

# “Something Divine Mingled Among Them”: Care for the Parentless and the Poor as Ecclesial Apologetic in the Second Century

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Apologetics is in crisis.

Apologetics may even be approaching its demise—or at least that's what the title of a recent book seems to suggest.

*The End of Apologetics* were the words that greeted me from the front cover of this particular text. The sentiment probably should have concerned me more than it did. The end of apologetics could seriously complicate my life, after all, since my livelihood depends in part on this discipline for which graveside services are apparently being planned.

As I read this work from philosopher and pastor Myron Bradley Penner, I was relieved to learn that it's not the entirety of apologetics that is headed down the same driveway as the dodo and the diplodocus. It is only—in Penner's words—“the Enlightenment project of attempting to establish a rational foundation for Christian belief” that is drawing its final breaths.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the more appropriate title—*The End of Establishing a Rational Foundation for Christianity after the Enlightenment*—failed to warm the hearts of the publisher's marketing team.

According to Penner, no rational common ground remains today on which the Christian and the non-Christian can meet. To seek any rational common ground is to grant that ground to secularity. As a result, apologetics that attempts to mount an argument from any shared rational foundation could

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<sup>1</sup> Myron Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Baker Academic, 2013) 7.

be, according to this book, “the single biggest threat to genuine Christian faith that we face today.”<sup>2</sup>

The use of rational arguments is “a kind of violence,” Penner says, that rips a person’s cognitive commitments out of the larger context of his or her life.<sup>3</sup> Christians cannot correct this crisis simply by using rational arguments within the larger context of a relationship with an unbeliever. The arguments themselves *are* the problem in a postmodern age because such arguments reduce a person to his or her status of rational belief or unbelief. When an apologist attempts to use a rational argument to convince someone to become a follower of Jesus, the rational form of the apologetic contradicts the relational content of the message.<sup>4</sup> *The End of Apologetics* sees rational apologetics as an approach which is not embodied in a community, which reduces listeners to their rational commitments, and which unnecessarily separates form and content.

What apologetics should see as its purpose is, according to Penner’s proposal, to interpret society “back to itself *theologically* in such a way that both the difference between *the way of the world* and *the Christian way of the cross* is made clear.” The result would be a uniquely postmodern witness in which the content becomes indistinguishable from the form.<sup>5</sup> A Christian who witnesses in this way declares to the world, “This is the truth I have encountered that has edified me. Take a look at my life, who I am and see if you think that it’s true. And I believe that if you consider your own life and appropriate this truth, you will find it edifying for you too.” Such a witness requires not only an individual but also a community “in which truthful

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<sup>2</sup> Penner, 12; see also 183.

<sup>3</sup> Penner, 150, 161.

<sup>4</sup> Others have rightly pointed out that presuppositional apologists have raised similar critiques for decades regarding the function of rational arguments in classical and evidential apologetics, albeit with different solutions. It is perplexing that no engagement with these critiques or alternate solutions appears anywhere in *The End of Apologetics*. See Nate Claiborne, “The End of Apologetics” (August 15, 2014): [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org).

<sup>5</sup> Penner, 90. In the end, what is intended by the phrase “the end of apologetics” on the cover of this book seems to include not only the demise of modern apologetics but also a rethinking of the goal—the “end” in the sense of the *telos*—of apologetics.

speech is made evident by the quality and character of their practices and life together.”<sup>6</sup> The church’s living testimony to the way of the cross reveals the deficiencies in the way of the world.

What I wish to challenge in this context is not the critique of rational apologetics in *The End of Apologetics* but the post-epistemological solution that the book presents as the only effective form of witness in a secular age. The effectiveness of the dialogical relationship that Penner proposes as an apologetic could certainly constitute one aspect of an effective witness. Yet this approach is presented as the best possible apologetic in a postmodern age, to the exclusion of all others. In this, *The End of Apologetics* seems to have traded one reductionism for another. In the same way that certain expressions of rational apologetics might reduce the human person to his or her *rational* commitments, the apologetics of edification that Penner proposes would seem to reduce the hearer to his or her *relational* perceptions and experiences, if this method were practiced exclusively.

Furthermore, in Penner’s model of apologetics, the evidence that is recognizable and accessible to those outside of Christ in a secular context seems limited to the work of the Word in the lives and conversations of Christians. This evidence, while certainly not unimportant, leaves little place for history, reason, defenses of Holy Scripture, or arguments from the order of the cosmos—each one of which has, in different times and ways, characterized the church’s apologetic strategies long before the Enlightenment was ever a gleam in any philosopher’s eye. In an attempt to reject the types of rational apologetics that succeeded the Enlightenment, *The End of Apologetics* ends up abandoning vast tracts of the Christian tradition that flourished prior to the Enlightenment.

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<sup>6</sup> Penner, 103–104, 127–128, 139.

## **The Exit Door You're Looking For May Be Behind You**

All of which brings us to a premodern alternative that *The End of Apologetics* leaves unconsidered. An examination of premodern Christian apologetics reveals a variety of approaches that address the precise problems that Penner perceives in post-Enlightenment rational apologetics. Many of these approaches were embodied in community and addressed hearers as embodied and relational beings. *The End of Apologetics* brushes aside any possibility of premodern solutions by merely mentioning that “the material connections that gave rise to modernity testify to the inability of premodern views of the world to sustain themselves.”<sup>7</sup> However, this casual dismissal of a *premodern view of the world* does not negate the possibility that *some patterns from the premodern church's witness in hostile cultural contexts might still provide a solution* that counteracts the dilemmas raised by the conditions of secularity.

With that in mind, I wish to suggest a possibility for apologetics that's repeated thousands of times each day on airport runways during pre-flight safety briefings: “Remember, the exit door you're looking for could be behind you.” The escape from the problems pointed out in *The End of Apologetics* may not be in front of us in the form of a postmodern apologetic but behind us in the earliest Christian centuries.

In the second century in particular, a multiplicity of Christian writers—Aristides of Athens, Athenagoras of Athens, Justin, and the author of *Epistle to Diognetus*, to name a few—grounded key portions of their arguments in the ethics of the Christian community. This pattern stood in clear continuity with the apologetic described in the first three chapters of 1 Peter, where the moral life of the church functions as a defense of the Christian faith (1 Peter 2:12–3:7, 16).

For the Christians who articulated this apologetic, the life of the church was not merely *a context for the practice of Christian faith* but *a primary evidence for*

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<sup>7</sup> Penner, 13, footnote 30.

*the truth of Christian faith*. To put it another way, their apologetic was, in part, *an ecclesial apologetic*—an argument that contended for the truth that the church confesses on the basis of the life that the church lives. The moral habits that sustained ecclesial apologetics in the ancient church encompassed a wide range of countercultural practices, including sexual continence, truthfulness, justice, contentment, kindness, humility, and honor for parents.<sup>8</sup> The focus of this chapter is, however, on a single strand within these ethics that was particularly prominent among the church’s moral habits—sacrificial care for orphans and for the poor. A close examination of this moral habit in the second century reveals an ecclesial apologetic that was grounded in the Spirit-empowered work of the people of God on behalf of the vulnerable.

What I will work out in this chapter is precisely how the church’s care for the parentless and the poor functioned as an ecclesial apologetic, testifying to the truthfulness and orthodoxy of the church’s confession on the basis of the church’s moral habits. After demonstrating how this premodern apologetic addresses the challenges raised in *The End of Apologetics*, I will then briefly consider the ways in which an ecclesial apologetic might function today as an encouragement to the church and a witness to the world.

### **1. “Something Divine Mingled Among Them”: Care for the Poor as Evidence for the Presence of the Divine in the Church in the *Apology* of Aristides**

“Aristides,” Eusebius of Caesarea wrote in the fourth century, “has left to posterity a defense of the faith.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the preservation of this defense “by a great number” of Christians in the time of Eusebius, the *Apology* of Aristides was thought to be lost for several centuries. Those assumptions begin to crumble in 1878, when a group of monastic scholars in Venice

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Aristides of Athens, *Apology*, 15. For the text of Aristides’ *Apology*, see Aristide, *Apologie*, SC 470 ed. Bernard Pouderon and Marie-Joseph Pierre (Sources Chretiennes, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History, Volume I: Books 1-5*, Loeb Classical Library 153, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Harvard University Press, 1926) 4:3:3.

published a Latin translation of an Armenian rendering of the text. A Syriac translation of the *Apology* emerged a few years later. At that point, it became clear that the *Apology* had never been completely lost at all. Centuries earlier, portions of a Greek text of the *Apology* had been separated, reworked, and incorporated into a Christian novel known as *Barlaam and Ioasaph*.<sup>10</sup>

Aristides addressed his *Apology* to one of two Roman emperors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, or perhaps both of them. Regardless of which emperor Aristides named as the addressee, it seems unlikely that any emperor actually read this work. Much like many “open letters” that circulate today, the *Apologia* may have been addressed to the emperor knowing that the invocation of the emperor’s name as the purported recipient would attract greater attention from the readers who constituted the actual intended audience.<sup>11</sup>

Aristides of Athens begins his defense by appealing to the beauty of creation and then to an argument from motion that seems to parallel a portion of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*:<sup>12</sup>

When I had considered the sky and the earth and the seas and had surveyed the sun and the rest of creation, I marveled at the beauty. I

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<sup>10</sup> Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) 206. For textual sources, see the modified stemma in William Rutherford, “Reinscribing the Jews: The Story of Aristides’ *Apology* 2.2–4 and 14.1b–15.2,” *Harvard Theological Review* 106 (2013): 66. Although the particular sections in *Apology* that focus on care for orphans, widows, and the poor are not incongruent with a second-century origin, the text of the *Apology* of Aristides cannot be established with certainty prior to fourth century on the basis of the extant manuscripts; it is not inconceivable that expansions of the text took place during and prior to the fourth century. See William Simpson, “Aristides’ *Apology* and the Novel *Barlaam and Ioasaph*” (Ph.D. diss., King’s College London, 2015) 238–239.

<sup>11</sup> Apologies may have been intended less to convert the unconverted and more to create a strong group identity among Christians. See Loveday Alexander, “The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards (Oxford University Press, 1999) 19; Tessa Rajak, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetics as Anti-Judaism in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho the Jew,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, “Ἀριστοτέλους τῶν Μετά τὰ Φυσικά Λ,” *Metaphysics, Volume II: Books 10-14. Oeconomica. Magna Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library 287, trans. Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong (Harvard University Press, 1935) 12:6–9 (1071b). See Thomas Gaston, “The Influence of Platonism on the Early Apologists,” *The Heythrop Journal* (2009): 577.

perceived the world and all that is therein are moved by the power of another: God who is hidden in them and veiled by them. (*Apology* 1)

Although Aristides appeals to a line of reasoning that later apologists would classify under the heading of classical arguments, his usage of these arguments is intended more to raise a question than to provide an answer. His goal is not to demonstrate the existence of a generic deity but to declare the inexplicability of the cosmos apart from a sovereign deity and then to define what attributes would need to characterize such a deity. According to Aristides, the cosmos requires a deity who is “immortal, perfect, and incomprehensible” (*Apology* 1), and this brings Aristides to the undergirding dilemma on which he structures the bulk of his argument: *Which of the four types of people in the world—barbarians, Greeks, Jews, or Christians—serves a deity that meets these requirements, and what manner of life does the worship of each of type of people produce?*

Aristides concludes that “Christians, as we have learned from their writings, have come closer to the truth and genuine knowledge than the rest” (*Apology* 15)—but this is only the starting point for Aristides’ positive argument for Christianity. It is the question of what “manner of life” Christianity produces that remains most relevant for the purposes of this chapter. It is at this point that Aristides begins to develop a clear ecclesial apologetic that defends the truthfulness and genuineness of Christianity on the basis of the church’s way of life.

After articulating the church’s ethics of sexual continence, kindness, honesty, and rejection of idolatry, Aristides turns his focus toward the care of Christians for the vulnerable and the poor:

They do not turn away their respect from widows, and they redeem the orphan from the one who abuses him. Those who have, give without boasting to the one who has not. When they see a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him like a brother; for they call each other brothers, not after the flesh but after the spirit, in

God. Whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one according to his ability pays attention and carefully sees to his burial. If they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them eagerly minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem the imprisoned one, they set him free. If there is anyone among them who is poor and needy and they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply the needy in their lack of food. ... They do not proclaim the kind deeds that they do in the ears of the crowd, but they are careful that no one should notice them; they conceal their giving like one who finds a treasure and conceals it. (*Apology* 15)

These habits of life are an integral part of the argument that drives Aristides to deliver some of the most memorable lines in his *Apology*. “Truly,” Aristides declares, “this is a new people, and there is something divine mingled among them” (*Apology* 16). The life of the church is, for Aristides, a confirmation of the truth of the faith.

The moral habits of the church do not stand alone as evidence, however. After presenting these evidences, Aristides points to Scripture as a true and authoritative source that sustains his claim: “Take their writings and read them!” Aristides implores his readers. “You will find that I have not presented these things on my own authority” (*Apology* 16). Nevertheless, the moral habit of valuing the vulnerable remains crucial in his argument. According to the *Apology*, the truth of the Christian God was revealed as Christians cared for widows, redeemed orphans, gave to those in need, and buried believers whose families could not afford a funeral. All of this was done without public fanfare.

The practice of burying the poor is particularly noteworthy in this context. In much of the Roman Empire, if a deceased individual could not afford burial, his or her body was tossed into a mass burial pit.<sup>13</sup> To avoid this

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) 42.



fate, those with the capacity to do so joined funerary societies.<sup>14</sup> The bylaws of one such society were inscribed on a marble slab in Lanuvium in the year 136, during the lifetime of Aristides of Athens. Joining this funerary society required applicants to donate 100 sestertii and one amphora of “good wine” (“*vini boni*”) upfront, followed by an ongoing monthly payment. The inscription on which these bylaws survive today was crafted, in part, for the purpose of publicizing the good deeds of the society’s patron.<sup>15</sup>

The church provided a funerary society for those who could not join such societies, whether because they could not afford to do so or because these societies required acknowledgment of pagan deities. Among Christians, the human body was sacred even in death, and the bodies of the poor were no less sacred than the flesh of the wealthy. Unlike the patrons of Roman funerary societies, Christians cared for the bodies of the deceased without publicizing their deeds. Christians were, in the words of Aristides, “careful that no one should notice” their charity.

Today, it is easy to read the words of Aristides and to assume that his intent was to demonstrate the value of Christianity by pointing to deeds that even non-Christians would have seen as good. After all, generosity to the poor and care for vulnerable are likely to strike even the most hardened secularists as desirable traits today. Yet such habits were not necessarily perceived as positive traits in the larger context in which Aristides penned his *Apology*.

The Greek historian Polybius was exaggerating when he claimed, “No one ever thinks of giving any of his private property to anyone if he can help

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<sup>14</sup> Maureen Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 45–46.

<sup>15</sup> The inscription is preserved by the National Museum of Rome at the Baths of Diocletian in Rome. Societies of the sort described in this inscription provided functions beyond funerary provisions; however, “the prominence of a funerary purpose in the life of Roman associations of the most varied kind is too well documented to permit marginalization,” Andreas Bendlin, “Associations, Funerals, Sociality, and Roman Law: The Collegium of Diana and Antinous in Lanuvium (CIL 14.2112) Reconsidered,” in Markus Öhler, ed., *Aposteldekret und antikes Vereinswesen: Gemeinschaft und ihre Ordnung* (WUNT I 280, 2011), 251–252.

it.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the writings of Lucian of Samosata reveal that generosity of the type that Aristides described was more likely to be seen as laughable than admirable in the second century.<sup>17</sup>

Long after the time of Aristides, a resistance to incongruous generosity was so ingrained in Roman thinking that these customs still limited people’s giving.<sup>18</sup> The fourth-century Christian writer Lactantius criticized those in the church who refused to give to the needy unless there was some opportunity for honor to be bestowed or the favor to be returned. Such people, according to Lactantius,

measure all things not by truth itself, but by present utility. For they hope that those whom they rescue from peril will make a return of the favor to them. But because they cannot hope for this in the case of the poor, they think that whatever they bestow on persons of this kind is thrown away. ... Throw aside those shades and images of justice; and hold on to the real, that which is fashioned by itself. Give to the blind the weak, the lame, the destitute. These must die unless you help them. They are useless to men, but useful to God.<sup>19</sup>

Care that is incongruous with the recipients’ capacity to return the favor is perceived as admirable today only because people are still mining their values from the rich moral motherlode that centuries of Christian tradition have embedded in the soil of Western civilization. Whenever secularity

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<sup>16</sup> Polybius, *The Histories, Volume VI: Books 28-39. Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library 161, ed. and trans. S. Douglas Olson, trans. W. R. Paton, rev. F. W. Walbank and Christian Habicht (Harvard University Press, 2012), 32:12.

<sup>17</sup> Notice in particular the sarcastic tone in chapters 11 and 12 of “The Passing of Peregrinus,” in Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus. The Runaways. Toxaris or Friendship. The Dance. Lexiphanes. The Eunuch. Astrology. The Mistaken Critic. The Parliament of the Gods. The Tyrannicide. Disowned*, Loeb Classical Library 302, trans. A. M. Harmon (Harvard University Press, 1936).

<sup>18</sup> The patterns of giving promoted in the writings of second-century Christians exhibit the perfection that Barclay described as *incongruity*, although *superabundance*, *singularity*, *priority*, and *efficacy* seem to be operative as well at times. See John M.G. Barclay *Paul and the Gift* (William B. Eerdmans, 2015) 66–78.

<sup>19</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes, Books I–VII*, trans. Mary Francis McDonald (Catholic University of America Press, 1964) 6:11. The words of Lactantius in *The Divine Institutes* 6:11 seem in some ways to hint at a non-circular ideal of giving.

affirms care for the vulnerable, a system that claims to be godless is applying for a loan from the bank of the Christian tradition.

When Aristides claimed “something divine is mingled among” the people of the church after describing the church’s care for the vulnerable, Aristides was not declaring that the *goodness* of these deeds demonstrated the presence of the divine among the people of the church. What he was pointing out was the *impossibility* of such counterintuitive habits of life apart from the presence of some power that transcends every human capacity.

The ecclesial apologetic of Aristides is a defense that asks, “What else must be the case if we see an entire community of people pursuing counterintuitive and countercultural patterns of generosity?” For Aristides, the only possible response is that—if a community practices generosity to the vulnerable alongside commitments such as continence, kindness, truthfulness, justice, humility, and honor for parents—there must be “something divine mingled among them” because no community is capable of sustaining such a life without the presence and power of the divine.

## **2. “Those Who Hold Heretical Opinions ... Have No Concern for Love”: Care for the Widow, the Orphan, and the Oppressed as an Outworking of Orthodoxy in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch**

“Just as we become aware of a meteor only when ... it blazes briefly through the atmosphere before dying in a shower of fire, so it is with Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria,” Michael Holmes reminds readers of the apostolic fathers, and it is true.<sup>20</sup> Sometime in the early second century, Ignatius was sentenced to die for his faith. A contingent of ten soldiers escorted him to Rome to die. Along the way, the bishop penned seven letters that survive as eloquent testaments of his faith and of his care for the churches.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Holmes, “The Letters of Ignatius,” *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Baker Academic, 2007), 166.

It is Ignatius' letter to the church of Smyrna that is most relevant for this chapter. Speaking to the church of Smyrna against heretics who claimed that Jesus had suffered in appearance only (*Smyrneans* 2:1), Ignatius declared that anyone who makes such claims is contrary to "God's way of thinking" ("γνώμη του θεού," 6:2).<sup>21</sup> This contrariety to the mind of God is not, however, a mere matter of thinking or believing. These heretics' disbelief in the physical sufferings of Jesus resulted in a lack of care for the physical needs that surrounded them. Those who "hold heretical opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ" are those who—according to Ignatius—also "have no concern about love, nor about the widow, nor about the orphan, nor about the oppressed, nor about the prisoner or the one released, nor about the hungry or thirsty" (6:2).

For Ignatius, wherever there is doctrinal wholeness and health, there will be living evidence of this faith embodied in the church. To believe in the physical sufferings of Jesus was to recognize some measure of continuity between the sufferings of Jesus and the sufferings of the widow, the orphan, the imprisoned, and the poor. The church enacts its Christological orthodoxy through generosity to the poor and care for the vulnerable. A lack of concern for the sufferings of the vulnerable was an outward symptom of beliefs about Jesus that were contrary to the very mind of God (6:2). The *Didache* makes a similar point, not regarding heretics with a defective Christology but regarding those who persecute Christians.<sup>22</sup> According to the *Didache*, such persons "have no mercy for the poor, do not work on behalf of the oppressed," "they turn away from those in need, oppress the afflicted, [and] advocate for the wealthy" (*Didache* 5:2). Ignatius extends this line of thinking to those who disbelieve in the physical sufferings of Jesus. Communities that downplay the physical sufferings of Christ become communities that refuse to meet the physical needs of the vulnerable. Defective Christology results in defective care.

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<sup>21</sup> "Προς Σμυρναίους Ιγνάτιος," *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Holmes, 248–261.

<sup>22</sup> "Διδαχή των Δώδεκα Αποστόλων," *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Holmes, 344–369.

Once again, the life of the church functions as an apologetic for the reality of God's presence in his church. For Aristides of Athens, the countercultural distinctiveness of the church's care for the poor demonstrates the power of God among his people. For Ignatius of Antioch, these same acts are a sign of the church's confidence in the physical incarnation and sufferings of Jesus. The ecclesial apologetic of care for orphans and the poor has implications not only for defending the truth of the faith but also for demonstrating a congregation's doctrinal integrity.

### **3. "You Will Love and Admire Those Who Suffer Punishment": Care for the Poor as Preparation for Martyrdom in the Epistle to Diognetus**

The *Epistle to Diognetus* is one of the most eloquent texts from the early church. The attacks that the author counters in the treatise are typical of those leveled at the church in the mid-to-late second century; thus, the second century seems the most likely timeframe for the composition of the first ten chapters.<sup>23</sup> These chapters reflect a time in the second century when separation between Christians and Jews was a "historical reality rather than an image, although not necessarily to the complete exclusion of the latter."<sup>24</sup> The final two chapters in the medieval manuscript in which the text survives may derive from a homily that is unrelated to the rest of the epistle; as such, these two chapters will not be referenced in this research.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Henri Marrou provides a range of possible dates ranging from the early second century to the early fourth century, concluding that the second century is most likely due to the points of contact between *Epistle to Diognetus* and the writings of Aristides, Justin, Melito, and others. Henry Meecham and Clayton Jefford concur with a mid-to-late second century date. See Clayton Jefford, ed., *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Henri Marrou, *A Diognète* (Cerf, 1952) 246–251; Henry Meecham, *The Epistle to Diognetus: The Greek Text, with Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Manchester University Press, 1949) 16–19.

<sup>24</sup> Florenc Mene, "Diognetus and the Parting of the Ways," *Themelios* 46 (2021): 365.

<sup>25</sup> Bart Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library 25 (Harvard University Press, 2003), 124; Michael Holmes, "The Epistle to Diognetus and the Fragment of Quadratus," *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Holmes, 689–690. For an alternate perspective on chapters 11–12, see Charles Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus's Apostolic Presbyter and the Author of Ad Diognetum* (Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 106–127.

The apologetic argument in *Epistle to Diognetus*—much like the one in *Apology of Aristides*—extols the exemplary ethics of those who follow Jesus. Care for the poor and for orphans is not, however, emphasized in the opening chapters of the text. In one of the most well-known segments of the epistle, the author focuses on sexual ethics and exceptional citizenship, mentioning the church’s care for the poor only briefly and in a manner that may be metaphorical. Christians “are impoverished, yet they enrich many; they need all things, yet they abound in everything” (*Epistle to Diognetus* 5:13).<sup>26</sup>

In *Epistle to Diognetus*, the supreme evidence for the presence of divine power among the people of the church is not their morals but their martyrdoms. After describing how Christians are persecuted and even executed, the author of *Epistle to Diognetus* makes this declaration: “These things do not look like human works; they are the power of God, they are the proofs [δειγματα] of his presence [παρουσίας]” (*Epistle to Diognetus* 7:9). The church’s faithfulness to the point of death is the evidence of God’s presence among his people.

What part, then, does care for the poor play in the apologetic argument of *Epistle to Diognetus*? In chapter 10 of the epistle, the focus turns toward an ethic that is grounded in the imitation of God. It is in this paraenetic context that the author reveals the role that care for the poor plays in the church’s defense of the faith.

According to *Epistle to Diognetus*, God revealed his benevolence toward humankind by sending Christ (10:2; see also “φιλανθρωπίας,” 9:2). Love for God results in imitation of God (10:4), which leads to a life of imitating

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<sup>26</sup> “Πτωχεύουσι, καὶ πλουτίζουσι πολλούς· πάντων ὑστεροῦνται, καὶ ἐν πᾶσι περισσεύουσιν,” *Epistle to Diognetus* 5:13 in “Πρὸς Διογνητον,” *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Holmes, 694–713.

God's self-giving benevolence.<sup>27</sup> This ethic of imitation leads Christians not to yearn for greater wealth or power, because "happiness is not a matter of ... desiring to have more than weaker people, or possessing wealth and using force against one's inferiors." Hoarding of wealth and lording of power are—in the words of this epistle—"alien to the greatness" that belongs to God (10:5).

In place of a stockpile of wealth for one's own pleasure, the Christian ethic of imitation produces habits of care for the socially disadvantaged:

Whoever takes up a neighbor's burden, whoever wishes to work for the good of someone who is worse off in something in which he himself is better off, whoever provides to those in need what he receives from God—that is the one who has received something from God. (*Epistle to Diognetus* 10:6)

It is through generosity to those who are "worse off" that the people of God become God-like in the eyes of those who receive these gifts ("θεός γίνεται των λαμβανόντων," 10:6) and are thereby revealed to be imitators of God. This generosity is intended to extend not only to fellow Christian but also to neighbors, regardless of whether or not these neighbors are Christians (10:5–6).<sup>28</sup>

It is at this point that the author reveals the apologetic role of care for those who possess less. According to *Epistle to Diognetus*, those who imitate God

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<sup>27</sup> The author seems to have been replying to a question that included some query related to the love of Christians for one another ("φιλοστοργίαν," 1:1). The benevolent love described in 9:2 ("φιλανθρωπίας," cf. Titus 3:4) suggests that the love of Christians for one another is grounded in the love of God for humanity; imitation of this love causes Christians to reach beyond mutual love and to love their neighbors who are not yet Christians. See discussion in Juan Ignacio Ruiz Aldaz, "La Recepcion del Concepto de *Philanthropia* en la Literatura Christiana," *Scripta Theologica* 42 (2010): 295–296.

<sup>28</sup> Although *Epistle to Diognetus* is distinctly Christian in its application, there are echoes of Stoic ideals in this exaltation of universal benevolence. The purpose of these allusions to Stoic ideals was not, however, to affirm them in their Stoic context. It was to bring readers to recognize the true, Christian meaning of these terms, which can only be understood after conversion. See Joseph Dodson, "New Friends and Old Rivals in the Letters of Seneca and *The Epistle to Diognetus*," *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 45 (2018): 402; Henry Meecham, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, 48–49; Michael Bird, "The Reception of Paul in the *Epistle to Diognetus*," *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael Bird and Joseph Dodson (T&T Clark, 2011) 71, 82, 88.

through generosity to the poor will grow to love and admire the lives of Christians who face martyrdom (10:6–7), and it is martyrdom that provides the ultimate evidence of the truthfulness of Christian faith (7:9). A disposition of care thus prepares the believer for the possibility of his or her own martyrdom, the ultimate act of God-like generosity (“you will despise that which is here esteemed to be death,” 10:7–8). Habits of generosity toward the powerless cultivate a heart of admiration for the persecuted. The people of the church, therefore, give their possessions to train themselves to be ready to give their lives. Care for the poor is preparation for martyrdom.

For Aristides of Athens, it is the *countercultural incongruity of the church’s care for the poor that demonstrates the reality of God’s presence among the people of the church*. In the letters of Ignatius, *the church’s concern for physical suffering reveals the church’s orthodox confidence in the reality of Jesus’ physical incarnation and suffering*. For the author of *Epistle to Diognetus*, care for the poor also has an apologetic purpose, but the function is different both from the *Apology* of Aristides and from the letters of Ignatius. If I have understood *Epistle to Diognetus* rightly on this point, a life of generosity toward poor is *a means by which God trains his people to imitate his self-giving love for humanity, even to the point of following the example of those who give their lives for their faith*.

### **An Ecclesial Apologetics of Generosity, A Better Possibility for the Present and Future than Proclaiming the End of Apologetics**

What Myron Penner seems to reject in *The End of Apologetics* is any approach to apologetics that reduces hearers to rational commitments and separates the form of the argument from the content. A proper approach to apologetics in the present time is, in his estimation, a post-epistemological narrative that testifies to the Word of God through the life and words of a believing community. The word of the cross embodied in the life of the church provides both the form and the content of this proclamation of the truth of Christian faith.



Part of what we see in the apologists of the second century is an ecclesial apologetic that recognizes the life of the church as an evidence for the truth of the faith. And yet, far from reducing anyone to his or her rational commitments, this apologetic was deeply embodied and communal. For Ignatius, it was precisely the church's engagement with physical needs and challenges that revealed the reality of the church's confidence in the physical sufferings of Jesus. Belief in the incarnation was distinguishable from the church's care for the orphans, the widows, and the poor; however, this living argument of concern for physical needs flowed inevitably from the church's Christology. Form and content were congruent without being collapsed.

In the *Apology* of Aristides, the witness of incongruous care for the poor revealed that "something divine" was at work among the people of the church (*Apology* 16). And yet, this appeal to the life of the church did not prevent Aristides from appealing to rational arguments—including an aesthetic argument and a cosmological argument from motion, drawn from Aristotle—to show what sort of deity the design of the cosmos necessitates. Neither did an ecclesial apologetic rule out appeals to the historical testimony of Scripture. *Epistle to Diognetus* in particular presents us with a beautifully embodied ecclesial apologetic. A generous response to the physical needs of neighbors grows out of Christ-centered imitation of God. These acts of sacrificial generosity prepare our souls for martyrdom, the consummate evidence for the truth of our faith.

In this way, a rational argument is made in the context of a life lived, with no reduction of the recipient to his or her rational commitments. In all of these approaches, the common ground is a pattern of generosity which the recipients cannot deny, even though they might attribute it to a cause other than "something divine mingled" among the people of the church. According to *The End of Apologetics*, "what is needed in our witness, if those we engage are to be edified, is a poetics that performs the essentially Christian, in which there is no gap between the form of witness and its

content.”<sup>29</sup> And yet, what habit is more essentially Christian than practicing for martyrdom in the name of Christ? And how can the form and the content possibly be more congruent than when our preparation for death is a participation in his death?

What *The End of Apologetics* seems to be seeking—rightly or wrongly—is an exit from certain individualistic, rational forms of apologetics that arose as part of the Enlightenment project. And yet, the ancient church provides us with an ecclesial apologetic that meets the challenges which, according to the *The End of Apologetics*, require utter reconfiguration of the process and purpose of apologetics.

Perhaps the exit door that we’re looking for is not in front of us but behind us.

### **Ecclesial Apologetics and the Life of the Local Church**

So how might a renewed emphasis on this ecclesial apologetic strengthen how Christians in local churches show the beauty of the gospel in their neighborhoods? As I consider the church where I am privileged to serve as a pastor, three distinct realities come to mind.

(1) *Works of charity are evidential, not merely attractional.* Christians seem at times to see the church’s works of generosity as acts intended to attract people to church, with the hope that some of these individuals might listen to the gospel. Yet the care of the church for the vulnerable is so much more than a means to attract an unbeliever’s interest. These works are themselves evidence that “something divine” is at work in the life of the church. **This is more than “lifestyle evangelism” that attempts to gain a hearing with non-Christians through acts of kindness. In an ecclesial apologetic, the life of sacrificial kindness that characterizes the church is itself evidence for the truthfulness of the faith that the church professes.**

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<sup>29</sup> Penner, 90.

Such a life is incomprehensible and impossible apart from the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus; thus, it is unavoidably centered on the gospel.

*(2) Healthy theology cultivates care for the broken and the vulnerable.*

Ignatius of Antioch rightly recognized a connection between theology and charity. Those who lacked confidence in the physical incarnation and sufferings of Jesus also lacked concern for the physical sufferings around them. Focused and intentional care for physical needs does not guarantee a church's orthodoxy, of course. A lack of such care, however, suggests a defect that extends beyond the church's priorities to the church's theology. If a church is hesitant in its generosity to the parentless and the poor, the problem is not merely a matter of ministry priorities but of the congregation's underlying theology.

*(3) Preparations for martyrdom surround us, and they are beautiful.*

According to the author of *Epistle to Diognetus*, generosity cultivates admiration for the persecuted and prepares us for the consummate apologetic of martyrdom. Thus, in some sense, care for the vulnerable is a dress rehearsal for dying well. It is a miniature martyrdom, a liturgy of letting go what is temporary for the sake of what is eternal. Through such generosity, Christians participate in God's self-giving love now and practice martyrdom in preparation for what may be required later.

Our churches are filled with women and men who are living out these miniature martyrdoms, and it is beautiful. The family that adopts the child whose patterns of attachment have been disordered by years of abuse, the parents who choose to raise a son with Down syndrome instead of seeking the abortion that their physician recommended, the woman who treats sex workers as human beings with dignity and helps them to forge a new life for themselves and their families, the man who pours his life into educating penitentiary inmates who are serving life sentences, and so many others—all of these are participations in the sufferings of Jesus and preparations for martyrdom, and they should drive us to whisper with Aristides, "Truly, this is a new people, and there is something divine mingled among them."

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