

Church History I

First Baptist Church Dandridge
 Dr. Justin Terrell
 Jterrell@fbcdt.org

Session Eight

“Christianity in North Africa” – Part Two

Introduction

In the second and third centuries, the North African region was dominated by the Alexandrian church, with such leaders as Clement and Origen. But one should not overlook another important city to the west, Carthage. From this ancient coastal seaport, the church was led by leaders like Tertullian and Cyprian, who made impacts that resonated throughout the early centuries, and are even felt today.

A. Carthage

1. Tertullian

- a. **Location:** The ancient city of Carthage (present day Tunis, Tunisia) was known as the third most important city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. It was founded in



814 BC and was filled with a mixture of native Africans (Berbers) and migrant Phoenicians. These migrants introduced Latin and Hellenistic culture to the area, which expanded Rome’s influence in the region, eventually becoming the capital city of the Roman province of Africa. Little is known about how

Christianity arrived in Carthage, but records show that twelve Christians were martyred in the year 180 AD, indicating that the gospel had reached to this region following the first century. Because Northwest Africa was known for the presence of indigenous evil and migrant worldliness, the church took on the identity of being light in darkness, a “*separate body of Spirit-filled believers, chosen by God out of the world, and called by Him to oppose pagan culture and a society that was controlled by demonic powers*” (Needham, 138). Against this dark environment arose one of the most notable theologians and apologists in church history, Tertullian.

- b. **Background:** Unlike other church leaders and theologians, who were raised in one area and ministered in another, most believe that Tertullian was a lifelong native of Carthage. He was

born there around the year AD 140, converted to Christianity while on a trip to Rome at the age of 30, and lived in Carthage for the remainder of his life. Some debate whether he was ordained as a presbyter, or if he remained a lay teacher in charge of catechumens, like Origen. However, he became an incredible force in early Christianity. Some believe that his writings bear the mark of a lawyer or trained debater because of the logical and legal aspects of his arguments.

- **Quote:** *“Tertullian was one of the most warlike spirits even to enlist in the army of Christ; his hawkish, fire-breathing personality perfectly expressed the uncompromising hostility of the North-West African Church towards the Pagan society of the Roman Empire. He was also a talented, many-sided theologian, with a gift for winging his piercing thoughts with bold, colorful and dazzling words.”* – Nick Needham

c. Teachings

- **Life in Culture** – In AD 196, he wrote *“Apology,”* which argued that the Roman government should stop persecuting the church. After all, Christians paid their taxes and prayed for the emperor and the welfare of the Empire. However, it was not the role of Christians to take part in the activities of Pagan society. Christians were not allowed to work for the government, serve in the army, teach in any secular educational institution, or be involved in any business that supported the Pagan religion (e.g., painting or sculpting idols, public entertainment, etc.). Tertullian understood the Roman world as *“the camp of darkness”* and the church as *“the camp of light.”* He maintained a very negative attitude of the Empire, saying, *“Nothing could be more alien to us than the state. We Christians know of only one ‘state,’ of which we are all citizens: the universe.”* Unlike the other theologians, such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, he didn’t value Greek philosophy as a unique witness to the gospel. Tertullian called believers to be on guard against such worldly teaching, considering it to be spiritually dangerous, threatening the purity of Christian truth. He once asked the question, *“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”* In other words, what has Greek philosophy to do with the Bible? All the truth a Christian needed has been revealed in the Word of God (i.e., the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture).
- **Trinity and Christ’s Nature** – Tertullian’s most significant work was called *“Against Praxeas.”* Praxeas, which some believe was a pseudonym for the bishop of Rome, “Callixtus,” was a Roman Christian who put forth a Sabellian doctrine of the Trinity. Sabellianism affirmed one God but only one person, meaning that God appears as Father or Son or Holy Spirit, but never at the same time. God changes “modes” depending on the circumstance (aka “Modalism”). However, Tertullian wrote to defend the true teachings of Scripture. He was the first Christian writer to use the word “Trinity” (Latin, *“Trinitas”*) to describe God’s essence as one God in three persons. He described God as having one “substance” (“substantia”) and three persons (“personae”). Just as a set of gold coins are all made of gold (i.e., the substance), each coin represents an individual coin (i.e., the person) that is separate but equal in value to the rest. Therefore, according to Tertullian, the Trinity is one single divine nature, but exists in three distinct individuals. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God, but individual members of the

godhead. However, he believed the Son (“Logos”) had not existed as a distinct person from the Father from all eternity, but had become distinct just before the creation of the universe (i.e., eternal generation of the Son). Tertullian also believed that through the incarnation, the Son became one person with two substances: God and human. Christ was therefore fully God and fully man at the same time, in one single person. The Western Church accepted Tertullian’s theology of the Trinity and incarnation, and his arguments became the bedrock in future Trinitarian and Christological debates.

- **Holiness** – Tertullian had very high and radical principles regarding the Christian life. His legal mind was one that sought after perfect order and rigorous achievement. He promoted fasting on a frequent basis. He taught that Christians could only get married once, even if the original spouse died. A Christian who committed a serious sin after baptism could only be forgiven once. He glorified martyrdom, indicating that if a Christian ran away or bribed a government official to spare his life, he had betrayed Christ. Tertullian once said, “*He who fears to suffer cannot belong to Him who suffered.*” These views are what made him open to the Montanist movement, even writing a defense for the “*New Prophecy*.” However, even Montanism wasn’t strict enough for Tertullian, so he founded his own sect called the “Tertullianists,” who survived until the fifth century. However, his Montanist ties led many of the early church fathers to regard him as a heretic (false teacher). Tertullian died peacefully around AD 225.

2. Cyprian

- a. **Background:** By the mid-third century, Christianity had spread throughout North Africa. However, emperors Decius (AD 249-251) and Valerian (AD 253-250) ordered the first full-scale, universal persecution of the church, which happened to be during the lifetime of Cyprian of Carthage. He was born near Carthage around AD 200, and belonged to an upper class, rich family. Cyprian became a famous lawyer and professor of rhetoric before becoming a Christian. Following his conversion to Christ in AD 246, he gave away his entire fortune to the poor. As people in the church noticed his strong character, gentleness, love, and peaceable spirit, he was eventually elected as bishop of Carthage. Unlike Origen, he maintained a very simple, literal understanding of the Bible. However, he viewed Tertullian as “the master” theologian, and used his writings every day.
- b. **Teachings**
 - **Communion** – Cyprian was one of the earliest church fathers to set forth a theological doctrine of holy communion in sacrificial terms. He did not teach that the Lord’s Supper made a fresh sacrifice for sins, but understood that through the eucharist, Christ presented Himself to the Father as the One who had made the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of his people on the cross; and by eating the bread and drinking the wine, believers were united in that personal offering of Christ, so that Jesus presented himself and the congregation to the Father. He also taught that holy communion benefited the “faithful departed,” believers who have died. On another note, Cyprian settled a debate about whether it was acceptable to substitute water for wine. He concluded that water was not acceptable, but only water mixed with wine, which was the traditional element.

First, he reasoned that both Jesus and Paul instructed that wine should be used; second, he argued that wine was necessary to remind believers of Jesus' blood, which was poured out as a sacrifice on the cross. In Letter 62, Cyprian wrote, "*Know then that I have been admonished that in offering the cup the tradition of the Lord must be observed, and that nothing must be done by us but what the Lord first did on our behalf, as that the cup which is offered in remembrance of Him should be offered mingled with wine. For when Christ says, 'I am the true vine,' the blood of Christ is assuredly not water, but wine. Neither can his blood by which we are redeemed and given life appear to be in the cup, when in the cup there is no wine whereby the blood of Christ is shown forth.*"

- **Bishop Authority** – In Cyprian's book, "*The Unity of the Catholic Church*," he held that unity is tied to the person and office of the bishop; "*where the bishop is there is the Church.*" He believed that the difference between the original apostles and the true bishops had faded away. The apostles were merely the first bishops; the bishops were the new apostles – not indicating that bishops had apostolic infallibility but had the power of leadership and discipline over the congregation and were given the supernatural power to administer the "*life-giving sacraments of baptism and holy communion*" (Needham, 143). Such an understanding of the bishop led to the doctrine of "apostolic succession," which indicates that God grants such authority from one bishop to the next. However, while Cyprian acknowledged that Peter had been the Roman church's first bishop, he did not concede that Peter had authority over his fellow bishops, nor did he teach that the bishops of Rome were infallible. In one particular controversy over baptism, Cyprian even accused bishop Stephen of Rome of "*error, arrogant claims, irrelevant statements and contradictions.*"
- **Lapsed Christians** – Cyprian had a very strong view of the Catholic Church (not the Roman Catholic Church, but all recognized and unified churches that submitted to Christ and affirmed the apostles' teachings), in that if one was not involved in or recognized by the Church, then there was no assurance of salvation. Cyprian once said, "*Outside the Church there is no salvation.*" Further he reasoned, "*You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church as your mother...if anyone was able to escape the flood outside of Noah's ark, then you can escape judgment if you are outside the doors of the Church.*" This incredibly strong view of the church led to a major question during the persecution brought upon by emperor Decius: "What should be done about lapsed Christians?" The word "lapsed" was used to describe those who succumb to the pressure of denying Christ to save their lives. Decius had ordered all citizens to offer sacrifices to the gods and to obtain an official certificate stating that they had done so. Many church members either made the sacrifice or offered bribes to the magistrates to give them a fake certificate. So, after the persecution was over, would it be permissible to allow such unfaithful cowards back into the church? Should they wait for a period of time? Who has the authority to decide this question? Cyprian presided over a local church council at Carthage in AD 251 to settle this issue. Several views and factions formed.

- **Novatianists:** The church in Rome, led by a presbyter named Novatian, broke away from the Roman church and formed a new congregation focused on greater discipline. The “Novatianists,” as they were called, extended from Rome to Spain, with followers in Carthage, Syria, Egypt, Constantinople, and beyond. Those who followed this movement believed that the lapsed should have no chance of forgiveness and be exiled back into the world.
- **Catholics:** This local party of church members, led by the presbyter Novatus, broke away from the church and offered a softer, more lenient approach, allowing unconditional acceptance back into favorable standing with the church.
- **Cyprian:** He took a middle approach, offering to re-admit to those willing to perform penance, which is an act of confession and seeking forgiveness (i.e., repentance). However, Cyprian believed that only the bishops had the authority to settle the question – no lay members. Some were suggesting that “confessors,” ordinary church members that had endured true persecution, had the spiritual right to weigh in, but Cyprian disagreed, stating that only bishops had that authority.
- **Novatianist Conversion?** – A secondary issue arose from the controversy stemming from believers who cheaply escaped persecution. How do we handle Novatianists – those who split off from the church over the first issue – when they wanted back into the Catholic Church? According to their own standards, the church should never let them back in. However, Cyprian said yes, but required them to get rebaptized in the Catholic Church, because it was the true Church and had exclusive authority in matters of God’s Kingdom. But Stephen, the bishop of Rome, said no – as long as a person had been baptized by water in the name of the Trinity, his baptism was valid. This disagreement led to schism, or division between the churches of Rome and Northwest Africa. Bishop Stephen even threatened to excommunicate all the churches that followed Cyprian’s view.
 - **Quote:** *“Let each bishop give his opinion in this matter without judging another, and without separating from the fellowship of those who are not of his opinion. None of us must set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor force his brother-bishops to obey him by tyrannical terror. Every bishop has full liberty and complete power in his own church. No other bishop can judge him, and he cannot judge any other bishop. Let us all await the judgment of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has the power to appoint us as governors in His Church, and who alone can judge our conduct.”* – Cyprian
- c. **Death:** The split between Rome and Africa came to an end when a new persecution of the church broke out under the emperor Valerian. Cyprian was arrested in AD 257 and martyred in AD 258. Bishop Stephen also died, perhaps as a martyr.