

Module 105: Cyprian

The Unity of the Church by St Cyprian; Introduction by Stephen Tomkins; Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.”

Module Introduction

In 249, the Empire launched an eleven year assault on the church, its most savage to this point. The suffering of the Church had some unexpected repercussions. While thousands died heroically for their faith, many Christians broke down and sacrificed to the gods to save their lives. Afterward many repented and wanted to rejoin the church.

What was the church to do? Many believers thought that such betrayal was a blasphemy that could never be forgiven. Others said the fallen could be readmitted to the church after years of arduous penance and teaching (though of course even this lenient approach would seem harsh by today's standards). Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage (in modern Tunisia), was a champion of this more forgiving approach, which became the official policy of the Catholic church. He also heightened the importance of bishops in the church by insisting only they could decide whether anyone should be forgiven. But not everyone could accept this conciliatory approach, and many split away from the Catholic Church to form what they considered to be a pure and uncompromised church. The split is named after Novatian, the bishop elected by the hard-line church in Rome.

Cyprian wrote *The Unity of the Church*, his greatest work, to counter the Novatian schism. He argues that there can only be one united church, under one united episcopate, and any breakaway movement is therefore a false church. He was hugely influential, both in raising yet further the authority of bishops, and in furthering the idea that there is one uniform true church united in opinion and practice.

4. There is no need for lengthy arguments, [about the unity of the church] because the truth is obvious, as you will see

from this brief recap: The Lord says to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." [Matt. 16:18-19] Then, after his resurrection, he says, "Feed my sheep." [John 21:15] He then gives equal power to all the Apostles: "As the Father sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they shall be forgiven, and if you retain anyone's sins, they shall be retained." [John 20:21] But, but to show how important unity is, Christ ordained that it should start with one apostle. The rest of the apostles were just the same as Peter, of course, partners with him in honor and power, but the source was in unity. In the *Song of Songs*, the Holy Spirit describes this same church in the person of our Lord: "My dove, my spotless one, is but one. She is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bore her." [Song 6:9] How can anyone think he keeps the faith, if he breaks the unity of the Church? The blessed Apostle Paul teaches the same sacrament of unity: "There is one body and one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God? " [Eph. 4:4] Do they who fight and resist the Church believe that they are in the Church?

5. We should all firmly believe in and maintain this unity, but especially those of us that are bishops, so that we may prove the episcopate to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brothers by false teaching: the episcopate is one, and each part is held to the whole body by each other part. The Church is also one, though spread far and wide by its ever-increasing fruitfulness. There are many rays of the sun, but one light. There are many branches of a tree, but one strength from its mighty root. From one spring flow many streams, and though they are multiplied in rich abundance, yet they are still united in one source. You cannot separate a ray of light from the sun, because its unity does not allow division. You can break a branch from a

tree, but when broken, it will not be able to bud. Cut a stream off from its source and it dries up. It is the same with the Church. Filled with the light of the Lord, it shines its rays over the whole world, yet everywhere it is one and the same light that shines, and the body is not divided. The Church's fruitfulness spreads branches over the whole world. It sends forth her rivers, freely flowing, yet the source is one, and she is one mother, plentiful in fruitfulness. We are born from her womb, nourished by her milk, given life by her spirit.

6. The spouse of Christ cannot commit adultery. She is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home, she guards with chaste modesty the sanctity of one bed. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and unites with an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church. No one who forsakes the Church of Christ can receive the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother. It was as possible to escape outside Noah's Ark as it is to escape outside of the Church. The Lord warns us, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." [Matt. 12:30] He who breaks the peace and the unity of Christ, is an opponent of Christ. He who gathers anywhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ. The Lord says, "I and the Father are one;" [John 10:30] and again it is written of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, "These three are one." [1 John 5:7 - an interpolation not included in modern translations.] Does anyone believe that such unity which comes from the strength of God and is held together by the sacraments of heaven, can be divided by the falling out of opposing wills? Anyone who does not keep this unity does not keep God's law, does not keep the faith of the Father and the Son, does not keep hold of life and salvation.

7. This sacrament of unity, this unbreakable bond of

concord, is demonstrated in the Gospel, when the coat of the Lord Jesus Christ is not at all divided nor cut, but is received as a whole garment by those who cast lots for it. Scripture says, "Because the coat was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, they said, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it.'" [John 21:23-24] That coat had a unity from the top down, that is, unity that came from heaven and the Father, that could not be torn by those who received and possessed it. It is whole and undivided. No one who splits and divides the Church of Christ can possess the garment of Christ....

8. Who, then, is so wicked and faithless, who is so insane with the madness of discord, as to believe that the unity of God can be divided, or to dare to tear the garment of the Lord, the Church of Christ? He himself warns us in his Gospel, "There shall be one flock and one shepherd." [John 10:16] Does any one believe that there can be many shepherds in one place, or many flocks? The Apostle Paul urges this same unity: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree with each other and avoid schisms. Be united in the same mind and in the same judgment." [1 Cor. 1:10.] And again, he says, "Bearing with one another in love, labor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." [Eph. 4:3] Do you think that you can stand and live if you leave the Church, building other homes for yourself?

9. ...How could the fierceness of wolves exist in a Christian breast? Or the savageness of dogs, the deadly venom of serpents, or the bloody cruelty of wild animals? We are to be congratulated when people like this are separated from the Church, rather than overcoming the doves and sheep of Christ with their cruel poison. Bitterness cannot coexist with sweetness, darkness with light, rain with clear skies, war with peace, barrenness with fertility, drought with water, or storms with tranquility. Do not think that good people can depart from the Church. The wind does not carry away the

wheat, nor does the hurricane uproot a tree based on a solid root. It is only light straws that are tossed about by the tempest and feeble trees that are blown down by the whirlwind. The Apostle John condemns people like this: "They went out from among us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would surely have continued with us." [1 John 2:19]

10. This is why heresies often been started, and still continue to arise, because twisted faithless minds refuse to live in peace and unity. But the Lord permits this, while people still have free will, so that the Truth will test our hearts and our minds, allowing the sound faith of those that pass the test to shine out. As the Holy Spirit forewarned, "It is necessary for there to be heresies so that those of you who are approved can stand out from the rest." [1 Cor. 11:19] This way the faithful are approved, the wicked detected, and even before the Day of Judgment, the souls of the righteous and of the unrighteous are already divided, and the chaff is separated from the wheat. The unrighteous are the ones who on their own authority, without any divine arrangement, set themselves up to preside over the daring strangers who assemble with them, who appoint themselves bishops without any law of ordination. The Holy Spirit in the Psalms points to them sitting in the seat of pestilence and plagues, deceiving with serpent's tongue, skillful in corrupting the truth, vomiting deadly poisons. Their speech creeps like a cancer, their talk is a deadly poison in every heart and breast.

11. ...The Lord points these people out. "They have turned from me, the fountain of living waters, and have made broken cisterns which hold no water." [Jer. 2:13] Although there can only be one baptism, they think that they can baptize; although they turn from the fountain of life, they promise the gift of living and saving water. People are not washed by them, they are made filthy. Their sins are not purged away, but are piled high. Such a birth does not give

sons to God, but to the devil. They are born by falsehood, and they do not receive the promises of truth. They are conceived through sin, and lose the grace of faith. They cannot receive the reward of peace, because they have broken the Lord's peace with the madness of discord.

12. Do not deceive yourselves by misinterpreting the words of the Lord that, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." [Matt. 18:20] Corrupters of the Gospel quote these words, ignoring the ones that come just before (as they themselves are separated from the Church, so they divorce one section of the text from the next). For the Lord, urging his disciples to unanimity and peace, said, "I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about what you ask for, it shall be given to you by my Father in heaven." This shows that God gives, not in accordance with to the number of those who ask, but in accordance with their unanimity. "If two of you shall agree on earth" - agreement comes first. This shows that our firm and faithful agreement is essential. But how can you agree with anyone if you do not agree with the Church itself, and with the universal brotherhood? How can two or three be assembled together in Christ's name, when they are clearly separated from Christ and from his Gospel? For we have not withdrawn from them, but they from us. Their success in building many places of worship from which to spawn further heresies and schisms has emboldened them in forsaking the source of the truth. The Lord says to those also who are in his Church, that if they agree with each other in his instructions and are united in prayer - even of only two or three are present - they will receive what they ask from the majesty of God.... He does not divide people from the Church - after all, he himself set up and created the Church. Instead, to rebuke the faithless for their discord and commend peace to the faithful, he shows that he is with two or three who pray with one mind, rather than with a great many who disagree, and that more can be obtained by the harmonious prayer of a few, than by the discordant prayer

of many. ...

14. Even if people like this become martyrs for the name of Christ, their stain is not washed away. The unforgivable grievous sin of discord is not purged by suffering. You cannot be a martyr outside the Church. You cannot enter the kingdom when you shun those that will reign there.... Those who fall out cannot receive the rewards of Christ. He said, "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you." [John 15:12] No one will receive Christ who has violated the love of Christ by faithless dissension. He who does not have love does not have God. The blessed Apostle John says, "God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him." [1 John 4:16] No one can live with God who is not of one mind with God's Church. They may be burned, or lay down their lives, or be thrown to the wild beasts. This will not prove to be the crown of faith, but the punishment of sin. It is not the glorious ending of religious valor, but the destruction of despair. Such people may be slain, they cannot be crowned.

Discussion Starters:

1. What do you think were the rights and wrongs of the disagreement about whether to readmit repentant apostates to the church? Should all repentant sinners be welcomed back to the church? Or is it not for us who have been spared such trials to judge?

2. In section 4, how does Cyprian argue from Scripture that the true church is united in one body of bishops? Do you agree with his exegesis?

3. What analogies does Cyprian use in part 5 to demonstrate the church's unity in dispersion throughout the world? Do the metaphors work?

4. In section 6, Cyprian brings out his big guns, insisting that no one can be saved outside the one true church. Are

you convinced by this argument? Is it harder to accept these days when there are so many more different churches? Remember, even in Cyprian's day, big cities like Rome had several house churches; so his argument was not against meeting in a separate building but against a deeper disunity.

5. "Do not think that good people can depart from the Church." Do you agree that truly good people can only exist in the true Christian church?

6. How can we tell a true church from false? Do you think your answer would be the same as Cyprian's?

7. "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." How is this text misused, according to Cyprian? How do you understand it yourself?

8. Currently 260 new denominations form each year around the world. What do you think Cyprian would have to say about that? Is the church terribly divided, or does its spiritual unity make such divisions irrelevant?

9. There have been instances in which an unsaved person in a remote region has heard or read God's word, believed it and led others to Christ, who then worship together without a bishop or any connection to any other church. Are they part of the church? How do they fit in Cyprian's theory?

Bible Verses

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

John 17:20-23

Psalm 133

Ephesians 4:1-16