

# The Early Church's Approach to Philosophy and What it Means Today

Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria each had distinct views regarding a Christian's approach to philosophy. By understanding their approaches, we can identify which one convicts us most. While some people lean toward one specific theologian's viewpoint, we should be careful. We never need to adopt a system that is not in agreement with the Bible or teaches things that clearly go against the character of the Lord.

Philosophy is normally a subject that Christians shy away from, but this needs to change. While philosophy has been connected to pagan roots, it is something Christians need to be aware of. The more knowledge we have of the real world, the more we will be able to help others come to know the Lord. If we only stay in our bubble of academic thought, we will never impact the lost world for Christ.

## Justin Martyr & Philosophy

"Justin Martyr approached philosophy by connecting the Gospel of Jesus to Greek philosophy" (McGrath, Alistar. "Historical Theology," Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2013, 24). He related the gospel to Platonism since it was highly influential during his day. The main way Martyr approached philosophy was centered on the Greek word logos, in which he used this word to connect the popular belief of Platonism to Christianity with a focus on John 1:14. He advocated that all knowledge could be found in the logos, which is Jesus Christ.

From Martyr's writings on philosophy and theology, he was approaching the people of his day with the truth that what all philosophers are looking for is fulfilled in Christ (McGrath 5). Martyr had the belief that any person who behaved in the manner



they believed to be logos, they could be categorized as a Christian. In other words, if a person behaved in a holy, godly, and honorable way, they were most likely a Christian.

Within Martyr's view, he saw that Christians had full understanding of the knowledge of the logos; whereas, philosophers only have partial knowledge of the logos (McGrath 42). He ultimately had the belief that if anything is rooted in the logos, whether theological or secular, it should be seen as truth to Christians. This can be a dangerous teaching as it is not found in the Bible. As Christians, we need to be careful with these schools of thought and ensure we are walking in accordance with Christ rather than a manmade teaching model.

While many Christians during his day flocked after his view of philosophy, there are many Christians who adhere to it today. The idea that anything rooted in the logos should be seen as truth is misleading to believers. The truth is only found in the Bible. It is not found in the belief systems of worldly thoughts. We can appreciate Martyr's impact on theology and biblical study; however, we also need to analyze things for ourselves to ensure we are walking in accordance with the Bible.

### Challenge Questions:

- Do you agree with Martyr's view of philosophy? Why or why not?
- Do you believe anything rooted in logos is Gospel truth?
- How might you analyze things for yourself?

### Tertullian's Differing View

Tertullian believed philosophy was pagan and should not be seen as equal to theology. He believed philosophy would only lead to heresy.



Heresy led to sin, which was something that was to be avoided at all costs. There was no room for both theology and philosophy within Tertullian's mind, as it would only lead the believer further from the Lord.

Within Tertullian's writings, he often connected philosophy to Gnosticism. He also spoke out against the heretic Marcion. Marcion believed that the Old Testament God was different from the New Testament God in the sense that the former is a God of law and order, whereas the latter is a God of love. Tertullian was pointing out the truth that there is only one God, and the Old Testament God is the same as the New Testament God. Tertullian, unlike Justin Martyr, condemned philosophy and chose to point believers away from this belief system.

Tertullian was a strong theologian, and his caution is good. However, we don't need to view all philosophy as being evil. There is much good to be learned from various studies of philosophy. On the same page, we also need to understand that Tertullian was trying to go against the Gnostic teachings of his day, such as those taught by Marcion. Therefore, it is not surprising that he would condemn all philosophy. He had already seen the damage inflicted by Marcion and the power false teaching could hold.

### Challenge Questions:

- What parts of Tertullian's teachings on philosophy do you agree with? Which ones do you disagree with?
- Explain why you believe Tertullian was so cautious with philosophy. How does this impact your view?
- Do you feel confident in aligning theology with philosophy? Why or why not?



## Clement of Alexandria's Positive View of Philosophy

Clement of Alexandria saw philosophy as a good thing because he reasoned that philosophy was given to the Greeks as a means to prepare them for the gospel, much in the same way that the Jews had received the Law to prepare them for Jesus: "Thus until the coming [parousia] of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness" (McGrath 6). Clement believed that God created all things; therefore, all things could be seen as good, including philosophy, and Jesus was the completion of all things (Colossians 1:16). Therefore, Clement of Alexandria saw philosophy as a highly valuable and positive thing to point Greeks and others to Christ.

Philosophy can teach us many things, and we would be wise to study it. Nonetheless, we must exercise caution and not study philosophy with an unbiblical lens.

As with anything, there needs to be a healthy balance. We do not need to go too far to one side of the argument, or we could end up in a bad situation. Rather than trying to find alignment with one particular theologian, we need to decide our own view by prayer and studying God's Word.

### Challenge Questions:

- Do you agree with Clement's positive view of philosophy?
- How might you take away the positives from Clement's argument while also being cautious of his agreement with philosophy?
- What ways can you discern philosophy biblically? Rather than just going along with a particular theologian, how can you look at matters for yourself?



## Modern Theologians & Approaching Theology with a Biblical Lens

As believers, we must wrestle with our view of philosophy. Is it beneficial, or does it lead us away from Jesus? Personally, I do not fully agree with Justin Martyr, Tertullian, or Clement of Alexandria. However, I do believe that God uses all things to work out everything for His glory (Romans 8:28).

And this could mean philosophy, but in the modern day, it seems that philosophy draws people away from Christ. I would not go as far as to say that all philosophy leads to heresy; nonetheless, philosophy should be approached with caution because it does have the capacity to lead people astray. Rather than following after Jesus, individuals might be quick to follow after philosophers or modern intellectuals.

Christians should study philosophy for the sake of understanding; however, Christians should be discerning when they approach the subject. Not all philosophies lead the lost to accept Christ. Christians also need to be cautious concerning Martyr's belief that any person is a Christian if they behave in anything outside salvation through Jesus. Many people are kind, considerate, and pleasant, but that doesn't mean they are Christian.

We also need to be cautious of viewing philosophy as the ultimate evil or leading to heresy, as Tertullian believed. Philosophy can be used positively or negatively, depending on the person's motive. Nonetheless, Christians need to be cautious when approaching philosophy because our ultimate truth is found in Christ, not in philosophy. Similar to any manmade system, there can be positives and negatives.



Each of us must prayerfully consider how to approach philosophy, whether historical philosophy or modern thought. The Early Church theologians each had their own take on philosophy, and we would be wise to heed their beliefs, but we must also align all our beliefs with the Bible. If we fully embrace philosophy, it could cause us to walk away from Christ, and if we fully reject philosophy, it could mean losing wonderful opportunities to help many people come to know Jesus. This is why we must reflect on the Lord's teaching, ponder what He is telling us, and adopt a healthy view of philosophy.

### Challenge Questions:

- In what ways can you start analyzing and studying philosophy with a biblical lens?
- How do you think Jesus would want you to approach philosophy?
- Do you think it is possible to be a theologian and a philosopher? Why or why not?

By: Vivian Bricker