

The critical issues confronted by Cyprian of Carthage

by Brian McKinlay

The counsel drawn from Cyprian is often applied narrowly. When studied more broadly, however, his writings offer a rich and challenging resource for reflecting on the resolution of conflict within the church. - *Andrew Hamilton*¹

An unconscious theology, indeed, can be every bit as important and as influential as a fully self-conscious one ... In no case is this largely unconscious influence more significant than in the case of Cyprian. - *M.F. Wiles*²

I

Cyprian's tenure of the see of Carthage was only nine years (249-258). Yet in this time he dealt with several serious matters in a way that had lasting influence. These will be outlined in this essay. Church unity was a crucial challenge for Cyprian, and this will be considered in more detail. His understanding of the unity of the church, and the role of the bishops in that unity, was important to the way he dealt with matters at large. In considering how Cyprian tackled the church problems of his day we will also observe some of his resources and methods.

*Background*³

Nothing is known of the birth of Cyprian (Thaschus Cæcilius Cyprianus) and his early life. At his conversion he was possibly middle aged. He was wealthy, and known as an orator. He was baptised about 246 CE. He was only a recent convert when he became Bishop of Carthage in 248 or 249. He had declined, but was acclaimed by the people. A minority opposed his election, including some who remained his enemies. Cyprian's thought was influenced by Tertullian, who may have been the only Christian author to whom Cyprian had access. Cyprian himself was prolific - his known writings are eighty-one letters and a number of treatises.

¹ Hamilton, Andrew. - "Cyprian and church unity", *Pacifica* 8(1):9-21, February, 1995, at p.9.

² Wiles, M.F. - "The Theological legacy of St. Cyprian", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (15)2:139-149, October 1963, at p. 139.

³ For historical details, where not otherwise attributed, I am relying on: *The Rise of Christianity* / W.H.C. Freund. - Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, pp. 351ff. and *The Early church* / Henry Chadwick. - Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, pp.118ff.

II

This part of the essay sketches Cyprian's dealing with the issues of (a) restoration of those who had lapsed from the faith in the face of persecution, (b) schism over the church leadership in Rome, (c) rebaptism of those baptized by heretics, and (d) the response to epidemics of plague.

*The lapsed*⁴

Decius became Roman Emperor in 249 with the ambition of restoring ancient pagan virtues.⁵ In January 250 he published an edict against Christians. Bishops were to be put to death, other persons to be punished unless they recanted by offering ritual pagan sacrifice. Cyprian retired to a safe place of hiding for, if he had died, election of a new bishop would have been as impossible. Some clergy lapsed, others fled. Meanwhile Cyprian wrote encouraging the clergy in their duties⁶, encouraging imprisoned confessors, and speaking eloquently about the martyrs⁷. As the severity of the persecution increased, many Christians apostatized.⁸ Some would not sacrifice, but purchased *libelli*, or certificates, saying that they had done so. There were several thousand *libellatici* in Carthage. (Some Roman clergy blamed Cyprian for the desertion of his flock, giving advice as to the treatment of the lapsed.⁹ But Cyprian explained his conduct¹⁰, and sent to Rome copies of thirteen of the letters he had written to Carthage from his hiding-place.)

⁴ For this discussion, I rely in particular on Burns, J. Patous. - On rebaptism : social organization in the third-century", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1(4):367-403, Winter 1993, at p.369ff.

⁵ See the description of the Decian persecution in Frend., *op.cit.*, pp.318ff.

⁶ *The Ante-Nicene fathers: translations of the writings of the fathers down to AD 325* / edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. - Rev. ed. - Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1957. Vol. 5, *Epistles* 4,5 and 7. Citation of Cyprian's letters can be somewhat confused, as differing editions have adopted different patterns of numbering. I have used the ANF numbering which differs from that used in European editions by Hartel (Vienna, 1868-71) and later by Clarke (New York, 1984) and others. There is a comparative table of the numberings in the *Appendix* to this essay.

⁷ *Epistles* 6, 8.

⁸ This Cyprian lamented in his treatise *On the lapsed*, 8-9. See extracts in *A New Eusebius: documents illustrating the history of the Christian Church to AD 337* [NER] / edited by J. Stevenson, rev. ed. by W.H.C. Frend. - London: SPCK, 1987, document 195. References to this work (e.g. NER:195, are to document numbers, not pages. Eusebius describes the similar impact of the Decian persecution in Alexandria in *HE* IV.41.9-13, see NER:192.

⁹ *Epistle* 2.

¹⁰ *Epistle* 14.

When the persecution eventually eased in 251, owing to rivalry for the imperial throne, many of those who had lapsed sought forgiveness and restoration. There was division as to whether and how those who had lapsed should be restored. During the persecution, Cyprian had proposed that *libellatici* should be restored, when in danger of death, by a priest or deacon.¹¹ Others should await the cessation of persecution, when councils could be held at Rome and at Carthage, and a common policy be agreed. Some regard had to be paid to the prerogatives of the confessors, yet the lapsed could not be placed in a better position than those who had stood fast. It would seem that Rome agreed.¹²

Priests who opposed Cyprian were admitting to communion all who had recommendations from the confessors, and the confessors themselves issued a general indulgence, requiring the bishops to restore to communion all whom they had examined. To Cyprian, this was an offence against discipline.¹³ He gave some value to the indulgences, but only in submission to the bishop. He denounced the most infamous of his opponents, Novatus, and his deacon Felicissimus¹⁴. To the bishop's order to delay the reconciliation of the lapsed until the council, Felicissimus had replied declaring that he could not be in communion with those who had accepted the large alms distributed at Cyprian's order.

On the lapsed, the council was to decide that each case must be judged on its merits, and that *libellatici* should be restored after varying, but lengthy, terms of penance. Those who had actually sacrificed might after life-long penance receive Communion in the hour of death. But any one who put off sorrow and penance until the hour of sickness must be refused all Communion.¹⁵ Describing the council, Cyprian wrote, "Scriptural passages

¹¹ *Epistles* 11 (extract, NER:198), 12 (extract NER:199) and 13.

¹² *Epistle* 29.

¹³ *Epistle* 11.

¹⁴ *Epistle* 39.

¹⁵ *Epistle* 51.

were produced, in a lengthy debate, on both sides of the issue and eventually we arrived at a balanced and moderate decisions, striking a health mean."¹⁶

The return of persecution was to cause the assembling of another council in 252 or 253, in which it was decided to restore all those doing penance, that they might be fortified by the Eucharist against trial. In all of these decisions, the verdict which emerged from the councils was similar to that earlier espoused by Cyprian, evidencing the strength of his leadership.

Schism over the leadership in Rome

About time of the council in 251, two letters arrived from Rome, one announcing the election of Cornelius as its bishop, the other making accusations against Cornelius. Two bishops, Caldonius and Fortunatus, were dispatched from Carthage to Rome for further information, and the Carthaginian council awaited their return.¹⁷

Meanwhile another message arrived, saying that Novatian had been elected Bishop of Rome. Novatian was to pronounce refusal of forgiveness to those who had lapsed in the persecution. Though Cyprian was harsh with those who had lapsed, Novatian's adhesion to rigorism seems to have had the result of destroying his support at Carthage. On the testimony of two African prelates who witnessed the election of Cornelius, Novatian's envoys were disbelieved, and Cyprian wrote to Cornelius advising that he had refused to accept the ordination of Novatian.¹⁸ Soon afterwards came the report of Caldonius and Fortunatus together with a letter from Cornelius, in which the latter complained somewhat of the delay in recognizing him.

Cyprian wrote to Cornelius, apologizing for his delay in acknowledging him, as Cyprian had awaited word from the emissaries.¹⁹ In his letter, Cyprian implied that if he did not communicate with Cornelius he would be outside the Church.

¹⁶ *Epistle 51.6.*

¹⁷ *Epistle 40.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Epistle 41.*

*Rebaptism*²⁰

Tertullian had argued that as heretics have not the same God, their baptism is null. The African Church had adopted this view (c.220) under Agrippinus, a predecessor of Cyprian, who strongly agreed.²¹ Similar custom was observed in places in the East, where there may have been rebaptism because many disbelieved in the Trinity, and possibly did not use a right form.

Letters from Cyprian addressed to Numidian bishops (c. 255), reflect the beginning of the controversy²². In 256, sixty-one bishops signed a conciliar letter from Carthage to Stephen, Bishop of Rome, explaining their reasons for rebaptising former heretics, claiming that it was a question upon which bishops were free to differ.²³ Stephen immediately issued a decree that the Roman tradition of simply laying hands on converted heretics in sign of absolution must be everywhere observed, on pain of excommunication.²⁴ Since Christ is always the principal agent, the validity of the sacrament is independent of the unworthiness of the minister. Stephen insisted only on correct form. Stephen's letter severely censured Cyprian, who wrote to Jubainus that he was defending the one Church - why then was he called a prevaricator of the truth, a traitor to the truth?²⁵ Yet in his letters, Cyprian gives due consideration to Stephen's arguments, though disagreeing with them.

At the September Synod of 256, eighty-seven bishops assembled from the three provinces maintained their attitude against baptism by heretics.²⁶ This sharpened a dilemma posed by Cyprian's policies. He maintained the right of bishops to think for themselves, declaring that no one to be a bishop of bishops.²⁷ But he asserted the necessity of unity in the Church, and would not break the bond with Rome. Messengers sent to Rome with this document were refused an audience.

²⁰ This issue is particularly well documented by Burns, *op.cit.*

²¹ *On the Unity of the Church* 11.

²² *Epistles* 69, 70.

²³ *Epistle* 71.

²⁴ Cyprian gives the gist of Stephen's letter in *Epistle* 72.3.

²⁵ *Epistle* 72.11.

²⁶ The minutes of the Council of 256 are in the Cyprian correspondence as *Sententiae Episcoporum*.

²⁷ Cyprian at the seventh Council of Carthage, see NER:218. Cf. *Epistle* 75.17.

Cyprian sought support from the East. The Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, Firmilian, was supportive of Cyprian, heaping scorn on Stephen.²⁸ Stephen died in 257 and was succeeded by Sixtus. Probably when it was seen at Rome that the East was largely committed, the question was dropped. The Carthaginian policy was finally retracted by a Synod under Gratus (345-348).

Plague

In 257 Carthage suffered a severe plague epidemic. Cyprian organized medical relief and nursing, available to all residents, but this did not prevent the masses from being convinced that the epidemic resulted from the wrath of the gods at the spread of Christianity. On an earlier occasion, Proconsul Demetrianus had contended that the wars, famine and plagues afflicting the world, must be imputed to the Christians because they did not worship the gods. Cyprian had argued in response, that all things are gradually deteriorating with the old age of the world and it was rather the heathens themselves that were the cause of such mischief, because they did not worship God. Moreover, they were distressing the Christians with unjust persecution.²⁹

In the treatise *On the Mortality*³⁰, Cyprian said that Christ had foretold afflictions such as plague. Plague was not to be feared, for it led to mortality and that man was wanting in faith who was not eager for the life to come. Patience without murmuring is needed, for without struggle victory cannot ensue. Though the Christians suffer disease in common with the unbelievers, they do not experience the same death. They are taken to consolation, but the unbeliever to punishment.

III

*Church unity and order*³¹

For Cyprian, the core of church unity was in the relationship between the church and the Gospel. The Gospel was for him the measure of church life.³²

²⁸ *Epistle* 74.5-6 See NER: 217.

²⁹ *An address to Demetrianus, Treatise* 5. See NER:220.

³⁰ *Treatise* 7.

³¹ Hamilton, *op.cit.* is particularly helpful on Cyprian and church unity.

But the church also was essential to the saving work of the Gospel. Thus in his treatise *On the Unity of the Church* (read to the council of April 251, seeking its support against the schism started by Felicissimus and Novatus), Cyprian declared:

[The Church] keeps us for God, and appoints unto the Kingdom the sons she has borne. Whosoever parts company with the Church, and joins himself to an adulteress, is estranged from the promises of the Church. He who leaves the Church of Christ, attains not to Christ's rewards. He is an alien, an outcast, an enemy. He can no longer have God for a father, who has not the Church for a mother. If any man was able to escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then will that man escape who is out of doors beyond the Church.³³

The unity with which Cyprian deals is not so much the unity of the whole Church, as the unity to be kept in each diocese by union with its bishop. Hence whoever is not with his bishop is cut off from the Church and cannot be united to Christ. As Peter is the foundation, binding the whole Church together, so in each diocese is the bishop. The close union of the bishops maintains the unity of the whole Church.³⁴

This unity firmly should we hold and maintain, especially we bishops, presiding in the Church, in order that we may approve the episcopate itself to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brotherhood by falsehood; no one corrupt our faith in the truth by faithless treachery. The episcopate is one; it is a whole in which each bishop enjoys in full possession. The Church is likewise one, though she be spread abroad ...³⁵

Cyprian's understanding of the nature of church unity was fundamental to his approach to other issues. For example, he rejected the baptism of former heretics in part because it had occurred away from organic unity with the church.

But it is to approve the baptism of heretics and schismatics, to admit that they have truly baptized. For therein a part cannot be void, and part be valid. If one could baptize, he could also give the Holy Spirit. But if he cannot give the Holy Spirit, because he that is appointed without is not endowed with the Holy Spirit, he cannot baptize those who come; since both baptism is one and the Holy Spirit is one, and the Church founded by Christ the Lord upon Peter, by a source and principle of unity, is one also.³⁶

Cyprian strove to maintain unity with other dioceses, Rome in particular. This was to be achieved as much as possible by harmony between the bishops.

³² See the discussion by Hamilton, *op.cit.*, p.15ff.

³³ *On the Unity of the Church*, 6; see also NER:205.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Thus Cyprian wrote many of his letters to Rome, sharing information and discussing at length matters of agreement and disagreement. He acknowledged the seniority of Rome, which, "from her greatness plainly ought to take precedence of Carthage"³⁷ Yet, in Cyprian's view, each bishop was answerable to God alone for his actions, though he ought to take counsel of the clergy and the laity in important matters.

Where internal discipline was concerned, Cyprian considered that Rome should not interfere, and that uniformity was not desirable. At the seventh Council of Carthage in 256, he declared:

It remains that we severally declare our opinion on this same subject, judging no one, nor depriving any one of the right of communion, if he differ from us. For no one of us sets himself up as bishop of bishops, or by tyrannical terror forces his colleagues to a necessity of obeying; inasmuch as every bishop in the free use of his liberty and power, has the right of forming his own judgement, and can no more be judged by another than he can himself judge another. But we must all await the judgement of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has the power of both setting us in the government of his Church, and of judging our acts therein.³⁸

Within his own jurisdiction, as we have seen, Cyprian emphasized unity through communion with a common head, the bishop. Frend remarks that Cyprian held a view of church authority that was adapted to his times.³⁹ God was one, his church must be one, and each community must have one leader.

IV

To complete this discussion of how Cyprian dealt with critical issues, we can look a few features of his methods and resources.

Councils

From the time of Cyprian, synods came to be an important means of Church administration, and they were held in Africa with greater frequency and regularity than elsewhere. We know from Cyprian's letters that, except in time of persecution, the African bishops met at least annually; six or seven synods were held under his presidency. In the synods to deal with the lapsed, and in

³⁶ *Epistle* 49.3.

³⁷ *Epistle* 48.2.

³⁸ see *NER*: 218.

³⁹ *Op.cit.*, p.351.

the synod of 256, which considered the question of re-baptism, there were bishops, priests, deacons, and laity. But only the bishops had a final vote.

The Bishop of Carthage was honorary chief of the bishops in the provinces of Africa, Numidia and Mauritania - about a hundred in number; but he had no actual jurisdiction. Their decisions as a council had no formal force.

Exchange of information

Reflecting his concern for the unity of the whole church, Cyprian was at pains to inform others in the church of his reasons for action. Many of the extant letters were written to provide copies of documents to fellow leaders elsewhere. This was particularly so in the relationship with Rome.

Methodology and ideas

Cyprian was clearly a vigorous administrator and leader, and a man of strong practical faith. His writings evidence a willingness to voice strongly held principles, sometimes at considerable length. However his theological methodology and ideas have been criticized. Thus one nineteenth century author caustically described Cyprian's concept of a catholic church, bound together by visible and external unity as, "Cyprian's grand contribution to the progress of error and corruption in the Church."⁴⁰ A proper discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, but M.F. Wiles writing in 1963, for example, casts doubt on (a) Cyprian's use of the Old Testament in an arbitrary, literalistic manner, (b) his intermingling of earlier traditions in a way which obscures the novelty of his ideas, and (c) his use of pre-Christian ideas without allowing for their transformation in the light of the Gospel.⁴¹ Given that Cyprian had been a Christian for only a short time before his election, however, his understanding and putting-into-practice of the faith was remarkable.

Vision and prophecy

In his book *Prophecy in Carthage*⁴², Cecil Roberts shows that on numerous occasions Cyprian refers to visions experienced by various

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, (Edinburgh, 1870) p.169, as cited by Louis Berkhof in *The History of Christian doctrines*. - Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969 [first published 1937]

⁴¹ Wiles, *op.cit.*, p.149.

⁴² *Prophecy in Carthage : Perpetua, Tertullian and Cyprian* / Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. - Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1992.

individuals, including himself.⁴³ Cyprian wrote of these visions as ecstatic experiences whereby God conveyed messages to human beings.⁴⁴ Thus he was comfortable to explain his decision to leave Carthage by saying that God directed him, by through of a vision.⁴⁵ This sense of Divine inspiration and direction complemented Scripture in strengthening Cyprian to vigorously carry out his policies. It may well have fortified him at the very end of his life.

V

Persecution was renewed under Valerian in 257.⁴⁶ In the same year, Proconsul Paternus exiled Cyprian to Curubis (about 65km from Carthage). In 258 Galerius Maximus, the successor of Paternus, recalled Cyprian to Carthage, where he submitted himself to judgement, being unwilling to flee.⁴⁷ Following Cyprian's refusal to offer pagan sacrifice, he was beheaded.

Cyprian may have been inexperienced as a Christian when he became bishop of Carthage. But he used to the full the talents that he had, of administration and leadership. His ability as a theologian has been debated, but Cyprian's writings show that he was a student of Scripture. It would seem, too, that Cyprian sought to respond to the inspiration of the Spirit as he wrestled with the challenges facing the people of his diocese.

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⁴³ Cyprian refers to his own visionary experiences in *Epistles* 7.5-6, 34, 35, 55.1, 62.1,68.10.

⁴⁴ *Epistle* 9.4,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ See Frend, *op.cit.*, pp.324ff.

⁴⁷ There is a description of Cyprian's trial and death in *Acta Proconsularia*, extracted in NER:222.

A New Eusebius: documents illustrating the history of the Christian Church to AD 337 / edited by J. Stevenson, rev. ed. by W.H.C. Frend. - London: SPCK, 1987.

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APPENDIX

Comparison of alternative numberings of Cyprian's epistles

Source: *Prophecy in Carthage : Perpetua, Tertullian and Cyprian.* / Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. - - Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1992., p.224

This compares the numbering of Cyprian's *Epistles* in:

ANF *The Ante-Nicene fathers: translations of the writings of the fathers down to AD 325* / edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. - Rev. ed. - Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1957. Vol. 5.

Hartel Hartel's edition of Cyprian writings in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum* (Vienna, 1869-71). This numbering is also used in some other editions and in NER.

ANF	Hartel	ANF	Hartel	ANF	Hartel	ANF	Hartel	ANF	Hartel
1	-	21	22	41	45	61	4	81	80
2	8	22	27	42	47	62	63	82	81
3	9	23	29	43	46	63	65		
4	5	24	28	44	48	64	3		
5	14	25	31	45	49	65	1		
6	13	26	33	46	51	66	68		
7	11	27	34	47	50	67	67		
8	10	28	35	48	52	68	66		
9	16	29	36	49	53	69	70		
10	15	30	30	50	54	70	71		
11	17	31	32	51	55	71	72		
12	18	32	28	52	56	72	73		
13	19	33	29	53	57	73	74		
14	20	34	40	54	59	74	75		
15	37	35	7	55	58	75	69		
16	23	36	12	56	60	76	76		
17	26	37	41	57	61	77	77		
18	24	38	42	58	64	78	78		
19	25	39	43	59	62	79	79		
20	21	40	44	60	2	80	6		