

The First Apology of Justin Martyr

Excerpt 1*

Address, Plea for Reason, & Demonstration of Christ's Teachings

To the Emperor Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar¹ and to Verissimus his son, the Philosopher, and to Lucius the Philosopher, son of Caesar by nature and of Augustus by adoption², a lover of culture, and to the Sacred Senate and the whole Roman people.

On behalf of men of every nation who are unjustly hated and reviled, I, Justin, son of Priscus and grandson of Bacchius, of Flavia Neapolis in Syria Palestina³, being myself one of them, have drawn up this plea and petition.

Reason requires that those who are truly pious and philosophers should honor and cherish the truth alone, scorning merely to follow the opinions of the ancients, if they are worthless. Nor does sound reason only require that one should not follow those who do or teach what is unjust; the lover of truth ought to choose in every way, even at the cost of his own life, to speak and do what is right, though death should take him away. So should you — since you are called “Pious” and philosophers and guardians of justice and lovers of culture — at least give us a hearing, and it will appear if you are really such. For in these pages we do not come before you with flattery or as if making a speech to win your favor but asking you to give judgment according to strict and exact inquiry, not — moved by prejudice or respect for superstitious men or by irrational impulse and long-established evil rumor — giving a vote that

would really be against yourselves. For we are firmly convinced that we can suffer no evil unless we are proved to be evildoers or shown to be criminals. You can kill us, but cannot do us any real harm.

But so that no one may think that this is an unreasonable and presumptuous utterance, we ask that the charges against us be investigated. If they are shown to be true, [let us] be punished as is proper. But if nobody has proofs against us, true reason does not allow [you] to wrong innocent men because of an evil rumor — or rather [to wrong] yourselves when you decide to pass sentence on the basis of passion rather than judgment. Every honorable man will recognize this as a fair challenge and only just, that subjects should give a straightforward account of their life and thought and that rulers similarly should give their decision as followers of piety and philosophy, not with tyrannical violence. From this, both rulers and subjects would gain. As one of the ancients said somewhere, “Unless both rulers and those they rule become lovers of wisdom cities cannot prosper.”⁴ It is for us, therefore, to offer to all the opportunity of inspecting our life and teachings, lest we ourselves should bear the blame for what those who do not really know about us do in their ignorance. But it is for you, as reason demands, to give [us] a hearing and show yourselves good judges. For if those who learn [the truth] do not do what is right, they have no defense before God.

The mere ascription of a name means nothing, good or bad, except for the actions connected with the name. (Indeed as far as the name charged against us goes, we are very gracious people.⁵) But we do not think it right to

*The entire book can be read here:

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.ii.html>

¹ that is, Antoninus Pius

² Lucius Verus was adopted by Emperor Antoninus Pius and later became emperor himself alongside with Marcus Aurelius, whom he also adopted.

³ that is, Samaria

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, V. 15.

⁵ This is a play on words. The Greek word for “Christ” is very similar to the Greek word for “gentle/kind”.

ask for a pardon because of the name if we are proved to be criminals, and on the other hand, if neither the appellation of the name nor our conduct shows us to be wrongdoers, you must face the problem whether in punishing unjustly men against whom nothing is proved you will yourselves owe a penalty to Justice. Neither reward nor punishment should follow from a name, unless something admirable or evil can actually be shown about it. Among yourselves you do not penalize the accused before conviction, but with us you take the name as proof.... Again, if one of the accused denies the charge, saying he is not [a Christian], you dismiss him, as having no proof of misconduct against him; but if he confesses that he is one, you punish him because of his confession. You ought rather to investigate the life of the confessor and the renegade, so that it would appear from their actions what sort of person each is. There are those who, learning from Christ their teacher, when they are put to the test, encourage others not to deny him. And similarly [there are] others whose bad conduct gives some excuse to those who like to accuse all Christians of godlessness and crime. This is entirely improper. There are those who assume the name and costume of philosophers but do nothing worthy of their profession; as you know, men among the ancients who held and taught opposite views are included under the one name of "philosophers". Some of them even taught godlessness, and those who became poets proclaim the impurity of Zeus with his own children. And you do not restrain those among you who follow such teachings but even offer prizes and honors to those who thus, in beautiful words, insult [the gods].

What can all this mean? You do not make judicial inquiries in our case, though we are bound neither to commit crimes nor to hold such godless ideas. Instead, you punish us injudicially without deliberation, driven by unreasoning passion and the whips of evil demons. The truth must be told. In old times, evil demons manifested themselves, seducing women, corrupting boys, and showing terrifying

sights to men, so that those who did not judge these occurrences rationally were filled with awe. Taken captive by fear and not the understanding that these were evil demons, they called them "gods" and gave each of them the name that each of the demons had chosen for himself. When Socrates tried by true reason and with due inquiry to make these things clear and to draw men away from the demons, they, working through men who delighted in wickedness, managed to have him put to death as godless and impious, saying that he was bringing in new divinities.⁶ And now they do the same kind of thing to us. For these errors were not only condemned among the Greeks by reason, through Socrates, but also among the barbarians⁷, by Reason Himself, who took form and became man and was called Jesus Christ. In obedience to Him, we say that the demons who do such things are not only not rightly called gods but also are in fact evil and unholy demons, whose actions are in no way like those of men who long after virtue.

So, then, we are called "atheists".⁸ We certainly confess that we are "godless" with reference to beings like these, who are commonly thought of as gods, but not with reference to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is untouched by evil. Him and the Son who came from Him — as also the army of the other good angels⁹ who follow Him and are made like Him — and taught us these things and the prophetic Spirit we worship and adore, giving honor in reason and truth; and, to everyone who wishes to learn, we transmit [the truth] ungrudgingly as we have been taught.

But someone will say, "Some [Christians], have been arrested and convicted as criminals."

⁶ According to Plato, this was, in fact, part of the charge against Socrates.

⁷ that is, from the perspective of the Romans, the Jews

⁸ The Christians were called "atheists" by the Romans, since they did not worship the Roman gods.

⁹ This whole sentence is a confusing one to translators, but it is clear from Justin's other writings that he is opposed to the worship of angels. It seems likely that he is simply saying that the angels, which mean "messengers" are also sent from God as Jesus was sent as the Messenger to us.

Many at various times, perhaps, if you examine in each case the conduct of those who are accused. But do not condemn [all] because of those previously convicted. We admit in general that, just as among the Greeks, those who teach what seems best to them are all listed under the name of “philosophy”, even though their teachings are contradictory, so too the name [“Christian”] that is now being attacked is common to those among the barbarians who are [wise] and those who appear to be wise. They are all listed as Christians. So we ask that the actions of those who are denounced to you be investigated, in order that whoever is convicted may be punished as a criminal, but not as a Christian, and that whoever is shown to be innocent may be freed, committing no crime by being a Christian. We shall not ask you, however, to punish our accusers, for they suffer enough from their own wickedness and their ignorance of the good.

Consider that we have said these things for your sake, since when put to trial we can deny [that we are Christians]. But we do not wish to live by telling a lie. For, longing for the life that is eternal and pure, we strive to dwell with God, the Father and Fashioner of all things. We are eager to confess, being convinced and believing that those who have shown to God by their actions that they follow Him and long to dwell with Him, where no evil can disturb, are able to obtain these things. It is this, in brief, that we look for and have learned from Christ and teach. Plato similarly said that Rhadamanthus and Minos would punish the wicked who came before them. We [also] say that this is what will happen, but at the hands of Christ — and to the same bodies, reunited with their souls and destined for eternal punishment, not for a five-hundred-year period only, as [Plato] said. If anyone says that this is unbelievable or impossible, at least the mistake affects us and no one else, as long as we are not convicted of any actual crime.

Certainly, we do not honor with many sacrifices and floral garlands the objects that men have fashioned, set up in temples and

called gods. We know that they are lifeless and dead and do not represent the form of God; for we do not think of God as having the kind of form that some claim that they imitate to be honored — but rather exhibit the names and shapes of the evil demons who have manifested themselves [to men]. You know well enough without our mentioning it how the craftsmen prepare their material, scraping and cutting and molding and beating. And often they make what they call gods out of vessels used for vile purposes, changing and transforming by art merely their appearance. We consider it not only irrational but an insult to God, whose glory and form are ineffable, to give His name to corruptible things, which themselves need care. You are well aware that craftsmen in these [things] are impure and — not to go into details — given to all kinds of vice; they even corrupt their own slave girls who work along with them. What an absurdity, that dissolute men should be spoken of as fashioning or remaking gods for public veneration and that you should appoint such people as guardians of the temples where they are set up — not considering that it is unlawful to think or speak of men as guardians of gods.

But we have received¹⁰ that God has no need of material offerings from men, considering that He is the provider of all. We have been taught and firmly believe that He accepts only those who imitate the good things that are His — temperance and righteousness and love of mankind and whatever else truly belongs to the God who is called by no given name. We have also been taught that, in the beginning, He, in His goodness, formed all things that are for the sake of men out of unformed matter, and if they show themselves by their actions worthy of his plan, we have learned that they will be counted worthy of dwelling with Him, reigning together and made free from corruption and suffering. For as He made us in the beginning when we were not, so we hold that those who choose what is pleasing to Him will, because of that choice, be counted

¹⁰See 1 Co 11:23; 15:1

worthy of incorruption and of fellowship [with Him]. We did not bring ourselves into being, but as for following after the things that are dear to God, choosing them by the rational powers that He has given us is a matter of conviction and leads us to faith. We hold it to be for the good of all men that they are not prevented from learning these things but are even urged to [consider] them....

Now when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you rashly suppose that we mean something merely human. But we speak of a Kingdom with God — as is clear from our confessing Christ when you bring us to trial — though we know that death is the penalty for this confession. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we would deny it in order to save our lives and would try to remain in hiding in order to obtain the thing we look for. But since we do not place our hopes on the present, we are not troubled by being put to death, since we will have to die somehow in any case.

We are, in fact, of all men your best helpers and allies in securing peace, convinced as we are that no wicked man, no covetous man nor conspirator — nor virtuous man either — can be hidden from God and that everyone goes to eternal punishment or salvation in accordance with the character of his actions. If all men knew this, nobody would choose vice even for a little time, knowing that he was on his way to eternal punishment by fire; every man would follow the self-restrained and orderly path of virtue, so as to receive the good things that come from God and avoid His punishments. There are some who merely try to conceal their wrongdoing because of the laws and punishments that you decree, knowing that, since you are only men, it is possible for wrongdoers to escape you. If they learned and were convinced that our thoughts as well as our actions cannot be hidden from God, they would certainly lead orderly lives, if only because of the consequences, as you must agree. But it seems as if you were afraid of having all men well behaved and nobody left for you to punish. This would be the conduct of public

executioners, not of good rulers. Such things, we are convinced, are brought about by the evil demons, the ones who demand sacrifices and service from men who live irrationally. But we have not learned [to expect] any unreasonable conduct from you, who aim at piety and philosophy. But if, like thoughtless men, you prefer custom to truth, then go ahead and do what you can. Rulers who respect reputation rather than truth have as much power as brigands in a desert. The Word¹¹ Himself has shown that you will not succeed, and, after God who begat Him, we know of no ruler more royal or more just than He. For just as all men try to avoid inheriting the poverty or sufferings or disgrace of their ancestors, so the sensible man will not choose whatever the Word forbids to be chosen. He foretold that all these things would happen — our Teacher, I mean, who is the Son and Apostle of God the Father and Master of all, that is, Jesus Christ, from whom we have received the name of “Christians”. We are sure that all the things taught by Him are so, since we see that what He predicted is actually coming to pass. This is God's work, to announce something before it happens and then to show it happening as predicted. I might stop here and add no more, having made clear that we ask for what is just and true. But though I know that it is not easy to change over at once a mind that is bound down by ignorance, I am encouraged to add somewhat to persuade the lover of truth, being sure that one can dispel ignorance by putting truth against it.

What sound-minded man will not admit that we are not athiests, since we worship the Fashioner of the universe, declaring Him, as we have been taught, to have no need of blood and libations and incense, but praising Him by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all that He has given us? We have learned that the only honor worthy of Him is, not to consume by fire the things He has made for our nourishment, but to devote them to our use and those in need, in thankfulness to Him, sending up solemn prayers and hymns for our creation and

¹¹Greek λογος *logos*, a well known philosophical concept

all the means of health, for the variety of creatures and the changes of the seasons, and sending up our petitions that we may live again in incorruption through our faith in him. It is Jesus Christ who has taught us these things, having been born for this purpose and crucified under Pontius Pilate, who was procurator in Judea in the time of Tiberius Caesar. We will show that we honor Him in accordance with reason, having learned that he is the Son of the true God Himself and holding Him to be in the second place and the prophetic Spirit in the third. It is for this that they charge us with madness, saying that we give the second place after the unchanging and ever-existing God and begetter of all things to a crucified man, not knowing the mystery involved in this, to which we ask you to give your attention as we expound it.

...Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not use the same fireplace with men of different tribes because of customs, now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, living according to the fair commands of Christ, may share with us the good hope of receiving the same things from God, the master of all. So that this may not seem to be sophistry¹², I think it fitting, before giving our demonstration, to recall a few of the teachings which have come from Christ himself. It is for you then, as mighty emperors, to examine whether we have been taught and do teach these things truly. His sayings were short and

¹²that is, a plausible but false philosophy

concise, for He was no sophist, but His word was the power of God....¹³

...

...And so those who make second marriages according to human law are sinners in the sight of our Teacher, and those who look on a woman to lust after her. For he condemns not only the man who commits the act of adultery but also the man who desires to commit adultery, since not only our actions but our thoughts are manifest to God. Many men and women now in their sixties and seventies, who have been disciples of Christ from childhood, have preserved their purity, and I am proud that I could point to such people in every nation. Then what shall we say of the uncounted multitude of those who have turned away from incontinence and learned these things? For Christ... said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."¹⁴ For the Heavenly Father wishes the repentance of a sinner rather than his punishment....¹⁵

...

...For we ought not to quarrel. He has not wished us to imitate the wicked but rather, by our patience and meekness, to draw all men from shame and evil desires. This we can show in the case of many who were once on your side but have turned from the ways of violence and tyranny, overcome by observing the consistent lives of their neighbors or noting the strange patience of their injured acquaintances or experiencing the way they did business with them....¹⁵

...

Now those who are found not living as He taught should know that they are not really Christians, even if His teachings are on their lips; for He said that not those who merely profess but those who also do the works will be saved.

¹³Justin next quotes and paraphrases many teachings of Christ from the Gospels, stopping to give the clarifications and examples that are included here.

¹⁴Lk 5:32

¹⁵Justin returns to quoting and paraphrasing the teachings of Christ.

For he said this: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. For whoever hears me and does what I say hears Him who sent me. Many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not eat in your name and drink and do mighty works?’ And then I will say to them, ‘Depart from me, you workers of iniquity.’ Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when the righteous will shine as the sun but the wicked will be sent into eternal fire. For many will come in my name clothed outwardly in sheep’s clothing but being inwardly ravening wolves. By their works you will know them. Every tree that does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”¹⁶ So we ask that you, too, should punish those who do not live in accordance with His teachings but merely say that they are Christians.

More even than others, we try to pay the taxes and assessments to those whom you appoint, as we have been taught by Him....¹⁷ So we worship God only, but in other matters, we gladly serve you, recognizing you as emperors and rulers of men and praying that, along with your imperial power, you may also be found to have a sound mind. If you pay no attention to our prayers and our frank statements about everything, it will not injure us, since we believe — or rather are firmly convinced — that every man will suffer in eternal fire in accordance with the quality of his actions and similarly will be required to give account for the abilities which he has received from God, as Christ told us when he said, “To whom God has given more, from him more will be required.”¹⁸

¹⁶Mt 7:21-23; 13:42-43; 7:15-16, 19

¹⁷Justin proceeds to describe the story found in Mt 22.

¹⁸Lk 12:48