

# Tertullian, the Chief of the Latin Apologists

by J.B. Galloway

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*Tertullian was a Christian apologist and theologian who played a crucial role in defending Christianity and shaping Latin theology, emphasizing the importance of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, and Christian modesty.*

**Scripture:** Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 12:4, Ephesians 5:18, James 5:14, 1 Peter 3:15

**Topics:** "Church History", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

J.B. Galloway preaches about Tertullian, the Christian defender, who used his literary gifts to defend the Church with great zeal. Tertullian's fierce temperament led him to join the Montanists, emphasizing their spiritual enthusiasm and strict orthodoxy. He was a prolific writer, producing apologetic, doctrinal, and ethical works, including a masterpiece defending the Christians against persecution. Tertullian also emphasized the importance of holiness, sanctification by the Holy Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit in the life of a believer.

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## Transcript

### Tertullian, The Christian Defender

He was born at Carthage in North Africa, probably of pagan parents. He was the son of a proconsular centurion. He was well educated, especially in Roman law. His birth is placed at about A.D. 145. Attracted by the courage of the Christians, he was converted and used his great literary gifts for the Church. He was a married man and wrote treatises addressed to his wife. He was a presbyter until middle age, and later in life espoused the party of Montanus. Persecution was prevalent during the early part of his life but he escaped, in spite of his vigorous protests against the persecutors. His chief service to the Church was that of a Christian defender, which he did with great zeal, and was not interrupted until death. No early father is more valuable to us than Tertullian, for the vivid pictures he gives us of both pagan and Christian life.

### Tertullian, the Montanist

His fierce temperament led him always to extremes, and in middle life he joined the Montanists, finding their rigid asceticism and spiritual enthusiasm more congenial than the ordinary life of the Church, which was beginning to drift away from the truth. His doctrine, however, is strictly orthodox, and he is the father of Latin theology. Such words as Trinity, substance, person, sacrament, and church as used for a building occur first in their Latin form in his writings.

The Montanists arose in Asia Minor in the century. They were eminently spiritual people, and bitterly persecuted. They became a separate sect in the third century and were expelled by Rome, for they stood by the old paths against the Catholic hierarchical tendency. They insisted upon regeneration followed by heart purity with the baptism of the Holy Ghost, which they professed to enjoy. They contended for Christian perfection and a pure, spotless Church; fasted frequently, prayed much, testified with joy; gave freedom to the Holy Ghost, and shouted in their worship. They insisted upon a divine call to preach. They forbade all ornamentation in clothing and the appearance of their women in immodest attire. They looked with contempt upon this present world, living under a vivid impression of the great final catastrophe, believing that Christ would come and reign personally during the millennium. They were ardent believers in the second advent of Christ, which they believed near at hand. John Wesley says of Montanus, their founder, that "he was not only a truly good man, but one of the best men then on the earth."

#### Tertullian, the Writer

He was the first great Latin writer in the Church. Even at Rome the language of the Church was Greek to the end of the second century. His writings include several apologetic works, more bitter in tone than the Greek apologists; a long doctrinal work Against Marcion (the most formidable heretic who had yet opposed the Christians); and many ethical and theological essays. His Apology Against the Pagans, written about A.D. 197, is the most brilliant defensive writing in the Early Church. It is a masterpiece in unity and skill. He shows the unjustness of persecution, and proves the error of the charges against the Christians. He proves the unity of God in his Proof of the Soul and Against the Heathen Mythology. He wrote a book to the proconsul Scapula, who was very cruel to the Christians. He answered the Jewish arguments in his book Against the Jews, and proves the immortality of man in his book on The Resurrection.

#### Tertullian On Holiness

The early Christian writers say that it was customary in the second century and afterward to pray for the Christians to be filled with the Spirit. From Tertullian we learn that it was the practice to anoint the baptized believer with oil before praying that he be filled with the Holy Ghost. Oil was used as a symbol of the Spirit. Kings and priests were anointed with oil in the Old Testament, and the sick were anointed in the New Testament for healing. As water in baptism symbolized cleansing from sin, so the anointing with oil symbolized the baptism of the Spirit.

#### Inviting the Holy Spirit

In Tertullian's On Baptism, chapter 8, he says: "In the next place the hand is laid on us invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction." Further on, "Then over our cleansed and blessed bodies willingly descends from the Father the holiest Spirit." In chapter 10 of the same book we read, "And so the baptism of repentance was dealt with as if it were a candidate for sanctification shortly about to follow Christ."

#### Sanctified by the Holy One

Water was looked upon as a chosen vehicle of divine operation, a type of cleansing. In chapter 4 we read:

By the very attitude assumed for a type of baptism, that the Spirit of God, who hovered over the waters from the beginning, would continue to linger over the waters of the baptized. But a holy thing, of course

hovers over a holy; or else, from that which was hovered over borroweth a holiness, since it is necessary that in every case an underlying substance should catch the quality of that which overhangs it..... Thus the nature of the waters, sanctified by the Holy One, itself conceived the power of sanctifying.

Not so clear on how you get holiness, but expecting it.

### Gifts of the Spirit

In Against Marcion, Book I, chapter 28, Tertullian shows that if Marcion is right the sacraments have no virtue, and there would be no need for regeneration, nor the gift of the Spirit. His words are:

If the regeneration of man, how can he regenerate that which has never been generated? If the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, how will he bestow the Spirit, who did not at first impart life? For the life is in a sense the supplement of the Spirit. He therefore seals men, who have never been unsealed in respect of him; washed men who had never been defiled so far as he was concerned . . . . Why then impose sanctity upon our most infirm and unworthy flesh, either as a burden or as a glory? What shall I say, too, of the uselessness of a discipline which sanctifies what is already sanctified?..... Why keep back from a work its due reward?

In Book V, chapter 8, he has a long chapter discussing the gifts of the Spirit, comparing the prophets' prophecy and the apostles' declaration fulfillment, and challenging Marcion to produce anything like the gifts of the Spirit foretold by the prophets.

### Illumination of the Spirit

He shows the need of being filled with the Spirit In On the Resurrection of the Flesh, he says:

The flesh is washed, that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed or sealed, that the soul may be fortified; the flesh is overshadowed with the imposing of hands, that the soul may be illuminated by the Spirit.

### The Old and the New Man

In chapter 45 of the same book he explains the old man and new man in Paul's epistles. And in chapter 46 he shows that it is the work of the flesh and not the bodily flesh itself that is carnal and sinful. A quotation reads:

In like manner he [the apostle] called "the carnal mind" first "death," and afterwards "enmity against God"; but he never predicated this against the flesh itself. But to what then, you will say, must the carnal mind be ascribed, if it is not to the carnal substance itself? I will allow your objection, if you will prove that the flesh has any discernment of its own. If however, it has no conception of anything without the soul, you must understand that the carnal mind must be referred to the soul, although ascribed sometimes to the flesh, on the grounds that it is ministered for the flesh and through the flesh. And therefore the apostle says that "sin dwelleth in the flesh," because the soul by which sin is provoked has its temporary lodging in the flesh, which is doomed indeed to death, not however on its own account, but on account of sin.

### Christian Modesty

He is very strong in his arguments against worldliness. He covers almost every phase of dress and conduct in his two books On the Apparel of Women. He begins Book I, chapter 1, by saying:

If there dwell upon earth a faith as great as the reward which is expected in heaven, no one at all, beloved sisters, from the time she first knew the Lord, and learned the truth concerning her own condition, would have a desire to gladsome (not to say too ostentatious) a style of dress.

He says perfect modesty will abstain from everything that tends to sin. In Book II, chapter 2, we read:

You must know that in the eye of perfect, that is Christian modesty, carnal desire of one's self on the part of others, is not only not to be desired or even expected of you: first, because the study of personal grace as a means of pleasing does not spring from a sound conscience. Why therefore excite towards yourself that evil passion? Why invite that to which you profess your self a stranger? Second, because we ought not to open a way to temptation, which by their instancy sometimes achieves wickedness which God expels from those who are His. We ought indeed to walk so holily, and with so entire substantiality of faith to be confident and secure in regard to our conscience.

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