

Early Church Fathers: Justin Martyr, Heretic?

[Note: this is an unusually long installment of *ET&N*, both because Justin Martyr is no simple topic and because of the numerous (and sometimes lengthy) responses to the previous issue ([Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, ET&N 72](#)).]

This is the third in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* [series](#) on the influential writers of the pre-Nicene period of the church (before 325 A.D.). Previous installments were an [Introduction](#) (*ET&N* 30) and [Clement](#) (70) of Rome. The purpose of the series is to examine the writings of these individuals to better understand the context of the early church and determine what lessons they hold for today's Christian. Additional installments of this series will include Tertullian, Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Novatian, Ignatius, Irenæus, Origen, and others.

Most modern Christians may at some time have heard of Justin Martyr, but they know little of his life or influence. In fact, I suspect many think the word "martyr" came from Justin, while it is the opposite. "Martyr" comes from the Greek word, **μαρτυρ (martus)**, meaning *a witness*. It is used frequently in the New Testament; for example, "*Church leaders, I am writing to encourage you. I too am a leader, as well as a witness (martus) to Christ's suffering, and I will share in his glory when it is shown to us*" (1 Peter 5:1). It came to mean one who died for his or her faith because this served as the ultimate witness.

Justin died for his faith in Rome when he affirmed his Christianity and refused to worship pagan idols. As one of the earliest and most notable to suffer such a fate, he became known as "Justin Martyr," but during his life he was known more as a philosopher, teacher, and apologist--another word that deserves some explanation. An apology has nothing to do with the more common modern meaning of expressing regret for an error or discourtesy. Rather, apology derives from the Greek word **ἀπολογία (apologia)**, which means *a plea, an answer (for self), clearing of self, or defense*. There are eight instances of **apologia** in the New Testament, seven by Paul ([Acts 22:1](#)*, [25:16](#); [1 Corinthians 9:3](#); [2 Corinthians 7:11](#); [Philippians 1:7, 16](#); and [2 Timothy 4:16](#)), but it is Peter's use that is most relevant to apologetics: "*but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense (apologia) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*" (1 Peter 3:15).

Knowing that Justin is a celebrated teacher, apologist, and martyr, you may be surprised to learn that some of the views reflected in his writings would be considered heresy (another word that requires defining) in modern orthodox Christianity. The word "heresy" derives from the Greek word **αἵρεσις (hairesis)**, meaning *a choice*. It is used in the New Testament to mean a sect, division, or faction. Heresy is very much in the eye of the beholder in that differing opinions by two people are heretical to each other. Heresy eventually became an ecclesiastical crime as the Roman Catholic Church applied clamps on "correct" doctrine. Many other Christian groups do the same today (although they don't usually burn "heretics"). For more on orthodox vs. heretical doctrine, see [ET&N 8, "False Doctrine."](#)



Life of Justin

Justin was born in about 100 A.D. in the city of Neapolis (modern Nablus, a city of over 100,000 under Palestinian Authority about 40 miles north of Jerusalem in the West Bank), which had been founded by Vespasian near the site of Shechem around the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Shechem is mentioned in the Old Testament as the place where Abram built an altar after God appeared to him and promised the land of Canaan to his offspring ([Genesis 12:5-7](#)). Abram's grandson Jacob bought a piece of land there and built another altar ([Genesis 33:18-20](#)), leading to one of the less uplifting events in Jewish dealings with other people—the deceitful revenge taken upon natives of Shechem by Jacob's sons after the rape of their sister, Dinah ([Genesis 34](#)).

Later, Shechem was also the site of the revolt of the northern tribes against Solomon's son Rehoboam when he ignored the advice of elders to act with mercy ([1 Kings 12](#)), leading to the split kingdom. After the Assyrian conquest (722 BC), Shechem lost its importance, but it regained its status during the Hellenistic period after being re-established by the Samaritans, who built a temple on nearby Mount Gerizim. The Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.) destroyed Shechem, and the site lay in ruins until Vespasian.



While Justin was born in Samaria, his family appears to have been Roman colonists in the newly re-established city of Neapolis (Greek, *new city*). Both his name and his father's (Priscus) are Latin, while his grandfather's (Bacchius) is Greek. In his writings, Justin testifies to being uncircumcised (*Dialogue with Trypho* 29) and having grown up with a Greek education (*Dialogue* 2). In his search for truth, Justin encountered Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean, and Platonic teachers. He left Stoicism when his teacher claimed the knowledge of God was unnecessary; Peripateticism because his teacher demanded a fee, and Pythagoreanism because he was unwilling to meet the teacher's demand that he learn music, astronomy, and geometry first (*ibid*). He became quite enamored with Platonism because "the contemplation of ideas furnished my mind with wings" and as he "made the greatest improvements daily," he "expected forthwith to look upon God," which he viewed as the "end of Plato's philosophy" (*ibid*).

Justin's Conversion

It was at this point that he encountered, probably in Ephesus, a rather mysterious unnamed old man, who challenged his Platonic views and introduced him to Christ Jesus through the writings of the Old Testament prophets whom he extols as "more ancient," "filled with the Holy Spirit," and "witnesses to the truth above all demonstration" (*Dialogue* 7). It seems to have been the age of the Old Testament prophecies and their accuracy concerning the appearance of the Messiah which convinced Justin to convert to Christianity.

Justin speaks of his baptism (*Dialogue* 29), but he does not describe the circumstances of the event. It is reasonable to assume, however, that it came shortly after the discussion with the old man. "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul," he writes. "And a love of the prophets, and of those men who of friends of Christ, possessed me...I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable" (*Dialogue* 8).

Subsequently, Justin taught for a time on two occasions in the home of Martinus in Rome, a well-known Christian meeting place, and may have established a school there. Eusebius, the fourth century church historian, wrote that "...Justin was especially prominent in those days [during the bishoprics of Pius (140-155) and Anicetus (155-166)]. In the guise of a philosopher he preached the divine word, and contended for the faith in his writings." Justin may also have traveled extensively, teaching in other major cities as other philosophic Christian teachers did.

The Martyrdom of Justin

Eventually, he was charged in Rome with and confessed readily to being a Christian. In [The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs](#), an early document generally considered genuine and accurate, Justin's succinct description of Christian testimony is preserved:

"...we worship the God of the Christians, whom we reckon to be one from the beginning, the maker and fashioner of the whole creation, visible and invisible; and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who had also been preached beforehand by the prophets as about to be present with the race of men, the herald of salvation and teacher of good disciples. And I, being a man, think that what I can say is insignificant in comparison with His boundless divinity, acknowledging a Certain prophetic power, since it was prophesied concerning Him of who now I say that He is the Son of God. For I know that of old the prophets foretold His appearance among men" (*Martyrdom* I).



The trial of Justin
[Click for larger image](#)

Rusticus, prefect of Rome, completes his examination of Justin by asking, "Are you not, then, a Christian?" to which Justin replies simply, "Yes, I am a Christian." Rusticus then examines Justin's students—Chariton, Charito (a woman), Euelpistus (an imperial servant), Hierax, Paeon, and Liberianus. Each repeats Justin's testimony.

Rusticus warns Justin that he will be scourged and executed and asks, with apparent sarcasm, "Do you suppose, then, that you will ascend into heaven and receive some recompense?"

"I do not suppose it," Justin replies. "But I know and am fully persuaded of it."

Rusticus then commands the group to sacrifice to the Roman gods under threat of death. As one, they reply, "Do what you will, for we are Christians, and do not sacrifice to idols." The degree to which Christian executions was commonplace is indicated by the author's comment that Justin and his students were taken "to the accustomed place," where they were beheaded. The date of Justin's martyrdom is not certain, but fell during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), probably around 165.

Justin's Writings

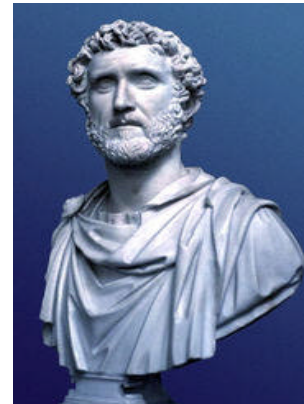
While Justin is so celebrated as a Christian martyr that the word has become an appendage to his name, his most significant accomplishment lies in the philosophical teachings reflected in his writings. According to Eusebius, these included Justin's "discourse of his in defense of our doctrine addressed to Antoninus Pious, and to his sons, and to the Roman senate" (*First Apology*), his *Second Apology*, a *Treatise against Heresy* (from which Irenæus quotes), two works against the Greeks (*Discourse and Refutation*), *The Sovereignty of God*, *The Psaltes*, *On the Soul*, and *Dialogue against the Jews*. Eusebius adds that "a great many other works of his are still in the hands of many of the brethren" (Eusebius, *Church History* 4.18).

Of these only his *Apology* (the so-called *Second Apology* is really an appendix to his earlier apology) and *Dialogue against the Jews* (aka *Dialogue with Trypho*) have survived. It is particularly regrettable, perhaps, that Justin's *On the Sovereignty of God* is lost since Eusebius reports that Justin proved "not only from our Scriptures, but also from the books of the Greeks." It would have given us even more insight into Justin's use of Greek philosophy. Because of the extant works, Justin is known as one of the earliest Christian apologists.

Justin's Apology - read the entire text [here](#) ("*First Apology*") and [here](#) ("*Second Apology*")

While Justin endeavors to refute specific charges against Christians, three broad themes run through his *Apology*:

1. The conviction of Christians for merely being Christians is both **unreasonable** and **unjust**,
2. The false charges against Christians are lies and misperceptions perpetrated by **evil demons**, and
3. The doctrines of Christianity are similar to the **incomplete revelation** of truth given to Greek philosophers, particularly Plato.



Antoninus Pius, to whom Justin addressed his *Apology*

Justin was fighting against the suspicion that Christians were guilty of the crimes of atheism, immorality, and disloyalty, and that merely admitting to being a Christian represented confession to these crimes. He tells the Emperor that Christians "are most excellent people" (*1 Apology* 4), but admits to would not be just to be acquitted merely by claiming to be a Christian. Consequently, he asks the Emperor to "pass judgment after an accurate and searching investigation" (*1 Apology* 2). Justin wants the doctrine and practices of Christians to be brought into the light of day, where they can be judged on their own merits, rather than on innuendo. From this, one has to wonder if perhaps Christians were overly secretive about their beliefs and practices. While this is understandable given the persecutions that occurred during the reigns of Nero (54-68), Domitian (81-96), and Trajan (98-117), excessive caution may have contributed to the general suspicion.

In presenting the virtues of Christianity, Justin cites Jesus' teaching on chastity (*1 Apology* 15), patience and servanthood (16), and civic responsibility (17). He quotes from what he calls "Memoirs of the Apostles," although he seems to have been the first to use the term "gospel" in the plural (66). The specific source of Justin's quotes is not always clear, but we know that all four of the canonical gospels were in circulation by his time, and he also quotes the apocryphal Gospel of Peter (see [ET&N 39, Apocryphal Gospels](#)).

One particularly notable feature of Justin's apologetic arguments lies in his contention that the ideas of Christianity are imperfectly mimicked in the teachings of Greek philosophers, particularly Plato. According to Leslie William Barnard (*Ancient Christian Writers: St. Justin Martyr, The First and Second Apologies*, Paulist Press, 1997), Justin "retained the Middle Platonic idea of God as unknowable and transcendent, the Unmoved First Cause, Nameless and Unutterable, Unbegotten...incapable of coming unto direct contact with any of His creatures" (p. 16). It was only through the *logos*--with descriptions strikingly similar to those in John's Gospel--but understood in the light of the Old Testament "Word of God" and Greek philosophy.

Justin teaches of *logos spermatikos* (a Stoic term with different meaning) as the seed of that Word that is given to all people. Through the partial revelation of the *logos spermatikos*, things good and noble became evident to some, even before Christianity, but the *logos* is complete and perfect only in Christ Jesus. This allowed Justin to adopt anything worthwhile into Christianity as a reflection, albeit incomplete or imperfect, of the *logos*.

Hence, he claims that the philosophers took material from the Prophets. In pointing out Man's ability to choose between good and evil, for example, he claims that Plato's line, "The blame is his who chooses, and God is blameless," is taken "from the Prophet Moses" (*1 Apology* 44). "Whatever both philosophers and poets have said concerning the immortality of the soul, or punishments after death, or contemplation of things heavenly, or doctrine of the like kind," Justin continues. "They have received such suggestions from the prophets..." (*ibid*).

The notion that spiritual ideas are available to each human being is not so innovative as it may seem at first. Solomon testified that "(God) has put eternity into man's heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul said, "(God's) invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20).

For Paul, it was Man's own unrighteousness and stubborn refusal to see what was evident that lead him astray, but Justin blamed the work of demons. Like contemporary Jews, Justin believed that fallen angels, consorting with human women, produced demons (an interpretation of [Genesis 6:2-5](#)) who subsequently multiplied "to form a whole army of evil powers that was seeking to bring the human race into subjection" (*Barnard* pg. 17). He blamed these demons for the perversion of the *logos spermatikos*, including caricatures of Christian practices like the Eucharist and baptism.

Justin's Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew - Read the entire text [here](#).

Scholars are divided over whether or not Justin's *Dialogue* represents a real conversation. The majority seem to hold that some conversation occurred between Justin and Tryphon, a Jewish leader, probably in Ephesus, but since Justin's wrote the work many years after the alleged event, it is quite likely that Justin embellished it substantially. It is a lengthy, fascinating but sometimes confusing work. If this issue of ET&N were not already lengthy enough, I would cite some features of it.

Justin's Unorthodox Beliefs

Even though Justin is embraced by most modern Christian groups (he is a "Saint" of both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox church), some of the beliefs reflected in his

writings are definitely **not** consistent with modern mainstream Christian beliefs, although it is sometimes difficult in the case of his *Apology* to know how much is designed specifically to appeal to pagan attitudes. Perhaps, like Paul (cf [1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#)), Justin believed in becoming like a Greek in order that some might be saved.

Worship of angels. Ironically, one of the most serious charges against Christians was that they were atheists (because they did not worship the traditional Roman gods). In refuting this accusation, Justin admits "we are atheists, so far as (demons and idols) are concerned" (*1 Apology* 6), but he testifies that Christians worship "the most true God," the Son, and "the prophetic Spirit" (*ibid*). However, he adds that Christians also worship "the host of other good angels who follow and are made like to Him (Jesus)" (*ibid*), adding elsewhere "that there are angels who always exist, and are never reduced to that form out of which they sprang" (*Dialogue* 128).

Doctrine of works. Justin never directly quotes or expressly mentions Paul in any of his extant works. Some scholars have suggested that this may be because of his opposition to Marcion, who used some of Paul's writing in his competing version of Christianity. Marcion (the subject of a later installment in this series) could not reconcile the God of the Old Testament with the God who sent Christ to the world; hence, he created a "Bible" that excluded all of the New Testament and included only edited versions of Luke's gospel and seven of Paul's letters. Since Justin taught in Rome at about the same time Marcion did and was vehemently opposed to him, these scholars believe that Justin avoided Paul to prevent any association with Marcionites.

Whatever the reason, Justin seems to have missed or ignored Paul's strong message of the gospel of grace. Instead, his writings are full of salvation by works. For example:

- "if men by their works show themselves worthy of this His design, they are deemed worthy" (*1 Apology* 10).
- "...those only are deified (*sic*) who have lived near to God in holiness and virtue..." (*1 Apology* 21)
- "...we hold it to be true, that punishments, and chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man's actions" (*1 Apology* 43).
- "...there shall be punishment in eternal fire inflicted upon those who do not live temperately and conformably to right reason" (*2 Apology* 2).

We might understand Justin's focus on behavior in his *Apology*, since he is trying to refute the charge that Christians are immoral, but when he mentions grace in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, it appears only to give people the ability to cleanse themselves: "...we have by the grace of our Jesus, according to His Father's will, stripped ourselves of all those filthy wickednesses with which we were imbued" (*Dialogue* 116).

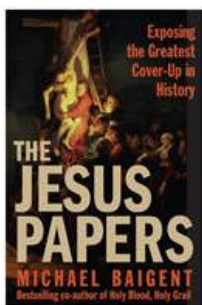
Creation. In what might be a somewhat lesser error, Justin also taught that "(God) in the beginning did of His goodness, for man's sake, create all things out of unformed matter" (*1 Apology* 10). This concept is one from Platonism and held by some Gnostic groups. Irenaeus (another future subject in this series) wrote that Valentinians "hold the Creator formed the world out of previously existing matter" (*Against Heresies* 2.14). Contrary to Justin's teaching, the Bible clearly states that all things were made "by the word of the Lord" (Psalm 33:6).

Circumcision. Justin tells Trypho that "we too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you,--namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts" (*Dialogue* 18). Justin is wrong about circumcision, the Sabbath, and feasts, but I'll detail the counter-evidence for circumcision only. Paul tells us that the sign of circumcision was given to Abraham specifically because of his faith in God (Romans 4).

Justin has a few other odd (and unbiblical) notions. He refers to "a certain mysterious import" of the "eighth day" (*Dialogue* 24) apparently misunderstanding the traditional eighth day circumcision of Jewish babies (cf Luke 1:59, Philippians 3:5) and confusing it with the Sabbath. He also claims that "a fire was kindled in the Jordan" when Jesus stepped into the water to be baptized by John (*Dialogue* 88). There is no biblical account of such an event and although perhaps Justin meant it symbolically (the beginning of Jesus' ministry), it is always dangerous to add personal accounts to the biblical text. As far as I know, this fire in the Jordan is unique to Justin. Finally, according to Irenaeus (who admires him), Justin wrote that "before the Lord's appearance Satan never dared to blaspheme God, inasmuch as he did not yet know his own sentence..." This too appears to be an invention of Justin.

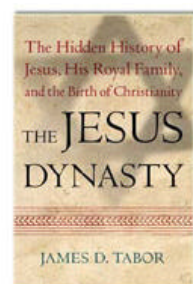
Now

In some circles, it is fashionable these days to speak of the diversity of early Christian beliefs and practices, and it is true that there were many flavors of ancient Christianity. Within the first three hundred years after Christ, the church was peppered with Judaizers, Gnostics, Marcionites, Arians, Monarchists, Ebionites, and Montanists, to name a few. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947), the Nag Hammadi library (1945), and more recently, the *Gospel of the Savior* and *The Gospel of Judas* (1970's), interest in these Christian and quasi-Christians sects, successfully refuted by orthodox leaders, has exploded. Books by such academics as Elaine Pagels of Princeton University (*Beyond Belief*) and Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina (*Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew*) question the truth of orthodox Christian faith.



Harper San Francisco

Adding to these legitimate observations of diversity are the fanciful speculations of Michael Baigent (*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the theoretical basis of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-Up in History*, published last month) and James Tabor (*The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*), both of which suggest that Jesus had earthly dynastic ambitions.



Simon & Schuster

The editorial description of *The Jesus Papers* on amazon.com reveals the presumptive nature of these works: "In *The Jesus Papers*, Michael Baigent reveals the truth about Jesus's life and crucifixion." *U.S. News and World Report* gave Tabor extraordinary cover treatment ("[The Kingdom of Christ: A bold new take on the historical Jesus raises questions about a centuries-long quest](#)," April 17, 2006).

The tactic employed by the secular media is to present these competing ideas without pointing out that, in many cases, they are mutually exclusive. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, for example, cannot be true if the *Gospel of Judas* is. Perhaps Justin was correct in asserting that demons were behind the early misrepresentations of

Christianity, and perhaps, having been held at bay for centuries, demons are now deceiving the media into trying simply to create confusion about the nature and mission of Christ Jesus.

One of the most common suggestions that accompany challenges to the validity of the New Testament canon is that it was the result of some vast "right-wing" (orthodox) conspiracy, but while it is true that some diversity in early Christianity disappeared as the church progressed, it is certainly not true that **all** questionable doctrines were obliterated. In fact, the writings of Justin, one of the most celebrated early writers and martyrs, reflect some ideas that most Christians now would consider incomplete or erroneous. This clearly demonstrates the fact that the early church did not engage in a genocidal campaign to remove all "minority opinions" from some monolithic set of proscribed beliefs.

The real danger posed by these books and the accompanying media hysteria is that the faith of some Christians may well be shaken. If there were validity in the competing theories, it would lead to one of three conclusions:

1. There is no God,
2. There is a God, but He doesn't enough care about us to preserve a consistent message, or
3. There is a God, but He is too ineffectual to accurately present and preserve His message.

There is really no legitimate way to incorporate the ideas of Baigent and Tabor, not to mention the ancient apocryphal works, into historic Christianity. In our post-modern, relativistic, tolerant, multi-cultural, politically-correct society, some who call themselves Christians will undoubtedly try, but as for me, I believe God exists and has faithfully presented and preserved His message to mankind in the canon of the Bible.

These developments also reveal two opposing phenomenon: (1) the interest in Jesus in this country is at an incredibly high level (particularly when you consider the success of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*) and (2) a multi-faceted attack on the orthodox understandings of Jesus presented in the New Testament threatens the future of the historic church. Why bring all of this up in this installment of the *Ekklesia Then & Now* early church fathers series? Because these men faced a similarly multi-faceted challenge—from both inside and outside the church. Perhaps by understanding how these men successfully navigated the treacherous waters of the first three Christian centuries, we can gain valuable insights about how the church can survive today's challenges.

The barrage of current attacks on the nature of Jesus and the reliability of the canon makes it tempting to relate this activity to Paul's description of the coming of the lawless one: "*Therefore God sends them a **strong delusion**, so that they may **believe what is false**, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness*" (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12, emphasis mine). Certainly, the often mutually-exclusive, sensational claims spread by the media represent a strong delusion, and there are those who consequently believe what is false. I have heard of liberal churches who are studying *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the blasphemous non-fictional (remember, non-fictional does **not** mean true) basis for many of Dan Brown's theses in the *Da Vinci Code*, as a serious counterpart to canonical accounts.

The *Da Vinci Code*; *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*; *The Jesus Papers*; and *The Jesus Dynasty* represent delusions, but how effective they will be depends on (1) whether or not God sent them and (2) how consistently the church explains the truth. This past Sunday, as part of an ongoing series on Paul, I taught about the apostle's instructions to church leaders in 1 Timothy and Titus. False teaching is one of the primary themes of these letters, and Paul charges his protégés to protect the flock against such teachings ([1 Timothy 1:3](#)). He laid out the methods for doing so:

- Explain the truth ([1 Timothy 4:11](#); [Titus 1:9](#))
- Rebuke those who contradict it ([Titus 1:9](#), [Titus 1:13, 15](#))
- Set an example ([1 Timothy 4:12](#))
- Expound the Scriptures ([1 Timothy 4:13-14](#))
- Persist ([1 Timothy 4:16](#))
- Warn twice then separate ([Titus 3:10-11](#))

As the May 19 theatrical release of the *Da Vinci Code* nears, we who believe in the truths of the Bible and put our hope in the grace of God would do well to practice Paul's prescription. While Justin Martyr's errors (a tiny part of his teaching) did not threaten orthodox faith, those of many others over the centuries have, and the implications for a lost world are profound.

From Peter's instructions ([1 Peter 3:15](#)), apologetics--being prepared to give a reason for our hope--is the responsibility of every Christian. Justin's "heretical" views were not excised from the annals of Christianity--they are preserved and honored. His views upheld the essentials of Christianity--God as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Creator of the universe and Christ Jesus as His human incarnation who bore the sins of Mankind to satisfy our sentence of guilt and make possible a relationship with God. Furthermore, he retained his life-long loyalty to the orthodox church. The views of others that were rejected--and must continue to be categorically rejected--are those that deny these fundamental facts.

Discussion ([Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs](#))

Not surprisingly, I suppose, the *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* issue of *ET&N* brought numerous responses. In addition to these responses (some of which are quoted below), Edward Fudge mentioned the article in his gracEmail "Family Note," resulting in more than 125 requests from his audience and a record number of hits on [my website](#). This demonstrates the degree to which this issue permeates our brotherhood, which I find unfortunate. I avoided it for nearly three years because I didn't want to make more of it than it deserves.

From James:

I am so glad I do not have to fight this anymore. We do both (a capella and instruments) in a 'Community' style congregation. It is truly a gigantic burden lifted. No one even talks about it anymore – they are more focused on the worship itself as opposed to the modus operandi.

DS: James' comment illustrates another point about the "music wars" -- surely God never intended to remove our burden sin through Christ Jesus, just to impose new burdens like this one.

From Edward:

Great job on this issue, showing your usual diligence in research, temperance in spirit and carefulness in wording! I find it quite interesting that throughout Christian history, opponents of instrumental accompaniment nearly always based their opposition (in whole or in part) on its usage by their spiritual adversaries – whether that be the Jews, the pagans, the Catholics or the “denominations.” What we need to do is what you have done so well, which is to study the Bible itself and see what it actually has to say.

From Jim:

Rick Atchley, minister at the Richland Hills church in Ft Worth, TX delivered, along with Bob Russell, former minister of the 18k Christian church in Louisville, KY a presentation at the recent Tulsa Workshop on division within our fellowship. You may have heard of it, or as Al Maxey has suggested, you can order the DVD of the same lesson Rick presented at his church. It is very powerful. If you haven't seen it I would recommend that you call the RH church and order a copy. The cost is \$6. Thank you for your lesson on instrumental music. My fellow elders and ministry staff are going to study this topic.

[DS: The Rick Atchley sermon Jim is referring to is "title," and it is available in mp3, real audio, and videocast at the Richland Hills website \(www.rhchurch.org\)](#)

From Brad:

I read with interest your findings. I have a couple thoughts/questions.

As one who grew up in the cofc, my first intro to any "Greek" language was by a preacher either on the real meaning of baptism or this subject, acappella singing. The preachers seem to quote from the work of Everett Ferguson. I have his book and in the first chapter he deals with "Psallo: Its History and Meanings," and he comes to different conclusions regarding the word than do. Why the difference? Does it boil down to which set of scholars one is going to believe?

I also wonder if we make this too difficult by an assumption, (not addressed in your article) that examples of what God approved in the Psalms do not have direct application since they come from the O.T./Old Law which we have been taught are the same and as such do not inform N.T./New Law matters. While the work of Jesus at the cross fulfilled the old law and made its sacrificial system forever unnecessary, does that mean nothing in the O.T., which the N.T. refers to as Scripture, applies to the covenant people of God today? I heard for most of my life and said it myself a number of times, the O.T. is not for us today. The problem I am having is that Paul seems to say the opposite of that in 2 Tim. 3:15-17. "and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, [17] so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Is Scripture (O.T.) profitable or not? (We seem to want to employ the Nadab and Abihu story as authoritative.) If it is, as Paul says it is, then the intricacies of N.T. linguistics are less an issue anyway. Just some thoughts for your consideration.

[DS: For a response about "psallo" see Daryl's comment below:](#)

[Brad's comments about the Old Testament probably deserve more than a brief reply, but in my opinion, the Old Testament is highly profitable for Christians. After all, it was initially the ONLY Scripture that the early church had. Clearly, there are aspects of the Law \(i.e., food restrictions\) that were lifted by Christ, but I still think most of the Law remains profitable if not efficacious for salvation. I've heard it suggested that individual elements of the Law are still in force unless **specifically** repealed in the New Testament, but I think that contradicts Paul's comments about the Law and disciples of Christ.](#)

From Darryl:

Good article Dick.

While I agree with your conclusion, I think some of your arguments are weak, especially 1 Corinthians 14: 7—of course you admit that much in the article. But consider also that PSALLO (“to pluck”) in Ephesians is in reference to a named instrument: “the heart.” Also, even if a word may have meant one thing in the LXX does not mean it did not evolve by the first century to mean something a little different (e.g., in English “charity”, “square”, “pot”, “bad”—“assassin” means “those who smoke hashish!”). It could be argued (and usually is) psallo merely means to sing a psalm (without regard to instrumentation) and psalmos could merely mean a style of song (not necessarily accompanied). To say instrumentation is necessarily inherent in the word is going a little too far, imoho.

The issue for me is that Ephesians and Colossians are not law codes, but personal letters. You don’t interpret a personal letter the way you would a legal document. In a legal document silence prohibits. In a personal letter silence does not—unless the context clearly demands prohibition. Also, what would the silence prohibit? Does it prohibit “playing” or does it prohibit “not singing”? That makes a huge difference!

Again, we agree with each other—we just come to the same conclusion from different ways.

I will say, after worshipping at a national pastors’ conference I was not blown over by an “organ” but by a worship band. While it was billed as worship (as opposed to a concert) the volume was so loud I couldn’t even hear myself sing! Most of the pastors weren’t singing, but visiting—a la concert behavior. Anything can be abused—but I am not eager to run to an instrumental service due to such abuse—especially where worship leaders become front and center instead of Jesus (I know preachers are just as susceptible).

Now I did experience a wonderful worship at the same conference with about 50 people. It was a contemplative service lead by a young man with an acoustic guitar. He sat in a darkened corner—if it wasn’t for the fact that he was “miked” you wouldn’t have even noticed him. There I worshipped!

DS: Darryl makes some good points (as he almost always does) about the meaning of the word “psallo,” as well as the work of Edward Ferguson (to whom Brad referred). If you’re interested in a lengthy article specifically about **psallo**--one that included the denominational support argument I wrote about and a number of overly presumptive conclusions--[click here](#). I do not deny that the meaning of **psallo** may have evolved by the first century, but I would also suggest that Paul would have understood that at one time **psallo** involved instruments and if he had meant to issue any ban, he would either have avoided the use of the word or stated clearly that he meant voices only. He did neither. Furthermore, if instrumentation is **not** implied by **psallo**, how does it differ from **humnos** (hymn)?

It is also important to remember that the Septuagint (LXX) was the dominant edition of Jewish Scripture in the first century among those to whom Paul was writing. When the word *may* have evolved in common usage, Paul certainly would have been fully aware of its use in the LXX.

I agree that evidence of instrumental use in the New Testament church is thin, but it’s a lot stronger than evidence for any kind of ban on instruments. As I suggest in the essay, ultimately the meaning of “psallo” doesn’t really matter because the New Testament is not a new set of regulations and, even if it were, any reference about assembly practices are far too ambiguous and vague to serve as reasonable regulations.

Finally, Brad’s question about which scholars to believe is certainly valid. While I do not wish to disparage scholarly biblical word study, I find the argument over **psallo** rather silly. A plain reading of Scripture reveals no clear ban (nor even an obvious vague one) on instruments even, as I comment below in a response to Rob, purely instrumental music. A command to sing to one another in no way precludes over forms of praising God.

From Alphaia (this note was too long to quote in its entirety, so these are excerpts):
...there is no known physical instrument that has a heart to make melody in! Neither did the Spirit confirm a word that indicates we must make "harmony", which is also purely physical. My question is: Can anyone show how the instrument has a spiritual heart? An instrument makes harmony, not melody.

DS: First, Alphaia addressed me as "brother Dick," which I take as a confirmation that, despite the fact that he found "so many things...that I believe are in error," he says he is not one of those who condemns those with differing opinions. I appreciate that and, even though I disagree with Alphaia, I reciprocate. As far as this part of the comment is concerned, Alphaia is referring to Ephesians 5:19 ("...singing (**ado**) and making melody (**psallo**) to the Lord with all your heart"). If **psallo** does in fact mean "to play an instrument," certainly a faithful believer could both sing and play an instrument with all his or her heart focused on the love of God. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). Surely, this can include playing an instrument!

Alphaia continues:

Also, concerning classification of Christians "condemning congregations" (the ekklesia) is not our job. (Matt.7:1). However, we must each determine what we must do by faith, (Rom.14:23) and condemn any practice not necessary to keep and perform the Lord's work. If this is not true, I wonder what the Lord really meant when He said in: John 12:48, "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. AND in: Matt. 4:4 "Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" AND Paul's statement in Eph. 2:8-10, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them". This sounds to me like God requires men to live by faith, surely this must be from God's "word" (Code of ethics or law or {?}). Rom.10:17 tells us what He desires. This truth, does not say that we can do anything to earn salvation, Our salvation is free and paid for, provided we follow the Master's words. WE SURE CAN NOT BE SAVED WITHOUT "Working in his vineyard". If this is not so, what do the following Passages mean?

John 6:29, "Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. (to believe includes trust and obey, does it not?)

Philip. 2:12, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Col. 1:10b, "...being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God".

2 Thess. 1:11b. "....and fulfill all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power"

Rev. 22:12, "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be." (KJV).

DS: This is the heart of the matter and where Alphaia and I apparently part company. From Alphaia's argument, I think we'd have to conclude that Paul was not saved from his tortured confession in Romans 7:15-25; e.g., "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (7:19). Even Paul lamented that he could not keep do everything God expected of him. What was the solution? Deliverance from our hopeless condition through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, which relieves us of the sentence of death if we remain faithful (a mind and heart condition) to Him.

There is a clear inconsistency in Alphaia's argument. On the one hand, he quotes Ephesians 2:8-10, which clearly declares that our salvation has nothing whatsoever to do with our works, even our worship "works" in the assembly, yet later he claims "we sure can not be saved without 'working in His vineyard.'" I have to ask, which is it? Are we saved by grace or by "working in His vineyard." If we cannot be saved without the latter, then what is the value of grace?

The Old Covenant introduced the Law so that sin would be revealed, proving our need for something different, and that something is God's own condescension to become one of us and, despite His complete innocence from sin, take on our guilt and satisfy His righteous sentence for our sin. As Paul says, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25a)

Does this mean we are free to act however we wish? Of course not! But the New Covenant freed us to act in love (albeit inconsistently) not by regulation but by the freedom bought by grace.

Alpha continues:

ISN'T it true, "The old Law Covenant is gone, with a replacement of a New one? Paul called the NEW ONE "A LAW" in Romans 8:2, because through Christ Jesus "the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." How can we accept the claim that the law (Covenant) of Christ is "fruitless regulations", when Paul wrote 1 Cor, 9:.21, "To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law, so as to win those not having the law". Note, Paul did not say "A Law".

DS: The law of Christ is NOT fruitless regulations—it is one thing: putting faith in Christ and doing our best (which will never be good enough) to worship him through in everything we do. This is the ONLY regulation in the new covenant, the only thing that can bear fruit. To suggest that the new covenant consists of a new litany of minute regulations is to reduce it to the same fruitlessness as the Old Covenant. The Levitical Law was useful only in that it revealed sin. Would you have the New Covenant serve only that purpose?

Paul uses "the law of Christ" to DIFFERENTIATE the old covenant from the new covenants, which he presents as categorically different. The old law consisted of fruitless regulations since, because of our sinfulness, man is unable to attain salvation through them. If the new law were of the same nature as the old, it would be equally fruitless. I thank God the law covenant does NOT consist of a bunch of regulations that must be met to "earn" salvation. Neither you nor I would make it if it were.

Being "under Christ's Law" is being under grace, where the sentence for our guilt has ALREADY BEEN PAID. This does not free us to libertine behavior, but it does free us from a penalty for our inevitable sinfulness. Furthermore, it frees us to acts of love and kindness out of a grateful heart rather than out of legal obligation.

Alpha concludes:

A final question: How can we claim that these things do not apply to the church assemblies? Certainly some items are private, but is it not foolish to expect us to "teach and admonish one another" in song when not together? (Col.3:16). But Paul used the term "church" specifically 9 times in Ephesians and 6 times in Colossians with directions in Col. 4:16, "And when this epistle is read among "you" (is this not the church?) cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea". How can we claim these instructions were not to the church?

DS: I never suggested that Paul's instructions do not apply to the assembly, but when Paul refers to the "church," he is **not** referring specifically to the assembly, he is referring either to a specific group of Christians in a specific place (e.g., Colossians 4:15, 16) or the worldwide body of Christians (e.g., Colossians 1:24). Paul's emphasis is **not** the assembly (except where he is correcting errors such as those in Corinth), but rather the whole of Christian life. As a result, if we **were** to conclude that instruments were banned, we would have to apply that outside the assembly--Christians would be completely and permanently enjoined from the use of instruments in **any** setting!

I conclude my response to Alpha's comments with this open introduction from a private letter to him:

*Alpha, Your comments bring me enormous grief because even though I firmly believe you love the Lord and are seeking to serve Him, you appear to be putting your hope in your faithful works rather than in His grace, and your works can never be good enough to satisfy God's righteous demands. Our only hope comes through the fact that Christ has already paid the price for our inevitable sinfulness, freeing us to display our gratitude through loving action. But these actions will **never** be perfect, and God demands perfection. That perfection comes through Christ's sacrifice **only**.*

From Steve:

Dick - thank you for this outstanding article! While studying the subject of "unity" I've been thinking a lot about our "command-example-necessary inference" hermeneutic. It seems like we've had the most division over inference, perhaps because of our desire to have a "pattern" for everything the church does. I think there is so much to work on in the area of loving God and our neighbors to be bashing one another on inferences. But we can't stand the silence! I think this is a good area to apply Romans 14:22. [*The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.*] Someone pointed out that the same argument used against instruments is used for church buildings, hymnals, and other things about which Scripture is silent. He said, one man's "aid" is another man's "innovation." If we realized how inconsistent we are in applying Scripture, perhaps we would all be more humble and tentative in our conclusions. Thanks again - I really appreciate you!

DS: My thanks to Steve for his kind remarks and his excellent observations.

From Dan:

You have written an excellent article. However, as a lifelong member of the Church of Christ, I would just like to see us known by our love. There is absolutely nothing in scripture directing what kind of music is used in worship or any other detailed format of a worship service. Our greatest commands are to love God and love our fellowman. Lets unite in bringing Jesus to the world and love and respect others and leave any decision about worship style or music to the elders of each local congregation and how we can best reach the lost. Maybe God just wants to see how we can settle our differences on issues that he gave no direction. Personally, I feel if god did not specify, he does not care. I appreciate the freedom and flexibility. Let's encourage other to love God, Love each other, and respect differences of opinion on minor issues and move to solve the really great problems of the world and follow the specific items which God directed.

DS: Here, here! I made the same basic point at the beginning of the article.

From Pete:

I appreciate your great research of this matter. I would like you to consider in your heart that the altar was made with stones that were uncut (God made) and Moses was to take off his sandals and walk with bare feet (God made) on holy ground. He may want us to sing with our voices (God made). I am not sure that it is a matter of silence. If God covers the what and how then that is not silence. This is only food for your thought. I was raised Lutheran and I will not say that we worshiped the

organ but it was clearly up front in every sense of the word.
No reply needed. Have a great day.

DS: I am absolutely convinced that God does indeed want us to sing with our God-made voices, I'm just convinced He has no problem with us using instruments to enable our singing, just as we use plates and small cups to enhance the communion (although I know some would argue with such usage).

From Darrell:

Bravo, my brother. I think this is one of the most elegant articles I ever read on the matter. I have seen both arguments adamantly stated and based on what I've read in your article, they were both in error.

From Rob:

"Musical instruments cannot accomplish that purpose, but they can enhance the vocal utterances that accomplish that purpose."
This is the only comment with which I don't really agree. The Greeks believed in music's power to influence the listener's character as taught under the Doctrine of Ethos. Greek boys learned music beginning at age 6 in the gymnasium. Instrumental music alone can be quite encouraging, and the Bible indicates as much. Recall that David was called in to play his harp for King Saul as the king was being tortured by an evil spirit sent by God. Furthermore, some of the most uplifting music is instrumental only or mostly. I think specifically of Beethoven's work, especially the "Ninth Symphony" and "Ave Maria" (I don't think I've ever heard this in any language but Italian or Latin, so it might as well be instrumental.). Even when the chorale is absent from the Ninth, I know what the music is about, and it makes my heart swell with gladness. Seriously, I love it. Or think of Aaron Copeland's "Appalachian Spring" based on the Puritan song "Simple Gifts." It evokes in me images of a God who supplies all that we need in simple, blossoming gifts. It's simply (a fully intended pun) beautiful. Pachelbel's "Canon in D Minor" arouses the memory of my wife walking down the aisle to accept my hand in marriage. This old flint becomes positively teary eyed when I hear it. Do I need to mention Bach's "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring"? No words, but the context is clear from the title alone. Any piece of instrumental music can be placed in a context and interpreted for an audience so that they can reflect on its moods and intended meaning, even embellishing it with their own meaning and adding layers of their own experience. Just as is done with responsive hymns, we know that sometimes it is best to sit back and listen and meditate. As a guitar player, the playing itself is encouraging to me, especially as I reflect on the fact that I and many others have been given the innate faculty to essentially "sing" with something in addition to my vocal chords (I used to sing barber shop quartet, by the way, but my voice isn't so good anymore). I'm not relying on the instrument to do my worshipping for me. I engage my whole body in the production of music. When I get together with my friends to play, the camaraderie that we build is exactly what I think Paul is referring to in Colossians and Ephesians because we are "...making melody to the Lord with all [our] heart[s], giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." It takes submission to one another to play music together well.

DS: Rob was one of the brothers I asked to review preliminary versions of the essay, and he was very helpful in pointing out some weaknesses. He sent this note before the final version, and I agree, but I decided to save his remark for the discussion. I found it particularly interesting that many of the compositions he cited as inspiring (Copeland, Pachelbel, Bach) are among my favorites as well.

After publication, Rob sent this addition comment:

Well, spot on. I'm not sure I have much to add, but I really enjoyed reading this final version.

If there is anything I would think about a little more is the following statement: "That God was literally deadly serious about the acts of worship he authorized under the Mosaic Law is amply demonstrated in one Old Testament passage"

...(O)ver time my thinking has evolved to embrace the idea that God was concerned about Holiness and our intentions towards it, not necessarily strict rule keeping. The implication in these passages is that Nadab and Abihu were drunk. In their inebriated state they broke the rules. But Aaron's other son's also broke the rules about the way the sacrificial meat was to be eaten, but they weren't killed because they made their mistake out of grief over their familial loss. David ate the show bread reserved for priests, and Jesus praises his decision. Jesus healed on the Sabbath and "harvested" on the Sabbath. Why? Because the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. By extension, I think we can say that the Law was actually made for man, not man for the Law. Isn't that ultimately the point of this discussion about music? That God has made mankind to glorify Him in all dimensions and that man would enjoy God forever through the full expression of his creative faculties.

From Al:

Thanks for the "Ekklesia Then & Now" email on music in the church. It is one of the best I have read. It helps that I agree with you. However, you analyzed this like you do each of your emails and put it together so well. Thanks for your contribution to the discussion.

From Bobby:

Thank you for the study you shared with us about Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, I really appreciated it.

One thing you didn't mention (I may have overlooked it) is the argument which is made from Eph. 5:19 that the "instrument which is to be twanged or plucked is the kardia, the heart strings." The text says that we are to sing and psalm with the heart.

Would you comment on this please. In my studies I have come to the same conclusions that you have.

Fraternally in Jesus

DS: "addressing one another in psalms (**psalmos**) and hymns (**humnos**) and spiritual songs (**ode pneumatikos**), singing (**ado**) and making melody (**psallo**) to the Lord with all your heart (**kardia**)" (Ephesians 5:19).

If Paul meant for the phrase "with your heart" to modify only psallo, that might bolster an argument that he understood psallo to mean pluck (pluck your heart strings), but, as I expressed earlier, it seems to apply to the entire activity--ado (singing) and psallo (making melody, playing an instrument). Again, however, a rejection of a biblical basis for a ban on instruments does not rest primarily on the meaning of psallo.

Finally, I received one more response about the "Ultimate Reality Vacation" issue (ET&N 71) from Wayne:

Especially appreciated your piece on the LA experience. I did a similar trek last October. Attached as Word doc. are three e-mail reports back to the church here who supported me in it.

I forwarded your report to our church members who have e-mail, and had a few hard copies for our other folks last Sunday morning.

DS: I enjoyed reading Wayne's report from New Orleans, both because he too stayed at Tammany Oaks and because he was there several months before I was, when things were still much wetter. He reported that his team wore protective overalls and face masks. When I was there, most of the mud had dried, so we generally did not

wear the suits, but we certainly wore masks because of all the mold. Wayne mentioned moving a refrigerator/freezer, and we moved several of those, too. Experiencing the smell of a refrigerator that's been sitting for seven months without power (and remember many New Orleanians eat a lot of shrimp) is something unforgettable!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion! You can also [e-mail me](#), and if you choose to post, I probably won't distribute your post individually since that costs me money. Rather, I will copy your post to the "Discussion" section of the next issue.

NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Puteoli (May 16)

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