

Module 104: Tertullian

Defense by Tertullian. Trans. Rev. S. Thelwall. Modernized, abridged and introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“The blood of Christians is seed.”

Module Introduction

Tertullian was born in Carthage (modern Tunis) at about the time of Polycarp's death and probably trained as a lawyer. He converted from his pagan background and devoted himself to writing impassioned books - more than 30 in total - in defense of the true faith. He attacked the pagan religions of the Roman Empire, and challenged heretical versions of Christianity.

He was one of the generation of “Apologists,” second-century theologians who wrote for a hostile readership in an attempt to challenge pagan misunderstanding and prejudice, showing that Christianity was reasonable and respectable, not a shameful secret society.

This text is from his most famous writing, *Defense*, alternatively translated *Apology* - but don't be misled, there isn't defensive or apologetic sentence in it! Its aim is to argue the case for Christianity, correct people's misconceptions about it, and undermine their confidence in the superiority of paganism. He also challenges the Roman policy of killing Christians who will not apostatize (renounce their faith). He was the first theologian of the western church, and the first to write in Latin. His writings not only made an impression on the pagan world but helped to boost the church's self-confidence.

4. Having demonstrated this unjust public hatred against us, I will now make my stand and show our blamelessness. I not only refute the charges that are laid against us, but I turn them back on our accusers, showing that while Christians are free from these crimes, they are widespread among the accusers - as well they know.

7. We are accused as of being monsters of wickedness

observing a sacred rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it. Then after the feast, we are supposed to practice incest, the dogs who rule us turning out the lights so that our impious lusts might have the cover of shameless darkness. This is what is constantly laid to our charge, and yet you never try to uncover the truth. Well, if you believe it, bring the matter to the light of day; if you will not look into it, then do not believe it. We insist that there is no reality at all in these accusations that you dare not find out the truth of....

We are assaulted and betrayed every day. Our meetings are often attacked. But who ever heard a child crying out there? Who ever gave evidence to the judge of our gory deeds? Have those who discovered such atrocities concealed them or been bribed? If we are so secretive, how did you find out what we do? Not from our own guilty lips, obviously, so it must be from strangers. But how would they find out? All religious initiations keep the profane away - let alone such ones as you suppose ours are. Every one knows what rumor is like. One of your own proverbs says "Of all evils, rumor flies the fastest." Why is rumor such an evil thing? Is it because it is fast? Is it because it carries information? Or is it because it is utterly false? [Tertullian argues that pagan rites themselves are often corrupt and that the Christian scriptures are superior in age and divinity, and he protests Christian loyalty to the Emperor.]

39. Having refuted the charges laid against us, let me now show what we really are. We are a body knit together by one faith, one discipline and one hope. We meet together as a congregation, uniting together to offer prayer to God. We pray for the emperors and all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for peace and for the delay of the final end. We read our holy scriptures to nourish our faith, hope, steadfastness and good habits. We hear exhortations and rebukes. We take such judging very seriously - as befits those who believe they are in the sight of God - especially

seriously when anyone sins so grievously we have to cut them off from our prayer, our congregation and all sacred things. Our elders preside over us, obtaining that honor not by money, but by their established character. There is no buying and selling in the things of God. Though we have a fund, but not because people can buy religion. Once a month, anyone who wants to makes a small donation - but only he who is able and willing; there is no compulsion. It is not spent on feasts, but to support and bury poor people, to provide for orphans, the elderly old persons, victims of shipwreck and those in prison for their faith.

44. No one considers how great a loss it is to the Empire, what an injury to the state, when people as virtuous as we are put to death in such numbers, and so many of the truly good suffer the ultimate penalty. Here we call your own acts to witness, you who are daily presiding at the trials of prisoners, and passing sentence upon crimes. In your long lists of those accused of many and various atrocities, has any assassin, any thief, anyone guilty of sacrilege, or seduction, or stealing bathers' clothes, ever been named as a Christian too? Or when Christians are brought before you purely on the charge of being Christians, do you ever find them to be guilty of such crimes? It is always with your folk [i.e. pagans] that the prison is steaming, the mines are sighing, the wild beasts are fed: it is from you that the organizers of the gladiatorial circus always get their herds of criminals to feed up for the occasion. You will find no Christian there, unless they are there simply because they are Christians.

45. We and we alone are without crime. And there is nothing strange about that, because it is an absolute necessity for us. We have a perfect knowledge of what goodness is, being taught by a perfect Master, God himself. And faithfully we do His will, being commanded by a Judge we dare not despise. Your ideas of virtue, on the other hand, come from mere human opinion, and you are commanded by human

authority. This means that your understanding of morality is deficient: it is incomplete and lacks the authority to produce a life of real virtue. Human knowledge of what is good is easily deceived, and human authority is easily despised. So, which is the better rule, to say, "You shall not kill," or to teach "Do not even be angry?" Which is more perfect, to forbid adultery, or to restrain from even a single lustful look? Which indicates the higher mind, prohibiting evil-doing or evil-speaking? Which is more thorough, not allowing an injury, or not even letting an injury done to you to be repaid? [Matt 5:21-48] No doubt about it, we, who receive our reward under the judgment of an all-seeing God, and who look forward to eternal punishment from Him for sin, we alone make a real effort to lead a blameless life, inspired by our greater knowledge, the impossibility of concealing anything, the severity of the threatened torment (not merely long but everlasting) and our fear of the Judge whom all should fear and by which fear they are judged - I mean not the Proconsul, but God.

49 All you can do to us depends upon our own pleasure. Being a Christian is obviously a matter of my own choice, so you can only condemn me for Christianity if I choose to be condemned. Do whatever you can to me on that score, and you do it at my will, not in your own power. The people's rejoicing in our persecution is therefore utterly groundless. When they delight in our suffering, they are merely sharing in our joy, because we would far rather be condemned than betray God. Those who hate us should regret rather than rejoice in our condemnation, as we have obtained the very thing we choose.

50 "In that case," you say, "why do you complain about being persecuted? You should be grateful to us for giving you the sufferings you want." Well, it is quite true that it is our desire to suffer, but in the same way that a soldier longs for war. Of course, no one suffers willingly, since suffering involves fear and danger. But we are like those who object

to the conflict, but fight with all our strength, and when victorious rejoice in the battle, because they reap from it glory and spoil. It is our battle to be summoned to your courts and, in fear of execution, to fight there for the truth. But the battle is won when the goal of the struggle is reached. This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil of eternal life. But, you say, we are vanquished. Yes, when we have obtained our wishes. Therefore we conquer in dying; we seize the victory in the very moment that we are overcome. Bound to a stake, we are burned on a heap of wood. This is the attitude in which we conquer, it is our victory robe, it is our triumphal entry. This attitude does not please those whom we overcome. Because of it, we are counted a desperate, reckless race. But the very desperation and recklessness you object to in us, you exalt among yourselves as a standard of virtue in the cause of glory and of fame. Mucius of his own will left his right hand on the altar. What sublimity of mind! Empedocles gave his whole body at Catana to the fires of Etna. What resolution! The founder of Carthage gave herself away in second marriage to the funeral pile. What a noble witness of her chastity! ...

Zeno the Eleatic, when he was asked by Dionysius what the good of philosophy is, answered that it teaches contempt of death and so was handed over to the tyrant's whip without flinching, and sealed his opinion with his death. We all know how the Spartan lash, applied with the utmost cruelty under the very eyes of encouraging friends, confers honor on the young men who endure it in proportion to the blood which they shed. For such human glory, you count it neither reckless folly, nor desperate obstinacy to despise death and all kinds of savage treatment. You will endure this for your home country, for the Empire, for friendship, but not for God! You cast statues in honor of such people, you put inscriptions upon their images and carve epitaphs on their tombs, so that their names may never perish. So far as you can by your monuments, you grant your sons the

resurrection of the dead. But anyone who expects the true resurrection from God and so suffers for God, is insane! Go zealously on, good presidents! You will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice us, kill us, torture us, condemn us and grind us to dust, as they demand. Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. That is why God allows us to suffer. Did you not just recently condemn a Christian woman to be violated by men rather than thrown to the lions? In doing so, you showed that we consider a taint on our purity something more terrible than any punishment and any death. Your cruelty, however great, is more a temptation to us than a benefit to you. The more we are mown down by you, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed. Many of your writers, such as Cicero and Seneca... exhort their readers to bear pain and death bravely, and yet their words do not find so many disciples as Christians do, who teach not by word, but by deed. In fact, the teacher is this very obstinacy that you rail against: all who contemplate it want to find out what is at the bottom of it; all who find out embrace our doctrines; and all who have embraced them, desire to suffer in order to become part of the fullness of God's grace, and obtain God's complete forgiveness by giving in exchange for their blood. For that secures the remission of all offenses. And this is why it is that we give you thanks, on the very spot, for your sentences on us. As the divine and human are ever opposed to each other, when we are condemned by you, we are acquitted by the Highest.

Discussion Starters:

1. It is quite shocking to hear the rumors about Christians that Tertullian seriously had to address. How do you think such stories got around? In your experience, do Christians still face misunderstanding?
2. How does Tertullian describe the reality of Christianity in section 39? How does it compare to what you have read of the church in earlier centuries? And to the present day church?

3. What comparisons does Tertullian draw between Christian and pagan morality - both in the way they behave and where they get their beliefs from?

4. "All you can do to us depends upon our own pleasure." How is that true?

5. "In that case, why do you complain about being persecuted?" It sounds as if Tertullian has been making his case - that Christians glory and triumph in their suffering - almost too well! Is it a fair point, that if persecution is so good for Christians they should welcome it and do nothing to avert it? How does Tertullian answer?

6. Why according to Tertullian, does God allow Christians to suffer for their faith?

7. How would you sum up Tertullian's argument? If you were a pagan Roman reading it, do you think you would find it convincing?

Bible verses:

Matthew 5:21-48

1 Peter 3:8-16; 4:12-16

Acts 17:22-31

Jeremiah 12:1-4