



## **FOOLS AND HERETICS: THE TRIBULATIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH: PAGANS AND JEWS**

September 17 /18, 2025

Acts 18:1-22; Acts 19, I Corinthians

Gonzalez, chapters 1-4

### **I. Introduction**

- a. Christianity's fragile beginnings (year 100: scattered, powerless, minority).
- b. By 300: spread across the empire, survived persecution, nearing toleration.
- c. Key question: How did the early church define itself in relation to Judaism and the Greco-Roman/pagan world?
- d. 1 Corinthians 1:22–23.
  - i. "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified..."
  - ii. Two fronts of challenge: Jewish rejection and Greco-Roman mockery.

### **II. Christianity and Judaism**

#### **a. Shared Roots**

- i. Jesus, the apostles, and the first Christians were Jewish.
- ii. Acts 2:36 – Peter's sermon to Jews at Pentecost.
- iii. Acts 3:1 – apostles still worship at the Temple.
- iv. Acts 6:7 – even some priests joined the faith.

#### **b. Conflict and Separation**

- i. Growing opposition from Jewish leaders: Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7), synagogue rejections of Paul (Acts 13, 17, 18).
- ii. Jews saw Christians as heretics introducing false messiah and foreign customs.
- iii. Example: Jews of Corinth seeking Paul's imprisonment (Acts 18).

#### **c. Wider Jewish-Roman Context**

- i. Judaism's special tolerated status in the empire.

- ii. Periodic uprisings: 70 CE destruction of the Temple, later revolts (115–117; 132–135).
- iii. This turbulence led to suspicion of Jewish communities, widening the gap between Jews and Christians.

**d. Christian Self-Understanding**

- i. Church increasingly Gentile by late 1st century.
- ii. Debate over Hebrew Scriptures (Marcion vs. apostolic witness).
- iii. Paul: OT “makes you wise for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15).
- iv. Fulfillment, not rejection: Acts 13:32–33.
- v. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* – Christians as “true Israel.”

**III. Christianity and Paganism**

**a. Pagan Life as the Air They Breathed**

- i. Pagan rituals everywhere: homes, trade guilds, festivals, politics.
- ii. Refusal to participate = social and spiritual danger.

**b. Christian Witness Against Idols**

- i. Paul at Lystra (Acts 14:15) – turn from vain things to the living God.
- ii. Acts 19 – Ephesus riot against Paul, economic threat to Artemis cult.

**c. Pagan Perception of Christians**

- i. Seen as “atheists” (denying the gods), cannibals, libertines (incest).
- ii. Fear: Christians’ exclusivity might anger the gods and endanger society.
- iii. Viewed as irrational, dangerous, anti-social.

**d. Christianity’s Attractiveness**

- i. Offered certainty: revealed law, utterly just God, victory over death.
- ii. Offered community: Acts 2:44–45 – shared possessions, radical fellowship.
- iii. Care for poor, sick, abandoned = powerful witness.

**IV. The Roman State**

- a. **Political Suspicion: “Jesus is Lord” vs. “Caesar is Lord” (Acts 17:7).**
- b. **Acts 16:21 – accused of unlawful customs.**
- c. **Acts 18 – Gallio dismisses case against Paul.**
- d. **Early views: Tacitus mocks Christians as “haters of mankind.”**
- e. **Nero (64 CE): precedent of persecution.**

**V. Apologetics and the Apologists**

**a. The Apologetic Task**

- b. 1 Peter 2:12–17, 3:15 – conduct and defense.
- c. Defend Christianity against the Jews, Greco- Roman Paganism, and the Roman State. charges of heresy, irrationality, atheism, and treason.
- d. **Justin Martyr (c. 160)**
  - i. With Judaism:
    - 1. Argued that the Gospel and the faith of the church are the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel, and the highest philosophy.

2. *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160 CE), insisted that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that the Christian community had become the true people of God: “We, who have been brought near to God through this crucified Christ, are the true Israelite race.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 11)
- ii. With Pagan Philosophy:
  1. **Connected faith and philosophy through the Logos.**
  2. **All true philosophy fulfilled in Christ.** “Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. For next to God, we worship and love the Logos who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.” (*First Apology*, 46)
  3. **John 1:1,14 as central.**
- e. **Tertullian** (c. 155–220)
  - i. Suspicious of philosophy: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”
  - ii. *Apology* – defended loyalty to emperor: “We pray for him.”
  - iii. Defined Christian distinctiveness and integrity.
- f. **Origen** (c. 185–254)
  - i. *Contra Celsum* – responded to pagan critics on philosophical terms.
  - ii. Christianity as rational and morally transformative.
  - iii. Paradox: brilliant theologian, yet later condemned for speculative theology (preexistence of souls, universal restoration).
  - iv. Respected and rejected—Calvin praised his brilliance but criticized his errors.
- g. **Athenagoras of Athens** (c. 133–190),
  - i. *Plea for the Christians* to Marcus Aurelius.
  - ii. Defended against charges of atheism, immorality.
  - iii. Highlighted Christian ethics and sanctity of life.

## VI. Conclusion

- a. Early Christianity defined itself in dialogue and opposition.
  - i. From Judaism: continuity and fulfillment.
  - ii. From paganism: rejection of idols, but embrace of truth wherever found.
  - iii. From Rome: obedience to law, but higher allegiance to Christ.
- b. Apologists helped the church:
  - i. Defend against slander.
  - ii. Preserve the community in persecution.
  - iii. Connect gospel with cultural longings.
- c. Christianity survived not by blending in, but by faithfully confessing: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, Lord of all.