

Learning the Art of Apology

1 Pet 3:15

A clear presentation of the gospel calls upon the powers of reason. Men can reason only with the knowledge and concepts they have. In the ancient world this meant Greek philosophy and pagan authors. ***So Christianity was forced by the needs of men and the mission of the church into the world of pagan thought***

The church always stands in a dual relationship to human affairs. *John 17:15-18 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

This suggests that in God's plan the church feels the rhythm of detachment and involvement:

- detachment because the gospel and eternal life are not from men but from God
- involvement because God sends the church into the world to shine as light and to lead men to the truth.

Witness to some is compromise to others.

Some Christians resisted the efforts of scholars to reconcile the Christian faith with Greek philosophy. *John 2:15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* Paul 2 *Cor 2:14 what fellowship can light have with darkness?*

---In the third century the most violent opponent of Christian reconciliation with Hellenic philosophy was Tertullian "***What do Athens and Jerusalem have in common? Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We have no need of curiosity reaching beyond Christ Jesus. When we believe, we need nothing further than to believe. Search that you may believe; then stop!***" ***Christians could not afford to dismiss Tertullian's attitude as the narrow-minded reaction of some religious bigot.*** Gnostic had in fact trained their philosophical guns on the gospel and had left many a Christian's in disarray.

----In Alexandria there was a school led by Clement and Origen. Clement "***The way of truth is one (Christ). But into it as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides.***"

----Around 180 a Sicilian Christian named Pantaeus established a school of "***Christian Gnosticism***" in Alexandria and lectured there on Christianity as the true philosophy. He aimed to enter the thought-world of pagans to show the superiority of the faith. **The teaching was "gnostic" because it asked the big questions of meaning; but it was "Christian gnosticism" because it retained orthodox answers.**

Pantaeus' reputation drew Clement to Alexandria. Clement remained for twenty years first as Pantaeus' pupil, then as his successor as head of the school. People who lived at the same time as him called him a "***messenger of Christianity in philosopher's garb.***"

He understood the questions and problems of young people who came from such Rome, Athens, and Antioch. Many of the students encountered Christianity before in the form of some Gnostic theory. **Clement had to enter their world, disentangle their conceptions, and lead them slowly from error to the true knowledge of Christianity.**

----He lived and taught like a philosopher and used the forms and the language of the Gnostics of his time (in today's church he would be judged to have sold out). BUT Clement's purpose was clear. ***He seized not only the external look and forms of expression of the contemporary pagan philosophers but also their problems.***

- Example, he discussed the universe and its meaning (cosmology), so **loved by Gnostics**, he did not do it with the intention of proving these ideas wrong offhandedly and then discarding them quickly, but instead he pointed out how the fundamental religious questions about the **creation of the world, the existence of evil in this life, and the salvation through the Word, Jesus Christ**, found their last and deepest answer in Christian revelation. ***His purpose was not purely or even primarily***

theological, but pastoral. He aimed to win not arguments, but men to Christ, and lead them to salvation.

The Christian convert often faced a choice

- between clever, eloquently defended heresy
- dull, narrow-minded orthodoxy. Any informed Christian in a modern secular school would recognize the problem. ***Clement was determined to offer a third possibility***
- The positive role for philosophy. Clement argued that it was preparation for Christianity. ***“Before the advent of Christianity, philosophy was needful to the Greeks for righteousness. Now it is useful to piety for those who attain faith through demonstration. Philosophy was a schoolmaster to the Greeks, as the law was to the Hebrews, preparing the way for those who are perfected by Christ.”***

In building their philosophical case for Christianity, the gnostics left the apostolic gospel in shambles. But Clement and Origen remained thoroughly loyal to the essential message of Peter and Paul even as they presented it in philosophical form.

Clement and Origen differ from the gnostics in another important respect—**Christian behavior**. Gnostic heretics were not interested in the training of character. **But Clement insisted that spiritual insight comes**

- to the pure in heart,
- to those humble enough to walk with God as a child with his father
- to those whose motive for ethical behavior goes beyond fear of punishment or hope of reward to a love of the good for its own sake.

Clement’s ministry marked an important juncture in the progress of Christian doctrine. After him, Greek thinking united with Christian thought. Without it the staggering theological achievements of the first church councils would have been impossible.

Shortly after the turn of the third century a persecution against Christians broke out in Alexandria.

Clement was forced to flee the city, He surrendered leadership in the school to a remarkably gifted 18-year-old. Origen proved a worthy successor to Clement.—Origen came from a Christian home. **His father was a martyr in the same persecution that drove Clement from Alexandria.** To support his family Origen sold his secular books and began teaching.

He accepted invitations to travel from many quarters. Students from hundreds of miles came to capture something of his wisdom. Among the earliest was a young law student from Asia Minor named Gregory (*St. Gregory of Neocaesarea*), later nicknamed the Wonder-Worker, because of his unusually successful missionary labors among his own people.

After five years under Origen’s instruction Gregory wrote a book praising his teacher.

Origen’s philosophy was more than a matter of ideas, it was a way of forming character. His example proved to be his most powerful lesson. He stimulated us, says Gregory, ***“by the acts he performed more than by the theories he taught.”*** (*actions vs words*). He urged his students to ***“examine the springs of their conduct, to note the impulses that led them out of confusion into moral order, and to resist the seeds of evil and cultivate the growth of goodness,”*** which was what Origen meant by reason. So he instilled in his students a love for virtue, and they came to see that their teacher was himself a model of a truly wise man (*because of how he lived*).

The Scriptures, he believed, are the treasury of divine revelation. Students, therefore, must see them as a whole. If the apparent sense of a given passage contradicts the necessary convictions of morality or the nature of God, there must be some deeper lesson underneath the surface of the passage.

He held that there are three levels of meaning in the Bible: the literal sense; the moral application to the soul; and the allegorical or spiritual sense, which refers to the mysteries of the Christian faith.

Origen’s overriding concern was to allow the whole Bible to speak for itself, whatever a single text may seem to say, for when the Bible speaks it speaks for God who inspired it.

Here Origen scored a telling point against the heretics. The persistent tendency of heresy, whether ancient or contemporary, is to grab a few impressive texts and to get some rigid and erroneous interpretation. *Origen wanted the whole Bible to speak, because he knew that what the Bible taught in its entirety is the central truths of Christianity.*

Origen's teaching was always the gospel preached in the Catholic church —***but where the church had not definitely spoken, he felt free to speculate. He did this with such boldness that later generations,*** as well as people in his own day, charged him with heresy. --- had some bizarre beliefs—universalism: ***Origen's vision extended so far as to teach that all creatures including the devil himself would one day be restored to communion with God. Hell would be emptied.*** Many people in the history of the church have dreamed that God's love would someday triumph over all sinful rebellion. But Orthodox Christians felt that they could not turn the dream into a doctrine because such an idea almost always tends to deny man's free will and its eternal consequences.

Charles Williams - If God has character and if man has choice, an everlasting rejection of God by man must be admitted as a possibility – hell must remain.

Just as Christ in his incarnation adopted human existence, so his people in the course of history adopt the humanity of all peoples and civilizations. 1 Cor 9:19-23 *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Clement repeatedly declared: ***“For the Hellenes one must become a Hellene in order to win them all. One must offer to those who demand it the kind of wisdom with which they are familiar so that as easily as possible they can make their way through their own world of ideas to the belief in the truth.”***

They demonstrated that the best of classical culture could find a home and a future within the church.