

Learning from the Church Fathers (4)
Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 A.D.)
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Our North American culture exalts progress – the newer the better. Since the 1980s, evangelical market-driven or market-shaped congregations are seeker friendly, offering a gospel without a call to cross bearing. To make the Gospel attractive for postmodern, liberal churches, preach a message that offends no one. To the liberal mind, choice is more important than truth. But truth is an exclusive claim. Would someone stake his life on something he/she didn't believe to be genuinely true? In both the seeker friendly and liberal churches, there is no sense that our spiritual foundation actually stretches down and back through time. But true Christianity finds its roots in its historic orthodoxy. It is the faith given once for all and is filled with life and excitement. We believe the same things that the apostles and the early church fathers believed and for which they were willing to give up their very lives.

Justin Martyr's Life

Since the early church fathers are the key to opening up the rich treasure trove of Christian orthodoxy, their life and work lead us to the sure foundation upon which to build our faith. If for no other reason than the sheer bulk of his achievement, Justin Martyr is the most important second-century apologist. He once said that it is unnecessary for believers to give an account of the Christian faith. It is sufficient to say, "We have come to the faith." But over against non-Christians it is essential to prove the truth and to find reasons. He did not write a systematically constructed theology. Nevertheless, he made some important statements on the Trinity, Christology, the doctrine of creation, and exegesis.

Justin was born in Flavia Neapolis (modern Nablus) in Samaria. He searched for answers on vital issues among various philosophies, and finally found his "contentment" in Platonism. But even within this security, he became unsettled by a conversation with an old man who pointed him in the direction of the books of the Old Testament prophets. In them he recognized the truth of the Gospel, and from then on, he wore a philosopher's cloak to indicate that he was a Christian itinerant preacher.

The Defence of the Faith (Apologetics)

Justin Martyr was a church father who performed the hard work of breaking a trail for future generations of Christians. He was among the first to engage the broader Greco-Roman culture with the Gospel. He used connecting points between the church's proclamation and the thought-world of his time. To defend Christianity in the face of intense criticism from pagan sources, Justin argued that traces of Christian truth were to be found in the great pagan writers. In support of his claim that Christianity was the true philosophy, he attempted to correlate John's doctrine of the Logos (John 1:1) with Greek philosophy, arguing that Christianity was superior to Platonism and that any truth in Plato was actually plagiarized from Moses. His belief that the books of Moses were older was an important apologetic argument, and one that was repeated by Christians for centuries. In his day, any belief system was regarded with more respect if it could be shown to be particularly ancient.

Justin's famous thesis, that the philosophers, being enlightened by the divine Logos, were in some sense Christians without knowing it. He stated, "For we worship and love, next to God, the Logos, who comes from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since it was for our sake that he became a human being, in order that he might share in our sufferings and bring us healing. For all writers were able to see the truth darkly, on account of the implanted seed of the Logos which was grafted into them." He argued that anyone who tries to act according to this Logos can be thought of as a Christian – including Socrates. This aspect of Justin's teaching would be repudiated by most other writers of the patristic period, who felt that he had gone too far in his attempts to relate faith and philosophy.

The Demonic

Justin understood his times. He often mentioned demons in his writings. He considered them to be steadfastly opposed to the Gospel. To a culture immersed in the worship of gods, he did not pretend they did not exist. But he called the worship of lifeless images of the gods irrational nonsense. He pointed out, as the apostle Paul had, that the gods are neither human nor divine, as pagans imagined, but demonic. Christians, therefore, do not pay homage to the gods, since they acknowledge that the gods in reality are evil demons who by terror and torment entice humans to revere them as gods. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by means of His life and resurrection overcame the demons, whose ringleader is Satan. He liberates all humans who desire to believe in him from the dominion of demons.

Defence of the Christian Lifestyle

In the early church era, many pagans believed Christians were immoral reprobates. So Justin attempted to reveal what Christianity is all about. He refuted common errors and rumours that Christians were atheists and that they ate flesh and drank blood. He was concerned with winning civil toleration for Christians. He argued that civil authorities should take pains to see whether in fact the Christian faith is destructive of civic loyalty. He wrote that even if the Christians should be judged foolish and misguided, at least they have done nothing worthy of the death penalty. He appealed to the emperor not to allow anything to prompt him in evaluating Christians other than their righteous life, piety, and love for truth. He pointed out that he and his fellow Christians "stand apart from demons and follow God;...we who once took pleasure in fornication, now embrace self-control; we, who...valued the acquisition of wealth and possessions above everything else, now put what we have into a common fund, and share with everyone in need; we, who hated and killed one another, and would not share our lives with certain people because of their ethnic differences from us, now live intimately with them."

Justin's Theology

Justin explained the novelty of Christianity by pointing to a progressive revelation of God. He established his reasoning on the Old Testament and cites particularly the prophets in order to demonstrate how Christian truth was prepared under the old covenant. The Old Testament prophecies foreshadow the Gospel. Justin found "types" or prefigurations of Christ's redemption in the Exodus from Egypt, in Joshua crossing the river Jordan to enter the

promised land, and in many other events. In other words, God prepared the Jewish people for the coming Messiah. Justin also developed the idea that the Church is the new Israel and urged Jews to repent of their obstinacy in their refusal to embrace Christ as the Messiah. In the Sermon on the Mount, he saw an ethic of universal validity, continuous with the highest aspirations of Judaism, but freed from the shackles of ceremonial rules peculiar to one race among the hundreds of races in God's creation.

Worship Practices

The liturgy in the early church was structured and orderly. The church fathers made a considerable point of the fact that Christian worship is held on the first day of the week. Justin noted, "On the day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the countryside gather in one place." According to Justin, at the ordinary Sunday service it was customary to read from the "memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the apostles as the time permits." The "memoirs" refer to a reading from one or more New Testament writings, and, more specifically to a reading from one of the Gospels. The designation "prophets" refer to the Old Testament prophets, which may include Moses. There was also a Prayer of Intercession, not only for the spiritual growth of Christians but for all the people everywhere. Justin indicated that this general prayer comes after the sermon and before the Communion service. He spoke of the ministry of deacons, the giving alms, and the care of the poor, as part of the worship services on the Lord's Day. He also gave the earliest description of Christ's presence at the Lord's table. He noted, "For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, was made both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transformation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh." In other words, when the elements of bread and wine are taken in faith, the transforming and nourishing power of Christ for the salvation and the healing of the person are made available.

Justin's Martyrdom

Justin spent his final years of his life in Rome, where he likely wrote most of his works. It was also the city where he was executed for his Christian testimony. For Justin, persecution of Christians has rich spiritual meaning. He believed that God allows persecution to test Christians on the path to perfection. And they offer Christians an opportunity to demonstrate convincingly the superiority of their faith. Justin suffered martyrdom in 165 AD. He and five other men, as well as a woman, appeared before the Roman city prefect, Quintus Iunius Rusticus. Rusticus ordered Justin and those who were arrested with him "to obey the gods and submit to the rulers." When Justin was offered acquittal from the death penalty, he defiantly refused: "No person in his right mind turns from piety to impiety." And Rusticus asked the accused, "What is your lifestyle?" "What do you teach?" "Where is your gathering place?" The question regarding location takes aim at a punishable secret gathering of a conspiratorial kind. This is how Justin responded: "It has always been public, known and accessible to all." Thus remained the final question: "Are you a Christian?" Then Rusticus threatened with a whipping and beheading in case they did not render sacrifice required by imperial law. At the same time, he inquired whether the accused, in fact, do believe in the resurrection justifying a risk such as this. Since they responded affirmatively to every question, he pronounced the

death sentence. The verdict was not rendered on account of the name, Christian, but on account of the refusal to sacrifice as prescribed by law.

(To be continued)