

THE APOLOGETIC METHOD OF QUINTUS SEPTIMIUS FLORENS TERTULLIANUS

Under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter told the recipients of his first canonized letter, and all Christians thereafter by implication, to set apart Christ as Lord of their hearts. Only then would they be ready and able to give a defense to anyone who asked them to give a reason for the hope which they possessed.¹ God has been gracious to provide gifted apologists to His church throughout the past 2000 years. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, Tertullian hereafter, was the premier Latin theologian and apologist at the close of the second and dawn of the third century. Though he studied law and once worked in Rome as a jurist, notable philosophical precision and biblical fidelity characterizes his approach to “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God.”² Tertullian’s stated commitment to the complete authority of the Bible in all areas of life greatly influenced his apologetic method. Regardless of the nature of his arguments—evidential, rational, or transcendental—he fashioned them to necessitate and verify the Scriptures. Autonomous reasoning was out-of-bounds for Tertullian.

Tertullian was an eclectic apologist; his criticisms of unbelief varied according to his opponent’s worldview. The arguments that he employed to counter the claims of Jews differed from those which he leveled against the polytheistic Romans of his day. General tactical trends in Tertullian’s arsenal for defending God’s word, however, are discernible. They include (1)

¹1 Peter 3:15, NASV

²2 Corinthians 10:5a, NASV

demonstrating ignorance, (2) exposing double-standards, inconsistencies, and dialectic tensions³ and, (3) declaring Jesus Christ as the precondition to knowing God. He simultaneously undermined the credibility of unbelief while setting forth the tenets of Christianity.

Much of Tertullian's most well-known apologetic works⁴ simply consists of biblical teaching. He realized that truth would not be believed until ignorance and error were dispelled. "But the Son of God has no mother in any sense which involves the violation of her purity; in fact, she who is regarded as his mother did not marry (i.e. consummate her marriage). But, let me discuss His nature first; *then the manner of His birth will be understood* [emphasis mine]."⁵ Tertullian knew the Romans defined many scriptural terms differently than the biblical authors. Jesus as God's "Son," as it is even today, was confusing to many of the Roman Empire. "It is God we worship, through Christ! Think of Him as a Man; it is through Him and in Him that God wills to be known and worshipped."⁶ The Bible determined every facet of Tertullian's ethic or behavior. He knew the task of apologetics was more than a game of mental chess. He delivered both content *and commands* to his pagan readers. "Examine, therefore, whether the divinity of Christ is true. If it is, and if its recognition remakes men for good, it follows that you must renounce the false, when in its full light the nature of what you believe is revealed to you."⁷

³Socrates, Plato, Kant, and Hegel all define "dialectic" differently. For the purposes of this paper, a dialectic tension refers to an irreconcilable disunity among the axiomatic principles of one's epistemology, metaphysic, or ethic.

⁴*Ad Nationes, Apology, An Answer to the Jews, The Soul's Testimony, A Treatise on the Soul, The Prescription Against Heretics*

⁵Tertullian, *Apology*, vol. 10 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Emily Joseph Daly (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 62-63.

⁶Ibid., 67.

⁷Ibid., 68.

Numerous rumors about the Christian church had been invented by A.D. 200. To make room for truth, Tertullian systematically addresses them. “Like certain others, you have talked foolishly about the head of an ass being our God.”⁸ He shows the Roman magistrates time and time again that lying is an inborn pleasure. Christians were frequently accused of exposing infants. “We are spoken of as utter reprobates and are accused of having sworn to murder babies and to eat them and of committing adulterous acts after the repast.”⁹ Tertullian asks, “Who has ever come upon a baby wailing, as the accusation has it?”¹⁰ Christians referred to one another as brother or sister. Tertullian sarcastically rebutted the notion that all Christians had to be blood related. “What about the Christians who are without relatives? A man cannot really be a Christian, I suppose, unless he is someone’s brother or son.”¹¹

Tertullian was able to fault the accusations of his unbelieving neighbors by pointing out their double standards and hypocritical slanders. As a trained rhetorician, he knew one of the most efficient ways to stop the mouth of a gainsayer was to publicly shame him. Saturn worshippers sacrificed their babies while devotees of Mercury offered up grown adults! If these barbaric acts did not yield enough blood, Jupiter would be bathed in it during games held in his honor.¹² The pagans who despised Christians because of their supposed bloody rites committed the very crimes which they claimed to loathe. Tertullian’s rejoinder—“But with us, murder is

⁸Ibid., 49.

⁹Ibid., 25.

¹⁰Ibid., 26.

¹¹Ibid., 29.

¹²Chapter 9 of *Apology*

forbidden for all. We are not permitted to destroy even the fetus in the womb, as long as blood is still being drawn to form a human being.”¹³

Christians were charged with committing incest because of the aforementioned terms of endearment they used. God strictly forbids the practice. Yet, the same Roman citizens who judged Christians showed their love to Jupiter by illicitly loving their mothers. “Who are more expert at practicing incest than those whom Jupiter himself has instructed? Ctesias relates that the Persians have intercourse with their own mothers.”¹⁴

According to Tertullian, every province and city of Rome had its own god. Many of these gods were not worshipped at Rome and were not considered Roman. None of the pagans were persecuted for choosing to worship what they desired. “We [Christians] are the only ones kept from having our own religion. . . . But among you it is lawful to worship anything you choose except the true God”¹⁵

Having served as a priest in Carthage,¹⁶ Tertullian knew the Scriptures well. So he knew the apologetic power of a godly life. Along with murder, incest, and adultery, Christians were thought to be guilty of treason, sacrilege, social discord, economic loss, and natural disasters. But did the Romans have any reasons to believe such things? The records of the courts and prisons proved the pagans *alone* were guilty of social ills. “It is with men from your own midst that the jail is always bulging No one there [in the jails and mines] is a Christian—

¹³Tertullian, *Apology*, 10:31-32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶According to Jerome

unless he is *merely* that”¹⁷ Pagan Romans were the true rabble of the Empire. Never had a Christian been guilty of insurrection. Tertullian asks his readers to recall how many Christians had assaulted an emperor. He then posits every usurper “offered sacrifices for the well-being of the emperor and swore by his *genius* . . . right until the very outbreak of their disloyalty.”¹⁸ The Christian’s refusal to burn incense to the emperor and sacrifice to the gods in no way impugned his or her commitment to the emperor or Empire. On the contrary Tertullian asserts that Christians were the best Roman citizens. They were impartial. They loved and honored all persons, including the emperor. Evil towards anyone was forbidden. Christians were to love both friend and foe, refraining from returning evil for evil. Why? Because the true God has commanded such behavior.

In at least four of his works,¹⁹ “the master,” as Cyprian called Tertullian, showed that all non-Christians unwittingly reveal their knowledge of the true God. Though they strive to suppress what their conscience and nature incessantly tells them, they cannot. In word and deed, they “show their slip”²⁰ and testify of Yahweh’s existence and supreme lordship.

The soul, though it be repressed by the prison house of the body, though it be circumscribed by base institutions, weakened by lust and concupiscence, and enslaved to false gods, yet, when it revives, as from intoxication or sleep or some sickness and enjoys health again, names ‘God’ with this name alone because, properly speaking, He alone is true. ‘Good God!’ ‘God Almighty!’ and ‘God grant it!’ are expressions used by all mankind.²¹ That He is a Judge, also, is testified by the phrases: ‘God sees,’ and ‘I commend it to God,’ and ‘God will reward me.’ O testimony of the soul, *which is by natural instinct Christian* [emphasis mine]! In fine, then, the soul, as it utters these phrases, looks not to the Capitol

¹⁷Tertullian, *Apology*, 10:109.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹*Ad Nationes, Apology, The Testimony of the Soul, A Treatise on the Soul*

²⁰I thank the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen for this incisive expression.

²¹See also chapter two of Tertullian’s later work *The Testimony of the Soul*.

but to heaven. It knows the abode of the living God; from Him and from there it has come.²²

The soul of man not only knew “of God” but “about God.”²³ God’s goodness, power, justice, and creative ability were manifest in everyday Roman parlance. “God willing” and “May God curse you” revealed the soul’s innate knowledge of God’s power. “God is good,” “God does good,” and “But man is evil” flowed from the same mouth, showing man’s inborn knowledge of God’s goodness and man’s inherent lack of it. The heathen of ancient Rome, even the philosophers who denied the reality of an afterlife, would label dead persons as “poor man” or “blessed,” thus revealing their knowledge of God’s justice.

The actions, along with the words of non-Christians, betrayed their stated beliefs. Many persons feared death. “If thou are incapable of suffering after death, if no power of feeling remains, if, finally, thou art nothing after having left the body, why dost thou lie to thyself as if thou wert capable of enduring anything further?”²⁴ The acts of non-Christian worship denied the pagan’s stated belief, to wit, his god was the chunk of wood or rock before him. “Why does it [the soul] utter protestations heavenward, and its curses earthward? Why does it render service in one place, and call upon an avenger elsewhere?”²⁵ “Is it a wonderful thing that, fallen though it [the soul of man] is, it cannot forget its Creator, his goodness and His law, and its own end?”²⁶

²²Tertullian, *Apology*, 10:53.

²³The existence *and* character of God are known by pagans.

²⁴Tertullian, *The Testimony of the Soul*, vol. 10 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 138.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 142.

²⁶F. Watson, *The Defenders of the Faith* (New York: Pott, Young, & Co., n.d.), 177.

Jews profess allegiance to the Old Testament only. Proving the veracity of the New Testament to them by appealing to its age could not be done.²⁷ Knowing the Jews believed in a promised messiah, Tertullian simply labored to show that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the many prophecies about Him. The temptation to appeal to something other than Yahweh in order to “prove” Christianity in this case did not exist for Tertullian. In *An Answer to the Jews*, he begins his assault on their worldview by challenging their misunderstanding of the Law. If adherence to the Law made one acceptable to God, how then were Adam, Noah, and Abraham, who lived before the time of Moses, ever justified? Jews prided themselves on being a circumcised people. Tertullian shows Abraham was reckoned as righteous *before* his circumcision. God by His own doing reconciles sinners. The Law, Sabbath, and circumcision could not and were never intended to do it.

The Jews disbelieved the messiah had to die in order to fulfill Scripture and atone for sinners. Tertullian cites the Psalms and many passages from the Prophets to show them that Jesus, whose very name means “Yahweh is salvation” was indeed Yahweh. His apology to the Jews took the form of a diatribe in which he anticipated and refuted their objections.

Finally, Tertullian took up his pen against those who named the name of Christ as their Lord but denied the essentials of the faith²⁸—heretics. The tone and content of *The Prescription Against Heretics* portrays the great indignation he had for them. Tertullian had no

²⁷In chapter 19 of *Apology*, Tertullian argues for the authority of the Old Testament on the basis of its age. Moses preceded Thales. Unbelievers stole life principles from the Hebrew Bible by not recognizing the Author as the true source.

²⁸“Faith” for Tertullian was the body of beliefs held by true Christians. His use of the word parallels Jude’s usage in verse 3 of his epistle.

tolerance for professed Christians who could not find complete satisfaction in the Scriptures. “I have no patience with the man who is always seeking, for he will never find.”²⁹

What you must seek is what Christ taught, and precisely as long as you are not finding it, precisely until you do find it. And you did find it when you came to believe. You would not have believed if you had not found, just as you would not have sought except in order to find. Since finding was the object of your search and belief of your finding, your acceptance of the faith debars any prolongation of seeking and finding. The very success of your seeking has set up this limitation for you. Your boundary has been marked out by him who would not have you believe, and so would not have you seek, outside the limits of his teaching.³⁰

The seed of heresy was pagan philosophy, which by definition dismissed Christ as the sole proprietor of truth. Autonomous reasoning was the arch enemy of Truth per Tertullian. It could in no way augment or clarify the truth of God. How could it when the machinations of fallen men “founded” it? It was pseudochristianity arrayed in humanistic garb. “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!”³¹

Tertullian’s apologetic method embodied his belief that only God can speak for God. Whether answering the charges of pagans, Jews, or heretics, he vigorously worked to uphold the Scripture as the final source and criterion of truth.

²⁹Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, trans. Peter Holmes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 249.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 248.

³¹*Ibid.*, 246.