did not emphasize a grammatical-historical system of interpretation.

Their system of interpretation included the belief that the Scriptures had more than one meaning and wasn't concerned with the meaning of the writer of Scripture, but was to look for the “hidden meaning.” Their conclusions often came up weird and absurd as to theological interpretation and contained many un-Scriptural ideas. The men associated with this school of instruction were Clement and Origen.

Clement: (not Clement of Rome) a Christian philosopher.

He sought to show Christianity as the final great philosophy as he related it to the Greek philosophy. His writings:

Protrepticus: 190 AD. Written to show the superiority of true Christianity so pagans would accept it.

Paedagogus: Instruction in morals for young Christians. Shows Christ as the true teacher of the rules for life.

Stromata: several books. Book #1: The Christian is presented as the true gnostic and Christianity as the true philosophy. Book #2: Christian morality is superior to pagan morality. Book #3: Book on Christian marriage. Book #4, 5, 6: Disposition unknown currently. Book #7, 8: Pictures the religious life of the believer.

Origen: a pupil of Clement, above described:

Was in leadership position at the Alexandrian school from 203-232 AD. He succeeded Clement as the



head of the Alexandrian school at the age of 18 years. He was brilliant. His writings are estimated at over 6,000 works.

His life habits: very ascetic, simple and included sleeping on bare board floors. He was the basic originator of studies in textual criticism. This occurs in his Hexapla where he has several Hebrew and Greek versions of the Scriptures arranged in parallel columns. In Hexapla, Origen sought to render an accurate representation of the original text of Scripture. This led to more exegetical study in later reformation times.

He wrote, *Against Celsus*, an answer to the charge that Christians were irrational and the charge that the historical basis of Christianity was lacking. He answered it by showing the change of conduct by Christians, the openminded investigations for the truth by Christians and their purity and influence.

His great work is *De Principiis*, 230 AD. This is the first Christian systematic theology. He developed the allegorical system of interpretation. Taught that Christ was continually generated from the Father and subordinate to Him. Believed in the pre-existence of the soul. Believed in the final restoration of all spirits.

The Carthaginian School: the western school.

Their objective: They were interested in practical matters of organization and government of the church and doctrines regarding the Church. Their leaders were Tertullian and Cyprian.

Tertullian:

Refer to information in section on Western Apologists. Defended Christianity against false charges. Wrote pamphlets and books on practical matters, dress, ornaments for women, separation from pagan amusements, immorality, idolatry.

He was the founder of the Latin Theology. He was the first to state the theological doctrine of the trinity, which was done in 215 AD in his work, *Adversus Praxean*. He emphasized the distinctions between the persons of the Father and the Son.

He also set forth the Traducian doctrine of the origin of the soul. (The soul is passed on at conception in the reproductive process.) He emphasized greatly the rite of baptisms and also that sins after baptism were mortal sins. He used the word “trinity” in reference to the essence of God. This doctrine of the trinity is probably his greatest contribution to Christianity.

Cyprian: 200 AD

Born of wealthy parents and educated in rhetoric and law. Became a Christian in 246 AD. Became a bishop of Carthage in 251 AD and maintained that position until martyred in 258 AD. He was an administrator and organizer. His greatest work: *De Unitate Catholicae Ecclesiae*.

He made a clear distinction between the bishop and the elder. The bishop was defined as the center of unity in the church to guard against schism. He did not affirm Peter’s bishopric in Rome. He did, however, emphasize the primacy of Peter in the succession of apostles down through Church history.

His major influence was from his doctrine of apostolic succession, the primacy of the Roman bishop, over the other bishops. The primacy of the bishop of Rome was stated in the descriptive phrase, “the first among equals.”