

# THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

## Third Place Winner

### Laity

#### Imitation of God as Introduction to God: Lessons from Second Century Apologetics

Michael Distefano

*I understand, sir, that you are really interested in learning about...Christians.... You want to know...what God they believe in and how they worship him.... You would like to know the source of the loving affection that they have.... You wonder too why this new race or way of life has appeared....*

- *The Epistle to Diognetus* 1.1<sup>1</sup>

*In our ranks...you can find commoners, artisans, and old women who, if they cannot establish by reasoned discourse the usefulness of their teaching, show by deed the usefulness of the exercise of their will. For they do not rehearse words but show forth good deeds.*

- Athenagoras, *Legatio* 11.4<sup>2</sup>

*“This we can show in the case of many who were once on your side but have turned...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.”*

- Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 16<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Text and translation from “The So-Called *Letter to Diognetus*,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. Cyril Richardson, First Touchstone Edition., vol. I of *The Library of Christian Classics* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 219.

<sup>2</sup> Athenagoras, *Legatio* 11.4 (text and translation from Cyril Richardson, “*Athenagoras’ Plea*,” in *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 81).

<sup>3</sup> Justin, *I Apol.* 16 (text and translation from Justin Martyr, “*The First Apology of Justin, The Martyr*,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. Cyril Richardson (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 287).

Once a week on Sundays as a seminarian, I would stop and rest. Often, I would seek out the anonymity of the city to spend a few hours in solitude and prayer. In the fall of 2016, still weary from the pressures of Monday-Saturday, I trudged down Boylston Street, harmonizing somewhat with the well-worn faces of the figures perched across the façade of Boston’s Trinity Church in Copley Square. Sensing my vulnerability, perhaps, a man in need approached. I responded, noting that I wasn’t carrying cash but that I’d be glad to buy him a meal and eat with him if he wanted the company. After our meal and parting, I began settling back into restful anonymity when I was stopped again. This time, by a man in his mid-thirties wearing a well-tailored coat and high-end dress shoes.

“Why did you do that?” he asked. “I’ve never seen anyone do anything like that before.”

He’d watched the entire exchange and stuck around to inquire. Too exhausted to feel anxious about any potential awkwardness, I answered straightforwardly,

“Because I believe that’s what Jesus has done for me: I believe he is the bread of life – he offers himself free of charge, despite what I deserve. Living this out is the most natural thing I can do.”

After chatting for a bit, the man surprised me again by saying,

“I want to learn more but I don’t want to keep you. Would you be up for talking again?”

I agreed, we exchanged numbers, and the rest is history.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but the Spirit was planting a seed about an ancient methodology for effective apologetics, connecting my Sabbath experience

to what my thesis advisor would later call, “the first way of evangelism.”<sup>4</sup> The lesson, ancient and modern, is this: the best *front door* for Christian apologetics is not the words we speak but the lives we live. Second century North African apologist Minucius Felix put it succinctly, “As for the daily increase in our numbers, that is no proof of error, but evidence of merit; for *beauty of life* encourages followers to persevere, and *strangers to join our ranks*.”<sup>5</sup> Christianity’s early apologists were unanimous in their emphasis on Christian living – what Felix called, “beauty of life.”

If modern Anglicans have anything to learn from the earliest (and, arguably, most successful)<sup>6</sup> Christian apologetic writers, it’s this: training parishioners to live “beautifully” – embodying the truths of the Gospel in full view of outsiders – is the most urgent task of Christian apologetics.<sup>7</sup> This method is best suited to (a) prompt the questions for which we must be prepared to answer (1 Peter 3:15), (b) provide a preliminary demonstration of the forthcoming explanation, and, perhaps most importantly, (c) prepare hearts eager to engage with what we have to say.

## WE’VE BEEN HERE BEFORE (SORT OF)

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. David Wilhite (Truett Theological Seminary, PhD University of St. Andrews) used the above phrase in response to the oral defense of my 2023 thesis. To quote Dr. Wilhite, “You may have discovered the first way of evangelism.”

<sup>5</sup> Minucius Felix, *Apology* 37.1 (text and translation from Tertullian and Minucius Felix, *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*. 31.7, ed. Gerald H. Rendall and T. R. Glover, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 411-413).

<sup>6</sup> For historical, statistical, and sociological analysis of the surprising and remarkable growth of the early Christian movement, see the writings Larry Hurtado (*Destroyer of the Gods*), Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity*), and Alan Kreider (*The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*).

<sup>7</sup> See my research as presented in *Embodied Theology in the Greek Apologetic Writings of the Second Century*. In this project I examined, primarily, four Greek apologists of the second century (Aristides, Justin Martyr, the author of *Diognetus*, Athenagoras) and, secondarily, the two Latin apologists (Tertullian and Minucius Felix).

Many have noted the “great dechurching” of the West<sup>8</sup> and have been tempted to retrieve American Revivalism in preaching or the works of Chesterton and Lewis in apologetics. Both, however appropriate in their time, would be a mistake in our own. Our world is less like theirs than we might imagine. Proximity does not equal similarity. Ironically, timelier resources require a further reach. Happily, as Anglicans firmly rooted in the global historic church, we have a far reach indeed.

The world of the early Christian apologists in 250 A.D. is nearer in many ways to our situation than 1950s America.<sup>9</sup> Many American Christians find themselves in what feels like “uncharted territory,”<sup>10</sup> reeling from the seismic changes that have taken place in the span of a just a few decades.<sup>11</sup> Many influential writers and scholars have noted modern similarities to the ancient Greco-Roman culture surrounding the early Christian movement.<sup>12</sup> The most relevant parallel for our purposes is simply this: there is now, as there was then, a lack of familiarity with (and an occasional hostility towards) the Christian

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Graham and Jim Davis write, “As a nation, we’re currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of the United States. Tens of millions of formerly regular Christian worshippers nationwide have decided they no longer desire to attend church at all. These are what we now call the dechurched. About 40 million adults (16 percent) in America today used to go to church but no longer do. For the first time in the eight decades that Gallup has tracked American religious membership, more adults in the United States don’t attend church than attend church. This isn’t a gradual shift; it’s a jolting one.” Michael Graham and Jim Davis, “What Is the Great Dechurching?” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/great-dechurching/>)”

<sup>9</sup> In November 1956, Congress passed a joint resolution declaring “in God We Trust” to be the official motto of the United States. In July 2024, claiming anything like allegiance to the Christian God is to court skepticism from a great many and downright outrage from a culturally significant few. The trend is clear.

<sup>10</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 15.

<sup>11</sup> The most obvious change the church is facing is marginalization, culturally and politically. This, however, should not be overstated. Christians are still a privileged group in America, especially compared to persecuted groups around the world and Christians in the second century. Further, the marginalization that Christians in the US are facing should not be compared to the marginalization certain minority groups have faced.

<sup>12</sup> These similarities include pluralism, hedonism, insistence on partisan virtues and purity, and the primary position of politics/power in the cultural milieu. The two periods remain wildly divergent, and the similarities must not be overstated. However, with the relationship of majority to culture to Christianity in the crucial center, 250 A.D. will be more instructive to modern apologists than 1950 A.D. One of the earliest and most notable voices to note these similarities was T.S. Elliot. Elliot may have coined the phrase, “modern paganism,” regarding the dominant cultural strands of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. See also the works of Nietzsche and the more recent scholarly works of Philip Jenkins, Charles Taylor, Carl Trueman, Ferdinand Mount, Larry Hurtado, and Steven Presley.

movement. If there is, as Fr. John Behr recently put it, “an uncanny parallel” between the second century and our own, modern Anglicans must learn to engage the methods of the earliest Christian apologists.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent acknowledgement of this cultural echo is Steven Presley’s 2024, *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church*. Presley argues that early Christians, noting their marginalized position among influential elites, “undertook organic intellectual interactions with the hope that some of their pagan neighbors might find its arguments convincing and come to respect Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> There is an important truth in this. Early Christian apologists were careful to present the faith as rationally coherent and intellectually compelling.

However, Presley’s purely rational emphasis misrepresents the *main thing* Christian apologists were attempting. It wasn’t Christian thinking<sup>15</sup> or preaching,<sup>16</sup> primarily, that initially attracted outsiders. What the early apologists emphasized –

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<sup>13</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Reprint edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Presley, *Cultural Sanctification*, excerpt (<https://cred.net/excerpt-cultural-sanctification/>).

<sup>15</sup> Pagan records demonstrate that they were either unaware of Christian apologetics (“It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of Christian apologetic writings were never quoted, much less acknowledged, by intellectual pagans,” Dan Williams, *Defining and Defending the Faith*, 43), or that they found Christian metaphysics laughable (see Jacob Engberg, et. all, *In Defense of Christianity*, conclusion). The presupposition that superior intellect, reason, or rationality was a *primary* aim of the early apologists does not stand. This notion was refuted substantially within the apologetic writings themselves. “Lactantius,” writing two centuries after the earliest apologists, has the second century apologists in view when he “reflected back over the Christian writings of the first three centuries. . . and reported that none of them had interested the pagan [intelligencia]. In Lactantius’ view, most of the Christian writers were not ‘wholly eloquent,’ and even the one who was undeniably eloquent – the rhetorician Cyprian – was philosophically lightweight.” Lactantius, *Inst.* 5.1.22-28, trans. A. C. Coxe, *ANF 7:136*; quote originally located in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, for example, referred to “our writings, to which no one comes for guidance unless he is already a Christian” (Tertullian, *Test.*, 1) - recent scholarship supports this claim. See especially Alan Kreider’s *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* and Dan Williams, *Defining and Defending the Faith*, 34-36. The force of this argument is treated by Alwyn Pettersen. In his section on the so-called “argument from antiquity,” Peterson writes: “It was [the] prophetic Spirit who inspired the prophets, so completely inspiring them that Athenagoras was content to liken the Spirit’s using the prophets to deliver God’s message to a flautist using a flute to deliver his music. . . . It followed . . . that Christians, relying on the ancient prophets, did indeed speak and live . . . the “God taught” truth. . . . Indeed, that Christians were “God taught” and not merely worldly wise was evidenced, the Apologists argued, in the fact that *Christians generally were simple, humble people. . . . As the prophets were “illiterates and shepherds and uneducated” . . . so Christians, who learned from these prophets, were those who did “not know even the shape of letters, who [were] uneducated and barbarous in speech. . . . So you can see that these things are not the product of wisdom but by the power of God.*” Alwyn Pettersen, *The Second-Century Apologists* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), emphases added.

and what attracted “strangers to join [their] ranks” – was the “beauty” of Christian living. Many historians have noted the improbable growth of the early Church. The causes were numerous and varied, and church historians have disagreed on which were most impactful. When allowed to speak for themselves, the earliest Christians (and their critics),<sup>17</sup> overtly and overwhelmingly emphasize the attractive nature of Christian living.<sup>18</sup>

Early Christians believed that a foretaste of the Kingdom of God had erupted into the present world order, *reordering* the way citizens of this new heavenly Kingdom interacted with marriage and sexuality, finances, the unborn, violence, the poor, the marginalized, the uneducated, and the infirm. Christianity represented a “new way” of being in the world.<sup>19</sup> The Kingdom of God, according to the earliest apologists, was visible and discernable even before it was intelligible. This central emphasis on the beauty of the Christian way of life – especially in relationship to those in need – was, according to historian Henry Chadwick, essential to the growth of the movement: “The practical application of charity was probably the single most potent cause of Christian success.”<sup>20</sup>

## THE SURPRISING FAILURE OF C.S. LEWIS

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<sup>17</sup> See especially the writings of Lucius, Julian (called “The Apostate”), and Pachomius in Jacobsen, et. al, *In Defence of Christianity: Early Christian Apologists (Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity)*. Writing in the fourth century, Julian notes, “It is disgraceful that when no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Galileans (Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us...” and because of this emphasis, Christians “have gained ascendancy.”

<sup>18</sup> See research presented in my 2023 thesis, *Embodied Theology in the Greek Apologetic Writings of the Second Century*.

<sup>19</sup> “New race” or “new way” was a favorite self-designation of the early Christians when describing their movement in the apologetic catechesis. See, especially, *Christianity’s Surprise* by Kavin Rowe, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* by Alan Kreider, *Destroyer of the Gods* by Larry Hurtado, and *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Penguin History of the Church: The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 1993), 55–56. Chadwick is not alone. See the writings of Alan Kreider, Robert Wilkin, Gerald Sittser, and others.

Something like the equal opposite has occurred in our time.<sup>21</sup> The causes for this too are multivarious. There is, however, one simple truth in which we can be confident: modern apologetic strategies have failed. However unlikely it may seem, one of the primary figures predating this modern apologetic failure is the indomitable C.S. Lewis.<sup>22</sup>

As successful as Lewis was himself, his towering influence on Christian apologetics has preceded the greatest decline in Church attendance in the history of the West. While I'm not suggesting a causal relationship between Lewis's influence and church decline, I am noting that imitation of the remarkably successful writings and style of Lewis – often heralded as the Anglican apologist *par excellence* – has done nothing to stem the tide of church decline. What are we to make of this?

Apologetic imitations of Lewis have not succeeded in the modern era in part due to the myopic focus on crafting rational and intellectual defenses of the faith in the mold of *Mere Christianity*. It has been rightly noted that “*ites*” or “*ists*” often produce caricatured versions of their founders (such that *Calvinists* are often less nuanced than Calvin himself, etc.). Something *Lewisites* often miss in our rationality-obsessed culture is that a full fourth of Lewis's *Mere Christianity* is centered on Christian living.<sup>23</sup> This oversight has hampered modern apologetic efforts.

Another obvious but seldom acknowledged reason that Lewis's influence has failed modern apologists is simply this: none of us are C.S. Lewis. To avoid

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<sup>21</sup> According to Jim Davis and Michael Graham, “More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined.” Davis and Graham, “The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?”

<sup>22</sup> To be perfectly clear, I am in no way anti-Lewis. In fact, as college sophomore and new Christian, halfway through my first read of *Mere Christianity*, I decided that I would read Lewis's famous apology once a year until I died. I have kept that aspiration (imperfectly) and have studied a great many of Lewis's other works as well. As I write this, there is a picture of Lewis on the wall of my study (thanks to the folks at Rabbit Room).

<sup>23</sup> What Lewis himself calls “Christian Behavior,” Book Three of Lewis's four-part apology (pgs. 29-68).

readers of Lewis, modern apologetic comparisons always feel cheap – like a millennial comparing One Direction to the Beatles. Lewis was in an intellectual class of his own, a product of privileged educational opportunities (unavailable to most Christians through time); and, crucially, Lewis belongs to that rare species of intellectual giants who can seamlessly articulate their erudite reasonings to the “everyman’s” average mind.

By way of contrast, consider second century apologist Athenagoras. “Among us,” he writes, “you will find uneducated people, tradesmen, and old women, who, *if they are unable in words* to prove the benefit of our doctrine, *yet by their deeds* exhibit the benefit arising from their persuasion of its truth. *They do not practice speeches but exhibit good works.*”<sup>24</sup> The genius of early Christian apologetic emphases is that they could be imitated, not by a select few intellectual elites, but by all parishioners – uneducated, tradespeople, and the overlooked. This method of prioritizing Christian behavior in apologetic catechesis proved remarkably effective. Central Christian doctrines such as the atonement, reconciliation, and adoption, it turns out, are arrestingly beautiful when physically embodied. Imitation of God’s behavior (as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of God’s Christ), became a crucial bridge to the eventual proclamation of the same.

My central point is this: while Lewis’s own writings assisted a great many in his time, limited imitation of the rational/intellectual style of Lewis has not helped in our own. In other words, Lewis-the-apologist succeeded as an evangelist but failed as a catechist.

## MILITARY GRADE APOLOGETICS

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<sup>24</sup> *Legatio* 11 (Richardson 310).

The resemblances between the times, however, should not be overstated. The gulf between second century Greco-Roman culture and modern American culture represents an impassible gap. It would be difficult even for a professional historian to imaginatively inhabit the culture of the Roman Empire – particularly regarding the ubiquitous nature of violence and the absolute power of the state. As such, any cultural marginalization modern American Christians encounter cannot be anything like the various persecutions early Christians faced. This does not render second century apologetic writings less valuable, however. Rather, they present us with a strategy that has been tested under similar but more extreme conditions than our own. They are, for us, “military grade.”

#### THE SURPISING SUCCESS OF THE OVERLOOKED

Having not yet heard Descartes’s epoch defining phrase, “I think, therefore I am,” the earliest Christians were not trained to prioritize the rational over the ethical. Since the Enlightenment, on the other hand, Christian apologetic writers have accepted as normative the secular notion that humans are *primarily and essentially* rational beings. This, it turns out, is false.<sup>25</sup> Early Christians understood something that our rationality-obsessed culture often misses.<sup>26</sup> Namely, those unfamiliar with the Christian message must first see the faith demonstrated before they can understand it articulated.

Third century bishop and apologist, Cyprian of Carthage, summarizes his apologetic predecessors this way, “We are philosophers not in words but in deeds...we do not speak great things – we live them.”<sup>27</sup> The North African

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<sup>25</sup> See *The Elephant and the Rider* by Jonathan Haidt.

<sup>26</sup> A post-Christian West, then, needs to engage the pre-Christian Near East as conversation partners. Here, I’m speaking of second century Christianity generally, which was taking root primarily in modern-day Turkey, North Africa, Greece, and Rome. These last two, some have argued, were not “the first great Western civilizations” but the last great Eastern civilizations. In this way, the lessons from the early apologists may aid not only Western Anglicans in the ACNA but also those in the Majority World.

<sup>27</sup> Cyprian, *Pat.* 3 trans. G. E. Conway, FC 36 (1958), 256.

apologists Minucius Felix and Tertullian corroborate this emphasis. Felix repeats Cyprian’s phrase, verbatim.<sup>28</sup> Tertullian harmonizes with them both, writing that Christians “teach by deeds.” Why? “It is *mainly the deeds of a love so noble* that lead many to put a brand upon us. *See, they say, how they love....*” Outsiders do not first say, “*hear their teachings*” but “*see how they love.*”<sup>29</sup>

Origen’s towering intellectual work, *Contra Celsum*, cites as his primary *apologia* (ἀπολογία) Christ’s way of life, “Our...Lord Jesus Christ...was convinced that all *his life and actions...were better than any speech...*and superior to any words that he might say in defense (ἀπολογουμένων).”<sup>30</sup> Even Justin Martyr, the great Christian philosopher, links apologetic success with “consistency of living” rather than erudite reasoning,<sup>31</sup> “Many... have turned ... *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.”<sup>32</sup> Outsiders were drawn to Christianity by observing the “beautiful” (καλός)<sup>33</sup> commands of

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<sup>28</sup> Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 38.6 (SC 291:186, trans G.H. Rendall, LCL 250 [1931], 432.

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.16 in *Tertullian, Apology, De Spectaculis, with an English Translation by T.R. Glover: Minucius Felix, with an English Translation by Gerald H. Rendall* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 227.

<sup>30</sup> *Contra Celsum* 1.1 (text and translation from Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 3).

<sup>31</sup> Many scholars have noted that Justin’s major theological contributions are incomplete and often unclear. As influential as they were to later theological formulation, they serve only a secondary position within his apologetic works (With Winrich Löhr, “Christianity as Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives of an Ancient Intellectual Project,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 64.2 (2010): 178, “One could argue that Justin’s concept of Logos theology had a primarily hermeneutical focus. It is Christ the pre-existent Logos of God, Justin claimed, that communicated divine wisdom in the Old Testament.” That is not to say that doctrine itself was penultimate to Justin’s philosophical construction. The incarnation, proof from prophesy, the crucifixion, and bodily resurrection were indispensable foundational elements. From these, Justin builds his central argument, which had to do, primarily, with the consistency of one’s life with those same doctrines (With Ulrich, 58; “Justin sees Christianity [as] characterized by consistency between morality and faith.”) In this way, metaphysical realities were foundational to Justin’s theological construction but penultimate in Justin’s presentation.

<sup>32</sup> *I Apol.* 16 (Richardson 252). Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Καλός (*kalos*) has the sense of “beautiful” already in the New Testament; καλός especially takes on this sense in the writings of early church; Walter Grundmann and Georg Bertram, “Καλός,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 553. See also Legatio 16.1 (Schoedel 32-33) and elsewhere; Schoedel consistently translates καλός as “beauty” and “beautiful.”

Christ, embodied in the lives of believers. The Christian life (consistent, attractive, and “strange”) *was* Justin’s initial apology.

The apologetic writers of the second century set forth to address a variety of questions while revealing a consistent ethos, deeply absorbed and powerfully displayed. Early Christian apologists understood that for “outsiders” unfamiliar with the message to grasp the truth about the love of Christ, they first had to experience, in truth, the love of Christians. If there is a truly common theme present within the corpus of second century apologetic writings, it’s this: the duty of ordinary Christians was not to proclaim truth with peculiar eloquence but to display peculiar love in imitation of their God.

Imitation *of God*, they thought, was the best introduction *to God* and the most compelling argument for his existence. Given the similarities between the times, modern Anglicans would do well to pay attention to these ancient catechists.<sup>34</sup>

## THE PRIORITY PARADOX

The clear Chronological Priority for second century apologists, then, was practical demonstration of spiritual realities. They expected that demonstration would precede inquiry, and that inquiry would prompt explanation/articulation. Interestingly, the effectiveness of this ancient ordering has been verified by recent findings in the field of learning theory.<sup>35</sup> Aristides (perhaps the most influential second century apologist), for his part, offers only two lines of doctrine to forty arrestingly beautiful lines of social ethics.<sup>36</sup> However, while ethics (what we have

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<sup>34</sup> The early apologists were catechists, providing training materials for “insiders” even as they framed their writings towards “outsiders.” See especially Williams, *Defining and Defending the Faith*, 33-36, 184 and Francis Young, “Not for nothing is this material...called catechetical” (Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” 89).

<sup>35</sup> See *Atomic Habits* by James Clear (“System 1” vs “System 2” thinking, pg. 261) + *Tiny Habits* by B.J. Fogg (the “Information-Action Fallacy,” 4).

<sup>36</sup> In what Niles Pedersen called a “medieval best-seller” (with more than 140 surviving manuscripts in Greek alone; the novel was also translated into Armenian, Arabic, Ethiopian, Slavonic, Serbian, Belorussian, and

been calling “demonstration”) was the clear focus of second-century apologetic writings, it was not, according to the apologists themselves, the final aim.<sup>37</sup>

For Aristides and his contemporaries, the Ultimate Priority was the eventual and subsequent explanation of the gospel. This is what I have called “the Priority Paradox:” *because* proclamation is the Ultimate Priority, it must not lead, but follow. Living “beautifully” in view of - and in relationship with - outsiders evidently prompted the questions for which Christians were better prepared to answer (1 Peter 3:15). Having experienced the practical love of God, the average pagan faced fewer obstacles in route to understanding the faith. Having been shaped by the rhythms of the love of God, the average Christian had less ground to travel in their subsequent explanation of the same.

## LESSONS IN LOVE

The lesson for modern Anglican apologists and parishioners is this: we must begin to see the task of apologetics less like the selling of an intellectual good and more like an invitation into relationship. Like training parishioners for marriage, a

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Russian (inspiring Leo Tolstoy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century), French, Anglo-Norman, Provençal, and Middle High German, as well as Norwegian, Icelandic and Swedish), Aristides devotes two lines of Christian doctrine compared to 40 lines for Christian ethics. Difference of 40 and 2 =  $(|40-2|/(40+2)/2) = 38/21 = 1.8095 = 181\%$ . See J. Rendel Harris, *The Apology of Aristides: On Behalf of the Christians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891).

<sup>37</sup> In Aristides *Apology*, the apologist emphatically claims that Christians “do not proclaim... in the ears of the multitude” and “hide their gift as they labour to become righteous” (*Apology* 16). The message of Christianity is initially veiled even as the “good deeds” of Christians are on full display. Something visibly attractive was thought by the apologists to have emerged in the world through the new lives of this new people. Indeed, it is, according to the Aristides, on “account of them that beauty flows forth [into] the world” (*Apology* 16). Yet, while their “gift” may have been “hidden” initially, it was not altogether unavailable. The message of salvation was accessible for those willing to “search for it” (*Apology* 15). For those who would seek, truth could ultimately be found in the “words of Christians.” It was ultimately through the “word incorruptible,” that one might “escape from condemnation and punishment,” and find “life everlasting” (*Apology* 17). These “words,” Aristides explains, are the very “words of God” (*Apology* 17). Justin invites his readers to consult the teachings of Christians contained in Scripture: “We not only boldly consult these books, but also as you see, offer them for your inspection, being sure that what they declare will be welcome to all” (*1 Apology* 44). The pattern is evident: Christians, reticent at fist in matters of proclamation, were bold in demonstration. Demonstration was expected to prompt inquiry. Inquiry, then, was received by invitation (“Their sayings and ordinances, ... you are able to know. ... Truly great and wonderful is their teaching to him who is willing to examine and understand it” (*Apology* 16). Finally, invitation led to explanation and proclamation. On this order (demonstration, invitation, proclamation) the apologists were unanimous. This pattern may be on display in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. It is profoundly apparent in the conversion of the titular character in *The First Greek Life of Pachomius*.

myopic emphasis on proclamation (or, the “proposal”) would be ill-conceived. In that case, we run the risk of equipping articulate asses. Training for demonstrable acts of love towards the other is a crucial first step – and the order matters.

Ultimately, the proposer must open his mouth and proclaim his love.

Proclamation/explanation, for the proposer, as for modern apologists, is *the* crucial moment. But if he has not spent prior months demonstrating his love, his words will almost certainly fall on deaf (and possibly repulsed) ears. Conversely, a proposer who has been demonstrably present in love before the crucial moment may stumble through his carefully planned words. No matter. The proposed who has experienced his love (and grown to love and trust him in return), will smile endearingly at his eager, if inarticulate, invitation.

As Christian apologists, our goal is to be faithful to the message – a steady presence in a culture of shifting sand; and to be present in society – living lives of love and service such that when people hear the message of the gospel it will be like seeing the ring at a proposal. The proposed has already experienced love, all that is left for her is to accept the invitation.