



APOLOGETICS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE(I)

Apologetics is the proper response to questions about the faith. The questions and issues may change from time to time, but the need to answer, explain, and/or defend our faith is constant. Our appreciation of apologetics will be enhanced if we have an understanding of how this project has been carried out over the centuries.

The Struggle with Judaism (30-65 A.D.)

During the first generation (30-65 A.D.), the challenge was to persuade the Jews that Jesus, who suffered a shameful, criminal's death, was their long-awaited Messiah. Evangelism and apologetics amongst Jewish people focused on Old Testament Scriptural foundations (Acts 2,3,7,15) and the fulfillment of prophecy, especially that the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection were predicted (Acts 2:22,23,36; 3:18; 14:1,2; 17:1-3; 26:22,23). Jews were called to take a second look at the Mosaic Law and its purpose (Romans, Galatians, & Hebrews). In doing so, the Apostles identified and tried to respond to a number of the reasons for Jewish rejection of Jesus – misguided tradition, concern to maintain power, jealousy, and a fixation on externals.

The Struggle with Greco-Roman Paganism (30-313 A.D.)

As the early church struggled against Jewish traditionalism and, at times, persecution, there was also the problem of Greco-Roman paganism. Conceiving of deity in terms of absolute power made it hard for Greeks and Romans to accept the idea of an all-powerful God allowing His own son to die as an atonement for his rebellious creatures (1Corinthians 1:23). Viewing the human body as inherently evil, because it was part of the material creation, made it difficult for them to accept the idea of resurrected bodies (Acts 17:18,31,32). There were still plenty of *Sophists* around, training politicians to manipulate the masses with words, as well as arguing for the abolishment of all traditional concepts of morality and “family.” *Stoicism* believed that the world was ruled by a divine *logos* or intelligence, but that you can choose to accept and work with the fixed and determined realities. *Epicureanism* held that the gods exist, but have no concern for the world (essentially, Deism) and this means that we must rely on our own senses, mental conceptions, and feelings. The *Skeptics* were agnostics who suspended judgment on religious matters, preferring to criticize corruption and seek the “untroubled life.” Religious pluralism, materialism, hedonism, etc. were all major players in the major cities of the Roman Empire and Acts 14 & 17 show us how Paul adapted the message to this setting.

Safe from Roman persecution as long as it was viewed as a “sect” of Judaism (30-65 A.D.), things changed in the later first century, as Christians became scapegoats to Nero and then “bad citizens” who refused to worship the emperor. In response to this, Apologists (Justin, Tertullian, Irenaeus, etc.) tried to explain Christianity and Biblical teaching in response to the distortions, misrepresentations, and rumors circulating in Roman society. They pointed out the folly of idolatry and pagan religions, while demonstrating the positive effects of Christianity through marital faithfulness, raising all of their children, hard work, honesty, and facing death with hope.

The Middle Ages (313-1500 A.D.)

With the end of Roman persecution (313 A.D.) and the rapid 4th century transition to Christianity as the “state religion,” there was no longer any need to “defend” Christianity against external questions or attacks. Instead, the emphasis moved to philosophical “development” in theology and institutionalism. **John Chrysostom** (347-407 A.D.) and **Augustine** (354-430 A.D.), wrote extensive commentaries and theological works on various topics. Augustine’s City of God offered a Christian view of history and explained Rome's fall to the barbarians (410 A.D.) as being God's judgment on a sinful, worldly city.

The **Scholastic** movement (800-1300 A.D.) furthered the restoration of the Greek philosophers and created complex speculative theology systems in their attempt to harmonize Christianity with Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle. The later incident with Galileo occurred because of the degree to which Aristotle’s philosophy and cosmology had been blended into “Catholic” thinking throughout Europe.

The **Renaissance** (1300-1600 A.D.) was a rebirth of learning and inquiry in general, the study of nature, and, especially, the Greek/Roman classics and art. The movement was not organized from any central office, but it did tend to spread from Italy to Germany and as far as Scotland through the influence of various great minds/talents. The southern renaissance tended to be characterized by humanism (“man is great”) and became more theistic (God-centered) as it moved north, with God/Bible-centered reform movements arising in Germany and Switzerland in the 16th century. Out of the Renaissance, two opposite and competing movements would arise – the Reformation (1520-1648) and the Enlightenment (1689-1789) – and both have been instrumental in producing the modern Western world. (Continued next month)