



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 4 – Defending the Truth against False Accusations

Because the Christians refused to worship the Roman gods, they were often called atheists. It is for this reason that they were persecuted by the Roman authorities. But other accusations were brought against the Christians also. Because only Christians were permitted to observe and participate in the Christian love feasts during which the Lord's Supper was celebrated, non-Christians suspected that these love feasts featured excessive drinking and adulterous orgies. Some even suspected that Christians killed little children and ate them at their feasts, since they heard talk about eating Christ's body and drinking Christ's blood. Such rumors led to false accusations. Mobs were incited against the Christians through such wild lies.

Other observers noticed that the lower classes of people were drawn to the Christian Gospel rather than those considered wise and influential. We see this when the apostle Paul told the congregation in Corinth: **"Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called"** (1 Corinthians 1:26). For this reason, Christianity was maligned as a religion only for the ignorant and the poor. Respected pagans like Celsus and Cornelius Fronto wrote about the Christians like this: Among the Christians "we find people who work with wool and rags, and cobblers, that is, the least cultured and most ignorant kind." Christians "lack education and culture, and are crude and ignorant" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 51).

Christians were accused of being foolish because they worshiped a criminal who had been crucified by the Romans. Critics said that Jesus was an illegitimate son, born of Mary through fornication with a Roman soldier. They made fun of the Christian idea that the dead will rise one day. They regarded the Christian steadfastness in the face of death to be stupid stubbornness based on a foolish fancy.

Several Christians responded to these attacks in writing. These men are called "apologists" – defenders of the truth. Among them were Greek writers like Justin Martyr, who described what really went on in Christian worship, and Athenagoras, who explained the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Minucius Felix and Tertullian wrote in the Latin language in defense of the Christian faith against those who attacked it.

Some of the apologists rejected all pagan culture and philosophy. Others emphasized the fact that the best pagan thinkers, like Socrates and Plato, did have a kind of natural knowledge of God and were even able to understand some of the differences between right

and wrong. Some of the apologists also understood the benefits of the Greek culture and the Roman emphasis on law and order.

One of the best defenses of Christianity in that period was written by an unknown author in a letter to a man named Diognetus: “Christians are no different from the rest in their nationality, language, or customs... They live in their own countries, but as sojourners. They fulfill all their duties as citizens, but they suffer as foreigners. They find their homeland wherever they are, but their homeland is not in any one place. They marry, as do others; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey all laws, but they live at a level higher than that required by law. They love all, but all persecute them” (Chapter 5:1, 5-11, Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 57; this letter can also be found online¹).

The Christians were striving to live Christian lives in a pagan world. They were **“in the world”** but not **“of the world”** (John 17:11-14). Their example is helpful for Christians living in the 21st century. In most parts of the world today the culture is pagan rather than Christian, even in countries that once were dominated by Christianity. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: **“Our citizenship is in heaven”** (Philippians 3:20). But here on earth our Lord says to us: **“Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world”** (Philippians 2:14-15).

Questions:

1. Why were the early Christians called atheists?
2. What wild rumors about Christians were circulated among the people?
3. Why did Celsus attack the faith of Christians?
4. Name some of the early Christian apologists. Use other sources, if possible.
5. What can we learn for our living today from the letter to Diognetus?
6. What is meant by the common table and the common bed?
7. How do we know that the early Christians opposed infanticide?

¹ www.earlychristianwritings.com/diognetus.html