

Christian Apologists

Augustine, as painted by Botticelli, c. 1480



The term comes from the Greek word *apologeomai*, which means “speak in defense of.”

Very active in the 100s through 300s, Christian writers defended the teachings of the New Testament against criticisms by different groups:

Against the Jews, they insisted that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament passages (such as Isaiah 53 and Ex 12), and that they still respected the books of the Old Testament as being God’s Word, although the rituals of the Old Testament were no longer binding.

Against the Arians, the Apologists held, in the language of the Council of Nicaea, that Jesus was “of one substance” with the Father (*homoousios*). The Arians held that Jesus was a created being, and had not always existed. Against another group, called Gnostics, the Apologists argued that Jesus’ human body was real, and not an illusion.

Against the pagans, the Apologists insisted that Christians made good citizens, because they were chaste, honest, and prayed for their rulers.

Perhaps the most famous apologist was **Augustine** (354-430 AD; Bishop of Hippo, 396-430). One of his most famous works was the *City of God*, written to defend Christianity in the light of pagans blaming Christianity for the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD.

- Augustine said that worship of pagan deities did not stop the Gauls from sacking Rome in 390 BC, nor Hannibal from defeating Roman armies in the Second Punic War. And so Augustine argued that if you aren’t going to blame Jupiter or Mars for Rome’s disasters before the Rome became Christian, you shouldn’t blame the God of the Bible for the sack of Rome in 410.
- The basic theme of the *City of God* was that there were two human communities in history—those who love themselves (the city of man), and those who love God (the city of God).
- Augustine held that there could never be any peace inside the city of man, because it was full of people who would battle each other for power and wealth, and that conflict was inherent in this city—whether through quarrels, litigation, or foreign or domestic wars. Only within the city of God, could people have tranquility. And so Augustine turned the pagans’ charges against themselves, saying that Rome could have no peace unless it acted according to Christian principles.
- Finally, by divorcing the Romans’ view of history from the glory of Rome itself, he helped give the people a new vision to live under, instead of complaining that their empire had fallen. Augustine directed people to see their history as that of the city of God, which had existed since the time of Abel (a son of Adam, killed by Cain), and would exist until the end of the world.