

# Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage

by J.B. Galloway

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*The sermon explores the life and teachings of Cyprian, emphasizing his contributions to the early Church and the importance of holiness and proper baptism.*

**Scripture:** Romans 8:14

**Topics:** "Church History", "Sanctification"

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## Description

J.B. Galloway preaches about Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, highlighting his conversion, selfless acts for the poor, struggles during persecutions, and his views on the Church and holiness. Cyprian's time as a bishop was marked by challenges, including dealing with the lapsed Christians who returned to idolatry during persecution. He emphasized the importance of being fully sanctified through baptism in the Church and receiving the Holy Spirit for spiritual vigor and holiness.

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## Transcript

### CYPRIAN, THE BISHOP OF CARTHAGE

#### Cyprian And His Works

Thasius Cyprian was born about A.D. 200. We know very little of his early life. He was wealthy and highly educated; by profession he was an orator and teacher of rhetoric. He was converted in middle life in A.D. 246. He was the owner of some of the finest pleasuregrounds in Carthage, which he sold after his conversion for the benefit of the poor. His friends rebought it and gave it to him. His ordination and elevation to the office of a bishop rapidly followed his conversion. Because of his position and outstanding character he was made a bishop in A.D. 248, and one of the greatest of his time. He was a pupil of Tertullian and followed many of his ideas, but differed on the position that the Church held and on a few other questions.

His time as a bishop was marked by many struggles: first against the persecution of Decius, during which he went into retirement for fourteen months; then against the disorders of the Church, principally about discipline. Many had lapsed back into idolatry during persecution, and when peace was restored they asked to be restored to communion again. Some in the Church contended that the lapsed should be restored on the easiest terms; others were more strict and would not allow them to return at all. In some cases, after they had proved themselves for many years or were about to be martyred, they were allowed to come into the Church again. At the council of the African bishops under the presidency of Cyprian a

middle and more reasonable course was taken.

The fact that he had risen to the bishopric within two years after his conversion caused a spirit of jealousy on the part of some. During the year he wrote many letters from his place of concealment to the clergy at Carthage, controlling, warning, directing, and exhorting; and in every way he maintained his episcopal superintendence in his absence, in all matters relative to the welfare of the church at Carthage. The first thirty-nine of his epistles, except the one to Donatus, were written during his retirement. Felicissimus opposed his method. Both the bishops at Carthage and Rome began to oppose him. Novatius went to Rome, and schisms arose which caused Cyprian much trouble.

After some time persecutions began again against the Christians from the state, and Cyprian did not escape. He was banished by Valerian and beheaded in A.D. 258.

Cyprian's theory of the Church was that it is one visible body, presided over by bishops, each of which is free and independent in his own sphere, and yet acts in council with the others for the good of the whole. His ideals for the Church had to be destroyed by decreedalism before the papacy could exist.

### The Christian Lapsi

This term was used for those apostates from Christianity who lapsed back into idolatry. Decius published an edict against the Christians in A.D. 250. The procedure was as follows: The magistrates were bidden to assemble the Christians together and command them to sacrifice. Those who consented were subjected to no further annoyance and were given certificates indicating the same. The certificates were called libelli. Recent excavation has brought to light several of these. One from Egypt reads: "To the superintendents of offerings and sacrifices at the city. From Aurelius. It has been my custom to make sacrifices and pour libations to the gods and now I have in your presence in accordance with your commands poured libations and sacrifice and tasted the offerings together with my son Aurelius Dioscuros and my daughter Aurelia Lais. I therefore request you to certify my statement. The first year of the Emperor Caesar Gaius, Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius."

If this was from a Christian who had lapsed back into idolatry, how little did he think that his record would be read almost two thousand years later! How careful we should be about our records!

### Cyprian on Holiness

From the writings of Cyprian and others it seems that it was the common practice to pray for the new converts that they might be filled with the Spirit. They were following up the example of Peter and John, who went down to Samaria and found disciples there who had been baptized, yet had not the Holy Ghost. They prayed for and laid their hands upon them, that the newly converted ones might receive the Holy Ghost (see Acts 8: 15-17).

### Heavenly Contest

Cyprian recognized that some of the martyrs were filled with the Holy Spirit. We read from his Epistle 7, To the Martyrs, of their devotion:

The multitude of those present saw with admiration the heavenly contest -- the spiritual contest, the battle of Christ -- saw that His servants stood with free voice, unyielding mind -- bare indeed of weapons of the world, but believing and armed with the weapons of faith. The tortured stood more brave than the

torturers; the limbs were beaten and torn, overcame the hooks that bent and tore them. The scourge repeated with all rage could not conquer their invincible faith.

A few sentences later we read:

A voice filled with the Holy Spirit broke from the martyr's mouth which the most blessed Mappalicus said to the proconsul in the midst of his torments, "Ye shall see a contest tomorrow."

### Laying on Hands

Cyprian recognized that it took more than the mere praying for and anointing with oil and laying hands upon to get the Holy Ghost. And some might pretend to help others get the Holy Ghost who did not have Him themselves. In Epistle 69, To Januarius and Other Numidian Bishops, he says:

But how can he clean and sanctify the water who is himself unclean and in whom the Holy Spirit is not?..... It is necessary that he should be anointed who is baptized; so that having received the chrism, that is the anointing, he may be anointed of God, and have in him the grace of Christ. Further, it is the Eucharist whence the baptized are anointed with the oil sanctified on the altar. But he cannot sanctify the creature of oil, who has neither an altar or a church; whence also there can be no spiritual anointing among heretics since it is manifest that the oil cannot be sanctified . . . Therefore he must be baptized and renewed who comes untrained to the church, that he may be sanctified within by those who are holy, since it is written, "Be ye holy, for I am holy, saith the Lord."

Commenting still further on baptism in Epistle 70, he says:

And he who of his own authority grants this advantage to them, yields and consents to them, that the enemy and adversary of Christ should seem to have the power of washing, and purifying, and sanctifying a man.

### Fully Sanctified

In Epistle 71, speaking of those who have been baptized outside of the church and have been stained among heretics, he says:

When they come to us and to the church which is one, ought to be baptized for the reason that it is a small matter to lay hands on them that they may receive the Holy Ghost unless they receive also the baptism of the church. For then finally they can be fully sanctified.

### Lord's Seal

In Epistle 72, To Jubaianus, concerning the baptism of heretics, these words occur:

But if, according to a perverted faith, one can be baptized without, and obtain remission of sins, according to the same faith he could also attain the Holy Ghost; there is no need that hands should be laid upon him when he comes, that he might obtain the Holy Ghost, and be sealed.

He speaks of the Church in his day following the example of Peter and John at Samaria in these words:

Only that which was needful was performed by Peter and John; viz., that prayer should be made for them, and hands being imposed, the Holy Spirit should be invoked and poured out upon them, which now too is

done among us, so that they who are baptized in the church are brought to the prelates of the church, and by our prayers and by the imposing of hands obtain the Holy Spirit, and are perfected with the Lord's seal.

### Spirit for the Saved

He shows that it is the saved man who is fitted to receive the Holy Spirit. In Epistle 73:

For if anyone out of the church can become God's temple, why cannot also the Holy Spirit be poured out upon the temple? For he who has been sanctified, and his sins put away in baptism, has been spiritually reformed into a new man, has become fitted to receive the Holy Spirit.

In the same epistle we read:

For water alone is not able to cleanse away sins, and to sanctify a man, unless he have also the Holy Spirit. Wherefore it is necessary that they grant the Holy Spirit to be there, where they say baptism is; or else there is baptism where the Holy Spirit is not.

### Spouse of Christ

And again:

For the church alone which, conjoined and united with Christ, spiritually bears sons; for the same apostle again says, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify it, cleansing it with the washing of water." If, then, she is the beloved and spouse who alone is sanctified by Christ, and alone is cleansed by His washing, it is manifest that heresy, which is not the spouse of God, nor can be cleansed nor sanctified by His washing, cannot bear sons to God. \* \*

But further one is not born by the imposition of hands when he received the Holy Ghost, but is baptized, that so, being already born, he may receive the Holy Spirit. \* \*

But as the birth of Christians is in baptism, while the generation of sanctification of baptism are with the spouse of Christ alone, who is able spiritually to conceive and bear sons to God.

From Epistle 75, we read:

And therefore, in order that, according to the divine arrangement and the evangelical truth, they may be able to obtain remission of sins, and be sanctified, and become the temples of God, they must absolutely be baptized with the baptism of the church.

### Spiritual Vigor

From the Treatise of Cyprian, Number 10, Chapter 14, we see that he taught that we are to mortify the deeds of the flesh and live holy:

Vices and carnal sins must be trampled down, beloved brethren, and the corrupting plague of the earthly body must be trodden under foot with spiritual vigor, lest, while we are turned back again to the conversation of the old man, we be entangled in deadly snares, even as the apostle, with foresight and wholesomeness, forewarned us of this very thing, and said; "therefore, brethren, let us not live after the flesh, for if ye live after the flesh, ye shall begin to die; but if ye, through the Spirit, mortify the deeds of the flesh, we shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God they are the sons of God." If we are the

sons of God, if we are already beginning to be His temples, if, having received the Holy Spirit, we are living holily and spiritually, if we have raised our eyes from earth to heaven, if we have lifted our hearts, filled with God and Christ to things above and divine, let us do nothing but what is worthy of God.

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