Justin Martyr: Defender for the Church

Justin's Conversion and Writings

In a previous article I talked about the persecutions Christians experienced in the early church.{1} One of the striking characteristics of persecuted Christians was the courage they exhibited on their way to execution. In fact, we're told by an adult convert of the early second century that this courage was a factor in making him open to the gospel. This convert was a philosopher named Justin, whom you might be familiar with as Justin Martyr. Justin was one of the church's earliest apologists or defenders. Church historian Robert Grant says Justin was "the most important second century apologist."{2} As we consider the work of Justin, along the way we'll see some similarities in the charges made against Christians in his day and ours. Maybe we can learn something from this second century Christian.

Justin's Life

It is believed that Justin was born shortly after 100 A.D. His birthplace was Flavia Neapolis, in Syria-Palestine, or Samaria.{3} Justin's childhood education included rhetoric, poetry, and history. As a young adult he took a special interest in philosophy, and studied primarily Stoicism and Platonism.{4} Justin was searching for God, which "is the goal of Plato's philosophy," he said.{5}

Justin was introduced to the faith directly by an old man who engaged him in discussion about philosophical issues and then told him about Jesus. He took Justin to the Hebrew prophets who were before the philosophers, he said, and who spoke "as reliable witnesses of the truth."{6} They prophesied of the

coming of Christ, and their prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Justin said that afterward "my spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. . . . it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Savior's words."{7} Justin sought out Christians who taught him history and Christian doctrine, and then "devoted himself wholly to the spread and vindication of the Christian religion."{8}

Justin continued to wear the cloak which identified him as a philosopher, and he taught students in Ephesus and later in Rome. James Kiefer notes that "he engaged in debates and disputations with non-Christians of all varieties, pagans, Jews, and heretics."{9}

Justin's conviction of the truth of Christ was so complete, that he died a martyr's death somewhere around 165 A.D. Eusebius, the early church historian, said he was denounced by the Cynic Crescens with whom he engaged in debate shortly before his death.{10} Justin was beheaded along with six of his students.

Historian Philip Schaff sums up Justin's character and ministry this way:

> *He had acquired considerable classical and philosophical culture before his conversion, and then made it subservient to the defense of the faith. He was not a man of genius and accurate scholarship, but of respectable talent, extensive reading, and enormous memory. . . . He had the courage of a confessor in life and of a martyr in death. It is impossible not to admire his fearless devotion to the cause of truth and the defense of his persecuted brethren.{11}*

Justin's Writings

Several books have been attributed to Justin, but only three are universally accepted as genuine. They are what are now called the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology,* and the *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*. His *First Apology* was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, who reigned from 138-161 A.D., his sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius, and to the Roman Senate and "the whole Roman people."{12} The *Second Apology* was apparently addressed to the Roman Senate, although it originally might have been attached to the *First*. Both were written in response to persecution.

Justin and Greek Philosophy

Justin's understanding of Christianity was filtered through the philosophy he had learned. The Platonism of Justin's day had a strong theistic bent, and its high moral tone seemed to accord with Christianity. Justin (and others) connected the Logos of philosophy with the Logos of John chapter 1. Historian Philip Schaff describes the thinking this way:

> *The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational. The Logos endowed all men with reason and freedom, which are not lost by the fall. He scattered seeds of truth before his incarnation, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and barbarians, especially among philosophers and poets, who are the prophets of the heathen. Those who lived reasonably and virtuously in obedience to this preparatory light were Christians in fact, though not in name; while those who lived unreasonably were Christless and enemies of Christ. Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.{13}*

In addition to this source of truth, Justin (and others) believed that the teachings of Moses were handed down through the Egyptians to the Greeks.{14} God was not simply known

through abstract reasoning; He made Himself known personally as well as He spoke to the prophets who in turn made Him known to us.{15}

If Justin's idea about Christ and the Logos seems odd, we should keep in mind that we, too, typically understand Christianity through the categories of the philosophies of our day. We aren't completely neutral readers of Scripture.

For example, in modern times science has been considered to be the supreme source of truth. This fed the development of evidential apologetics. This is a method which emphasizes historical and natural facts as evidences for the faith. But scholars have come to see that facts aren't the completely value-free "truths" modernism taught. Other Christians who object to what they consider such an overly rationalistic approach have drawn from existentialist philosophers who are more concerned with the human condition. In other areas, too, we reveal the ideals of modernism in our Christian lives. How many "how-to" books are on the shelves of Christian bookstores? There is a tendency to take a "do this and such-and-such will result" attitude about our personal and spiritual development. Proper technique is a very modernistic notion.

Thus, we shouldn't be too harsh with Justin Martyr. He was a man of his times who did his best to explicate and defend Christian beliefs using the framework of thought with which he was familiar. In doing so, he was a significant force in the development of Christian theology and apologetics in the early church.

Justin's Apologetics

Christians Treated Unfairly

In his two Apologies, Justin's primary goal was to defend *Christians* rather than *Christianity per se*.{16} Christians

were being treated unfairly; Justin's ambition was to get fair treatment for them. Persecution had advanced to the point where Christians were worthy of judgment just for bearing the name *Christian*. Their odd worship habits, their refusal to participate in the civic cults and in emperor worship, and their strange beliefs were enough to create a general bias against them. Thus it was that under some emperors and local governors Christians could be brought to trial just for bearing the name.

Christians and Atheism

Part of the problem was a misrepresentation of Christian beliefs. Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists. Justin asked how they could be atheists since they worshipped "the Most True God." Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and "pay homage to them in reason and truth." Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, but they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter but were honored by governmental leaders. {17}

Christians and Citizenship

Another accusation against Christians was that they were enemies of the state. Their lack of participation in pagan religious rituals, which were a part of everyday public life during those days, and their talk about belonging to another kingdom led to charges that they weren't good citizens. Justin responded they weren't looking for an earthly kingdom, one that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn't go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that "we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace," because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives.{18} "Only God do

we worship," he said, "but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men."{19} As a specific example of being good citizens, Justin cited that Christians are faithful in paying taxes because Jesus said they should (Matt. 22:20-21). Justin's general argument was that by living virtuous lives, something highly regarded in Greek philosophy, Christians were by conviction good citizens.

The Situation Today

Does this kind of situation sound familiar to you? Today, bearing the name *fundamentalist* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, close-minded, and certainly harmful to society.{20} If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting red in the face and sinking to the level of name-calling in response, but by setting forth what we really believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren't harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further and show how the morality of our day is harmful to society. This might be persuasive to some, but certainly not on everyone, maybe not on most. But in clarifying what we believe and why we believe it, we will strengthen the church, and this is important if, as I think, believers are weakened more through name-calling and ostracism than through attacks on doctrine.

Christianity as Moral

In addition to being called enemies of the state and atheists, Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. For example, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character.

For one thing, Justin said, Christians demonstrated their honesty by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They loved truth more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies.

This attitude of living according to truth was one example of the change brought about in people's lives following their conversion. One writer notes that this change came to be known as "the triumphal song of the Apologists."{21} Justin said:

> *We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly. . . .{22}*

Justin also emphasized the chaste behavior of Christians, in response to accusations of immoral behavior during worship. To show how far that was from the truth, he told the story of a young man who asked that a surgeon make him a eunuch to prove that Christians do not practice promiscuity. The request was denied, so the young man chose to remain unmarried and accountable to fellow believers.{23}

One of Justin's apologetical tactics was to contrast what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for it, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in

drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of men and animals on their idols. Christians were accused of sexual immorality, but it was their critics, Justin said, who imitated "Jupiter and the other gods in sodomy and sinful relations with women."{24}

Today, Christians who oppose abortion are said to hate women. Those who believe that homosexuality is wrong are called hate-mongers. When we try to present our case as Justin did it can be hard to get a hearing. This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to clarify our beliefs or even to show how critics can be as immoral as they accuse Christians of being.{25} What we need to remember is that a clarification of Christian teachings isn't enough. It wasn't in Justin's day. Consider the means he listed by which people were brought to Christ. He said that many were "turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters."{26} Christians' high moral character, even though often maligned, is a powerful witness and apologetic for the faith.

Justin's Case for Christ

As part of his defense of Christians before the Emperor and Roman Senate, Justin also argued that Christianity was true. This was important because reason and the pursuit of truth were highly valued by the Roman intelligentsia. Since one of the charges against Christians was that they held superstitious beliefs, it had to be shown that their beliefs were reasonable. Let's consider Justin's central case for the truth of Christianity, namely, that the coming of Christ—the Logos of God—was foretold through the Prophetic Spirit thousands of years in advance.

Eternal Logos

Earlier I spoke of how Christ was identified with the Logos—the locus of reason in the universe—of which the philosophers spoke. Speaking of Him in these terms would help gain a hearing from the cultured classes of his day. As one historian noted, "Whenever [the Logos] was mentioned the interest of all was at once secured."{27} It was important to show the reasonableness of the faith, and the Logos was the locus of reason in major schools of Greek philosophy. To quote Philip Schaff again, "Christianity is the highest reason," for Justin. "The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational."{28} In addition to guaranteeing the rationality of Christianity, identifying Jesus as the Logos indicated His antiquity, which was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief. I should note here that this emphasis on reason should not leave us thinking that faith meant nothing for Justin. He repeatedly refers to faith in his apologies. He speaks of us being made whole "by faith through the blood and the death of Christ."{29} He even refers back to Abraham who "was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in Him."{30} However, even here the matter of knowledge is central because Justin put more weight on believing in the teachings of Christ than on believing in Christ himself. *Fulfilled Prophecies* But why should this claim about Jesus be believed? The reason was that He was the fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years earlier which proved that He wasn't just a man who could do magic, but the promised Son of God. "We are actual eye-witnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were fortold [sic]," he said.{31} Justin summarized the Old Testament prophecies about Christ this way:

> *In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying,*

> *rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called and actually being the Son of God. And that He would send certain persons to every nation to make known these things, and that the former Gentiles rather [than Jews] would believe in Him. He was foretold, in truth, before He actually appeared, first five thousand years before, then four thousand, then three thousand, then two thousand, then one thousand, and finally eight hundred. For, in succeeding generations new Prophets rose time and again.{32}*

Not only was the fulfillment of prophecy remarkable in itself, but it was also significant that such prophecies were made long before the Greek philosophers, for, unlike today, antiquity was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief.

Conclusion

For all the weaknesses in his theology and apologetics, Justin Martyr provides an example of those who took their faith very seriously in the early church, and who sought to be a mouthpiece for the Lord and a defender of His people. Schaff says that "[Justin's writings] attest his honesty and earnestness, his enthusiastic love for Christianity, and his fearlessness in its defense against all assaults from without and perversions from within."{33} While it might seem to us that Christianity was really just philosophy to Justin, historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that Justin's faith was fed more by what the church confessed about Christ than by his own philosophical speculation. "He was, after all, ready to lay down his life for Christ; and his martyrdom speaks louder, even doctrinally, than does his apologetics."{34}

Notes

1. Rick Wade, Persecution in the Early Church, Probe Ministries, Sept. 1999.

2. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.

3. *Justin Martyr, First Apology, in Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 33.

4. James E. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr, Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr," justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html.

5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 151.

6. Ibid., 159.

7. Ibid., 160.

8. Philip Schaff, Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325, vol. II in *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 714.

9. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr."

10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "St. Justin Martyr." www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm. See also Justin's own prediction of his betrayal in *The Second Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 122-23.

11. Schaff, 715.

12. Justin, *First Apology*, 33.

13. Schaff, 723.

14. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, s.v. "Platonism and Neoplatonism," by A. Hilary Armstrong. See also Justin, *First Apology*, 81.

15. *Catholic Encyclopedia.*

16. Robert Grant believes it was the martyrdom of Polycarp in Rome which prompted Justin to write to the emperor. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 53.

17. Justin, *First Apology*, 37-39.

18. Ibid., 43-44.

19. Ibid., 52.

20. The reader might want to see my article *Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society*.

21. Thomas B. Falls, in Justin, *First Apology*, 47, note 2.

22. Justin, *First Apology*, 47.

23. Ibid., 65.

24. Ibid., 133.

25. This kind of discussion can be difficult in general because of the moral relativism of our day. A good book to read which shows that Americans aren't as relativistic as they seem to think is William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996). For a summary presentation of Watkins' ideas, see my article *The New Absolutes*.

26. Justin, *First Apology*, 50.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, quoted in J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 46.

28. Schaff, 723.

29. Justin, *Dialogue*, 166.

30. Ibid., 183.

31. Justin, *First Apology*, 66.

32. Ibid., 68.

33. Schaff, 719.

34. Pelikan, 143.

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