

BEFORE CHRISTENDOM



An Icon of Cyprian of Carthage

THE THREE HUNDREDS

CYPRIAN

Cyprian was born the son of a wealthy North African merchant and seemed to have lived the first part of his life enjoying that status, and even abusing it. He lived and worked as a rhetorician and politician. Later in life, however, at 35 he was confronted by a Christian priest named Caecilius who convinced Cyprian of the fruitlessness of his ways. Cyprian was then baptized and became a Christian, rising quickly to the rank of deacon, priest, and then bishop within only 3 to 4 years (this ascendancy could take a life time for others).

As a bishop, Cyprian's chief concern was that of the "lapsii," lapsed Christians who had engaged in pagan activities such as sacrificing animals in order to keep from being persecuted. Cyprian felt that these Christians could, and in fact should be heartily encouraged to, return to the Church. However, Cyprian also felt that such a return should be marked by a period of penitential acts and status. There were two detractors to Cyprian on either side of this. On one side, there was a growing heresy called "donatism" that said that those who lapsed (especially priests) were forever condemned by God. On the other side, there were many priests who felt that these should be readmitted without any penance. Cyprian's concern in this matter made him an unpopular bishop with some, but also forced him to write volumes on the nature and being of the Church, which is the chief concern of most of his writing.

They are blind guides,' He says, 'of the blind. But if a blind man guide a blind man, both shall fall into a pit.' Such a one is to be turned away from, and whoever has separated himself from the Church is to be shunned. Such a man is perverted and sins and is condemned by his very self. Does he seem to himself to be with Christ, who acts contrary to the priests of Christ, who separates himself from association with His clergy and His people? That man bears arms against the Church; he fights against God's plan. An enemy of the altar, a rebel against the sacrifice of Christ, for the faith faithless, for religion sacrilegious, a disobedient servant, an impious son, a hostile brother, despising the bishops and abandoning the priests of God, he dares to set up another altar, to compose another prayer with unauthorized words, to profane the truth of the Lord's offering by false sacrifices, and not to know that he who struggles

against God's plan on account of his rash daring is punished by divine censure.

NOVATIAN (HERETICAL)

Also dealing with the problem of the “lapsii” was the North African bishop named Novatian. Novatian believed that those who had lapsed had no hope for repentance. Early on, Novatian had sided with Cyprian in requiring periods and acts of penance before returning to the Church, but later in his life, Novatian took the perspective that those who had lapsed should not be readmitted to the Church and as such were forever condemned under the requirements of the law. Some believe that Novatian’s change of heart may have been politically motivated as it appeared to pander to “rigorists” who also felt that the “lapsii” should be reintroduced to the Church. Whether Novatian’s election was purposeful in this way or not, he was elected as an “antipope” or the pope of a small group of rigorists after the election of another pope named Cornelius. Novatian was declared a heretic for his views on repentance soon after his election, and while his followers held with him for many years, Novatianism finally died out in the mid to late 300’s.

Novatian, however, wrote many theological works that are not tainted by his issue with repentance and readmission to the Church. Novatian wrote quite eloquently about the Trinity and on Christian living.

“Hereto also I will add that view wherein the heretic, while he rejoices as if at the loss of some power of seeing special truth and light, acknowledges the total blindness of his error. For again and again, and frequently, he objects that it was said, Have I been so long time with you, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me, has seen the Father also. But let him learn what he does not understand. Philip is reproved, and rightly, and deservedly indeed, because he has said, Lord, show us the Father, and it suffices us. For when had he either heard from Christ, or learned that Christ was the Father? Although, on the other hand, he had frequently heard, and had often learned, rather that He was the Son, not that He was the Father.”

EUSIBEUS (HERETICAL)

Like Novatian, Eusibeus gave many great things to the Church, but eventually ended up being branded a heretic for his allegiance to the heresy of Arianism that held that Jesus was not the same substance as the Father. Eusibeus' life is largely unknown. He appears to have been born in Caesaria and lived there most of his life and career.

Eusibeus' magnum opus was something that helped the early Church greatly. Eusibeus wrote what he called the "Ecclesiastical History," a history of the Church that stretched from the Ascension of Christ to Eusibeus' current day. While Eusibeus' allegiance to Arianism caused him to be declared a heretic, "Ecclesiastical History" was written before his dalliances with this heretical belief.

"First, then, in the place of Judas, the betrayer, Matthias, who, as has been shown was also one of the Seventy, was chosen to the apostolate. And there were appointed to the diaconate, for the service of the congregation, by prayer and the laying on of the hands of the apostles, approved men, seven in number, of whom Stephen was one. He first, after the Lord, was stoned to death at the time of his ordination by the slayers of the Lord, as if he had been promoted for this very purpose. And thus he was the first to receive the crown, corresponding to his name, which belongs to the martyrs of Christ, who are worthy of the meed of victory. Then James, whom the ancients surnamed the Just on account of the excellence of his virtue, is recorded to have been the first to be made bishop of the church of Jerusalem. This James was called the brother of the Lord because he was known as a son of Joseph, and Joseph was supposed to be the father of Christ, because the Virgin, being betrothed to him, "was found with child by the Holy Ghost before they came together," as the account of the holy Gospels shows. But Clement in the sixth book of his Hypotyposes writes thus: "For they say that Peter and James and John after the ascension of our Saviour, as if also preferred by our Lord, strove not after honor, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem."