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## Chapter 5.9

# The Church's Historical Testimony to & Demonstration of *Virtue Apologetics*

*Christianity Has Done More Good than All Other Religions Combined*

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### **Primary Points**

- Early Church leaders boasted about the superior virtue of Christians.
- The Church did not emphasize apologetics in the Reformation era.
- Edwards: "Christian practice is . . . the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences."
- Spurgeon to an agnostic who challenged the superiority and veracity of his faith, "The God who answereth by orphanages, let Him be God."
- Unfortunately, in the last 200 years it is very difficult to find Christian leaders who will support the value and place of *virtue apologetics*.
- The real God is the real source of any real love and real Christians have been the superior source of such supernatural love.
- All of the other religions *combined* do not even begin to compare with the religion that is really from God in regards to loving humanity.
- Addison: "As it spread through the world it seemed to change mankind into another species of beings."
- Pinnock: "Eastern religions seem to produce stagnant societies, and Islam, intolerant ones."
- Gerstner: "The ultimate proof of the divinity of the Christian religion [is] its influence in the world during the past twenty centuries."
- Gerstner: "No society which has once lapsed into barbarism has ever been known to rise to civilization except by the Christian religion."
- Any student of history can confirm that the level of morality and virtue of any given culture has been in direct proportion to the presence and vitality of Christianity.
- Kennedy: "Despite its humble origins, the Church has made more changes on earth for the good than any other movement or force [or religion] in history."
- There is no other religion in the world that can boast, or will ever be able to boast, that it has even one Mary Slessor.
- Neither the duration nor popularity of a religion which proves its divinity, but rather, its virtue.

## A) The Church's Historical Testimony to *Virtue Apologetics*

### A.1) Early Church

We have suggested and demonstrated in previous chapters that virtue is the ultimate apologetic prescribed in the Scriptures. This same perspective was shared by the generation of Christians immediately following the Apostles as well. The apologists of the ancient Church used several apologetic approaches in their effort to defend the new religion of Christianity to the culture of their day. However, contrary to the suggestion of many, they were not primarily concerned to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of Christian belief over Greek philosophy and pagan superstition. Rather, like Christ and the Apostles, their most repeated and important apologetic approach was the supernatural virtue displayed in the Christian community.

Thus, Justin Martyr (c. 100-165; who earned his namesake by dying for his faith) addressing his *Apology* to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius about the year 150 declared:

Since our persuasion by the Word . . . we who formerly delighted in fornication now cleave only to chastity. We who exercised the magic arts now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all else the acquisition of wealth and property now direct all that we have to a common fund, which is shared with every needy person. We who hated and killed one another, and who, because of differing customs, would not share a fireside with those of another race, now, after the appearance of Christ, live together with them. We pray for our enemies, and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us that, if they live according to the excellent precepts of Christ, they will have a good hope of receiving the same reward as ourselves, from the God who governs all.<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, an apology for the Christian faith was written to the Roman Emperor Hadrian by a Christian philosopher named Aristides (died c. 134). We see that *virtue apologetics* was the foundation of his approach as he writes:

Other than Him, no god do they [the Christians] worship. They have the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself impressed upon their hearts, and they observe them, awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. They do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor do they bear false witness, nor covet the goods of other men. They honor

father and mother and love their neighbors; and they render just judgment. What they would not want done to them, they do not do to another. They make appeal to those who wrong them, and win them to themselves as friends.

They hasten to do good to their enemies. They are gentle and reasonable. They abstain from every unlawful exchange and from all uncleanness. They despise not the widow, nor do they distress the orphan. Whoever has, distributes liberally to him that has not. Should they see a stranger, they take him under roof, and rejoice over him as over a blood brother. For not after the flesh do they call themselves brethren, but after the spirit. For the sake of Christ they are ready to lay down their lives. They keep His commands without wavering, living holy and just lives as the Lord God commanded them; and they give thanks to Him every hour for all their food and drink and for the rest of their goods. <sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Athenagoras of Athens (c. 133-190) relied upon *virtue apologetics* when he wrote his *Plea for the Christians* to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius around the year 180. His treatise contained such chapter headings as "The Elevated Morality of the Christians," and "The Vast Difference in Morals Between the Christians and Their Accusers." Among other things, he wrote:

We are so far from practicing promiscuous intercourse, that it is not lawful among us to indulge even a lustful look. . . . [Christians] are to be called to account for their very thoughts, how can any one doubt that such persons practice self-control? For our account lies not with human laws, which a bad man can evade, but we have a law which makes the measure of rectitude to consist in dealing with our neighbor as ourselves. <sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch (c. 185), described the general morality of the day in his *Apology to Autolycus* and countered:

But far be it from Christians to conceive any such deeds; for with them temperance dwells, self-restraint is practiced, monogamy is observed, chastity is guarded, iniquity exterminated, sin extirpated, righteousness exercised, law administered, worship performed, God acknowledged: truth governs, grace guards, peace screens them; the holy word guides, wisdom teaches, life directs, God reigns. <sup>4</sup>

Around the year 220, a Roman Christian lawyer named Minucius Felix wrote in an apology to the authorities for his faith:

If we Christians be compared to you [Roman society in general], although some of us may not be equal to our standards, we shall

be found to be much better than you. You forbid adultery, yet you do it. We, however, are known as men only to our wives. You punish crimes when they have been committed. With us, it is a sin even to consider a crime. You fear witnesses. We fear even our own conscience, which we cannot escape. And finally, the jails are full of your people; but there is no Christian there, unless his crime be his religion. Otherwise, he is an apostate.<sup>5</sup>

About the same time, the famous Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220) wrote, "We are not recognized in any other way than by the reformation of our former vices."<sup>6</sup> A little over a hundred years later, the great early Church leader Chrysostom (c. 345-407), taught that the most effective means of evangelism was the example of Christian living and said, "There would be no more heathen if we would be true Christians."<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Chrysostom thought such virtue was the most powerful miracle:

When [Christians] are careless about virtue, and those who [see] it withdraw themselves far from our ranks, how are we to subdue our enemies? For even if miracles were wrought now, who would be persuaded? For so it is, that our upright living seems unto the many the more trustworthy argument of the two; miracles admitting of a bad construction on the part of obstinate bad men; whereas a pure life will have abundant power to stop the mouth of the devil himself.<sup>8</sup>

An additional reason that the leaders of the post-apostolic Church used *virtue apologetics* to support their claims of spiritual superiority was that the miraculous *sign gifts* such as healing and tongues had ceased. Elsewhere, we quote several of these early Church leaders as testifying to this very thing, and because such apostolic miracle working was no longer occurring in order to authenticate the Gospel, *virtue apologetics* was preferred.<sup>9</sup> Although, we would suggest the "**greater works**" (John 14:12) of the spiritual miracle of supernatural virtue was even preferred by Christ and the Apostles who could work physical miracles.

## A.2) Middle Ages & Reformation

While *virtue apologetics* was at the heart of proving the superiority of the Christian faith in its early history, the foremost apologist of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), focused primarily on *intellectual apologetics*. Nonetheless, Christian apologist Alan Richardson notes:

St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that Mohammed had won men to his allegiance by promising carnal delights, whereas the

greatest of all the Christian miracles was that Christianity effected the conversion on a vast scale of wise and simple alike, despite the fact that it promised not carnal but spiritual rewards-with persecutions.

This "wondrous conversion of the world to the Christian faith" is proof that the miraculous signs did take place and were seen to guarantee the truth of the revelation in Christ. Mohammed had had to rely not merely on carnal promises but also on fables; "nor did he add any signs of supernatural agency, which alone are a fitting witness to divine inspiration, since a visible work that can be from God alone proves the teacher of truth to be invisibly inspired: but he [Mohammed] asserted that he was sent in the power of military arms-a sign that is not lacking even to robbers and tyrants."<sup>10</sup>

In addition, some of the monasteries at that time were the preserve of authentic Christian piety and were often exemplars of *virtue apologetics*. *Virtue apologetics* is precisely what one of their foremost leaders, St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was referring to when he famously said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary use words."<sup>11</sup>

As we move into the Reformation period, we still do not see an emphasis on the objective moral proof that regeneration provides to authenticate Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote in his *Preface to the New Testament*:

Truly, if [saving] faith is there, he cannot hold back; he proves himself, breaks out to good works, confesses and teaches this Gospel before the people, and stakes his life on it. . . . That is what Christ meant when at the last he gave no other commandment than love, by which men are to know who were his disciples [John 13:34-35] and true believers. For where works and love do not break forth, there faith is not right, the Gospel does not yet take hold, and Christ is not rightly known.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, in Luther's *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* we read:

[Saving] Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. It is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this [saving] faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. . . . Because of it [saving faith],

without compulsion, Christians are ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown them this grace.<sup>14</sup>

Along these lines we can quote the Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683):

Yea, of all the external arguments that are or may be pleaded to justify the divine authority of the Scripture, there is none more prevalent nor cogent than this of its mighty efficacy in all ages on the souls of men, to change, convert, and renew them into the image and likeness of God, which hath been visible and manifest.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, apologetics in general was not an emphasis during the Reformation. We would suggest this was because they were more concerned with preaching the Gospel, then arguing about it, as we discuss elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Post-Reformation apologetics seemed to focus again on the *intellectual* kind as evidenced in the popular works of ones like John Locke (1632-1704) and William Paley (1743-1805).

### A.3) Eighteenth Century

However, in the eighteenth century, we find one of the best statements concerning *virtue apologetics* in the writings of the foremost skeptic of miracles in the history of the world, even though it was probably sarcasm. In the process of concluding the most famous critique of Christianity's appeal to the authentication of miracles, David Hume (1711-1786) wrote in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

Upon the whole we may conclude that the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity. And whoever is moved by faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.<sup>17</sup>

A clearer statement describing *virtue apologetics* would be hard to find. Although we would affirm that the "continued miracle in his own person" would be objective evidence to base a reasonable conclusion on, something that Hume would have denied.

As we move to the American scene in the eighteenth century, we encounter Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) who, while not at all

neglecting *intellectual apologetics*, did much to further *virtue apologetics* with the publication of his lengthy *A Treatise on Religious Affections*. Here he forcefully argued that the godliness of truly born again Christians is unique, and that it is virtues that ultimately prove a Christian's spiritual superiority to themselves and others. After minutely discussing a multitude of other evidences, Edwards shares his conclusions in the final part of the *Treatise*, some of which we have excerpted in the following:

I shall consider Christian practice and holy life, as a manifestation and sign of the sincerity of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors and brethren. . . . And that this is the chief sign of grace in this respect, is very evident from the word of God. [Christ taught] men's fruits must be the chief evidence of what sort they are . . . so it is the evidence that Christ has mainly directed us to give to others, whereby they may judge of us: Matt. 5:16. . . . Doubtless, when Christ gives us a rule how to make our light shine, that others may have evidence of it, his rule is the best that is to be found. . . . Thus it is plain, that Christian practice is the best sign or manifestation of the true godliness of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors. . .

Christian practice is plainly spoken of in the word of God, as the main evidence of the truth of grace, not only to others, but to men's own consciences. It is not only more spoken of and insisted on than other signs, but in many places where it is spoken of, it is represented as the chief of all evidences. . . .

Another thing which makes it evident, that holy practice is the chief of all the signs of the sincerity of professors, not only to the world, but to their own consciences, is, that this is the grand evidence which will hereafter be made use of, before the judgment seat of God; according to which his judgment will be regulated, and the state of every professor of religion unalterably determined [cf. Matt 25:31-46]. . . .

Now from all that has been said, I think it to be abundantly manifest, that Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs.<sup>18</sup>

Just one of the biblical evidences Edwards gave for the superiority of *virtue apologetics* was his remarks on the sixth chapter of Hebrews:

And the Apostles do mention a Christian practice, as the principal ground of their esteem of persons as true Christians. As . . . in the 6th chapter of Hebrews. There the Apostle, in the beginning of the chapter, speaks of them that have great

common illuminations, that have been enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, that afterwards fall away, and are like barren ground, that is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned: and then immediately adds in the 9th verse (expressing his charity for the Christian Hebrews, as having that saving grace, which is better than all these common illuminations): "But beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation; though we thus speak."

And then in the next verse, he tells them what was the reason he had such good thoughts of them: he does not say that it was because they had given him a good account of a work of God upon their souls, and talked very experimentally; but it was their work and labor of love; "For God is not unrighteous, to forget your work and labor of love."<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, while Edwards obviously believed in the evangelistic power of preaching, in a sermon on Psalm 139:23-24 he said:

If those who call themselves Christians, thus walked in all the paths of virtue and holiness, it would tend more to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ in the world, the conviction of sinners, and propagation of religion among unbelievers, than all the sermons in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Another well known Puritan at heart, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), also emphasized *virtue apologetics* in his ministry and evangelism. One of his biographers describes the enormous social welfare work conducted in London under Spurgeon's leadership and remarked:

The Almshouses and the orphanage were, of course, the fruit of Christianity, and they stood out in sharp contrast to the lack of such institutions among the unbelievers. England had then its 'Free Thinkers' Societies and its Agnostic Associations, but those organizations did nothing to help the poor and the suffering. They labored to denounce Christianity, but they knew nothing of self-sacrifice for the sake of the needy. Like the Levite in the parable, they "passed by on the other side."

But evangelical Christians had long been associated with the building of homes for the aged and for orphaned children. Professor Francke had erected and maintained a great orphanage in Germany, and George Whitefield had molded his life around such a project in the American colony of Georgia. George Müller was conducting an orphanage that was home to more than two thousand youngsters in England. Dr. Barnardo gave up his medical practice to devote himself to aiding homeless children.

To an agnostic who one day accosted him and challenged his Christian beliefs, Spurgeon pointed out the failure of the unbelievers' organizations to take on any definite and sustained program of help to the thousands of needy around them. In contrast he pointed to the works that sprang from evangelical Christianity, and he closed the conversation by paraphrasing the triumphant cry of Elijah, vigorously asserting, as well he might, "The God who answereth by orphanages, let Him be God." <sup>21</sup>

We would suggest that virtually every strain of Christianity today, including Evangelical, Reformed, Anglican, Roman, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Charismatic, are all in desperate need of reestablishing Chrysostom's, Edwards' and Spurgeon's emphasis on *virtue apologetics*. Thus we can hardly find any testimonies to such a thing in the last 200 years.

While it is unfortunately extremely difficult to find a contemporary Christian book or commentary that will assert *virtue apologetics*, several years ago Dr. Yandall Woodfin, Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated what should be obvious:

One can hold the Christian faith to be true only to the degree that it is capable of demonstrating its claim in the arena of pragmatic confirmation. . . . [T]he final proof of theology is found in the quality of one's life. The world can learn that Christianity has received the ultimate and final revelation only when Christians present the exclusiveness of this claim through the demonstration of their love. <sup>22</sup>

## **B) The Church's Historical Demonstration of *Virtue Apologetics***

If it is true that born again Christians are expected and equipped by God to be morally superior to others, in order to prove their epistemological and spiritual superiority to others, we would expect this superiority to be demonstrated throughout the history of the Church. And it has. The real God is the real source of any real love and it must be at least admitted by any unbiased observer of human history that real Christians have been the superior source of such supernatural love.

If anyone would doubt this, we can simply ask how many orphanages, medical missions, hospitals, disaster relief organizations, homeless shelters, food banks, and a myriad of other human welfare institutions have been started, served, and funded by Christian individuals and countries compared with those of any other religion in

the world? All of the other religions *combined* do not even begin to compare with the religion that is really from God in regards to loving humanity.

### **B.1) Early Christianity**

Although there has been an inexcusable lack of writing and research regarding *virtue apologetics* for the Christian faith, especially in our generation, some can be found. For example, concerning the early Church compared with competing religions of the time, NT scholar William Baird notes:

[A]fter Alexander [the Great], syncretistic cults, combining Greek and oriental ideas, moved from the East to the West. Carried by soldiers and migrants, these cults spread their message by written and oral propaganda, rituals and rumors of miracles. They promised escape from fate and death; they satisfied curiosity about the world and the mysteries of the East. Yet the surprising thing is the slightness of the change which they effected in the fundamental temper of the people among whom they took root. Within this world of competing religions, Nock notes that Christianity was remarkably successful.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, we read in *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*:

Christianity burst into a corrupt world with a brilliantly new moral radiance. . . . The moral level of society was dismal, and sin prevailed in many forms. . . . Into this discouraged world came Christ and his Spirit-transformed disciples, filled with holy joy, motivated by a love which the pagans could not grasp.<sup>24</sup>

Also, Joseph Addison in his apologetic writings noted:

There was one other means enjoyed by the learned Pagans of the three first centuries, for satisfying them in the truth of our Saviour's history which I might have flung under one of the foregoing heads but as it is so shining a particular, and does so much honour to our religion, I shall make a distinct article of it, and only consider it with regard to the subject I am upon: I mean the lives and manners of those holy men who believed in Christ during the first ages of Christianity.

I should be thought to advance a paradox, should I affirm that there were more Christians in the world during those times of persecution than there are at present in these which we call the flourishing times of Christianity. But this will be found an indisputable truth, if we form our calculation upon the opinions which prevailed in those days, that every one who lives in the habitual practice of any voluntary sin actually cuts himself off

from the benefits and profession of Christianity, and whatever he may call himself, is in reality no Christian, nor ought to be esteemed as such.

In the time that we are now surveying, the Christian religion shewed its full force and efficacy on the minds of men, and by many examples demonstrated what great and generous souls it was capable of producing. It exalted and refined its proselytes, to a very high degree of perfection, and set them far above the pleasures, and even the pains, of this life. It strengthened the infirmity, and broke the fierceness of human nature. It lifted up the minds of the ignorant to the knowledge and worship of him that made them, and inspired the vicious with a rational devotion, a strict purity of heart, and an unbounded love to their fellow-creatures.

In proportion as it spread through the world it seemed to change mankind into another species of beings. No sooner was a convert initiated into it, but, by an easy figure, he became a new man, and both acted and looked upon himself as one regenerated and born a second time into another state of existence.

It is not my business to be more particular in the accounts of primitive Christianity which have been exhibited so well by others, but rather to observe, that the Pagan converts, of whom I am now speaking, mention this great reformation of those who had been the greatest sinners, with that sudden and surprising change which it made in the lives of the most profligate, as having something in it supernatural, miraculous, and more than human.

Origen represents this power in the Christian religion, as no less wonderful than that of curing the lame and blind, or cleansing the leper. Many others represented it in the same light, and looked upon it as an argument, that there was a certain divinity in that religion which showed itself in such strange and glorious effects.

This therefore was a great means not only of recommending Christianity to honest and learned Heathens, but of confirming them in the belief of our Saviour's history, when they saw multitudes of virtuous men daily forming themselves upon his example, animated by his precepts, and actuated by that Spirit which he had promised to send among his disciples.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Kenneth Latourette, Yale Professor of Church History, suggested that virtue was the reason for the early Church's rapid growth when he writes:

Christianity has become the most potent single force in the life of mankind. . . . Why was it that Christianity had this amazing expansion? How shall we account for the fact that, beginning as

what to the casual observer must have appeared a small and obscure sect of Judaism, before its first five centuries were out it had become the faith of the Roman state and of the vast majority of the population of that realm and had spread eastward as far as Central Asia and probably India and Ceylon and westward into far away Ireland? Why of all the many faiths which were competing for the allegiance of the Roman Empire, many of them with a much more promising outlook, did it emerge victor? . . . .

In spite of the divisions which we are to describe in the next chapter, the Christian churches were the most inclusive and the strongest of all the various associations in the Roman world. They cared for their poor and for those of their number imprisoned for their faith. In times of distress churches would help one another by gifts of money or food. A Christian holding membership in a local unit of the Church would be among friends in whatever city or town he found others of his communion. The only fellowship approaching that of the Christians in solidarity was that of the Jews, and in contrast with the churches, which welcomed all, regardless of race, this was as much racial and cultural as religious. . . .

The constancy of the martyrs under torture impressed many non-Christians. As we have seen, by no means all Christians stood up under trial. Many wilted. Yet enough remained firm to give convincing evidence of a power which nerved children, old men, and weak women as well as stalwart youths to hold to their faith under grueling and prolonged torment and to do so without bitterness towards their enemies. One of the apologists was obviously speaking truth when he declared that when reviled, the Christians blessed.

Moreover, Christianity worked the moral transformation which it demanded. Augustine was by no means the first or the only morally defeated individual who found victory in the Gospel. This was so frequent as to be almost normal. The apologists rang the changes on the welcome given by the Christian community to the tarnished, weak dregs of society and on the regenerating vigour of the faith. . . . Through the Spirit promised by Jesus came the moral transformations which were so marked in the Christian fellowship. . . .

The exceeding greatness of the power was displayed primarily in the transformation of those men and women who became followers of Christ, who put their trust in him. Even now, so Jesus had said, men might enter the kingdom of God, and, indeed, were entering it. To use other figures employed in the New Testament, men could be born again, they could die to sin and, by the same power which raised Jesus from the dead, they could be raised to walk in newness of life. The proof that they

had experienced this new birth, this resurrection to a new life, was to be seen in their "fruits," in the "fruits of the Spirit." . . .

It was chiefly through such lives that the creative impulse was released which produced the Church and Christian literature, theology, and worship, which swept away the pagan cults of the Roman Empire, which wrestled with the problems of war and with the relation to the state, property, marriage, and the popular amusements. It was through these lives that within the Church the position of women and children was lifted, dignity was given to labour, and much of the sting was taken from slavery.

No individual attained fully to the "high calling of God in Christ." . . . Yet here, in earthen vessels, was a power at work which, in spite of what looked like chronic frustration, out of human material apparently hopelessly and basically marred and twisted, was achieving the seemingly impossible, the re-creation of thousands of men and women until they displayed something of the quality of life which was seen in Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Along the same lines, Charles Colson has written:

Consider the rise of the Christians during the Roman era. People were drawn to Christians, not because of evangelistic outreaches or crusades, or through mass media-those didn't exist. The church grew because Christians were doing the gospel and had a community-a local church-where people really loved each other.

During the great plagues that swept Rome in the second century, all of the doctors fled, but the Christians stayed and took care of the sick. They embodied what Christians are called to do. Although many Christians died because they took care of the sick, pagans were drawn to Christ because they saw both the love of Christians and Christianity itself as a better way of life.

When Constantine declared Rome the Holy Roman Empire, people thought he did that for political reasons, but he didn't. It was already Christianized; he just recognized the realities of what really happened.<sup>27</sup>

## **B.2) Christianity & the Nations**

Along the same lines, John McClintock (1814-1870) and James Strong (1822-1894) wrote a century ago in their very influential, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, that the Christian's unique spiritual standing is proven by the effect of their virtue:

[T]he superiority of Christian nations over heathen nations is in the possession of those characteristic qualities which are gifts of

the Spirit, in the establishment of such customs, habits, and laws as are agreeable thereto, and in the exercise of an enlightening and purifying influence in the world. . . .

Those nations which are now eminent in power and knowledge are all to be found within the pale of Christendom— not, indeed, free from national vices, yet, on the whole, manifestly superior both to contemporary unbelievers and to paganism in its ancient days.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, James Orr (1844-1913), a highly respected teacher of apologetics and systematic theology in Scotland wrote:

The presence of the Holy Spirit in human hearts, in communities, in history, is as verifiable a fact as any we know. There is a Holy Spirit in the Church--the Fountain of light, of holiness, of power; the Source of sanctification, of renewal, of peace and joy. This effect-- itself supernatural-- needs a cause, and, tracing it back, the cause is only to be found in Acts 2.<sup>29</sup>

One of the more helpful advocates of *virtue apologetics* is NT scholar Alan Richardson who wrote:

It cannot be too strongly stressed that the Church's own life and witness are the true apology for the Christian faith. The facts of contemporary Church history should therefore be made known as widely as possible. . . .

The unique phenomenon of Christian faith and life extending across the centuries is the significant fact which must be explained. The testimony of those who have in every age translated into deeds and life the faith of the Church is the primary apologetic evidence of a continuing special revelation of God.<sup>30</sup>

We can even find some support from Dr. Clark Pinnock, Emeritus Professor of Theology at McMaster Seminary, in spite of the fact that he is a foremost proponent of *inclusivism*. This position claims that essentially all religious roads can lead to Christ, even though people may not know it is Christ they are encountering and being saved by. Nonetheless, Dr. Pinnock is honest about the superiority of Christian virtue when he writes:

What exactly is saintliness anyway? Is it a life of service to the poor (a hallmark of Christianity) or a life of other-worldly contemplation (found in other religions)? . . . I look and see blessings such as universal human rights, the demythologizing of the state, the care of the sick and the poor, . . . and the ideal of self-giving service, and I notice that it is mostly the fruit of the Christian Gospel and possibly proof of its superior sanctifying

power. Eastern religions seem to produce stagnant societies, and Islam, intolerant ones.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most helpful and contemporary defenses of *virtue apologetics* comes from the pen of John Gerstner in his excellent Christian apologetic, *Reasons for Faith*. Dr. Gerstner concludes that "The ultimate proof of the divinity of the Christian religion [is] its influence in the world during the past twenty centuries."<sup>32</sup>

Among other evidences, Dr. Gerstner mentions the research of Dr. Warneck who "was another great student of primitive cultures and the impact of missions upon them." Dr. Gerstner adds, "His many studies and researches in the field concluded that no society which has once lapsed into barbarism has ever been known to rise to civilization except by the Christian religion."<sup>33</sup> This should not surprise us, as any student of history can confirm that the level of morality and virtue of any given culture has been in direct proportion to the presence and vitality of Christianity. No such claim can be made for any other religion.

Dr. Gerstner adds:

While we are speaking about barbaric customs, let us mention in passing what Christianity has done for barbaric peoples generally. Christlieb was one of the most comprehensive students of missions among primitive peoples. He tells us, among many other things, what Christ has done for the Hottentots . . .

[T]hirty years ago, [a Portuguese] might express a doubt as to whether the Gospel could elevate and heal the most degraded heathen [i.e. the Hottentots]. But today the Portuguese can no longer maintain that the Hottentots are a race of apes, incapable of Christianization. You can no longer find written over church doors in Cape Colony, "Dogs and Hottentots not admitted," as at the time when Dr. Van der Kemp fought there for the rights of the downtrodden natives.

Today no one could be found to agree with the French governor of the island of Bourbon, who called out to the first missionary to Madagascar, "So you will make the Malagasy Christians? Impossible. They are mere brutes, and have no more sense than irrational cattle"; since there are hundreds of evangelical congregations established there.<sup>34</sup>

While Muslims and Marxists have imposed their religion on people with human force, Christianity has done so with a divine message authenticated by divine virtue. D. A. Carson, Professor of NT at Trinity writes the following in support of *virtue apologetics* in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount:

For a variety of reasons, Christians have lost this vision of witness [i.e. *virtue apologetics*], and are slow to return to it. But in better days and other lands, the faithful and divinely empowered proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so transformed men that they in turn became the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).

Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted and perverting liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labor, establishment of orphanages, reform of the penal code—in all these areas the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness. The darkness was alleviated. And this, I submit, has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with the norms of the kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

More recently, the late Presbyterian scholar, Dr. D. James Kennedy, has chronicled the unique historical effect of Christian virtue throughout the world in his book, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History*. Dr. Kennedy writes:

Despite its humble origins [one man and a few disciples], the Church has made more changes on earth for the good than any other movement or force [let alone religion] in history. To get an overview of some of the positive contributions Christianity has made through the centuries, here are a few highlights:

Hospitals, which essentially began during the Middle Ages. Universities, which also began during the Middle Ages. . . . Literacy and education for the masses. . . . Representative government . . . Civil liberties. The abolition of slavery, both in antiquity and in more modern times. . . . The elevation of women. Benevolence and charity; the good Samaritan ethic. Higher standards of justice. The elevation of the common man. The condemnation of adultery, homosexuality, and other sexual perversions. This has helped to preserve the human race, and it has spared many from heartache.

High regard for human life [like working against abortion]. The civilizing of many barbarian and primitive cultures. The codifying and setting to writing of many of the world's languages. Greater development of art and music. . . . The countless changed lives transformed from liabilities into assets to society because of the Gospel. The eternal salvation of countless souls!<sup>36</sup>

While some critics may balk at Dr. Kennedy's claims, he offers plenty of evidence to support them. As we discuss elsewhere, even a more accurate understanding of such historical incidents as the Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades will serve to prove our point.<sup>37</sup>

Dr. Kennedy addresses twelve different areas of human life and history, and demonstrates that Christian virtue has had the most positive impact upon them of any other group of people that can be named: political, cultural, religious, or otherwise.

Here, we can only briefly touch on the impact that Christian missionaries have had on the morality of cultures. For example, Dr. Kennedy relates:

The morality of any society can be easily judged by the view it holds of human life. In 1844, H. L. Hastings visited the Fiji Islands. He found there that life was very cheap and that it was held in low esteem. You could buy a human being for \$7.00 or one musket! That was cheaper than a cow. After having bought him you could work him, whip him, starve him, or eat him, according to your preference-and many did the latter.

He returned a number of years later and found that the value of human life had risen tremendously. One could not buy a human being for \$7.00 to beat or eat. In fact, you could not buy one for seven million dollars. Why? Because across the Fiji Islands there were 1,200 Christian chapels where the Gospel of Christ had been proclaimed, and people had been taught that we are not our own; that we have been purchased with a price, not with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Dr. Kennedy shares an interesting anecdote that illustrates the power of *virtue apologetics* on even one of Christianity's greatest foes:

In the last century, there was a great attack on foreign missionaries in the *London Times*. An experienced traveler wrote a letter to the editor in which he criticized this attitude. The letter writer said that such an attitude on the part of a voyager was particularly inexcusable-for should he happen to be cast ashore on some uncharted island, he would devoutly pray that the lesson of the [Christian] missionary had preceded him! The writer of the letter was no less than Charles Darwin, later an enemy of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, he recognized the utilitarian value of the faith.<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Kennedy goes into some detail in documenting what he then concludes:

The religion of Jesus Christ has done more to elevate moral standards than any other force in history. Had Jesus never come, it's unlikely the Ten Commandments would be known beyond the Jews. Had Jesus never come, many of us-those who are of Anglo-Saxon stock-might still be drinking out of human skulls as they used to. Had Jesus never come, the Scandinavians might still be out plundering and terrorizing their neighbors as their ancestors, the Vikings, used to, until the Gospel of Christ took

hold. Had Jesus never come, many of the formerly cannibalistic tribes of Africa, Asia, or the Americas would no doubt still be gorging on human flesh.

But Jesus did come, and He elevated morality and life on earth to a much higher level than ever before. . . . As many in the West continue to reject Him and His standards of right and wrong, we seem to be regressing to the vile and unspeakable sins that besmirched the ancient pagan world.<sup>40</sup>

As an example, Dr. Kennedy shares about one missionary woman named Mary Slessor:

Literally hundreds of stories from the modern missionary movement could be told at this point; stories that underscore the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes the morality of people by transforming their hearts. I will tell of only one, Mary Slessor of Calabar (1848-1915), who was from Scotland.

She was converted in her teens, and after doing mission work in the slums of Dundee, she felt the call of God to serve as a missionary to Africa. In 1876, she left for Nigeria. She learned that beyond Okoyong, deeper in the heart of Africa, around Calabar, was an area in which lived four million savages so ferocious, so fierce, that even the government soldiers feared to penetrate the land. These four million cannibals were so degraded, their customs so vile, that it stretches the imagination to consider the types of things they did.

Witchcraft and drunkenness were rampant. The savages worshiped fetishes; they murdered twins; they turned the mother of twins out into the jungle to be devoured by beasts because they believed twins were brought about by a conjunction with a demon. Almost half of the population was slaves. When a man died, they would eat fifty slaves; twenty-five more would have their hands tied behind them and their heads would be whacked off. Unmarried women were chattel. They could be raped, tortured, or murdered at will. . . . Children were considered no better than animals, often simply left to die.

Mary's heart was touched by the plight of twins always left to die or ground to pieces in a pot. She would snatch them up and take them in. At first the people were astonished because they believed that anybody who touched a twin would die, but Mary didn't die. So she gathered around her over the years many of these young "bairns," as she called them, to nurture them. . . .

Perpetual warfare among the different tribes had continued for innumerable centuries, but when she would hear of a tribe of warriors going out to attack another tribe, she would run barefoot through the jungle, where there were poisonous snakes and plants. She would head them off, standing in front of a whole

host of armed cannibals with outstretched arms to demand that they stop. They did! . . . .

In incredible ways, by her faith in God, in her prayer, her winning countenance, the love she demonstrated, she was accepted. People milled around her and looked. . . . She began to teach them about the Son of God who had loved them enough to die for their sins. Astonishingly, God opened up their hearts. They became very willing to hear.

One after another the chiefs of the various villages yielded their lives to Christ. One after another the tremendously horrible customs plaguing these people for years were abolished; the murder of twins, infanticide, the slaughter of wives and slaves, the trial by poison and boiling oil, and all other terrible customs. Through her ministry, thousands from the Ibo tribe became Christians and abandoned their degrading ways. Indeed, the moral standards of many parts of the world have risen dramatically because of Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

There is no other religion in the world that can boast, or will ever be able to boast, that it has even *one* Mary Slessor. Neither Buddhism, Hinduism, Humanism, Islam, Marxism, or New Age. And the history of Christianity can boast of a multitude more, both those who are well known, and those who are not.

Therefore, it is neither the mere duration nor popularity of a religion which proves its divinity. This fact exposes the error of the well known "Christian" philosopher John Hick who is a foremost promoter of *pluralism*, or the idea that virtually any religion is as good as another. For example, Dr. Hick writes:

Every conception of the divine which has come out of a great revelatory experience and has been tested through a long tradition of worship, and has sustained human faith over time and in millions of lives, is likely to represent a genuine encounter with divine reality.<sup>42</sup>

Nonsense. Not even Dr. Hick's eloquence can overcome the fact that again, *no other religion* other than Christianity can boast of even *one* Mary Slessor. Both biblical and historical facts seem to clearly demonstrate our position that God intends supernatural virtue to be the ultimate proof that the followers of the King are spiritually superior to the followers of any other religion in the world. We do not claim that such moral superiority is our own doing, but rather the result of God indwelling us with God the Holy Spirit.

Because *virtue apologetics* provides evidence for the moral and spiritual superiority of Christianity, it also serves to prove its exclusivity as the only religion that is accepted by the real God. This is because only those who follow the King have such superior virtue, and

it was He who said, “**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me**” (John 14:6).<sup>43</sup>

### **Pastoral Perspective**

- Does your church have anyone with testimonies concerning *virtue apologetics*? Elicit them and communicate them in some way in order to instruct and encourage people to imitate this vital part of being an Authentic Christian.

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## **Extras & Endnotes**

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### **A Devotion to Dad**

*Father, we glory today in the service of Your saints throughout history. They have lived a life of love, even dying for the sake of humanity. What a tremendous testimony to Your own power and character! May we revive and carry on the tradition of such earthen vessels, seeking Your strength to do so, and giving up whatever comforts or pleasures are necessary in order to burn as a light for You.*

### **Gauging Your Grasp**

- 1) Why do you think it was characteristic of Early Church leaders to boast about the superior virtue of Christians to public authorities, but this does not occur today?
- 2) Why do you think apologetics in general did not seem to be an emphasis in the writings of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation?
- 3) Jonathan Edwards wrote: “Christian practice is . . . the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences.” Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 4) We claim: All of the other religions *combined* do not even begin to compare with the religion [Christianity] that is really from God in regards to loving humanity. Give several specific lines of evidence

for this. Do you agree or disagree and why? If you agree, what are the implications of this?

- 5) Why isn't such *virtue apologetics* being promoted, discussed or practiced much in our day in American Christianity?
- 6) Why wouldn't the popularity of a religion be a good indication of its divinity?

### **Recommended Reading**

- *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History*, D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, (Thomas Nelson, 1997).
- *Reasons for Faith*, John Gerstner (Harper & Row, n.d.).

### **Publications & Particulars**

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, I.14 (online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).

<sup>2</sup> *The Apology of Arrestees the Philosopher*, (online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).)

<sup>3</sup> Athenagoras, *Plea for Christians*, 32 (online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).

<sup>4</sup> Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, II.15 (online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 35.5-6; excerpted from *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, William A. Jurgens (Liturgical Press, 1970), 110.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 2.10 (online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 vols., (Hendricksen, 1975), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 6.8; online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

<sup>9</sup> For testimonies concerning the cessation of *sign gifts* in the early Church and their replacement with supernatural virtue see chapter 5.7 and 6.13.

<sup>10</sup> cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Book 50, Chap. vi.; See Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* [Harper, 1948], 154, 156-7)

<sup>11</sup> Reference unavailable.

<sup>12</sup> For example, John Calvin, in his commentary on Matthew 5:13-16 regarding Christ's statement that Christians are the salt and light of the world, seems to suggest these words were merely directed to the twelve Apostles, and, at any rate, does not even hint at their apologetic application which is precisely the one Christ is making (cf. v. 16; *Commentaries*). Calvin, of course,

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introduced the idea of a subjective, and really unprovable, "inward testimony of the Spirit," which we discuss further in chapter 3.4.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the New Testament*, in Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 111.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, Lull, 101.

<sup>15</sup> John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*; online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org), VI.6.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of Luther's view of defending the Gospel in general see section 2.2.C.

<sup>17</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, excerpted from *In Defense of Miracles*, Douglas Geivett, Gary R. Habermas, eds. (InterVarsity, 1997), 44. We do not desire to misinterpret Hume here. He can be taken at face value or could even be interpreted as speaking sarcastically. At the very least, we can say that while Hume may have not believed that "a continued miracle in his own person" was adequate proof for the superiority of the Christian religion, he did seem to recognize it as an apologetic claim of the Christian.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise on Religious Affections*, II.12.1, 2.5; online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

<sup>19</sup> John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Berea, 1991), I.307.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, III.128-9.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* (Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 1999), 129-30.

<sup>22</sup> Yandall Woodfin, *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy* (Abingdon, 1980), 30, 172.

<sup>23</sup> William Baird, *History of New Testament Research 2 Vols.*, (Fortress, 1992, 2003), II.431.

<sup>24</sup> "Evangelical Social Concern," in *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Baker, 1973), 223-24.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Addison, *Evidences of the Christian Religion* (John Denio, 1812), sec IX; online at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (Hendricksen, 1975), *xii*, 104-7, 263-4. Predictably, many critics have claimed that the reason for the rapid and non-violent (contra Islam) expansion of early Christianity was Emperor Constantine's support of it. Latourette puts this view in perspective when he writes:

One of the factors to which is attributed the triumph of Christianity is the endorsement of Constantine. But, as we have suggested, the faith was already so strong by the time when Constantine espoused it that it would probably have won without him. Indeed, one of the motives sometimes ascribed to his support is his supposed desire to enlist the

cooperation of what had become the strongest element in the Empire, the Christian community. (105)

<sup>27</sup> Charles Colson in *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*, David Kinnaman, (Baker, 2007), 87.

<sup>28</sup> "Holy Spirit" in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature (M&S)*, CD-ROM ver. (Ages Software, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Eerdmans, 1952), 125.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (NY: Harper, 1948), 137-8. Richardson adds:

The story of the Church's expansion and activity during the last century and a half and in our own days constitutes as impressive a record of victorious living as anything which previous centuries can show. Amongst recent short books dealing with this theme we may mention: H. P. Van Dusen, *What is the Church Doing?* and *They Found the Church There*; John Foster, *Then and Now* and *World-Church*; K. S. Latourette, *The Unquenchable Light*; E. A. Payne, *The Church Awakes*, W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church*. (Ibid.,. 137).

<sup>31</sup> *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis Okholm, Timothy Phillips, eds. (Zondervan, 1996), 61.

<sup>32</sup> John Gerstner, *Reasons for Faith* (Harper & Row, n.d.), 230.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 158-9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Carson adds:

I recommend the reading of such books as J. W. Bready's *England: Before and After Wesley* (in the abridged American edition, the title is *This Freedom-Whence?*), or D. W. Dayton's more recent *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. Although I am not always convinced by their theological analyses, nevertheless such books teach us how almost all valuable social trends were spawned by the Evangelical Awakening under such men of God as George Whitefield, John Wesley, Howell Harris, Lord Shaftesbury, William Wilberforce and others. (*Sermon on the Mount*, [Baker, 1978], 31-32).

<sup>36</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> We discuss several historical events often thought to detract from the moral record of Christianity in section 5.17.

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 170-71.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 167-9.

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<sup>42</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, (MacMillan, 1977), 141.

<sup>43</sup> For further applications of *virtue apologetics* to several wider issues in Christianity see chapter 5.6.