



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Cyprian of Carthage, d.258 A.D.

As Christianity continued to grow in number and influence throughout the Roman world it faced many challenges – from detestably inaccurate pagan rumors and state persecution to gnostic revision of orthodoxy. It also faced its own internal challenges both doctrinally and organizationally. During the third century, while certainly Christological debates were in full swing (but not yet at their zenith as they would be in the fourth century), there also arose the question of the nature of the church and its leadership, especially the nature and role of a bishop. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage is one of the central figures in this debate and a key player in the events which contributed to many ecclesiological questions of the Early Church

The Life & Times of Cyprian

- Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus was born early in the third century, the exact or even approximate year is not known. Little is known about his life prior to becoming Bishop.
- He was born to a pagan Roman family, well educated in rhetoric and possibly law, and up through mid-life taught rhetoric professionally and attained to a fair degree of wealth.
- Converted around 245-246, likely in Carthage by Caecilianus, a local presbyter, who was his spiritual father. Cyprian was a brilliant writer and orator and an avid follower of Tertullian. Shortly after his baptism he was ordained a presbyter, and not long after that in 249 was elected as bishop, although he was still considered a novitiate; that fact along with his wealth and talent rankled a number of (jealous?) presbyters in Carthage who troubled him for many years.
- The same year as his election Emperor Decius comes to the throne and in 250 enacts one of the harshest waves of persecution the church had yet seen. Although brief, it was a very trying time for the Church, especially in North Africa where the influence and prestige of the confessors was high. The Bishops in Rome and many prominent cities were martyred, but Cyprian fled Carthage. His rationale was that he might live to continue to guide his flock, and to his credit later offered his life for martyrdom. Nevertheless, many church leaders questioned his decision, including those in Rome.
- Trouble began when five presbyters, who had personal dislikes of Cyprian, rallied a number of confessors to work with them for a more lax approach than Cyprian's to the lapsed. The confessors believed they had the authority to forgive apostates, and gave penitents letters of recommendation for the bishop. Did presbyters and holy, but un-ordained, Christians have the authority to do this? And either way, was there a 'standard' established for such readmission?
- When persecution subsided enough Cyprian convened a council in Carthage in 251 to determine a standardization of church policy regarding the lapsed, and wrote *De Unitates* and *De Lapsis* as part of the deliberation.
- Meanwhile, trouble was brewing in Rome. After the Bishop was martyred (January, 250) the See was vacant for over a year. The church was led by a group of presbyters, the most prominent of which was Novatianus, who believed in a more stringent, traditional approach to not restoring penitents. When at last an election was held in 251, Cornelius was elected, much to Novatianus' dismay. He promptly had his faction elect him as the 'true' bishop of Rome, because he and his faction hold fast to the holiness of the church and the older rule of excommunication for life of apostates. However, Cyprian sides with Cornelius. Soon Novatianists spread to Carthage and rallied a number of confessors to their cause, and eventually elect their own bishop of Carthage.
- After the initial furor of the episcopal schism settled, many wished to return to the church under Cyprian. This was not problematic unless they had been baptized under the 'alternate' church.

Rector's Forum @ St. George

Cyprian, and Cornelius' successor in Rome, Stephen (elected in 254), both considered the Novatian church to be outside the real Church. Novatian had never actually been duly elected as Bishop of Rome. However, although Stephen and Cyprian agreed on this matter, they disagreed regarding the viability of the sacraments administered by such church leaders. Stephen argued that the Sacraments were Christ's, and their efficaciousness was not contingent upon the holiness or 'worthiness' of the minister. Cyprian argued that there could be no Sacraments outside the church. When Stephen pressed the issue he enacted the first known use of the See of Rome attempting to exert juridical authority over another bishop; a "proto-papal" understanding of Rome. Cyprian, and the council he convened in 256, would not budge and Stephen declared him the Antichrist.

- While Cyprian certainly respected the unique prestige of the See of Rome, he did not assent to the Bishop of Rome having hierarchical jurisdiction over other bishops, i.e. a papal view. His was along the classical Greek (an Anglican!) understanding that all bishops are essentially equal. For Cyprian the Bishop of Rome was, in Episcopal terms we use for the Presiding Bishop, *primus inter pares* – the first among equals. This is also the Anglican view of the ABC wrt other archbishops in the Communion.
- The debate is brought to a halt when in 257 Stephen dies and under Emperor Valerian a new persecution breaks out. This time Cyprian is arrested and sent into exile in Curubis, not far from Carthage, where he remained for a year. In 258 a second edict brought Cyprian once again before the authorities and when, on 14 September 258, he refused to sacrifice to the image of the emperor, was summarily executed.

The Theology of Cyprian

Extant works

- Thirteen treatises, of which *On the Unity of the Church* and *On the Lapsed* are his most significant.
- 81 letters, of which 59 were written by Cyprian himself, 6 synodical letters written under his authority, and 16 letters written to him.
- Cyprian was well versed in the works of Tertullian, from whom much of his ecclesiology is derived. For both men the church is a single unity in continuum from the apostles through their writings (i.e. the Scriptures of the NT along with the OT) and the successor to the apostles – the bishops. However, while the main concern for Tertullian was doctrinal purity, for Cyprian it was Church unity. Thus Cyprian emphasizes more forcefully the significance of the bishop and the idea of apostolic succession, not just in terms of doctrine, but of a lineage stretching back to the apostles.

Ecclesiology

- The Bishop – symbol and instrument of unity.
 - For Cyprian, the Church by definition is united. Not that all must agree, but there must be a clear understanding of the authority, importance, and unity of the Church. Outside the Church there is no salvation, "You can not have God for your Father without the Church for your Mother" (*Unity, 6*). He likens the church to the unrent garment of Christ and the Ark.
 - The bishop becomes not only the symbol of that unity, but the physical administrator of it. Under Cyprian we see the beginnings of a shift in 'apostolic succession', from its inherently doctrinal use regarding the teaching of the apostle's (from whom did you learn the faith) to a more institutional usage with the unbroken chain of authority from the apostles.
 - This raises another important question for a later era in the Church's life: can you have the true church without a bishop? Is the role and presence of a bishop necessary for the church, or is their central role one that arose over time, and even out of need at times. Cyprian's thinking on apostolic succession leads to later doctrines which make a bishop essential; cf. Letter 33:1, "the Church rests on the bishops and every act is governed by these".
- The Church: Hospital for Sinners or Gymnasium for Saints?
 - Cyprian (correctly) argues that ultimately the Church is the former, a hospital for sinners. However, he takes a very rigorous stance on the authority and unity of the church and the need for holiness, following Tertullian. Re-admittance is contingent upon recognition of the

Rector's Forum @ St. George

appropriate apostolic authority. It is ordination that gives a leader their right to pronounce forgiveness and administer the sacraments. Thus the sacramental nature of the church, its unity, and authority are connected.

- Consequently, Cyprian begins using the Latin term *sacerdos*, which means 'priest', to refer to the ordained presbyter. While the use of this new word in terms of the unity and authority of the church is understandable, it creates significant issues. Never before had a Christian leader been called a 'priest'. In the NT the word is never used except to refer to the High Priestly office of Christ himself and to the priesthood of all believers (who are sharing in Christ's priestly office). Presbyter = elder. It leads to the clergy being viewed as mediators, which facilitates the penitential system and treasury of merit.
- Orthodox definition vs. Anglican (Protestant) definition vs. RC. The Orthodox, Church = gathering of the faithful around their bishop. RC, Church = the faithful under the Pope. Anglican/Protestant, Church = gathering of the faithful where there is Word & Sacrament

Sacraments & Sin

- What to do with the lapsed and the presence of (ongoing) sin in a Christian's life? In his work, *On the Lapsed*, Cyprian argues that no human has the authority to forgive apostasy, but later takes the position that decisions on such grave matters are settled by the bishop, who can be rightly advised by holy confessors. In order to prevent some penitents from being treated too harshly by some bishops and too leniently by others, Cyprian convenes a synod after Easter, 251 (see above).
- Sacraments inside or outside the church. The chief area of contention between Cyprian and Stephen focused on the sacrament of baptism. Could someone be legitimately baptized by an 'unworthy' minister; unworthy either in terms of their character (holiness) or in terms of their standing within the Church? Novatianite baptisms were not valid in Cyprian's view because Novatian and his group had left the Church. This is why today Roman Catholics do not view any baptisms outside the RC Church as legitimate and why non-Catholics may not commune.
 - Cyprian's view of the Sacraments, especially baptism, is that it must be administered by a pure person, "how can a pure stream come from a muddy spring". If you were baptized by a 'bad' priest then you needed to be re-baptized. Fortunately on this matter the wider church did not follow Cyprian – the validity of the Sacraments does not depend on the purity of the minister. If it did we all would have reason to doubt our baptisms!
 - Article XXVI, Of the Unworthiness of Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament
- Cyprian's theology is primarily seeking to uphold the unity of the church, understandably so and to his credit. However, he ends up attaching the work of the Spirit and the Gospel too concretely to the institutional church. He does not make distinction between the visible church and the 'invisible' church. See Article XIX, Of the Church. Bishop Stephen pointed out to him that the Sacraments are Christ's, not the Church's. Cyprian argued they are the Church's.
- Forgiveness vs. holiness as characterizing re-admittance of the lapsed. Forgiveness and reconciliation are hallmarks of the Gospel and the Christian life. But what happens when the church loses its sense of being set apart, holy unto the Lord. What if it loses its saltiness? Those who try really hard, and really, really want to be forgiven (thus demonstrating themselves 'worthy' of forgiveness) are preferred. This is actually counter to the Gospel; Christ came for the sick, not the well. But God's grace does set us apart to do the works he prepared in advance for us to walk in (Eph 2:8-10). Grace does not come because of one's holiness, but it does create in us holiness.
 - Roots of the medieval penitential system. If you are righteous at baptism, and yet still sin, you must 'work off' that sin. The extent of the sin (e.g. apostasy) determines the penance.
 - Protestant answer:
 - justification *sola fide* – we do not confuse justification and sanctification
 - *simul iustus et peccator* – the justified still sin, but that sin is not counted against them
 - proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel, which many Church Father's failed to do, especially Cyprian.