

*The Apologists*

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In our last lecture, we were looking at the very important person from the apologetic school who is known as Justin the Martyr. We've seen a little bit about his life, and today we begin looking very quickly at some of his doctrines. This morning we'll continue on to look at his doctrines of man, or his doctrine of human beings. What's important for us to note concerning Justin is that he provides a significant background for later theological development. He is a precursor to what will later develop in the ancient church, a movement surrounding the monk Pelagius and later the movement in the sixteenth century called Arminianism. Justin Martyr believes that human beings have complete independence, they have complete free will, and there is no divine forward notion for any aspect of human life. This important theme first elaborated by Justin will be discussed in more detail by systematicians and apologists, but we should note for this course the idea that human free will enters by this time period, the time period of the apologists, and can be seen as the wedding or the marriage of Greek philosophy and the teachings of the Bible.

Moving on chronologically, our next apologist is Tatian (T A T I A N) the Syrian. Tatian came to Rome when he became a Christian and a student of Justin Martyr. After Justin's death, he went back to the East, and as he was developing Christianity, he became strongly against marriage, the drinking of wine, and the eating of meat. He wrote a number of works, which we have. His first work is entitled *A Discourse to the Greeks*. He's writing an open letter to Greek culture, and in some ways it's intended to be an apology for Christianity. It's written sometime after 165, but whatever the purpose of this letter, it rejects and sharply criticizes Greek culture. The work is divided into four sections. First it begins by explaining the way in which the universe was created, which is different from the way in which Greek philosophical culture understood creation. He then begins to talk about supernatural things such as astrology and even a demonology, that he's against the idea of demons controlling the universe. The last two parts

of his work are the most important. The third part is a critique of Greek society. There he violently or strongly critiques that society with its lack of moral values and some of its understandings of the way in which life should be carried out. And in contrast to that he has in his last part the moral value of Christianity as two opposing moral societies. Also, he has written what we know as *The Diatessaron*. It's what we would call today a harmony of the Gospels. We don't have any copies of the originals and aren't even sure of the original language, whether it was written in Greek or Syriac, but it takes the parts of all four of our Gospels and makes them into one story, and *The Diatessaron* is especially important for those in the study of the New Testament and its history.

The next apologist is Athenagoras of Athens, and he has been termed the most eloquent of the Christian apologists. He's kinder than Tatian in his attitude toward the Greeks. He has a number of writings as well as supplication for the Christians written at approximately 177, and there we have some very important historical material. He provides an introduction and then a refutation of the three charges which were made against Christians, and we'll be talking about those charges more in just a few minutes as we take a look at the history of persecution of the ancient church. But these three main charges leveled against the Christians were that they were atheists, that they were cannibals, and that they were guilty of incest. Again, we'll be talking about why these charges were leveled against the Christians a little bit later.

He also has a work on the resurrection of the dead. Of course, the resurrection of the dead was very strange in terms of the Greek philosophical world. There was no conception of a resurrection, and the idea of Jesus being resurrected from the dead was a stumbling block to the Greeks. He attempts to prove that the doctrine of a resurrection from the dead is very reasonable. He says that the resurrection of the dead in no way interferes with the nature of God and it's consistent with the nature of man that he is created for eternity, and therefore, it's not so strange to have a doctrine of the resurrection.

His theology is important as well. He avoids the idea of subordinationism, and we'll be talking about that important theological term throughout the forthcoming lectures, but subordinationism is the idea that Jesus, as second person of the Trinity, was deeply underneath, that is, in terms of His level of being was greatly subordinate to the Father. Subordinationism

comes from two Latin words, the prefix *sub*, and we know that word from the word, for example, *submarine*, a vessel that goes under the water; and ordination, we know that that means the way things are ordered. Jesus is ordered underneath the Father, and what's important for Athenagoras is that he does not have a doctrine of subordinationism, which is very common among the other apologists. He also affirms the deity of the Holy Spirit and develops to a very fine extent the doctrine of the Trinity. He maintains, as do most of the other apologists, that true wisdom, wisdom that is of the ultimate variety, must come from revelation, an important doctrine of Scripture.

Theophilus of Antioch was a late convert to Christianity, and he, too, came from pagan parentage. We have just a few of his writings. One was a letter written to a prefect named Autolycus, which was shortly written after AD 180. He defends Christianity against the objections of this pagan friend. Most important in this writing is his defense of Scripture. He's the first postbiblical writer to present and somewhat develop the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. As is mentioned in a number of our textbooks, it was assumed from the earliest times that the Bible was the God-breathed Word, but it's in Theophilus that that theory, which is found in the Scriptures, is elaborated upon, and the Scriptures are called by him "the Holy Word of God." His theology also uses the word *triad* as he discusses the nature of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We should note in our examination of the apologists that they are slowly developing a full-orbed doctrine of the Trinity and they are wrestling with the biblical material, attempting to put it together in a systematic form.

Melito of Sardis is the next apologist that we should look at very quickly. We don't know very much about his life, but we do have a few of his writings. He wrote an apology at about AD 170, and we have a few parts of that apology. Also we have a sermon on the passion of Christ or a homily on the passion. It contains the story of the exodus and the Passover, and interestingly both of these events of the time period of the Old Testament are treated as a type of Christ's redemptive activity. This is a very helpful glimpse at how the early Christian church preached from passages from the Old Testament and how they understood the relationship between the two Testaments. Melito asserts the full divinity of Jesus Christ, that He was preexistent, that He was, although preexistent, still incarnate, born of a woman, fully man and fully God. He also has a relatively well-developed doctrine of original

sin.

That ends our brief examination of the apostolic fathers and the apologists. There are a number of apologists about whom we have some information that has not been discussed in great detail in these lectures, and as you look at the study outline, you'll be able to see more material and more books being given to you where you can further investigate this interesting time period.

I'd like to move now to a very important subject, and that is the interpretation of Scripture by the apostolic fathers and the apologists. How did our first Christian fathers struggle with preaching the Word of God? How did they understand the relationship between Old and New Testaments? How did they do their exegesis? Let's take a look first of all at the apostolic fathers. Those are the ones who come immediately after the time of the writing of the New Testament.

First of all, we should stress that all the apostolic fathers without exception proclaimed the words of the Bible to be the very words of the Holy Spirit. For example, Athenagoras says that "the Spirit uses the writers as a flute player might blow into his flute." This is what we would call today a mechanical theory of inspiration, that the authors of the Scriptures were the mechanics, were the tools, of the Holy Spirit as they wrote the Bible. That does not keep them, the apostolic fathers that is, from very strange hermeneutical methods. In other words, a full and good doctrine of Scripture must go hand in hand with a good interpretative method. The apostolic fathers also implement what we call today apocryphal literature. It is never or not often implemented and is a matter of debate as to whether these quotations from what we call apocryphal literature are ever quoted as Scripture.

The apostolic fathers also use a modified form of what we call allegorical exegesis, and we've talked about allegorical exegesis to some extent in the earlier lectures. We must be very careful as we analyze the nature of allegorical exegesis as used by the apostolic fathers. Some of apostolic fathers rejected the use of this allegorical method as such, yet they did use a form of allegory in that they made the Old Testament an immediate witness for Christian truth. *The Epistle of Barnabas*, for example, finds throughout the Old Testament something which can be referred to Christ or to Christianity. For example, as he quotes Isaiah 45:1, "As the Lord said to my lord," we find that there's an obvious reference according to that epistle to Jesus Christ. Some

interesting material on that would be in a book called *Essays on Typology*, edited by Lampe and Woollcombe, and there we have a chapter entitled “The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology” for further information.

The writings of the apostolic fathers demonstrate obviously that they are inferior in their theological development to the Scriptures. That hardly needs to be said, but as one reads the material of the New Testament and then moves chronologically ahead to the apostolic fathers, the difference in the nature of their writings is shocking. There’s obviously the divine movement of the Holy Spirit as He is moving in the lives of the writers of the Bible, as He is instructing them into the divine truths; we see immediately a difference between the testimony of the Scriptures, the writing of the Scriptures, and then the struggling with the Scriptures that the apostolic fathers and apologists are doing as they try to take the teaching of the Scripture and systematize that teaching. It’s obviously inferior. The reason for that being, of course, the movement of the Holy Spirit Himself, moving and directing the writers of the Bible. Even as early as Clement of Rome there’s a marked difference between his writings and the writings of the Scriptures, even though chronologically there’s not a vast difference.

And what do we think about the apologists and their view of the Scriptures and how they are to be interpreted? We’ve talked already about Justin Martyr. He maintains, as well, a canonical theory of inspiration. He also implements apocryphal literature. He thought too that the Old Testament was written mainly for Christians. He sees in all the theophanies, the appearances of God in the Old Testament, a certain Christophany; that is, that for example in the famous burning bush that it is Jesus Himself who reveals Himself to Moses. Justin too was probably influenced by Philo. He thinks that the Old Testament writers spoke in mysteries, in types, and in symbols, and that these mysteries, types, and symbols are made clear by the New Testament.

Moving on in our lecture outline, we turn to persecution in the ancient church. The first thing we’ll look at are the general characteristics. This is one of the most difficult parts of the course for me to teach. I have to confess that each time I go over this period of our Christian history, it takes me awhile to recover after lecturing and thinking about this time period. As my heart goes out to the time for about two hundred years when brothers and sisters, although far away chronologically, yet still brothers and

sisters, had to live lives of horror that are very difficult for us as twentieth-century Christians to imagine. Let's take a look at this time period in general and set the stage for an important time period, one that in many ways is very removed from us, at least in the Western and the Western European world, one that is a time period that is far removed and yet a time period that is an important part of our history.

We remember that Christianity was a persecuted religion and the magic year of the cessation of that persecution is 312. That's a year we should remember. The time period of persecution is a unique period of our history, one that is full of significance. Our purpose today is to briefly present the history of persecution and attempt to discover why those persecutions occurred.

Historically speaking, the persecutions of Christianity began first with the Jews and then afterwards came from the Gentile community. They lasted, although not continuously, for over two hundred years. Two hundred years is only a portion of two thousand, but certainly those one hundred years or those two hundred years of persecution represent for us a very significant period of time. As we Americans reflect upon our own history, we not too long ago celebrated our two hundredth anniversary, and we think that we have a long history. If we think in those terms, then we recognize that the history of persecution was also a long one.

As we attempt to classify the number of persecutions, we find that it's a rather arbitrary affair. They could be numbered at ten, as Augustine does in the *City of God*, or six, as another church father, Lactantius, does, or perhaps nine, as another ancient author asserts. The exact number is not important for us to remember. What we need to do is investigate the various background elements, and these background elements will provide a unified structure to all the persecutions of the ancient church. After we've finished our investigation, we'll attempt to interpret the causes of these persecutions.

There were only two persecutions that extended over the entire empire: those of the emperor Decius from the years 250 to 251, and Diocletian, 303 to 313. Even so, we should be reminded that Christianity was legally an illegal religion from the time of the emperor Trajan in AD 98. He reigned from 98 to 117. Returning to the history of persecutions, we should see that it was the Jews who were the first persecutors, but we should also add a very

important note of caution. There were a number of complex forces playing roles in all persecutions, and the casual statement that the Jews were the cause of persecution is dangerous to make. We must remember that there's a great difference between what was happening in that century and in our own. It's been asserted that the Jewish community was responsible for the death of the leader of the church in Jerusalem whose name is Simeon, that was in 107, as well as for the death of Polycarp in 156, who was burned to death.

During the famous Barcaca wars, 132 to 135, when Judaism was undergoing severe restrictions by the Roman government, the leader of the insurrection forced all Christians to either join with them or to be murdered by them. As you know, the rebellion was defeated and the Roman government nearly destroyed Judaism. It appears to many scholars that the Talmud, written toward the end of the second century, as well as the Babylonian Talmud, written 430 to 521, are also important sources of anti-Christian literature. But much more important than the persecutions under Judaism were the persecutions suffered under the Roman government. Domitian, who was emperor from 81 to 96, condemned many Christians to death. His charge against them was that they were atheists.

Yet it was the emperor Trajan who was the first to pronounce Christianity forbidden by the state. He announced that all secret societies or clubs were forbidden as well, thus reviving a law that had been on the Roman books for quite some time. The movement of Trajan regulated the treatment of Christians for more than a century. It was under Trajan that Ignatius of Antioch, a man whom we have already looked at briefly, was torn to shreds by beasts in Rome.

Under Antonius Pius, about 138 to 161, Polycarp of Smyrna was martyred in 156. Under the philosopher ruler, Marcus Aurelius, a name perhaps familiar to many of us, 161 to 180, a law was passed that punished those that endeavored people to fear God, that is, endeavored to persuade people to fear God. This law was probably aimed at Christianity. Under his rulership the famous Christian apologist Justin Martyr received his name in 166. During the reign of Septimius Severus, 193 to 211, persecutions continued. Clement of Alexandria gives us some details of life during his reign. Clement said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded right before our eyes."

The persecutions under Decius, 249 to 251, were the most cruel of the persecutions that we have so far observed. Since it covered the entire empire, it produced the most number of martyrs. [Next] was the persecution of Valerian, an emperor since 253, who began a persecution in 257 to 258 during which Cyprian was martyred. There was a time of rest for the Christians during the reign of the emperor Gallienus for about eight years, but that moved us on very quickly to the Diocletian persecution of 303, which ended in 311 or as late as 313. The terror of the Diocletian persecution was greater than all the others before it. Beginning in 303, three edicts were given by Diocletian that progressively became worse and worse. The churches were to be destroyed, the Bibles were to be burned, and all Christians were to be removed from public office and forced to sacrifice to the gods on the pain of death. The famous church historian of the ancient church, Eusebius (I've mentioned his name a few times earlier) was a witness of the persecutions in Egypt and other areas. He relates accounts of churches being torn to the ground, many Bibles being burned at the marketplaces, and the hunting down and torture of pastors. The accounts are also filled with Christians being torn to shreds by wild beasts. It was so terrible and bloody that he tells us that even the beasts got tired of their frequent attacks upon the innocent Christians. Finally, there were the edicts of toleration issued in 311. This does not end the story of Christian persecution, but it ends the tale of woe during the ancient church.

Moving on to the next point of the lecture, we see that the story of the persecution in the ancient church elicits various responses as we reflect upon that time period of history. Sometimes, as I've mentioned in the introduction, I wonder whether God would give me the strength to withstand the torture which was the lot of so many pastors. Other times I attempt to imagine what it would be like to always have to worship in secret or to have all my property confiscated. I wonder if I could stand to see the persecution of loved ones. I wonder what it would be like to bear the insults that were such a commonplace for Christianity for so many years. The problem for us today, in this century, is the one of interpretation. How do you and I understand these past events? Are they to be relegated to notebooks that grow yellow with age over the years? Here's one of the most important and perhaps most difficult tasks that the students of the ancient church faced.

Let's begin our analysis of persecution of Christianity. As we do that, certain important factors must be considered. First of all, even though there were breaks in the times of persecution,

persecution did not occur continuously during these years that we are studying, but the possibility of its outbreak was always there. Most scholars maintain that this is the case because popular opinion was uniformly against the church. This can be observed, for example, that Nero in the early part of our history knew that there was sufficient popular opinion against the Christians to use them as a scapegoat as early as AD 64. The reason for this popular animosity may be varied, but it appears to be because Christianity required a certain way of life. How did this Christian way of life appear to the average Roman citizen? First of all the Christians were generally known as what we would call today “killjoys” or “sticks in the mud” or some other common term. We know this to be the case because in part of the account that we have entitled *The Epistle to Diognetus* written in 130. There it says that, and I’m quoting from that epistle, “The world hates the Christians, though it receives no wrong from them, because they set themselves against its pleasures.” We also have the text from the Octavius of Minucius Felix in AD 180. There we see the pagan disputant complaining against the Christians as he says, “You abstain from the pleasures of a gentleman”; that is, the theater and the gladiatorial games.

The Christians were blamed for their slight interest in public affairs, for their separateness from the rest of society, and from social duties. Their religion as a whole was so unpopular that Tacitus, dying after 117, says that Christians were, and I’m quoting from him, “a class of men loathed for their vices,” and Suetonius called the religion “a new and baneful superstition.” The people themselves were against the Christians and the philosophers were too. They saw Christianity as a rival, that is, a rival philosophical system, a rival way of life over the kingdom of the minds of men, and they saw as Christianity advanced, their kingdom shrinking. The problem was further complicated in that most of the population did not know much about the religion. Since only Christians were permitted to partake of the Lord’s Supper, for example, the stories that circulated concerning that supper could not be based upon direct observation, unless a Christian told the story, and they were not about to spread false rumors concerning what they believed.

And last there were the three general charges that were brought against the Christians that we’ve already heard. Do you remember what they are? They were that Christians were atheists, that they were cannibals, and that they were incestful. How can a Christian be called an atheist? Remember, they didn’t have any gods to

worship. They didn't have any statutes. They didn't have anything in front of which they bowed down, and since they had no visible gods, they mustn't have had any god. But this charge of atheism was not understood the way it would be in twentieth-century America. Atheism defined in Roman culture was an indifference to the duties of citizenship, whether that be political or social duties, as well as disloyalty to the state. The state and the belief in many gods were wedded. Christians didn't believe in many gods. They must have had no gods. They were against the gods; therefore, in the mind of the Roman culture, they must have been against the state because our state stands for worshipping many gods.

Concerning the other two charges, that is, that they ate human flesh and were incestuous, is also understandable given the nature of the Lord's Supper and the nature of Christian community. How is it that we are cannibals? Picture in your mind walking by a house with the windows open as the Lord's Supper is being celebrated, or a church building, and the minister is inviting the congregation to partake of the Lord's Supper. What will the minister say? "Here is the body of Christ, broken for you. Here's the blood of Christ that was shed for you. Drink all of it. Drink ye all of it." What a horror! They're drinking this man's blood! They're eating His flesh! They must be cannibals. And what about incest? The Scriptures are very clear against such a horrible behavior, but the Bible also says to greet each other with a holy kiss. And the Bible also tells us to address each other as brothers, that we are truly brothers in Christ or brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore we greet our sister with a holy kiss. Certainly these Christians must be doing more than greeting each other with holy kisses. Therefore the three charges—atheists, cannibals, and incestuous—doesn't paint a very good picture of the Christian community does it?

If we attempt to summarize the material that we've learned about the causes of Christian persecution, we can see some important theological points being made. First of all, we must together acknowledge the sovereign mercy of God in ordaining all things that come to pass in the life of His church, in the life of His bride, but the outstanding observation for us to make concerning the persecutions of the second century in particular is that they were sporadic and that they were prompted by the mob. It was the mob that was moved against the religion that was a novelty. It was the mob that was against this religion that had barbarian origins, that is, non-Greek origins. And it was the mob that perhaps most importantly believed that this religion had no national bases. It

wasn't a Greek religion; it was a religion that claimed all people. It was the mob that was against this religion that proposed a belief in faith without being able to see gods. That was irrational, they thought, and rather idiotic.

We also note that at the time the average Christians appeared as having no culture. They had no social standing; they were usually poor. Yes, the first converts were in terms of numbers basically from the lower classes of society, and as is in the case of the twentieth century, so too the lower classes of society usually have less political clout than the upper classes, and so this was a religion of the poor, a religion of the downcast.

Also, the Christians were considered to be unpatriotic. Remember patriotism then is not quite the same as we understand it in modern America, but they were unpatriotic in terms of participation in the various patriotic duties of the time, which would involve burning incense to the idols, to the gods. And generally the Christians were seen as people who were, to use the words of their own time, gloomily serious.

As we move ahead from the second century to the third, we see that persecution was directed in a large measure by the state and was more universal. We move from mob violence to organized violence against the Christian church. The government itself had now come to fear the church. One of the reasons was that Christianity appeared as an illicit cult or a vulgar innovation whose religious aspect was probably merely a façade for concealing something much worse. The Roman government was always suspect of clubs, of secret organizations, and Christianity could have appeared as being dangerously antisocial. It had to be banned by the government since it wasn't on the list of approved societies.

Last, let's attempt to analyze this data and develop judgments concerning the persecution of the early church. Here I want to mention that my judgments will only be preliminary in nature, and I would like to ask you to reflect upon this material as well. What I want to do is provide a few points of reflection from the lessons of history. First, God's blessing of His people does not always mean that He's going to bless them financially. The Christians with few exceptions in these early centuries were not a rich people, yet the early Christian church was greatly blessed of God. Second, we should note that Christianity had something to say to its culture. One point of high importance is that the church

in its early centuries forbade abortions, which were very common in the world that surrounded it. Third, it appears to me that the church does become more pure the closer it is to persecution. The persecutions of the ancient church caused problems concerning what to do with the lapsed, and we'll talk about that word in just a minute, but lapsed coming from those who at one time made profession of faith in Jesus Christ and joined the church, but during the time of persecution fled or denounced Christianity to try to save their skin. What are we going to do with those people? We'll be talking about that in just a minute, but it was a difficult problem for the ancient church. In general when there's a high price to pay for Christianity, the Christian is more pure.

Last, the fact that we are not presently suffering persecution should result in praise in our hearts and prayers to God that it keeps us true to Him, for we know that we are not in a special time that keeps God from causing us to undergo persecution and that it's only by the grace of God that our government and our society keeps us from this time of horror. And so we should think back upon our past, remember that God in His sovereignty ordains all things that come to pass in His church. Think about how those Christians suffered; think about what it is to be a Christian in terms of an entire life's commitment. To reflect upon how that early church, although persecuted, although a small minority, spoke radically to its culture. To remind ourselves that the first persecutions were sponsored by the mob; that is, that the Christians stood in such radical antithesis to the paganism of their culture, to the blatant sinfulness of their culture, that the people really did not appreciate the Christian community. These important points of our past are helpful to us in developing our own twentieth-century theories concerning the relationship between Christianity and culture, and especially for those who are bound for the mission field. They too must reflect upon how it is to be a Christian in a culture that is radically different from Christianity.

Do we too have the courage that the early church had in facing imminent persecution, knowing that around each corner could be a Roman soldier about to ask us whether we find Jesus to be the Lord or whether we find Caesar to be the lord.

And who is the Lord in our lives today? Let's be strong and stand for Jesus Christ as the Lord of our culture, as the Lord of our lives,

and take these lessons of the ancient church and bring them to our hearts so that these important lessons are not just put in your notebook, not just put on the shelf, but can be made to live in vitality in twentieth-century America.