



The Early Defenders of the Faith

“Apologetics” is the term used to refer to the defense of the faith. Those who specialise in this are often called “Apologists.” Originally, the term was often used in a legal setting, where someone might speak in court in defence of another, or seek to defend his own actions or views. Since every Christian is called to be *“always ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...”* (1 Peter 3:15), every Christian is really called to be an apologist. To help us do that, it is good to consider those who are known for their efforts in this department. We can learn from what has not been done well, as well as from what has hit the nail on the head.

In this article we will consider the early Christian Apologists, many of them “church fathers” who wrote from the end of the New Testament era to the time of Augustine – the second to the fifth century AD. During this time there were three main schools of thought in the Christian world: Alexandrian (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Aristides, Athenagoras, Tatian, Theophilus, Mileto and Appollinaris); Latin (Felix, Lactantius and Theodoret); and African (Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius and Augustine) – though some of these could be claimed by more than one school. Of these three schools, the Alexandrian was probably the most influenced by non-Christian philosophy, resulting in a compromised apologetic approach.

The early apologetic writings include the following names: Quadratus; Aristides; Aristo of Pella; Justin Martyr; Tatian; Miltiades; Appollinaris; Athenagoras; Theophilus of Antioch; Melito of Sardis; Hermias; Minucius Felix; Tertullian; the anonymous Letter to Diognetes; and Augustine.

In this early stage, much of the apologetic effort was motivated by a desire to defend Christians against severe persecution – as well as the positive desire to spread the Gospel. The Lord Jesus had been executed ostensibly for trying to undermine the State. Christians were often seen in the same light, as enemies of the State. Many of the Apologists therefore addressed their defences to Roman emperors, like Hadrian, or to regional governors. Their approach was to give a reasoned defense in a judicial setting, seeking to prove that Christianity was good for the State, rather than harmful.

Atheists and anti-social

Christians were also accused of atheism, because they rejected the Greek/Roman pantheon – both the old gods and the newer Caesar-worship. Christians refused to join in with the sacrifices and the religious festivals to these gods. They shunned the arena and the games, where these gods were honoured. They often refused military service, because of the oaths required to Caesar as god. This was seen as anti-social, as well as anti-State and anti-religion. Did these Christians not claim that they *hated* the “world”? These Christians are haters of humanity! They introduce religious novelty, rejecting the respected traditions of Greek and Roman society. They must be mad, they worship a God who was crucified! These are the kind of accusations commonly levelled against believers at that time. Christians were also accused of immorality: cannibalism, since they ate the body of their Lord; incest and homosexuality, since they loved their brothers and their sisters; and mistreating children. The Empire, as the Guardian of religion, peace, morals and justice, had to act against this dangerous sect of Christianity!

The Apologists sought to answer these various charges. Unfortunately, they did not always do so in a Biblical way. If we consider the New Testament, we find the apostles defending the faith against the attacks of Jews, largely by showing that Christ fulfils the Old Testament (Acts 7). When

defending the faith against Gentiles, the apostles do not argue in an intellectual and philosophical manner against the prevailing Greek ideas. They simply *proclaim* the basic truths of Creation, Providence and Christ's work (Acts 17). In Acts 26, after outlining his own conversion and work, Paul again simply states the Biblical truth of the resurrection and calls upon King Agrippa to repent.

That does not mean that we may not use reason to show the futility of non-Christian thinking. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, the apostle also claims that they were "*destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God...*" However, the believer's use of reason must be guided by the Word of God. Our weapons are not to be "*of the flesh,*" but those that are "*divinely powerful*" (verses 3-4) – the Word and Spirit of God. Often, the early Apologists apparently relied on non-Christian attacks upon polytheism – either by pagan philosophers, or perhaps by Jewish apologists. It is legitimate to use arguments developed by non-Christians, so long as they are first severed from their false presuppositions and placed in the framework of Biblical presuppositions. The early Apologists were not always sufficiently careful about that.

Ignored false presuppositions

The more common arguments taken from these sources included the idea that antiquity proves superiority. Moses preceded Homer and the Greek philosophers, therefore Moses must be better. The Apologists also tried to show that it is idolatry that produces immorality, not Christianity. They argued that polytheism (many gods) is unreasonable. If these are used as stand-alone arguments, they are flawed. For faith in a myth could also bring about moral behaviour, relative peace, martyrdom etc. Moreover, if antiquity makes for superiority, perhaps we should say that the Greek philosophers were good, though Moses is better. If we can accept what the philosophers say at some points, why not all? The early Apologists tended to ignore the effect of sin upon the mind. They tended to ignore the false presuppositions that underlie even the most noble thoughts of the philosophers.

While the Apologists also argued from the resurrection of Christ and from fulfilled Biblical prophecies, they often treated revelation as a kind of add-on to the knowledge that the non-Christian already has – an approach that later influenced Roman Catholic apologetics. This idea of revelation completing non-Christian knowledge took its most serious form in those Apologists who tried to use the Greek idea of the *Logos*. The *Logos* was frequently viewed as an impersonal principle or force of Reason and Order in the universe. Some of the Apologists tried to Christianise and personalise this principle. Some identified it with Christ, who is called *Logos* – the Word – in the New Testament e.g. John 1:1, 14. Some, like Origen, even made the *Logos* subordinate to God. They argued that this *Logos* made the world of matter, because matter was seen as an unworthy thing for God to handle. Some of the Apologists believed that every human being had some of the *Logos* as a seed within, the principle of reason that enabled non-Christians and their philosophies and cultures to arrive at some truth, though they needed the Bible to add more truth. This implies that the main problem in the world is ignorance, rather than sin. As a result, there is a playing down of the *antithesis* that comes because man is fallen and sinful – the opposition between the Christian and the non-Christian, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, between Christian versus non-Christian culture. It ignores the effect of man's total depravity upon all his thinking. This problem is seen especially in the writings of Justin Martyr, in his student, Tatian, and in Appollinaris.

There were, however, some Apologists who saw things more clearly, who made revelation their starting-point and refused accommodation with non-Christian philosophy. Aristides made it clear that one cannot unite Christianity and paganism. Hermias stressed that pagan philosophy is vague, speculative and useless. The philosophers are therefore always contradicting themselves. The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 1:18ff). Tertullian called the Greek philosophers the "Patriarchs of Heresy." He realised that philosophy is never neutral. The antithesis always creates a deep gulf between Christian and non-Christian thought: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" To receive Christ, we need not merely additional information, we need the gracious operation of His Word and Spirit.

A notable defender

Most notably, Augustine developed these themes. Writing at the tail-end of pagan domination of the Empire, he opposed Manichaeism (a dualistic religion proposing two cosmic forces constantly opposing each other, one good and one evil). He also wrote against Pelagianism, which taught that original sin has not spread to all mankind, though people do imitate Adam's bad example; and that men can choose to do good without any special operation of God's grace, simply by using their free will. In answer to this, Augustine taught what we would call the "Five Points of Calvinism." He stressed God's predestination, His sovereignty and the sovereignty of His grace. He denied the Pelagian teaching of free will. He stressed man's total depravity and therefore he upheld the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought. He emphasised the importance of the covenants. He emphasised God's sovereignty in Creation and Providence, as opposed to a world governed by chance. He taught the distinction between the transcendent God and the totally dependent, finite creature. He made it clear that man needs an infallible Word and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, if he is to be saved by Jesus Christ.

All of this comes out clearly in Augustine's contrast between the *City of God* and the city of the world. While he saw the *City of God* as coming to expression especially in the church, he also realised that these two cities are in constant battle because of the unseen, spiritual forces that oppose each other – and because there are opposing presuppositions governing Christian and non-Christian thought, respectively. There can therefore be no accommodation between the two. Christian thought, grounded squarely on Biblical presuppositions, must oppose non-Christian thought, philosophy and culture. That is not to say that Augustine refused to recognise the more noble aspects of non-Christian culture. He accepted that God restrains evil in this world, enabling unbelievers to come up with ideas that Christians can agree with on the surface. But beneath that, at the deeper level, there is no true unity between Christian and non-Christian thought.

That was the basis on which Augustine conducted his defense of the faith. It is that same basis on which Calvin and many later Calvinists have conducted their defenses. For that reason, Augustine has been called by some the "Father of Christian Presuppositionalism" – the attempt to ground the defense of the faith at every point on Biblical presuppositions, rather than seeking unity with non-Christian reasoning. Without the Biblical presuppositions Augustine espoused – Creation, Providence, Total depravity, Revelation, the uniqueness of Christ and His work, and the work of the Holy Spirit – it is impossible to build a proper defense of the faith, avoiding accommodation with non-Christian thought. That does not mean we cannot begin our discussion with unbelievers at the points in which they are interested – as the early Apologists began their discussion at the points where paganism attacked the faith. We may begin with issues like Creation versus evolution, or the definition of marriage, or the "problem of evil." But our underlying presuppositions must remain clear to us: the same presuppositions that Augustine derived from the Bible.

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