



A Reading Plan for Christian Apologists

Part 2

By

Mark McGee

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We have looked most recently at the “Apostolic Fathers” in our series. They include men like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna – disciples of the apostles of Jesus Christ. They were born during the 1st century and served as bishops and apologists of the very early Church.

The men who followed the Apostolic Fathers in the 2nd, 3rd and early 4th centuries fought many important battles for orthodox Christianity as passed to them from the apostles through the apostolic fathers. The writings of these brave men are important for modern Christian apologists to read because the battles they fought are similar to what we fight today. Plus, we can learn from the deep devotion they presented in both their lives and ministries.

We’ll begin with Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.

Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus was born in the city of Smyrna (Asia Minor) in the early part of the 2nd century AD (approximately 130 AD). He heard the preaching of Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, who was Bishop of Smyrna during the 2nd century AD –

“But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time,-a man who was of much greater weight, and a more stedfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics.” Against Heresies, Book III

Irenaeus moved from Smyrna to Lugdunum (Lyons .. modern-day France) and became Bishop of Lyons after the martyrdom of Pothinus (approximately 177 AD). Irenaeus continued to serve as bishop until his death (approximately 202 AD).

The New Dictionary of Theology describes Irenaeus as a “vigorous anti-heretical writer devoted to the biblical faith” (*New Dictionary of Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2016, p 456). His writings include *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* mentioned by Eusibius in his *Ecclesiastical History* –

“Knowing, my beloved Marcianus, your desire to walk in godliness, which alone leads man to life eternal, I rejoice with you and make my prayer that you may preserve your faith entire and so be pleasing to God who made you. Would that it were possible for us to be always together, to help each other and to lighten the labor of our earthly life by continual discourse together on the things that profit. But, since at this present time we are parted from one another in the body, yet according to our power we will not fail to speak with you a little by writing, and to show forth in brief the preaching of the truth for the confirmation of your faith.”
The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, Translated from the Armenian by Dr. Armitage Robinson, The MacMillan Co, 1920

One of the benefits for a Christian apologist to read Irenaeus’ *Demonstration* is to see how a leading 2nd century bishop handled biblical theology. Irenaeus begins his instruction for Marcianus by explaining the primary purpose for Christian instruction –

“We send you as it were a manual of essentials, that by little you may attain to much, learning in short space all the members of the body of the truth, and receiving in brief the demonstration of the things of God. So shall it be fruitful to your own salvation, and you shall put to shame

all who inculcate falsehood, and bring with all confidence our sound and pure teaching to everyone who desires to understand it. For one is the way leading upwards for all who see, lightened with heavenly light: but many and dark and contrary are the ways of them that see not. This way leads to the kingdom of heaven, uniting man to God: but those ways bring down to death, separating man from God. Wherefore it is needful for you and for all who care for their own salvation to make your course unswerving, firm and sure by means of faith, that you falter not, nor be retarded and detained in material desires, nor turn aside and wander from the right.” *ibid*

Notice key terms and purposes –

- manual of essentials
- all the members of the body of the truth
- receiving .. of the things of God
- fruitful to your own salvation
- put to shame all who inculcate falsehood
- bring with all confidence our sound and pure teaching to everyone who desires to understand it
- the way leading upwards for all who see, lightened with heavenly light
- many and dark and contrary are the ways of them that see not
- this way leads to the kingdom of heaven, uniting man to God
- those ways [the dark and contrary] bring down to death, separating man from God
- needful for you and for all who care for their own salvation
- make your course unswerving, firm and sure by means of faith

- that you falter not
- nor be retarded and detained in material desires
- nor turn aside and wander from the right

These are all essential in the full process of making disciples “of all the nations.”

Irenaeus began his instruction at the “beginning” –

“For it is necessary that, things that are made should have the beginning of their making from some great cause; and the beginning of all things is God. For He Himself was not made by any, and by Him all things were made. And therefore it is right first of all to believe that there is One God, the Father, who made and fashioned all things, and made what was not that it should be, and who, containing all things, alone is uncontained. Now among all things is this world of ours, and in the world is man: so then this world also was formed by God.” *ibid*

And continued through the teachings of Moses, the preaching of the Hebrew prophets, the coming of Jesus Christ to earth, His crucifixion and resurrection, and His sending the Apostles into the world.

Irenaeus also addressed the ongoing challenges from heretics of the 2nd century –

“So that none should imagine God the Father to be other than our Creator, as the heretics imagine; (for) they despise the God who is, and make gods of that which is not; and they fashion a Father of their own above our Creator, and imagine that they have found out for themselves something greater than the truth. For all these are impious and blasphemers against their Creator and against the Father, as we have shown in the Exposure and Overthrow of Knowledge falsely so-called. And others again reject the coming of the Son of God and the dispensation of His incarnation, which the apostles delivered and the prophets declared beforehand, even such as should be the summing up of mankind, as we have shown you in brief: and such also are reckoned amongst those who are lacking in faith. And others receive not the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and cast away from themselves the prophetic grace, watered whereby man bears the fruit of life unto God: and these are they of whom Isaiah speaks: For they shall be, saith he, as an oak that is stripped of leaves, and as a garden that hath no water. And such are in no wise serviceable to God, seeing that they cannot bear any fruit.” *ibid*

So then in respect of the three points of our seal error has strayed widely from the truth. For either they reject the Father, or they accept not the Son and speak against the dispensation of His incarnation; or else they receive not the Spirit, that is, they reject prophecy. And of all such must we beware, and shun their ways, if in very truth we desire to be well-pleasing to God and to attain the redemption that is from Him.” *ibid*

Irenaeus is best known for his writings against heretics and heresies of his day – not unlike those that Christian apologists deal with today.

Resources

[Irenaeus of Lyons](#)

[Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching](#)

[Irenaeus \(Theopedia\)](#)

[Irenaeus \(Early Church\)](#)

[Irenaeus \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Irenaeus \(Christian Classics\)](#)

Irenaeus was one of the best theologians of the 2nd century AD and also one of the most skilled of Christian apologists of his time. He and other Christian leaders addressed a wide range of heresies, including –

- Docetism
- Gnosticism
- Marcionism
- Montanism
- Valentinianism
- Ebionitism
- Nicolaitism
- Paganism

Against Heresies is the combination of five books. Books 1-2 address various Gnostic systems, while Books 3-5 refute the systems from the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

I will highlight some of the writings from each of the books to give you a flavor of Irenaeus' approach to apologetics. As you read how the 2nd century apologist addressed the heresies of his day, consider how you might use similar techniques in addressing heresies of our day.

[Please click on the link below to read the full text.]

[Against Heresies, Book I](#)

“Inasmuch as certain men have set the truth aside, and bring in lying words and vain genealogies, which, as the apostle says, ‘minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith,’ and by means of their craftily-constructed plausibilities draw away the minds of the inexperienced and take them captive, [I have felt constrained, my dear friend, to compose the following treatise in order to expose and counteract their machinations.] These men falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretence of [superior] knowledge, from Him who rounded and adorned the universe; as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal, than that God who created the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein. By means of specious and plausible words, they cunningly allure the simple-minded to inquire into their system; but they nevertheless clumsily destroy them, while they initiate them into their blasphemous and impious opinions respecting the Demiurge; and these simple ones are unable, even in such a matter, to distinguish falsehood from truth.” Preface, part 1

“I have deemed it my duty (after reading some of the Commentaries, as they call them, of the disciples of Valentinus, and after making myself acquainted with their tenets through personal intercourse with some of them) to unfold to thee, my friend, these portentous and profound mysteries, which do not fall within the range of every intellect, because all have not sufficiently purged their brains. I do this, in order that thou, obtaining an acquaintance with these things, mayest in turn explain them to all those with whom thou art connected, and exhort them to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ. I intend, then, to the best of my ability, with brevity and clearness to set forth the opinions of those who are now promulgating heresy. I refer especially to the disciples of Ptolemaeus, whose school may be described as a bud from that of Valentinus. I shall also endeavour, according to my moderate ability, to furnish the means of overthrowing them, by showing how absurd and inconsistent with the truth are their statements. Not that I am practised either in composition or eloquence; but my feeling of affection prompts me to make known to thee and all thy companions those doctrines which have been kept in concealment until now, but which are at last, through the goodness of God, brought to light. ‘For there is nothing hidden which shall not be revealed, nor secret that shall not be made known.’ Preface, part 2

One of the first things that becomes obvious in *Against Heresies* is the depth of his understanding of the foundation and purpose of each heresy –

“Such are the thirty Aeons in the erroneous system of these men; and they are described as being wrapped up, so to speak, in silence, and known to none [except these professing teachers]. Moreover, they declare that this invisible and spiritual Pleroma of theirs is tripartite, being divided into an Ogdoad, a Decad, and a Duodecad. And for this reason they affirm it was that the ‘Saviour’-for they do not please to call Him ‘Lord’-did no work in public during the space of thirty years, thus setting forth the mystery of these Aeons. They maintain also, that these thirty Aeons are most plainly indicated in the parable of the labourers sent into the vineyard. For some are sent about the first hour, others about the third hour, others about the sixth hour, others about the ninth hour, and others about the eleventh hour. Now, if we add up the numbers of the hours here mentioned, the sum total will be thirty: for one, three, six, nine, and eleven, when added together, form thirty. And by the hours, they hold that the Aeons were pointed out; while they maintain that these are great, and wonderful, and hitherto unspeakable mysteries which it is their special function to develop; and so they proceed when they find anything in the multitude of things contained in the Scriptures which they can adopt and accommodate to their baseless speculations.” Chapter 1, part 3

Irenaeus continued to explain the intricacies of the Gnostic heresy by looking at how the heretics explained the origin of Christ and the Holy Spirit –

“After this substance had been placed outside of the Pleroma of the Aeons, and its mother restored to her proper conjunction, they tell us that Monogenes, acting in accordance with the prudent forethought of the Father, gave origin to another conjugal pair, namely Christ and the Holy Spirit (lest any of the Aeons should fall into a calamity similar to that of Sophia), for the purpose of fortifying and strengthening the Pleroma, and who at the same time completed the number of the Aeons. Christ then instructed them as to the nature of their conjunction, and taught them that those who possessed a comprehension of the Unbegotten were sufficient for themselves. He also announced among them what related to the knowledge of the Father,-namely, that he cannot be understood or comprehended, nor so much as seen or heard, except in so far as he is known by Monogenes only. And the reason why the rest of the Aeons possess perpetual existence is found in that part of the Father’s nature which is incomprehensible; but the reason of their origin and formation was situated in that which may be comprehended regarding him, that is, in the Son. Christ, then, who had just been produced, effected these things among them.” Chapter 2, part 5

The Gnostics tried to use Scripture to support their heresies –

“They moreover affirm that the Saviour is shown to be derived from all the Aeons, and to be in Himself everything by the following passage: ‘Every male that openeth the womb.’ For He, being everything, opened the womb of the enthymesis of the suffering Aeon, when it had been expelled from the Pleroma. This they also style the second Ogdoad, of which we shall speak presently. And they state that it was clearly on this account that Paul said, ‘And He Himself is all things;’ and again, ‘All things are to Him, and of Him are all things;’ and further, ‘In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead;’ and yet again, ‘All things are gathered together by God in Christ.’ Thus do they interpret these and any like passages to be found in Scripture.” Chapter 3, part 4

Irenaeus called the heretics on their misuse and abuse of Scripture –

“Such, then, is the account which they all give of their Pleroma, and of the formation of the universe, striving, as they do, to adapt the good words of revelation to their own wicked inventions. And it is not only from the writings of the evangelists and the apostles that they endeavour to derive proofs for their opinions by means of perverse interpretations and deceitful expositions: they deal in the same way with the law and the prophets, which contain many parables and allegories that can frequently be drawn into various senses, according to the kind of exegesis to which they are subjected. And others of them, with great craftiness, adapted such parts of Scripture to their own figments, lead

away captive from the truth those who do not retain a steadfast faith in one God, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Chapter 3, part 6

“Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth.” Chapter 8, part 1

“You see, my friend, the method which these men employ to deceive themselves, while they abuse the Scriptures by endeavouring to support their own system out of them. For this reason, I have brought forward their modes of expressing themselves, that thus thou mightest understand the deceitfulness of their procedure, and the wickedness of their error.” Chapter 9, part 1

Irenaeus then moved in to attack the falsity of their hypothesis –

“Learn then, ye foolish men, that Jesus who suffered for us, and who dwelt among us, is Himself the Word of God. For if any other of the Aeons had become flesh for our salvation, it would have been probable that the apostle spoke of another. But if the Word of the Father who descended is the same also that ascended, He, namely, the Only-begotten Son of the only God, who, according to the good pleasure of the Father, became flesh for the sake of men, the apostle certainly does not speak regarding any other, or concerning any Ogdoad, but respecting our Lord Jesus Christ. For, according to them, the Word did not originally become flesh. For they maintain that the Saviour assumed an animal body, formed in accordance with a special dispensation by an unspeakable providence, so as to become visible and palpable. But flesh is that which was of old formed for Adam by God out of the dust, and it is this that John has declared the Word of God became. Thus is their primary and first-begotten Ogdoad brought to nought. For, since Logos, and Monogenes, and Zoe, and Phoyς, and Sorer, and Christus, and the Son of God, and He who became incarnate for us, have been proved to be one and the same, the Ogdoad which they have built up at once falls to pieces. And when this is destroyed, their whole system sinks into ruin,-a system which they falsely dream into existence, and thus inflict injury on the Scriptures, while they build up their own hypothesis.” Chapter 9, part 3

“But since what may prove a finishing-stroke to this exhibition is wanting, so that any one, on following out their farce to the end, may then at once append an argument which shall overthrow it, we have judged it well to point out, first of all, in what respects the very fathers of this fable differ among themselves, as if they were inspired by different spirits of error. For this very fact forms an a priori proof that the truth proclaimed by the Church is immoveable, and that the theories of these men are but a tissue of falsehoods.” Chapter 9, part 5

Irenaeus believed that one of the primary attacks of Valentinianism was on the unity of the Church and he addressed the importance of that unity in his first “book” –

“As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the

truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it.”

Chapter 10, part 2

Irenaeus exposed the inconsistency of Gnostic heretics –

“Let us now look at the inconsistent opinions of those heretics (for there are some two or three of them), how they do not agree in treating the same points, but alike, in things and names, set forth opinions mutually discordant. The first of them, Valentinus, who adapted the principles of the heresy called ‘Gnostic’ to the peculiar character of his own school, taught as follows: He maintained that there is a certain Dyad (twofold being), who is inexpressible by any name, of whom one part should be called Arrhetus (unspeakable), and the other Sige (silence). But of this Dyad a second was produced, one part of whom he names Pater, and the other Aletheia. From this Tetrad, again, arose Logos and Zoe, Anthropos and Ecclesia. These constitute the primary Ogdoad. He next states that from Logos and Zoe ten powers were produced, as we have before mentioned. But from Anthropos and Ecclesia proceeded twelve, one of which separating from the rest, and falling from its original condition, produced the rest of the universe. He also supposed two

beings of the name of Horos, the one of whom has his place between Bythus and the rest of the Pleroma, and divides the created Aeons from the uncreated Father, while the other separates their mother from the Pleroma. Christ also was not produced from the Aeons within the Pleroma, but was brought forth by the mother who had been excluded from it, in virtue of her remembrance of better things, but not without a kind of shadow. He, indeed, as being masculine, having severed the shadow from himself, returned to the Pleroma; but his mother being left with the shadow, and deprived of her spiritual substance, brought forth another son, namely, the Demiurge, whom he also styles the supreme ruler of all those things which are subject to him. He also asserts that, along with the Demiurge, there was produced a left-hand power, in which particular he agrees with those falsely called Gnostics, of whom to we have yet to speak. Sometimes, again, he maintains that Jesus was produced from him who was separated from their mother, and united to the rest, that is, from Theletus, sometimes as springing from him who returned into the Pleroma, that is, from Christ; and at other times still as derived from Anthropos and Ecclesia. And he declares that the Holy Spirit was produced by Aletheia for the inspection and fructification of the Aeons, by entering invisibly into them, and that, in this way, the Aeons brought forth the plants of truth.” Chapter 11, part 1

In addition to Valentinus, Irenaeus exposed the teachings of other Gnostic heretics in his first book including Secundus, Ptolemy, Colorbasus, Marcus, Simon Magus, Menander, Saturninus, Basilides, Carpocrates, Cerinthus, the Ebionites, Cerdo, Marcion, the Encratites, the Nicolaitanes, and Barbeliotes.

Against Heresies, Book II

Irenaeus used the Preface of his second book to remind readers that his purpose in writing was “exposing knowledge falsely so called” –

“In the first book, which immediately precedes this, exposing ‘knowledge falsely so called,’ I showed thee, my very dear friend, that the whole system devised, in many and opposite ways, by those who are of the school of Valentinus, was false and baseless. I also set forth the tenets of their predecessors, proving that they not only differed among themselves, but had long previously swerved from the truth itself. I further explained, with all diligence, the doctrine as well as practice of Marcus the magician, since he, too, belongs to these persons; and I carefully noticed the passages which they garble from the Scriptures, with the view of adapting them to their own fictions. Moreover, I minutely narrated the manner in which, by means of numbers, and by the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, they boldly endeavour to establish [what they regard as] truth. I have also related how they think and teach that creation at large was formed after the image of their invisible Pleroma, and what they hold respecting the Demiurge, declaring at the same time the doctrine of Simon Magus of Samaria, their progenitor, and of all those who succeeded him. I mentioned, too, the multitude of those Gnostics who are sprung from him, and noticed the points of difference between them, their several doctrines, and the order of their succession, while I set forth all those heresies which have been originated by them. I showed, moreover, that all these heretics, taking their rise from Simon,

have introduced impious and irreligious doctrines into this life; and I explained the nature of their “redemption,” and their method of initiating those who are rendered ‘perfect,’ along with their invocations and their mysteries. I proved also that there is one God, the Creator, and that He is not the fruit of any defect, nor is there anything either above Him, or after Him.” Preface.1

Irenaeus then explained what he planned to accomplish in his second book

—

“In the present book, I shall establish those points which fit in with my design, so far as time permits, and overthrow, by means of lengthened treatment under distinct heads, their whole system; for which reason, since it is an exposure and subversion of their opinions, I have so entitled the composition of this work. For it is fitting, by a plain revelation and overthrow of their conjunctions, to put an end to these hidden alliances, and to Bythus himself, and thus to obtain a demonstration that he never existed at any previous time, nor now has any existence.” Preface.2

Irenaeus began his apologetic by addressing the Gnostic belief concerning the “pleroma” –

“It is proper, then, that I should begin with the first and most important head, that is, God the Creator, who made the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein (whom these men blasphemously style the fruit of a defect), and to demonstrate that there is nothing either above Him or after Him; nor that, influenced by any one, but of His own free will, He created all things, since He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence.” Chapter 1.1

“For how can there be any other Fulness, or Principle, or Power, or God, above Him, since it is matter of necessity that God, the Pleroma (Fulness) of all these, should contain all things in His immensity, and should be contained by no one? But if there is anything beyond Him, He is not then the Pleroma of all, nor does He contain all. For that which they declare to be beyond Him will be wanting to the Pleroma, or, [in other words,] to that God who is above all things. But that which is wanting, and falls in any way short, is not the Pleroma of all things. In such a case, He would have both beginning, middle, and end, with respect to those who are beyond Him. And if He has an end in regard to those things which are below, He has also a beginning with respect to those things which are above. In like manner, there is an absolute necessity that He should experience the very same thing at all other points, and should be held in, bounded, and enclosed by those

existences that are outside of Him. For that being who is the end downwards, necessarily circumscribes and surrounds him who finds his end in it. And thus, according to them, the Father of all (that is, He whom they call Proön and Proarche), with their Pleroma, and the good God of Marcion, is established and enclosed in some other, and is surrounded from without by another mighty Being, who must of necessity be greater, inasmuch as that which contains is greater than that which is contained. But then that which is greater is also stronger, and in a greater degree Lord; and that which is greater, and stronger, and in a greater degree Lord-must be God.” Chapter 1.2

Irenaeus mentioned Marcion many times in *Against Heresies*. Marcion was a bishop in the early part of the 2nd century AD who taught that the God of the Old Testament was not the Father of Jesus Christ. Marcion rejected the Old Testament as Scripture and believed the original apostles became false apostles by Judaizing the Gentiles who were becoming Christians. Marcion believed that Paul was the only true apostle and that only edited portions of some of Paul’s writings (and a shortened version of Luke’s Gospel) were Scripture. Marcion’s views became popular with many churches in the 2nd century, which led to a strong defense of Old and New Testament writings and theology by orthodox church leaders.

Here are some of Irenaeus' comments about Marcion in Book 2 of *Against Heresies* –

“These remarks are, in like manner, applicable against the followers of Marcion. For his two gods will also be contained and circumscribed by an immense interval which separates them from one another. But then there is a necessity to suppose a multitude of gods separated by an immense distance from each other on every side, beginning with one another, and ending in one another. Thus, by that very process of reasoning on which they depend for teaching that there is a certain Pleroma or God above the Creator of heaven and earth, any one who chooses to employ it may maintain that there is another Pleroma above the Pleroma, above that again another, and above Bythus another ocean of Deity, while in like manner the same successions hold with respect to the sides; and thus, their doctrine flowing out into immensity, there will always be a necessity to conceive of other Pleroma, and other Bythi, so as never at any time to stop, but always to continue seeking for others besides those already mentioned. Moreover, it will be uncertain whether these which we conceive of are below, or are, in fact, themselves the things which are above; and, in like manner, will be doubtful] respecting those things which are said by them to be above, whether they are really above or below; and thus our opinions will have no fixed conclusion or certainty, but will of necessity wander forth after worlds without limits, and gods that cannot be numbered.” Chapter 1.4

“The Bythus, therefore, whom they conceive of with his Pleroma, and the God of Marcion, are inconsistent. If indeed, as they affirm, he has something subjacent and beyond himself, which they style vacuity and shadow, this vacuum is then proved to be greater than their Pleroma. But it is inconsistent even to make this statement, that while he contains all things within himself, the creation was formed by some other. For it is absolutely necessary that they acknowledge a certain void and chaotic kind of existence (below the spiritual Pleroma) in which this universe was formed, and that the Propator purposely left this chaos as it was, either knowing beforehand what things were to happen in it, or being ignorant of them. If he was really ignorant, then God will not be prescient of all things. But they will not even [in that case] be able to assign a reason on what account He thus left this place void during so long a period of time. If, again, He is prescient, and contemplated mentally that creation which was about to have a being in that place, then He Himself created it who also formed it beforehand [ideally] in Himself.” Chapter 3.1

“But, beyond reason inflated [with your own wisdom], ye presumptuously maintain that ye are acquainted with the unspeakable mysteries of God; while even the Lord, the very Son of God, allowed that the Father alone knows the very day and hour of judgment, when He plainly declares, ‘But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, neither the Son, but the Father only.’ If, then, the Son was not ashamed to ascribe the knowledge of that day to the Father only, but declared what was true regarding the matter, neither let us be ashamed to reserve for God those

greater questions which may occur to us. For no man is superior to his master. If any one, therefore, says to us, 'How then was the Son produced by the Father?', we reply to him, that no man understands that production, or generation, or calling, or revelation, or by whatever name one may describe His generation, which is in fact altogether indescribable. Neither Valentinus, nor Marcion, nor Saturninus, nor Basilides, nor angels, nor archangels, nor principalities, nor powers [possess this knowledge], but the Father only who begat, and the Son who was begotten. Since therefore His generation is unspeakable, those who strive to set forth generations and productions cannot be in their right mind, inasmuch as they undertake to describe things which are indescribable. For that a word is uttered at the bidding of thought and mind, all men indeed well understand. Those, therefore, who have excogitated [the theory of] emissions have not discovered anything great, or revealed any abstruse mystery, when they have simply transferred what all understand to the only-begotten Word of God; and while they style Him unspeakable and unnameable, they nevertheless set forth the production and formation of His first generation, as if they themselves had assisted at His birth, thus assimilating Him to the word of mankind formed by emissions." Chapter 28.6

Irenaeus addressed Marcion and his followers many more times in *Against Heresies* in Books 3, 4 and 5. We will also read more about Marcion when we look at the writings of Tertullian.

Valentinus was another popular Gnostic teacher in the early part of the 2nd century. He believed that only he and his followers received the knowledge (gnosis) that led to the highest form of salvation. Valentinus also taught that angels participated in creation and played an essential role in the salvation of humans. Irenaeus addressed those and other heresies in Book 2 –

“Those, moreover, who say that the world was formed by angels, or by any other maker of it, contrary to the will of Him who is the Supreme Father, err first of all in this very point, that they maintain that angels formed such and so mighty a creation, contrary to the will of the Most High God. This would imply that angels were more powerful than God; or if not so, that He was either careless, or inferior, or paid no regard to those things which took place among His own possessions, whether they turned out ill or well, so that He might drive away and prevent the one, while He praised and rejoiced over the other. But if one would not ascribe such conduct even to a man of any ability, how much less to God.” Chapter 2.1

“The cause, then, of such a dispensation on the part of God, is to be inquired after; but the formation of the world is not to be ascribed to any other. And all things are to be spoken of as having been so prepared by God beforehand, that they should be made as they have been made;

but shadow and vacuity are not to be conjured into existence. But whence, let me ask, came this vacuity [of which they speak]? If it was indeed produced by Him who, according to them, is the Father and Author of all things, then it is both equal in honour and related to the rest of the Aeons, perchance even more ancient than they are. Moreover, if it proceeded from the same source [as they did], it must be similar in nature to Him who produced it, as well as to those along with whom it was produced. There will therefore be an absolute necessity, both that the Bythus of whom they speak, along with Sige, be similar in nature to a vacuum, that is, that He really is a vacuum; and that the rest of the Aeons, since they are the brothers of vacuity, should also be devoid of substance. If, on the other hand, it has not been thus produced, it must have sprang from and been generated by itself, and in that case it will be equal in point of age to that Bythus who is, according to them, the Father of all; and thus vacuity will be of the same nature and of the same honour with Him who is, according to them, the universal Father. For it must of necessity have been either produced by some one, or generated by itself, and sprung from itself. But if, in truth, vacuity was produced, then its producer Valentinus is also a vacuum, as are likewise his followers. If, again, it was not produced, but was generated by itself, then that which is really a vacuum is similar to, and the brother of, and of the same honour with, that Father who has been proclaimed by Valentinus; while it is more ancient, and dating its existence from a period greatly anterior, and more exalted in honour than the remaining Aeons of Ptolemy himself, and Heracleon, and all the rest who hold the same opinions.” Chapter 4.1

“As to the point, then, that their system is weak and untenable as well as utterly chimerical, enough has been said. For it is not needful, to use a common proverb, that one should drink up the ocean who wishes to learn that its water is salt. But, just as in the case of a statue which is made of clay, but coloured on the outside that it may be thought to be of gold, while it really is of clay, any one who takes out of it a small particle, and thus laying it open reveals the clay, will set free those who seek the truth from a false opinion; in the same way have I (by exposing not a small part only, but the several heads of their system which are of the greatest importance) shown to as many as do not wish wittingly to be led astray, what is wicked, deceitful, seductive, and pernicious, connected with the school of the Valentinians, and all those other heretics who promulgate wicked opinions respecting the Demiurge, that is, the Fashioner and Former of this universe, and who is in fact the only true God-exhibiting, [as I have done,] how easily their views are overthrown.” Chapter 19.8

“But if any lover of strife contradict what I have said, and also what the apostle affirms, that ‘we know in part, and prophesy in part,’ and imagine that he has acquired not a partial, but a universal, knowledge of all that exists,-being such an one as Valentinus, or Ptolemaeus, or Basilides, or any other of those who maintain that they have searched out the deep things of God,-let him not (arraying himself in vainglory) boast that he has acquired greater knowledge than others with respect to those things which are invisible, or cannot be placed under our observation; but let him, by making diligent inquiry, and obtaining information from the

Father, tell us the reasons (which we know not) of those things which are in this world,-as, for instance, the number of hairs on his own head, and the sparrows which are captured day by day, and such other points with which we are not previously acquainted,-so that we may credit him also with respect to more important points. But if those who are perfect do not yet understand the very things in their hands, and at their feet, and before their eyes, and on the earth, and especially the rule followed with respect to the hairs of their head, how can we believe them regarding things spiritual, and super-celestial, and those which, with a vain confidence, they assert to be above God? So much, then, I have said concerning numbers, and names, and syllables, and questions respecting such things as are above our comprehension, and concerning their improper expositions of the parables: [I add no more on these points,] since thou thyself mayest enlarge upon them.” Chapter 28.9

“Those, then, who are of the school of Valentinus being overthrown, the whole multitude of heretics are, in fact, also subverted. For all the arguments I have advanced against their Pleroma, and with respect to those things which are beyond it, showing how the Father of all is shut up and circumscribed by that which is beyond Him (if, indeed, there be anything beyond Him), and how there is an absolute necessity [on their theory] to conceive of many Fathers, and many Pleromas, and many creations of worlds, beginning with one set and ending with another, as existing on every side; and that all [the beings referred to] continue in their own domains, and do not curiously intermeddle with others, since, indeed, no common interest nor any fellowship exists between them;

and that there is no other God of all, but that that name belongs only to the Almighty;-[all these arguments, I say,] will in like manner apply against those who are of the school of Marcion, and Simon, and Meander, or whatever others there may be who, like them, cut off that creation with which we are connected from the Father. The arguments, again, which I have employed against those who maintain that the Father of all no doubt contains all things, but that the creation to which we belong was not formed by Him, but by a certain other power, or by angels having no knowledge of the Propator, who is surrounded as a centre by the immense extent of the universe, just as a stain is by the [surrounding] cloak; when I showed that it is not a probable supposition that any other being than the Father of all formed that creation to which we belong,-these same arguments will apply against the followers of Saturninus, Basilides, Carpocrates, and the rest of the Gnostics, who express similar opinions. Those statements, again, which have been made with respect to the emanations, and the Aeons, and the [supposed state of] degeneracy, and the inconstant character of their Mother, equally overthrow Basilides, and all who are falsely styled Gnostics, who do, in fact, just repeat the same views under different names, but do, to a greater extent than the former, transfer those things which lie outside of the truth to the system of their own doctrine. And the remarks I have made respecting numbers will also apply against all those who misappropriate things belonging to the truth for the support of a system of this kind. And all that has been said respecting the Creator (Demiurge) to show that he alone is God and Father of all, and whatever remarks may yet be made in the following books, I apply against the heretics at large. The more moderate and reasonable among them thou

wilt convert and convince, so as to lead them no longer to blaspheme their Creator, and Maker, and Sustainer, and Lord, nor to ascribe His origin to defect and ignorance; but the fierce, and terrible, and irrational [among them] thou wilt drive far from thee, that you may no longer have to endure their idle loquaciousness.” Chapter 31.1

Irenaeus was not shy about calling out the heretics. He understood their heresies well and knew the damage they caused the Church. May we understand the heresies of our time, know the damage they cause the Church and be empowered by God’s Spirit to call them out. More about that in future studies.

Against Heresies, Book III

Irenaeus started his third book by pointing to how the Apostles did not begin preaching the Gospel or placing anything on the record until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. He also presented the early Church's understanding of which Gospel accounts were from the Holy Spirit –

“For, after our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge: they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.” Chapter 1. 1

Irenaeus presented how all the Apostles agreed on central points of the Gospel message and how opponents of those central points were actually opposing God Himself.

“These have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ the Son of God. If any one do not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned, resisting and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics.” Chapter 1.2

“... as is the case with all heretics.”

We hear the words “heretic” and “heresy” often today. Is a heretic someone who disagrees with our personal or denomination’s view of Christian teaching and practice or are there specific things that define a heretic? If specific things, what are they?

The Greek word translated “heretic” is αἰρετικός. It comes from the word αἰρέω, which means “I choose, prefer.” The word αἰρετικός was used in Greek literature for people who were factious and divisive and chose to form their own sects. It is found one time in the New Testament, Titus 3:10

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αιρετικον ανθρωπον μετα μιαν και δευτεραν νουθεσιαν παραιτου

Literal – “A factious man after one and a second admonition reject”

KJV – “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject ...”

NKJV – “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition ...”

NASB – “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning ...”

NIV – “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time.

After that, have nothing to do with them.”

ESV – “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him ...”

Here is the context of what Paul was addressing –

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by

works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” Titus 3:1-11

Paul left Titus in Crete and told him to “set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you” (Titus 1:5). Titus is on an Apostolic mission from Paul. Paul told Titus to teach the elders about their responsibilities as leaders in local churches. Paul also told Titus to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1) and “Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you” (Titus 2:15). It was in that context that Paul told Titus to remind Christians what we read in Titus 3 –

“This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and

second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”

It's important that we understand the context of when Paul used the word “heretic.” He pointed to what Christians should do and what they should not do. There are some things that are “good and profitable” and there are other things that are “unprofitable and useless.” Paul told Titus to teach church leaders and members how to deal with four primary issues that divide people from Truth: foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law. It was in that context that Paul wrote, “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” That is 1st century church discipline needed desperately in the 21st century. Paul did not say that we all need to get along and let people be what they think they should be. He said “reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition.”

The word “reject” is *παραιτέομαι* (from *παρά* and *αἰτέω*) and translates as “refuse, reject, decline, shun, avoid.” This is far more than just Christians having different views or interpretations on non-essential issues. Heresy went to the core essentials in Church teaching and Paul said to “reject” a divisive person after the first and second admonition “knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.” This is a serious violation. Look at what Paul told Timothy and Titus to teach both church leaders and members and you'll see what the Apostle viewed as core essentials in Church doctrine and practice.

Both Paul and the Apostle Peter used the word αἵρεσις (heresies, factions) in their letters. As you'll see in the verses below, the Apostles took a strong view against people who practiced heresy –

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Galatians 5:19-21

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.” 2 Peter 2:1-3

Notice what we learn here from Paul and Peter –

- there will be false teachers among you
- they will secretly bring in destructive heresies
- they will even deny the Lord who bought them
- they will bring on themselves swift destruction

- many will follow their (heretics) destructive ways
- because of them the 'way of truth' will be blasphemed
- by covetousness they will exploit believers with deceptive words
- their words cause "strife"
- their contentions, selfish ambitions, dissensions, and heresies are "the works of the flesh" NOT "the fruit of the Holy Spirit"
- those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God

As Paul wrote in the verses leading up to Galatians 5:19-21 – "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Galatians 5:16-18). The "flesh" and the "Spirit" are CONTRARY to one another.

I hope these words of the Apostles will penetrate your heart and mind as a Christian apologist. These are among some of the most powerful warnings we find in the New Testament against heretics and heresy. What are we to do when we find heretics in the Church? Welcome them? Invite them to lead us and teach us? Follow them? Obey what they teach? NO! We are to "reject" them ... "avoid" them ... "shun" them ... "refuse" them. The commands of Christ and His Apostles are clear. We are NOT to RECEIVE heretics into Christian fellowship and ministry. We are to REJECT them.

The Challenge

Heretics and heresies have been a challenge for the Church since the 1st century. That's why reading how the Apostles addressed them is important to our understanding of how to deal with modern heretics and heresies now. Our challenge today is know how to identify a true heretic and deal with them biblically.

Irenaeus used the word "heretic" many times in Book III. Let's see what a Christian apologist in the 2nd century thought about the beliefs of those heretics and what we can learn that may help us identify heretics today –

"Thou hast indeed enjoined upon me, my very dear friend, that I should bring to light the Valentinian doctrines, concealed, as their votaries imagine; that I should exhibit their diversity, and compose a treatise in refutation of them. therefore have undertaken-showing that they spring from Simon, the father of all heretics-to exhibit both their doctrines and successions, and to set forth arguments against them all. Wherefore, since the conviction of these men and their exposure is in many points but one work, I have sent unto thee [certain] books, of which the first comprises the opinions of all these men, and exhibits their customs, and the character of their behaviour. In the second, again, their perverse teachings are cast down and overthrown, and, such as they really are, laid bare and open to view. But in this, the third book I shall adduce proofs from the Scriptures, so that I may come behind in nothing of what thou hast enjoined; yea, that over and above what thou didst reckon

upon, thou mayest receive from me the means of combating and vanquishing those who, in whatever manner, are propagating falsehood. For the love of God, being rich and ungrudging, confers upon the suppliant more than he can ask from it. Call to mind then, the things which I have stated in the two preceding books, and, taking these in connection with them, thou shalt have from me a very copious refutation of all the heretics; and faithfully and strenuously shalt thou resist them in defence of the only true and life-giving faith, which the Church has received from the apostles and imparted to her sons. For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: 'He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and Him that sent Me.'" Preface

"It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to "the perfect" apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men; which men, if

they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon [to the Church], but if they should fall away, the direst calamity.” Chapter 3.1

“But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time,-a man who was of much greater weight, and a more steadfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics. He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles,-that, namely, which is handed down by the Church. There are also those who heard from him that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.’ And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, ‘Dost thou know me? ‘I do know thee, the first-born of Satan.’ Such was the horror which the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth; as Paul also says, ‘A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition,

reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.' There is also a very powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth. Then, again, the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles."

Chapter 3.4

"To which course many nations of those barbarians who believe in Christ do assent, having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and, carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendour, shall come in glory, the Saviour of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent. Those who, in the absence of written documents, have believed this faith, are barbarians, so far as regards our language; but as regards doctrine, manner, and tenor of life, they are, because of faith, very wise indeed; and they do please God, ordering their conversation in all righteousness, chastity, and wisdom. If any one were to preach to these men the inventions of the heretics, speaking to them in their own language, they would at once stop their ears, and flee as far off as possible, not

enduring even to listen to the blasphemous address. Thus, by means of that ancient tradition of the apostles, they do not suffer their mind to conceive anything of the [doctrines suggested by the] portentous language of these teachers, among whom neither Church nor doctrine has ever been established.” Chapter 4.2

“But, according to these men, neither was the Word made flesh, nor Christ, nor the Saviour (Soter), who was produced from [the joint contributions of] all [the Aeons]. For they will have it, that the Word and Christ never came into this world; that the Saviour, too, never became incarnate, nor suffered, but that He descended like a dove upon the dispensational Jesus; and that, as soon as He had declared the unknown Father, He did again ascend into the Pleroma. Some, however, make the assertion, that this dispensational Jesus did become incarnate, and suffered, whom they represent as having passed through Mary just as water through a tube; but others allege him to be the Son of the Demiurge, upon whom the dispensational Jesus descended; while others, again, say that Jesus was born from Joseph and Mary, and that the Christ from above descended upon him, being without flesh, and impassible. But according to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh. For if anyone carefully examines the systems of them all, he will find that the Word of God is brought in by all of them as not having become incarnate (*sine carne*) and impassible, as is also the Christ from above. Others consider Him to have been manifested as a transfigured man; but they maintain Him to have been neither born nor to have become incarnate; whilst others [hold] that He did not assume a human form at all, but that, as a dove, He did descend

upon that Jesus who was born from Mary. Therefore the Lord's disciple, pointing them all out as false witnesses, says, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' Chapter 11.3

“And that we may not have to ask, Of what God was the Word made flesh? he does himself previously teach us, saying, ‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came as a witness, that he might bear witness of that Light. He was not that Light, but [came] that he might testify of the Light.’ By what God, then, was John, the forerunner, who testifies of the Light, sent [into the world]? Truly it was by Him, of whom Gabriel is the angel, who also announced the glad tidings of his birth: [that God] who also had promised by the prophets that He would send His messenger before the face of His Son, who should prepare His way, that is, that he should bear witness of that Light in the spirit and power of Elias. But, again, of what God was Elias the servant and the prophet? Of Him who made heaven and earth, as he does himself confess. John, therefore, having been sent by the founder and maker of this world, how could he testify of that Light, which came down from things unspeakable and invisible? For all the heretics have decided that the Demiurge was ignorant of that Power above him, whose witness and herald John is found to be. Wherefore the Lord said that He deemed him ‘more than a prophet.’ For all the other prophets preached the advent of the paternal Light, and desired to be worthy of seeing Him whom they preached; but John did both announce [the advent] beforehand, in a like manner as did the others, and actually saw Him when He came, and pointed Him out, and persuaded many to believe on Him, so that he did himself hold the place of both prophet and

apostle. For this is to be more than a prophet, because, ‘first apostles, secondarily prophets;’ but all things from one and the same God Himself.” Chapter 11.4

“Such, then, are the first principles of the Gospel: that there is one God, the Maker of this universe; He who was also announced by the prophets, and who by Moses set forth the dispensation of the law,- [principles] which proclaim the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ignore any other God or Father except Him. So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them endeavours to establish his own peculiar doctrine. For the Ebionites, who use Matthew’s Gospel only, are confuted out of this very same, making false suppositions with regard to the Lord. But Marcion, mutilating that according to Luke, is proved to be a blasphemer of the only existing God, from those [passages] which he still retains. Those, again, who separate Jesus from Christ, alleging that Christ remained impassible, but that it was Jesus who suffered, preferring the Gospel by Mark, if they read it with a love of truth, may have their errors rectified. Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus, making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel, as I have shown in the first book. Since, then, our opponents do bear testimony to us, and make use of these [documents], our proof derived from them is firm and true.” Chapter 11.7

“For this is the subterfuge of false persons, evil seducers, and hypocrites, as they act who are from Valentinus. These men discourse to the multitude about those who belong to the Church, whom they do themselves term ‘vulgar,’ and ‘ecclesiastic.’ By these words they entrap the more simple, and entice them, imitating our phraseology, that these [dupes] may listen to them the oftener; and then these are asked regarding us, how it is, that when they hold doctrines similar to ours, we, without cause, keep ourselves aloof from their company; and [how it is, that] when they say the same things, and hold the same doctrine, we call them heretics? When they have thus, by means of questions, overthrown the faith of any, and rendered them uncontradicting hearers of their own, they describe to them in private the unspeakable mystery of their Pleroma. But they are altogether deceived, who imagine that they may learn from the Scriptural texts adduced by heretics, that [doctrine] which their words plausibly teach. For error is plausible, and bears a resemblance to the truth, but requires to be disguised; while truth is without disguise, and therefore has been entrusted to children. And if any one of their auditors do indeed demand explanations, or start objections to them, they affirm that he is one not capable of receiving the truth, and not having from above the seed [derived] from their Mother; and thus really give him no reply, but simply declare that he is of the intermediate regions, that is, belongs to animal natures. But if any one do yield himself up to them like a little sheep, and follows out their practice, and their ‘redemption,’ such an one is puffed up to such an extent, that he thinks he is neither in heaven nor on earth, but that he has passed within the Pleroma; and having already embraced his angel,

he walks with a strutting gait and a supercilious countenance, possessing all the pompous air of a cock. There are those among them who assert that that man who comes from above ought to follow a good course of conduct; wherefore they do also pretend a gravity [of demeanour] with a certain superciliousness. The majority, however, having become scoffers also, as if already perfect, and living without regard [to appearances], yea, in contempt [of that which is good], call themselves 'the spiritual,' and allege that they have already become acquainted with that place of refreshing which is within their Pleroma."

Chapter 15.2

"Since, therefore, the Scriptures have been interpreted with such fidelity, and by the grace of God, and since from these God has prepared and formed again our faith towards His Son, and has preserved to us the unadulterated Scriptures in Egypt, where the house of Jacob flourished, fleeing from the famine in Canaan; where also our Lord was preserved when He fled from the persecution set on foot by Herod; and [since] this interpretation of these Scriptures was made prior to our Lord's descent [to earth], and came into being before the Christians appeared-for our Lord was born about the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus; but Ptolemy was much earlier, under whom the Scriptures were interpreted;- [since these things are so, I say,] truly these men are proved to be impudent and presumptuous, who would now show a desire to make different translations, when we refute them out of these Scriptures, and shut them up to a belief in the advent of the Son of God. But our faith is stedfast, unfeigned, and the only true one, having clear proof from these Scriptures, which were interpreted in the way I have related; and the

preaching of the Church is without interpolation. For the apostles, since they are of more ancient date than all these [heretics], agree with this aforesaid translation; and the translation harmonizes with the tradition of the apostles. For Peter, and John, and Matthew, and Paul, and the rest successively, as well as their followers, did set forth all prophetic [announce-merits], just as the interpretation of the elders contains them.”

Chapter 21.3

“All therefore speak falsely who disallow his (Adam’s) salvation, shutting themselves out from life for ever, in that they do not believe that the sheep which had perished has been found. For if it has not been found, the whole human race is still held in a state of perdition. False, therefore, is that, man who first started this idea, or rather, this ignorance and blindness-Tatian. As I have already indicated, this man entangled himself with all the heretics. This dogma, however, has been invented by himself, in order that, by introducing something new, independently of the rest, and by speaking vanity. he might acquire for himself hearers void of faith, affecting to be esteemed a teacher, and endeavouring from time to time to employ sayings of this kind often [made use of] by Paul: ‘In Adam we all die;’ ignorant, however, that ‘where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.’ Since this, then, has been clearly shown, let all his disciples be put to shame, and let them wrangle about Adam, as if some great gain were to accrue to them if he be not saved; when they profit nothing more [by that], even as the serpent also did not profit when persuading man [to sin], except to this effect, that he proved him a transgressor, obtaining man as the first-fruits of his own apostasy. But he did not know God’s power. Thus also do those who disallow Adam’s

salvation gain nothing, except this, that they render themselves heretics and apostates from the truth, and show themselves patrons of the serpent and of death.” Chapter 23.8

Irenaeus called out heretics by name in *Against Heresies*. They claimed to be Christians and teachers of the Gospel, but Irenaeus demonstrated with both Scripture and logic that they were not true to the Gospel of Christ.

Do you think that’s a good idea for Christians to do today? Should we name names? Why or why not? Let’s see what we can learn from one of the leading Christian apologists of the 2nd century as we ask God for wisdom in how to address modern heretics and their heresies.

Satan was the first heretic and gnostic. He said that God had misled Adam by withholding the truth about what would happen to him if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (calling God a liar). Satan also declared that he (Satan) had ‘special’ knowledge about the spiritual world that would ‘open’ Eve’s eyes to greater knowledge (knowing good and evil)

—

“Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’ ... You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:1, 4-5

God cursed the serpent (Satan) and promised that the Seed of the woman would one day crush his (Satan's) head. Satan then began a vicious campaign against humanity to destroy the woman who would carry the Seed that would crush his head. Satan was not successful. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, died on the Cross and rose from the dead, making a public spectacle of Satan and those who would follow him.

“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”
Colossians 2:13-15

Paul went on to tell the Colossian Christians that because of Christ's triumph they were free to follow Christ and not be cheated from their spiritual reward.

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from

God. Therefore if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” Colossians 2:16-23

Paul’s description of those who would cheat Christians of their reward contains excellent insight to the so-called ‘Christian gnostics’ of the early centuries of the Church. I say ‘so-called’ because they were neither ‘Christian’ nor endowed with true ‘knowledge’ (gnosis).

Many people followed Satan’s lead and opposed the Truth during the 1st Century. Many of them came from within the Church, which reminds us of the Apostle Paul’s warning to Christian leaders –

“For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” Acts 20:27-30

We know that Satan “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). What can we Christians do in the face of such attacks? Here’s what we learn from the Apostle Peter –

- humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt us in due time
- cast all our care upon Him, for He cares for us
- be sober
- be vigilant
- resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by our brotherhood in the world

Satan’s attacks on Christians are the same around the world and throughout history. The idea that God has withheld vital spiritual ‘knowledge’ from us that we can only learn from people who God has given His “secrets” is ridiculous and dangerous. As Paul wrote, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” Paul did not withhold any knowledge from the Christians he taught. He declared to them the “whole counsel of Go.”

God has made His Truth clear to His children through the declarations (writings) of Christ’s Apostles. People who oppose God’s revealed Truth and exalt themselves as knowing “secret things” of God are heretics and false teachers.

Heretics

Here are some of the people and groups Irenaeus called “heretics” in *Against Heresies* –

- Valentinus
- Marcion
- Cerdon
- Secundus
- Ptolemy
- Colorbasus
- Marcus
- Simon Magus
- Simonians
- Menander
- Saturninus
- Basilides
- Carpocrates
- Cerinthus
- Ebionites
- Nicolaitanes
- Tatian
- Encratites
- Barbeliotes
- Ophites
- Sethians

- Cainites

One of the important points Irenaeus made about these heretics was that they “are of much later date than the bishops to whom the apostles committed the Churches.” (Book 5.20.1) We saw Irenaeus point that out in great detail in Book 3. He also pointed out the heretical danger of thinking that they (heretics) had “hit upon something more beyond the truth” –

“Those, therefore, who desert the preaching of the Church, call in question the knowledge of the holy presbyters, not taking into consideration of how much greater consequence is a religious man, even in a private station, than a blasphemous and impudent sophist. Now, such are all the heretics, and those who imagine that they have hit upon something more beyond the truth, so that by following those things already mentioned, proceeding on their way variously, in harmoniously, and foolishly, not keeping always to the same opinions with regard to the same things, as blind men are led by the blind, they shall deservedly fall into the ditch of ignorance lying in their path, ever seeking and never finding out the truth. It behoves us, therefore, to avoid their doctrines, and to take careful heed lest we suffer any injury from them; but to flee to the Church, and be brought up in her bosom, and be nourished with the Lord’s Scriptures. For the Church has been planted as a garden (paradisus) in this world; therefore says the Spirit of God, ‘Thou mayest freely eat from every tree of the garden,’ that is, Eat ye from every Scripture of the Lord; but ye shall not eat with an uplifted mind, nor touch any heretical discord. For these men do profess that they have themselves the knowledge of good and evil; and they set their own

impious minds above the God who made them. They therefore form opinions on what is beyond the limits of the understanding. For this cause also the apostle says, 'Be not wise beyond what it is fitting to be wise, but be wise prudently,' that we be not east forth by eating of the 'knowledge' of these men (that knowledge which knows more than it should do) from the paradise of life. Into this paradise the Lord has introduced those who obey His call, 'summing up in Himself all things which are in heaven, and which are on earth;' but the things in heaven are spiritual, while those on earth constitute the dispensation in human nature (*secundum hominem est dispositio*). These things, therefore, He recapitulated in Himself: by uniting man to the Spirit, and causing the Spirit to dwell in man, He is Himself made the head of the Spirit, and gives the Spirit to be the head of man: for through Him (the Spirit) we see, and hear, and speak." Book 5.20.2

Irenaeus laid the full heresy at the feet of Satan, where it belongs –

"As therefore the devil lied at the beginning, so did he also in the end, when he said, 'All these are delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give them.' For it is not he who has appointed the kingdoms of this world, but God; for 'the heart of the king is in the hand of God.' And the Word also says by Solomon, 'By me kings do reign, and princes administer justice. By me chiefs are raised up, and by me kings rule the earth.' Paul the apostle also says upon this same subject: 'Be ye subject to all the higher powers; for there is no power but of God: now those which are have been ordained of God.' And again, in reference to them he says, 'For he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of

God, the avenger for wrath to him who does evil.' Now, that he spake these words, not in regard to angelical powers, nor of invisible rulers-as some venture to expound the passage-but of those of actual human authorities, [he shows when] he says, 'For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, doing service for this very thing.' This also the Lord confirmed, when He did not do what He was tempted to by the devil; but He gave directions that tribute should be paid to the tax-gatherers for Himself and Peter; because 'they are the ministers of God, serving for this very thing.'" Book 5.24.1

More Apologists, More Heretics

We will see other apologists naming heretics as we continue our study. This precedent began with Jesus and His Apostles. They called out the heretics of their day by name. (e.g. Pharisees, Sadducees, Phygellus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus and Philetus). Paul went so far as to write –

“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” Romans 16:17-18

Why do you think Paul and the others did that? Do you think that was wise or unwise? We might ask ourselves this question – should we call out today’s heretics by name? Another question might be – what if we don’t?

I recommend that before we call anyone a “heretic” or “false teacher” we are sure of their heresy and false teaching. We may find many differences in interpreting Scripture with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but calling people “heretics” and “false teachers” are strong words that can carry serious consequences. We need to be careful when using those terms for people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. However, we can follow the example of Jesus, the Apostles and the early apologists and name names where appropriate knowing we are following a strong tradition –

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” Colossians 2:8-10

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” 1 John 2:18-19

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.” 2 Peter 2:1-3

One of the strongest admonitions to Christians about standing strong against the heresies of this age comes in John's second letter –

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” 2 John 1:7-11

Does that mean we should not be kind and compassionate in our dealings with non-Christians who disagree with us about the existence of God, reliability of Scripture or Deity of Christ? Of course we should. Paul wrote –

“Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.” (Colossians 4:5-6) Peter reminded us to “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.” (1 Peter 3:15-16)

What John addressed in his second letter concerns “deceivers,” people who present themselves as Christians but do not continue in the “doctrine” of Christ. We are NOT to receive them as brothers because that would be sharing in their evil deeds and send a dangerous message to Christians who look to us for spiritual guidance.

I would go so far as to say we should not share in ANY way with their ministry of deception. If we do appear with them (e.g. platform, radio or TV program), it should be for the purpose of declaring that their teaching is heresy.

An Important Reminder

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17

“But He answered and said, ‘It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”

Before we continue looking at the writings of early Christian apologists, I’d like to share something important for us to remember as we read post-Scriptural Christian writings.

The New Testament includes hundreds of quotes from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Paul was addressing the Old Testament Scripture when he wrote that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” Jesus was addressing the Old Testament Scripture when He told Satan about living “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

So, does that mean the New Testament writings are not Scripture?

Jesus told His Apostles that the Holy Spirit would also guide them into “all truth” –

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you” John 16:12-15

Following His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus opened up the Old Testament Scriptures to teach His Apostles about Himself and “the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Luke 24:44-45; Acts 1:3). On the Day of Pentecost the Apostle Peter stood before a great crowd of people in Jerusalem and said –

“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth

beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved.” Acts 2:14-21

Then, Peter added his own words to those of the prophet Joel –

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.” Acts 2:22-24

Peter quoted from the Psalms to support his claim about the resurrection of Christ and told the crowd they needed to repent and be saved –

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’” Acts 2:38-40

About three-thousand people responded to Peter's call to repentance and were saved that day. What we learn next is vital in understanding the New Testament –

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47

The earliest followers of Christ on the Day of Pentecost understood that the Apostles' doctrine (teaching) came from Christ and the Holy Spirit and was vital to their new faith. Jesus chose His Apostles, including Paul, and told them that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. Jesus said the Spirit would not speak on His own authority, but would speak what He heard – “and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”

Speaking of Paul's writings, 1st century Christians believed his writings were apostolic and to be obeyed as coming directly from God. The Apostle Peter vouched for the Holy Spirit inspiration of Paul's letters –

“Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” 2 Peter 3:14-16

The author of Hebrews wrote that God had spoken in the past to the fathers of Israel “by the prophets” and in “these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

- Old Testament Scripture – “by the prophets”
- New Testament Scripture – “by His Son”

Even as the Holy Spirit inspired the Old Testament prophets to write Scripture, so the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament Apostles to write Scripture that we can trust to be “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Why This Is Important

We as Christian apologists can trust what is written in the Bible – Old and New Testaments. We believe, and for good reason, that the Bible is of Divine origin. We are often questioned by atheists and other non-believers about why we trust something written by men. We don't trust what men write – we trust what God writes – and God chose to reveal His Word through men He personally chose and called. God spoke in past times through the prophets. We can trust the writings of those Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament. God spoke in “these last days” to us by His Son. We can trust the writings of Christ's Apostles in the New Testament.

God has given His people a firm foundation in what to believe and that foundation is the doctrine of the prophets and apostles –

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Ephesians 2:19-22

As we read through the many writings of apologists through the centuries, we have a sure foundation in the Scriptures to ensure that what they say is correct. Knowing that the Holy Spirit inspired all Scripture (Old and New Testament) gives us the confidence to compare every other writing with it.

Who Can We Trust?

I believe we can trust the writings of the Old and New Testament, but who we can trust after that will be more difficult to determine. The key, I believe, is in how closely the writer stays to the biblical text. That means we as Christian apologists must know the Scriptures well – very well. How else can we compare the writings of men to the Word of God?

So far we have looked at the Words of Jesus Christ, the writings of His Apostles, and the writings of men who were disciples of the apostles and disciples of the disciples of the apostles (e.g. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons). I believe we can trust much of what they wrote about orthodox Christianity and the heresies they faced from both inside and outside the Church. However, we must be sure to use the Scriptural litmus test with all of them to ensure that what we learn from them about defending the Christian worldview always passes the biblical test (e.g. Matthew 7:15-20; 1 John 4:1; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:13; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; Jude 1:4). If they wrote something that doesn't pass that test, make a mental or even physical note of it and don't use it in your arguments. We must not allow unbiblical apologetics to become part of our defense (*apologia*).

Please keep this in mind as we continue to look at the writings of Christian apologists from the 2nd century to the present day. We must be careful not to be pulled into error because of human admiration. It is easy to become enamored with men and women we like and forget that our primary

responsibility is to Jesus Christ. Our job is to represent the Truth of God without turning to the left or to the right. Even a small turning away from absolute biblical truth can be catastrophic. We must maintain a straight path as we present our “defense” for Christianity.

We are currently looking at the writings of some of the leading Christian apologists of the 2nd Century. If you are reading this from your living room, office, porch, breezeway or other comfortable location, let's remember that many early apologists wrote from prison or on their way to martyrdom. Defending the faith has never been about being comfortable. It's about being comfortable with being uncomfortable.

I find it interesting how 1st century Christians would say things like these –

“So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” Acts 5:41

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Romans 8:16-18

“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.” Philippians 1:29-30

“But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. ‘And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.’ 1 Peter 3:14

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” 1 Peter 4:12-13

“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10

I believe Christians in the western world (e.g. United States, Canada, UK, Europe) may face severe persecution and suffering for being followers of Jesus Christ by the end of the 21st century. That’s one of the reasons for this series on a reading plan for Christian apologists. We need to get ready for a 2nd/3rd century style persecution of the Church. The Holy Spirit, I believe, is calling apologists by the thousands from around the world to equip them for what He knows is coming.

While we can learn from the writings of the early apologists about how to respond to the many heresies surrounding our culture, we can also learn how to “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” Some of the people who may one day ask you or your children or grandchildren for that reason may be people in authority – people with the power to arrest, throw in prison, and even execute. I don’t say that to frighten you – only to call us

to be ready. Severe persecution is already happening to many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world today.

“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.” John 15:20

Quadratus and Aristides

What we know about Quadratus comes from Church historians Eusebius and Jerome –

“After Trajan had reigned for nineteen and a half years Aelius Adrian became his successor in the empire. To him Quadratus addressed a discourse containing an apology for our religion, because certain wicked men had attempted to trouble the Christians. The work is still in the hands of a great many of the brethren, as also in our own, and furnishes clear proofs of the man’s understanding and of his apostolic orthodox. He himself reveals the early date at which he lived in the following words: ‘But the works of our Saviour were always present, for they were genuine:-those that were healed, and those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were also always present; and not merely while the Saviour was on earth, but also after his death, they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day.’ Such then was Quadratus.” Eusebius of Caesarea, Hist. Eccl. IV.3., 340 AD

“Quadratus, disciple of the apostles, after Publius bishop of Athens had been crowned with martyrdom on account of his faith in Christ, was substituted in his place, and by his faith and industry gathered the church scattered by reason of its great fear. And when Hadrian passed the winter at Athens to witness the Eleusinian mysteries and was initiated into almost all the sacred mysteries of Greece, those who hated the Christians took opportunity without instructions from the Emperor to harass the believers. At this time he presented to Hadrian a work composed in behalf of our religion, indispensable, full of sound argument and faith and worthy of the apostolic teaching. In which, illustrating the antiquity of his period, he says that he has seen many who, oppressed by various ills, were healed by the Lord in Judea as well as some who had been raised from the dead.” Jerome, *Illustrious Men* 19, 393 AD

Aristides the Athenian

What we know about Aristides also comes from the writings of Church historian Eusebius and Jerome and from fragments of Aristides’ apology – “Aristides also, a believer earnestly devoted to our religion, left, like Quadratus, an apology for the faith, addressed to Adrian. His work, too, has been preserved even to the present day by a great many persons.” Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.* IV.3., 340 AD

“Aristides, a most eloquent Athenian philosopher, and a disciple of Christ while yet retaining his philosopher’s garb, presented a work to Hadrian at the same time that Quadratus presented his. The work contained a systematic statement of our doctrine, that is, an Apology for the Christians, which is still extant and is regarded by philologists as a monument to his genius.” Jerome, *Illustrious Men* 19, 393 AD

Aristides addressed the Roman Emperor Hadrian on behalf of the Christian worldview comparing it with the worldviews of Barbarians, Greeks, Egyptians and Jews –

“I say, then, that God is not born, not made, an ever-abiding nature without beginning and without end, immortal, perfect, and incomprehensible. Now when I say that he is “perfect,” this means that there is not in him any defect, and he is not in need of anything but all things are in need of him. And when I say that he is “without beginning,” this means that everything which has beginning has also an end, and that which has an end may be brought to an end. He has no name, for everything which has a name is kindred to things created. Form he has none, nor yet any union of members; for whatsoever possesses these is kindred to things fashioned. He is neither male nor female. The heavens do not limit him, but the heavens and all things, visible and invisible, receive their bounds from him. Adversary he has none, for there exists not any stronger than he. Wrath and indignation he possesses not, for there is nothing which is able to stand against him. Ignorance and forgetfulness are not in his nature, for he is altogether wisdom and understanding; and in Him stands fast all that exists. He requires not

sacrifice and libation, nor even one of things visible; He requires not aught from any, but all living creatures stand in need of him ... This is clear to you, O King, that there are four classes of men in this world:— Barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians. The Barbarians, indeed, trace the origin of their kind of religion from Kronos and from Rhea and their other gods; the Greeks, however, from Helenos, who is said to be sprung from Zeus. And by Helenos there were born Aiolos and Xuthos; and there were others descended from Inachos and Phoroneus, and lastly from the Egyptian Danaos and from Kadmos and from Dionysos. The Jews, again, trace the origin of their race from Abraham, who begat Isaac, of whom was born Jacob. And he begat twelve sons who migrated from Syria to Egypt; and there they were called the nation of the Hebrews, by him who made their laws; and at length they were named Jews. The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it. This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and he had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished. But he himself was pierced by the Jews, and he died and was buried; and they say that after three days he rose and ascended to heaven. Thereupon these twelve disciples went forth throughout the known parts of the world, and kept showing his greatness with all modesty and uprightness. And hence also those of the present day who believe that

preaching are called Christians, and they are become famous.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Translated from the Syriac Version by D.M. Kay, Assistant to the Professor of Semitic Languages in the University of Edinburgh

Here are some of the specific aspects of how Aristides addressed the non-Christian worldviews that modern apologists may find instructive.

The Barbarian worldview –

“The Barbarians, then, as they did not apprehend God, went astray among the elements, and began to worship things created instead of their Creator; and for this end they made images and shut them up in shrines, and lo! they worship them, guarding them the while with much care, lest their gods be stolen by robbers. And the Barbarians did not observe that that which acts as guard is greater than that which is guarded, and that every one who creates is greater than that which is created. If it be, then, that their gods are too feeble to see to their own safety, how will they take thought for the safety of men? Great then is the error into which the Barbarians wandered in worshipping lifeless images which can do nothing to help them. And I am led to wonder, O King, at their philosophers, how that even they went astray, and gave the name of gods to images which were made in honour of the elements; and that their sages did not perceive that the elements also are dissoluble and perishable. For if a small part of an element is dissolved or destroyed, the whole of it may be dissolved and destroyed. If then the elements themselves are dissolved and destroyed and forced

to be subject to another that is more stubborn than they, and if they are not in their nature gods, why, for sooth, do they call the images which are made in their honour, God? Great, then, is the error which the philosophers among them have brought upon their followers.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Chapter III, Translated from the Syriac Version

The Greek worldview –

“Let us turn further to the Greeks also, that we may know what opinion they hold as to the true God. The Greeks, then, because they are more subtle than the Barbarians, have gone further astray than the Barbarians; inasmuch as they have introduced many fictitious gods, and have set up some of them as males and some as females; and in that some of their gods were found who were adulterers, and did murder, and were deluded, and envious, and wrathful and passionate, and parricides, and thieves, and robbers. And some of them, they say, were crippled and limped, and some were sorcerers, and some actually went mad, and some played on lyres, and some were given to roaming on the hills, and some even died, and some were struck dead by lightning, and some were made servants even to men, and some escaped by flight, and some were kidnapped by men, and some, indeed, were lamented and deplored by men. And some, they say, went down to Sheol, and some were grievously wounded, and some transformed themselves into the likeness of animals to seduce the race of mortal women, and some polluted themselves by lying with males And some, they say, were wedded to their mothers and their sisters and their daughters. And they

say of their gods that they committed adultery with the daughters of men; and of these there was born a certain race which also was mortal. And they say that some of the females disputed about beauty, and appeared before men for judgment. Thus, O King, have the Greeks put forward foulness, and absurdity, and folly about their gods and about themselves, in that they have called those that are of such a nature gods, who are no gods. And hence mankind have received incitements to commit adultery and fornication, and to steal and to practise all that is offensive and hated and abhorred. For if they who are called their gods practised all these things which are written above, how much more should men practise them—men, who believe that their gods themselves practised them. And owing to the foulness of this error there have happened to mankind harassing wars, and great famines, and bitter captivity, and complete desolation. And lo! it was by reason of this alone that they suffered and that all these things came upon them; and while they endured those things they did not perceive in their mind that for their error those things came upon them.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Chapter VIII, Translated from the Syriac Version

The Egyptian worldview –

“The Egyptians, moreover, because they are more base and stupid than every people that is on the earth, have themselves erred more than all. For the deities (or religion) of the Barbarians and the Greeks did not suffice for them, but they introduced some also of the nature of the animals, and said thereof that they were gods, and likewise of creeping things which are found on the dry land and in the waters. And of plants

and herbs they said that some of them were gods. And they were corrupted by every kind of delusion and defilement more than every people that is on the earth. For from ancient times they worshipped Isis, and they say that she is a goddess whose husband was Osiris her brother. And when Osiris was killed by Typhon his brother, Isis fled with Horos her son to Byblus in Syria, and was there for a certain time till her son was grown. And he contended with Typhon his uncle, and killed him. And then Isis returned and went about with Horos her son and sought for the dead body of Osiris her lord, bitterly lamenting his death. If then Isis be a goddess, and could not help Osiris her brother and lord, how can she help another? But it is impossible that a divine nature should be afraid, and flee for safety, or should weep and wail; or else it is very miserable.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Chapter XII, Translated from the Syriac Version

The Jewish worldview –

“Let us come now, O King, to the history of the Jews also, and see what opinion they have as to God. The Jews then say that God is one, the Creator of all, and omnipotent; and that it is not right that any other should be worshipped except this God alone. And herein they appear to approach the truth more than all the nations, especially in that they worship God and not His works. And they imitate God by the philanthropy which prevails among them; for they have compassion on the poor, and they release the captives, and bury the dead, and do such things as these, which are acceptable before God and well-pleasing also to men,—which (customs) they have received from their forefathers.

Nevertheless they too erred from true knowledge. And in their imagination they conceive that it is God they serve; whereas by their mode of observance it is to the angels and not to God that their service is rendered:—as when they celebrate sabbaths and the beginning of the months, and feasts of unleavened bread, and a great fast; and fasting and circumcision and the purification of meats, which things, however, they do not observe perfectly.” *The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Chapter XIV, Translated from the Syriac Version*

The Christian worldview –

“But the Christians, O King, while they went about and made search, have found the truth; and as we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations. For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come. Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols (made) in the image of man; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others; and of the food which is consecrated to idols they do not eat, for they are pure. And their oppressors they appease (lit: comfort)

and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; and their women, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest; and their men keep themselves from every unlawful union and from all uncleanness, in the hope of a recompense to come in the other world. Further, if one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. And if any righteous man among them passes from the world, they

rejoice and offer thanks to God; and they escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another near. And when a child has been born to one of them, they give thanks to God; and if moreover it happen to die in childhood, they give thanks to God the more, as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And further if they see that any one of them dies in his ungodliness or in his sins, for him they grieve bitterly, and sorrow as for one who goes to meet his doom.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Chapter XV, Translated from the Syriac Version

Aristides concluded his apologia to Emperor Hadrian with these powerful words –

“Now the Greeks, O King, as they follow base practises in intercourse with males, and a mother and a sister and a daughter, impute their monstrous impurity in turn to the Christians. But the Christians are just and good, and the truth is set before their eyes, and their spirit is long-suffering; and, therefore, though they know the error of these (the Greeks), and are persecuted by them, they bear and endure it; and for the most part they have compassion on them, as men who are destitute of knowledge. And on their side, they offer prayer that these may repent of their error; and when it happens that one of them has repented, he is ashamed before the Christians of the works which were done by him; and he makes confession to God, saying, I did these things in ignorance. And he purifies his heart, and his sins are forgiven him, because he committed them in ignorance in the former time, when he used to blaspheme and speak evil of the true knowledge of the

Christians. And assuredly the race of the Christians is more blessed than all the men who are upon the face of the earth.

Henceforth let the tongues of those who utter vanity and harass the Christians be silent; and hereafter let them speak the truth. For it is of serious consequence to them that they should worship the true God rather than worship a senseless sound. And verily whatever is spoken in the mouth of the Christians is of God; and their doctrine is the gateway of light. Wherefore let all who are without the knowledge of God draw near thereto; and they will receive incorruptible words, which are from all time and from eternity. So shall they appear before the awful judgment which through Jesus the Messiah is destined to come upon the whole human race.” The Apology of Aristides The Philosopher, Translated from the Syriac Version by D.M. Kay

You can read the Syriac and Greek translations [here](#).

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