

St Cyprian of Carthage: On the Unity of the Church

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1 Introduction to Cyprian and his Treatise On the Unity of the Church (OUC)

1.1 Who was Cyprian?

Much about bishop Cyprian can be learned from the book that his deacon Pontius wrote, titled *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*.

Cyprian (ca. 208-14 September 258) was a very wealthy pagan citizen in Carthage, probably from Punic or Amazigh (Latin: Berber) background. His original name was Thascius. He was classically educated, hence a lawyer and an orator. He became a Christian through Caecilius, an old priest, and was baptized ca. 246.

Cyprian made a fast career in Church. In 248-249 he was made bishop – maybe with the support of the poor as he was known for his generosity. A few priests in Carthage were unhappy about this as they claimed seniority and they became his enemies.

1.2 Decian Persecution (250-251)

Emperor Decius decided to restore the old Roman religion and to attack the church. There had been no persecution for 38 years, so this came unexpectedly. Bishops, priests, deacons and many other members of the church were asked to sacrifice to the Emperor. Cyprian fled in time from Carthage, where the persecution was extremely savage.

In Carthage, thousands bought a certificate (Latin: libellus) that stated they had sacrificed, even though they had not. Many others did actually sacrifice. Both groups were called the Lapsi (Latin for ‘fallen’, or ‘lapsed’). A third group refused to give in, and was called Confessors (meaning: those who confessed their Lord, and did not lapse). Many of this last group suffered badly. Many people were killed or sent to work in the mines.

Many of the lapsed Christians were remorseful and wanted to come back into the Church.

What to do with them? Was it possible for these people who had denied their Lord, to come back to Him? What example would that be for the other Church members?

When Cyprian returned to his diocese after 14 months of hiding, he allowed those who had bought letters, if they showed real remorse, to be restored to the fellowship. Those who had actually sacrificed had to wait until the point of death for being allowed back into the Church. Clergy that had lapsed were allowed back into church but they were deposed from their functions.

1.3 Opposition to Cyprian

While Cyprian was gone, five priests and the deacon Felicissimus elected a certain Fortunatus as their own bishop. The major area of disagreement was that the schismatics did not want to ever accept lapsed people back into the Church again.

In Rome, people with similar opinions had elected Novatian as a counter-bishop instead of the Roman bishop Cornelius. It seems that initially their difference was purely personal, and that only later the followers of Novatian also adopted more rigorous measures against the lapsed. The Novatians began to create an alternative Church all over the Roman Empire, and they also elected their own bishop in Carthage, a certain Maximus, to add to the confusion in that city.

In this period, the treatise ‘On the Unity of the Church’ was written by Cyprian. He read this at the synod that he had called together in April 251; most clergy sided with him against the breakaway ‘church’. As the Church in Rome suffered from similar schisms, ‘On the Unity of the Church’ was also sent to the Confessors in Rome, to convince them of the evil of schism.

1.4 Martyrdom of Cyprian

Under Emperor Valerian a new persecution broke out in 257. Cyprian was brought before

Proconsul Paternus on 30 August 257. The minutes of the interrogation are still extant. Cyprian refused to denounce the faith and he did not want to mention the names and addresses of the priests. Paternus then exiled him, together with his deacon Pontius.

The successor of Paternus was Galerius Maximus. He brought Cyprian back to Carthage and had him beheaded on 14 September 258, as the first bishop of Carthage to obtain the crown of martyrdom.

1.5 Writings of Cyprian

Cyprian wrote the following works, all in Latin:

- To Donatus – on the vices of Roman society and the beauty of the Christian life.
- Testimony to Quirinius – two books showing how the Jews misunderstood their Scriptures and one book on Christian ethics.
- 81 letters, many almost booklets, on martyrdom, morality, almsgiving, modesty, etc. One of these is ‘On the Unity of the Church’.

2 Content of On the Unity of the Church

2.1 Introduction

> **Read** OUC 1 and 3 and discuss:

1. What is more dangerous, persecution or heresy and schism?
2. What is the cause of heresy and schism?

2.2 The basis of Christian Unity

> **Read** OUC 4-5 and discuss:

1. What is the basis of Christian unity?
2. How does Cyprian describe the episcopate?

2.3 The Unity of the Church

> **Read** OUC 6 and 8 and 21 (last paragraph only) and discuss:

1. What does Cyprian say about those who began their own church?

Note in OUC 6: ‘It is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, “And these three are one”’. Compare with 1 John 5:7.

2.4 Bad behavior of Schismatics

> **Read** OUC 10-11 and 17 starting after the quote of Mathew 15:14, and discuss:

1. The bad things the heretics do.
2. What does this teach us about the core of Christian unity?

2.5 Where two or three are gathered in my name

In OUC 12, Cyprian discusses that schismatics misuse the verse ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name...’. That verse is not an excuse for small, sectarian meeting, but a call for unity. He also blames them for using this verse without taking everything the Bible says about Church and its unity into account.

2.6 Being a Confessor is no guarantee of salvation

Cyprian writes in OUC 14 and 20-21 that even if someone is a confessor, this does not guarantee salvation: ‘the inexpiable and grave fault of discord is not even purged by suffering. He cannot be a martyr who is not in the Church.’

2.7 Situation of Lapsed vs. Schismatics

> **Read** OUC 19 and discuss:

1. Is Cyprian not too kind on those who betrayed Christ?
2. Is he not too harsh on those who confessed and later separated from the church that allowed lapsed believers to return to church?

10.2.8 Final general exhortations

> **Read** OUC 26-27.

The general comment of the schismatics was that the churches had become lukewarm and the major proof of this was that lapsed Christians were allowed back after penance. In this final exhortation Cyprian recognizes the reality of the criticism. He does call the Church to being ‘hot’ for God again. Being an imperfect community is no reason for him to leave the Church to start a ‘better one’. This is impossible for him, as Christ can only be found in the Church that he himself has founded.