



## FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

### Justin Martyr, c.100 – c.165 A.D.

It did not take long for the pagan world to react to the growing presence of Christianity. By the second century Christians faced stigmas, bias, and fear and scorn from those around them. Although persecution by the state was sporadic and localized, there were cultural and intellectual objections to the Christian faith. It fell on the shoulders of leaders like Justin, the great apologists, to rise to the defense of Christianity

#### The Life of Justin

- Born in a pagan family of Greek and Roman parentage in Flavia Neapolis, a Roman city in Samarian Palestine. As a young man he went to Ephesus to study philosophy and set out on a quest for truth, which ended up being a type of grand tour of the Greek philosophical schools of thought.
- He first became a student of Stoicism, which at the time was the most 'popular' philosophy, but found that his tutor could not explain God to him. He then moved on to an Aristotelian (Peripatetic) teacher, but was quickly turned off by the teacher's over eager desire for fees. Next he tried the Pythagoreans but the teacher first required him to learn music, astronomy, and geometry, which Justin did not want to do. Finally, Justin settled on Platonic philosophy, primarily because of its mystical interpretations of God.
- However, Justin's life takes a radical turn one day. While meditating by the seaside he is met upon by an old man who refuted the platonic doctrine of the soul and spoke to Justin about the Old Testament prophets and the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Justin was converted on the spot.
- Justin understood Christianity, the revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ, to be what he called 'The True Philosophy'. His conversion, while certainly genuine, was not an out of hand dismissal of Greek philosophy. Thus as a Christian Justin did not abandon his philosophical inquiries, but rather sought to better understand the Greco-Roman world, with its philosophies, in light of Christ. He even continues to wear the robes and costume of a philosopher.
- Justin then moves from Ephesus to Rome where he founds a school and by the year 155 writes an *Apology* (also called Justin's *First Apology*) to Emperor Antonius Pius in defense of Christianity. A few years later, but no earlier than 161, he reissues this work with some additional material in what is called his *Second Apology*, occasioned by an outbreak of persecution in Rome. Sometime between the publication of these two apologies he issues *Dialogue with Trypho*, probably about 160. The *Dialogue* recounts a past debate with a Jewish rabbi which occurred around 135. It is a work of particular importance because the debate took place during the Jewish War in Palestine, and likely happened shortly after his conversion. It is a key source for personal information on Justin's life. When recounting his own conversion by the sea the words of the old man and the truth of the prophets kindled in him a love of Christ, and led him to embrace the Christian faith.
- Sometime around the year 165 Justin and six others were arrested and brought before the prefect. There Justin held fast to the faith he had defended for so many years, and when he refused to make sacrifice to the Emperor, he gave his life for the Lord he loved.

#### The Times of Justin

- Civic/cultural misconceptions.
  - The Greco-Roman world was very wary and skeptical of Christianity. Because Christians often referred to each other as 'brother' and 'sister', including husbands and wives, some began to think that Christians practiced incest. Due to the illegal nature of Christianity meetings were

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in homes, and often in secret. They would gather for communal meals where Eucharist was had, and were called 'love feasts'. Only initiates, that is those baptized, were allowed to participate. Thus the imagination strung these ideas into a rumor that Christian gatherings were orgiastic celebrations of excess.

- Another rumor that arose surrounded the 'body' and 'blood' of Christ. Since Christians at communion spoke of eating the body and blood of Jesus, they were sometimes viewed as cannibals. Since the idea of the incarnation and Jesus as a child were so common and foundational to Christianity, some pagans thought that Christians would put babies in the loaf and force new initiates into cutting the 'loaf' and then eating the infant.
- Most of these false notions were fairly easily put to rest, and by the end of the 3rd century most of the beliefs and practices of Christians were fairly well known by in the Empire. Additionally, Christian communities were usually marked by a degree of care, love, and upstanding morality, and were typically not seditious towards the state.
- Philosophical challenges
  - There were a number of well educated Romans who thought Christianity was foolish and contradictory. Because Christians did not worship statues and the standard polytheistic pantheon they were labeled 'atheists'.
  - One of the first outspoken critics of Christianity was Celcus, who was an active opponent of Christianity. Although he disliked the Jews as well, at least they held to a tradition of their ancestors. Christians have not ancestral tradition, not even that of the Jews from which they come. Furthermore, the Jews were not into spreading their Judaism all over the Empire like the Christians were. For a number of Roman intellectual skeptics, because one can't be sure of anything, at least stick with tradition.
  - For the Romans, Christianity presented "a revolutionary religious movement yet without a conscious political ideology; it aimed at the capture society throughout all its strata, but was at the same time characteristic for its indifference to the possessions of power in this world...Celsus was the first known person to realize that this non-political, quietist, and pacifist community had it in its power to transform the social and political order of the empire" (Chadwick, 69). Celsus thus sought to arm pagan society against Christianity.
  - There were also theological issues such as the incarnation, monotheism, and resurrection which most pagans found unpalatable. It became fairly common to blame natural disasters on Christians, whose evangelization of the Empire was, in their minds, bringing the displeasure of the gods upon them (see Augustine's *City of God*).
- Social class issues
  - One also realized that the intellectual opposition to Christianity was also deeply rooted in social class prejudice. For well-to-do Romans, Christians represented the crude, ignorant rabble of the Empire. The idea that God would reveal himself to and love the poor was a repugnant idea to the upper class. The fact that Jesus actually ate with and even *touched* the poor, and even the leprous, was a revolutionary thing for any 'god' to do; revolutionary in a good way for the poor, in a bad way for the upper class.
  - Although there were many wealthy people who did genuinely convert to Christianity in the first four centuries (Lydia, for example in the Book of Acts, ch 16), on the whole Christianity was seen primarily as a proletariat movement.

## The Theology of Justin

- Three of Justin's works survive: two apologies (which are actually two parts of a single work), and his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jewish rabbi. We have met, very briefly, with Justin's view of the pagan philosophical world before, when we studied Origen (and to some extent his teacher, Clement).
- The True Philosophy – Although Justin very clearly rejected pagan myth and cult, he was still very gracious to the best that classical philosophy had to offer. While Plato got many things wrong about

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God (from a Christian standpoint), Justin was rather struck by how much he got right. Platonic teachings about the soul's innate relationship to god, that humans are accountable for their actions to god, and that there will be judgment and justice in the world to come, are ideas that Justin saw as 'true', in the sense that they matched up with Christian revelation. There is much that Plato got wrong, the transmigration of the soul, for example, but for Justin what he got 'right' required a question of revelation. How had Plato arrived at these profound insights? For Justin the answer lay in two possibilities: first, that Plato had come into contact with the OT scriptures via a Greek synagogue which provided them with hints of the True truth. The second follows St Paul's thought of general moral revelation, as outlined in Romans 1 and 2. That all humans, being created in God's image, have His moral law written to some extent on their hearts, so that no one is without excuse. Humanity is endowed by its Creator with a conscience. Later Protestant theologians would write of 'general' versus 'special' revelation; Justin speaks of the Divine Logos which has implanted a certain light in all of us. Just as Abraham hoped for Christ, though unseen, so too did Socrates in understanding, though dimly, the light of the Logos become a "Christian before Christ."

- General vs. Special revelation, critiquing Justin. The modern missionary movement: many missionaries during the 18<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century found within non-Christian cultures ideas or customs which very readily 'translated' to Christianity (e.g. Bruce Olsen, *Bruchko*). While it is legitimate to uphold Justin's argument about Greek philosophers from general revelation, it pushes the point to far to equate, essentially, the revelation given to Abraham with that given to Plato. God the Father really did speak to Abraham and made a covenant with him, which Abraham received in faith. Even though the promises made to him were not fully resolved until the coming of Jesus Christ, and thus Abraham 'saw dimly', he was given special revelation by God, albeit special revelation appropriate for that particular point in salvation history. While this may not be a fully parsed idea in Justin's work, such thinking falls into an easy trajectory from it and must be guarded against. Thus in all fairness, Justin was mainly arguing that the divine Reason (i.e. the Logos) which revealed God's will to Abraham was the same Reason which in general terms revealed 'nuggets' of Truth to Plato.
- Interestingly, Justin's use of the Logos lays a very early foundation for Trinitarian theology. By defining the Logos as divine but distinct from the Father and then becoming incarnate in Christ, he laid a foundation for much of the later Christological debates of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Justin also affirmed the full incarnation of the Logos, as refutation of the Gnostics, which he also wrote against. He particularly took care to define the virgin birth. What the scriptures mean, he argues, is not that God had sex with Mary when she was a virgin, which many pagan gods were quite happy to do, but rather that Mary conceived without having sex and thus remained a virgin (*Apology* 22).
- OT – Justin saw the revelation of God in the Old Testament prophets, being fulfilled in Christ, as one of the chief signs of the validity of Christianity. It also meant that he opposed such gnostics as Marcion who rejected the use of the OT and the God found therein. His own conversion testifies to this truth.
- Christian life: one of the ways Justin sought to dispel the erroneous and detestable rumors about Christians was to discuss some of the features of Christian life in worship. Consequently, he becomes one of our best sources for knowledge of what life in the Early Church looked like.
- In the end, we may say that Justin sought for a way for Christianity to claim whatever good it could find in classical culture in spite of its having been pagan (Gonzalez, 56).