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CYPRIAN THE APOLOGIST

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To Regina, Grace, and Juliet for their years of unwavering support
and to Dr. Edward L. Smither for his patient work as a mentor

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ABSTRACT

Cyprian has not generally been viewed as an apologist of the Patristic era. This study examines whether Cyprian should be considered an apologist under a four-part definition of the term, which coheres with the New Testament uses of *apologia* and *apologeomai* and finds expression in the work of the recognized second-century apologists Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Mathetes, Minucius Felix, and Tertullian. It is argued that Cyprian engaged in an extensive program of apologetics characterized by these same four elements.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Research Concern

Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage (AD 200-258), was an important Patristic figure who made valuable contributions in a number of different areas. Most contemporary Cyprian scholarship focuses on his work as a practical church administrator, his view on church unity, his contribution to the development of the Roman Catholic episcopate and penitential system, and his baptismal doctrine. These are important areas of emphasis in his life and ministry, but they do not exhaust our understanding of the man. Cyprian should also be regarded as a Patristic apologist.

Apologetics has always been a multi-faceted endeavor that defies simple definition. In the Patristic era, apologetics was at first focused primarily on defending Christianity against charges of suspect or illegal activity.¹ In the hostile environment of the second century, Christians had to defend themselves against various charges: that they were immoral, that they were unpatriotic, that they posed a danger to the state, and that their false beliefs angered the gods who maintained the harmony of society. As they defended against these charges, the apologists also advanced arguments for the faith that were more positive in nature.² They strove to proclaim the benefits of Christianity to a world that badly needed it, to argue that Christianity was a belief system that coheres well with the world as it really is, and to defend the faith against internal forces of division that would weaken it.

¹ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has its Reasons: Interpretive Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2006), 2-6.

² *Ibid.*, 3. See also Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), xx.

There are a number of important apologies from the century preceding Cyprian. These include works such as the two *Apologies* of Justin Martyr, Athenagoras' *A Plea for the Christians*, the *Letter to Diognetus*, Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and the *Apology* of Tertullian. These works contain various elements which cause them to be identified as "apologetic."

Cyprian is absent from most accepted lists of Patristic apologists. For example, there is no entry for Cyprian to be found in Baker's *Encyclopedia of Apologetics*.³ No mention of him is found in many standard apologetics texts written by evangelical scholars.⁴ In his comprehensive *History of Apologetics*, the Roman Catholic scholar Avery Dulles passes over Cyprian quickly, noting that he "deserves brief mention" largely because of his connection to Tertullian. Dulles points out that whereas a few of Cyprian's treatises are somewhat apologetic in character, his primary works like *On the Unity of the Church* have pastoral rather than apologetic aims.⁵ Dulles is not alone in assuming that works written in a pastoral context, with primarily pastoral aims, need not be carefully mined for evidence of a serious and coherent apologetic program. Perhaps this is a continuation of the early assessment of Cyprian made by Lactantius, who considered Cyprian's writings to have appeal mostly for those already within the church.⁶

It is the argument of this dissertation that there is a clear thread of apologetic thought that runs through Cyprian's writings. This can be established from a careful review of the treatises and letters, even though many of these (on their face) address other matters. Cyprian's writings

³ Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

⁴ Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody, 1976); Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); L. Russ Bush, ed., *Classical Readings in Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); and Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

⁵ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 53-55.

⁶ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.1.

were often addressed to fellow believers, written in the context of practical problem solving for the church. Cyprian, like Tertullian before him, brought a Roman legal mindset to bear in his works. Although he was primarily writing to the church, he saw himself as also engaging the pagan culture around him apologetically, even if in an indirect manner. He believed that his works would circulate among a wider audience than just the churchmen to whom they were originally addressed.

Portraits of Cyprian are not fully complete until his role as an apologist is properly acknowledged. This dissertation will add to the base of scholarly knowledge by showing that Cyprian's works can and should be read in an apologetic light. Cyprian's works have much in common with the works of recognized second century apologists and include each of the elements to be found in a robust definition of apologetics.

Literature Review

Patristic scholars who have written on Cyprian in the last half-century include the likes of Maurice Bevenot, Michael Sage, Johannes Quasten, Francois Decret, Charles Bobertz, J. Patout Burns, Geoffrey Dunn, Allen Brent, Jakob Engberg, and Henk Bakker. None of these focus on the apologetic themes and emphases that permeate the corpus of Cyprian's works.

Bevenot, for example, a Roman Catholic who wrote in the mid-twentieth century, was focused on issues of manuscript transmission. Earlier Protestant scholars like Wilhelm Hartel and H. Koch had argued that the "Textus Receptus" (TR) version of *On the Unity of the Church* chapter four was the original from Cyprian's hand whereas the "Primacy Text" (PT), more supportive of the chair of Peter in Rome, was a fraudulent interpolation made by a later hand,

perhaps Trent-era Catholics.⁷ Subsequent research by Chapman revealed there was a lengthy history of the text existing in two separate versions, and suggested the alterations may have been made by Cyprian himself.⁸ Bevenot, building on the work of Dom Chapman and D. Van den Eyde, examined the issue in depth and concluded based on the manuscript tradition and textual considerations that PT was changed to TR by Cyprian sometime after 255, when he locked horns with Bishop Stephen of Rome over the rebaptism of heretics and grew concerned about Rome's assertions of authority.⁹ This has since become the preferred solution among scholars.¹⁰

Resolution of manuscript issues such as this one were seen as important because they helped establish a proper understanding of Cyprian's role in ongoing Catholic-Protestant polemics.

Since Bevenot, scholarship has moved on to other areas of interest. Sage (1975), who artfully weaves an analysis of Cyprian's writings into the secular and ecclesiastical history of the third century, concludes that Cyprian's most important service to the church was the way in

⁷ The PT made its first public appearance in a Roman edition of Cyprian's works compiled by Manutius in 1563. Hartel's 1868 edition of Cyprian's corpus did not include it, and most scholars (especially Protestant ones) rejected it, following Hartel. See Wilhelm Hartel, ed., *Opera Omnia Cypriani*, CSEL (Vienna: n.p., 1868), 3.1; H. Koch, "Cyprian und der Romische Primat" *Texte und Untersuchungen* 35 (1910): 158-69; and John L. Rossner, "New Light on Cyprian," *Anglican Theological Review* 40, no. 3 (July 1958): 215-16.

⁸ John Chapman, "Les Interpolations dans Le Traite de S. Cyprien sur l'Unite de l'Eglise" *Revue Benedictine* 19 (1902): 246-54. Chapman was able to demonstrate that a complete alternate version of chap. 4 of *On the Unity of the Church* existed. See Rossner, "New Light," 216.

⁹ Maurice Bevenot, *St. Cyprian's De Unitate Chapter 4 in the Light of the Manuscripts* (London: Analecta Gregoriana, 1939), 1-39; idem, "Primatus Petro Datur: St. Cyprian on the Papacy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 5, no. 1 (1954): 19-35; idem, *The Tradition of Manuscripts: A Study in the Transmission of Cyprian's Treatises* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 172; and Damien Van den Eyde, "La Double Edition du *De Unitate* de Saint Cyprian," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique* 29 (1933): 5-24. Bevenot also wrote extensively about Cyprian's views on other issues, like penance and baptism.

¹⁰ Bevenot's theory is supported, in part, by the various biblical citations and allusions that occur in both TR and the writings from the rebaptism period. See Karl Shuve, "Cyprian of Carthage's Writings from the Rebaptism Controversy: Two Revisionary Proposals Reconsidered," *Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 2 (Oct 2010): 629. Some scholars accept Bevenot's fundamental argument about Cyprian reworking the text, but argue for an earlier date for the changes, perhaps as early as 252. See Stuart G. Hall, "The Versions of Cyprian's *De Unitate* 4-5: Bevenot's Dating Revisited," *Journal of Theological Studies* 55, no. 1 (April 2004): 138, 145-46. A minority of scholars on the Protestant side still believe that PT was never from Cyprian's hand at all, but was in fact the work of later Catholics trying to assert the primacy of Rome. See, for example, Roy L. Griggs, "Christ's Seamless Robe: A

which he worked to maintain church unity and discipline in the face of various opposing factions.¹¹ Quasten (1986), in his extensive discussion of Cyprian in *Patrology*, highlights Cyprian's contributions in the areas of ecclesiology, Roman primacy, baptism, penance, and Eucharistic theology.¹² Decret (1996), who explores Cyprian in the broader context of early North African Christianity, focuses on Cyprian's efforts to resolve the problem of the lapsed, to champion conciliar unity, and to arrive at an acceptable solution to the rebaptism controversy.¹³

A number of scholars have chosen to view Cyprian through a social science lens. Bobertz (1997), for example, delves deeply into Cyprian's reliance on the Roman patron-client relationship.¹⁴ Burns (2002) argues that Cyprian's ministry was focused on church purity and how to utilize ritual to protect the church's "sacred boundary" in the aftermath of persecution.¹⁵ Dunn, like Bobertz, examines Cyprian's participation in the Roman patronage system (2003), and also looks at issues like Cyprian's view on almsgiving (2004), his ministry to women, and

Study of Cyprian's Concept of the Unity of the Church," *Mid-Stream* 16, no. 4 (Oct 1977): 404.

¹¹ Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian*, Patristic Monograph Series 1 (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1975), 356-60.

¹² Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus, vol. 2 (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1986), 373-83.

¹³ Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 55-81.

¹⁴ Charles A. Bobertz, "Patronal Letters of Commendation: Cyprian's Epistulae 38-40," in *Studia Patristica* 31, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 252-59; idem, "Patronage Networks and the Study of Ancient Christianity," in *Studia Patristica* 24, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 20-27.

¹⁵ J. Patout Burns, Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 176. In this work, Burns relies on Mary Douglas' theory of purity as a group boundary. See David E. Wilhite, "Cyprian's Scriptural Hermeneutic of Identity: The Laxist 'Heresy,'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32, no. 1 (2010): 62-63; J. Patout Burns, Jr., "Social Context in the Controversy between Cyprian and Stephen," in *Studia Patristica* 24, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven, Peeters, 1993), 38-44; idem, "The Role of Social Structures in Cyprian's Response to the Decian Persecution," in *Studia Patristica* 31, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 260-67.

his care for the poor (2006).¹⁶ Brent (2010) views Cyprian as a product of his Roman culture and worldview, arguing that Cyprian regarded the Christian bishopric in terms of Roman judicial and constitutional principles, and viewed the role of bishop in terms of the obligations and privileges of the Roman patronage system.¹⁷

Engberg (2009) is willing to label Cyprian an apologist, but only in the sense that a few of his treatises are directed at outsiders—Jews, Greeks, Roman emperors and magistrates—and are concerned with refuting allegations against Christians and providing outsiders with a personal conversion account. An apologist, for Engberg, is one who has produced one or more such works. Under this definition, Cyprian’s three apologetic works are *To Donatus*, *On the Vanity of Idols*, and his *Address to Demetrianus*.¹⁸ The vast majority of Cyprian’s writings would not qualify as apologetic. As will be shown below, this definition is too restrictive and ignores the many apologetic elements that pervade Cyprian’s other treatises and letters.

Some scholars find it fruitful to celebrate the diversity of Cyprian’s contributions by taking an interdisciplinary look at the bishop. Bakker, van Geest and van Loon (2010), for

¹⁶ Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Cyprian and His Collegae: Patronage and the Episcopal Synod of 252,” *Journal of Religious History* 27, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 1-13; idem, “Heresy and Schism According to Cyprian of Carthage,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 55, no. 2 (Oct 2004): 551-74; idem, “The White Crown of Works: Cyprian’s Early Pastoral Ministry of Almsgiving in Carthage,” *Church History* 73, no. 4 (Dec 2004): 715-40; idem, “Cyprian’s Care for the Poor: The Evidence of *De Opere et Eleemosynis*,” in *Studia Patristica* 42, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006); idem, “Validity of Baptism and Ordination in the African Response to the ‘Rebaptism’ Crisis: Cyprian of Carthage’s Synod of Spring 256,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 257-74; idem “Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57, no. 2 (April 2006): 205-25.

¹⁷ Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Brent, who is generally critical and suspicious of Cyprian, argues that Cyprian also engaged in a fundamental reinterpretation of the North African theology of martyrdom so that he could extend the control of his bishopric into new areas. See also Allen Brent, “Cyprian’s Reconstruction of the Martyr Tradition,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53, no. 2 (April 2002): 241-68.

¹⁸ Jakob Engberg, “The Education and Self-Affirmation of Recent or Potential Converts: The Case of Cyprian and the *Ad Donatum*,” *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 16, no. 1 (2012): 134-44; idem, “‘From Among You Are We. Made, Not Born Are Christians,’ Apologists’ Accounts of Conversion before 310 AD,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Early Christian Apologetics*, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity Series 5, ed. J. Ulrich (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 49-77.

example, compile a series of essays on Cyprian covering topics like the accuracy of his depiction in the *Life of Cyprian* and the *Acta Proconsularia*, his hermeneutics and use of Scripture, his Christology, his ecclesiology, his views on episcopal elections, his theology of baptism, and the theological continuity between him and Augustine.¹⁹

The various works cited above, which serve as important resources for this dissertation, paint a picture of a complex man who made many theological contributions. But a thoroughgoing apologetic effort is not one of them. The fact that scholarship has paid little or no attention to evaluating Cyprian's apologetic strategy is an oversight that calls for taking a fresh look at Cyprian. The present study will be relevant for apologists who have skipped over Cyprian in their work, and for Patristic scholars who have heretofore not regarded Cyprian as an apologist.

Methodological Design

Research Questions

The following are the major research questions to be addressed in the dissertation. First, what is a good working definition of apologetics? How are the terms *apologia* and *apologeomai* used in the New Testament? Does their usage cohere with the definition provided? These questions will be addressed in Chapter Two.

Next, what is it about the recognized apologists of the latter half of the second century that causes them to be classified as such? Does their work fit with the definition provided? How so? These questions are the focus of Chapter Three.

¹⁹ Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon, eds., *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010). Bakker himself also explores other issues, such as the extent to which principles of Baptist congregationalism can be seen in Cyprian's thought. See Henk Bakker, "Towards a Catholic Understanding of Baptist Congregationalism: Conciliar Power and Authority," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 159-83.

Shifting the focus to Cyprian, can his work be shown to exhibit the same apologetic elements found in the definition, and in the work of the second century apologists? If so, should Cyprian be considered an apologist also, even though he has not been heretofore? These questions will be asked in Chapter Four.

If Cyprian is an apologist, what continuity and development can be seen in his apologetics? What are his primary apologetic emphases, and what is their ongoing relevance for Christian believers today? What areas for further research are stimulated by this study? These questions will be the focus of Chapter Five.

Assumptions

The dissertation will use the Latin text of Cyprian's corpus which was transmitted by Hartel (1868) and which is now widely available in English translation.²⁰ It will make assumptions about which treatises and letters genuinely belong to Cyprian and which are spurious. Scholarly consensus exists about most of these works, but the authenticity of some, such as *On the Vanity of Idols*, is still debated. The dissertation will assume Sage's (1975) dating scheme for the treatises. The dissertation will assume that Cyprian is the author or recipient of each of the eighty-two letters comprising the Oxford edition of his letters. These are contained in G. W. Clarke's four-volume work, *The Letters of St. Cyprian* (1984), which serves as a key resource for the dissertation. Clarke's dating scheme for the letters will be followed. The dating of the treatises and letters is important because it enables them to be properly located in context and speaks to the mind of Cyprian at key turning points in his ministry.

²⁰ Hartel, *Opera Omnia* 3.1-3.

Design Overview

Chapter Two of the dissertation frames the question by providing a working definition of apologetics. Apologetics is difficult to define. The dissertation will use a working definition which includes four key elements: (1) benefits, (2) coherence, (3) rebuttal, and (4) strengthening. The New Testament use of the terms *apologia* and *apologeomai* will be examined to see if they cohere with this definition.

Chapter Three will then survey some of the most famous apologetic works from the latter half of the second century. These include the two *Apologies* of Justin Martyr, *A Plea for the Christians* by Athenagoras, the *Letter to Diognetus*, the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, and the *Apology* of Tertullian. This sample spans different geographic areas and covers works written in Greek as well as Latin over a period of about fifty years. The focus is on identifying their main apologetic elements and evaluating whether their work coheres with the definition of apologetics provided in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four of the dissertation will shift the focus to Cyprian. It will engage in a detailed review of Cyprian's primary source documents with an eye to identifying the extent to which the four characteristic elements of apologetics can be found in Cyprian's writings. To do this, the treatises and letters will be sorted chronologically and divided into five major periods: the Early Period (246-49), the Decian Period (250-51), the Plague Period (252-54), the Rebaptism Period (255-257), and the Martyrdom Period (257-58). One section of Chapter Four will be dedicated to each period. Sorting and reviewing the material this way makes it easier to identify the unique emphases in each phase of Cyprian's ministry and to trace the points of continuity and discontinuity in his thinking. In the process of reviewing the documents, the dissertation will touch on the issues coloring Cyprian's ministry during each period. It will

consider the various formative influences on him, such as the Roman and Carthaginian society in which he was raised, the influence of Tertullian—who is recognized as one of the early church’s greatest apologists and on whom Cyprian frequently showed extensive literary dependence—and the unusual challenges Cyprian had to face in these years of unrelenting struggle.

Chapter Five will reach conclusions about whether or not Cyprian should be considered a Patristic apologist. It will identify the points of continuity and change that can be observed in his apologetic, and explore the relevance of his apologetic for believers today. Some suggestions for further study will be offered.

Research Procedures

The research for this dissertation is focused on the primary source material: the New Testament documents, the works of the second century Patristic apologists, and the treatises and letters in Cyprian’s corpus. All of these documents are readily available in excellent English translation. There will also be extensive interaction with relevant secondary source material.

The argument of this dissertation is that Cyprian should be considered, among other things, an apologist and that scholars have improperly overlooked his apologetics. The dissertation should be judged on whether a robust and coherent apologetic strategy can be identified from Cyprian’s primary source materials that can be shown to fit with a reasonable definition of apologetics, with the witness of the New Testament, and with the work of the recognized apologists of the second century. The dissertation will attempt to handle Cyprian’s works in an even-handed way, without misreading them or imposing unnatural interpretations on them.

Space limitations preclude a more thorough investigation of other aspects of Cyprian’s life and ministry, such as the details of his policy on readmitting the lapsed into the communion

of the church, his arguments for church unity and a decentralized episcopate, his position on the rebaptism of heretics, and so on. These topics dominate Cyprian studies and have been covered in depth elsewhere by other scholars. This dissertation will deal with those matters tangentially, only as they relate to the development of the topic at hand.

Chapter 2

Apologetics

Working Definition

The term “apologetics” is surprisingly difficult to define. In fact, many contemporary works on apologetics prefer to bypass a rigorous definition in order to focus on the spectrum of different apologetic methodologies that pertain today. The *Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, for example, focuses on lengthy explanations of the various methods: the classical, the evidential, the presuppositional, and so on.¹ The popular text *Five Views on Apologetics*, likewise, compares and contrasts these different methods using give-and-take by their representative spokespersons.² Bernard Ramm, too, focuses his text around what he considers the three main varieties of apologetics and the three main forms of apologetic argumentation they use.³ As L. Ross Bush notes, this modern desire to divide and categorize apologetic methodology is difficult to make fit with most actual historical works of apologetics, especially those of the early church, which are characterized by more eclectic and less specialized approaches.⁴

Those who attempt a single definition of apologetics are quick to point out that it must include multiple elements of both an offensive and defensive nature. W. G. Phillips, for example, defines apologetics as the attempt to render Christian faith persuasive by forming belief in non-

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), s.vv. “Types of Apologetics,” “Classical Apologetics,” “Experiential Apologetics,” “Historical Apologetics,” “Presuppositional Apologetics.”

² Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

³ Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 13-14. The three varieties that Ramm highlights are those that stress: (1) subjective immediacy, (2) natural theology, and (3) revelation.

⁴ L. Russ Bush, ed., *Classical Readings in Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), ix-xiv.

Christians, as it defuses their attacks, and by sustaining belief in Christians, as it nurtures their faith.⁵ Ronald Mayers defines apologetics as a mixture of defensive arguments and positive proclamation that endeavors to show the truthfulness—philosophical, historical, theological—of the faith, as well as its viability.⁶ For John Frame, apologetics has three aspects: proving or giving a rational basis to the faith; defending or answering objections to the faith; and offensively attacking the foolishness of unbelieving thought.⁷ Boa and Bowman identify four aspects of apologetics. For them, apologetics is first of all proof—philosophical arguments and scientific evidence that Christianity is a belief system that should be accepted. Secondly, it is a defense against attacks of various sorts that come against the faith. Third, it is a refutation of the arguments that unbelievers present for their own worldviews. Finally, apologetics is persuasion—an effort to see that the truth of Christianity be applied toward a sincere life commitment.⁸ J. K. S. Reid, in his attempt to define apologetics, describes the various elements of both an offensive and defensive nature that he perceives. Reid writes,

Apologetics operates from a position of strength combined with humility: strength because it is conscious of possessing a Gospel that the whole world needs; humility because the Gospel discloses further riches as it is applied to the world and its difficulties. It consists of the positive declaration of this Gospel in the face of the facts and circumstances with which it is confronted and by which it is often opposed. Apologetics engages with confessed enemies of Christianity outside, defending it against the ignorance, misunderstanding and defamation of unbelief. It engages with the wreckers from within, defending the Gospel against heresy that would ruin or disable it. And it engages more generally in expounding the faith so that it may secure a fair hearing, knowing that it is equally important to

⁵ Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Apologetics,” by W. G. Phillips.

⁶ Ronald B. Mayers, *Balanced Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 1-3 and 7-8.

⁷ John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2.

⁸ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has its Reasons: Interpretive Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2006), 5-6.

emphasize that reason is not the whole of faith and that faith is not tenable in utter defiance of reason. Apologetics not only defends but also commends the faith.⁹

What is clear from the forgoing is that any good definition of apologetics must recognize the multi-faceted nature of the task and the variety of offensive and defensive elements that apologetics includes as it seeks to both persuade and defend.

Considering the various insights above, the following will be adopted as a working definition of apologetics: *Apologetics is a program of support for the Christian faith which contains one or more of the following elements: (1) a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith, including but not limited to salvation; (2) an argument for the coherence of the faith as a worldview that makes sense and fits well with the world as it really is; (3) a defense of the faith against false charges brought against it by the outside enemies of the church; and (4) a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it.* These four elements may be referred to in shorthand as (1) benefits; (2) coherence; (3) rebuttal; and (4) strengthening.

Apologetics is first of all a bold and positive declaration of the many benefits and advantages of the Christian faith. The apologist, much like the evangelist, testifies to the reality of the Gospel message and the various benefits that it entails. Through Jesus Christ, God has given the gift of salvation to humanity. But there are other benefits as well. The Gospel gives the believer assurance and hope, it enables him to endure difficulties and suffering with joy, and it even empowers him to be a martyr for the faith if need be. Christian belief creates in him various

⁹ J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 13-14. Here Reid appeals, in part, to the insights of Moule. See C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967), 6.

types of virtue that make him a model citizen. The apologist sees his job, in part, as heralding this beneficial message so that non-believers will be attracted to the Christian faith.¹⁰

Secondly, the apologist stresses that the Christian message is coherent. Christianity is a worldview that makes sense given the realities of the world as it is. It appeals to the human reasoning faculties. What Scripture teaches, even about unusual events like miracles and resurrection, is plausible.¹¹ Christian belief does not conflict with philosophy, but fits well with the best of what philosophy has to offer. It shines light on alternative pagan belief systems in such a way that they can be seen to be inferior to the Christian worldview. A strong case can be made for Christianity's rationality and coherence.¹² Christianity provides satisfying answers—which are better than the alternatives—for the challenges, puzzles, and struggles of the present life.

Third, the apologist seeks to defend believers against the various charges leveled against them by those outside the church. The apologist seeks to rebut the charges that Christians are immoral, lawbreakers, unpatriotic, atheistic, and so on. He frequently makes an appeal to law,

¹⁰ Although the apologist is referred to here with shorthand use of the masculine pronouns “he” and “his,” such use is not intended to be gender-exclusive. Women can, and do, also engage in apologetics.

¹¹ Since the famous objection of Hume, many modern apologists have developed the argument that there is no good reason for an *a priori* rejection of miracles and that belief in miracles, including the resurrection, is actually quite reasonable. See, for example, Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Seminary Press, 2006), 171-238; Robert A. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (New York: Lexington, 2014), 101-81; Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 262-80; Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1-42; and Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 171-208.

¹² J. P. Moreland, for example, makes a strong case that the Christian faith is a rational and coherent worldview. The alternatives are less adequate to explain the world in a way that is appealing to philosophers, scientists and others. Apologetics can give believers confidence that their faith is both reasonable and true. Apologetics contributes to the conclusion that the Christian worldview is at least rationally permissible, if not rationally required. Moreland cites the cosmological argument pointing to a necessary first cause, the teleological argument pointing to a designer, the inability of mind to arise from a materialistic world, the credibility of the NT documents, the strong evidence for the resurrection, the falsity of the claim that science disproves religion, and the evidential value of religious experience. See Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 11-13 and 249-58.

wanting to separate actual illegality from groundless accusation. He stresses that Christians must be treated fairly and without prejudice. This element of apologetics frequently goes hand-in-hand with the first (“benefits”) element in that if it can be shown Christianity inculcates virtue in its citizens, then it follows that they must not be guilty of crimes.

Finally, the apologist seeks to strengthen the church against heresy or other forces of division that would weaken it from within. The apologist knows that the body of Christ must remain strong and united if it is to be an effective witness to a watching pagan world. So, he works to keep its doctrine pure and consistent with apostolic teaching. He maintains discipline and respect for those in positions of ecclesiastical authority. He admonishes those in the church to cooperate with one another and remain united so the church will not be weakened. This element of apologetics was present in the early church but grew somewhat over the course of the Patristic era as the church itself grew and faced an increasing number of threats from within.

This four-part definition of apologetics is the baseline definition and model to be used in the dissertation. Chapter Three will show how this definition finds nuance and fullness in the work of the second century apologists. Chapter Four will show how all four elements can be found abundantly in Cyprian’s writings. Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to examine whether this definition fits well with the New Testament understanding of apologetics.

Apologia and Apologeomai in the New Testament

The first century world into which the New Testament came was already familiar with apologetics. Centuries earlier, Plato’s *Apology* had laid out Socrates’ defense against the charge that he was advocating strange gods, and more recently Philo (the first century Hellenistic Jew) had used the concept of *logos* to interpret the Old Testament in a way that would be persuasive to

the Hellenistic mind.¹³ The Old Testament itself engages in a program of apologetics. This can be seen most clearly in the writings of the prophets, who speak “the Word of the Lord” in order to persuade and defend. The episode of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (found in 1 Kings 18) is an example of a multi-faceted program of apologetics that contains all four elements of the definition above: Elijah argues that Israel’s God has total control over the elements and that he, unlike Baal, can answer by fire and bring life-giving rain (benefits element 1); belief in this God makes good sense because he listens and answers, whereas Baal is unresponsive and lifeless (coherence element 2); Elijah rebuts the accusation that he is the “troubler of Israel” and argues instead that it is Ahab and his family who are guilty for the way they have abandoned the Lord’s commands (rebuttal element 3); and Elijah knows that when God answers by fire, the people’s hearts will once again be turned back to him (strengthening element 4).

The English word apologetics derives from the Greek noun *apologia* (“defense”) and the related verb *apologeomai* (“to make a defense”). These words are found eighteen times in the New Testament. The first two occurrences are found in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 12:11, Jesus tells his disciples that in the future they will be called upon to publicly acknowledge the Son of Man before synagogues, rulers, and authorities. At that time, they should not worry about how they will defend (*apologeomai*) themselves, because the Holy Spirit will tell them what to say. In Luke 21:14, with the end times in view, Jesus again warns his followers that they will be persecuted, handed over to synagogues, put into prison, and brought before kings and governors. They should not worry ahead of time what they will say as they defend (*apologeomai*) themselves, because Jesus will give them the words and wisdom that adversaries will be unable

¹³ Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 1; Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 43-47; and Reid, *Christian Apologetics*, 34-35. Philo’s work drew on the idea of the *logos* as an intermediary between God and the world. Logos theology would find important expression later in the apologetic works of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras.

to resist or contradict. In both of these passages from the Gospel of Luke, what is in view is a mixture of Gospel proclamation, or “benefits” element (1), and defense against the charges brought by accusers, or “rebuttal” element (3).

Several occurrences of these terms are found in the Book of Acts. In Acts 19:33, the city of Ephesus is in an uproar because the Gospel message is reducing the income that tradesmen can earn from the Temple of Artemis. A certain Jew named Alexander is pushed to the front of the crowd to make his defense (*apologeomai*) against the charge of disturbing the peace, but he never gets the chance because of the crowd. Rebuttal element (3) is in view here. In Acts 22:1, Paul has been seized by a crowd of Jews in front of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Roman commander who intervenes allows Paul, because he is a Jew, to address the crowd. Paul then makes his defense (*apologia*) to them in Aramaic. He begins with his testimony. He tells them about the reality of his conversion experience with Jesus literally appearing to him, giving him audible instructions, and directing him. He tells them how calling on the name of Jesus can wash their sins away. Eventually the Jews refuse to listen further and Paul is taken away. In this episode, apologetics is a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith, or element (1).

In Acts 24:10, Paul stands accused before the Gentiles. The lawyer Tertullus has presented his legal case against Paul to the Roman Governor Felix. Paul then rises to defend himself (*apologeomai*). He rebuts the specific charges against him. It is simply not true, Paul insists, that he was arguing with anyone at the Temple, stirring up the crowd, or making any sort of disturbance. Besides, those who might testify to that effect are not present in the courtroom as witnesses, so the charges have no teeth under Roman law. As he proceeds, Paul also mentions that he believes in the promises of Scripture and has placed his hope in the resurrection of the dead. This is an example of rebuttal element (3) mixed with benefits element (1).

After spending two years in prison, Paul is now on trial before Festus, the successor of Felix, in Acts 25. The setting is a courtroom in Caesarea. The Jewish leaders are making accusations against Paul based on Jewish and Roman law. They are struggling to prove any of the charges. In 25:8, Paul defends himself (*apologeomai*) by claiming he has done nothing to violate the law and he has the right, under Roman law, to appeal to Caesar. In 25:16, Festus agrees that Roman law prohibits anyone from being handed over to death until they have had the chance to offer their own defense (*apologia*). This is an example of the rebuttal element (3) of apologetics.

In Acts 26, Paul appears before King Agrippa. Agrippa wants to hear what Paul has to say, and Festus wants to hear it again, too, because he needs to clarify the charges to be made against Paul before sending him off to Rome. In 26:1-2, Paul begins to defend himself (*apologeomai*) against the accusations of the Jews. Because there are many high-ranking officers and prominent men present, Paul decides that his defense should begin with his personal testimony. After describing his former life as a Pharisee, including the way he persecuted and murdered Christians, Paul shares his conversion experience. He proclaims the Gospel message to them. They can repent, turn to God, move from darkness to light, and have their sins forgiven in the name of Jesus. Furthermore, to believe this message is not unreasonable and sense: Moses and the prophets said it would take place, and the events surrounding Jesus were public, i.e., “not done in a corner.” In 26:24, Festus interrupts Paul’s self-defense (*apologeomai*), fearing that perhaps Paul is losing his mind, and eventually Agrippa stops the proceedings entirely when Paul tells Agrippa that he, too, can be converted. Acts 26 presents the benefits element (1) mixed with the coherence element (2).

The final eight occurrences of *apologia* and *apologeomai* occur in the New Testament epistles. In Rom 2:15, Paul writes that even the Gentiles, who live in opposition to God's law, prove that they have God's law written on their hearts whenever their thoughts alternate between self-accusation and self-defense (*apologeomai*). Because Paul depicts the righteous law of God and the unrighteous human heart as antagonistic enemies, this is an example of apologetics in its rebuttal sense (3).

The epistles of First and Second Corinthians contain several uses of apologetics in sense (4), as a defense of the faith against heresy and other forces of division that would weaken it from within. In 1 Cor 9:3, Paul presents his defense (*apologia*) against those in the church who would sit in judgment of him for the way he exercises his rights as an apostle, including his rights to food, drink, marriage, and support from the congregation. Paul makes it clear that although he has these various rights, he has chosen not to exercise them so that nothing would hinder the progress of the church at Corinth. Likewise, in 2 Cor 12:19, Paul defends (*apologeomai*) his ministry and his refusal to be a financial burden to the Corinthian believers. He notes how this, and everything else he does, has been done to strengthen the church. In 2 Cor 7:11, Paul is overjoyed to see that his earlier ("severe") letter has had the desired effect of creating a godly sorrow in certain of the Corinthians. This godly sorrow has produced in them earnestness, concern, alarm, desire to see justice done, and eagerness for self-defense (*apologia*). The Corinthian believers, like Paul, are motivated to take whatever steps are necessary to keep the church pure and strong.

The word *apologia* occurs twice in the first chapter of Philippians. In 1:7, Paul writes that he is in chains because of his defense (*apologia*) and confirmation of the Gospel. He adds in 1:17 that while he is imprisoned for his *apologia*, others have been able to deliver the Gospel message

without him. Some do it with good motives and some with bad, but either way the Gospel is preached, which is good. Paul's *apologia* in prison involves both a positive proclamation of the faith, element (1), and a defense of the faith against its accusatory enemies in Rome, element (3).

A mix of elements (1) and (3) can be seen in the last two New Testament occurrences. In 2 Tim 4:16, Paul is nearing the end of his life in prison and laments that Demas and others have left him, with only Luke staying behind to help. He writes that at his first defense (*apologia*), nobody was there to come to his support. But Paul will not despair about this, because he knows the Lord has been standing by his side and giving him the strength to proclaim the message to the Gentiles despite their hostility toward him.

The final occurrence of *apologia* is found in 1 Pet 3:15. The context of this passage is suffering for the faith at the hands of hostile opponents of the church. Peter writes that Christians should always be ready to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks them to give a reason for the hope they have. But they should be careful to do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a good conscience, so that those who speak maliciously about their good behavior in Christ will be ashamed of their slander. This, too, is a mix of apologetic elements (1) and (3).

The above review of *apologia* and *apologeomai* in the New Testament reveals that the biblical conception of apologetics is clearly multi-dimensional. In many cases, it is a positive declaration of salvation and the other benefits of the faith, which is element (1), combined with a defense of the faith against the charges brought by enemies, which is element (3). But also in view is element (2), that the Christian faith is coherent and reasonable and fits with the reality of the world as it is, and element (4), that the faith needs to be defended against those who would weaken it from within. The biblical exploration above, then, upholds the working definition that

serves as a model for the present work. It also gives warrant to examine the Patristic documents in light of the definition.

This dissertation will now examine some recognized apologists from the latter half of the second century in order to show how their apologies incorporate unique mixes of these four apologetic elements.

Chapter 3

Late Second Century Apologetics

Introduction

Apologetic works from the latter half of the second century can be shown to contain a mix of the four apologetic elements laid out in the definition in Chapter Two. Apologies from this period are known for being famously “defensive” (element 3), in that they rebut the charges that Christians are immoral, lawless, unpatriotic, and atheistic. But a careful examination reveals that they also display the other three elements of apologetics. They make a positive declaration of the Gospel and its benefits (element 1), they endeavor to show that the Christian worldview is coherent and fits with the circumstances of the world as it really is (element 2), and, to a lesser extent, they make a defense of the faith against forces that would weaken it from within (element 4). Representative works from this period include the two *Apologies* of Justin Martyr, *A Plea for the Christians* by Athenagoras, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, *The Octavius* by Minucius Felix, and Tertullian’s *Apology*.

Representative Works

The *Apologies* of Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr, author of two *Apologies* and *The Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, is perhaps the most important of the second century Christian apologists.¹ His *Apologies* (written c. 150-160) are addressed to the civil authorities: the first to Emperor Antoninus Pius, his sons, and the

¹ Justin, a philosopher, should also be considered an important early Christian missionary because of his work in Rome and Ephesus among the pagans, Jews, and Christian heretics. See Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 35 and 38.

Roman Senate; the second to the Senate and people of Rome.² But they are intended for a broad audience of outsiders as well.³ Justin begins both of these works by defending the Christian faith against its hostile accusers. He explains why there is no good reason that Christians should be treated as criminals.⁴ Christians are not licentious or lawless. Contrary to rumor, nothing untoward happens at their worship services like ritual intercourse or cannibalism.⁵ They pay their taxes. Christian businesspersons have integrity.⁶ This is apologetic element (3), rebuttal.

Justin also goes on the offensive, arguing that the Christian belief system is superior to the pagan alternatives. Christianity has a number of benefits and advantages that paganism lacks. Christianity provides people with the best doctrinal and moral framework with which to live. It enables them to live a virtuous life characterized by peace and love, and makes them the best citizens of the empire, not the worst.⁷ God gives his followers the power to bring healing to the sick and the demon-possessed.⁸ This is the benefits element (1) of apologetics.

² Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 1-2; idem, *2 Apology*, 1. Justin assumes that these men are rational and he can appeal to their rational faculties. See Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 67.

³ Engberg, “‘From Among You Are We. Made, Not Born Are Christians,’ Apologists’ Accounts of Conversion before 310 AD,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Early Christian Apologetics*, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity Series 5, ed. J. Ulrich (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 62-64, 72.

⁴ Justin, *1 Apology*, 3-4, 12, 17; *2 Apology*, 1-3.

⁵ Justin, *1 Apology*, 5-6, 26, and 65-67. Smither, drawing on the work of Sara Parvis, notes that Justin’s defense against these charges is developed using a form of Roman legal petition known as a *biblidion*. Athenagoras would later use the same form in his *Plea for the Christians*. See Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 112, with further reference to Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and His Worlds* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 10.

⁶ Justin, *1 Apology*, 16; see also Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 43.

⁷ Justin, *1 Apology*, 9-13, 36, 59, 63, 67; *2 Apology*, 1-4, 12-14. Whereas Justin points to the persuasiveness of the Jewish prophets as the primary reason for his conversion in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin emphasizes in his *Second Apology* that the courage and virtue of the Christians, including the martyrs, was also an important factor in his conversion. See Engberg, “‘From Among You Are We. Made, Not Born Are Christians,’” 70-72.

⁸ Justin, *2 Apology*, 6; see also Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 141.

A more significant stress in these treatises is on the coherence element (2). To do this, Justin draws on the principles of philosophy, especially *logos* doctrine. The *logos* doctrine was not Justin's innovation. In addition to being Johannine, it was also familiar to later Judaism—having spread through the influence of Philo—and to pagan philosophical groups like the Stoics.⁹ Justin argues that the *logos* was made fully manifest in the incarnate Jesus. Before Jesus, however, it existed in “seed” form (*logos spermatikos*) in the wisdom of the Old Testament prophets and in the best of Greek philosophy.¹⁰ God enabled the prophets and the philosophers to speak truth in proportion to the share of the seed that they had.¹¹ In this sense, Christ was partly known ahead of time by men like Elijah and Socrates. They could be said to be “Christians” before the coming of Jesus in the flesh.¹²

With the *logos* now fully manifest, a person can know the truth in full by embracing Christianity. Unlike the work of demons, who seek to mislead the human race into embracing heathen mythology and other falsehoods, the teaching of Christianity is not harmful fiction.¹³ Rather, it is a belief system that coheres with, and advances beyond, what came before.¹⁴ Christians can now know in full what the ancients only knew in part: the wisdom of God, the means by which the universe was created and ordered, the way to gain knowledge of the Father.

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 103-04 and also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2008), 96.

¹⁰ Justin, *1 Apology*, 5, 31-35, and 46; idem, *2 Apology*, 8, 10, and 13.

¹¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 31-32.

¹² Justin, *1 Apology*, 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5, 14, 56, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46. See also Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, The Beginnings of Patristic Literature from the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: IN: Christian Classics, 1986), 207-09.

With Christianity, they can now possess “the thing itself,” and not just the imitation and seed of the thing.¹⁵

Justin’s argument is especially persuasive and credible because he speaks the language of a philosopher. He is able to communicate Christian truth to those in a Hellenistic culture, meeting his philosophically-minded audience on their own turf. According to his testimony in *Dialogue with Trypho*, he had been both a Platonist and a Stoic for a time before embracing Christianity as the answer to his own quest for truth.¹⁶ The genius of his approach is that he disarms pagan philosophy by expanding upon it rather than repudiating it entirely. He uses it to reach the conclusion that Christianity is the one true philosophy.¹⁷ Justin frames his embrace of Christianity as a shift in philosophy, or as conversion to the true philosophy, rather than as a religious shift. This protects him from challenges of superstition or atheism. Christianity is a rational philosophy and paganism is an irrational one.¹⁸ Christians can only be considered “atheists” in the sense that they do not believe in false gods.¹⁹ Its truth is substantiated by the fact that its followers, unlike the followers of Socrates and Plato, are willing to die for it.²⁰ This is a good example of apologetic element (2), the argument that Christianity is a worldview that makes sense because it fits with the world as it really is.

¹⁵ Justin, *1 Apology*, 2, 5, and 63; idem, *2 Apology*, 13.

¹⁶ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 1-8 for his conversion experience recounted. See also Quasten, *Patrology*, 196; Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 32; Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 114; and Smither, *Mission of the Early Church*, 77, 111.

¹⁷ J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 48-49; Quasten, *Patrology*, 198; and Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 14.

¹⁸ Justin, *1 Apology*, 9-10, 20; Wilken, *The Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 83, 88; and Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 67.

¹⁹ Justin, *1 Apology*, 5, 15-17; idem, *2 Apology*, 3.

²⁰ Justin, *2 Apology*, 10, 12; and Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 57-59.

A Plea for the Christians by Athenagoras

Athenagoras' *A Plea for Christians*, written a decade or two later (c. 176-180), is another treatise that is famously characterized by its rebuttal element (3), but that also goes beyond that into making a more positive case for the faith. Athenagoras, a contemporary of Justin's pupil Tatian, writes in a very elegant style and is clearly a well-educated man.²¹ This apologetic, like the previous ones, is addressed to the emperors.²² Athenagoras begins by stressing the rebuttal element (3), noting how unfair it is that people of other faiths are free to worship whatever strange gods they choose—cats, dogs, serpents, crocodiles—without fear of harassment, whereas Christians cannot worship the one true God. Christians are punished although they commit no crimes worthy of punishment.²³ He notes that one charge against the Christians is particularly nonsensical: the charge that they are atheists.²⁴ It is not atheism to worship one God who is himself eternal and who created all things.²⁵ The poets and philosophers proclaimed there can only be one God and were rightly praised for it.

²¹ Quasten, *Patrology*, 229-30; see also Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 112.

²² Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 1. This work is addressed to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2-3, 14, 31.

²⁴ The “atheist” charge against Christians sounds strange to modern ears. In the Roman mind, Christianity was a “superstition” (*superstitio*). Roman religion was based on “piety” (*pietas*) that resulted in obedience and loyalty to Roman traditions and customs. Piety ensured civic unity, economic success, political harmony and orderly transitions between emperors. Superstition, in contrast, was seen to involve irrational and novel ideas about the divine realm. Superstition stood in opposition to piety and the genuine religious feelings of piety that undergirded the public life of the empire. It moved religion into a private realm where it did not belong. True religion, as expressed in piety, belonged in the public realm for the benefit of the empire. To move religious values out of the public sphere and into the private lives of individuals, or into private associations between individuals, was to offend the Roman mind. Worshipping a God that could not be seen, as the Christians did, was superstition and atheism. This would anger the gods and cause them to remove their protection from Rome. See Wilken, *Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 50-63, 79, 125. See also Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 19-20.

²⁵ Athenagoras, *Plea*, 10.

With this, Athenagoras shifts to the coherence element (2) of apologetics. Polytheism is easily proven to be an absurd and seriously deficient worldview.²⁶ It is logically impossible that God could be any thing that is made of matter, as the pagan gods are. God must be spirit, power, and reason. He must be eternal and uncreated, free of all change. Matter, on the other hand, is that which is created and fashioned by him—or more particularly, by his Son the *logos*. The Son is the intelligence of God and the word of God, who was sent forth into the formless world by God to be his chief idea and creative force.²⁷ Like Justin, Athenagoras stresses the critical importance of the *logos* for understanding the world. God created, adorned and governed the world through his *logos*. God's *logos* is intimately connected with him.²⁸ None of the false gods have the property of self-existence, as does the true God. All were originated at a certain point in time and derive their constitution from something else. Athenagoras here develops an early form of the cosmological argument, arguing for the logical necessity of a creator God being the ultimate cause of all other things while himself being eternal and uncaused.²⁹ The Biblical revelation of God the Father, and his Son the *logos*, enables people to understand where the world came from, how it started, and who superintends it. That God must be eternal, and that he would issue forth his thought and his power through his eternal Son the *logos*, is a worldview

²⁶ Ibid., 4-8. See also Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 34; and Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 112.

²⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 85, 99; see also Athenagoras, *Plea*, 10-12.

²⁸ Athenagoras' depiction of the *logos* is somewhat less subordinationist than Justin's. In other words, Justin tends to stress the subordinate position of the *logos* to the Father, whereas Athenagoras tends to emphasize the unity of the *logos* with the Father. The precise vocabulary of Nicene Orthodoxy was still a ways off. See Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 113 and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 99.

²⁹ Athenagoras, *Plea*, 15-19. This argument appeals to the Stoic idea that the divine must be one and must also be closely related to the created universe. Marcus Aurelius, the primary intended recipient of this document, had an interest in Stoic philosophy. See Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 68.

that is far more rational than any of the pagan alternatives.³⁰ For Athenagoras, like Justin before him, the Christian faith is the faith that coheres best with the world as it really is. This is apologetic element (2).

Athenagoras also incorporates in his apologetic the benefits element (1). Far from being immoral, the Christians are actually model citizens. Their God gives them the power to live upright and chaste lives. Christians renounce all forms of murder, including abortion, and all forms of cruelty, including the gladiatorial games.³¹ Furthermore, the way that Christians live proves that what they believe must be correct. Many Christians are among the least educated people in society, who cannot argue persuasively for the truth of Christian doctrine, but they live such good lives that what they believe must be true.³² That the truth of Christianity is substantiated by the attractiveness of Christian living is a theme that would be taken up with greater force in *The Letter to Diognetus*.

The Letter to Diognetus

The author and date of this treatise are not known for certain. A number of different candidates have been proposed for the author, who identifies himself simply as Mathetes (“disciple”). Candidates include Justin Martyr, Aristides, Irenaeus, Quadratus, and Hippolytus of Rome. Perhaps the most plausible suggestion, however, is Pantaenus, the head of the catechetical

³⁰ Athenagoras, *Plea*, 10; see also Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 188-91.

³¹ Reid, *Christian Apologetics*, 47; see also Athenagoras, *Plea*, 32-35.

³² Athenagoras, *Plea*, 11.

school of Alexandria, writing to his regional procurator Diognetus sometime in the 180s.³³

Pantaenus is noteworthy for his service as a missionary to India and, later, as a mentor to the great Eastern apologists Clement of Alexandria and Origen.³⁴

Diognetus is a high-ranking pagan official, but not one who is actively persecuting Christians. So, *The Letter to Diognetus* is free to dispense with the usual defensive pleas for fairness and justice and focus exclusively on a positive case for the faith. Defensive element (3), which famously characterizes the earlier apologies of Justin and Athenagoras, is now entirely absent and replaced with offensive element (1). Diognetus has made a serious and thoughtful inquiry about Christianity which elicits an equally serious and thoughtful response from Mathetes. Diognetus wants to know what it is about the Christian life that makes it superior to the pagan and Jewish alternatives, and how it is that believers can go through life with such disdain for the world and for death.³⁵ So, Mathetes describes, in beautiful and moving prose, the wonderful and supernatural life of the Christian. He describes for Diognetus the various benefits of the Christian faith.

Like other apologists of this era, Mathetes was probably schooled in Platonism. As he discusses the relationship of the Christians to the world, Mathetes draws on the Platonic image of the soul trapped within the body.³⁶ As the soul dwells within the body without being a part of it,

³³ Quasten, *Patrology*, 248-49 and Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 35. Dulles notes that this solution, suggested by Henri-Irenee Marrou, seems to fit the data best. As the head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, Pantaenus would have been capable of producing such a rhetorical masterpiece, and the style of the Greek prose fits with an Alexandrian provenance. The document can probably be dated safely to the 180s because the reign of the equestrian procurator Claudius Diognetus stretched from c. 180-99.

³⁴ Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 38, with further reference to Eusebius, *Church History*, 5 and Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 36. Clement of Alexandria wrote the great apologetic work *Exhortation to the Heathen*, and Origen authored the monumental *Against Celsus*.

³⁵ *Letter to Diognetus*, 1 and Reid, *Christian Apologetics*, 40.

³⁶ *Letter to Diognetus*, 6.

the Christian dwells in the world without being a part of it. The Christian bestows various benefits upon the world he inhabits: he gives it its life, he infuses it with joy and purpose, and he works his influence upon it to restrain its fleshly lusts.³⁷ Faith gives the Christian the power to live joyfully amidst a pagan culture that he rejects. He is in the world but not of the world. He does his duty as a citizen while suffering as a foreigner. He obeys the law while the dictates of his conscience force him to transcend the law. He lives in the flesh but not according to the flesh. He makes himself poor in order to make others rich. He loves others while being persecuted mercilessly by them.³⁸

Mathetes is an early advocate of penal substitutionary theology, arguing that Christ took the punishment and death that sinners deserved so that sinners might be justified. When God delivered up his Son as a ransom, there was a sweet exchange of the just for the unjust, the holy for the lawless, the innocent for the transgressors.³⁹ This benefit is a source of great joy. If Diognetus is willing to accept the Christian faith, he will receive various other benefits in addition to this. He will have true knowledge of the Father. He will partake in divine wisdom that will help him order his life. He will be filled with a joy that riches can not replicate. His love of God will manifest itself in all kinds of good behaviors that will accrue to his advantage.⁴⁰ In conclusion, the Christian faith is something that has a wide variety of positive, life-changing benefits for those who will accept it.⁴¹ It makes sense to embrace this faith, then, despite the suffering it may entail. This is apologetic element (1).

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ Ibid., 5. See also Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 44.

³⁹ *Letter to Diognetus*, 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10-12.

⁴¹ Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 116-17.

Minucius Felix's *Octavius*

The *Octavius* of Minucius Felix is dated to the 190s. This work is in Latin rather than Greek. By the end of the second century, Greek starts to phase out as the official language of the Western church and its liturgy.⁴² It should be no surprise, then, that apologies from this point forward are increasingly found in Latin. Works from this period also start to reflect the more “practical” Roman mindset. Many of the Latin apologists have formal training in rhetoric and law.⁴³ Jerome and Lactantius note that Minucius Felix is one of the distinguished lawyers of his day in Rome.⁴⁴ The clarity and persuasiveness of its argumentation make the *Octavius* one of the finest examples of early Christian apologetics.⁴⁵ Training in rhetoric and law is something that Minucius Felix will have in common with those who follow him, Tertullian and Cyprian. A study of the *Octavius* is important for a study of Cyprian because there are a widely-acknowledged similarities (if not direct dependences) between the *Octavius*, Tertullian's *Apology*, and Cyprian's treatise *On the Vanity of Idols*.⁴⁶

With Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, the shift continues away from apologetics marked by rebuttal element (3) toward apologetics marked by benefits element (1) and coherence element (2). This treatise is set in the countryside outside of Rome on a beautiful autumn day. This is a time when cultured men can relax and reflect on the meaning of life. Minucius Felix writes in a

⁴² Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:154.

⁴³ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 47.

⁴⁴ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 58; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.1.

⁴⁵ Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:158.

⁴⁶ Sage argues that there is such a direct dependence between this work and the earlier works (the *Octavius* and the *Apology*) that *On the Vanity of Idols* was most likely not written by Cyprian. See Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian*, Patristic Monograph Series 1 (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1975), 356-60, 373-75. Quasten argues that it was probably written by Cyprian, but was importantly influenced by the two earlier works. See Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:159-62.

graceful, Ciceronian style that is designed to appeal to cultivated Romans.⁴⁷ The *Octavius* is a dialogue, following a Ciceronian pattern, between two of Minucius Felix's friends: the pagan Caecilius and the Christian Octavius.⁴⁸

Caecilius is an adherent of traditional Roman religion who is skeptical of Christianity. He represents the understandable reluctance on the part of many to let go of what has served the Empire so well for so long. He lays out the various reasons for this reluctance. The universe is a divine riddle and nobody, least of all the Christians, can claim certain knowledge in this area. The Roman gods have brought health and happiness to the Roman people. Christianity is new to the world, and has many strange features. Its adherents meet in secret. They get drunk and engage in murder and incest.⁴⁹ They worship a God who, hidden as he is, must be viewed with suspicion. This religion is "superstition" (*superstitio*); that is why the Christians, lacking true Roman piety (*pietas*), shun associations with traditional Roman activities and fail in their civic duty to the empire.⁵⁰ The Christian teachers only try to convert the lowest members of society—the women, children and slaves—and this must be because their teaching cannot stand up to the scrutiny of more discerning people.⁵¹ The Christian argument for the resurrection of the body is nonsensical.⁵² Christians suffer through many indignities in this life, and this must mean that

⁴⁷ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 48.

⁴⁸ Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:155.

⁴⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 9. For these particular charges, Caecilius is allegedly relying on the claims of Marcus Fronto, a tutor of Marcus Aurelius. See also Wilken, *Christians*, 18.

⁵⁰ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 12, and Wilken, *Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 66, 118.

⁵¹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 5-10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

their God cannot or will not do anything to help them.⁵³ Christianity is a religion that lacks coherence, and does not fit well with the facts and circumstances of the real world as it is.

Caecilius concludes that a wise man should repudiate a religion like this.⁵⁴

Octavius makes a careful and well-reasoned reply to Caecilius' arguments, stressing that Christianity is, in fact, more coherent than paganism. The wise man, Octavius argues, should reflect on the nature of the world and human life rather than just writing it off as an unknowable mystery. As he looks around him, the wise man will notice the great beauty and intricate design that is evident in nature and in human beings. Here Octavius advances an early form of teleological argument, arguing for clear evidence of a designer God.⁵⁵ He reminds Caecilius that the poets and philosophers, including Plato and the Stoics, argued persuasively that there can only be one God.⁵⁶ Those philosophers agree with the Christian view that the world will come to a dramatic final end.⁵⁷ Gods of wood and stone and metal cannot possibly be divine because so many of them were taken over from conquered peoples for whom they proved impotent against Roman military power.⁵⁸ Just because the Christian God cannot be seen does not mean that he (like the human soul) does not exist.⁵⁹ In short, the Christian worldview is the more coherent one: it is consistent, it is intellectually viable, and it is philosophically tenable.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 13. See also Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 48-49 and Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 98-99.

⁵⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 17-18.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19-22.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 34. See also Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 33. Quasten takes note of many ways in which this treatise betrays Stoic influence. For example, the ethics of the dialogue have much in common with the Stoic ideal, and the doctrine of God follows a Stoic concept. See Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:158-59.

⁵⁸ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 23-26. See also Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 47-48.

⁵⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 32.

Octavius also stresses benefits element (1), articulating the various advantages that the Christian faith bestows. Christians are moral people. It is the pagans, not the Christians, who show they are immoral people through their homicides, abortions, and incest.⁶⁰ Christians may be simple people from the lower classes, but they have wisdom from God. Discernment is not related to wealth; poor people can be very discerning once they know God.⁶¹ Christians have been set free from the burden of riches, which will soon disappear anyway.⁶² Christian suffering is not evidence of a God who is impotent, but rather a sign that God is working to build virtue and character in his followers. Only Christians can be genuinely happy, because only they have peace about their future destiny. They live happier and more fulfilled lives than the pagans around them who ostensibly live in peace and comfort.⁶³ After hearing this powerful mix of apologetic elements (1) and (2), Caecilius is quickly convinced and becomes a believer.⁶⁴

Tertullian's *Apology*

Of the various second century works surveyed in this chapter, Tertullian's *Apology* (c. 197) is the longest and most detailed. Many church historians also judge it to be the most significant. This is attested by its very robust manuscript tradition.⁶⁵ As was Minucius Felix,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 29-31.

⁶¹ Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:157.

⁶² Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 36.

⁶³ Ibid., 37-38. See also Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 153.

⁶⁴ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 40. Engberg argues that another important factor involved in Caecilius' conversion was the collective conversion account that Octavius presents in chapter 28. See Engberg, "From Among You Are We. Made, Not Born Are Christians," 60.

⁶⁵ Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:251-62.

Tertullian was educated in rhetoric and law.⁶⁶ He presents the case for the Christian faith using the shrewd mind of an attorney. There are some similarities in content between the *Apology* and the *Octavius*, but also some important differences in content, style, and tone. The *Apology* is far more aggressive and intense in its attack on paganism. Whereas the *Octavius* seeks to persuade the pagans by engaging them in dialogue, the *Apology* seeks to challenge and defy them.⁶⁷ The *Apology* is not as urbane and flowery as the *Octavius*, but what it lacks in polish it makes up for in its logical strength and rhetorical intensity.⁶⁸

This sweeping work contains all four elements of Christian apologetics. It begins with rebuttal element (3). Written from Carthage to the collected governors of the Roman provinces, it refutes the many charges made against the Christians. Most of the charges made against them, Tertullian argues, are made out of ignorance.⁶⁹ They relate more to the name “Christian” than to the actual deeds of Christians. Tertullian rebuts the charges that Christians are guilty of crimes like infanticide, cannibalism, and incest. Choosing his words carefully, he stresses that Christianity is an “association” (*corpus*), a “council” (*curia*), and a “party” (*facto*), rather than a political “club” (*hetaeria*). Its goal is to help people live good and moral lives rather than engage

⁶⁶ Decret, Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 33.

⁶⁷ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 48.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 1.

in any subversive or illegal political activities.⁷⁰ The persecution of Christians is a miscarriage of justice, and the laws directed against Christians must be considered unjust.⁷¹

Tertullian, like the earlier apologists, is not content to merely rebut false charges. He quickly segues into coherence element (2). The charge of atheism, for example, is not only false but it is also senseless. Any rational person can see that the case for monotheism is superior to the case for polytheism. The Christians are the ones who worship the true God. The so-called “gods” of paganism can be nothing of the sort. Refusing to worship false gods that do not exist can not possibly be wrong because it is far more coherent and sensible. As a result, there must be toleration for Christian belief.⁷²

Tertullian engages with philosophy as he works to establish the coherence of the faith. Tertullian’s attitude toward philosophy defies easy description. It is subtle and nuanced. On the one hand, he seems to reject philosophy outright. In his *Apology*, and even more so in his *Prescription Against Heretics* (where he famously writes, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”), Tertullian seems to favor a fideistic approach and argues for the need to accept Christian truth by faith.⁷³ Revelation, he argues, leads one closer to God whereas unrestrained philosophical speculation leads one further away. Truth has been given to the world once and for

⁷⁰ Ibid., 7, 39. See also Wilken, *Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 19, 31-46. One frequent suspicion about the Christians, dating back to the time of Pliny, was that they were meeting in groups that were similar to Bacchic societies, funerary societies, or political clubs (*hetaeria*), which frequently engaged in subversive activities and so had to be outlawed.

⁷¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 7-9 and also Eric F. Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 67.

⁷² Tertullian, *Apology*, 21-24; Osborn, *Tertullian*, 86-87; Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:257-58; and also Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 36.

⁷³ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 7.

all through Jesus and there is no need to look elsewhere for it now.⁷⁴ Jesus is the last and greatest revelation of the will of God. Anyone who takes the time to examine the Scripture will see that this is true.⁷⁵ Truth is marked by its simplicity, but men prefer to fiddle with truth to satisfy their own egos, and so they go beyond simple truth and drift into sophistry.⁷⁶ Even pagans know through revelation that there is one God.⁷⁷ On the other hand, Tertullian embraces philosophy and uses it. Stoic ideals, and in particular the influence of Seneca, permeate much of his *Apology*.⁷⁸ He appeals to Zeno to explain the sense in which Christ should be considered God's Son, and to Cleanthes to explain how the logos can be the ultimate cause of all events.⁷⁹ Tertullian's ethics, logic, and metaphysics are all very Stoic.⁸⁰ He has a Stoic understanding of the ultimate importance of opposites, and how justly ordered opposites throughout nature reflect the fundamental design and intention of the logos.⁸¹ What Tertullian really resists is not so much philosophy per se, but rather the idea that there can be a Christian faith that is mixed with or improved by speculative elements from other philosophies.⁸²

⁷⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, 21. See also Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 175-76 and Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 57.

⁷⁵ Tertullian, *Apology*, 18-21; Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 162; and also Osborn, *Tertullian*, 80.

⁷⁶ Tertullian, *Apology*, 46-47; Osborn, *Tertullian*, 15, 30-31.

⁷⁷ Tertullian, *Apology*, 17. See also Reid, *Christian Apologetics*, 61; Osborn, *Tertullian*, 77-78; and Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 49.

⁷⁸ Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 174 and Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 49.

⁷⁹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 21 and Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 92.

⁸⁰ Osborn, *Tertullian*, 35

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 69-75.

⁸² Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 339-40.

Tertullian also touches on apologetic element (1) and the practical benefits of the Christian faith. This is not the threat to social stability that many pagans assume it is. Actually, it is a source of great support for the state. Christians lead genuinely virtuous lives, and they love one another with sincerity. Praying to the one true God, instead of to Caesar, actually helps Caesar in the end because it improves the society that Caesar is trying to govern. Praying for the health of Caesar and for the success of his imperial armies brings stability to the empire. Christians are model citizens because they mitigate all forms of evil and injustice in the society around them.⁸³

Tertullian weaves into his *Apology* a discussion of suffering and martyrdom and how those are important additional benefits of Christianity. As the soldier longs for war so that he can receive battle glory, so the Christian longs to have his faith tested in times of persecution, and, if possible, to leave the world as a martyr. Here Tertullian pens his famous phrase, “Only one thing in this life greatly concerns us, and that is, to get quickly out of it.”⁸⁴ To die a martyr is to obtain victory; it is to conquer. The fact that Christians suffer and die for Christ willingly, in freedom, is proof that Christians possess the truth. Since Christianity is truth sent from God, established by God, it cannot and will not be destroyed by its enemies. God will see that attempts to do so only enlarge it further. Hence, Tertullian’s famous statement: “The more often we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”⁸⁵ Tertullian’s understanding

⁸³ Tertullian, *Apology*, 30-39. See also Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 138-41 and Osborn, *Tertullian*, 65-66, 84-85.

⁸⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 50. See also Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 50; Osborn, *Tertullian*, 76; and Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:260.

that suffering and martyrdom is one of the great benefits of the faith is something that permeates his other works also.⁸⁶

Tertullian also incorporates apologetic element (4) in this treatise, as he works to strengthen the church against its internal enemies. Here Tertullian mentions the “rule of faith,” or the principle for doctrinal continuity between the early apostolic church and the present church. Tertullian’s view, which he would develop at greater length in his *Prescription Against Heretics*, is that the rule of faith is a guide by which to exegete Scripture and ensure orthodoxy in church teaching over time.⁸⁷ It is closely related to Irenaeus’ concept of a “canon of truth.”⁸⁸ The rule of

⁸⁶ For example, Tertullian composed his *To the Martyrs* sometime after the persecution of 197, making it roughly contemporaneous with his *Apology*. Here he writes to encourage those in prison who are facing imminent death, telling them not to fear because death will be a blessing and a release from the evils of this present world. The next round of persecution, under Septimius Severus in 202-03, was directed at catechumens and caught in its web the young convert Perpetua and her friends. Tertullian records their martyrdom and highlights how God enables them to face it with such tremendous courage and resolve. Another work from this period is *The Chaplet*, where Tertullian writes to a soldier facing execution because he has refused to wear the army’s crown of laurels associated with the cult of the emperor, telling him not to fear because through his martyrdom he is about to inherit the true crown of life. In the treatise *Scorpiace*, Tertullian stresses that martyrdom is a command from God and Christians are obligated to die for Christ when the circumstances dictate it. The third wave of persecution that Tertullian lived through occurred under Emperor Caracalla in 211-13. Here Tertullian writes *To Scapula*, where he attempts to strike fear in the heart of the proconsul for what he is doing to Christians. He also writes *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*, where he argues that persecution comes from God in order to prove the faith of Christians. God uses it, as cruel and unjust as it is, as an instrument to carry out his will. Christians must not flee from persecution and martyrdom because God is its author and has designed it for his children’s good. God promises believers that he will stand by them in the midst of it and provide them with all the spiritual weapons they need. To flee from it, then—especially if one is a member of the clergy—is an act of cowardice and faithlessness. Smither notes how, in Tertullian’s view, suffering was intimately connected to the growth of the church, and individuals would be converted as they witnessed and were moved by the heroism of the martyrs. See Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 2; idem, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitus*, 1-6; idem, *The Chaplet*, 15; idem, *Scorpiace*, 8; idem, *To Scapula*, 3-5; idem, *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*, 1-11; and Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 59-60.

⁸⁷ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 19; also Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 39.

⁸⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, 47, as well as Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3. Tertullian would use several different terms for this idea, in the *Apology* using the term “rule of truth” (*regulam veritatis*), and elsewhere using the term “rule of faith” (*disciplina fidei*, or *regula fidei*). The early church was beginning to wrestle in a substantive way with the relationship between Scripture and tradition. In the second century, the Old and New Testament writings were regarded as the clear source of divinely inspired teaching. The concepts of “tradition” and “what Scripture teaches” were regarded as essentially synonymous, in that Christ’s teaching was written in the Scripture and Christ’s teaching was also passed down faithfully by the apostles and their successors so that was evident in the traditions of the church. Scripture and tradition were regarded as twin, interrelated sources of authority for the church. The heresies of the second century, especially Gnosticism and Marcionism, forced the church to further clarify the relationship between Scripture and tradition because the church at this time needed to deny that there was any secret “tradition” beyond what was taught in Scripture and what was affirmed by the church. With terms like “the canon of truth”

faith, argues Tertullian, serves as a vital protection against those “tainters of our purity” who would try to introduce new heresies and weaken the church from within.⁸⁹

This concern with apologetic element (4) will increase notably as the baton is passed from Tertullian to Cyprian. Before turning to a discussion of Cyprian, it must be noted that he and Tertullian have some important connections with one another. Both men were from Carthage and were trained in law and rhetoric. Both shared certain Stoic presuppositions. Their lives overlapped—Cyprian was in his twenties when Tertullian died—although there is, unfortunately, no evidence they knew each other personally.⁹⁰ In later life, Cyprian is reported to have read daily from Tertullian’s works and referred to him as “the master.”⁹¹ Several of Cyprian’s treatises display a direct or indirect dependence on earlier works by Tertullian.⁹² The two men

(Irenaeus) and “the rule of faith” (Tertullian), these theologians expressed their view that Scripture must always be interpreted in accordance with apostolic tradition and what the church had long understood to be the central elements of the Christian faith. Tertullian’s “rule of faith” was meant to come alongside Scripture, to support it, rather than to supplement or correct it in any way. For Tertullian, Scripture and tradition existed in a reciprocal relationship with each other, such that the rule of faith was derived from Scripture and said nothing other than what could be plainly recognized from Scripture. Tertullian took it for granted that the teaching of the apostles and the teaching of the church were, in his day, consistent. He believed the second century church stood in physical continuity with the apostles, as evidenced by the continuity of its teachings (which were derived from Scripture) and the historical succession of its bishops. Heretics mishandled the text of Scripture and came up with false teachings because they ignored the rule of faith. See Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 13 and 19; John D. Morrison, *Has God Said? Scripture, the Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 255-61; Gregory Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 143-47; Osborn, *Tertullian*, 34, 115, 151-58; Edward W. Fashole-Luke, “What is the Catholic Church?” *Communio Viatorum* 16 (Spring 1973): 63-64.

⁸⁹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 47. See also Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 117; and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 40.

⁹⁰ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 70 and Sage, *Cyprian*, 102. Sage mentions that neither Monceaux nor Harnack were able to infer any direct personal contact between the two men based on the (admittedly sparse) evidence.

⁹¹ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 53. Cyprian’s great admiration for Tertullian is somewhat ironic in that Tertullian was a “schismatic” of sorts during the time he was a Montanist.

⁹² These include Cyprian’s *On the Vanity of the Idols*, which is similar to Tertullian’s *Apology* (and to the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix); Cyprian’s *On the Dress of Virgins*, which is similar to Tertullian’s *On the Veiling of Virgins* and his *On the Apparel of Women*; and Cyprian’s *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, which is similar to Tertullian’s *An Answer to the Jews*. See Hans van Loon, “Cyprian’s Christology and the Authenticity of *Qod Idola Dii Non Sint*,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language and Thought, Late Antique History*

had similar views on a number of issues, including the need to defend the faith with a rich, multi-faceted apologetic. One should be surprised, then, that history has judged to Tertullian to be an apologist and Cyprian not. The evidence will show that this is a mistaken judgment that needs correction.

Summary

All four elements included in the working definition of apologetics can be seen in the famous works of apologetics from the latter half of the second century that were reviewed in this chapter. Each work is of course different, having its own unique approach and points of emphasis. For example, in Justin's two *Apologies* and Athenagoras' *Plea for the Christians*, the focus is mostly on rebuttal element (3), supplemented with coherence element (2). In the *Epistle to Diognetus* and the *Octavius*, the focus is mostly on benefits element (1), supplemented with coherence element (2). In Tertullian's *Apology*, all four elements can be found, in a balanced way, with a renewed interest in strengthening element (4). Taken as a whole, these works sustain the argument that apologetics in the early church was a multi-faceted effort characterized by all four elements.

Something of a shift occurs from the middle of the second century to the end. The rebuttal element (3), which is stressed initially, gradually starts to give way to the coherence element (2) and the benefits element (1). Perhaps this is because the apologists begin to feel

and Religion, ed. H. Bakker, Paul Van Geest, and H. van Loon, vol. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 128, 136. See also Sage, *Cyprian*, 55-57, 154-56, 373-75, 383. Tertullian and Cyprian both wrote treatises on the Lord's Prayer (see Cyprian's *On the Lord's Prayer* and Tertullian's *On Prayer*), but there is less similarity between these two works than the other pairs of works. See Junghoo Kwon, "Cyprian, Origen, and the Lord's Prayer: Theological Diversities between Latin West and Greek East in the Third Century," *Asia Journal of Theology* 26, no. 1 (April 2012): 56-57. As Pierre de Labriolle observes, "St. Cyprian has indeed well-studied Tertullian. He follows him closely in many of his treatises. But not a single time does he name him" (Pierre de Labriolle, *La Crise Montaniste* [New York: Kessinger, 2010], 471). That said, Cyprian never mentions or references any other authors in his writings, either. See Douglas L. Powell, "Tertullianists and Cataphrygians," *Vigiliae christianae* 29, no. 1 (March 1975): 38.

somewhat less threatened and more able to go on the offensive with their faith. Internal strengthening element (4) begins to appear towards the end of this period with Tertullian. Continued growth in the church has by this point increased the relative threat from internal enemies as opposed to external ones.

Chapter Four of the dissertation will explore the writings of Cyprian and will show that Cyprian, like those reviewed above, should be considered an apologist for the way he incorporates each of these four apologetic elements. It will become clear that there is no good basis on which to say these earlier works are “apologetic” and Cyprian’s are not.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Cyprian's Writings

Introduction

Thascius Caecilianus Cyprianus was born in Carthage around the year 200.¹ He was born into a wealthy family that possessed a large estate and most likely had curial rank in the city. As a young man, he was trained as a *rhetor*, and likely served in the law courts of Carthage.² This education and position in society explains why his writing style was so persuasive, why he retained connections to the leading pagans of the city, and why as a new Christian he was able to rise so rapidly through the ranks of the clergy.³ As a new convert, Cyprian was mentored by the presbyter Caecilian.⁴ His assumption of Caecilian's name speaks to the importance of that relationship.

Cyprian's primary source material includes thirteen treatises and eighty-two letters. In order to examine these in a coherent way, each of them will be assigned to one of five periods of Cyprian's ministry and examined in chronological order. In assigning dates to the treatises, the

¹ There is some uncertainty about this and some propose a birth year as late as 210. See Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 70.

² Sage, *Cyprian*, 103-09; Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44; and Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 70. Cyprian may also have held an administrative position of some sort in the city. Jerome (*On Illustrious Men*, 67) mentions that Cyprian had a fine reputation as a teacher of rhetoric before he was converted. In his *Sermon 312*, Augustine refers to Cyprian's great oratorical skills.

³ Pontius notes that Cyprian's time as a catechumate was unusually short because he displayed full evidence of genuine conversion immediately, and he also benefitted from his strong relationship with Caecilian. See Pontius, *Life*, 2-4 as well as Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "Catechumate and Contra-Culture: The Social Process of Catechumate in Third-Century Africa and its Development," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47 (2003): 294.

⁴ Smither argues that Cyprian, like Augustine after him, formed a number of strong mentoring relationships. After being himself mentored by Caecilian, Cyprian chose to continue in mentoring relationships with the clergy in Carthage and elsewhere. Smither notes he used four main avenues for his mentoring: (1) resourcing others with letters; (2) resourcing others with treatises; (3) calling and participating in councils; and (4) disciplining other members of the clergy. Even though Cyprian had a good deal of authority in the church, he always sought a balance between authority and cooperation. He remained a humble learner and a disciple throughout his ministry, seeking advice from others and working diligently to achieve consensus. See Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*, 28-38.

dissertation relies importantly on the work of Michael Sage.⁵ Sage's chronology not only makes good logical sense—tying the subject matter of the treatises to the challenges of each phase of his ministry—but it also matches the order in which the works are listed in Pontius' *Life and Passion of Cyprian*.⁶ The dissertation departs from Sage by siding with Quasten and others in considering the treatise *On the Vanity of Idols* to be genuine.⁷ Because of Cyprian's great stature in the church, and his famous death as a martyr, it should be no surprise that a number of spurious treatises tried to find their way into his collection. There are a handful of such treatises which will not be considered here, even though many are rich in apologetic content.⁸ It is important to

⁵ Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian*, Patristic Monograph Series 1 (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristics Foundation, 1975), 383. Clarke advocates a slightly different chronology for the treatises, with the major differences being an earlier dating for *On Works and Alms* (249), *On the Lord's Prayer* (250), and *Exhortation to Martyrdom* (250). Sage's scheme is preferable because the material in the first two treatises fits better with the circumstances of the plague than it does with the circumstances of the Pre-Decian period, and the material in the third fits best with the circumstances of Cyprian's own martyrdom. Clarke himself is tentative about the alternative dates he assigns to these three works. Either way, the apologetic content of the treatises is not significantly altered by their dating. The two chronologies are close at most points. See G. W. Clarke, ed., *The Letters of Cyprian*, Ancient Christian Writers Series, vol. 1 (New York: Newman, 1984), 45-46.

⁶ Pontius the Deacon, *The Life and Passion of St. Cyprian*, 7.

⁷ Sage considers this to be a spurious, but the balance of scholarship leans towards it being genuine. See, for example, Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus, vol. 2 (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1986), 364. Following Quasten, the present work assigns *On the Vanity of Idols* a relatively early date of 247. This treatise knows nothing of persecution and it exhibits other characteristics of Cyprian's early work.

⁸ For example, there is *On the Public Shows*, a work about the immorality and idolatry that confront Christians when they attend the theatre and the games. Another is *On the Advantage of Chastity*, which exalts virginity and continence. Both of these works may have been authored by Novatian. A third work, *On the Glory of Martyrdom*, bears some broad similarity to Cyprian's final treatise, but lacks its reliance on Scripture and argues in a way that is more Stoic than Christian. Although influenced by Stoic philosophy and classical literature, Cyprian always consciously refrained from drawing overtly on them in his works, preferring to leave that way of thinking behind as much as possible. These works should also be rejected for reasons of style and vocabulary. They have a pretentious air, they are overly wordy, and they contain language that is too flowery to be Cyprian's. Another spurious work that has been falsely attributed to Cyprian is the *Exhortation to Repentance*. This lacks a good manuscript tradition, having made its first appearance in a 1751 publication of Cyprian's works. It is a collection of Bible quotations with little of substance tying them together. The spurious treatise *To Novatian* is a polemic from an unknown author, perhaps another North African bishop, who clearly shares Cyprian's view on the baptism of heretics but lacks Cyprian's eloquence and speaks in a more rough-handed way than Cyprian would have. Four final treatises which are almost certainly spurious are *On Rebaptism*, *Against Gambling*, *On the Singularity of the Clergy*, and *On the Calculation of Easter*. All of these were probably written in North Africa, likely by bishops or presbyters, but they evidence signs of a late third or fourth century dating. See Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:367-69; Clarke, *The Letters of Cyprian*, 1:17 and idem, ed., *The Letters of Cyprian*, 3:42; and also Sage, *Cyprian*, 261-62, 405-06.

note that Cyprian's treatises were meant to circulate widely. He employed copyists to publish them. This ensured they could be read not only in Carthage, but also in Rome and elsewhere.⁹

The standard edition of the letters is the Oxford edition. Initially assembled in 1682, it formed the basis for the collection assembled by Hartel (1871) and followed by all major scholars since then, including Fahey (1971), Sage (1975), Clarke (1984), Quasten (1986), Burns (2002), and Brent (2010). Of the eighty-two letters that have been preserved, sixty are from Cyprian's own hand, sixteen are written by others (causing Cyprian to reply or respond in some way), and six are synodal letters from the African church as a whole.¹⁰ Dozens more, now lost, can be inferred from the corpus that remains.

The letters, like the treatises, were written to influence a broad audience. Many of them were originally drafted as public letters. Cyprian also routinely had copies of the letters produced so they could be sent to others right away. Cyprian labored under the assumption that his work would be read not only by those in his episcopal see, but also by others in Rome and in various other parts of the Empire.¹¹ Cyprian wanted this, in part, to help maintain unity in the church. For example, in *Letter 32*, which he writes to his clergy in Carthage, Cyprian includes copies of previous letters he has exchanged with the Roman church and adds the following:

With your customary zeal you should make every effort to see that what we have written as well as what they have replied should become known to our brothers. And further, you should fully inform on these matters any bishops, my colleagues, or presbyters or deacons from other churches who may be in Carthage with you or who may come later. And if they wish to make copies of these letters and take them back home, they are to be allowed to do so. What is more, I have given instructions to the lector Satyrus, our

⁹ Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 34-35.

¹⁰ Nienke Vos, "A Universe of Meaning: Cyprian's Use of Scripture in Letter 58," in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 68-70.

¹¹ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:5-8. See also Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*, 30-33.

brother, to grant permission to any individual who so desires to transcribe copies, my purpose being that in our temporary and provisional settlement of the affairs of our church we may all securely keep in agreement together.¹²

Likewise, in *Letter 55*, Cyprian notes that a letter written by the clergy in Rome had been “distributed to all parts of the world and has reached the knowledge of all the churches and all the brethren.”¹³ Cyprian knew that the apologetic elements he incorporated in his writings would affect a wide variety of people.

As with the treatises, it makes best sense to examine the letters in their chronological (rather than numerical) order. This gives a good feel for the flow of events and provides a window into the development of Cyprian’s thinking at each stage of his ministry. The dissertation will rely on Clarke’s chronology of the letters, which is generally accepted by scholars.¹⁴

The first period examined will be the early period between Cyprian’s conversion and the onset of the Decian persecution (246-49). Four of the thirteen treatises were written in these years. These are *To Donatus*, *On the Vanity of Idols*, *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, and *On the Dress of Virgins*. Also included in this period are *Letters 1-4*. These works are rich in apologetic content.

¹² Clarke, *Letters*, 2:39.

¹³ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:35.

¹⁴ Clarke does an exhaustive job locating each of the letters in the appropriate phase of Cyprian’s ministry and providing commentary on the context and the Latin text. In many cases, he provides an estimated or approximate date when there are no firm grounds for certainty and few clues from the context. As with the treatises, none of the apologetic import would change notably as a result of slightly different dates for the letters. Many scholars who have written extensively on Cyprian find Clarke’s chronology of the letters to be persuasive, and they rely on it for their location of the letters in Cyprian’s ministry. See Geoffrey D. Dunn, “The White Crown of Works: Cyprian’s Early Pastoral Ministry of Almsgiving in Carthage,” *Church History* 73, no. 4 (Dec 2004): 729.

Early Period (246-49)

To Donatus (late 246)

Cyprian's first treatise was probably written some time between his mid-life conversion in the year 245 and his subsequent baptism in the spring of 246. *To Donatus* is an apologetic essay about Cyprian's conversion. It is meant, at least in part, to exhort other potential converts.¹⁵ This work, like many that would follow it, is intended to reach a wide audience of pagans in North Africa.¹⁶ The treatise is set in the autumn, during the cool harvest period that intelligent Romans found so conducive to philosophical and theological reflection. This setting for the letter is almost identical to that of the *Octavius*, perhaps intentionally so.¹⁷ Cyprian's objective in the treatise is to recount for Donatus, and others who will read the treatise, the benefits he sees in the Christian faith and why Christian faith makes so much sense given the grim realities of the world as it is. This is apologetic elements (1) and (2).

¹⁵ Engberg notes that Cyprian is not unique in writing an apologetic essay that is characterized by an account of his conversion, shortly after that conversion took place, in an attempt to positively influence others toward conversion. Here Cyprian follows in the footsteps of Minucius Felix and Tertullian. Later, Arnobius and Lactantius would do the same. See Jakob Engberg, "The Education and Self-Affirmation of Recent or Potential Converts: The Case of Cyprian and the *Ad Donatum*," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 16, no. 1 (2012): 143; idem, "'From Among You Are We. Made, Not Born Are Christians,' Apologists' Accounts of Conversion before 310 AD," in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Early Christian Apologetics*, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity Series 5, ed. J. Ulrich (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 68.

¹⁶ Cyprian retained an excellent reputation among the pagans of Carthage after becoming a Christian, and he never fully departed from the high social position into which he was born. This allowed his written works to have ongoing influence among the pagans. See Pontius, *Life*, 7, 14; see also Vincent Hunink, "St Cyprian: A Christian and Roman Gentleman," in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 38. There is also some question about exactly who Donatus is. Engberg views Donatus as a recent convert, or perhaps one who is not yet fully converted, and views the treatise as intended for an audience of pagans who are thinking about converting. Wilhite argues that Donatus is already a bishop and that this treatise has multiple audiences in mind, including—but not limited to—those who attend Donatus' church. See Engberg, "The Education and Self-Affirmation of Recent or Potential Converts," 136-43; David E. Wilhite, "Cyprian's Scriptural Hermeneutic of Identity: The Laxist 'Heresy,'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32, no. 1 (2010): 65; and Michael A. G. Haykin, "The Holy Spirit in Cyprian's *To Donatus*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (Oct 2011): 322.

¹⁷ Sage, *Cyprian*, 111.

In a break with his former way of life as a lawyer, Cyprian now aims to speak simply and to tell the truth plainly, without the use of flowery words.¹⁸ He explains how he came to see the world as soaked in sin, and his former way of life as bondage to sin.¹⁹ Although he at first was skeptical about the possibility of being “born again,” he discovered that once he became a believer, things which had been dark and mysterious to him now suddenly began to make sense. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, his obfuscated and carnal worldview began to fade, replaced by a clear and clean Christian worldview.²⁰ God began to draw the veil away from his eyes, allowing him to see things the way they really are: evil, treacherous, and hopelessly corrupt. Who would want to stay in a place where morality was so degraded, where innocence was rarely defended in the law courts, and where wicked men escaped condemnation?²¹ Not even money, which Cyprian had, could prove to be a solace in such a world. Money simply fostered anxiety and insecurity, and held people in bondage.²² It may have been easier for Cyprian to think this way—and for Donatus to accept it—given the troubled state of the Carthaginian economy, which was very slow to recover from the ruinous effects of the revolt of 238.²³ Cyprian’s actions matched his words, and he turned over a considerable portion of his estate to the church shortly after converting.²⁴

¹⁸ Cyprian, *To Donatus*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5. See also Haykin, “The Holy Spirit in Cyprian’s *To Donatus*,” 323.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-10.

²² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²³ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:13 and Sage, *Cyprian*, 40-44. Contra Bobertz and others, Dunn argues it was at this point that Cyprian wanted to step away from any further participation in the Roman patronage system. See Dunn, “The White Crown of Works,” 725.

²⁴ Pontius, *Life*, 2-3. Perhaps speaking with hyperbole, Pontius implies that it was a total renunciation of his

The best way to respond to the uncertainty of the present world, Cyprian argues, is for a man to detach from it and place his hope in the certainty of the Christian faith. “The one solid and firm and constant security is this,” writes Cyprian, “for a man to withdraw from these eddies of a distracting world, and, anchored on the ground of the harbor of salvation, to lift his eyes from earth to heaven.”²⁵ By placing his faith in Christ, he can free himself from the world’s unpleasant shocks and entangling snares. He is free to see how this earthly abode is temporary and inconsequential. It makes sense for him to go through life as a Christian because then he has the benefit of a relationship with Jesus Christ, who not only saves him, but also subsequently instructs and directs him.²⁶ This relationship is a two-way street. Cyprian pens the phrase, “See that you observe either constant prayer or reading: speak now with God, let God now speak with you” (*Sit tibi vel oratio adsidua vel lectio: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum*).²⁷ To be able to speak with God, and have him speak with you, is an enormous benefit. For a man like Donatus, who possesses a well-balanced mind, the benefits and coherence of Christianity should prove compelling.²⁸

estate, but this does not fit with the fact that Cyprian remained a person of some resources throughout the remainder of his ministry. Either way, Cyprian was motivated to continue giving from what remained of his resources. He even bestowed on his executioner the relatively large gift of 25 gold pieces. See Dunn, “The White Crown of Works,” 719-20, 739; see also Hunink, “St. Cyprian,” 32-34.

²⁵ Cyprian, *To Donatus*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. It should be noted that this treatise exhibits a high Christology with a focused attention on the salvation of mankind through the person of Jesus Christ. Cyprian’s other early treatise, *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, also exhibits a high Christology. His interest in Christology faded somewhat over time as he grew more concerned with other matters of ecclesiology. See Hans van Loon, “Cyprian’s Christology and the Authenticity of *Qod Idola Dii Non Sint*,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language and Thought, Late Antique History and Religion*, ed. H. Bakker, Paul Van Geest, and H. van Loon, vol. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 137-41.

²⁷ Cyprian, *To Donatus*, 15. This expression of Cyprian’s was carried forward, with some modification, by many later church fathers including Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom. See Neil Adkin, “*Oras-Loqueris ad Sponsum, Legi-ille Tibi Loquitur* (Jerome, Epist. 22.25.1),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (June 1992): 141-45.

²⁸ Cyprian, *To Donatus*, 16.

To Donatus is quite similar in tone and content to some of the second century works, especially the *Octavius*. It is a very clear example of apologetic elements (1) and (2). If this were Cyprian's only surviving treatise, history would most likely remember him as an apologist.

On the Vanity of Idols (247)

The next treatise Cyprian writes is *On the Vanity of Idols*. The work pre-dates the Decian persecution, because it makes no reference to it, and a date of 247 seems to fit the circumstances best. Most scholars consider this to be a genuine work from Cyprian's hand.²⁹ Some, however, do not. Sage, for example, argues that it does not belong in Cyprian's collection because it is little more than a summary of chapters 18-23 of Minucius Felix's *Octavius* combined with a summary of chapters 21-23 of Tertullian's *Apology*. Cyprian frequently reworked material from Tertullian, Sage argues, but always with far more independence than this.³⁰ Quasten, on the other hand, writes for the majority when he argues that this should be considered Cyprian's work even though it incorporates the ideas of those earlier men. It is most likely an effort by Cyprian to consolidate arguments from men he respected about the futility of pagan idolatry and the value of Christianity. Quasten thinks that Cyprian probably intended to keep this essay for his own reference rather than distributing it. That would account for its lack of literary polish.³¹ Either

²⁹ Augustine (*On Baptism*, 6.44) and Jerome (*Letter* 70.5) accepted this treatise as genuine but, importantly, it is absent from the list of works referenced in Pontius' *Life*. Fahey considers it to be genuine and includes it in his collection of Cyprian's works.. Quasten agrees that the evidence, on balance, favors authenticity although he acknowledges some doubt about it. Quasten thinks it is most likely an early work because it lacks the polish of some of Cyprian's later writings and because Cyprian feels comfortable in this treatise leaning on the work of others whom he respects, like Minucius Felix and Tertullian. Van Loon, who agrees it is genuine, notes the textual similarities between this and other works of Cyprian. He also notes the many differences between this and Tertullian's *Apology*. See Michael Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1971), 19; Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:364; and van Loon, "Cyprian's Christology and the Authenticity of *Qod Idola Dii Non Sint*," 129-35.

³⁰ Sage, *Cyprian*, 55-57, 373-75.

³¹ Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:364.

way, this work is important for the present study because it establishes a literary link between Cyprian and the earlier apologists Minucius Felix and Tertullian in which there is, at a minimum, some sharing of apologetic ideas.³²

Like the previous treatise, *On the Vanity of Idols* is highly apologetic. It is a condensed argument for the coherence and reasonableness of the Christian worldview. This is apologetic element (2). The pagan gods of the nations, Cyprian writes, cannot possibly be considered divine because many of them used to be kings. They are just beloved men whose memories their subjects wished to keep alive after their deaths.³³ Reiterating one of the main arguments from the *Octavius*, Cyprian writes that these gods were powerless to stop the Roman army, so why should they be considered worthy of worship?³⁴ History shows that kingdoms rise and fall because of the heroism (or the crimes) of their human rulers, not the will of their gods.³⁵ As Plato knew, there can only be one real God.³⁶ This God must be too large to live in temples made by human hands, and too pure to be seen with human eyes.³⁷ To believe that Jesus Christ—the power, reason, and *logos* of the Father—came in the flesh is not at all unreasonable because God had already been revealing himself for many generations to the Jewish prophets and people.³⁸ The

³² While the literary evidence shows that Cyprian was familiar with the work of the Latin apologists Minucius Felix and Tertullian, it is less clear the extent to which he was also familiar with the work of the Greek apologists Justin Martyr and Athenagoras. Justin was a figure of some renown in Roman Christian circles, and his works may have been part of the Christian intellectual milieu in Carthage, but this cannot be demonstrated conclusively. See Sage, *Cyprian*, 71-73.

³³ Cyprian, *On the Vanity of Idols*, 1-3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

fact that Jesus, while innocent, chose to suffer on the cross is proof that what he said was true. The fact that his followers, also innocent, choose to suffer along with him is additional proof.³⁹ To believe this is more sensible and coherent than the pagan alternatives. *On the Vanity of Idols* is a very clear example of apologetics element (2), arguments for the coherence and reasonableness of the Christian worldview.

Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews (249)

The next treatise, written to Cyprian's friend Quirinus, should be dated to the period after Cyprian assumed the post of bishop in early 249, but before the Decian persecution began in early 250, because it makes no mention of the latter.⁴⁰ Here Cyprian again demonstrates an interest in philosophical argument, but he begins to subordinate that to Scriptural exegesis and attention to matters of practical church governance.⁴¹ This work includes many more Scriptural citations than the previous two writings. Cyprian's knowledge of Scripture is advancing and his exegetical ability is growing. In his exhaustive review of Cyprian's use of Scripture, Michael

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ It is possible that Quirinius was a catechumen and that Cyprian wrote this treatise, in part, to explain to him some of the basics of Christian doctrine. This would have given Quirinius a hermeneutical framework for interpreting Scripture and helped him understand his new set of mores for living as a Christian. Sage notes that Cyprian's election to bishop must have occurred in 249 because it is referenced in *Letter 59*, which was written in 252 and makes reference to Cyprian's having served as bishop for a period three years. As with the previous treatise *On the Vanity of Idols*, there are some who argue that *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews* should not be attributed to Cyprian. Bobertz, for example, argues that this work probably antedated Cyprian. He points to the differences in the biblical text used in this treatise and in Cyprian's other treatises. He also argues that the position on penance taken here seems too rigorist to be Cyprian's. See Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "Catechumate and Contra-Culture: The Social Process of Catechumate in Third-Century Africa and its Development," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47 (2003): 294, 294-95, 300, 305; Sage, *Cyprian*, 138; and Charles A. Bobertz, "An Analysis of *Vita Cypriani* 3:6-10 and the Attribution of *Ad Quirinium* to Cyprian of Carthage," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (June 1992): 118-22.

⁴¹ Hays notes that after *To Donatus*, a shift begins to take place, with Cyprian's allusions to classical philosophy quickly receding into the background. To the extent they appear, philosophical allusions tend to be targets of Cyprian's polemic rather than allies in his argumentation. See Christopher M. Hays, "Resumptions of Radicalism: Christian Wealth Ethics in the Second and Third Centuries," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 102, no. 2 (2011): 267-68.

Fahey notes that over the course of his ministry Cyprian makes about 1,500 biblical citations from a wide variety of Old and New Testament texts. Cyprian views the Scripture as inspired and authoritative. He regards Tertullian's *regula fidei* as the guide to its proper interpretation. Cyprian is also inclined to read the Old Testament in a Christological way, to rely extensively on typology, and to engage in what modern exegetes would call "proof-texting."⁴² Some, like Lactantius, have considered Cyprian's generous use of Scripture to be an indication that his work is not primarily apologetic, and that he is making an appeal to those inside the church rather than those outside.⁴³ That conclusion does not necessarily follow. Justin, for example, used a good deal of Scripture in his apologetic writings directed at outsiders.⁴⁴

The first two books of the *Three Books of Testimonies* stress the coherence element (2) of apologetics. The first book concerns Israel, and how they lost their privileged position with God because they forsook the Lord to follow idols and rejected the Messiah.⁴⁵ As a result, they were driven from their land.⁴⁶ God gave a new circumcision, a new law, and a new baptism to the

⁴² Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible*, 43-44, 56, and 623-27. Downs regards the *Three Books of Testimonies* and the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, in particular, as evidence of Cyprian's propensity to proof-text. Wilhite explores how Cyprian feels free to use Scripture to construct social identities for himself and others. Smither notes that Cyprian's extensive quoting of Scripture helps to identify the "African stream" of the Old Latin Bible that existed before Jerome assembled the Vulgate, and how that stream differed from the Italian and Gallic streams. See David J. Downs, "Prosopological Exegesis in Cyprian's *De Opere et Eleemosynis*," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 282 and Wilhite, "Cyprian's Scriptural Hermeneutic of Identity," 58-77; and Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 96.

⁴³ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.1. Interestingly, Lactantius seems to have used this treatise by Cyprian as something of a Scripture manual and guide for his own presentation of the life of Christ. Many of the citations Lactantius uses have a parallel in Cyprian's *Three Books of Testimonies*, although Lactantius also inserts a good deal of extra material not found in *Three Books of Testimonies* in order to enhance his Scriptural presentation. Lactantius also frequently prepares different Scriptural groupings and progressions than Cyprian. See Paul McGuckin, "The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 2 (July 1982): 145-53.

⁴⁴ The *Dialogue with Trypho* is of course full of Biblical references as Justin tries to convince Trypho the Jew, from the Scriptures, that Jesus is the Messiah. Justin's *First Apology* also contains numerous Scripture references. For example, there are 46 explicit references in the second half of the work (chapters 32-68).

⁴⁵ Cyprian, *Three Books of Testimonies*, 1.1-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.6.

believing Gentiles. He replaced the Jewish priesthood with the Christian priesthood.⁴⁷ Israel was set aside in favor of the church.⁴⁸ Cyprian's attitude toward Judaism here is not mean-spirited and fits with the successionist inclinations of the Patristic era.⁴⁹ His goal is to show that Christianity fits easily and seamlessly with the Old Testament revelation that came before it, and that this can be substantiated from the words of the Old Testament itself.⁵⁰ Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* made similar arguments.⁵¹ The notion that Christianity is a coherent worldview because of its firm grounding in Judaism is an example of apologetic element (2).

The second book concerns the divinity of Christ. Here Cyprian exegetes the various titles for Jesus Christ, including the "Word" of God, the "Wisdom" of God, the "Son" of God, the "Lamb" of God, and so forth. Once again, Cyprian puts increasing stress on the text of Scripture and appeals to Scripture more than to philosophical reasoning. Cyprian tries to show that the Bible is reliable. Its terms and promises make sense and are internally consistent.⁵² He tries to convince the reader—whether Jewish, Christian, or pagan—that the Christian Scriptures are trustworthy and coherent, and that they form the basis for a cogent worldview. This is the coherence element (2) of apologetics.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.8-17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1.21-22.

⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this document has frequently been examined (and frequently criticized) in the context of the history of anti-Semitism. In particular, some persecution against Jews during the Middle Ages may have been justified directly or indirectly from arguments advanced here, although it is quite doubtful that was ever Cyprian's intention. See Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest and Hans van Loon, "Introduction: Cyprian's Stature and Influence," in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 2.

⁵⁰ Cyprian, *Three Books of Testimonies*, 1.21-24.

⁵¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 9-47, 109-42. See also Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:202-03.

⁵² Cyprian, *Three Books of Testimonies*, 2.1-2, 2.8-10, 2.15-19, 2.28-29.

The third book is the most practical of the three and is the most Scripturally dense. It lays out the various principles for Christian living, and explains the benefits of them. It encourages believers to do good works, show mercy, give alms, be humble, restrain their anger, show brotherly love, refrain from swearing, dress modestly, avoid carnality, await the return of the Lord, be willing to wage war against the devil, and embrace martyrdom.⁵³ Cyprian's aim in this third book is to show that the Christian life, as directed by Scripture, is one that is well-ordered and produces happy, virtuous people. This is the benefits element (1) of apologetics.

On the Dress of Virgins (249)

This treatise betrays no hint of persecution and so it, too, must be dated to the pre-Decian period of Cyprian's episcopate. The year 249 fits well because it is evident that Cyprian's ecclesiastical responsibilities are now beginning to grow. As with the *Three Books of Testimonies*, there is a continued shift here from the theoretical focus that characterizes Cyprian's earliest treatises to a more balanced focus that melds theory with the practical considerations of a bishop who has responsibility over his flock.

By authoring a treatise like this on virginity, Cyprian shows himself to be very much in tune with the ascetic impulse that marks the third century. Cyprian, an unmarried bishop, had to embrace the same life of continence that he commends to the virgins. This treatise is clearly familiar with Tertullian's works *On the Veiling of Virgins* and *On the Apparel of Women*, and draws on them, but without sacrificing literary independence.⁵⁴ The primary idea that underlies this treatise is that discipline is an important characteristic of the Christian life and is essential for

⁵³ Ibid., 3.1-12, 3.19-23, 3.36, 3.60-64.

⁵⁴ Sage, *Cyprian*, 155-56 with further reference to Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 7, 15; idem, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1-2.

the well-being of the church.⁵⁵ Virgins are exhorted to persevere and to be on guard against any forces that would threaten their self-discipline and thus threaten the church from within. Threats to self-discipline include wealth, public appearances, baths, excessive jewelry, cosmetics, and ornamentation.⁵⁶ Cyprian stresses that dedicated virgins belong to the church, and that Cyprian is responsible for overseeing them.⁵⁷ Obedience to the bishop is a principle which Cyprian will emphasize even more in the next phase of his ministry.⁵⁸

Discipline and obedience are not only important for the unity and strength of the church, but they are benefits that God promises to give to his followers. God will help his people resist the temptations of the flesh and live lives of continence.⁵⁹ God gives his followers the power to persist in this difficult calling, and will reward them for it in the end.⁶⁰ This treatise is a good example of apologetic element (4), strengthening the church against internal forces that would divide it, combined with apologetic element (1), declaring the benefits of the faith.

⁵⁵ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 1-2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7. Dunn argues that Cyprian warns all Christian women, especially the rich ones, about the proper use of their wealth and the need to refrain from using wealth in such a way that they arouse the lust of men. Weaver observes that for Cyprian, it is inappropriate to indulge in any form of ostentation that would hamper the women's ability to fulfill their vows. Rankin adds that for Cyprian, because true riches reside in Christ, anyone who would seek to elevate worldly wealth in this way shows that they have an improper love of the world. See Dunn, "The White Crown of Works," 726; Rebecca H. Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (Oct 1987): 372; and David Rankin, "Class Distinction as a Way of Doing Church: The Early Fathers and the Christian Plebs," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 3 (2004): 311.

⁵⁷ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 20-22.

⁵⁸ Sage, *Cyprian*, 156.

⁵⁹ Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 2, 6-7, 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4, 21-22. Cyprian notes that the reward of a dedicated virgin is like that of the martyr. If the martyr is paid back one hundred-fold, the dedicated virgin will be paid back sixty-fold.

Letters 1-4

Letters 1-4 are usually regarded as the first written because, like the early treatises, they know nothing of the Decian persecution to come and give no indication of a later dating. As Clarke argues, these are not demonstrably pre-persecution letters, but they are safely placed in this early period because they are non-persecution letters.⁶¹ As with the treatise *On the Dress of Virgins*, they show a growing interest on Cyprian's part to strengthen the church against internal forces that would weaken it or cause division.

For example, *Letter 1* addresses a situation in which a presbyter has been appointed as a trustee and guardian under someone's will. This is a violation of established procedure in the church, Cyprian writes, and contrary to the decision of a previous council. Cyprian argues that the Lord's soldiers must be free to devote themselves entirely to spiritual matters, and must not entangle themselves in the affairs of this world.⁶² Doing so will weaken the church. *Letter 2* concerns a man in the church who makes his living by giving acting lessons. Cyprian notes that such a profession does not suit a professing Christian because it will require him to do various scandalous things, like dress up in women's clothing. To keep the church strong, the man in question should find a different line of work, regardless of how badly he needs the money.⁶³ *Letter 3* discusses the insolent behavior of a certain presbyter toward his bishop. Citing numerous examples from Scripture—including the destruction of Korah and his associates found in Numbers chapter 16—Cyprian warns that the man who defies the Lord's priest in this way will face God's judgment. "Are we really in a position to rebel in any way against God who makes us

⁶¹ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

bishops?” asks Cyprian.⁶⁴ This is another early look into Cyprian’s high view of ecclesiastical order: he refuses to countenance any rebellion by presbyters against their bishops, and insists that such men desist immediately because what they are doing will hurt the church.⁶⁵ *Letter 4* deals with a case of sexual impropriety. Some virgins from a neighboring bishopric admit to having slept with men (including a deacon) and so must be disciplined. It is the responsibility of the bishop to oversee this situation and see that it is rectified because church discipline is needed for a strong church.⁶⁶ All of this is apologetics in its strengthening sense (4).

Conclusion

The works from Cyprian’s early period (246-249) are quite rich in apologetic content and involve most of the elements of a thorough apologetic program. In *To Donatus*, he shares his personal testimony and the various benefits that he has appropriated since his conversion. This is apologetic element (1). He also argues that the Christian worldview makes the most sense of the world as it is, which makes the faith appeal to any man who possesses a well-balanced mind. This is apologetic element (2). *On the Vanity of Idols* harmonizes with, and likely borrows from, the work of the earlier apologists Minucius Felix and Tertullian. It argues mostly for the coherence of the Christian worldview. With his *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, Cyprian begins to weave more Scripture into his writing and to make the case that the Biblical text, because it is trustworthy and coherent, forms the basis for a sensible worldview. These three

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-57.

⁶⁵ In this letter and others (e.g., *Letter 69* and *Letter 75*), Cyprian invokes the Old Testament example of the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses and Aaron. The destruction of these men serves as a warning against men in Cyprian’s day who would seek to undermine the established priestly authority established by God for his church. See James L. Garrett, Jr., “The Priesthood of All Christians: From Cyprian to John Chrysostom,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 23-24.

⁶⁶ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:57-61.

treatises are characterized by various arguments for the coherence of the faith, apologetic element (2), and a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith, apologetic element (1).

With *On the Dress of Virgins* and Cyprian's first four letters, which are more practical in nature, Cyprian begins to shift his focus toward element (4) of apologetics and the idea that the faith must be protected from the various forces of division from within that would threaten it. This would become an increasing focus for him as his ministry moves into the next phase.

Decian Period (250-51)

Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Decian persecution, which began in Rome at the end of 249 and extended to Carthage by the spring of 250, would influence the remainder of Cyprian's ministry and shape his legacy. Previous episodes of persecution against Christians had been occasional and sporadic, but with this episode the imperial effort to stamp out the Christian faith became more systematic and widespread. Decius was seeking to reverse the forces of anarchy and decay within the Empire by forcing the populace to return to traditional Roman religion and appease the gods through sacrifice.⁶⁷ He also felt threatened by the rival power of a growing church. All citizens were forced to state that they were (and always had been) worshippers of the Roman gods, and to demonstrate their piety by participating in public sacrificial acts which would be attested to by a written *libellus*.⁶⁸

Cyprian notes that some of the Christians in Carthage, whose faith was weak, rushed out quickly to sacrifice in the Forum.⁶⁹ Others did so reluctantly, only after being imprisoned or

⁶⁷ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 172-75.

⁶⁸ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 50.

⁶⁹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 7-8. It is also possible that some of these Christians genuinely believed they

tortured. Those whose faith faltered, either by sacrificing to the gods (the *sacrificati*) or burning incense to them (the *thurificati*), became known as the lapsed (*lapsi*). Others, who had the means and the connections to pay bribes to obtain certificates, became known as the certificate buyers (*libellatici*).⁷⁰ Some stood their ground and became famous as confessors of the faith (*confessores*). Some became martyrs. In North Africa, where there was already a history of persecution against Christians, martyrdom was highly respected and seen as a direct ticket to heaven.⁷¹ As noted above, this glorification of martyrdom is evident in the writings of Tertullian.⁷² It would continue, with some modification, in the writings of Cyprian.

It is during this period that Cyprian articulates the very robust ecclesiology for which he is best remembered. On their face, his writings from this period—*On the Lapsed*, *On the Unity of the Church*, and fifty or so letters—concern themselves with matters of practical church governance. But a careful reading shows that they are rich in apologetic content as well. Throughout this time of suffering and strain, Cyprian is focused on defending the church from heresy and other forces of division from within that would weaken it, which is apologetic element (4). To a lesser extent, he is also focused on articulating the various benefits of the Christian faith, which is apologetic element (1).

should offer sacrifices out of respect for the Emperor and his government, or they sacrificed quickly in order to avoid unnecessary conflict with their pagan neighbors. Cyprian notes that some members of the clergy (presbyters and bishops) lapsed also. He mentions four bishops in particular. See Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 53-54, and also Clarke, *Letters*, 4:68-88, 112-16.

⁷⁰ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 52.

⁷¹ Sage, *Cyprian*, 209-10 as well as Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 10. *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (180), a document which speaks to the persecution of Christians in North Africa, helped to color this history. It is actually the earliest surviving document in North African Christian history.

⁷² As discussed above, this can be seen clearly in works such as Tertullian's *To the Martyrs*, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*, *The Chaplet, Scorpiace*, *To Scapula*, and *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*.

Letters 5-43

The letters from the Decian period are, in chronological order: 7, 5-6, 13-14, 11, 10, 12, 15-19, 8-9, 20-28, 33, 35, 29-32, 36-40, 34, 41-48, 50, 49, 53, 52, 51, and 54.⁷³ The first three-quarters of these letters predate the treatises *On the Lapsed* and *On the Unity of the Church*, so they will be examined first in order to get a better feel for the flow of events.

Letter 7 is written shortly after the persecution begins in the spring of 250. Cyprian has decided it is best for him to leave the city of Carthage, a decision which many will naturally second-guess after the fact.⁷⁴ In *Letter 7*, Cyprian states his reason for leaving: his continued presence there might incite violence and make him responsible for the peace being broken. Once the Decian order was enacted, pagans became angry at the obstinate Christians who refused to participate in the sacrifices. As bishop, Cyprian did not want to be responsible for any more of this violence because it would weaken the community and the church. “It is my duty to look to the general peace of the community,” Cyprian writes. “For the moment, I must accordingly remain separated from you, however low that makes my spirits. What I fear is that my presence may provoke an outburst of violence and resentment among the pagans and we become thereby responsible for the peace being broken. It is particularly a duty of ours to ensure that everyone is left undisturbed.”⁷⁵ Cyprian has prayed about the decision, and believes it is what God wants him to do, because he describes his location as “the place where it was the will of God that I should come,” and adds, “I will come to you only when you write that affairs have been settled...or if

⁷³ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:12, and *Letters*, 2:20-21.

⁷⁴ This is evident from Cyprian’s exchange of letters with the church at Rome (especially *Letters 8-9* and *Letter 20*), and Pontius’ desire to defend Cyprian against the charge of cowardice in his *Life of Cyprian*.

⁷⁵ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:67.

the Lord should vouchsafe a sign to me.”⁷⁶ By advocating a course of action which will best defend the church from forces of division, Cyprian is engaging in element (4) of apologetics.

Cyprian was not the only bishop to make this decision. Most or all of the other North African bishops, given their positions of prominence, decided to either hide themselves or leave their bishoprics during the Decian persecution. Many fled to Rome and to other cities. In fact, there is no evidence of a single North African bishop who was martyred during this period, suggesting that Cyprian’s decision to leave town was the standard one.⁷⁷ In light of this, the capture and murder of Pope Fabian, the bishop of Rome, should be regarded as something of an outlier.⁷⁸

Pontius, one of Cyprian’s deacons, wrote *The Life of Cyprian* shortly after Cyprian’s martyrdom in 258.⁷⁹ It is clearly a panegyric, marked more by an attempt to inspire and persuade than to simply inform.⁸⁰ One of Pontius’ goals in this treatise is to clear Cyprian of lingering suspicions about his decision to leave the city, in order to protect his reputation. After opening remarks about Cyprian’s conversion, his renunciation of the world, and his many works of piety, Pontius discusses Cyprian’s retreat. Here Pontius chooses his words carefully: this was not a

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Angelo Di Berardino, preface in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), x.

⁷⁸ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:70.

⁷⁹ The attribution of this document to Pontius actually comes from Jerome (*On Illustrious Men*, 68), rather than from the document itself. Some scholars in more recent times have considered that authorship to be dubious and have printed it as an anonymous work. See Hunink, “St. Cyprian,” 29. Scholars have studied various issues surrounding the figure of Pontius, such as the historicity of his person as well as his style and the sources he may have used in writing this work. Aronen, for example, sees *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas* as a key hagiographical source that informs the *Life of Cyprian*, especially chapters 11-19 of it. See Jaako Aronen, “Indebtedness to *Passio Perpetuae* in Pontius’ *Vita Cypriani*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 1 (March 1984): 67-74.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Henk Bakker, “Instigator and Standard-Bearer of Christianity (*Acta Proconsularia* 4.2): A Reconstruction of Early Impressions of Cyprian’s Image as a Bishop,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010),

“flight” (*fuga*), but rather a “retreat” (*secessus*).⁸¹ Pontius feels compelled to make this distinction because of the negative connotations of the former term, including the way the “flight” of church leaders was so roundly denounced in Tertullian’s *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*. Cyprian would certainly have read this treatise by Tertullian and been familiar with its arguments.⁸² Pontius assures his readers that the motive for Cyprian’s retreat was not human fear or “faint-heartedness” (*pusillanimitas*), but rather a fear of the Lord. “It was indeed *that* fear,” writes Pontius, “which would dread to offend the Lord who bade him seek the place of concealment.”⁸³ To have stayed in Carthage, then, would have been to sin against the Lord by ignoring the Lord’s command and contributing to the weakening of his church.

Pontius goes on to stress that even if Cyprian had wanted to die the death of a martyr in 250, God would not have allowed him to. Cyprian could have “hastened to the crown of martyrdom appointed for him, especially when with repeated calls he was frequently demanded for the lions,” writes Pontius. But then who would remain “to teach penitence to the lapsed, truth to heretics, unity to schismatics, peacefulness and the law of evangelical prayer to the sons of God...to raise up such great martyrs by the exhortation of his divine discourse?”⁸⁴ In other words, God needed Cyprian to help strengthen the church in the period that followed. Thus it

45-47, 64. Some go so far as to call the *The Life* a work of “hagiographic propaganda.”

⁸¹ Ibid., 50-51.

⁸² As discussed above, Cyprian read frequently from Tertullian’s works and referred to him as “the master.” Several of Cyprian’s treatises show a familiarity with, if not direct dependence on, earlier similar works by Tertullian. In this treatise, Tertullian argues that fleeing during times of persecution is essentially the same as renouncing Christ. Persecutions come from God, not the devil, and are sent to test men. Their fate remains in God’s hands regardless of how things may appear. Tertullian singles out church leaders who flee for particular condemnation. How can the laity, reasons Tertullian, hope to stand firm if their leaders turn their backs and run? The bishop who flees in time of persecution is like the bad shepherd who allows his flock to be destroyed by the wolves. See Tertullian, *On Fleeing*, 1, 2, 5, and 11.

⁸³ Pontius, *The Life of Cyprian*, 7.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

was better for Cyprian to steer the church from afar than to leave it rudderless and vulnerable.⁸⁵ As Pontius sees it, Cyprian is defending the church against the forces of division that would weaken it, which is apologetic element (4).

The next few letters shift the focus to apologetic element (1), or the positive declaration of the benefits of the faith. In *Letter 5*, for example, Cyprian instructs his clergy to come to the aid of confessors with some church funds that have been set aside for this purpose.⁸⁶ One of the benefits of the faith is that Christians love another and help each other in times of distress. With *Letter 6*, Cyprian (echoing Tertullian) reiterates to the confessors the various benefits of suffering and martyrdom. God uses what they go through to purify them and prove the genuineness of their faith.⁸⁷ Christ himself provided the example of suffering and death. To imitate Christ in this way is to gain his promises and be a joint heir with him.⁸⁸ To joyfully endure suffering is to make a strong and positive declaration about Christianity to a watching pagan world. In *Letter 13*, Cyprian reminds the confessors of this. What they are enduring is an excellent testimony to the pagans. The pagans will remember it long after the confessors are released from prison.⁸⁹ *Letter 14* reiterates that God will help the confessors persevere until that day arrives.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Ibid., 7-9 and Clarke, *Letters*, 1:102.

⁸⁶ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:62-63.

⁸⁷ Here Cyprian's thinking clearly resonates with the rationale given for suffering and martyrdom provided by Tertullian in his *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*, 1-4.

⁸⁸ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:63-66. Cyprian makes it clear that this promise applies to women as well as men. All women in the church can imitate what the female confessors have done with their demonstration of courage and their upholding of ecclesial *disciplina*. See Dunn, "Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution," 212.

⁸⁹ Clarke, *Letters Vol. 1*, 83-86. Cyprian notes that any failure on the confessors' part to uphold *disciplina* will hurt not only them, but the whole community as well. See Dunn, "Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution," 213.

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:87-89.

With *Letter 11*, Cyprian again frames the persecution as the work of God: it is a loving father rising up to discipline his children. In recent years, Cyprian argues, the church has been characterized by lack of discipline, refusal to pray or repent, internal squabbling, and disregard for the Lord's precepts. Now the confessors must stand firm, refusing to be worn down and give in to the pressures.⁹¹ The Lord's discipline is actually a corrective that is beneficial for the church.⁹² A loving father disciplines his children for their own good.

Letter 10 returns to that the idea that the confessors are making a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith to the pagan world around them. The proconsul of Carthage and the great throng of bystanders in the city can clearly see the heavenly battle in which the confessors are engaged, and the strength their God is giving them.⁹³ Like the apostle Paul, the confessors are speaking volumes through their steadfastness. In *Letter 12*, Cyprian reminds the clergy to continue supporting those who are languishing in prison. The church will also support, with special commemoration, those who have perished. One of the benefits of the faith is being supported by the generosity of other Christians.⁹⁴

With *Letters 15-17*, there is a shift back to apologetic element (4), as the issue of premature reconciliation of the lapsed takes center stage. With these letters, Cyprian becomes less effusive in his praise for the confessors and more concerned about the budding threat to ecclesiastical order that they represent. Confessors, who have started to take on a quasi-priestly status because of their courage and near-martyrdom, have begun issuing letters of reconciliation

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 76-78. See also Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 54.

⁹² J. Patout Burns, Jr., "Establishing Unity in Diversity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 386.

⁹³ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:74-75.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

and peace (*libelli pacis*) to the lapsed for readmittance to the church.⁹⁵ Cyprian argues that the peace of the church cannot be offered so easily, with the authority of the bishop disregarded in the process. He knows intuitively that this behavior, if left unchecked, will damage the church from within. He argues in *Letter 15* that such action mocks God's standards for discipline and order. Hasty and unworthy reconciliations will cause people to "heap odium" on the church. They will also cause "a great deal of bad blood against me later on," Cyprian writes.⁹⁶ Cyprian has no desire to see the church become a laughingstock as it engages in the shady business of trafficking in letters. Instead, the bishop will need to carefully review the conduct of each lapsed person when he returns. *Letter 16* reiterates the internal damage done by a program of hasty reconciliation: it deceives the lapsed, it insults the bishop, it mocks the Lord (inviting his further rebuke), and it exposes Christians to ill-will.⁹⁷ These are themes that will emerge again with renewed vigor in the forthcoming treatise, *On the Lapsed*. Cyprian tries to prevent the laity of Carthage from going along with such a program in his *Letter 17*. The church, he reminds them, must be characterized by order and discipline. So they should obey the bishop, respect the penitential process to be followed when he returns, and wait for a council to be called.⁹⁸

Spring turns to summer, a time of increased seasonal illness in and around Carthage.

Cyprian softens his tone slightly in *Letters 18-19*, which address lapsed individuals facing

⁹⁵ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 55. Burns argues that the confessors represent a new position in the church hierarchy, for whom the exact privileges and obligations are not yet clearly defined, and thus Cyprian has to respond to their claims of special privilege with a delineation of the limits of their power. See J. Patout Burns, Jr., *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.

⁹⁶ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:90-92. See also Maurice Bevenot, "The Sacrament of Penance and St. Cyprian's *De Lapsis*," *Theological Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 1955): 177-79.

⁹⁷ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:93-95.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-98. See also James Dallen, "The Imposition of Hands in Penance: A Study in Liturgical Penance," *Worship* 51, no. 3 (May 1977): 226.

imminent death. The mercy of God should not be denied them. They can confess their sins to any presbyter (or deacon) should they happen to become gravely ill before Cyprian can return and straighten things out.⁹⁹ This is not optimal procedure, of course, but the Christian faith is one in which the mercy of God trumps everything. This is apologetic element (1).

Letters 8-9 begin a series of interactions with the church at Rome. The Roman clergy has learned that Cyprian left the city during the persecution. Writing in *Letter 8* that now is a time for strength and faithfulness, they are skeptical that Cyprian has done the right thing. Leaders of the church must stand courageously and firmly in the faith, they argue, and not give in to fear. They must be a good testimony to the world. Drawing on the same metaphor that Tertullian did years earlier in his *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*, they argue that the clergy must be good shepherds, not hirelings who allow the sheep be ravaged by the wolves.¹⁰⁰ Replying in *Letter 9*, Cyprian mentions the recent martyrdom of bishop Fabian of Rome and how this was an excellent example for the church.¹⁰¹ The following *Letter 20*, also sent to the Romans, clarifies why Cyprian left Carthage. “I was thinking not so much of my own safety as the general peace of our brethren,” he writes, “concerned that if I brazenly continued to show myself in Carthage I might aggravate even further the disturbance that had begun.”¹⁰² Cyprian reassures the Romans that he has been continuing to look after the needs of the church from afar. He has been working to stop the program of easy reconciliation and the careless issuance of *libelli*. He has been working to

⁹⁹ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:98-99. In *Letter 18*, for example, the power to absolve sins is communicated by Cyprian not only to the priests but also to the deacons as well. This is because of the extraordinary circumstances in which the church now finds itself. See John H. Taylor, “St. Cyprian and the Reconciliation of Apostates,” *Theological Studies* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1942): 28.

¹⁰⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 1:68-69.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 101.

end the chaos and reestablish church order.¹⁰³ In other words, he has been engaged in apologetic element (4), working to defend the faith from the internal forces of division that would weaken it. The Romans accept his argument.¹⁰⁴

The next three letters show that the issue of hasty reconciliation is not going away. In *Letter 21*, a Roman writes to the Carthaginian confessor Lucianus, now in prison and close to death, asking him to pardon several lapsed women.¹⁰⁵ Lucianus replies in *Letter 22* that he has done so, by invoking the authority of a dozen or so martyrs who (before dying) specifically approved of extending such forgiveness to the lapsed.¹⁰⁶ Lucianus then pens *Letter 23* to Cyprian, informing him that he and others have granted their peace to the lapsed in the name of the martyrs, and that Cyprian and his fellow bishops should do the same.¹⁰⁷ Cyprian is appalled by this act of disrespect and will not let it stand. Doing so will divide the church.

A neighboring bishop pens *Letter 24* to Cyprian, assuring him that his diocese is not buying into such hasty reconciliations.¹⁰⁸ Cyprian concurs in *Letter 25*, and passes it on to his own clergy in *Letter 26*.¹⁰⁹ *Letter 27*, sent to Rome, castigates Lucianus for what he has done. Cyprian insists the bishop alone has the right to reconcile the lapsed. Lucianus' program is an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 102-03.

¹⁰⁴ Although the Roman church accepts Cyprian's argument, Cyprian will still have to address lingering suspicions about his character in upcoming years. Doubts about Cyprian would be importantly spread by Felicissimus and the other rebel presbyters of Carthage. See, for example, *Letter 59* and *Letter 66*, as found in Clarke, *Letters*, 3:68-88, 116-23.

¹⁰⁵ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:103-06.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 106-08.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 110-11.

innovation.¹¹⁰ Although Lucianus is a confessor, Cyprian notes, he is poorly trained in the Scriptures. “He has paid scant regard to the fact that it is not martyrs who make the gospel, but that martyrs are made through the gospel.”¹¹¹ Cyprian fears that those lapsed persons who consider themselves forgiven under this program will resent Cyprian when he returns to examine the particulars of their cases. In some places, the lapsed are now even becoming violent toward the church as they clamor for reconciliation.¹¹² Cyprian is working hard to shut the Pandora’s Box that Lucianus has opened so that the church won’t be weakened further. To argue for church discipline and church unity at this critical juncture is to engage in apologetic element (4).

Cyprian’s attempt to strengthen the church continues in the next several letters, composed in the late summer of 250. These letters stress that obedience and discipline, which are made manifest in church unity, constitute a powerful apologetic for the faith. *Letter 28*, for example, informs the Roman confessors that the best Christian witnesses are those who preserve their confession of the faith through constancy and discipline.¹¹³ In *Letter 33*, Cyprian argues that because the church is founded upon and governed by the bishops, a group of the lapsed presuming to tell the bishop what to do is both disgraceful and internally damaging.¹¹⁴ One of the best ways for the church to remain united is for the bishops to communicate with one another and to adopt consistent strategies for governance. Cyprian makes this point in *Letter 35*,

¹¹⁰ Brent, “Cyprian’s Reconstruction of the Martyr Tradition,” 242-45. Brent maintains that Cyprian’s opposition to Lucianus was inappropriate. Lucianus was just acting in line with the long North African “martyr tradition” which Cyprian chose to disallow because it contradicted his particular understanding of episcopal authority. The imposition of episcopal hands as a requirement of reconciliation does not seem to have existed before Cyprian’s time. Thus it is Cyprian, Brent argues, who is the real innovator in this matter.

¹¹¹ Clarke, *Letters*, 1:112-13.

¹¹² Bevenot, “The Sacrament of Penance and St. Cyprian’s *De Lapsis*,” 180-81.

¹¹³ Clarke, *Letters*, 2:23-25.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

addressed to the clergy in Rome, and in *Letter 29*, addressed to the clergy back home in Carthage.¹¹⁵ In *Letter 30*, the Roman clergy write to say they agree with Cyprian. The church must remain united or else it will be damaged. What is happening to the church is being witnessed by “almost the entire globe,” they write, and so the response of the leadership needs to be universal, consistent, and binding.¹¹⁶

The next several letters, composed in late 250 and early 251, return to the idea that suffering and martyrdom is a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith, or apologetic element (1). In *Letter 31*, some confessors thank Cyprian for the great encouragement he has been to them. They note there is no better way to defend the faith than to confess Christ in the face of tortures. To do so unflinchingly, with help provided by God, is proof of the power of Christianity.¹¹⁷ Cyprian agrees in *Letter 32*, sending a copy with his endorsement to the clergy in Carthage.¹¹⁸ In *Letter 36*, the Roman clergy note that this testimony of the martyrs must be consistent with the testimony of the bishops.¹¹⁹ Cyprian writes *Letter 37* to the confessors in prison, reminding them of the glory that accompanies their confession before government officials. If they only knew what a dazzling bright light they emit from their jail cells. Like summer roses in the winter, the willing martyrs stand out as bold and beautiful witnesses of the power of the gospel.¹²⁰ *Letters 38-39* appoint as readers two young men who stood their ground in the early days of the persecution and refused to deny Christ before the magistrates. Their

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 25-26, 44.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 27-31.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 33-39.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 39-40.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 45-48.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 48-52.

heroic deeds are such a great testimony to the pagan world that it is only fitting their lips should be the ones to proclaim the gospel.¹²¹ *Letter 40* appoints to the office of presbyter a brave confessor who was burned over half of his body and almost died, but did not waver in his faith. Such a man is an excellent spokesperson for the benefits of the faith.¹²²

A few final letters pre-date the treatises *On the Lapsed* and *On the Unity of the Church*. Here the focus shifts back to church discipline as a way to defend the faith against the internal forces of division that would weaken it, or apologetic element (4). *Letter 34*, for example, praises the church in Carthage for excommunicating a presbyter who insisted on rushing ahead with hasty reconciliations.¹²³ *Letter 41* encourages them to excommunicate the ring-leader Felicissimus also. Cyprian argues that this man is a revolutionary, a dangerous and seditious rebel who is trying to create internal turmoil. The clergy responds in *Letter 42* that they have gone ahead and excommunicated him. In *Letter 43*, Cyprian laments that he will not be able to return to Carthage by Easter of 251, as he had hoped. But he encourages his faithful clergy to stand firm against the rebel presbyters until he can return and the council can be called. What the rebels are doing to the church is actually the most dangerous trial of all, and if left unchecked, has the power to destroy the church.¹²⁴ For Cyprian, calling a council is one of the most effective

¹²¹ Ibid., 52-57. Cyprian notes that normally this appointment would have required approval from the congregation, but in this case—due to the exceptional circumstances of Cyprian’s being away, and the fact that these men have such unimpeachable character—the normal procedure can be dispensed with. *Letter 39* makes reference to Celerina, the grandmother of Celerinus, who is one of the young men appointed as a reader. Celerina had been a martyr years ago, and the Basilica Celerinae may have been dedicated to her memory. This probably helped the cause of Celerinus. See Alexander W. H. Evers, “*Post populi suffragium: Cyprian of Carthage and the Vote of the People in Episcopal Elections*,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 178; and Dunn, “Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution,” 210-12.

¹²² Clarke, *Letters*, 2:57-58.

¹²³ Ibid., 42-43.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 61-63. See also Burns, *Cyprian*, 4.

ways to protect the church from this internal threat. With language that anticipates *On the Unity of the Church*, Cyprian writes that there is only one church, and that it has been “founded, by the Lord’s authority, upon Peter.”¹²⁵ No other altar can be set up and no other priesthood can be appointed. To do so is to scatter what God has gathered, and to uproot from within what God has established.¹²⁶ Cyprian makes an apologetic defense of the faith by doing everything in his power to stop this dangerous schism.

On the Lapsed (March 251)

It is likely that *On the Lapsed* was originally delivered as a sermon in Carthage before being recast into a treatise and circulated.¹²⁷ This very passionate work contains a mixture of apologetic elements. The church has just been dealt a tremendous blow. Now, with the persecution over, what can be learned from this experience about who God is and what he requires of his people? Is the Christian worldview one that still makes sense? Is the Christian God one who can still be trusted to impart blessings and benefits, given what has just happened to the church? What can be done to defend the church against further damage? Cyprian addresses these and other questions as he begins to lay out principles for restoring the lapsed to the communion of the church.

First of all, Cyprian writes, God must be praised because he is a God who answers prayer. A time of peace, long prayed for, has finally returned after a long and dreadful night of

¹²⁵ Many of the same assumptions and arguments that underlie the forthcoming treatise *On the Unity of the Church* are previewed here in *Letter 43*. See Griggs, “Seamless Robe,” 401.

¹²⁶ Clarke, *Letters Vol. 2*, 61-67.

¹²⁷ Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 85.

persecution.¹²⁸ It is true that some abandoned Christ during this time, but many also stood firm with the help that God gave them. God’s help enabled many believers, even women and children, to stand courageously through the trials and to hold firm in the face of suffering and loss of property. Even those who decided to make a “cautious retirement,” like Cyprian himself, were empowered by God to make their courageous confessions.¹²⁹ These are benefits of the faith, and this is apologetic element (1).

During the persecution, God exhibited another important aspect of his character: he showed himself to be a God who disciplines his children. The persecution of Decius was not a curse, but rather a heavenly rebuke to a church whose faith had grown cold and sleepy in recent years.¹³⁰ The Christians of Carthage deserved what happened to them—they actually deserved more—because they were weak, sinful, and lacked the discipline (*disciplina*) they should have had. Many came forward to renounce Christ willingly, asking not to be put off any longer, and were shamefully conquered before the battle even began.¹³¹ They loved their money more than God.¹³² They had lost all fear of the Lord. What they experienced was a blessing because it was

¹²⁸ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3. Cyprian praises the female confessors as well as male ones for their steadfast perseverance through these trials. He is pleased that the women have been able to overcome their “natural weakness,” and hold on as well as the men. See Dunn, “Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution,” 214-15.

¹³⁰ Christians enjoyed a time of relative peace and freedom since about the year 215, and especially since the year 230. Notable toleration was extended under the reign of Emperor Phillip the Arab (244-49). See Smither, *Mission in the Early Church*, 17 and also Johannes Roldanus, “No Easy Reconciliation: St. Cyprian on Conditions for Re-integration of the Lapsed,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 92 (Sept 1995): 24.

¹³¹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 8. Adkin notes that some of the vivid language Cyprian uses in chapter 8, as well as some he uses in chapter 22, was reused (with some modification) by Jerome in his *Letter 147 to Sabinianus*. See Neil Adkin, “Catullus in Jerome? Notes on the *Cohortatoria de Paenitentia ad Sabinianum* (Epist. 147),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 65, no. 4 (2011): 410-23.

¹³² Cyprian clearly frames the persecution as God’s judgment on the church because of their greed, their enslavement to wealth, and their excessive enjoyment of possessions. These things undermined their allegiance to Christ, so God put a stop to it. See Weaver, “Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church,” 373.

God's divine correction.¹³³ It showed that God is a loving parent who pays very close attention to his children do, and responds in love toward them. This is apologetic element (1).

Echoing an earlier theme from *To Donatus*, Cyprian reminds his audience that the Christian faith is one that calls people to renounce the world and its wealth. This principle of renunciation is no longer theoretical church talk. It has become very real. Believers now have to actually let go of their wealth. Doing so is the wise course of action, Cyprian argues, because wealth is so uncertain and letting go of it will bring about blessings from the Lord, including the blessing of eternal life in heaven.¹³⁴ As in *To Donatus*, this is a mixture of apologetic elements (1) and (2). Having the power to renounce wealth is a benefit of Christianity, and doing so is a rational response to the grim realities of the world as it really is.

Those who lapsed because they found it impossible to relinquish their wealth or to endure prolonged suffering should not despair. God is a God of mercy. He is a God who, after rebuking and chastising, is willing to tenderly forgive.¹³⁵ This is one of the reasons why the Christian life is so compelling. This is apologetic element (1).

But at the same time, God's mercy must not be presumed upon. People who are heedless and unrepentant will not be forgiven. They cannot rush back into the church, "with hands filthy and reeking with smell," before they have properly confessed their crimes and made expiation for their sin.¹³⁶ To do so would be to mock God. Only God can forgive sin, and only on his

¹³³ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 5-7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14, 32-35.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

timetable.¹³⁷ Allowing the *sacrificati* to return too quickly to the Lord's Table not only harms the offenders but also endangers the clergy who allow them to come.¹³⁸ Those clergy who participate are guilty of subverting church discipline.¹³⁹ What the lapsed have done must be fully confessed and atoned for, by the hand of the priest, before forgiveness can take place. Because individuals cannot be received back into the church before an "offended Lord" has been appeased, the confessors must not hinder them from making a long and full penance.¹⁴⁰ To oppose the plan of

¹³⁷ Ibid., 17. Bevenot, a Roman Catholic priest, argues that by saying only God can forgive sins, Cyprian is not saying here that priests do not have the power to forgive sins in this life under certain conditions. Rather, he is saying that the absolution offered by the church and its priests must always involve the satisfaction and contrition that God requires. Forgiveness does not need to wait for the final day of judgment. See Bevenot, "The Sacrament of Penance and St. Cyprian's *De Lapsis*," 175, 187-88, 192.

¹³⁸ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 3. See also Robert Mayes, "The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Cyprian of Carthage," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (July-Oct 2010): 317.

¹³⁹ Bevenot, "The Sacrament of Penance and St. Cyprian's *De Lapsis*," 198-99. The insubordinate priests are in as much danger as the confessors and martyrs by going along with this program and disregarding the authority of the bishops.

¹⁴⁰ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 16, 29-30, 35-36. This episode is important for the developing doctrine of penance. Cyprian argues that because the Lord has been offended, he must receive a measure of "satisfaction" before he will extend his forgiveness. He receives this from prayer, good works, penance, sorrow, and exclusion from the Lord's Table for some appropriate amount of time. See Roldanus, "No Easy Reconciliation," 24-27. As he develops this position, Cyprian shows some dependence on the earlier thinking of Tertullian about penance. Tertullian (*On Repentance*, 7-10) had argued that all sin could be forgiven by a penitential process characterized by *exomologesis*. By this term, he meant public acts of confession marked by outward manifestations of remorse and shame such as weeping, groaning, lying down in sackcloth and ashes, prostrating oneself before the elders of the church, and subsisting on the plainest of foods. Such acts of self-humiliation would be designed to appease the Lord. See also Everett Ferguson, "Early Church Penance," *Restoration Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1994): 92-95, and Frank H. Hallock, "Third Century Teaching on Sin and Penance," *Anglican Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (Oct 1921): 133-38. Doing these things would offer God *satisfactio*, a Roman legal concept referring to the appropriate payment for a committed offense. The harder a penitent was on himself, the more satisfaction God received, and the easier God could then be on the penitent. After a proper amount of time had passed, the clergy could once again restore the penitent to the good graces of the church so that he could receive the Eucharist. Tertullian was the first to refer to this rigorous process of penance, directed by the clergy, as a sacrament of the church. Tertullian's view about forgiveness of post-baptismal sin was somewhat fluid, however. He displayed more tolerance in his early writings and more rigor in his later works, after becoming a Montanist. For example, the Montanist-era treatise *On Modesty* (c. 220) takes a more stern view of sin. Here Tertullian argues there are three post-baptismal sins which are "mortal," or non-remissible: adultery, murder, and idolatry/apostasy. See Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 1, 12 and 19-22. Because of the way he understands baptism at this point in his life, Tertullian thinks the church is forbidden to intercede for baptized persons who commit these sins. Cyprian harmonizes with the early Tertullian, in terms of advocating the principles of *exomologesis*, and not the later Tertullian in believing that idolatry is totally irremissible. The later Tertullian appears to be an innovator in this regard, with little precedent in the church before him. The New Testament does not speak of irremissible sins, nor are there signs of this belief in the Apostolic Fathers and other second century documents. In fact the opposite is taught: see Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 7, 18, 48, 51 and 56-57; Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philipppians*, 6 and 10; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philipppians*, 3 and 8;

reconciliation fashioned by God's priests would be to oppose God, who has given the priests their authority and appointed them as the proper channels of penance.¹⁴¹ With this defense of an orderly penitential system, Cyprian is engaged in the internal strengthening element (4) of apologetics.

On the Unity of the Church (March 251)

On the Unity of the Church, which many theologians and church historians judge to be the most important of Cyprian's works, was also written in the spring of 251 in advance of Cyprian's return to Carthage and the council scheduled for that summer. It was read aloud at the council.¹⁴² The treatise is primarily *ecclesiological*, but as is clear from Cyprian's other works, this does not mean that it is not *apologetic* as well. In fact, *On the Unity of the Church* is a good example of a work of apologetics in sense (4), as a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it.

In *On the Unity of the Church*, Cyprian articulates his understanding of the foundation and function of the episcopate. In Cyprian's view, the unity of the church is built on the

idem, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 4; *The Didache*, 4 and 14-15; and *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 19. It must be noted that Cyprian writes, "Remission cannot be granted in the church to him who has sinned against the Holy Ghost" (*non posse in ecclesia remitti ei qui in Deum deliquerit*) in III.28 of his *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, but his meaning here is not entirely clear and this observation stands alone without much help from context. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, The Christian Tradition, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 147 and Osborn, *Tertullian*, 171, 173; Ferguson, "Early Church Penance," 85-99; idem, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 338-39; Taylor, "St. Cyprian and the Reconciliation of Apostates," 35-36; Paul F. Palmer, "Jean Morin and the Problem of Private Penance," *Theological Studies* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1945): 327-33; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2008), 193.

¹⁴¹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 18.

¹⁴² Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 72.

collegium of the church's bishops.¹⁴³ As the church is one, so the episcopate is one. Cyprian states that there is a measure of primacy in the chair of Peter (the bishop of Rome), because the church's oneness reflects the oneness of Peter who stands at its origin.¹⁴⁴ But he also states that all of the bishops—like all of the apostles before them—have an equal measure of authority. Each rules alone over his episcopal territory.

Scholars like Brent argue that Cyprian is now bringing his understanding of Roman jurisdictional authority into the church, viewing the bishop as an ecclesiastical version of the proconsul.¹⁴⁵ Because Cyprian had been a *rhetor* or *advocatus* who was familiar with the law courts, he naturally came to understand ecclesiastical power in terms of the power structure of the Roman legal *imperium*.¹⁴⁶ Cyprian thinks that the bishops, like the proconsuls, should have supreme and inviolable authority within their own geographically defined space. Like proconsuls, they should cooperate with one another without overriding one another, always displaying mutual recognition and respect as they discuss things.¹⁴⁷ The bishop's chair (*cathedra*) should be similar to the proconsul's chair (*sella curulis*), entailing similar responsibilities and privileges.¹⁴⁸ The diocese over which a bishop rules should be a *provincia*,

¹⁴³ Cyprian's view on the importance of the bishop for the church is broadly similar to that of Ignatius of Antioch, who famously wrote, "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be" (Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8). See also Bakker, van Geest, and van Loon, "Introduction," 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 4. Cyprian uses similar language about Peter as the source of the church's unity in his *Letters* 33, 55, and 59. Cyprian regards the chair of Peter as the beginning from which the unity of the church's bishops arose. This reflects the concept of *sacramentum unitatis*, or the mystery of the one standing for the many. See Eric F. Osborn, "Elucidation of Problems as a Method of Interpretation, II (Concluded)," *Colloquium* 9, no. 1 (Oct 1976): 14-16 and also Robert B. Eno, "The Significance of the Lists of Roman Bishops in the Anti-Donatist Polemic," *Vigiliae Christianae* 47, no. 2 (June 1993): 159-61.

¹⁴⁵ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 328-29 and Clarke, *Letters*, 1:19.

¹⁴⁶ Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 44.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

akin to a Roman province, and the bishop should govern by enforcing divine law (*lex divina*) much like the proconsul enforces civil law.¹⁴⁹ For Brent, the principles laid out by Cyprian in his treatise *On the Unity of the Church* make good sense when understood in this light.¹⁵⁰ Others note the procedural similarities between Cyprian's episcopal synods in Africa and the Senate in Rome.¹⁵¹

Chapter 4 of *On the Unity of the Church* is controversial and has been the subject of much jousting between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Roman Catholics like to stress that Cyprian mentions Peter as the rock upon which the church is built (Matt 16:18), and the one told to feed Christ's sheep (John 21:17), and that Peter's authority is "the origin of that unity, as beginning from one." However, Protestants like to stress Cyprian's qualifier that "assuredly the rest of the apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honor and power."¹⁵² Unfortunately, the manuscript tradition is uneven with the text existing in two different versions. One version (the "Primacy Text" or PT) is more favorable to the Roman cause than the other (the "Textus Receptus" or TR). Following Bevenot, scholarship is now fairly settled in the conclusion that both are from Cyprian's hand and that Cyprian reworked the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁵⁰ Brent argues further that Cyprian, given his position as a wealthy and privileged Roman, naturally gravitated toward the principles of the Roman patronage system. As Brent sees it, the five rebel presbyters opposed Cyprian because, in their view, Cyprian had shrewdly used his wealth to secure for himself an ecclesiastical patronage arrangement that bypassed them. The laity in Carthage accepted this arrangement because it was in their best interests to do so. This is why they heartily embraced Cyprian as their choice for bishop and never resisted his plan for restoring the lapsed even though it was complicated and contentious. Because he was their patron, it was natural that Cyprian would remain safely outside the city during the period of persecution, and that his "clients" would look after his interests in his absence. As attested by *Letter 13*, financial support from Cyprian was expected as part of this arrangement, and Cyprian never failed to provide it when needed. See Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 72.

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Philip R. Amidon, "The Procedure of St. Cyprian's Synods," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 4 (Dec 1983): 328-36. Amidon concurs with the earlier conclusions of French scholar P. Batifol that the African synods and the Roman Senate stood in the same procedural tradition, but Amidon disagrees that the similarity extended all the way to an identical ordering of the meetings.

original PT into TR during the later rebaptism crisis in order to clarify his meaning and refocus his stress on episcopal equality and unity.¹⁵³

On the Unity of the Church rails against the rigorist Novatianists in Rome, as well as the laxist schismatic presbyters in Carthage, about the damage they are doing to the church from within.¹⁵⁴ Cyprian writes, “These are they who of their own accord, without any divine arrangement, set themselves to preside among the daring strangers assembled, who appoint themselves prelates without any law of ordination, who assume to themselves the name of bishop, although no one gives them episcopate.”¹⁵⁵ Schism is related to heresy in that those who subscribe to false views soon find themselves members of competing communities.¹⁵⁶ Creating schism that divides the church from within is a worse crime than having lapsed during the persecution. The lapsed only harm themselves, whereas the schismatics harm others in the church. Even the confessors, who have given such glory to God and gained so much for themselves, will lose their reward if they unite with schismatics and depart from the peace of the

¹⁵² Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 4.

¹⁵³ Sage, *Cyprian*, 399-402. Sage, like many others, follows Bevenot and agrees both versions are from Cyprian’s hand. See also Russel Murray, “Assessing the Primacy: A Contemporary Contribution from the Writings of St. Cyprian of Carthage,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 54-55.

¹⁵⁴ Novatian was a presbyter (as well as theologian and author) who had himself elected as the rival bishop of Rome in the midst of the power vacuum caused by the persecution of Decius. A rigorist, Novatian advocated a severe program of penance for the lapsed, including a refusal to ever grant peace to certain lapsed persons, even at the point of death. Novatian was able to gather supporters in Rome and other major cities like Carthage. By the year 252, there were three rival bishops in Carthage: Cyprian represented the Catholics, Fortunatus represented the laxist party, and Maximus represented the Novatianist party. See Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 58 and also Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 6-7.

¹⁵⁵ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. See also Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Heresy and Schism According to Cyprian of Carthage,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 55, no. 2 (Oct 2004): 559, 573. Dunn argues that the theological terms “heresy” and “schism” would come to be distinguished in later years, but at this point they were very closely connected (almost interchangeable) in Cyprian’s mind.

church.¹⁵⁷ Cyprian adds that because there can only be one church, sacraments performed outside of it (by those who depart from it) cannot possibly have any validity.¹⁵⁸ This is a theme that Cyprian will return to with renewed intensity in his later struggle with bishop Stephen of Rome over the rebaptism of heretics.

Cyprian understands that the Novatianists and the rival presbyters are opening up an internal breach in the church which cannot be allowed to persist. What kind of faith can Christianity be if different versions of it are all equally valid? What will happen to the church if some of its members are proclaiming one message, and some another? Won't outsiders laugh at a church that has two or three bishops in each diocese? If the ordained clergy insist that the lapsed must be forgiven through a structured program of penance directed by a priest, while the never-ordained confessors insist that the lapsed can be forgiven without such a program, and the schismatic followers of Novatian advocate a third program, what does that say about the strength of the church? Cyprian argues that a divided faith will not stand for long. If different teachings can coexist together under the same banner of truth, pagans outside the church will scoff at the Christians. Just as Tertullian knew there needed to be a "rule of faith" with which to interpret Scripture, or else any heretic could make it say whatever he wanted, Cyprian knows that there must be one orthodox policy on reinstating the lapsed or else the church becomes chaotic and weakened. By defending the essential *unity* of Christianity, Cyprian engages in apologetic element (4): a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it.

¹⁵⁷ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 19-21.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4, 13, 15.

In Cyprian's view, the truth of Christianity has always been opposed. The enemies of the truth—whether pagan idolaters outside the church, or contentious men inside the church—always allow themselves to be deceived. Deceit and division are the tools of Satan. Satan knows he cannot alter the truth of the Gospel, so he tries instead to subvert the truth by creating disagreement and division within the church.¹⁵⁹ He tries to convince men that they can still possess the truth even though they have departed from the source and guarantor of that truth, which is a unified church under its bishops. This resonates with the earlier thinking of Ignatius, who had written in his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, “Shun divisions, as they are the beginning of evils. All of you are to follow your bishop...He who honors the bishop is honored by God; he who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil.”¹⁶⁰

Church unity, Cyprian continues, is the primary characteristic of the Christian faith and the clear teaching of Scripture. The church is the bride of Christ; Christ cannot marry two brides. The church is the seamless robe of Christ; such a robe cannot be torn. Christians are lambs and doves who love peace, not ferocious wolves who love to tear and devour.¹⁶¹ Scripture warns ahead of time that false teachers and divisive men will spring up, so nobody should be surprised that they are here, now that the Last Days have arrived.¹⁶² God is not present “where two or three gather in my name” (Matt 18:20) if those two or three have intentionally chosen to separate from

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 1-3.

¹⁶⁰ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8-9. Harper notes that for Ignatius, unity is not so much an end in itself as it is a means to ensure that apostolic truth can be carried forward unimpeded. See George W. Harper, “Breaking with Cyprian's Paradigm: Evangelicals, Ecclesiological Apathy, and Changing Conceptions of Church Unity,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32, no. 4 (Oct 2008): 310.

¹⁶¹ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 6-8.

¹⁶² Ibid., 10, 16.

the others with a spirit of discord.¹⁶³ Jesus' promise that he would be with small groups was his assurance that he would be with *united* believers no matter how small in number; it was not his sanctioning of breakaway groups.

For Cyprian, maintaining the unity of the church is not just important; it actually is a *salvation* issue. In chapter 6 of this treatise Cyprian pens his famous phrase, "He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother," and adds, "If anyone could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he may also escape who is outside the church."¹⁶⁴ Cyprian would go on to state this even more directly a few years later in his *Letter 73*: "There is no salvation outside of the church (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*)."¹⁶⁵ The schismatics against whom Cyprian writes are not just weakening the church; they are departing from it entirely, and so they are on their way to perdition. Like Solomon or Judas, who once enjoyed favor with God but lost it when they walked away from him, even brave confessors from the Decian persecution will lose their reward if they refuse to maintain brotherly love and move into schism.¹⁶⁶ Breakaway groups, who now "bear arms against the church," cannot possess Christ. Like the Old Testament priests who offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, those who create their own doctrines and traditions will be severely punished by God.¹⁶⁷

In conclusion, the bishops need to do their part and remain united, so they can speak the truth authoritatively with one united voice.¹⁶⁸ Cyprian understands intuitively that if church unity

¹⁶³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁵ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:66.

¹⁶⁶ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 16, 20-22.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 17-19.

¹⁶⁸ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 74-76.

is broken, the whole Christian enterprise is at risk of dying. “God is one, and Christ is one, and his church is one, and the faith is one, and the people joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord,” writes Cyprian. “Unity (*concordia*) cannot be severed, nor can one body be separated by a division of its structure, nor torn into pieces, with its entrails wrenched asunder by laceration. Whatever has proceeded from the womb cannot live and breathe in its detached condition, but loses the substance of health.”¹⁶⁹ To defend the unity of the faith, then, is to defend the faith itself. Cyprian is engaged here in apologetic element (4), a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it.

Letters 44-54

Decius dies in June of 251 and Cyprian is able to return to Carthage as the imperial edict is abandoned.¹⁷⁰ A final batch of letters is written in the middle of 251. These letters concern the situation in Rome with Novatian having arisen to challenge Bishop Cornelius for the chair of Peter. They reiterate Cyprian’s theme that the unity of the church is absolutely essential for its strength. To defend that unity is to defend the faith from its enemies within, to engage in apologetic element (4).

In *Letter 44*, which is addressed to Cornelius, Cyprian notes that Novatian’s appointment as a rival bishop cannot possibly stand. Cornelius has been duly elected by the testimony and judgment of the people (*ac plebis testimonio et iudicio*).¹⁷¹ Those who seek to undermine this

¹⁶⁹ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 55.

¹⁷¹ Clarke, *Letters*, 2:67-68. In a number of his letters (e.g., *Letters 44, 58, 59, and 67*), Cyprian stresses the involvement of the people in episcopal elections. This is a confirmatory sign, once the clergy has first approved of the candidate. Pontius carefully notes that Cyprian’s own election was made with the explicit approval of the laity in Carthage. Granfield notes that Cyprian’s willingness to give weight to the voice of the people and champion the cause of community participation in episcopal elections is somewhat surprising, given his very elevated view of the episcopacy. But it is not without precedent. Hippolytus of Rome, for example, also believed that bishops should be

process weaken the church. What Novatian and his followers are doing not only hurts the church, but also renders impotent any witness for the faith that they wish to have. Those who “claim to be the champions of Christ and the gospel” must first be, by definition, a part of the church they wish to champion.¹⁷² Here Cyprian describes the church as “catholic,” a term he uses to distinguish the authentic and lawfully constituted Christian community, headed by its duly appointed bishops, from all heretical and schismatic groups.¹⁷³

Letter 45, like several others in this group, revisits the metaphor of church as “mother” that Cyprian presented in his *On the Unity of the Church*. Those who depart from mother church cause confusion and uncertainty in the minds of those whom they seek to reach with the gospel. “We must do all we can to gather within the church the bleating and wandering sheep,” Cyprian writes, who “are being separated from their mother through the attacks made by members of a willful and heretical faction.”¹⁷⁴ What the rebels are doing is causing the sheep to wander away, and this is weakening the church.

Cyprian pens *Letter 46* to a group of confessors who have gone over to Novatian’s side. Cyprian is incensed. The very thought of two competing bishoprics is a sacrilege. It is forbidden. And it hurts the gospel. “Nor should you suppose that you are acting as champions of the gospel

chosen with the consent of the people. See Pontius, *Life*, 5; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 2; Evers, “*Post populi suffragium*,” 171-77; Patrick Granfield, “Episcopal Elections in Cyprian: Clerical and Lay Participation,” *Theological Studies* 37, no. 1 (March 1976): 41-51.

¹⁷² Clarke, *Letters*, 2:68-69.

¹⁷³ Cyprian also applies the term “catholic” to the universal church spread throughout the world, which includes all valid local churches. Cyprian did not mean primarily *doctrinal* uniformity when he used the term “catholic,” although he seems to have assumed that as well. See, for example, Edward W. Fashole-Luke, “What is the Catholic Church?” *Communio Viatorum* 16 (Spring 1973): 65-67.

¹⁷⁴ Clarke, *Letters*, 2:69-72.

of Christ,” Cyprian warns them.¹⁷⁵ Cyprian writes *Letters 47* and *48* to tell Cornelius that he has taken the rebel confessors to task, and has spread the word in North Africa as best he can that Cornelius, not Novatian, is the rightful bishop.¹⁷⁶ Cornelius responds with *Letter 50*, in which he castigates the rebel confessors, and *Letter 49*, in which he expresses relief that some of them are now returning to the fold.¹⁷⁷ *Letters 51-53* confirm their return.¹⁷⁸ In *Letter 54*, the last from the Decian collection, Cyprian thanks the returning confessors for the steps they have taken to set an example for others. Now that they have come back to the church, they are once again guides into truth, rather than guides into error.¹⁷⁹

Conclusion

From a review of this period, it is clear why Cyprian began to be so closely associated with ecclesiastical unity, discipline, and governance. With intense passion and eloquence, Cyprian argues over and over again for the essential unity of the Christian church and the necessity of maintaining proper discipline and order within that church so that it will remain strong. This is importantly ecclesiology, but it is also importantly apologetic element (4), a defense of the faith against heresy and other internal forces of division that would weaken it. To a lesser extent, Cyprian continued to discuss the benefits of the faith, element (1), and the coherence of the faith as a worldview, element (2), in this period. These elements would be stressed more forcefully in the next period, characterized by a fearful and deadly plague.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 72-73.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 74-76.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 76-80.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 80-86.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 86-88.

Plague Period (252-54)

Introduction

As if Cyprian's episcopate were not difficult enough already, the city of Carthage was affected by a severe plague in the aftermath of the Decian persecution. This was most likely a form of smallpox that started in Ethiopia in the year 250 and gradually worked its way northwestward. Outbreaks would occur in North Africa on and off over the next twenty years, with an intense one occurring in the years 252-254. Still reeling from the effects of the Decian persecution, the Christians of Carthage were devastated by this latest development.

Cyprian's treatises from this period, along with Pontius' *Life of Cyprian*, are the best contemporaneous sources for the details of the plague. Cyprian records many of the physical symptoms, and Pontius discusses how widespread the damage was.¹⁸⁰ The bodies of the dead gradually started to pile up around the city. Civilized Roman society was on the verge of giving way, replaced by chaos and many people giving in to their basest survival instincts. During this time of strain, Cyprian rose to the challenge and showed himself a very strong leader for the church. He helped his flock to remain faithful to God, and to show benevolence toward everyone both inside and outside the church. He helped the church maintain an effective witness.¹⁸¹ Cyprian's writings from this period are very passionate, and are once again rich in apologetic content.

¹⁸⁰ Sage, *Cyprian*, 269-70. Vivid descriptions of this plague can be found in Cyprian's *On Mortality* and his *Address to Demetrianus*, as well as in Pontius' *Life of Cyprian*. Because of the graphic details provided by Cyprian and his biographer, this particular outbreak is known to history as the "Plague of Cyprian." See Hunink, "St. Cyprian," 35.

¹⁸¹ Pontius, *Life*, 9.

On the Lord's Prayer (early 252)

The first treatise from this period, written in early 252, is *On the Lord's Prayer*. This treatise, which is the finest early exposition of the Lord's Prayer in Latin, is broadly similar to Tertullian's *On Prayer* but is better organized and shows signs of independence.¹⁸² In this treatise, Cyprian engages primarily in apologetic element (1), as he argues that the ability to pray and have one's prayers answered is a significant benefit of the Christian life.

Cyprian opens the treatise by observing that the *logos* prompts men to pray.¹⁸³ To pray is to follow God's loving discipline, which has been given to men for their own good. The one who prays has the privilege of standing in the presence of God. He should be humbly grateful for this.¹⁸⁴ Cyprian exegetes the Lord's Prayer word by word, showing how it represents a compendium of heavenly virtues and benefits. The Christian who prays the Lord's Prayer shows that he has fully renounced his former carnal way of life and has embraced a new spiritual way of life which is far more beneficial.¹⁸⁵ Echoing a theme from the *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, Cyprian notes that the Jews have given up the right to call God their "Father in Heaven" because they are unbelieving, whereas Christians (through prayer) now have power to keep from falling away.¹⁸⁶ Prayer enables them to be victorious in their struggles against the

¹⁸² Sage, *Cyprian*, 288-89 and Junghoo Kwon, "Cyprian, Origen, and the Lord's Prayer: Theological Diversities between Latin West and Greek East in the Third Century," *Asia Journal of Theology* 26, no. 1 (April 2012): 57.

¹⁸³ Cyprian, *On the Lords Prayer*, 1.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-4. See also D. Richard Stuckwisch, "Principles of Christian Prayer from the Third Century: A Brief Look at Origen, Tertullian and Cyprian with Some Comments on Their Meaning for Today," *Worship* 71, no. 1 (Jan 1997): 11.

¹⁸⁵ Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 9, 15.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-13. Christians now have the privileged status of sonship, an important benefit. See also Kwon, "Cyprian, Origen, and the Lord's Prayer," 60-63.

flesh, as they unleash the power of God to help them.¹⁸⁷ Prayer gives them the power to love their enemies.¹⁸⁸ Prayer gives them the power to overcome temptation.¹⁸⁹ Prayer delivers them from evil. Christians can ask God for deliverance from the evil of this world, which is now so pressing and so obvious due to the ravages of the plague. Pagans cannot do this. What better way to go through life, Cyprian reasons, than with God as one's guardian?¹⁹⁰ What greater benefit can one have than God's protection in a world where life is so short and precarious? That the Christian God will save and protect his people, whereas the pagan gods cannot, is an enormous benefit of Christianity and is accessible through prayer.

As in *To Donatus*, Cyprian argues in this treatise that wealth is a seducer and a deceiver. The wise man will see that his wealth is never sufficient and can never satisfy him, and so he will choose to willingly renounce it. Doing so makes him dependent on the Lord for his daily bread, but this is not to be feared because the Lord has always shown himself faithful to provide.¹⁹¹ The wise man also realizes that people need the power to forgive each other, and this power can only be found in Christianity. The man who forgives and lives in unity, because he has prayed, will be found innocent on judgment day.¹⁹² These are all benefits of the Christian faith.

¹⁸⁷ Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 14-16.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 18-21. For Cyprian, one way to receive daily bread from the Father is to participate in the Eucharist at the church. Another way is to free oneself from the entanglements of wealth, by distributing property to the poor (as Cyprian himself did), and by living a simple life of poverty—seeking first the Kingdom of God and then allowing God to provide for daily needs. See Kwon, “Cyprian, Origen, and the Lord's Prayer,” 70-71. Cyprian does not assume that the Lord is obliged to provide anything more than the basic necessities of life, or that anything more should be required for believers. See Hays, “Resumptions of Radicalisms,” 270.

¹⁹² Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 8, 22-24, 30. This is no doubt a thinly-veiled criticism of the schismatics who, because they have prayerless and unforgiving hearts, will not come under the authority of their local bishop. See Kwon, “Cyprian, Origen, and the Lord's Prayer,” 73.

Address to Demetrianus (mid 252)

The second treatise written in 252 is Cyprian's *Address to Demetrianus*. In this treatise, Cyprian incorporates apologetic elements (3), (2) and (1). Cyprian writes this work because he feels compelled to respond to the charge—made by Demetrianus and others—that the plague which has affected Carthage has been caused by recalcitrant Christians refusing to worship the traditional Roman gods. That Christians should be fingered as the source of the empire's troubles is by this time a well-worn idea to which pagans return again and again, especially in times of stress in the political and natural realms. It is this same idea that drove Decius to try his program of universal sacrifice two years earlier.¹⁹³ And it is something that already has a long history of apologetic refutation.

Cyprian sets out to defend the faith against the false charges now brought against it by Demetrianus. Demetrianus is an ignorant, mistaken, and senseless man whose faulty logic needs to be set straight with wisdom. So Cyprian undertakes a reasoned response, hoping Demetrianus can be persuaded by “the cogency of truth.”¹⁹⁴ The decay that the world is experiencing has been going on since the beginning of time, Cyprian argues, and cannot possibly be blamed on Christians' not worshipping the traditional Roman gods.¹⁹⁵ The world and everything in it has always been decaying; this is its natural condition (a Stoic idea). Should Christians be blamed when men grow old and their hair turns grey? That the world is decaying more *rapidly* now is a different thing, and is to Cyprian a sure sign that the end times are near.¹⁹⁶ The world is hurtling

¹⁹³ Sage, *Cyprian, 277-78*. In a sense, Cyprian's motivation for writing this treatise is similar to Augustine's motivation for writing *City of God*.

¹⁹⁴ Cyprian, *Address to Demetrianus*, 1.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5. Cyprian's view that the end of the world is near is quite evident in this treatise, as it was in *To Donatus*, and as it will be in the upcoming treatises *On Mortality* and *Exhortation to Martyrdom*. Cyprian believes

towards an end because the pagans will not fear or worship the true God. They offend God with impunity and they refuse to repent, so it is they (and not the Christians) who bring wrath upon the world.¹⁹⁷ Here Cyprian makes many of the standard arguments found in element (3) of apologetics. For example, he notes that to be a Christian is either a crime or it is not; if it is, those who confess it should be put to death, and if it isn't, Christians should not be persecuted.

Cyprian segues from the rebuttal element (3) into the coherence element (2) of apologetics. The pagan gods, he argues, are silly things: crocodiles, apes, stones, and serpents. If those are worthy of human worship, why does Demetrianus need to defend them? Let them rise up and defend themselves if they really exist. If, on the other hand, Demetrianus is greater than these gods he reveres, then he should be ashamed to seek their protection. The wise man will see the obvious incoherence of the pagan system. This should lead him to abandon false gods and turn to the real God in heaven.¹⁹⁸

Cyprian also incorporates apologetic element (1), as he mentions some of the benefits of the faith. Christians may be in the same boat as the pagans, Cyprian writes, but only to a degree. Both may die a gruesome death from the plague, but after that, Christians will be welcomed into an eternal home.¹⁹⁹ Pagans will not. The pagans should envy them, not resent them, because the Christians can know with confidence they are going to a better place. In the final portion of the treatise, Cyprian pleads with Demetrianus to convert before it is too late and his opportunity for

that the plague and the other natural disasters affecting the natural realm, as well as the heresies and schisms affecting the church, are part of a cosmic pattern that fits with biblical prophecy. It also fits with Stoic ideas of natural law and "hylomorphism." Cyprian appears to share these Stoic presuppositions with both Minucius Felix and Tertullian. See Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 92-110.

¹⁹⁷ Cyprian, *Address to Demetrianus*, 7-11.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-16.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

salvation has passed. Demetrianus is facing the prospect of certain damnation, and once he has died, it will be too late for him to repent. But there is still hope for him. He isn't dead yet. "To him who still remains in this world no repentance is too late," writes Cyprian. "The approach to God's mercy is open, and the access is easy to those who seek and apprehend the truth."²⁰⁰ This is another wonderful benefit of Christianity. Ever the concerned pastor, Cyprian tries to persuade Demetrianus to abandon his ill-conceived position and accept the saving grace of God.

The *Address to Demtrianus* must be classified as an apologetic treatise. It employs many of the same apologetic arguments—both defensive and offensive—that characterize the classic second century works from Justin, Athenagoras, Mathetes, Minucius Felix, and Tertullian. It is addressed to a pagan audience outside the church. Its goal is to defend Christians against false charges and to make the case for Christianity as a coherent worldview and a faith with various compelling benefits. If this treatise were his only surviving work, Cyprian would surely be remembered as a Christian apologist, even in the most conventional sense of the term.²⁰¹

On Mortality (late 252)

This beautiful and passionate work, probably written during the worst part of the plague, is a powerful apologetic for the benefits of the Christian faith in the midst of great suffering. Most likely originally a sermon, it is directed to the wider Christian community of Carthage.²⁰² As with many of Cyprian's works, a broad secondary audience—including pagans—is in view.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 20-25.

²⁰¹ In fact, this is one of the works which causes Engberg to label Cyprian an "apologist," under his more restrictive definition of the term. See Engberg, "The Education and Self-Affirmation of Recent or Potential Converts," 134-44.

²⁰² Scourfield notes that Cyprian's phrase *fratres dilectissimi* probably refers to both the clergy and the laity. See J. H. D. Scourfield, "The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian: Consolation and Context," *Vigiliae Christianae* 50, no. 1 (Mar 1996): 14, 34.

This treatise is a good example of an offensive apologetic that incorporates elements (1) and (2), a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith combined with arguments for the fundamental coherence of the Christian worldview.

Cyprian begins by noting that many Christians have been wavering and need encouragement at this difficult time.²⁰³ He is happy to provide it. As in his previous treatise *To Demetrianus*, Cyprian notes that the world is now rapidly decaying as it enters the Last Days. Various natural disasters and pestilences are occurring, as should be expected. These are signs that the world is passing quickly away, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand.²⁰⁴ The Christian can face the prospect of death with boldness and confidence. He knows he is about to be united with Christ. He is about to be “withdrawn from these whirlwinds of the world” and “attain the harbor of our home and eternal security.”²⁰⁵ He is about to be set free from his long and painful struggle with the devil. It makes no sense that he should want to stay here in this world. “What blindness of mind or what folly it is,” writes Cyprian, “to love the world’s afflictions and punishments and tears, and not rather to hasten to the joy which can never be taken away!”²⁰⁶ The world has nothing to offer the Christian. This is reminiscent of Tertullian’s observation in his *Apology* that “only one thing in this life greatly concerns us, and that is, to get quickly out of it.”²⁰⁷ Cyprian argues that the only reason to fear death would be if one didn’t know God, or didn’t believe that what God promised was really true.²⁰⁸ To be able to leave this

²⁰³ Cyprian, *On Mortality*, 1.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰⁷ Tertullian, *Apology*, 41.

²⁰⁸ Cyprian, *On Mortality*, 6.

world with confidence, knowing what lies ahead, is a great advantage that the Christian has and the pagan lacks.

Unfortunately, the plague makes no distinction between believers and non-believers. All people right now are affected equally: the same bleeding from the eyes, the same fever, weakness, vomiting, uncontrollable bowel discharges, and amputation of limbs because of putrefaction.²⁰⁹ Christians are not promised any lesser share of this horrendous suffering. What God does promise them, however, is that he will help them remain steadfast and resolute in the midst of their suffering. The Bible is filled with examples of righteous men who were able to endure suffering with patience and courage.²¹⁰ The Christians of Carthage can now do the same. They must remember that they are just strangers in this world. Their approaching death is a means of release from this world and entrance into their eternal dwelling. The Christians, who are approaching immortality, can be joyful despite their losses because these losses are not *scandala*; they are occasions for battle.²¹¹ But for the pagans, who are rapidly approaching God's judgment, their pending death is a terror and a source of grief.²¹² God intends that pagans wake up to the fact that they have a deficient worldview which must change. Rational pagans should

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 8, 14.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 10-13. Cyprian particularly stresses the examples of Job and Abraham/Isaac.

²¹¹ Ibid., 11-13, 19-22, 26. See also Scourfield, "The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian," 16.

²¹² Scourfield disputes the thesis that there are many connections to be found between this treatise and earlier pagan "consolatory" writing. In the Stoic worldview, which some scholars argue informs this treatise, a certain amount of grief was permissible and could be indulged in. But the Bible-based belief system Cyprian advocates here differs importantly from the Stoic system in how it regards grief. Cyprian's goal is not to offer consolation to grieving Christians, but rather to strengthen and unite them. For Cyprian, accurate Christian teaching (distinct from Stoic teaching) is critically important at this juncture, and it provides Christians with the best source of comfort. See Scourfield, "The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian," 13-21, 31-32.

repent and believe the gospel while there is still time. Cyprian expects many will. Through the terror of the plague, Cyprian writes, “the heathens are constrained to believe.”²¹³

On Mortality is a beautifully written and moving treatise designed to reassure the Christian community of the benefits they possess in Christ—peace, security, assurance, hope—and the fact that their worldview is more coherent and sensible than the pagan alternative. These advantages are brought out clearly by the grim realities of the plague. *On Mortality* is a good example of an offensive apologetic which incorporates elements (1) and (2). In this sense, it is somewhat similar to the *Letter to Diognetus* and the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix.

***On Works and Alms* (early 253)**

With thoughts of death and mortality in the air, now is a good time for Cyprian to teach his flock about the importance of giving.²¹⁴ The next treatise, *On Works and Alms*, probably originally delivered as a sermon in early 253, stresses apologetic element (1). One of the important benefits of the faith is the way it enables Christians to be very generous.

Cyprian begins by noting that Christ’s selfless giving is the model for those who follow after him. Christians have been shown mercy by Christ, so they can show mercy to others through their giving. If they refuse to show mercy to others, God will withdraw his mercy from them.²¹⁵ Generous Christians have an advantage over other men in that their God is faithful and

²¹³ Cyprian, *On Mortality*, 15. The implication is that backslidden Christians, too, can be moved to repent and prove the genuineness of their faith at this time. See also Scourfield, “The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian,” 27-28.

²¹⁴ The majority of scholars (Quasten, Sage, Dunn, and others) date this treatise to the plague period. The placement of its reference in Pontius (*Life*, 9) implies that as well. Nevertheless, some scholars date it earlier, to the Decian period. These include Clarke, Fahey, and others. See Downs, “Prosopological Exegesis in Cyprian’s *De Opere et Eleemosynis*,” 288 and Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Cyprian’s Care for the Poor: The Evidence of *De Opere et Eleemosynis*,” in *Studia Patristica* 42, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 363-64.

²¹⁵ Cyprian, *On Works and Alms*, 3-5.

will not allow them to ever be in serious want.²¹⁶ The Christian who shares his wealth with another really shares it with Christ, and becomes a partner of Christ in his heavenly kingdom.²¹⁷ The one who is worried about caring for his family should take note that giving to the poor is the best way of securing God's blessing. Leaning on texts like Proverbs 16:6 ("By mercy and truth iniquity is purged"), Cyprian argues that faithful giving helps secure post-baptismal forgiveness of sin.²¹⁸ Giving also enlists God to act as the guardian and protector of a Christian's family once he is gone.²¹⁹ What other religion provides a man with such valuable insurance beyond the grave? To save for one's children what should have been given to the poor will just backfire because it will lead one's children to the devil instead of Christ.²²⁰ When pagans give, they receive a public recognition which is fleeting. When Christians give, they obtain a perpetual reward in the Kingdom of Heaven. These are all significant benefits of Christianity.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 9-11.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 13. Cyprian was keenly focused on caring for the needy throughout his episcopate. He had in mind a discipleship that was characterized by renunciation, simple living, and generous giving. That said, he stopped short of advocating something as radical as the communal sharing of goods. See Hays, "Resumptions of Radicalisms," 269-71.

²¹⁸ Cyprian, *On Works and Alms*, 2, 4, 18-19, 21-26. Interestingly, Cyprian argues that acts of charity, especially the giving of alms, work to appease divine wrath and purge sin from a believer's life. Almsgiving helps to win favor with God and to stave off his retribution. A parent's giving even helps to purge the children's sin. Dunn agrees that this treatise is not so much concerned with the general benefits of charitable giving as it is with the specific benefits that accrue to the giver, especially the purging of one's sin. Downs, likewise, argues that this treatise focuses on the redemptive value of giving and does so by employing "prosopological exegesis," a method which can also be found in Justin Martyr and Tertullian. The belief that almsgiving helped to purge sin became increasingly prevalent in the fourth and fifth centuries. See Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 373-74; Dunn, "Cyprian's Care for the Poor," 364-65; idem, "The White Crown of Works," 740; Boniface Ramsey, "Almsgiving in the Latin Church: The Late Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 226-59; and Downs, "Prosopological Exegesis in Cyprian's *De Opere et Eleemosynis*," 279-85.

²¹⁹ Cyprian, *On Works and Alms*, 16-18.

²²⁰ Ibid, 19.

Letters 55-66

The letters that belong to this period are *Letters 55-66*. As with the letters from the previous (Decian) period, these letters are concerned—on their face, at least—with issues of church order, discipline, and the restoration of the lapsed. But they are also apologetic in that they engage in a combination of apologetic element (4), a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it, and apologetic element (1), a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith.

Cyprian's lengthy *Letter 55*, which probably dates to early 252 because it reviews the decisions made at the African and Italian councils of the prior year, details the councils' thought process about penance for the lapsed and notes how different programs of penance have been prescribed for different types of offenses.²²¹ Here Cyprian argues that the rigorist Novatian's position is by definition wrong because he is *outside* the church. "I must make clear to you that it is not right for us to even want to know what it is he is teaching, since he is teaching outside," writes Cyprian. "Whoever he may be, whatever his qualities, he can be no Christian who is not inside the Church of Christ."²²² Novatian must be stopped because he is dividing the church and all those who divide are necessarily wrong.²²³ Cyprian also notes in this letter that his opponents' idea that all sin is equal, and therefore equally remissible, is not a Christian idea but rather a pagan philosophical idea found among Stoics. Echoing Tertullian, he insists that Christian philosophy rooted in the Scriptures must never be confused with—because it is superior to—all

²²¹ Clarke, *Letters*, 28, 40-47. According to this program, the only people who should not count on being reconciled to the church are those who refuse to do any penance at all during their lifetimes. Cyprian was never a rigorist. See Taylor, "St. Cyprian and the Reconciliation of Apostates," 39-45.

²²² Clarke, *Letters*, 3:48.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

pagan philosophical ideas.²²⁴ To accept such ideas would be to weaken the church from within. In *Letter 65*, addressed to a church whose lapsed bishop wants to return to his office without doing full penance, Cyprian echoes some of the arguments and themes. Church order and discipline must be followed or the church will be weakened from within.²²⁵

With the next letter, Cyprian shifts to apologetic element (1), a declaration of the benefits of the faith. One of the main benefits of Christianity is God's grace. Cyprian writes *Letter 64* in the middle of 252, shortly after that year's annual church council.²²⁶ Here he discusses the council's decision that infant baptism should occur as soon as possible after birth. This letter speaks not only to the growing popularity of infant baptism by the mid-third century, but also to the urgent crisis environment in which the church now finds itself. In such an environment, with plague and death all around, God's grace is to be laid hold of with a renewed sense of urgency. Now the cries of the newborn seem like "nothing else but imploring for our help," and now is a time when "we must do everything we possibly can to prevent the destruction of any soul."²²⁷

²²⁴ Ibid., 42-43. Cyprian could not accept that those who had purchased *libelli* were in the same position as those who had sacrificed and should be treated alike when it came to penance. Likewise, there had to be a distinction made between those who sacrificed right away and those who did so only after a long and brave struggle. The idea that all sin is equal is a pagan idea that the church must never accept. Cyprian writes, "But quite different, dearly beloved brother, is the thinking of philosophers, in particular of the Stoics: they claim that all sins are equal and that it is quite wrong for a man of gravity to be easily moved to pity. But the fact is that a vast distance separates Christians and philosophers, and we are warned by the Apostle: *Beware lest you fall prey to the empty wiles of philosophy*. We ought, therefore, to shun any notions which do not issue from the clemency of God but which are rather begotten of the arrogance and rigidity of philosophy" (as quoted in Edward D. Junkin, "Commitment to the Fallen Brother: Cyprian and the *Lapsi*," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 87, no. 7 [April 1972]: 39-40).

²²⁵ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:113-16.

²²⁶ This letter is sent by Cyprian and a synod of sixty-six other bishops to a certain Bishop Fidus, the location of whose episcopal see is not known with certainty. See G. W. Clarke, "Cyprian's *Epistle 64* and the Kissing of Feet in Baptism," *Harvard Theological Review* 66, no. 1 (Jan 1973): 147.

²²⁷ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:110-12. Augustine would later point to Cyprian's embrace of infant baptism as evidence that the practice had, by Augustine's time, become established tradition in the church. Importantly for Augustine, Cyprian also argues in *Letter 64* for the doctrine of original sin, stating that newborn infants have inherited from Adam "the ancient contagion of death." See Augustine, *On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 3.4-3.7; and Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 344-45, 387-88.

The Christian faith is valuable because it prevents such destruction. The Christian God is one who distributes his heavenly grace equally to all, without respect to age. No one is disbarred from access to his grace because God “is merciful, kind, and loving towards all men.”²²⁸ These are significant advantages.

Letter 59, the next written, shifts back to apologetic element (4). This letter is penned to Bishop Cornelius in Rome. Cyprian’s rival presbyters have been stirring up trouble in Rome as well. Fortunatus has set himself up as a rival bishop in Carthage, and his co-conspirator Felicissimus has travelled to Rome seeking to have him recognized. The letter derides these excommunicated men for the schism that they advocate. Cyprian argues that those who depart from the church in this way become enemies of Christ who, with “raving madness” and “frenzied shouting,” harm the message of the Gospel.²²⁹ Nobody has the right to oppose a validly elected bishop who has been approved by God, the other bishops, and the laity.²³⁰ The election of a bishop is an act of God that reflects the will of God. Because God ultimately appoints the bishop, the person who seeks to overturn the bishop is seeking to overturn the providential reign of God in his church.²³¹ This would cause great damage to the church from within.

In 253, Cyprian produces five more letters. The first three focus mostly on the benefits element (1) of apologetics. For example, *Letter 56*, written in the spring, addresses the difficult

²²⁸ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:112.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68-79.

²³⁰ Henk Bakker, “Towards a Catholic Understanding of Baptist Congregationalism: Conciliar Power and Authority,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 166-70. Dunn also takes note of Cyprian’s stress here on the *collegium* of the bishops. The *collegium* involves independence for each bishop but also a greater measure of influence and power for some, like Cyprian himself. See Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Cyprian and His Collegae: Patronage and the Episcopal Synod of 252,” *Journal of Religious History* 27, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 7-12.

²³¹ Paul J. Fitzgerald, “A Model for Dialogue: Cyprian of Carthage on Ecclesial Discernment,” *Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (June 1998): 241-47. Fitzgerald notes that the four essential steps of an election, in Cyprian’s view, are: the *testimonium* (the testimony or character witness provided by the other clergy and the laity), the *suffragium*

question of penance for those who at first stood their ground but eventually gave way under the extreme pressure of torture. This matter will be discussed at the upcoming council, but it is Cyprian's judgment that these men, who have repented and sought the Lord's mercy, should find forgiveness in the church. Such is the love and clemency of the Christian God.²³² *Letter 57*, written after that council, expresses more softening in how the lapsed are to be handled. A quicker reconciliation is now to be offered because the church expects hostilities to begin again shortly. Those who are about to return to the battlefield on Christ's behalf should be fully reconciled to Christ before they go back out. God is merciful and gentle and full of compassion; he knows those who are his, and he does not want his church to be too severe with them. Such is the goodness of God.²³³ *Letter 58* centers on the theme of martyrdom and uses the motif of military battle. The time of Antichrist is upon them now, and the church needs to be fully prepared for the end of the world. Now is the time to follow Christ and imitate what he did. The Christian God will give the soldiers of Christ (*miles Christi*) the strength to go through the battle that lies ahead without any fear. He will give them a crown (*corona*) as a reward.²³⁴ Such is the value of the Christian religion.

The next two letters return to apologetic element (4). *Letter 60* reveals that Cornelius has been arrested for his confession of the faith. Cyprian praises him and argues that he is a model of truth for the rest of the Roman church to follow. Novatian, in contrast, who sows seeds of

(the voting), the *consensus* (the accord among the church), and the *iudicium* (the action of divine will).

²³² Clarke, *Letters*, 3:53-54.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 55-59.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-68. Cyprian describes this period as a "day of pressure," a "day of affliction," and a "day of persecution." The Christian should be glad about this, however, because he has a share in the sufferings of Christ. Suffering confirms him as a son of God. See Vos, "A Universe of Meaning," 73-92.

division in the church, is but a “teacher of pride” and a “corruptor of truth.”²³⁵ In *Letter 61*, addressed to the new bishop Lucius after Cornelius’ martyrdom, Cyprian reiterates that persecution has the beneficial side-effect of confounding heretics like Novatian who seek to weaken the church from within.²³⁶

There are four final letters which date to 254. The first two stress apologetic element (4). In *Letter 66*, Cyprian writes to a fellow bishop to deny some false allegations that have been made about him. Cyprian argues that because God oversees his church, he will see to it that bishops who have been validly appointed to office will be worthy men. Because the bishop bears apostolic authority, including the authority to forgive sins, believers must have confidence that he can be relied on firmly. Here Cyprian famously writes, “You ought to realize that the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop.”²³⁷ God acts in this way to protect his church from within.

Letter 63 is addressed to a fellow bishop. Here Cyprian responds to a question about the communion cup. Cyprian argues that it must always include a mixture of water and wine, not just water. He argues that to mix the elements in this way is to follow the Lord’s example and his explicit teaching. The church must continue what Christ himself did and what the apostles after him proclaimed.²³⁸ Those who teach otherwise are violating the rule of faith, sowing seeds of confusion. To continue this would be to introduce division from within.

²³⁵ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:88-91.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 92-94.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116-19. See also John Behr, “The Trinitarian Being of the Church,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 83.

²³⁸ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:98-103. Cyprian notes that both the water and the wine have important typological significance which cannot be ignored. See also Barry M. Craig, “Potency, Not Preciousness: Cyprian’s Cup and a Modern Controversy,” *Worship* 81, no. 4 (July 2007): 299-301.

Letter 62 shifts back to apologetic element (1). Here Cyprian writes to express solidarity with a group of Christians, including some virgins, who have been kidnapped by barbarians and are being held for ransom. The Christian faith is one where believers are united in love and willingly come to one another's assistance. Cyprian unites his heart with them in prayer and encloses a monetary gift for them.²³⁹ *Letter 82* (possibly spurious) was written some months later to express relief that those referenced in *Letter 62* have been returned home safely. Here Cyprian rejoices because God answers prayer and God has enabled all of them—both women and men—to remain faithful to their ecclesial *disciplina* during this time of testing.²⁴⁰

Conclusion

The treatises and letters from the plague period, a time of great suffering and strain for the church, are again quite rich in apologetic content. All four elements of apologetics can be seen in this period. Cyprian engages in element (1) as he describes the many benefits of the faith. A believer can pray and have his prayers answered, he has access to the grace of God, he can endure the ravages of the plague knowing that something better awaits, and he can give generously knowing that doing so enlists God as his protector and the guardian of his children. Cyprian also engages in element (2) as he argues for the coherence of the faith. The pagan gods are silly and to cling on to them, instead of the Christian God who can help them, is especially foolish and senseless when death is so near. Cyprian engages in element (3) as he rebuts the false charges made by Demetrianus and his followers that the Christians are the cause of the plague. Finally, Cyprian engages in element (4) as he defends the faith from heresy and other internal

²³⁹ Clarke, *Letters*, 3:95-97.

²⁴⁰ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:106-07. Dunn argues that this letter is likely authentic and notes that it is important as a window into Cyprian's view of women and pastoral care. The women addressed here are treated as confessors, just like the men. Cyprian also sees himself as both offering pastoral care *to* them, and receiving lay care *from* them. See

forces of division by arguing for the continuity of apostolic teaching and forcefully rejecting Novatian and the rival presbyters of Carthage who seek to sow confusion and division among God's people.

Rebaptism Period (255-56)

Introduction

The fourth major period of Cyprian's ministry may be referred to as the "rebaptism" period because it is dominated by Cyprian's struggle with Stephen, the bishop of Rome, over the rebaptism of heretics. In this period, Cyprian writes two more treatises—*On the Good of Patience* and *On Jealousy and Envy*—as well as nine more letters. The issue of rebaptism, which is a theological and doctrinal issue, directly informs these writings. But apologetic elements also permeate them, especially element (4). Cyprian once again makes a sustained effort to strengthen the church against internal forces of division.

The rebaptism issue came to the fore because there were people who had been baptized by Novatianist clergy who subsequently wanted to join the Catholic Church. Did they need to be rebaptized because their original baptism, performed by a heretic, was invalid? Cyprian had argued earlier in *On the Unity of the Church* that because there can only be one church, sacraments performed outside that one church cannot, by definition, have any validity.²⁴¹ The sacrament of baptism could only be efficacious if administered by one possessing the Holy Spirit. To possess the Holy Spirit, a presbyter had to be in the one true Church, which was the sole repository of grace.²⁴²

Dunn, "Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution," 208-10.

²⁴¹ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 4, 13, 15.

²⁴² Sage, *Cyprian*, 304 and Clarke, *Letters*, 4:39-40. Dallen notes that Cyprian, like Tertullian before him,

Stephen disagreed with this understanding. In his view, ex-heretics who had been previously baptized could be admitted to the church through penance and the laying on of hands.²⁴³ Importantly, Stephen argued from *tradition* as well as Scripture for his position. The laying on of hands in such cases had been the practice of the Roman church for a very long time.²⁴⁴ Cyprian recoiled at the thought that tradition might trump what he understood to be the clear teaching of Scripture.²⁴⁵ Stephen's appeal to tradition would make this an important early test case in the evolving Roman Catholic "dual-source" (Scripture and tradition) view of authority.²⁴⁶

strongly believed that it was impossible to receive the Holy Spirit outside of the one true church. See Dallen, "The Imposition of Hands in Penance," 227.

²⁴³ Stephen's position was expressed in several letters of the Cyprian corpus, such as *Letters 69, 73, 74, and 75*. For Stephen, a baptism should be considered a valid baptism if it involved water, the use of the interrogatory questions, the baptismal creed, and the invocation of Jesus' name. The Novatianists did all of these. Stephen agreed these baptisms were deficient because they did not bestow the Holy Spirit, which was not present in the Novatianist church, but the Holy Spirit could be bestowed on the individual through the laying on of hands once he entered the Catholic church. See William C. Weinrich, "Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine, and Augustana VIII: Remarks on the Church and the Validity of Sacraments," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Oct 1991): 270-71.

²⁴⁴ The policy in Rome, as well as Alexandria and Palestine, was penance and the laying on of hands. The policy in North Africa and Asia Minor was rebaptism. Cyprian points out in *Letter 71* that the Roman tradition on this matter is technically irrelevant, because in former times it concerned people who had been baptized in the catholic church and left, whereas now it concerned people whose original baptism was performed outside the catholic church. See Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 241; Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 61; and Clarke, *Letters*, 4:50.

²⁴⁵ Cyprian inherited Tertullian's suspicion about extra-biblical traditions creeping into the church. Tertullian affirmed that Scripture must remain the essential root, source, and fountainhead of all tradition. While acknowledging that Scripture was ambiguous in some places, and that arguments conducted purely on the basis of Scripture could not always be won, Tertullian was concerned about extra-biblical traditions arising that were not well grounded in Scripture. He was fearful that tradition would gradually grow by "space of times," "influence of persons," and "privilege of regions." These would be the sources which, "from some ignorance or simplicity, custom finds its beginning; and then it is successively confirmed into a usage, and thus is maintained in opposition to truth." See Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 1.1; idem, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 19-21, 28, 37, 43; idem, *Against Marcion*, 4; and Osborn, *Tertullian*, 34, 115, 151-58.

²⁴⁶ Karl Barth, for example, notes in his *Church Dogmatics* that Cyprian's position in this dispute was something that the later Reformers could point back to as evidence that the church fathers did not uniformly embrace what would become later the official "two-source" view of authority in the catholic church. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 546-49.

The dispute between the two bishops dragged on for several years, and became increasingly heated as both sides dug in their heels. Cyprian, who took pride in the autonomy of the African churches, garnered the support of several Carthaginian councils.²⁴⁷ But he failed to win Stephen over. He eventually let the matter drop because he thought that maintaining church unity was more important than being right, and he did not want to become himself a schismatic after spending the majority of his ministry condemning that practice. In addition, the persecution of Valerian began to divert attention away to more pressing matters. As a result, the dispute had no explicit resolution during the lifetimes of Cyprian and Stephen.²⁴⁸ Both perished as martyrs: Stephen in August of 257, and Cyprian in September of 258. In later years, it was Stephen's position that would come to be judged as orthodox.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 59-60.

²⁴⁸ Sage, *Cyprian*, 325-27.

²⁴⁹ In the fourth century, for example, Eusebius (*Church History*, 7.3) took Stephen's side in the conflict, noting that Stephen had become indignant and stopped Cyprian when Stephen realized that the church must not "add any innovation contrary to the tradition which had been held from the beginning." Canon 8 of the Council of Nicea would concur, and conclude that the Novatianists could be received into the church through the laying on of hands. See Behr, "Trinitarian," 85. In the mid-fourth century, Basil the Great (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 27) was the first to argue that there are actually some aspects of Christian faith and practice which are not found in Scripture at all, but only in the traditions of the church. A further step toward Stephen's position took place in the early fifth century with the work of Augustine. In Augustine's discussion of baptism (*On Baptism Against the Donatists*, 2.1, 2.8, 4.6, 5.5, 5.17 and 6.1), he explicitly mentions Cyprian and his dispute with Stephen over this issue. Augustine greatly valued the work of Cyprian and had an extensive knowledge of his works. Augustine notes that Cyprian, to his credit, did not break the communion of the church over this issue even though he disagreed vehemently with Stephen about it. Augustine also admits that Cyprian's arguments from Scripture were strong. However, Augustine thought that Cyprian's policy on rebaptism was a local and short-lived innovation particular to North Africa, having begun only at the time of Agrippinus (c. 220), and thus relatively new, and this made it less appealing than Stephen's position which had a longer (i.e., Roman apostolic) tradition to it. Augustine generally gave weight to practices with long traditions behind them. Importantly, Augustine's disputes with the Donatists had pushed him to the conclusion that the sacraments possessed an inherent efficacy that could be separated from the merits of the individuals involved. This implied that baptism in the name of Jesus would still be efficacious even if administered by a heretic. The Donatist church would stress that their opposing view was consonant with Cyprian's and that they were the real successors to Cyprian. Augustine rebutted this assertion of continuity with Cyprian by noting that Cyprian would have condemned their schism. Vincent of Lerins continued to reflect on the relationship between Scripture and tradition in his *Commonitory*. Vincent argued that doctrine had to be validated by both the authority of Scripture and the tradition of the church, using the three-pronged standard of universality, antiquity, and consent (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ad omnibus*). Evolution of the two-source doctrine continued through the Middle Ages as canon law was increasingly built on the twin foundations of Scripture and tradition. The two-source view received official expression at the Council of Trent. In its fourth session, the council affirmed that while Scripture had a higher

The dispute about rebaptism of heretics would be the subject of several large councils in North Africa in 255 and 256. Cyprian believed that the patient work of councils could prevent and heal divisions in the church. His next treatise, *On the Good of Patience*, can be firmly dated to the period just before the council of spring 256 because of its reference in *Letter 73*.²⁵⁰ This treatise seems designed to bolster Cyprian's own patience, and that of others around him, in the face of this latest controversy in the church.

On the Good of Patience (early 256)

On the Good of Patience focuses on apologetic element (1), and making a positive declaration of the benefits of the Christian faith. Cyprian begins this work by noting that patience is a virtue that is of heavenly origin. The fact that Christians can be patient people is something that commends Christianity over the pagan alternatives. Pagan philosophers may have *claimed* to have had the virtue of patience, but they did not have it in fact because they did not know the one true God from whom patience derives. Christians should be considered the real “philosophers,”

dignity than tradition, Scripture depended upon tradition to be properly interpreted. Truth from the Holy Spirit was contained in the written books of the Bible and, equally, in the unwritten traditions of the Catholic Church. Both were “preserved in the Catholic Church by continuous succession” and both were to be received “with an equal affection of piety and reverence” (Pope Paul III, *The Canons and Decrees of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent*, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct04.html>, 18). See Vincent, *Commonitory*, 2-3, 17, 23, 29; John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 144-46; Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and the Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 369-72; Paul van Geest, “*Pectus ardet Evangelica pietate, et pectori respondet oratio*: Augustine’s Neglect of Cyprian’s Striving for Sincerity,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 203, 213-17; Abraham van de Beek, “Cyprian on Baptism,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 156-64; Matthew Alan Gaumer, “Augustine of Hippo’s Nuanced Claim to the Authority of Cyprian of Carthage,” in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 184, 192-94; Sage, *Cyprian*, 328; and Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, 292.

²⁵⁰ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:69. Cyprian mentions at the end of this letter that he has recently composed a treatise on patience, a copy of which he encloses.

Cyprian argues, and not the pagans, because they alone have the power to practice what they preach when it comes to virtues such as this.²⁵¹

Christians are uniquely empowered by their religion to be patient and longsuffering, like their Father in heaven is. God continually showers love on all the people of the world despite their many sins and provocations, waiting patiently for them to repent. Likewise, his Son the *logos* is also a model of patience. He patiently endured suffering at the hands of evil men, up to and including his crucifixion.²⁵² Christians who are patient prove that they are genuine disciples of Christ. They prove that they understand truth from God.²⁵³ With a thinly veiled reference to Stephen, Cyprian argues that the way a Christian reacts to challenging circumstances—whether he works through them patiently or not—is a barometer of what is inside of him.²⁵⁴ Those who do not cultivate patience open the door to the devil.²⁵⁵ God empowers his followers to be model citizens possessing desirable virtues like patience.²⁵⁶ To be patient is to be like God himself, something that is possible only through the restorative and transformative power of Christ. Pagans do not have this ability. This is a significant benefit of the Christian faith.

On Jealousy and Envy (summer 256)

Written later that same year, the next treatise is something of a companion piece in that it decries the opposite of patience: jealousy and envy. The increasing friction between Cyprian and

²⁵¹ Cyprian, *On the Good of Patience*, 1-3.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

Stephen over the rebaptism issue once again lurks in the background of the treatise and informs it. Stephen has not ceded any ground to Cyprian after the last council. Cyprian writes *On Jealousy and Envy* on the eve of the last and largest of these councils (eighty-six bishops), held in September of 256.²⁵⁷ He hopes that it might somehow soften hard heads around him. It is written in the context of ongoing clerical jockeying where ecclesiastical jealousy and envy are sadly on display. Like the previous treatise, *On Jealousy and Envy* stresses element (1) of apologetics and the benefits of the faith. It also stresses element (4), an attempt to defend the faith against the internal forces of division that would weaken it.

Jealousy and envy, Cyprian argues, are vices that creep in quietly. The Christian must guard himself carefully against them. Satan, who was cast down from heaven because he was jealous and envious of God, seeks to infect human beings with the same destructive emotions that he has.²⁵⁸ Cyprian lists the various Bible characters who gave in to these sins and the harm that resulted.²⁵⁹ These sins are part of a larger linked chain of sins that culminate, eventually, in violence and murder.²⁶⁰ As in previous treatises, Cyprian argues that it is the inward sins of the heart that cause the outward symptoms of heresy and church schism.²⁶¹ Those who are jealous

²⁵⁷ It is clear by this time that Cyprian's embrace of the "synodal tradition" is a key characteristic of his episcopate. Typically, local councils in North Africa would involve about forty bishops, and provincial ones would involve about sixty bishops. The fact that Cyprian calls an even larger plenary council in the year 256 reflects the fact that the previous year's council had contradicted the position of Stephen, and thus it now seemed wise to bring the collective judgment of an even greater number of bishops to bear. See Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 47.

²⁵⁸ Cyprian, *On Jealousy and Envy*, 3-4.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6. See also Paul M. Blowers, "Envy's Narrative Scripts: Cyprian, Basil, and the Monastic Sages on the Anatomy and Cure of the Invidious Emotions," *Modern Theology* 25, no. 1 (Jan 2009): 28.

²⁶¹ Cyprian, *On Jealousy and Envy*, 6.

prove that they are carnal, not filled by the Holy Spirit.²⁶² They do tremendous damage to the church. With Stephen no doubt in view, Cyprian cautions against a “contest for exaltation,” and calls on his listeners to “love those whom you previously had hated,” “favor those whom you envied with unjust disparagements,” and “make yourself a sharer with them in united love.”²⁶³ Cyprian is trying to protect the church against jealousy and envy as sources of internal division in the church. This is element (4) of apologetics.

Fortunately, the Christian is not powerless to give in to jealousy and envy. Because he is regenerate in Christ, and has been born again in the image of God, he has the power to change. He can begin to be what he was not before as he responds positively to God. Unlike the pagan, who has no such ability, the Christian has the power to live as Jesus Christ did.²⁶⁴ The Christian can strengthen his mind through prayer, spiritual discipline, release of his worldly goods, and reflection on the divine precepts found in God’s word.²⁶⁵ The Christian God is the one who gives his followers the power to live radically changed lives. This is a benefit of the Christian life which pagans do not have. Here Cyprian is engaged in element (1) of apologetics.

Letters 67-75

The letters that fit into the rebaptism period are *Letters 67-75*. They are focused on strengthening the church from internal threats, which is apologetic element (4). *Letter 69* is the first chronologically.²⁶⁶ It lays out the case for why those who have been baptized by heretical

²⁶² Ibid., 13.

²⁶³ Ibid., 10, 17.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 16-18. See also Blowers, “Envy’s Narrative,” 31, 37.

²⁶⁶ This is the generally accepted view, as argued by Clarke, but Burns believes that this letter belongs somewhat later in the controversy, after the synodal letters of 255 and 256 (*Letters 70* and *72*). The exact timing

groups must be rebaptized in the catholic church.²⁶⁷ The Holy Spirit, Cyprian argues, is only present in the catholic church. People baptized elsewhere don't possess it because it hasn't ever been conveyed to them. All sacraments performed by heretics outside the catholic fold are by definition invalid because they are performed *outside*, and thus without the Spirit. Heretics are without and rights or powers whatsoever, Cyprian maintains. Even if the baptized followers of Novatian were to believe all the correct things theologically, this is irrelevant. They do not have the Spirit. It has never been imparted to them.²⁶⁸ To let them back into the church without rebaptism would be to damage the church.

Another attempt to strengthen the church comes in *Letter 70*. This is a conciliar letter which notes that the 255 North African council has agreed with Cyprian's position.²⁶⁹ Cyprian argues that if the catholics admit that baptisms performed by Novatianists are equally valid, which they do when they simply lay hands on converts, then they are giving their tacit approval to the entire schismatic enterprise and weakening the church from within.²⁷⁰ In *Letter 68*, Cyprian urges Stephen to throw his weight behind the effort to excommunicate a schismatic bishop of Arles. Unless the bishops remain united, and share a mutual concern for the flock of

does not affect the apologetic content. See Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 100-131 and Karl Shuve, "Cyprian of Carthage's Writings from the Rebaptism Controversy: Two Revisionary Proposals Reconsidered," *Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 2 (Oct 2010): 628.

²⁶⁷ This letter is a testimony to the North African custom of rebaptizing heretics, a custom recognized by both Cyprian and Bishop Magnus, to whom the letter is addressed. See Shuve, "Cyprian of Carthage's Writings from the Rebaptism Controversy," 630-31.

²⁶⁸ See Clarke, *Letters*, 4:34-40. Cyprian argues that the Novatianists may use the same baptismal creed as the catholics do, but their words are meaningless because they are spoken outside the church. Because the Novatianists do not impart the Holy Spirit, their baptisms must be considered profane, adulterous, and totally without effect. See Weinrich, "Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine, and Augustana VIII," 275 and Gaumer, "Augustine of Hippo's Nuanced Claim to the Authority of Cyprian of Carthage," 189.

²⁶⁹ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:45-46.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-48.

Christ, wolves will eventually savage the flock.²⁷¹ The church will cease to be a place of protection and safe pasture because the sheep will become confused about who the real shepherds are. In order to defend the faith against this corrosion from within, then, the bishops have no choice but to lock arms in unity.²⁷²

Letter 67, a conciliar letter, makes a related point. It addresses the problem of two bishops who have been found guilty of idolatry and removed from office. Cyprian writes to encourage the presbyters and laity who remain. God wants his church to be pure and undefiled. He wants his ministers to be upright. The church can only be a strong testimony to the outside world if it remains internally pure and takes steps to ensure its clergy remain disciplined and holy. The clergy and laity should work together to confirm new bishops and to depose those who are guilty of wickedness.²⁷³

The baptismal issue comes back into focus with *Letters 71-75*, which date to the early months of 256. These letters again stress element (4) of apologetics. In *Letter 71*, Cyprian replies to a bishop's question by clarifying the conclusion reached by the most recent council.²⁷⁴ He notes that Stephen's argument—based on tradition—is weaker than his own argument, which is based on Scripture and reason. Cyprian insists that the church must always “convince by reason” rather than “lay down regulations simply from custom.” Stephen should behave like the apostle

²⁷¹ The bishops, in Cyprian's view, not only have a primary responsibility to oversee their episcopal sees but also have a secondary shared responsibility to oversee the health of the universal church. A bishop who falls into sin has to be promptly removed in order to prevent the universal episcopal college from being infected and the holiness of the universal church from being tainted. See Burns, “Establishing Unity in Diversity,” 388-89.

²⁷² Clarke, *Letters*, 4:29-31. See also Murray, “Assessing the Primacy,” 52.

²⁷³ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:21-27. See also Bakker, “Towards a Catholic Understanding of Baptist Congregationalism,” 168-71. For Cyprian, the broader the participation among the clergy and laity the better a candidate's qualifications could be known and the lesser the chance that “an unworthy person may creep into the ministry of the altar.” Such broad participation helps the church discern the divine will of God. See Granfield, “Episcopal Elections in Cyprian,” 42-43.

²⁷⁴ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:48-51.

Peter, who, when confronted by Paul about his prejudicial treatment of Gentiles, “did not assert that he had the rights of seniority and that therefore upstarts and latecomers ought rather to be obedient to him.”²⁷⁵ Cyprian knows that the church will be weakened from within if it departs from the teachings of Scripture, and from solid reasoning, and instead clings to ill-advised practices that have for whatever reason managed to become customary.

Cyprian addresses *Letter 72* to Stephen. It attempts, once more, to win him over. Cyprian thinks it is so important to convince Stephen to go along with the North African consensus that he persists in this relentless program of letter writing.²⁷⁶ It is extremely important that there be agreement on this issue, Cyprian writes, “for it bears closely upon the question of episcopal authority and the unity as well as the dignity of the Catholic Church as laid down and instituted by God.”²⁷⁷ A church lacking unity is a weakened and vulnerable church that will start to lose its dignity. When the bishops can’t agree on something, and one bishop (in Rome) tries to force the others to go along against their will or threatens them with excommunication, then the authority of all the bishops, and the respect accorded them, is seriously undermined.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 49-50. Cyprian’s desire to see reason (and Scripture) elevated over tradition will become more intense in his upcoming letters, especially *Letter 74*. Just because the Roman church can claim a more direct relationship to Peter doesn’t mean that they will always be right. Peter himself could make mistakes, as was pointed out in his confrontation with Paul over associating with Gentiles in the Antioch church. Cyprian notes once again in this letter that his position has some tradition behind it, as it extends back to the time of the earlier North African bishop Agrippinus (c. 220). Other references to this North African tradition can be found in *Letter 7* and *Letter 73*. See Clarke, *Letters*, 4:51, 56.

²⁷⁶ Geoffrey D. Dunn, “Validity of Baptism and Ordination in the African Response to the ‘Rebaptism’ Crisis: Cyprian of Carthage’s Synod of Spring,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 274. Here Cyprian shows his great skill as a leader and protector of the church.

²⁷⁷ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:51-52.

²⁷⁸ Admittedly there is a tension in Cyprian’s thought between the need for unity among bishops and the need for autonomy of bishops. Cyprian maintains this tension by arguing that autonomy must be exercised in the context of unity. Cyprian reiterates in *Letter 72* that the Roman church must seek to force its will on the North African churches, and vice versa. “We are not forcing anyone in this matter; we are laying down no law,” writes Cyprian. “For every appointed leader has in his government of the Church the freedom to exercise his own will and judgment, while having one day to render an account of his conduct to the Lord” (Clarke, *Letters*, 4:54). The *Acta* from the council of 256 will also record Cyprian’s sentiment on the matter: “For neither does any of us set himself

Letter 73, addressed to bishop Jubaianus of Mauretania, is perhaps Cyprian's most complete theological statement on the rebaptism matter. This is where Cyprian makes his famous statement that "there is no salvation outside of the church" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).²⁷⁹ He stresses in this letter that the catholic church has the truth and heretics do not. To accept their baptisms is to imply that they share in the truth. Doing this undercuts the entire catholic enterprise. The clergy has to protect the life-giving waters of the church so that they remain pure and available to those thirsty individuals on the outside who come looking for them.²⁸⁰ The clergy must not confuse people about where the truth resides. When heretics return to the catholic church to confess their sins and be restored, won't it be confusing to them (and to those who watch) if the church tells them their sins have already been forgiven? "We who preside over the faith and truth," Cyprian writes, "must not deceive or mislead those who come to the faith and truth."²⁸¹ Any compromise about truth will weaken the church from within.

up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another" (Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 63-64, 77). As Dunn sees it, Cyprian's position is essentially that bishops can do whatever they want provided they are aware they must eventually answer to God for it. See Dunn, "Validity of Baptism and Ordination in the African Response to the 'Rebaptism' Crisis," 263; and Sage, *Cyprian*, 319.

²⁷⁹ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:66. Poorthuis notes that this phrase would find continued expression in centuries of later Roman Catholic documents. It can be seen in materials from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII (1302), and the decrees of the Council of Florence (1442). This phrase of Cyprian's has, until the latter part of the twentieth century, been taken by Catholics to mean that all non-Christians (e.g., Jews, Muslims) as well as non-Catholic Christians (Greek Orthodox, Protestants) are condemned to perdition. Poorthuis argues that this overly rigid understanding of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has led to unnecessary intolerance and condemnation of various groups. Properly interpreted, he argues, Cyprian's concept should encourage believers to search for salvation within the community of believers rather than to preclude dialogue with people of other faith traditions. See Marcel Poorthuis, "Cyprian and the Tolerance of Our Mother the Church: A Heritage between Identity and Exclusion," in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 252-55, 265-68.

²⁸⁰ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:54-60.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65-68. A valid baptism is related to the truth of the faith itself. Therefore, a Novatianist who confessed a creed in a false (heretical) gathering could not have received a valid baptism. See Weinrich, "Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine, and Augustana VIII," 276.

The tone of the last two letters is increasingly harsh. Cyprian is doing his best to follow his own advice and demonstrate patience, but he is finding that difficult. In *Letter 74*, a fellow bishop has asked to know Stephen's position. Cyprian recounts Stephen's view, adding that "there is much that is arrogant, irrelevant, self-contradictory, ill-considered, and inept in what [Stephen] has written."²⁸² Stephen has remarked that there must be no "innovation" and that the church should remain with its (Roman) tradition. But for Cyprian, it is Stephen who is the innovator. Cyprian gets furious. He "cannot comprehend the pigheadedness nor understand the presumption which places human tradition before divine ordinance."²⁸³ For guidance on matters like this, "We must go back to the Lord as our source, and to the tradition of the Gospel and the apostles," writes Cyprian. "Let our conduct draw its rules from the same source from which our beginnings and our precepts took their rise."²⁸⁴ Here Cyprian draws his famous conclusion: "For a custom without truth is but error grown old."²⁸⁵ Custom without truth must not be allowed to stand because it will weaken the church from within.

Letter 75 is sent to Cyprian from the Cappadocian bishop Firmilian, who is aware of the controversy and takes Cyprian's side in it. He agrees that Stephen's "appalling discourtesy," "outrageous actions" and "insulting arrogance" have unnecessarily ruptured the peace between

²⁸² Clarke, *Letters*, 4:70. Cyprian is not only insulted by Stephen's assertion that the North African procedure is an "innovation," but also rejects the assertion that the Roman practice mentioned by Stephen actually dates back to the apostles themselves. See also Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 10.

²⁸³ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:71.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 76. Shuve notes that the dispute, in Cyprian's mind, is now not just about a misguided understanding of baptismal theology, but about a misguided understanding of tradition and its proper place in the church. As mentioned above, Karl Barth highlights this quote by Cyprian as indicating an early resistance to the budding two-source view of authority in the church. Barth, the great theologian of the Word, highlights this as the main reason for the separation between the Roman Catholic church and what will always be the true "evangelical" church. See Shuve, "Cyprian of Carthage's Writings from the Rebaptism Controversy," 642; and Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1:546-49.

the bishops.²⁸⁶ Firmilian, like Cyprian, sees the obvious damage being done when a bishop like Stephen “finds the location of his bishopric such a source of pride, who keeps insisting that he occupies the succession to Peter,” yet who is so clearly in the wrong.²⁸⁷ He agrees with Cyprian that this is custom in opposition to truth, and that the clergy’s primary obligation should be to stand for the truth regardless of custom. If the bishops overlook this, they are guilty of “darkening the light of the church’s truth,” and they will be “the cause of death to those who wished to have life.”²⁸⁸ He agrees with Cyprian that prideful bishops who insist on custom rather than truth are damaging the church from within.

Conclusion

The documents from the rebaptism period are theological and doctrinal on their face, but this does not preclude them from containing important apologetic elements. Cyprian mostly stresses apologetic element (1) in his treatises from this period. Christianity is a faith that has various benefits. Christianity is a religion that can produce citizens with the very important virtue of patience. This is because patience derives from God and can only be bestowed on God’s children. Similarly, the Christian religion enables its followers to escape the vices of jealousy and envy. Not every Christian avoids these vices all the time—even a bishop like Stephen falls prey to them occasionally—but the Christian who is humble and prayerful will be able to avoid them if he tries. Pagans have no such power.

Cyprian mostly stresses apologetic element (4) in his letters from this period. Christianity is a faith that must continually be defended against heresies and forces of division. The church

²⁸⁶ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:79.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

cannot give in to the idea that the Novatianists have an equal share in the truth and can convey sacramental powers equally. It cannot give in to the idea that a practice backed by Roman custom and tradition is as important as one backed by reason and the plain meaning of Scripture. If it does so, the authority and dignity of the church is threatened, people are confused about the truth, and the church is greatly weakened from within. Cyprian is motivated to write relentlessly and apologetically to prevent this from happening.

Martyrdom Period (257-58)

Introduction

The final period of Cyprian's ministry is his martyrdom period. By 257, the Emperor Valerian had come to share many of Decius' concerns about instability in the empire and non-compliant Christians being the cause of that instability.²⁸⁹ Valerian, like Decius, decided he had no choice but to act. He directed his edicts—especially the second one—at the structure and clergy of the church rather than the citizenry as a whole. This was more targeted than Decius' plan had been, and would hopefully expend fewer resources as a result.²⁹⁰ In Carthage, the proconsul quickly identified Cyprian as an important target. After some preliminary questioning, he sent Cyprian off to exile in the small town of Curubis. Cyprian would remain there for about a year before being recalled for trial and execution in the late summer of 258.

²⁸⁹ In addition to Cyprian's materials, a good source for details on Valerian's anti-Christian measures is Eusebius, who also details the persecution faced by Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria. Valerian had to deal with mounting economic problems including a crushing debt load, a nearly bankrupt treasury, and very high rates of inflation and currency debasement. Seizing church property and confiscating the assets of wealthy Christians was another way to help ease the strain. See Eusebius, *Church History*, 7.10-11; Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, 67-68; and Paul Keresztes, "Two Edicts of the Emperor Valerian," *Vigiliae Christianae* 29, no. 2 (June 1975): 84-94.

²⁹⁰ Sage, *Cyprian*, 342. Valerian, like Decius, wanted to force the church and its leaders to acknowledge the Roman gods. He banned church services and Christian funerals, purged the Senate of Christians, ordered the confiscation of Christian's property, and (especially) ordered the execution of clergy.

During this period Cyprian writes his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, as well as his final *Letters 76-81*. Knowing that his own death is fast approaching, he writes very passionately. In these last few works, Cyprian mostly stresses apologetic element (1), with various final arguments about the benefits of being a Christian.

Exhortation to Martyrdom, to Fortunatus (late 257)

Cyprian writes his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* shortly after being sent off to exile. His goal in this treatise is to provide a compendium of Bible verses to help and encourage his church, now being stripped of its clergy, in the coming persecution of the Last Days.²⁹¹ Cyprian gathers together a large number of verses and organizes them into a single fourteen-point argument—with each point supported by Scripture—for why martyrdom should be embraced by Christians. This treatise exhibits some continuity with the work of Tertullian.

Cyprian begins by making some arguments about idols. He writes that idols are not gods; God alone must be worshipped; God warns sternly against idolatry; God does not easily pardon idolaters; and God gets so angry with idolaters that he sanctions their death. Cyprian sounds like earlier apologists as he writes that idols made of silver and gold obviously have no life in them and cannot be divine. This is apologetic element (2), the coherence argument for Christianity. But Cyprian goes beyond the incoherence of idolatry to argue that idolatry infuriates the living God. Christians must be careful lest they ever fall into it. Cyprian provides many examples from Scripture of how the people who did so were severely punished.²⁹² Idolatry is the gravest sin

²⁹¹ Cyprian, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, preface. Downs cites this work as another example of Cyprian engaging in “proof-texting” by pulling together collections of passages designed to prove his argument. See Downs, “Prosopological Exegesis in Cyprian’s *De Opere et Eleemosynis*,” 282.

²⁹² Cyprian, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 1-5. Bevenot notes the similarity between the way sin’s remissibility is depicted here and the way it is depicted in *On the Lapsed*. God forgives, but he does not forgive lightly or easily (*facile*). See Bevenot, “The Sacrament of Penance and St. Cyprian’s *De Lapsis*,” 189.

there is, Cyprian writes, and God cannot easily pardon those who allow themselves to succumb to it.²⁹³ This repeats a previous argument from *On the Lapsed*.

Echoing themes from Tertullian's *On Fleeing in Times of Persecution*, as well as his own earlier works, Cyprian argues that persecution is something that God is now sending to prove the faith of Christians. As a result, it will be very important to exhibit courage and steadfastness in the face of it.²⁹⁴ Believers should not fear when their time comes, because God will protect and guide them through whatever they must endure.²⁹⁵ A great reward awaits those who are martyred.²⁹⁶ Dying for one's faith is the highest and most dignified calling one can have as a Christian. Believers must remember this. "What a dignity it is," he writes, "and what a security, to go gladly from hence, to depart gloriously in the midst of afflictions and tribulations...it behooves us to embrace these things in our mind...if persecution should fall upon such a soldier of God, his virtue, prompt for battle, will not be overcome."²⁹⁷ Here Cyprian engages in apologetic element (1) as he declares that to be able to die a martyr is one of the greatest benefits of the Christian faith.

Letters 76-81

Cyprian's final works (*Letters 76-81*) are similar to the *Exhortation to Martyrdom* in both tone and apologetic emphasis. These letters stress the great benefits that Christians have and inspire the Christians to be encouraged, not discouraged, in this time of increasing stress. *Letter*

²⁹³ Cyprian, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 1-4.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

76, for example, is written to a group of individuals in Numidia who have been imprisoned down in the mines until they can be sentenced to death. This group includes both clergy and laity, and it includes both women and children as well as men.²⁹⁸ Cyprian expresses love for these heroic Christians, and solidarity with them. He sees himself as having a share in their sufferings.²⁹⁹ Cyprian praises them and encourages them in their dark and dreary circumstances. He includes a financial gift with his letter in an attempt to relieve their suffering in whatever small way he can. Their present suffering will bring them great reward, he promises, and will encourage others to follow bravely in their path. God will be faithful to help them endure their pain and know what to say when they are finally brought to trial.³⁰⁰ In times like this, the Christian God shows himself to be very trustworthy and very real. The benefits of the faith come to the fore.

Letters 77-79 contain the thankful replies from those imprisoned down in the mines. They share Cyprian's view that martyrdom will be a crown for them, and they look forward to it despite their intense suffering at present. They tell Cyprian he has a crown awaiting him, too. They value Cyprian's leadership in the church and they are grateful that he has taken the time to encourage and support them in their hour of need. Once clear benefit of the faith is the way Christians are faithful to help and support each another in times like this.³⁰¹

Letter 80 has Cyprian back in Carthage under house arrest and should be dated to August of 258. Cyprian writes to a fellow bishop to report that the situation now looks bleak. Bishop Sixtus in Rome has already been killed, and the order has been given that all confessing

²⁹⁸ To Dunn, this is another example of Cyprian writing to female confessors. Anyone who was faithful to maintain church *disciplina*, regardless of their sex or status in the church, was worthy of praise and imitation in Cyprian's eyes. See Dunn, "Cyprian and Women in a Time of Persecution," 217-18.

²⁹⁹ Clarke, *Letters*, 4:95.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-100.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 100-04.

clergymen are to be put to death immediately. Likewise, “senators, high-ranking officials, and Roman knights” will lose their property and positions of status if they don’t recant.³⁰² Cyprian knows that as soon as the directive from Rome arrives, he will be recalled to Carthage and killed. He has no intention of resisting the directive when it arrives. He wants his church to remember that “they should not be fearful but rather joyful at this, the hour of their confession; for they know that during it soldiers of God and of Christ are not slain, but crowned.”³⁰³ In times like this, Christians must keep in mind that it is not death, but rather deathless eternity, that awaits them. The promise of eternal life and reward, which is unique to Christianity, is one of its most important benefits.

Letter 81 is Cyprian’s final work, dating to within a week or so of his death on September 14. Here Cyprian reports that his capture is imminent. He desires to be martyred at home in Carthage, in front of his people, so they can be encouraged by his faithfulness. “It befits a bishop,” writes Cyprian, “to confess his faith in that city where he has been placed in charge over the Lord’s flock. It is proper that the appointed leader in the Church should bring glory upon all his people by making his confession in their midst.”³⁰⁴ He gives his clergy some final instructions. They should remember all that he has taught them, remain calm, and not be worried about what will happen to them, because God is standing at their side in their time of need. Cyprian now prepares to make his full confession (*confessio*). A confession goes beyond words and into deeds. It entails a willingness to die for Christ. “His will,” writes Cyprian, “is that we

³⁰² Ibid., 104. This letter contains a good summary of Valerian’s second edict, issued in 258, which was intended to tighten the noose further than the first had around the necks of the most prominent Christians: the clergy, the high-ranking politicians, the *matronae*, and the *Caesarini*. See Keresztes, “Two Edicts of the Emperor Valerian,” 84-85.

³⁰³ Cyprian, *Letters*, 4:105.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

should do more than *profess* our faith; we are to *confess* it.”³⁰⁵ The Christian God is the one who gives his followers the power to confess their faith with blood.

Conclusion

The documents from this period are rich in apologetic content, especially element (1), which is the positive declaration of the benefits of the faith. During times of suffering, the fact that Christians help each other, and that God stands by their side, is extremely valuable. Also valuable is how the believer is empowered by God to make a full confession of his faith with his life. To be able to die as a martyr is a gift from God. It is a glorious crown and a direct entrance into a deathless eternity. Rather than shrink back from this, the Christian should gladly embrace it as a significant benefit of his faith.

Cyprian practiced what he preached. The account of Cyprian’s trial and execution is preserved in the *Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*.³⁰⁶ This document, like Pontius’ *Vita*, has an apologetic slant to it and was probably written by a Christian. Nevertheless, it is more sober and formal than the *Vita*, and records the events of Cyprian’s death in the language of a civil servant rather than a disciple.³⁰⁷ The *Acta* portrays Cyprian as a resolute man who does not waver at all in his final hours. He is asked by the proconsul Galerius, “Do you put yourself forward as leader for these men of sacrilegious mind?” Cyprian replies, “Yes.” Galerius continues, “The most sacred emperors order you to perform the requisite ceremonies.” Cyprian replies simply, “I will not do it.” Galerius urges him to reconsider and to “consult your interests.”

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 106, emphasis added.

³⁰⁶ *Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*, I-VI.

³⁰⁷ Bakker, “Instigator and Standard-Bearer of Christianity (*Acta Proconsularia* 4.2),” 49.

By saying “consult your interests,” Galerius is likely referring to the fact that Cyprian is a privileged man from a wealthy curial family who still has plenty of connections with high-ranking pagans.³⁰⁸ But Cyprian replies, “In a matter so just, there is no consultation.”³⁰⁹ Being martyred for the faith he has so strenuously defended, for so long, is his ultimate apologetic.

Summary

Chapter Four has carefully reviewed each of Cyprian’s treatises and letters in order to show that there is a clear apologetic thread that runs through these works. In each of the five phases of his episcopate, Cyprian engaged in a rigorous defense of his faith by incorporating the four basic elements of an apologetic program into his writing. He was deliberate about doing so even when those writings concerned, on their face, more practical matters of church governance. Because the presence of apologetic elements (1) through (4) is so extensive, it is reasonable to conclude that Cyprian—like Justin, Athenagoras, Mathetes, Minucius Felix and Tertullian before him—ought to be considered a Patristic apologist.

Chapter Five will review the continuity and development in Cyprian’s apologetic, explore the ongoing relevance of Cyprian’s apologetic emphases for believers today, and propose some areas for further research.

³⁰⁸ He may also be referring to the fact that Cyprian is a man who heads up a large ecclesiastical hierarchy, many of whom are now in attendance at these proceedings. See Hunink, “St. Cyprian,” 38.

³⁰⁹ See *Acta Proconsularia*, 3. A similar response is found in *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, 1.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Cyprian the Apologist

This dissertation began by observing that Cyprian has not generally been considered an apologist of the church. As noted in Chapter One, Cyprian is referenced only tangentially—if at all—in most apologetics texts. Recent studies of Cyprian have largely concerned themselves with other matters, such as his work as a practical church administrator, his views about Catholicism and church unity, his contribution to the developing penitential system, and his advocacy of decentralized church governance. The present study set out to explore whether perhaps this was an oversight and Cyprian should be considered an apologist under some reasonable definition of the term.

Chapter Two canvassed the apologetic literature in order to settle on a working definition of apologetics. There is broad agreement that such a definition must involve multiple elements of both an offensive and defensive nature. The following was adopted as a working definition:

Apologetics is a program of support for the Christian faith which contains one or more of the following elements: (1) a positive declaration of the benefits of the faith, including but not limited to salvation; (2) an argument for the coherence of the faith as a worldview that makes sense and fits well with the world as it really is; (3) a defense of the faith against false charges brought against it by the outside enemies of the church; and (4) a defense of the faith against heresies and other internal forces of division that would weaken it. This definition was shown to fit with the sense of the Greek terms *apologia* and *apologeomai* as used in the New Testament.

In Chapter Three, some recognized works of apologetics from the latter half of the second century were reviewed. These include the two *Apologies* of Justin Martyr, *A Plea for the*

Christians by Athenagoras, *The Letter to Diognetus*, the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, and Tertullian's *Apology*. These works contain examples of all four of the elements of apologetics that comprise the definition. Each apologist has his own unique approach and emphasis, in part reflecting the unique circumstances under which he wrote.

Chapter Four carefully examined each and every document (treatise and letter) in the corpus of Cyprian's work. Each was assigned to one of the phases in Cyprian's ministry, in order to locate them properly in context, and they were examined in chronological order. The goal was to see whether these works are characterized by the same four apologetic elements that are found in the New Testament writings and in the works of the recognized second century apologists. This examination revealed that Cyprian deliberately and repeatedly engaged in all four elements of a robust apologetic program. Time and time again, he stressed the benefits and coherence of the Christian faith, and he labored in various ways to defend it against its internal and external enemies. As a result, Cyprian should be considered a Patristic apologist.

As mentioned at the outset, one risk in a study like this is that the primary source documents are read selectively and forced to fit into a box for which they were not designed. Should *On the Unity of the Church*, which is clearly a work of ecclesiology, be read as a work of apologetics? Is it proper to look for apologetic elements in letters which are very practical in nature—like those encouraging fellow Christians in jail, or disciplining virgins, or urging presbyters to wait for a council to be convened? The answer is yes. Apologetic themes and emphases can be woven into all kinds of written works, even those which (on their face) address other matters. It is reasonable to expect that men like Cyprian, with strong apologetic inclinations, would look for every possible opportunity to persuade others about the benefits and coherence of the faith, and to defend it against those who would weaken it. This is especially true

when the author knows (as Cyprian did) that his works will circulate among a wide audience of Christians and pagans. Examining documents carefully in order to draw out these apologetic themes and emphases, while perhaps unusual, is not illegitimate because it unearths a significant amount of information that gives warrant to view Cyprian as a Patristic apologist. The presence of apologetic elements (1) through (4) in Cyprian's writings is so extensive that even if only a fraction of those elements are accepted, one should reach the same conclusion.

Continuity and Development in Cyprian's Apologetic

The second century apologetic works reviewed in Chapter Three exhibit a mix of both continuity and development. There is continuity in that each of the works uses an individualized, eclectic approach containing its own unique blend of the four apologetic elements. There is also development in that these works, as a group, gradually move away from rebuttal element (3), which characterizes the earliest works, toward the coherence element (2) and the benefits element (1). Perhaps this is because the apologists felt more confident as the threat of persecution faded somewhat as the second century drew to a close. Strengthening element (4) was not strongly evidenced until Tertullian's *Apology*, the last work written. This may relate to the growth of the church and the fact that internal, rather than external, enemies began to pose a relatively larger threat to the church at the dawn of the third century.

Cyprian's work, likewise, is also characterized by both continuity and development. There is continuity in that multiple apologetic elements can be seen in many of his writings and in each phase of his ministry. In the Early Period, for example, Cyprian focuses mostly on apologetic elements (1) and (2) in his treatises, with some attention to element (4) in his letters. In the Decian Period, Cyprian continues to address elements (1) and (2), but shifts more notably into strengthening element (4), especially in *On the Lapsed* and *On the Unity of the Church*. The

Plague Period involves all elements (1)-(4), with perhaps the most stress on element (1), as the worries and struggles of this time lead Cyprian to reiterate the advantages of the faith for those near death. In the Rebaptism Period, Cyprian stresses element (1) in his treatises but element (4) in his letters, as the church is once again in dire need of strengthening from within. In the Martyrdom Period, Cyprian stresses mostly benefits element (1), as he and his associates face martyrdom. Rebuttal element (3), which is the most important for the earliest second century apologists, is the least emphasized in Cyprian's ministry.

Cyprian's works also show development. His early and late works are dominated by benefits element (1) and coherence element (2), while his middle works are dominated by strengthening element (4). It may be that Cyprian was naturally inclined towards offensive apologetics but was forced to engage in more defensive apologetics given the burdens and responsibilities of his episcopate. In the middle years of his ministry, important doctrines such as penance/reconciliation and rebaptism required more explicit formulation. Different factions in the church took it upon themselves to try to shape these doctrines, and this created numerous sources of internal division which required a defensive apologetic response by Cyprian.

The preponderance of element (4) in Cyprian's mid-career writings is likely one of the main reasons Cyprian has not been considered an apologist by historians of the church. Many see this as the work of a churchman and not the work of an apologist. Some are reluctant to even include element (4) in their definition of apologetics, preferring to think of apologetics as a series of intellectual arguments for the coherence of the faith. Even if element (4) is dismissed as the work of a churchman, not an apologist, there is still ample evidence that Cyprian engaged to such an extent in the other elements that comprise the definition that he should be considered an apologist. Some of his treatises—like *To Donatus*, *On the Vanity of Idols*, *On Mortality*, and *An*

Address to Demetrianus—are so thoroughly apologetic under the most conventional definition of the term that Cyprian would almost certainly be considered an apologist if they were his only surviving works. Perhaps it is because those treatises are overshadowed by his more famous ecclesiological treatises (*On the Lapsed*, *On the Unity of the Church*), that Cyprian’s career became redefined and his work as an apologist overlooked.

Apologetic Emphases and Their Relevance for Today

Benefits

What are Cyprian’s main apologetic emphases and what relevance do they have for believers today? Beginning with apologetic element (1), Cyprian is careful to point out Christianity’s many benefits. For example, Cyprian reminds believers that God is one to whom they can pray, and who will answer their prayers. God is one who places in his children the desirable virtues of patience and generosity. God makes Christians ideal citizens who are valuable to the harmony and well-being of the state. He gives them the power to overcome the lusts of the flesh and remain disciplined. He pays close attention to what they do, and he disciplines them for their own good when necessary. As Cyprian argues in *On the Lapsed*, God can use government persecution to wake up sleeping and self-centered Christians. If God should allow government persecution to strike the modern American church, which is in many ways similarly asleep and self-absorbed, Christians will find that Cyprian’s work can help them frame the experience properly.

God is one who, after rebuking and chastising, is willing to tenderly forgive. Christians have a Father whose mercy and forgiveness trump everything, and who will restore those who are willing to repent, regardless of how long they have lived apart from him. God also gives Christians the power to forgive others. Paganism conveys no such power. God uses Christians to

financially support those in need. As Cyprian notes, when a Christian is generous with his wealth, he enlists God to act as the guardian and protector of his children after he is gone. This protection is something that non-believers desperately want, but no amount of money can obtain for them. Cyprian also reminds believers how life today, like life in the third century, is so brief and unstable. Christian faith is the best way to cope with its fearful plagues and violence. Christians have a God who will guide and direct them as long as they have to remain here. He is their enduring source of hope and comfort. Pagans do not have anything like this.

Cyprian's ministry years were characterized by an unrelenting stream of difficulties and challenges. In the persecution of Decius, many believers suffered greatly. When the persecution of Decius stopped, a plague started. When the plague passed, another round of persecution began. Cyprian's apologetic was characterized by a profound sense of the great advantages of being a Christian during difficult times like these. Christians in America may not see the relevance of this for their lives, at least not right now, but Christians in the Majority World—who face suffering on a daily basis—can take great comfort in what Cyprian wrote.

Like Tertullian before him, Cyprian considered martyrdom for the faith to be one of Christianity's greatest benefits. For him, it represented a swift and glorious entrance into the very presence of the Lord. Today, many Christians outside of the United States face the real prospect of being martyred for their faith. They can be greatly encouraged by works like Cyprian's *Letters 5-14* and *76-81*, his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, and the record of Cyprian's own fearless martyrdom contained in *The Life of Cyprian* and the *Acta Proconsularia*.

Coherence

Cyprian also encourages modern believers to engage in apologetic element (2), as they follow him in arguing for the coherence of the Christian faith as a worldview. The coherence

argument is leveled against Christians with great regularity today. As in the third century, many non-Christians see Christians as ascribing to an irrational view of the origins and operations of the world. Cyprian's writings provide useful ammunition for this battle. Cyprian shows how the various pagan alternatives, when probed, can rather easily be shown to make less sense than the Christian worldview. Cyprian's arguments about wealth and the foolishness of trusting in it are still quite valid. His efforts to reach men like Donatus and Demetrianus show how an articulate engagement with non-believers about the reasonableness of the Christian worldview can yield excellent results. His exegetical labor to show that the history of Israel and the consistent message of Scripture make a plausible case for God's action in history can be replicated today. Rational people can still be persuaded, if Christians will work hard to persuade them.

Rebuttal

As noted above, rebuttal element (3) is less of an emphasis in Cyprian's writings than in the writing of the second century apologists. But Cyprian still takes the time to rebut false charges leveled against Christians. He does this most notably in his *Address to Demetrianus*, where he rebuts the accusation that Christians are atheists who are upsetting the order and well-being of Roman society, and that they are the cause of natural disasters like the plague. In America today, the accusations against Christians are different, but they still exist. For example, some argue that Christians are "intolerant" and should be found guilty of "hate crimes" because they damage society when they speak out against certain sinful lifestyle choices. Modern-day Christians can learn from Cyprian how to fashion a defense against false charges like this, and to do so with a mixture of firmness and love.

Strengthening

Cyprian's apologetic program is focused most importantly on element (4), or defending the faith against heresy and the other internal forces of division that would divide and weaken it. Believers today would do well to reflect on his emphases here and apply them. Christians today frequently see the need to defend the faith against its external enemies, like atheists and secular humanists, but overlook the need to defend it against its internal enemies. Christians should recall that Paul worked hard to strengthen the Corinthian church by refusing to exercise the various rights that he had as an apostle (1 Cor 9:3, 2 Cor 12:19), that Tertullian worked hard to articulate a "rule of faith" so that doctrinal purity in the church would be protected and heretics could be identified as such, and that Cyprian spent much of his time laboring to prevent the church from division over doctrinal matters like how to restore the lapsed and whether or not to rebaptize heretics.

Cyprian shows the contemporary believer various ways he can work to strengthen his church. For example, he can diligently oversee those individuals in the church for whom he has responsibility. He can discipline them appropriately. He can respect those in positions of authority over him, understanding that church governance and order have been established by God. He can work patiently through church councils, governing boards, and other forms of group decision making. He can refuse to sow the seeds of division and discord in his congregation. He can be on the lookout for heretical teachings and expose them. He can work to convince others on matters of faith and doctrine by appealing to reason and Scripture, rather than custom and tradition. Careful observers of Cyprian, like Augustine, have pointed out the need for Christians of all times to follow Cyprian in avenues such as these.¹

¹ Smither notes how Augustine, in nine of his sermons commemorating Cyprian, encouraged his hearers not just to remember Cyprian's martyrdom but to imitate Cyprian's life and how he worked to strengthen the church.

For Cyprian, maintaining church *unity* is perhaps the most important part of apologetic element (4). This often makes Protestants squirm. They don't like the way Cyprian condemns them for being "schismatic" and refusing to stay in the Catholic Church. They especially don't like Cyprian's insinuation that doing so costs them their salvation. As a result, many Protestants shy away from the writings of this most "catholic" of church fathers.² However, before dismissing it, contemporary Protestants should reflect carefully on what Cyprian has to say about unity. Men like John Calvin took the time to do this. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin interacted thoughtfully with Cyprian's *On the Unity of the Church*. For Calvin, the unity that Cyprian spoke of can be understood to refer to the invisible connection that all believers have to one another, with Christ as their head. Cyprian's thinking about the equality, broadly-distributed control, and limited hierarchal power of the bishops fits with this conception of unity. For Calvin, church unity was indeed something that was precious in God's sight and had to be defended just as stridently as Cyprian suggested.³

These sermons celebrated his practical work as a bishop (309); his preaching and writing (310); his renunciation of the world (311); his faith in word and deed (312); his perseverance (313); his commitment to truth and holiness (313A); his testimony before his persecutors (313B); his spreading the aroma of Christ (313C); his consistent teaching (313D); and his love of unity and peace (313E). In chapter 27 of his *Life of Augustine*, Augustine's biographer Possidius considers Cyprian to be a saint like Augustine. See Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 71; idem, "'To Emulate and Imitate': Possidius' Life of Augustine as a Fifth Century Discipleship Tool," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 155-57, 164; Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), 369-80.

² Roldanus notes that many Protestants, as well as many Roman Catholics like Hans Kung, are offended by the idea that God's mercy might be tied tightly to one particular ecclesiastical body, especially one with such a concentrated episcopal power structure. See Johannes Roldanus, "No Easy Reconciliation: St. Cyprian on Conditions for Re-integration of the Lapsed," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 92 (Sept 1995): 23.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1016, 1047, 1106-18. See also Aza Goudriaan, "Cyprian's *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*: Why Did Reformed Theologians Consider It a Useful Book (1559-1655)," in *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought*, ed. Henk Bakker, Paul van Geest, and Hans van Loon (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 226-39. Other early Reformed theologians who found value in Cyprian's comments about church unity include Scultetus, Mornay, Polanus, and Voetius.

Many Protestants believe the natural state of Christianity is not the structural unity that Cyprian had in mind, but rather the more holistic invisible unity of the type Calvin envisioned as he read Cyprian. Such unity is not characterized by “uniformity,” but rather by an increasingly elaborate “pluriformity.” Accordingly, the growing number of religious bodies that characterize modern Christianity—each with its own specific mission, tailored to reach unique cultures around the world—is something to be accepted rather than rejected. The tremendous growth of Christianity, especially in places where more than one type of church is allowed, seems to support this Protestant contention.⁴

But even if this is true, Protestants should still heed Cyprian’s words and abhor all forms of unnecessary division. Christians are in a relationship of communion with one another as part of the universal church, which is the body of Christ.⁵ They are commanded to love one another and to work together to evangelize the world. Isn’t it true that some damage is done to Christ’s body when one tears at the fabric of the church by separating from one’s fellow believers? Cyprian issues a stern warning about this: “Who, then, is so wicked and faithless, who is so insane with the madness of discord, that either he should believe that the unity of God can be divided, or should dare to rend it—the garment of the Lord—the Church of Christ?”⁶ This warning should act as a regulator on the more divisive instincts of Protestants. Cooperating with fellow

⁴ See, for example, Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, trans. James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 75; Oscar Cullman, *Unity Through Diversity: Its Foundation, and a Contribution to the Discussion Concerning the Possibilities of Its Actualization* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 29; John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* (London: SCM, 1975), 16; and George W. Harper, “Breaking with Cyprian’s Paradigm: Evangelicals, Ecclesiological Apathy, and Changing Conceptions of Church Unity,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32, no. 4 (Oct 2008): 313-15.

⁵ Russel Murray, “Assessing the Primacy: A Contemporary Contribution from the Writings of St. Cyprian of Carthage,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 56-63. Murray notes that some signs of a collegial understanding of primacy were present in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Although Cyprian’s words about organic church unity are to some extent a product of the age in which he lived, they can still serve as a starting point and compass for ecumenical dialogue today.

⁶ Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 8.

believers and remaining united to the greatest extent possible is a powerful way to strengthen the church and defend it from within. Now, just as in the third century, this is an important part of the apologetic task.

Further Research

This dissertation points to several areas where further research is needed. One, just mentioned, is the need for more work on Cyprian's notion of church unity and its ongoing usefulness in the modern context. What does it really mean to speak of "unity" in the modern church? Who, if anyone, is actually practicing it? If the structural unity that Cyprian envisioned is (rightly or wrongly), gone for good, what should it be replaced with? Is there a way to do this while remaining faithful to Cyprian's underlying intent? Does "unity" today just mean an "agreement to disagree," cordially, as members of the universal invisible body of Christ? Or might it demand something more? Should there be a renewed attempt to find common ground in various doctrinal disputes? Should there be more direct cooperation with other Christian denominations, either at home or on the mission field? These various questions are as difficult to answer as the ecumenical movement itself has proven to be. But reading Cyprian provides fresh impetus to explore these questions, and to look for answers, as a way of strengthening the church from within.

It would appear that a much deeper embrace of Cyprian by evangelical scholars is warranted. Cyprian is in some ways an ally of the Catholic cause, but in other ways an ally of the Protestant or evangelical cause. Not only is his view on distributed church governance rather evangelical, but so is his view on the authority of Scripture relative to tradition and his strong resistance to any "two-source" view of authority in the church, as Barth has noted. A careful reading of Cyprian reveals these various affinities, but somehow evangelical scholarship has not

been adequately motivated to mine his work to the same extent Catholics have. Cyprian is a fruitful field for more evangelical research.

The dissertation also suggests that more work is needed to understand apologetics in a holistic way. Apologetics in the modern era has become more or less an academic discipline. Offering historical evidences and developing logical proofs is part of the apologetic task, for sure. This is mostly coherence element (2). Modern apologists need to incorporate more of benefits element (1), rebuttal element (3), and strengthening element (4) in their work. This is not just the domain of preachers and churchmen; there is plenty of room for scholarly engagement here. Modern apologists who would incorporate these elements in their texts would be returning to the more holistic understanding of apologetics that permeated the New Testament, the work of the second century apologists, and the work of Cyprian.

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