

Perspectives on Church History: Where we've come from and how we got here
Unit 1: The Ancient Church (6 BC to AD 590) – The Ancients were people just like us
Part 5: The Apologists (AD 90 – 250)

1. Overview: “Defending Christian truth has always been of foremost importance in church history. As the church moved into the late second century, this need was especially acute, for both inside and outside the church false teaching and error abounded. Thus, God raised up a group of individuals – the Apologists – who defended the Christian faith and, in doing so, led the church toward deeper theological truth. Error forced the church to think more precisely about what it believed and to reach a consensus on what the Scriptures taught.

“False teaching came from both inside and outside the church. Most error was a crude mixture of Greek philosophy, Judaism, and other Eastern beliefs that assailed Christian teaching about Jesus Christ and His work. Non-believers often characterized Christians as atheists, cannibals, or immoral. The first criticism arose because Christians refused to worship the emperor or the Greco-Roman gods; the second because of a misconception about the Lord’s Supper; and the third because of the love displayed within the early church.” Eckman, p.19.

2. What was causing the problem? In brief, as the years passed, and the church continued to grow and expand, heresies outside the church began to threaten its existence while errors within the church confused and misled believers. These are among the heresies and errors the Church was encountering:

a. Heresies from beyond

Gnosticism was the greatest threat to early Christianity. The Gnostics had a *dualistic* view of reality. They believed that the material, physical world was base, lesser and evil, while the spiritual, immaterial world was intrinsically good. A good God, it was held, could not create an evil world – a divine spark from God created the physical universe.

- As for Jesus, then, Gnostics argued that He only appeared to have a physical body. For them, only a secret, spiritual knowledge (“gnosis”) can save individuals from the physical world, and it was imparted to few. Because only the soul was good, salvation was only spiritual as well; therefore, the Gnostic rejected the resurrection of the body.
- Paul fought the earliest form of Gnosticism. As Jewish Christians had sought to make the means of salvation *legalistic* (think of Galatians), these men sought to make the means of salvation *intellectual*. This product of Greek rationalism was a danger in the Colossian church.
- By the time of the Apologists, Gnosticism was still a threat to the faithful and would be so throughout the second century. As God would have it, however, this heresy contributed to the development of the church – in time the early church responded with both the development of a canon of scripture and a creed to test orthodoxy.

Manicheanism was another product of Greek rationalism, being based on dualism the same as Gnosticism. Founded by Mani of Mesopotamia, this heresy held that two opposing forces, light and darkness, were in constant, eternal conflict. Christ, it was held, was the Light that liberated the soul from the inferior physical body. This system stressed ascetic living and emphasized the preference for an unmarried state. Like Gnosticism, it catered to those who considered themselves intellectually elite.

Neoplatonism was derived from certain of Plato’s teachings and was highly mystical in character. This philosophy held that the goal of mankind was to be “reabsorbed” into the divine essence. Such reabsorption occurred through mediation and similar mystical acts. Salvation was spiritual in nature and totally Christless, but it would influence Christianity by making mysticism attractive within the church.

b. Errors from within

Marcionism was the product of a wealthy and influential second-century heretic, Marcion, who came to establish a rival church in Rome. He claimed there were two gods – the Old Testament god who was the evil creator of the universe, and the New Testament god of love and redemption, revealed by Jesus Christ. Marcion developed his own canon of Scripture, totally rejecting the Old Testament while also eliminating many New Testament works since several books accepted by others reflected a Judaistic bias. His rival church lasted several centuries. In the pattern that we will see again and again, however, Marcion's influence was positive in God's sovereignty – his considerable influence forced the church to think carefully and systematically about the nature of the Godhead and about a canon of Scripture.

Ebionitism surfaced in the late first century and survived into the fourth. This heresy was like what Paul addressed in Galatians. Ebionites believed that Jesus was the prophetic successor to Moses but was not the second person of the Trinity. These legalists viewed Jesus as an exalted figure who perfectly kept the law, and they were violently opposed to the free-grace gospel of Christianity. Dualistic in nature like others mentioned above, Ebionites were strict ascetics who practiced a life of self-denial and poverty.

Montanism arose in Turkey in the second century. Its creator was Montanus, maintaining that his "New Prophecy" established that the coming of Christ was near. This fringe movement stressed obedience to the "Paraclete," the Holy Spirit, with such obedience directed by His messenger, Montanus. The visible sign gifts were evidence of anointing for this view of the Second Coming. Montanists declined to accept the New Testament canon as it was developing and were thus condemned as heretics by the church. That said, their views would compel the church to consider more carefully the role of the Holy Spirit in the faith.

3. And if this wasn't enough, the church was still "under pressure" – Contemporaneous with the heresies and errors discussed above was continued persecution of the church within the Roman empire. Opposition from Rome to this point in the life of the church had taken many forms. Beginning with Nero in the late 60s, persecution persisted in various degrees in the decades to follow.

- The first empire-wide persecutions, though, did not occur until the reign of emperor Decius in around 250, whose attempt to enforce sacrifices to Roman Gods in all his realm was opposed by Christians. It certainly didn't end there – "The most merciless persecutions occurred under emperor Diocletian in the early 300s. He ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of the Scriptures, the closing of church meetings, and the imprisonment of Christians. Later, he made the refusal to sacrifice to the gods a capital crime.

"Increased persecution forced the church to determine what was really important. For what were church members willing to die? For what holy writings were members willing to die? Determining the answers inspired and encouraged the Apologists." Eckman, p.21.

4. From these developments, the Apologists emerged.

a. Justin Martyr. Justin was extremely well educated and acquainted with the popular philosophies of his day. At the age of 33, he became a Christian through the influence of an elderly believer who directed him to the Scriptures. In time, Justin would continue his pursuit of philosophical truth through the revealed Word of God. For him, Christianity was the outstanding system of philosophical truth.

Justin would do battle with Marcion, faulting his view of God and his condemnation of the Old Testament. Also, Justin would be a critical character in the recognition of the authority of the New Testament – for him, the two Testaments were in continuity with each other.

Probably his most contribution to the faith is found in his writings. His two *Apologies* were not only defenses of the faith but also direct appeals to Rome to recognize the superiority of Christianity to the pagan religions. This fact, he contended, made unjust the continued persecution of the faith. His *Dialogue with Trypho* was a passionate attempt to convince Jews that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

“Like most of the early church leaders, Justin’s theology was not well developed. He believed in the Trinity and the deity of Jesus, but he did not work out the complexities of the Godhead or the relationship between the deity and the humanity of Jesus. His background in Greek philosophy was often more of a hindrance than a help.” Eckman, p.22.

Along with six others, Justin was arrested in route to Rome in around 165. A mock trial followed in which none of these believers refused to recant and for which each was beheaded. The name “Justin Martyr” was thus born.

b. Irenaeus. Influenced by Polycarp, Irenaeus was a well-known and recognized opponent of Gnosticism. Although born in Asia Minor around 135, he would come to be the bishop of Lyons by 177. His pasturing and teaching influenced much of modern day Europe. He was believed to have been martyred around 202.

His writing is a virtual window to the developing theology of the church in the second century. To begin with, he was the first Apologist to have a view of scriptural authority that was fully developed. He too saw great continuity between the two Testaments. His arguments freely quoted or referenced both, as seen by the fact he relied on all but four of the New Testament books.

In direct contrast to the Gnostics, Irenaeus saw Jesus as the very center of theology. For him, Christ was the link between creation and redemption – what was lost by Adam was regained by Christ. In an attack of the dualism of Gnosticism, he argued that Jesus’ physical body was of a literal nature and that His physical body was central to the resurrection.

He also emphasized the physical presence of Christ in the bread and wine – a conviction that would develop later into transubstantiation. He also linked forgiveness directly to the ordinance and recognized a special role for Mary, the mother of Jesus (the “new Eve”).

c. Origen. At the time of Origen’s birth, Alexandria, Egypt had developed into an important theological center of the early church. His upbringing appears to have influenced the course of his life in that he would write the first systematic theology in church history. He was convicted to the position that Scripture was inspired and authoritative. He was deeply devoted to ascetism – living a life of self-denial, and his influence would directly impact the monastic system of later centuries.

For him, commentary on Scripture was a valuable tool to combat heresy. His Scripture translations would be relied upon as a guard against false teachings. Origen eventually ministered in Caesarea. After about 20 years of service there, around 254 he too would die for his faith, suffering intense torture in the process.

Origen taught that the use of allegory was critical in solving the mysteries of the texts. For example, he argued that only allegory would aid the interpreter in seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Levitical system. His methods would influence the interpretation of Scripture for hundreds of years, yet his convictions regarding allegory were not without a price because the use of allegorical interpretation has often been negative. As is true today, the issue then was deciding who was to decipher the hidden meaning and what was the proper standard to apply. The subjectivity of his allegory methods would prove in some respects to be problematic.

The Apologists

Who?	Major Writings?	Main Focus?
Justin Martyr (circa A.D. 100—165)	<i>Two Apologies, Dialogue with Trypho</i>	Defense of authority of both the Old and New Testaments
Irenaeus (circa A.D. 135—202)	<i>The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching, Against Heresies</i>	Attacked the dualism of the Gnostics by defending the centrality of the physical resurrection of Jesus
Origen (circa A.D. 185—254)	<i>Hexapala</i>	Developed tools for Bible study

5. Conclusion. “The Apologists made their mark in church history. They contended for the faith and began to systematize theological truth. Through their work the church reached consensus on the 27 books of the New Testament canon. The church also inaugurated its ecclesiastical structure, with the office of bishop becoming more significant.” Eckman, p.24. They would open the door for a more mature reflection on theology which was to follow, led by the third generation of Church Fathers, the Theologians.