

Learning from the Church Fathers (12). Cyprian (200 to 258 A.D.)

What is the Church? Can we not be Christians without belonging to a church? People shop for churches, looking for the best deal, as they do for "previously owned" cars. Then there are denominations that wonder whether or not they have a future. In June 2008, for example, the United Church of Canada debated the topic: "Shouldn't the United Church just throw in the towel?" No wonder this question is raised when the denomination gives legitimacy to Rev. Greta Vosper, who wrote a book entitled *With or Without God*, in which she rejects the divinity of Christ, the authority of Scripture, Christian orthodoxy and God himself.

How many still affirm with John Calvin the view that "there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother [the church] conceives us in her womb, gives us birth, nourishes us at her breast"? But Calvin didn't affirm anything new. He restated Cyprian's view of the Church.

Thascius Cyprian (200 to 258 A.D.)

Cyprian was born in or near Carthage (modern Tunisia) in a wealthy, distinguished pagan family. He was given a good education and became a very successful and wealthy lawyer. He did not become a Christian until he was forty-six years old. He was baptized into the church the same year. After his conversion, Cyprian disposed most of his wealth and property and gave it to the poor. In 248 A.D., shortly after the death of bishop Donatus of Carthage, Cyprian was elected as his successor. His meteoric rise to a position of such immense dignity and authority caused misgivings and doubt among members of the clergy in Carthage. Novatus, senior presbyter, and other clergy like Deacon Felcissimus, were opposed to Cyprian's election. But before he had time to prove himself, persecution by Emperor Decius began.

Decius (c.200-251)

Decius came to the throne as a reformer at a time when everything seemed to be going wrong everywhere. In his zeal for the restoration of the historical national gods, he organized an attempt to wipe out Christianity. The persecution's first phase was directed against Christian leaders. Cyprian escaped by going into hiding. Some of his fellow Christians accused him of unfaithfulness and cowardice. But Cyprian refused to justify or excuse his flight to safety. His decision was made in good faith, in the belief it was more important than he should remain alive to rally his people, than accept martyrdom and leave his church leaderless.

For Cyprian, his time spent in hiding was not a punishment for "to the Christian the whole of this world is a single home...Further than that, while he is honestly serving God, he is a stranger even in his own state." But while in exile, he was not idle. He wrote many letters to the clergy and others in Rome and Carthage, warning, directing, and exhorting, and in every way maintaining his oversight in his absence, in all matters connected with the well-being of the church. He appeared to have returned to his public duties early in June 251. The second phase of the persecution began when Decius commanded all governors to search out everyone who rejected the national worship and the highest penalties had to be enforced. This order reached all classes and no one was spared. When Decius became preoccupied with war against the Goths, he had no time left to persecute Christians. In June 251 A.D. he

was defeated and killed. He had reigned for only two years.

The death of Decius was followed by two years of anarchy, a period which ended when Valerian (253-260) became emperor. For four years he left the church in peace, but in the continuing disturbances of his reign, he too, like Decius before him, considered that the Christians were a disturbing and treacherous element in society, and in 257 A.D., he introduced a policy of persecution. In 258 he launched a full scale attack on the church and tried to deprive the church of its clergy, its upper-class support, and its property.

Cyprian's Doctrine of the Church

Throughout his ten years as bishop of Carthage, Cyprian faced three key issues as a result of the persecution. First, the lapsed; second, the baptism of heretics and schismatics; and third, the nature of the church. Cyprian's central thought was the unity and oneness of the church. He expressed this in two of his works - *The Lapsed* and *The Unity of the Catholic Church*.

1. The lapsed

When the Church suffered persecution, every effort was made to secure apostasies and imprisonments. Those who refused to conform were tortured in order to break down their resistance. A great number denied the faith; apostates were many and martyrs few. In the case of those who had been under suspicion of being Christians but who now conformed by offering a sacrifice, a certificate of *libellus* was issued to prove their compliance. As soon as the first wave of persecution had passed, many of the lapsed Christians wanted to return to the Church. Therefore, they brought another kind of certificate bearing the signature of some martyr or confessor with a request to readmit them to the church. These certificates were issued sometimes wholesale and often with great irresponsibility. If their authority had been accepted, it would have meant the breakdown of all discipline in the church.

What was to be done with lapsed Christians? Cyprian was inclined to take a strict line with lapsed Christians but realized that a measure of accommodation was necessary. The lapsed were to be treated as penitents and none were to be readmitted for the time being except any whose life was in danger. These judgments, however, were unacceptable to Cyprian's opponents who favoured greater leniency. An open conflict occurred and both parties sought support in Rome.

But in Rome a similar situation had arisen. After the martyrdom of bishop Fabian, Cornelius was appointed as his successor. The presbyter Novatian, who had hoped for the position, allowed himself to be elected by his own faction as a rival bishop. His attitude toward the lapsed was harsh. Those who disagreed with Cyprian's policy of leniency joined hands with Novatian. When another wave of persecution seemed imminent in 252, Cyprian issued a general decree to pardon all penitents in order that they might be strengthened against the impending conflict.

2. Baptism Controversy

Another difficulty Cyprian faced was the admission into the church of people who had been

baptized in some heretical or schismatic body. Should they be re-baptized or not? The usual practice was not to re-baptize them. Cyprian took the view that since there could be no salvation outside the church, heretical and schismatic baptisms are not acceptable. Penitents coming into the church from such bodies must therefore be admitted by baptism. Cyprian said it was a mistake to regard this as re-baptism because all sacramental acts performed *outside the one true church* were in fact null and void.

3. *The Unity of the Church*

Cyprian stated that the church might be spread abroad through all the world – yet she remains one: "Even as the sun has many rays, yet one light." In *Ancient Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, Robert E. Webber notes that the church throughout history has unfolded in many cultures and therefore no one expression of the church stands alone as the true visible body of Christ. And he says, "One way of experiencing the unity of the church is to affirm that it is 'a community of communities'." In Webber's view, "there is only one church, but expressed in many cultural ways." Cyprian argued that the church is the only absolute voice of God's mercy and God's grace is limited to her. He asserted, "No man can have God as his Father who has not the church as his Mother." Furthermore, the church is "one mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated." And "outside the Catholic church," Cyprian maintained, "there is no salvation." To separate from the church, therefore, was the worst of sins.

Cyprian stressed the indivisibility of the church. The unity of the church is symbolized in the portraits of the pure bride, who dwells in one house, the seamless garment of Christ, the Old Testament Passover in one house, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a peaceable dove. To protect the unity and sanctity of the church we need to be spiritually alert. Cyprian warned that Satan invented heresies and schism, whereby he might subvert the faith, might corrupt the truth, and might divide unity.

4. *On Ministry*

As Reformed Christians, we part ways with Cyprian since for him the unity of the church existed for him through the office of bishops, the successors of the apostles. Cyprian taught a new view of the bishop. He set the bishop on a pedestal higher than had ever been thought of before. He liked to say that "the bishops are the glue that binds the church together....Therefore you know that the bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop and if somebody is not with the bishop, he is not in the church." Cyprian did not stress apostolic succession as a test of validity of the office of bishop, but he emphasized the idea that he was the successor of the Apostles and the legitimate interpreter of the apostolic tradition. He explained that Christ built the church upon Peter, because the primacy had been given to him. Yet all the apostles were important and united. "If a man does not maintain the unity of Peter, how does he maintain the faith?" asked Cyprian. Thus, the authority in the church resided in the whole body of bishops. Should the bishop prove unworthy, then the neighbouring bishops had the right to depose him.

The bishop's power was from above and his main function was to represent God to the

people. The bishop did not owe his election to any popular verdict, the people merely acquiesced in what was given. God's grace was dispensed by the bishop who was equated with the priest of the Old Testament. Both Jews and Gentiles were familiar with the idea of priests and sacrifices but Cyprian was the first to relate it to Christianity. In Cyprian is found the germ what would become the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper – the mass. Eventually, the bishop became the sacrificing priest and the bloodless but real sacrifice that he offered was the passion of our Lord. The New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers began to fade into the background, almost into oblivion, with Cyprian's view of church unity through bishops.

As we are confronted with so much opposition from so many different sources, we do well to heed Cyprian's counsel for "the sons of God to be peacemakers, gentle in heart, simple in speech, agreeing in affection, faithfully linked to one another in the bonds of unanimity." He lived what he believed. He was brought before the authorities. He refused to sacrifice and was put to death in September 258 A.D. by public beheading.

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