

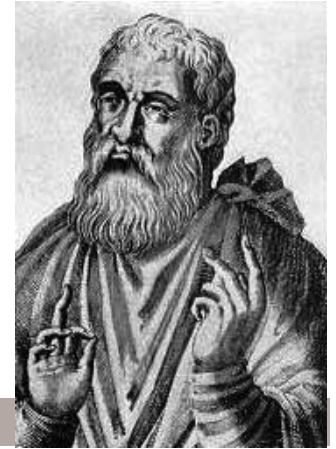


PROFILES IN FAITH

Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165)

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While it is true that every generation faces fresh challenges to their faith and witness, many find that other heroes have gone before us, and tackled similar challenges in powerful ways. Justin Martyr is one of these deeply engaged and thoughtful heroes.

He was born around 100 AD in the Greco-Roman colony of Flavia Neapolis, a city in what is now the northern West Bank area of the Holy Land. Thirsting for truth, he made the rounds of the various systems of philosophy available at the time. He first went to study Stoic philosophy, but found the agnosticism empty and described his teacher as a man who “knew nothing of God and did not even think knowledge of him to be necessary.” There followed a Peripatetic (itinerant philosopher), who seemed most interested in getting his fees; he then looked into Pythagorean philosophy but found that too great a knowledge of music, astronomy, and geometry were required before he could ask the bigger questions of truth. Finally he found himself persuaded of the potency of Platonism in the vibrant city of Ephesus, attracted by meditation upon truth and beauty, and the journey of perception of these lasting and immaterial realities in a fleeting world.

Justin believed that he was drawing near to a revelation of God when, on a solitary walk along a seashore, he met an old Christian man who engaged him in conversation. This Christian shook Justin’s confidence in Platonism’s wisdom and challenged him to look at the writings of the Hebrew prophets—much older than the philosophies he had been reading and superior, since they were not reasoners but *witnesses*. The prophets had foretold the coming of Christ, and these prophecies had been fulfilled. The old man left and Justin never saw him again, but this profound

conversation changed the course of his life. He followed the man’s advice and read the Old Testament and then the Gospels, and in the process, the enthusiastic Platonist became a Christian. He wrote: “I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable.”

After his conversion, Justin met other Christians who disciplesd him. As a result, he devoted himself to the spreading of the gospel. He was never ordained in any official role, but became a powerful evangelist and voice for Christ in his generation. He wrote: “Everyone who *can* preach the truth and does *not* preach it, incurs the judgement of God.”

Justin was an evangelist who used philosophy and arguments as he went. He engaged with the ideas and attacks of a hostile culture, trying to convince Romans, Greeks, and Jews to turn to Christ. He lived in times when profession of Christ was a crime under a Roman law designed to curb secret societies and prohibited religions. Despite this, after a few years he moved to Rome, where he founded a Christian school. Here he met vehement opposition from the Cynic philosopher Crescens, whose antagonism to the gospel made Justin determined to compose an “Apology” or reasoned defense of the Christian faith. This Apology was issued in 150 AD in the form of a petition addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius. Sometime afterward Justin published his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. A shorter *Second Apology* was addressed to the Roman Senate, apparently after the accession of Marcus Aurelius (161 AD).

A few years later, Justin was denounced to the Roman prefect as subversive and condemned to death along with six other Christians—he was beaten and beheaded. The prefect at his trial asked him to denounce his faith by making a sacrifice to the gods.

Justin replied, “No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false.”

Why is Justin Martyr important to us?

As one of the earliest Christian apologists, Justin is relevant to us because his context has huge resonance with the issues we face today in the decadent, pluralist West. He was facing a Greco-Roman culture convinced of pluralism but specifically antagonistic towards Christianity. He also had to contend with the huge difference between Christian morality and the morality of this pagan culture—an issue which he dealt with frequently. In this culture, sexual relationships in particular were relatively promiscuous and both homosexual and heterosexual relationships were completely acceptable and encouraged. Preaching the Christian gospel presented hearers with an inevitable moral challenge then, as it does today.

Justin was preaching Christ and Christ alone in the ancient world where multiple philosophies and religions were competing for the attention of the public. Although a pluralistic state, some religions were frowned upon and explicitly outlawed, and Christianity was one of these. Christians’ refusal to worship the many gods of the age or to worship the emperor was perceived to be a threat to national security—like refusing a pledge of allegiance or an oath of loyalty to a king. As a result, Christians were under heavy pressure to acquiesce and make Christ just a part of the pantheon of gods on offer, rather than insisting on Him being the only true God. In his first Apology, Justin tried to demonstrate to those in authority that Christianity was not a threat to the state and should be treated as a legal religion. He wrote “on behalf of men of every nation who are unjustly hated and reviled.” Justin argued that Christians are, in fact, the emperor’s “best helpers and allies in securing good order, convinced as we are that no wicked man... can be hidden from God, and that everyone goes to eternal punishment or salvation in accordance with the character of his actions.”

Justin’s Method

Justin was a brilliant apologist and one from whom we can learn so much today. He used a varied methodology, not relying on one tried and tested way, but using all kinds of approaches in order to persuade and convince people that the Christian message was true and relevant to them.

Polemic: Justin was not afraid to call darkness dark and brightness light. He talked, for example, about the demonic very frankly with those who opposed the gospel. He saw there was a crucial place for polemics in evangelism with the more feisty of his opponents.

Some of the best evangelists amongst Muslims today are not averse to engaging in polemical as well as persuasive debate.

Storytelling: Justin famously told a story to the emperor that was intended to show that Christians are good citizens. At the end of the first Apology, Justin told how, during a difficult battle, Christian soldiers fighting in the Roman army didn’t want to fight on in an impossible situation, and so instead called an impromptu prayer meeting. The heavens opened and it poured with rain, stopping the battle and saving many Roman lives. Justin told this story to assert that Christians are good citizens and to undermine the common misconception that Christians were enemies of the state, with their opting out of religious festivals and all their talk of a “kingdom.” Justin responded that Christians weren’t looking for an earthly kingdom that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn’t go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that “we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace,” because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives. “Only God do we worship,” he said, “but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men.” It is crucial today that we too use storytelling in the task of calling hearts and minds to follow Christ. Jesus always used parables, and a Christian faith in the public realm will remain high and dry philosophy without illustrations.

Persuasion: Justin used powerful, emotively persuasive arguments to convince people of the truth of the gospel. He cited Christian bravery in the face of brutal martyrdom as an argument for the truthfulness and sincerity of their beliefs. “For though we are beheaded, and crucified, exposed to beasts and chains and fire and all other forms of torture it is plain that we do not forsake the confession of our faith, but the more things of this kind happen to us so much the more are there many others who become believers and truly religious through the name of Jesus.” We need to do the same today—find powerful arguments that people find persuasive and use them in a relevant way.

Clearing up misunderstandings: There was a lot of rumor and misunderstanding in the pagan world about what Christians believed and did. It was commonly believed that they were cannibals who ate a body at sexually perverse love feasts. Justin therefore gave a description that remains one of the most accurate historical accounts of early Christian worship. “On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of

the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons." We need to do similar clear-up jobs today, dispelling the rumor that Christianity is legalistic or sexist or against women's rights with calm, clear-headed information and description.

Dialogue: Justin exploited the apologetic potential of the idea of the Logos, which was current in both Stoicism and Platonism. In dialoguing with adherents of these philosophies, he connected their views on the Logos with the Christian gospel. He argued that the same Logos is known by Christian and pagan believers, but that it is the Christians who have a full and complete revelation of this in Christ. He argued that pre-Christian philosophers like Heraclitus and Socrates had partial access to the truth, and that their followers should come to Christ for the fullness of what they glimpsed. Justin argued that Christianity builds upon and fulfills the hints and anticipations of God's revelation that are found in pagan philosophy: "Our religion is clearly more sublime than any human teaching in this respect: the Christ who has appeared for us human beings represents the Logos principle in its fullness." We need to do the same today—make points of connection with the current culture and use them in dialogue. An example would be the widespread interest in spirituality today. This gives believers a wide-open door to share that there is a real, personal God who wants relationship with us, and who fills his forgiven people with the Holy Spirit.

He used their philosophy against them: Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists and fiercely persecuted. Justin commented, "Though we declare that we do no wickedness and that we do not hold atheistic opinions, you do not examine the charges made against us; but impelled by unreasoning passion and by the instigation of evil demons, you punish us without examination." Christians were being killed because of their dangerous and irrational belief in atheism! Justin used the Romans' faulty reasoning against them in his writing. He asked how Christians could be atheists since they worshipped "the Most True God." Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and "pay homage to them in reason and truth."

Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, yet they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter, but were honored by governmental leaders. We can learn from this approach by pointing out where atheistic worldviews fail their own tests for truth, or where a belief in moral absolutes belies tacit belief in a moral law giver.

Personal testimony: Justin told his own conversion story as a means of convincing others. He wrote: "My spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy... it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Saviour's words." We need to do this today—share our personal testimonies about what Jesus has done in our lives.

Worldview and disagreement—finding points of dissonance: Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. As mentioned above, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character. Justin said Christians demonstrated their *honesty* by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They *loved truth* more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies. Justin said, "We who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly..." The great irony here is that Christians were accused of immorality when actually the opposite was the case, and Justin pointed out this anomaly. He powerfully contrasted what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of men and animals on their idols.

Living it out: True Christianity should be seen in action. Words and apologetic arguments are not enough—the actions and lifestyle of the believer have

a potential even today to present a huge challenge to others. Justin said that many were “turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors’ lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters.” One writer notes that these examples of changed lives later came to be known as “the triumphal song of the Apologists.”

An Inspiring Teacher and Example

Justin had to face charges of atheism, immorality, illegality, and irrationality. He countered all of these with powerful apologetic responses, not allowing people to go on rejecting the gospel for faulty reasons. What a challenge for us to present the claims of the One True God in the face of pluralism, to stand lovingly firm in contemporary clashes of morality and ethics, to rebut charges of irrationality and stupidity in response to the New Atheists.

Today, bearing the name *evangelical* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, closed-minded, and certainly harmful to society. If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting angry or discouraged but by setting forth what we really believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren’t harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further, as Justin did, and show how the morality of our day is actually *harmful* to society.

Justin the apologist and martyr is an inspiring example to us today of how to contend for the faith in an increasingly hostile world. We have a lot to learn from his thoughtful, bold, compelling, fearless approach. Living less than 100 years after Christ, he gives us a fantastic insight into the methodology and challenges of the early church as they proclaimed the gospel. He used polemic, persuasion, storytelling, clearing up misunderstanding, dialogue, using their philosophy against them, personal testimony, worldview challenges, and a practical, vibrant, lived-out Christian faith in his approach. He was not just a great articulator of the message—he paid the ultimate price, dying a martyr’s death.

So we are left with the question: Are we prepared to make a stand for Christ in our own situations—workplace, university, family, or community? Are we effective in making the gospel clear to people? Are we prepared to suffer for Christ?

Justin was.

His last words were: “We desire nothing more than to suffer for our Lord Jesus Christ; for this gives us salvation and joyfulness before his dreadful judgment seat, at which all the world must appear.”



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