

The Ancient Defense of the Faith

(This lesson is based primarily on The Story of Christianity by Justo L. Gonzalez.)

Sporadic persecution –

- Last week we basically left off with the fact that during the 1st and 2nd centuries of church history there was no systematic, empire wide persecution of the church. However, if someone was accused of Christianity they would be tried, tortured, and martyred.
- This meant that Christians needed the good will of the neighbors to survive.
- And this made it very important to refute the false claims of the enemies of Christianity with the truth about the faith. This led to various writings by “the apologists”.

Ancient objections to Christianity –

- Objections to Christianity based on ignorance...
 - Because Christians met every week to celebrate a “love feast” and because Christians referred to each other as “brothers” and “sisters”, including their spouses, pagans jumped to the conclusion that Christian worship consisted of orgy like gatherings that included incest.
 - Because the churches celebrated communion regularly and spoke of receiving the blood and body of Christ, who had been born as a baby, the pagans created horrific stories of babies being placed inside loaves of bread, new Christians being told to slice the bread, and in doing so killing the baby.
- Objections to Christianity based on partial truths...
 - One of the primary objections to Christianity in the first 2 centuries was simply that Christians were of the lower classes and were barbarians compared to the cultured Greeks and Romans.
 - They were accused of being uncultured, crude, and ignorant. Christians had derived their teaching from the Jews and not from the more cultured Greeks and Romans.
 - Pagans accused Christians of worshipping a ridiculous deity. They proclaimed him to be omnipotent, but on the other hand they depicted him to be like a neighborhood busybody. This god they claimed was constantly evaluating human performance, going into people’s homes and listening to what was being said and even checking what was being cooked.
 - Pagan attackers of Christianity especially objected to Christianity because Christians abstained from most social activities.
 - Christians would not join the army.
 - Christians would not participate in local feasts because they amounted to worshipping the gods or the emperor.
 - Other pagan objections to Christianity centered around Christ.
 - They would point out that Jesus was condemned and crucified by the Roman officials of the day.
 - They would object that if Jesus was truly the Son of God, then why did he allow himself to be crucified?
 - Pagans also objected to the Christian belief in eternal life. Christians were willing to be martyred because they believed in eternal life with God. But the pagans objected to the idea of leaving this life, which is certain, in the hope of a life in the future that is uncertain.

The Christian response to these pagan accusations:

- There were basically two different responses to dealing with these accusations.
 - Tertullian taught that yes, Christianity was VERY DIFFERENT from the surrounding culture and attacked Greek and Roman culture and thought.
The reason that he did this was that he thought many of the heresies arising at this time were a result of trying to combine Christianity with pagan philosophy.
Tertullian is famous for asking, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the Academy have to do with the Church?”

- Justin Martyr on the other hand worked to point out various points of similarity between Christianity and pagan philosophy and culture.
This was at least partially due to the way that Justin was converted. He experienced a long spiritual pilgrimage, seeking the truth. He studied various philosophical schools of thought until he found Christianity, which he considered to be “true philosophy”.
- Justin pointed out these similarities between Christianity and pagan philosophy:
 - The best pagan philosophers denied the existence of the Greek and Roman gods and said that they were created by the people to approve of the immoral behavior.
 - These same philosophers affirmed the existence of a supreme being.
 - And they believed in a life after death.
- Tertullian warned against syncretism.
- Justin Martyr opened the way for Christians to affirm whatever good they could see in the culture around them.

Ancient Heresies: Christian theology has often been developed in response to error...

- **Gnosticism –**

- *gnosis* – knowledge
- Gnosticism was not a well defined group. It was a philosophy of “secret, mystical knowledge” that was thought to be reserved for those with true understanding.
- Their core “belief” was that the “spiritual” was good and that the “material” was evil.
- Their goal was to escape the body and enter a purely spiritual existence.
- There was a belief that originally all reality was spiritual. One of the original spiritual beings created by the supreme being fell into error and created material reality. Eventually, a messenger would come and show people how to return to this original spiritual existence.
- For “Christian” Gnostics, this messenger was Christ.
- These “Christian” Gnostics objected to the idea that Christ had a real physical body.
- Gnostics had two opposing philosophies of life. Since the material world is evil, some were very strict and legalistic in keeping their bodies in check. Others however were very libertarian because they decided that since the body was temporary and didn’t matter that much, they could give full license to their physical lusts.

- **Marcion –**

- Marcion was the son of a bishop. He knew Christianity from his youth.
- But he hated the material world (gnostic influence?) and he hated the Jews.
- Marcion was convinced that the physical world is evil. And he decided that the Christian God (the Father of Jesus) was different from the Jehovah of the Jews. Jehovah had created the world and therefore he was evil.
- Therefore he rejected the Old Testament and any elements of the New Testament that were Jewish. This only left the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. But even these had to be purged of their Jewish elements, specifically where Paul and Luke quote the Old Testament!

- **The Christian Response to these heresies:**

- **Canon** – Because Marcion objected to any Gospel account but Luke’s and because the Gnostics claimed that Jesus had entrusted his “secret knowledge” to only one disciple, the church specifically insisted on ALL four Gospels even though their emphasis was sometimes different.
By the end of the second century, the core of the canon was defined: 4 Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles.
- **Creed** – see Apostle’s Creed in hymnal... baptismal confession
- **Authority** – apostolic succession
 - The ultimate question became who had the authority decide what the “deposit of faith” really was.
 - At this point, the idea of “apostolic succession” became very important. Some churches had lists of bishops that went back to one or more of the original disciples.
 - Modern historians questions the validity of these lists, however, the ability to prove that the leaders of a given church went back to the disciples was important for the issue of who had the authoritative Gospel.
 - Originally, apostolic succession did NOT mean that ordination of ministers needed to be traced back to the original apostles.