

“The words of our Savior were always present”

Week 8: Quadratus - Confessing the abiding presence of Christ

This week wraps up the current series on the *Apostolic Fathers*, as we examine the Roman world and an early church figure named Quadratus, who is considered to be the first Christian apologist. The *Apology* of Quadratus is very nearly completely lost, save for only one brief fragment preserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius. In that excerpt below, Eusebius also mentions another early church figure named Aristides, thought to be the second Christian apologist. Though a surviving copy of the *Apology* by Quadratus has never been found, the *Apology* of Aristides was found in 1889 by British scholar Rendel Harris at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.

Though Eusebius wrote that Quadratus had presented his *Apology* to the Roman emperor Hadrian (c. 124-125), modern scholars continue to debate whether Quadratus wrote the *Apology* to Hadrian or to his successor Antonius Pius. It has also been suggested that the *Epistle to Diognetus*, which we read in week 6 is actually the *Apology* by Quadratus. Thus, though Eusebius possessed copies of these apologies by Quadratus and Aristides, not having surviving copies in the present has left much ambiguity to the dating of these writings, their content, and the Roman emperor(s) to whom they were written.

Both Quadratus and Aristides wrote in the early second century when Christianity was growing rapidly in the Roman world. Educated Christian writers sought to make a defense, or apology, for the Christian religion to the Roman world, and in particular to imperial power. However, it would take until the year 313 and the Edict of Milan under emperor Constantine for Christianity to finally gain toleration, legal recognition, and the end to its persecution. In 380 Nicene Trinitarian Christianity was made the state religion of the Roman Empire by decree of the Edict of Thessalonica.

The period of this week’s readings covers the two centuries prior to the Constantinian era, beginning with Tacitus’ Roman history, the *Annals*, during the reign of emperor Nero (reign 54-68) and his violent persecution of Christianity. We then move to the periods of Trajan (reign 98-117), Hadrian (reign 117-138), Antonius Pius (reign 138-161), and Marcus Aurelius (reign 161-180). It is a period during which Christianity, while growing, was also misunderstood, persecuted and unfavorably represented in Roman writing. The apologies of Quadratus and Aristides represent the development of apologetics as a theological discipline meant to make a reasoned case for Christianity to the wider world. The apologists Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Minucius Felix among others, continued to develop the discourse of Christian apologetics aimed at the Roman world, by confessing Christ in public political and intellectual discourse.

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From the *Apology* of Quadratus

Excerpt from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.iii):

“When Trajan had reigned for nineteen and a half years Aelius Hadrian succeeded to the sovereignty. To whom Quadratus addressed a treatise, composing a defense for our religion because some wicked men were trying to trouble the Christians. It is still extant among many of

the brethren and we have a copy ourselves. From it can be seen the clear proof of his intellect and apostolic orthodoxy. He shows his early date by what he says as following his own words:

But for the words of our Saviour were always present, for they were true, those who were cured, those who rose from the dead, who not merely appeared as cured and risen, but were constantly present, not only while the Saviour was living, but even for some time after he had gone, so that some of them survived even till our own time.

Such was he. Aristides too, a man of faith and devoted to our religion, has, like Quadratus, left behind a defense of the faith addressed to Hadrian. His writing, too, is preserved by many. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*. Vol. I, Trans. by Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library No. 153, Cambridge: Harvard, (1926) 1992, IV.iii)

Excerpts from Roman writers about Christianity

Excerpt from Tacitus, *Annals* (XLIV):

But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crown styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened to crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt, which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, but to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man. (Tacitus, *Annals*. Vol. V, Loeb Classical Library No. 322, Trans. by John Jackson, Cambridge: Harvard, (1937) 1994.)

Excerpt from Pliny, *Letters*. *Pliny to the Emperor Trajan* (Letter XCVI):

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance. I have never been present at an examination of Christians, consequently, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed...

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them in the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are

becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of accused persons. Among these I considered that I should dismiss any who had denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they repeated to me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and further had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand any genuine Christian can be induced to do...

I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which has been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.

Trajan to Pliny (Letter XCVII)

You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance. However suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age. (Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*. Vol. II, Trans. by Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library No. 59, Cambridge: Harvard, 1969).

Excerpt from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Book 11.3):

Happy is the soul which, at whatever moment the call comes for release from the body, is equally ready to face extinction, dispersion, or survival. Such preparedness, however must be the outcome of its own decision; a decision not prompted by mere contumacy, as with the Christians, but informed with deliberation and gravity and, if it is to be convincing to others, with an absence of all heroics. (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. Trans. by Maxwell Staniforth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964).

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Meditation

When Pliny the Younger wrote to emperor Trajan with questions about Christianity, he was Roman governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus in northern Asia Minor (c. 110 to 112). The exchange of letters between Pliny and Trajan contains the earliest surviving Roman administrative discussion about Christianity. The *Annals* written by Tacitus (c. 116), an official Roman history, covers the period from Tiberias to Nero (AD 14 –68), and functions as an independent witness to the trial and execution of Christ under Pontius Pilate, also shedding light on the treatment of Christians under Nero. Finally the well-known passage in the *Meditations* of

Marcus Aurelius reveals disdain for the “heroics” of Christian death, no doubt a reference to the manner in which Christian martyrs faced execution and death in public Roman spectacles. It is against this background of Roman misunderstanding, prejudice and contempt that early Christian theologians began to make a case for Christianity to the ancient Roman world.

When Quadratus wrote to the emperor Hadrian, he was pointing to Christ as the living reality that Christians knew through faith. Writing, “for the words of our Saviour were always present,” Quadratus confessed his faith in words that modern Christians can also understand. It is the abiding presence of Christ, through faith, that has allowed followers of Jesus throughout history to face trial, persecution, and even death, knowing that in imitating the suffering of Jesus they also participate in his resurrection. The words of Quadratus reveal a deep conviction in the resurrection that Jesus raises us to new life over and over again, moving us from death to life as we anticipate the finality of our own lives.

Paul writes, “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (Romans 6:5). The ancient Roman world was dying and early Christian apologists like Quadratus and others confessed their faith in the resurrection through a political, intellectual and cultural discourse that began to convince and change the lives of people. Pliny bears witness to this change in the ancient world writing that Roman temples had become deserted, indicating a change in religious and cultural life as Christianity grew in stature. Though Christianity was at times bitterly persecuted, Pliny and Trajan reveal a Roman passion for justice and rule of law that contained the seeds of pardon and mercy that would eventually come to the aid of Christians after Constantine.

Yet as Christianity grew into legal toleration, it was transformed into a state religion. In addition to the battles between orthodoxy and heresy, and the eventual victory of a Nicene Trinitarian faith, the welding of Christianity to imperial service created a Christian “world” known as Christendom. Though this world really no longer exists today, the vestiges of Christendom’s imperial religious power have been hard for many to reimagine or let go of.

Paul’s words, “*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s*” (Romans 14:8), point to a Christian discipleship of following Jesus and his cross, by which over and over, Jesus invites us to die to him so that we might live anew today. In a post-Christendom world in which the church again finds itself misunderstood and at times even forgotten, we remember, like Quadratus, that the living word, Jesus Christ abides with the church. Calling it again and again to discipleship and service. It is in dying to ourselves and the power of this world, that the power of the servant Christ is unleashed, not to attack or oppress, but to walk with and serve others in humble service.

As we end yet another series, we are reminded that to be a Christian is to follow Jesus and his cross over a lifetime, “*always ready,*” as Peter wrote, “*to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence*” (1 Pet. 3:15). Early Christians like the Apostolic Fathers, followed Jesus not because of implicit imperial or cultural power, but because they were grasped by the power of new life in Christ’s resurrection. So too we walk by faith grasped by a living hope that we know through faith. May we, with gentleness and reverence, witness in word and deed so that the world might believe. Amen.

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Thank you for following this series.