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Tertullian's *The Apology*: The Opening Statements for the Defense

An apology, in its use in language, means to say sorry for an offense committed against another person. However, the term apologetics as it relates to theology does not correspond to this definition in the least because that would mean Christians should apologize for their beliefs. It would mean that Jesus would have apologized to those He offended in being the Son of God, but Jesus only ever presented statements to defend His deity, His humanity, and the redemption story of the Bible. The theological understanding of apologetics is to defend a belief in Christianity, so apologetics actually began in the Scriptures themselves. It gained greater importance as a movement during the second century as Christians were being persecuted allowing apologists such as St. Justin Martyr and Tertullian to emerge on the scene. Tertullian, unlike most apologetics, writes *The Apology* as forensic rhetoric to defend Christians on trial for their beliefs providing both scriptural and historic proof of their innocence, while most apologetics, from C.S. Lewis to Douglas Groothuis, write to defend to Christian faith as a whole.

In First Peter 3:15, Peter writes, “Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason.” This verse succinctly gives a definition for and explains the purpose of apologetics, which pulls its origin from the Greek for *apologia*. A person must be able to offer a reasonable defense for beliefs. Douglas Groothuis states in his article “Christian Apologetics in a Nutshell” that “apologetics is the task of showing that Christianity is objectively true, compellingly rational, and pertinent to the whole of life.” Naysayers of the Christian faith need to see the truth in the Scriptures. They need to understand the reasons behind the truth and then

be able to find places in their own lives to apply the truth. However, if apologetics exists to defend the Christian faith and share the truth with the world, it must be done with reverence for the Scriptures and in the absence of arrogance and pride. In other words, the defense must be presented in love and as Paul tells Timothy in Second Timothy 2:25, “instructing his opponents with gentleness.” The first apologetic is Jesus Himself because He was constantly having to defend the truth against the naysayer groups like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In the same respect, Tertullian is an apologetic that writes an entire defense of the Christian faith and for those being persecuted for it.

Tertullian is a second-century apologetic who lived in Roman Carthage in Africa. Information about his life is scarce, the details obscure, and his death unknown. However, the most important fact about Tertullian is that he lived and participated in the pagan world until his conversion to Christianity, details unknown. Tertullian, then, became a staunch defender of the faith. Tertullian “lived within a ‘Christian world’—the community of Christians—very self-conscious about its presence in the surrounding ‘pagan world’” (Sider xiii). He writes with a purpose—to expose the lies and reveal the truth. One of his most important works, *The Apology*, fights to defend the Christian faith against the Roman government, a government that was persecuting Christians. *The Apology* “portrays a contemporary populace careless of evidence, eager for gossip, ready to believe the worst—even that their Christian neighbors are cannibals!” (Sider xiv). Tertullian then uses the prosecutors’ careless evidence as his own evidence in the defense of Christians, the actions of the pagan world to defend the Christians living in it. In his defense, “from the searing rhetoric of Tertullian’s often intransigent demands upon his fellow Christians there emerges, though sometimes by inference, the portrait of a Christian society struggling to define its identity in relation to the world and to establish the limits of compromise

with the surrounding paganism” (Sider xiv). Christian society is still trying to define itself in the world, to present truth in a world of lies. Christians are constantly on trial for their beliefs and will continue to be so until the second coming of Christ. That being said, the defense presents its opening statements.

Tertullian becomes a Christian and then decides to use his faith to defend Christians in North Africa who were being persecuted and tried by the Roman government for their beliefs. The four charges against these Christians can be divided into two categories. Incest and cannibalism are civil charges while sacrilege and treason are public charges. The charges of incest and cannibalism “were scurrilous and propagated by rumor,” and Tertullian openly denies them as his defense and says “the acts were totally inconsistent with Christian faith and practice (Livermore 62). However, Tertullian is quick to point out, in the case of cannibalism, that “certain nations have appointed the tasting of blood...for the ratification of a treaty” and that “blood from an incised thigh, caught in a shield and given to her own worshippers, seals those dedicated to Bellona (Tertullian). For incest, Tertullian presents the evidence that “the Persians cohabit with their own mothers,” and that locally, pagan believers “expose their [your] children to be taken up by any passing stranger” (Tertullian). The prosecutors are familiar with these local practices as most relate to their pagan religion. Unfortunately, the prosecutors “could not present one person who had actually witnessed the acts” (Livemore 62). Tertullian’s closing statements for incest and cannibalism say,

If you would only observe how that these sins are to be found amongst yourselves, you would at the same time perceive that they do not exist amongst Christians. The same eyes would have informed you on both points. But two kinds of blindness readily go together; so that those who see not what is, seem to see what is not.

However, the charges of sacrilege and treason that the prosecutors present “were really more serious, since they arose from an indisputable feature of Christian discipline, the restriction of worship to the living God” (Livemore 62). Christians cannot worship any person other than God, including the emperor, and to do so would be a denial of the faith. Therefore, Tertullian accepts these charges, making Christians guilty of these crimes. The only escape that Tertullian finds is a loophole. He reasons that because “natural law stands above civil enactments,” which have “no legitimate force,” the laws must be bad and flawed. The laws need to be reviewed before prosecution is carried out against Christians. Tertullian presents sufficient evidence to refute every charge, and the prosecutors and citizens could now understand the context of *The Apology* from a Christian viewpoint. As Livemore states in his article “Reasoning with Unbelievers and the Place of the Scriptures in Tertullian’s Apology, “To take terms infused with pagan values and redefine them so they bear Christian values, as Tertullian attempted and in some degree accomplished in *The Apology*, is a supreme act of the loyal opposition” (74).

Tertullian provides the above defense using forensic apologetics, but the most important charge against the Christians involved in this prosecution was just being a Christian. According to Paul Keresztes in his article “Tertullian’s Apologeticus: A Historical and Literary Study, “Christianity was a crime, the *only* one that counted when Christians were tried as such” (255). Tertullian’s whole defense, at this point, is that there is a problem with the investigation, which is a “logical conclusion on the basis of the oddities in what he claims was universal Roman procedure with Christians” (Corke-Webster 255). The main oddity is that the prosecutors are actually forbidden to investigate claims against Christians nor could the prosecutors look for Christians to accuse. So, Tertullian begs the

question of the prosecution as to what basis they have for their claims. His understanding is that “pagans have to hate the name because they know nothing else about Christianity. Hatred of a thing requires knowledge of it, otherwise you are merely hating the word itself, which is laughable” (Corke-Webster 255). The solution in the court system is to accept or deny the label Christian. In other words, “denial of Christianity was followed by acquittal, continued adherence to it, by condemnation...their innocence...was entirely immaterial; ‘yes’ and ‘no’ were the only possible please to the material question: ‘Are you a Christian?’” (Keresztes 126-127). Just as Tertullian’s *The Apology*, this question becomes the basis for the apologetic theology, and the answer must be followed by sufficient evidence.

Tertullian’s *Apology* stands the test of time as a piece of literature but also has a reference to the continued efforts of the apologists. Tertullian writes like he is actually presenting this message to the governing councils, or prosecutors, which serves his purpose well because he could “address pagans on their own ground and from their own presuppositions...and ascertain the ‘facts of the case’” (Sider 4). His writing also “achieves a higher level of literary sophistication” than other apologetic works of his time. Its literary successes include a “tight logic of its structure, the powerfully climactic arrangement of its argument, the relentless retortion of the charges whereby the accusations are hurled back upon the accusers, and a narrative that is at once caustic in style” (Sider 6-7). Tertullian basically attacks the problem of human blindness through sarcasm and historical examples. The pagans, or prosecutors, cannot see the truth in the Christian faith because their view is distorted, and they are trying to shift guilt from themselves onto the Christians. Tertullian

uses the pagans' own beliefs and practices to make them see that there is no difference between the pagan and the Christian, except for God. (Sider 3).

It is in this revelation of truth that leads pagans to become Christians, just like Tertullian. Another great apologist is C.S. Lewis, who starts as an atheist and ends his life as one of the most prolific Christian authors of all time. As much as he tries to deny the existence of God and the validity of the Scripture, the more substantial the evidence proves him wrong. He, then, becomes a staunch defender of the Christian faith. Lewis studies Christianity from "Idealism to Theism" and tries to prove that the Gospel is truer than any other religions.

Lewis says, "Once you accepted Theism you could not ignore the claims of Christ. And when you examined them it appeared to me that you could adopt no middle position. Either he was a lunatic or God" (Brazier 3). He is basically saying that there is no straddling the fence. For Tertullian, it was a yes or no answer to the question about being a Christian, and for Lewis, it is an either/or situation. Any person is free to deny Christ and reject His deity and His humanity, but "we cannot argue that our position has been thought through and argued out logically in a reasonable manner in the face of evidence" (Brazier 3). Faced with the either/or dilemma, Brazier writes, "This either-or distinction is therefore rooted in the Gospel. Nothing humanity can do or say can close the dialectic: people have to come to a decision when they encounter Jesus either through reading the Bible or through the witness or the church" (8). It is all about the evidence, the witness, and the defense.

This evidence is the same evidence Tertullian gives the prosecutors at trial, evidence that is indisputable. The evidence presets a strong enough defense for Christianity that even the most devout atheists, pagans, or prosecutors must stop and take notice. For

both Tertullian and Lewis, the defense presents the truth that will expose the lies or the prosecution. For a more modern-day apologetic, Douglas Groothuis agrees that apologetics begins with the truth.

For Groothuis, truth comes from the Bible and must be defended “on the basis of historical, literary, and archaeological evidence” (5). With this truth, he believes apologetics should approach the Christian faith cumulatively by looking at different fields, like history, and then focusing on the worldview of Christianity. He suggests that all worldviews, even a Christian worldview, should meet the following three criteria: “(1) internal consistency, (2) factual adequacy, and (3) existential livability. The defining claims of any worldview must agree with each other, they must match the reality of the objective world, and they must be consistently livable in a life-giving way” (Groothuis 3). If these three criteria are applied to the truth of the Bible, it means that the Bible cannot contradict itself. It means that the facts presented in the case must be correct so that the evidence is credible. Finally, the truth is applied to real-life situations and is not found lacking. After the evidence is presented, a person must make a choice. It the same *yes/no* or *either/or* question that Tertullian and Lewis asks. Groothuis presents the question, though, with three possible answers—(1) “He was lying and knew it; (2) He was mentally imbalanced; or (3) He was who He said He was” (Groothuis 6). If Jesus is who He says He is based on the evidence, then a person either believes or does not, either claims to be a Christian or not.

Whether apologetic is used to defend a Christian against false claims or whether it is used to defend the Christian faith, all apologists agree that the argument must contain the truth and must be stated in love and gentleness. Whether faced with non-believers asking questions about Christian beliefs or in the face of real persecution at the hands of people who hate the Christian

faith, believers must be able to face the evil one, defend the faith, and stand strong in the face of persecution. Tertullian explains it best in his *Apology* when he writes,

But with Christians the case is totally different. No one is ashamed; no one feels regret, except indeed that he did not become a Christian sooner. If he is censured, he glories in it; if accused, he pleads no defence; if interrogated, he even voluntarily confesses; if condemned, he gives thanks. What kind of evil, then, is this, which lacks the essential characteristics of evil,--fear, shame, prevarication, regret, sorrow? What kind of evil is this of which the criminal is proud, to be accused of which is his prayer, and to be punished for it his happiness? You cannot call this madness,--you, whose ignorance of the subject is clearly proved."

It becomes a choice to either stand in defense of the faith and the truth or allow the ignorance of the persecutors to outline what they believe to be true. It is saying yes to the question, *are you a Christian*, in the face of possible death. It is knowing that God is not a lunatic but who He says He is within Scripture.

Groothuis writes, "Surely, apologetics is part of God's mission to restore shalom to a rebellious planet through the work of Jesus Christ!" People search for truth and peace in a world filled with lies, so most do not know where to turn or what to believe. Christians are called to share peace and truth with the people searching because Christians know the truth and are filled with the truest peace that is offered through Jesus Christ. However, how can people feel their way through the fog of lies and unrest to find what Jesus has to offer? They cannot, or more specifically, they cannot do it on their own. It is the job of Christians to push through the fog and offer the naysayers shalom. The only way they will believe is through the defense Christians provide for their faith, a defense that has stood the test of time, from the beginning of time.

Apologetics started with Jesus and carried through to Tertullian and to C.S. Lewis and to Douglas Groothuis and to Christians prepared to present their case. Once the truth is exposed, no one can refute it. The defense rests its case.

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