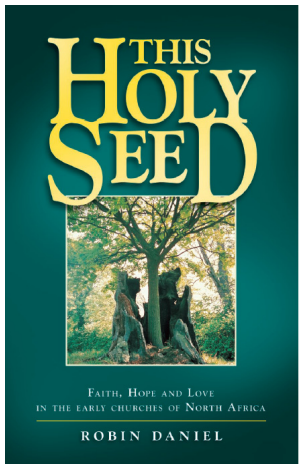
THIS HOLY SEED

Robin Daniel



"There is hope for a tree.
If it is cut down, it will sprout again,
and its new shoots will not fail."

"Like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains standing when it is felled.
The holy seed is its stump."

Job 14:7; Isaiah 6:13

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As often as you mow us down,
the more numerous do we become:
The blood of the Christians is seed.

For who, when he sees our obstinacy
is not stirred up to find its cause?
Who, when he has enquired,
does not then join our Faith?
And who, when he has joined us,
does not desire to suffer,
That he may gain the whole grace of God?

Tertullian [1]

Despite the fiercest opposition,
the terror of the greatest persecutions,
Christians have held with unswerving faith
to the belief that Christ has risen,
that all men will rise in the age to come,
and that the body will live forever.

And this belief, proclaimed without fear,
has yielded a harvest throughout the world,
and all the more when the martyrs' blood
was the seed they sowed.

Augustine [2]

[1] *Apology* 50
[2] *City of God* 22:7

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PREFACE

The dating of events in early North Africa is the subject of continuing scholarly debate, and we have attempted to note the most generally accepted dates. The numbering of Cyprian's letters follows that of the Eerdmans edition of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series, volume 5. For Augustine's letters and sermons, we have followed the numbering of the Benedictine Latin texts. The Eerdmans' *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series arranges Augustine's sermons somewhat differently, but also notes the Benedictine numbering. Biblical quotations are from the New International Version, except where otherwise noted.

Terminology is a matter of greater difficulty. Certain words which originated with the Greek- and Latin-speaking Christians of the first and second centuries were still being used by their successors in the Middle Ages; some are still current today. The earliest Christians did not always use those words in the same sense as those who came after them. The medieval Roman Catholic Church, in particular, with its hierarchy of religious officials and its liturgical formulae, continued to use ancient Latin terms although the practices and beliefs which they represented had by then evolved to such an extent that the apostles would hardly have recognized them.

For this reason we have avoided certain traditional words that might be misleading, and adopted equivalents which may convey more accurately the meaning understood during the period we are studying. We refer, for example, to "overseers" rather than "bishops". Despite its derivation from the early Greek *episkopos* and Latin *episcopus*, the word "bishop" does not today evoke the role or activity of an *episkopos* in a North African church of the first and second centuries. For the same reason we refer to "elders" rather than "presbyters", and to "helpers" rather than "deacons". For convenience, a small "o" is used for the "overseers" who were jointly responsible for the early churches, and a capital "O" for the solitary "Overseer" who often replaced them from the third century onwards.

We have also avoided words with a modern denominational connotation. The early churches were neither Roman Catholic, nor Protestant, and they knew nothing of customs and beliefs adopted in later centuries. In place of the term "ordination", for example (with all this implies to the modern reader), we simply refer to people being appointed to positions of leadership, or oversight, in the churches. We avoid speaking of "monks" and "nuns", because the communities of celibate Christians in the early days bore little resemblance to their medieval successors. The word "conference" is used for the occasional gatherings of Overseers, in preference to the more traditional "council", because the former conjures up in the modern mind a better idea of what actually took place on those occasions.

The word "church" with a small letter is used of any local fellowship of believers. The word "Church" with a capital letter indicates the mystical Body of Christ embracing all true Christians, and transcending denominational labels such as Catholic, Montanist or Donatist. The "Church in North Africa" thus comprises

Christians of all persuasions living in that part of the world. It does not imply any formal ecclesiastical structure or administrative control.

The title "Catholic Church" refers to the official association of churches which submitted, from the second century onwards, to the decisions of the periodic "Catholic" conferences (councils) and were served by the Overseers (bishops) approved and appointed by the "Catholic" authorities. It should be clear, however, that the Catholic Church in North Africa was by no means Roman Catholic. If anything it was "Carthaginian Catholic". It was, at least in its earliest days, evangelical, in that it affirmed the Old and New Testaments to be given by inspiration of God and drew its beliefs and practices very largely from them. Only with the passage of time did traditions and the decisions of conferences come to rival the word of God as a source of authority. In fact it was only after the final collapse of the Catholic Church in Africa that Roman Catholicism assumed its familiar medieval form.

Most modern writers refer to the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa as *Berbers*. This was originally a term of abuse, or at least of disrespect, meaning "babbler" or "barbarian". It was used by Latin-, Arabic- and French-speakers, but not by the North Africans themselves. We have given them the name they prefer: Imazighen, meaning "free men" or "masters". The *gh* is pronounced as a very light gargle, somewhat similar to the Parisian French *r*, but best represented in English perhaps by *hh*. Thus we pronounce the word: *Imazihhen*. The singular noun, and adjective, is *amazigh* (masculine) or *tamazight* (feminine). The language which they speak is known as *Tamazight*.

Abbreviations:

ANF	ed. Roberts & Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Series* (Eerdmans)
NAPNF	ed. Schaff, *Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers Series* (Eerdmans)
DOTCC	ed. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (OUP)
ECF	ed. Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (OUP)
HOTCC	Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans)
COG	Augustine, *City of God*

INTRODUCTION

A marvellous vigour animates the faith of the men and women who move through these pages. If the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, then the dynamic progress of Christianity in North Africa proves the potency of that seed.[1] From small beginnings the churches experienced phenomenal growth, and within two hundred years were well-nigh setting the pace for the entire world.

The New Testament narrative of the Acts of the Apostles draws to a close with chapter twenty-eight, but of course the work of the Gospel went on without a break. Christianity spread rapidly along the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and the surviving records actually tell us more about the African Christians at this time than about their brethren elsewhere. "In the writings of Tertullian, the Church of Africa... is suddenly placed before us with a fullness and vividness scarcely equalled by any Church at this period, and exceeded by none."[2]

Indeed, the Way of Christ had become a part of life: "Roman Africa became a most flourishing centre of early Christianity. The vigour of the faith displayed by the African Church is unexampled even in [early] days. No province produced more brilliant examples of constancy in martyrdom. No Church can boast more illustrious names than those of the three great North Africans: Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine."[3]

North Africa has been called "the home of uncompromising Christianity",[4] and North African Christianity was certainly dramatic. Even its problems and failings were spectacular: the tendency to split into factions for example. "Christianity ardently embraced was ardently cherished and defended. The [fervent] African spirit found expression in energetic benevolence, in stern self-discipline, and in heroic courage. If sectarianism was nowhere more aggressive, persecution was nowhere more unflinchingly endured."[5] These were no ordinary people! "Deeply impressive indeed is the history of these North African Christians, great alike in their virtues and in their faults."[6]

[1] referring to Matt 13:31
[2] Plummer p.109
[3] Foakes-Jackson p.263
[4] Foakes-Jackson p.509
[5] Plummer p.110
[6] Foakes-Jackson p.263

If the zeal of the earliest churches inspires us to a greater faith, their subsequent struggles can teach us much about the sterner realities of the Christian life. Indeed, as the centuries pass, we find the Christian communities marred by strange and ultimately fatal flaws – flaws which caused them to crack, and eventually to crumble. The Church which rose to heights of brilliance was yet to fall to the depths of obscurity, and to disappear – it would seem – without trace. And perhaps in looking back we can learn a little here and there which will help us, in our own day, to steer a wiser and a safer course through the rocks that still loom large, and which threaten even now to shipwreck the vessel. The rocks, as we shall see, have not changed very greatly, although the weed which covers them may bear a different hue.

There are, as it happens, many striking parallels between the condition of the land, and the nature of the people, as they were in the past and as they are now. Persecution, for example, is no new thing. Emperors and governors in Roman times were often steadfastly, and sometimes violently, opposed to the way of Christ. And those who would follow him were faced with a choice, as they frequently are today: to obey God or to obey man.

There were social tensions then, as now: an urban elite on the one hand – wealthy, sophisticated, educated – and the mass of people on the other, who felt trapped in what seemed a life of toil with little hope of advancement. Christians were drawn from both groups. And to compound the tensions that this might produce, there were racial and religious complexities which confused and distracted the early churches, as they sometimes do today.

In Roman times, well established trade and administrative links stretched across the Mediterranean to Europe and to the Near East. These brought a continuous flow of new ideas and technological innovations, a mixing of cultures and languages similar to that of our own day. There was a constant movement of people, too, between the churches of North Africa and those in Europe and Asia Minor. Brothers in Christ, wherever they came from, were welcomed, and they contributed to the life of the churches as the Holy Spirit led them. Leaders travelled far afield to visit their counterparts in other places; periodic gatherings of representatives took place in order to discuss matters of importance. The North African Christians learned from the experience and advice of their brothers in other lands, and offered to them in turn the benefit of their own counsel and encouragement.

There was in the past, as now, discussion concerning the relationships between the churches of the different towns and cities. Some people expected the larger, or older churches to exert a degree of control over those elsewhere. Others firmly resisted this. There was sometimes uncertainty as to who were the divinely appointed leaders of the churches, and what that

leadership entailed. The issue of language also arose. Which language, or languages, should be used for worship and for witness? And there were different opinions regarding the necessity for discipline in the churches. Should a Christian, for example, who falls into serious sin be accepted back into the fellowship of the church, and if so, on what terms? In addition, there were specific controversies deriving from particular doctrines and practices approved by some, but not by others. Apart from all this, a certain vagueness is apparent at times as to the practical aim of the Christian community and the purpose of God for his people in this world. What, after all, were the Christians hoping to achieve?

"There is nothing new under the sun," Solomon assures us;[1] and indeed most of the challenges and dilemmas which we now face have been encountered in times past. One is wise who learns from his own experience, but he is wiser who learns also from the experience of others. And as for us, if we fail to understand the choices and the decisions which our fathers made – and the consequences of those choices and decisions – then we have only ourselves to blame.

We have much to learn; but equipped with the lessons of history, we can face with far more confidence the opportunities of our day. Indeed, we have many advantages which our forebears lacked. Where they climbed we too can climb, and higher! And shall we not see the power of God sweep through this land once more? – a glorious revival of Christian life: the name of Jesus proclaimed in every place by living fellowships of loving saints. Against such a Church, the gates of hell shall not prevail![2]

The Christians of North Africa were a vast multitude, and with their own eyes they saw the power of God at work in these lovely hills and valleys. The people of this land deserve to know their remarkable Christian history. Such a heritage cannot be lost to them. Filled with the joy of the Lord, our fathers prayed for the future of their land. And now, so many years later, our life in Christ is surely an answer to their prayers. And what God did for them, can he not do for us? And what he has done in past times, can he not do again?

We pray that this story of old heroes will hearten and inspire the heroes of our own day, and stir in our hearts a longing for the love of God to fill North Africa once more. The tree which fell is by no means dead: within its stump is a holy seed. The seed is sprouting before our eyes, and we shall nurture its precious growth until the tree once more has spread its shady branches through all this thirsty land.

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[1] Ecc 1:9

[2] referring to Matt 16:18

We sometimes find ourselves at odds with the great Augustine, yet we cannot deny him the final word. As we draw the threads of our story together, we offer it to you with the same plea that he made as he concluded his monumental "City of God":

"It may be too much for some, too little for others.
Of both these groups I ask forgiveness.
But of those for whom it is enough I make this request:
that they do not thank me, but join with me
in rendering thanks to God."

Amen.

DATES

BC	
1000	Phoenician settlement on Mediterranean coast of North Africa
800	beginnings of Carthaginian Empire
146	Rome defeats Carthaginian Empire, start of Roman rule in Africa
AD	
c.68	martyrdom of apostles Peter and Paul
156	Polycarp of Smyrna martyred
c.160	Tertullian born
165	Justin martyred
177-192	persecution under Marcus Aurelius and Commodus
177	persecution at Lyon and Vienne
180	persecution at Scillium
c.195	conversion of Tertullian
c.200	Cyprian born: Montanists excommunicated in Rome
202-204	persecution under Severus
203	martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas: Tertullian joins Montanists
c.230	death of Tertullian
245	conversion of Cyprian
248	Cyprian appointed Overseer in Carthage
249-251	persecution under Decius
253-260	persecution under Valerian
258	martyrdom of Cyprian
c.260	Arnobius born
261	Gallienus makes Christianity a permitted religion
284-304	persecution under Diocletian
c.305	beginnings of Donatist movement
308	persecution under Galerius
310	edict of toleration by Galerius
312	accession of Constantine
313	Edict of Milan granting freedom of religion
316	Constantine pronounces sentence against the Donatists
325	Council of Nicaea
327	death of Arnobius
354	Augustine born
372	revolt of Firmus

386	conversion of Augustine
395	division of Roman Empire into East and West
396	Augustine made Overseer in Hippo
410	Rome sacked by Goths under Alaric
411	conference in Carthage to resolve Donatist controversy
429	Vandals invade Africa
430	death of Augustine
439	Vandals under Genseric capture Carthage
455	Rome sacked by Genseric
533	Byzantine reconquest of North Africa
647	Arabs win battle of Sbeïtla, beginning of Arab invasion
670	foundation of Kairouan
683-686	Kosayla effective ruler of North Africa
695-702	Kahina holds back the Arabs
711	Arabs lead army to Spain
740-1062	Berghawata movement in Morocco
750-1146	Kharedjite movement in Algeria
809	foundation of Fes
893-1120	Shiite (Ketama and Ibadite) conquests in Algeria
1050	immigration of Banu Hilal and other Arabian tribes
1160	Abd el-Moumen destroys last Christian communities

NAMES OF NORTH AFRICAN TOWNS

ancient	***modern***	***ancient***	***modern***
Abitina	Chaoud	Sala	Salé
Caesarea	Cherchell	Scillium	Kasserine
Calama	Guélma	Sicca	El Kef
Cirta	Constantine	Sitifis	Sétif
Cuicul	Djemila	Sufetula	Sbeïtla
Curubis	Korba	Thagaste	Souk Ahras
Cyrene	Chahat	Thamugadi	Timgad
Gummi	Mahdiya	Theveste	Tébessa
Hippo	Annaba	Thugga	Dougga
Icosium	Algiers	Thisdrus	El Djem
Lambaesis	Tazoult	Thabraca	Tabarka
Lixus	Larache	Tingis	Tangier
Madaura	Mdaourouch	Tipasa	Tipasa
Milevis	Mélève	Utica	Utique
		Volubilis	Oualili

PART ONE: FIRST FRUITS
(1st and 2nd centuries)

1. A Seed is Sown

Perpetua hardly knew how to face her father. What could she say? At last she turned to him: "Father, do you see this water pot standing here?" The old man glanced at the object in the corner of the filthy prison cell. "I see it," he replied. And she said to him, "Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" He answered, "No, it can't." "And so," said Perpetua gently, "neither can I call myself anything but what I am, a Christian!"

Born into a prosperous family, Vivia Perpetua had spent the long, sunny days of her happy childhood in the lovely seaside city of Carthage on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Lacking no comfort or privilege, she had enjoyed an education available to few girls of her day. Now she was no longer a child but a young married woman twenty-two years of age, and the security of her early years had been swept away by a crisis which shook her entire family. Arrested and imprisoned, Perpetua was accused of a serious crime: she had confessed to being a Christian.

For several weeks now she had been held in the city jail. As the days went by, her father had hoped he might persuade her to change her mind, and so secure her release. But time was running out; she showed no sign of yielding. And now the old man heard her say, as firmly as ever, that she was still resolved to follow Christ. Saddened and exasperated, he stormed out.

What more could he do? An honourable man, an upright citizen of Carthage, he was well-known in the most respectable circles. Never had he been in any kind of trouble: his reputation was unblemished. He worshipped the same gods as his neighbours, and caused no offence to anyone. But now he faced shame and humiliation, all on account of his perverse, rebellious daughter. It was love for her that constrained him to climb the hill to the public jail and beg for entry into its dark, squalid passages. He was not a harsh or a cruel man. His heart grieved for his daughter and he longed to help her – to take her away from that dreadful place. He thought of the fun and laughter they had shared in happier days and knew he must persuade her to give up this strange and stubborn folly that had somehow taken hold of her. Perpetua wrote in her diary: "Now

when the games approached, my father came to me, worn with trouble, and began to pluck out his beard and to throw himself on his face and curse his years, and I sorrowed for the unhappiness of his old age."

* * *

Perpetua was not alone in her cell. She had her baby boy, no more than a few weeks old, and she was thankful for this: he had been taken away, and she knew he had cried for her. But the baby was a further grief to the old man. "Consider your little son who cannot live without you," he said to her. "Lay aside your pride and do not ruin us all." And Perpetua grieved for the child who must indeed live without her.

Some kind friends had spoken to the prison authorities and gained permission for Perpetua to spend certain hours of the day in a lighter part of the building. It was here that her mother and brother had come to see her, and it was then that they brought her precious child. "The prison," she wrote, "became all at once like a palace, and I would rather have been there than anywhere else." After that she would not let the baby go. She kept him with her all the time and fed him at her breast in the hot, fetid darkness of the crowded cell. And she prayed for him: that he too, as he grew, would come to know the way of truth – and not fear to follow it.

Then there was Felicitas, faithful Felicitas, a servant but far more than a servant. She was a sister in Christ, and a dear friend. Felicitas was afraid, but not of death; she was afraid that she would be left behind. Even the Roman Empire did not execute pregnant women, and Felicitas was eight months with child. She asked Perpetua and her friends to pray that she might give birth before the day appointed for their trial. The prayer was answered, we are told, and immediately her labour pains began. She cried out, and one of the guards laughed: "If you cry out at this, what will you say when you are thrown to the beasts?" "Now I suffer what I suffer," she replied, "but at that time Another will be with me who will bear my pain, because I will be suffering for his sake." She gave birth to a little girl. Three days later the child was an orphan.

The jailer sometimes allowed friends to visit Perpetua and Felicitas in their cell. It was dark, and horribly cramped, and they suffered from the uncouth rudeness of the guards. But it was there that the two young women, with three or four companions, were baptized. Perpetua prayed for grace to bear whatever might lie ahead.

She and her friends had been singled out from among the Christians of Carthage. The authorities wished to make a public example of them. And now the whole city waited to see whether they would sacrifice to the idols

and deny Christ. The governor hoped they would – then perhaps others would become discouraged or fearful and do the same. But he underestimated the determination of Perpetua and her friends, and he knew nothing of the grace of God which would sustain them in their hour of trial. If they were to be made an example, they were determined to be a worthy and honourable one – to shine with the love of God on the stage prepared for them.

Perpetua's heart went out to her loving father. She wished she could please him, but she knew Christ as he did not. If she denied the truth would that, she wondered, really be of help to him? In the end, surely it would only deceive him. She must show him the way of Christ whatever happened, and pray for him to understand.

Her brother knew how she felt. He was a comfort to her, for he too, like her mother, was a Christian. He came to pray with her in her cell and suggested that she ask God to reveal what was to happen. The answer to their prayer came in the form of a dream. She saw a narrow, golden ladder set up from earth to heaven, guarded by a fierce beast at the foot, and hedged in at the sides by weapons of war. She saw in her dream Saturus, one of the four Christian men with her in prison. He started to climb the ladder, and she followed, treading on the head of the beast as she stepped onto the first rung. As he reached the top, Saturus called out to her, "Perpetua, I am waiting for you!" Joining him there, she found herself in a meadow where a shepherd sat milking his flock, surrounded by figures robed in white. The shepherd reached out to her and offered her a small cake of cheese. She took it with both hands and the white-robed company said "Amen", at which she awoke with a taste of sweetness still in her mouth. This and other dreams brought great comfort to Perpetua and her friends, and gave them courage and strength to meet their discomforts with joy, and to face the future without fear. They knew that the visions were from God, and would be fulfilled. They felt sure that the shepherd was their Saviour Jesus Christ, and that soon he would welcome them to that beautiful meadow; there they would taste the sweetness of God's love.

They were not at all like the ordinary prisoners, who generally caused trouble and made life difficult for the guards. They were patient and thoughtful, and filled with quiet confidence. Perpetua's diary tells us that one of the soldiers superintending the prison "began to regard us in great esteem, perceiving that the mighty power of God was in us." His name was Pudens.

* * *

When the day of their trial was announced, Perpetua's father came again. She tried to console him. "May God's good will be done for us," she said. "We are not in our own hands but in his." "Daughter," he said. "Pity my grey hairs! Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called your father. Don't make me a cause of mockery before men. Don't bring about our ruin, for none of us will dare to show his face if you are condemned." He threw himself at her feet, and wept in despair, imploring her to turn back from the wretched and abhorrent path she had chosen. She stood before him quietly, waiting for him to finish what he had to say. He said it, and left, heavy-hearted; he took with him her baby son.

Little time remained. Perpetua wrote in her diary: "We were just having our midday meal when we were suddenly hurried off to be questioned, and we came to the market place. Immediately, the news ran all through the market and a vast crowd began to gather. We climbed up onto the platform. The others, when they were questioned, confessed their faith boldly. And so it came to my turn." Her father crept as close as he could, holding out her child to her. He cried out, "Take pity on your baby!" The judge could not help being moved at the sight, and urged her to draw back before it was too late. "Spare your father's white hairs," he said. "Spare the tender years of your child. Just offer a sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor, and go free." "I cannot!" she replied. "Are you a Christian?" he asked. "I am!" she said firmly.

At these words her father cried out in anguish, and continued to clamour until the judge, growing impatient, ordered him to be removed. In the scuffle, he received several blows from the clubs of the guards. Perpetua heard the blows. "I suffered the pain of my father," she said, "as if it had been me they struck. I suffered for his desolate old age." But she could not give way. She could not deny the truth; she could not deceive her family; she could not turn her back on her Saviour. Sentence was pronounced and she was condemned, with the others, to face the wild beasts in the arena.

Living in Carthage at this time, and probably standing in that very crowd, was a young man, a lawyer named Tertullian. "The blood of the Christians," he said, "is seed." This holy seed, once sown, was destined to yield an astonishing harvest.

For the time being, they were taken back to the cells. There they stayed, awaiting the great festival to be held on the birthday of one of the emperor's sons; they were to be put to death then for the entertainment of the city. During those days one of the young men, Secundulus, died, but as time went by the dungeon witnessed remarkable scenes. The five young people, far from lamenting their fate, rejoiced in it. Their loving gentleness and their steadfast faith made a profound impression on all who saw them.

Visitors who came to gaze on them and pity their misfortune were surprised to find them filled with a strange, radiant confidence. Those who had intended to comfort them, found them already rejoicing in the comfort and assurance of God himself. A number of onlookers were so amazed that they resolved there and then to follow the way of Christ. Perpetua wrote: "They all went away astonished, and as a result of these things many believed." The prison guard Pudens was so affected that he evidently decided to became a Christian too. Perpetua saw her father once more before the final day, but not her child whom he refused to bring to her.

It was customary for condemned prisoners, on the eve of their execution, to be entertained with a public feast. The five took this opportunity to have a fellowship meal with others of their group in remembrance of their Saviour, Christ who had suffered and died for their sake. The people of the city crowded in to see them. Some were united with them in the same faith; others, at that time, were not. "Mark our faces well," said Saturus, "so that you may recognize us on the day when we are judged."

The next day, the 7th March AD 203, Perpetua, Felicitas, and the three young men, Saturus, Saturninus and Revocatus were led out into the arena – the public amphitheatre where the games and chariot races were held. They felt relief that their ordeal would soon be over, and gladness at the thought of the welcome they would so soon receive in their heavenly home. They were beaten as they passed between the lines of soldiers, and then the attendants attempted to robe them in ceremonial pagan garb – the men in scarlet and yellow gowns like priests of the god Saturn, and the women like those consecrated to the goddess Ceres. They protested, saying they were not idol worshippers but Christians, and eventually were allowed to go out in their own clothes. The vast crowd roared around them from the benches as they walked bravely into the open space in the middle of the amphitheatre. At last the beasts, enraged by hunger and the goadings of their captors, were turned loose. The three men were savagely torn by leopards and bears. Perpetua and Felicitas were wrapped and tangled in nets and, as they sang psalms of joy and faith in God, they were thrown before a maddened cow which gored them and tossed them cruelly.

Perpetua fell awkwardly, and seeing her tunic torn from her side, she drew it round her, we are told, "more mindful of her modesty than her suffering." She tied up her loose hair, and looked around for Felicitas. Her friend was lying on the ground. Helping her to her feet, they were taken to a small room leading off the arena. Perpetua seemed in a trance, despite her wounds, as though she had felt nothing, asking when the beasts were to come. In this moment of respite, as she regained her breath, Perpetua's brother and a friend called Rusticus came to see her. "Stay firm in the

faith," she urged them, "and love one another, and may our martyrdom not be for you all a cause of shame!" Then she rose and went back into the arena. In another part of the stadium Saturus was talking to the soldier Pudens. "Now believe with your whole heart," he urged him. "Farewell, and be mindful of my faith, and let not these things disturb you but rather strengthen you."

When the watching crowds had seen enough of the wild beasts, realizing that some of the mutilated victims were still alive, they called out for them to be dispatched. Perpetua and her friends embraced one another for the last time and limped with dignity and quiet joy to the centre of the stadium where men with swords fell on them. The gladiator who had been appointed to kill Perpetua was little more than a youth. He fumbled nervously and stabbed her ineffectually. She took hold of his sword and steadied it against her breast with her own hand. Finally she too was set free.

* * *

Carthage was a curious place. It was the capital of Africa; but then Africa – at least the Roman province which bore that name – was no more than a narrow strip of land along the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Carthage in the third century AD reminds us, in some ways, of Corinth. They were both sea ports with a rootless, shifting population occupied mainly with commerce, knowing few social distinctions but those of wealth. Both suffered the strain on morals typical of the transit town tenanted by adventurers of all types, separated from the restraint of friends and family, and lured by the sensuous indulgences of heathen religion. In both we encounter a cosmopolitan mix of races – Africans, Italians, Jews, Egyptians, and Gauls – and a restless emotional and mental energy finding its outlet in the quarrels of the streets and markets, and in the violent tumult of the amphitheatre. And all was aggravated by the hot climate, the flies, and the diseased squalor of the stinking, overcrowded alleys. Carthage was a city proud of itself, yet fallen from its past splendour; subject to Rome, yet uneasy in its subjection; dominating the surrounding region and the tribes which inhabited the interior, yet holding no real control over them; united in its outward worship of the ancient deities, yet inwardly splintered by doubt in their reality.

And the people of Carthage found in their midst a most unusual group of men and women: almost a family, yet not related by ties of blood; almost a religion, but not having any gods that could be seen; almost a race, yet drawn from many different countries. They included rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated, and they numbered among their

company Africans, Italians and Jews, without distinction. They had a touching gentleness and a strange attractive charm. You would never find them quarrelling, or cheating, or drunk. They would not join in the uninhibited orgies of their neighbours; they were never seen at the public plays, and they were never known to enter the famous temples of the city. In fact they were an enigma, a mystery. They lived in Carthage but seemed to want no part in it. On the contrary, they met secretly in little groups here and there, and no one knew what went on behind their closed doors.

Yet they were the kindest of people. If you came to know one of them you would find yourself drawn to trust and confide in him. If you asked him to explain what he believed, he would tell of one who had come not very long ago as a saviour for mankind, who was rejected by those he came to befriend, and was finally put to death. But that was not the end of the story, for, if you will believe it, three days later this man walked out of his tomb, and in some odd way is with his followers still.

This was surely a beautiful story, and a harmless belief, and perhaps it was true. But the Roman Empire set little store by beauty, and had scant concern for truth. Religion was useful as a means of controlling and manipulating the people. It worked well so long as all adhered to the same religion and all participated in public worship. But now, to their annoyance, the imperial authorities found in the very heart of their African capital, a steadily growing body of people who had opted out of public worship and refused to sacrifice in honour of the emperor. The very fabric of society and of civilization was under threat. This movement must be stamped out before it went any further – and all the more quickly in view of the ominous rumblings of discontent stirring throughout the Empire. The people of Carthage were growing restless and impatient with their Roman rulers. They needed entertainment. Word came that the keepers of the beasts required more victims for the arena. Those Christians, they said, will serve our purpose very well.

* * *

Perpetua and her companions left behind them a community of believers whose feelings must have been very mixed – gladness that their loved ones were now beyond the reach of further cruelty, yet sadness that their friends were no longer with them; assurance that they had been welcomed into a better place by the Shepherd of Perpetua's dream, but uncertainty as to what would yet happen to those left behind. The five poor bodies were taken from the arena and lovingly buried. A plaque was erected to commemorate their courageous stand. Every year, on the anniversary of their death, the

Christians met to remember them, and they drew strength from their brave example. One of the women of the Christian community took Felicitas' baby girl, and reared the orphan child with her own. As the girl grew she learned how Felicitas had believed in Christ and had not denied her faith, and she was told that one day she would see the mother whom she had never known, and would be with her in heaven where there are no more tears and no more separations. We do not know what happened to Perpetua's son. Perhaps he was brought up by his grandfather as a pagan, or perhaps by Perpetua's brother as a Christian.

One other detail is hidden from us: we know nothing definite of Perpetua's husband. It may be that he finds no place in the narrative because she had been forced into marriage against her will to one who cared little for her and her faith, and who simply abandoned her in her hour of need. But it seems more likely that her husband was one of those who shared her imprisonment. On hearing of her arrest, Saturus had given himself up freely to the authorities. In Perpetua's dream, he had waited for her so they could enter life together. He himself had seen a vision of heaven with Perpetua by his side. They were not to be separated. A Christian man who could win the love of such a girl would not be one to run from danger: he would proclaim his faith and live for it – and if needs be, die for it – in the arena, or the mountains, or the deserts far inland. And he would stand by his wife whatever happened. There were such men in North Africa in those days.

The ill-judged policy of imperial Rome had backfired: that was clear to everyone. The challenge had been accepted and the battle won, and now the city of Carthage knew that Christians would not yield to force. Six brave men and women had held firm to their belief in Christ, undaunted by the threats and the cruelty, refusing to bow to Roman tyranny. Everywhere, in the streets and market places, people were talking of what they had seen and heard, questioning what it all meant. This new teaching evidently possessed an unusual power: it took away the fear of death, and filled its followers with an inexplicable joy and confidence. And what, they asked themselves, would happen next? The great African city waited uncertainly, wondering what lay at the heart of this remarkable Christian faith.

The details in this story, including the extracts from Perpetua's diary, are all factual. They are drawn from the contemporary account, of which an English translation appears in Musurillo pp.106ff., Hardy pp.36ff. and *ANF* Vol.III pp.697-706.

2. Peoples and Pioneers

Perpetua's Carthage had already witnessed a thousand bustling years of history. The diverse inhabitants of the great city were drawn from the mixed residue of peoples who had found their way there literally from north, south, east and west. Some, landing from the sea, had married the daughters of men who for countless millennia had grazed their flocks on the coastal plains. Others had worked down from the mountains of the Atlas and Rif, driven by strife or by ambition. Some had travelled north on the Saharan trade-route, finding in Carthage the final Mediterranean terminus beyond which they could go no further. Sailors and farmers, senators and slaves, Africans and Europeans rubbed shoulders in the narrow streets of the ancient city, and mingled their dialects and their goods in its markets. By the third century AD its population had risen to at least 100,000.[1]

Carthage was originally founded as a small trading post by the rugged Phoenician merchants who arrived there from the eastern Mediterranean around 1000 BC. But these men were not the first to dwell along this warm seaboard. Early writers have left us a description of the African people, known as the Imazighen, or Berbers, whom the Phoenician travellers met when they first beached their strange craft on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Most were nomadic pastoralists raising cattle, sheep and goats, living in tents and moving with the seasons. Others were settled permanently in the upland valleys, dwelling in mud-walled, or dry-stone huts. They tended olive trees, kept some livestock, and sowed their small fields with wheat and barley. The women wove cloth and made pottery; the men worked stone and wood, and made whatever tools they needed. Metals were scarce, and money unknown.

Their staple diet was a kind of dry semolina made from rough ground barley or wheat, known as *seksu* or couscous. They dressed in tunics ornamented with red bands, and in colder weather wore hooded, woollen cloaks. They had a liking for jewellery and arranged their beards and hair neatly. They had a reputation for a robust constitution and long life.

Family groups lived together under the eye of their grandfather or eldest uncle, and lands were owned in common by the family or clan. They built their villages on the hillsides where they could easily be defended, and they formed local alliances of clans and tribes for mutual protection, or sometimes aggression. A confederation of this sort would be led by an assembly comprising the heads of the families. In times of unrest a man

[1] Raven p.101

renowned for his military prowess might unite several tribes and become a local chieftain or king for a while.[1]

* * *

The Phoenicians did not infringe upon the lands of these indigenous Africans; they were content simply to establish small settlements along the Mediterranean shore. Having built their main base at Carthage in 800 or 700 BC, they continued westwards, setting up rudimentary depots and trading posts along the coast, through the straits of Gibraltar and down the Atlantic seaboard of Morocco, as far as modern-day Larache and Essaouira. The Phoenicians were great travellers and maintained sea links throughout the then-known world, from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, and as far as the English Channel.

This extensive commercial network, however, was not destined to endure. Year by year the Phoenicians had watched their original homeland at the eastern end of the Mediterranean become increasingly, and hopelessly, subject to the overwhelming military might of the Assyrian Empire. But it was to the great Greek soldier Alexander that the Phoenician capital, Tyre, finally fell in the 4th century BC. Finding their eastern roots forcibly pulled up, those Phoenician adventurers who had settled along the African coast elected to stay there and make a future in their adopted homeland. They took the name of their largest settlement and became known as "Carthaginians".

This seems to have given them fresh momentum. Over a period of eight centuries the industrious Carthaginians developed a formidable Mediterranean empire which caused considerable anxiety to its rival across the sea in Rome. Indeed, the gifted Carthaginian general Hannibal, in 219 BC, was poised to capture the great city of Rome itself, having crossed the Alps from Gaul with a convoy of 37 battle elephants. In the end his elephants died, along with many of his men, and he was kept waiting for reinforcements which never arrived. His promising campaign, like the Carthaginian Empire itself, ended rather with a whimper than a bang.

In fact the Carthaginians never attempted to conquer or to rule North Africa by force. They regarded the southern continent simply as a source of raw materials and of fighting men for expeditions elsewhere. The outposts they established were little more than market places, surrounded by extensive agricultural estates producing olive oil, wheat and grapes. These settlements could hardly be adequately defended against any serious attack,

[1] The character and history of the Imazighen are considered further in Appendix 1.

and the Carthaginians relied on maintaining friendly relations with the Imazighen and on trading links which were of mutual benefit. They intermarried freely with the indigenous people, introducing their Punic language and their own brand of pagan religion. They bartered with the local shepherds and farmers, bringing hand-crafted metal goods, glassware and dyed cloth from other parts of the Mediterranean, in exchange for African wool, horses, and olive oil, and for the ivory, slaves and ostrich feathers which came up with traders from the Sahara. They introduced new trees – figs, pomegranates and vines – and they taught the Imazighen how to plant and tend them. Their large-scale agriculture was a great innovation for the Africans, who until then had been limited to tending their small flocks and herds, and caring for the family fields and orchards. The Imazighen readily agreed to the use of their land in this way. Indeed, they stood to benefit considerably from the assured market for the foodstuffs and animal products which they supplied. No doubt they also enjoyed the greater variety in their diet, and the metal tools and other craft goods which their sophisticated neighbours brought. They took to wearing the purple robes and heavy jewellery of the Carthaginians, and learned to speak their language.

* * *

But this could not last for ever. The Carthaginians had friends in Africa, but powerful enemies elsewhere. The Romans had been badly shocked by Hannibal's momentary success. The second century BC saw the arrival of a Roman army at the gates of Carthage, followed shortly afterwards by the fall of the city to its assailants, in 146 BC.

The Romans initially came to North Africa for one reason only: to destroy the power of their great Mediterranean rival, and then go home. But immediately, and inevitably, they became involved in alliances with the local Amazigh leaders who hastened to forge links with the newcomers as they had with their predecessors. The Romans began to see the potential in Africa for the recruitment of mercenaries to bolster the hard-pressed forces on the other frontiers of the Empire. Before long, Roman soldiers gave way to Roman administrators, and plans for colonization began to take shape. Settlers started to arrive. They came mostly from the provinces of the Roman Empire rather than from Italy itself. Gauls, Spaniards, Dalmatians, Syrians, and Jews all added their blood and their customs to the melting pot of Carthage, and they spoke Latin or Greek rather than Punic.

The Romans were great administrators. Once they had decided to stay, they set about organizing their new North African territory with energy and

enthusiasm. They regarded Africa primarily as a source of food, obsessed as always by their need of bread for the ever-expanding and ever vulnerable Empire. Acres of olive trees were uprooted and replaced with wheat and barley. Timber was cut from the forests wherever it could be shipped by water. The Romans had soon organized extensive irrigation works, and constructed aqueducts for cities such as Carthage and Caesarea (Cherchell), and they began to lay down their distinctive roads paved with great slabs of freshly quarried stone.

The leaders and local chiefs of the Imazighen were left to rule whatever lands and people they could, and in the towns the Carthaginian populace was accepted as a trading and commercial class. The leading Carthaginians and the Amazigh chiefs who would pledge their loyalty to the emperor were rapidly endowed with the status and the benefits of Roman citizenship. They found, much to their pleasure, that they could rise rapidly through the political and social hierarchy in the newly developing towns. An Amazigh, Septimius Severus, was elected as Roman emperor as early as AD 193: such was the reality of Roman meritocracy. An Amazigh who became a prefect in Rome could write with justifiable pride: "In my opinion our race is privileged, almost predestined, so prolific it is in people of ability, and all these children it has produced and trained are seen to reach the highest positions."[1]

But those who had not succeeded in jumping on the Roman bandwagon were less enthusiastic. As the imperial officials sought to codify and tax the loosely organized agricultural lands left by the more easygoing Carthaginians, they came up against opposition from the local people who had hoped, perhaps, to see rather more profit for themselves from the change in trading partners. The Romans, they discovered, were rather keener on possessing and controlling territory than had been their predecessors: Carthaginian settlers had generally paid rents on the lands they occupied. As the area under wheat advanced, some tribes lost their traditional grazing lands to Roman agriculture. Many of their men chose to become paid labourers; others took their flocks further inland to the poorer soil of the higher ground. Their future was uncertain.

By the 1st century AD the Romans had loosely divided the coastal strip into five provinces. This was for administrative convenience rather than because the boundaries represented any real geographical or social divides. The province of *Cyrenaica* extended westwards along the coast from Egypt into modern Libya. Further west, *Proconsular Africa* (later called *Tripolitania*) embraced the shores of what is now the Bay of Syrte. This

[1] Ayache p.54

was the administrative heart of Roman North Africa, centred on its capital, Carthage, near modern-day Tunis. Further west still was *Numidia* and then *Mauritania Caesariensis* (Algeria) and *Mauritania Tingitana*, reaching down the Atlantic coast as far as Sala (near Rabat). The inland town of Volubilis in northern Morocco, not far from the site of modern-day Meknes, grew gradually and became the capital of the western area until the 4th century, when unrest led the Roman authorities to withdraw their administrative headquarters to the coast at Tangier.

The vast, almost ungovernable inland plains and mountains were simply known as the lands of the *Getules* or *Moors*, ruled by their own chieftains. The local Amazigh chief Jugurtha (154-104 BC) managed by somewhat ruthless means to establish his power over a large area inland of Carthage. By 25 BC, an area to the west was recognized as the legitimate territory of Juba II, an Amazigh whose Egyptian wife, Selena, was the daughter of Anthony and Cleopatra. Juba had been brought up in Rome and had achieved distinction there as a scholar. During his forty-eight auspicious years as king, he introduced many aspects of Greek and Roman civilization to North Africa. The Imazighen savoured the trade goods and the craft techniques of Mediterranean civilization and delighted in the cultivation of more varied crops. The stability which Roman rule had brought to the region meant that North African farmers and craftsmen were now able to export their produce to the distant markets in the furthest parts of the Empire. Their powerful allies brought peace and prosperity, but they also introduced the less attractive features of Roman society – the crude brutality of the arena, the humiliating institution of slavery and the perverted depravity of pagan idolatry, along with the unfeeling harshness of the ruthlessly efficient imperial administration.

* * *

And so we find in North Africa, by the first century AD, a mix of peoples, languages and cultures. The inhabitants of the land had been drawn willingly enough into the mainstream of Mediterranean civilization, adopting with ease and enthusiasm the new ideas and new techniques which came their way. The field was now ready and waiting for the advent of the most momentous development of all. The next few years would usher in a new era: the arrival of something which North Africa had never seen before.

The Phoenicians and the Romans, in their day, had come in order to trade, to settle and become prosperous. But just beyond the eastern horizon, with sails set fair for Cyrene and Carthage, already on their way were some most

unusual travellers. And their motives were quite different. They had no thought of exploiting the agricultural or mineral resources of the land. Their purpose was not to trade with the people, and certainly not to rule over them. They brought no weapons, no wealth, nothing in fact but words of kindness – a message of friendship and hope and assurance. These were the people with whom Perpetua threw in her lot, and with whom she was willing to lay down her life.

Secondary sources for the early history and prehistory of North Africa are Camps pp.86-119, 145-177; Frend *TDC* pp.25-47; Guernier pp.51-82.

3. Majesty and Mystery

From earliest times, the peoples of North Africa have shown signs of a profound religious sensitivity. Indeed, there is something universal in human nature which cries out for contact with the mysterious Unseen: belief in the supernatural is common to every continent and every generation. But the closer a people live to the natural world the more deeply they feel that intense desire to communicate with the powers that be, however dimly those forces might be perceived. It is only in the great man-made cities of the modern age that atheism can thrive, for there man is surrounded by his own works and has no time to think, no time to marvel, and no time to try to understand.

Like all who spend their days in the fields and the forests, the ancient Imazighen of the Neolithic and Iron Ages must have been awed by the manifest powers of nature. They felt the same lifting of the heart that we experience when we wake in the morning and glimpse the breath-taking majesty of the snow-capped mountain peaks riding northward in the clear sunlight. They were awestruck, as we are, by the irresistible, raging force of the torrent after the storm, sweeping trees and rocks before it, and down to the plain. They too stood mesmerized by the crashing of the sea on the rocky coast and the wheeling of the seabirds in the western wind. And they marvelled at the setting sun as it ripened, burnished gold to red, and dipped softly beneath the grey, distant hills at the end of the day.

But nature was also full of fears. It held for them the power of life or death. If rain did not fall, the crops would perish – and that meant starvation. If disease struck the herds, then death was just around the corner for them too. Few of their children could survive infancy, and the fate of one child to live and another to die must have seemed an awful and inscrutable one. Was there no way at all to influence what would happen? Was it not possible to avert disaster, or ensure survival? Were there invisible forces behind the majestic unconcern of nature? And could those forces be placated, or befriended? Could their aid be enlisted in the struggle for life?

* * *

It is not an easy task to look back four thousand years and determine what our ancestors thought about life and death, or to imagine how they tried to explain the mysteries of the world about them and the perplexing flow of daily events – especially when they were a people who had no reason to

write down their innermost convictions and speculations. But we can pick up clues to their beliefs, firstly, from whatever artefacts they might have left behind: idols, altars, carved stones or paintings – anything in fact which might have religious significance. And even if the ancient people themselves wrote nothing, we might find reference to them in the writings of others who knew them, traded with them or fought against them. It is also sometimes possible to discern traces of ancient beliefs and practices in customs and superstitions which survive to this day. As we consider the religion of the Imazighen in ancient times we are fortunate, for we can find clues to their beliefs in each of these three ways.

There is evidence that they looked especially to the sky – the abode of the sun with its light and warmth, and the source of life-giving rain. The sky, of course, is full of wonders – the vivid sparkling stars at night, and the softly luminous moon, the magic colours of the rainbow breaking from the clouds as the storm clears, the silent white snowflakes drifting mysteriously to earth, the terrifying flash of the lightning, and the grumbling threat of the thunder. It is not surprising that the heavens inspired awe and fear and worship. Carvings of the sun are frequently found in burial chambers and on standing stones. Sometimes the sun god is represented as a lion with a fiery mane, an animal common in North Africa up to and beyond Roman times and which still appears frequently in folk tales. Inscriptions engraved in shrines and tombs sometimes refer to a god called *Ayyur*, meaning "moon" in the language of the Imazighen.

Worship of the heavenly bodies continued down through historical times. Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, informs us that the Imazighen (Libyans) of his day offered sacrifices to both sun and moon. The elder Pliny, in the first century AD, confirms this. Cicero tells us that when the Amazigh king Massinissa met the Roman general Scipio in the second century BC, he prayed to the sun: "I give you thanks, O Sun most high and you other divinities of the sky, that it has been granted to me before departing this life to see beneath my roof, in my kingdom, P. Cornelius Scipio."[1] Ibn Khaldun tells us that many Imazighen of the 14th century AD still worshipped the sun, the moon and the stars.

The sky speaks of unsearchable mysteries, and just as man reached heavenwards so did the wild, wind-sculptured pinnacles of the Atlas mountains. Perhaps this is why the mountain-tops have always drawn the North African to worship. The elder Pliny tells us that "The Atlas... for the Libyans is a temple and a god." On the High Places, archaeologists have found the remains of Roman temples dedicated to Saturn which were

[1] quoted in Camps p.200

actually built on the ruins of Phoenician shrines, which were themselves constructed from the rubble of earlier pagan sanctuaries. But even before this, as early as the Neolithic period, the Imazighen were carving symbols on the cloud-wreathed peaks of the Atlas and Rif, in caves and grottos and on the rocks which brooded threateningly, or perhaps watched benignly, over their humble dwellings.

Were these rocky places the haunts of the *jnun*, the spirits of the earth? It would seem so. Nowadays votive offerings are still presented in little pottery bowls almost identical to the prehistoric vessels unearthed by the archaeologists. Ribbons are still tied to the thorny bushes which shelter the guardian spirits of particular sacred rocks, haunted caves, springs and gnarled, patriarchal trees. These acts of worship, or of entreaty, testify to an enduring belief in the spirits of the locality – a belief which has evidently survived at least four millennia. The benevolence of the local spirits had always to be secured before ploughing, or reaping, or spending the night on the territory which they guarded. Woe betide anyone who offended such spirits – they ran the risk of incurring the direst penalty: infertility, blindness, madness, or even death.

We know the names of fifty-two of these local deities, largely from written inscriptions or dedications to them in Phoenician and Roman times. Most have a thoroughly Amazigh name, and their names show that they were generally spirits who could bring rain or fertility, but the influence of each was always restricted to its own small area – its own hill, or spring, or village. This was the typical, practical religion of the early Imazighen – a form of animism closely resembling that found in many other parts of the world.

A traveller moving from place to place – a trader, or a musician or soldier – was careful to satisfy the spirits watching over each locality to which he came. Those who travelled a great deal, especially Amazigh soldiers enlisted in the Roman army, tended to lump the local deities together under the name *Dii Mauri*, the Moorish Gods, and then invoke them collectively. This at least ensured that none were left out. One of the most frequently found dedications is to the goddess *Warsissm* or *Varsissima*, a title which in the language of the Imazighen actually means "Without-Name". It seems that they were as anxious to placate the "unknown god" as were the Athenians in the days of the apostle Paul.[1]

It is difficult to know exactly how these deities were placated. Neolithic cave paintings and carvings indicate that rams and bulls were offered as sacrifices, but it is impossible to tell whether they were presented to specific

[1] Acts 17:23

gods, or what sort of deities these might have been. Certain animal sacrifices still exist among the Imazighen which are very different from those of the Arabs in the Near East, but which closely resemble those of the Phoenicians.

Such were the concerns of the living, but the ancient Imazighen took no less care with the burial of their dead. Tombs were built of stone blocks, facing the rising sun. The departed were provided with jewellery, earthen bowls and basins, as though they would have need of these things in the hereafter. Other tombs were dug in the cliff face and decorated with paintings in ochre. These burials date from as early as the Neolithic, and continue well into the Phoenician period.

* * *

In many respects the practical religion of the ancient Imazighen seems to have differed little from that of their rural descendants today. Then, as now, there was a strong and almost universal belief in malevolent supernatural forces, and a continuing desire for protection from them. Many current North African customs and beliefs find no place in either orthodox Christianity or Islam and clearly survive from an earlier age.

The use of "sympathetic magic" underlay many such practices, based on the supposition that one can gain influence over a person, animal or object by creating a model or representation of the intended victim and then performing ritual acts upon it. This would force him to behave in a specific way, or to suffer a particular fate. Knots might be tied in a ribbon or a piece of hair, for example, in order to bind and frustrate the designs of an antagonist, or to seal the womb of a female rival. The symbolic closing of a jacknife could cause impotence for a person whose name had been written on the blade.

By a ritual act it was believed that one could influence the course of events in the outside world. Clothes might be turned inside out in order to bring about a change of circumstances. Seasonal fertility rites could ensure the fecundity of crops and herds: the agricultural year was marked by ceremonies associated with the cutting of the first furrow and the gathering of the first sheaf. Augustine, and others more recently, have written of extravagant sexual orgies, "nights of error", intended as an annual stimulus to the gods or spirits of fertility, in the hope that they would inspire similar activity among the flocks and herds.

Customs and superstitions connected with rainfall are found in almost every semi-arid land, and North Africa is no exception. Women constructed dolls representing "the bride of the rain", much as they do today in certain

places, and these were carried in ritual procession accompanied by songs and pleas to the heavens.[1] The inhabitants of the Canary Islands were accustomed to beating the waters of the ocean with sticks in order to release the waters of the sky. This ancient heathen practice was condemned by Augustine, and he also rebuked those who bathed naked on the day of the summer solstice, inflaming the passions of the watchers. Such customs have apparently died out, but pavements and doorsteps are still sprinkled daily at certain seasons – often no more than a token sprinkling, leaving most of the dust untouched. Is this simply intended to cool the ground, or did it also, one wonders, originally have some deeper significance?

Many believed, in Roman times, as many do today, that their fate was written in the stars. They turned to the astrologers and the sorcerers who read the future in the heavens or in the entrails of animals or the pack of cards. They enquired after auspicious days for a marriage or a journey. They sought out, or avoided, particular people or places in the somewhat illogical hope that they might escape their appointed destiny if it were bad, or ensure its fulfilment if good. Fear of the "evil eye" – the curse cast by an envious rival – dates back beyond Roman times. So does the belief that individuals, and even inanimate objects, can be the repositories of a spiritual power, or *baraka*. Red hot branding irons were used then, as now, as a cure for headaches and character defects such as compulsive thieving or drunkenness.

The number five, the symbol of the open eye and the stylized pomegranate all had religious or magical significance and are still seen today in North Africa. They were associated with the ancient Phoenician goddess Tanit, as was the motif of the open hand which is commonly found today on the tailboards of lorries, painted on doorposts and skilfully worked in jewellery. Generally known as the "Hand of Fatima" (the daughter of Muhammad), the hand motif is often thought of as an Arab importation but is obviously far older. It is found in the Phoenician remains at Carthage and elsewhere.[2] Shrines and holy places in Roman times were whitewashed with slaked lime, and nowadays we still see lime applied to the tombs of Islamic "saints", to isolated rocks and trees, and the doorposts and window frames of houses. This sometimes amounts to no more than a token daubing of whitewash over the exterior walls of the house. Is it simply decoration, or does it serve some other purpose? The original significance of such customs is often little understood by those who practise them today.

Charms such as bones and cowrie shells were worn in the past as they are now, especially by women, to give security against demons, against the

[1] Laoust pp.202-255
[2] Moscati pp.179, 180

"evil eye", or simply to ward off bad luck. Spells were written on paper or bone. Sometimes the ink was washed off and swallowed; sometimes the paper was buried, or burned where the intended victim would be sure to inhale the smoke. Amulets – small leather pouches – were sometimes worn, containing a shred of paper or some other small object with magical power. In more recent times, Koranic verses were often placed in these amulets, or Arabic characters arranged in magic patterns, but the ancient Tifinagh alphabet – in a highly corrupted form – is used even today, clearly suggesting a pre-Islamic origin for such practices.[1] Medicinal plants had a widespread popularity which is little diminished in our own day. It is sometimes not at all easy to draw a distinct line between folk remedies and occult practices using herbal, mineral and animal substances.[2]

* * *

Such were the beliefs of the ancient Imazighen, stretching back, as far as we can tell, into the Stone Age – and in some cases surviving even to the present. But other influences have also made themselves felt during the intervening centuries. The Phoenicians, from 1000 BC onwards, brought to North Africa, along with their trade goods and crops, a set of new gods. Their distinct form of religion was adopted by the indigenous North Africans alongside the older animistic traditions. Images of the Phoenician gods were carved in bass relief on rock faces, or on upright stones erected for the purpose of worship. The engraved images are sometimes accompanied by inscriptions in the ancient Tifinagh script; later examples frequently use Punic or Latin characters. Some of these idols were grotesque. We find Tertullian, as late as the second century AD, taking issue with his contemporaries for worshipping demons and vain idols of stone and wood. In the fourth century AD the people of Tipasa evidently still worshipped with great enthusiasm a bronze serpent with a gilded head.

But the chief of the Phoenician gods was Baal-Hammon, the sun god. Baal was a major deity with a following throughout the Mediterranean basin, and especially in the towns. Despite the crudities of Baal worship, the cult of this supreme god was readily accepted by the Imazighen. In fact,

[1] Akhmisse pp.43-44. The Tifinagh alphabet is discussed in Appendix 1.
[2] Camps, Hart and Coon, offer much fuller accounts of modern folk religion in North Africa. Camps also deals in detail with various aspects of ancient North African paganism. Servier (pp.465-468) identifies similar traditional beliefs in southern Europe, pointing to a relatively uniform religious system uniting the Mediterranean lands of Antiquity. See also Rachik, Akhmisse, Laoust; and ed. Camps, *Encyclopédie Berbère*: articles on *amulettes* (p.613), *animisme* (p.660), *arbres sacrés* (p.853) etc.

Baal-Hammon, the chief of the gods, seems to have struck a chord in the hearts of a people who were already groping towards the concept of a great Being who stood above the array of local deities and spirits. Perhaps, indeed, a vague belief in a supreme God had always co-existed with the day-to-day invocation of lesser, though more accessible, powers. Dedications to Baal, and later to Saturn, his Roman counterpart, are very common in pre-Christian North Africa.[1]

Both Jews and Christians subsequently found the Imazighen particularly responsive to their respective monotheistic faiths, as indeed did the Muslims somewhat later. Perhaps the Jews, from the fourth century BC onwards, were the first to introduce the concept of a single almighty God, but it seems more likely that they merely add substance to existing though necessarily hazy notions.[2] Islamic teachers of the tenth and eleventh centuries AD referred to the one God by the name of *Yakush* or *Yush*.[3] Had the memory of this name survived among the Imazighen from their ancient past, or was it a more recent introduction? We do not know. But it is an intriguing fact that traces of primitive monotheism have been found not just here but among the most diverse of isolated, pre-industrial peoples, in every corner of the globe – an apparently spontaneous belief in a distant and shadowy supreme Being, overlaid and obscured by the practicalities of ancestor or spirit-worship.

Could this almost universal recognition of a supreme God be a sign of mankind's common origin, a cultural throwback, a memory passed down from generation to generation and stretching back to our earliest ancestors, Noah, and before him Adam? Some scholars would seriously suggest this.[4]

[1] Camps p.215; Frend *TDC* pp.77-79

[2] It is the universal custom of the Imazighen to address God as *Rebbi* but the origin of this name is unclear. The fact that Arab Muslims normally refer to God as *Allah* might lead one to suppose that the name *Rebbi* is pre-Islamic. It may indeed stem from early Jewish influence. The Hebrew *rabbi* means "my lord" although the Biblical usage of this word is always with reference to men rather than to God. It is, perhaps, more likely that we should look for the origin of *Rebbi* to that other Semitic language, Punic, or to possible earlier Semitic linguistic influences on the development of Tamazight itself. The occasional Qur'anic use of *rebb* (lord) may thus have struck more of a chord with the Imazighen than the novel term *Allah*, resulting in their general adoption of *Rebbi* as the name of God.

[3] Norris p.6. In fact, "G. Marcy suggests that *Yakush* may derive from the name of Jesus" (*Encyclopédie Berbère* p.431f). This seems somewhat unlikely. Another possible, but unproved, derivation of *Yakush* is from a Tamazight verb root meaning "to give". God would thus be known as "the Giver". Other variants of this name were *Yush*, *Ayyush* or *Aggush* (Ouahmi Ould-Brahim; Aherdan p.63). The Saharan Twareg of the nineteenth century referred to God as *Amanay* or *Amanay maqqaren*, and sometimes as *Mesi* (Norris p.228). These words, however, are probably derived from Latin and Hebrew roots (*Mesi* = Messiah).

[4] Custance, *DP*.34; Richardson pp.50,51. "Going back to the most primitive people, the

Or is it simply the feeling, awakened afresh in each generation, that the glory of man, and the prodigious complexity and beauty of nature must have been designed by some great Mind? There are too many marvels in man himself – sight, hearing, thought and speech – for humanity to have sprung by chance from nothing. Only a Being greater than man could have made man, and only a Being purer than man could inspire in him those exalted aspirations and ideals which he experiences in what he knows are his best moments.

* * *

If the Imazighen sensed these things, then the worship of Baal-Hammon could only be a disappointment, for it failed abysmally to match up to the loveliness of the natural world and the nobility of man's purest ideals. The worship of Baal and his female consort, Tanit, was marked by a sickening cruelty. James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* depicts in harrowing detail the human sacrifices in the temple of Tanit. The little children were placed on the sloping hands of the idol, and they slid from there into a fiery oven. Meanwhile, "people danced to the music of flutes and timbrels to drown the screams of the burning victims," and the parents were forbidden to show grief. Archaeologists, excavating remains dating from the 7th century BC at Carthage, have found the charred remains of babies, ranging from new-born to three years of age, along with other proof of this hideous cult. But by the 3rd century BC it seems that a ram or a bull was often offered as a substitute for the child, at least by more wealthy families.

The universal sign of Tanit was a triangle, pointing upwards and surmounted by a small circle.[1] This shape is still common in Amazigh art and jewellery. The triangle sometimes takes the form of a cross, which has led some to suppose that these brooches and earrings, so similar in some respects to the crucifix, are a lingering testimony to an ancient Christian tradition. But the opposite is the case; they predate the coming of Christianity to North Africa and represent the most grotesque of the pagan cults.[2]

Pygmies of Africa or the central Californian Indians – all have one Supreme Sky God to whom they make offerings" (Schmidt, quoted by Custance p.21). "Wherever we can trace back polytheism to its earliest stages, we find that it results from combinations of monotheism. In Egypt even Osiris, Isis, and Horus, so familiar as a triad, are found at first as separate units in different places: Isis as a virgin goddess, and Horus as a self-existent god" (Petrie, quoted by Custance p.10).

[1] Moscati pp.180, 202, plate 6; Harden p.80, figs. 24, 25, 31b

[2] Cooley p.17. It is possible, however, that the traditional cross motif of the Saharan Twareg to the south is of Christian origin (Gabus pp.63-67).

The worship of the Phoenician gods has died out, but the same cannot be said for the animistic practices which preceded them. The survival of these ancient beliefs and superstitions testifies to the profound significance they held for the people of this land; they met a very deeply felt need. They were the attempt of an intelligent and sensitive people to gain some control over a complex and threatening world.

* * *

By the first century A.D. a substantial number of Imazighen were living in the growing coastal towns of the Mediterranean. Many families had intermarried with Roman administrators and merchants; many more had daily dealings with them in the markets and the port. They heard all the current news and absorbed all the most recent ideas which ran through the Empire. Their ambitious sons had acquired the language and the mental stimulus of a classical education. They discussed with cultured tutors the profundities of the Greek philosophers, and they pondered the mathematical explanation of hitherto impenetrable enigmas. The Imazighen had entered into the intellectual questings of the wider Mediterranean world, and had begun to mine the deeper seams of accumulated human knowledge. What were the ideas which they discussed together in their literary schools and in the shady courtyards of their red-tiled villas?

The animistic people of the inland plains and hills were not alone in their feeling that there must be a supreme deity above the plethora of lesser powers. Educated Romans were actually reaching out in the same direction. There was in fact a widely felt desire, during the last ages of Greek and Roman heathenism, for personal contact with the one God who had existed before all things. The old mythical deities were increasingly neglected, and yet society as a whole was not sceptical or irreverent about the supernatural. In fact the philosophers exercised more spiritual influence than the priests of Roman heathenism. It was the philosophers, indeed, who most diligently endeavoured to awaken in their followers a desire for moral and ethical perfection, and who pointed to the existence of a "prime mover" and a "first cause". People believed there was some deity "out there" or "up there", the unseen god who had actually created the world. The problem was in knowing how to make contact with him.

In the meantime the town-dwellers made do with the worship of the ancient pagan deities, offering sacrifices to Saturn, or to one of the other gods: Mercury the god of eloquence and skill, Mars the god of war, Venus the goddess of love, Neptune the god of the sea, and so on. Others worshipped the gods of the "mystery religions", so called because their rites

were not disclosed to the uninitiated. These cults involved peculiar half-human and half-animal deities and the mythological stories which were associated with them. Mithraism was perhaps the most popular, whose devotees bathed in the life-giving blood of a ritually slaughtered bull. Most of these cults had in common the dying and rising again of a god. The chief deities were frequently in pairs, a male and a female, the one dying and the other aiding in the resurrection. The dying and rising usually coincided with the autumn and spring equinoxes, and symbolized the death of the old year and the birth of the new. By feasting and drinking, and by sexual rituals, the devotees attempted to ensure their own immortality and the fertility of their land and crops. Many people, however, were beginning to feel that the crudities of the mystery religions were unworthy of the great and sublime enigmas which they sensed in nature and in the universe. The stories of the gods seemed to bear little relation to the forces of good and evil which they discerned in the heart of man, and in the world around them – for the behaviour of the gods was no less cruel and licentious than that of their worshippers.

The early Roman age was perplexed above all by the transitoriness of all things, and fired by an overwhelming desire for life and immortality. Everything seemed doomed to inevitable decay and extinction. Good things seemed never to last; destruction was the inescapable lot of all mankind. There was a great longing in the hearts of men and women for victory over that old enemy, Death – a craving for life beyond the grave and for a preservation of all that was noble and true. The philosophers from Plato onwards had not managed to give more than an uncertain answer to men's anxious questionings. The mystery religions offered more hope, but they were many and varied, and this very multiplicity made it plain to the intelligent mind that the mysteries still moved in the twilight of mythological imagination and not in the broad daylight of established fact. Hearts were hungry, crying out for a message of renewed hope and assurance. When it reached them, it came as a tremendous relief to many honest and thoughtful men and women – in the halls and villas of the towns, as in the spirit-haunted villages of the countryside.[1]

* * *

[1] Frend *TDC* pp.94-111 "The power of the evil spirits could be neutralized only by access to secret knowledge granted to mankind by a Saviour who himself was stronger than death. The key to immortality offered by... Christianity was feverishly grasped at by individuals who felt that their lives were beset by demonic perils beyond their ken" (Frend *TDC* pp.94-95). Roman paganism is discussed by Bainton pp.71-112; Green pp.134-199; Foakes-Jackson pp.180-197.

For now, there came travellers to the streets and market-places, speaking with the confidence of eye-witnesses, or of people who had recently met with and questioned eye-witnesses. They were talking not about vague theories or mythological divinities, but about solid facts, and about events which had happened recently, in a recognized place and at a known time. They brought news of a remarkable Teacher. His wisdom, purity and power to transform the wicked and the weak proved him someone far greater than the philosophers of olden days. He spoke of the one true God (the first cause and prime mover) as though he knew him personally. He passed his busy days in the midst of noisy, bustling, importunate crowds, yet free from the slightest moral stain, offering help, counsel and comfort to all. His teaching cut to the heart, exposing the guilt and shame of human nature, speaking to the needs and longings of all mankind. But more than his teaching, it was his character that showed him to be the "perfect philosopher". He bore patiently with the malice of evil men, submitting calmly to a corrupt trial and a bloody death. Then to their amazement, this innocent man performed before their very eyes the old story of the dying and rising god – no longer a fanciful tale but now an acknowledged fact. He actually rose from the grave, and his empty tomb was still there to prove it. He had fulfilled in reality what the fathers had only imagined. And it was clear that the sacrifice of this innocent life stood as more than a futile pious gesture. As he died, they declared, he bore in his own body the divine judgment on the sin of the world, setting its inhabitants free from the penalty of death and hell hanging over every sinful generation. And the best of the message was this: that anyone who would put his trust in that godlike one could share in his moral purity, in his profound wisdom, and in his immortality. The strange mythological deities of antiquity, with their selfish demanding pettiness could now be forgotten. Here was one who had revealed himself to their own generation and who far surpassed those discredited phantoms. His name was "the Lord Jesus Christ".

This simple account of the facts and their meaning awakened intense interest in the towns along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. But what of those inland who knew nothing of the philosophical quest for immortality, nor of the ethical ideals of the Greek thinkers, and who remained tied to the troublesome spirits of the rocks and springs around about them? What sense would the Gospel make to the people of the countryside?

The message which the first Christians brought to them was, we imagine, a most dramatic and compelling one. The visitors declared that the One High God, who created heaven and earth and all things seen and unseen,

had broken into their world. A mighty man had come from heaven, a saviour who calmed the stormy wind and raging waves. He opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. He cleansed lepers, raised cripples to their feet, and even restored the dead to life. Evil spirits fled from him, and crowds sang for joy as he set them free from bondage of body and soul. But then it seemed that all the powers of Evil were aroused. Wicked men seized him, beat him mercilessly, and hung him on a wooden cross beneath the hot sun. After six long hours he died. His body was laid in a cave on the side of a rocky hill and a heavy stone rolled across the entrance. But the spirits of heaven and earth could not silence such a one. Three days later, he rose from death, walked out of the cave, and was seen alive and well by hundreds of sober witnesses before ascending with kingly majesty into the blue sky above their town.

And what was the meaning of all this? – glorious freedom from the powers of darkness, longed-for peace at last! Living, he had set free the sick, the fearful and the oppressed. Dying, he had borne the anguish of a ruined world. Rising, he had crushed and overthrown the forces of evil for ever. And now, declared these fearless travellers, the great Saviour is alive, and his strong, pure Spirit dwells not in the rocks and caves, but right here in us who believe. And you too, they said – if you will call to him for help, and put your trust in him – you too can find a sure refuge and secure protection in his loving care. The Chief of spirits, after all, is infinitely good! And through him you will come to know the supreme God, the creator of all the wonders which we see in nature. And life will never be the same again.

4. Treasures and Travellers

Traders from the east commonly called in at the North African ports on the long stages of their westward voyage down the Mediterranean. Cargo boats with merchandise from Cyprus, Jerusalem, Damascus and Alexandria often carried a substantial number of passengers, as we see from the account of the apostle Paul's journeys in the Acts of the Apostles. Not only merchants, but also Roman officials and administrators frequently made the somewhat shorter crossing of the narrow straits from the imperial capital in Italy to the province of Africa as they went about their official business. The city of Carthage was only three days sail from Rome.

Many of these sea-borne trade routes dated back to Phoenician times, and they were well used and well known by the first and second centuries of our era. The coast of North Africa with its varied people was spacious and accessible, and must have beckoned irresistibly to the Christians of Palestine and southern Europe, as they prayed and sought God's will, fired with the zeal of their new-found faith and the desire to share it with others.

In fact, a number of North Africans had already made the same joyful discovery. Certain Libyans – Jews and converts to Judaism – had been present on the Day of Pentecost at the very inauguration of the Christian Church. Standing in the crowd that heard Peter as he preached the Gospel of salvation for the first time, some North Africans were undoubtedly among the three thousand who believed.[1]

But even earlier than this we meet Simon from the Libyan port of Cyrene, near modern Benghazi, who carried the cross of Jesus. It seems very likely that he became a believer, for his sons Alexander and Rufus were later well known to that circle of friends for whom the Gospel of Mark was written.[2]

A few weeks after the death of Christ, some Cyrenians from the Synagogue of the Freedmen met with Stephen. It must have been a memorable encounter, for "they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke."[3] Several days later, accompanied by the young Saul of Tarsus, they heard Stephen's powerful exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures and witnessed his martyrdom. Shortly afterwards we read of believers from Cyrene and from Cyprus: not only had they become Christians, but now they had taken the momentous step of preaching the

[1] Acts 2:10
[2] Mark 15:21; Rom 16:13. Cyrene should not be confused with the later Muslim settlement at Kairouan, near Sousse, Tunisia. The two towns have been given the same Arabic name.
[3] Acts 6:9, 10

Gospel of Christ to Gentiles as well as to Jews. They "went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."[1] Their hometown Cyrene was, of course, a flourishing port, where Jews, Phoenicians and Imazighen constantly mixed with visitors from every part of the Mediterranean. The cosmopolitan background of these early African believers undoubtedly helped to give them sympathy for the other races in whose midst they now found themselves: they became the first cross-cultural missionaries of the Christian Church. Early Christian graves are found in Cyrene among the tombs of the Jewish community – evidence indeed that these Libyan believers, returning to North Africa, brought the new faith with them.[2]

The Gospel at this time was spreading out in all directions, and Tertullian speaks of early African contacts with the Christians in Rome.[3] It is likely, therefore, that the Good News travelled both westwards, from Palestine and Alexandria, and simultaneously southwards from Italy: it had probably reached all the major ports of Mediterranean Africa within fifty years of Christ's death.

The Libyans who first brought news of that remarkable Pentecost were followed shortly afterwards by others who had lingered in Jerusalem, taking the opportunity to spend more time in the company of the apostles and the other Christians there. "Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts" and "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."[4] The majority of these men and women were scattered in the persecution following the death of Stephen, and many would naturally find their way back to their African homeland. These later arrivals brought up-to-the-minute news of amazing conversions, of Peter's miraculous release from prison, of the terrible consequences of the great lie told by Ananias and Sapphira, of the remarkable healings, of Stephen's heroic testimony and the astonishing conversion of Saul, the great enemy of the faith.

A little later, news reached the Libyan coast that Peter had visited a Roman centurion and that the Gentiles in his house had received the salvation of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit just like the Jews. The Gentiles of North Africa – Romans and Imazighen – would hear with great interest how the apostles and elders in Jerusalem had welcomed men and women like themselves into the Church of Christ.

[1] Acts 11:20
[2] Latourette Vol.II pp.97ff.; Neill p.37
[3] *The Prescription Against Heretics* 36
[4] Acts 2:46, 42

* * *

The vitality and enthusiasm of these earliest believers is most impressive. The celebrated historian Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339 AD) tells us of the early second century: "About that time, many Christians felt their souls inspired by the holy word, and they longed for perfection. Their first action, in obedience to the instructions of the Saviour, was to sell their goods and to distribute them to the poor. Then, leaving their homes, they set out to fulfil the work of an evangelist, making it their ambition to preach the word of the faith to those who as yet had heard nothing of it, and to commit to them the books of the divine Gospels. They were content simply to lay the foundations of the faith among these foreign peoples; they then appointed other pastors, and committed to them the responsibility for building up those whom they had merely brought to the faith. Then they passed on to other countries and nations with the grace and help of God."[1]

We can picture these intrepid men and women stepping ashore in Africa, filled with hope and expectation. They stand on the quayside, gazing up at the squat buildings of the town glistening in the morning sunlight, wondering which of the houses above them would yield a brother or sister in Christ, and which would become a beloved place of fellowship and prayer. These earliest Christian travellers brought with them not only their first-hand testimony to the life and teaching of the apostles and of Jesus himself but also their own precious hand-written copies of the holy Scriptures – perhaps a gospel of Mark or a copy of one of Paul's letters. The manuscripts which they brought were almost certainly written in Greek, for that is the language of the earliest Christian writings found in North Africa.[2]

Perhaps they followed Paul's policy of going first to the local Hebrew community. The Jewish residents of North Africa already knew the God who created all things, and they were waiting expectantly for the true Messiah that he had promised to send. Perhaps among these old Jewish families they might find hearts prepared and ready to receive Jesus as their

[1] *Church History* III, 37:2-3 (*NAPNF* Series 2, Vol.I)

[2] Latourette Vol.I p.92. There is no solid support for the tradition that one of Christ's twelve Apostles, Simon the Canaanite, preached extensively in North Africa before travelling on to his death as a martyr in Britain (McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles* pp.211-213). Documented reference to this supposed journey appears only in a ninth century manuscript from Constantinople (Istanbul) and in an obscure text attributed to a fourth century Overseer in Palestine. Had Simon preached in Africa, it is unlikely that earlier African writers such as Tertullian would have made no reference to his visit when discussing the origins of their churches. The early North African Christians clearly had no knowledge of any such sojourn, and it would appear to have no basis in fact.

long-awaited Saviour. Some Jews, we know, accepted the faith very early in North Africa. But others disbelieved, and like Paul, the Christian travellers would turn from them to the pagans with their hollow ethical precepts and their idols of wood and stone. The writers of the first century pay much more attention to the typical questions and objections raised by the Jews than do the apologists of the second and third; by then most converts were pagans rather than Jews.

* * *

It would be fascinating to know in more detail where the earliest believers first heard the Gospel and how they began to meet together and to teach and encourage one another. Perhaps they gathered day by day in one of their homes to discuss the implications of this new way of life, and to read whatever came their way of those rare fragments of God's word that circulated around the Mediterranean. The arrival of a Christian from Palestine or Asia Minor must have been heralded with joy. Word would spread from house to house, and family to family, as they assembled to meet the newcomer. He would be earnestly questioned as to his understanding of the faith and his experience of the churches elsewhere. Had he met Peter? What did Paul say about this? What did James mean by that? Was John still in prison on Patmos? Perhaps such visitors brought portions of the Scriptures which were read out to the assembled company, or taught them the hymns which were sung in Jerusalem or Antioch. The visitor must have lent a sympathetic ear and offered advice and spiritual counsel for whatever problems or questions his new brothers and sisters might have encountered as they endeavoured to put their faith into practice and explain it to their families and neighbours.

It did not occur to these first African Christians to leave a record of their activities for our benefit. They built nothing distinctive, and great writers had not yet emerged from among them to testify to their beliefs and practices. But we see the extraordinary effectiveness of their witness from the obvious size and maturity of the Christian communities when the veil is raised on them a hundred years later.[1] In fact, the first century has left clear

[1] After the apostolic age, the first African Christians whose names are mentioned in historical records are the Scillitan martyrs, introduced in Chapter 9, and one Victor, who was born in Proconsular Africa and served as Overseer of the church in Rome for thirteen years (185-198 AD). Victor is chiefly known for his insistence that Easter Day be celebrated on a Sunday each year irrespective of the date of the month, and this indeed became the custom of churches throughout the world. But which town Victor came from, how he came to follow the way of Christ, and what links he maintained with the churches of his homeland we do not know.

traces of only one Christian community in Africa west of Egypt, and that is in Cyrene, but by AD 200 there are accounts of well-established, flourishing churches in many parts of modern-day Tunisia and Algeria.[1]

* * *

The good news ran like a forest fire through the coastal plains of North Africa, as it had in Palestine. More and more were hearing the Gospel and receiving it "with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people."[2] The message spread from person to person, neighbour to neighbour. And it certainly was the best of news: the demonstration of God's love for man, with convincing proofs, and with no political or commercial obligations. It left men free. In fact it brought them a freedom which they had never known before: freedom from discredited myths, from moral degradation, and from the bondage to petty, capricious local spirits. It enabled them to hold up their heads with confidence, proud to be members of a new and growing community built on the admirable principles of love and trust and honesty. "The doors which had been shut opened, and light shone in the darkness."[3] So wrote Cyprian who was born in a pagan home in Carthage about 200 AD, and died half a century later, one of the best known Christians of all time.

There is an inherent equality in the teachings of Christ which puts all men on the same footing. No one is better or worth more than another, for all are created by the same God, and all are judged by the same standards. Each one who sets out on the path to eternal life is beloved in the sight of God and welcome in the fellowship of his people. The equality which Christianity brought must have had an overwhelming appeal to many a man and woman. However humble his background, and however despised he might be in the forum or the school, he could take his place as a child of God in the meetings of the church, and stand there alongside the highest and richest in the land. Indeed, by the quality of his holy life and the firmness of his testimony in the hour of trial, he could surpass them all, earning a respect in the church which he could never hope for in the world. The Christian community, like its Master, "sees not as man sees; man looks

[1] Certain graves dated 50 or 60 AD in the Jewish cemetery at Hadrumetum (Sousse) may be Christian rather than Jewish, but this has not been conclusively proved. Second century churches are known to have existed in Carthage (Tunisia), Sitifis (Sétif, Algeria), Lambaesis (Tazoult, Algeria), Madaura (Mdaourouch, Algeria), Uthma, Thuburbo Minus and Thysdrus (all in Tunisia) and Leptis Magna (Libya) (Cooley p.29).
[2] Acts 2:47
[3] *To Donatus* 4

on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."[1] Christianity must have brought dignity and self-confidence to many who would otherwise have floundered at the bottom of the pile, struggling to rise in the world. It was this vibrant and compelling faith which took North Africa by storm.

* * *

These Christian groups, indeed, were so successful that within two or three generations of the Gospel's first arrival in North Africa it had taken root in almost all the towns along the coast. The work of evangelism was widespread, vigorous and enterprising, and within the space of a hundred and fifty years the churches in Carthage, Cyrene and elsewhere were ready to take their place alongside the great early Christian centres which figure largely in the Acts of the Apostles: Antioch, Ephesus and Philippi.

In 198 AD when Tertullian addressed his "Apology" to the Roman governors, the churches which he describes meet regularly for worship and for teaching. They have recognized leaders and provide support for their widows and orphans. They have their own cemeteries and their own meeting rooms. The Christians were by no means an obscure or inconsequential minority. "We began only yesterday", says Tertullian, "and yet we have filled every place belonging to you: cities, islands, castles, towns, markets, even your military camp, your companies, the palace, the senate, the forum."[2] And fifteen years later, the growth was even more marked when he declared: "We are a great multitude, almost a majority in each city".[3]

In this short time the Gospel had penetrated every level of society, and its influence was felt in every sphere of life. In AD 256 a conference in Carthage was attended by representatives from some fifty churches in the province of Proconsular Africa alone, and twenty more from Numidia. Fifty years later their number was even greater, and reports testify that the Christians formed a majority of the population throughout the province of Africa, with the exception only of the Cape Bon peninsula, near Tunis. There were developing Christian communities, too, in northern Morocco around Tangier, and in many places along the Libyan coast to the east. This extraordinary rate of growth testifies both to the power of the message and

[1] 1 Sam 16:7 RSV
[2] *Apology* 37
[3] *To Scapula* 2

the energy of the messengers. The fields were ripe for harvest and the reapers wielded the sickle tirelessly.[1]

The Christian grapevine was climbing rapidly up the latticework of Roman civilization. And its shoots were slowly but surely stretching out towards the inland tribes, the farmers and shepherds of Amazigh North Africa.

* * *

Christianity undoubtedly benefited from the *pax romana* – the period of peace, political stability and economic development brought by Roman rule. Africa was, at this time, a most prosperous province. It had seldom been devastated by the kind of local wars which had ravaged southern Europe. Travellers could move around in relative safety, and easily find the means to support themselves. The local inhabitants were receptive to new ideas, free of the grinding poverty and the conflicts and hostilities which might otherwise have made them wary or preoccupied with their own concerns. The Roman authorities might not approve of Christian preaching, but at least they would uphold the right of everyone to a fair trial, and defend them from the mob violence which might otherwise ensue.

But although the pax romana was a great help to the Gospel of Christ, the early Christian evangelists by no means restricted themselves to areas of firm Roman control. On the contrary they spread out far beyond the limits of the Empire – brave men and women depending on the protection not of the imperial authorities but of the living God; servants not of civilization but of Christ, bringing not weapons or merchandise but good news of God's love for man. Evangelization penetrated the country much more deeply than Romanization ever did. Tertullian speaks warmly of the conversion of "the varied races of the Getules [Imazighen] and the vast territories of the Moors, inaccessible to the Romans but subjugated to Christ."[2] The remains of church buildings are found in remote hamlets whose names are not even recorded in Roman documents.[3] Epitaphs and inscriptions were raised in honour of Christian farmers and Christian princes far beyond the frontiers of Roman administration. The love of God is not bound by any human restraints, and those who are filled with his love will take it even to the ends of the earth.

[1] referring to John 4:35
[2] *An Answer to the Jews* 7
[3] Camps p.175

Secondary sources for the early evangelization of North Africa are Neill pp.37-42; Latourette Vol.I pp.92-3, 112; Cooley pp.28-30; Frend *TDC* pp.94-111.

PART TWO: THE AGE OF TERTULLIAN
(late 2nd to early 3rd century)

5. The World and the Way

"The Christian Church is unique. It is older than any other organization or group of organizations now found on the planet. No other religion has created an institution quite like it. Judaism, to which it is deeply indebted, developed a community which like the Church has been scattered in many lands. However, the composition of Judaism is as much racial as religious. The Christian churches, in contrast, have been recruited from many races, and the tie which holds them together is not one of blood."[1]

What, then, is the bond which unites these diverse people? Is it submission to the rules and decrees of an ecclesiastical authority? Or is it something less tangible? What indeed is the Church? Is it now what it once was? Or has it gained something with time? Has it lost something? Is the Church an organization, or is it simply a visionary idea?

Latourette speaks of the great principles which inspired its earliest days: "From the first it has embraced a purpose which seems to have been derived directly from the example of Jesus himself, that of the pastor or shepherd." It devoted itself to, and was taken up with "the care of individuals, with the ideal of loving, self-forgetful effort to win them to what the Christian conceives as the highest life, and to help them to grow in it."[2]

The early church in Jerusalem, as we see from the Acts of the Apostles, was a caring community of this sort. Like a large extended family it comprised people of all ages who knew one another quite well, and loved and supported each other in the ups and downs of workaday life. They met every day in the Temple, and ate together in their homes "with glad and generous hearts", teaching and encouraging one another, praying together, and giving thanks to God for his manifest blessing upon them.[3] They welcomed into their fellowship all who would follow their Master. Perhaps because of their high standards, perhaps because of the miracles done in

[1] Latourette Vol.I p.251
[2] Latourette Vol.I p.252
[3] Acts 2:42-47 RSV

their midst, the Christian community was held somewhat in awe by the people of Jerusalem, who were reluctant to mix with them in any casual fashion. In fact we read that "nobody outside the group dared to join them, even though the people spoke highly of them. But more and more people were added to the group – a crowd of men and women who believed in the Lord."[1]

Within a very short time, however, the members of this close-knit community were being called away to take the good news to Judea, Samaria and, within the space of a few years, to the uttermost parts of the earth.[2] And many in those distant places received their message with gladness. New Christian groups sprang up along the shores of the Mediterranean, in Europe, Asia Minor and even further afield, and they met together to teach and encourage one another, as the first Christians had in Jerusalem.

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At any level higher than a small group, their oneness in these early days was more theoretical than practical, for they were too scattered to be in very close or frequent contact with believers elsewhere. But gradually the ties between the Christians in one town and those in the next strengthened. They were living in the same milieu and facing the same problems and opportunities. As they followed their trade or business affairs from one place to another it was natural to discuss matters of common interest and concern. The most pressing of these issues was how to live as followers of Christ in an idolatrous society – how to avoid compromise with the temptations and vices of a heathen town, and how to win friends and neighbours to the way of Truth.

Christians and pagans dwelt side by side in North Africa, much as they did in Asia and Europe. Stone-built Christian meeting rooms are often found, in the towns, standing beside a shrine of Mithras or opposite a pagan temple. In the country, we find Christian burial stones at sites otherwise devoted to the spirits. The homes of the Christians, too, were scattered among those of their pagan neighbours – they did not form a distinct quarter or neighbourhood.

The Christian communities were distinct from the pagans not in physical location, but in the kind of life they lived. They sought to be the lamp which brought light and hope to the whole town, the salt which gave it savour. They bore patiently with their pagan neighbours, dealt honestly with them, and endeavoured to avoid all cause of offence. They took seriously the

[1] Acts 5:13-14 GNB
[2] Acts 1:8

ancient command, "Love your neighbour as yourself," and such love constrained them to speak of the way of Christ when the opportunity arose.[1] They demonstrated the reality of their faith by the quality of their lives, not ashamed to be known as Christians, but ready to explain the truth of God to all who would listen.

* * *

Three types of people made up the main bulk of the populace of North Africa, and all were present in the churches. The Imazighen were by far the majority. The Phoenicians, with whom they had intermarried, formed an artisanal and commercial class in the towns and cities. The aristocratic Romans from Italy possessed extensive agricultural estates, and they formed an urban elite. But in the church all were brothers and sisters, members of a family which cut across all racial, linguistic and social barriers. Their relations with the Jews were friendly, and the sharp controversies which are recorded in the New Testament had more or less given way to a mutual tolerance and respect, although they had by no means given up their hope of winning the Jews to the faith.

But obviously their closest relationships and friendships were with others of like mind. Within their own circle the Christians sought to live according to the commands of Jesus, serving one another as Christ had served and washed the feet of his disciples. The Church did not set out to transform society. It aimed rather to draw people into its community and change the attitudes and principles of its own members. Their great emphasis was upon the salvation of the individual. They longed for men and women to find reconciliation with God and then to live day by day in harmony with him. It was only in the course of their efforts to help individuals that the early Christians took issue with those features of society which tended to drag them down. To be sure, the New Testament, and notably the sayings of Jesus, introduced ideals which, if fully carried out by all men, would entirely change society. Indeed, a number of pagan authorities saw clearly enough the implications of these teachings if they were adopted by a large

[1] Mark 12:31. See also Eph 4:25 RSV; Rom 15:2. "Christianity, once established, was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. It was a light shining in darkness and illuminating the darkness. And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow men" (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.20).
The pagan emperor Julian (AD 361-363) attributed the early popularity and rapid spread of Christianity to three causes: kindness, honesty, and care of the dead (providing the poor with an honourable burial) (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.381).

number of people. They would tear at the very roots and fabric of society as it then was.

* * *

The churches made no official denunciation of the institution of slavery, for example, or of the barbaric gladiatorial contests. But Christians who possessed slaves were exhorted to treat them decently as they would wish their heavenly Master to treat them.[1] Christian slaves, for their part, should give honest service to their earthly master as an offering acceptable and pleasing to God.[2] In fact many Christians chose to free their own slaves. But slaves were glad, in any case, to belong to a kind Christian master, and he, in turn, was happy if he had honest Christian slaves. "How many slaves we see who lack for nothing," said Augustine two hundred years later, "whilst free men are reduced to begging."[3]

There was no great slave trade in Roman North Africa comparable to that of later times. Slaves in the Roman Empire were for the most part of Greek or northern European origin rather than African. The Imazighen themselves did not experience slavery except under the most exceptional of circumstances. But a believer who found himself in such a situation was encouraged not to rashly set himself against the established order of society. Conversion to Christianity did not absolve him from the legal constraints which lay upon him. He would hope to earn his liberty, but in the meantime should bear patiently with his lot. "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave."[4]

It was not shameful to be a slave. Many, especially Greeks, possessed a degree of culture and education beyond that of their masters. They were allowed to walk around the estates and the streets of the town quite freely. Ambrose said that a slave might actually be superior to his master in character, and more free than a master who was in bondage to Satan and to sin.

[1] Eph 6:9
[2] Eph 6:5-8; Titus 2:9-10
[3] Hamman 134 (*Sermon* 356:7)
[4] 1 Cor 7:20-22

Christianity did not seek to arouse dissatisfaction or stir up unrest. On the contrary, it taught a man how to be happy whatever his circumstances.[1] It did not attack the institution of slavery any more than it made public complaint about any other aspect of paganism. It went far deeper than that. Christianity introduced a radical new way of looking at all human relationships – the first was to be last; the greatest was to be servant of all. He who took a low place was called up higher, and the Kingdom of Heaven belonged to the little child. A Christian looked not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. He turned the other cheek, went the second mile, and prayed for those who misused him. A man often found he had more in common with his Christian slave than with his pagan family: they enjoyed a common faith, and shared the common dangers it entailed. In the eyes of God, and in the church itself, there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[2] Euelpistus, a slave of the imperial household, was brought before the tribunal in second century Rome, and when questioned replied, "I am a slave of the emperor. But I am also a Christian, for I have been set free by Jesus Christ! By his grace I have the same hope as my brothers!"[3]

Some slaves even rose to positions of leadership in the Christian community; a number were appointed as overseers, sharing in responsibility for their local fellowship. The Christians considered it a privilege to minister to the needs of a slave who was imprisoned or otherwise afflicted on account of his faith in Christ, and they vied with one another to honour one who had obtained the martyr's crown. Such love shown towards the slave himself rang the death-knell for the system which had humiliated him. The Church did not attempt to cut down the tree of slavery – that would have been a long and dangerous task – but she stripped its bark, and left the tree to die.

* * *

While the Christians were still a small minority there was little they could do to impede the torrent of violence and sexual licence which flowed through pagan society, but they themselves would take no part in it, neither the cruelty of the gladiatorial arena nor the immorality of the stage. If others sank to such depths, they at least would not; they were "in the world" but not "of the world", and they knew it. They prayed for one another, as Jesus had for his disciples, "not that you take them out of the world but that you

[1] Phil 4:4,11-13; Gen 39:20-23
[2] Gal 3:28
[3] *Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs* 3 (*ANF* Vol.I p.305); Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.351

protect them from the evil one."[1] Yet, as their numbers grew year by year, the pagan crowds flocking to view the latest spectacle began to thin, until the Christians themselves were blamed for the decline of interest in the plays and games.

The churches made no attempt to challenge or undermine the inequalities inherent in the class structure of the towns and the rural estates. They believed that God had granted lands and houses to some, just as he had granted skills and abilities to others, along with gifts of character and speech. But the Christians insisted on treating all men equally and with respect. They did not fear the powerful, nor did they despise the weak. They feared God alone, and loved all men. The poor and humble received honest measure and courteous treatment, as did the rich and influential; and all were equally welcome in the meetings of the church. "Don't show favouritism," said James the brother of Jesus. "Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"[2] The character of a man mattered far more than his wealth or position. Inscriptions on early Christian gravestones very rarely make any reference to the social status of the person, although the emblems of his craft, or the tools of his trade, are often carefully and lovingly depicted along with tokens of family affection.

* * *

Such attitudes were quite revolutionary; they would touch the heart of any sensitive person. But the Christians did not always find themselves approved by other members of society. Some saw them as a divisive influence, too ready to take an independent line of their own. Loyalty to the imperial ideal was a value constantly inculcated, and anyone who showed a tendency to question its well established customs laid himself open to the charge not only of threatening the peace of the Roman Empire but also of undermining the very civilization it represented.

Writing within 150 years of Christ's death, Celsus for example had vigorously criticized the Christians because they refused to serve in the army. They were a menace, he said, and what would happen if everyone followed their example? The Empire would be overrun by barbarians!

[1] John 17:15
[2] James 2:1-4

Origen accepted the charge that they would not fight, and defended Christian pacifism. But he pointed out that their aim was not to divide society, nor to support one nation against another, but rather to elevate all men to a higher standard of morality – and even, if possible, to take away the desire for war. Tertullian at the same period maintained that Christians, far from being disruptive, were actually the best subjects the emperor had ever had, for they would not raise an insurrection or a riot, and never plotted against the authorities. On the contrary, they offered prayers to God for the emperor that he might enjoy a long life and a peaceful reign. They took no interest in politics and had no aspiration towards worldly power; they simply wished to be left in peace. Their Master had said, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight!"[1] Tertullian spelt this out clearly in the North African context: "With us all ardour for glory or position has grown cold and we have no compulsion to form associations for this end. Nor is anything more alien to us than political activity. We acknowledge only one universal commonwealth, the whole world."[2]

* * *

The Christians were not so naïve as to suppose that the totality of pagan society would wish to embrace Christian standards, nor that the evils of that culture with all its powerful vested interests could be done away with quickly by political means. Their aim was not to criticize the established economic and social system but rather to show individuals a better way of living – to establish a new community within the existing society, a community where Christian standards could be maintained by genuinely Christian people.

In fact the new Christian groups commended themselves by the evident purity of their lives. They must have formed a very striking contrast to the urban culture of their day with its sexual licence and perversion, its crass arrogance and obsequious servitude, its bloody games and contests, and its harsh, unfeeling attitude to the slaves and labourers who served it. We should not imagine that the early Christians were perfect, but at least they aspired to perfection. They valued such qualities as integrity and compassion, and resolved to love their neighbours as themselves. They had shortcomings and sins to confess: but unlike those around them, they recognized their faults, and endeavoured to amend them. There were undoubtedly failings and lapses, as there were in the churches of the New

[1] John 18:36 AV
[2] *Apology* 38

Testament itself, but the earliest North African believers knew how to cope with the failings and survive the lapses, and press on to follow Christ more closely.

The darker the sky the brighter the stars will appear. The kindness and the honesty of the Christians must have seemed quite remarkable to the grim and jaded palettes of their weary neighbours. They never complained; they refused to involve themselves in disputes, and they were always ready to help anyone in need. Passing in the street, they spoke sincerely of their joys and sorrows; they comforted one another and prayed for one another. As they went about their work they sang the spiritual songs which were dear to them. They were thankful for everything. Their life was clearly lived on a plane above that of their neighbours. "You are the people of God," they were told. "He loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another... And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity."[1]

They really did care for one another. Writing to the Christian master of a thieving runaway slave, the apostle Paul had informed him that the slave had just become a Christian too, and he urged the master to forgive him whatever wrongs he had done: "Welcome him back... now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ."[2] This outlook on life had by no means died out with the apostolic age. Perpetua and Felicitas – mistress and servant – shared a common faith, and lived and died together, offering one another encouragement and comfort in the amphitheatre at Carthage. Such was the oneness of the Christian community. Widows and orphans, and travellers far from home could be sure of a warm, loving welcome with a Christian family; even the pagans and Jews around them received help at their hands. Nothing like it had been seen before.

* * *

Adultery and other sexual vices were a running sore in the side of heathen society, and brought untold misery. Divorce was facilitated by the law and employed on the most frivolous of pretexts, to the extent that family life had become almost impossible. Parents lived in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust; children often did not know where their parents were, or even who they were. But it was different in the Christian community. Marriage was respected, and the Christians spoke much of the special relationship

[1] Col 3:12-14 GNB
[2] Philemon 17,16 GNB

between husband and wife, compared in Scripture to the relationship between Christ and the Church. "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."[1]

Loyalty was a new and inherently Christian value, and that between husband and wife surpassed all other human loyalties. Divorce was not an option for the Christian. Jesus had said: "They are no longer two but one. Man must not separate, then, what God has put together."[2] Christian husbands and wives learned to value and appreciate one another, and to make the effort required to live in harmony. Marriage, they believed, was intended for their mutual help and encouragement in spiritual as well as practical matters, and they found that as they did their utmost to love and support one another, their relationship became an increasingly precious one. "How wonderful," said Tertullian, "is the union of two believers – one hope, one vow, one discipline, one worship! They are brother and sister, two fellow-servants, one spirit and one flesh... They pray together, fast together, instruct, exhort, and support each other. They go together to the church of God, and to the table of the Lord. They share each other's tribulation, persecution and spiritual progress. Neither conceals anything from the other; neither avoids, neither annoys the other. They delight to visit the sick, supply the needy, give alms without constraint... They do not need to keep the sign of the cross hidden, nor to restrain their Christian joy, nor to stifle the blessing. Psalms and hymns they sing together... Christ rejoices when he sees and hears this. He gives them his peace. Where two are together in his name, there is he; and where he is, there the devil cannot come."[3]

If Christian marriage meant the forming of a new bond it also implied the loosening of old ones. The couple would pack their bags and bid farewell to their respective parents and the house in which they had each grown up. Once united, they established a new home, however humble it might be, and enriched it with the love of Christ. God's word spoke of both a uniting and a leaving: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one."[4] The old custom of taking a wife or a husband into the parental home was fraught with difficulties, but breaking the mould was not easy. It had to be done sympathetically and lovingly. Aged relatives were still to be respected and honoured – and if needs be supported – but no longer were they to expect

[1] Eph 5:22,25
[2] Mark 10:8-9 GNB
[3] *To His Wife* 2:8 (See Schaff's translation *HOTCC* Vol.II p.364.)
[4] Eph 5:31 GNB

unquestioning obedience and submission on the part of their married offspring. The bridegroom was now responsible for his own home, for his wife and in due course for his children; he could not on any account shirk that responsibility. But when his children grew up they in turn would leave the parental nest to marry and to build a home of their own, knowing that they could count on the loving support and prayer of their parents whenever they needed it.

Women especially appreciated their position in the Christian community. They had been completely excluded from many of the mystery religions and their role in others had been distinctly dubious. But as Christians they were honoured and respected, and could find a useful and rewarding outlet for their talents and imagination – especially through the instruction which they gave to the younger women and children. There were always widows and orphans to care for, too, and hospitality to be offered to travellers. A Christian wife could safely be entrusted with all manner of tasks and responsibilities, and her husband appreciated her loving support and her sensible advice. It was Augustine who pointed out that Eve was not taken from the feet of Adam to be his slave, nor from his head to be his ruler, but from his side to be his beloved partner.[1] How good it was for husband and wife to be able to pray together about anything of concern, and rejoice together in the answers to those prayers! "A wife of noble character... is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue."[2] Priscilla was one such woman, mentioned in the pages of Scripture, and there were many like her in North Africa.[3]

* * *

Children, too, were welcome in the homes of the Christian community. Jesus himself had said: "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these."[4] The simple faith of a child was often an inspiration to his own mother and father. As Christian parents read the Scriptures they found much practical advice on how to bring up their offspring "in the training and instruction of the Lord."[5] Timothy was one of those blessed in this way from childhood. Paul wrote to him: "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your

[1] *De Genesi ad Litteram* 1, IX, 13; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.363
[2] Prov 31:10,11,26
[3] Acts 18:26
[4] Mark 10:14 GNB
[5] Eph 6:4

grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." And Paul reminds him "how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."[1]

Such children were free to devote their youth and the strength of their best years to the Kingdom of God, with the blessing and encouragement of their parents. Having always known the difference between good and evil, they had clung to the one and shunned the other. They never knew the intolerable burden of wasted years, and the shameful memories of past indulgences: and they had never acquired the selfish, irritable nature of those who since childhood have thought only of themselves. They were spared that bitter struggle to forsake deeply engrained habits which comes to all who find Christ later in life. To be born into a Christian family was a wonderful privilege, and to return to a loving, united Christian home at the end of a hard day in the schools or markets or streets of the city must have filled many a young heart with gladness.

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The Christians encouraged one another to work hard and earn their own living. In this way they would be able to help others less fortunate, especially those who could not hold down a job due to sickness or old age.[2] Work was considered a normal Christian duty, and the apostle Paul's readiness to earn his living by working with his hands, making tents, showed that manual labour was in no way degrading.[3] "We were not idle when we were with you," he wrote, "nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you."[4]

In fact many who became Christians entered into an honest trade for the first time. "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."[5] The church looked askance at any healthy person who was able to work and neglected to do so. "If a man will not work," said the apostle Paul, "he shall not eat!"[6] Christians should "be

[1] 2 Tim 1:5, 3:15
[2] Acts 20:34-35
[3] Acts 18:3
[4] 2 Thess 3:7-8
[5] Eph 4:28
[6] 2 Thess 3:10

ready for any honest work"[1] and all the more so if they had dependants who relied on the wages they brought in: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[2] There were plenty of opportunities in the towns and in the country for one who was not too proud to dirty his hands. No stigma or shame attached to hard work or to a lowly position. Many, in times of persecution, were sent to the mines and were proud to glorify Christ there in the most squalid of conditions. They considered that they were appointed to that place by God as lights to shine in the darkness – as apostles of Christ, not prisoners of men.

Some occupations, however, were clearly unacceptable. A Christian would not enrol as a gladiator, for example, in that age of appalling cruelty to man and beast. He would not become involved with drama or the stage because of the grossly immoral scenes – the legends of the gods – which were represented in religious guise before the eyes of a lascivious public. He would not entangle himself in any form of idolatry or astrology, or the crafts associated with pagan worship, such as the fabrication of lamps and garlands and other adornments for the temples. A Christian could not be a schoolmaster because of the lessons he would be required to teach. The multiplication tables were harmless enough, but the letters of the alphabet were memorized by chanting the names of the pagan gods.[3] He would not be a judge for he might be called upon to shed blood; he would not be a lawyer for he might have to defend a guilty man, or accuse an innocent one. Nor would he be a public speaker if that involved him in the declamation of flattering lies in praise of unprincipled rulers or benefactors. Many a man gave up the career upon which he had embarked because he could not reconcile it with his conscience; he was content with a more modest occupation. Riches, and the careers which ensured their acquisition, were not the chief end of life. Sermons preserved from the first four centuries constantly exhort the man of modest means to be content with his sufficiency, and the man of substantial means to be generous with his abundance. Merchants were told to ascertain the just price – to ask no more and accept no less.

[1] Titus 3:1 RSV
[2] 1 Tim 5:8
[3] Tertullian considered that in a pagan society it was necessary for Christian children to attend pagan schools: otherwise they would grow up illiterate. But the Christian teaching they had received in the home would help them to evaluate what they were taught, and to discern the true from the false. A Christian child at school "will be safe, like one who accepts poison, but does not drink it" (*On Idolatry* 10). This, of course, placed a great onus on the parents to teach him well, and to help him discern.

For the first three centuries, there was a general belief among Christians that service in the army was inconsistent with their faith. Certainly it might involve them in violence and bloodshed, which seemed hard to reconcile with the teachings of Christ.[1] Could one imagine Jesus killing a man when ordered to do so by his commanding officer? No more could his disciple do such a thing. Tertullian said, "The Lord in disarming Peter unbelted every soldier from that time forth."[2] Tertullian argued against Christians joining the army on other grounds too: firstly, that such service brought them under another master than Christ, and secondly, that it prevented a man from fulfilling his obligations to his family. The higher ranks, moreover, would be obliged to take a leading part in the invocation of the gods associated with their particular battalion. Yet, in matters of this sort, nothing was to be done hastily or rashly. Soldiers who were already soldiers when they first became Christians were not exhorted to renounce their profession immediately, although they would have to seek another occupation as soon as they were free to do so. As it happened, the state was able to fill the ranks of the army without difficulty. There was no shortage of pagan volunteers for the imperial forces, and the conscription of Christians against their will never became a general issue of controversy in Roman North Africa.

So we see the Christians forming their own community within the established structure of society. These were early days as yet; they were still a persecuted minority struggling to survive in a powerful pagan empire. They could hardly have imagined that one day a Christian would sit on the imperial throne, promulgating laws that imposed Christian standards on the entire civilized world.[3] Yet it was the patient, honest goodness of those first generations of believers which won the respect of their neighbours and paved the way for the acceptance of many of these ideals by society as a whole.

Secondary sources for the life of the early Christian communities are Bainton pp.71-110; Green pp.134-199, 234-285; Latourette Vol.I pp.244, 261-265, 291; Neill pp.43-44; Foakes-Jackson pp.236-239; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.334-386.

[1] such as Matt 5:39,44
[2] *On Idolatry* 19; referring to Matt 26:52
[3] The emperor Constantine issued a law, for example, in AD 315, forbidding the branding of slaves on the face. The following year, he facilitated the process of emancipation by requiring only a written certificate signed by the slave's master, instead of the previous ceremony of manumission in the presence of the prefect and his assistant. He also legislated to prevent parents from killing their unwanted children (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.350, 370).

6. Loyalty and Love

Having heard about the life of Christ, and experiencing for themselves the power of his Spirit in their midst, the new Christians must have turned with eager interest to the writings of his earliest followers. What did those who had actually seen and heard Jesus say about him? How did Peter and John and James put the teachings of their Master into practice in other parts of the Mediterranean world which was their common home? The Scriptures which Christian travellers brought to North Africa were rather different from the scrolls rolled round wooden handles which had been carried for generations by Jewish teachers. Christians, in fact, pioneered the use of the *codex*, or book, of hand-written pages bound together into a compact volume which made for ease of transport and reference.

Little groups of men and women pored over the narratives and letters which came their way. Those who could read well would sometimes painstakingly transcribe a copy for themselves, or arrange for someone else to make them one. By the early third century, Greek was no longer a universal Mediterranean language, and those who could not understand the tongue in which the New Testament was written asked for the sense and meaning to be explained to them. But by now there were also Latin translations which were more easily understood, at least by the educated members of the Christian community.

God's word provided a stimulating focus for their gatherings. Some years previously, Timothy in Ephesus had been encouraged to use it in this way. "Devote yourself," he was told, "to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching."[1] Justin Martyr, writing from Rome about 150 AD reports that the meetings of the church there commenced with a reading "from the records of the prophets or the writings of the apostles."[2] The passage was then explained by one of the leaders of the church, and after that they prayed and worshipped together. Tertullian, fifty years later, tells us that each of the worshippers was "asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God – either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing."[3] To judge from the small number of early hymns which have been preserved, it would seem that the singing consisted mainly of psalms translated into Greek or Latin.

[1] 1 Tim 4:13
[2] *First Apology* 67 (*ANF* Vol.I)
[3] *Apology* 39

* * *

There were two great festivals for the Christian community. The climax of the year came at Easter with the remembrance of the death and resurrection of the Saviour, but the coming of the Holy Spirit was also celebrated fifty days later, at Pentecost. The time between Easter and Pentecost was marked by standing instead of kneeling at prayers.[1] These two special seasons had their own developing traditions, but there was one event which the churches celebrated every week – the Lord's Day. According to Tertullian, the first day of the week was a day of rest from work and worldly affairs; it was a day for worship and for fellowship in the company of other Christians. "We make Sunday a day of festivity," he said. "We devote Sunday to rejoicing."[2]

This was the day, Tertullian tells us, when the Christians met to celebrate the Lord's Supper. They assembled on the evening of the first day of the week just like their counterparts in Troas where on one famous occasion the apostle Paul had spoken until dawn.[3] Sunday commenced, according to the custom of the time, at dusk, so the meeting was actually held on what we would call Saturday evening. The lamps were lit, and the late hour conjured up all the more vividly the last supper which Jesus shared with his twelve disciples "on the night he was betrayed."[4] In times of persecution it was safer to meet at night. In some places the believers preferred to meet just before dawn, or later the following morning.

The Lord's Supper was not a public meeting and it was very rarely mentioned in literature intended for those who were not Christians. It was, on the contrary, an opportunity for those who had devoted themselves to the way of Christ to remember him lovingly and to draw close to one another in their common faith. Rich and poor, landowner and labourer, master and servant, all gathered in a large room in one of their homes, or in a hall set aside for the purpose. They took their places with a sense of expectancy, wondering what blessing their Lord might grant to them as they lifted their hearts to him in prayer, and what blessing he might call on them to take to others.

They remembered how Jesus, after he had washed the feet of his disciples, had sat with them at supper for the very last time. They recalled the words he had spoken when he took the loaf and broke it: "This is my

[1] Christmas, the celebration of Christ's birth, was a later (fourth century) addition to the Christian calendar.
[2] *Ad Nationes* 13; *Apology* 16
[3] Acts 20:7
[4] 1 Cor 11:23

body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me."[1] They re-enacted the scene. A loaf was broken and each of them took a small piece of the bread. They remembered how their Master had taken the cup of wine and said, "This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you."[2] Then the cup was passed from hand to hand, and each in turn took a sip. Finally they thought of what Jesus had said as his last supper with his disciples drew to a close, and they felt again within them the stirrings of that divine love which bound them together. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."[3]

Tertullian in the late second century, and Augustine in the fourth, both tell us that pagan visitors, and believers who were not yet baptized, left the meeting before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. "Every time they were present at a service they were reminded, by their dismissal before the most solemn rites were celebrated, that there were mysteries known to none but Christians."[4] The fullest divine blessings were granted only to the faithful and the sincere. The bread and wine – symbols of the body and blood of Christ – were taken with great reverence. Tertullian tells us that those who participated took care that no fragment or drop should fall to the ground. As the meeting came to an end, pieces of the broken bread were taken to the homes of those who were too sick or weak to attend.

* * *

The celebration of the Lord's Supper was followed by the communal meal, or *Agapé*. Tertullian describes it for us: "Our feast shows its nature by its name, and its name means 'love' in the language of the Greeks. It allows nothing vile, nothing immodest. We sit down to food only after tasting, in the first place, of prayer to God. We eat as much as hungry men desire; we drink as much as is good for decent men. We take as much as men who remember that during the night they also must pray to God, and we talk with one another as those who know that God hears."[5]

The Christians brought with them gifts of bread, wine and other foodstuffs, each according to what he had, and these formed the basis of the common meal. Whatever was left over, along with any gifts of money that

[1] Luke 22:19 GNB
[2] Luke 22:20 GNB
[3] John 13:34,35
[4] Foakes-Jackson p.230, also pp.229-236; Hamman p.239
[5] *Apology* 39

had been offered, were handed out to the needy members of the church – orphans and widows with no family to provide for them, those who had suffered injuries or serious illness and could no longer work, those who had lost their means of livelihood because of their Christian faith and now suffered hardship while seeking another occupation. A certain amount was laid aside for the provision of hospitality to Christian travellers, for those who had been robbed or shipwrecked, and for the expenses of giving a decent burial to the poorer members of the church. Occasionally we read of funds being used to ransom Christians who had been imprisoned or sent into penal servitude on account of their faith. Sometimes assistance was sent to churches in other places in time of famine and hardship. "This is, as it were, the deposit fund of kindness," said Tertullian. "For we do not pay out money from this fund to spend on feasts or drinking parties or vulgar revelry, but to pay for the nourishment and burial of the poor, to support boys and girls who are orphaned and destitute, and old people who are confined to the house, and those who have been shipwrecked, and any who are in the mines [condemned because they were Christians], or banished to islands, or in prison."[1]

Each member of the church was expected to contribute whatever he or she could, but there was no compulsion about it, and it was certainly not a payment for spiritual blessings received. "There is no price attached to any of the things of God," said Tertullian. "Though we have a kind of money chest, it is not for the collection of official fees as if ours were a religion of fixed prices. Each of us puts in a small donation on the appointed day in each month, or when he chooses, and only if he can, for no-one is compelled, and the offering is voluntary."[2] But knowing that "it is more blessed to give than to receive",[3] they were glad to contribute what they could, according to the provision and leading of the Lord. "Each one must do as he has made up his mind," said the apostle Paul, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."[4]

The Christians taught that property and possessions were a solemn trust to be administered thoughtfully with wisdom and discretion, and with prayer for the guidance of God. Whatever a man or woman had received from the Lord should be used honourably without ostentation or pride: it was a stewardship for which he would be held accountable before the judgment seat of the Almighty, and which should be discharged carefully for the benefit of God's kingdom.

[1] *Apology* 39
[2] *Apology* 39
[3] Acts 20:35
[4] 2 Cor 9:7 RSV

Even the poor were accountable to God for what they had, however little it might be: there was always someone in even greater need, and nobody was denied the privilege of ministering to the destitute, or of laying up treasure in heaven. Each would contribute according to his ability, "in proportion to what he has earned."[1] Was there not the example of the widow with her two little copper coins? And Jesus had said of her: "This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."[2] There were many such widows in the churches of North Africa; they had little on earth but their treasure was great in heaven.

* * *

The Christian ideal, however, went beyond the giving of money. It extended to the consecration of one's very self – the devotion of one's time and strength and abilities to the work of God. There were many ways in which a believer could be of service to others in the church. The New Testament made this clear: "Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom."[3] And not just once a week! "Encourage one another daily," said the word of God.[4] There were many in need of such encouragement, not only those who had newly come into the faith with questions and uncertainties to be resolved, but others who had more painful and distressing problems – a harsh master, a nagging heathen wife, an overbearing pagan husband, or perhaps chronic illness or blindness or simply old age. Christians were to "visit orphans and widows in their affliction,"[5] and whatever troubles they might find in the homes they visited, there was always one unfailing resource in the face of need: the love of God himself. He was never far away. "Pray always for all God's people," the Christians were told, and they saw many answers to their prayers.[6]

There was much, in particular, that the women could do while their menfolk were occupied with work and the other demands of life. They were welcome in the homes of friends and neighbours and exerted there a quiet influence for good. A woman was deeply appreciated who had from God that loveliness of character which only he can give, "the unfading beauty of

[1] 1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:2 GNB
[2] Mark 12:43-44
[3] Col 3:16
[4] Heb 3:13
[5] James 1:27 RSV
[6] Eph 6:18 GNB

a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."[1] She was kind and sympathetic, a good listener and a loyal friend. Such a one would be a blessing wherever she went. She had "a reputation for good deeds,... brought up her children well, received strangers in her home, performed humble duties for fellow-Christians, helped people in trouble, and devoted herself to doing good."[2] Such service to the children of God was accepted as service to Jesus himself. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you," they asked, "or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" "I tell you the truth," replied Jesus, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."[3]

* * *

Before a Christian travelled to another town or city he would ask his friends if they knew of anyone living in that place who followed the way of Christ. Furnished with the name of one of the leaders, or overseers, of the church there – and perhaps the location of his home or his place of work – the traveller would seek him out as soon as he arrived. If, for any reason, the overseer himself was unable to take care of the visitor, he would arrange for him to stay in the home of another family. In those days the inn was invariably a haunt of vice, so that no Christian would send a brother to find shelter there; hospitality to strangers was an essential duty, and a basic qualification for Christian leadership. "Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless... He must be hospitable."[4]

But as the churches grew, impostors were sometimes in the habit of presuming upon the kindness of the Christians. To prevent this, it became customary for them to travel with a letter of introduction signed by an elder from their own church. Even overseers travelling to attend conferences in Carthage or elsewhere had to be identified by at least one other overseer before they were admitted. Only well-known Christian leaders had no need of such attestation, for in their case their life testified to their faith. The apostle Paul was one who could ask with some humour: "Could it be that, like some other people, we need letters of recommendation to you or from

[1] 1 Pet 3:4
[2] 1 Tim 5:10 GNB
[3] Matt 25:37-40
[4] Titus 1:7,8

you? You yourselves are the letter we have, written on our hearts for everyone to know and read."[1]

* * *

The early North African Christians baptized their converts, as had John the Baptist, by dipping them in water. This symbolized, above all, a fresh start – the death of the old person and the resurrection of the new, the disappearance of the sinner and the emergence of the child of God. As water washed the body, so the forgiveness of God washed the conscience clean. Christians were generally baptized in streams or rivers, or sometimes the sea. Not until the early fourth century were baptismal pools specially constructed for the purpose, with steps leading down into the water, and even a fire or underfloor heating to take away its chill.

Baptism was a great and awesome occasion. Those who were to be baptized on a particular day prepared for it with prayer and fasting, and made open confession of their sins. Then followed a public renunciation of the devil and all his vain allurements, and the candidate was led to the water. As he stood there, he was questioned as to his faith, and having affirmed his trust in Christ and his desire to follow him, he was dipped in the water in the name of the Father, and again in the name of the Son, and again in the name of the Holy Spirit. In some cases, if he was aged or infirm, or if a pool of water was not locally available, baptism could be administered by pouring water over the head of the believer in the name of the Father, and then again in the name of the Son, and again in the name of the Holy Spirit.[2]

In New Testament times, those who believed had been baptized immediately on profession of faith in Christ. The Ethiopian prime minister, the centurion Cornelius, Lydia and the Philippian jailer had all been baptized on the very day that they first heard the Gospel and believed. They accepted the message wholeheartedly and were baptized immediately. There was an excitement and an immediacy about the preaching of the Gospel in the days of the apostles, and a momentum that brooked no delay. Those who wished to proclaim publicly their new-found faith were not refused.[3] It was apparent however, that a person might ask for and receive baptism without such a purity of motive. In the New Testament itself, we read of a sorcerer, Simon, who apparently believed the word of God, and was baptized. But he showed all too soon that his motives were mixed and

[1] 2 Cor 3:1-2 GNB
[2] Foakes-Jackson pp.230-231. Baptism is considered further in Chapter 25.
[3] Acts 2:38,41; 8:12,38; 10:48; 16:33

his understanding of the faith confused and uncertain. Peter's words to him subsequently indicated that if he had asked for baptism unworthily, then upon his own head be it! – he would be the one to suffer for his audacity.[1]

Nevertheless, it was to prevent this kind of situation that the churches of the second century felt it wise to defer baptism at least until the principles of the Gospel had been thoroughly discussed and well understood. They began to give systematic teaching to those who asked for baptism, and ensured that they considered the implications of the step they were taking. This was doubly important in days when a public profession of faith in Christ could cost a man his freedom or his life, and his acceptance into the community of Christians could cost the freedom or the life of others if he proved to be a traitor or a trouble-maker. "Those whose duty it is to baptize should know that baptism is not to be bestowed rashly," said Tertullian. "And so it is more salutary to delay baptism according to the state and character of each person."[2] He advises against baptizing those who have not yet reached adulthood lest they compromise their faith when faced with the temptations of adolescence, and bring shame on the name of Christ. "And those who are hearing [the word of God]," he adds, "ought to long for baptism, not to claim it hastily as a right. For he who longs for it honours it; he who claims it hastily disdains it... the former yearns to deserve it, whilst the latter promises it to himself as his due."[3]

By the third century, this period of formal, preparatory teaching and probation had been extended from six months to a year, and sometimes as long as three years: the stipulated time varied from place to place. The larger churches appointed special teachers to instruct baptismal candidates in the basic doctrines of the faith. Each person requesting baptism was asked why he or she wished to be baptized. Then enquiry was made into his trade or craft, and if his occupation proved to be incompatible with the Christian faith, he would have to forsake it before he could undergo the ceremony. Once baptized, he could share in the Lord's Supper and take a full part in the life of the church.

* * *

From the very beginning, the leaders of the churches were faced with the difficult question of what to do about those who fell into serious sin after they had been baptized. And not only the leaders were concerned about this, but all who cared about the well-being of their Christian brothers and

[1] Acts 8:9-24
[2] *On Baptism* 18
[3] *On Repentance* 6

sisters. The aim of all discipline was to lead the offender to repentance and restoration. "My brothers," said the apostle Paul, "if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted too."[1] If there were signs of genuine regret and a determination not to repeat the fault, then the offender was to be welcomed back into the fellowship of the church; he was to be forgiven and accepted. "Now, however, you should forgive him and encourage him," said Paul, "in order to keep him from becoming so sad as to give up completely."[2] But if, on the other hand, he showed no sign of genuine contrition and no desire to obey the word of God, he was to be excluded from the church and its meetings. "You should not associate with a person who calls himself a brother but is immoral or greedy or worships idols or is a slanderer or a drunkard or a thief. Don't even sit down to eat with such a person."[3]

In fact, as this might imply, a baptized believer who was found guilty of sexual immorality, or of involvement with the worship of idols, was treated much more severely than a new believer who had barely escaped from such snares, whilst a mere pagan who hung at the fringes of the Christian community – perhaps the husband or wife of a believer – was treated with great forbearance should he indulge in idolatry or adultery. What else could be expected from one who did not yet know the way of God or the power of his Spirit?

But Tertullian, writing in the late second century, was concerned to show how seriously the Christians of his day took the question of discipline, and how earnestly they exhorted one another to purity and holiness. "We are a body united by our religious profession, by our godly discipline, by the bond of hope," he said. "We have exhortations, admonitions, and godly censure. For judgment is administered by us with great gravity, as is natural with men who are convinced that they are in the sight of God. And you have the most impressive anticipation of the Judgment to come when a man has so sinned as to be banished from participation in prayer, and from meeting with us, and from all sacred fellowship."[4]

If a Christian were excluded from the worship of the church and from the Lord's Supper, so terrible did this sentence appear that we read of some submitting to a ten or twenty year penance, involving all manner of humiliations, in order to demonstrate true penitence and gain restoration to

[1] Gal 6:1 GNB
[2] 2 Cor 2:7 GNB
[3] 1 Cor 5:11 GNB
[4] *Apology* 39

the fellowship of God's people. Tertullian writes that a believer who has deliberately sinned against God must show his repentance by full confession of sin, abstinence from all pleasure, constant prayer and fasting, imploring the brethren to pray for him. Only then would he be sure not to fall again.[1] Origen, writing at much the same period, says that Christians who had fallen into grievous sin could be readmitted to the fellowship of the church only after a lengthy period of testing, during which it would appear whether their repentance was genuine, but they could never again be raised to a place of leadership. Tertullian added that a leader would be stripped of his position and his responsibilities as a consequence of just one lapse, and could never regain them. It was vital, he said, for Christians to practise what they preach; those around them should be quite clear that hypocrisy is not to be found or tolerated in the church. And this is why only the highest standards are acceptable.

* * *

In the smaller towns and villages, Christians continued to meet in one another's homes or in the fields and woods. But in the cities, by the late second century, despite the periodic persecutions which afflicted the Christian community, special buildings were often set apart for worship. The church buildings in North Africa resembled the ordinary houses in which the people lived, except that they had a large central room, often with a domed roof, and with raised seats at the front for those who led the meetings. A portion of the room was railed off, containing the Lord's Table upon which the bread and wine were placed at times of worship. The hall was decorated simply and without ostentation, like their own homes – nothing more than the occasional drawing or carving depicting a biblical scene or a symbol of the Christian way, such as the beautiful marble plaque of the Good Shepherd found in the catacombs at Sousse, Tunisia.

But the favourite symbol of the early Christians seems to have been that of the fish. The Greek word *ichthus* "fish" is an anagram comprising the initials of the five words JESUS CHRIST SON of GOD SAVIOUR. Tertullian speaks lovingly of this symbol which was in itself a testimony to faith in Jesus – as Messiah, God incarnate, and Redeemer – borne proudly by those who believed him to be just that.

The North African Christians liked to decorate their utensils and their houses and cemeteries with this motif, or with an anchor or a dove. The cross does not appear in Christian art in North Africa until toward the close

[1] *On Repentance* 9

of the fourth century.[1] This is strange, because it was common in other parts of the Empire well before this. At Herculaneum in southern Italy, for example, traces of a cross have been found buried in the lava of a volcanic eruption which took place in AD 79. Perhaps the cross was little used in North Africa because it so closely resembled the inverted triangle, the symbol of the Phoenician goddess Tanit.

Not until the third and fourth centuries did pagan converts begin to adopt thoroughly "Christian" names. These were often names taken from the Bible or else pagan names borne by Christian heroes and martyrs of the past. They obviously chose their names with care. Some expressed personal qualities such as humility or patience; others spoke of joy and victory and eternal life.[2] But prior to this, throughout the first two centuries, converts generally retained their pagan names, even when these names denoted the deities they had previously worshipped. A change of name would have been tantamount to a public declaration of conversion to Christianity, and a rejection of the gods which underpinned society. This, apart from offending unconverted parents, might well have aroused unnecessary prejudice, and brought persecution not for the sake of truth or moral principles but simply on account of a personal name. Rather than this, it was better to show by an honest and unselfish life the practical reality of God's love, and to draw friends and neighbours quietly and willingly into the faith. The early Christians took seriously Peter's wise counsel: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."[3] Yet as the Christian community grew, its members scorned to hide their light under a bushel, and increasingly they testified to the hope they professed by the names they bore.

[1] The Italian officials to whom Tertullian wrote c.198 AD were aware of the cross being used in Christian worship. Tertullian, however, was referring to a European custom, not necessarily an African one (*Apology* 16; *Ad Nationes* 1:12).

[2] Latourette Vol.I pp.261, 283

[3] 1 Pet 3:15

7. The Triumph of Truth

In Carthage, about 160 AD, a baby boy was born to a certain centurion in the service of the Roman governor; he was given the name Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus. His parents little knew that their son was to become the outstanding North African of his generation. Tertullian enjoyed an excellent education, applying himself to the study of philosophy and law. As a young man he indulged exuberantly in all the extravagant vices of heathen society. He observed the formalities of pagan religion but thought little about their meaning.

At the age of about thirty five, however, events brought him to a personal crisis. For some time, the growing Christian community of Carthage had been viewed with increasing suspicion by the Roman authorities. The Christians would not participate in public sacrifice; nor would they swear by the divine power of the emperor. A number were suddenly arrested and ordered to conform. Tertullian was deeply moved by their extraordinary courage in the face of the cruel sufferings inflicted upon them by the pagan authorities. He knew these men and women, and he was sure that they were innocent of any crime. They were honest folk – better people in fact than the pagans who abused them. Now he saw with his own eyes how they refused to deny what they believed, and faced death with an undaunted confidence that they would rise again – an assurance which Tertullian himself had not found in his shallow paganism. They clearly possessed a deeper and a different quality of joy than that to be wrung from the sleazy entertainments of Carthage. They radiated a calm nobility which somehow raised them above the rabble, and above their Roman tormentors. As he pondered on the meaning of it all, the conviction grew in his mind that this little handful of obstinate men and women had discovered something very precious. And if the way of Christ was the truth, there was only one thing for him to do about it.

With Tertullian there were no half measures. When he became a Christian, he did so with all the passionate enthusiasm and the intense conviction that characterized the man. His life, which had been aimless, took a firm direction; his character, which had been unstable, was made whole. His restless mind was fixed at last on what he knew to be right and true. He felt like a new man, a complete man, and so he was. He later wrote, "Christians are made, not born,"[1] and this was certainly his own experience. His powerful imagination was captivated by the way of Christ. At last he

[1] *Apology* 18

had found the cause for which his passionate nature cried out – a purpose worthy of his devotion and his energies. He had set his hand to the plough and from then on he would never look back.

* * *

But if the message made the man, the man was no less an asset to the cause he had espoused. Shortly after his conversion he began preaching and teaching the Faith in Carthage, and so successfully that he soon found he had no time to spare for the rhetorician's legal career which had been marked out for him. He gave himself to the work of the Gospel, trusting God simply to provide for his needs. He began to write about the new way of life that was unfolding before him, and from the first he reveals his love for his North African homeland and especially his hometown of Carthage.

As a Christian writer, Tertullian stands almost alone in his generation. A number of his works are lost, especially his earlier writings, and some composed in Greek. Those that remain are numerous, though for the most part short. They are practical and topical, dealing with the urgent questions which faced the Christians of his day, and they cover a multitude of subjects. They give, incidentally, a great deal of valuable information about pagan and Christian society in North Africa at the close of the second century.

The earliest, and perhaps the greatest of his major works was the *Apologeticus*, or "Apology", written around AD 198, during the despotic reign of the brutal Septimius Severus. It is a masterly presentation of the Christian faith – not an academic treatise, addressed to a cultured emperor of philosophical and literary tastes, but a fierce polemic written in time of persecution to magistrates who refused to listen to a word in defence of Christianity, and who condemned the accused solely on their admission that they practised, and refused to abandon, an unauthorized religion. The word "Apology" does not imply regret, or the justification of an offence, as its modern English usage might suggest. On the contrary, it represents a reasoned demonstration of a point of view, with logical proof of its truth and validity, and a persuasive plea for its acceptance.

The work commences by showing the absurdity of arresting Christians as though they were criminals and then tormenting them, not to make them reveal hidden crimes, but to make them disguise honest beliefs. "Other offenders," he says, "are tortured in order that they may confess. Why are we alone tortured to make us deny what we confess willingly?"[1] And why

[1] *Apology* 2

is it, he asks, that people rail so passionately against Christianity? The universal prejudice against us is as illogical as it is unfounded. The very people among whom we live recognize that Christians are the best of men and women, yet still they despise us. They say, "A good man, Caius Seius, except that he is a Christian" and "I marvel that that wise man Lucius Titius has suddenly become a Christian."[1] Why is it, Tertullian asks, that husbands, fathers, masters deplore the reformation of morals which accompany the Christian faith? Can it be that they really prefer a deceitful pagan wife or son or servant to an honest Christian one?

Why should the Christians be so hated? "If the river Tiber comes up to the walls, if the river Nile fails to come up to the fields, if there is no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is a famine, or a pestilence, the cry immediately is: "The Christians to the lions!"[2] Why should we be blamed for adversities that are common to all men? This is certainly not justice in the best Roman tradition. And he knew what he was talking about: "Tertullian writes as a lawyer, pleading that the persecution of the Christians is illegal and that the laws against Christians are a denial of human rights."[3] Indeed, he declared, "It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions."[4] A good citizen ought not to suffer prejudice because of his religion; laws should restrain bad behaviour, not honest beliefs.

If Tertullian's legal background taught him to recognize evidence, it also enabled him to make the very most of it. His training in rhetoric, allied to his innate gift for the telling phrase, brought an astonishing eloquence and power to his speech. "His style matches his thought. It... is vigorous, emphatic and eloquent. His terseness and abruptness make him sometimes obscure, and his vocabulary is amazing in its indiscriminateness. No term is too technical or archaic, no expression too vulgar or provincial, if only it will indicate his meaning. And where a Latin word is not ready to hand, he tries a Greek or coins a fresh one. His style has all the mingled material and all the rapidity and directness of an avalanche. Timber, stone, and earth, leaves, flowers, and rubbish, are all swept together and hurled along, to open out some choked path or to overwhelm an adversary."[5] His writings are clearly the work of an enthusiast, and he sometimes gets carried away by the force of his conviction and the vehemence of his argument. At times his enthusiasm for his subject leads him into rash assertions which are

[1] *Apology* 3
[2] *Apology* 40
[3] Bettenson, *ECF* p.15
[4] *To Scapula* 2
[5] Plummer pp.114-115

hardly borne out by the facts. Especially when reading his polemical material, "One must always remember that one is listening to the special pleading of an impassioned advocate, not to the sworn testimony of a witness or the summing up of a judge."[1]

But in all this, whether he himself was aware of it or not, he was creating a new language, or at least forging an old language into new shapes: he was making of Latin a vehicle able to bear the grandeur and the power of the most profound message that man had ever heard. The literature of Latin Christianity really begins with Tertullian. He had ideas which had never been expressed in that language before, and his one aim was to express them forcibly. It was Tertullian who coined the word "Trinity" to describe the nature of God, and it is estimated that he invented a total of some 982 new words altogether.

The great French historian Julien sees in Tertullian the lively temperament of the Amazigh set on fire by the spark of Christian truth and burning with irresistible conviction. He was "a converted Berber, but under the Christian veneer, retained all the passion, all the intransigence, all the indiscipline of the Berber."[2] Tertullian at times bewails his own heat of temper. Yet he continues, driven onwards by his self-confident impatience, wielding words like weapons of war, pursuing his opponents relentlessly, and hurling after them every kind of argument in order to beat them into submission. It is not surprising that few could reason or debate with him: his prodigious talents left room in the arena for none but he. Tertullian is a writer with whom it is impossible always to agree and who sometimes jars on us, but with all his faults, he is a man of great genius, and his character is one of the most fascinating in the history of the Church.

* * *

Tertullian had the heart of an evangelist. His writings are devoted above all to winning pagans and Jews to faith in Christ. He presents all the reasons for belief and answers all the objections. And when he turns his thoughts to the Christian community itself, his great desire is that the pagan world should be able to look there and see Christ. The life of the Christians must match up to the Gospel they proclaim. What use, he asks, is a Christian Church which does not commend itself to the outsider? What can it achieve if it does not manifest the holiness of Christ? How can pagans be attracted to the Saviour if they see his followers in a worse state of sin than they are themselves? Tertullian longed for the Church to be a faithful witness to the

[1] Plummer p.115
[2] quoted in Guernier p.185

world. When he spoke to the people of Carthage he liked to be able to point to the transformation which Christ can make in a man or woman. But if there was no sign of that transformation, then the preaching of the Gospel must fall on deaf ears. Tertullian challenged his critics to find one Christian who had been accused of sacrilege or seduction, or who was a murderer or a cut-purse, or a stealer of the clothes of bathers. And if they did find such a one, they would find also that he had been cut off from the fellowship of the Church. Declarations of this kind required that the Christian community live up to the picture he painted of her. Corruption in the Church would cut the ground from under his feet, and the feet of all those who were seeking to win others to faith in Christ.

Tertullian urged his fellow-Christians to avoid all appearance of compromise with political groups and worldly powers. The empires of the world rise and fall, he said, but the Church is eternal. She is a spiritual kingdom, not an earthly or physical one, and she must remain free to minister to the spiritual needs of all men whoever they might be. If the Roman authorities looked on her with favour she might rejoice; if they despised and hated her she must endure. But on no account should she be wooed to their cause: she was not to be an instrument of Roman rule. The Christian is a good and honest citizen, but his hopes are founded not on any human republic or kingdom. He belongs first of all to that people called the Church of God, and his sovereign is the King of kings; this is where his loyalty lies. “Is any nation, bounded by its frontiers, more numerous than we are,” he asked, “we who are a nation with no limit but the whole world?”[1]

The sincerity of Tertullian’s conviction is as unquestionable as his zeal. He is sure of his position, and all other points of view are but sinking sand. What can an unconverted man know of truth? What can a worldly man know of holiness? How can a worshipper of idols comprehend, or criticize, the teachings of the Bible? As the apostle Paul said, these things are understood by the revelation of God’s Spirit. “Whoever does not have the Spirit, cannot receive the gifts that come from God’s Spirit. Such a person really does not understand them; they are nonsense to him... Whoever has the Spirit, however, is able to judge the value of everything.”[2]

A Christian who has denied his faith was seen by Tertullian as a coward and a traitor without excuse: he had lied and blasphemed in order to save his own skin. And should he return to the faith, the Church must not accept him back as though nothing had happened: that was the way to fill its ranks with feckless drifters and hypocrites. The Church of Christ, said Tertullian,

[1] *Apology* 37
[2] 1 Cor 2:14-15 GNB

could not feebly condone crass disloyalty to her Master or deliberate sin against him. A believer who turned back to the worship of idols, or to the immorality of paganism, should be excluded from the Church. Was not the Lord Jesus worthy of better service? A Christian must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Christ; anything less than full commitment was an insult to God and to his people. Deliberate sin must be dealt with seriously, as indeed it had been by the apostles of Christ.[1]

The power to cast out demons was common in the churches of Tertullian’s day. He refers to exorcism not as a rare phenomenon to be ascertained with difficulty from the evidence of others, but as an undeniable fact known to everyone, and to which he could confidently appeal as proof that his message was true. He does not ask his pagan adversaries to believe that such powers still exist, but rather to accept the Gospel which they so clearly authenticate.

* * *

Tertullian knew the Scriptures well, quoting frequently from the Gospels and the Epistles as well as the Old Testament. He was clearly in the mainstream of the pure, apostolic faith. We see in his writings few of the incipient religious accretions which were shortly to complicate the life of the churches. He recognized no sacraments besides baptism and the Lord’s Supper; he argued against the novel practice of infant baptism; he referred to Mary the mother of Jesus without any mark of special reverence. He denied the necessity of celibacy for the leaders of the Church, although he saw value in celibacy for any Christian, if undertaken voluntarily. He firmly believed in the priesthood of all believers, often reminding his hearers that where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there is Christ in the midst of them; and he affirmed most emphatically that the true Church will be governed by the Spirit of God, not by conferences of men. He confidently expected to see in his own days the end of the world, the return of Christ, and the onset of the Millennium.

At times, however, his writings seem to reflect the more questionable thinking of his generation, and are hardly born out by a careful reading of Scripture itself. He held, for example, that a Christian should marry only once: if a husband or wife died, the surviving partner should not re-marry. He seemed to believe that the ceremony of baptism would purify the believer from all past transgressions, and if the believer fell into sin after his baptism, he advocated the imposition of penance – humiliations, fastings

[1] 1 Cor 5:9-11

and prayers – which could restore the sinner to divine favour. But only once: if he fell a second time, he was beyond hope. Tertullian appeared to accept a period of purification for the soul between death and judgment, and the value of prayers for the dead, although he shows no sign of the convoluted system of confessions and indulgences to which the doctrine of Purgatory gave rise in Medieval times.

Tertullian was not a methodical teacher; his work is marked more by imaginative spontaneity than by logical order. In actual fact it is often difficult to discern from his writings whether he himself taught a particular doctrine or whether he is merely expressing a commonly held belief, or even ironically parodying a belief which he does not hold. His views on these lesser issues are not systematically presented; they are thrown out in passing as he pursues other, more urgent, themes. His contribution to the heritage of the Church was a priceless one, but one which, in the final analysis, needed to be balanced by the contribution of others.

* * *

After some years, Tertullian was probably appointed an elder in the church at Carthage but, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, he never advanced further in the developing ecclesiastical hierarchy, and indeed he appears to have had serious reservations about any such organizational structure. His wife was a Christian. He wrote two treatises on Christian marriage which he dedicated to her, affectionately calling her "my best-beloved fellow-servant in the Lord."[1] Like most men of his time, Tertullian probably wore a short-sleeved white linen tunic, a sort of long shirt reaching to the knees, with a belt at the waist. He demonstrated his independence from the customs of the Roman Empire by laying aside the loose, flowing Roman outer-garment, the toga, and preferring the Greek *himation* (a sort of coat), or else the cloak, or *pallium*, of the philosopher; he justified this preference in a book on the subject of clothing. Others seem to have followed his example and the toga tended to disappear from the churches. On his feet he wore sandals laced around the ankles. His hair was cut short, and he may have worn the short beard which had been fashionable since the turn of the second century. Clement of Alexandria, an older contemporary of Tertullian, referred to the beard as "the flower of manliness". "The beard," said Clement, "is an attribute with which God has endowed men and lions!"[2] To remove it was both a mark of effeminacy and an affront to the Creator!

[1] *To His Wife* 1:1
[2] *The Instructor* 3:3 (*ANF* Vol.II)

* * *

Tertullian dwelt in Carthage at the time when Perpetua and her friends were put to death there in AD 203. Some writers believe that it was he who composed, or edited, the account of their martyrdom. Be that as it may, it was certainly about then that he decided to join the group of Christians, known as Montanists, to which they apparently belonged. This movement had acquired a certain popularity in North Africa by the early third century. Its members followed the teachings and example of one Montanus, who had commenced preaching around AD 170 in the province of Phrygia, in what is now central Turkey.

Montanus believed that his generation stood at the threshold of a new era, the age of the Holy Spirit, in which revelations and prophecies would be given to all God's children according to the promise of Scripture: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."[1] The Christians who met with Montanus began to see and hear such things. "The Spirit moves the mind," he said, "as when a musician plays upon the lyre" and in this way the believer could receive and pass on the very words of God.

The Montanists took the principles of the New Testament seriously and endeavoured to put them into practice, whatever difficulties might ensue. Like many others, they could not reconcile military service with the teachings of Jesus: Christians should have no part in the army. The study of profane or pagan literature, they said, was also inappropriate for a Christian: it could only lead him astray, or else cause others who followed his example to stumble. They began to meet together in their own homes, where they prayed and fasted and read the Scriptures together; they held one another to the highest standards. They looked forward to a heavenly reward and a better life. Christ was returning very soon, they believed, and every eye would see him and every tongue confess that he is Lord,[2] and then he would gather up his own people and take them to dwell with him forever in glory. The Christian was not to become entangled in the affairs of this passing world, and if he were called upon to suffer persecution or martyrdom for the sake of Christ, then he could rejoice that God had so honoured him. Tertullian was strongly drawn to such a group. He was attracted by their earnest desire to obey the word of God. Their wholehearted sincerity matched his own.

[1] Acts 2:17-18
[2] Phil 2:11

The Montanists were unhappy with certain trends they observed in the churches of North Africa, as in Asia Minor: they longed for a more visible holiness to be clearly seen in the Christian community. Many Christians, they said, were not living in true obedience to Christ. Some, it seemed, were prone to indulge in disreputable activities, and to participate in sordid heathen amusements; the name of Christ was blasphemed because of what so-called Christians were doing. Such people ought to be excluded from the churches. Outsiders – pagans and Jews – should have the opportunity to hear the Gospel, but they must not be called Christians until they really were Christians – until they would deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Christ.

The Montanists chafed at the increasingly formal structure of authority which tied the churches together and cramped the freedom of their meetings. There was a growing tendency for the leaders in the large urban centres to lord it over the flock and even to make pronouncements which they expected other churches to obey. Leaders should be respected, said the Montanists, but were by no means infallible, and even they must submit to the authority of God's word. Unity, they declared, should not be imposed by heavy-handed force: true oneness is a fruit of loving tolerance and can only be found when all are filled with the Spirit of Christ. The unity of the Church should be spiritual rather than institutional, and there should be room within it for varied opinions and differing emphases. The Saviour himself is its head and his Spirit must be its guide; no man can take his place.

The meetings, too, were becoming increasingly formal, allowing little freedom for the Holy Spirit to speak directly to the individual members of the churches. The recognized overseers, they pointed out, would not be the only ones to receive God's guidance: each believer could pray to the Lord and know his will, and contribute to the life of the church for the common good.

If the sensitive purity of this group in its earliest days commands our respect, their readiness for martyrdom compels our unfeigned admiration. They had no hesitation in laying down their lives – when the alternative meant denying their Saviour. We can perhaps forgive them for a certain unbending insistence on absolute standards of right and wrong, and for their impatience with those who desired a less demanding path, for the principles they upheld were really no more than the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. They added little and removed nothing. Their prophecies and revelations introduced no new or strange doctrines; they consisted mainly of fervent exhortations to deeper love and to greater holiness. Perhaps they tended towards an excessive legalism; but, if so, it derived simply from an

earnest desire to put into practice what they saw in the word of God. They resembled, in certain points, the Christian Brethren and Pentecostal movements of a later period.

* * *

Many churches of the second century, however, were moving in quite a different direction. Some were inclining to the view that prophecy had ceased with the age of the apostles. Personal revelations, it was said, could no longer be received by Christians, and anyone now claiming to receive prophecies from God must be an impostor. The Montanists were perturbed by such assertions, but they had no wish to separate themselves from their brothers in Christ. Rather than causing open divisions they bore patiently with misunderstanding and prejudice, and did their best to influence the Christian community from within.

There were, nonetheless, those in the older churches who resented what they felt was the criticism of the Montanists, mistrusted their independent spirit, and ridiculed the revelations they claimed to have received. Complaints were made about them in the highest quarters, and they were condemned by certain churches in their native Phrygia. One of their opponents, by the name of Praxeas, travelled as far as Rome and succeeded in convincing the Overseer of the church there that the Montanists were a divisive influence and a dangerous menace to the unity of the Christian Church throughout the world. The result was decisive. The Montanists were formally excommunicated by the church in Rome, and subsequently by all the churches in every province who followed her lead – a grouping which came to be known as the Catholic, or universal, Church. This rejection and exclusion was not due to any false teaching on the part of the Montanists, but simply because they disrupted the ordered life of the churches and would not accept the standards prescribed by the recognized leaders.

Serious doubts were subsequently raised concerning the orthodoxy of Praxeas himself. His views concerning the deity and humanity of Christ undoubtedly strayed from Biblical truth, whereas the Montanists were unquestionably orthodox in this respect. But the damage was done. It is not, perhaps, surprising that the Montanists should be badly misunderstood by subsequent church historians of a Catholic and Episcopalian bent who in their own generation echo the ecumenical plea for unity at any price. Epitaphs are written dismissing them in such terms as: "stern enthusiasts,

heroes in the day of persecution, bigots in time of peace."[1] But that is not at all the whole story.

And this was by no means the end of the Montanists. In Tertullian they found their greatest champion; he wrote a lengthy and well-reasoned refutation of Praxeas. Putting his weight behind the movement which he refers to as "the New Prophecy", Tertullian made Montanism not merely respectable, but a power to be reckoned with in North Africa. The Montanists continued to teach and minister to one another as led by the Holy Spirit, and evidently with the manifest blessing of God.[2]

* * *

Tertullian remained throughout his life in Carthage, although he visited Rome at least once, and may even have served as an elder in the church there for a while. He became acquainted in Rome with a Latin version of the Scriptures which sometimes differs widely from that used later by Cyprian in Carthage. But the arrogance of the leaders of the church in Rome, and their bewildering hostility towards the Montanists, left a permanent mark on Tertullian and undoubtedly helped to drive him into their camp. His was too commanding an intellect, and too fervent a spirit, to submit easily to the clumsy dictates of lesser men. It was not his wish to cause or to encourage division; nor was it the desire of the older churches to exclude him from their fellowship. He held with his whole heart the principles of the Christian faith, and differed from his fellow-believers only in thinking their standard of holiness too low. He remained a great champion of true Christianity; some of his most telling works against Gnosticism and other heresies were written after he had joined the Montanists. And it must be said that his scorching eloquence is the more effective when directed against the follies of the common foe than when aimed at the inadequacies of the Catholic Church he had left.

Tertullian always regarded unity as a great Christian virtue, but not one to be bought at the price of truth. New ideas, he maintained, must always be tested by the word of God; errors must be identified early, before they can spread and take root. Truth, he says, is one, heresy manifold; truth is to be recognized by the consent of all the churches whereas heresy is local and limited to a party; truth is derived from the apostles whereas heresy is

[1] Foakes-Jackson p.254

[2] The Montanists of Asia Minor maintained their independent churches well into the sixth century (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.421).

modern; truth is confirmed by holy Scripture whereas heresy sets itself against and above holy Scripture.[1]

Eventually it would seem that Tertullian grew disillusioned with the extremes towards which some of the Montanists were tending. The adherents of such lively, uninhibited groups sometimes show an alarming tendency to accept without question the wildest pronouncements of their "prophets", inspired – so they believe – by the Holy Spirit. As Tertullian saw clearly enough, faith is admirable, but only if the object of that faith be true. Spiritual freedom must be tempered by careful discernment. Truths revealed by God, and in harmony with the inspired Scriptures, should be accepted; but ideas derived from the imaginative ramblings of the well-intentioned but over-excitable human mind – these should not be allowed to lead the churches astray. "My dear friends," said the apostle John some years earlier, "Do not believe all who claim to have the Spirit, but test them to find out if the spirit they have comes from God."[2] And Paul likewise observed that the Spirit gave to one "the gift of speaking God's message" but, equally, to another "the ability to tell the difference between gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not."[3] After some years Tertullian apparently parted company with the Montanists, taking a number of his closest friends with him. Truth, for him, still mattered most of all.

* * *

Tertullian is equalled by only one Christian leader in his generation, the great Origen. The latter was born in Alexandria but later moved to Caesarea on the coast of Palestine. Tertullian and Origen were in some respects surprisingly alike, in other ways thoroughly dissimilar. Each of them had a gift for original and imaginative thought, and each of them applied that gift to a prolific stream of writings, defending the faith against heathen, Jew and heretic. Both led lives of the strictest self-denial and both, by precept and example, inspired their generation to genuine Christian devotion. Each of them would suffer the loss of all things rather than compromise the truth of the Gospel. Yet the two of them spent the latter portion of their lives at variance with the greater part of the Christian Church and in conflict with its most influential leaders in Rome.

These points of marked resemblance are on the surface; but there are significant differences which lie deeper. The fact that one of them spent half his life in pagan wickedness, whilst the other from his birth knew the

[1] See *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32.

[2] 1 John 4:1 GNB

[3] 1 Cor 12:10 GNB

blessing of a stable Christian home, is the explanation of much that follows. The stern fervour of Tertullian was doubtless in his nature but it was intensified by the complete break with the past which his conversion imposed upon him, whereas the "sweetness and light" of the lovable Origen were the fruits of a gentle growth in Christian character from his earliest childhood. This is reflected in the way they wrote: the one with dogmatic boldness, the other with a subtle and speculative courtesy. The one deals in forthright assertions, the other in lofty aspirations. Tertullian offers to the moral despair of the world a stern rebuke, and to its intellectual despair a scoff. But Origen had deep sympathy for both, and felt keenly for those who were groping towards an understanding of the mysteries of the universe. Tertullian had studied philosophy as a pagan and acquired the utmost contempt for it: philosophy had shown itself a source of countless falsehoods and heresies. It had led people into a total darkness which could only be dispelled by the revealed light of the Gospel. Origen who had studied it (and far more thoroughly) as a Christian, esteemed it highly, and saw it as a partial and preparatory revelation which might still serve as a handmaid to the truth.

Although they both found themselves at odds with other Christians, the reasons for this were different in each case. Tertullian's separation was his own doing; that of Origen was the work of his adversaries. Tertullian, though never condemned at Carthage, deliberately left the church in which he had ministered, and made a point of finding fault with its weaknesses. Origen, excommunicated at Alexandria and Rome, moved away to the east where he enjoyed the closest of fellowship with the churches of those parts, criticizing nobody. Here we can see perhaps, as we shall observe again, how profoundly the character of a man may determine the ministry he undertakes and the views he holds.

* * *

Some have said that Tertullian, drifting away from the Montanists, subsequently returned to the Catholic grouping of churches, to which most Christians in North Africa belonged at this time. Such a view smacks somewhat of wishful thinking on the part of those who revere both the man and the Catholic body. In fact, two centuries later there were still groups of Christians who were identified as Tertullianists. Although they seem not to have been numerous, their existence indicates that Tertullian had continued to maintain a certain distance from the Church he had so vigorously

criticized.[1] On the other hand, a century after his death, even such a staunch advocate of Catholic unity as Cyprian prized his writings above all others. "Hand me the master!" Cyprian is reported to have said whenever he wished his secretary to pass him a volume of Tertullian. As Tertullian was never officially condemned or excommunicated by leaders of the Catholic Church in Carthage or Rome, he may have considered that no formal reconciliation was necessary. He was always one who would meet and worship with any who loved and served Christ faithfully, to whatever church they might belong.

The great translator, Jerome, tells us that Tertullian lived to a good age. Neither the manner nor the date of his death is known. It must be placed somewhere between AD 220 and 240 and this would make him at least 60 when he received the call to higher service.

Tertullian spoke both to the growing Church and to the watching world, glorying in the contrast between the two – a difference that was clear to all with eyes to see: "the truth of Christian doctrine, as opposed to the falsehood of paganism; the purity of Christian morals, as opposed to pagan licentiousness; the brotherhood of Christian fellowship, as opposed to the selfishness and cruelty of paganism."[2] Truth, purity and brotherhood: these were his great themes. But his epitaph must be his own memorable affirmation of truth, the truth of God which must not, and cannot, be hidden:

> "Truth asks no favour for her cause.
> She knows that on earth she is a stranger,
> and that among aliens she may easily find foes.
> Her birth, her home, her hope are in the heavens.
>
> One thing meanwhile she earnestly desires,
> that she be not condemned unknown."[3]

Secondary sources for the life of Tertullian are Barnes; Lloyd pp.21-60; Foakes-Jackson pp.206-208, 263-265; Latourette Vol.I pp.125-131; Plummer pp.111-119. Frend *TDC*, and Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II both contain numerous references.

For the Montanists see *NAPNF* Series 2 Vol.I: *Eusebius* V, 16-18 (with extensive translator's footnotes); Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.415-427; Barnes; Wright; Foakes-Jackson pp.224-225 etc.

[1] Augustine tells us that it was through his efforts that the Tertullianists of Carthage were finally reconciled to the Catholic Church in the fourth century (*De Haerisibus* 6; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.421).

[2] Lloyd p.28

[3] *Apology* 1; see translation in Lloyd p.23

8. Documents and Doctrines

The greatest minds among the Christians of the first four centuries were taken up with the definition and defence of the Faith. They were occupied with such questions as: Was Christ a man like us, or was he an angel? Or was he a different kind of being altogether – neither man, nor angel? Has Christ always existed, or did he come into existence when he was conceived in the Virgin's womb? Was Christ really tempted to sin as we are, so that he actually might have sinned? Or was it impossible for him to sin – with the implication that he could not really have been tempted?

The early Christians searched for answers to questions such as these in the Old Testament, in the writings of the apostles, and in the recorded sayings of Jesus himself. Sometimes they speculated and reasoned from what seemed to them to be the accepted principles of logic and commonsense. But ultimately they always came back to the Old Testament and the earliest Christian writings, which they believed to be inspired by God. Any point of doubt could be settled by reference to a saying of the Lord Jesus, or a statement from Peter, or Paul, or one of the other apostles.

By the end of the first century, all the books which make up our New Testament had been written, but they circulated in the Christian communities as separate documents. One church might possess a Gospel of Matthew; another might have a Gospel of John. Another had perhaps four or five of Paul's letters. Elsewhere there might be Peter's first epistle or the book of Revelation. But other Christian writings also acquired a certain popularity, and the leaders of the churches were faced with the necessity of deciding which of the existing writings were actually by the hand of the earliest apostles. Which were to be considered authoritative, given by the inspiration of God to his specially chosen servants, and which were merely the well-meaning creations of man?

As early as AD 180 there was, in fact, a large measure of consensus among the Christians of every continent as to which were the authoritative, or canonical, books. Marcion in Pontus, to the far north-east of what is now Turkey, had drawn up a very short list of acceptable books as early as AD 140, but his views veered towards the mystical idiosyncrasies of Gnosticism, and he was predisposed to reject those books which did not support his position. Other early writers included the books approved by Marcion, adding others which they were accustomed to use in their own churches. In the West, John's Gospel was less popular than the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke), and the book of Hebrews was only slowly

accepted there. In the East, on the other hand, the book of Revelation was not at first recognized.

In the early third century, Tertullian referred to each of the four Gospels when describing the life of Christ, and by the middle of the third century all the books which now make up our New Testament were accepted as genuine and authoritative. The letter of Athanasius, Overseer of the church in Alexandria, written in AD 367 is commonly regarded as the first to define the canon of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books that we now use. Thirty years later, a conference in Carthage defined the canon of the New Testament exactly as it is now universally received.

The acceptance of these books naturally meant the rejection of others, which are now called the New Testament Apocrypha. Weird and wonderful miracles are reported in these apocryphal writings, obviously at variance with the sober and restrained accounts given in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Nevertheless they enjoyed a wide vogue among those who revelled in the fantastic and did not give over-scrupulous consideration to the teachings which accompanied it. Some of these books purported to be written by the apostles, but on closer investigation they contained teaching incompatible with the documents which had unquestionably been left by those men. There was a spurious Gospel of Peter, for example, which contained doctrines that Peter never could have taught. Another was the so-called *Epistle of Barnabas*, probably composed in the second century,[1] and one of the best known was the *Didache*, or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles", probably written around 100 AD. Athanasius, in the fourth century, refers to these apocryphal writings as "books which are not authoritative but appointed by the early Christians to be read to those new to the faith."[2] The allegorical tale entitled *The Shepherd of Hermas* was widely distributed in North Africa, and there was also a letter called the *Epistle of Clement*, and a number of other texts, including purported accounts of Jesus' childhood and the travels of Peter, Paul and the other apostles. Certain individuals and churches in the first four centuries claimed inspiration for one or another of these books and argued for their recognition along with the Gospels and Epistles which now make up our

[1] The *Epistle of Barnabas* should not be confused with the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*. No reference to the latter is found in any document before the end of the fifth century when it is mentioned as a recent heretical work. An eighteenth-century work claims to be this lost *Gospel of Barnabas*, but it is written in Italian. As it quotes from the seventh-century *Qur'an* and from the thirteenth-century *Divine Comedy*, it clearly cannot date back to apostolic times. No other copy of this spurious "Gospel" has been found apart from a few fragments in Spanish which have since disappeared. It is entirely absent from the numerous collections of genuine first century writings prized by the early Christians.

[2] *Festal Epistle* 39; Bainton p.98

New Testament. But the consensus of the churches indicated otherwise, and a careful reading of the apocryphal works shows them, in each case, to be flawed in doctrine and lacking in that restraint and balance which epitomize the books which the churches have ever since recognized as the authentic word of God.

* * *

The writings which now make up our New Testament were held in great respect by the early churches. Their leaders referred frequently to them when preaching and teaching; their theologians appealed constantly to them as they clarified and propounded the great truths of the faith. Tertullian, for one, based his understanding of the Trinity entirely on the testimony of these apostolic writings. "All the Scriptures," he said, "give clear proof of the Trinity."[1] The early Christians believed that these documents had been inspired by God in the same way that the Books of Moses, and the Prophets and the poetical works of the Old Testament had been inspired: "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."[2] And they felt the need to search the Scriptures, to trust in the promises revealed there, and to apply their precepts to the demands of daily life. Tertullian, again, expresses this well: "We are compelled to refresh our memories of our sacred writings, in order to see if any special feature of the present time requires warning or reconsideration. In any case we nourish our faith with these holy utterances; we stimulate our hope, we establish our confidence; and at the same time we strengthen our discipline by constantly paying attention to the commandments."[3]

The early Christians were well acquainted not just with the New Testament but with the Old Testament too. Most could not read the Hebrew original, and the version most widely used during the first four centuries was the Greek translation called the Septuagint, sometimes known by the abbreviation *LXX*. The work of translation from the Hebrew Old Testament had been undertaken by seventy, or seventy two, Jewish scholars in the city of Alexandria, sometime around 200 BC. Each of these scholars was shut up in a different cell, so the story goes, and each one miraculously produced an identical translation of every verse. It should be added that neither Tertullian nor Augustine set much store by this popular legend, but both nevertheless appreciated the translation.

[1] *Against Praxeas* 11
[2] 2 Pet 1:21
[3] *Apology* 39

The Septuagint was regarded by the early Christians with deep veneration, and all the more in view of its supposedly miraculous origin. It was from this version that they drew their arguments against the Jews. Certain points of doctrine which they derived from the Septuagint, however, were unfortunately based on faulty renderings of the verses in question, and it was not until subsequent translations were completed, such as Jerome's Latin version known as the *Vulgate*, that those ideas were finally abandoned.

* * *

The theology of the early Church was not compiled systematically. Like the canon of the New Testament, it was worked out and put together piece by piece in response to current needs, or in answer to particular questions that arose. Most of the theological writings of such men as Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen were composed in reply to a challenge thrown out by critics or by other Christians whose views and teachings they recognized to be unsound. In fact, these antagonists deserve our thanks, for it was they who forced the most gifted minds of the day to think through some of the most complex and difficult issues which stem from the inspired writings of the New Testament. The same basic questions are raised in every generation, and the answers given by Tertullian and others, eighteen hundred years ago, are often as relevant now as they were then.

On one occasion, certain detractors had asked why God allowed man to fall into sin. Why did God not protect man from temptation, they demanded, or at least give him strength to overcome it? They argued that when God allowed Adam to fall into sin, the Creator must have been lacking either in goodness, or foreknowledge, or power. They implied that if he existed then he himself must be blamed for the evil in the world. Or perhaps, they hinted darkly, he does not exist after all!

Tertullian fires a broadside at these critics in his usual vigorous style: "And now for those questions of yours, you dogs, whom the apostle Paul turns out of doors,[1] you who bark at the God of truth. These are the bones of contention which you are perpetually gnawing: 'If God is good, and has foreknowledge and the power to avert evil, why has he allowed men to be beguiled by the devil and to fall away from obedience to his law so that they die...? For if he is good he would not wish such a thing to happen; if prescient, he would not be ignorant that it was going to happen; if powerful,

[1] referring to Phil 3:2

he could prevent its happening. Every event must be consistent with those three attributes of the Divine Majesty.'"[1]

Having raised the question, Tertullian sets about answering it. He follows the example of Christ himself, pointing out that the goodness, omniscience and power of God are shown clearly in his works of creation, and in his sending prophets who accurately foretold the future. He then suggests that evil should not be sought in the nature of God, but in the nature of man. "I find that man was established by God as a free being, possessed of the power of choice. For this is the very thing which shows me the image and likeness of God which exist in man,... in that he has been given the characteristic of freedom and power of choice. And the fact that he has this condition is confirmed by the very law which God then established. For a law would only be established for one who had the power of *choosing* the obedience demanded by the law... And so, complete freedom of choice for good or ill was granted to man, that he might be master of himself consistently, clinging to good of his own accord, and of his own accord renouncing evil. For it was necessary that God's judgment of man (who is in any case set under God's judgment) should be just, as resulting from man's own free choice. Otherwise, if God compelled people to be good or evil irrespective of their will, there would be no justice in his condemnation of the evil or his reward of the good which they did by compulsion rather than by choice."[2]

God could have constrained man, says Tertullian, to invariable obedience, but such an obedience would surely represent bondage rather than love. True goodness is a quality that must be freely and voluntarily embraced. Man is compelled neither to be holy or wicked. He can, by his own choice, cling to the good and resist the evil, and in this he is made like God himself. But if a man is free to choose good, he is also free to choose evil: and at times he will do so. The fall of man, and the wickedness in the world, are the inevitable consequence of freewill granted to man by God. But even this is preferable to an enforced obedience which would demonstrate God's power but make man a slave. And in granting this freedom to mankind, God has shown, not denied, his foresight, his wisdom and his goodness.

Tertullian had little patience with those who took pleasure in mocking the divine wisdom of God. God has revealed himself as he is, as one who judges and yet as one who redeems. "You call him Judge," said Tertullian, "yet you deride as cruelty the strictness of the Judge which deals with each case exactly as it deserves. You demand a God of supreme goodness, and then, when his gentleness accords with his kindness and associates with

[1] *Against Marcion* 2:5. See Bettenson's translation *ECF* pp.111-112.
[2] *Against Marcion* 2:6

man in lowliness to suit man's poor capacities, then you cry this down as weakness. You are satisfied neither with an awesome nor with an approachable God, neither with the Judge nor with the Friend."[1] But then, of course, the critic has no desire to be satisfied. He delights more in a clever question than a sound reply; he is rarely concerned to discover the truth.

* * *

The facts of the life, death and resurrection of Christ were not disputed during the first two centuries; they were common knowledge with Jew and Gentile alike. Much thought, however, was focussed on the nature of Christ himself. Was Jesus simply a man who received a special anointing of the power of God? Was he an angel who appeared to have a human body? Was he a special sort of being, created by God but different from both men and angels? Many theories of this sort emanated from those who are now incorporated under the heading of *Gnostics*. The Gnostic groups were heavily influenced by Greek thought and claimed to have a deeper understanding of reality than other people due to their initiation into the mysteries of philosophy, mythology or astrology, and they interpreted the Bible and everything else in the light of this special knowledge. They considered all matter, and everything in the world, to be evil; they could not conceive of the holy Son of God taking a human body. He must be an angel, they said, or a spirit![2]

Tertullian rises to the challenge: "No angel ever descended for the purpose of being crucified, of experiencing death, of being raised from the dead... They did not come to die, therefore they did not come to be born. But Christ was sent to die, and therefore had of necessity to be born, that he might be able to die."[3] He became a real human being, of flesh and blood like us.

Writing to these objectors on a different occasion, Tertullian sweeps away the idea that human flesh is corrupt and therefore unworthy of the Son of God. "Let me then pursue my purpose, which is to do my best to claim for the flesh all that God conferred upon it in creating it." When God created

[1] *Against Marcion* 2:27
[2] The miracles that glorified the birth, healing ministry, resurrection and ascension of Christ clearly showed him to be greater than any of the prophets. From earliest times he has been endowed with the unique title "Son of God" as one who came to earth as the personal representative or manifestation of the Deity. Christians of the past and the present have always understood this expression in a spiritual and symbolic sense without any sexual connotation.
[3] *On the Flesh of Christ* 6

Adam from the clay of the ground, he could "glory in the fact that this poor clay had come into the hands of God... and was happy enough at the mere touch."[1] But as God was creating the body of Adam, he was thinking not just of Adam but of the Son of God who would eventually bear the same shape, the same form. "Think of God wholly occupied and absorbed in the task, with hand, sense, activity, forethought, wisdom, providence – and above all, that love of his which was tracing the features. For in all the form which was moulded in the clay, Christ was in his thoughts as the Man who was to be. For the Word was to be made clay and flesh... Some things are privileged to become nobler than their origin... Gold is just dust when it comes out of the earth, but when it is refined into solid gold it is a very different substance, more splendid and valued than the lowly source from which it comes."[2] And Christ is of the same clay as Adam, yet infinitely more glorious.

It is not at all absurd, then, for Christ to have been both God and man, possessing a divine Spirit and a human body. "Therefore, learn with Nicodemus that 'what is born of the flesh is flesh; and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'[3] Flesh does not become spirit, nor spirit flesh; but they can both exist in one person. Jesus consisted of flesh and spirit – of flesh as man, of spirit as God. The angel proclaimed him Son of God in that he was spirit, keeping for the flesh the title Son of Man. Thus also the apostle confirms that Christ was composed of two realities, when he designated him the 'mediator of God and man.'"[4]

* * *

The Gnostics were perplexed by the concept of the Holy Trinity. They found it difficult to understand how Christ could himself be God, yet distinct from God. They taught that Christ was a special being, but not to be considered equal with God. Tertullian gave much thought to this question. He starts by considering what we clearly know about God himself. "Before all things existed, God was alone. He himself was his own universe, his own place; he was everything. He was alone in the sense that there was nothing external to him, nothing outside his own being. Yet even then he was not alone, for he had with him something which was part of his own being, namely his Reason. For God is rational and Reason existed first with him, and from him it extended to all things. Reason is his own

[1] *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 6
[2] *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 6
[3] referring to John 3:6
[4] *Against Praxeas* 27; referring to 1 Tim 2:5

consciousness of himself. The Greeks call it *Logos*, which is the term we use for discourse; and thus our people usually translate it literally as 'Discourse was in the beginning with God.'"[1] Here, of course, Tertullian is referring to the opening of John's Gospel where "the Word" (meaning Reason, Thought, Self-expression) represents Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."[2]

This is not as difficult to understand as one might think, Tertullian continues. "To understand this more easily, first observe in yourself (remembering that you are made in 'the image and likeness of God'[3]) that you also have reason in yourself, as a rational creature... Notice that when you silently engage in argument with yourself, in the exercise of reason, you are doing what God has done. For you express your thoughts with words at every stirring of consciousness. Your every thought is speech; your every consciousness is reason... Thus, in a sense, speech is in you as something distinct from yourself."[4]

Now, granted that God and man think and express their thoughts in a similar way, there is this difference: God's thoughts have infinite power to become reality. Man can think great things but does not have the power to produce what he has imagined. God on the other hand has only to think of a thing and it can be created instantly, and perfectly, from nothing. The Word, which had always existed in the mind of God, was born, or begotten, at the moment when God put the thought into effect. "This then is the time when the Word takes upon itself its outward manifestation and dress... This was the actual birth of the Word, when it proceeded from God."[5] The disciples of Jesus recognised that their Master was the Word which had come from God. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."[6]

And so, says Tertullian, "The Word [Christ] makes God his Father, since by proceeding from him he became the first-begotten Son – first-begotten, as begotten before all things; only begotten, as begotten uniquely from the womb of his heart."[7] And Scripture demonstrated this truth, for Jesus

[1] *Against Praxeas* 5
[2] John 1:1-3
[3] referring to 1 Cor 11:7
[4] *Against Praxeas* 5
[5] *Against Praxeas* 7
[6] John 1:14 RSV
[7] *Against Praxeas* 7

himself told us that he came forth from God, issuing from his inward thoughts. He spoke of the glory which he had with the Father before the world began.[1] He spoke of the Father's love for him before the creation of all things.[2] He spoke of the Father sending him into the created world.[3] But even in the world, he was "in the Father." "I and the Father are one," Jesus said. "I am not alone; the Father who sent me is with me."[4] He had come forth from the Father; he was still one with the Father, and after his resurrection he would return to the Father. He was always, unchangeably, the Word of God, the manifestation of the divine Creator himself.

* * *

This was how Tertullian attempted to answer the Gnostics. But there were other groups who went to the opposite extreme, maintaining that Christ and the Father were one and the same. Tertullian had an answer for them too. Jesus himself said, "The Father is greater than I,"[5] and this, Tertullian observes, is because "the Father is the whole substance [of deity] whilst the Son derives from him and is a portion of the whole... The Son was produced from the Father, but was not separated from him. For God produces the Word... as a root produces the shoot, a spring the river, the sun a ray, for these manifestations are *projections* of those substances from which they proceed. I would not hesitate to call a shoot 'the son of a root', a river 'the son of a spring', a ray 'the son of the sun'. For every original source is a parent, and what is produced is its offspring. Much more is this true of the Word of God, who has received the name of 'Son' as his proper designation. But the shoot is not detached from the root, the river is not detached from the spring, the ray is not detached from the sun; nor is the Word detached from God. Thus in accordance with those analogies I confess that I speak of two, God and his Word, the Father and his Son. For root and shoot are two, but conjoined; spring and river are two, but conjoined; sun and ray are two, but conjoined. Everything that proceeds from anything must needs be another thing, but is not therefore separate. When there is one other there are two; where there is a third there are three. The Spirit makes the third from God and the Son, as the fruit from the shoot is the third from the root, the canal from the river the third from the spring, the point where a ray falls third from the sun. But none of those is divorced

[1] John 17:5
[2] John 17:24
[3] John 17:18
[4] John 10:38,30 RSV; 8:16 GNB
[5] John 14:28 RSV

from the origin from which it derives its own qualities. Thus the Trinity derives from the Father by continuous and connected steps. It in no way impugns his oneness while it preserves the reality of his diverse ways of revealing himself."[1]

And so, Tertullian concludes, Christ and the Holy Spirit came forth from within the being of God himself. They had existed with the Father through all eternity, but at a particular time they were sent forth as a revelation of himself. The Word is God, but God is more than *just* his Word. The Spirit is God, but God is more than *just* his Spirit. God comprises all of these – himself, his Word and his Spirit. The Word of God is his revelation of himself; the Spirit of God is his revelation of himself. But he remains himself, one God as he always has been and always will be.

Some people, regarding Jesus as the incarnate godhead, went so far as to assert that the Father died on the cross, and bore the sins of Man. "This is blasphemy," replied Tertullian. "Let it not be spoken. Let it suffice to say that Christ the Son of God died, and died because it is contained in Scripture... Yet since in Jesus two natures are established (a divine and a human), while it is agreed that the divine is immortal, the human nature is mortal. It is clear that when the apostle says that 'Christ died', he is speaking in respect that he is flesh and man and Son of Man, not in that he is Spirit and Word and Son of God."[2]

Christ had two natures, argued Tertullian, "joined in one person, Jesus, who is God and man... And the proper quality of each substance remains so intact that the Spirit carried out in him his own activities – the powers and miracles and signs – while the flesh underwent the experiences proper to it – hunger when it met the devil, thirst when with the Samaritan woman, weeping for Lazarus, anguish even unto death, and at last the flesh died."[3] Christ was tempted in his body and mind with the same temptations that beset us[4] – he was neither shielded from them nor assured immediate victory over them – but he was strengthened by the divine Spirit within him so that he never once yielded. His human body suffered and died, yet his divine Spirit remained always alive. His Spirit left his body at the moment of death[5] but was restored to it again at the moment of resurrection.

Here we see the difference between the Son and the Father. The Father is unchangeable and has no physical body; he does not die or rise from death. It was the Son who suffered and died physically, as only a man can. He

[1] *Against Praxeas* 9,7
[2] *Against Praxeas* 29
[3] *Against Praxeas* 27
[4] Heb 4:15
[5] Matt 27:50

cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[1] "This," said Tertullian, "was the cry of the flesh and the soul, not of the Word and the Spirit. It was the cry of man, not the cry of God. That was the apostle's meaning when he wrote, 'The Father did not spare his Son,'[2] and Isaiah declared, 'The Lord has delivered him up for our sins.'"[3] It was God the Father who delivered up God the Son for our sake. It was the Son alone, proceeding from the Father, who became man, and who bore on the cross the contamination of sin. And Tertullian offers the illustration: "If a stream is contaminated... this does not affect the source, although there is no separation between source and stream."[4] The Son was put to death, but the Father, having no human body, could never die. Therein lies the distinction between the persons of the godhead.

* * *

Such theological debate was vital if the Faith were to be preserved and passed on to subsequent generations without corruption or error. But not everyone could be expected to follow the complexities of logical proof and refutation. Happily, the basic teachings of Christianity were clear and wonderfully practical. The simplest believer could accept the words of Jesus at face value – to be obeyed and believed, if not fully understood: a person did not need to read Tertullian in order to serve Christ.

From the earliest days evangelists and preachers had proclaimed the Gospel in unreached areas and then taught those who responded how to live there as Christians. Most of these travellers knew the Christian message well and explained it accurately, but some, like Apollos in Ephesus, were themselves rather in need of further instruction concerning the way of God.[5] They left small groups of believers here and there to fend for themselves without the benefit of the smallest portion of Scripture. Some of these new groups acquired ideas and teachings which were not strictly correct; others showed themselves grossly unorthodox. The problem which faced the leaders of the existing churches was how to distinguish between groups which were to be accepted as true churches of Christ, and those which were not. Tertullian proposed two criteria by which they could judge. Firstly, he asked, was the church established by one of Christ's twelve apostles or by someone who had been approved and appointed by an apostle? And

[1] Matt 27:46
[2] referring to Rom 8:32
[3] *Against Praxeas* 30; referring to Isaiah 53:6
[4] *Against Praxeas* 29
[5] Acts 18:24-26

secondly, was the church teaching the same doctrine that the apostles and Christ had taught? If a group met these criteria, it could be considered "apostolic" and its members accepted as brothers in Christ.

Tertullian then sets before us the great principle: the unity of the churches resulting from their single origin. He takes us back to the eleven disciples whom Jesus chose: "They first bore witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea and founded churches there, and then went out into the world and proclaimed to the nations the same doctrine of the same faith. In the same way they established churches in every city, from which other churches borrowed the shoot of faith and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day borrowing them... And so the churches, many and great as they are, are identical with that one primitive church issuing from the apostles, for thence they are all derived... All are one. And their unity is proved by the peace they share, by the title of 'brethren', and by the mutual bond of hospitality."[1]

Tertullian challenged new churches which propounded novel doctrines to prove their pedigree. "Let them display the origins of their churches. Let them unroll their list of overseers in unbroken succession from the beginning, so that the first overseer of theirs shall prove to have as his precursor, and as the source of his authority, one of the apostles or one of those associated with an apostle."[2]

But Tertullian also insisted that the actual teaching of the new churches must be tested to see if it accorded with the teaching in the churches which the apostles themselves had established. "Now the substance of their preaching, that is Christ's revelation to them, must be approved, in my view, only on the testimony of those churches which the apostles founded by preaching to them both in person and afterwards by their letters... We are in communion with the apostolic churches because there is no difference of doctrine. This is our guarantee of truth."[3]

The situation, however, was complicated by the presence of some unorthodox teachers who had produced documents supporting their particular views which they claimed were written by one or other of the apostles. Tertullian countered this, saying, "Even if these heresies should devise such a pedigree, it will be of no help to them. For their very teaching, when compared with that of the apostles, will proclaim by its diversity and dissimilarity that it originates neither from an apostle nor from anyone associated with an apostle... This test will be applied to those churches of a later date, which are daily being founded. Though they could

[1] *The Prescription Against Heretics* 20
[2] *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32
[3] *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32

not therefore produce an apostle or someone associated with an apostle for their founder, still, if they unite in holding the same faith, they equally are reckoned apostolic because of the kinship of their teaching."[1]

Faced with a proliferation of new churches, Tertullian felt it desirable for each one to trace its pedigree, step by step, back to an apostle. But the more important test of orthodoxy was clearly that of proving that its doctrine was in accordance with the apostolic doctrine, as recorded in Scripture and as taught in the oldest churches. Tertullian, however, did not live to see the mustering of opposing forces for the great battle between "doctrine" and "pedigree", which took place a century after his death.

The establishment of the New Testament canon is discussed by Bainton pp.97-99; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.516-524. For Tertullian's controversial writings see *ANF* Vols.III & IV. Bettenson *ECF* offers a more modern translation of selected passages from Tertullian's work.

[1] *The Prescription Against Heretics* 32

9. Cross and Crown

Christian theologians and apologists had proclaimed and expounded the Gospel with great effect from the earliest days. But in fact the work of the celebrated scholars probably contributed less to the actual spread of Christianity than did the visible proof of its power manifested in the lives of its more humble adherents. The new faith showed itself not only reasonable and acceptable to the intellect; its truth was proved no less effectively by its ability to transform the lives of ordinary people from every rank of society. Its merit was seen in the honest character and gracious purity of the early Christians in their dealings with their neighbours. Its winsomeness was shown in their kindness to the despised and the weak. But its power was above all manifest in the unshaken constancy with which they faced persecution. These Christians were clearly in touch with a Divine Being of great potency. The new faith was plainly destined to vanquish and supersede those failing philosophies and cults which had proved such a sad disappointment to previous generations.

Paradoxically, the times when the churches grew fastest were those when they were most severely harassed. Christianity remained an illegal and subversive doctrine in North Africa for the first three hundred years of its existence. The followers of Christ were in effect outlaws, liable at any moment to be hunted down by Roman prefects and proconsuls. There were long years when nothing happened to upset the peaceful growth of the Church, then suddenly at the whim of an emperor or a governor, violent persecution would fall upon them. Every Christian knew that sooner or later the time might come for him to testify to his faith at the cost of his life.

* * *

The churches in North Africa were familiar with the New Testament and its account of the martyrdoms of Stephen and of James. News had later reached them of the mad emperor Nero – of the brutal rage which had incited him against the Christians of Rome and his lying allegation that they had lit the fire which destroyed much of the city. They knew of the deaths of the apostles Peter and Paul which probably occurred at that time. Periodically they heard of troubles in other parts of the Empire, such as the martyrdom in AD 110 of Ignatius, Overseer of the church in Antioch, who was carried off to die in Rome, and the death in the same city of Justin Martyr in AD 165. But none surpassed the drama attending the final days of

Polycarp, Overseer of the church in Smyrna (Turkey), as it was described in the long letter written by the believers in that city.

In his young days, Polycarp had been a disciple of the apostle John and a friend of Ignatius. Now advanced in years, his wise, loving counsel was often sought by the churches of the region, and he was frequently called upon to settle any differences of opinion that might arise. His was a happy and well-fulfilled old age, in the midst of the Christian community which loved and honoured him.

The church in Smyrna, however, was severely shaken when several of its members were suddenly arrested by the pagan authorities, and put to death on account of their faith. Pagans and Jews gathered to watch the spectacle, and in the heat of the moment some of the bystanders began to shout for the leader of the church. "Let search be made for Polycarp!" they yelled.

The Smyrnan believers describe in faithful detail what happened next. "The most admirable Polycarp," they wrote, "when he first heard of this was not at all dismayed. He wished to remain there in the city. The majority, however, prevailed upon him to leave, and he withdrew to a small farm not far away. There he passed the time with a few companions, wholly occupied night and day in prayer for all men and for the churches throughout the world, as indeed was his custom." He stayed there for a few days, and then moved to another farm nearby. He staunchly refused, however, to flee from the neighbourhood. He fully expected the authorities to seek him out, and awaited them calmly.

It was late in the evening when the soldiers arrived at the farm. Polycarp was resting in an upper room. Hearing the noise and bustle below, he simply said, "God's will be done!" He rose, ordered food and refreshment to be brought for them and asked them only to allow him an hour for prayer. When they saw him, the soldiers were impressed by his age and his steadiness, and surprised that such a great fuss should be made about such a very old man. "He stood and prayed," the friends from Smyrna tell us, "being so filled with the grace of God that for two hours he could not hold his peace, while those that heard him were amazed. The men felt sorry that they had come after so venerable an old man." He prayed for them all, and for his Christian brothers and sisters, all those he could think of, by name. Then they sat him on a donkey and set off towards the tribunal in Smyrna.

As they drew near the city, the police chief Herod and his father chanced to meet them on the road. They took Polycarp into their carriage to remonstrate with him for his obstinacy in refusing to say "Lord Caesar", and in declining to save his life by sacrificing to the gods. Polycarp, however, persisted in his polite refusal, and eventually they became so impatient with him that they angrily thrust the old man out of the carriage.

He fell with such force that his leg was injured. Making light of the hurt, he continued along the road with his escort until at last they came to the arena where the games and spectacles were to be performed.

The letter continues: "Now as he was entering the stadium, there came to Polycarp a voice from heaven: 'Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man!' No-one saw the speaker, but the voice was heard by those of our people who were there." The noise of the crowd increased until it was difficult to hear what was going on. The judge asked Polycarp to swear by the divine power of Caesar, and to curse Christ. His reply is one of the treasures of Christian history: "Eighty-six years have I served him," said Polycarp, "and he has done me no wrong. How could I now blaspheme against my King and Saviour?"

The magistrate warned him again. Polycarp was adamant: "If you vainly imagine that I would swear by the divine power of Caesar, as you say, pretending not to know what I am, hear plainly that I am a Christian. And if you are willing to learn the teaching of Christianity, grant me a day and listen to me." Then said the proconsul, "Persuade the people here!" Polycarp replied, "I had deemed you worthy of speech, for we are taught to render to authorities and the powers ordained by God honour as is fitting. But I deem not this mob worthy that I should defend myself before them." The magistrate warned him again and urged him to sacrifice, threatening him with the wild beasts if he still refused. "Send for them," said Polycarp, "for repentance from better to worse is not a change permitted to us, but to change from cruelty to righteousness is a noble thing." The magistrate then threatened to burn him alive. "You threaten me with a fire which burns for a short time," answered Polycarp, "but you know nothing of the eternal fire which is prepared for the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring what you will!"

Judgment was pronounced and the herald proclaimed three times in the midst of the arena, "Polycarp confesses that he is a Christian!" A stake was set up, and a great heap of firewood piled around it. Polycarp walked calmly to the place and stood against the stake. As the executioners were stooping to attach him to it with nails so he would not fall, he asked them not to take the trouble. "He who gives me the strength to bear the flames will enable me to remain steady," he said. He was held there only by cords, and as the flames swept around him he was heard to give thanks to God for allowing him to suffer, like his Saviour, for the sake of the truth. He raised his eyes to heaven. "O Lord, omnipotent God," he said. "I thank you for counting me worthy of this day and this hour, to have a share among the number of the martyrs for the resurrection to eternal life." Then seeing that the flames billowed round him without apparently doing him any harm, one

of the soldiers plunged a sword into his side. The blood rushed forth in such a stream that it extinguished the fire. The proconsul, however, was determined that the Christians should not have the final word, nor the body of their honoured leader; he ordered the fire to be relit. And Polycarp entered into the joy of his Lord.[1]

The Jews and the pagans, the mob and the authorities, had united with one mind to stamp out the Christian community. Such a task, however, was quite beyond them. "They did not know," says the letter from Smyrna, "that we can never abandon Christ who suffered for the salvation of those who are being saved from all the world, nor can we worship any other." With the death of Polycarp, in AD 156, the persecution in Smyrna ceased: it had utterly failed to intimidate the church. And now it was the turn of Gaul, and of North Africa.

* * *

The first persecution to affect the southern shores of the Mediterranean occurred under the rule of the emperors Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, between 177 and 192 AD. And it was at this time that news came to the North African churches of events in Gaul (France) which show the high feelings running through the pagan Empire at this time. In the towns of Lyon and Vienne, rumours were circulating of gruesome abominations allegedly practised in secret by the Christians: incest, murder, and even cannibalism. In consequence they had been excluded from the public buildings, baths and markets, and they were forbidden to show themselves anywhere in public. In AD 177, a number of servants and slaves who worked in Christian households were hideously tortured in an attempt to substantiate these allegations. Lurid testimonies were drawn by the sword from these poor bewildered folk in the town square, and the mob worked itself up to a state of frenzy. Christians were dragged to the forum and the crowd raged uncontrollably as word went round of the outrages they were supposed to have committed. But even under torture no support was found for the charge which the Roman authorities had hoped to secure against the Christians: that of treason.

A slave girl named Biblias, who had been forced to make statements against the family for whom she worked, was taken and tortured a second time in order to extract further details. She revolted against her tormentors, announcing that she too was a Christian and that there was no truth in the allegations; they were innocent, she said, of any crime. She died bravely,

[1] The contemporary account is *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (*ANF* Vol.I pp.37ff.; Musurillo pp.2ff; Hardy pp.55ff.) Some extracts appear in Bettenson *DOTCC* pp.9-12.

resolute in her faith. Then Sanctus, a deacon of the church in Lyon, was seized and red hot bronze plates applied to his body. Sanctus said not a thing, beyond the words: "I am a Christian!"

In a neighbouring town, a young man from a wealthy family, whose name was Symphorinus, having refused to bow down before the image of the goddess Cybele, was condemned to be beheaded. His mother, who was also a Christian, showed herself not at all dismayed. As he made his way to the place of execution, she called out to him, "My son, be firm and fear not that death which so surely leads to life. Look to him who reigns in heaven. Today your earthly life is not taken from you, but transformed by a blessed exchange into the life of heaven."

A large number died in the prisons of Lyon during those days, without any kind of legal proceedings or trial. Those who survived the ordeal compiled an account of what happened. They spoke in moving terms of an aged leader of the church: "Now the blessed Pothinus, who had been entrusted with the ministry of the oversight in Lyon, and was more than ninety years of age, and quite feeble in body... was brought to the judgment seat, escorted by the city magistrates and all the rabble, with shouts and hoots of derision. And being asked by the governor: who the God of the Christians was, he replied, 'If you are worthy, you will know.' Whereupon he was pulled about mercilessly." The jostling crowd punched and kicked him, and objects were thrown at him by those who could not reach him. Severely bruised and scarcely breathing, he was thrown into jail, where he died two days later.

A female slave, named Blandina, was tormented for a whole day, so cruelly that the attendants were surprised that she could still be alive afterwards. She was then fixed to a stake and exposed to wild beasts. Day after day she was brought out to see the tortures endured by her friends, and she prayed out loud for them all, until finally she was tied in a net, thrown to a bull and gored to death in the amphitheatre. She still refused to say a word against the Christians. The bodies of the martyrs were denied burial and finally burnt to ashes and cast into the river Rhone.

The written account which we have of these martyrs in Lyon and Vienne reveals to us a remarkable Christian spirit. The sufferers show no sign of bitterness or hatred towards their persecutors, and no resentment towards those who alleged against them crimes which they never committed. "Nothing can be fearful," they wrote, "where the love of the Father is; nothing painful, where shines the glory of Christ!" They do not condemn their weaker brothers and sisters who, unable to endure their sufferings, yielded to the demands of their tormenters. On the contrary, they show for them all a most wonderful tenderness accompanied by a singular humility.

What is more, the whole episode served to prove to the people of Gaul that the Christians were not common criminals. They could not be proved guilty of any atrocity, and they could not be frightened into denying the faith which they knew to be true.[1]

* * *

The focus of events now moves across the sea to the Roman province of Proconsular Africa. It was at this time, and in this context, that the Christians of Scillium were called upon to give an account of themselves. There were seven men and five women and their names testify to their Amazigh and Punic background. One of them, Speratus, figures largely in the written account which we have, and whether or not he was the means by which the others came into the faith, he is clearly the leader of this courageous little group. They had in their possession the letters of the apostle Paul, and apparently read them and other Scriptures with keen interest. In the year AD 180 they were arrested in their home town of Scillium (near Sbeïtla, Tunisia) and taken to answer before the authorities at Carthage.

The drama opens with the Scillitans already standing in the courtroom in the presence of the proconsul Saturninus. The interrogation commences and is recorded in faithful detail. The proconsul is a courteous man, determined to do his duty despite the repugnance which he feels for the distasteful task of interrogation. He directs proceedings with a cool poise and a self-possessed restraint. From his first words he shows himself willing to be lenient in the name of the emperor if the Christians will show themselves reasonable. Speratus, for his part, affirms their innocence of any crime, whereupon the proconsul attempts to bring him back to the issue of loyalty to the emperor. Speratus replied, "We have done no evil, nor have we participated in any wrongdoing, but when we have been handled roughly we have given thanks, for we honour our Emperor." The proconsul tried a different tack, saying, "We too are religious, and our religion is straightforward: we take our oath on the divine power of the lord our emperor, and we pray for his well-being. And you must do the same!" Picking up on a word which the official had used, Speratus replied, "If you will listen to me patiently, I will explain to you the secret of true

[1] Eusebius, *Church History* V, chap.1 (*NAPNF* Series 2, Vol.I); also in Bettenson *DOTCC* pp.12-13; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.55-56; Musurillo pp.62ff. The Christians of Vienne and Lyon show definite Montanist sympathies. They urged the churches of Phrygia and Rome not to quench the Holy Spirit by taking severe action against the Montanists of the East.

straightforwardness." The proconsul rose in his seat. "You just wish to attack our religion," he said, "and I won't listen to you. Just swear by the divine power of the lord our emperor." Speratus answered, "I do not extol the empire of this world, but instead I serve the God whom no man has seen, nor can see with his eyes. I have committed no theft. If I buy anything I pay the necessary tax, for I extol my Lord, the King of kings and the Emperor of all the nations."

The proconsul held his peace. Turning from this stubborn individual to his friends, he attempted to come between them and their leader, hoping that they would prove more amenable. "Give up this belief," he admonished them. "Don't get mixed up in this folly!" But he found the others equally resolute. Eventually he was obliged to pronounce the legal sentence, but he offered them a reprieve of thirty days if they wished to reconsider. They refused to accept any delay, affirming that they were resolved to be Christians. "We fear no-one," said Cittinus, "since it is the Lord our God who is in heaven." Donata added, "We honour Caesar as Caesar, but we fear God alone." Vestia said, "I am a Christian." Secunda added, "I am too, and that is what I want to be."

Little more was said. They were condemned to death. The official document detailing the crime of which they were accused makes no rude or reviling condemnation of them. It simply records the facts without emotion: "Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the others have confessed that they live according to the Christian practice. It being understood that they were offered the opportunity of returning to the religion of the Romans and that they have obstinately refused, we condemn them to perish by the sword." "We give thanks to God!" said Speratus. "Today," said Nartzalus, "we are martyrs in heaven. Thanks be to God!" The herald announced the sentence. "Praise God!" they said again. And that is all. The account draws to its close with the simple and moving declaration: "And thus they all received the martyr's crown, and reign with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen."[1]

The narrative is marked throughout by a poignant simplicity and a touching concern for accuracy and fairness in the details that it lovingly portrays. Each participant says exactly what he must say; the story unfolds inexorably, and the conclusion is inevitable. But as we observe the actors in this little drama we can perceive some of the underlying forces at work: an irreconcilable conflict between two contrasting conceptions of the world, a fundamental lack of understanding between two conscientious groups of sincere and honest people whose duty, or whose conscience, set them one

[1] Monceaux Vol.I pp.61-70; Musurillo pp.86ff.; Hardy pp.28ff.

against the other. The servants of Christ and the servants of the Empire find themselves at loggerheads, and yet feel no sense of personal animosity one toward the other.

A church building was later erected on the site of the martyrs' graves, and its remains are probably those which have been found to the west of Carthage, near the hamlet Douar Ech-Chott. Other Christians are known to have died during the same period elsewhere in North Africa.

* * *

Thirty years later persecution reared its ugly head once more. This time it was inspired by a man who was himself an Amazigh – the emperor Septimius Severus, the first African to wear the imperial purple. Severus was a native of Leptis Magna near modern Tripoli in Libya, and this strange man ruled in Rome for eighteen years from AD 193 until he died in AD 211 far from home, in York, England. Roman writers describe him as a "Berber" who had learned Latin well but who never lost his African accent. In the early years of his rule Severus was favourably disposed towards the Christians, for he believed that his recovery from a dangerous illness had been due to the anointing of oil and prayer which he had received at the hands of a Christian slave named Proculus. The education of his sons was even placed in the hands of a Christian nurse and a Christian tutor. Severus, however, had married the daughter of the priest of the sun god worshipped in the city of Emesa in Syria, and he took to combining Christian worship with the rites of the mystery religions. Severus and his consort, not content with being all-powerful rulers of a vast Empire, chose to present themselves as Jupiter, supreme god of all the earth, and Juno, his queen. Having overthrown his two rivals for the imperial throne, Severus became undisputed master of the world, and his policy was now directed, with unrelenting and unscrupulous determination, to extinguishing every spark of liberty which still remained in his dominions. Imperial power and divine worship turned his head. He began to demand absolute obedience to his most outrageous whims and became obsessed with the thought that the Christians could not be relied upon to conform to his demands.

He was exasperated in particular by an incident which occurred in the East but which was carried by report throughout the world and which made a profound impression in every part. On the occasion of his two sons, Caracalla and Geta, being raised to the imperial titles of Augustus and Caesar, Severus distributed official largesse to the soldiers of his army who came to receive it wearing laurel crowns. One of them was conspicuous

among the rest, his head bare, his crown in his hand. When asked the reason, he said, "I am a Christian."[1]

Such audacity was a staggering affront to the pride of Severus, and in the year 202 he issued a decree prohibiting conversion to Judaism or Christianity on pain of death. The local officials went beyond their instructions, endeavouring, as such men do, to impress their superiors by their efficiency. They set about stamping out the new religion altogether. Among the first to suffer were Perpetua and her friends in Carthage. There were many others in North Africa.

The effects of the edict, however, were felt most acutely along the coast in Alexandria where Leonides, the father of the great theologian Origen, was deprived of his property and possessions, and taken off to die along with other members of the church there. Leonides had brought up his seven children, of whom Origen was the eldest, with much thought and prayer, and with careful discipline. He had taught them to memorize a small portion of the Bible every day. Hearing that his father had been seized, the seventeen year old Origen determined to go with him to the forum and, if need be, to death. His mother however, reluctant to lose both husband and son in one day, took his clothes and hid them, which effectively compelled the boy to remain at home. All he could do was to write to his father in prison, begging him not to fear for his widow and orphaned children but to trust that God would provide for them.

On Leonides' death the family was left destitute. Origen's faith, however, was not disappointed: a kindly Christian widow, who had private means, took him into her home. Such was his love for God's word and his zeal for God's way that, although still only eighteen years of age, he was shortly afterwards appointed master of the college attended by the young Christians of Alexandria. He worked faithfully as head of this school for almost thirty years. His lectures were popular and he appears to have possessed a singular ability to arouse the enthusiasm of his students. Origen was by no means a dry theorist: he sought to obey God's word and follow its guidance day by day. As he read the New Testament, he was particularly impressed by the words of Jesus: "You have received without paying, so give without being paid."[2] He felt that if he were to obey these words he should not ask fees for his Christian teaching, and in order to support himself he sold a quantity of the parchments in his possession which he had copied out by hand. From the proceeds he allotted himself a small daily allowance which supplied his needs for a while, although his food was of the poorest and he had only one coat. He felt the cold of winter severely, and slept on the bare

[1] Tertullian, *The Chaplet* 1; Lloyd p.38
[2] Matt 10:8 GNB

floor. This he did for the sake of Christ who, he said, had nowhere to lay his head.[1]

Some time later a number of Origen's pupils were arrested and put to death because of their faith. Origen went with them to their trial and was roughly treated by the Alexandrian mob. His life was spared on that occasion, and he became in the course of years a celebrated teacher in the churches of Alexandria and then Caesarea in Palestine. He later travelled a great deal in the service of Christ. He wrote a number of theological books and led many Jews and pagans to the Christian faith, although certain of his philosophical ideas and his allegorical interpretations of Scripture were considered then, as now, to be somewhat controversial.

Origen never forgot the Biblical teaching and the gracious example he had received from his father. Leonides remains almost unknown, but his influence brought salvation to many through the work of the son who followed in his footsteps. The one was called to die for Christ; the other to live for him.[2]

* * *

Persecution continued in many parts of the Empire, and for a while was so severe that many people believed Severus to be the great Antichrist, foretold in Scripture, who would arise and attempt to exterminate the Church in the days immediately preceding the return of Christ and the end of the world.[3] But Severus apparently felt that with his stern decree the spirit of the Christians was broken and the destruction of the Church complete. They were largely ignored during the remainder of his reign and in the days of his immediate successors.

For almost half a century, the churches knew peace and freedom from strife, and they quietly prospered. But therein lay a fatal danger. Many of the Christians began to relax and take part more freely in the debilitating pleasures and pastimes of city life. Gradually they lost that discipline, that sense of being a special people, and that firmness of heavenly conviction which had nerved them for the great crisis that they had survived so successfully fifty years before. As the third century progressed, they began to seek the friendship and the favour of their pagan neighbours, and they left themselves sadly ill-prepared to withstand the greater pressures which were yet to come.

[1] Luke 9:58

[2] For the life and work of Origen, see Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.785-796; Foakes-Jackson pp.273-277.

[3] 2 Thess 2:3-4; 1 John 2:18; Rev 13:5-8

10. Trial and Testimony

In AD 249 the storm clouds gathered once more. The new emperor Decius was increasingly disturbed by signs of decay and military failure in the Roman Empire; he ascribed its ills to the displeasure of the gods. Hoping to restore the fortunes of his dominions, he issued a decree that all citizens, male and female, must offer public sacrifice and receive a certificate from the local officials proving that they had done so.

Christians in every part of the Empire were hustled to the public squares and ordered to sacrifice. Some were quickly cowed into compliance, especially those whose Christian commitment had weakened during the enervating days of peace; they hurried to the altars in deference to the imperial command. Others, with the connivance of the officials, purchased certificates without actually making the prescribed sacrifices. But many refused, and many perished. Among those who stood firm was Origen. Imprisoned and tortured in the city of Tyre, he died of his sufferings in his seventieth year. But it is notable that the Christians were no longer publicly accused of murder and incest and immorality. The purity and honesty of their lives was common knowledge. From now on it was their refusal to conform that aroused hostility, not their alleged misdeeds.

Cyprian, the Overseer of the church in Carthage, wrote lengthy accounts of the persecutions endured by the Christians, many of whom were known to him personally. A number in Carthage itself had been imprisoned, including women and children, and some had died of their sufferings. One of their number, named Celerinus, happened to be in Rome at the time when Decius' edict was issued. He bore the afflictions imposed on him there without flinching, and eventually was called into the presence of the emperor himself, where he firmly confessed his faith in Christ. "He was the first," wrote Cyprian, "to brave the battle in our days. He marched in the front rank… for he faced the ruler himself, the author of the conflict." For nineteen days Celerinus was incarcerated in a dungeon, weighed down with iron chains. "His body was shackled," said Cyprian, "but his soul free of fetters. His flesh wasted away from prolonged lack of food and water, but his soul lived by faith and by his integrity; and God nourished him with spiritual food. In the face of affliction, Celerinus was stronger than his affliction; imprisoned, he was more noble than his jailers; stretched on the ground, he was just as tall as the torturers standing above him; in chains, he was as strong as those who had shackled him; taken out for judgment, he had a finer bearing than his judges; and although his feet were tied, he crushed the head of the serpent."

Celerinus survived his ordeal and returned to North Africa, where he continued to serve as a reader in the church at Carthage. His scars and the traces of his many wounds were a source of wonder to the believers there who marvelled that anyone could withstand such brutality for the sake of his faith, without succumbing either to death or to falsehood. "And if anyone is like Thomas," added Cyprian, "and refuses to believe what he hears, then he will certainly believe the testimony of his eyes, seeing the proof of what we say."[1]

Another young man, Aurelius, faced a similar trial in Carthage itself. Brought before the city magistrates for the first time, he was roughly handled and then, when sentence was passed, found himself banished from the province. A little later, he was arrested a second time and brought before the proconsul, where he again withstood the more violent brutalities inflicted upon him. "He has fought in two battles," wrote Cyprian. "Twice he has confessed Christ and twice he has emerged with the glory of a victorious confession. After his first victory he was exiled. Again he entered the fight, in a more terrible conflict, and he triumphed again. He emerged victorious in the martyr's battle. Each time that the enemy of God tried to incite his servants to evil, the soldier of God, always ready, always valiant, withstood and gained the victory. It was not enough for him to contend just once in the presence of a few people, at the time of his exile; he deserved to do battle in the public square where his courage could be seen by all. After the magistrates, he had to defeat the proconsul; after exile he had to triumph over tortures." Aurelius, like Celerinus, survived and became a reader in the church at Carthage.[2]

About the same time, the name of Numidicus became well-known in Christian circles as one who quite literally escaped through the fire.[3] Numidicus was a well-loved member of the church in Carthage, and his encouragement and example had been a great source of strength to his friends there. The Carthaginian mob rose against the Christians in those days, blaming them for all manner of misfortunes, stoning and burning any who came into their hands. Numidicus and his wife were among those caught by the impetuous crowd and carried away. The poor man saw his wife perish in the flames at his side. Badly wounded and severely burnt, Numidicus was left for dead. His daughter, however, searching for his body among the charred remains, found him still alive, and managed to nurse him

[1] Monceaux Vol.II p.137; Cyprian *Letter* 33
[2] Monceaux Vol.II p.138; Cyprian *Letter* 32
[3] 1 Cor 3:15

back to health. When fully recovered, he became a "helper" responsible for administration in the church at Carthage.[1]

Celerinus, Aurelius and Numidicus survived the persecution of Decius, but many others did not. Celerinus had received a letter from a friend of his, Lucianus, who sent news of his companions in captivity. He tells us that a dozen had died in prison, of hunger and thirst. Two others who died under torture in Carthage were Paulus and Mappalicus; their names were carefully noted down and added to the growing list of martyrs.[2]

* * *

Many of the strongest Christians were deprived of their property and banished from the Roman provinces at this time. They found their way to the villages of the interior, far from civilization and out of reach of any imperial official. Here they put down roots and started a new life. They might miss the comforts of civilization, and feel the lack of a steady income, but they must have delighted in the freedom to worship as they pleased. It is clear, moreover, that they could not keep their faith to themselves. The Imazighen of the inland areas were soon hearing the story told by these refugees: what had happened to them, why they had been forced to leave their homes, and how it was that they came to have such a firm and joyous faith – a faith for which they were prepared to suffer the loss of all things.[3]

Decius was thus the inadvertent cause of many people hearing the Gospel for the first time, in regions far from the coastal towns. But Decius himself never knew this. Deserted by his gods, he was killed in battle against the Goths in AD 251, a bare three years after his accession to the throne. The churches breathed a sigh of relief and, taking stock of the situation, found themselves strengthened and hardened by the fires of affliction. They were free once more from the debilitating influence of those among them who had been Christian only in name, and they rejoiced in the glorious fortitude of their new heroes. The survivors were all the more determined to follow Christ through thick and thin, for death or for life, resolved to be faithful to him, come what may.

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[1] Monceaux Vol.II p.138; Cyprian *Letter* 34
[2] Cyprian *Letter* 8
[3] Phil 3:8

But why was pagan society so incensed against the Christians? What harm had the people of Carthage and Rome received at the hands of these peaceable folk? What was their offence? To answer this question, we need look no further than the fact that they were different. They did not act like ordinary people, and consequently they had made themselves an unknown quantity. Because their behaviour was abnormal it was unpredictable and therefore, to their rulers and to their neighbours, it must be open to suspicion.

Dark rumours had circulated from the earliest days. What did the Christians get up to in their secret meetings? Only those initiated into their mysteries were allowed to attend their common meals, and the fact that these gatherings were held behind closed doors, and that only recognized members of their own group were admitted, led to all sorts of calumnies and suspicions. Were they plotting a rebellion against the emperor, or conspiring to tear down the temples of the gods? And what did they do in those so-called "love-feasts"? Tertullian, along with the other great defenders of the faith, answered these insinuations with a sincere protestation of innocence. He describes the harmless and holy fellowship of the saints. When the common meal has been eaten, he says, there are no lascivious rites but, on the contrary, a sincere worship of the God in whose name they gather: "The feast ends, as it began, with prayer." And he asks, "Who has ever been harmed by our assemblies? We are in our meeting just what we are when we are dispersed; we are the same in a group as we are as individuals. We hurt no one; we bring sorrow to no one. When the decent and the good meet together, when the kindly and the pure assemble, that should not be called a faction, but an honourable assembly."[1]

But perhaps the greatest cause of popular hatred directed against the Christians was that they took no part in the public amusements – the festivities of the pagan holy days – and they failed to attend the parties organized by pagan guilds of workers. It was not so much what they did, but what they refused to do which so perplexed and enraged their contemporaries. Tertullian again comes to their defence, and tries to explain the reason. "We have no concern with the frenzy of the races, with the lewdness of the theatre, with the cruelty of the arena," he says,[2] and he admits that they do not buy the customary garlands of flowers to decorate the heathen temples. But no one should have the impression that Christians were hostile towards the world around them. Not a bit of it! The Christians participated fully in the everyday activities of life – in the shops, the markets, the forum and elsewhere in the towns and in the countryside. They

[1] *Apology* 39
[2] *Apology* 39

worked in the same fields and workshops; they ate in the same inns; they wore the same clothes, cooked the same food, used the same furniture. And they were respectful and friendly to all. The Christians had by no means turned their backs on their neighbours; nor had they abused or insulted the things which they held dear.[1]

There were, nonetheless, strong vested interests in the towns and villages of the Roman Empire which began to feel very threatened by the rapid growth of the Christian communities in their midst. The pagan priests could not fail to resent the declining influence of their gods and the diminishing numbers attending their worship. The coffers of the temples were steadily emptying and the makers of images and garlands growled threateningly, like Demetrius and his workers in Ephesus some years previously, when the goddess Artemis began to lose out to the preaching of the apostle Paul.[2] The purveyors of fashionable luxuries, and entertainers – makers of jewellery, musicians and dancers, the whole theatrical profession, athletes and gladiators – all turned a jaundiced eye on the Christians who failed to support and patronize the services they offered, and drew away their other clients. The more extreme members of the Montanist groups, too, sometimes taunted these idolaters with the frivolous vanity of their religious commerce, causing offence which perhaps drew down unnecessary odium on the heads of their wiser and more discreet brethren.

Loyalty to the Empire was a value firmly held and passionately defended not only by its ruling elite but by the majority of its citizens too. Christians who would not follow its time-hallowed customs could be badly misunderstood and deeply resented: they appeared to be undermining the very foundations of civilization itself. They would not participate in the national religion; they would not offer sacrifices to ensure the peace and prosperity of the land; they would not throw incense on the censer as a mark of loyalty to the emperors and the gods under whose patronage the Empire had been placed. The Christians seemed to be opting out of society, enjoying its benefits but evading its responsibilities. Members of the church who possessed property found it particularly difficult to avoid the demands of idolatry: those with lands and houses were expected to contribute largely to the costs of the public sacrifices and spectacles. Members of well-to-do families were especially susceptible to the malice of jealous pagan neighbours, and of the spies employed by suspicious emperors. In fact, the most dangerous charges brought against Christians were those made anonymously. A known person who brought a frivolous or false allegation would find himself in serious trouble. But an anonymous accusation could

[1] *Apology* 42
[2] Acts 19:23-27

be made with impunity, and all sorts of gross and irresponsible calumnies were perpetrated in this way by the enemies of the faith. At times the Jews – jealous for their privileged position as adherents of a permitted religion – were in the forefront of these attacks: they took a leading part, for example, in the martyrdom of Polycarp.

In addition to this, Tertullian tells us that in his experience Christians were often hated simply because they loved one another. The pagans objected to the way that they treated each other as brothers and sisters, helping one another and supporting their widows and orphans, and those of their number who had fallen on hard times. "It is chiefly the practice and implementation of such loving-kindness as this that puts a brand of disgrace upon us with certain people. 'See,' they say, 'how the Christians love one another!' for *they* themselves hate one another. 'See,' they say, 'how ready the Christians are to die for each other!' for *they* will more readily kill each other. They find fault with us, too, because we call one another 'brother'. And the reason for their criticism is simply this, I feel sure: that among them every name of friendship is assumed in mere pretence."[1]

The Christian community was careful to honour the emperor, to obey the laws, and to pay whatever taxes were due. The word of God instructed them: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."[2] Tertullian was quick to point out that the Christians had no political motives or ambitions; they were not rebels against the government. They were peaceable, honest and respectful. The best emperors and the wisest officials, he said, recognized this: they saw in the Christians those sterling qualities which they would fain have seen in all their subjects. Only bad emperors had oppressed the Church, he added, being either insecure and anxious to curry the favour of pagan extremists, or impetuously egocentric and swayed by impulse rather than sound judgment. And speaking to the Roman officials he offered a plea for tolerance, promising loyalty in return.

Sometimes, however, the Christians did find that their duty set them at odds with the authorities. If they gave to Caesar what was Caesar's, they must also render to God what was God's.[3] Even the authority of the emperor was subject to that of the One who had created all things; certain circumstances left them no choice but to "obey God rather than men".[4] They could not sacrifice to idols, for example, even if imperial decrees

[1] *Apology* 39
[2] Rom 13:1
[3] referring to Mark 12:17
[4] Acts 5:29

demanded this, nor could they curse the name of Christ. Some refused to take a legal oath, believing it to be wrong for a Christian to do so. Jesus had told them: "Do not use any vow when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven... nor by earth... Do not even swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. Just say 'Yes!' or 'No!' – anything else you say comes from the Evil One."[1] Others could not reconcile military service with their Christian conscience. These refusals undoubtedly added fuel to the fires of resentment.

The Roman upper classes – landowners, for the most part – were understandably wary of any new teachings which might threaten the status quo and endanger their wealth and position. The egalitarian aspects of Christian teaching were not guaranteed to endear it to these wealthy, pagan aristocrats. Tensions developed especially during times of drought and food scarcity. Christian preachers felt little bound to approve the vast gulf between rich and poor when their friends and neighbours were hungry and homeless. Like Christ himself, they urged those with treasures to lay them up in heaven rather than on earth, and they drew inspiration from what was said in the New Testament about the snare of riches, and the blessings pronounced on the needy and downtrodden. Such ideas fell on sympathetic ears among the poor, but did not make for popularity with the Roman authorities. The local officials, drawn largely from the ranks of the aristocracy, would not be slow to enforce any imperial edict which promised to root out and destroy such teachings.

It is also well to remember that besides the stringent legislation of the municipal law courts and the unpredictable public hostility of the mob, believers were subject to family tribunals over which the head of the household presided with almost unlimited power. A pagan husband could condemn his Christian wife to death; fathers were known to disinherit their sons, and to impose all manner of sufferings on their slaves for professing the Christian faith.

* * *

The forces arrayed against the churches were manifold and weighty. Much of the difficulty lay in the fact that Christianity was not an officially recognized religion in the Roman Empire, and therefore the Christians could offer no legal defence. Tertullian tells us that the heathen at times taunted them, saying, "According to the law you don't even exist!" But he

[1] Matt 5:34-37 GNB

points out that, whether they like it or not, the Christians *do* exist, and he goes on to demand: Who then is found in error: the Christians, or the law?[1]

It may be asked why the Christian Church did not seek to obtain legal recognition. After all, the Jews had done so. The obstacle lay in the Roman idea that religion was a matter of race, rather than of personal conviction. The Greeks had their gods and so did the Romans. "The Jews," said Celsus, "are not to be blamed, because each man ought to live according to the custom of his country, but the Christians have forsaken their national rites for the doctrine of Christ."[2] To the Roman legislator the first obligation of a man was not to his conscience or to his gods, but to the state. The Empire claimed the right to decide which deities its subjects should worship. It did not trouble itself overmuch about the private beliefs a man might hold, but it imposed upon him, with the utmost rigour, an irrevocable obligation to attend the public rites of the state religion, and to make a definite show of conformity. A new faith which forbade its adherents to worship idols was bound to run into head-on collision with such a system.

An authoritarian regime could not easily grasp the concept of a loyal citizen with an independent religion. Nevertheless, Tertullian pleaded with the Roman magistrates simply to give the Christians a fair hearing. If the authorities would only find out what the Christians believed, they would cease to rage against them. In fact, he says, they would find nothing for which to reproach them at all. People accused of violent crimes, he points out, are allowed to defend themselves and even bring trained advocates to plead their cause. "They have full opportunity of reply and cross-examination, for it is not permitted to condemn men undefended and unheard. Christians alone are not allowed to say anything to clear themselves, to defend truth, to save a judge from injustice. The judge looks only for the thing which public hate requires – the confession of the name [of Christ], not the investigation of the charge [an alleged crime]."[3]

All this hostility, said Tertullian, is inspired by mere blind, ignorant prejudice. If only people would stop for a moment and consider the facts of the matter they would see things in quite a different light. "All who formerly hated, because they did not know the true nature of the thing they hated, cease to hate as soon as they cease to be ignorant... Men cry out that the state is beset by Christians; that there are Christians in the countryside, in the villages, in the islands; that people of both sexes, of every age and condition, even of high position, are passing over to the Christian society. This they lament as though it were a calamity. And yet, for all that, they are

[1] *Apology* 4
[2] Origen *Against Celsus* 5:25 (quoted by Foakes-Jackson p.45)
[3] *Apology* 2

not stimulated to consider whether there may not be some good in it that they have failed to notice."[1]

Tertullian referred frequently to the willingness of the Christians to die rather than deny their faith; the fortitude of the martyrs was one of the chief weapons in his armoury. The truth of Christian teaching was borne out by the steadfastness of those who held it. "Ask yourselves, then," he says, "whether the divinity of Christ be a true belief. If it is such a belief that the acceptance of it transforms a man, it follows that everything contrary to it should be renounced."[2] And he points to the restraint and self-control which typified the Christians under trial. They did not take to arms, nor did they flee from imperial authority. "How often you rage against the Christians, partly because of your inclination, partly in obedience to the laws. How often too the hostile mob pays no attention to you and attacks us with stones and fires, taking the law into its own hands... Yet though we are banded together, though we are so eager to face death, what instance did you ever note of a retaliation for injury?"[3]

* * *

Most of the Roman proconsuls, like the younger Pliny, probably felt somewhat uncertain as to how they should deal with those brought before them. Pliny wrote from Bithynia to the emperor Trajan, in the year 112 AD, asking for advice. "It is my rule, Sire, to refer to you in matters where I am uncertain," he said. "I was never previously present at any trial of Christians; therefore I do not know what are the customary penalties or investigations, and what limits are observed. I have hesitated a great deal on the question of whether there should be any distinction of ages; whether the weak should have the same treatment as the more robust; whether those who recant should be pardoned, or whether a man who has always been a Christian should gain nothing by ceasing to be such; whether the name itself, even if innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the crimes attaching to that name." The last query in this long list derives from the common belief among the pagans, at least in the early days, that Christians engaged in such crimes as infanticide, cannibalism and incest. Did the admission of the accused that he was a Christian automatically indicate that he was guilty of these things, wondered Pliny, or not?

What strikes us most forcibly from documents such as these is that the proconsuls and magistrates, like Pliny, who sentenced the Christians to such

[1] *Apology* 1
[2] *Apology* 21
[3] *Apology* 37

terrible tortures and cruel public deaths, were no more than conscientious subordinates attempting to do a job of administration in obedience to orders. They desired only to ensure the peaceable submission of the populace to the established laws concerning the authorized state religion. True, they were often short of compassion, but their job compelled them to suppress whatever personal feelings they might have. They certainly lacked, in most cases, a personal interest in the quest for truth, but they generally held no great animosity towards those upon whom they calmly inflicted such dreadful sufferings. They were merely the unattractive representatives of a cruel and inhuman political system, in a world where life was cheap and the bloody afflictions endured by others were the backcloth to everyday life, and, let it be said, the staple diet of the public entertainments.

Pliny outlines the procedures he undertook in questioning those who were brought before him: "I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist, I sentence them to death. For I do not doubt that, whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their perverseness and their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished." Pliny was typical of those who believed that the chief crime of the Christians was their defiance of authority, their refusal to be cowed by the dictates of the state, their refusal to forsake their faith when commanded to do so irrespective of any merits or demerits it might have.

Pliny tells the emperor of an anonymous pamphlet which came to his notice, in which the names were listed of many who were said to be Christians. They were summoned before him. "All who denied they were Christians I considered should be discharged, because they called upon the gods when I ordered them to do so and did reverence with incense and wine to your statue, which I ordered to be brought for this purpose, together with the statues of the deities, and especially because they cursed Christ, things which it is said genuine Christians cannot be induced to do... Others named by the informer first said they were Christians and then denied it, declaring that they had been, but were so no longer... They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ." But even Pliny knew that these were not the "genuine Christians", such was the reputation of those who truly belonged to Christ. Pliny recognized from experience that nothing could induce true Christians to curse their Saviour.

Pliny extracted confessions from some of these, but their confessions were deficient in the macabre vices about which he had hoped to hear; in fact their offences were not very interesting at all. "But they declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted only to this: that on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to

recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by a solemn promise – not a promise to engage in some crime or other, but merely to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery and breach of faith, and not to deny a deposit when it was claimed. After the conclusion of this ceremony it was their custom to depart and meet again to take food, but it was ordinary and harmless food."

Pliny found this simple statement of the facts inadequate and goes on to reveal the bleak heart of the imperial administrator: "I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this by applying torture to two maidservants who were called "helpers". However, I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition, and I therefore postponed my examination and decided to send to you for guidance."[1]

* * *

The authorities desired not the death of the Christians but their restoration to the gods of Rome. Imperial policy was intended not to depopulate the churches but to repopulate the temples, not to change the religious beliefs of the people but to secure their docility. The emperors had constantly at the back of their minds the knowledge that Africa was a very shaky part of the Empire, with hundreds of tribes – all potential enemies – only a few miles inland, beyond a frontier which could never be defended militarily from a full-blooded attack. The proconsuls lived in constant anxiety; they must stamp out any remote sign of disorder or dissent in these difficult provinces before it had time to become a serious political threat.

Any nation which is held together by religious uniformity, and which controls its people by means of its official priesthood, will feel threatened by a minority that chooses to opt out of the national religion. While the minority remains hidden, and conforms outwardly to the requirements of religious observance, it is generally left in peace. But a degree of control over the people is lost as soon as the minority publicly confesses its non-conformity. Once a non-conformist group is strong enough to be known publicly as such, it threatens to attract large numbers into its fold, and a bold, growing minority is apt to become a majority if left unchecked.

These were reasons why the Roman authorities tried so desperately to stamp out the young churches in North Africa. They little knew how complete was to be their failure. The North African churches were destined to outlast and outlive the most powerful military empire that the world had ever seen.

[1] *Letter* 10 (*Ad Trajan*): 96 (Bettenson *DOTCC* pp.3-4)

Foakes-Jackson pp.44-48 considers some of the reasons for persecution under the pagan Roman Empire.

11. Grace and Glory

The Christians of North Africa threw themselves into the most harrowing ordeals with astonishing recklessness. The numbers rose to many hundreds, if not thousands, who endured appalling sufferings on account of their commitment to Christ. They professed themselves glad to do so, and died rejoicing. They refused categorically to sacrifice to the gods of Rome; nor would they swear by the divine power of the emperor. Such zeal is not easy for us, in our generation, to understand: it is not the sort of behaviour we are accustomed to. What was the reason, we might wonder, for this uncompromising obstinacy? And why were they determined to confess their Christian faith publicly even at the cost of their lives?

Firstly, we should remember that they were sure of their ground; they firmly believed they had discovered the truth. They were convinced that Christ was indeed "the Lord from heaven" and "the light of the world".[1] They trusted what he said and were certain his way was better than any other; they could see the difference with their own eyes. They were proud to be Christians and honesty would not allow them to utter the great lie demanded of them, to worship the Roman emperor as "Lord and God", for they had felt the love of the true God who made all things. They had experienced the warmth and kindness of the Christian community as a foretaste of heaven in the midst of a cruel world. Their faith had brought them great joy; it had transformed their lives. They had not the slightest doubt of its reality, and nothing could take it from them or bring them to deny it.

They were filled, moreover, with an overwhelming personal sense of gratitude to their Saviour. He had loved them when they had no thought for him; he had sought them as a shepherd seeks his lost sheep. He had cared for them in their wretchedness and degradation; he had lifted them out of the slimy pit and set their feet upon a rock.[2] How could they deny their Lord when all the good which they possessed, and all the happiness which they now enjoyed, was his gift to them? Everything that made life worthwhile was from him – health, strength, friendship, love and self-respect, forgiveness, acceptance and the great hope of eternity. How could they curse the One who had saved them, provided for them, and loved them to the end – who had given his all for their sake, who had struggled beneath the weight of a heavy cross, and finally died hanging from it, for them?

[1] 1 Cor 15:47 AV; John 8:12
[2] referring to Ps 40:2

They were inspired no less by the profound honour which they felt was bestowed upon them: to be his special people, those who would rise from the grave and reign with him for ever. And the privilege was all the more marvellous for those who might be singled out personally to bear his name before the watching world. They longed to serve Christ in any way they could. How might they show their loyalty and love for him? How could they honour him for all his goodness to them? – a few days of discomfort borne cheerfully for his sake, a faithful testimony, a firm declaration of faith as the crowds jostled to hear the sentence pronounced, the flash of the sword – and then eternal life. And among the watching multitudes in the prison or the public square, some might perhaps be won to the truth at the very moment of departure. Though Christ's first disciples forsook him and fled, they for their part would stand bravely with him; if Peter had denied him, they at least were not ashamed to be known as his friends. Like Saul of Tarsus, they felt they were set apart to bear his name before governors and kings.[1] They would make the good confession before the rulers of their day, as Jesus had done before Pontius Pilate.[2]

The challenge of persecution did not take them by surprise. Their Master had called them to this great work and had promised to strengthen them in it. "You yourselves must be on guard. You will be arrested and taken to court. You will be beaten in the synagogues; you will stand before rulers and kings for my sake to tell them the Good News. But before the end comes, the Gospel must be preached to all peoples. And when you are arrested and taken to court, do not worry beforehand about what you are going to say; when the time comes, say whatever is then given to you. For the words you speak will not be yours; they will come from the Holy Spirit... Everyone will hate you because of me. But whoever holds out to the end will be saved."[3] And it was true; these men and women found in the hour of trial a glorious liberty to speak of Christ, an eloquence and a joy poured on them from above. They were glad to be Christians, the most privileged people in the world. They had nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of; their Master had committed no crime, and neither had they. They were proud to bear his name. Tertullian affirmed this intense sense of loyalty to Christ: "We say before all men, and when torn and bleeding through your tortures we shout aloud: 'We worship God through Christ!' Think him a man if you will, but through him and in him God desires to be known and worshipped."[4]

[1] Acts 9:15-16
[2] 1 Tim 6:13
[3] Mark 13:9-13 GNB
[4] *Apology* 21

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The persecuted Christians were sustained in their sufferings by their unwavering conviction that a better life awaited them. They had merely to step across the narrow threshold of death to enter their eternal home – to be forever in the blessed presence of God where there are no tears and no sorrows. Joyfully reunited with their loved ones in that perfect place, they longed to be welcomed there, not as lazy workers but as good and faithful servants, pleasing to their Lord. A bold affirmation of faith in Christ would not go unrewarded. "If anyone declares publicly that he belongs to me," Jesus had said, "I will do the same for him before my Father in heaven."[1] And "if we have died with him," said that earliest of all hymns, "we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him."[2]

There were many who wished to reign with him; they longed earnestly for a martyr's crown. Certain of the ultimate victory over the powers of darkness, they had already loosened their ties with this unhappy and deceitful world. It was destined soon to pass away, and they wished no longer to be held in bondage to its petty pretensions and its gross depravities. Tertullian spoke for them all when he said, "We desire the hastening of our reign, not the protraction of our slavery... Yea, thy kingdom come, Lord, with all speed. This is the prayer of Christians, the confusion of the nations, the exultation of the angels! This is what we pray for!"[3]

The return of Christ was their constant expectation. Each new upheaval and every fresh disaster reminded them of their Master's warning and his promise: "I am coming soon!"[4] "Be on your guard, then," he had said, "because you do not know what day your Lord will come."[5] He would return to his people as their Saviour but to the world as its Judge. "The Judge is standing at the door," said the Scriptures.[6] "The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly... and they will not escape."[7]

[1] Matt 10:32 GNB
[2] 2 Tim 2:11-12 RSV
[3] *On Prayer* 5
[4] Rev 22:20
[5] Matt 24:42 GNB
[6] James 5:9
[7] 1 Thess 5:2,3

The heyday of the Roman Empire was already past, and as it entered on its decline there were on every hand ominous signs that the end of the world was racing ever nearer – plagues, wars, earthquakes, the collapse of stable government, and disillusionment with all that the Empire had stood for. "Don't be troubled," Jesus had said, "when you hear the noise of battles close by and news of battles far away. Such things must happen, but they do not mean that the end has come. Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be earthquakes everywhere, and there will be famines. These things are like the first pains of childbirth... The trouble of those days will be far worse than any the world has ever known."[1]

The trends were all downhill; the state of mankind seemed already hopeless, and could only get worse. Only the most optimistic could think otherwise. A Christian who was taken from the world before it entered those terrible last days could count himself blessed indeed. Tertullian said: "Faith keeps watch for that Day... and daily fears that for which it daily hopes."[2] For many people, the desire to leave the world before its final conflagration cut the last remaining ties which bound them to it, and nerved them for the hour of trial, the moment of departure.

Whatever sufferings the followers of Jesus were called to endure, they could be sure of the final victory. The ragings of the heathen, in their mad revolt against the Son of Man, were all foretold in God's word. "They will fight against [Christ], but [Christ] together with his called, chosen, and faithful followers, will defeat them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings."[3] Tertullian looked forward to the day when the kingdoms of this world would be overthrown, and every knee would bow before the Lord Jesus.[4] His imagination raced ahead to the coming of Christ, the Day of Judgment and the destruction of the tormentor. The final victory would wipe away the remembrance of all the humiliations and degradations God's people had suffered at the hand of cruel and wicked men. "But what a spectacle is to come!" he wrote. "The appearing of the Lord, acknowledged, exalted, triumphant. What exultation of angels that will be, what glory of saints as they arise! And after that, the splendour of the reign of saints, and the city of New Jerusalem! But there are other sights besides! That last and eternal day of judgment, that day unexpected by the nations, that day they laughed at... What shall I marvel at then?... I shall see all those mighty monarchs whose reception into heaven was proclaimed groaning together in

[1] Mark 13:7-8,19 GNB
[2] *A Treatise on the Soul* 33
[3] Rev 17:14 GNB
[4] Phil 2:10

lowest darkness... the governors, the persecutors of the Lord's name melting in fires more fierce than those with which they raged against the Christians... philosophers... poets... tragedians... actors... charioteers."[1] In that day we will observe the fate of those who spat on Christ, and laughed in his face, and scourged and crucified him.

If persecution came, salvation could not be far behind. The Christians took courage from the words of their Master: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near."[2] The day of the Lord's return was drawing ever closer. What would be the sign of its arrival? "The sun will grow dark," Christ had said, "the moon will no longer shine, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in space will be driven from their courses. Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will send the angels out to the four corners of the earth to gather God's chosen people from one end of the earth to the other."[3] The Christians looked expectantly for these signs. They would be among the chosen ones for whom he came, and knowing this they feared not the fleeting sword or the brief threats of men.

As they waited for this momentous event, they found comfort especially in the book which had completed the New Testament canon, the book of Revelation. Written, as many believed, by the aged apostle John from prison on the island of Patmos, its final passages describe, in wonderful detail, the ultimate victory of Christ, along with the glories of the Heavenly City. John is shown a vision of the future, and he describes what he sees. The martyrs are singled out for special honour: they had borne the name of Christ to the end, refusing to compromise with the world and its idolatrous rulers. "And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."[4]

The martyrs indeed looked to attain to a great prize if they were found faithful unto death. Those who perished for the sake of God's kingdom would be raised instantly to glory, as "priests of God and of Christ",[5] whilst their lesser brethren who died of old age or sickness yet remained in Hades, the place of the dead, awaiting the end of the world and the Day of

[1] *The Shows* 30
[2] Luke 21:28
[3] Mark 13:24-27 GNB
[4] Rev 20:4
[5] Rev 20:6. See Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.83.

Judgment before entering their eternal home. "The rest of the dead," in John's vision, "did not come to life until the thousand years were ended."[1] And after the thousand years, Satan would be set loose once more, to "deceive the nations" and "to gather them for battle",[2] before the final conflagration and the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth".[3]

The prophecy that the martyrs would ascend and reign with Christ for a thousand years exerted a very powerful hold on the Christian mind throughout the world at this time. The Millennium finds expression in the writings of Polycarp in Asia Minor, Irenaeus in Gaul, Justin Martyr in Rome, and among the Montanists of Phrygia and North Africa. Many of them considered that these passages in the book of Revelation referred to a literal, earthly kingdom yet to be inaugurated, over which Christ and his saints would reign for a literal thousand years. Others, notably Clement and Origen in Alexandria, and later Augustine in Africa, taught that the Millennium had commenced with the first coming of Christ, who having ascended into heaven was already reigning there with the martyrs.[4] But whichever interpretation was preferred, these Scriptures brought great comfort and bold assurance to Christian people in the conflicts they faced.

There was yet one more very compelling reason for the Christians' uncompromising loyalty to their faith: they were aware of what the alternatives would entail. They knew that they were caught up not just in a clash of ideas and moral principles, but in a battle of spiritual forces too. Their utter intolerance of idolatry, and their refusal to participate in any aspect of pagan religion, stemmed from the conviction that the idols themselves were not just useless lumps of wood or stone, but the actual dwelling places of malevolent and extremely potent forces – forces which could wreck the health, character and livelihood of a man or woman, and bring insanity or even death.

The peculiar power of these spirits was well known: those who worshipped them could produce proof of extraordinary and otherwise inexplicable happenings. Pagan priests and necromancers gloried in the supernatural. But the source of their enchantment was profoundly satanic, and once the evil spirit had been invoked, the devotee found himself in absolute bondage to the terrible thing whose aid he had enlisted. The Christian community was not fooled into thinking that a sacrifice offered to an idol, or an oath sworn on the divine power of the emperor, would be an

[1] Rev 20:5
[2] Rev 20:2, 7-8
[3] 2 Pet 3:7-13
[4] Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.589-620 discusses the diverse eschatological ideas of the great early Christian theologians.

empty, meaningless act of politeness. They knew that intensely dangerous currents of evil underlay these false religions, and untold misery attended those sucked into them. They dare not entangle themselves again in the yoke of bondage.[1] The word of God warned them clearly enough to have nothing to do with these satanic powers: "What is sacrificed on pagan altars is offered to demons, not to God. And I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink from the Lord's cup and also from the cup of demons. You cannot eat at the Lord's table and also at the table of demons."[2]

Acquaintance with the supernatural was by no means confined to the heathen, however. The highest of all spiritual powers, was, of course, Almighty God himself, and he granted remarkable abilities to those who were in intimate touch with him. Evil spirits were frequently driven out in the name of Jesus by Christians of the second and third centuries, as they had been by their counterparts in New Testament times; miracles of healing were by no means uncommon. The martyrs testified to dreams and visions of obvious, compelling spiritual import, as did many of their more ordinary brethren: not a few seem to have been drawn to faith in Christ through such supernatural manifestations. The astonishing ardour of the Christians evidently stemmed, in many cases, from their intimate, personal experience of both the power of the devil and the power of God. And they had no doubt on which side they wished to be found.[3]

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The Christians regarded the hour of trial not as a humiliation to be endured but as an opportunity to be seized. When they found themselves forced onto the public stage they saw this as their chance to shine there with the love of God. If we, in our day, attempt to explain away, or simply ignore the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount, they on the contrary accepted it, and gloried in it. They forgave their enemies and they blessed them, and they turned the other cheek. "But I tell you who hear me," said their Master, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic."[4] They prayed for their tormentors, and they went

[1] Gal 4:8-9, 5:1
[2] 1 Cor 10:20-21 GNB
[3] Frend *TDC* pp.94-95
[4] Luke 6:27-29

the figurative second mile gladly for the sake of their Lord.[1] They knew that a blessing awaited them for their faithfulness. "Blessed are those," said Jesus, "who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."[2]

They found comfort in their affliction. The Spirit of God filled their hearts with a fiery joy that brought boldness and assurance. In their time of need, they discovered that the Suffering Servant draws very close to his suffering servants. The message which they proclaimed was not so much of God's irresistible power as of his warm comfort – his steadfast love and compassion for the weak and the down-trodden. And they were right. Christianity does not proclaim a distant God, imposing cold decrees and correct judgments, but a loving Father who seeks and who saves. The Gospel speaks not of One who clothes the strong with glory, but of One who fills the humble with joy. "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."[3]

The conduct of the Christians in the courtroom and in the arena was a continual source of wonder to the watching crowds. In the face of death, a faithful testimony was a momentous achievement and a victory in itself. Public confession of faith in Christ was part of the Church's calling to proclaim the Gospel to the world, and an opportunity to be seized at all costs. Locked in dungeons, exposed to the beasts, chained before prefects and proconsuls, we find no discourtesy or anger expressed by Christians towards the authorities, and very rarely fear or dismay. Instead, these court sessions are marked by a quiet thankfulness to God, and a firm expression of trust in him as the One who is in control of all things. The magistrates, they knew, were mere pawns to be moved at will by the wise hand of the eternal God. After all, Jesus had said to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."[4] It was this certainty of God's control which inspired the calm, dignified behaviour that is so impressive in the records of these proceedings – courage in the face of threats, courtesy towards the cruellest of tormentors, and a joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead them into the glory of his heavenly kingdom.

[1] referring to Matt 5:41
[2] Matt 5:10-12
[3] Luke 1:52-53 RSV
[4] John 19:11 RSV

The onlookers were deeply affected by all this. We have well-authenticated cases of pagans realizing the truth of the Gospel and resolving to follow Christ at the very moment when they witnessed the condemnation and death of Christian men and women.[1] And there were undoubtedly many more, both pagans and Jews, who were deeply moved by what they saw and heard, receiving vivid impressions which led them in time to the same faith. Tertullian wrote to the Roman governors: "Your cruelty profits you nothing, though it grows ever more ingenious. It is one of the attractions of our community. As often as you mow us down, the more numerous do we become." And then Tertullian throws out that superb challenge which has entered our Christian heritage. "The blood of the Christians is seed," he said. "Many of your philosophers exhort men to patient endurance of suffering and death... Yet their words have won fewer disciples than those whom Christians have taught by the example of their deeds. That very obstinacy, with which you upbraid us, shows you the truth. For who, when he sees our obstinacy is not stirred up to find its cause? Who when he has enquired does not then join our faith? And who when he has joined us does not desire to suffer, that he may gain the whole grace of God?... Therefore it is that we, at the same time that we are judged, thank you for your judgment. Such a contrast there is between the things of God and the things of man, that when we are condemned by you, we are absolved by God."[2]

The blood of the martyrs certainly was the seed of the Church. The prison doors were besieged by crowds of friends and well-wishers, all eager to visit their brothers and sisters confined within its walls. The public proceedings of the North African lawcourts were the most effective platform from which the Gospel had ever been proclaimed. The graves of the martyrs became the favourite meeting places of the Christian community. The churches drew strength from the inspiring example of its great heroes and champions, and the day on which they suffered was celebrated each year as the day of their glory. Christians in prison issued exhortations and counsel to the churches, and their words were accepted as though inspired by God himself. The dreams and visions which they beheld were welcomed as the oracles of God, and the written accounts of the martyrs were the most popular literature of the early churches. The Christian communities flourished and thrived on the very afflictions which were intended to destroy them.

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[1] Neill pp.43-44
[2] *Apology* 50

What conclusions can we draw from this remarkable response to persecution? Far from crushing the Christian faith, the brutalities of the Roman governors served only to popularize it; rather than wiping out the Church, they invigorated it. Why was this? Firstly we must remember that, by the third century, the Christians were already a very sizeable minority in the towns and cities of North Africa, and in some places even a majority. Bold resistance to the authorities could more easily be sustained in a situation where the Christians were very numerous. The magistrates could not possibly arrest or kill them all: there was not room in the prisons, for one thing, and if they had done so the public life of the city would have come to a standstill. Whilst a proportion of those who flocked to give public honour to the martyrs would certainly pay the penalty for doing so, the Church as a whole was secure from destruction. For every Christian locked in the dungeon, there were a hundred more outside, eager to sustain their brother in his hour of glory, and to honour his memory after it.

The solid growth of the Christian community in the years preceding the crisis undoubtedly furnishes the key to its boldness and its conspicuous survival once the hammer fell. The churches had made hay while the sun shone, and now, like Joseph in Egypt, they had ample resources stored in their spiritual barns for the years of famine. Like the five wise maidens, they had plenty of oil prepared for their lamps; they were bright lights, equipped to shine radiantly in the darkest of nights.[1]

The perspective of history, moreover, shows us that, even from a human point of view, the forces in favour of Christianity were more than a match for those arrayed against it. Convinced of the truth of the Gospel and the falsehood of paganism, the Christians enjoyed a firm assurance of victory, whereas the heathen had no similar confidence in their own religion. Its obvious absurdities and its moral corruption made them ashamed, even while they clung to it for the sake of old association. The weapons of calumny, which were used so freely against the Christians in the early days, fell feebly to the ground when the spectacle of public martyrdom showed what sort of faith it was that they actually held. Paganism could inspire no such moral integrity or personal fortitude; still less could it inspire the great hope and assurance of salvation and eternal life which sustained the Christians in their last hours. Nor could it match the loving fellowship which was the hallmark of the Christian community, overcoming the invidious distinctions of rank, culture and race which riddled heathen society.

[1] referring to Gen 41:46-57; Matt 25:1-13

Persecution certainly had the effect of drawing the Christian community together; old differences were forgotten in time of common hardship. Once an imperial edict had been read out, the blow might fall indiscriminately on any member of the church. Immediately, the believers began to visit one another, exhorting each other to hold firm. As soon as they learned of the arrest of one of their number, they rallied round, organizing visits to the prison and arranging comforts of all sorts to sustain and hearten him. They expounded Scripture to him, praising his faith and extolling the glories of his divine mission, doing all in their power to help him ride victorious through the battle-ground which lay before him. They prayed fervently for him and fervently with him. On the day of the trial, they turned out in large numbers, filling the courtroom or the public square in order to provide moral support for their brother, to pray for him, to hear his last words, to maintain his courage and guard against his weakening. Those selected to stand before the crowds were seen as the soldiers of Christ, the champions of the Christian community. As they testified to the truth of the Gospel they were attesting also to the strength and the faith of their own group. The martyr represented the church to which he belonged; the heroism of the one reflected upon the honour of all.

The true heroes of the early church in North Africa were not its great preachers, nor its brilliant theologians. The men and women who were remembered with greatest affection, and whose deeds were recounted with most loving devotion, were poor in the things of this world – but rich in faith. “One of the outstanding ironies of history,” said Samuel Brengle, “is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass upon each other. The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.”[1] Felicitas, Speratus and Celerinus are lovingly remembered to this day whilst the lofty aristocrats who pronounced sentence on them are consigned to oblivion. Truly did Christ say: “Many who now are first will be last, and many who now are last will be first.”[2]

[1] quoted in Oswald Sanders *Spiritual Leadership* p.13
[2] Mark 10:31 GNB

PART THREE: THE AGE OF CYPRIAN
(3rd century)

12. Humanity and Humility

As the second century advanced into the third – about the time that Tertullian joined the Montanists – there was born in Carthage one who would almost equal him in fame, and perhaps surpass him in influence. Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus, like his celebrated predecessor, was brought up in a comfortable pagan home. But unlike the young Tertullian, he shrank from the crude debaucheries of heathen society; he showed early signs of a sensitive and refined nature.

Cyprian was at heart far more African than Roman, and the future was to reveal him staunchly defending the interests of his people and his homeland. Despite this, he was quite at ease in the intellectual Latin environment of the city, and moved freely among its aristocracy. He showed much promise and quickly made a name for himself as a leading member of the Carthaginian legal community, a young man of wealth and consequence.

It was at the mature age of 45 that he became a Christian, in AD 245, through the friendship and kindly counsel of an aged elder from the church at Carthage whose name was Caecilius. From the vantage point of his new-found faith, Cyprian looked back on the burdens of his old life. Others might have seen him as a prosperous and eminent member of Carthaginian society, but appearances can be deceptive. "I was myself so entangled and constrained by the very many errors of my former life," he said, "and so enslaved by the faults which clung to me, that I could not believe it possible for me to escape from them. And in despair of improvement I actually cherished these evils of mine as if they had been my dearest possessions." Eventually, finding release from the burden of a guilty conscience, he entered into peace with God, through faith in Christ. He tells us it was a great relief to him: "But when the stain of my earlier life had been washed away... and light from above had been poured into my heart..., when I had drunk the Spirit from heaven, and the second birth had restored me so as to make me a new man, then straightaway in a marvellous manner doubts began to be resolved. The doors which had been shut opened, and light

shone in the darkness. What before had seemed difficult was now easy. What I had thought impossible was now capable of accomplishment."[1]

Cyprian at that time possessed a fine house and gardens in Carthage; he sold them after his conversion for the benefit of the poor. His friends were astonished and, showing their esteem for him, repurchased the property and restored it to its former owner. He always had a capacity for winning and retaining the love and loyalty of those around him. While still a young Christian he was known as a person of high character, generosity and tact. He had an instinctive ability to make firm and wise decisions and his gracious manner was such as to win the trust and confidence of others. Although he gave up his legal career, his training and experience must have helped to develop in him those qualities which later made him such an effective ecclesiastical statesman and administrator.

He is said to have been gifted with an excellent memory and this is indeed confirmed by the abundant quotations in his writings. A detailed knowledge of God's written word was a great asset, especially in those days of cumbersome hand written books when verse numbers had not yet been inserted in the text of Scripture: it was no easy matter to hunt for a verse in the midst of a discourse or discussion. But above all, he was a perfectionist, striving constantly to live up to his own high standards of faith and holiness. His great desire was to be like Jesus, and he would not presume upon, or abuse, the assurance that he had of God's love. "Only let fear be the guardian of innocence," he said, "so that the Lord, who in his kindness has streamed into our minds with the inflowing of his heavenly mercy, may through our righteous activity desire to remain with us as a guest of the soul that delights in him. We should take care lest the security we have received should produce carelessness and the old enemy [of sin] creep in unawares once more."[2] He never married: his life was devoted to the family of God, never to any family of his own.

His writings reveal that same patience and that same discipline which he exerted over his strong character, and which he longed equally to see in the church. We find a happy balance in his letters and treatises, and a serene clarity in the arguments he propounds. He always prefers the gentle slopes of persuasion to the rough ground of duress. He gives careful attention to detail, and even more to style. Every phrase is carefully weighed; his facts are accurate, and his summing-up precise. He was an African through and through, but clearly one from the cultured Roman school.

Like other men of his generation, Cyprian probably had short hair and possibly a neatly trimmed beard. He wore the close-fitting linen tunic of his

[1] *Letter* 1: *To Donatus* 4 (*ANF* Vol.V p.275)
[2] *Letter* 1

day, reaching to the knees and belted at the waist, with sleeves, and decorated with braid at the front and at the cuffs – a rather finer garment than the simple, white tunic worn by the previous generation. In winter, he kept out the cold with a coat or cloak of coarse woollen cloth.[1]

* * *

About two years after his conversion, the Overseer of the church in Carthage died, and the members of the church clamoured for Cyprian to take his place: his appointment took place shortly afterwards. This rapid rise testified to his reputation, but it was not guaranteed to endear him to the existing elders of the church, who saw themselves as its natural leaders. Indeed five of them, headed by one Novatus, opposed him from the start, taking vehement exception to the elevation of a novice to such a position of authority.

In fact at that time Cyprian himself had no desire for such distinction, and felt himself unworthy of it. He seriously considered leaving Carthage in the hope of a quieter life elsewhere, but in the end he was persuaded to stay. At moments like this, a life is in the balance – to rise or to fall. On a single decision by a particular man may rest the future of a nation – or of a church. Often has the history of Christianity hinged upon the response of one man or woman to the moment of opportunity! It was the body of ordinary Christians in the church at Carthage who begged for Cyprian to lead them, and throughout his troubled time as Overseer he retained their unfailing loyalty and support. Opposition certainly came his way, but it arose more from the body of elders than from the church as a whole.

Cyprian's brief honeymoon as Overseer in Carthage lasted but eighteen months. The forty years of peace which the churches had enjoyed were drawing to their close; harder times lay ahead. This long freedom from persecution had been something of a mixed blessing in any case. The Faith had certainly spread, but it now counted among its adherents many weak and unworthy characters. Serious scandals had come to light, sometimes involving even the leaders of the churches – cases of alleged dishonesty, extravagance and ostentatious luxury. Some who had risen to positions of leadership seemed to know little of the faith they preached, or of the Scriptures they expounded. Elsewhere Christians were said to be compromising with the worship of idols. A sharp remedy was needed, and Cyprian believed he was divinely forewarned of its imminence. He spoke to his church of the testing times which he saw ahead, and he urged its

[1] On the subject of clothing see Hamman pp.67ff

members to prepare themselves. They should mend their ways, before it was too late, and forsake the greed and pride, the false swearing, the quarrelling and the love of ease and luxury which had softened the fibre of their faith.

As the year 249 drew to its close, Decius mounted the imperial throne and the iron hammer of affliction fell heavily on the church in Carthage. While some were boldly proclaiming their faith in the public square and valiantly shedding their blood, Cyprian himself went into hiding. For a year he continued to write to his flock, encouraging them to hold firm in their faith, to be prudent and to avoid causing any unnecessary offence. When the hour of trial had passed he returned to Carthage. But from that time on, he had to face the taunts of Novatus and others who said that he had run away like the hireling who flees when he sees the wolf coming, deserting the cause of Christ in order to save his own skin.[1]

Writers since then have tended to defend Cyprian's cautious inclination to lie low. Some quote Christ's instruction: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another."[2] Others emphasize that Cyprian was kept safe by divine providence, as was Jesus himself: "No-one seized him, because his time had not yet come."[3] Cyprian himself perhaps felt that his presence in the city would draw unnecessary attention to, and affliction upon, the whole Christian community, and that he was needed not for a brief moment of glory but for the long haul of establishing the church on solidly organized foundations. Cyprian was not the sort of man to shrink from danger, but neither was he one to court it. His character was not such as to revel in persecution, nor one to flinch from it when the situation demanded fortitude. He was perhaps like those who show themselves more wise than heroic, holding to the old maxim: "He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day." And eight years later he proved himself to be no coward, facing his eventual martyrdom with great serenity, having then completed the work which he had barely started at the earlier moment of crisis.

* * *

His flight, like his appointment, was apparently well justified by the outcome. In fact those eighteen months of bitter persecution left the church with difficulties requiring the application of a wise and discerning mind. Returning to Carthage, his qualities of leadership were immediately put to the test by two particular issues which had arisen there, and likewise in the

[1] John 10:12-13
[2] Matt 10:23
[3] John 8:20

other churches of the region. First, there were numerous men and women who had held firm throughout the persecutions, without compromise. Confessing their Christian faith valiantly, they had taken the consequences – torture, imprisonment and death – without faltering. And when the crisis had passed, those who survived were held in great honour by the whole Christian community. Set apart from the rest, they had become a unique band of "confessors"; their fearless public testimony had made them heroes and champions of the faith. They were seen as men and women of the Holy Spirit, filled with the grace of God. Their every word was honoured and revered, and they exerted an enormous influence over the minds and hearts of the Christians. It became clear that they now enjoyed a respect above that extended to the official Overseers of the churches who had in some cases shown themselves considerably less resolute. Many Christians began to wonder which were their real leaders – those who owed their appointment to men, or those who had triumphed in the power of God?

Cyprian viewed the situation with some concern. The prayers and the opinions of these confessors, in the minds of many, had acquired a special – almost magical – value, beyond those of their more ordinary brothers. And there was a disturbing tendency, now they had proved themselves, to excuse them from the normal standards of discipline and humility incumbent on all disciples of Jesus. It seemed that transitory sufferings in the name of Christ might come to count for more in the eyes of the church than the less dramatic qualities that go to make up true spiritual worth. Which was a greater proof of faith: a swift avowal of loyalty to Christ on the public platform, or years of persevering devotion to his cause? Which was of greater value in the sight of God: a glorious Christian death or a beautiful Christian life?

The other side of this coin was the question of how to deal with those who, far from standing firm, had turned back under the pressure of persecution – those who had offered pagan sacrifices and denied their faith. They had, they said, been caught off-guard, like Peter in the courtyard of the High Priest, and now wished to be restored as he was. Expressing a greater or lesser degree of remorse and repentance, they asked if they could now return to the church. Some had actually acquired, from one or another of the confessors, a "certificate of peace", authorizing or requesting their restoration. Many believed that the confessors had acquired for themselves such an abundant entry into the kingdom of God that they were empowered in some way to act as intercessors, to shelter their weaker brothers and lead them to spiritual safety. The certificates they gave out were disconcertingly

varied. Some were vaguely comprehensive: "Let this man and his people be admitted to the Lord's Supper." Others were more specific.[1]

The leaders of the churches faced a dilemma: should they honour these cheques drawn on the confessors' spiritual bank account, or not? To do so might seem like a weak acquiescence in the blasphemies which had been uttered by those who now presented the certificates; but to refuse them would be to cast a slur on the confessors who were honoured by all.

* * *

The issue was not entirely a new one. Tertullian, after the earlier persecutions, had dealt with a similar situation in his uncompromising way. The confessors, he said, had no right to pardon sins, nor to interfere in the discipline of the church. Some, in his day, having been turned away by the leaders of the church, were going to the dungeons and asking the confessors there for pardon. "The people who are most eager to gain access to the prison," he said ironically, "are those who have lost the right of entrance to the church."[2] But "even if the martyr is sure of his imminent martyrdom, though the sword be now suspended above the martyr's head, though his body be stretched upon the cross, though he be tied to the stake for the lion's prey, though he be tied to the wheel and the fire heaped beneath him, yet who permits a mere man to pardon the sins which God alone can forgive?"[3]

Some of the confessors, in fact, only lay in jail for a very short time; they suffered somewhat less than their brethren faithfully serving God night and day outside the prison walls. "But as for you, you fully bestow this power on these martyrs of yours," Tertullian says reproachfully. "Each one when he has 'confessed' puts on his mild bonds in this new fashion of custody, and immediately the adulterers flock around him and the fornicators come to him."[4]

There were some within the church at Carthage who took Tertullian's argument further than this. They argued against the acceptance of any who had sacrificed to idols and any who had cursed Christ. Discipline, they said, as it was taught in the New Testament, demanded their permanent exclusion from the church.[5] Others pressed for a more generous policy of reconciliation. They were led by Novatus, the elder who had most strongly

[1] For the text of one such "certificate" see Bettenson *DOTCC* p.13
[2] *To the Martyrs* 1
[3] *On Modesty* 22
[4] *On Modesty* 22
[5] 1 Cor 5:9-13; 6:9-10

opposed Cyprian's appointment as Overseer. Having expressed himself in Carthage, Novatus packed his bags and went to consult the church in Rome. On his arrival, he found opinion there equally divided – but the Overseer himself was unsympathetic. Novatus campaigned for the appointment in Rome of a rival Overseer, Novatian, who by coincidence bore a similar name but turned out to be far more severe in his attitude towards those who had weakened. Novatus failed to secure in Rome the firm support he had hoped for.

Cyprian himself was at first inclined to take a stern view of those who had compromised their faith. Like Tertullian before him at Carthage, and now Novatian in Rome, he had refused even those begging him for reconciliation on their death-beds. But it was difficult to reconcile such strictness with his own belief that outside the fellowship of the Church there was no salvation. He believed that there was forgiveness with God through the atonement of Christ for any lapsed Christian who had truly repented. And if he were forgiven by God, could the church refuse to forgive him? It seemed not. Moreover, there were so many lapsed Christians who wished to return that to exclude them all would risk driving them to establish a separate church of their own, and this in Cyprian's eyes would make the last state far worse than the first.

His compassionate heart found here reason enough to allow him to take a softer line with them. This resolve took firmer shape when he was again faced with some, lying at death's door, who begged for reconciliation and for his blessing before it was too late. He accepted them back into the fellowship of the church. As it happened, a number of these subsequently recovered. They now found themselves members of the church – lapsed, repentant and restored. With these in their midst, it was impossible to turn away others who were no less guilty but who had not chanced to fall ill.

At this moment Novatus and his friends declared that they refused to recognize Cyprian's authority over the church, and announced that they had appointed in his place one of their own number as its Overseer. Feelings ran somewhat high – but not, in the event, very far. Few in the Christian community would accept the newcomer and somewhat lamely the challenge to Cyprian's leadership fizzled out. This particular battle was quickly won and lost, but the campaign continued on a wider front and it dealt now in issues rather than personalities.

In AD 251 Cyprian arranged a conference at Carthage to discuss the question. Each church in the region was invited to send one representative. After lengthy deliberation, the conference decided that those who had merely obtained certificates (saying they had sacrificed, or had otherwise secured the approval of the authorities) might be restored, but those who

had actually offered sacrifice to the idols must submit to a long penance. Distinctions were drawn between those who had sacrificed willingly and those who had done so only under torture – also between those who had made their families share in their apostasy and those who had apostasized in order to save their families. As for the confessors, Cyprian told them that they should specify the name of each person whom they recommended for restoration, and must take heed that they recommend only those who had proved their sincere regret and their determination to stand firm should similar circumstances arise again. In practice, he was inclined to ignore the certificates altogether and treat each case on its merits, insisting that the Overseer of the church in question find signs of genuine repentance before re-admitting a lapsed Christian. Leaders who had lapsed, however, were excluded from ever again holding positions of responsibility.

A second conference was held at Carthage a year later, AD 252. The new emperor Gallus was threatening renewed persecution and many of those who had fallen away on the previous occasion now came in consternation to Cyprian. How could they stand firm as Christians, they said, if they were denied the fellowship of the church and the blessing of the Lord's Supper? The conference authorized further relaxations: all who truly repented were at once restored, with exhortations to greater steadfastness in future. In the event, the emperor Gallus died before he could put his threats into effect.

* * *

As we have seen, the controversy was not confined to Africa. The Novatianists in Rome refused to participate in worship there with Christians who had denied the Lord and had thus, they believed, committed the unforgivable sin.[1] They set out to establish new churches of their own. Novatian's followers "began to style themselves 'the Pure', and this attitude was linked with a particular reverence for the Scriptures. They claimed to be the 'evangelical' Church."[2] Long after Novatian's death, there remained a separate church in Rome belonging to the group that bore his name. The Novatianists spread to many parts of the Empire including North Africa, where they probably combined with what remained of the Montanists.[3] Like the Montanists, they accepted in their fellowships only those they considered to be sincere disciples of Christ.

[1] Mark 3:28,29; Luke 12:8-10
[2] Frend *TDC* p.128 (also p.319); Monceaux Vol.II pp.34-35
[3] The two movements are known to have joined forces in Phrygia (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.197).

There were evidently now many groups of Christians in North Africa, preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus and admitting no loyalty whatsoever to the official Catholic Church in Carthage, of which Cyprian was Overseer. The earliest recorded use of the term "Catholic Church" occurs in the letters written about AD 115 by Ignatius, the leader of the church in Antioch. Ignatius means by this term the universal Church comprising all the Christians in the entire world, and he takes it for granted that the members of all the local churches are included in it. Cyprian, however, a century and a half later, had to face a more complex and painful situation in which the ancient association of churches, which he called "Catholic", no longer embraced all who professed to be Christian. The Catholic Church was in fact no longer catholic.[1] By Cyprian's time, however much he might regret the fact, it had become just one of several distinct denominations, albeit still the largest of them.

And this was the reason for the second great controversy which faced him: whether those who were members of other Christian groups could be recognized as brothers in Christ. By now many had been baptized by Montanists, Novatianists, and others outside the official Catholic Church. The question arose: was their baptism valid or not? Were they true Christians or not? Cyprian refused to accept that a sincere Christian could, or would, ever separate himself from the ancient, universal Catholic Church. To do such a thing would be spiritual suicide. Those who are not members of the Catholic Church, he said, are not Christians at all; they are cut off from the promises of Christ, and cannot inherit eternal life.

These two great controversies absorbed the brief ten years of Cyprian's life as Overseer in Carthage, and it was in response to the questions thrown up by them that he developed his theory of the Church and its ministry. That scheme has its supporters and its detractors, but no one can deny that it has influenced every generation since.

* * *

Cyprian, however, was not left in academic seclusion to ponder these issues: a great and urgent danger of a very different type was advancing rapidly towards the borders of North Africa. The plague, which had ground its grim way through Ethiopia and parts of Egypt, finally reached Carthage in AD 252.

Many of the heathen blamed this terrible scourge on the Christians, believing it to be a retribution sent by the offended ancestral deities – a

[1] The word "catholic", of course, means "universal, all-embracing".

chastisement for the general complacent toleration of the Christian faith which had so largely supplanted the gods of Africa and Rome. The pagans looked now with ill humour on that growing company in their midst which had turned its back on the old ways and spurned the ancient powers. And so the churches had to endure, along with the miseries of the plague, the threats of those who held them responsible for it. They bore the sorrows of sickness and death inflicted by the pestilence, and then faced riots, injuries, destruction and bloodshed at the hands of the mob which was maddened by it.

And at this time the ravaged streets of Carthage became yet another arena for the demonstration of Christian love. The believers cared compassionately for their dying brothers and sisters. They did their utmost to ease their final days, not fearing to share their fate but looking forward to reunion in the presence of Christ. The pagans around them had no such hope. They shrank from the ghastly putrefaction of the dead and dying, recoiling from the tormented sufferers on their doorstep in the vain hope of avoiding contamination and surviving a few more days or years in what still remained of their desolate world – for they had none other.

In fact the picture we are given of the heathen is one of utter terror, running hither and thither in frenzied desperation, not knowing what to do or where to go – an ants' nest broken open, seething in hysterical turmoil, completely out of control. Each one thought only of himself, with no care for his anguished friends or the dead bodies of his stricken family. Corpses were flung into the streets, and left stinking in a steadily gathering cloud of flies; rats and other vermin gnawed at the bloated flesh. Infection spread; the plague prevailed; it mastered and tyrannized, crushing great and small alike. It destroyed the aristocrat as surely as it broke the beggar, and the indescribable stench of death hung like a pall over the shattered city of Carthage.[1]

Cyprian called the Christians together. He described the symptoms of the plague and told them that they must expect no divine immunity from it. He strengthened their resolve to trust God in the midst of the storm, and reassured them that those who had perished were not lost, but rather set free from the hard shackles of human bondage. They have entered into the joy of life eternal, he said. We are not like the wicked, without hope. "To the Jews and pagans and the enemies of Christ this mortality is indeed a plague, but to God's servants it is a departure to salvation."[2] For now, at this very hour, it may be that God will call us to himself, to receive the blessing he has promised us. And Cyprian rebukes the inconsistency of putting on black

[1] *Life and Passion of Cyprian* 9 (*ANF* Vol.V pp.270-271)
[2] *On the Mortality* 15 (*ANF* Vol.V pp.469ff)

as a sign of mourning for the dead: "Should black clothes be put on here, when over there they have already put on their white robes? Will not the heathen rightly blame us if we mourn as extinct and lost those whom we declare are alive with God?"[1]

When our neighbours are in need, he says, then we have our greatest opportunity to show the love of Christ. The heathen, in their selfish fears, have no thought to spare for their dying neighbours. But Christians are bound to act very differently. It would be no wonder if we were to attend to our own friends, but our Lord charges us to do good to sinners and tax-collectors too, and to love our enemies. And what if the heathen blame us for their afflictions, and add further griefs to ours? Christ prayed for those who persecuted him, and if we are his disciples, we should do likewise.

Cyprian went on to suggest practical ways that his people could help, each according to his ability. Any who had money were first to buy food and other comforts needed by those who were stricken, and then to do whatever else they could to ease their sufferings. Those who had no money could devote their time to serving the needy in a spirit of love. So the Christian community of Carthage set to work gladly. They nursed the sick and buried the dead, both heathen and Christian, with unselfish kindness, as service to Christ himself. This was perhaps Cyprian's finest hour. We can only marvel at the power of the man to inspire and to motivate. Gone were the controversies, forgotten the rival personalities and feuding factions. In the face of human need, we see a very kind and a very compassionate Christian man with a gift for spiritual leadership. And the blessing of God rested upon him.

The plague continued in different parts of the world for twenty years. Month after weary month, the heathen witnessed these acts of love and the serene assurance with which the Christians faced death. Many began to wonder what it could be that made them act in this way. How was it that they could be so kind to the poor and widows and old people? Why should they stoop so low as to care for ragged orphan children and slaves? How could they show such love to the very ones who had so bitterly mistreated them? And how was it that death held no terrors for them? The loving service and the great faith which Cyprian stirred up in the Christian community were not quickly forgotten by the people of Carthage, as we shall see.

* * *

[1] *On the Mortality* 20

Cyprian was certainly no arrogant ruler delighting to lord it over others. He appears to have been a large-hearted and singularly lovable man. He wrote to the elders and helpers of his church in Carthage: "From the time when I first took on this task of Overseer I made up my mind to do nothing on my own private opinion without your advice and without the consent of the people."[1] Cyprian readily submitted to the decisions of the four conferences in Carthage, which he had done so much to instigate, and he won the loyalty of his church by repeatedly taking its members into his confidence and explaining his plans and his decisions to them. "The authority of Cyprian does not frighten me," said Augustine some years later, "because I am reassured by his humility."[2] His treatment of those opponents who sought reconciliation with him shows how generously he could forget the tensions and conflicts of the past. He bore no grudges and was slow to take offence. Receiving a critical letter from the church in Rome at the time of his flight from Carthage, he sent it back to them with the courteous request that they would examine it and see whether it was indeed from them: he thinks it might have been tampered with. He also sent a full statement explaining his conduct.[3]

His writings reveal his debt to Tertullian, as we have seen. "Hand me the master!" he would say, turning to his secretary for a volume of Tertullian's work. Cyprian agreed with his master that there was no salvation outside the Church, but he went much further than Tertullian in equating the universal Church of Christ with the official Catholic body. In fact, at this point, his theory of the Church diverged dramatically from that of his great predecessor, and taken to its logical conclusion would actually have excluded Tertullian from membership, and probably from salvation too. Cyprian's writings never refer to Tertullian by name, and the ideas and illustrations which he borrows from him are softened and refined so that their cutting edge is blunted, and also their tendency to offend. That the two knew each other is possible, but uncertain: they lived in the same city, but at the time of Tertullian's death Cyprian was still a pagan lawyer.

* * *

In AD 257 an edict was issued by the emperor Valerian forbidding Christians to meet together, and threatening severe penalties for any leaders who would not conform. Cyprian was immediately arrested and brought for questioning before the governor of the province of Africa. Asked to give an

[1] *Letter* 5 (*ANF* Vol.V p.283)
[2] quoted by Walker *TCOSC* p.55
[3] *Letters* 2 & 3, (*ANF* Vol.V pp.280-282)

account of himself, he replied firmly: “I am a Christian and an Overseer. I recognize no other gods but the one true God who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them. It is this God that we Christians serve. To him we pray day and night – for ourselves and all mankind, and for the welfare of the emperors themselves.” The governor asked him about the other leaders in his church. “Our principles,” answered Cyprian courteously, “forbid anyone to give himself up to you, and I may not inform against them.” “But,” he added, “if they be sought after, they will be found each at his post.”

The governor read him the text of the new imperial decree, and then judgment was pronounced: Cyprian was to be separated from his flock and banished from Carthage. He was taken to a place nearby called Curubis. Happily, this was a pleasant town by the sea-shore, and Cyprian appears to have been treated there with the greatest possible consideration. He was often visited by his friends, and wrote many admirable letters of advice and encouragement to them. He did not forget those Christians who had been carried off at the same time to harsher places, or sent to work in the terrible mines. He did all he could to relieve their distress, sending them money and other comforts whenever he could.

A year later, Cyprian was summoned back to Carthage where he found that a new governor had just arrived. The emperor Valerian, observing that his first edict against the Christians was ineffectual, followed it up with a second, far more severe. Its terms were uncompromising. It decreed death for Overseers and other church leaders. All Christians were to forfeit their houses, fields and other property, and then suffer banishment or execution. Cyprian knew that this decree meant the end for him. His friends urged him to find an opportunity to escape. He refused. He was carried off to the governor’s country house about six miles from Carthage where he was allowed to have supper with some close companions. Many of the Christians, when they heard where he had been taken, came out from Carthage and watched all night outside the house lest their beloved Overseer be put to death or carried off into exile without their knowledge.

Next day Cyprian was led to the tribunal, a little way from the governor’s palace. He was tired and hot with the walk under a burning sun, and as he was waiting for the governor’s arrival a soldier of the guard kindly offered him a change of clothes. Cyprian thanked him but declined to accept them. “Why should we bother to remedy troubles which will probably come to an end today anyway?” he said. The governor took his seat and ordered Cyprian to sacrifice to the gods. He refused. The governor then warned him to consider carefully the risk he was taking. “In so righteous a cause,” answered Cyprian, “there is no need of consideration.” The governor

announced the sentence, condemning him to be beheaded. “Thanks be to God!” said Cyprian. A cry arose from the Christians: “Let us go and be beheaded with him!” They were held back.

As evening drew near he was led by the soldiers to the public square. Vast crowds assembled to cheer the man who had won their respect and love; many of his people climbed into the trees to see more clearly. He prayed, removed his cloak, and ordered twenty-five gold pieces to be given to the executioner. He tied the scarf round his own eyes, and two of his friends bound his hands. His body was laid out to satisfy the curiosity of the onlookers. The Christians of Carthage returned that night and carried it off with tapers and torches to their burial ground. They met continuously around his grave, praying together and exhorting one another never to forget the life and the example of that brave and gracious man who himself had never ceased to pray for them and care for them all.

Thus, in AD 258, Cyprian died; he was aged about 58. He had been leader of the church in Carthage for only ten years, but what momentous years they had been! The entire African city rose to celebrate the martyrdom of her most distinguished son. In AD 250 the crowd had shouted “Cyprian to the lions!” Now, eight years later, they pitied and honoured him. His conduct during the plague had won them over. To the very last he suffered no insult. The Christians had outlived the general unpopularity which had generated the riots of the previous century. The people of Carthage, Christian and pagan alike, recognized in Cyprian a man of stature, marked by wisdom and kindness, and one who sought for peace rather than conflict. A leader who can win the love and respect of his opponents deserves a place in history. Those who honour such men in their lifetime have but anticipated the verdict of posterity.

A century and a half later we find Augustine preaching, in his memory, an anniversary sermon to the crowds assembled in the majestic building which was erected at the site of his martyrdom. Now Rome has crumbled and the governor of that time is forgotten, but Cyprian himself remains a bright star in the North African crown. Honours and comforts were not lacking to him in his last days, but he parted willingly with these small things, to receive at the hand of his Saviour a greater reward.

The primary sources for Cyprian’s life and work are *The Life and Passion of Cyprian* written by his friend and contemporary, Pontius (English translation in *ANF* Vol.V), *The Acts of Cyprian* (Musurillo pp.168ff.) and *The Passion of Cyprian* (Hardy pp.31ff.), along with his letters and treatises (also in *ANF*). Secondary sources include Plummer pp.119-128; Foakes-Jackson, especially pp.265-269; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.843-849. Frend *TDC* also has numerous references.

13. Meetings and Ministers

The lives of Tertullian and Cyprian overlap one another by some thirty years, yet we can see in these two remarkable men the embodiment of two successive and quite distinct epochs in the history of the Church. Tertullian survived from the apostolic age with its relatively informal, self-sufficient Christian groups of the type found in the New Testament, whilst Cyprian was the first great advocate of the new Catholic pattern of church government that was to prevail during the succeeding centuries. Tertullian saw the Church as a worldwide brotherhood embracing all believers. For Cyprian it had become an organized society, comprising authorized groups subject to centralized ecclesiastical control.

The third century, then, marks a turning point: the transformation of the independent churches into "the Catholic Church" – the formal assimilation of the local Christian communities into a structured, international institution. It was then, too, that Christian worship finally relinquished its original collective spontaneity, with leadership in each church narrowed down to the ministry of a single Overseer. And Cyprian himself, as we shall see, was the guiding light to these developments in Africa.

* * *

The small scattered churches of the New Testament period and the following century had lived in constant expectation of the Lord's return and the end of the world. They dealt quickly with whatever problems might arise, each issue on its own merits and according to the simple Biblical principles of love and truth. The subject of outward organization did not appear of great importance at that time: every church had its own recognized leaders, and needed no other or higher authority. In practice, the teaching and the forms of worship in the churches throughout Asia, Europe and Africa remained very similar, but this was simply because each church referred for guidance to the same Scriptures and the same well-known traditions of the apostles – not because they consciously endeavoured to maintain a structured uniformity.

By the turn of the first century, however, we find new forces at work which pressed heavily on the churches throughout the world. Two common foes had emerged which had the effect of drawing the churches together – persecution from outside, and falsehood within. The new tensions, and the uncertainties to which they gave rise, necessitated a greater degree of contact between the Christian communities. If a brother in one church, for

example, began to expound teachings which others believed to be erroneous, they would naturally turn for advice to their friends in the next town. If the erring brother had to be excluded from their fellowship, it would be wise to warn the Christians in neighbouring towns so they would be aware of the situation, and could take whatever steps they felt appropriate. A decision taken in one church would generally be upheld by its neighbour. As time passed and the links developed, the most influential churches – such as those in Carthage and Rome – began to count on the compliance of others with whatever resolutions they might make. Thus we begin to see the first signs of that hierarchy of command which was subsequently to develop into the Catholic Church.

In times of difficulty, if persecution arose in one town, some of the Christians might find it expedient to move away for a while, until the fuss died down. And so in North Africa we find the believers pushed from place to place in the same way that those in Palestine had been scattered following the martyrdom of Stephen.[1] They would make their way to the homes of brothers and sisters in more peaceful parts, and find comfort and encouragement there. Those who elected to stay put, risking the loss of property and livelihood, sometimes received gifts of food or clothing from the Christian community in the town or village along the road, or from even further afield. Believers suffering persecution in Lyon and Vienne, France, sent an account of their sufferings as far as the eastern provinces of Asia and Phrygia; presumably they knew that the churches there would be concerned and would want to help if they could. Stresses such as these – from outside, and from within – began to draw the churches together for mutual support, in years of peace as in times of affliction.

For all that, the local churches were still no more than independent groups of believers, bound one to another by the simple ties of brotherly love and mutual respect. The Christian communities were characterized by that same informality which had seemed good to the apostles a century earlier and to the Holy Spirit whose guidance they had sought. Indeed the early churches enjoyed a remarkable spiritual freedom: there was opportunity for all to take part in the life of the Christian community and in its meetings, and each member would participate as he felt led by the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul tells us about the Christian groups that he knew: "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all. The Spirit gives one person a message full of wisdom, while to another person the same Spirit gives a message full of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one person, while to another person he gives the power to

[1] Acts 8:1,4-5

heal. The Spirit gives one person the power to work miracles; to another, the gift of speaking God's message; and to yet another, the ability to tell the difference between gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not. To one person he gives the ability to speak in strange tongues, and to another he gives the ability to explain what is said. But it is one and the same Spirit who does all this; as he wishes, he gives a different gift to each person."[1]

But how did this work in practice? How did this variety of different gifts and divinely inspired abilities contribute to an orderly meeting? "This is what I mean, my brothers," continued Paul. "When you meet for worship, one person has a hymn, another a teaching, another a revelation from God, another a message in strange tongues, and still another the explanation of what is said. Everything must be of help to the church... All of you may proclaim God's message, one by one, so that everyone will learn and be encouraged."[2] This remarkable informality placed the onus on each member of the church to seek God personally and to contribute wholeheartedly for the benefit of all. Not only was there opportunity for everyone to participate: they were each encouraged to do so. They shared a common responsibility for the life of the church; they were expected to "serve one another in love." They were all urged to "encourage one another" – and this not just once a week: they should "exhort one another every day."[3]

* * *

There were, of course, people in the Christian community with evident abilities and God-given spiritual powers. Such men and women were Christ's gift to the church. "He... gave some to be apostles," said Paul, "some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service."[4] Any Christian might aspire to such service, but its purpose was not to exalt the talented and assertive above their brothers. On the contrary, as Paul says, its aim was to train and equip all the members of the church to be useful and effective in the work of God.

In addition to those who exercised spiritual gifts, there were particular men – elders and helpers – appointed to bear overall responsibility for the growth and well-being of the church, and especially for its administration and discipline. Their role was a vital one. These men were chosen not so much for their creative ability as their godly character, and this is shown in

[1] 1 Cor 12:7-11 GNB
[2] 1 Cor 14:26,31 GNB
[3] Gal 5:13; Heb 10:23-25 RSV; 3:13 RSV; Col 3:16-17
[4] Eph 4:11,12

the requirements listed by Paul for aspiring elders and helpers.[1] They would make sure that the needs – both spiritual and practical – of everyone in the church were being met. They would take decisions about its ministry and the time and form of its meetings. They would supervise the appropriate ceremonies associated with marriage and death; they would encourage those with spiritual gifts to use them well and with suitable humility; they would exercise discipline if any member of the church fell into sin; and they had the important task of ensuring that both teaching and practice continued to be in accordance with the principles of God's word. Later they bore responsibility for the buildings used by the church

An elder must have a good practical knowledge of the Scriptures. In the nature of things, Christian groups that allow free participation will always be vulnerable to the false teacher. This is why each of the elders must be "able to teach" and "to encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."[2] One or two might, indeed, have a special flair or skill in expounding the word of God, but others might ordinarily serve the church in different ways. One would perhaps be more comfortable as an evangelist, moving among the people in the markets and public places, and leading them to Christ. One might have a gift of great faith, or wisdom, or the ability to heal. Another might be particularly good at comforting and encouraging the faint-hearted and bereaved as he visited them in their homes. Whatever his contribution, each was known to be a genuine man of God and worthy of the respect of all.

In the New Testament we find such leaders referred to sometimes as elders and sometimes as overseers. The latter term was used primarily in the Gentile churches, and the former in the churches whose members were mainly of Jewish origin. The two titles are evidently interchangeable: they refer to the same office, and were held by the same men. They were elders because they were the recognized senior members of the Christian community; they were overseers because they oversaw, or looked after, the spiritual needs of the community. The title "elder" speaks of their authority in the church; the word "overseer" describes the task they perform.[3]

The majority of overseers almost certainly earned their living from the trade, craft or employment which absorbed most of their time. Their leisure, too, was necessarily occupied with the requirements of their families in addition to the needs of the church. They were busy men and it suited them well to share their responsibilities for the well-being of the Christian

[1] 1 Tim 3:1-13
[2] 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9
[3] In Acts 20:17 and 28, where Paul meets the leaders of the church in Ephesus, the two terms are used interchangeably, as they are in Titus 1:5-7.

community: each could contribute in whatever way he was best qualified, and when one was not available another could take his place. Paul and Barnabas appointed a number of elders in each church as they travelled through Lycaonia and Pisidia,[1] and Titus was likewise instructed to appoint a group of such men in every town on the island of Crete.[2] Such plural leadership is taken for granted in the New Testament. We find several elders at Philippi and at Ephesus;[3] help was sent to the body of elders responsible for the church in Jerusalem;[4] and both James and Peter refer to a group of elders in the churches to which they wrote.[5]

The elders, in New Testament times, rose as one might say from the ranks: a person would be chosen to participate in leadership in the church of which he was already a member.[6] This meant that those appointed to eldership were all familiar with the local conditions, and well-acquainted with the circumstances of those entrusted to their care. They knew their people and their people knew them. They worked the same fields and frequented the same markets; they spoke the same language and faced the same problems. A man was not brought from elsewhere to take responsibility for a church he did not know. When apostles and other itinerant workers, such as Paul, Timothy or Titus were sent to establish or help a church in a distant town, they did not become its permanent leaders. On the contrary, they appointed elders from among its own members, taught and encouraged them and then, after a space of months or at most a few years, moved on.

The elders were chosen for their wisdom and spirituality. A potential leader must be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom."[7] And of the other qualifications for leadership required by the New Testament, none refer to educational level or racial origin.[8] No-one was excluded from spiritual responsibility because of a humble social background. Nor did a man or

[1] Acts 14:23
[2] Titus 1:5
[3] Phil 1:1; Acts 20:17
[4] Acts 11:30
[5] James 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1. See also 1 Tim 4:14.
[6] Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5
[7] Acts 6:3 GNB, referring to the seven men chosen to serve the church in Jerusalem. Scripture nowhere refers to the Seven as "deacons". In fact, it would seem more likely that those of them who remained in Jerusalem were among the body of men later referred to in the book of Acts as "the elders" (Acts 11:30; 15:4 etc.). In that case they would have been responsible for the leadership of the Jerusalem church, whilst the apostles concerned themselves with establishing the doctrinal basis of the faith and with the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world. (See *NAPNF* Series 2, Vol.I: Eusebius *Church History* II, 1:1 footnote p.103.)
[8] 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9

woman require academic distinction in order to serve God: the apostles Peter, James and John, after all, were just ordinary fishermen. No-one was disqualified because of his race or place of birth, so long as he was now a permanent member of the church he was to serve. We find at Antioch, for example, five leaders, each evidently originating from a different country – Barnabas from Cyprus; Simeon, probably a black African; Lucius from Cyrene, possibly an Amazigh; Manaen from Palestine; and lastly Saul, a Jew from Tarsus.[1] But all were now accepted as men of Antioch, having settled in the city, taking part in its life and commerce and speaking the language of its people.[2]

There is no sign in the New Testament that one or more of the elders ever occupied a position above the others. On the contrary, they took all decisions jointly, and even the apostle Peter did not consider himself to be in a position above the other leaders of the church. When he writes to them, he refers to himself simply as a fellow-elder, not commanding them but appealing to them as an equal.[3] The value of joint decisions has long been recognized – both to ensure the prudence of the decision and to guarantee its willing implementation. "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."[4] This is true in the church, as in any other sphere. The leaders in each town met as a group, and prayed and sought guidance together in the discharge of their joint responsibility. In Antioch, for example, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"[5] And they all laid hands on them and sent them off to preach the Gospel in other lands.

The elders were assisted by a group of helpers, sometimes known as "deacons". In apostolic times, the helpers occupied themselves with such practicalities as the distribution of food and other assistance to widows.

[1] Acts 13:1
[2] It appears that Barnabas and Saul deliberately settled in Antioch in order to help establish the church there (Acts 11:19-26). Having done so, they moved on, leaving the church in the hands of its local leaders (Acts 13:1-2).
[3] 1 Pet 5:1. When Paul visited Jerusalem, he consulted "those who were of repute" including Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus (Gal 2:2,9). Some have suggested that James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, but there is no evidence for this: he was a recent convert, not even one of the twelve apostles who were still ministering there at that time.
James probably belonged to the body of elders who met with the apostles on one famous occasion to discuss the admission of the Gentile believers. His contribution to that debate met with approval, but the decision was taken at that time by "the apostles and elders", and the letter summing up their recommendations was sent likewise by "the apostles and elders", not by James! (Acts 15:6,22,23)
[4] Prov 15:22
[5] Acts 13:2

Later they were also concerned with the maintenance of the buildings, furnishings and books which belonged to the church, and in some cases its cemetery. The helpers might include women such as Phoebe, who served the church in the town of Cenchrea, near Corinth,[1] but other women such as Priscilla were greatly appreciated and blessed in the work of God without apparently occupying any official position.

The New Testament thus shows us a pattern of leadership that develops within each local church, cutting across all racial, cultural and educational barriers. Each local group is led by a number of overseers, or elders, who share jointly in its decisions, its administration and its discipline. But Christian service is not concentrated exclusively in their hands: they are by no means the only ones to participate in the meetings of the church. There is ample freedom for every believer to take part, and to develop whatever spiritual gifts might be granted by God for the benefit of all. This system worked well: the churches of the first century were highly successful. Their teaching and outreach were dynamic and productive, and their informal flexibility enabled them rapidly to carry the Good News throughout the Mediterranean world of their day.

* * *

The trend towards a more rigid structure, and the elevation of one overseer above his fellows, progressed quite slowly at first. In the letter written by Clement in AD 96 to the church in Corinth, the spiritual gifts are not prominent as they were in Paul's letter to the same church, but Clement's references to church leadership show that there had been little change in other respects by the end of the first century. He mentions helpers, as one might expect, and when he refers to overseers and to elders he uses these words interchangeably, as we have seen them used in the New Testament. Clement wrote in the name of the church in Rome, but there is not a hint that he is seen as the sole, or chief overseer in that city. Nor does he refer to an individual overseer in Corinth. The Didache, purporting to represent the teaching of the twelve apostles, was written probably in Egypt or Syria some ten or twenty years after Clement's letter. This document clearly describes joint leadership in the churches of that time, and instructs the Christians to "choose for yourselves overseers and helpers who are worthy of the Lord."[2]

From this point on, however, a change is increasingly apparent. It progressed more quickly in some places than others. Ignatius of Antioch,

[1] Rom 16:1-3
[2] *Didache* 15 (*ANF* Vol.VII; Staniforth p.197)

writing in about AD 115, urges the various churches of Asia Minor (Turkey) to obey the "Overseer" who had been appointed in each city.[1] It may be that his repeated exhortations indicate a certain resistance on their part to the new form of leadership, but this is by no means clear. The new pattern, moreover, seems not to have taken root so quickly in every place, even in Asia Minor. Polycarp writes from Smyrna, one of the chief cities of this region, around AD 150, referring to himself as one of the elders. He makes no reference to a sole Overseer, either in his home town or in the church at Philippi to which his letter was addressed.[2]

In AD 138, Justin Martyr tells us that the church in Rome was led in its celebration of the Lord's Supper by one who "presided" over the meeting, but it is not clear if the one who directed the meeting was also responsible for the teaching or the administration of the church. Nor is it apparent, from what Justin says, if it was always the same man who presided each time the Lord's Supper was celebrated.[3]

* * *

By the late second century however, the original form of church leadership was beginning, in most places, to show signs of elaboration. Tertullian refers, at that time, to a threefold ministry in the churches of Africa – overseers, elders and helpers. In the larger churches elsewhere, we find additional divisions such as "assistant helpers", and "readers", and we now begin to see clear moves towards a developing hierarchy. Eusebius tells us that in Rome, around 250 AD, there were no less than forty-six elders, seven helpers, seven assistant helpers, forty-two servants, and fifty-two exorcists, readers and door-keepers, all of whom received financial support from the church. More than fifteen hundred widows and people in distress were also provided for by the church in Rome at this time, and there were an estimated total of some 50,000 believers there altogether, probably meeting in several different locations.[4] It is not difficult to imagine the immensity of the administrative task involved in co-ordinating all this activity. Increasingly we find the supervision of these administrative complexities left by the church in the hands of the most capable man among its leaders. He gradually assumed a role as chief overseer of the church, forsaking his trade or employment in order to devote his full time to this work.

[1] *To the Magnesians* 6,7; *To the Trallians* 3,7,13 etc. (*ANF* Vol.I; Staniforth pp.72-82)
[2] *ANF* Vol.I p.33; Staniforth pp.119-132
[3] *First Apology* 65 (*ANF* Vol.I p.185
[4] Eusebius *Church History* VI, 43:11; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.850

The trend towards concentrating leadership in the hands of one man may well have been encouraged by the Roman law which required every corporate body or society to have a registered spokesman. The elder chosen for this representative role would naturally acquire a special importance in the church, and by the mid-third century many churches in North Africa had a leading or representative elder of this type.

The tendency towards the elevation of one man in each church was finally formalized and consolidated in the latter half of the third century. It was at this time that Cyprian arranged the series of conferences which had such an influence on the future development of the Church. These conferences provided an opportunity for the leaders of the churches over a wide area to discuss and agree on matters of pressing concern to them all. They were held in a central location, and in Africa this generally meant Carthage. The local churches were each asked to send one representative, and having selected one of their elders for this demanding duty, they would eagerly await his return with a report of the proceedings. The result, inevitably, was to raise the elder in question above his fellows: he alone could exert influence over decisions taken by the conference, and he alone could convey to the church the views and opinions of the leaders from elsewhere. The outcome of this was permanently to establish one man as the effective leader in each church; he became known as the Overseer or "bishop" of the church. Increasingly, from this time on, we find the teaching and administration of the local church left in the hands of this one man, and we are rapidly moving away from the simple New Testament pattern of joint leadership and general participation.

* * *

Cyprian, in fact, was the great advocate of "one-man ministry" in the North African context. For Biblical justification he leans heavily on somewhat fanciful analogies, saying that as there is one Church, one faith, one baptism, there must be one Overseer in each church. He draws rigid parallels between the Church and the Old Testament people of God. Cyprian, indeed, generally refers to the Overseer in each church as its "priest". In his mind the Overseer was in much the same position as the priest had been for the Israelites, standing as an intercessor between God and his people, and presenting to God prayers and offerings on their behalf. The Overseer was the "judge" of his people and entitled to their absolute obedience. The believers entered into the benefit of the New Covenant when they were baptised by the Overseer, in the same way that the Israelites entered into the Old Covenant through the rite of circumcision. A

believer who had sinned and repented could receive forgiveness only when the Overseer laid hands on him and pronounced his offence pardoned. The Lord's Supper was seen as a holy sacrifice offered to God on an altar by the Overseer, just as the High Priest of the Old Testament had offered sacrifices on behalf of the worshippers.[1]

Cyprian's system depended absolutely on the official ministrations of the appointed Overseer, acting on behalf of Christ himself and invested with his divine authority. Prerogatives which Scripture confers on Christ alone were now to be administered by the priests of the Catholic Church. Privileges which God's word allowed to all believers were now restricted to Cyprian's Overseers. Tertullian had said that the simple cloak of the frugal philosopher was the appropriate garb for the Christian teacher; Cyprian's priests, however, must have distinctive robes worthy of their exalted station.

Cyprian looked on the helpers, or "deacons", as the successors of the Old Testament Levites, assisting the priest in the routine tasks of worship. Both the Overseer and his helpers, like their Old Testament counterparts, were entitled to financial support from the congregation. The helpers, in fact, were becoming very prominent officials. They dealt with various financial and administrative matters under the direction of the Overseer. They were usually seven in number, in memory of the seven helpers chosen by the early believers in Jerusalem to assist the apostles.[2] Cyprian deliberately played down the role of the elders, leaving them little or nothing to do in the churches.

* * *

In his early days Tertullian had accepted the new trend towards rule from above, and the increasing distinction between clergy and laity, between leader and led. He had misgivings, but saw it perhaps as a necessary response to growing administrative complexity. In later years, however, as his sympathies moved towards the Montanists, he valued ever more highly the contribution of each member in the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit, he taught, should lead the meetings of the church, speaking through each member for the encouragement of all. Tertullian firmly believed in the priesthood of all believers, often reminding his friends that Christ has "made us a kingdom of priests, to serve his God and Father."[3] He maintained the right of any Christian man, if he found himself far from an existing church, to baptize, to administer the Lord's Supper, and to

[1] *Letter* 9:2; 62:14; 64:1; 65:1-2; 67:2 etc.
[2] Acts 6:3-6
[3] Rev 1:6 GNB

undertake any task normally reserved to the recognized leaders. "Where there are three persons, though they be ordinary believers, there is a church," he said.[1]

Tertullian observed that the Lord's command to baptize was given to all who would bear the name of disciple.[2] However, a believer should never take upon himself such tasks lightly or thoughtlessly: "How much more is the discipline of reverence and humility incumbent on ordinary believers (since it also befits their leaders), so as not to claim presumptuously for themselves the duty entrusted to the overseers... Let it suffice, then, to exercise your right in cases of necessity, when the special nature of place, occasion, or of the person concerned compels it." And let us test ourselves, he adds. A Christian should find himself each day in holiness and purity of heart before the Lord, ready for any good work: "It is God's will that we should all be in a fit state to administer his sacraments at any time and in any place."[3] Tertullian, at least, had not lost sight of the great New Testament ideal.

* * *

Looking back to the New Testament we find no reference to a church with a solitary Overseer; by the fourth century hardly any church in North Africa was without one. The Overseer was responsible for the administration of the church, and to a very large extent for its worship, teaching and outreach too. This perhaps worked satisfactorily when a man of ability and genuine godliness, such as Cyprian or Augustine, occupied the position and managed to delegate many tasks wisely and well. But what would happen when the great man had passed on and a lesser one was called to fill his shoes? The consequences could prove to be disastrous, as events would all too soon show.

For discussion of developing leadership structures, see Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.124-151; Foakes-Jackson pp.212-213; Norbie, *NTCO* pp.39-40; Strauch pp.205-207.

[1] *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7
[2] *De Baptismo* 17, referring to Matt 28:18-20. The eleven were to baptize and make disciples, and then teach them in turn to baptize and make disciples, and so on.
[3] *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7

14. Church in Chains

Emperors came and emperors went. Some were astute politicians; some were pleasure seekers. Some were absorbed in the careful administration of their vast territories; others were weak, or simply wicked. Some turned their attention to the followers of Christ, some did not. "The Christians were alternately ignored, caressed, or persecuted according to the caprice of the successful soldier who for the time held the Empire."[1]

The place of the brutal Decius was taken in AD 253 by Valerian, who immediately halted the oppression of the Christians. Valerian, however, soon showed himself addicted to the practice of magic and the use of horoscopes, and having assumed the imperial throne he fell increasingly under the influence of counsellors who practised such satanic arts. Four years later an edict appeared forbidding the Christians to meet together and threatening with death any of their leaders who encouraged them to do so. A number of Overseers were exiled at this time, including Cyprian in North Africa.

A year later, in AD 258, Valerian issued a second, much more rigorous decree which marked a significant new phase in the history of the early persecutions of the Church. The penalties for adhering to Christianity were now codified in an elaborate and invariable table. For the leaders the punishment was death, without appeal or recall. All Christians who had any social status – landowners, senators and other public figures – were to be stripped of their official rank and deprived of their property. If they persisted in their faith they were to die. Ladies who owned lands or property were to lose them and suffer banishment from the Empire. Officials and government employees, if they had at any time professed Christianity, were to be sent in chains to work on the government estates.

Dwelling in the shadow of the imperial throne, the church in Rome suffered much at this time, but the spirits of the Christians there were by no means dampened. After lying for a year in the Roman dungeons, some of them wrote with glowing faith to Cyprian in Carthage: "What more glorious and blessed lot can by God's grace fall to man than, amid tortures and the fear of death itself, to confess God the Lord with lacerated bodies and a spirit departing, yet free to confess Christ the Son of God – to become fellow-sufferers with Christ in the name of Christ?"[2]

[1] Foakes-Jackson p.48
[2] *Letter* 25 (*ANF* Vol.V p.303)

This expression of joy in affliction was buttressed by a determination to hold firm, come what may. "If we have not yet shed our blood we are ready to shed it. Pray then, beloved Cyprian, that the Lord would daily confirm and strengthen each one of us more and more with the power of his might and that he, as the best of commanders, may at length conduct us to the battle-field which lies before us, his soldiers, whom he has trained and tested in the hazardous encampment, armed with those divine weapons which can never be conquered." The church in Rome stood firm in these critical times, and its leaders set a valiant example. Five successive Overseers in Rome were apparently martyred in the six years between AD 250 and 256.[1] But the churches across the sea to the south were, for their part, no less resolute.

* * *

Large numbers of men and women in North Africa suffered the confiscation of their property, banishment from their homeland, imprisonment, torture and death rather than deny Christ by word or deed. Threats and harassment were powerless to deter the Christians from the path they had chosen and knew to be right. A minority might in the end submit in order to save their skins, but the number who refused to yield was so great that the objective of destroying the Church was doomed from the start. The Christians could be threatened and killed, but that did not stop them being Christians. Even if they renounced the faith, their judges found later that the denial had been meaningless – a momentary weakening rather than a change of heart. The consent, under torture, to offer sacrifice was no proof of conversion to paganism, and most of the Christians stalwartly refused to sacrifice in any case. On the contrary, they gloried in their public confession of faith in Christ. They sang hymns and preached the word of God to the crowds who watched as they stepped up to the place of execution. The Roman authorities might well wonder what purpose was to be served by hunting down a people who rejoiced when they were caught. What was to be gained by killing those who died gladly? What was achieved by destroying those who won more to their cause through their death than they had in their life?

In response to the new laws, Cyprian urged the Christians to exercise prudence and moderation. We should be wise, he said, when visiting believers in prison: it was important not to cause offence or provoke the authorities and other pagans unnecessarily. There were Christians, especially those influenced by the Montanists, whose thirst for glory led

[1] Foakes-Jackson p.261

them to court martyrdom by publicly ridiculing the heathen gods and insulting the officials who sustained their dwindling prestige. These zealots hoped to prove to their tormentors that the imperial policy was a hopeless one, but such a result, argued Cyprian, could only be attained when boldness was tempered and restrained by love and by common courtesy.

He offered advice to those who were undergoing interrogation. They should answer wisely and with dignity, and trust God to strengthen them in the hour of trial. As Christ had instructed them: "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."[1] Cyprian insisted that under no circumstances should the names of other Christians be revealed to the authorities. A believer could gladly and unashamedly confess his faith in Christ, but he should never betray his brother. This was a principle in the Christian community from the earliest times: Justin Martyr, summoned before the judge a century earlier, had confessed his belief in the one true God and in the Saviour Jesus Christ, but had politely informed his interrogator that he could say nothing about the beliefs of others, or the whereabouts of their meetings, despite the threats of scourging and death, which threats were shortly afterwards carried out.[2]

Like Justin, and before him the apostle Paul, Cyprian encouraged his brothers in affliction at this time with the thought that the pains of this world are transitory whilst the glories of the world to come will last for ever; there will be a heavenly reward for earthly trials steadfastly endured. "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."[3]

* * *

After Valerian's first decree, Cyprian was taken off to Curubis, and kept under guard. Distressing news reached him there of the terrible afflictions which had fallen upon the brethren in Numidia. He wrote to them offering encouragement and comfort. Their faith in Christ had earned them a sentence of forced labour in the Numidian gold and silver mines – a punishment which far exceeded the simple discomforts of prison. Cyprian knew many of them personally: nine of their number were Overseers who

[1] Mark 13:11
[2] *The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs* (*ANF* Vol.I pp.305-306)
[3] 2 Cor 4:17-18; Rom 8:18

had attended the conference in Carthage the previous year, AD 256. Along with them were other Christian leaders, and members of their churches, including women and children.

After a severe beating, they had been branded on the forehead with a red-hot iron like convicts or runaway slaves; their feet and ankles were locked in iron fetters and weighed down with heavy chains. With their heads half-shaved, their bodies all but naked, and with barely enough food for survival, they worked underground by day in the choking gloom of the smouldering torches which illuminated the filthy mines. At night they stretched on the cold ground, exhausted, to sleep. They responded with steady faith and irrepressible humour. "Here we are, beloved Cyprian," wrote one of their number, "and the condemned send you many thanks before God. By your letter, you have lifted our sick hearts; you have healed our battered limbs; you have released our feet from the fetters, and you have even made our hair re-grow on our half-shaved heads. You have lit up the darkness of our dungeon; you have made the steep, arduous gradients of the mines like wide open country; you have placed before us sweet-smelling flowers and dispersed the horrible stench of the smoke."[1] Perhaps the writer of this letter tried to lighten his sufferings by making fun of them, but his carefully composed phrases, and the clumsy contrasts which he fashions, testify none the less vividly to the horror of his circumstances.

Most of the Numidian confessors did not survive for long under this gruelling regime: such harsh conditions were more than the human body could endure. By the time Cyprian had addressed his reply to them, a large number had already succumbed to their privations; many others died during the following two years. Those of the leaders who survived until the publication of Valerian's unsparing second edict, in AD 258, were probably all taken from the mines at that time and beheaded, as was Cyprian himself. Two of these were Nemesianus and Jadus. Their names were added to the list of martyrs; released from bondage, they had entered into the joy of their Lord.[2]

* * *

Some weeks before the death of Cyprian there occurred an event surrounded by mystery which is nevertheless referred to frequently in the later writings associated with the churches in North Africa and which made a profound impression on them. At Utica, near Carthage, a terrible massacre of Christians evidently took place in which up to three hundred men,

[1] *Letter* 77, (*ANF* Vol.V p.404)
[2] *Letters* 76 & 77 (*ANF* Vol.V); Monceaux Vol.II pp.139-141; referring to Matt 25:21

women and children of all ages perished. The proconsul responsible was the same cold administrator who had sentenced Cyprian, but events at Utica took a somewhat more dramatic turn. It is said that, offered a choice between denying Christ and perishing in a ditch of caustic, alkaline quicklime, the martyrs with one accord leapt into the ditch and perished, thus acquiring in literal reality the white robes symbolically promised to the victorious saints in the book of Revelation.[1] For this reason they became known as the *Massa Candida*, or "white company".

The ditch of quicklime probably existed, but the likelihood is that it was not the living saints who plunged into it, but their bodies. Modern writers suggest that the three hundred dead were deposited there after decapitation in order to prevent their decomposition in the open air. A ditch of quicklime was often used in Roman times for the disposal of the slain after major battles. Valerian's edict had specified decapitation as the appropriate punishment, and we find in one of Augustine's sermons, preached in memory of the *Massa Candida*, a reference which seems to indicate that they were indeed beheaded. We know very little more about this host, except that a memorial was erected in their memory at Utica, at Calama (Guélma, Algeria) and probably at other places also, and that versions of their story, with certain elaborations, including at least one saga in poetic form, found their way to all parts of the Empire.[2]

* * *

Further to the west, in the spring of AD 259, some months after the death of Cyprian, three friends were travelling together through the mountains of Numidia. They were Marianus, who was a reader in one of the churches, the "helper" Jacobus who had already suffered for the faith during the time of Decius, and a third, unnamed companion who has left us with an account of what happened to them. Seated together in a ramshackle cart, they wound their way along a craggy mountain road hemmed in on either side by jagged rocks and narrow ravines. Towards midday Jacobus grew drowsy, and as he slept he saw a vision which he later recounted to his friends: a young man of exceptionally tall stature appeared to him and announced that he would soon die a martyr. Following the road, the three eventually arrived at a place called Mugas, near Cirta (not far from modern Constantine, Algeria).

They stopped there at a farm, where they found some Christian people and heard from them of terrible persecutions unleashed that very week in

[1] Rev 3:4,5; 7:9,13
[2] Monceaux Vol.II pp.141-147

the nearby town of Cirta. Troops had been called in to assist the local magistrates in hunting down Christian leaders who had been officially banished from the imperial cities. Two Overseers, Agapius and Secundinus, captured by the troops, had been brought through Mugas on their way to face the tribunal at Cirta. These two had received hospitality at the farm, where they had cheered everyone by their courage and their spirited exhortations. But the welcome which the people of that place had given to the two Overseers aroused the suspicions of the escort. Two days later a centurion and soldiers returned to Mugas. They surprised the Christians at the farm and took them all off to Cirta, the three travellers among them.

In the city, after a brief interrogation, some of them were released, but those who held positions of leadership in the church were confined to the city jail. They were brought out for further interrogation and torture, especially Marianus who was suspected of hiding the truth. The magistrate did not believe his claim to be a mere reader in the church rather than a "helper" like his companion. It was a ploy, said the official, to escape the penalty of the edict which applied only to the principal leaders among the Christians. Marianus was suspended by his thumbs and beaten, as were some of the others, for a considerable time, but without success. At length he was taken back to the cell where he found his friends. The hardships of the dungeon were relieved by dreams and visions which the Christians saw, and which brought immeasurable comfort and solace: they received many promises of salvation and tokens of God's blessing. On one occasion Marianus believed himself transported to Paradise. He saw himself before the heavenly tribunal, and to the right of the Judge he recognized Cyprian who called out a greeting to him.

Several days later, the magistrate decided to refer the case to the governor of the province and sent the prisoners inland to Lambaesis (Tazoult). As the convoy was about to start, one onlooker was so moved with joy at the thought of the martyrdom which awaited the travellers that his own faith could not be hidden: he joined the procession. On arrival in Lambaesis, they were conducted to the prison, and divided carefully into two groups: the leaders who were to be accused as such under the second decree of Valerian, and the others who were to be charged with attending meetings in contravention of the first. The governor left the leaders for several days while he dealt with the others. During that time, Jacobus had a vision: he found himself in Paradise where he saw a banquet of faithful confessors and he was told that the following day he himself would take part in that heavenly feast.

The next day he was presented before the governor along with Marianus and the other leaders. All were condemned to be beheaded. They were led

out of the town to a place beside a fast-flowing stream, and the attendants stood them in line to facilitate the task of the executioner. As they waited, blindfolded with scarves tied round their eyes, marvellous sights passed before them: brilliant cavalcades and processions of young people dressed in white, mounted on horses white as snow. Some heard the sound of the horses passing by. Marianus himself raised his voice and prophesied that soon the blood of the righteous would be avenged. He spoke with confidence and power: he foretold plagues, and captivities, and famines, and earthquakes, and other catastrophes which he saw hanging over the world and ready to fall upon it. Those who awaited the stroke of the sword were greatly heartened by these fearless affirmations of God's almighty power and sovereignty, and by the boldness of Marianus' faith and his defiance of the powers of darkness. Finally the executioner completed his gruesome task, and the heads and bodies of the martyrs were tumbled into the stream.

A simple journey which began in the mountains of Numidia took the travellers as far as the Celestial City. They were glad to arrive, welcomed by many friends, where there is "no more death or mourning or crying or pain... Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat... And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."[1] The writer of the account adds that among the onlookers, one of the Christians, heroic above the rest, gave thanks to God – she was the mother of Marianus. Augustine mentions her with respect and affection a century and a half later.[2]

* * *

Many Christians met one another for the first time in prison, and the friendship which sprang up between them in the hardships they shared was no less heartfelt for being brief. We read of Montanus, Flavianus, Renus and a number of others who were thrown into the dungeons of Carthage in AD 259. There they met a Christian lady called Quartillosa who had been arrested previously and who, on hearing of the martyrdom of her husband and son, had seen a vision in which she learnt that she would not survive them by many days. The hunger and thirst, and the other afflictions faced by these men and women in prison, were alleviated by visits from their Christian friends who sometimes persuaded the guards to allow them entry, and by the dreams and visions which came no less frequently to the condemned. One of these revelations was intensely practical in its effect for

[1] Rev 21:4; 7:16-17
[2] Monceaux Vol.II pp.153-157; Musurillo pp.194ff.

it resolved a dispute between two of the young men. In his dream, Montanus saw the guards entering the cell and taking the prisoners to a wide plain where they were met by Cyprian and Lucius, his successor as Overseer in Carthage. The Christians were all dressed in white, but when Montanus looked down he found that his own robe was deeply stained. He knew what the stains signified, and on awaking went over to a brother with whom he had quarrelled, asking his forgiveness. There and then their friendship was restored and they continued day by day to pray together and encourage one another in their common hope.[1]

Long months passed; the governor had died and the appointment of his successor was delayed. Eventually some members of this little "church in chains" were interrogated afresh and taken out to die. Some days later, the guards returned a second time. In ones and twos they were removed and not seen again. The group diminished in numbers, but not in faith. As they were led to the place of execution, some preached fervently to the crowds; others maintained a dignified silence, simply quoting verses of Scripture to fortify themselves for the conflict. Montanus, however, seized the opportunity to address the throng. He preached against idolatry, against those who divided the churches with their own proud and bigoted notions, and against those who denied the faith through their shameful irresolution. He exhorted the faithful to obedience, and he urged the leaders of the churches to unity. He was standing before the executioner, about to die, when he thought of Flavianus, one of their number who had been brought out with them for trial and then inexplicably taken back to the cells. He prayed fervently that Flavianus might join them in three days time. Sure that his prayer was answered he tore the scarf from his eyes, ripped it in two, and left half with his watching friends for Flavianus, telling them to prepare a grave for Flavianus along with the rest.

The following day a strange incident took place. Flavianus was brought before the tribunal. But unknown to him, the judge, in collusion with some influential citizens, had determined to release him. Flavianus himself had for many years been a professional public speaker, only recently converted to Christianity; he was a "helper" in the church at Carthage. His former pupils and his admirers had already come to the authorities several times and begged for his release, maintaining that he was not really a "helper" as he claimed and therefore did not fall under the ruling of the imperial decree. They pleaded with the magistrates, and with Flavianus himself. "Have done with this obstinacy of yours!" they begged him. "Just sacrifice for now, and afterwards you can do what you wish. It is mere folly to court death, and

[1] This Montanus is not, of course, the Phrygian of the same name whose followers were known as Montanists.

shun life." These well-meaning words from his old pagan friends and students must have awakened conflicting emotions in the heart of Flavianus. He thanked them for their kind sympathy, but was moved there and then to try to win them to his new-found faith, teaching them things in prison, we are told, that they had never heard from him in the classroom. "It is better," he said, "to die with a clear conscience than to worship stones. There is only one God, and he has made all things: it is he alone whom we must worship." Flavianus was convinced that he had found the way of truth, the way to everlasting life. "So even if we are killed, we live," he said. "It is not death which defeats us; it is we who defeat death. And you too," he added, "if you would know the truth, you must become Christians."

On the day when he had seen Montanus and the others going out to die whilst he himself was ordered back to his cell, he had felt a great disappointment that the judge had changed his mind about his sentence. However, at that moment a verse from the book of Proverbs had come to his mind. "The king's heart," he reminded himself, "is in the hand of the Lord.[1] So why should I be upset? And why should I feel bitter towards a man whose decisions are determined from on high?" Arriving back at his familiar cell, the guards found the door stuck fast; they only succeeded in opening it after considerable effort. Flavianus took this for a sign that he would not be there for long.

When next he was summoned, Flavianus found himself confronted with a new stratagem. A soldier, with the connivance of the judge, produced a certificate testifying that Flavianus was not a "helper" in the church and that in consequence he should be set free. Events took an odd turn. The proconsul asked Flavianus why he had falsely claimed to be a "helper". "Because that's what I am!" he replied. When he was shown the certificate, he said indignantly, "Can you really believe that I have deceived you, and that the author of this false certificate has told the truth?" "You're lying!" cried the crowd. "What purpose would I have in lying?" asked Flavianus. Finally, baffled by his refusal to take advantage of his reprieve, the proconsul resigned himself to pronouncing the obligatory sentence. Radiant, Flavianus turned towards the place of execution.

The crowd pressed round him, and he exchanged words of encouragement with the Christians there; he began to tell them of the visions he had seen in prison. The martyred Cyprian had appeared to him, he said, and Flavianus had asked him if the headsman's blow was painful. "Our flesh does not suffer," Cyprian replied, "when our soul is in heaven." Other visions followed until finally a man had appeared to Flavianus saying, "Why are

[1] referring to Prov 21:1

you troubled? Twice already you have confessed God. Tomorrow you will be a martyr by the sword." The throng of curious people pressed round him to hear more clearly what he was saying. At that moment, it started to rain heavily. Those who were not Christians hastened to find shelter. Flavianus saw around him only the faithful, and seized his opportunity to bid them farewell. He gave them a kiss of peace, and then climbing up to a place where he could be heard by everyone, he exhorted them all to unity, obedience and love. "My very dear brothers," he said, "you will have peace in yourselves if you respect the peace of the Church, if you remain united in love. Do not think that my words are empty, for our Lord Jesus Christ himself said, a little before his suffering: 'My will is that you love one another.'" Then Flavianus descended and made his way to the place of execution. He tied round his eyes the scarf left by Montanus, knelt down, and prayed, awaiting the sword. At last he was reunited with his friends. They had prayed for him to join them soon, and now their prayer was answered: the whole group had achieved the apostle's ambition to be "absent from the body, and... present with the Lord."[1]

* * *

Some years passed; emperor succeeded emperor, and little attention was paid to the Christian community. The only reports we have of troubles at this time seem to be isolated instances arising in the Roman army. In AD 295, in the town of Theveste (Tébessa, Algeria) a young man named Maximilian was brought by his father for enrolment in the imperial service. Maximilian, however, as he stood before the proconsul in order to complete the enrolment formalities, announced that he was a Christian and therefore could not bear arms. The official waved aside the objection. His height was measured, and they were about to pass round his neck the ball of lead comprising the sacred seal of the military oath, when Maximilian again stopped them. "I cannot accept the seal," he said. "I already have the seal of Christ my God!"

All manner of arguments were used in the attempt to persuade him, but he was obstinate. Thinking that the young man was suffering from a passing fancy, the proconsul urged his father to remonstrate with him, and he himself told him to consider the consequences of such a strange whim. But Maximilian replied in uncompromising terms: "I am in the service of my God. I cannot serve the world. As I have already told you, I am a Christian." To which the proconsul replied, very much to the point, that

[1] Monceaux Vol.II pp.166-178; Musurillo pp.214ff.; 2 Cor 5:8 AV

there were Christian soldiers among the bodyguard of the emperor, and they did not hesitate to bear arms. Maximilian could not deny this. "They know what they must do," he said. "As for me, I am a Christian, and I cannot do wrong." The proconsul pressed him further: "Those who serve in the forces, what wrong do they do?" "You know what they do!" replied Maximilian. Finally the bewildered proconsul was compelled to implement the statutory penalty for rebellious insubordination.

Maximilian accepted his decision cheerfully, with the words which had become customary: "Thanks be to God!". At the place of execution, he encouraged the faithful to do as he had done. Then he turned calmly to his father, asking him to give the executioner the new clothes that had been bought for entering the army. He said he hoped that his father would join him soon, then bade him farewell. He was just twenty-one years old. The youthful conscript regretted that he must disobey, just as the proconsul regretted the good soldier he had lost. A tragic waste of a young life, one might think, yet Maximilian made his choice knowing exactly what it would entail. Death held no fears for him; he was sure that something far better awaited him beyond that shining threshold. After all, a faith which extends to this life only is hardly worth having. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied."[1]

The figure of the father is, all along, a touching one. He had fulfilled the legal requirement by presenting his son at the recruitment office; he had even provided the young man with a new outfit. But he went no further. Asked by the proconsul to intervene, he replied simply: "He knows well himself what he must do." The old man listened attentively throughout the court proceedings, but said not a word; he stood by his son to the very end. Then, the account tells us, "he returned to his house with great joy, giving thanks to God that he had been able to send ahead such a gift to the Lord, since he himself was soon to follow his son." Whether or not he too was martyred, the father is also, in his way, a hero.[2]

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At this time we have the first recorded martyrdoms in the far western province of Mauritania Tingitana (Northern Morocco). In the year 298, in the capital city of Tingis (Tangier), celebrations were under way for the anniversary of Maximian, commander of the western half of Diocletian's Empire. Abruptly, in the midst of the banquets and sacrifices, one of the centurions, named Marcellus, took the great belt of his Roman uniform and

[1] 1 Cor 15:19 RSV
[2] Monceaux Vol.III pp.114-117; Musurillo pp.244ff.

threw it down before the colours, the banners of the legion, declaring: "I serve Jesus Christ, the King Eternal!" Then he threw down his weapons, and his sceptre of command: "From now on I will no longer serve your emperors! I disdain to worship your gods of stone and wood which are idols both deaf and dumb. If such is the condition of soldiers that they are compelled to sacrifice to the gods and to the emperors, then I will throw in my sceptre and my belt and renounce the colours. I refuse to serve any longer!" As soon as the other soldiers had recovered from their surprise, Marcellus was placed under arrest and led to the commandant, who clapped him in jail. "It is not right for a Christian who honours Christ the Lord to fight for the concerns of this world," he declared. Three months later, he was brought out, questioned as to the exactitude of the details, and executed.

But the story has an additional twist. The military clerk, Cassianus, who was charged with compiling the record of Marcellus' interrogation, followed the proceedings with interest. He was profoundly impressed by the young man's point of view and the reasons he had given for it. As the judge pronounced the sentence of death on Marcellus, the clerk suddenly threw his tablets and stylus to the floor. The military staff were struck dumb. Marcellus, in chains, smiled, and the judge rose furious, demanding an explanation. "Well, you've imposed an unjust sentence!" said Cassianus. The clerk was not permitted to say more, but hustled off to the cells.

A month later he, in turn, was brought for trial and, echoing the sentiments expressed earlier by Marcellus, was condemned and executed. Such was the power of Christian conviction, and such was the effectiveness of bold testimony in the hour of trial. Cassianus became something of a local folk hero; a hymn was written extolling his faith as the fearless martyr of Tangier.[1]

[1] Monceaux Vol.III pp.118-121; Musurillo pp.250ff. The hymn was written in Latin by one Prudentius (Prudentius, *Peristephan* IV, 45).

15. Conferences and Congregations

In the days of the apostles, the Christian community in each place had looked for guidance to its own leaders, and they in turn had looked to the Lord. The local church might seek advice and counsel from elsewhere, and from experienced visitors such as Paul or Timothy, but it was not ruled from Antioch or Jerusalem or any other distant city. No church anywhere else had the right to direct, or to discipline it.

The links between the churches were loose, informal, and limited to occasional visits and periodic letters carried by courier from one town to another. Little thought was given to the systematic organization of the churches or to establishing formal administrative links between them. The New Testament writers know of no international body co-ordinating the Christians of Asia, Europe or Africa. They refer only to the individual local churches – "all the churches of Christ",[1] the churches in Syria and Cilicia,[2] "the Galatian churches",[3] "the churches in the province of Asia",[4] "the churches of Judea".[5] Rarely do they refer to "the Church" as a wider entity, and then only in the most abstract of terms – there was as yet no organization which went by that name. The "body of Christ" was a mystical entity, not a functional or administrative one.

By the end of the second century, however, we find signs that the Christians of North Africa were beginning to discuss the organization of their churches in more detail. They gave much thought to the nature of Christian unity. In what way did the local churches constitute "the Church"? What were the implications of their membership in the worldwide body of Christ? Should they all take the same view of controversial issues, or was there room for differences of opinion? Should a decision taken by one church always be upheld and implemented by other churches? If so, which churches had the right to make such decisions? Should conferences be held to reach agreement on matters of common concern? If so, what authority had such conferences to enforce the conclusions they came to? Or should each group of Christians make up its own mind about matters of doctrine and practice, seeking the guidance of God himself through prayer and diligent study of the Scriptures?

[1] Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 2 Cor 8:23; 11:28; 2 Thess 1:4; Rev 2:7; 22:16
[2] Acts 15:41
[3] 1 Cor 16:1
[4] 1 Cor 16:19
[5] Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 2:14

There were, among them, two basically incompatible points of view, and these stemmed from radically different responses to the fundamental question: What is the Church? Cyprian, for one, had a very precise answer to this question. The Church, he said, is an institution established by Christ, and governed by his apostles and their successors. It embraces all the local churches founded by the apostles themselves and by those whom they had appointed. Cyprian liked to look back to the origin and pedigree of the worldwide Church, regarding the local churches established by its representatives as offshoots of that ancient body. Others, such as the Montanists, saw things in a different light. The Church, for them, was not an institution but a brotherhood to which all who loved Christ automatically belonged. The authentic mark of any local group of Christians lay not in the time or manner of its original creation but in the soundness of its present teachings and beliefs.[1]

For Cyprian, the Church comprised all who were loyal to the approved Overseers, that is, Overseers who could trace their appointment back to an apostle or to someone appointed by an apostle or one of his successors, and who were themselves loyal to the leaders of the oldest churches in the major cities such as Rome and Carthage. This association of Christians he called the Catholic Church. His opponents argued that it was impossible to trace back every group of believers, name by name, to an apostle. It was more important to ascertain whether their teaching and practice matched that of the apostles. In any case, they said, the Church is not an organization owing obedience to men in any particular city or cities, but to God alone. For them, the Church comprised all who belonged to Christ, whether or not they adhered to one particular association of believers or another. Their emphasis was on the spiritual life of the local church – its present, living relationship with God – not on the identification and maintenance of official links with older churches in other places.[2]

[1] The only explicit Montanist texts to have survived in North Africa are those of Tertullian. Consequently, it is difficult to determine the number and distribution of Christians who were later associated with this movement. Many of the documents relating to the North African martyrs, however, manifest the same vigorous faith and the same doctrinal emphases which typify both Tertullian and the Montanists of Asia. Tertullian himself, of course, was highly respected in his own lifetime, and after it: his works were widely circulated, both inside and outside the Catholic Church. These facts might imply that the influence of Montanism actually spread somewhat further than its name, and that, in addition to separate Montanist groups, there were probably many within the North African Catholic churches (and also among the Novatianists) who had strong Montanist leanings.

As for the beliefs of the Montanists, Tertullian's teachings are clear and distinctive, and it is from his writings (and from the sayings attributed to Montanus himself) that we infer the views held by the third century Montanists of North Africa.

[2] See the latter part of Chapter 8 for Tertullian's view of the newer churches: "If they unite

These two contrasting views concerning the nature of the Church had serious implications. If loyalty to recognized Christian leaders is seen to be the keynote, then there can be loving acceptance of all who will follow such leaders and participate in the churches they have established, whatever their weaknesses and sins might be. But if holiness of character and personal faith are all-important, then the local churches must accept in their number only those who show themselves true followers of Christ. Much discussion centred on such questions. Should all and sundry be invited to attend the worship of the Christian community, for example, or only sincere believers? Which of those associated with the Church should be considered its members with a right to participate in its decisions and to benefit from its financial and material assistance? Did the Church in fact comprise all who claimed to be Christians, or only those who obeyed the commands of Christ? Did it comprise believers only, or also those who did not yet believe but might eventually do so? Did it include all who attended its meetings, or just those who had been baptized? And what about those who had been baptized but did not attend?

The Catholic body, to which Cyprian belonged, regarded the Church as a field in which wheat and weeds both grow. The field must be tended so that the wheat will flourish, but the bad weeds should not be rooted up for fear of harming the good wheat – and perhaps, they hoped, some of the weeds might in the end turn out to be wheat. Others such as the Montanists and Novatianists, on the contrary, saw the Church as the bride of Christ, called to be holy, faithful, and altogether worthy of her divine Bridegroom. The implications were far-reaching. The Catholic party desired as many as possible – both good and bad – to enter its gates, hear its teachings and benefit from its sacraments. It deterred nobody from membership who would acknowledge the official authority of its leaders. Their opponents, on the other hand, were content with a smaller Church, but one which would shine as a pure light in a dark world – a fellowship of sincere disciples free from the slightest suspicion of immorality, or dishonesty, or idolatry. The Catholics were inclined towards toleration in matters of doctrine, and leniency with regard to discipline. The Montanists and Novatianists, on the contrary, aspired to uphold the truth and live in strict obedience to it: they dealt severely with any who compromised its highest standards. Some local churches leaned one way, some leaned the other; some had within their ranks advocates of each viewpoint.

* * *

in holding the same truth they equally are reckoned apostolic *because of the kinship of their teaching*."

Unity was the great watchword of the Catholic party, to be maintained by love, and by tolerance of the weak and the failing. They dwelt on such passages as the prayer of Jesus for his disciples: "that they may be one as we are one... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."[1] This unity can only be maintained by absolute loyalty to the officially constituted Church of Christ, in submission to the Overseers who bear his authority. Leaving the Catholic Church, said Cyprian, to join another group of Christians would be like a man forsaking his wife for the favours of a paramour. "Whoever separates from the Church in joining an adulteress is beyond the scope of promises granted to the Church, and if he leaves the Church of Christ he will not attain to Christ's rewards. He is a foreigner, an outsider, and a foe." And then Cyprian makes that statement which has so often been quoted by his supporters and by his detractors: "He who does not have the Church as his mother cannot have God as his Father."[2] A person who left the Catholic Church, then, had cut himself off from Christ.

The Montanists and Novatianists were no less attached to the value of unity, but it was to be a somewhat more discerning unity – a unity in the Spirit, a unity of all who held the truth, a unity of belief, not of organization. It was a oneness which stemmed from loyalty to Christ himself, in submission to the Holy Spirit and the divinely inspired word of God. "The totality of those who have joined together in this faith is designated the Church by the Church's Author and Consecrator," said Tertullian. "It will be the Church of the Spirit... not the Church as a number of Overseers."[3] As the apostle Paul had taught, "There is one body, and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all."[4] And all who held this one faith, and served this one Lord were, in the very nature of things, part of this one body: it extended beyond the range of geographical or administrative or ecclesiastical boundaries.

Whilst the Catholics spoke much of the "love" which drew saint and sinner together, the Montanist emphasis on "truth" tended to separate the sinner from the saint. Love, for the Catholic, meant tolerance of sin and error. Truth, for a Montanist such as Tertullian, meant the exposure and

[1] John 17:11,20-21,23
[2] *On the Unity of the Church* 6
[3] *On Modesty* 21
[4] Eph 4:4-6

renunciation of all such things. Yet, with their stern concern for purity, the Montanists were not unloving. They believed that the love of a Christian for his brother was to be his testimony to the world: kindness and compassion seen within the Christian community would reflect the love of the Father himself. And as God had loved the world and sent his only Son to die for it, so the Christian would love his heathen neighbour and do his utmost to win him to the way of salvation. But love which is not based on truth, said Tertullian, does not deserve to bear that name. Christian unity can only be built on the foundation of Christian truth.

Cyprian saw things differently. In his spiritual scales unity will always outweigh truth. A person who destroys the unity of the Church gains nothing by believing and teaching orthodox doctrine: "He who does not preserve this unity preserves neither God's law, nor faith in the Father and the Son, nor life itself and salvation."[1] However sound his beliefs might be, in short, he is not a Christian at all. Cyprian's doctrine inevitably leads him towards the conclusion that a man is saved, not by personal faith in Christ, but by membership of the Catholic Church. One such as Novatian who has left the Catholic Church is no longer to be considered a Christian. "You must know in the first place that we should not be curious about what Novatian teaches, since he teaches outside. Whoever he is and whatever his character may be, he is not a Christian if he is not in Christ's Church."[2] Establishing a separate church was indeed the worst transgression a man could possibly commit – a far greater sin than that of the lapsed Christians who had denied Christ and then returned to the Catholic fold. "The apostate sinned once," said Cyprian, "but [the separatist] sins daily. And if an apostate becomes a martyr he can obtain the promise of the kingdom, but a separatist, if he is executed outside the Church, cannot attain to the Church's rewards."[3]

For scriptural proof of all this, Cyprian is forced once more to rely on some questionable analogies, taking passages of Scripture out of their context and forcing meanings from them which were never intended by their writers.[4] Thoroughly convinced of his position, he grabs hopefully at any verses which might offer to support it – a baneful practice sadly not unknown today. He argues, for example, that salvation is found only within the safety of the Catholic Church because only those who took refuge inside Noah's ark had been able to escape the deluge. He asserts that the Church must be a single organization because Christ's robe was seamless and could

[1] Walker *TCOSC* p.53
[2] *Letter* 51:24
[3] quoted in Walker *TCOSC* p.52
[4] For example, see *On the Unity of the Church* 7; *Letter* 73:11; 74:15 (*ANF* Vol.V).

not be torn in pieces. He quotes the saying of Jesus, "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one"[1] in support of his contention that those who belong to the Catholic Church are guaranteed salvation. He quotes the words of Jesus: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters,"[2] asserting that all who are not "with" the Catholic Church are "against" Christ.

The application of these particular verses to the institutional basis of the Church lacks somewhat in conviction. The salvation of God was not the unique possession of the Catholic Church, or any other Church. The apostle Paul in prison rejoiced that the Gospel was being proclaimed, whether by friends or by foes.[3] A man once cast out demons in the name of Jesus although he did not belong to the recognized group of disciples. Should he be rebuked because he was seeking to serve Christ without official authorization? Not at all, said Jesus. "Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."[4] Jesus, it would seem, was somewhat less exclusive than Cyprian in determining who could serve him. The Church of Christ would seem rather less narrow than the Church of Cyprian.

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Cyprian admitted that much of the Novatianist teaching was perfectly sound. And this raised the disturbing question: If truth could be found outside the Catholic Church, might not error be found within it? For Cyprian, the guarantee of the Church's continuing orthodoxy lay in the security of the rigid administrative structure which he advocated. Leaders were appointed by existing leaders, and the task of teaching was thereby concentrated in the hands of authorized Overseers whose correctness and conformity were officially endorsed. He believed that if each Overseer was appointed by other Overseers and if each congregation did what its Overseer said, all would be well.[5] Was this, we might wonder, a little naïve? His confidence in the ability of men to pass on exactly what they have learned, without adding to it or subtracting from it (and their disposition to practise what they preach) reflects the high standards he set himself rather than the realities of human nature.

[1] John 10:29,30
[2] Matt 12:30
[3] Phil 1:15-18
[4] Mark 9:39-40
[5] *Letter* 26:1; 67:5; 68:8

He would have been on firmer ground had he made the word of God his authority rather than the hierarchy of men. Placing such emphasis on adherence to the decisions of Overseers and conferences, it was inevitable that obedience to men would supersede compliance with God's word as the criterion of orthodoxy. The former is the easier course, for it panders to a universal human desire for the esteem of peers and superiors. There are Pharisees in every generation who love the praise of men rather than the praise of God.[1] Cyprian's system was guaranteed to fan that subtle flame.

We can perhaps excuse Cyprian by the fact that he wrote as a child of his time. He had not the benefit of our seventeen centuries' experience of error and corruption within the official Catholic Church, and truth and holiness outside it. He had perhaps never known balanced, loving fellowships of godly Christian people beyond the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical system of which he was a part. In his day, many of those who had separated themselves had tended towards novel teachings or disorderly practices which inevitably discredited them in the eyes of those whose sympathies already lay elsewhere. Cyprian's experience of some who had gone out to form their own Christian groups had been tainted by the bitter fruits of controversy and ill-feeling, and we can perhaps sympathize with him. It was hard for one who was so committed to loving tolerance and unity to see the Christian community broken up in such a way.

For Cyprian, love and tolerance were two sides of the same coin, but only when practised within the confines of the Catholic Church. It is unfortunate that he did not extend his generosity beyond those limits. We find it difficult to have any sympathy with his constantly reiterated view that those who separated themselves from the Catholic Church were condemning themselves to eternal damnation. On one occasion, Cyprian picked up on a verse beloved by those who were establishing their own small Christian groups, and asked the rhetorical question: "How can two or three gather in the name of Christ when it is obvious that they have separated from Christ and from his Gospel?"[2] It may have been obvious to Cyprian, but it was not to them, and it is not, perhaps, to us. They believed in Christ as firmly as he did; their separation was not from their Saviour, but from the organization which they felt had failed him. Cyprian, of course, was unable to foresee the future with its sad downward spiral, and perhaps could not be expected to understand that in separating from a corrupt and degenerate church those two or three might prove to be more faithful followers of Christ, and more pleasing to him, than the remaining rabble who feared not to bring shame on his name by their gross worldliness and sin.

[1] John 12:43
[2] Walker *TCOSC* p.53

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Cyprian's theory of baptism followed from his view of the Church. It represented another very considerable departure from the practice in New Testament times. The apostles had baptized all who professed faith in Christ, wherever they might be. The Ethiopian was baptized by Philip in a pool in the open country; the Philippian jailer apparently in his home; Lydia in the river. None of these had any knowledge of an organized Church. Immersion in water was simply a symbolic re-enactment of the washing from sin which the believer had already received through faith in Christ; the ceremony itself did not save or change him in any way. Sinking beneath the water and rising again, he was given a visual reminder that his old sinful life had ended, and his new Christian life begun. He was baptized not into the Church but into Christ, accepted not by any group of men but by God.[1] The Church is not mentioned in any of the baptisms recorded in the New Testament.

For Cyprian however, membership of the official Church being all important, baptism administered by the priestly Overseer became the means of acceptance into the company of God's people, and thus into eternal salvation. He spoke not of "baptism into Christ" but of "baptism into the Church",[2] and maintained that the ceremony was invalid if administered by anyone outside of the Catholic Church. "We cannot be saved except by the unique baptism of the only Church."[3] Baptism by Montanists or Novatianists was ineffectual, he said, and devoid of divine blessing. In consequence, anyone baptized outside of the Catholic Church would have to be re-baptized on his admission into it.

Baptism, like the Lord's Supper, was seen as a "sacrament" – an outward ceremonial act which effected a miraculous inward change. The waters of baptism washed his sin away and sealed his acceptance into the Church. Cyprian actually called the ceremony "saving baptism" and referred to it as

[1] Rom 6:3-5; Gal 3:27. It is sometimes said that 1 Cor 12:13 speaks of baptism into the Church *with water*. But the context might suggest that the subject of 1 Cor 12 is the work of the Holy Spirit drawing diverse people into one Body and imparting diverse gifts to them (see also Mark 1:8). If so, this passage refers not to church leaders baptizing with water, but to God baptizing with his Spirit – not a public ceremony, but a divine empowering. Even if we prefer to see here a reference to water baptism, the Body into which the Corinthians were baptized was a spiritual one, not an institutional one: it was the mystical Body of Christ transcending all ecclesiastical factions.

[2] *Letter* 72:9,22 etc.

[3] *Letter* 73:11

"the life-giving bath".[1] A miracle took place, he believed, when the Overseer dipped a person in the water: at that moment he was born again. A second miracle occurred as, emerging from the water, the Overseer laid his hands upon him – he received the Holy Spirit. "Those who are baptized in the Church are brought to the priests of the Church, and by our prayers and the imposition of hands obtain the Holy Spirit and are perfected with the Lord's seal."[2] No longer is the gift of the Spirit the prerogative of Christ, freely imparted to all who are his.[3] The Holy Spirit, like salvation itself, has become the perquisite of the Catholic Church bestowed by the priestly ministrations of its approved Overseers. Again Cyprian ascribes to the Church powers which Scripture gives to Christ alone.[4]

By this time even infants were not infrequently baptized, before they could have any understanding of the faith, and then assured that they belonged to Christ because they had been baptized into his Church. The subsequent career of many such infants demonstrated that their baptism had worked no miracle and effected no very evident salvation.

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Cyprian's ideas were not developed gradually: they are propounded in his earliest letters written as Overseer in Carthage. At that time he had himself been a Christian for barely three years. His view of the Church, nonetheless, was widely accepted in North Africa. In fact, by the late third century, every town, almost every village, had its Overseer, and by the fourth century often two Overseers with two churches, representing different points of view.

Cyprian's understanding of the Church found its administrative outlet in his unflagging efforts to establish the authority of the single Overseer in each church. In Cyprian's system, the Overseer of a church could only be appointed or "ordained" by the Overseers of other churches. They had the

[1] *Letter* 72:3; 73:5; 75:11. The Catholic view of "sacraments" shows a surprising resemblance to the traditional animistic principles of "sympathetic magic" (see Chapter 3).

[2] *Letter* 62:8; 72:9

[3] Rom 8:9

[4] The idea that the Holy Spirit should be received by the imposition of the Overseer's hands, was a newly developing tradition of the Church rather than a Biblical doctrine. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit was God's gift to all who believed in Christ (Rom 8:9; Gal 3:2). In Scripture it appears that the Holy Spirit was only imparted through the laying-on of hands in the case of the Samaritans, Saul of Tarsus, and the disciples of John the Baptist, whose acceptance as true Christians might otherwise have been questioned (Acts 8:17,18; 9:17; 19:6). But others, including proselytes and Gentiles, received the Holy Spirit without any such ceremony, although other signs testified to their acceptance (Acts 10:44).

responsibility to ascertain that his teaching and character were in accordance with the scriptural and apostolic traditions. Cyprian allowed the members of the church and its elders to express a desire or preference, as they had done in his own appointment, but they did not have the right to legitimize the nomination. An Overseer who displeased the Overseers of other churches could simply be excommunicated by them, and his church along with him if it supported him. Both he and they would thus be excluded at a stroke from the Catholic Church and from the salvation found uniquely in it. The churches, then, were to be firmly under the control of "the Church", and the people under the control of the Overseer.

The Overseers of the various churches were all equal, said Cyprian. None of them was to be exalted above another, for they were priests whilst Christ himself was the High Priest. Thus neither the Overseer in Rome, acting alone, nor the Overseer in Carthage or anywhere else, had any right of jurisdiction over other churches. Authority, on the contrary, was vested in conferences of Overseers. And just as Cyprian pressed incessantly for the recognition of the authority of the one Overseer in each church, he constantly emphasized the authority of the conferences which met to decide on matters of common concern. Cyprian was not the first to convene conferences of Overseers – two had been held in North Africa before his appointment – but during his time they grew ever more frequent and increasingly well attended. He tells us that in AD 220 a total of 70 Overseers were present in Carthage, representing 70 churches from the provinces of Africa and Numidia. Twenty years later, the number had risen to 89. From then on, conferences were organized more and more frequently – in 252, 253 and 254, twice in 256 – and the numbers attending grew steadily throughout that time. The traditions of the Church were debated and codified in these conferences. Pronouncements were made concerning particular doctrines and practices, and a common position was established to which the local churches were expected to subscribe.

From that time onwards, Christians of a Catholic persuasion have looked back for guidance to the decisions of such conferences (expressing the authorized traditions of the past) when they are not looking for a pronouncement from the Overseer in Rome or some other city (as representing the authoritative stance of the leading church of the present). Some of these traditions and pronouncements stood from the first on rather shaky ground, some way removed from the teachings of Christ and the apostles; yet to question them was to court trouble. A complex organization cannot easily find room for men and women who will think for themselves and search the Scriptures with an open mind. Such a system fears disorder more than anything, and for this reason the Catholic Church, from

Cyprian's time onwards, has almost invariably preferred conciliation and compromise to any precise definition of doctrine.[1] Preserving the Church has always been more important than proclaiming the truth. Indeed, such is human nature: tradition almost always weighs more heavily in the minds of men than truth.

Tertullian was not one to conform to this or any other pattern. "Our Lord Christ," he said, "has called himself Truth, not tradition."[2] He recognized that traditions can arise from error, or from human weakness, or from sin. Even Cyprian had said that a tradition without truth is simply an old error.[3] Had not the Pharisees in the days of Jesus shown this same tendency to exalt tradition above God's word? "These people," says God, "honour me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me. It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach man-made rules as though they were God's laws! You put aside God's command and obey the teachings of men!" And Jesus declared: "You have a clever way of rejecting God's law in order to uphold your own teaching."[4] The Catholic Church in third century North Africa was sailing perilously close to the wind.

Fifty years previously, the Montanists had said as much. They longed for direct contact with God himself – to know him, not merely to know about him. They had tried to restore to the churches the spontaneity and freedom which had steadily faded since the apostolic age. For them, human authority must yield to the Spirit of God. They refused to accept that spiritual gifts could be conferred by the official appointment of one man by other men. Spiritual gifts and spiritual leadership could come from God alone, granted to whomever he pleased, inside or outside the organizations devised by men. Cyprian's ecclesiatical system would not appeal to such as these; they had no wish to be part of any such scheme.

For an English translation of Cyprian's ecclesiological writings see *ANF* Vol.V. Bettenson *ECF* also provides a useful selection of introductory texts. Cyprian's ecclesiology is discussed by Walker *TCOSC* (esp.pp.49-60); Foakes-Jackson pp.222-224, 265-269; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.150-151.

[1] Foakes-Jackson p.254
[2] quoted by Plummer p.113; referring to John 14:6
[3] *Letter* 73:9; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.527
[4] Mark 7:6-9 GNB

16. Distance and Diversity

Contacts between East and West are often productive, and always challenging. Indeed, the first vigorous spread of the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean world followed the reclothing of an eastern, semitic faith in the pragmatic garb of western logic. Its greatest exponent and advocate, Saul of Tarsus, was an eastern man with a western turn of thought – a mystic, but a singularly practical and methodical one. Herein lies the secret of his effectiveness, and this has often proved to be the way of progress. The mystical East and the pragmatic West: the two together are more than the sum of their parts – if only they can succeed in understanding one another and co-operating, pulling together and not apart. With Rome, the capital of the west, only six hundred kilometres across the sea, and the eastern city of Alexandria just ten days sail along the Egyptian coast, the church in Carthage found herself heir to both traditions and able to extract the honey from both honeycombs – if she could only hold them together in loving harmony.[1]

Carthage, Alexandria and Rome: these were the three great centres of early Christianity in the age following that of the apostles. The triangular relationship between the churches in these famous cities provides a fascinating study, and one of profound significance. Indeed, the interplay of their contrasting characters, and the ebb and flow of their diverse emphases, continue to find expression in the churches of the modern world. Their relations were at times warm, occasionally heated, but always respectful.

If their ancestry was similar and their status in Roman times fairly comparable, their subsequent fortunes have proved to be widely divergent. The church of Rome, with all its excesses and aberrations, has continued through fifteen centuries to flourish and to dominate as the focus of a major international organization. Of the church in Carthage, on the other hand, nothing now remains apart from the accounts of its martyrs and the writings of its great theologians. Yet those documents have been translated into countless languages and continue to fascinate and inspire Christian people in every generation and every land. The church of Alexandria has likewise

[1] "The brightest sparks of invention have resulted from the impact of civilisations and the clash of contrasting ideas. Where such friction has been long avoided, mental stagnation has been the result; such a stagnation as must always characterise a society which exists in isolation." "It is a commonplace among students of history that the brightest inventions (like the alphabet) can be traced very often to the borderlands between one culture and another; to the borderlands, more especially, between East and West" (Parkinson pp.7-8, 94).

ceased to be a force in the Christian world, although to the theologians of Alexandria we largely owe the Nicene creed, which has shaped and confirmed the faith of countless millions, along with methods of Biblical interpretation that have profoundly influenced all subsequent Christian scholarship.

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The origins of the church in Alexandria are obscure. It is said to have been founded by Mark, the nephew of Barnabas. There is a tradition that, having completed his account of the life of Christ, Mark left the manuscript with the young church in Rome and then travelled on to Egypt where he succeeded in establishing a number of Christian groups.[1] We know that the eloquent Apollos, who profited from the gentle correction of Priscilla and Aquila, was a native of Alexandria,[2] but there is no evidence that he ever returned there to help in the work of the Gospel. Alexandria was a centre of Greek culture, and the church there shows its profound debt to both Semitic and Greek ways of thought. Its theologians, including Clement and Origen, pored over the Old Testament, and yet prided themselves on preserving and applying the methods of Greek philosophy in their interpretation of it.

The theologians of Alexandria contrast strongly with their neighbours along the Mediterranean coast: they revelled in all the subtleties of abstruse intellectual conjecture. Where the North Africans concentrated on the practical realities of the Christian life, the Alexandrians roamed restlessly along the corridors of philosophical thought. The North Africans took the Scriptures at face value; the Alexandrians wove them into complex allegories. Whereas the early North African writers looked into the word of God for help with the problems and challenges of everyday life, their peers in Alexandria attempted to plumb its depths, speculating on the profoundest of theological mysteries. The issues and factions which attracted the North African – Montanism, Novatianism and Donatism – were more moral than doctrinal, and when the North African became speculative it was about himself rather than about the universe or its Creator. The nature of man, or the relation of man to God – these were things worth discussing; but the mysteries of the Godhead, or the nature of Christ – subjects which fascinated the Alexandrians – these were to be accepted without reasoning. The churches of North Africa had no quarrel with Alexandria. They saw things from rather a different perspective; but they did not seek to interfere, and they feared no interference.

[1] Eusebius *Church History* II, 16:1
[2] Acts 18:24-26

* * *

The relationship between the church of Carthage and her sister in Rome was a far more stormy one. Rome, of course, was the capital of the Empire and the focal point of almost all Mediterranean trade and administration; the Romans were by nature administrators rather than thinkers. The church in Rome had been founded early and could boast its own letter by the hand of the apostle Paul, perhaps the weightiest of all his writings. The church in Rome claimed both Peter and Paul as its early leaders; they were followed by one Linus and then by Anacletus, and in about AD 90 by Clement.[1] He was "fourth from the apostles," they said, and heir to their apostolic authority. Clement himself emphasized the importance of obedience and uniformity. If theological debate in Alexandria was decided by logic, in Rome it was determined by authority.

Clement, however, was a humble man and showed none of that crude desire for power over other churches which manifested itself in many of his successors. The first signs of such authoritarian pretensions appear in about AD 195 when the Overseer Victor decided that all the churches in the world should conform to his own judgment regarding the date on which Easter ought to be celebrated. He threatened to cut off all relations with the churches of Asia Minor for refusing to abandon a date which they claimed to have derived from the apostle John himself. Irenaeus wrote from Lyon to point out the unreasonableness of Victor's conduct, and the Roman Overseer had the wisdom to withdraw his threat of excommunication. In similar vein, however, Victor rejected out of hand the cry for greater purity in the church. He took the part of that Praxeas whose opinions, as we have seen, were unorthodox but whose loyalty to Rome was unquestioned, and he condemned the Montanists whose teaching was orthodox but whose submission to the church in Rome was found wanting.

Victor was the first but by no means the last of the Roman Overseers to engage in a bid for pre-eminence. They saw the church of Rome as the natural leader of that developing international organization which they called the Catholic Church and to which they believed all Christians should adhere. But their emphasis on organizational unity and conformity of practice was maintained only by allowing great latitude in matters of belief; the successive Overseers in Rome showed themselves very slow to correct or discipline errors of doctrine. It was not merely moral courage or spiritual integrity that seemed in short supply. Rome, in fact, lacked theologians with

[1] Clement of Rome should not be confused with Clement of Alexandria, who live about a century later.

the intellectual ability effectively to contend with proponents of novel ideas and subtle heresies. For a period of several centuries the Overseers in Rome repeatedly failed to address the real points of doctrinal difficulty, relying instead on the pressure of a vote to compel acceptance of their position. Repeated crises showed them concerned not with defining and defending the Gospel of Christ, but defining and defending the Catholic Church. The great offence in their eyes was not error, but schism; in this they were entirely of one mind with Cyprian in Carthage.

Cyprian, however, took issue with his counterparts in Rome on a different matter. As we have seen, he believed baptism to be invalid if administered outside the Catholic Church: anyone baptized outside "the Church" must be re-baptized on his admission to it. Stephen, the Overseer in Rome, opposed such a view and peremptorily refused to accept or have fellowship with those who adhered to it. Stephen maintained that the baptism in the name of the Trinity was valid whoever performed the ceremony, regardless of the teachings, and indeed the moral character, of the one who administered it. He was the earliest popular exponent of the idea that baptism was a sacrament which imparted a benefit irrespective of the faith or character of those who receive and administer it. Assertions of this type were taken to bizarre lengths by the Roman Catholic Church of Medieval times.

Resistance to Stephen's decree was not limited to Africa, however. The Novatianist Christians in Rome itself were no less opposed to him, although the grounds of their opposition were somewhat different. Their great emphasis was purity of life and doctrine and they denied the right of the Church to absolve the sin of those who had deliberately flouted God's law by offering sacrifices to idols or by denying the faith. Such people, they said, could not be forgiven and re-admitted to the fellowship of the Church simply on the authority of the Overseer; they must show clear signs of profound repentance as evidence that they sought God's forgiveness and acceptance. Cyprian, in Africa, now found himself at odds with both parties in the Italian capital. Against Stephen he maintained the independence of the North African churches; against the Novatianists he defended the right of the Overseers to re-admit lapsed Christians.

Stephen, for his part, did his utmost to impose his rulings on the churches in Africa. Cyprian stoutly replied that Stephen might legislate for the church in Rome but that he had no jurisdiction over the churches elsewhere. The Overseer in Rome, he said, was in no way superior to the Overseers in other cities; every Overseer was a priest, but Christ alone was a High Priest. Stephen and his successors in Rome pointed to Christ's words to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church." They claimed that as Peter was the first Overseer in Rome, they themselves were his successors and heirs to his

authority. Like him, they had the power to bind and to loose, whatever that particular phrase might mean. Tertullian had earlier pointed out that the authority to bind and loose was given not to the Church, nor to future leaders of the Church, but to Peter himself on one occasion,[1] and to all the apostles on another.[2] "How absurd you are," he said, "in overthrowing and changing the manifest intention of the Lord who conferred this on Peter, as an individual."[3] Peter, or Peter's faith, might be the rock on which the Church was built, but this did not by any means imply the transference of ecclesiastical authority to those who happened to dwell in the city where Peter spent his latter days. Origen in Caesarea joined the fray: "But if you think that the whole Church is built on Peter alone, what do you have to say of John and each of the apostles?"[4] Cyprian agreed, remarking that even Peter did not presume to give orders to the other apostles: he, indeed, submitted to correction at the hands of one of them.[5]

The church in Rome, however, was unconvinced. Some went so far as to call the Overseer in Rome the "Supreme Pontiff", or highest ruler, attributing to him the authority to forgive sins. Tertullian seized on this grandiose title with outspoken irony and hurled it in their teeth. "That Supreme Pontiff, that Overseer of overseers, issues an edict saying, 'I absolve the sins of adultery and fornication for those who have done penance!'... Where should this liberality be published? On the doors of houses of vice, I would have thought, under the signs of their trade? That kind of 'penance' should be announced at the actual scene of the sin!... But this edict is read in the churches; it is pronounced in the Church, the Church which is a virgin! Let such proclamation be far removed from the bride of Christ!"[6] The church, the community of saints, was no place to announce such things: "But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints... Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man... has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."[7] These were the words of the apostle Paul. The Overseer in Rome, by his proclamation, had directly contradicted them. Where then was his apostolic authority? But the claims of the Overseer in Rome and his

[1] Matt 16:19
[2] Matt 18:18
[3] *On Modesty* 21
[4] quoted by Walker *TCOSC*
[5] Gal 2:11-14
[6] *On Modesty* 1. It is the Devil who bears the title "Supreme Pontiff" in Tertullian's writings (e.g. *To His Wife* 1:8). It must indeed have seemed ironic to him that the Overseer in Rome appropriated the title for himself.
[7] Eph 5:3-5 RSV

party to absolve sins were to reach an even greater state of absurdity in the course of the following centuries.

Stephen still insisted on the African churches conforming to his rulings and finally declared that he would have no fellowship with churches which baptized a second time those who had already been baptized once. Unless they submitted to him, he said, they would be excommunicated from the Catholic Church. In response to this threat, Cyprian determined to gather together as many sympathetic Christian leaders as possible for a conference which might crystallize and unify the North African opposition to the overweening dictates of these ambitious men in Rome. Thus we find eighty-seven Overseers gathered together in Carthage in AD 256. The conference affirmed Africa's independence of the church in Rome, and it brought to a head the issue of how the Catholic Church should be governed, and how its authority should be exercised. It pitted Cyprian's scheme – conferences of Overseers – against the system of papal decrees demanded by the Overseer in Rome.[1]

For a while the European churches followed Stephen's lead whilst the churches of Africa and the East opposed it. Eventually, in AD 314, a conference of Overseers, summoned to Arles in southern France, decided in favour of Stephen; his view concerning re-baptism was enforced on all. Cyprian, however, did not live to see this final defeat for the position which he held throughout his life. Friendly relations between the churches of Carthage and Rome were eventually restored, but the controversy was by no means over, as we shall see.[2]

[1] The Montanists, of course, did not accept that there should be any such ecclesiastical authority. In the New Testament it is clear that the apostles themselves exercised no formal disciplinary control over the churches. The existence of troublesome teachers with Jewish scruples, and others with Gnostic tendencies, were a constant trial to them, yet we never read of an apostle at any time excommunicating a church for supporting such men or holding the views they propounded. The apostles, when they write to the churches, appeal to them, exhort them and remind them of God's commands, but never order them to conform; nor do they punish them for failing to respond to the advice sent to them.

Authority in the New Testament lies entirely in the hands of the elders in each local church; it is they alone who are responsible to discipline the members of their church. The apostle Paul, for example, advises the church in Corinth to discipline its erring member; he does not impose such discipline himself (1 Cor 5:2-5).

In fact, the group of apostles and elders who met together in Jerusalem to discuss the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 15) had no practical means of enforcing their decision. They relied only on the power of gentle persuasion, based on sound scriptural principles and reinforced by earnest prayer for the Holy Spirit to lead the local leaders to embrace the truth willingly and direct their churches accordingly.

[2] See Chapter 28.

* * *

While conferences and Overseers debated these matters in Rome and Carthage, the Gospel continued to move steadily inland, carried by humbler though perhaps more significant emissaries. In fact the third century witnessed something of a mass movement of men and women into the kingdom of God. Thousands throughout the plains and coastal hills of North Africa heard and responded to the Good News at that time. Perhaps the insecurity of those days drove them to seek consolation or assurance, or practical assistance from Christians who had proved themselves friends to the poor and needy. Maybe they saw in the new faith a refuge from the spirits which had so tormented their ancestors. Or it could be that the Gospel provided a rallying point for all seeking freedom from tyranny of any sort. But whatever the reason, God blessed North Africa with fresh hope and a new sense of purpose, and its people began to taste the fruits of honesty and loving kindness.

New churches were constantly being established. Country landowners and small farmers were encouraged to build meeting halls on their lands, and to provide for the support of Christian workers. By the end of the third century, there were twenty such buildings in Carthage itself, and eight in Hippo, with dozens more in the surrounding countryside.[1] We can actually trace the spread of Christianity from the list of Overseers who attended the conferences such as that in Carthage in AD 256. Representatives came in that year from churches in all the major towns stretching as far inland as 300 kilometres from Carthage, and also from the neighbouring province of Numidia to the west. The contemporary account tells us that the conference included "a great number of Overseers from the provinces of Proconsular Africa, Numidia and Mauritania, and also elders and helpers."[2]

The fact that visitors from the Roman province of Mauritania are mentioned in this document proves that the Gospel had by this time extended its influence a considerable distance to the west. But the identity of these Mauritanian believers is not clear. According to the contemporary report, not one of the Overseers who participated in the formal debate actually came from an identifiable town in Mauritania. Who then were these believers from the far west? Were they, perhaps, evangelists sent by the churches of Numidia or Proconsular Africa to work in Mauritania? Or were they recently converted Mauritanian Christians, not yet recognized as Overseers? Both these suggestions have been made, but we cannot be sure. It is equally possible that the Mauritanian churches, for some particular

[1] Hamman p.289
[2] *Seventh Council of Carthage*, *ANF* Vol.V p.565

reason, decided to send observers, but not official representatives. Were they unhappy, we might wonder, with Cyprian's organizational scheme? Did they object on principle to the institution of conferences to impose legislation on distant churches? Or did they disagree perhaps with the stated aim of this particular conference? It is also possible that the province of Mauritania maintained formal links with the churches of Spain at this time rather than with those of Africa, or even that Mauritania was an autonomous administrative area whose Overseers might attend but not participate in the decisions of the conference.[1]

Whatever the reason for their modest, and apparently silent representation on this occasion, there are indications that the churches in Mauritania, though smaller and younger than those of the east, were no less vigorous: they were growing as fast as those in the African and Numidian provinces. The accounts of the martyrs mention thriving Christian groups in Tipasa, Caesarea (Cherchell), Tingis (Tangier) and Lixus (Larache) in the extreme west. The Christian community in Volubilis (northern Morocco) became so well established that it eventually outlived the churches of Carthage and Cyrene.

Not only was the Gospel spreading west: it was moving south into the hills and plains of the interior. Spiritual life had already extended far beyond the limits of imperial power. It is sometimes said that early Christianity in North Africa was restricted to the Roman and Romanized aristocracy, and that the Imazighen were Christianized only where, and to the extent that, they were Romanized. The facts, however, do not bear this out. Romanization and Christianization in Africa, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean Basin, did not always go hand in hand: there were tribes who claimed to be Christian far inland of the area under Roman control. In the fifth century, for example, we come across the king of the Ukutameni – the future Shiite Ketama of inland Algeria – who boldly called himself "the servant of God".[2] And there were many others, both before and after – Christian princes ruling over clans and wider groupings which confidently professed their Christian faith. They expressed far more loyalty to Christ than they ever did to Rome.

[1] Février Vol.I pp.178-181. The *ANF* translator considers that four of the Overseers at the conference of 256 were in fact from Mauritania Caesariensis. This is possible, but the identification of the towns they came from is extremely difficult. The major towns of Mauritania (Sitifis, Tipasa, Caesarea, Tingis, Volubilis) do not receive a mention in the contemporary account of the conference, and one would have expected Overseers from these centres to be present if the Mauritanians were officially represented.
[2] Camps p.175

If Christianity was not restricted by the imperial frontier, neither was it tied to the urban centres. Refugees from the pagan persecutions found their way to many parts of inland North Africa; the traces of their buildings and cemeteries are found in numerous places. In fact all the villages so far excavated in southern Numidia prove to have had at least one church building.[1] A good example is the little meeting house in the country to the north of Thamugadi (Timgad, Algeria) where a stone is still in position listing the names of the local Christians, and their Overseer and "helper".[2]

The urban churches were cosmopolitan; their members included Christian Imazighen and immigrants from every part of the Empire, as well as believers whose origins were Jewish or Phoenician. The educated Greek and Latin-speakers were undoubtedly the most articulate members of the urban churches, and the famous North African Christian writers and theologians were drawn almost entirely from their ranks. But they were almost certainly a minority. The busy lives of the illiterate populace of any country are rarely reported in the historical records: the shepherd, the fisherman, the small farmer do not write about their doings, and the historian can easily overlook them. Nonetheless we can catch a glimpse here and there of otherwise unknown and often un-named Christians in the records and inscriptions which have come down to us. The accounts of the martyrs, for example, include petty traders, soldiers from the army, women occupied with their families, agricultural workers and slaves, as well as lawyers, public speakers, landowners and others from the upper echelons of society. Outside of the towns, foreigners were scarce, and there the majority of the Christians were Imazighen. Many rural inscriptions are written in faulty, ungrammatical Latin. Presumably the best-educated member of the church was chosen for this task but even he could make only a poor attempt at it; the majority of his brothers were certainly illiterate. The Gospel had penetrated well beyond the schools and the law-courts of the Romans, and

[1] Raven p.179

[2] Février Vol.I p.184. Further research is required with regard to such remains. There is also a certain amount of verbal and anecdotal evidence of "Christian" peoples deep in the interior during, and perhaps before, Islamic times. Christian origins are claimed by the Regraga tribe in the Essaouira region of western Morocco (Robinet, *Esquisses pour Essaouira*, 1996). In a number of places, early European travellers came across ruined buildings, clearly predating the colonial era, which were said by the local inhabitants to have belonged to "Christians". It is unclear exactly who these "Christians" were, and at what date they were present, but their remains have been reported as far south as the Souss valley and Figuig in Morocco. See, for example, Montagne, "Un Magasin Collectif", *Hesperis* 1929 (fig.22); Doutté, *En Tribu*, Paris, Paul Geuthner, 1914 (fig.56, p.260); Campbell, *With the Bible in North Africa*, Kilmarnock, 1944 (pp.27, 105-106); Meakin (pp.309-311).

the Christian community drew its members from all the many, varied ranks and races that made up North African society.

* * *

By the third century, Latin had largely replaced Greek as the language used for worship and for teaching in North Africa. But what of those who knew neither of these foreign languages? Did they worship and teach in Tamazight? It seems likely: in other parts of the Empire at this time, local languages were certainly employed. Tamazight was rarely a written language and, consequently, evidence of its use is scanty; it would serve well for prayer and for preaching, but inscriptions and documents were generally composed in Latin, and they alone have survived.

Were the early Christians reluctant to use local languages in the work of God? Some have thought so, despite the fact that the Day of Pentecost witnessed the preaching of the Gospel in a dozen different tongues. Why did the apostles themselves show no sign of attempting to speak the languages of the peoples among whom they later ministered? Paul and Barnabas might indeed have saved themselves some considerable embarrassment and danger in Lystra had they been able to address the people in their Lycaonian tongue.[1] The reason must lie in the extraordinary social climate of the Mediterranean world at the time of the apostles, and the particular ministry which they had undertaken. They were moving rapidly in a quite unique environment at a time when the majority of the urban populace throughout the entire known world spoke Greek fluently. Paul and his fellow-workers restricted themselves to the cities, where Greek was known – theirs was a distinctively urban ministry. Once they had established a church in a major city, it was clearly the responsibility of the believers there to take the Gospel out to the surrounding countryside. Origen informs us that the city churches of the third century regularly sent their missionaries out to the villages.[2] And the local Christian community would be better equipped to do this than the apostles themselves, because many of them would naturally speak the local language of the area where they lived.

The letters written by early Christians in various parts of the Empire during the period immediately following the time of the apostles show that, whilst the language of the educated was used in the urban churches, there was a clear expectation that the Gospel be explained to the rural populace in its own dialect. Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-200) speaks of using the Celtic

[1] Acts 14:8-20

[2] Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.21

tongue far more than Greek or Latin for his work in the south of France.[1] Spain, however, provides us with the most striking example. The Gospel, indeed, seems to have prospered more in the Spanish-speaking countryside than the Latin-speaking towns.[2] This meant, at first, that the Spanish churches took a minor role on the world stage, producing no outstanding leaders or literature. That was the price they paid for using their own language, but it was a price which in the long run was well worth paying, for it ensured the survival of the Spanish churches when Rome fell. But if the Christians of Africa did not make use of the local language to quite the same extent, they certainly used it more than some have suggested.

In Egypt, by the middle of the third century, we come across isolated believers far out in the desert who were beginning to translate the Scriptures into the various dialects of the language which we now know as Coptic.[3] Tertullian, writing in North Africa at the same period, tells us that there were tribes in the province of Mauritania who knew the Gospels, and this would imply that they were discussed and taught, if not actually read, in the local dialect. In fourth-century Hippo, Augustine referred specifically to the work of the Gospel progressing in what he called the Punic language but which was almost certainly Tamazight (Libyan).[4] It appears that there were certain areas at that time where a knowledge of the local dialect was a desirable, if not a necessary qualification for a church leader: Augustine wrote to Crispin, a local Christian leader in Calama (modern Guélma), some 70 kilometres inland from Hippo, encouraging him to go out among his flock and find out what they really believed, even if he had to take an interpreter with him.[5]

[1] *Against Heresies*, pref. 3; Neill p.34
[2] Latourette Vol.I pp.96-97
[3] Neill p.36
[4] Many of Augustine's congregation in Hippo itself were "not well-skilled in Latin" (*On John* 7:18). Those in the countryside would be far less so. But what was their mother tongue? Frend observes, "Much confusion has been caused in the past by Augustine's identification of the native language spoken in the countryside as 'Punic'... Throughout historical times, Libyan or Berber and not a Semitic [i.e. Punic] or Latin language has been the mother tongue of the peoples of the Numidian plains... If one also takes into account that modern Berber contains a few Latin loan-words but practically none of Punic origin, it must be accepted that the villages with whom Augustine came into contact spoke Libyan. The fact that to Romans the Libyan language was 'unpronounceable' would make it easy to group all local languages under the heading of 'Punic'." In conclusion, "There seems to be little doubt now that the language spoken by the natives of Numidia, and also in the mountainous districts of the Proconsular province,... was Libyan and not Punic" (Frend *TDC* pp.57-58, 335). Brown remarks, "Augustine would instinctively apply this, the traditional undifferentiated term, [i.e. Punic], to any language spoken in North Africa that did not happen to be Latin" (Brown p.22).
[5] *Letter* 66:2 (*NAPNF* Vol.1 p.323)

There is evidence that the Gospel was carried deep into the North African interior; it is true, nonetheless, that its progress was slower here and its impact less profound than in Egypt to the east, or in Europe to the north. Travellers in Europe have always been well served by the extensive sea and river routes of that continent. Egyptian evangelists, too, benefited immensely from the ease of transport up the Nile; Christian witness could follow the flow of regular commerce two thousand kilometres up that great waterway. The effectiveness of these travellers is borne out by the tenacious hold which Christianity still has on the Coptic Egyptians and the southern Sudanese to this day. The early translation of the Scriptures into the Coptic and Ethiopian languages is probably the reason for the continuing use of those tongues for worship throughout sixteen centuries of foreign rule and domination. If the North African evangelists had moved further inland in greater numbers, and if they had early translated the Scriptures into Tamazight, we might have found a flourishing Amazigh church still in existence today.

The unsettled and mountainous nature of the country may have held them back. It required a week's journey by horseback for Augustine to travel 150 kilometres from the coast at Hippo to the neighbouring inland churches of Cirta or Milevis.[1] It was by no means uncommon for Christians to be kidnapped by bandits and held for ransom. The caravan routes, bringing salt, gum, slaves and gold from the far south, did not provide easy access for Christians wishing to take the Gospel inland. Routes such as these were controlled by powerful, unscrupulous merchant-brigands with bands of armed retainers, who tyrannized and in some cases colluded with the local chieftains across whose lands they dragged their spoils. It would take a brave evangelist to tangle with such company or linger on such tracks. But the failure to translate Scripture into the local language is less easy to explain.

[1] Brown p.193

17. Memories and Martyrs

The Roman officials were perplexed by the sturdy response of the Christians to persecution. So far the sword had succeeded only in providing them with a public platform for the Gospel and a burgeoning list of heroes and champions whose words and deeds were their inspiration and delight. Recognizing that the influence of those who had died was as great, or greater, than those who yet lived, the authorities did their utmost to quell the cult of the martyrs. The proconsul who condemned Cyprian to death had already forbidden the Christians to visit the graves of those who had perished for their faith. But such a ban was bound to be ineffectual: the believers visited the resting places of their loved ones anyway, and held meetings for worship quite openly there.

The names of the martyrs were inscribed in the Memorial Book belonging to each church, and reference was constantly made by preachers and teachers to the written accounts of their words and deeds. The anniversary of their death was celebrated each year with a public reading of the narrative of their last days. At the height of a major persecution in the middle of the third century, Cyprian wrote from exile, encouraging each church to note the date on which its martyrs died, and the location of their graves, so that their anniversaries could be celebrated properly.

The men and women in prison desired their testimony to be a permanent strength and encouragement to the Christian community. Their last days were lived out in the conscious awareness that every detail would be lovingly noted and recorded for posterity. By the same token, the friends of those who suffered felt it their duty to write a narrative of events. The author of the account concerning Marianus and Jacobus tells his readers that "the task of making known their exaltation has been entrusted to me by those very noble witnesses of God: I speak of Marianus, one of our most beloved brothers, and of Jacobus." "It was they," he continues, "who asked me to bring to the attention of our brothers the story of their combat."[1]

The number of martyrs multiplied as each generation took its place and paid its price. Every day of the year announced itself as the anniversary of one martyr or of several, and the task of reading the daily list of names and narratives grew increasingly time-consuming. There were attempts to condense and summarize the accounts of those most distant in time and location, and to add comments on the main lessons to be learned from the events. These abridgements and rewritings of the text led sometimes to the

[1] Monceaux Vol.II p.157

existence of several distinct versions of the same martyrdom, used in different churches. The most restrained and dispassionate renderings are usually the original, or earliest ones. The simple facts, in any case, were more poignant and impressive than any subsequent dramatic reworking could make them; there was no need to gild the lily.

The accounts which survive are written with touching simplicity and with every indication of sincerity. They have the ring of truth and bear the hallmark of events which really happened. The participants show themselves very real, and very human. Like us, they were prey to fears, and sometimes in need of reassurance. Indeed, as we read of these young men and women we find ourselves drawn to them, for their faith is no different from our own. The space of almost two thousand years, which stands between us, simply vanishes as we are caught up in their great love for one another and for their Saviour. We share the assurance they had of eternal life, and almost wish to stand with them on the public platform, looking beyond the trials of this passing world to the joyous fellowship of the next. And one day, indeed, we shall meet them there, and know them as people, not merely as names.

They were happy with their circumstances. The initiative lay with them: they were far from being unwilling victims. In most cases they could have preserved their lives simply by cursing Christ and offering the required sacrifices. This they were not prepared to do. They knew the decision they must make, and there was no reluctance on their part: they chose to lay down their earthly lives for the sake of what they believed to be the truth. In our day we may find it hard to understand such devotion, but perhaps this reflects a weakness in our character rather than in theirs.

* * *

In some places, however, the honours heaped on the martyrs progressed to extreme lengths. Their relics, clothes, bones and books became objects of superstitious veneration and even worship. At the time of Cyprian's execution, handkerchiefs and garments had been placed around him as he knelt to receive the sword so that drops of his blood might be caught and borne away. This was a common practice. People travelled from far and wide to visit a site of sacred memory where the relics of the martyr might be preserved. They came in order to pray, and to seek divine guidance, helped no doubt by the holy associations of the place and the example of the one whose name it bore. Christians commonly asked to be buried beside the remains of the martyr, so that in the resurrection of the dead they might rise with him.

Perhaps we can discern in this veneration of relics the lingering influence of animistic superstition – the ancient cult of sacred trees and magic stones refashioned in Christian guise – although the believers themselves would hardly have seen it in these terms. The leaders of the churches frequently spoke against such tendencies: Cyprian himself, and Tertullian, both admonished the Christians for their superstitious practices, and warned them against depending on the merits of the martyrs rather than the atonement of Christ. Augustine had to remind some of his hearers that the meetings held at the cemeteries were not intended for the worship of the martyrs, but for the worship of God. Nevertheless, we can perhaps guess at the feelings which ran through sections of the Christian community. The confident victory of the martyrs over the powers of darkness and death evidently struck a hidden chord in the hearts of those whose ancestors had struggled despairingly against those very powers.

We might feel that the Christians granted excessive honour to their martyrs, but there is no sign of that wild-eyed fanaticism which typifies the stranger sects of certain eastern religions whose exponents arouse themselves to violent ecstasies as blood flows from self-inflicted wounds. There is not the slightest indication of such things in the accounts of the Christian martyrs. They went willingly and calmly to a death they welcomed, but they trod that path with dignity and firm self-control, showing a mature and sincere love for God and man to the very end. Their final words were typically exhortations addressed to their brethren rather than anathemas pronounced on their judges.

And what of the populace who heard and saw them in the forums and places of execution? As we read the accounts, we are perhaps surprised to find that it was with more curiosity than anger that the pagan throngs of the late third century came to watch them. The days were long past when the followers of Christ were the butt of impassioned resentment and the victims of outrageous rumours. Now they were pitied perhaps, but they were also respected. The influence of their steady faith and heartfelt joy had won many to their cause, and was destined to outlive the final death-throes of a doomed paganism.

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The last great ordeal for the churches is linked with the name of the emperor Diocletian, and this was perhaps the most terrible of all. Diocletian had risen from humble origins: his parents were slaves in the service of a Roman senator. He had been acclaimed emperor by the assembled troops on the day when he plunged his sword into the commander of the army

whom he alleged, without investigation or trial, to be the murderer of the previous commander. His phenomenal rise testifies to his ruthlessness, but also to his personal abilities. He immediately set himself to re-establish the authority of the imperial throne and reform the administration of the Empire.

It is a strange paradox that the imperial palace was actually in Diocletian's time, as in certain previous periods, a stronghold of Christianity.[1] Diocletian's wife, Prisca, and his daughter, Valeria, were both known as believers, as were two of his most influential counsellors. There had been religious freedom for some years before Diocletian's accession, and toleration continued for a further eighteen years after it. Isolated cases were occasionally reported of mistreatment at the hands of officious petty administrators, but there was no general pressure on the churches during this period. Indeed, it was widely felt that the laws of toleration passed by some of the more recent emperors – notably those of Gallienus in AD 261 allowing the churches to own property – amounted to the recognition of Christianity as one of the officially approved religions of the Empire.

For some forty years the churches of North Africa had flourished. They built halls and meeting places in the towns and cities. Great numbers were added to the faith, and new Christian groups had sprung up in places where they had never been seen before. But in many cases the growth, as they were about to discover, was more of foliage than fruit. The multitudes who had entered the churches enjoyed life and gave thanks for it, but they had, as yet, known little of challenge or conflict: their faith had not been put to the test. For the older generation, the tribulations of the past receded into the golden haze of memory. A certain laxity and laziness rendered them increasingly soft and heavy footed, and they were quite unprepared for the rigours of spiritual combat.

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The emperor Diocletian, rather against his better judgment, was eventually persuaded by the pagan philosophers who frequented his court to take steps to restrain the phenomenal growth of the Church. His first edict, in AD 303, was essentially a reaffirmation of Valerian's comprehensive statute of AD 258, with the notable omission of the death penalty and of the punishments relating to upper-class Christian women. This renewed legislation was nonetheless clear-cut, comprehensive and crushing: church buildings were to be relinquished and vacated. All Christian writings were to be publicly

[1] Paul conveyed greetings to the church in Philippi from "all the saints... *especially those who belong to Caesar's household*" (Phil 4:22).

burned and all Christians deprived of property. They were forbidden to meet together. Finally, all free men who professed the faith were to be degraded to the position of slaves, without civil or legal rights.

Turmoil followed this pronouncement throughout North Africa. Many who had claimed to be Christians decided that they were not really Christians after all. But others discovered within themselves the stirrings of a spirited inner courage which was quite new to them. Their first halting public confession revived a hitherto lethargic faith, and inspired a fresh determination to stand with Christ and his people. Indeed, their initial hesitant bid to show their colours often brought such assurance and blessing that they resolved from then on to speak of Christ at every opportunity, outside or inside the prison walls.

In one small town alone, Abitina (Chaoud), near Carthage, forty nine people – thirty men and nineteen women – were arrested: they admitted to holding illegal Christian meetings. Taken away to Carthage, they continued their meetings in the prison itself, worshipping, praying and reciting Scriptures they had learned by heart. The men were for the most part from the lower levels of society, craftsmen and artisans, although one was a city councillor.

Before their arrest, they had assembled regularly to read the Bible in the home of one of their number named Emeritus. He was now brought out for interrogation. "Why did you allow these people to enter your house?" the magistrate asked him. "Because they are my brothers and sisters," he replied, "and I could not prevent them from coming." "But you should have prevented them," insisted the official. "Certainly not," Emeritus replied. "We could not stand upright without celebrating the Lord." "But," persisted the magistrate, "the commands of the emperors and caesars come first." "God is greater than the emperor," was the reply. "Have you any Christian writings in your house?" "I have them in my heart," answered Emeritus. The account tells us that the magistrate, feeling that he had achieved nothing, sent them back to jail where they evidently remained for a considerable period of time.

Fundanus, Overseer of the church in Abitina, had apparently attempted to come to terms with the authorities at an early stage, handing over the Scriptures belonging to the church of Abitina and yielding at least outwardly to the demands of the law. Now that the Abitinian Christians were incarcerated in Carthage, Mensurius, the Overseer in Carthage, along with his "helper" Caecilian, endeavoured to defuse the situation, discouraging the crowds from assembling around the prison. The growing rift between the fervent African believers and their more circumspect

Overseers was becoming ever more apparent: it was soon to give rise to the greatest controversy which ever faced the churches of North Africa.[1]

Mensurius himself, the third Overseer in Carthage after Cyprian, was commanded to deliver up his handwritten copies of the Scriptures for burning. With commendable audacity he hid them, and handed over some heretical books in their place. But others had less presence of mind, or less courage. We have the official legal record, left to us by the Roman authorities, of what happened to the church in Cirta (Constantine, Algeria). The local magistrate, accompanied by a body of men, burst into "the house where the Christians met". There he found the Overseer, Paulus, with almost all the leaders of the church. According to the terms of the edict, and the instructions he had received, the official ordered the Christians to hand over their holy books and sacred objects. They were so taken by surprise that none of them knew what to say; there was no protest. Paulus, the Overseer, merely told the official that the books were in the possession of those who read them. He sat there saying nothing as the officials went through the meeting room, the storerooms, the library, the chamber where common meals were held and other parts of the building. A list was drawn up of the articles which had been seized but little else happened. There was a fuss when some hidden items were discovered; the Roman magistrate uttered dire threats against anyone trying to conceal things from the imperial authorities. A number of the Christians scurried round, bringing books to him, hopeful perhaps of currying his favour. At that point, two of the "helpers" rose in shame from this seemingly abject surrender; they refused to answer the questions addressed to them. Immediately they were clapped in irons. The magistrate left the building and set off on a tour of the homes of readers associated with the church. Everywhere books and papers were handed over. If the husband was not at home, the flustered wife did a hurried search for whatever papers there might be in the house.

And with this the legal document ends. The narrative, of course, is written at the instigation of those who despised and disparaged the Christians: it is not intended to cast them in a favourable light. But it is doubly valuable for that very reason because it shows us the other side of the coin which is so vividly depicted in the glorious accounts of the martyrs. In this cold document we see the shadows which lay unnoticed in the background of those more heroic narratives. The legal report reveals to us the acquiescent feebleness of those trembling leaders of the church in Cirta. And there were probably many such. Yet, with the passage of a few months, we frequently find the likes of these so imbued with renewed faith and zeal that they too

[1] Monceaux Vol.III pp.96-101; Frend *TDC* pp.8-10

would willingly join the ranks of the martyrs. Such was the miracle of Christianity in North Africa: the wood at times seemed very damp, yet it needed but a spark to set it triumphantly ablaze.[1]

* * *

Shortly after this, a real fire broke out at Diocletian's palace in the town of Nicomedia (north-western Turkey). His household slaves were tortured in an attempt to identify the culprits. A few days later, a second fire broke out. The Christians in the imperial household were now cruelly abused. The wife and daughter of Diocletian were forced to sacrifice to the gods, and the two Christian counsellors along with the Overseer of the church in Nicomedia were put to death. The Christians protested their innocence. The fires, however, happened to coincide with the official adoption of Christianity as the national religion of the neighbouring kingdom of Armenia, just beyond the eastern frontier of the Empire. There were uprisings in the adjoining parts of Diocletian's domains which he feared were instigated by the Armenians. The result was Diocletian's second edict ordering the arrest of all Christian leaders.

Decius, forty years previously, had attempted to crush the Church by frightening the believers away from it. Diocletian's method was different: he planned to destroy the Church by wiping out its leadership. The goal of Decius – the forcible eradication of Christianity from the Empire – was clearly a hopeless one, but his successor hoped that he might at least induce its organization to collapse. Perhaps, bereft of shepherds, the flock would wander away of its own accord. The persecution continued month after bitter month throughout the year 303.

In December Diocletian reached the twentieth year of his reign and to mark the occasion a general amnesty was announced. The leaders of the churches, recently arrested, were offered freedom if they would renounce their Christian faith and sacrifice to the gods; torture was the alternative. The prisons emptied rapidly, probably at least partly because the prison governors took advantage of the opportunity to release the Christians, who had shown themselves as blameless during their incarceration as they had been before it.

In the spring of the following year, however, Diocletian fell seriously ill, and apparently lost his reason for a time. With his illness, and his abdication shortly after, the vigorous pagan faction which dominated the Roman senate determined on a fresh move to stamp out Christianity. The most severe

[1] Monceaux Vol.III pp.93-95

legislation of all was passed in AD 304, punishing by death all Christians who refused to offer sacrifice. This brutal decree was stringently enforced by the emperor Galerius, and the slaughter reached its climax in the terrible year of 308. The following year Galerius himself lay on his death bed, tormented by that same loathsome disease which God's judgment had brought many years before on Herod Agrippa.[1] In AD 311, as his life ebbed away, Galerius issued a strange decree. He restored to the Christians their privileges, and concluded with a pathetic request that they remember their dying emperor in their prayers.

Two years later the persecutions were over. Christianity was recognised a legal religion. The accession of Constantine, and the Edict of Milan in AD 313, brought to an end the heavy and heroic sufferings which the churches had endured for two and a half centuries.

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There remains yet one story to be told before we leave the accounts of the martyrs. It appears to have taken place after the period of the great persecutions, for the temples of the gods are said to be in ruins. Yet Christians were still a minority in the town where it all takes place, and the pagans stirred themselves up vigorously enough to champion the cause of their idol. The story concerns a young girl who lived in the seaside town of Tipasa (Algeria). She was fourteen years old and her name was Salsa. Although her parents were pagans she had chosen the way of Christ and had been baptized. The day came when the populace of Tipasa gathered to celebrate the feast of the Dragon, a local divinity represented by an idol in the form of a bronze serpent with a gilded head. The temple of this god was located on a rocky outcrop above the sea.

Salsa was reluctant to accompany her parents to the festivities in the temple of the dragon god, but she did so, feeling it to be her duty as a daughter. She watched, trembling, as they performed the sacrilegious rites, and she tried vainly to awaken in her parents and the people around her the horror which she felt. They laughed and made fun of her. The proceedings drew to their close, as was the custom, with a banquet, followed by the liberal drinking of libations, and after that, a long siesta. Salsa took advantage of these moments of general somnolence to slip into the sanctuary of the idol. She detached its golden head which she sent rolling down the precipice into the sea. It is not hard to imagine the fury of the revellers when they awoke and found their idol mutilated. They set a watch

[1] Acts 12:22-23 GNB

upon it, in case the culprit should return, and they determined if possible to catch him red-handed. Not in the least daunted, the young girl resolved to send the body of the idol after its head. She succeeded a second time in entering the sanctuary, and managed to dislodge the bronze body of the serpent. It went crashing down the rocky cliff into the sea. But this time Salsa was caught. She was torn in pieces by the enraged worshippers, and hurled from the clifftop. The Christians retrieved her body from the water and buried her near the harbour. The remains of her sanctuary, with its mosaics and inscriptions, can still be seen today.

Legends grew up around this simple narrative. A story circulated of her body being carried by the current of the sea until it tangled with the anchor of a trading vessel – at which a violent storm blew up, lasting three days and abating only when the captain, alerted repeatedly by dreams, raised the body from the water. A number of years later, in AD 372, a local African chieftain rose against the power of Rome, but having wreaked havoc in the towns of the province, he suffered a strange and foreboding experience on entering the sanctuary of Salsa outside the walls of Tipasa. He was quickly defeated by the inhabitants of the town, and died shortly afterwards – thanks, it was said, to the intervention of the martyr.

These accretions to the narrative, however, cannot detract from the naïve sincerity of Salsa's anguished resolve to strike a personal and, as it happened, effective blow against the falsehood of idolatry. The innocent young girl, who loved truth more than life, captured the imagination of her generation. She became more than just a local heroine. The sanctuary built over her tomb drew Christians from throughout the region and from as far away as Gaul and Syria, and her martyrdom was celebrated annually in the churches of Spain and Italy as well as in North Africa. A substantial cemetery surrounds her grave, and can still be seen today. Christians of mature years and wide experience chose to be buried near the spot where the young girl lay, identifying themselves in old age with the cause which she in her youth had so artlessly embraced.[1]

[1] Monceaux Vol.III pp.164-167

18. Conversion and Consecration

More than a hundred years separate the death of Cyprian in Carthage and the appointment, in AD 395, of Augustine as Overseer of the church in the neighbouring town of Hippo. It is during this interval that we come across the enigmatic figure of Arnobius. If not quite matching the spiritual or intellectual stature of Tertullian or Augustine, Arnobius was certainly their equal in his love for his homeland and his people.

Arnobius was born in AD 260. As a young man he was a well-known and successful teacher of rhetoric in the small town of Sicca (El Kef, Tunisia). His lectures were enlivened by illustrations drawn from his wide knowledge of the great Greek and Latin plays, and the other literature of his day, all woven together with a style which is warm and vigorous. The people of Sicca had reason to be proud of their brilliant, cultured son, and his students must have been drawn to him by his affection for the North African town where both he and they were born. His writings abound in references to the countryside which he knew as a boy. If he had cause to mention misfortunes and calamities, he remembered the droughts, and the depredations of the locusts. If he thought of the riches of the region, he pointed to the flocks of sheep, the olives and the vines. He speaks of the camel kneeling to receive its load, and he thinks back to one particular year when the inland tracts of the Getules were dry and desolate, whilst the harvests were superb in the coastal plains belonging to the Moors and Numidians.

Arnobius is an Amazigh through and through, and proud to be such: he had little liking for Roman power. He speaks of the ancient North African divinities from personal acquaintance, making sport of the petty, imported gods of Rome which seemed so inferior. He enjoys recounting the ancient glories of Africa and likes to remember that the Carthaginian Hannibal once caused the foundations of Rome to tremble. He looks on the Roman conquest as one of the misfortunes suffered by his race.

In religious debate, however, Arnobius had always ranged himself against the group of Christians who lived in his hometown. They appear to have been numerous: an Overseer from Sicca had participated in Cyprian's conference of AD 256, and ruins of their meeting places can still be seen today. They must have found the well-read pagan rhetorician a formidable opponent, whether in public, or private discussion. He for his part would have relished the combat, the cut and thrust of controversial disputation. He was more than a match for most of the Christians: they did not have the benefit of his advanced education. But for all that, he was impressed by

their staunch loyalty to their beliefs and their steadfastness at the time of Diocletian's harsh decree.

* * *

Arnobius was drawn by his profound interest in moral and ethical problems to search out whatever philosophies and religions he came across. None of them, however, seemed to have the final answer. He was tormented by an indefinable longing to believe – to discover the truth and then to worship whatever gods or spirits it might reveal. Whilst practising all the rites of paganism, scrupulous to the minutest detail, he remained as dissatisfied with the worship of the idols as he was with the wisdom of the philosophers. He admitted some years later, not without a sense of shame, "I used to worship – oh, how blindly I worshipped! I worshipped the figurines which came out of the metal-workers' forges, gods beaten out on the anvil with blows of the hammer. I worshipped elephants' bones, paintings, and ribbons tied to ancient trees. If I saw a polished stone rubbed with olive oil, I expected to find in it a divine power, and I would kneel before it, and call out to it. I was asking for favours from an unresponsive block of stone."[1]

But Arnobius grew disillusioned with all this. He saw nothing but foolish make-believe in the worship of man-made idols. He scorned the myths of the Roman gods and mystery religions.[2] But sorcery was a different matter. He had no doubt that real powers (later he saw them to be satanic powers) lay behind the black magic which had been practised by his ancestors for generations before the Romans came to North Africa. He had seen these forces at work with his own eyes. After his conversion to Christianity he challenged the pagan sorcerers to perform the same miracles that Christ had accomplished, and he was confident that they could not do so. But he acknowledged all the same that they had the ability to foretell the future, and he believed that through their spells they could bring about the insanity or death of an intended victim. They could destroy the affections felt by members of a family for one another; they could unleash forces of love and hate; they could assure the victory or defeat of the horses which raced in the arena; they could cause deafness or dumbness, and open locked doors without a key.

[1] *Adversus Nationes* 1:39 (*ANF* Vol.VI)

[2] His hometown of Sicca was known as Sicca Veneria, "the seat of the vile worship of the goddess of lust [Venus] in whose temples the maidens sacrificed their chastity." Arnobius was "especially severe in his exposure of the immoralities of the heathen gods" (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.857).

He recognized the unquestionable spiritual reality of paganism, but found it sadly devoid of moral principles. Turning elsewhere, the ethical standards of the philosophers appealed to him, but he looked there in vain for signs of spiritual power. Animistic paganism and abstract philosophy both stood condemned: each was lacking in some vital respect. But could they be united, casting their flaws and falsehoods aside, so that the realities to be found in each might contribute to a more satisfying whole? Arnobius attempted to fit them together, but returned, disappointed, from his long speculations. Those with powers had no morals, and those with morals had no powers; there was no way to reconcile the two. For a while he fell into a kind of despairing scepticism: he did not know what to believe, and he found himself believing nothing. Yet his heart still cried out for truth. If only he could find the truth, he would devote his life to it, and spend his days in making it known to others in the same wretched condition.

As he turned these things over and over in his mind, he was struck by certain features of Christianity which had hitherto escaped his attention: the miracles of Christ which testified to a spiritual power far greater than that which he had seen in paganism, and moral standards which surpassed even those of the philosophers. The Christians, moreover, had the confident assurance of immortality which had been but a speculative hope with the Greek thinkers. And the Christians showed a resolute heroism under persecution which far transcended the devotion of any pagan to his idol or spirit. What did these things mean? In the end, was it actually Christianity that united spiritual power and ethical virtue? And if the Gospel of Christ was the truth, could a public figure such as he, who had so vehemently and eloquently contradicted the Christians, simply announce that he had changed his mind and become a Christian after all? Would he not lose the respect of all who had formerly honoured him as an erudite teacher of rhetoric? It was then that Arnobius had a series of striking dreams which he took as a divine confirmation of the convictions which were growing in his mind.

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The Christians of Sicca were surprised, and somewhat disconcerted, at the sudden announcement, in AD 295 or 296, of Arnobius' conversion to their faith: at first, they would not believe it. It was merely a ploy, they thought, to infiltrate and destroy the Christian community. The Overseer of the church refused to baptize in the name of Christ the one who had been so notorious in opposing him. But Arnobius was unquestionably sincere, and to prove it he began to write his lengthy "Apology". The book was entitled

Against the Heathen, but perhaps it was as much to convince the Christians of his conversion as to persuade the pagans of their errors that he undertook this work. Or it may be simply that he needed to get off his chest the pent-up emotion which at last had found release in his new faith. The apostle Paul, some three centuries earlier, had also found the church slow to believe that the persecutor was truly converted. Paul went to the deserts of Arabia to think and to pray before he started writing,[1] and Arnobius might have done well had he followed that example. Jerome tells us that he wrote his Apology as a newly converted man, and this perhaps explains some of the peculiarities which characterize it.

His book was completed about AD 304, in the face of Diocletian's last great persecution, and it alludes to harassment of the Christians, burning of their sacred Scriptures, and destruction of their meeting houses. It is by no means a carefully reasoned treatise of the sort one would expect from a mature theologian. It rather resembles a hastily assembled collection of assertions, which its author undoubtedly believed, but which might have been refined, and perhaps qualified, had he written after more extensive experience of Christian teaching and a longer period of reflection. In fact, he defends a faith which he barely knows, and he depicts with more confidence the heathenism he had rejected than the Christianity he had espoused. He is quite at home in pagan mythology, but he never quotes the Old Testament, and the New Testament only once.

For all that, he had quickly grasped the essence of the Christian life. "We have learned," he writes, "from Christ's teaching and his laws, that evil ought not to be requited with evil, that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, that we should rather shed our own blood than stain our hands and our conscience with that of another. An ungrateful world is now for a long period enjoying the benefit of Christ... If all would lend an ear to his salutary and peaceful laws, the world would turn the use of steel to occupations of peace, and live in blessed harmony."[2] He indignantly asks the heathen, "Why have our writings deserved to be given to the flames, and our meetings to be cruelly broken up? In them prayer is offered to the supreme God, peace and pardon are invoked upon all in authority... In them all that is said tends to make men humane, gentle, modest, virtuous, self-controlled, generous in dealing with their possessions, and inseparably united to all who are members of our brotherhood."[3]

Arnobius' book must have taken him many months to complete. It is clear from the way he writes that he was a scholar. He is both learned, and

[1] Gal 1:17
[2] *Adversus Nationes* 1:6 (*ANF* p.415); Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.860
[3] *Adversus Nationes* 4:36 (*ANF* p.488); Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.860

imaginative. He has a questioning mind, and yet holds strong convictions. His prose is good-humoured, sincere and fair-minded, although it flows with such a vigorous emotional intensity that it threatens at times to swamp his argument. He delights in pithy aphorisms such as: "It is belief which makes religion." And he draws imaginative analogies. Persecutions, for example, he considers a blessing to the Christian – like wild beasts that rage against the prisoner and then find they have wrecked the prison, thus unintentionally setting him free.

He writes eloquently of the majestic greatness of God, the feeble ignorance of man, and the need for faith. He lifts his heart in worship towards the God whom he had so recently discovered, and this is one of his most beautiful passages:

"O greatest and highest Creator of invisible things! O God unseen and to all beings incomprehensible. You are worthy! You indeed are worthy – if mortal tongue may call you so – to receive unceasing and fervent thanks from all that breathes, as we fall on bended knee before you, and kneel throughout our lives in ceaseless prayer and supplication. For you are the one who set in motion all there is; you embrace all things; you are the foundation of everything – infinite, without beginning, immortal, without end, unique. You are not embodied in any physical object, and no limits confine you. There are no bounds to your perfection and your greatness – without place, movement, or pattern. About you nothing can be perfectly defined or delimited with human words. To understand you we must be silent, and to seek after you through the darkness our wandering conjecture must utter no sound. Grant pardon, O King of kings, to those who persecute your servants, and according to your loving-kindness forgive those who fly from the worship of your name."[1]

When all is said and done, we actually know very little about Arnobius, apart from what he himself tells us in the solitary book which he has left us, and as Monceaux sagely observes, "Many authors bear little likeness to the books they have written."[2] The remainder of his career is obscure. We do not know if he continued to teach rhetoric in Sicca; we do not know whether he married. Neither do we know how he coped with the final persecutions, nor what he did during the days of peace which followed. It is not clear whether he was fully accepted as a member of the church in Sicca, or whether his erudition and his reputation hindered him from taking a lowly place as a newcomer, seeking instruction at the hands of the farmers and tradesmen who made up the Christian community.

[1] *Adversus Nationes* 1:31
[2] Monceaux Vol.IV p.245

We do know, however, that he encouraged and influenced at least one of his pupils, Lactantius, who was appointed tutor to the Emperor's son and who wrote a number of doctrinal articles on various subjects: the providence of God, the divine punishment meted out to the persecutors of the Church, and eventually the seven volumes of his *Divine Institutes*.[1] Jerome referred to Arnobius briefly in the year 327, and it is possible that Jerome's tribute was occasioned by his death at that time.

Much, then, remains obscure about the life and testimony of Arnobius, but enough is known for him to take an honourable place in the Christian history of North Africa. He was an Amazigh to the core – a gifted and an earnest man who devoted his time and his considerable talents to his book contending for the Gospel, and who willingly risked his career, and his life, for the sake of Christ.[2]

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Whilst Arnobius, and those like him, were enjoying the fruits of their homeland, dwelling happily among their own people, others were severing those links and setting out, without a qualm, for the desert. Some Christians found the temptations of urban life so difficult to resist that the only solution was to leave the towns altogether and start afresh, far away from the haunts they had frequented in the days before their conversion.

Just as some despaired of life in the towns, others had grown disillusioned with life in the churches. Since the very beginning, there had arisen within the Christian communities ardent souls who complained that the bulk of the Christians did not live up to those high standards they had set for themselves. Some of these found the tepid passivity of the conventional churches a spiritual hindrance rather than a help. The majority wisely rolled up their sleeves and took it upon themselves to help raise the standard. But others lacked the spiritual gift or the faith for such a task, especially if they found the leaders of the church as complacent as their flock. Many of these earnest souls decided to leave the Christian community altogether, seeking a closer fellowship with God in prayer – alone, or with others of like mind – far away where there were no distractions.

[1] Concerning freedom of belief, Lactantius wrote: "Religion cannot be imposed by force. In order to influence the will, controversy must always be carried on by words rather than blows. Torture and godliness are totally incompatible: it is not possible for truth to be united with violence, or justice with cruelty. Nothing is so much a matter of free choice as religion" (*Divine Institutes* 5:20. Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.36).

[2] The life of Arnobius and his "*Apology*" are discussed by Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.856-861; Monceaux Vol.IV pp.242-286; Plummer pp.129-130.

One of the first to do so had been Antony. The account of his life was written down probably by Athanasius, Overseer of the church in Alexandria. Born towards the end of the third century, Antony came from a wealthy family; he had one sister. Antony was in the meeting room of the church in his own village one day, when the story was read from the Gospel of Matthew about the rich young man who approached Jesus and asked what he must do in order to inherit eternal life. Antony was a rich young man himself, so he felt that the question had some personal significance. He was greatly affected by the reply which Jesus gave to the young man: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."[1] These words struck Antony "as though he had received the command from God himself... As though the text had been fashioned for him, Antony immediately went out of the church and gave the property he had inherited from his parents to the inhabitants of the village, so that neither he nor his sister should suffer further embarrassment from it. He sold all the other property he possessed and, having disposed of it for a handsome sum, gave the money to the poor, keeping a little for his sister." Antony retired to a cave in the rocks, and a little later moved deeper into the Egyptian desert, to the east of the Nile.[2]

The desert was chosen by many such men because of the belief that waterless tracts were the abode of demons and therefore the place where battle was to be joined. Antony remained there, a solitary hermit – communing with God, working miracles and casting out demons – for twenty years. He returned briefly to civilization in the year 338 to add his weight to the controversy against the Arians whose doctrines denied the deity of Christ, but he returned to his solitary retreat as soon as he was able. The account of his life became part of the literature of the Empire, and by AD 386 his influence had spread throughout the Mediterranean Basin.

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Antony and others chose a solitary pilgrimage, but some preferred to escape the world by establishing monastic communities where a number of men, or in some cases women, might live together, following a strict code of behaviour and devoting themselves to set hours of prayer and other spiritual exercises. Areas of barren land were settled and cultivated by such groups who often saw their vision in terms of making the desert blossom as the

[1] Matt 19:21

[2] *NAPNF* Series 2, Vol.IV, pp.188ff.; Cooley p.47

rose.[1] The idea of monasticism was derived largely from the eastern religion which went by the name of Manicheism: it is not found anywhere in the Bible.

The first Christian monasteries were apparently established by an Egyptian, Pachomius, around AD 318. These isolated communities of men (or in some cases of women) took vows of celibacy, inspired by the desire to devote themselves more fully to the service of God, and perhaps also by a reluctance to bring children into a doomed and dying world. The monastic ideal sometimes included such strange notions as self-inflicted torments intended to subdue the lusts of the flesh, and feats of endurance designed to demonstrate the power of the Spirit over the body. The celebrated Simon Stylites (390-459) spent thirty years alone on a platform at the top of a high pillar, descending only to preach to the crowds who assembled at its foot. Others passed their time in transcribing or translating the Scriptures or theological works. It must be remembered that books had to be handwritten for a further twelve centuries before the printing presses started turning in Reformation Europe.

Monasticism failed to attract widespread interest or support during the years of persecution. In AD 313, however, the Edict of Milan suddenly freed the Church from the constraints of the law and drew to its bosom the enthusiastic populace of the towns and villages. The edict also deprived the more ardent Christians of the opportunity to express their zeal by public confession and martyrdom. The Church now found itself filled with an ill-disciplined rabble. As these poured in at the front door, many of its more earnest members slipped out of the back, and the zeal which could no longer find its outlet in martyrdom directed itself towards the monasteries and the caves, as well as the more conspicuous movements of spiritual protest.[2] As Bainton observes, "When the masses entered the Church, the monks went to the desert."[3]

The great writer Jerome (340-420) commenced his monastic career as a hermit in the Syrian wilderness. Jerome, however, eventually found hard intellectual study in Rome more efficacious than the physical hardships of the desert in subduing the passions of the flesh. He undertook the massive task of translating the Old and New Testaments from the original tongues into contemporary colloquial Latin. The result was the so-called Vulgate, used as the standard Bible of the Roman Catholic Church to the present day.

[1] Is 35:1 AV
[2] The early success of Donatism probably owed much to such feelings.
[3] Bainton p.126

Augustine supported the practice of monasticism, and by AD 400 a number of these communal houses were to be found in North Africa. For most of his life he himself lived in a community of this sort at Hippo, and his widowed sister dwelt in another. At the beginning of the fifth century, the aristocratic lady Melanie gave up her estates, freed eight thousand of her slaves, and founded two monasteries for 80 monks and 130 nuns in the region of Augustine's hometown, Thagaste. There she remained for the rest of her days.

Although monasticism was never a major or distinctive feature of Christianity in North Africa, the ideal of celibacy which it introduced exerted an influence over many Christian leaders – not least among them Augustine himself – with significant consequences for the pattern of life in the churches.

PART FOUR: THE AGE OF AUGUSTINE
(4th to early 5th century)

19. Purity and Protest

As Constantine's Edict of Milan came into effect, the careworn Church of the Christian martyrs suddenly awoke to find itself welcomed into the sumptuous precincts of imperial favour: among its members was now the emperor himself. The sense of awe and amazement was still vivid ten years later when Constantine invited a company of Overseers to dine with him in the palace. As the survivors of the great persecutions, some of them maimed and blind, filed between ranks of Roman soldiers to sit at table with the emperor, at least one of their number wondered whether the kingdom of God had come on earth, or whether he was dreaming.[1]

At first sight, the Edict did not seem particularly dramatic. It proclaimed nothing new and condemned nothing old. It merely authorized each person to worship in whatever way he chose, and it provided for the property confiscated from the churches to be restored. But this simple decree in AD 313 had two far-reaching consequences: it ended the persecution of Christians throughout the Empire, including North Africa, and it led very quickly to what became a permanent alliance between the Church and the Roman state. No longer did the Christians have to gather at night behind closed doors in the inner rooms of their houses, or underground amidst the dark tombs of their ancestors. They could meet where they wished and without fear; some were even appointed to high positions in the imperial administration. The future seemed rosy, and the churches of North Africa began to look forward optimistically to their golden era.

By this time, however, there were disturbing signs that the huge Empire was entering upon its slow decline, and the Church, associating itself with the secular power, clearly ran the risk of sharing in its collapse. Cyprian seems to have foreseen this. Shortly before his martyrdom in AD 258, he remarked to a Roman official in Carthage: "You ought to be aware that the age is now senile. It has not now the stamina that used to make it upright, nor the resilience and vigour which used to make it strong... This is the

[1] Eusebius *Life of Constantine* III, 15; Bainton p.122

sentence that has been passed upon the world; this is the law of God: that what has been must die, and what has grown up must grow old."[1]

The economic and financial crisis which swept the Empire after about AD 250 did not spare North Africa. The gold content of the Roman coins dropped to vanishing point, and it became increasingly difficult to buy and sell. Crops which had previously fetched a good price were left rotting. Imported goods were unobtainable, and the benefits of the Roman presence in Africa seemed no longer so clearly to outweigh its inconveniences. The police power of the Third Legion, established by the emperor Alexander Severus in the early third century, began to weaken. Sensing the irresolution of the imperial administration, the tribes of the plains and mountains cautiously undertook a few exploratory forays against the Roman outposts. The chieftains in Numidia and Mauritania-Caesariensis began one by one to renounce their superficial collaboration with the Romans, and gathered together the men and the means for an armed insurrection. The revolt sparked and flickered throughout North Africa, except in the province of Proconsular Africa (Tunisia) where the growth and spread of urban life and commerce had so bound up the rural populace in the general prosperity that revolution would have exerted little appeal.

Elsewhere fewer benefits had trickled down to the mass of people living off the land. Heavy and seemingly arbitrary taxation had left many of the poorer labourers and artisans with grudges and grievances. In certain places, the properties of Roman colonists were seized, and Cyprian himself had to send 100,000 *sequestras*, raised by the church in Carthage, to ransom Christians captured by armed insurgents in Numidia. The Amazigh emperor Septimius Severus had advised his son many years before: "Pay the soldier richly and forget about the rest." Indeed, the Roman administration leant heavily on the strength of the army, and on the threat of force which came to mind whenever a soldier appeared in view.

The great landowners generally acted as local magistrates, but their impartiality was not always as marked as their power. Their contemporaries alleged that they exercised justice and committed injustice, and there was some truth in this. Neither was their payment of their workers always as fair or as prompt as the workers themselves might have wished. The imposition and collection of taxes lay firmly in the hands of these magistrates, and acting as both accuser and judge, they had the right to imprison slaves and execute free labourers. As times grew harder, and the rural populace increasingly felt the pinch, the weak sought the protection of the strong, and the strong the patronage of the stronger. It was an uneasy situation for all

[1] Treatise 5: *To Demetrianus* (*ANF* Vol.V p.458); also quoted in Cooley p.34

parties. Even the most upright and honest of Christian proprietors could find himself the target of resentments which were no less bitter for being unfounded.

In AD 330, Constantine had moved his imperial capital eastwards from Rome to Constantinople (modern Istanbul). The greater distance now compounded the problems he faced in co-ordinating the administration of his far-flung African dominions. The task of keeping the peace on the southern shores of the Mediterranean was an increasingly difficult one. Having secured the support of the Church, however, Constantine looked forward to enlisting its aid in that endeavour. Now that there was freedom of worship and belief, the leaders of the churches would be able to encourage the peaceable co-operation of their people for the general well-being of all: such was the admirable ideal of a genuinely Christian emperor. But it was sadly naïve.

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As the churches of Europe and Asia tangled themselves increasingly in the theological thickets of Arianism, Gnosticism and the other burgeoning heresies, the North African churches were preoccupied with their own particular problems. The speculations which engrossed periodic conferences of Overseers on the other side of the Empire held little appeal for them. They were far more affected by a home-grown movement which has acquired the name of "Donatism" and which effectively split the Christian community of North Africa in two.

The apparent origin of the Donatist controversy lay in the large number of lapsed Christians who were left behind after the persecutions of Diocletian. They surfaced like driftwood after a storm, unsightly and out of place, and no-one quite knew what to do with them. The question was the same as that which had exercised Cyprian and others after the earlier persecutions, except that this time those alleged to have betrayed the cause included some well-known Overseers and other Christian leaders. The question was: should they be accepted back in the churches, or must they be shunned as traitors? But underlying the issue of what individual people had done, and whether it mattered, there lay the same fundamentally divergent views which had emerged in the previous century concerning the nature and purpose of the Church itself. Was the Church to be an international organization, welcoming and teaching all who would support it, and attempting to wean them from their faults? Or was the Church to be a brotherhood of believers, called out of the world as faithful servants of Christ, and refusing to compromise with the ungodly? The controversy was

an old one, but this time the relentless intensity with which it was pursued, and the forces of disintegration which racked the weary Empire at this particular juncture, meant that it could end only in tragedy.

Constantine, desiring peace and harmony throughout his vast domain, and anxious to establish a secure and united Church which would assist him in administering it, commenced his rule by promulgating laws of all-embracing religious tolerance, and he encouraged the churches to welcome back the lapsed. This, he felt, was the opportunity for a fresh start. It did not take Constantine long to discover, however, that the leaders of the Numidian churches, and a large part of the Christian community in Carthage and elsewhere, did not see things in such simple terms. They were adamant in making a distinction between those Christians who had stood firm in persecution and those who had not. They drew up lists of Overseers who allegedly had betrayed Scriptures into the hands of pagan officials, and they refused to accept these as leaders in their churches. They shunned all who had cursed the name of Christ and sacrificed to idols, quoting such stern verses as the words of the apostle Paul: "You should not associate with a person who calls himself a brother but is immoral or greedy or worships idols or is a slanderer or a drunkard or a thief. Don't even sit down to eat with such a person."[1]

Two years before Constantine's accession, Mensurius, Overseer of the church in Carthage, had died and a "helper" from the church by the name of Caecilian was chosen to succeed him. Many in the church had been unhappy about this choice, feeling that Caecilian's conduct during the persecution had shown him unworthy of the position. They opposed his appointment, just as sixty years before, Novatus and his party had disputed the choice of Cyprian for the same post. The appointment was invalid in the sight of God, they said, because Caecilian was a traitor and because one of those who had instated him, the Overseer Felix, was himself guilty of handing over Scriptures to the pagan authorities. An alternative Overseer, Majorinus, was proposed and formally accepted by seventy Numidian Overseers secretly assembled in Carthage. Meetings were held in various houses to plot the downfall and overthrow of whichever was the opposite camp. When the rival Overseer, Majorinus, died a few years later, the fiery Donatus was chosen in his place and from then on his name was attached to the party which he represented.

More heat than light was generated by the subsequent conflict between the factions supporting these rival Overseers. It was alleged by the Donatists that Caecilian, and his predecessor Mensurius, had disparaged the

[1] 1 Cor 5:11 GNB

Abitinian martyrs incarcerated in the jail at Carthage and had prevented their friends from visiting and sustaining them in their sufferings.[1] Caecilian, they repeatedly asserted, while still a "helper", had betrayed the holy Scriptures of the church in Carthage into the hands of idolaters. To alter even a single letter of the Scriptures was a crime, but contemptuously to deliver up the entire Word of God for destruction was an iniquity without redress. The more zealous of his defenders, in turn, maintained that the party of Donatus, during the persecutions, had stirred up a dishonourable extravaganza of fanaticism by deliberately provoking the imperial officials to take action against them: they had contrived for themselves flamboyant martyrs out of ungodly charlatans. At this stage the dispute was confined to the question of who was to be recognized as Overseer of the church in Carthage. But there were other hidden forces at work, and the churches in the towns and villages of the country round about were beginning to take sides, for reasons which had little to do with the original controversy.

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Realizing that the conflict could not easily be resolved, Constantine decided to enlist the help of the churches in Italy and Gaul (France). He appointed a commission to meet in Rome in AD 313, comprising fifteen Italian and three Gallican Overseers, under the chairmanship of the Overseer of the church in Rome. They were to hear both parties, ascertain the facts of the matter and attempt to bring about a reconciliation. Their investigations eventually established the innocence of Caecilian, and two Overseers were despatched to Africa with the declaration that Caecilian had the support of the Catholic Church. When these envoys reached Carthage however, they were disconcerted to find the party opposing Caecilian not in the least abashed by this pronouncement. On the contrary, refusing to retreat from their position, they appealed for the personal intervention of the emperor. Constantine, showing unwearied patience, ordered another, larger commission to meet in Arles, southern Gaul in AD 314. At least thirty-three Overseers were present, and again Caecilian was acquitted and approved. Neither Caecilian nor Felix, they said, had handed over Scriptures to the authorities. For three years, Constantine avoided any official pronouncement in the matter, and Caecilian himself was detained by his own affairs in Rome.

At last, however, the unrest in the churches of Africa grew to such a pitch that Constantine felt compelled to act: in AD 316 he took steps for the legal

[1] See Chapter 17.

enforcement of the decision taken at Arles. The Donatists were threatened with punishment if they persisted, and were told to discontinue their meetings or take the consequences. This served only to boost their sense of injustice, their popularity, and their determination to establish and maintain their own independent churches. The position was now crystal clear: they would never on any account submit to, or compromise with those who had publicly denied Christ and still showed not the slightest remorse for having done so. Many of the Donatists, refusing to bow to the imperial decree, suffered at the hands of the Roman authorities. They were harassed, intimidated and imprisoned. In their new churches there was found once again that stirring atmosphere of energetic devotion and bold defiance which had typified the years of pagan persecution so recently ended.

* * *

As the resolve of the Donatists hardened, they found growing numbers flocking to their churches: poorer people bearing deep-seated grudges against wealthy neighbours; country folk who envied the opulent prosperity of the townsmen; the uneducated, smarting from humiliations received at the hand of the cultured aristocracy, and Imazighen who resented the Roman soldiers strutting through lands which had previously belonged to them. Whole congregations, with their Overseers, abandoned their Catholic connections and came over to the Donatists. They probably found a ready sympathy, too, among the survivors of the Montanist and Novatianist movements.[1] Some of the major landowners had strong Donatist sympathies too, such as Crispus of Calama (Guélma) who rebaptized eighty of his Catholic workers. The support of such influential men emboldened the lesser members of their party, and also provided a degree of protection for them.

The Donatist leaders sensed that the mass of people were behind them. News of their resistance to the rulings of Carthage and Rome had been heard with avid interest by the restless tribes of the inland territories: their cause had rapidly become a popular one. The only fly in the ointment was

[1] For a view of Tertullian as a forerunner of the Donatists, see Frend *TDC* pp.118-124. There were, nonetheless, significant differences between the Donatists, and the Montanists of Tertullian's day. The most obvious is the Donatists' comprehensive adoption of Cyprian's ecclesiastical system, appointing their own Overseers and arranging their own conferences. On the other hand, their powers of survival might be partly attributable to the way they involved the members of their churches in the life of the Spirit, giving them a strong sense of community and personal involvement. This was very much a Montanist emphasis. (See Frend *TDC* p.319.)

the fact that these enthusiastic supporters little knew what the Donatist cause actually stood for – beyond the fact that it was in opposition to Rome.

How could the leaders of the churches possibly teach all these well-wishers the doctrines of the Christian faith? How could they even begin to explain to such numbers the Gospel of salvation through faith in Christ as Redeemer? How could they talk personally with each newcomer to see if he had understood what he had heard? Their attempts to preach the Gospel very likely fell on deaf ears in any case. The people had not come in order to find out how their sins might be forgiven; they wanted only to discuss ways to rid their land of imperial troops and Roman officials. The celebrity of those preachers who fearlessly, and naïvely, spoke out against authority grew in proportion to the feelings of unrest which spread through the valleys and plains of North Africa. Churches which urged independence of Roman control attracted to themselves the belligerent malcontents of each town and village, and, along with them, any who wished to avoid paying their taxes.

It is perhaps ironic that the deepest penetration of the Gospel into inland North Africa probably occurred at this time and in this way. The tragedy is that it was a different, and a very compromised, Gospel which the people heard. There was little in it of love for one's enemies or the blessing which is promised to the peacemakers. The Donatist churches found themselves floundering in what amounted to unprecedented popularity – and utter chaos.

It was not long before they discovered that they had also become the unwilling champions of unruly bands of men who styled themselves the *Agonistae*, or "Militants". Others knew them as the *Circumcellions*, meaning "those who loiter round the farms".[1] The relatively polite battles of words in the halls of Carthage were suddenly compounded in the agricultural countryside by far more vigorous combat with rather heavier weapons. A violent revolt was gathering momentum, involving large numbers of landless labourers, sharecroppers and seasonal agricultural workers, all stirred up by the Circumcellions. They were incensed by ever-increasing taxes levied on the poor, from which the wealthy in one way or another found exemption. They rampaged through the countryside armed with heavy clubs, claiming to be soldiers of Christ, shouting Donatist slogans and terrorizing the rural populace. They looted the meeting places of the Catholics and attacked the leaders of their churches, killing at least one Catholic Overseer. They interfered in private disputes: here demanding

[1] or perhaps "those who loiter round the shrines" – meaning the tombs of the martyrs where they received offerings of food.

the repayment of a debt, there threatening a landowner who had reprimanded a slave.

There was no way for the leaders of the Donatists to restrain these Circumcellions: it was simply their misfortune to find themselves pitching and reeling in the same chaotic boat without any pilot or steersman. Many of the Circumcellions rushed madly into danger, courting injury and death. They indulged in drunken orgies and frenzied dancing at the tombs of the martyrs. Augustine tells us that their battle-cry "Praise be to God!" was more feared than the roar of a lion. Finally the Circumcellions converged on the outskirts of certain towns and set to work to destroy their buildings and massacre their inhabitants, until at last imperial troops were sent against them and order was restored.

Many of the Donatists were far from happy about their new allies. Indeed the Donatists and Circumcellions officially remained two quite separate movements until as late as AD 347. Prior to that, indeed, they had often found themselves on opposite sides. The Donatists for a long time had refused to have Circumcellion graves in the cemeteries attached to their churches. But the Donatist leaders in Numidia put their weight behind the grievances of the Circumcellions in that province, and their counterparts in Carthage were perhaps reluctant to bring about a division within their own ranks by taking a different line. From this point on, the two movements would stand or fall together.

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As a politician, Constantine was bound to favour the Catholic party. They were the conservatives – the upholders of order, of unity, and obedience to authority. The Catholic Overseers were cultured, educated Latin-speakers, protégés of the wealthy landowners and aristocrats who administered the Empire. The Catholics (despite Cyprian's protests) had learned to look increasingly to Rome for spiritual guidance. Emphasizing worldwide unity, their focus was on the welfare of the Empire as a whole rather than the particular requirements or interests of Africa. The Donatists, on the other hand, showed every sign of turbulence. They sprang from the same freethinking, uninhibited tradition as the Montanists and Novatianists who had already proved so difficult to subdue and control. And the Donatists, of course, now had the misfortune to attract the support of that belligerent rabble which was only too obviously terrorizing the countryside. It was a foregone conclusion as to which party Constantine would support; but for all that, he endeavoured to be patient and fair.

It was obvious that his earlier efforts had failed completely to bring about any resolution to the problem: he was clearly perplexed by the whole situation. In AD 317 he wrote again to the Catholic Overseers in North Africa urging them to forbear as far as possible from retaliating to the injuries they had received at the hands of the Circumcellions. In AD 321, hoping that where firm directives had failed, sweet reasonableness would succeed, he granted the Donatists liberty to act according to their own conscience; he begged them to be sensible and seek reconciliation. This merely enabled them to consolidate their position. Their churches were by now well established, increasing rapidly in number and influence: in fact for the next eighty years the Donatists could claim the allegiance of the majority of Christians in North Africa.

The vitality of this movement can only be accounted for by recognizing that, despite the inept arguments of its early leaders and the uncontrolled savagery of its more objectionable partisans, there was indeed a strong party among the Christians of Africa opposed in principle to the authoritarian structure of the Catholic Church and its evident pact with the Roman rulers. Whereas the Catholics spoke the Latin of the soldiers and magistrates, the Donatists were largely Tamazight-speaking: they thought of themselves as Africans rather than Romans.[1] A large dose of nationalistic pride gave flavour to the simmering cauldron, even among those whose first loyalty was to Christ. The Donatists' cry of "What has the emperor to do with the Church?" expressed the feelings of many who had received little but affliction and oppression from the pagan emperors, and who wished now to run their churches free from the heavy hand of the emperor's ecclesiastical hierarchy. The conferences of Catholic Overseers with their high-flown Latin phrases struck no chord in the hearts of men and women who lived close to the soil. The Donatists, on the other hand, exiled from the cities and scattered throughout the countryside, speaking the language of the people around them and sharing their aspirations for freedom, had captured the imagination and sympathy of the farmers and craftsmen amongst whom they found refuge.[2]

[1] "The discovery of large numbers of Libyan and Romano-Libyan inscriptions in Numidia settled the controversy on the language spoken by the Numidian natives in St. Augustine's time in favour of Libyan or proto-Berber." The Donatists certainly used Latin in their conferences and their theological writings, but Frend observes, "There seems little doubt that if Latin was the language of the inscriptions, Berber was used in the Donatist services in the country districts" (Frend *TDC* pp.xiv; 335).

[2] "It seems clear that linguistic and racial feeling were among the many factors that underlay the Donatist schism which racked the Church in North Africa generation after generation and left it hopelessly weakened in the face of its enemies when the day of judgment came upon it" (Neill p.38). "The two submerged elements (Berber and Punic) united to support

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Having in the first instance appealed to the emperor for his judgment against their opponents, and then finding it turned against themselves, the Donatists began more clearly to identify the state as the great adversary, and the state Church as its main instrument of oppression. They turned ever more vehemently against the Catholic body, maintaining that it was a corrupt institution and had forsaken Christ. Many local Christian groups were divided over this issue. The towns and villages of North Africa soon found themselves with both a Donatist and a Catholic church, and an Overseer in each. Those who sided with the Donatists began to regard themselves as the true Church of God, the faithful remnant who had not forsaken the way of truth. They exhorted one another to denounce the hypocrite and the idolater. "Leave them and separate yourselves from them," they quoted from the Scriptures, and "have nothing to do with what is unclean."[1] The Catholics, for their part, had always considered themselves the only true Church.

A traveller arriving in Africa would hardly be able to tell the difference between the two churches whose buildings often stood side by side. They had the same Scriptures, the same form of meeting, the same pattern of leadership. "We are brothers," said Augustine. "We call on the same God; we believe in the same Christ; we hear the same Gospel; we sing the same psalms; we respond with the same Amen; we hear the same Hallelujah; we celebrate the same Easter. Why are you outside the Church whilst I am in it?"[2]

This question puzzled Constantine as much as anyone else. The problem was compounded by the fact that certain properties were claimed by both Catholics and Donatists: buildings had been confiscated and restored more than once according to the fluctuating terms of previous imperial proclamations. Constantine had first attempted to overawe the Donatists by decree; next he had tried a persuasive letter; finally he decided simply to ignore them. His successor, Constans, hoped to bribe them into submission. It was when he saw this emperor's money that Donatus uttered those famous words which became, in effect, the motto of the Donatists, and

the Donatists precisely because the opposite, less rigorous policy was espoused by the local Latin aristocracy and by the Latins in Rome. The Berbers especially were anti-Roman. They had become Christians when Rome was persecuting the Christians; now they supported that branch of Christianity disapproved by Rome" (Bainton p.120).

[1] 2 Cor 6:17 GNB

[2] *Expositions On the Psalms* 55:16 (*NAPNF*) (54:16 in Hamman p.297)

summed up their insistence on the separation between Church and state: "What has the emperor to do with the Church?" The cry was taken up and carried throughout North Africa, and the duty of separating from the Church of the emperor, the Catholic Church, was proclaimed on every side. The Circumcellions seized the opportunity to commit fearful atrocities, and such were their excesses that Donatus himself called for the intervention of the civil power. Unfortunately, the military official who put down the unrest drew no distinction between the Donatists who were probably innocent and the Circumcellions who were conspicuously guilty. The army determined to stamp out the troublemakers and make a public example of any who seemed to be ringleaders, without asking too many questions as to who exactly had done what. Donatus and the other leaders were exiled, despite the gracious efforts of the Catholics to prevent this, and held in custody by the emperor in Rome.

Donatus himself died in exile in AD 355. For forty years he had been the inspiration behind the movement – a great organizer, speaker and writer, and a man of integrity. He was proud, fervent and uncompromising, and he held both himself and others to the highest Christian standards. Augustine always showed the greatest of respect for his opponent, placing him alongside Cyprian as a "precious jewel" in the Church of Christ. His position was given to Parmenian, one of the most capable of his supporters. Parmenian in fact was a foreigner, a Spaniard or Gaul. He too was an able speaker and a prolific writer of controversial pamphlets. In his discussions with the Catholic champion, Optatus of Milevis, there are actually many points on which the disputants were fully agreed. But neither was able to build a lasting settlement on this tentative foundation.

When the pagan Julian succeeded his Christian predecessors as emperor in AD 361, the Donatists in exile appealed to him and obtained leave to return to Africa. Julian, sometimes known as the apostate, had no great respect for the Catholic Church, reproaching it with having abandoned the simple ideals of Christ. Observing that Donatism was the preference of most of his African subjects, he saw no reason to deny them their wish. The Donatist Overseers at once took possession of many of their former church properties and set to work ostentatiously cleaning the buildings with salt and water, applying liberal coatings of whitewash. The Catholics took this as an insult, especially when many of their number were re-baptized as Donatists and several of their Overseers changed sides. The Donatists were rapidly regaining the ground they had lost.

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Up to this point, the Circumcellions had shown themselves little more than malicious trouble-makers and hot-heads. There were stirrings inland, however, which presaged a more concerted attempt at armed rebellion. By AD 365, a large number of tribes had banded together in a general uprising which aimed at nothing less than the expulsion of Roman power from North Africa. Among the insurgents were many Circumcellions who had added to their wooden clubs all manner of knives, spears and hatchets. The unrest continued for the next thirty years. Under the Amazigh leader, Firmus, who claimed for himself the title "Emperor of Africa", the rebels captured the towns of Caesarea (Cherchell) and Icosium (Algiers). Firmus was finally halted, and killed, in AD 375 at Tipasa on the Mediterranean coast due to the spiritual intervention, it was said, of the young girl Salsa, martyred some years previously, whose shrine he had entered. Two years later, the tribes rose a second time under the leadership of Gildo, the brother of Firmus, whom some believed he had betrayed. By cutting the food supplies of the Empire, Gildo threatened to bring Rome to her knees, and at that moment he declared his support for the Donatist struggle against the Catholic Church. Such a declaration, of course, did the movement far more harm than good. The Roman army reinforced its ranks and marched on the rebel encampment. In the ensuing conflict, Gildo and many of his supporters were killed; the rebellion was over.

Superior military force had won the day: the insurgents were beaten back and rapidly subdued throughout the provinces of Proconsular Africa and Mauritania. But Donatism, and the restive factions which had promoted its cause, continued to prevail elsewhere, especially in the rugged country of Numidia. Throughout North Africa as a whole, Donatist sympathizers still greatly outnumbered the Catholics. Jerome, a contemporary of these events, remarked that Donatism was the religion of "nearly all Africa."

These were perilous and threatening times for those trying to govern and administer the southern Mediterranean territories. The new emperor Honorius determined to take steps which would settle the situation once and for all. Edicts were issued enforcing the death penalty for anyone considered guilty of fomenting unrest: to those who had died in the armed turmoil were now added others executed by imperial decree. During the days of the idealistic Constantine, none of the Donatists had been put to death; his hope was always to bring about a reconciliation. Now, however, they began to acquire martyrs for their own cause. The state had taken the side of Christian against Christian, church against church. Believers were dying not for the sake of Christ, but for their own particular faction. And the bloodshed showed no sign of abating.

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It was on to this stage that Augustine stepped, with care and with much thought, as the fourth century passed into the fifth. He had followed the course of events with concern. He himself had a Donatist cousin, and the majority of Christians in his hometown of Hippo were Donatists. He ignored the peripheral confusion of scandals, buildings and personalities, and undertook to write two short books which would bring into the open the real underlying issues. In these he set out his views on the nature of the Church.

His understanding of this subject followed very closely from that of Cyprian, but with certain qualifications. This is typical of the man. He shrank from quick definitions and hasty conclusions. In fact, as Bainton observes, "he had no simple answer for anything." But his great strength was his willingness to talk patiently and amicably with his opponents. His was an iron hand in a velvet glove. His subtle and penetrating mind laid bare the inconsistencies in any argument presented to him, and he instantly drew attention to any verse of Scripture misapplied or taken out of context to justify what it was never intended to justify. In other, previous controversies his patience and courteous attention to detail were such that his baffled antagonists had tended simply to destroy themselves in their frustration. Such was the outcome, too, of Augustine's earlier discussions with the leaders of the Donatists. They were humiliated, whilst the merits of their position were never adequately presented.

From the first they were reluctant to engage in public debate with so formidable an opponent. Augustine had considerable difficulty in pinning them down to a time and place when the points at issue could be fairly discussed. Some of their members, like Cresconius, declared that Augustine's skill in dialectics and rhetoric gave him an unfair advantage. Others, falling back on the original grounds of the schism, simply said, "The children of the martyrs have nothing to say to the children of the traitors."

More than eighty years had now elapsed since Majorinus had been chosen as a rival to Caecilian in Carthage, and few men living could recall that time. Fewer still could remember as far back as the persecutions when books were alleged to have been betrayed to the pagan authorities. Majorinus had been replaced by Donatus; he had passed on, and now his successor had given way to another. The Donatists were perplexed, too, by the fact that some of their number had split off and appointed a different Overseer in Carthage. This meant that there were now three men claiming that position. The confusion was further compounded when the Donatist

churches in the province of Mauritania announced that they had separated themselves from those in the other provinces.

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The Donatist ranks were divided, but zeal for their cause had by no means abated. They persisted in recalling the incidents of the persecution as though they had occurred recently. All that had happened since seemed to them merely an aggravation of the first offence. For them, indeed, the accession of Constantine did not represent the epoch of change, the triumph of the Church, which it was to Christians in the rest of the world. Constantine himself had risen against them, and his successors were no better in their estimation than the pagan emperors of the past.

By this time the Donatists had manoeuvred themselves into a corner from which they could not easily extricate themselves. Their position was an indefensible one for any Christian to be in, and many of them realized it. Their earliest leaders had made two profound and irrevocable mistakes. Firstly, they had built their case on what one man, Caecilian, was alleged to have done, and secondly, they had accepted into their ranks large numbers of people whose motives were political rather than spiritual. They had become embroiled, first, in a sour conflict of personalities, and then in a political chaos which they had no power to control. They had failed to press firmly for an amicable agreement on the principles of freedom and holiness in the churches, and found themselves instead the unwilling figureheads of what had become a social and economic revolt.

Would it have helped if Donatus and the other early leaders had publicly dissociated themselves from the Circumcellions, expressing in clear terms their opposition to violence? Perhaps it would; but it may be that the leaders of the Donatist churches were reluctant to drive any wedge of animosity between themselves and the turbulent mob, who might at any moment swing from enthusiastic support to vindictive reprisal. The Donatists knew themselves to be sitting on a political powder keg which was already fizzing and liable to explode at any moment.

Nevertheless, among the Donatists there were some, of whom the gifted teacher Tyconius was representative, who were decidedly uncomfortable about the state of hostility into which their colleagues had slipped. They did not like the harshness with which the leaders of their group spoke to their opponents. Faithfulness and integrity, they agreed, were values to be upheld by all, but love was, or should be, the crowning virtue and the mark of the Christian. "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with

gentleness."[1] Were not some of their party becoming mere Pharisees, fighting for the letter of the Law with a ferocity that denied its spirit? It was difficult to see how a movement which pressed for purity and holiness in the church could so easily tolerate violence and disputation in its dealings with those outside.

Since the beginning of the controversy, there had been a far stricter discipline, and a more charitable spirit, among the Catholics than among their opponents, and many in the Donatist camp were profoundly unhappy with the way the situation had developed. What had happened, they asked themselves? What were they thinking of? Was the cause of Christ to be advanced by the clash of weapons, and bolstered by the war cries of armed insurgents? Where was the Gospel of peace in all this turmoil? "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels," said the apostle, "but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."[2] But the few voices raised in protest found themselves shouted down, lost amidst the resounding gongs and clashing cymbals. They were out of step with the urgent, vehement feelings of the restless multitude. Gradually, one by one, they slipped quietly away, leaving the ranks of those they could no longer support.

It was time, thought Augustine, to reach a compromise. In AD 393 a preliminary conference was arranged in Hippo. In fact, a total of eighteen conferences were held between that year and AD 419, in which hardly any point of doctrine or discipline was left untouched. From beginning to end, Augustine pressed his points home firmly and courteously, still hoping to reach amicable concord with the leaders of the Donatists. He was willing to make concessions, such as recognizing their Overseers and the disciplines imposed on their own members, and he urged the Roman authorities not to treat them harshly; he welcomed any of their number who wished to join the Catholics. This pleasing tolerance, allied to the greater purity and holiness now manifest in the Catholic Church, began to win over some of those who, while accepting the justice of many of the early Donatists' claims, could not stomach the uncouth savagery of their later, less attractive recruits.

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[1] 2 Tim 2:24-25 RSV
[2] 1 Cor 13:1-3

The Donatists, at the start of the controversy, had the benefit of a valid and reasonable point of view with a long and respectable pedigree. They differed little from the Montanists and Novatianists in seeing the Church as the community of God's people dwelling in the world, but distinct from it. Membership of the churches, they believed, should be restricted to true and sincere Christians. They welcomed outsiders who wished to join them but insisted that newcomers demonstrate the reality of their faith – including their determination to stand by it in time of persecution – before they could participate fully in the life and worship of the Christian community. The second principle which they held dear was that of independence. They wished their churches to be free of state control and the dominance of the self-perpetuating Catholic hierarchy which increasingly concentrated its authority in Rome.[1]

It is clear that these were fair and defensible points: Tertullian and Cyprian had both held much the same position. It should also be remembered that the Donatists, like the Montanists and Novatianists, were impeccably sound with regard to their teaching on the deity and the atonement of Christ – doctrines which fell under serious and prolonged attack in other parts of the Empire. They also opposed such Catholic innovations as monasticism which had no scriptural foundation. The Donatists evidently started life as true evangelical Christians. They became the unfortunate victims of overbearing ecclesiastical ambition, sacrificed to the rigid political requirements of the Empire, and they have been the butt of much prejudiced disparagement ever since.[2] Their early leaders, unfortunately, could neither set the pace nor the tone of their campaign, and the behaviour of their wilder partisans was destined to leave a hideous stain on what had started life as a clean and decent garment. Sadly, the stain would never come out: the garment was irretrievably soiled.

[1] "The Donatists thought of themselves as a group which existed to preserve and protect an alternative to the society around them. They felt their identity constantly to be threatened: first by persecution, later, by compromise... The Catholicism of Augustine, by contrast, reflects the attitude of a group confident of its powers to absorb the world without losing its identity... poised, ready to fulfil what it considered its historic mission, to dominate, to absorb, to lead a whole Empire" (Brown p.214).
[2] See Frend *TDC* pp.128-129, 319. Even Augustine, when he had the opportunity to talk with his opponents personally, found some worthy of his sincere respect. On one occasion, in 397, he and his friend Alypius were able to visit Fortunius, the elderly Donatist Overseer in Thubursicum Bure (Teboursouk). "They were welcomed by an excited crowd, and the two rivals parted on good terms; and Augustine admitted that, 'in my opinion, you will have difficulty in finding among your bishops another whose judgment and feelings are so sound as we have seen that old man's to be'" (Brown p.230).

For Catholic documents relating to the Donatist controversy see *NAPNF* Series 1, Vol.IV. Some Donatist writings (accounts of the martyrs) are available in Tilley. Secondary sources include Frend *TDC* (many references); Brown (especially chaps.19 & 28); Lloyd pp.206-223; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.III (many references); Foakes-Jackson pp.288-295, 496-502.

20. Trauma and Tragedy

The Donatist controversy showed every sign of dragging on for the rest of the century, and beyond. There seemed no real point of agreement, and no basis for compromise. The Donatists were not willing to be part of the Catholic Church, and the Catholics were not content to let them be separate. The Donatists would not accept those alleged to be traitors, and the Catholics would not renounce them.

The imperial government was preoccupied with its own troubles, following the sack of Rome in AD 410, but events in Africa began to move swiftly towards a climax when the Catholic Overseers sent a strong delegation to the emperor Honorius complaining bitterly about the freedom allowed to the Donatists in Africa. In the year 411 the emperor agreed to summon representatives to a special conference in order to seek some final solution to the problem. The sessions were to be held under the presidency of Marcellinus, proconsul of Africa, a man whose Christian virtues are commended by both Augustine and Jerome. The Donatists were promised the suspension of all previous penal measures during the conference, and the liberty to return home in safety, whatever might be the result. But they were warned that a refusal to participate would result in legal steps to enforce their conformity.

This, of course, obliged the Donatists to attend, whether they wished to or not. At the end of May that year, a company of 279 Donatist Overseers entered the city together, and there eventually assembled to meet them a total of 286 Overseers from the Catholic party. They had travelled to Carthage from as far away as Tangier in the west and Tripoli to the east. On the first of June they took their places in the large hall designated for the occasion and the conference began, the largest ever in Africa. The Donatists had an able leader in Petilian, the Overseer of their church in Cirta (Constantine), who had formerly been an eminent advocate. Against him, the Catholics had Augustine, Overseer of the church in Hippo. At the age of fifty eight he was in his prime, an experienced public speaker and a daunting adversary.

The conference started ominously for the Donatists. Marcellinus opened the proceedings by reading out a long imperial pronouncement. This defined the aim of the conference: “to confirm the Catholic faith”, and described the Donatists as “those who have discoloured Africa with vain error and superstitious dissension.” Much time was wasted in preliminary wrangling as to the terms of the debate. Was it to be an assembly of Overseers discussing theological issues, or was it a legal tribunal convened

in order to hear and ratify Catholic accusations against the Donatists and pass sentence upon them? Considerable discussion revolved around the slight disparity of numbers: the Catholics had sent out for twenty more Overseers so that they might not be in the minority, and the Donatists alleged that they were still the majority if their absent members were counted. The identity of all the participants had then to be proved, amidst mutual recriminations. At length seven Overseers were chosen on each side to represent their respective parties.

Both sides, however, continued to raise objections. Marcellinus proposed that if the Donatists took exception to him as a judge, they should themselves nominate another of equal rank to be associated with him. They declined to avail themselves of the offer, saying that they had not asked for the first judge, nor would they ask for a second. When Marcellinus asked the Donatists to be seated they refused because, they said, they were forbidden by the Scriptures to sit with the ungodly, whereupon Marcellinus ordered his own chair to be removed and he himself remained standing. When Augustine courteously spoke of the Donatists as "brothers" they would not accept the friendly overture, saying that there was no brotherhood between themselves and the wicked. Despite these and similar delays which consumed the first two days, the conference began in earnest on the third day, the chief speakers being Augustine on behalf of the Catholics and Petilian for the Donatists.

Feelings were running high. Petilian, in fact, won all the opening moves. He was anxious to steer the discussion away from the simple case of Caecilian, which had already been decided against his party by Constantine: he knew that Marcellinus was duty bound to uphold previous imperial legislation. Instead of this, Petilian shrewdly forced the burden of proof back on the Catholics, for if they were seeking to pass judgment on the Donatists in the name of the emperor, they would have to demonstrate that they were the true Church of Christ in Africa with a right to condemn their opponents. "At a stroke, the conference became a general debate on the nature of the true Church: and for this debate, the Donatists had prepared an impressive manifesto."[1] The discussion extended through three sessions on three separate days; for two and a half of these, the case of Caecilian was avoided, and on the subject of the Church the Donatists clearly had the better of their opponents.

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[1] Brown p.332

As to the means of determining doctrine and practice, the conference of 411 at least succeeded in realizing, at its outset, one great achievement: it marked the acceptance by both parties of the supreme authority of Scripture as the definitive guide for matters of belief and practice in the churches. The Scriptures had been quoted extensively in previous controversies, but it was at this time that the distinction was finally drawn between the canonical books of the New Testament, as we now have them, and the other early Christian writings. It was to the New Testament, thus clearly defined, that Augustine and Petilian appealed in support of their respective positions. The Donatists had wished to introduce into the dispute the rulings of their own conferences, and the visions and sayings – confirmed by alleged miracles – of their own prophets and martyrs, and the Catholics too had pronouncements from their own conferences and from Overseers in other parts of the world. But there was no common ground for agreement to be derived from these doubtful and disputed sources. Eventually it was decided, not without protest, to let the question stand or fall by the testimony of holy Scripture alone.

Both sides were agreed to describe the Church of Christ as "the holy catholic Church". The Donatists, however, insisted on the note of holiness as the supreme essential whilst the Catholics emphasized catholicity, or universality, laying less emphasis on visible holiness. The chief argument of the Catholics was the undeniable fact that the Donatists had separated themselves from other Christians. Christ, they said, desired his Church to be one. Yes indeed, replied the Donatists, but his Church is to be holy as he is holy. Their rallying cry was the apostolic command to "Drive out the wicked person from among you!"[1] which they applied to Caecilian and all who supported him. Augustine pointed out that such disciplinary action was the responsibility of the officially appointed leaders of the Church, not that of divisive factions within it. The Donatist reply was that, on those terms, men of Caecilian's stamp should have been excluded from the Church, not appointed as its Overseers. The Catholic Church, they said, had failed to exercise the discipline of which Paul spoke. Having shirked its divine responsibility and disobeyed the word of God it had forfeited the respect and allegiance of all true Christians. They quoted the words of Christ: "I am the true Vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit... If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers."[2] Caecilian, they added, was such a branch, cut off from Christ along with all who supported him. As for

[1] 1 Cor 5:13 RSV
[2] John 15:1-6

themselves, they had remained in the Vine – the living Church of Peter, not the fallen Church of Judas.

The Donatists, in fact, claimed that they, rather than the Catholics, were the true heirs of Cyprian. Had not Cyprian accepted martyrdom rather than compromise with the world? The true Church, they said, is that which endures persecution, not that which persecutes. The Donatists, indeed, had always regarded themselves as the legitimate African representatives of the universal, or "catholic", Church. Augustine asked whether the Donatists, confined to one continent, could be considered the true Church of Christ in Africa, when all the world recognized their opponents as such. The Donatists replied that geographical limits meant nothing: the Son of God came to earth and dwelt in one small country, and during his ministry had even fewer followers than they did. They added that, on moral issues, minorities are usually right, for the silent majority inevitably takes the broad road leading to destruction.

The Donatists saw themselves as the godly remnant, the pure Church which had not quenched the Spirit of God, and whose prayers were heard by him. They alone had been concerned for holiness; they alone had shunned the sins and transgressions that would alienate man from God. Petilian quoted from the Old Testament prophets, showing how often God had closed his ears to his chosen people because of their wickedness, and promised salvation to a godly remnant separating itself from the corrupt mass of the unfaithful.[1] He quoted Christ's words: "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."[2] Augustine denied the applicability of these verses to the matter under discussion.

Augustine, for his part, would go a long way for the sake of peace, but even he would not concede principles which he held dear.[3] He believed that the Donatists' conception of the Church was an erroneous one, and that they confused the Church Militant on earth with the Church Triumphant in heaven. The Church on earth would always be like Noah's Ark, he said – a

[1] Brown p.218
[2] Matt 7:14 RSV
[3] For Augustine, the terms Christianity and Catholicism had probably always been synonymous. He had grown up in the small town of Thagaste which, unlike many others, was largely united in the Catholic cause; his mother was emphatically loyal to the Catholic Church. Converted in Europe, Augustine then moved exclusively in the exalted ecclesiastical and court circles of Milan where Catholic Christianity was flourishing, and the Church visibly united against pagan opponents – the Latin intellectuals, Neoplatonist philosophers and Manicheans of Europe. Returning to Africa in AD 388, he was essentially ignorant of African Donatism. He was probably surprised by the strength of its support, and perplexed to find the Catholics in Hippo a weak and declining minority. His background was such that it would never have occurred to him to become a Donatist himself.

refuge for the weak and needy. Only in heaven would it be pure and spotless. As long as the world endures, the Church would have unworthy members who will finally be excluded only at the Last Judgment. In the meantime, it was not for any man to judge his brother. Anyone who abandoned the Church because he found its members unworthy, was himself guilty of a greater sin than theirs – the sin of divisiveness, which is an offence against Love.

He referred to the famous parable of the weeds, or tares. The Church, said Augustine, will contain both wheat and weeds: that is, both good people and bad. "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" enquired the workers in the parable. "No," replied the master. "Let the wheat and the weeds both grow together until harvest."[1] The harvest would not take place until the Day of Judgment; the godly and the ungodly would not be separated until then. Next Augustine quoted the parable about the fishing net. The Church, he said, is like a net, thrown into the sea by the fishermen, which catches fish, some good for food and some worthless. But the fish are not sorted until "the end of the age" when "the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good."[2] The Church, said Augustine, is bound to contain weeds amidst the wheat, bad fish along with the good. Her task is not to judge between one and another but to teach and encourage all, and to work for the improvement of the weak, the erring and the ignorant.

It was clear to the Donatists, however, that these parables were not describing the Church at all. According to the explanation of Christ himself, the wheat and weeds are growing not in the Church but in the world; the fish are caught not from the Church but from the world. "The field is the world", said Jesus quite explicitly. The good seed and the tares are growing up together in the towns and villages, not in the assemblies of the Christians. The good and bad fish are gathered up not from the churches but from the streets and markets where they will mingle together until the end of the age. Neither of these parables could possibly refer to good and bad mixed promiscuously in the Church for there was no Church at the time when Christ spoke. The parables described the Kingdom of God, which is not at all the same thing as the Christian Church. Augustine's reply was simply to assert that the parables referred to the Church.

Augustine had previously written a careful refutation of the Donatists' attitude to the sacraments. They believed that the ceremony of baptism or the Lord's Supper administered by an unworthy man would be devoid of the blessing of God. A false Overseer, they argued, like a false prophet or a false teacher, could only lead God's people astray; he could not minister

[1] Matt 13:24-30 GNB
[2] Matt 13:47-50 GNB

blessing to them.[1] Augustine did not agree. The true administrator of the sacraments, he said, is Christ himself. The Overseer is merely an agent through whom Christ chooses to work. The validity of the sacraments cannot be destroyed by his character, any more than the rays of the sun become impure by shining through an open sewer.[2] On this principle, even if it were proved that Caecilian had betrayed Scriptures into the hands of the infidel, and even if he had committed worse offences, the sacraments received at his hand were perfectly valid because he was the person chosen by the Catholic Church – and therefore by Christ – to be Overseer in Carthage. But, added Augustine, sacraments can only be of benefit to a Christian who is a member of the true Church, that is the Catholic Church. If he has separated himself from the Church, he cannot receive the blessing of Christ. The Donatists, of course, would not agree that the Catholic Church was the only true Church, nor that its sacraments were automatically efficacious. Augustine's interpretation of Scripture had failed to convince them.

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It was in the final session, however, that Augustine came into his own. He was determined, now, to force a decision on the clear-cut issue of Caecilian's condemnation. Had that Overseer betrayed the faith and corrupted the Catholic Church in Africa, or had he not? On the question of Caecilian's faults, the Donatists were on shakier ground. Petilian received decidedly the worst of his exchange with Augustine on this point, sinking finally to a petty personal criticism of Augustine's misspent youth, with veiled hints that he was still at heart a Manichean. Augustine frankly admitted the sins he had committed before his conversion, confessing that but for the grace of God he would have been without hope. His blameless moral reputation and his well-known theological writings were sufficient answer to the other insinuations.

Petilian then asked the more pertinent question: why the Catholics should wish to use force to put down those who dissented from their point of view or resisted their authority. Augustine's views on the subject of legal coercion had undergone a change around the year 408. Formerly he had wished to rely only on the influence of persuasion. "I would have no man

[1] Cyprian had earlier said the same thing. Augustine took the same position as Stephen, Overseer in Rome, on this issue, believing the "sacrament" to be effective irrespective of the character of those who administered and received it. See Chapter 15.
[2] *De Baptismo* 4:16-18

compelled to believe against his will," he had said.[1] But even his long patience had finally been exhausted by the Donatists' continual refusal to be persuaded. What was more, Augustine had seen for himself that many had latterly been induced to return to the Catholic fold simply by the threat of punishment. In his own town of Hippo, a Catholic minority was converted into a majority by such methods. He began to feel that the end justified the means as far as the use of force went. He tried to find Scriptural justification for this, answering Petilian with words quoted out of context from another parable of Jesus: "Compel them to come in!"[2] Although he never advocated violence, he began to speak in favour of imprisonment and the confiscation of property as a valid means of driving the Donatists into the Catholic Church. He pointed with approval to the recent laws imposing the death penalty for pagans practising sorcery and idolatry: the Donatists themselves, apparently, had never thought to dispute those laws. If conformity could be imposed by force outside the Christian community, could such methods not be justified within it?

Augustine was not a harsh or vindictive man. He was strongly opposed to the common use of torture in criminal proceedings: it caused innocent people to confess to acts they had not committed, and left them maimed. He did not, like some other Catholics such as Optatus of Milevis, advocate the death penalty for heresy. He might have risen above legal expedients altogether, but even he had been worn down by the long years of conflict; now he saw no other way to restore order. Despairing of winning the Donatists over by force of argument, he turned to the force of law. Reluctantly he had recognized the sad fact that a state Church – or any other state religion for that matter – can only ensure conformity to its practices and obedience to its officials by the threat, and if necessary the use, of physical coercion.

Looking back we can see all too clearly how the spirit of the Roman Empire had crept into the Catholic Church: they had joined forces in their design to rule the world. The Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, the secular authority and the religious authority – the two vines, intertwining, found support in one another, and at the conference of 411 we see the firstfruits of their union. Sadly, the use of political power to enforce conformity has typified the subsequent course of the Catholic Church, throughout the world and down the centuries: its leaders have repeatedly justified policies of coercion with the very arguments that Augustine introduced at this conference. It is a tragedy that such a charitable man should set in motion so dark and wretched a history, but the forces of

[1] quoted in Foakes-Jackson p.500
[2] Luke 14:23 AV

human nature and the requirements of worldly politics were too strong even for him.[1]

Marcellinus, who until then had stood aloof, now took the bit between his teeth. He brushed aside demands for a decision on the nature of the Church, and pressed judgment against the Donatists on the question of Caecilian. He had responded to Augustine's restrained and persuasive courtesy. But even if Marcellinus had not actually arrived at the conference convinced that for the good of the Empire the Catholic party must win, this judgment must surely have hardened in his mind as a consequence of the rude and foolishly offensive behaviour of the increasingly frustrated Donatist representatives. They, for their part, were allowed to return home unmolested, and a space of time was given for them to consider whether they would accept the simple terms offered to them: they could retain their churches, buildings and Overseers if they would rejoin the Catholic Church, accept its doctrines and submit to its decrees. But in case of refusal they were to suffer the utmost rigour of the law.

As they left the conference, the Donatists claimed, with pathetic optimism, that the debate had gone in their favour. They appealed again to the emperor – without success. In the following year, AD 412, an edict was issued imposing heavy fines upon all who engaged in Christian activities outside of the official Catholic Church. The poor who could not pay the fine were to be beaten; masters were ordered to force their slaves into conformity. Overseers and other Donatist leaders were to be banished, their lands and places of worship confiscated. Anyone found sheltering them would suffer severe penalties. And as if this were not rigorous enough, further legislation was added two years later depriving them of civil rights.

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Was the defeat of the Donatists a personal triumph for Augustine? Was his influence in the controversy decisive? Probably not: their overthrow had been inevitable from an early stage. Augustine did no more than tip a balance which was already falling against them. Donatism declined rapidly from this point onwards, not merely on account of the imperial decrees but because the whole movement had been irretrievably discredited. Many sympathizers had already returned to the Catholic Church prior to the conference of 411, but for others, these final prods from the imperial goad persuaded them to take the decision which they had long foreseen in any

[1] Augustine would have been horrified by the subsequent atrocities of the Medieval inquisition and the Crusades. As we have seen, he abhorred violence and bloodshed of any sort.

case. The wiser and more Christlike of the Donatists had grown ever more disillusioned with the failure of their leaders either to exert some control over the Circumcellions or to dissociate their churches from that unruly company altogether. There were few real Christians who could stomach such atrocities any longer.

The new laws were enforced with severity, but their blow fell only on the last expiring remnant of what had once been a movement embracing the majority of Christians in North Africa. The disintegration of the Empire after the sack of Rome in AD 410, did not engender any revival of Donatism. Augustine had one further, fruitless, public debate with their surviving Overseers in AD 418 in Caesarea (Cherchell), but as a movement it was dead. The story of the Donatists is not an edifying one; in many respects it is a very sad one, but it is deeply instructive, and therein lies its value.

The Catholics, for their part, did not have long to enjoy their victory. Their churches, along with the few remaining Donatist communities, succumbed shortly afterwards to the Vandal invaders. Apart from a brief Donatist revival two hundred years later, in the sixth century, nothing more is heard of them. They never acquired a following in any other part of the world. Resisting overtures from the various heretical groups of Europe and Asia, they ended as they had begun: a local movement, confined to Africa, but inseparably tied up with the triumphant rise and the tragic fall of the Church on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. They represent the last and greatest embodiment of that recurring pattern which so strikingly marks the history of Christianity in North Africa: the disintegration of Christian communities in time of peace which had flourished in the days of affliction. The disputes in the aftermath of persecution always caused more harm to the Church than the persecution itself.

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The Donatists have not proved popular with Church historians. Although they outnumbered the Catholics from an early stage in the controversy and continued to do so until the very end, they wrote very little about it; at least, very little has been preserved. We can barely guess at the hopes and ideals of their more balanced and moderate members: for the most part these were neither great writers nor eloquent speakers, and they were quickly overshadowed by their more turbulent colleagues. It is often the fate of the reasonable man to be trodden underfoot by the extremist: he has no heart for struggles and disputations, and eventually retires from the fray, sadder and wiser. The documents which have come down to us from this period

were written by imperial officials or by members of the Catholic party. Most of the more recent commentary on the controversy has likewise been the work of historians with a decidedly Catholic or Episcopalian bent. So we do not often consider the other side of the story, as it was seen from the Donatist camp.

The Donatists, moreover, have appeared ever since in a doubly bad light for we find them distinctly reluctant to attend conferences; they do not wish to compromise, and they resist all overtures of friendship. In too swiftly condemning them for this, however, we run the risk of overlooking the fact that conferences, compromise and friendship were the design of the Catholics whose very aim was reconciliation and unity. The Donatists simply desired to be left in peace, to establish their own churches along their own lines; they had nothing to gain from conferences or compromises. They had no great ambitions to influence, or gain control of the Catholic Church; they only wished to be free of it. The fact that they agreed to participate in the repeated conferences arranged by the Catholics, knowing that in Augustine they had an opponent whose intellectual and rhetorical power they could not match, is a sign of grace on their part, and an indication that they were not entirely the bigoted pugilists they have sometimes been taken for. They attended perhaps in order to show the number and strength of their following, perhaps in order to explain and win some sympathy for their position, perhaps because they were legally obliged to participate, but they certainly did not attend in order to coerce the Catholics as the Catholics wished to coerce them.

The criticisms levelled at the Donatists have derived almost entirely from the simple fact that they regarded themselves as separate from the Catholic Church. With hindsight we surely cannot regard this as so very grave an error, if it be an error at all. It certainly should not blind us to the fact that initially their desire was not to divide the Christian community but rather to hold it to higher standards of faith and holiness. When they met with no sympathy or desire for reform, their only recourse was to establish churches of their own, according to the leading of their conscience. In this they resemble the Hussites, the Waldensians, and the Lutherans in Europe. And if there is a parallel between the Donatists and the Lutherans – both forced to leave a Church they wished to reform – perhaps there is also one between Augustine and Erasmus who each attempted to inspire from within the Catholic Church a counter-reformation which would do away with the abuses lying at the heart of the division. Luther, like Donatus, left the Catholic Church because for him the principle of visible holiness was of greater importance than that of visible unity. Augustine, like Erasmus,

attempted patiently to heal the breach because he felt that the principle of visible unity overrode that of visible holiness.

* * *

Augustine won the formal debate, but he had by no means won the heart of the North African people. The victory gained at the conference had to be legislated by force. It is not the logic of a position which generally convinces the mass of people, especially not in North Africa. It is the personal charisma, the *baraka* of the man who stands among them which sways them this way or that. The Donatists failed, in the end, largely because they had no leader able to hold them within the limits of that love and patience which are the hallmark of the true Christian, and which ensure the blessing of God. After the death of Donatus there was no-one among them who could exert that kind of magnetic influence for good over his fellows. There was no leader with the moral and intellectual stature of a man like Tertullian. That great North African would have sympathized with the early aims of the Donatists, but he would surely have steered them away from their rash compact with political factions. Tertullian might not have matched Augustine's subtlety in debate, but his penetrating mind would at least have foreseen some of the dangers which lay ahead. He would have urged the Donatists to behave with dignity and forbearance, telling them that they must earn the respect of others, and then reminding the watching world that they had earned it. Tertullian always pointed to the irreproachable behaviour of the Christian men and women of his own day, and he would have emphasized that they wished no harm, but simply to worship and organize their churches independently of imperial and ecclesiastical constraints. Tertullian would not have desired to re-unite the Donatists and the Catholics – his view of the Church and the churches did not require submission to an organization – but he would have urged all who love Christ to love one another, and he would have spurned any thought of alliance with the violent and profane. A unity imposed by force will always be a precarious and unpopular one. Tertullian's position was clear: if a man believed in Christ, he was a beloved brother; if he did not, he was a needy neighbour. If a person knew the Gospel, he was a sower; if he did not, he was a field to be sown. There was no place in this simple scheme for a Christian cause espoused by pagan ruffians.

It is perhaps understandable that the Donatists relished their early popularity, although little comprehending the reasons which lay behind it. For a time they rode jubilantly on the crest of the wave: they could count their supporters in thousands against the Catholics' hundreds. But this

short-sighted political entanglement was ultimately the cause of their downfall. The Donatists became so identified with the Circumcellions, in the eyes of the state and of everyone else, that they had no hope of surviving the universal opprobrium which fell on the burners of farms and plunderers of houses and church properties. Involvement with popular uprisings is always fraught with the most hazardous of perils. Embittered expressions of hostility, especially when associated with acts of violence, cannot ever be reconciled with the teachings of Christ and his apostles. "Love your enemies," said Jesus. "Do good to those who hate you."[1]

The Church is called neither to be a tool of the state nor a thorn in its side. Christians are to be peaceable and respectful members of society. They are not fighting to gain anything on this earth: they are pilgrims and strangers here, looking to inherit a better world in the hereafter, and doing whatever good they can in the short time granted to them before they depart. "My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight."[2] His disciples will keep clear of aggressive factions and political disputations. They will watch and pray while the conflict rages for power and privilege, and then steal on to the deserted field of battle when the tumult ceases and bind up the wounds of the fallen. The servants of Christ will gather a church together from the burnt-out cinders which remain, and breathe fresh life into them. That path requires more courage, and more patience, and much more love than the hasty leap into the open arms of aggression which ends all too often in the gory mire of bloodshed, hatred and death.

But the greatest misfortune of the Donatists was that, from the first, they had built their case on a weak and ill-considered foundation. They pressed for the condemnation of Caecilian, and when no grounds could be found for this, they were left in hopeless disarray. And that was not at all the real point at issue: it mattered little what one man had, or had not, done. The important question was the much wider one of whether the churches must submit to the rule of the Catholic organization with its tolerant acceptance of the lapsed and the sinful, or whether the churches should be free to organize themselves in the way they wished, as communities of committed believers. Petilian tried to shift the focus in this direction at the conference of 411, but by then it was too late.

This question re-emerged some twelve centuries later, in the long strife between the state churches and the Nonconformists of Europe. The eventual outcome there was a much happier one: experience had shown that peace could only come with freedom. The passage of time had made it apparent to

[1] Luke 6:27
[2] John 18:36 AV

all parties that the mutual respect which Christian people should show to one another will only blossom when we can agree to allow each person to worship as he chooses, and each church to organize itself as it feels led by God.[1]

In the Donatist controversy, as we find so often in history, events grind slowly but surely towards an inevitable conclusion. Given a sincere but sadly naïve Christian emperor, an anxiously assertive state Church, a restive populace, and a cry for freedom running through Christian and pagan communities alike, the forces making for discord were immense. Moreover, all the competitors in the race were running blind: none had ever handled a situation like this before. They did not have the advantage of hindsight, nor the benefit of lessons that we have learned from subsequent centuries of history. They were caught up in human forces stronger than the best of them, and complexities beyond the understanding of the wisest. Resenting and condemning one another, they were all ultimately subject, as it seems, to the judgment of God which fell deservedly upon a movement that went astray and a Church conformed to the world.

As for Augustine, he moves through the story with grace and charm – in some respects perhaps right, in other ways probably wrong – yet for all that, rising head and shoulders above his contemporaries. And we believe that God was working all things together for good with those who truly loved him – those who were called according to his purpose.[2]

[1] Ambrose of Milan (c.340-397) had already recognized this truth, accepting that individual local churches might quite justifiably retain their own particular customs, so long as these did not conflict with scriptural principles. In Rome, for example, the Christians fasted on Saturdays; in Milan, less than 500 km distant, they did not. Ambrose said, "When I go to Rome, I also fast on Saturday: when here, I do not." And his sensible advice was: "If you go to any church, observe the local custom" (Brown p.87).

Some years earlier (c.150), Polycarp had visited Rome and found that Easter celebrations were held there on a different day from the day observed in Smyrna. He had some discussion with Anicetus, the Overseer in Rome, but Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp) wrote that, "they quickly came to a peaceable understanding about this matter, having no love for mutual disputes." Schaff comments on Irenaeus' account of these events: "This letter proves that the Christians of the days of Polycarp knew how to keep the unity of the Spirit without uniformity of rites and ceremonies" (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.213-214).

[2] referring to Rom 8:28

21. Despair and Deliverance

"The life of Augustine has a special appeal because he was a great sinner who became a great saint, and greatness is all the more admirable if it is achieved against the odds."[1] Augustine, as a young man, showed few signs of intellectual greatness and none of spiritual worth. In the *Confessions*, that most readable of early books, he shows us not only the sins of his past but also the attitudes and misconceptions that gave rise to them, and which dominated his character and his conduct until the age of thirty-two. Even after he had become convinced of the truth of Christianity, he was held back from following it by the immoral ties which bound him to his mistress. But this was not common knowledge. By the time he came to write his *Confessions*, at the age of about forty-three, the Christian community had long esteemed him as a great and a good man, and one of his main reasons for writing his autobiography was to persuade his admirers that any good qualities he might have were his only by the grace of God who had saved him so often from himself. Augustine tells us much about his own thoughts and feelings, but as he looks inwards he sees nothing so much as his utter dependence on the God who made, sought and saved him.

Aurelius Augustinus was a provincial country boy. He was born in the year 354, in the inland hill town of Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras), a crossroads and market place in the province of Numidia to the south of modern Annaba. He had at least one brother and two sisters. His father, Patricius, was a small landowner with an official post in the local government – a pagan, but tolerant of the Christian faith practised by his wife. He seems to have had no objection to his son learning the tenets of the faith while still a child. In fact, for many years, the young Augustine was a regular attender at the classes given for boys in Thagaste, but he gave little promise then of what he was later to become. His school days, he tells us, were a miserable experience, valuable only as a training for the conflicts, injustices and disappointments of adult life.[2] He disliked the drudgery of study, especially foreign languages such as Greek. But the young Augustine was a sensitive and thoughtful boy, and an avid reader of whatever books chanced to come his way. He knew Latin from childhood for this was the language spoken at home.

A good deal of his time was spent in idleness. Free of any firm control from his father, he did much as he pleased. He wandered around with other

[1] Pine-Coffin, intro. to *Confessions* p.11
[2] Chadwick p.7

boys of his own age, and it was their influence, he tells us, that led him to rob an orchard of unripe, green pears. "Why did I do it?" he asks himself: he would certainly not have stolen the worthless fruit had he been alone. It was the natural perversity of human nature which led him astray, spurred on by the bravado of the gang. He was a sociable lad, and popular with his peers, but the desire to impress others was often his undoing. Later, in adolescence, simply to win the admiration of his companions, he used to boast of sins which he had not even committed. It was probably through the influence and example of these friends that he became a regular spectator at the obscene performances of the theatre, and learned to enjoy the cruel sports of the arena. The influence of his companions strove with that of his mother, Monica, in the heart of the young Augustine.

Augustine's mother was a Christian. Much of her childhood had been spent in the company of a devoted servant of the family, a woman of advanced years, who had lived with Monica's parents all her life; she taught the girl many things about the way of Christ. Monica's parents, however, chose for her a pagan husband. Monica never ceased to pray for the conversion of Patricius and, despite his unfaithfulness to her, she endeavoured by her loving, gracious loyalty to win him to the truth. She was one who knew the value of that advice given by the apostle Peter: "You wives must submit to your husbands, so that if any of them do not believe God's word, your conduct will win them over to believe. It will not be necessary for you to say a word, because they will see how pure and reverent your conduct is."[1] She said little to him about the way of Christ, but showed much by the way she lived. Augustine tells us that his father was a kind man, but rather hot-tempered: "My mother knew better than to say or do anything to resist him when he was angry. If his anger was unreasonable, she used to wait until he was calm and composed and then took the opportunity of explaining what she had done."[2] She would not allow other women to gossip and complain about their own husbands in her presence, and by her kind sympathy she was often able to put an end to quarrels which arose among the women themselves; she did her best to help each understand the other's point of view.

Augustine's father died when the boy was seventeen, but the sadness of parting was sweetened by the fruit of Monica's forbearing perseverance. Patricius "in the very last days of his life on earth" had become a Christian and asked for baptism. Throughout his life he had done his best for his son, stinting himself severely in order to provide for his schooling. But Patricius while still a pagan could do little more for him than that.

[1] 1 Pet 3:1-2 GNB
[2] *Confessions* 9:9

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In the history of the world, as in that of the Church, it seems that many outstanding men owe their qualities to an exceptional mother, very few to a talented father. The mother's influence is almost always the stronger, and perhaps it is harder, too, for a son to emerge from the shadow of a gifted father. Be that as it may, some of the most striking passages in Augustine's *Confessions* are those where he writes of his mother. It is clear that he always held her in great respect, and that he was invariably a good and affectionate son, although he may not have appreciated Monica's true worth until after his own conversion. On her death bed she told him she had never heard him speak a harsh word to her, and this is not hard to believe – for whatever other sins Augustine felt himself bound to confess, unkindness to others was not one of them.[1]

Monica was left rather badly off at her husband's death, but a wealthy lady who knew the family generously offered to help with the cost of her son's education. At the age of seventeen Augustine left his home in Thagaste and set off on the long road to the city of Carthage, some 240 kilometres away, having been accepted as a student at the college there. For the first time he saw the sea, and was entranced by the beauty of the blue sparkling water in the sunlight. As he wandered through the streets of the great city, the capital of Africa, he felt himself free at last of all constraints: the whole world lay before him. In the classroom too, the young man was beginning to show signs of the abilities which had hitherto lain dormant. But as his intellect quickened, his morals weakened. He became enmeshed in a relationship with a young woman whom he could not marry, according to the conventions of the time, because she was beneath him in status. The liaison lasted for the next twelve years, and gave him a son, Adeodatus. It was, in its way, an agreeable relationship, but one which left him uneasy – and it was destined to end in grief. Many years later, in the *Confessions* which he composed in the form of a long prayer to his Creator, he wrote: "I had prayed to you for chastity and said, 'Give me chastity and self-control, but not yet!'"[2] – the cry of a man who longs for an ideal he cannot reach, yet clings to a vice he abhors.

During those years in Carthage, Augustine went through great spiritual turmoil. In the course of his studies, he came upon the works of Cicero. His imagination was captured by the philosopher's great quest for wisdom; it fostered in him an intense desire to search for the truth. As literature, the

[1] after Pine-Coffin p.11
[2] *Confessions* 7:7

Christian Scriptures compared poorly with the polished prose of Cicero, and Augustine in those days thought the Bible fit only for the simple-minded. He accepted without question the assertion that it was full of contradictions and absurdities; his conceit would not allow him to read it for himself with an open mind.

Yet as the weeks went by, his personal quest for wisdom proved to be rather more frustrating than he had at first anticipated. It had brought him far more doubts than certainties. He could not account for the presence of evil in a world created by a God who was good, nor could he understand how the Creator of a physical world could be an invisible spirit. Eventually he was introduced to the religious group known as the Manicheans whose system of beliefs offered an explanation of the existence of evil which seemed to make sense to the young Augustine, and at the same time allowed the sinner to cast his blame elsewhere than upon himself.

Manicheism had spread rapidly among the pagans of the third and fourth centuries, and had snatched some too from the fringes of the Christian community. Its founder, Mani, was born in AD 216 in southern Babylonia. Eventually, after a life of religious zeal and asceticism, he was flayed alive in Gandishapur, Persia, in AD 276. Mani referred to himself as the *Paraclete*, the "Seal of the Prophets" and the "Apostle of the Last Generation".[1]

Like the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia, Mani taught that life was an eternal struggle between light and darkness, God and Satan, good and evil, the spirit and the flesh. The world itself, he said, and the entire physical creation is dark and wicked; goodness and light strive constantly to escape from it. Because the Manicheans saw the body simply as a prison for the soul, they considered it a crime to bring children into the world, and they condemned all sexual relations as a great evil. Redemption, moreover, was to be achieved not by the atonement of Christ, but through a continued self-imposed asceticism, with Jesus as a sort of "helper towards the light". In Carthage, and in Hippo, there were communities of Manicheans comprising monks who had resolved to follow the austere, celibate regime of those who aspired to "perfection", and others who studied the necessary writings but did not yet wish to submit to the rigours of "perfection". The latter ministered to the needs of the former who were forbidden to destroy any life, either animal or vegetable. The Manicheans met with bitter hatred and hostility in many places, and suffered persecution even more severely than the Christians.

[1] Mani was not the last to appropriate for himself such titles! A careful reading of John 16:7-15, however, indicates that the promised *Paraclete*, "Counsellor", or "Comforter", far from being a man, is the Holy Spirit of God who came upon the disciples at Pentecost.

Seeing her son slip further and further into the bizarre exercises of this group, and simultaneously into the no less enticing allurements of the flesh, Monica resolved to go and ask the advice of an aged Overseer who had himself once been a Manichean and was well qualified to demonstrate the errors of the sect and to explain the way of salvation to one ensnared by it. The wise Overseer understood Augustine's case very well and told his mother that it would be unavailing to talk with him in his present state of mind: indeed, it would only rouse him to justify his position, and harden his resolve to maintain it. As the old adage advises: a man convinced against his will – is of the same opinion still! Leave him alone for the time being, recommended the old man, and pray for him, that God will bring him to his senses. Monica, however, was not satisfied with this judicious reply. She continued begging him with tears to speak to her son and try to persuade him of the error of his ways. At last he said to her: "Go home now, and may God bless you, for it is not possible that the child of so many tears should perish."[1] And we are told that Monica took his words as if they had been a voice from heaven, and cherished the hope which they held out to her.

Having completed his studies in Carthage, Augustine returned to Thagaste in the year 375 and set up as a teacher of rhetoric, instructing his students in Latin literature, grammar and the art of public speaking. He had not been there long before he had a very solemn experience which caused him to think deeply. He had recently met up with one of his boyhood friends and found that, despite the passage of years, they had much in common; the two began to spend most of their free time together. Augustine wrote of this friend some years later: "As a boy he had never held firmly or deeply to the true faith, and I had drawn him away from it to believe in the same superstitious, soul-destroying fallacies which brought my mother to tears over me." Then Augustine's companion fell seriously ill of a fever, and as he lay unconscious, at the point of death, the leaders of the church came and baptized him. To Augustine's surprise and delight he revived, and as soon as he could talk, Augustine began to joke about the baptism that he had received without knowing it. "He looked at me in horror," wrote Augustine, "as though I were an enemy... and warned me that if I wished to be his friend, I must never speak to him like that again." A few days later, the fever returned and, to Augustine's great sorrow, he died. "My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death."[2] In his desolation, he was brought face to face for the first time with the reality of the grave, and it raised many misgivings and questions in his mind.

[1] *Confessions* 3:12
[2] *Confessions* 4:4

Shortly after this, Augustine moved back to Carthage where he took another teaching post. For nearly ten years he remained there with the Manicheans, carrying out the duties expected of their junior members. But serious doubts had already begun to trouble him, along with evidence of blatant hypocrisy which he saw within the group. He raised these matters with his Manichean friends, and when they could not help him, he was advised to consult one of their senior counsellors whose name was Faustus. Augustine's interview with Faustus in the year 383 was a great disappointment to him. His questions remained unanswered and he resolved to remain a Manichean in name only, while waiting for something better to turn up.

Life, however, was not entirely serious. Augustine was always one who sought out the company of others, and he surrounded himself with a circle of friends whose tastes and interests matched his own. He delighted in the cut and thrust of animated conversation; he found the lively minds of the young men with whom he spent his time a pleasurable stimulus. He spoke warmly of "the talk, the laughter, the courteous mutual deference, the common study of the masters of eloquence, the comradeship now grave, now gay, the differences which left no sting as of a man dissenting with himself, the spice of disagreement which seasoned the monotony of consent."[1] He was developing his mental capacities, and at the same time thoroughly enjoying himself.

Eventually though, finding his students at Carthage unbearably unruly, he left for Rome, stealing away at night, much against his mother's wishes. After a period teaching there, during which he had great difficulty in collecting the fees due to him, he was offered the opportunity of moving to the northern Italian city of Milan. The prefect of Rome, Symmachus, who was a well-known champion of paganism, had previously held the position of proconsul in Carthage. Having known Augustine during his time there, he now recommended the promising young teacher for the office of Master of Rhetoric at the imperial court, which at that time was residing in Milan. Aware of Augustine's knowledge of and opposition to Christianity, his influential patron was perhaps looking forward to the support of his gifted young protégé in the public debates which he held against Ambrose, the Overseer of the church in Milan. The doors were suddenly open for Augustine to take his place among the highest and greatest in the Empire, under the patronage of the leading intellectual pagan of his day.

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[1] *Confessions* 4:8

He was joined in Milan by his mother and some of his former North African students. Having now abandoned the tenets of Manicheism, Augustine's questioning mind was open to other influences. He began to read the works of the Greek Neoplatonist philosophers which had been translated into Latin by one of their most famous teachers, the North African Victorinus, of whom we will hear more presently. These writings helped Augustine to grasp the spiritual nature of God, and the possibility that evil could result simply from the misuse of man's freewill. This was a turning point for him. He realized that these two principles, which he had come to accept, were in fact the foundations not just of Neoplatonism, but of Christianity too.

Monica persuaded her son to attend the church of the celebrated Ambrose, renowned for the power and eloquence of his sermons, and the beauty of the hymns he had composed. Augustine went week by week, ostensibly out of professional interest in the techniques of oratory employed by the great preacher. But as he listened he found himself drawn also to consider the content of what Ambrose said, for here was a man who presented sound and logical reasons for belief. Ambrose grappled with exactly the kind of questions which troubled Augustine – the questions, indeed, which perplexed many of his generation – and Ambrose succeeded in showing that a man could be at one and the same time an intellectual and a Christian. Monica urged her son to visit Ambrose for a personal talk, but Augustine was reluctant to impose on the eminent man who had a constant stream of visitors in addition to his many responsibilities as Overseer of the church.

However, as he heard Ambrose week by week, Augustine realized that he had misunderstood the Christian position. He had hitherto been attacking not Christianity, but his own faulty impression of Christianity. "I used to criticize [the Christians]," he said, "for holding beliefs which they had never really held at all... I had been howling out my complaints not against the [Christian] faith but against something quite imaginary which I had thought up in my own head. At the same time I was ashamed of myself, because I had certainly been both rash and impious in speaking out in condemnation of a matter on which I ought to have taken pains to be better informed."[1] Eventually, Augustine went to see Ambrose, and he tells us that the Overseer welcomed him like a father. Ambrose encouraged him to look into the letters of that great thinker, Paul, and see what was said there about the purposes of God.

[1] *Confessions* 6:4,3

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Ambrose was a remarkable man, in many ways the direct opposite of Augustine. Whereas Augustine retreated from embarrassing situations, Ambrose would confront them head on; whilst Augustine would analyse a man's inner state, Ambrose would respond directly to his outward actions; where Augustine would seek reconciliation and compromise, Ambrose would hold staunchly to the position he felt to be right. On one celebrated occasion he defied the emperor Theodosius himself. The emperor had recently massacred seven thousand people in the town of Thessalonica in revenge for the death of an imperial officer during a riot. When Theodosius presented himself at the church to participate in worship, Ambrose refused to celebrate the Lord's Supper until the emperor had humbled himself to ask the forgiveness of God and had performed an act of penitence. In holding fearlessly to the twofold principle that God's standards must be applied impartially to all men, and that the authority of Christ is above that of the ruler, Ambrose had won the admiration of the young Augustine.

In the sophisticated European city of Milan, Augustine was somewhat less sure of himself than he had been in his homeland: he was all too conscious of his provincial African accent. His complacency was further shaken by the conversion of the famous Neoplatonist, Victorinus, who had translated or written many of the books of philosophy which had so impressed Augustine as a young man. Augustine tells us that Victorinus had been private tutor to many distinguished members of the Roman Senate, and to mark his ability as a teacher had even been awarded a statue in the Roman forum. Now in his old age, he had made a public confession of his faith in Christ. Victorinus had always been a worshipper of the idols which were in vogue among the aristocracy of Rome and Africa, and had "never ceased to defend these practices with all the fire of his oratory." Nevertheless Victorinus had been led in the course of his studies to read the Old and New Testaments and other Christian writings.

Augustine tells us his story: "Privately, as between friends, though never in public, he used to say to his Christian friend, Simplicianus, 'I want you to know that I am now a Christian.' To which Simplicianus would reply, 'I shall not believe it or count you as a Christian until I see you in the church of Christ.' At this Victorinus would laugh and say, 'Is it then the walls of the church that make the Christian?' He often repeated his claim to be a Christian and each time, Simplicianus gave him the same answer, only to receive the same rejoinder about the walls." Victorinus, Augustine tells us, "was afraid of offending his proud friends who worshipped heathen gods."

But he continued to read the Scriptures, and one day "he was seized by the fear that Christ might deny him before the holy angels if he was too faint-hearted to acknowledge Christ before men, and he felt himself guilty of a great crime in being ashamed [to acknowledge his faith]." Without warning he said to Simplicianus, "Let us go to the church. I want to be made a Christian." The leaders of the church wished to save the celebrated philosopher from public embarrassment and offered him the privilege of making his confession in private by reciting a set formula prepared for such circumstances. "But Victorinus preferred to declare his salvation in full sight of the assembled faithful," and he refused to use any set form of words composed for him by someone else. "So when he mounted the platform to make his profession, all who knew him joyfully whispered his name to their neighbours... They were quick to let their joy be heard when they saw him, but just as quickly came a hush as they waited to hear him speak. He made his declaration of the true faith with splendid confidence."[1] He was welcomed warmly into the Christian community. Augustine was profoundly impressed.

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In the meantime, Monica had persuaded her son to put away the one whom he always calls simply "the mother of Adeodatus". She had arranged for his engagement to an heiress whose dowry would facilitate his advancing career but who was still two years below the required age for marriage. He protested, but could not withstand the wishes of his mother: he sent the faithful companion of so many years back to Africa. Augustine, however, could not face the prospect of marriage and all it implied of domestic responsibility; even less could he face the prospect of two years' celibate restraint. While waiting for the time to elapse he formed another irregular union. But he was far from happy. "I continued to lead my usual life," he wrote in his *Confessions*, "but I was growing more and more unsettled, and day after day I poured out my heart to you."

During this time he was sharing lodgings in Milan with a young man called Alypius. One day they were visited by a North African friend, Ponticianus, who had a position in the imperial household of Milan. The visitor happened to notice a book which Augustine had left lying on a table. "He picked it up, and opened it," Augustine tells us, "and was greatly surprised to find that it contained Paul's letters, for he had supposed that it was one of the books which used to tax all my strength as a teacher. Then

[1] *Confessions* 7:2

he smiled and looked at me, and said how glad he was, and how surprised, to find this book, and no other, there before my eyes. He was, of course, a Christian and a faithful servant to you, our God... When I told him that I studied Paul's writings with the greatest attention, he began to tell us the story of Antony, the Egyptian monk, whose name was held in high honour by your servants, although Alypius and I had never heard it until then." As their friend unfolded the story of Antony, Augustine tells us their reaction: "In fact all three of us were amazed, Alypius and I because the story we heard was so remarkable, and Ponticianus because we had not heard it before."

Ponticianus told them of the effect which the story had had on another of his friends in the imperial court. Chancing upon a copy of the book about Antony, he had read it and then turned to his companion, "angry with himself and full of remorse, he looked at his friend and said, 'What do we hope to gain by all the efforts we make? What are we looking for? What is our purpose in serving the state? Can we hope for anything better at Court than to be the emperor's friends? Even so, surely our position would be precarious and exposed to danger? We shall meet danger at every turn, only to reach another danger which is greater still. And how long is it to be before we reach our goal? But if I wish, I can become the friend of God at this very moment.'" He read on, and finally burst out: "I am going to tear myself free of all our ambitions. I have decided to serve God! From this very moment, here and now, I shall start to serve him. If you will not follow my lead, do not stand in my way." Like Antony, they determined there and then to forsake career, marriage and society, to serve God wherever he might call them.[1]

As Ponticianus told them about those who had gone out to establish a celibate Christian community in the Egyptian desert, Augustine was amazed that those illiterate men should have such control of their passions; he thought bitterly of his own weakness. He felt ashamed: "My inner self was a house divided against itself. In the heat of the fierce conflict which I had stirred up against my soul... I turned upon Alypius. My looks betrayed the commotion in my mind as I exclaimed, 'What is the matter with us? What is the meaning of this story? These men have not had our schooling, yet they stand up and storm the gates of heaven while we, for all our learning, lie here grovelling in this world of flesh and blood!...' I cannot remember the words I used. I said something to this effect and then my feelings proved too strong for me. I broke off and turned away, leaving him to gaze at me speechless and astonished." Augustine needed to be alone.

[1] *Confessions* 8:6

"There was a small garden attached to the house where we lodged," he said. "We were free to make use of it... I now found myself driven by the tumult in my heart to take refuge in this garden where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle, in which I was my own contestant, until it came to its conclusion."

Alypius followed him. "He must have realized what my feelings were, for I suppose I had said something and he had known from the sound of my voice that I was ready to burst into tears... Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes... For I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying, 'How long shall I go on saying "tomorrow, tomorrow"? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?' I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain: 'Take it and read, take it and read.' At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children chanted words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the passage on which my eyes should fall... So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's letters. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: '...not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.'[1] I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."

Augustine, filled with a strange sense of being at peace with himself, told his friend what had happened. Alypius asked to see the passage he had just read, and as they looked through the verses together, and those which followed them, Alypius found himself moved by the assurance that there was acceptance in Christ too for a man like him, who had both loved and hated the wretched bloodshed of the arena and who had found himself constantly troubled by the feelings of guilt aroused in his sensitive conscience. "Then we went in and told my mother, who was overjoyed."[2]

[1] Rom 13:13-14
[2] *Confessions* 8:8,12

For Augustine, the great struggle was over. He little knew of the formidable conflicts which lay ahead. But Augustine, like many another, was to find from his own experience that the Christian life, however hard it might prove to be, is never so hard as life without Christ. "You made us for yourself," he said, "and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."[1]

The story of Augustine's conversion has often been told, but perhaps nowhere better than in his own *Confessions*. Commentary on these events is offered by Bonner pp.1-103, Foakes-Jackson pp.490-496 and, from a philosophical perspective, by Chadwick pp.1-29.

[1] *Confessions* 1:1

22. Servant and Scholar

In the year 386, at the age of thirty-two, Augustine resolved to become a Christian. He knew that for him this step meant the complete dedication of his life to the service of God. It meant forsaking his career as a teacher, and abandoning his forthcoming marriage. It meant trusting Christ to free him from the tyranny of sexual desire and to strengthen him for celibacy. He was setting out, as the apostle Paul had set out three and a half centuries previously, to devote himself entirely to the work of God, free of all human entanglements.

Pagan society was so haunted by sexual obsessions and perversions that there were many in Augustine's day who saw celibacy as the ultimate sign of Christian dedication. Some went so far as to decry marriage and criticize those who chose that path. Augustine himself never took that view: he spoke highly of Christian marriage, insisting that it was instituted by God for the blessing of mankind. Many outstanding Christians, then as now, continued to enjoy the company of wife and family, demonstrating in their homes the ideal and the reality of Christian marriage. Tertullian, in his day, was one such. Augustine, however, had chosen a course which, though perhaps no less demanding, was certainly more austere. He wished to be free of earthly ties, to be the more bound by heavenly ones.

For two years he continued to teach rhetoric in Milan, but the resolution was forming in his mind that he should leave this job to others who were just as well qualified for it, and devote himself instead to a task which perhaps he alone could do: that of searching out answers to the profound questions which troubled his generation. Moving in the sophisticated circles of the imperial court, he felt the call of God to demonstrate to the elite of the Empire the truth of the Gospel. Meanwhile, together with his son Adeodatus and his friend Alypius, he gave himself to studying the elementary doctrines of the Christian faith in the classes arranged by the church in Milan for those who requested baptism. On completing this course of instruction, they were baptized by the Overseer Ambrose amidst great rejoicing, and soon afterwards set out, together with Monica, to return to North Africa.

After a tiring overland ride, Augustine and his mother found themselves alone, resting in the port of Ostia whilst waiting for the boat to take them across the Mediterranean to Africa. As they gazed out of the window overlooking the garden in the courtyard of the house where they were staying, Augustine and his mother began to talk of the happiness of fellowship with God, of knowing him, and of one day being with him in

heaven, free of any earthly limitations and sins. In those moments they felt his presence very real with them, and the affairs of this world dropped away into insignificance. Years later, Augustine wrote of the things they talked about that day: "In that brief moment my mother and I had reached out in thought and touched the eternal Wisdom which abides over all things." It seemed like a foretaste of heaven: "Suppose that this state were to continue and all other visions of things inferior were to be removed, so that this single vision entranced and absorbed the one who beheld it and enveloped him in inward joys.., would not this be what we are to understand by the words: 'Come and share your Master's happiness'?[1] As we talked that day, the world, for all its pleasures, seemed a paltry place, compared with the life that we spoke of. And then my mother said, 'My son, for my part I find no further pleasure in this life. What I am still to do or why I am here in the world, I do not know, for I have no more to hope for on this earth. There was one reason, and one alone, why I wished to remain a little longer in this life, and that was to see you a real Christian before I died. God has granted me my wish and more beside, for I now see you as his servant, spurning such happiness as the world can give. What is left for me to do in this world?'"[2]

It was about five days after this that Monica was brought low with a fever. As her illness grew worse, she spoke to the young people who gathered at her bedside. Knowing she had previously expressed a wish to be buried with her husband in Africa, they now asked her: did she not mind leaving her body so far from her homeland? "Nothing is far from God," she replied, "and I need have no fear that he will not know where to find me when he comes to raise me to life at the end of the world." On the ninth day of her illness, she died, at the age of fifty-six. Her life's work was ended; that of her son had just begun.

* * *

By the autumn of 388, Augustine was back in Carthage. It was a mere five years since he had left, in search of quieter students and academic distinction. An African at heart, almost certainly of Amazigh descent, he was glad to be among his own people again.[3] While lodging in the familiar

[1] Matt 25:21

[2] *Confessions* 9:10

[3] Many writers have spoken of Augustine as a "Berber", and they are probably correct: he was almost certainly at least half-Amazigh. Camps (p.168) affirms: "It is not without significance that the greatest thinker of the Latin west, the author of the *City of God* and the *Confessions*, was a Christian Berber."

city with a Christian named Innocent, Augustine and Alypius were amazed by the miraculous cure of their host from painful haemorrhoids. After the unavailing ministrations of several doctors, he had been healed simply through the prayers of the church leaders who had gathered in his house to pray for him. But the stay in Carthage lasted only a few days. That city must have conjured up memories for Augustine – of his unsettled student days, his former mistress, and his decision to leave for Rome against his mother's wishes. Such memories were more painful than pleasant, and he was anxious to return to his own home in Thagaste.

Reading the Acts of the Apostles, Augustine had been impressed by the way in which the Christians of Jerusalem had disposed of their property and shared their possessions. Influenced also by the monastic groups he had seen in Italy, and those he had heard of in Egypt, he decided to sell the family property at Thagaste. He then set up home with Alypius, Adeodatus and a number of other young men who had likewise committed themselves to celibacy and Christian service. Much of their time was spent in study of the Scriptures, and in philosophical debate. For two and a half years this small community of men continued, more like a Bible College than a monastery. It was there, sadly, that young Adeodatus died at the age of only seventeen. He had shown much promise of an intelligence to match that of his father, a hope which was never to be fulfilled.

Having settled down, Augustine set to work on four philosophical articles, arguing that it is not inherently impossible to know the truth. From that time on, he never stopped writing. His first full-scale work was entitled *On the Greatness of the Soul*, in which he undertook to prove the

We know nothing about the background of Augustine's father, but the evidence indicates that his mother was of Amazigh origin. "Augustine's Berber descent shows itself in numerous small ways, in the name of his mother Monica, a Berber name, perhaps derived from the Libyan deity Mon worshipped in the neighbouring town of Thibilis, and in Augustine's tendency to follow Berber tradition and to attribute a nearer relationship to a brother than to a son" (Frend *TDC* p.230). Frend also suggests that the rather odd name, Adeodatus, given to his own son, is attributable to Punic or Berber influence.

Chadwick (p.6) also regards Monica as a Berber name. Brown (p.63) notes that Adeodatus was a popular name among the Christians of Carthage, meaning "given by God". Frend (*TDC* p.230) observes that Augustine's birthplace, Thagaste, was a strong centre of traditional Amazigh culture: "In no other area of North Africa are Libyan cemeteries, identified by Libyan and bi-lingual Romano-Libyan inscriptions, so numerous."

Augustine, however, shows no sign anywhere of speaking or understanding the Tamazight language: he and his mother conversed in Latin. A simple explanation for this may be that his father knew only Latin and did not allow the use of Tamazight in the family home. A situation of this sort is common in North Africa today, and leads to the loss of what was quite literally the mother-tongue.

immortality of the soul. He also wrote extensively against the sect of the Manicheans, affirming the truth of the Scriptures and showing that the Old and New Testaments are not contradictory.

As principal of this college of Christian philosophy, and the author of books which were by now widely circulated, Augustine found himself frequently approached for advice on the widest range of subjects. He gave each question the best of his attention, attempting to consider it in the light of divine revelation, without human prejudice or presupposition. He wished to devote himself fully to the study and teaching of matters which had puzzled other Christian thinkers; he had his future mapped out as a theologian and teacher of theology. He was aware that many of the churches felt themselves to be badly in need of a man to lead and to teach the flock, but he shrank from such human responsibilities. He deliberately avoided the churches which he knew to be in such a position lest they prevail upon him to abandon his academic work in favour of a pastoral ministry.

In the year 391, however, he was invited by a friend to visit the coastal town of Hippo Regius, now Annaba, Algeria. Hippo, the second port of Africa, had already existed for over a thousand years, and boasted many fine buildings and a public square crowded with splendid statues. His host was a member of the secret police who had expressed an interest in becoming a Christian. On arrival, Augustine found that his friend's interest had waned somewhat, but their discussions nevertheless occupied several days. On the Sunday, Augustine attended the church in Hippo, not knowing that the aged Overseer, Valerius, had for some time been hoping to secure the assistance of a younger man who might relieve him of some of his duties. Valerius was Greek and found the task of teaching the church in Latin a heavy burden. Accordingly, he referred that day to his need for an assistant. The congregation, well aware of Augustine's reputation, begged him to come and help them, and despite his protests, carried him to the front of the hall. There and then, he was appointed elder of the church in Hippo. Thus he came to the place with which his name has ever since been associated. He brought with him, as he afterwards remarked, only the clothes he stood up in.

Two problems confronted the newly-appointed elder. The first was to secure an opportunity for study, so that he might be able adequately to prepare for teaching those in the church who were asking for baptism. To meet this need Valerius granted him leave of absence until he felt ready to take on his new responsibilities. The second problem was how he might follow his ideal of dwelling with other single men in a community where all was shared. This was resolved by the construction of a suitable house in the

garden belonging to Valerius, where Augustine was joined by Alypius and his other old friends from Thagaste, as well as some new recruits. Augustine insisted that those living with him give away whatever houses and lands they possessed, either to the church or to their family, and participate in the frugal common life of the community, devoting themselves to the service of God and man.

After three years, Alypius left them to become Overseer of the church in Thagaste. But in Hippo, the aged Valerius was so pleased with Augustine's preaching and teaching and its good effect in holding his congregation to a higher standard of holiness and discipline, that the elderly Overseer, nearing the end of his life, asked Augustine to become joint-Overseer with him. Some months later, Valerius died and Augustine, at the age of forty-two, became the leader of the church in Hippo, the town whose name means "shelter". The year was AD 396, and he continued in that role for the next thirty-four years.

* * *

From the moment of his appointment, Augustine felt his first responsibility to be for the spiritual welfare of the Christian people of Hippo. The writings which constitute his legacy to posterity, and upon which his fame rests, were from that point on almost in the nature of a spare-time occupation – occasional tracts composed in the scanty leisure which his other duties afforded. Meetings of the church were held daily, and he was responsible for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and for baptisms, as well as for preaching and teaching. His sermons were delivered not only at Hippo but in other North African towns as well, and particularly in the city of Carthage to which he was frequently invited. In addition to this, he was wholeheartedly involved, throughout his life, in the training of the young men who lived with him, so that they might be thoroughly equipped to take up positions of leadership in churches elsewhere. They formed what amounted to a group of disciples intent on learning all they could from their gifted master before they were called away from him.

Time was also taken up by his supervision of the financial and administrative functions of the church, including the assistance given to widows, orphans and others in need. A number of orphans were legally in his care and he had to ensure that they were provided with employment and then suitably married. He was reluctant to arrange such marriages. "If the couple fall out with one another," he observed, "they will curse the one who

arranged their marriage!"[1] Then he was constantly interrupted by people requesting his intervention in disputes: he found himself involved in legal matters on behalf of Christians who desired, on Scriptural grounds, to reach amicable agreement without the public shame and the expense of using the lawcourts.[2] But it meant an onerous burden for the busy Overseer. At times he had to intervene with the secular authorities, too, in the interests of the church and her members. He put much thought into such matters, writing to officials and others at considerable length when necessary. He gave time also to visiting the members of his church, although he would only go to see those in need, especially widows and orphans in distress,[3] a rule which he probably imposed on himself to avoid any accusation that he was seeking the friendship and benevolence of the rich and influential. He would not attend feasts and banquets, but if asked to visit and pray for the sick he would come without delay. In addition to all this, he had to be available at any moment to offer hospitality to visitors. In view of all these pressing tasks, it is difficult to know where he found the time for his astonishing literary output. His friend, Possidius, tells us that he accomplished it by living laborious days and working far into the night. His responsibilities and his workload, far from decreasing, increased as he grew older. Such a life would have taxed a strong man, but it is the more remarkable in that Augustine was prone to illnesses, especially bronchitis, and not accustomed to robust health.

He lived a frugal life; his needs were few. In the community of men where he lived, meals generally consisted of vegetables, but meat was available for guests and for invalids. Wine was always served, although well-watered and strictly limited in the quantity allowed. "Drunkenness is far from me," Augustine declared with all sincerity, although he admits that sometimes he was tempted to overindulge in good food.[4] He would not tolerate any swearing on the part of his guests, whoever they might be, and would not allow them to use the name of God lightly or carelessly. It was also forbidden to speak in a critical or unkind manner about anyone else. A plaque was set up on the table which read: "Whoever delights to pull to pieces the character of those who are not present, let him know that this table is not for him!"[5]

His dress was modest and unostentatious, though he did not indulge in any self-conscious parade of poverty. He wore a simple black robe over a

[1] *Vita* 27 (Hamman p.279)
[2] 1 Cor 6:1-6
[3] James 1:27
[4] *Confessions* 10:31
[5] *Vita* 22 (Hamman p.279)

white tunic, as did the other men with whom he lived, and ordinary leather sandals on his feet.[1] He protested against the well-meant gifts of fine clothing which he received: "Such a gift perhaps is becoming for an Overseer," he said, "but it is not becoming for Augustine who is a poor man and born of poor parents." And on another occasion: "A luxurious garment would cover me with embarrassment and would be appropriate neither for my task, nor my old body, nor my white hairs." However, with kindness and tact, he could make an exception to his modest rule, as was shown in the case of Sapida. This Christian woman sent him a tunic made with her own hands, originally intended for her brother, Timothy, a "helper" in the church at Carthage, who had died before receiving his sister's present. Sapida declared that it would be a great consolation to her if he would accept the tunic. He had not the heart to refuse such a gift, but in the letter which he wrote thanking her and telling her that he was already wearing it, he suggested kindly that she seek for deeper comfort in remembering that her brother, for whom she had made an earthly garment, was now clothed with the imperishable robe of immortality.[2]

Augustine's dealings with women were marked by the greatest possible discretion. Only in cases of great necessity would he visit the houses occupied by communities of Christian women; nor would he permit any woman to stay at the house where he lived with the men. If a woman came to him for counsel or help, he would receive her only in the presence of other leaders of the church. He was concerned to give no grounds for slander or for misunderstanding, and he took pains to set an example which, if followed by all, might win the respect of Christian and pagan alike, and safeguard the weak from the snares which beset human nature.

* * *

Contemporary art, and the letters which have survived from the time of Augustine, enable us to picture the kind of people with whom he mixed, and to put faces, however blurred they must be, to the members of his church. The earliest portraits which we have of Augustine himself show him with short hair, and clean-shaven; this was indeed the custom in his day. Since the time of Cyprian the beard had gone out of favour but otherwise the appearance and clothing of men and women had changed little. Men and boys, in the towns at least, wore a white silk or linen tunic, decorated with animal motifs or sometimes Biblical scenes. In colder weather, for going out of doors, they wore a woollen coat or a cape, held in

[1] Brown pp.193, 198
[2] *Letter* 263:1 (Bonner p.129)

place by a metal brooch. In wintertime the rich wore furs. Tanned leather was favoured by the poorer people: it stood up well to the rigours of manual labour. Outdoor garments may have had a hood, but men in general went bare-headed, apart from fishermen who wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, similar to those we see today in North Africa. Trousers found their way into Africa from Gaul towards the end of the fourth century. Prior to this, the North African had kept his legs warm with gaiters below the knee when hunting or working in the fields. Then, as now, one could discern much about a person from his footwear: most people wore either sandals with laces, or a kind of plain heelless slipper. The rich sported rather more elegant, coloured slippers or short boots with an open toe, decorated with ivory; the poor went barefoot.

Women kept their hair long, but covered it with a head-scarf in the meetings of the church. They wore a long robe, loosely draped from the shoulders, and for going out of doors, a thicker tunic or a woollen coat, or a cape held in place by a jewelled brooch. Women from wealthy families could afford fine silk cloth imported from the East, and they adorned themselves with earrings, necklaces, bracelets and hair pins. A wide range of perfumes were available, at a price, along with skin creams and hair-removers. Cyprian, some years before, had chided at least one fashionable lady for using *kohl*, or antimony, in order to enhance the allure of her eyes. Women in the meetings of the church must dress and behave modestly, said Augustine, as did his predecessors.

For washing, the people of Augustine's time used perfumed oils and a kind of coarse brush with which they rubbed the skin. A type of toothpaste was also concocted from certain plants. Most people in the towns, and even the smaller settlements nearer the coast, went to wash every day in the public baths. The North Africans were generally a clean and neatly-dressed people, although more than once Augustine remarked that he could tell his sermon had exceeded its normal length by the intensified odour of humanity which reached even him at the front of the hall.[1]

Archaeological excavations at Carthage, Hippo and elsewhere have unearthed the actual buildings and possessions which belonged to the Christians of Augustine's time. The remains of Christian *basilicas* (meeting halls), both Catholic and Donatist, have been extensively excavated. The main room was usually rectangular, often with arches and porticos along its sides. Its length might extend to 80 or 100 metres, with a width of 45 metres or more, and a high ceiling. Other rooms were used for smaller meetings, for housing a library, or for a stone-built baptismal pool. The floors, walls

[1] For clothing, food and architecture in Augustine's day, see Hamman chap.3.

and sometimes the ceiling of the later buildings were decorated with mosaics and inlaid blocks of glass and marble.

The remains of two large churches have been found in Hippo itself, one Catholic and the other Donatist. The former is some 50 metres long and 20 metres wide and has a stone tank used as a baptistery and a large stone chair on which the Overseer probably sat. We do not know if this is the building where Augustine served so faithfully, but it is possible.

Over the doorways of their homes, alongside the name of the owner and inhabitants, the Christians often inscribed a verse of Scripture or the words of a prayer: "Lord, you are my help; you are my consolation." "May the Lord keep you from all harm; the Lord will watch over your life."[1] But the favourite inscription in Carthage was, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"[2]

North African lamps, dating from the fourth century, are decorated with various Biblical motifs – the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham and the three visitors, the two messengers returning from Jericho bearing a splendid bunch of grapes, Jonah sitting under a climbing plant, or emerging from the belly of the big fish, the three young men in the furnace, Daniel in the lions' den. Other household articles depict the Good Shepherd, Christ in glory, the symbol of the cross (sometimes with a curved head like that of a shepherd's crook), or the "Chi-Rho monogram" (the Greek *X* and *P* interlaced and often enclosed in a circle),[3] or the Greek letters *Alpha* and *Omega*, representing Christ the First and the Last.

Pottery plates and cups also bear Christian themes such as the sacrifice of Isaac, Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Peter and John fishing, the feeding of the five thousand, the miraculous catch, the last supper, or two fish in the form of a cross on some pebbles representing the breakfast prepared by Jesus at the lakeside. Some of this early Christian art in North Africa is very striking, such as the stone slab bearing the symbols of eternal life now in the museum at Cherchell, and the marble plaque of the Good Shepherd from the catacombs of Sousse, Tunisia.

The museums of Algeria and Tunisia are full of such remains. They testify to a warm faith which delighted in the stories of the Bible and in the promises of God, and they bring to life the people who made and used them. Such folk would surely have responded with enthusiasm to the preaching and teaching of a man like Augustine.

[1] Ps 40:17; Ps 121:7 (Hamman p.65)
[2] referring to Rom 8:31
[3] *Chi* and *Rho* represent the first two Greek letters of the word "Christ". This was a common early Christian symbol.

Augustine's early ministry is discussed by Bonner pp.104-133. His Neoplatonist philosophical influences and thought are considered by Chadwick pp.9-56. A translation of Possidius's contemporary biography is found in Deferrari.

23. Pastor and Preacher

Augustine, as Overseer in Hippo, did not seek to lord it over the members of his church or force them into actions against their will. The secret of his leadership lay in its wise restraint. When he believed a particular course of action to be desirable he would not rush others into that course hastily or unwillingly. On the contrary, he endeavoured to persuade them, treating them as intelligent people able to understand the situation as he did, and to embrace the way he suggested gladly. Augustine, moreover, had a gift for winning the sympathy and confidence of others. This was partly through his readiness to confess his own faults, which always seemed to his hearers far less than their own. But his humility was absolutely genuine: he never lost a real sense of shame at those inward sins which went unobserved to all but himself and his Lord.

Augustine was a man with strong feelings; he wept easily, and rose to exalted heights of joy in worship. It is not wrong, he says, for a Christian to experience emotion. On the contrary, the disciple of Jesus is liberated from the cynicism of those like the cold-hearted Stoic philosophers who suppress all human feelings, even compassion. Let the Christian, however, make sure he can still restrain and control his emotions when he needs to, lest they propel him into hasty judgments, or actions he would regret. "In fact," says Augustine, "the question is not *whether* the godly soul is angry, but *why*; not whether it is sad, but what causes its sadness; not whether it is afraid, but what is the object of its fear. To be indignant with the sinner with a view to his correction, to feel sorrow for the afflicted with a view to his release from suffering, to be afraid for one in danger so as to prevent his death – those are emotions which, as far as I can see, no sane judgment could reprove."[1]

He sympathized with the failings of his brothers, recognizing that no-one could know the extent to which another has been tempted, and that therefore a Christian should be slow to find fault. Some, by the nature of their occupation, are exposed to greater dangers and temptations than others. In fact, the hazards of being a leader in the church might far exceed those of other callings. Only when he found himself responsible for steering the boat could he appreciate the difficulty of the task. "It was the Lord's intention to chastise me because I was rash enough to rebuke many sailors for their faults, as though I were a wiser and a better man, before experience had taught me the nature of their work. So, on being sent into their midst, I

[1] *City of God* 9:5

then began to realize how presumptuous were my rebukes."[1] In his preaching he often referred, with evident sincerity, to his own weakness and unworthiness, and asked his people to pray for him. He is the servant, he says, rather than the father of the family. Poor in himself, he draws riches out of the treasury of God; weak in himself, he finds strength in his Saviour; lacking the words to say, he relies on the truth of God's revelation. "God knows," he says, "how I tremble in his presence, when I speak to you in his name."[2]

Augustine's theological treatises were written for his intellectual equals, but in the church at Hippo he wanted everyone to understand what he said. His sermons are remarkable for their simplicity of expression and their practical common sense. He makes sure that even the least educated can grasp his meaning. Forsaking the high-flown literary Latin of the philosophers, he employs the everyday language of the people. "I prefer," he says, "that the grammarians should find fault with me, rather than that the people should not understand me."[3] He speaks as a man to his friends, offering advice and showing them God's ways so that they too may worship and follow. He seeks for illustrations to his teaching in the simple objects around him, and he quotes the proverbs which were in common use among his people. Even these maxims, he believed, wrought from man's long experience of the world and of human nature, could point to divine truth and lead a soul to Christ.

He did not hesitate to repeat himself: that was the way to make sure everyone remembered what he had said. He describes a scene more often than he states an idea; he invents characters and gives them a dialogue to enact. He poses a question and then answers it; he traces events and he questions motives. He knows very well that the concrete communicates far better than the abstract. He constantly involves his hearers in the unfolding of his scheme. He invites them to respond to his questions, to contribute to his illustration, to agree to his suggestion. He plays on their emotions; he reads their thoughts from the expressions on their faces, and at last he drives his point home with a logic that cannot be gainsaid. He spoke spontaneously: he would have had little available time for preparation in any case. "Whatever God gives!" is his own description of his method. His sermons were written down while he spoke, by members of his church, in a form of shorthand, and copied out afterwards for distribution. On one occasion he spoke so effectively in Caesarea (Cherchell) that he moved the people to tears, persuading them to abandon a violent feud which for

[1] *Letter* 21 (Bonner p.113)
[2] quoted by Clark p.177
[3] quoted by Clark p.177

generations had brought injury and death through annual riots lasting several days in the streets of the city.[1]

In the year 393 he composed a sort of song, or chant, in order to help his congregation of dockers and farm labourers to grasp the facts and principles on which the Catholics relied in their dispute with the Donatists. The song has several verses, which begin with the consecutive letters of the alphabet, after the manner of Jeremiah's Lamentations and certain of the Psalms, and it concludes with an exhortation to unity. The majority of Christians, in fact, were still illiterate; they could not check what was said and done by referring to the Scriptures. Even Hippo, the second city in Africa, had no public school. The children of the rich were instructed by their private tutors, but these were a minority. "I am your document," said Augustine. "I am your book."[2] And great was the responsibility of a man who found himself in such a position: he would be accountable for every word he uttered, and he would be judged with greater strictness.[3]

The favourite subjects of Augustine's preaching were such as we would expect from our knowledge of his character and background: the evil of sin, the frailty and uncertainty of human life, the profound significance of death, the wonderful love of Christ, the efficacy of his self-sacrifice for our redemption, the example which he set and which we should follow, the gift and presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the nature and the glory of the Church. These are the pastures in which he delights to graze, and to which he lovingly leads his flock. "There is only one thing on earth which is absolutely certain, and that is death," he says, "and yet even in death there is something uncertain, namely, the day of its coming. We know not where we shall be when the Master of the house shall say to us, 'Depart!'" But are we right to grieve for those who have died? "A person whom you love has ceased to live; you no longer hear her voice; she mingles no more in the joys of the living, and you! you weep. Now tell me, do you weep like that over the seed, when you have cast it in the earth? If a man, knowing nothing of what will happen when the grain is cast into the soil, were to lament the loss of the grain, if he grieved as he thought of the corn which was buried, and looked with eyes full of tears on the furrows which cover it, would not you, who are better instructed than he, pity his ignorance? You would surely say to him: 'Don't be upset! What you have buried is no longer in the storeroom, or in your hand, but let a few days pass and this field which you find so barren will be covered with an abundant harvest, and you will be

[1] *On Christian Doctrine* 4:24
[2] *Expositions On the Psalms* 121:8 (Hamman p.203). Augustine tells us that he could not find a copy of the works of Cicero anywhere in the markets of Hippo.
[3] James 3:1-6; Matt 12:36,37

full of joy at seeing it.' In the same way, we who know what is going to happen [after death] rejoice in this great hope of ours."[1]

* * *

Augustine was one of the most prolific writers of all time, in any language. By the end of his life, he had produced 93 literary works and 232 books, quite apart from his sermons and letters, of which hundreds are still extant – only ten of his major works have been lost.[2] These writings represent a vast body of learning, and the ripened fruit of deep and extensive thought on all the weighty issues and controversies of his day. His interests extended to all of human experience, and he constantly draws illustrations from the world around him, the pattern of life in the North African countryside and the hubbub of urban activity. He was a master of the polished literary style, no less than the spoken word. For all its erudition, his written work retains the same warm persuasiveness that typifies what he said week by week to the church at Hippo. The rhetorical devices of the debater find their way into his writing, as they did in his preaching. He draws his readers along with him: "Therefore, let everyone who reads these pages proceed further with me when he is equally certain as I am; let him make enquiries with me when he is as hesitant as I... and thus let us enter together, along the path of love, in search of [God]."[3]

Augustine's Christianity was not to be hidden in a desert, nor in a monastery: it was to be taken out to the whole world. He was committed to proclaiming the good news to everyone. A Christian will love God with all his heart, said Augustine, and his neighbour as himself – and this means he can never sit complacently in the midst of a needy world. "The commandment to love his neighbour bids him to do all he can to bring his neighbour to love God."[4] He is to "live among men for their benefit."[5] Augustine himself set the finest of examples – through his personal conversations with people, through his preaching in the church, and through his tracts and treatises which were carried far and wide.

Augustine's writings were not planned systematically. He simply reached for his pen whenever he came across a book or heard an idea which he saw to be in error. Consequently, his works are often ostensibly "against" someone or something, and it is in the course of demolishing his opponent's

[1] quoted by Clark p.181
[2] Dudley/Lang p.40
[3] *De Trinitate* I, 3:5
[4] *City of God* 10:4
[5] *Letter* 95:2

argument that he elaborates his own. By the end of his life he had written on all the major controversies of his day, but the piecemeal way in which this body of theology took shape makes it difficult to systematize and summarize his thought. His struggle against Donatism lasted twenty years, during which time he developed a complete system of doctrine concerning the Church. His answer to questions raised by the fall of Rome extended to a full-scale treatment of the relationship between Church and state in the book which he called the *City of God*. His reply to Pelagius, as we shall see, resulted in a major theology of salvation which has acquired the name "Augustinian".

Augustine was well-qualified not just to explain the implications of the Gospel and to correct those who had misinterpreted it, but also to answer the specific objections raised by the adherents of the various other religions and philosophies which were current in his day. Shortly after his conversion, he wrote several articles refuting the Manichean teachings which had so confused his own youth. He then devoted many pages, including a good half of the *City of God*, to exposing the inadequacies of paganism and idolatry. He did his best also to win the Jews. In the earliest days, there had been frequent contact between church and synagogue, as the first Christians endeavoured to unravel the true meaning and interpretation of the Old Testament. But with the passage of the years Jews and Christians had grown apart, and the Jews in general had little sympathy for what had become largely a Gentile Church. They looked with a jaundiced eye on those who seemed, to them, to have seized their Holy Book and twisted it to their own ends. By Augustine's time, the Jews refused to recognize the version of the Septuagint used by the Christians, and turned instead to the original Hebrew text. The Jews in North Africa were a shrinking, persecuted and increasingly embattled minority, but Augustine longed to show them that the Messiah they hoped for had come, and was even yet waiting to receive them.

* * *

Augustine was well acquainted with the scientific theories and discoveries of his day, and took them seriously – especially in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and medicine. Following the example of Ambrose, he would sometimes resort to an allegorical interpretation of passages in the Scriptures which seemed to contradict the evidence of science. But in many cases he reserved judgment, and counselled Christians not to be too hasty in accepting or rejecting one view or another in fields about which they knew little. He was embarrassed by certain Christians who rejected science out of

hand. "It happens often," he reminds them, "that a non-Christian too has a view about the earth, the sky, the other elements of this world, the movement and revolution or even the size and distance of the stars... the natures of animals, plants, stones and such things, which he derives from incontestable reason and experience. It is too shameful and damaging and greatly to be regretted that such a one should hear a Christian talk utter nonsense about such things, purporting to speak in accordance with Christian writings."[1] On the other hand, no mere unproved speculation of science was accepted in preference to a statement in Scripture. Augustine believed that the Bible was accurate in all its details: "Whatever the [scientists] themselves can *demonstrate* by true proofs about the nature of things, we can show not to be contrary to our Scriptures. But whatever they *advance* [i.e. as a hypothesis] in any of their books that is contrary to our Scriptures... we should either indicate a solution or believe without hesitation that it is false."[2] But the purpose of the holy Scriptures is not to inform us of what we can easily discover for ourselves. On the contrary, their function is to tell us things which we could never find out on our own. "These are the writings of supreme authority in which we put our trust concerning those things which we need to know for our good, and yet are incapable of discovering by ourselves."[3]

He roundly condemned certain philosophers who maintained that we can know nothing, that everything is in its very nature uncertain, and that man is destined constantly to doubt. But he also warns us against the opposite extreme of overconfidence in our ability to understand. We should not be surprised, he says, if we come up against mysteries which we cannot explain: some things, even in the realm of theology, are admittedly unclear. We may find in Scripture statements which perplex us and raise doubts in our mind, but that is only to be expected: it demonstrates the limitation of the human mind, not the imperfection of Scripture. We cannot hope to understand all the enigmas of the universe, or comprehend the fullness of God himself. Even the apostle Paul said that, until he reached heaven, his knowledge would be limited: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."[4]

If some things are unclear to us, other things are self-evident. They are facts, proved by the experience of our senses and the logic of our minds, and by the infallible revelation of God's word. Our faith, says Augustine, is

[1] *De Genesi ad Litteram* I, 19:39
[2] *De Genesi ad Litteram* I, 21:41
[3] *City of God* 11:3
[4] 1 Cor 13:12

based on what is clearly revealed: "So long as this faith is sound and certain we cannot justly be reproached if we have doubts about some matters where neither sense nor reason give clear perception, where we have received no illumination from the canonical Scriptures, and where we have not been given information by witnesses whom it would be irrational to distrust."[1] The Christian believes what is clear, says Augustine, and waits for further light on what is unclear. He is sure about things that are shown to be true, but free to speculate, and form his own opinion, concerning things which are not yet proved. Our knowledge, though limited, is nonetheless true, and the Christian can take comfort from this.

Augustine often emphasized that man can never plumb the depths of God's word, or hope to understand everything in it. We must look into the holy Scriptures with suitable humility and reverence, and with earnest prayer for light to be granted to us. Without God's enlightenment we will understand very little: "If a man says to me, 'I want to understand so that I can believe,' I will answer him, 'Rather believe so that you will understand.'"[2] Faith would be rewarded with knowledge; trust with growing assurance. A person who insisted on understanding everything before he would believe, condemned himself to wait forever in a fruitless state of doubt. Only by entering a room could one see and measure its contents. "But above all things," he said, "remember this: not to be disturbed by the Scriptures which you do not yet understand, nor to be puffed up by what you do understand; but what you do not understand, wait for with humility, and what you do understand, hold fast with love."[3]

The Bible was always his authority. He refers frequently to "the inspired testimonies of Scripture" and "the sacred writings".[4] As he quotes a verse, he introduces it with the words "The Bible says (and the Bible never lies)," or "Let me prove this statement from Scripture."[5] But he tries to strike a balance between accepting the Bible at face value as a literal declaration of fact, and interpreting it in terms of allegorical allusion to mystical truths. Much depended on whether the particular portion under consideration was intended by its author as a poetic paean of praise or as a sober narrative of events. There were deeper meanings to be found in the simplest of events, but that did not mean the events never happened. "Now in my opinion," he wrote, "it is certainly a complete mistake to suppose that no narrative of events in [the Scriptures] has any significance beyond the purely historical

[1] *City of God* 19:18
[2] *On John* 40:9
[3] Sermon 51:35 (*Sermons on NT Lessons* 1:35)
[4] *City of God* 11:9
[5] *City of God* 11:6; 14:7

record. But it is equally rash to maintain that every single statement in those books is a complex of allegorical meanings."[1] No doctrine should be introduced or proved by a figurative or allegorical passage, although such portions might justifiably be used to illustrate teachings which are more clearly stated elsewhere in the Bible. He maintains that whenever we are tempted to attach a meaning to any passage which is at variance with the general testimony of God's word, we can be sure we are in error. And he lays down the general principle that no interpretation can be true which does not promote the love of God and the love of man. This is a singularly sane and balanced approach to Scripture, and one which we might do well to apply today. It was unfortunate, as we shall see, that he himself did not always follow the principles of interpretation which he advocated.[2]

Augustine was wary of new translations of the Bible, such as Jerome's Latin Vulgate, which he said confused people who were accustomed to the older versions. He himself worked mainly from the earlier Latin translations and the Greek Septuagint. These contained certain errors which unfortunately contributed to the confusion of ideas which is sometimes seen in his writings. He was not alone in this: other early theologians were led astray at times by inadequacies in the translations they used.

He wrote a number of commentaries on various parts of the Bible, emphasizing in particular the Old Testament references to the coming of Christ. He points out the prophecies which clearly foretell the coming of the Saviour, but he also finds many symbolic references to Christ hidden away in passages which seem on first reading to be treating other themes. He delights in showing how the miracles recorded in Scripture surpass those allegedly performed by the renowned pagan sorcerers. He draws from the Bible answers to the great questions about the creation of the world, the origin of evil, the final judgment and the two eternities – heaven and hell. Tracing in its pages the wisdom, foreknowledge and providence of the Almighty, he marvels at the grace of God towards a creation that has rebelled against him. Augustine was a great thinker, and might have made

[1] *City of God* 17:4
[2] Augustine's method was strongly influenced by Origen, although his scanty knowledge of Greek compelled him to read the famous Alexandrian in Latin translation. In fact, some of his preaching appears rather fanciful to the modern Biblical scholar, especially in his protracted expositions of the Psalms, so full are they of allegorical interpretations. Every "cloud" is symbolic of a prophet; every "mountain" of an apostle. Every "serpent" is a vice; the "moon" is the Church; the "trees" are nations; "oil" is the grace of God; "wild animals" are the Gentiles; "flying birds" are believers, and so on. His contemporary, John Chrysostom (c.345-407) is a more reliable expositor, restricting himself to the natural historical meaning of the sacred text and drawing from it the practical lessons intended by its original writers.

an outstanding philosopher, but he never forgot that man's thought must take second place to God's. For him, the divinely inspired Scriptures were always the final authority.

* * *

Augustine's influence grew steadily throughout his life. At the time when he was appointed Overseer in Hippo, the churches in Africa found themselves rent by the Donatist controversy, whilst those in Europe and Asia were preoccupied with an ever increasing array of heresies. Throughout the world, Christianity was in imminent danger of fragmenting in the fervour of its own popular success. His victory over the Donatists effectively united the churches of Africa. His refutation of Pelagius and other controversial teachers established the Christian faith on a more solidly Biblical foundation, and almost single-handedly he drew together a Catholic Church which had been on the brink of disintegration. Jerome wrote to him offering a compliment which has since been echoed by many others: "Catholics venerate you as the second founder of their ancient faith."

It was not, however, destined that Augustine's life should close on a note of triumph. He left this world in circumstances which would seem to mark the ruin of his life's work and the failure of all his hopes. The Roman Empire for which he felt deep respect and held high expectations – the Empire which had brought civilization, peace and religious freedom to almost the entire known world – found itself suddenly at the point of collapse. The city of Rome was surrounded, stormed and sacked by the Goths in AD 410. That was not quite the end; the Empire tottered on for a further sixty-six years.[1] But in AD 428 the Vandals, kin to the Goths, swept into North Africa, bringing with them an aberrant form of Christianity, Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. They crushed all in their path, appropriating the property and buildings of the African Christians and driving out their leaders. As the armies drew towards Hippo, some of Augustine's friends urged him to escape. He refused to leave the flock entrusted to him; he continued to preach and teach till the very end. The hour of danger, he said, is an hour when many seek for salvation, and he must be there to help them find it. He prayed that God would either save the town of Hippo from the invader, or take him from it before it fell.

[1] The western (Latin-speaking) half of the Empire finally disintegrated in AD 476. The eastern (Greek-speaking) half suffered many vicissitudes but survived, with its capital in Constantinople, until AD 1453.

As the Vandal forces battered the town gates, the great theologian took to his bed, devoting his final days to prayer. He made no will, for he had long ago abandoned all his possessions to God. He died on 28th August 430, in the seventy-sixth year of his life, fortified by the presence and prayers of his many friends. His supplication had been heard: he was spared the anguish of seeing the final ruin of his own earthly city. His old worn-out body was taken to Italy, his books were carried throughout the world – but the man himself was finally at rest, awaiting the coming of his Saviour, set for the Great Resurrection, ready to awake with the Trumpet call at the dawn of a new Day, and finally to enter the everlasting gates of the glorious city of God.

24. City of Rome and City of God

Augustine had grown up in an Empire that was very evidently in decline; the crumbling of her once immaculate buildings was symbolic of a far deeper decay. Roman discipline and enterprise had given place, all too obviously, to corruption and selfish hedonism in all sections of society. The audacious schemes of the soldiers and the engineers had been supplanted by the cautious conservatism of men who have more to lose than to gain. And, increasingly, the northern frontiers of the Empire fell under threat from the tribes beyond the Danube. These restless neighbours had been held off largely with the spears and swords of German mercenaries, Goths and Vandals, who were in the pay of the Empire, but the Germanic soldiers could see their growing strength matched by the increasing weakness of their Roman masters.

The sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in AD 410 was not entirely unexpected. Twice before, the German hosts had closed round the city and had been bought off with an enormous ransom. The looting itself lasted but three days, and was far less destructive than it might have been. But the fall of Rome marked the symbolic end of an age, and it came as a devastating blow to the entire Empire and the civilization which its ancient capital represented. Even two years afterwards, Jerome was still so affected by the destruction of Rome that he could not gather his thoughts sufficiently to dictate his commentary on Ezekiel. It was hard to believe that the city which had ruled the world for a thousand years had been breached and plundered, and left at the mercy of the wild barbarians who ran through her streets. Whatever threats and dangers might loom on the horizon, so long as the city had continued inviolate, the spell of the invincible and everlasting Empire was unbroken. However perilously it might totter, there was always the possibility that some champion might arise and miraculously save the fountainhead of civilization from the insolent hand of her uncouth neighbours. Although the government had latterly been relocated in Constantinople, Rome was still, in the minds and hearts of the people, the symbolic capital of the Empire: so much history was tied up with the ancient, legendary city, and so much wealth was still concentrated in the hands of the aristocratic families whose opulent villas ringed the outskirts of the metropolis. Many of these grandees fled to Africa, bringing with them tales of atrocities and humiliations inflicted by the Goths on the noble and unresisting populace.

Pagans and Christians alike saw in the overthrow of the illustrious city a visitation of divine retribution, but they diverged sharply in their

explanation of what Rome had done, or not done, to deserve this fate. The disaster was attributed by the pagans to loss of faith in their own gods, whose cult had been suppressed some thirty years before by the joint emperors Gratian and Theodosius. They cried out that the gods which had made Rome great had now deserted her, for she had turned from them. Twenty edicts, they pointed out, had been issued against paganism in the last twenty years of the fourth century. A curse, they said, had fallen on the city that had welcomed and pandered to an alien religion. Some pagan temples, like the famous Pantheon, had even been converted into Christian meeting places. But this was not a new complaint. Similar outcries had been raised against the Christians from as early as the second century, and had been answered in turn by Tertullian, Cyprian and Arnobius. But the unprecedented emotion surrounding the current calamity gave the accusation fresh weight and lent it renewed fervour.

Many Christians, on the other hand, had long predicted the disaster. They saw the humiliation of Rome as a fulfilment of the prophecies given by Christ himself in the book of Revelation. In that book of allegorical imagery, no symbol was clearer to the Christians of those days than that which spoke of Rome in the guise of bygone Babylon: “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” Even the seven hills on which Rome was founded were mentioned in prophecy.[1] Babylon and Rome, alike in their power and their corruption – as one had been destroyed, so would the other. The Christians looked back to earliest times and saw – throughout history – the hand of the Almighty God, the Judge of all the earth, stretched out to subdue the unjust and ungodly. The judgment of God would inevitably fall upon a depraved and dissolute Empire, as it had on the corrupt world of Noah’s day. The Christians urged the people around them to forsake that flagrant wickedness which both defiled and imperilled them – the blatant greed, malice and sexual immorality which, spreading to every town and village, had seemingly defiled the entire world. They begged the guilty to turn back, before it was too late, and seek the merciful forgiveness of God. Many, especially the Donatists, urged the Christian community to separate itself far more distinctly from the Roman Empire which was so evidently ripe for judgment. “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,” they cried. “Come out from them and be separate.”[2]

To many Africans, indeed, the sack of Rome was no more than the arrogant city deserved – a fitting end rather than an untimely misfortune. If Rome was doomed, what was that to them? They grieved for the Christians trapped within its trembling walls but their kingdom was not of this world:

[1] Rev 17:18,9
[2] Acts 2:40; 2 Cor 6:17

they were thankful to receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. The conquest of one armed power by another was of little concern to the people of God for "they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one."[1]

* * *

Augustine, typically, did not see it in such simple terms as these. He had already given much thought, even before the collapse of Rome, to the relationship between Church and Empire. Now Marcellinus, the Christian proconsul who had presided over the conference with the Donatists, asked him to compose a reasoned reply to the allegations that the disaster was due to neglect of the pagan pantheon. And so it was the desire to answer this question – to make some sense out of the fall of Rome, and to consider the reasons for the catastrophe – that prompted Augustine to write his great masterpiece, the *City of God*. But as he proceeds with his task, the horizon of his subject appears to grow wider and eventually embraces not merely the past but also the future of the Church, and not just the Church but the future of the Empire too. It was started in the year 413, and eventually comprised a series of twenty-two books, issued in instalments over the following thirteen years. He began at the age of fifty-nine, and completed his task at the age of seventy-two.

The first half of the finished work is devoted to a thorough dismissal of polytheism, and a comprehensive plea for belief in the one true God. Augustine starts by pointing out that what had befallen Rome had happened frequently before to other cities which worshipped pagan gods. Such idols had always been incapable of defending themselves and their worshippers from defeat and captivity; the fall of Rome certainly could not be attributed to their displeasure. He then goes to exhaustive lengths to show the absurdity of idolatry. The fact that he was beating a dead horse does not diminish the fact that he beat it well. "Augustine's elaborate indictment against paganism, lying on its death-bed, commands our sympathy less, in some respects, than the bold invectives which Tertullian hurled against paganism in its vigour; but the completeness of Augustine's treatment leaves the subject exhausted, requiring nothing more to be said."[2]

Augustine then turns to the fall of the city itself, pointing out that the Goths, who had benefited to some extent from Christian teaching, had treated its defeated citizens with a clemency and restraint which were altogether remarkable in the history of warfare. They had respected Christian meeting places and refused to harm those seeking refuge in them.

[1] John 18:36; Heb 12:28; 11:16
[2] Lloyd p.233

The Christians were thus spared many of the anxieties endured by the pagans, and in all this they could see the merciful hand of Providence. Those who had suffered did so, in most cases, through a vain attempt to protect their wealth from plunder. If they loved their money that much, says Augustine, they deserved to suffer in its defence and should rejoice that, in allowing its loss, God has freed them from its snare. "Those who suffered so much for the sake of gold should have been warned how much they should endure for the sake of Christ, so that they might learn, instead of loving gold and silver, to love him who would enrich with eternal fortune those who suffered for his sake. To suffer for the sake of wealth were pitiable."[1] True Christians, he added, lost little in the destruction of the city, for they had little in it to lose: their treasure was in heaven where it was quite safe. "They enjoy their earthly blessings in the manner of pilgrims and they are not attached to them."[2]

"But many Christians have been taken into captivity!" Augustine was told. "That would certainly be most pitiable," he replies with gentle irony, "if they could be taken anywhere where they did not find their God."[3] He goes on to demonstrate from the Bible how God has often blessed his people in captivity and supplied them with great consolations. How glad I am to be a Christian, Augustine says, even when I suffer, for God "has an eternal reward in store for me, in return for loyal endurance of temporal distress."[4] The inheritance of God's people is a heavenly one, not an earthly one. Though Rome might fall, the kingdom of God cannot be shaken. The earthly city might crumble, but the Heavenly City is eternal.

* * *

The City of God is both the title and the main theme of Augustine's great book. The concept did not originate with him: the Donatist Tyconius had earlier written a treatise on the same theme, but Augustine developed it at great length. He defines what this term means for him and builds upon it an elaborate theology. The City of God, he says, is the universal society, or community, of the faithful servants of God in all ages – past, present and future. He tells us that the title was suggested by the psalm: "Glorious things are said of you, O city of God"[5] and he quotes New Testament passages which speak of the Christian as a citizen of heaven and a member

[1] *City of God* 1:10
[2] *City of God* 1:29
[3] *City of God* 1:14
[4] *City of God* 1:29
[5] Ps 87:3

of the household or family of God. "Our citizenship is in heaven," says the apostle Paul. "You are... fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."[1] But the City of God is not the same thing as heaven itself. Many of its citizens are at present living on earth, although they will one day take their place in heaven. For Augustine, then, "the term 'city' simply means an association held together by some common bond,"[2] and in this case the bond of a common faith in Christ and a common salvation. He describes the City of God elsewhere in such terms as a "house", a "temple" or a "family"; he speaks of it as the "land of desire", the "happy land" and the "shining home". Those who belong to the City of God are those who love God and serve him. The earthly city, on the other hand, is peopled by those who live according to earthly standards. It is the society of those who do not obey God: "There is, in fact, one city of men who choose to live by the standard of the flesh, another of those who choose to live by the standard of the Spirit." "Some live by man's standard, others by God's."[3]

The two cities are spiritual, or mystical, cities; in fact, angels, or spirits, were the first to dwell in each of them. Satan and the angels who rebelled against God before the creation of man were subsequently joined in the corrupt city by Cain, the murderer of his brother Abel. The holy angels, on the other hand, dwelt from the beginning in the City of God where they were joined by Seth and his descendants, and by all who walk in God's appointed way. All men are born in the earthly city, said Augustine, but can become, if they are predestined to it, members of the Heavenly City. When they are born again through faith in the atonement of Christ, they enter immediately into the City of God. Augustine believed that a small number who were not Christians, or even Jews, might also find a place in the Heavenly City – the Gentile Sibyl, for example, because she had opposed the worship of false gods in ancient antiquity, and had spoken of the last judgment, and apparently made prophecies which pointed to Christ.[4]

* * *

The members of the two cities dwell side by side in the world. They share food, shelter and the other requirements of life. They participate together in trade and employment, and even in the meetings of the church, although

[1] Phil 3:20; Eph 2:19-20
[2] O'Meara, intro. to *City Of God* p.xxx
[3] *City of God* 14:1,4
[4] *City of God* 18:23

only those who are members of the City of God will finally gain salvation. The two cities are mingled together for the time being, but they are in fact built on two quite different foundations: "We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God; the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord."[1]

If heaven is not to be equated with the City of God, then neither, says Augustine, is the Church. For one thing, the City of God existed before the foundation of the Church on earth, and includes among its members very many of the Hebrews who faithfully worshipped God in Old Testament times. Secondly, said Augustine, some of those who take part in the life and worship of the churches would prove not to be members of the City of God at all. Some people had even been baptized, and now participated in the Lord's Supper, who would not in the end be saved from the final judgment: "[The Church] has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints. Some of these are hidden; some are well known, for they do not hesitate to murmur against God... even in the company of his acknowledged enemies. At one time they join his enemies in filling the theatres, at another they join with us in filling the churches."[2]

On the other hand, there are some people who at present take no part in the life of the Christian community, and who openly oppose the Gospel, but who will be found eventually in the City of God. "[The Church] must bear in mind that among these very enemies are hidden her future citizens; and when confronted with them she must not think it a fruitless task to bear with their hostility until she finds them confessing the faith."[3] These outsiders had not yet turned to Christ, but God foresaw that one day they would do so. God alone knows which individuals are predestined to salvation; he alone knows who is appointed to dwell eternally in the City of God. "In truth, these two cities are interwoven and intermixed in this era, and await separation in the last judgment."[4]

In the meantime, how should the Christian deal with the evil which exists in the world and in the Church, and how should he respond to those who love evil rather than good? "The man who lives by God's standards, and not by man's, must needs be a lover of the good, and it follows that he must hate what is evil... He should not hate the person because of the fault, nor

[1] *City of God* 14:28
[2] *City of God* 1:35
[3] *City of God* 1:35
[4] *City of God* 1:35

should he love the fault because of the person. He should hate the fault, but love the man. And when the fault has been cured, there will remain only what he ought to love, nothing that he should hate."[1]

* * *

Augustine traces the progress of the worldly community and the heavenly community through Biblical history. The two lines descend from Cain the murderer, and Abel the righteous, and continue side by side down the generations. The righteous Noah, for example, with the seven members of his family safely protected in the ark, are contrasted with the wicked multitudes who perished in the flood. The humble faith of the godly Abraham similarly sets him apart from the presumptuous builders of Babel. Augustine then traces the fate of the godly and the ungodly through the subsequent history of the Greek and Roman Empires. He breaks off periodically to deal with other questions which arise, and he leaves no knot in the string without at least some attempt to untangle it.

Having established his framework, he drew from it a Christian answer to the religious, philosophical, and political problems of the world and its government, pulling together the strands of thought which ran through the churches of his day, and those which had been handed down by previous generations. The *City of God* was a far more influential book in Augustine's own lifetime than the *Confessions* which is more widely read today. It was a Christian manifesto for the future of mankind – an optimistic one, expressing a steady confidence that even during that time of unparalleled crisis it was possible to draw up a Christian charter, not just for the prosperity of Rome, but for the whole world.

In fact, the humiliation of that ancient city did not mean the end of the Empire: the larger part of the Empire remained intact in any case, governed as before from Constantinople. Augustine still saw the Empire itself as a divinely ordained vehicle for the spread of Christianity throughout the world, and one which would continue for a long time, perhaps for ever. Even if there happened to be a breakdown in the political structure of the Empire, a peaceful confederation of smaller Christian states and kingdoms could equally well safeguard the future peace and prosperity of Latin and Greek civilization. Far from warning of decay and collapse, he boldly heralds the onset of the great Christian era. Augustine argued that Christianity and the state would each benefit by the good that was in the other – and by any good from wherever else it might come. Almost the only

[1] *City of God* 14:6

thing which the Church could not accept from Rome was her old polytheistic religion – but the ancient gods were in decline in any case.

The practical problem with which Augustine had to deal was the role of a spiritual Church in a secular Empire – the terms of the relationship between the Heavenly City and the earthly city. He did not pit the one against the other: on the contrary, they were to work together. Augustine looked for the gradual "Christianizing" of Roman civilization. The world would benefit, he said, from the salt and the light of the Church, just as the Church would benefit from the knowledge and experience of the world. Christians, he maintained, should profit from the discoveries of the world – science and philosophy, principles of engineering, history, geography and the precepts of human wisdom and psychology – just as the world should benefit from the teaching, sacraments and ethics of the Church. The Church would obey the emperor as far as the secular laws of the Empire went, and the emperor (who was always to be Christian) would in turn submit to the disciplines and guidance of the Church in moral and spiritual matters. The two were to be partners in a new world order.

Augustine, of course, was particularly "Roman" in his outlook. His father had been a government official, and he had been brought up in a family which thought highly of the Empire. He was Latin-speaking, educated according to the Roman system, and had embarked on that typically Roman career of rhetoric which was a sure path to high office in the imperial administration. In these matters, he thought as a Roman. "Even when philosophy leads him to Greece, and theology to the Hebrews, his purpose is that Rome should be fulfilled in both."[1]

At the very end of his life however, Augustine shows signs of growing disillusionment with the Empire. The massive, worldly structure had come to be ruled by a small group of men, violent, petty and corrupt. "Paradoxically, he had lost his enthusiasm for the alliance between the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, at just the time when it had become cemented... Bishops in other provinces might still be unduly impressed by the sudden conversion of the emperors, but Augustine would tell one of them that this did not in any way mean that the Gospel had been preached 'to the uttermost ends of the earth'... Nor had the Christian congregations benefited notably from their alliance with the state. Far from being a source of improvement, this alliance was a source of 'greater danger and temptation'."[2] He looked optimistically towards the emergence of a

[1] O'Meara, intro. to *City of God* p.xxiii

[2] Brown pp.337-338. Augustine had been profoundly shocked by the execution of Marcellinus (the apparently innocent victim of political intrigue), only three years after the conference over which he had presided in 411, and despite the earnest and unavailing

multitude of smaller Christian nations, arising, if need be, from the ashes of a defeated Empire. But his hope, increasingly, was in God rather than man.

* * *

In fact, Augustine's had never been the only way of appraising the political situation. Others were less convinced that the Romans had substantial good to offer them. Whilst admiring the engineering skills and the organizational efficiency which turned ambitious plans into wholesome realities, bringing roads to their cities and water to their homes, many Christians found the blatant immorality and cruelty of Roman society so distasteful that they wished for no more part in it than was necessary for their livelihood. They did not hanker after an illusory "Christian" Empire, nor did they believe that the world would become "Christian": God's word gave no such promise. For all that emperors might make "Christian" laws, they could not make Christians. The majority of people were still unbelieving and lost, "without hope and without God in the world".[1] Even Augustine, speaking of the inhabitants of Rome at the time of its fall, said, "The lust that burned in their hearts was more deadly than the flame which consumed their dwellings."[2] The first century Christians were told in the Scriptures how they should deal with the society in which they lived: "Do not love the world, or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever."[3]

The Donatists frequently quoted such Scriptures. They saw no way for the Christian community to enter into any kind of pact with people who did not know or obey God. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers," said God's word, "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and [the devil]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"[4] The outward forms of pagan worship might have withered, but its moral legacy survived unchanged in a society which had been built upon that dissolute foundation. "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from

intercession of the Catholic Church with the authorities on his behalf.

[1] Eph 2:12
[2] *City of God* 2:
[3] 1 John 2:15-17
[4] 2 Cor 6:14-16

God, and whoever knows God listens to us... This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood."[1] The Roman Empire was not simply a bag of flour from which the Church could sift the good and leave the bad; it was a bag of dust. And the miller who had ground it was the devil himself. "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one."[2] Augustine had his critics then, as now.

None of them, however, could write so well as he. The *City of God* was the favourite study of the great European emperor Charlemagne in the late eighth century. In it he found support for the concept of "Christendom", an idea which came totally to dominate the Medieval understanding of the world. Christendom represented that part of the globe where Christian values were supposedly upheld by Christian rulers – a "City of God" on earth. Medieval Christian monarchs saw themselves as heirs not just of Biblical tradition, but also of Greek and Latin culture. Augustine had attempted to combine the best aspects of both into a comprehensive form of Christian civilization. There were others who said that the two could not mix. They, however, were voices crying in the wilderness. As time passed, their voices were heard no more – until the Reformation burst on the European scene a thousand years later, and shattered for ever the weary, deluded fantasy of Catholic "Christendom" with its grotesque armies fighting under the banner of the Cross, and its endless inquisitions and crusades against "infidels", "Turks", and "heretics". Augustine was by no means responsible for the later excesses to which his concept gave rise, but the idea originated with him nonetheless.

The *City of God* is perhaps the most famous religious treatise ever written. It summed up the past and introduced the future at a time when the world was about to witness momentous changes. "It is one of the rare books which of themselves form historical events."[3] It completes the series of great Latin "Apologies" which had been written to defend and uphold the Christian faith in the face of aggressive paganism. It ushered in the theological themes which were to dominate the Middle Ages and its arguments continue to stimulate fervent debate in theological circles even today.

* * *

[1] 1 John 4:5-6
[2] 1 John 5:19
[3] Lloyd p.233

Augustine's other works, though less influential, have perhaps a more personal appeal. In his treatise entitled *On Happiness*, Augustine presents a parable of salvation. He paints a captivating picture of a harbour in the "land of desire" on the far side of a wide ocean. There are two ways to make a landfall in this pleasant place. One is the way of philosophy or logical thought which leads some to the safety of the harbour as they converse with the learned and wise, or read their books. But this way is possible only for an intellectual minority. There is, however, a second way to reach the haven. This is the way of Providence which uses the storms of adversity, blowing us towards safety even while we are striving in our ignorance and folly to escape in the opposite direction. In fact those who seem most successful in life have need of the fiercest storms to blow them off the course they have planned for themselves and on to the path that God has prepared for them. Some reach the harbour one way, some the other. And some arrive there partly through rational thought, and partly through providential adversity.

But one great hazard threatens all who approach the harbour: a curious island looms out of the sea just in front of its entrance. This beautiful island is so enticing that it attracts not only those who are nearing the haven, but even some who have already found shelter there. The conceited inhabitants of the island boast that their sea-girt sanctuary is superior to the harbour itself, although jagged rocks surround it on all sides. As the ships pass by, the islanders point the way to the harbour but disdain to follow them – until the day comes when they discover, too late, that they have been cut off from the "land of desire" and cannot reach it should they wish to. And what of those who avoid the island and succeed in reaching the haven? Some enter and find rest, but others in the end fail to settle permanently there.

The imagery is clear, representing the voyage that leads to eternal safety. The inhabitants of the island are the complacent Neoplatonist philosophers who had initiated Augustine and many of his contemporaries into the quest for truth but who had failed to grasp it for themselves. The harbour is not easy to find and not everyone will reach it; some who do so may still turn back. So too will many fail to attain salvation, and some who seemed to be Christians may in the end be lost.

It is not difficult to see how Augustine's allegory was inspired by his own journey into the harbour, as he described it in his *Confessions*. Previous biographical writing had always been motivated by the desire to immortalize the words and the deeds of great men, in particular the celebrated philosophers and soldiers. Outside the pages of Scripture itself, Augustine's autobiography was the first in the history of the world to make the pilgrimage of a soul more important than the conquest of a province or

the elucidation of a philosophy. But in analysing his own condition, Augustine was probing into questions affecting all mankind. His purpose was not to establish for himself a reputation or to win admirers. On the contrary, he sets out to show firstly his hopeless condition, and then the grace of God reaching out to save him from it. He does not hesitate to point out his faults, and indeed rarely shows himself in a good light. But in describing his deplorable state he demonstrates the condition of everyone. In depicting his own journey into salvation, he encourages his readers to make that same odyssey.

The image of the journey crops up again in another of his works, *Against the Academics*. Here we are given the story of two men travelling to the same destination, one of whom appears to have too much credulity, and the other too little. At a crossroads they meet a humble shepherd, whose directions one of them accepts without question. He sets off on the road indicated, while the other laughs at his naïvety and waits there for more reliable guidance, smugly thinking to himself that he is not one to be so easily duped. Waiting, however, becomes rather tedious, and eventually a cultured gentleman comes along on horseback. Though his advice conflicts with that given by the shepherd, and our friend is not entirely convinced of its correctness, he decides to take the path indicated by the obliging gentleman. He is soon hopelessly lost in the forest and finds himself wandering over a trackless mountain: the well-bred guide was, of course, an impostor. Meanwhile, his companion is resting contentedly at his destination. The story is intended to show that even the philosophers, claiming to doubt and question all things, eventually have to follow someone or something, and having done so are far more likely to go astray than one who accepted the plain leading of divine providence from the beginning. If God brings along a shepherd at the moment we need guidance, we should not be so foolish as to despise him in a conceited insistence on someone more imposing. The shepherd, of course, is Christ himself.

The *City of God* is discussed by O'Meara in his introduction to the Penguin edition of that work. See also Lloyd pp.224-235; Clark pp.154-166; Chadwick pp.96-106; Brown esp.chap.27.

25. Ceremonies and Celebrations

Sunday was a special day. By order of Constantine in AD 321 the first day of every week was to be a public holiday and a day of rest; only the peasants in their fields out in the country were working. As the sun rose in the sky the Christians of Hippo began to make their way to the *basilica*, or meeting hall, and took their places – the men standing on the right and the women on the left. They waited expectantly amid the quiet murmur of conversation.

The hall itself was a simple building, tucked away unobtrusively in a side street, its roof supported by two rows of columns, furnished with curtains and oil lamps but no paintings or statues or other decoration. It was filled with people. This was the main meeting of the week and all could attend – pagans, Jews and anyone else who wished to hear the Gospel. The Overseer waited in a side room, available to comfort and counsel anyone who wished to see him before the start of the meeting. Then he entered the main hall and sat in the great stone chair reserved for him at the front facing the congregation. As the meeting commenced a hush fell on the assembled multitude. Latecomers slipped in at the back. Children squirmed and fidgeted at the feet of their parents, and all eyes turned towards the figure at the front. Those who could not see stood on tiptoe or moved to a better position.

The Overseer rose and greeted them warmly, welcoming them to the meeting. Then he asked one of the "readers" or "helpers" to read out the chosen portion of Scripture from the Old Testament. This done, the Overseer announced a psalm. Each line was chanted in a nasal tone by one appointed to this task, and the congregation sang out the refrain at the end of the line. The final "a" of Alleluia was sometimes lengthened into a joyful song without words – worship of the mystery of God, transcending any language. Then one of the "helpers" would read a passage from one of the apostles' letters, followed by the singing of another psalm. And finally some verses were read from one of the Gospels, usually Matthew, before Augustine spoke to them.

His sermon lasted between half an hour and an hour, except at special festivals when it was reduced to ten minutes. Sometimes, if the subject was important and the congregation responsive, he would continue for two hours. As a preacher Augustine was peerless. His voice rose and fell, convincing and persuading, questioning and insisting. He thundered forth the truth of God and then, with the words hanging in space, a pause, and a silence in which God himself could speak to eager or anxious hearts. The

congregation did not understand all he said, but they never failed to sense the power of the awesome mysteries unfolded to them, and they felt at times that they had been led up the holy mountain and into the very presence of God himself. They felt like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration: "Master, it is good for us to be here!"[1]

The sermon completed, the crowd filed out of the building; only the baptized believers remained. These gathered round a table placed at the side of the hall, covered with a white cloth. After prayer, the offerings of the people were laid upon the table – bread and wine, rarely money, although grapes, oil and grain were also accepted. The Overseer prayed again, and then the bread and the wine, diluted with water, were taken by the "helpers" to the members of the church who partook of them in remembrance of their Saviour. The food offerings were gathered up for distribution to the poor. This was the great weekly celebration of the Christian community, the Lord's Supper, the focus of its life and worship.

* * *

Easter came but once a year. It was a grand festival which lasted several weeks. Easter was the time when many chose to be baptized. Others who had confessed serious sins came at that season seeking forgiveness and restoration to the fellowship of the church. For the forty days preceding Easter they fasted during the daylight hours, and prayed, and studied the doctrines of the faith. During this period Augustine preached several times a week. He spoke personally with all who desired baptism and tried to weed out those whose motives were suspect. He insisted that they indulge no more in pagan immorality, corrupt practices, or the depravities of the theatre and arena. During the course of these weeks they memorized the creed – the statement of faith – and they undertook to observe it faithfully. In the final week they were taken through the Lord's Prayer point by point, with special emphasis on "Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us."[2] As Easter Sunday approached, the excitement intensified. The fast was broken on the Thursday, and the candidates for baptism went to the public baths in readiness for the great day. On Friday and Saturday the whole church fasted and prayed with them.

As Saturday evening drew on, nightfall marked the onset of Easter Sunday itself and the ceremonies got under way. Dressed in their best clothes, the Christians gathered in the basilica, lit by innumerable lamps.

[1] Mark 9:5 AV
[2] Matt 6:12 GNB

The readings of Scripture began, starting with the creation, then Adam and Eve in the garden, the crossing of the Red Sea, the song of Miriam, the story of Jonah, and so on, leading right up to the death and the resurrection of the Saviour. There was a pause here and there for psalms and hymns sung by the whole congregation. And then came the sermon from Augustine, drawing their thoughts from the Biblical past to the present. Finally he turned to those who were to be baptized. They each, in turn, solemnly confessed their faith in Christ and renounced the devil and all his vanities. Then they formed a procession leading to the baptistery which, in Hippo, was located in a separate building nearby. While waiting there, they sang Psalm 42: "As the deer pants for the streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God!"

The baptistery was an octagonal stone-built pool, faced with mosaics, set in the floor, and flanked by steps which led down into the warm water. The first one to be baptized stepped carefully into the pool. The Overseer received him there gravely, paused a moment and asked him, "Do you believe in the Father?" "I believe!" he replied. The Overseer poured a cup of water over the head of the believer pronouncing the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father!" Then again, "Do you believe in the Son?" "I believe!" And, a second time, the water was poured over his head: "I baptize you in the name of the Son!" "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" "I believe!" And again, the water was poured over him, "I baptize you in the name of the Holy Spirit!" As he emerged from the water, the next took his place.

The newly baptized Christians each received a white linen robe. They stood in line, and the sign of the cross was traced on their foreheads by the Overseer with water from the baptistery. He then laid his two hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.[1] After this, they formed a procession back to the basilica where they were offered milk and honey to symbolize their reception into the Promised Land. Then, for the first time, they participated in the Lord's Supper. As dawn broke over the city, the ceremonies drew to a close and they made their way home, weary but contented, filled with love for their Lord and for their Christian brothers and sisters.

Later that morning those who had just been baptized re-assembled in the basilica where Augustine encouraged them to live the rest of their lives in the holiness they had attained through their baptism; he urged them to remain loyal to Christ and to his Church. The following week was a holiday with a carefree festival atmosphere. Each day the new believers, dressed in

[1] The novel idea that the Holy Spirit should be received through the imposition of the Overseer's hands has been discussed in Chapter 15.

white, met in the basilica where the Overseer instructed them concerning the demands and the privileges of the Christian life.[1]

* * *

Baptism in water was always the symbol of entry into the Christian faith. But many strange ideas had grown up around this ceremony. On this subject, perhaps more than any other, the churches had coloured and embellished the original apostolic teaching and practice. By Augustine's time, it was commonly believed that baptism washed away all past sins, and consequently the prudent often postponed receiving baptism until they were reasonably sure all their sins had been committed. The emperor Constantine was baptized on his death-bed for this very reason.

Augustine, like most of his generation, believed baptism to be essential for salvation: a Christian who died unbaptized would not find a place in heaven.[2] At times of crisis – epidemics, revolts, barbarian invasions – hundreds would flock to the baptistery. At Sitifis (Sétif), an earthquake brought a continuous procession to the pool – two thousand people. How all this was reconciled with the teaching of God's word that a man is saved by faith – not by baptism – is unclear.[3] How, one wonders, would the penitent thief, assured of paradise in the very hour of crucifixion, have fared if baptism were always essential for eternal life?

Nonetheless, the risk of dying unexpectedly and unprepared was such a grave one that some, far from delaying baptism to the last possible moment, hastened to arrange for it as early as possible, even baptizing infants who could have no understanding of the meaning of the ceremony. Nor could they know anything of the personal repentance and faith which always accompanied it in the New Testament. A child who died without being baptized would perish, they said: never part of the Church, it had no part in heaven.[4]

[1] Hamman pp.245-264 describes the baptismal ceremonies at Hippo.

[2] This belief, of course, raised the stakes in controversies such as that between Cyprian and Novatian where each party considered its own baptism to be the only valid and efficacious baptism in the sight of God.

[3] Eph 2:8

[4] Foakes-Jackson p.509; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II pp.258-262. Irenaeus (c.130-200) is sometimes said to be the first writer to offer direct testimony to the practice of infant baptism (*Against Heresies* II 22:4; Schaff p.259), but the passage in question is obscure, and the only baptism he mentions is that of Christ (as an adult) by the hand of John. Tertullian was opposed to infant baptism, for reasons we have considered in Chapter 6 (*On Baptism* 18). Cyprian, however, clearly supported this practice (*Letter* 58). Like Augustine, he believed that every newborn infant, having inherited Original Sin (fallen, tainted human nature), enters the world already condemned and under penalty of eternal damnation. Only

Both errors – that of excessive haste, and that of undue delay – stemmed from a basic misconception: that baptism itself was a "sacrament" which effected some change in the spiritual state of the one baptized, either ensuring his salvation or achieving his purification from sin. The result was that many who had been hastily baptized, either at birth or at a time of crisis or severe illness, thought they were true Christians although they understood little of the Gospel, and practised even less.

Augustine himself, as we have seen, was not baptized as a child, despite the fact that his mother was a believer. Although he once requested baptism as a boy at a time of serious illness, he was not in fact baptized until adulthood. Augustine's baptism, like those recorded in Scripture, demonstrated his personal faith and his resolve to follow Christ.

* * *

Marriage in the Christian community far surpassed its pagan counterpart: Christian marriage was a much closer and warmer relationship. Tertullian had long ago insisted on the consent of the interested parties. Sons and daughters were not to be married against their will, and their preference should weigh heavily in any plans for marriage undertaken by their parents. But once bride and bridegroom had given their free consent, they were married for life: there was no provision for divorce among Christians.

The wedding itself included the exchange of vows and a solemn promise of faithfulness. The bride and groom were presented by their respective parents. By way of symbolism, a married woman would place the right

if baptism washes away the stain of Original Sin does the infant have a chance of salvation. The unbaptized infant, Augustine said, will go to hell (Chadwick p.111). Pelagius easily rejected the idea that infants are born under condemnation, for he taught that mankind did not fall as a result of the sin of Adam. Evangelical Christians recognize this as one of Pelagius' errors (see chapter 26). Julian of Eclanum, however, a forthright Pelagian opponent of Augustine, looked back to the teachings of Tertullian, emphasizing the justice of God who could not conceivably punish an innocent infant for sins it had never committed (Brown pp.391-397).

Many Christians today would reject a doctrine that unbaptized children will perish. Infants, including the fetus who dies before birth, are clearly unable to know the will of God or to understand the Gospel of salvation. The infant itself has not transgressed the dictates of conscience; nor has it broken God's revealed Law; nor has it rejected the Saviour. The child does not know good from evil until it reaches a certain age (Is 7:16). Only then does its inherited tendency to sin actually lead it to sin, and only when it sins does it separate itself from God. Scripture, in fact, indicates that infants are in some way closer to the kingdom of heaven than are their parents. "Let the little children come to me," said Jesus, "and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:16-17).

hand of the bride in the right hand of the groom, and then the couple themselves laid their joined hands on the New Testament. The Overseer pronounced God's blessing on them and prayed for them. Then the wedding contract was read out. Augustine chided those who looked for dowries and endowments. Far better, he said, to be content with "the everlasting endowment of Christ." After the wedding, there followed seven days of festivity, and for Christians this was a time of happy fellowship, in contrast to the rank debauchery of the pagans.

In the Christian community, the wife was respected no less than the husband, and both were held to the vows they had freely made. Among the pagans there was no such equality: the wife was expected to be chaste and submissive, but the husband could do as he pleased. Roman law allowed a man to divorce his wife on grounds of sterility or adultery, but she had no such recourse. Augustine addressed Christian husbands: "It is not permitted for you to have mistresses. It is not permitted for you to marry women who have already been married and whose husbands are still alive. The law of the forum is not the law of Christ."[1]

They were encouraged to marry young. Family responsibilities would help them to settle down, and knock off the rough corners from their character before bad habits became too fixed. Girls were sometimes married as young as fifteen years of age but this was unusual. Monica married at the age of twenty-two, but then Augustine reproached his parents for marrying late. It was good to marry young, but not to rush into a hasty marriage without due thought: once the knot was tied it could not be undone. "My young friends," he said, "Think carefully! This is a chain of iron which you are binding on your feet: don't get caught up in it too quickly. Far from loosening it, I will be obliged to clinch it tighter."[2]

Social considerations sometimes led parents to arrange marriages with pagans. Monica's case was one such, and brought her many sorrows. Tertullian, two centuries previously, had spoken of mixed marriages and adultery in the same breath – an evil which Christians should shun at all cost. Cyprian, always a little more diplomatic, had still considered it a grave mistake. A Christian married to a non-believer would be exposed to incessant stress and temptation – disgusting heathen marriage rites and blatant sexual laxity and drunkenness, in addition to the all-pervasive demands of idolatry and animistic superstition. The home would be defiled by the images of the gods, food sprinkled with sacrificial wine, and conversation at table marred by the coarse jests and insults of thoughtless pagan bravado. Patience and kindness could not be expected from a worldly

[1] *Sermon* 392:2 (Hamman p.95)
[2] *Exp. on the Psalms* 149:10 (*NAPNF*) (149:15 in Hamman p.93)

partner, filling the house with his proud friends and selfish relations. A Christian wife, especially during the years of persecution, was very fortunate if her pagan husband ever allowed her to attend the meetings of the church or to teach her children Christian truth.[1]

Augustine refused to give a young girl for whom the church was responsible to a pagan who had asked to marry her. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers," said the apostle.[2] Pagans and Christians would never see eye to eye about the respective responsibilities of husband and wife, about the use of money, about the way their children should be brought up. As Monica discovered all too well, a pagan would not be bound by Christian standards.

* * *

The pagan populace viewed the Church with a quizzical eye. Were its members really the special people of God? How could they be so sure that they alone had the truth? One of Augustine's critics asked him why, if miracles were so common in the churches of New Testament times, they were no longer seen in their own day? In reply Augustine pointed out that, "they were necessary then, before the world came to believe, in order to win the world's belief."[3] But now, he says, belief is easy because anyone can freely hear the full and convincing explanation of the Gospel. People who demand miracles now, he added, only do so in order to cast doubt on the miracles of the past.

But as it happens, he declares, miracles have not ceased! "In fact, even now, miracles *are* being performed in Christ's name." They are not common knowledge for they are not written about or publicized. Nonetheless, "faithful Christians pass the news on to others of the faithful." As for the miracles recorded in Scripture, they are well-known; everyone can read about them. The miracles experienced today, on the other hand, are known only to the local church or the Christian family where they happen to have taken place.

[1] Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.366. The situation of a man or woman already married to an unbeliever at the time of conversion was of course, completely different. Tertullian observes that when a pagan wife is converted to Christ, her pagan husband will quickly see a change for the better. But when a Christian girl marries a pagan he will before long notice a change for the worse. To reach for heaven from the miry clay is a noble thing, but to descend voluntarily into the marsh would be both foolish and reprehensible (*To His Wife* 2:4-6).

[2] 2 Cor 6:14

[3] *City of God* 22:8

"A miracle occurred at Milan while I was there," he continues, "when a blind man had his sight restored... A great crowd had gathered to see the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius and the miracle took place before all those witnesses." And nearer home, in Carthage, there was Innocent, who was despairing of his physicians and at the point of death with painful haemorrhoids. He was healed as the elders prayed for him and, Augustine added, "I was present as an eyewitness."

In the same city, a woman called Innocentia was healed of incurable breast cancer after being told in a dream to ask one of the women, emerging from the water of baptism, to touch the affected place with the sign of the cross. This she did, and was immediately healed. Her story ends on a whimsical note, for the doctor who examined her afterwards asked her how it was that she had been so suddenly and completely healed after he had previously advised her there was no hope. When she told him what had happened, he seemed unimpressed and she thought he was going to make some disparaging remark about Christ. "Well," he said with humorous solemnity, "I thought you were going to tell me something remarkable!" He saw that the poor lady was becoming upset, so he hastened to add: "What is so extraordinary in Christ's healing a cancer, when he once raised to life a man four days dead?" The lady herself was reluctant to tell others about the cure until Augustine himself encouraged her to do so. And, he adds, many praised God on her account.

Augustine also tells us of a physician of Carthage who had excruciating gout in one foot, from which he was healed at the moment of his baptism, and which never troubled him again. A young woman of Hippo was cured of demon-possession when she anointed herself with oil mixed with the tears shed by the elder who had prayed for her healing. A one-time actor in the town of Curubis was healed of paralysis and a hernia, also as he was baptized. A large number of other people were healed of a whole variety of illnesses and afflictions in the towns of the region including Hippo itself, especially at the shrine there which was dedicated to Stephen, the first Christian martyr. These are all carefully recorded by Augustine himself. "Again in the same city of ours," he wrote, "the son of a banker, Irenaeus, fell ill and died. His lifeless body was laid out, and preparations for burial were under way amid wailing and lamentation, when one of the friends who were offering words of consolation put in the suggestion that the boy should be anointed with Saint Stephen's oil." He was, and as the Christians united in prayer for him, "the boy revived."

Augustine recounts in considerable detail the story of seven brothers and three sisters whose mother had been left destitute in Cappadocia, Asia, by the death of their father, a man of some standing in the town. She had been

badly treated by her children and, in her resentment, had laid a curse on them. As a result, they were all afflicted by a continuous trembling of the limbs. Unable to face their friends and those they had known, they left home and wandered from place to place. Two of them, a brother and a sister, found their way to Hippo a fortnight before Easter. They attended the meetings of the church every day, praying that God would forgive them and restore them to their former health. Wherever they went, throughout the town, people stared at them, and those who knew their story told it to others. Easter arrived and on that Sunday morning the young man was standing, holding onto the grating of the shrine containing the relics of the martyr Stephen. "Suddenly he fell flat on his face," says Augustine, "and lay there as if asleep, and yet he was no longer trembling as he usually did even in his sleep. Those present were astonished. Some of them were panic-stricken, others filled with pity." They were just going to pick him up when, "suddenly, he got up himself. He was not trembling. He had been cured, and he was standing there, completely recovered, meeting the stares of the congregation. Who then could refrain from giving praise to God? The whole church was filled in every corner with shouts of thanksgiving. They ran with the news to where I was sitting." The young man came and showed himself to Augustine, and as they resumed the meeting, the building "rang with shouts of joy: 'Thanks be to God! God be praised!'"

Three days later the church gathered to hear the public reading of the young man's story, whilst he and his sister stood at the front of the hall. "The whole congregation, men and women alike, fixed their gaze on the pair, the brother standing without any abnormal movement in his limbs, the sister trembling all over. Those who had not seen the effect of God's mercy towards him now recognized it when they saw what his sister was like." When the reading was completed, Augustine asked the pair to step down while he addressed the congregation. "Then, while I was speaking," he said, "what should be heard but the sound of fresh cries of thanksgiving from the martyr's shrine!" The girl had gone there to pray. "As soon as she touched the grating, she fell down as if asleep, just as her brother had done, and got up cured. And so while I was enquiring what had happened and what had caused the joyful uproar, they returned with her... in perfect health! Then indeed there arose such a clamour of wonder, such a continuous shouting, mingled with tears, that it seemed impossible that it should ever end... They rejoiced in the praises of God with wordless cries, with such a noise that my ears could hardly stand it."

And many other miracles of healing, and other signs of God's providential intervention are described by Augustine himself in precise detail. These are sober, almost pedantic, accounts of cases which he himself

knew and witnessed. Many of these miracles occurred in shrines devoted to the relics of the martyrs, or were attributed to "holy water", or earth brought from the site of Christ's tomb, or were otherwise associated with practices which find no Scriptural warrant. The historian merely has to record that Augustine, educated and intelligent man that he was, believed them to be genuine, and attributed them to the gracious power of God. And what is more, he wanted people to know about them. "I have been concerned," he said, "that such accounts should be published because I saw that signs of divine power like those of older days were frequently occurring in modern times too, and I felt that they should not pass into oblivion, unnoticed by the people in general."[1]

[1] *City of God* 22:8

26. Creeds and Controversies

Augustine's early writings were directed largely towards winning Manicheans, Neoplatonists and others to the Faith. The bulk of his later literary effort, however, went into correcting ideas and doctrines propounded not so much by those outside the Church as those within it. He would enter into the current debates wherever they might be, in any part of the Empire, not by any means restricting himself to local African issues.

The first four centuries of the Christian era witnessed a great deal of discussion and many extravagant speculations, in particular concerning the Holy Trinity. The leaders of the churches engaged in endless debate on the question of how there could be one God in three Persons. Sometimes the attempt to arrive at a comprehensive definition of the nature of the Godhead reached absurd lengths: none but the most erudite of theologians could even attempt to understand the abstruse formulae. How could they be of any possible benefit to the ordinary Christian in his workshop or fields?

But certain general tendencies began to manifest themselves. Influenced by particular local teachers or theological traditions, different emphases gradually developed in the various provinces of the Empire. In the East (Asia Minor, Syria and Alexandria), prominence tended to be given to the distinctions within the Trinity: the three Persons were in danger of being considered three gods. In the west (Europe and Africa), the unity of God was often emphasized at the expense of a due differentiation between the Persons. Various creeds, or statements of faith, were produced in the attempt to summarize and codify the basic doctrines of Christianity. Overseers were expected to subscribe to the authorized creed, and append their signature to it as proof of their orthodoxy. Somewhat later the churches in certain places took to memorizing and reciting the creed in their meetings.[1]

The deepest rift was that provoked by the teachings of Arius, an elder of the church at Alexandria in the early fourth century. He denied the eternal existence of the Word of God, thus rejecting the deity of Christ. The Son of God, said Arius, though sinless, was a created being, made by God: he was not himself God incarnate. Arius found himself opposed in his own church by the Overseer Alexander and by his successor Athanasius who vigorously contended that Christ has always existed as the Word of God, the second person of the Godhead from all eternity. In AD 325 a conference of Overseers, known as the Council of Nicaea, decided against Arius and

[1] Three of the earliest creeds are given in Appendix 2.

issued the so-called Creed of Nicaea, defining the essence of the Christian faith with special reference to the divine nature of Christ. The churches in the western half of the Empire, including North Africa, were in agreement with this statement of faith. Those of the east, however, especially in Asia Minor, refused to accept it. For a while the churches of the Arians actually outnumbered the orthodox in the Roman Empire. The leaders of the Vandals held the Arian position and with their invasion of the African provinces from AD 429 this heresy became, for a while, the official religion of North Africa. Other heresies, mainly concerning the divinity of Christ, were discussed and rejected by six further conferences following that in Nicaea.

The Arians had made Christ something less than God. The various Monophysite groups, on the other hand, including the Egyptian Copts and the churches of Ethiopia, accepted his deity but denied, in effect, that he was ever truly a man. The Nestorians, for their part, whose doctrines prevailed in Syria and elsewhere in Asia, mentally divided Christ in two, maintaining that he was partly God and partly man, two different natures subsisting within him. The virgin Mary, they taught, was the mother of his human nature but not of his divine nature. They discerned in the Gospel narratives certain passages where Jesus was acting as God and others where he acted as man. Augustine rejected each of these heresies, siding unequivocally with those who maintained both the deity and the humanity of Christ, united in a single flawless person.[1] He wholeheartedly approved the declarations of the Catholic conferences in Europe and Asia which maintained that Christ has always existed, that he has always been fully God and that he became fully man. Augustine accepted the full implications of the apostles' teaching: "The Word became a human being", justly called "the man Christ Jesus", yet standing as the unique visible manifestation of God himself, "for in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form."[2]

Augustine's book on the Trinity was one of his largest – about half the size of *City of God*. It was not directed against any particular protagonist but grew gradually as he added to it in the midst of his other activities. He tells us that he began it when young and finished it when old. Augustine's debates and correspondence with the Arians commenced many years before their encroachment onto African soil, and continued after it, ending only with his death shortly before their forces entered Hippo.

[1] The Donatists were also strictly orthodox with regard to the deity of Christ, as had been the Montanists and Novatianists.

[2] John 1:14 GNB; 1 Tim 2:5; Col 2:9.

* * *

His controversy with Pelagius, however, is the one with which his name will always be associated. It was, in essence, a typically African controversy – one which derived from practical, moral questions rather than those complex speculations about the nature of Christ which so fascinated the East.

Pelagius was a native of Britain, but had lived for many years in Rome. The laxity of morals in the great city, even among the Christians, shocked and troubled him. He felt that they were not taking seriously their responsibility to obey the word of God. He was upset in particular when he heard an Overseer quoting Augustine's prayer from the *Confessions*: "Give me grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!"[1] This, said Pelagius, makes us mere puppets in the hands of God. We should not ask God to do for us that which he has told us to do ourselves.

Pelagius felt that there was a tendency in the churches, encouraged by the circulation of Augustine's autobiography, to lay all the responsibility for everything on God, using this as an excuse to make little or no effort oneself. He reproaches those of his generation who considered God's standards impossible to attain: "We cry out at God, in the scornful sloth of our hearts, and say, 'This is too hard and difficult. We cannot do it. We are only human, and hindered by the weakness of the flesh.' What blind folly and presumptuous blasphemy! We ascribe to the God of knowledge the guilt of twofold ignorance: ignorance of his own creation and of his own commands. As if, forgetting the weakness of men, his own creation, he had laid upon men commands which they were unable to bear!"[2]

God's creation, said Pelagius, is perfect. Man is not born wicked and deserving of condemnation; he is born innocent and in need of encouragement. The sin of Adam has by no means injured his descendants: each of us starts his earthly career with the same powers and the same capacity for good which Adam himself enjoyed in Eden. God has purposed to bless the world, not to condemn it: God's will, indeed, is for each of us to walk with him, to become perfect in love and holiness. We can certainly do his will if we desire to do it, for just as his commandments were given to all men, so all men are able to obey them. "No one knows the extent of our strength better than he who gave us that strength... He has not willed to command anything impossible, for he is righteous, and he will not condemn a man for what he could not help, for he is holy."[3]

[1] *Confessions* 10:29
[2] *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 16, ad fin (*DOTCC* p.52)
[3] *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 16, ad fin (*DOTCC* p.52)

Pelagius was concerned not only with the nature of man, but even more with the nature of God. He stressed the love of the divine Father. He could not accept a doctrine which seemed to make God unjust – creating man hopelessly sinful and then punishing him for his sin. He took issue with the idea that man was bound to disobey God's law and was inevitably doomed to God's wrath. Where is the justice in that? he asked. On the contrary, he said, God has given man freedom to believe or to disbelieve, to obey or disobey, and God's judgment is a response to the personal choice a man has made.

Pelagius and his followers were idealists. They wrote for people "who wanted to make a change for the better."[1] Their aim, indeed, was to reform the whole Christian community. The perfectionism which led some of their contemporaries to the monastery, and others to the desert, inspired these men and women with a burning desire for revival in the Church. They believed that they could, by urgent exhortations, exercise an immediate influence on the behaviour of society. They had a most tender and compassionate concern for those around them, and could point to many who had found salvation, joy, and practical holiness through wholehearted, personal devotion to Christ. Their motives were admirable – but were their doctrines sound?

Augustine thought not. Perfection was an illusory goal in this life, he said, and beyond the reach of the ordinary Christian. Man, after all, is a fallen being, a sinner by nature, and a rebel deserving God's condemnation. The transgression of Adam entirely changed the relationship between man and God, and altered the whole course of nature. The effects of the Fall – death, disease, and sin – have afflicted all his descendants ever since. Man, in fact, struggles unavailingly to do good. He cannot obey God; he cannot understand the truth, and on his own he cannot find his way to salvation. Yet God in his goodness has set his favour on particular individuals; he has planted in their hearts the seed of faith, and granted them the gift of eternal life.

The writings of Pelagius were condemned by several conferences, in Africa and elsewhere, although they were approved in Palestine. A number of Overseers were expelled from their churches because of their support for him. Pelagius visited Hippo once, as a refugee from the Goth's attack on Rome, but unfortunately Augustine was away at the time: the two men were never able to meet and discuss their differences.[2] Pelagius himself had no desire to establish a sect or a Church of his own – these were profound questions, he said, on which good men might agree to differ. Augustine,

[1] Brown p.343
[2] Brown p.344

and those who have followed him since, have generally taken a rather less tolerant view of their opponents, although Augustine himself deserves our respect for his unfailing courtesy and generosity to those with whom he disagreed.

* * *

Augustine, nevertheless, felt that a doctrine which gave man the choice to accept or reject the will of the Almighty was a dangerous heresy. His emphasis lay in the sovereignty of God – God who controls all things, and whose will cannot be resisted. With severe and ruthless logic he built his theology of salvation on this foundation. God knows what will happen, and nothing happens against his will: therefore he determines what will happen. God knows who will be saved; they cannot be saved except by his grace: therefore the decision is his, not theirs. God's foreknowledge is infinite, and his providence irresistible: therefore he has appointed some to heaven and some to hell, even before they were born. A man cannot be condemned if God has predestined him to salvation; he cannot be saved if God has predestined him to condemnation. God has already determined exactly how many shall be saved; there is a "defined number of the elect."[1] The remainder cannot ever find salvation; they are doomed to eternal punishment, because "God, by a hidden, though just, disposition, has predestined some to the ultimate penalty."[2]

Man, in effect, may think he has choice, but really he has none. And this, Augustine assures us, is all to the good. For man, given free choice, would invariably choose evil rather than good. It is fortunate for us that our salvation does not depend on our own decision. "A man's free choice avails only to lead him to sin," said Augustine, "if the way of truth be hidden from him."[3] But God in his grace reveals the way of truth to certain individuals; he inspires them with feelings of delight; he imparts to them a desire for good. "The wills of men are set in motion by the grace of God... It is God who makes them to will the good which they previously refused."[4]

God's guidance, moreover, cannot be resisted: what God's grace imparts, man cannot refuse. "Assistance was bestowed on the weakness of man's

[1] *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani* III, 4:25 (Brown p.223).
[2] *Letter* 204:2 (Brown pp.335-336). "The first stirring of men's own wills was 'prepared' by God, and God, in his timeless Wisdom, had decided to prepare only the wills of a few" – Brown thus summarizes Augustine's idea (p.399). Augustine himself presents his case in *De Dono Perseverante* 35, trans. Bettenson *DOTCC* p.56.
[3] *De Spiritu et Littera* 5 (*DOTCC* p.54)
[4] *Letter* 217 (*DOTCC* p.55)

will, that it might be unalterably and irresistibly influenced by divine grace." In this way God determines that "they should most irresistibly will what is good, and most irresistibly refuse to forsake it."[1]

The eternal destiny of the individual thus depends, not on his choice to accept Christ or reject him, but on whether God has determined to redeem that person or not. A man is certainly saved by faith, said Augustine, but faith itself is a divine gift, granted to some and denied to others. The believer does not choose God. God chooses him. The individual, indeed, does not desire to know God unless God implants in him that desire. All are lost, but God's grace is given to some so that some shall be saved, and these are known as "the elect", the chosen ones. "Faith then," wrote Augustine, "as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God's gift; and let no one have any doubt whatever... that this gift is given to some, while to some it is not given."[2]

Augustine did not expect his flock to be free from sin; nor were they led to hope for it from his preaching. Though exhorted to resist the grosser temptations of pagan society, they must nevertheless expect each day to fall short of God's requirements. With his emphasis on the weakness of man rather than the power of the indwelling Spirit, such teaching would make it difficult for anyone to acquire a vision for practical Christlike holiness. In fact Augustine's Church is peopled by unworthy servants, helpless sinners saved by grace. The Christian, indeed, is a man who spends his days "looking on himself as a disgrace, and giving the glory to God."[3]

But perhaps the most distressing aspect of Augustine's system is the fear and apprehension which it lodges in the heart of the guilty. "Augustine granted, indeed insisted, that the elect can never know for certain whether or not they are elect."[4] Not until his dying breath would it be apparent

[1] De Correptione et Gratia 34-38 (*DOTCC* p.56)
[2] *Pred Saints* 16 (Forster & Marston p.206)
[3] Brown p.343 (*Epp. Pel.* III, 5:14). Brown comments, "Augustine's audience... would be told repeatedly that even the baptized Christian must remain an invalid, like the wounded man found near death by the wayside in the Parable of the Good Samaritan... he must be content to endure, for the rest of his life, a prolonged and precarious convalescence in the 'Inn' of the Church" (Brown p.365).

The Pelagians could not accept this. They regarded as a most depressing doctrine Augustine's emphasis on the constant tension in the life of the believer between "the flesh" and "the Spirit". This, they said, was simply the old Manichean struggle between "good" and "evil" recast in Christian guise. The Pelagians preferred to see the Christian as a "man made whole", "complete in Christ", a "son of God". "They could hardly support views that might seem to encourage pagan converts, who had at last taken the momentous step of becoming full Christians, to settle back into the moral torpor of a confirmed invalid" (Brown p.369).
[4] Chadwick p.116. Augustine asserts, "It might appear obvious to men that all who are

whether a man had persevered in the faith to the very end, and God alone knows to whom he has granted such perseverance. The believer must spend his days in anxious doubt, wondering whether God has chosen him for heaven, or for hell. And if God has not selected him for salvation, there is not a thing he can do about it. He will inevitably suffer his predetermined fate, and if sent to hell he cannot complain of injustice – for all men justly deserve condemnation.

This grim system – put forward as it was by a sympathetic and warm-hearted Christian man – found acceptance not only in Africa, "the home of uncompromising Christianity,"[1] but throughout the West. It was taken up by Calvin and others at the time of the Reformation, and has been held ever since by many godly people, both Catholic and Protestant. But there have always been those who shrank from it, driven perhaps more by the feelings of revulsion aroused by what seem its harshness and arbitrary injustice than by a reasoned refutation of its logic.

* * *

Pelagius himself was advanced in years, and evidently did not take pleasure in the rigours of intellectual combat. He retired from the fray leaving the field to a number of younger men who supported his position. One, John Cassian in Gaul, keeping very close to both the clear statements and the overall context of Scripture, attempted to weed out of Pelagius' theology some of its more questionable aspects.

He accepted, unlike Pelagius, that all men fell with the fall of Adam and deserve condemnation. He affirmed, like Augustine, that no man can make himself acceptable to God without divine help. But he denied that God would predestine anyone to irrevocable damnation, believing only that damnation was the predestined lot of all who deliberately turned their backs on him. The call of God, he said, comes to those who are ready to receive it, and he quoted the example of Zacchaeus, and the penitent thief saved on the cross, both unworthy of salvation and yet eager for it. Man has freewill, said Cassian, to obey or to disobey, to accept or reject salvation. But freewill alone is not enough: man needs the grace of God and his continuing

plainly good, faithful Christians deserve to receive the gift of persevering to the end. God, however, has judged it better that some who will not persevere should be mingled with the fixed number of the saints" (*De Dono Persev*. 8:19, quoted by Brown p.405). So it was quite possible for a good man to perish and a bad one be saved. "'A man is living badly,' Augustine had said, 'and perhaps in the predestination of God he is light: another lives well, and perhaps he is black as night'" (*Guelf* 18:1, quoted by Brown p.400).

[1] Foakes-Jackson p.509

help in order firstly to find the path of life, and secondly to continue walking that path without wavering. But this help, he said, is offered to all who sincerely desire it. Cassian's position was, in effect, a compromise between the views of Pelagius and those of Augustine. Sometimes it is given the title "semi-Pelagianism", but with equal accuracy it could be called "semi-Augustinianism", for it combines features of both systems.[1]

To sum up the controversy: whilst Augustine saw the grace of God in the *decree* of salvation for some, Pelagius saw it in the *offer* of salvation to all. Cassian saw it in the *implementation* of salvation for whoever desires to be saved.

* * *

Whatever our view of the matter, we can be thankful to Augustine for emphasizing the dependence of man on God, and for reminding us of the universal consequences of the Fall.[2] There were some, including Pelagius himself, who had begun to go beyond the teaching of Scripture in attributing to man moral and spiritual qualities which he did not possess. Augustine's rigorous emphasis on predestination, however, veered rather to the opposite extreme, and it is unfortunate that he based it on certain isolated verses of Scripture taken badly out of context. For example, he quotes Christ's choice of twelve disciples for the task of apostleship – "You did not choose me, but I chose you"[3] – and uses this as proof that God has selected those who will be saved. In similar vein, he takes the verse "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable"[4] and applies it not to the future of the Jewish nation – which is its context – but to the personal salvation of the individual. He ignores, or explains away, any Scriptures which do not happen to fit with his thesis. The apostolic teaching, for example, that "God our Saviour... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth," he interprets to mean merely that the "elect" will include representatives of every race and social class.[5] The verse which states, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world," he dismisses by asserting: "The whole world, then, means the Church."[6]

[1] An alternative to Augustine's view of freewill and predestination is outlined in Appendix 3.
[2] See Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22.
[3] John 15:16
[4] Rom 11:29
[5] *Enchiridion* 103, quoting 1 Tim 2:3,4; see also 2 Pet 3:9.
[6] *On John* 87:2, quoting 1 Jn 2:1-2

Augustine's doctrine of predestination to salvation or damnation was, in fact, something new in Christian history, and some have suggested that it owed more to his neo-platonist origins than to his study of scripture. In contrast to his view, the understanding which subsequently acquired the name of "semi-Pelagianism" seems to have been held universally for the first three hundred years of the Christian era in places as diverse as Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, Carthage, Jerusalem and Rome. We find it taught by all the great theologians – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Novatian, Jerome, John Chrysostom, as well as by the North Africans.

Among them Tertullian, for example, maintained that man was made in the image of God, and therefore has freewill as God has freewill. Freewill, says Tertullian, is God's gracious gift to man, and he shows from Scripture that God has frequently called upon man himself to make a choice between good and evil, obedience and disobedience to the laws he has been given. "The whole scheme of man's discipline through God's rules – with God's calls and threats and exhortations – assumes that man is free to choose obedience or defiance."[1]

Arnobius, too, takes issue with those who relieve man of his responsibility for his actions and decisions: "My opponent says: 'If God is powerful, merciful, willing to save us, let *him* change our dispositions, and *compel* us to trust in his promises!' But this would be violence... for what would be so unjust as to force men who are reluctant and unworthy to reverse their inclinations, to impress forcibly on their minds what they are unwilling to receive, and shrink from?" On the contrary, says Arnobius, "The Almighty... gives to all alike the power of coming to him. To all he says, 'The fountain of life is open, and no one is hindered or kept back from drinking.'"[2]

Nevertheless Augustine's views on predestination were rapidly taken up by the Catholic Church of his day and gained recognition as the official Catholic position.[3] In some ways this is not surprising. Those who emphasize the authority of the Church are drawn to doctrines which lay stress on the authority of God. A doctrine of coercion in salvation is easily matched by a doctrine of coercion in belief and practice. If men are driven to eternal safety despite themselves and against their will, can they not also be compelled by force to forsake heresy and submit to the true and orthodox Church? Advocates of such policies can undoubtedly show from experience

[1] *Against Marcion* 2:5. Tertullian's view of freewill has been discussed in Chapter 8.
[2] *Adversus Nationes* II:64,65 (Forster & Marston p.203)
[3] Imperial laws were issued threatening deposition and exile for any Overseer proved to hold Pelagian views (Brown p.398).

that authority generally ensures orthodoxy, whilst freewill and heresy often go hand in hand. Can we see in Augustine's support for the use of force to suppress the Donatists a reflection of his views on the place of coercion in the purposes of God? He forgets, perhaps, that freedom is something very dear to man – a blessing available only at risk of diversity, and at times, of waywardness. But it could be that God saw fit to grant man more freedom than Augustine himself was willing to allow.[1]

* * *

Looked at from rather a different angle, there were actually many similarities between Augustine and his original opponent. Augustine himself admits that Pelagius was a man of blameless life, with a zeal for righteousness. He always paid handsome tributes to Pelagius' exhortations: they were noted for being "well written and straight to the point." The two men were alike in emphasizing the importance of obedience to God, and each had arrived at the same place of personal faith in Christ. The great difference between them lay, perhaps, in the fact that they had reached that place along quite different routes. We have looked in some detail at Augustine's turbulent youth, his years of sin, and his profound, emotional conversion. Pelagius, on the other hand, had lived the tranquil life of a man who is not naturally prey to violent emotion. He dwelt in the seclusion of a monastic community where he spent most of his time in quiet study and prayer. His gentle, phlegmatic nature saw goodness as something to be cultivated by steady discipline and obedience; he had never felt himself to be lost or helpless. He trusted in Christ as his Saviour simply because Scripture said that this was the way of salvation; he knew he was saved because he had believed and acted upon what God had said. Augustine, on the other hand, had felt himself powerless to do what God said. He had struggled bitterly with his own human weaknesses, despairing of gaining the victory over temptation, eventually realizing that unless God rescued him, and kept him safe, there was absolutely no hope for him. He was saved entirely by the grace of God. He saw his salvation as an astounding miracle of divine mercy, for he had found that he could do nothing to save himself.

[1] Brown comments, "For a Donatist, Augustine's attitude to coercion was a blatant denial of traditional Christian teaching: God had made men free to choose good or evil; a policy which forced this choice was plainly irreligious. The Donatist writers quoted the same passages from the Bible in favour of free will, as Pelagius would later quote" (Brown p.236). "To [Augustine] it seemed that the new claims made by the Pelagians that they could achieve a church 'without spot or blemish', merely continued the assertion of the Donatists that only they belonged to just such a church" (Brown p.348).

The experiences through which each of these two men had passed may provide a key to understanding the controversy which arose between them, and perhaps also to the sad misunderstandings which sometimes arise between sincere Christians even in our own day.

It is impossible for us to do justice here to either side in the Pelagian debate. Furthermore, we should not be too hasty in accepting, or dismissing the "Augustinian" position on this or any other doctrine. We have already seen that Augustine's views changed with regard to the use of force in securing uniformity of belief and practice. With the passage of the years, his opinions modified themselves in other areas too. He describes himself as "a man who writes as he progresses, and who progresses as he writes."[1] Scholars have spent a lifetime attempting to construct theological systems out of passages drawn from Augustine's vast body of miscellaneous writings. But they cannot get around the fact that he sometimes changes his mind and frequently contradicts himself. A view which is developed with irresistible logic in one place may be dismissed in a few lines elsewhere. For example, his rejection of "freewill" is seemingly forgotten as he refers in the *City of God* to "sound Christian teaching" concerning "the soul, which could change for the worse through free choice."[2] Similarly, his early dismissal of miraculous healing as "the swaddling clothes of an infant Church"[3] which she had now outgrown, gave place to a warm approval of the continuing miracles he observed in his own church at Hippo and elsewhere.

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But Augustine was not so taken up with the great theoretical issues that he lost sight of the practical questions that troubled the more ordinary members of the churches. He saw that Christians often received blessing and prosperity in response to their prayers. But sometimes they did not, and it seemed then that their prayers went unanswered. How could this be explained? "In respect of good fortune, if God did not grant it to some petitioners with manifest generosity, we should not suppose that these temporal blessings were his concern, while if he bestowed prosperity on all just for the asking, we might think that God was to be served merely for those rewards, and any service of him would prove us not godly but rather greedy and covetous."[4]

[1] *Letter* 143 (Chadwick p.1)
[2] *City of God* 11:22
[3] Chadwick p.74 (*De Peccatorum Meritis* 2:52)
[4] *City of God* 1:8

God knows what we need before we ask him – but still he wishes us to ask, and indeed withholds his blessing until we do. "It is his will that you should pray, that he may give to your longings – that his gifts might not be lightly esteemed."[1] But if the prayer is unanswered, and we seem to be knocking at the door of heaven in vain, "keep on knocking for... what he wishes to give, he delays – so that you may long for it even more."[2] And thus through our prayers we learn to be more worthy, more patient, and more thankful.

Augustine also gave much thought, as others have before and since, to the question of why, in the providence of God, the righteous are allowed to suffer along with the wicked. He came to the conclusion that suffering is a great testing ground, revealing the true nature of a man or woman: "When the good and the wicked suffer alike.., though the sufferings are the same, the sufferers remain different. Virtue and vice are not the same, even if they undergo the same torment. The fire which makes gold shine makes chaff smoke; the same flail breaks up the straw, and clears out the grain; and oil is not mistaken for lees because both are forced out of the same press. In the same way, the violence which assails good men to test them, to cleanse and purify them, effects in the wicked their condemnation, ruin and destruction. Thus the wicked, under pressure of affliction, execrate God and blaspheme; the good, in the same affliction, offer up prayers and praises. This shows that what matters is the nature of the sufferer, not the nature of the sufferings. Stir a cesspit and a foul stench arises; stir a perfume and a delightful fragrance ascends. But the movement is identical."[3]

He encourages the Church not to be intimidated or downcast by the strength of the forces arrayed against her: the cause of God will ultimately prevail. The inadequacy of the messenger is no hindrance to the triumphant spread of the message. Even the apostles chosen by Christ "were men of humble birth, without position, without education, so that if there was any greatness in them or their doings that greatness would be Christ himself present in them and acting in them."[4] The apostles were men made bold by the power of God: "Now Christ had said to his disciples, 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.' And to prevent their being frozen with fear they burned with the fire of love. Finally the Gospel was proclaimed throughout the whole world, not only by the disciples who had seen and heard him both before his passion and after his resurrection,

[1] Sermon 56:4 (*Sermons on NT Lessons* 6:4)
[2] Sermon 105:3 (*Sermons on NT Lessons* 55:3)
[3] *City of God* 1:8
[4] *City of God* 18:49

but also after their death by their successors, amid terrible persecutions and the manifold tortures and deaths of the martyrs."[1]

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, said Augustine, and even the cruellest enemies of the Church do her a service for they "train the Church in patient endurance if they are given the power of inflicting bodily harm, while if they oppose her only by their perverse notions they train her in wisdom. Moreover they train her in kindness, or even generosity, so that love may be shown even to enemies." Providence ensures that the Church has just enough prosperity and just enough adversity: "Without any doubt, the providence of God provides her with the consolation of prosperity so that she is not shattered by adversity, and with the discipline of adversity so that she is not corrupted by prosperity."[2]

Augustine urges the Christian never to complain of God's dealings with him, but to trust in the wisdom of the Creator: "Divine providence thus warns us not to indulge in silly complaints about the state of affairs, but to take pains to inquire what useful purposes are served by things. And when we fail to find the answer, either through deficiency of insight or of staying power, we should believe that the purpose is hidden from us... There is a useful purpose in the obscurity of the purpose; it may serve to exercise our humility or to undermine our pride."[3] After all, a Christian should remember that he cannot by worry, or by artifice, add one cubit to his stature or one day to his life. Our times are in God's hands and, until the Master calls us home, we will remain in this world. "Man is immortal," said Augustine, "till his work is done."[4]

A Christian need never fear persecution. Even if the persecutor is sharpening his razor, Augustine remarks with some humour, he can only shave off your superfluous hair: "So whatever an angry man in power can take from you, count only among your superfluities." Let him take your worldly goods, your flocks, your lands! "Yes even this life itself! To those whose thoughts are of another life, this present life, I say, may be reckoned among the things superfluous... This powerful enemy, what has he taken away? What great thing has he taken away? That which a thief or a housebreaker can take! In his utmost rage he can but take what a robber can take. Even if he should have license given him to the slaying of the body, what does he take away but what the robber can take? I did him too much honour when I said 'a robber'. For whoever or whatever the robber may be, he is at least a man. He takes from you what a fever, or an adder, or a

[1] *City of God* 18:50
[2] *City of God* 18:51
[3] *City of God* 18:51
[4] *City of God* 18:51. See Matt 6:27; Ps 31:14-15.

poisonous mushroom can take. Here lies the whole power of the rage of men, to do what a mushroom can!"[1]

* * *

Augustine was a great controversial writer, but the passages which perhaps strike the warmest chord with modern readers, apart from the story of his great search for truth in the *Confessions*, are those in which he pours out his heart in worship to his Creator. His controversial works undeniably show a disciplined and penetrating mind, but his devotional works equally reveal a warm and loving heart. His skill with words was never restricted merely to proving points of doctrine. All his powers of language went into the expression of his love for his Master, and his delight in his high calling as a child of God. This was no cold demonstration of fact: it was the overflow of a heart enthralled by the wonder of what God had done for man – and, above all, what God had done for him, the most undeserving of men.

"What other refuge can there be, except our God? You, my God, are supreme, utmost in goodness, mightiest and all-powerful, most merciful and most just. You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you. You are unchangeable and yet you change all things. You are never new, never old, and yet all things have new life from you... You are ever active, yet always at rest... You grieve for wrong but suffer no pain. You can be angry and yet serene. Your works are varied, but your purpose is one and the same. You welcome all who come to you, although you never lost them... You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you."[2]

Augustine's doctrine of predestination is discussed by Chadwick pp.107-119; Brown pp.154-156, 235-243; Foakes-Jackson pp.502-511; with a strong plea for its acceptance by Bavinck pp.345-382, and a strong plea for its rejection by Forster and Marston pp.198-231.

[1] Sermon 62:14 (*Sermons on NT Lessons* 12:14)
[2] *Confessions* 1:4

27. Advice and Admonition

As we have seen, Augustine was fully expecting tares to grow up amidst the wheat of the Church, but it grieved him nonetheless when he saw the weeds growing tall and rampant within it. They compromised its witness to the world and made it a perilous place for the genuine follower of Christ. "Evil and lukewarm Christians hinder good Christians who are truly earnest," he said sadly. "This multitude hinders those who are doing well."[1]

Outsiders who wished to know more of Christ were sometimes surprised and shocked by what they saw of those who bore his name. "We wish the rest of the heathen to be gathered in," said Augustine, "but you are stones in their way: they have a desire to come, but they stumble and turn back."[2] He reproached the members of his Church who "by their unprincipled behaviour torment the feelings of those who live godly lives. Such people cause the name of 'Christian' and 'Catholic' to be defamed. And the dearer this name is to those who want to live a godly life in Christ the more they grieve that evildoers within the Church make that name less beloved than the hearts of the godly long for it to be."[3]

For his part, Augustine took very seriously his responsibility as a shepherd to care for the flock of God.[4] His preaching was intensely practical. He longed for a loving spirit of holiness to permeate the Christian community. But how to transform ordinary, self-centred people into saints? – that was the question. The first thing, perhaps, was to create in the heart of each one a deep longing to become a kinder and better person. "You purchase grain with your coins," he said, "a field with your silver, a precious stone with your gold; but what about love? You pay for that with your own self. You want to buy a property, a pearl, a beast of burden. To find the means to pay for these things you search through your fields and your home. But to purchase love, it is yourself that you must search. It is yourself that you must find."[5]

Augustine knew well the power of bad habits, which tended to weaken and corrupt the person who indulged in them: the constant swearing of oaths for example. "We see around us many men who do not want to swear, but because their tongue has picked up the habit, words escape from their lips which they are just unable to control... If you want to know what I

[1] Sermon 88:13 (*Sermon on NT Lessons* 38:13)
[2] *Sermon* 67:9
[3] *City of God* 18:51
[4] 1 Pet 5:2
[5] *Exp. on Psalms* 38:13 (Hamman p.47)

mean, start trying not to swear: then you will see how the force of habit goes on its own way." A Christian should be a man of his word, who can simply say "Yes" or "No". The integrity and reputation of the speaker will lend sufficient weight to his simple statement of truth. The name of God should certainly not be used lightly or thoughtlessly, "lest anyone... by the constant use of oaths sink down through force of habit into perjury."[1]

And what about the daily challenge of work, and the crafts and trades with which the Christians earned their living? All occupations are good, declares Augustine, whether or not they are lucrative, or prestigious in the world's eyes. Your job is whatever you make of it: "Don't be critical of your profession, or your trade, but only of yourself – of your heart which is greedy for gain and fears not God!"[2] Discounting activities that are patently dishonest or immoral, Augustine would affirm: "There is no worthless occupation – only shoddy workers." A true Christian would do his very best to be helpful and fair to everyone, whoever he was and whatever his position. Augustine spoke of a friend of his, a Christian doctor who served Christ by giving special care and attention without charge to the poor who could not afford to pay for his services.[3] And Augustine encourages them all to work hard as servants of the One who sees and knows everything, and will reward faithfulness. They should work, not thinking just of their earthly masters, "not with eyeservice as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart."[4] As the Master himself said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much."[5] And this goes not without reward. God will grant much to the servant who has been faithful with little – if not in this world, then in the world to come.

Augustine was strongly opposed to the common practice of money-lending at interest; it brought ruination to some and a fortune to others. Far better, he said, to trust God for the supply of one's needs as they arose.[6] Far better, too, to buy only what one has the money to pay for, and to avoid gambling at all costs. The Christian should lend freely, not expecting to receive back what he has lent.[7] But he should avoid borrowing. The coin of debt has two sides: "Lend," says the word of God, but "Owe no man any thing."[8] And a loan which is not to be returned will naturally be considered a gift, offered in the name of Christ and sanctified by his love for the needy.

[1] *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount* 1:51; Brown pp.149-150; referring to Matt 5:33-37
[2] *Exp. on Psalms* 70:17 (Hamman p.48) (Ps 71:15, *NAPNF*)
[3] *Letter* 159:3 (Hamman p.51)
[4] Eph 6:6 AV
[5] Luke 16:10
[6] Phil 4:19
[7] Luke 6:34-36
[8] Rom 13:8 AV; Prov 22:7

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Life in North Africa was perilous for the traveller, whether he took to the road for the sake of his business or for the work of God's kingdom. Augustine himself journeyed on horseback to preach in various places; other leaders came from far afield to attend the conferences in Carthage. Augustine, as was the custom, took a guide with him when the road was unfamiliar. Bandits and wild beasts abounded along the ravines and the forests of the rocky mountain tracks, especially in Numidia and further inland. Only the main highways were paved with rough, uneven Roman slabs. The minor roads and tracks were often cut off by landslides in winter, or by the torrents which raced furiously down from the snow-clad peaks. In the summer there was thirst to contend with, and the burning heat, and violent dust storms. But the Christian saw the providence of God in the smallest details of the journey – the finding of provisions, a respectable inn, the company of an honest fellow-traveller, the offer of a good donkey at a bargain price. These were blessings from God. Travellers would sing to keep their spirits up. Pagans roared out their bawdy songs; Christians sang psalms and hymns to the Lord.

The Christian life was like a journey. "Sing with your spirit a new song," said Augustine. "Sing it on the safe road, as travellers sing. They sing especially at night. Around them everything awakens fear – the slightest noise, and even the oppressive silence because it arouses uneasiness. Even those who are worried about bandits get together to sing."[1] But the Christian sings because his heart is full of joy, and because Christ goes before him preparing the way. And he does not sing the songs of the world, Augustine reminds us: "New is the way, new is the traveller, and new is the song."[2]

From time to time the traveller halts in order to rest. "We renew our strength as we pause at an inn, then we move on – a good picture of our life," he remarks. "You come to the inn because you are on the road. You take shelter there because you want to move on, not because you wish to stay at that spot. You are on a journey, and this life is a series of inns."[3] But the inns were often disreputable, and the traveller was grateful for the hospitality offered by other Christians. Shelter offered to a brother in Christ was shelter offered to Christ himself, as the two disciples found on the road

[1] *Exp. on Psalms* 66:6 (Hamman p.86) (Ps 67:6, *NAPNF*)
[2] *Exp. on Psalms* 66:6; 137:10 (Hamman p.86) (Ps 67:6, *NAPNF*)
[3] *On John* 40:10 (Hamman p.86)

to Emmaus.[1] The larger churches, like that in Carthage, sometimes organized a permanent house of hospitality; others allowed travellers to sleep in the church building. Monica, as she set out to visit her son in Italy, stayed overnight in a chapel close to the harbour at Carthage.

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Poverty and the poor find their place in Augustine's preaching, as they did in the streets of Hippo, where merchant and beggar mingled day by day. Wealthy landowners were drawn to the church by the reputation and the elegantly crafted sermons of gifted preachers such as Augustine. These aristocrats had made their fortune from exports to Rome, but the city was also a close-meshed sieve which caught all who had fallen on hard times or been driven from their own town or village by their misdeeds or the misdeeds of others. These found their way to the shacks and hovels on the outskirts of Carthage, or of Hippo. Many had felt the sting of fraud or corruption – businesses bankrupted by unscrupulous deals, lands confiscated or acquired by force, widows cheated of their due, title deeds stolen or altered, life made wretched by the threats of avaricious neighbours or bribes pocketed by unscrupulous lawyers. Ambrose in Milan had referred to Naboth's vineyard, stolen from him by the unprincipled king Ahab.[2] "This story repeats itself every day before our very eyes," said Ambrose; it was commonplace in Africa too.

Many were the families broken on this rack. Poverty was a harsh reality – creditors disputing at the grave of the debtor before his weeping children, decent folk turning in desperation to theft and prostitution, parents forced by the hunger of one child to sell another in the slave market, children themselves made destitute by the sudden death or desertion of their father, babies abandoned in the streets by their unwed child-mothers. Augustine referred often to such horrors, and woe betide anyone in his church inclined to take advantage of the weak: "Watch out! While you are devouring a little fish, a stronger one will come and devour you!"[3]

Augustine strongly opposed the common practice of abortion and the exposure of unwanted babies. Christian women, especially in the monastic houses, often undertook to look after these abandoned children – flotsam cast up by the heaving sea, without a home in the world. They found both home and hope in the care of the Christian community. "Now it is wintertime," said Augustine, "think of the poor. Clothe the naked Christ!

[1] Matt 25:37-40; Luke 24:13-35
[2] Hamman pp.144-145; referring to 1 Ki 21:1-19
[3] *Exp. on Psalms* 64:9 (Hamman p.208) (Ps 65:9, *NAPNF*)

Each one of you hopes to meet him in glory; but look, there he is lying under the archway. Look, there he is dying of hunger. Look, he's shivering with cold. Look, there he is penniless. Look, there he is far from home. Do as you are accustomed to do, but do more! Your spiritual knowledge must bear fruit in your actions. You praise the sower – now bring in the harvest!"[1]

Many were the sad stories to be heard from those who had lost home, health and livelihood. Women and men who were strong and fit could find seasonal work, but many were not strong, and many were not fit, and many had no means of survival beyond the kindness of those who would help them. Some would come knocking at the doors of the Christians. "You give to the beggar when he asks you," remarked Augustine, "but happy are those who give without waiting to be asked. Invite them in; give them something to eat. Be glad when their hunger is satisfied, for then they are satisfied with your bread, and you with the righteousness of God."[2] Another day he led his people to think about how they felt when they gave: "You have welcomed a poor person to your home. But you are hesitant. Isn't that what happens? Perhaps he is an impostor, a hypocrite. Well, give to him in any case. If he is a wicked man your kind gesture just might make him good!"[3] And with a yet sharper point: "See the poor man beside you! You who are rich, you are no more than a beggar at the door of God!"[4] The poor man, said Augustine, is a living parable: he shows the true nature of us all in the sight of God.

Augustine was not just an advocate pleading on behalf of the poor; he was their comforter too. They could never doubt that he was on their side. But sometimes they also needed a word of warning. Avarice, for example, was by no means restricted to the rich: the poor might be just as greedy. Covetousness is perhaps the most universal of all sins, condemned by the Law of Moses and by Christ himself.[5] "Look at the rich man standing beside you," said Augustine. "Perhaps he has a lot of money on him – but no avarice in him at all, while you, who have no money, are as avaricious as can be!"[6]

He congratulated those who, despite their hardships, cultivated a sense of humour and gave thanks to God for what they did have. But Augustine was no fool; he knew that many had brought poverty on themselves, especially

[1] *Sermon* 25:8 (Hamman p.351)
[2] *Exp. on Psalms* 103:3,10 (Hamman p.141)
[3] *Sermon* 41:7 (Hamman p.141)
[4] *Sermon* 123:5 (Hamman p.141)
[5] Exod 20:17; Lk 12:15
[6] *Exp. on Psalms* 72:26 (Ps 52:10, *NAPNF*)

those who thought to drown their sorrows, or find their joys, in the rough wine of Africa, and he knew of some who had started life with wealth and privilege, and ended in rags through that bitter craving. But have pity, he said, and deal kindly with them if you would have God deal kindly with you. The church did much for the poor – allocations for widows and orphans, and provision of used clothing for those in need of it – but that did not excuse its members from the obligation to do more. "To give to the poor," he said, "is to give to your personal messenger. He will deliver to heaven for you whatever you entrust to him."[1]

Love does its utmost to help others and bear with their faults, said Augustine, and this is the reason why we welcome back into the church those who have left it and those who fall into sin. But love sometimes requires us to hold the one we love to higher standards. God, like a wise father, disciplines us for our good. He does not wish to deprive us of blessing or of happiness, but he does wish to wrest from our hearts the sin that brings us grief. "It is love which strikes, wickedness which flatters."[2] God's dealings with us are not always comfortable, but they are always profitable. And as God deals with us faithfully, so must we deal kindly but firmly with others, reprimanding them when necessary, and all the more when we are personally responsible for their well-being.

Things are not always what they seem, remarked Augustine. People can do a good deed from the most selfish of motives. On the other hand, we can do what seems to be cruel from the best of motives. "Many things are done which seem to be good but in fact do not have love at their root."[3] And other things which seem to be hard and unpleasant are, in fact, done out of love for others. Discipline in the Church is like this – for the good of the one who receives it. But how can we know if we are doing good or bad? In our daily affairs, counselled Augustine, and in the running of the church, if we want to know what is the right thing to do, we should search our hearts for love, and do what love tells us to do. And he concludes with his famous declaration: "In the end just one commandment is given to you: Love, and do what you wish."[4] For one who loves will always wish to do good.

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In the towns of the fourth century, those who called themselves Christians outnumbered the heathen. There was scarcely a house without one

[1] *Sermon* 60:8 (Hamman p.140)
[2] *On One John* 7:8 (Hamman p.304)
[3] Hamman p.304
[4] *On One John* 7:8 (Hamman p.304)

Christian, and few homes where the pagans were a majority. But this did not imply any great change in the pattern of life in the streets and markets. The church stood in competition with the exhilarating spectacles to be savoured at the theatre and the stadium. The crowds emerging from the amphitheatre in Hippo, flushed with the breathtaking excitements they had just witnessed, found themselves mingling in the street with the Christians leaving the basilica. "Poor things," they murmured. "They don't know what they're missing!"[1] The gentle charm of the psalms and prayers, and the soaring eloquence of the sermon could not compete on these terms. The beauties of Christian worship were offered to the same public, but they appealed to different sentiments. The meetings of the Christians were never intended as entertainment, and anyone who thought of them as such would be disappointed. In his sermons, Augustine frequently lamented the absence of Christians who had gone to the theatre. The ones who would benefit most from what he had to say were not even there to hear it.

But there were those in the church who brought joy to him. They read the Bible in their own homes, doing their utmost to act in accordance with what they discovered in its pages. They met every day for prayer, and once a week for more advanced teaching, and they bore patiently with the faults and failings of those around them. They showed in their lives the love of Christ. They were like ants, said Augustine: "Consider then the ant of God. Every day she gets up early; she runs to the church; she prays; she listens to the reading; she joins in singing the hymns; then she goes off and chews over what she has heard. Like the ants these people keep going, backwards and forwards along the same path, gathering reserves for the winter."[2]

But pagan idolatry – and its country cousin, animism – were still a thorn in the side of the Christian community. At times when large numbers of heathen embraced the faith, they tended to carry with them into the churches a substantial quantity of pagan baggage. It was difficult for the already stretched leadership to provide adequate teaching for them all, and often the leaders themselves were ill-equipped to assess what was acceptable for a Christian to believe and to practise, and what was to be rejected. Certain customs became current among the churches of the fourth century which seem to stem from animistic rather than Biblical roots. They demonstrate little more than a thin Christian veneer laid over a solid body of superstition – the tracing of the sign of the cross in the air, for example, as a defence against the devil – and to this animistic background we might well attribute the enthusiasm for praying to the spirits of the dead,

[1] *Exp. on Psalms* 147:8 (Hamman p.168)
[2] *Exp. on Psalms* 66:3 (Hamman p.215) (Ps 67:3, *NAPNF*)

collecting the relics of the martyrs, and making pilgrimage to tombs and other sacred sites.

The ancient beliefs had exerted such a hold over the minds of men and women for so many generations that there were not a few who attempted to play safe, and keep a foot in both camps. To their old and well-tried recipes they simply added new ones. They praised God in the basilica, and exulted in the gods of fertility and war in the theatre and arena. They wore amulets, but placed Bible verses in some of them. They consulted the Overseer, but also the soothsayer and the astrologer. They feared bad omens and searched out good ones. They took superstitious precautions and uttered magic spells, and they tried to placate the demons who they believed prowled around the water sources and the farmsteads. "They imagine that they obtain their riches," said Augustine, "from the demons which they venerate. They say to themselves that God is necessary for eternal life, but for the necessities of this world it is better to address oneself to the demonic powers. The idiots!"[1] "They are good Christians while all goes well," he added, "but when something unfortunate happens they rush to the sorceress with her cards. How naïve!"[2]

Many who had formerly attributed their misdeeds to the conjunction of the stars still retained a certain superstitious fatalism, which is not unknown today. Instead of blaming the stars or "Fate", they just blamed God instead. The excuse was a convenient one: "If it had not been God's will I would not have done it! What do you expect? It was my destiny!"[3] In the old days their cry had been, "It was not I who committed adultery, it was Venus! It was not I who killed the man, it was Mercury!" Little had changed. Now they simply declared, "It was not I but God!"[4]

Others attempted to combine the worship of God with surreptitious offerings to the Roman deities: Celestis, Neptune, Juno and the others. For such people, any disaster, whether natural or human, crushed what little faith they had. As Rome fell, they fell with her. They grasped despairingly at the coat-tails of the retreating gods in a vain attempt to drag them back to an Empire they had forsaken.

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How to encourage people to make a clean break with the past? – this was a question which greatly exercised the leaders of the churches in the fourth

[1] Hamman p.183
[2] *Exp. on Psalms* 91:7 (Hamman p.184)
[3] *Exp. on Psalms* 140:9 (Hamman p.191)
[4] *Exp. on Psalms* 61:23 (Hamman p.192)

century. The decision was taken at that time to transfer the celebration of Jesus' birth from the 6th January to the 25th December, the date of the winter solstice and the birthday of the sun god. The reason for the change was to introduce a counter-attraction on this day when Christian converts were tending to join their pagan neighbours in idolatrous revelry.

It happened that the Easter festival of the Christians – when they remembered the death and resurrection of Christ – took place in the spring, at the very time when the pagans were celebrating their own rituals of death and resurrection. As the two festivals were held simultaneously, a Christian had to choose either one or the other. But the danger was that the Christian celebration would too closely resemble the one it sought to replace, and confirm in the minds of the participants not Christian truth but pagan error.

Not only were the beliefs and superstitions of the pagans still found in the churches but, sadly, in many cases, pagan standards of behaviour also. The Catholics, who welcomed all and sundry, found their meetings in consequence attended by many who were Christian in name only, and some who did not even claim that name. These crowds enjoyed the social occasion and the eloquence of the preacher – but they had no intention of ceasing to beat their wives, entertain their mistresses and cheat their customers. By the fourth century the focus of the meeting had become a skilfully articulated discourse or sermon punctuated by the cheering and clapping of the congregation. But Augustine wept; he told his flock he would rather they act on his exhortations than cheer his illustrations. He spoke of some who would not receive baptism for fear that this would compel them to be faithful to their wives. They much preferred him not to touch on personal matters of this sort. "Whether you like it or not, I will speak," he retorted.[1] He lays bare the shabby sins of his congregation and pleads with them to mend their ways. The picture he paints is perhaps darker than the reality, for he was concerned more with healing the sick than congratulating the healthy. The portrait, moreover, is intended to shock – and thus to reform – but the facts are undeniable.

Sometimes discipline could not be avoided: a man or woman would have to be excluded from the Lord's Supper. Sometimes the repentant one would engage in a severe and lengthy penance of fasting and prayers. But discipline of such a mixed multitude was fraught with difficulties: "It is necessary to consider what each one can bear," said Augustine, "in order to avoid paralysing some and stumbling others. What heartache I endure! Often it happens that I discipline one and he stumbles, and if I don't discipline him, someone else stumbles."[2]

[1] *Serm. Denis* 20:6; *Sermon* 82:11 (Hamman pp.97-98) (*Sermons on NT Lessons* 32:12)
[2] *Letters* 95:3 (Hamman p.211)

But why were they not better Christians? Some, perhaps, would answer: because they were not Christians at all, and quite unworthy of the baptism they refused to accept. By the fourth century, the church had become a focus of social life in the larger towns of North Africa. Its buildings had replaced the temples and the halls of the craft guilds as the place for people to meet and exchange gossip. By this time too, many had been born into Christian families and had attended the meetings of the church since childhood, without ever having made a personal response to the call of Christ. Some claimed to be Christians but gave little evidence of it; they were welcome anyway, in the hope that what they heard would improve them. They were members of the Catholic Church but, sadly, not disciples of Christ. So what else could one expect? How could they live in the power of God, if they had never received the forgiveness of God? How could they hope for the blessing of God if they refused obedience to God? Augustine did his best to transform the tares into wheat, but that task was beyond even him. He repeated the same warnings; he offered the same exhortations; he taught the same truths – but as the years went by, he found his flock as ignorant and as feeble as ever. The Catholic Church had ceased to be a fellowship of sincere Christian people, and much of the time his earnest exhortations fell on deaf ears.

28. Fashions and Frailties

The further we move from the apostolic era the more cumbersome become the traditions of the Church and the more lamentable the frailty of the Christians. Many New Testament principles which would have guided and guarded them were slowly set aside in favour of alien practices modelled on the customs of the world – the celibate asceticism of the Manicheans, the public oratory of the Greek philosophers, the superstitious rites of pagan idolatry and the administrative structures of the Roman Empire.

Times had changed. Gone were the days when a Christian might face imprisonment and death on account of his faith. As persecution faded from the memory, substantial buildings were erected and large numbers began to flock to them. The Christian community had become well established and well known, and its leaders were now popular public figures. By the early fifth century it was the respectable and fashionable thing to be seen among the crowds at the basilica. And there were many who attended church from the shabbiest of motives – in order to gain promotion, to please a Christian employer, to marry a Christian wife, to gain a Christian clientele. They were a trial to Augustine. "What joy have we in such crowds?" he said. "Hear me you few! I know that many listen to me, few take any notice."[1] And again, "The great evils in the church which cause us to groan, where have they come from save from the impossibility of withstanding the enormous multitude that, almost to the entire subversion of discipline, gain an entrance with their morals so utterly different from the way of the saints?"[2]

Gone were the days when the majority of Christians knew what they believed, and why. No longer were they drawn from the ranks of those who had attended a church school or a synagogue from childhood and had memorized large portions of Scripture. They were appallingly ignorant, and few were even aware of it. "We're not worried," they said with blithe nonchalance, "because we follow our Overseer!" "That makes no sense," replied Augustine, "for there are Overseers even among the heretics."[3] But the Christians had grown accustomed to depend on gifted men rather than on God. They were spectators at the church, not participants – attenders rather than disciples. "The people of Hippo," said Augustine, "whose servant God has made me, are almost all so utterly feeble that the slightest

[1] *Sermon* 3:1 (Brown p.402)
[2] On John 122
[3] *Sermon* 46:21 (Hamman p.204)

difficulty is enough to overwhelm them."[1] When Augustine was away from home, as he was for about a third of the time, they were thrown into consternation. They wrote to him in Carthage begging him to come back soon – the elder who did his best to fill the gap could not satisfy them.

Gone were the days when like-minded brothers and sisters met to encourage one another. No longer were there informal meetings where all could teach, or pray, or read God's word, as the Holy Spirit led each of them. Gone was the warmth of loving fellowship and the bond of a common faith in Christ. Gone, too, was the enthusiasm for taking the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. The call to come – to enter the building and hear the Overseer – had replaced the call to go – to sow the seed of the Gospel everywhere. The gathering of a large congregation around a gifted teacher became the pattern for the future: the growth of a great church in a central place, rather than the planting of Christian groups in every place.[2]

By the early fifth century, large metropolitan congregations were ruled, cajoled and entertained by the gifted orator who stood before them, and we see an ever-widening gulf between "clergy" and "laity", the leaders and the led. The clergy – Overseer, elders, helpers, assistant helpers and readers – directed the meetings of the church, read the Scriptures and chose the hymns and psalms to be sung. The role of the laity was simply to attend the meetings, give an outward show of conformity, and fill the money box. In both theory and practice the clergy were active, the laity passive.[3]

[1] *Letter* 124:1 (Hamman p.204) (*Letter* 24:2, *NAPNF*)
[2] It became the accepted norm for unconverted people to attend worship and hear the Gospel in the church building. The aim, of course, was to secure their conversion, but this strategy brought enormous problems. It contrasts strikingly with the practice of the New Testament churches, where meetings in homes were devoted to worship, prayer, teaching and fellowship for believers (Acts 1:13-14; 2:1,46-47; 4:23-24; 12:12; 20:7; 21:7-11), whilst the work of evangelism was conducted in public places… in the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 2:14ff.; 6:9ff.); the Temple courts and Jewish lawcourt of the same city (3:11ff.; 4:5ff.; 5:27ff.; 6:12ff.; 23:1ff.); throughout the region of Judea and Samaria (8:1,4-8); in many villages (8:25); on a desert road (8:26ff.); in all the towns (8:40); in the synagogues of Damascus, Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth and Ephesus (9:20-23; 13:5,14ff.; 14:1; 17:1-4,10ff.; 18:4-5,19;19:8); in the house of a wealthy Roman (10:34ff.); in the presence of the governor of Paphos (13:7); by the city gates of Lystra (14:8ff.); beside the river at Philippi (16:13ff.); in the streets and public jail of the same city (16:16ff., 25ff.); in the public square amidst the idols of Athens (17:16ff.); in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus (19:9); on the steps of the military barracks in Jerusalem (21:37ff.); standing before the governor and then king Agrippa in Caesarea (24:10ff.; 26:1ff.); in a boat on the Mediterranean Sea (27:21ff.); in the house of the Maltese official (28:7); and ultimately, according to Paul's wish, in the presence of Caesar in Rome.
[3] Brown comments, "The Christian communities had come increasingly to accept a dangerous degree of 'moral specialization': one life was left for the 'perfect', another for

The younger clergy were in most cases training to become Overseers; they were expected to observe far more stringent moral standards than the other members of the church. They looked forward to the day when they would be entrusted with a congregation of their own in some distant place. The smaller, rural churches had the choice either to appoint an Overseer from among their number or to accept an Overseer who had been trained in one of the large city churches. They opted for the latter if they could: he would be a well-educated man, a good speaker, skilled in Latin, and he would take care of everything for them. The gifted Overseer generally taught his flock well – but in doing so, effectively ensured that they remained sheep and never aspired to be shepherds.

The Overseers of the various churches, meeting together frequently at conferences in Carthage and elsewhere, accustomed themselves to using the authorized Latin liturgies and theological formulae which had been issued and approved by these conferences. The intention was to ensure uniformity of teaching and to avoid doctrinal error, but the effect was to stifle the initiative of the local Christians. The perpetration of a liturgical language, with which few were at ease, further separated the clergy from the laity. It impressed ever more firmly upon the farm workers and shop keepers a sense of their inferiority and their dependence on the educated Overseer who had been sent to look after them. And it very effectively quenched the Holy Spirit who was – if they only knew it – quite willing to speak to the Christians in their own Tamazight language, and minister to them through their husbands and brothers. Spiritual leadership had become the prerogative of a professional elite, the priestly caste that Cyprian had advocated and instigated.

The most astonishing development of all was the expectation – if not the requirement – that the clergy take vows of celibacy. In practice this meant that no married Christian could any longer have responsibility in the church. A married man appointed as an elder actually had to separate from his wife, who was then expected to join a convent – a monastic community of celibate women – or find something else to do with the rest of her life. A boy who had hitherto occupied a position as "reader" in the church, on attaining puberty had to make the choice, either to forsake marriage, or to give up all aspiration to Christian leadership.[1]

the average Christian. And it was just this widening gulf between an ascetic elite and a passive rank and file which brought the Christianization of the Roman world to a halt" (p.248).

[1] The Catholic Church in Rome officially prohibited the marriage of Christian leaders in AD 385, and has maintained its prohibition ever since, despite a continuing history of opposition to this policy even within the Roman Catholic Church itself (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.412; Bainton p.206).

This extraordinary custom cut right across both the teaching of God's word and the practice of the earliest North African churches. "Marriage," we are told, "should be honoured by all,"[1] and the apostle Paul roundly condemns those who "forbid marriage."[2] Peter and James were both married men, and so were "the other apostles," as were the heroes of the Old Testament. Indeed, "Each man should have his own wife," said Paul. Elsewhere we are told that an overseer or a helper "must be the husband of one wife" – meaning not that marriage would be compulsory for a leader in the church, but certainly that it would be normal and desirable.[3] We find the church meeting regularly in the house of a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, in Ephesus and again in Rome. A church met also in the family home of Philemon and Apphia in Colosse.[4]

This strange emphasis on celibacy was a new thing. Was it, we might wonder, derived from the insidious influence of the Manicheans who had already contrived to combine a conceited, celibate priesthood with a lazy and complacent laity? And was the Church of Christ to follow meekly along that trail? It would seem so.

Celibacy, of course, meant that the leaders of the churches were very largely ignorant of the pressures and the blessings of marriage and family life. On such matters of vital and universal concern, they could hardly offer any effective or acceptable advice. But the other result of this system was obviously that very few children grew up in homes where the word of God could be well taught and consistently applied. Not many children had parents who knew the Scriptures thoroughly and would be able to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."[5] Only a small minority of young people could now look to their mother and father for wise and informed Christian counsel. It was rare for a family to be in the habit of praying and reading God's word together. The focus was no longer on the family and the home but on the church building as the place for spiritual help and teaching.

This was a sad weakness. For all that, it was not yet an insurmountable one – so long as the children could indeed find such training and instruction in the meetings of the church. But if the churches were ever to be closed, and the Overseers exiled, few parents would have either the ability or the

[1] Heb 13:4

[2] 1 Tim 4:3 RSV

[3] 1 Cor 7:1-11; 9:5; 1 Tim 3:2,11; 4:1-3

[4] Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19 (v.8 shows that Priscilla and Aquila were in Ephesus); Philemon 1,2

[5] Eph 6:4

confidence to teach Christian truth to their offspring. The torch was doomed to flicker and die which could not be handed on to the coming generation.

* * *

These were not the only flaws in a Christian Church that, on the surface, appeared popular, prosperous and successful. An outward assurance all too often masked an inner uncertainty. In fact, the morale of the North African Christians at this time was not high. Many Overseers found themselves placed by imperial laws at the head of Christian communities that were still at heart Donatist. The successive debates and conferences instigated by the Catholics had never succeeded in refuting or discrediting Donatist pleas for the purity and independence of the African churches. Large numbers of believers had been forced into the Catholic fold against their will. Many others had come over of their own accord, not because they felt warmly towards the official state Church but simply because they were weary of disputation and violence. These were not likely to be enthusiastic Catholics.

Only a small minority of Christians in Augustine's day had ever read the Bible, or even a modest portion of it. They enjoyed the preaching of their Overseer but few were able or willing to read the Scriptures for themselves. It is a fact that no Church has ever succumbed to an alien religion or ideology in any land whose people could read or hear the word of God in their own language. But the land which raised Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine has never at any point in its long history enjoyed free access to God's word in any language. These great men achieved much in their own sphere but they did little to facilitate the widespread distribution of Latin or Greek Scriptures, and they evidently did nothing to translate God's word into Tamazight. This was a fatal mistake. To the east, by this time, the Egyptian monks had translated the Scriptures into the Coptic language, and the Syrian Christians had done the same for their people. The Ethiopians and Armenians were not far behind. We find early evidence of churches in these places using the local languages; these churches have survived to the present day.[1]

By emphasizing the use of Latin for teaching and for worship, and by reading only Latin and Greek Scriptures, Augustine and his generation ensured that, with the fall of Rome, the churches would fall too. As it was, they probably believed that the Empire would last forever, and that Latin would be the common language of the world for all time. But history teaches us that empires rise and fall; history would have taught them the

[1] Latourette Vol.I pp.256-257

same lesson if they had considered the fate of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Phoenicians. No church should fix its sights on a particular language simply because it is the language of the present rulers. The tongue which the people speak in their own homes is the one they understand best, and the one which will outlive all others.[1]

In North Africa, however, even the Latin Scriptures were in very short supply. They had to be copied out by hand. Books produced in the monasteries were expensive to buy, and it was rare for anyone to own a personal copy of even the smallest portion. The vast majority of Christians were illiterate in any case; most knew only the verses that were regularly read aloud in the meetings of the church. They were dependent on the Overseers who expounded the Scriptures for them; they had no means of checking the teachings they received against the authority of God's word. The Overseer would be respected and trusted, but even if his motives were the best in the world, he was not and could not be infallible. Strange ideas crept into the churches of North Africa for the simple reason that the people of God had no personal access to his word.

* * *

The kingdom of God, we are told, is like a treasure,[2] but not all the treasures possessed by man belong to the kingdom of God. The churches of Augustine's day had acquired riches on earth as well as riches in heaven, and this inevitably coloured their attitudes towards people as well as property. It was all too often the case that a man was valued for his position and his purse as much as for his spiritual insight and his faith. The fifth century hastened to enlist in the leadership of the church the cream of the

[1] The use of the local dialect for worship and Christian teaching will encourage the emergence of local leaders. It may also from time to time give rise to local heresies. If the churches are to use their local dialect, they have a responsibility not to cut themselves off from the Christian communities in other parts of the world, nor hastily to adopt teachings which have been rejected by the majority of Christians elsewhere. Greatly as we admire the steadfast perseverance of the ancient Coptic and Syrian Churches, it is a fact that they slipped in the one case towards the Monophysite heresy, and in the other to Nestorianism. The Ethiopians, for their part, have perpetuated many Jewish traditions which should find no place in the simple Gospel of Christ.
Much depends on the accuracy of the translation, and on the humility of those who use it, but a good translation of the Bible in the hands of wise and spiritual leaders will go a long way towards ensuring the survival of a church through the most difficult trials. And allied to the task of translation is that of teaching the Christians how to read the word of God, helping them to memorize large portions of it, and encouraging them to share it with others.

[2] Matt 13:44

cultured, influential, ruling class. When a rich man became a Christian, the churches of the region fell over one another to add him to their number and appoint him immediately as an elder – a comical picture, were it not so sad.

The apostles and teachers of New Testament times had not been chosen because of their educational or social level, or their wealth. Peter and John had been simple fishermen. Even the great scholar Paul had suffered the loss of all things; their Master, indeed, had nowhere to lay his head. Mature and godly character were the great requirements for leadership in the churches of the New Testament. Tertullian, in his generation, had said: "The most approved elders preside over all, having obtained this honour not by money, but by character."[1]

Two centuries later, however, Augustine found that senators and proprietors were rapidly raised to positions of spiritual leadership for which they were quite unsuited. Sadly, the reasons were not hard to find. Not only would the accession of an influential man increase the stature and reputation of the church he attended, but the money or property he donated to it would add to its prosperity. An aristocrat was born to leadership, people said, so he must be a leader. After all, they asked, would a renowned and wealthy man consent to sit on a rough bench alongside the poor and despised, and the outcasts of society? Jesus had done so, but now, it seemed, the servant was greater than his Master.[2] Overseers were appointed who had little or no interest in religion. One such was Synesius, the fourth century Overseer of the church in Cyrene, who felt himself to be the only cultured man in Libya. His self-confessed ignorance of theological matters is borne out by his letters which contain countless references to pagan authors, avenging deities, and fate, but hardly any at all to the Christian scriptures or to the will of God.[3] Augustine might resist the trend, but he could not halt it. He pleaded for a return to New Testament standards, as though the half-converted heathen who packed the churches would approve and observe them. Can we wonder that the Donatists, and the Montanists and Novatianists before them, saw the Catholic Church as fatally compromised and beyond hope of redemption?

The Catholic Church, indeed, had become a major landowner employing thousands of labourers. It happened occasionally that a merchant or proprietor would leave his business or property to the church in his will, and thus the church acquired extensive lands and agricultural estates, each with its own sizeable workforce, its running costs and its produce. The proceeds were used for the support of the clergy and the construction of

[1] *Apology* 39
[2] referring to John 13:16
[3] Mango p.36; Fitzgerald p.49, *Letter* 66 etc.

impressive buildings; the remainder was given to the poor. No doubt the estates were managed well, and with fairness and generosity, but it was hard for members of a church like this any longer to feel that they were strangers and exiles in this world, looking for their reward in the world to come.

But even such a church as this would not receive all it was offered. Augustine refused to accept one inheritance from a man who had a fleet of boats carrying produce from Africa to Italy. There were too many dubious practices involved in commerce of this sort, and Augustine shrank from such an entanglement. "What do we want with money, cargoes, and profits?" he demanded. "The church is not a trading company!" Quite so, we might agree, but was it any better for the church to be an agricultural corporation? Such schemes could only distract it from its spiritual calling, and tie up its most gifted men in the settling of accounts, the payment of wages, and the resolution of disputes about boundaries and contracts. "Do you think I enjoy possessing all these farms?" said Augustine. "God knows me; he knows what I think about it all – he knows that it is a weary chore for me." And again: "God is my witness, all this administration of property is a heavy weight on me: it is a servitude for me which I bear from fear of God and love for my brothers."[1]

It was a servitude, perhaps, but was it so clearly laid on him by God as he seemed to think? The Bible teaches us that the Church is a spiritual fellowship, and its work is spiritual work. Its purpose is the preaching of the Gospel to the lost and the teaching of holiness to the saved. It is not called to administer farms and businesses, nor to provide employment or amass profits. We find the apostles in the book of Acts not accumulating properties but selling them, laying up treasures not on earth but in heaven.[2] This appalling administrative burden was imposed on Christian leaders and Christian people, not by God, but by the social and political ambitions of the Catholic organization, and it became a source of many scandals and much sorrow down the succeeding centuries.

The official Catholic Church, orderly and directed firmly from above, appealed no doubt to the disciplined Roman temperament – it was modelled largely on the administrative structure of the Empire – but it contrasted oddly with the simple Christian groups that had sprung up in each city in New Testament times.[3] And such an ecclesiastical system cut right across the personal character of the North African. It was an alien structure, neither Biblical nor Amazigh, and it conflicted with the inherent love of the

[1] *On John* 6:25; *Letter* 226:9 (Hamman p.291)
[2] Acts 4:32-35; Luke 12:33-34; James 5:3; Matt 6:19-21
[3] Acts 2:42, 46-7; 12:12; 1 Cor 12:1-31; 14:1-40

North African for his individual freedom and his small, informal, local groupings. Submission to an authority hundreds of kilometres away was a new thing, at variance with the family loyalties and the fluid alliances which had typified the history of the people. It would not, perhaps, be fanciful to see the independent spirit of the Imazighen as the cause of their consistent preference throughout the centuries for non-conformist groups – movements which split from the official Catholic Church, and later from official Arab Islam. We find amongst those furthest inland the firmest supporters of Donatism, and in the days of the Muslims, of Shiism and Kharedjism,[1] and even now it is in the mountains that animism still contends most strongly with orthodox religion.

This independent outlook has at times strained friendships within Africa, and also across the Mediterranean. The relations between the Catholic Church of North Africa and her sister in Rome continued to be both cordial, and wary. Rome was clearly expecting the other churches to defer to her judgments and pronouncements, although the day had not yet come when the others would do so unquestioningly. As the years went by, the Overseer of the church in Rome, whoever he happened to be, claimed with increasing persistence to have inherited the authority of both Peter and Paul who were said to be its first Overseers. The notion that Peter was the original Overseer in Rome was itself not a fact beyond dispute. Peter was not definitely named as the first Overseer in Rome until the document known as the Liberian Catalogue was compiled (in Rome!) about 354 AD. And whether the current Overseer was endowed with the same authority as Peter was also a moot point. But the days were not far off when the Overseer in Rome would style himself "Pope", meaning "father", a title which in Scripture is never used of Peter – it is used of God alone. In the previous century, some had actually taken to calling Cyprian "Papa", as they did the Overseer in Alexandria. Cyprian did not encourage the use of this title, perhaps aware that it flew in the face of the express command of Christ, "Do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven."[2] It was some time later that the term was first used in addressing the Overseer in Rome, and not until the eleventh century that it was used exclusively of the Overseer in that city.[3]

Although Augustine respected the successive Overseers in Rome, and periodically asked for their advice and support in matters such as the

[1] See Chapter 30.
[2] Matt 23:9
[3] It was not until the nineteenth century that the Roman Catholic Church actually claimed the infallibility of the Pope's official pronouncements, along with those of past Popes (Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.168).

Donatist dispute, he never visited them, and he certainly did not accord them direct authority over the African churches. In AD 418, a conference in Carthage forbade appeals to Rome against decisions taken by the African Christian leaders. Even the strongest African proponents of Catholic unity felt qualms about the ambitions of the church in Rome, and at times resisted it.

Opposition to interference from the church in Rome came to a head at the beginning of the fifth century. In Carthage, a certain elder, Apiarius, had been relieved of his responsibilities because of his repeated moral lapses, whereupon he departed for Rome and persuaded the Overseer there of his innocence. He returned to Africa where he proceeded to add further misdeeds to his previous catalogue of offences. In the year 426 the Overseer in Rome sent instructions to Carthage, by the hand of a particularly supercilious imperial official, instructing Aurelius, the Catholic Overseer at the time, to reverse his previous decision, and reinstate the innocent and unjustly maligned Apiarius. The Overseer Aurelius convened a conference which deliberated for three days in Carthage without reaching a decision. Then suddenly the accused presented himself before them, humbly confessing his faults and asking forgiveness. This effectively closed the matter, establishing the guilt of Apiarius and yet providing for his reconciliation with the churches in Africa without reference to Rome. The imperial official returned to Italy, not a little abashed, bearing a letter from the church in Carthage which said: "Let us have done with these high-handed worldly ways. They are not appropriate for the Church of Christ where everything should be done simply and humbly, in the presence of God."[1]

If the leaders of the Church were wary of foreign activity, its members were largely oblivious of it. The doings of Overseers and conferences in distant provinces across the sea were no concern of theirs: they had never set foot outside of Africa, and had no wish to do so. The African churches were second to none, built upon the blessed earth that had soaked up the blood of the holy martyrs; theirs was a glorious Christian heritage, in no way beholden to Rome. Augustine tried to widen their horizons and strengthen their contacts with the churches in other lands, but in vain. Crowds might come to celebrate the memory of Perpetua, and Cyprian, but only a few, he remarked reproachfully, thought to remember the European martyrs, or even Peter and Paul, who did not enjoy the privilege of being Africans.

[1] Hamman p.32; Foakes-Jackson pp.526-527; *Synod of Carthage AD 424*, Mansi 3:839ff (Bettenson *DOTCC* pp.81-82)

* * *

The cult of the martyrs waxed strong in the fourth and early fifth centuries. There were few new martyrs, but the stories of the old ones gained in the telling, and their bones and shreds of their clothing became the objects of extraordinary veneration among the more superstitious and less well-instructed Christians. The confessors who had interceded for them in life were believed to intercede for them still after death, and the cult of the "Saints" came into being. Prayers were offered to the departed martyrs, to the apostles, and to Mary the mother of Jesus, in the belief that they heard such petitions and would submit them to the Almighty with greater effect than a prayer offered directly to him. No scriptural justification for this practice was required, or offered.

Death, and the great expectation of eternal life, continued to fascinate and inspire. It had long been the custom to celebrate the Lord's Supper at the graveside seven days after the decease of a loved one. Periodically thereafter the members of the family and the church would meet at that spot to pray and to sing hymns. This practice was a comfort to those who had lost a dear one, and helped them to cherish his memory and example, and it enabled them, all the more, to look forward to their heavenly reunion.

By Augustine's day, however, gross superstitions had grown up around this custom and it was believed by many that the departed believer participated with them, in some magical way, in the Lord's Supper as they partook of it at his grave. The belief grew up that his friends could pray for him, securing his well-being in the hereafter, and even pray *to* him for *their* well-being in the here and now. The ceremony of remembrance at the graveside was transformed into something closely resembling the pagan "sacrifice for the dead". There were not yet ostensibly those elaborate "masses for the dead" which marked Medieval times, with their assumption that the ceremonies and the prayers of the living can ease the lot of the dead, but we can see, in the fifth century, early traces of what was to become a grievous and costly delusion.

It was at this time, too, that we begin to find certain Christian heroes of the past endowed with the honorific title of "Saint". The apostles, for example, came to be called "Saint Peter", "Saint John", and so on. The Catholic Church claimed the right to decide who deserved such a title and who did not. Cyprian was declared a "Saint", and so, later, was Augustine. Tertullian, however, was overlooked: he would probably have refused such

a distinction in any case, pointing out that he and all who loved Christ were already "saints".[1]

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The churches of North Africa had come a long way. For more than two and a half long centuries, the Christians had suffered bitter persecution. Always the underdogs, despised and oppressed by a constant stream of haughty Roman prefects and governors, they had endured against all the odds. There was something in such a rugged faith which attracted the Imazighen: after all they too were underdogs in autocratic Roman society. But the accession of Constantine marked a turning point. Once the Church had been adopted as an arm of state power, it was seen in a different light. The mass movement to Christianity began to slow, and eventually dried up. Once the persecuted community had become respectable, its vigour was lost.

Religious freedom brought into the churches a new type of "Christian", one marked by sad indifference – indifference to the call of God, to the moral standards of Christ, and to the need of the world. The churches rapidly became larger, but hardly stronger. In fact, they had fared far better in the fierce fires of affliction than in the debilitating luxury of imperial favour, just as Jonah had acted more nobly in the belly of the great fish than in the comfortable shade of the climbing vine.[2] After the defeat of the Donatists, the Catholic Church appeared prosperous and successful, but as its traditions hardened, its hold on God's word slackened. Many of its members did not know the Christ whose name they bore.

Such a Church cannot long survive in the face of powerful and determined opposition, and its spiritual health was soon to be put to the most searching test. The indefatigable Vandals were knocking at the gate, and after them others, and after them yet more. This, it would seem, was the beginning of the end for Christianity in North Africa.

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[1] In the New Testament every believer is a "saint", a person made holy and separated from the world for service to God (Acts 9:41 AV; 26:10; Rom 1:7; 15:25,26,31; 2 Cor 1:1; 13:13). The apostle Paul writes "to the saints in Ephesus" – meaning the entire church in that city – and likewise to the saints at Philippi, and those at Colosse (Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2 AV). He refers to the churches throughout the world as "all the congregations of the saints" (1 Cor 14:33). The Catholics, however, who counted many unholy people among the members of their churches could hardly refer to them as "saints"; they began to use the word in a different sense, as an honorary title to be conferred on a few. The idea that certain exceptional Christians are saints, and others not, is a tradition of men rather than a principle of God's word.

[2] Jonah 2:1-2; 4:7-11

PART FIVE: LAST HARVEST?
(mid 5th century onwards)

29. Confusion and Collapse

By all accounts, the era of the Vandals in North Africa was an unmitigated disaster from first to last. Their name, deriving from their reputation, has entered the languages of the world with only one meaning: a vandal is an ignorant lout, given to wanton and futile destruction. Without seeking to excuse or defend the Vandals, however, we must bear in mind that the record of their doings has come down to us only through the impassioned reports of their victims and the embittered accusations of their sworn enemies; they themselves wrote little. But it is by no means certain that they would, in any case, have viewed their North African sojourn in any better or more noble light.

The Vandals were a Germanic people who had long ago left their Baltic homeland. Driven from place to place, they were constantly engaged in bloody strife with those who occupied the lands they coveted. It was only after centuries of this rootless wandering throughout Europe, with a constant struggle to gain and hold territory, that they found themselves, in the early years of the fifth century, temporarily in control of a large part of the Spanish peninsula. Somewhere along the way, the Vandals had adopted a corrupted form of Christianity, Arianism, which regrettably taught them little of divine truth and less of Christian love. In AD 429 an ambitious plan to conquer North Africa was entrusted to their most capable military commander Genseric who, despite his short stature and pronounced limp, duly accomplished the invasion across the Straits of Gibraltar with a mere 15,000 soldiers. His task was facilitated by the treacherous and self-seeking Roman administrator, Bonifacius, who apparently delivered the provinces of Africa to him in order to spite the emperor. There was little armed resistance: few were willing or able to oppose the invaders. The Vandals burned and looted at will.

Thus ended nearly six hundred years of Roman rule in Africa. No part of the Empire had so long escaped invasion, and in the end no part was so fearfully ravaged. The once prosperous and fruitful land presented to the view only ruined towns, burning villages and a population thinned by the

sword and mutilated by the uncouth savagery of a people who, without a civilization of their own, had accustomed themselves to sucking dry the civilizations built by others.[1] It seems that the seven or eight million Imazighen of North Africa, especially the remaining Donatists, welcomed the Vandals, hoping that with a change of ruler the future would take a turn for the better. Such hopes were to be cruelly disappointed.[2]

Some thirty-four years previously, in AD 395, the Roman Empire had officially been divided in two – the Western Empire governed from Rome, and the Eastern Empire ruled from the great city of Constantinople, also known as Byzantium. The western half had fallen under the sway of the Germanic Barbarians by the end of the fourth century. In AD 435, the eastern, Byzantine Empire formally recognized the Vandals – who were by now firmly entrenched in Africa – as allies. Four years later Genseric captured Carthage, and became the effective ruler of Mediterranean North Africa. His kingdom extended to the west a little beyond Caesarea (Cherchell), and as far south as his soldiers could in practice wield their swords. The remaining inland and western parts of North Africa fell under the fluctuating control of whichever local chieftains could grasp and retain authority.

Despite the agreement with Constantinople, the Vandal invasion effectively cut the links with the outside world. The Mediterranean and Atlantic sea routes were now prey to the constant depredations of Vandal pirates. Trade came to a standstill; the agricultural economy of North Africa faced ruin. Farmers were driven off their lands by acquisitive commanders whose knowledge of agriculture was minimal but whose ambitions knew no bounds. Many Amazigh craftsmen and merchants whose produce had formerly been carried to the markets of the Empire now found it left on their hands: stocks of grain and wool intended for Europe could not be sold in Africa. The country staggered under the weight of erratic and uncontrolled tyranny, compounded by periodic raids of armed bandits sweeping down from the mountains onto the rich defenceless towns of the plain. In AD 455 Genseric crossed the narrow sea to Rome, and the defenceless capital was sacked and looted a second time. The Vandal leader showed himself far more skilled at burning cities than governing them.

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The Vandals destroyed or appropriated all the church properties in the African towns, along with their furnishings and valuables. They bundled

[1] See Clark p.190
[2] See Frend *TDC* pp.297-299

most of the former church leaders onto old transport ships and packed them off to Rome; they feared these men more as a potential focus of political resistance than as a doctrinal hazard. Overseers appointed by the Vandals took their place. A Germanic dialect became the language of the churches, and Arianism became their creed. Until this time, the Arian heresy had largely passed the African churches by. The Conference, or Council, of Nicaea in AD 325 had firmly denounced Arius and all others who denied the divinity of Christ. But Nicaea was far from Africa, and the conference had taken place a long time ago. Augustine himself had written a very full and convincing refutation of Arian doctrines, but a hundred years later few Africans could read Augustine: his books were lost and his Latin was largely forgotten outside the chaotic confines of the administrative offices.

Genseric himself avoided violent oppression of the Catholics. In AD 476, in return for Roman recognition of the Vandals' rights over the territories they had captured, the Catholics were granted permission to re-open some churches and use the Latin language in them. But Genseric's heir, Huneric, was somewhat less charitable. In AD 484, he summoned to a conference a total of 466 Catholic Overseers – an extraordinary number under the circumstances. The purpose, ostensibly, was to debate controversial issues with the Arians; in fact, the aim was to destroy the Catholics. Vicious laws and swingeing punishments were inflicted on them and, during the next two years, ninety of their Overseers were put to death after brutal sufferings, far surpassing those endured in the pagan persecutions of the past. The Catholics, who had justified the use of force when they were in a position to exert it, now found that the boot was on the other foot. Many were exiled from the cities and, as a punishment, sent to live among the people inland. Others were sold into slavery. We are told of four Catholic believers sold by Genseric to the chief of the Caprapiti tribe: nothing daunted, they determined to convert the entire tribe to Christianity.[1] It may be that the legendary Christian origins of certain North African peoples, such as the Sanhaja of the Moroccan Rif, and the Regraga to the north of Essaouira, can be traced to the influence of such bold captives and refugees.[2]

The mild king Hilderic (523-530) allowed the Catholics some degree of respite. They seized the opportunity to arrange a conference and join forces with the aggrieved merchants of Carthage, whose businesses had been thoroughly ruined by the Vandals. They sent a joint plea to the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, begging him to come to their rescue. By now the populace of the inland plains, who at first had welcomed the invaders,

[1] Victor de Vita *Historia Persecutionis* 1:35-37 (Moorhead pp.16-17; Hamman p.34)
[2] Coon pp.16, 25; Hart p.344; Robinet, *Esquisses sur Essaouira*, Morocco, 1996 (ISBN 9981-918-01-6)

had seen them in their true colours and were no less anxious to see the back of them. The emperor Justinian observed with grim satisfaction the declining sea power of the Vandals, their fading military might, and the softening effect on them of luxury and excess. In AD 533, Byzantine troops landed cautiously near Carthage under the command of the circumspect general Belisarius. After a number of days spent beating about the bush, they soundly defeated the Vandal forces. The Arian church leaders fled; the Vandal soldiers enlisted in the imperial armies; others found their way back to Spain. And thus commenced what is known as the Byzantine period in North Africa.

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Forts were set up along the coastal strip from Leptis (east of modern Tripoli) to Tangier. The Byzantine leaders came to agreements with a number of the Amazigh chiefs, and a degree of peace and stability began to settle over the towns and cities on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Properties were restored as far as possible to the descendants of their original owners, and Catholic Overseers were appointed to the urban churches. The new administration met with a warm response from the large majority of Christians, but there was little comfort for the few surviving Donatists, or for the pagans, and none at all for those who had espoused the hated Arianism of the Vandals. Local chieftains, many of them professing to be Christians, jostled for position in the mountains, and in the western plains of what is now Morocco.

The imperial city of Constantinople proclaimed itself triumphantly as the capital of the world – the glittering, self-conscious standard-bearer of civilization. And North Africa was welcomed back into the imperial fold. But exhaustion and economic collapse were never very far away. It was not long before crippling taxes imposed by the failing provincial administration finally cut the root of whatever popular support the Byzantines might have enjoyed.

In fact, Byzantine control of North Africa was doomed almost from the outset. The remarkable thing is that its frail structure should hold together for so long – almost a hundred and fifty years. It endured until the middle of the seventh century, despite the lack of effective support from Constantinople, and despite the broken trade routes and ruined markets. It endured in the face of raids by the restless tribes of the mountains, and the incursions of nomadic warriors stealing up from the Sahara on their newly domesticated camels. And it stalwartly resisted the first exploratory forays

of the Arabs who were gathering their strength in Egypt. But there was an air of anxious unreality about it all.

Three generations had gone by, in which the Christian community had been starved of spiritual food. The Vandal language and the Arian heresy were alike useless to them. Latin – a little less incomprehensible – had not been well used or appreciated by the arrogant Vandal Overseers: they had done little more than confuse the people with their deceptive teachings about Christ. The Christians of the sixth century in North Africa were pathetically and tragically ignorant of God's word and, it would seem, strangers to God himself. More than a century had now passed since the days of Augustine: his generation had all passed on, and so had their children. The years of wastage had left little trace of his influence, and only a faded memory of the flourishing Christianity which the people of his time had enjoyed. The Christian community, if such it could be called, was confused, dispirited and cut off from the heritage of teaching and experience which could have ensured its survival.

But the Christians did what they could. Ignorant of the Greek language favoured by the Byzantine rulers, they looked hopefully for help and support from the church in Rome, and began cautiously to pick up the pieces. Those who could still understand Latin absorbed the teaching of the Scriptures and the liturgies introduced by the Overseers sent to them. During the decade 565-578 evangelists even began to move once more among the Amazigh tribes as far south as the Fezzan in the Libyan desert.[1] There was hope for a bright new start – only a glimmer as yet, but perhaps one last chance for the churches of North Africa. It was not yet too late – if only they could return to that simple faith in a living Saviour which their fathers had known, and if they could begin to teach the word of God in a language that the people could understand. But this was a dream never to be fulfilled.

There began, instead, an epoch of fantastic building projects – basilicas whose rich ornamentation drew its inspiration not from the Bible but from the Eastern opulence of an Empire which perceived its glory in the genius of man rather than the grace of God. These costly edifices rising to the sky served only to humble and overawe the dispirited Christian community. The

[1] Cooley p.54. Certain religious words of Latin origin, along with some Old Testament names, seem to have entered the vocabulary of the Saharan Twareg at this time. The Byzantine historian Procopius (c. AD 558) tells us that the inhabitants of Awjila (E. Libya) and Ghadames (W. Libya) were converted to Christianity during the reign of the emperor Justinian (AD 527-565), and that in AD 569 the tribes of the Garamantes (inland Libya) adopted the faith (H.T.Norris, *The Tuaregs: their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*, Aris & Phillips, 1975). (See also Mango p.185.)

remains of these magnificent structures can be seen today in such places as Leptis, Sabratha, Tébessa and Cherchell. Of the Christians who met in them nothing remains. The dazzling mosaics and majestic pillars and arches brought them small comfort – pointing perhaps to God's greatness, but little hinting at his love. They were a symbol of foreign brilliance and alien power, but they far exceeded and totally obscured the real needs of the Christians. Such splendours sat awkwardly on the ruins of a demoralized and broken North African Church. The contrast could not be more stark. The Byzantines were confidently assertive in their grand scheme to display the majesty of God, the Imazighen fearfully insecure in their doubtful uncertainty as to who God was, and what he had done, and what he might yet do for them.

As the buildings grew more splendid so did the rites and ceremonies of the Catholic Church. The appointed clergy led the congregation in a formal recitation of Latin liturgies – words which expressed worship of God but effectively prevented the people from saying anything to him. Latin was no longer a language they understood. The people attended, for the most part, not to give thanks to their Creator, nor to learn how to be better servants of Christ: they came rather to admire the awe-inspiring architecture and the music of the choir, and to receive the sacraments which they believed ensured their salvation. The idea grew up that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were miraculously transformed in the hands of the Overseer into the actual flesh and blood of Christ, although they still looked, tasted and smelt like ordinary bread and wine.

Many such features of the Byzantine Church foreshadowed the peculiar aberrations of Medieval Roman Catholicism – prayers for the dead, penances and pardons bought and sold for money, the fabrication of statues representing Jesus, Mary or the "Saints". Strange doctrines appeared, such as the existence of a purgatory where believers endure punishment after death in order to purify themselves of their own sins, and belief in the perpetual virginity and perfection of Mary the mother of Jesus, and the efficacy of prayers to her. Few would or could read the Bible to check or question these things.

Now there was freedom to propagate the faith, but there was, equally, freedom to propagate error. Since the earliest days of the Church, curious doctrines and heresies had arisen here and there. But now they positively flourished. The emperors in Constantinople showed a naïve inclination to involve themselves in these controversies, and to make pronouncements concerning them. But the emperors were, for the most part, woefully ignorant of the issues involved, and at times found themselves championing

views which were wildly unorthodox. They merely added to the general demoralization of the Christian community.[1]

What was the ordinary man or woman to think? As Catholics, Donatists, Arians and Byzantines, all claiming to be Christians, fought and persecuted one another across the length and breadth of the land, who could tell which were right, if indeed any of them were? The majority of people could no longer see Christianity in North Africa; they could only make out rival Churches. Bewildered by the never-ending disputes, and disenchanted with doctrines which they barely understood, they felt little bond of brotherhood with the haughty priests in their magnificent robes who intoned Latin phrases from the exalted heights of their episcopal thrones.

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It has often been said that the churches in North Africa were weakened more than anything by the controversies which afflicted them. There is some degree of truth in this, although one might question whether the controversies here were any more acute or difficult than those in other parts of the world where the churches, after all, survived more or less unscathed. Elsewhere the disputes emanated from particular theological questions, especially concerning the deity of Christ, but in Africa they revolved around simpler issues, and they focussed on popular personalities. Perhaps this was why they aroused greater passion and left deeper scars.

These conflicts – in the name of Catholicism, Montanism, Donatism, Arianism – needed to be resolved, but the process of sorting them out so confused the minds of the Christians, and so wrought on their emotions, that many lost patience with the intellectuals who had been appointed to lead them. Where was the simple faith and the joyful sense of God's presence which had characterized the early churches? Many hearts were hungry for a knowledge of the living God. They asked for bread and received a stone; they asked for an egg and received a scorpion.[2]

That sincere faith, which had dwelt in the hearts of the men and women of Tertullian's day, was no more. Six hundred years had served to mix into it the ambitions of men, the superstitions of the world, and the violence of armed authorities until it was no longer recognizable. The simple and forthright teachings of Christ were heard no more in North Africa. The first disciples, Peter and James and John, with their homely phrases and

[1] Theological dispute finally led to a split in AD 1054 between the western (Latin-speaking) Roman Catholic Church, governed from Rome, and the eastern (Greek-speaking) Orthodox Church, based in Constantinople.

[2] referring to Matt 7:9 and Luke 11:12

fisherman's garb, would have been baffled by the elaborate Byzantine basilicas and the liturgical Latin services of the sixth and seventh centuries. This was not what their Master had taught; this was not the faith which he had sent them to preach.

North Africa needed once again to hear the true Gospel, the simple message of God's love which alone could bring hope to the heart of man. That holy seed had been cast on the good soil for many years, and had brought forth many wonderful harvests. But now the old crop was left trampled, beaten down – dead and dry beneath a harsh sun. The field lay bare, awaiting the rains, the plough and the seed. But no longer was such spiritual seed to be found in this land. The hour had passed, and a strange, exotic seed was on its way, borne by different sowers. A new and alien crop was soon to cover the fields of North Africa.

Secondary sources for the Vandal and Byzantine periods in North Africa are Frend *TDC* pp.301-314; Coon pp.24-26; Camps pp.177-180; Cooley pp.49-57; Guernier pp.140-161.

30. Conquerors and Colonists

A mere twenty-six years after Muhammad's first campaign in Medina, his Arab followers – having wrung what they could out of Arabia and Egypt – set off to the west in search of further glory and richer plunder, and they fixed their sights on the plump and jaded cities of North Africa. In the year 647, ten thousand Bedouin horsemen, and as many footmen, crossed into what is now Tunisia. They had pushed a long way from home, far from the deserts of Arabia, in their quest for the bounty and the blessings of Allah. They had not travelled so far as the Vandals two centuries previously, but they had come a lot more quickly. They sliced through a limp Mediterranean world which fell softly apart like an overcooked chicken.

At Sufetula (Sbeïtla) they met some resistance from a weak Byzantine army which was swiftly overcome. Terms were agreed and the Arabs were bought off at a high price. They went back to Egypt laden with booty and confirmed in their conviction that North Africa was a promising land with much to offer. The enjoyment of these spoils occupied them for thirteen years after which, in AD 660, they resolved to return and replenish the coffers. Ten years sufficed for the exhaustion of their second haul. The fruits of North Africa seem to have been rather more alluring than those of Egypt, and in AD 670 they moved west again, under their able leader Oqba. This time they had come to stay.

The Arab was fired with zeal and enthusiasm as no previous invader had been. He was fighting to spread a religion which had already brought him worldly rewards beyond his wildest imaginings: he had chanced upon a path which had proved its worth, and one which promised much for the future. Moreover, the Arab had burned his bridges; he had cast off the restrictions of his homeland and was well set on the road to fame and fortune. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The Arabs, moreover, now found themselves on the threshold of a land whose aristocracy and intellectual leaders had fled, whose landowners had recently risen to a rank of which they had no previous experience, whose commerce was disrupted, and whose army comprised little more than a few underpaid German mercenaries. The men who might have had the ability to raise up an African defence and refute an Arabian theology had long since taken refuge on the other side of the Mediterranean, carrying with them all they could of value – books, treasures and the relics of the Christian martyrs.

In AD 698 the Arabs seized the historic North African capital, the great seaport of Carthage. It was not there, however, that they established their settlement. Their base – at first little more than an armed camp – was set up

at Kairouan on the plain some 100 kilometres inland. This marked a symbolic break with the past. From now on North Africa was to look not outward to western civilization but inward to the empty spaces of the interior. No longer was the port of Carthage its focus, and its door onto the wider Mediterranean world. That door was firmly closed by the new Arab overlords, men of the desert who had no love for the sea: they pressed westwards as far as the Atlantic coast of Morocco, but never crossed to the Canary Islands.

Spurred on by the thirst for power and for plunder, they were fortified by the conviction that these temporal blessings were their just reward for fighting the battles of their God. They established a second inland centre at Fes in AD 809, meeting with no further opposition from the Byzantines, for whom Africa had become little more than a distant and expensive liability. The Imazighen were caught off guard. The mountain tribes were well accustomed to harassing the urban settlements of the Romans, Vandals and Byzantines; they had engaged extensively in such forays during the previous two centuries. But their small raiding bands had always contented themselves with quick sorties out of their mountain strongholds onto those coastal plains. Now they were faced with a novel situation. The new invader did not restrict himself to the thin coastal strip. The Arabs demanded the inland regions too – lands which had always belonged to the Imazighen.

The newcomers developed a simple and highly effective military strategy. They attacked one tribe at a time in pitched battle with swift cavalry charges and overpowering weight of arms, and then offered a simple choice: conversion or taxation, either of which would effectively ensure the submission of the defeated.

The fourteenth-century Arab historian En-Noweiri records the sequence of events: "From Tangier, Oqba moved towards the south in the direction of the Sous al-Adna until he reached a town called Taroudant. There he encountered the first Berber troops and put them to flight after a bloody battle. His cavalry set about chasing the fugitives and penetrated the Sous al-Adna. The Berbers then gathered in such numbers that only Allah could count them. But Oqba attacked them with unprecedented ferocity. He totally massacred them and helped himself to some of their wives, who were of an unparalleled beauty. It is reported that one of their girls was sold in the East for a thousand gold coins." Reaching the Atlantic Ocean without further resistance, Oqba rode into the water and cried, "Lord, if this ocean did not prevent me, I would go to far countries, to the kingdom of the Two-Horned One, fighting for your religion and killing those who do not believe

in your existence or who worship other gods."[1] Shortly afterwards the Arabs took thirty-five thousand Amazigh slaves to Egypt. Two hundred of the most beautiful were offered as a gift to the governor of Egypt "including both girls and boys."[2]

The earlier Arab historian Ibn Abd el-Hakam, writing in the eleventh century, gives more detail of the methods used by Oqba: "Arriving at Weddan, he brought the region to submission and severed the ear of its king. 'Why have you treated me like this when you have already made peace with me?' the king asked. 'It is a warning to you,' Oqba replied, 'And whenever you put your hand to your ear you will remember it, and you will never dream of making war against the Arabs.' He then demanded three hundred and sixty of their people as slaves." With that, Oqba set off for the next town. Six miles from its gates he halted his horse and "invited its inhabitants to embrace Islam." Not surprisingly, they hastened to comply. But acquiescence brought them no immunity. Three hundred and sixty went off into slavery; their king was violently abused, insulted and sent away as a captive to the East. Oqba and his men rode on, overpowering each of the fortified villages in their path, until they came to the last in that region. Here, once more, he summoned the local king and cut off his finger. Taking his inevitable three hundred and sixty slaves, he set off with them back to the East, capturing fortresses as he went.[3] Eventually he arrived at a valley where he decided to found a permanent settlement. He called it Kairouan, "to serve as a place of weapons for Islam until the end of time."[4]

This was an unexpected turn of events for the Imazighen. For the first time they found themselves on the defensive, fighting not to acquire new lands and fresh loot, but to preserve what had always been theirs. Many of the fragmented tribes were Christian, at least in name, and had not engaged in warfare for generations; they certainly could not remember a time when they had united against a common foe. It had always been difficult, in any case, to obtain swords and spears from the merchants of the coast who were instructed not to supply potential enemies with the means of aggression. Now they were ill-equipped to offer more than a token resistance to the fierce, confident Arab horsemen. Many of the Imazighen, recognizing that they could not beat the invader, decided to join him, and took the opportunity, at the same time, to settle old scores against neighbouring tribes.

[1] En-Noweiri, *Nihayet el 'Arab*, chap.6; de Slane p.333
[2] En-Noweiri, chap.11; de Slane p.342
[3] de Slane pp.309-311
[4] En-Noweiri, 3:3, p.187; de Slane p.327

They were encouraged by the apparently mild demands of the Arabs who required simply that they pronounce a short sentence in an unknown language which was presumably an oath of loyalty to their leaders and to their religion. The Muslims believed in one supreme God: that was nothing new – so did the Christians and Jews. Even the ancient animistic traditions had pointed in the direction of a Supreme Being for as long as anyone could remember. The alternative was to pay into the coffers of the conquerors continual and heavy taxes – not an attractive proposition to people who had tasted fruit of that type under the Byzantines. Such a tax would perpetually rub salt in the wounds of servitude – an unwelcome prospect to men who had always prided themselves on their freedom. If the conquerors could be satisfied by the utterance of a few words, that was by far the better bargain. The Imazighen did not enquire into the niceties of theology: there seemed little difference between Islam and Arianism in any case. Islam, moreover, was an easy religion to adopt: its rites were simple and easily demonstrated. Its observances could quickly be learned and performed in public. The more difficult and private matters of honesty, purity, kindness and unselfishness, which were central to Christianity, found no great emphasis in the new religion. Pronouncing the *shahada* was sufficient to absolve a man from taxation, and perhaps to open the door for profitable commerce and preferment, without the complications of repentance or faith which had preoccupied the Christians. The assurance of men's acceptance was more easily obtained in any case than the assurance of God's acceptance – and the men, as could be seen, had swords! The peoples of inland North Africa chose a course which would save face, and would save money, but they chose it with marked lack of conviction. The Imazighen were quick converts – but very lukewarm ones, as later events would prove. And for the freedom of conscience, which they lost so easily, they have been paying ever since.

* * *

But they were by no means all inclined to submit so meekly. The great historian, Ibn Khaldun – himself probably of Amazigh origin – tells us: "The right to command the Berber people belonged now to the tribe of the Awreba and was exercised by Kosaila."[1] This chieftain, and the other leaders of his tribe, professed to be Christian. Kosaila had suffered much at the hands of the Muslims. He was captured by Oqba, put in chains and paraded throughout North Africa. But in AD 683 he succeeded in escaping

[1] Ibn Khaldun, *History of the Berbers* 6:216 (de Slane p.211); En-Noweiri, chap.7 (de Slane pp.334-338)

and raised against his tormentors a large force of Amazigh and Byzantine soldiers. The Arabs were taken by surprise. From the beginning they had been more a collection of heavily armed individuals than a disciplined army, and the weakness of their organization was now for the first time put to a serious test. Oqba was defeated and killed. Kosaila captured Kairouan itself and for a while he seems to have been, in name at least, the master of all North Africa. But the respite was to be short-lived. Five years later Kosaila was killed in battle against fresh Arab forces led by a Muslim general from Damascus. This soldier was himself ambushed and put to death by Byzantine sea-raiders shortly afterwards. For a while confusion reigned, but the Awreba recognized the weakness of their position and eventually capitulated to the newly re-organized and reinforced Arab army.

With the death of Kosaila, the torch of resistance passed to a tribe known as the Jerawa, who had their home in the Aurès mountains. They had actually embraced the Jewish faith. Large numbers of Jews had taken refuge among the Imazighen, especially during the fourth and fifth centuries. Bringing with them metal working techniques and other craft skills, they found a comfortable niche among the tribes who appreciated their manufactures and respected their honesty and their sincere faith in God. Intermarriage and conversion had established substantial groups of "Jewish Berbers".

Kahena was the queen of the Jerawa tribe. Her name denotes a priestess, or perhaps a sorceress, and she was reputed to have supernatural knowledge which her familiar demons taught her – a legacy of animistic rather than Jewish belief. With extraordinary fury she hurled back three Arab offensives sent against her and for more than three years remained undefeated. But with her death in AD 693 there was no longer a figure capable of rallying the assembled tribes; the armed and organized Amazigh resistance to the Arabs was almost over. A long series of local revolts, uprisings and massacres marked the following century. In one battle alone, 180,000 Imazighen lost their lives. Many more were taken into slavery or left mutilated and destitute.[1]

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The influx of Arabs, in the seventh and eighth centuries, was restricted entirely to the armed camps and existing urban centres. The first settlers were men of aristocratic family and high culture. They were well instructed in the tenets of their religion and spoke an elegant classical form of Arabic,

[1] Ibn Khaldoun, *Hist. Berb*. 6:4 (de Slane p.218)

akin to the language of the *Qur'an* itself. These were adventurers and warriors rather than colonists, and many of them were undoubtedly motivated by religious fervour. They were sensitive and adaptable, easily appropriating for their own ends the existing Byzantine administrative structures and the traditional agricultural system of which they had no previous knowledge. Surrounding themselves with Jewish and Christian advisers, they rapidly acquired the information and skills that they needed in order to make the transition from their former life as nomadic princelings to their new role as sedentary governors. They cannot claim to have introduced the Greek scientific heritage to North Africa, but they learnt it well from their Byzantine tutors and preserved it for the world during the centuries when Europe was preoccupied with her own social and political upheavals.

Travelling for the most part without women, they did not hesitate to take wives for themselves from among the Imazighen. Their offspring were genetically as much Amazigh as Arab, although brought up to the Arabic language and the Islamic religion. After several generations the Arab blood was considerably diluted, and we begin to see the emergence of the typical North African urban aristocracy – culturally Arab, but ethnically Amazigh.

The sons of Amazigh chieftains were often adopted by their Arab overlords who brought them up in their own homes or kept them there as hostages, which amounted to the same thing. The tribes who lived on the outskirts of these inland settlements sought the patronage and favour of their new rulers, and the custom grew up whereby an influential Arab would "adopt" an entire Amazigh tribe, which from then on had the right to bear his name. This system gave a degree of prestige and commercial opportunities which were eagerly coveted, and it contributed substantially to the "arabization" of the Amazigh people. In the same way that many rushed to curry Arab favour in the cities and the plains, others seized the opportunity of glory and of plunder with the army. It is well known that the Muslim hordes which overran Spain in the early eighth century were composed almost entirely of Imazighen, directed by a small coterie of forceful Arab commanders.[1]

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It was not until four hundred years later, however, that the major incursion of Arab people took place. In the 11th century, the Hilali Bedouin tribes arrived overland with their livestock, and began to spread throughout the

[1] En-Noweiri, chap.13 (de Slane pp.345-349)

inland plains. These colonists – the Banu Hilal, the Banu Solaim and others – had been driven out of Arabia by drought and famine, and by conflict with their Arab rulers.[1] They brought with them huge flocks of goats which devastated the scanty and fragile vegetation of North Africa. They avoided the mountains, which were unsuited to their nomadic pastoralism, but bludgeoned their way across the sedentary agricultural lands of the Imazighen with the help of the Zenata tribesmen who had been doing much the same thing for centuries. Duststorms rapidly completed the work which the goats had begun, whipping away the bare, dry topsoil. Vast tracts of arid and semi-desert wasteland spread across the previously fertile fields of wheat and vegetables. Ibn Khaldun describes them as an army of locusts destroying all in their path;[2] the weathered scars which were left on the land marked their inexorable track. Perhaps we can see here one more example of that repeated pattern in history: the conflict between the desert and the field, the nomad and the farmer: the desire of the desert dweller for the richer and softer lands which he finds in the possession of others, steals from them, and then ruins![3]

The Banu Hilal were less well instructed in the principles of Islam than their urban predecessors but saw the value of adhering to that religion nonetheless. They spoke a simpler form of Arabic which, in the course of a few generations, absorbed so many words and expressions from the Tamazight of their neighbours that the distinctive dialect of North African Arabic was born.

This influx of Arabs in the eleventh century amounted to no more than one hundred thousand, including women and children.[4] They were scattered among several million Imazighen. But their influence far exceeded their numbers. Their support was enlisted by one tribe against another, and by nomads against farmers. They did little more than tip the balance here and there in the ancient disputes which had preoccupied the tribes for generations, taking their share in the subsequent redistribution of land and

[1] Ibn Khaldoun, *Hist. Berb.*1:3 (de Slane p.29)

[2] de Slane p.34

[3] In the late fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldun of Tunis wrote: "Mark how all the countries of the world which have been conquered and dominated by the Arabs have had their civilisation ruined, their populations dispersed, and even the soil itself apparently transformed. Thus Yemen is in ruins, except for a few districts; similarly Iraq, which was so flourishing under the Persians, is devastated; so, too, is Syria at the present day. In North Africa and the Maghrib... ruin and devastation still prevail. Yet before that time all the country lying between the Sudan and the Mediterranean was the centre of a flourishing civilisation, as witnessed by the remains of buildings and statues and the ruins of towns and villages" (*Al Muqaddima*, I, 2:25; Monteil Vol.1 pp.297-8).

[4] Camps pp.137,187

property. After several pitched battles, the devastation of numerous towns, the destruction of trees and wells, accompanied by prolonged pillaging and looting with the loss of many lives, the Banu Hilal had become firmly entrenched.[1]

After considerable tension and further bloodshed, the urban Arab rulers were eventually reconciled to their unpolished rural counterparts, and began to take their side in local disputes, imposing whatever punishments they deemed appropriate on all who opposed them. From then on, Arab incursions were irresistible, and Arab favour was earnestly canvassed by all parties on every occasion. The motivation was strong to learn the language of the arbitrator and the judge. Within a few generations many of their collaborators, as well as their erstwhile rivals and opponents, had seen the advantage of going a step further and actually claiming to have Arab blood. Some had undoubtedly intermarried with the Arabs and, for them at least, there was an element of truth in the claim. Those who would not submit to the demands of the Muslim conquerors took to the mountains, where they have remained ever since.

The Arabs had succeeded in conquering a huge area and subduing a people who vastly outnumbered them; their imprint remains in North Africa to this day. But their number, in fact, was hardly greater than that of the Vandals, who have left no linguistic, cultural or religious trace: there are few, if any, North Africans eager to claim Vandal ancestry.[2] The success of the Arabs was due to factors other than their number.

* * *

It is often assumed that the Arabs were the people who brought civilization to the southern shores of the Mediterranean. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. The newcomers did no more than set up makeshift camps alongside those mature and worldly-wise cities which for the past twelve centuries had witnessed the ebb and flow of the sophisticated Carthaginian, Roman and Byzantine civilizations. The Imazighen, since the dawn of

[1] Ibn Khaldun tells us that at this time "the entire province of Africa was pillaged and sacked." The Arabs "captured Tunis and reduced its inhabitants to slavery." Even the Muslim settlement of Kairouan was not spared: "The Arabs penetrated there straightaway and began the work of devastation, robbing the shops, pulling down the public buildings, and ransacking the houses so thoroughly that they destroyed all the beauty, all the splendour, of the structures of Kairouan." Of those who attempted to resist them, 3300 were slaughtered in one day (*Hist. Berb.* 6:31-34; de Slane pp.35-37).

[2] Some 80,000 Vandals crossed with Genseric from Spain to Africa in AD 429, and their numbers were almost certainly augmented by later arrivals subsequent to this (Moorhead p.3; Bonner p.152; Brown p.424).

history, had been part of the Mediterranean world, sharing in the refined culture of the Greeks and the advanced technology of the Romans. The Arabs picked the fruit from the trees which others had planted; they turned their Arabian flocks on to pastures which for thousands of years had borne African flocks, and they struck fresh bargains with the merchants who had plied the Saharan camel routes, bringing gold and ivory from the south seemingly since time began.

The legacy of that ancient Mediterranean civilization remains to this day in North Africa. Large scale irrigation was a Roman introduction, and the remains of aqueducts and canals provide mute testimony to the scale of these early engineering works. Indeed, that agricultural civilization, which prospered for a thousand years prior to the Muslim conquest, has continued after it without a break to the present. Arab and Amazigh alike still divide the year according to the Roman calendar,[1] and farming vocabulary is particularly rich in words of Latin origin: the Arabs had little to introduce in the way of new crops, livestock or agricultural equipment.

The Romans, deservedly, are famous for their roads, but the design of the modern North African town house and farmstead also owes more to Roman architecture than Arabian: a single doorway penetrating the outer wall, with a vestibule leading on to the central courtyard; the courtyard itself open to the sky, with rooms on its four sides; a small garden, perhaps, or a fountain in the centre of the courtyard, and for wealthier families a bathing pool. The rough stone walls are held together by that wonderfully solid cement which was one of the Empire's great gifts to the world, and in certain areas the building is still covered by a typically Roman red-tiled roof. Even the colourful, tiled floors of today bring to mind the more imaginative Roman mosaics which inspired them. The Roman home was equipped with cisterns and watercourses, hardly less efficient than the iron pipes and concrete drains of our own day, and the public baths which the Romans introduced are still a feature of urban life in North Africa. The Romans built some six hundred cities and towns in North Africa and laid down 12,000 miles (19,000 kilometres) of road. Thirty large stone amphitheatres have been identified. The city of Thamugadi (Timgad) alone had thirteen public baths, and several municipal fountains. Water basins are common everywhere among the Roman remains of North Africa.

In the hills and mountains, of course, the Imazighen still build their distinctive, economical dwellings and storehouses from the mud and straw which lie to hand, and which have served them well since before the dawn

[1] Amahan pp.85ff. Village elders still use the ancient Julian calendar, commencing their months thirteen days later than the inhabitants of the North African cities, who follow the worldwide Gregorian system.

of history. Their habitations owe no more to Rome than to Arabia: they are unique to the Imazighen themselves.

The one new thing which the Arabs did bring was a religion – Islam. For some thirty generations, their ancestors in Arabia and Syria had been well acquainted with Christianity, and many Christians were found among them.[1] But the men who had thrown in their lot with Muhammad came for the most part, like him, from pagan rather than Christian stock. And like him, they were in some doubt as to what Christians actually believed. They thought that Noah's wife and one of his sons perished in the flood. They believed that Haman was Pharaoh's chief minister. They thought that Ishmael was the son Abraham took to sacrifice on the mountaintop, and that it was the wife of Pharaoh rather than his daughter who found the baby Moses. They confused Mary the mother of Jesus with Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron, and they thought that the Christians worshipped three gods – Father, Son and Mary.[2] They were sadly ignorant of the name of Christ, the events of his life, and the writings of his disciples.

For six centuries before the Muslim conquest, the teachings of Jesus had been known and treasured in North Africa. For six centuries after it, there remained Amazigh Christians who could have taught the newcomers the way of Christ. The Muslims, however, were more concerned to subdue the Imazighen than to learn from them. The Arabs spoke occasionally of a man who was mentioned in their new book – a character called Aaissa the son of Mary – who in some respects resembled the Lord Jesus Christ but in others was a different kind of person altogether. Aaissa, they said, was a created being like Adam, fashioned from dust. He was a prophet, but sent only to the Jews – and he had foretold the coming of Muhammad. One day Aaissa will return, they affirmed: and then he will marry and have children; he will bear witness to Muhammad, recognizing him as his superior in every respect. Eventually he will die, and be buried in Arabia. But Aaissa was not God incarnate; he did not come from heaven; he did not die on a cross, nor did he rise from the dead. He did not bear anyone's sins, and was not in any sense a saviour. Is this our Lord, we might ask, or is it "another Jesus than the one we proclaimed"?[3] Either by ignorance, or by design, his name and

[1] See Trimingham (many references).

[2] A similar ignorance led the pagans to suppose that the early Christians worshipped the sun because they met on Sunday (Latin, *dies solis*, the day of the Sun), and that they adored an idol in the shape of an ass's head because their Master once rode on a donkey (Tertullian, *Apology* 16; *Ad Nationes* 1:11,13). The pagans were also under the illusion that Jesus was called *Chrestos* "the Good", rather than *Christos* "the Anointed" (Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1:3; Tacitus, *Annales* XV:44, quoted in Bettenson *DOTCC* p.1).

[3] 2 Cor 4:11

his nature were changed. And whatever the reasons for it, the change would seem both sinister and ominous.[1]

* * *

The first half of the eighth century saw the majority of Imazighen converted at least superficially to Islam, although Ibn Khaldun tells us that the Amazigh tribes "from Tripoli to Tangier" changed their minds about the new religion a dozen times.[2] It would be a mistake to give the impression that the Arab conquest was immediate and conclusive. For five centuries there was widespread and vigorous opposition to the new rulers, and large tracts of country remained outside of orthodox Muslim control. Throughout the Middle Ages the Imazighen adopted with ease, sometimes with enthusiasm, each reforming movement which challenged the established Arab authority. These movements inevitably drew their main support from the rural populace and the poorer sections of society.

In AD 740 the Berghawata tribe, in the western plain of Morocco between Sala and Essaouira, went so far as to create their own religion with a new holy book in the Tamazight language, and they managed to exist as a separate nation until AD 1062. For much of the tenth century, the Shiite Muslims of the Ketama tribe controlled large areas of Algeria in the name of the Fatimid dynasty. In the tenth century, the Kharedjites of southern Algeria established the independent Ibadite kingdom whose descendants – in Djerba, Ouargla, Jbel Nfousa and the Mzab – maintain a separate identity to this day. Another Kharedjite kingdom was set up at Sijilmassa. In addition to this, many Amazigh chiefs of the mountains and the western plains remained quite beyond Arab and Muslim control until the Almohadine campaigns of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The nomads of the Sahara were not effectively Islamized until the fifteenth century, and the Guanches of the Canary Islands never were.

Just as Islam was slow to take root, Christianity was reluctant to die down. Active churches were still present in North Africa five centuries after the Arab invasion. Admittedly, the Christian community was far from what it had been, but in view of the traumas it had suffered, and the lack of teaching and encouragement it had received, the wonder is that it had survived at all. The Byzantine church in Africa had counted several hundred Overseers; by the eighth century there were no more than forty. But those forty had persevered. They had refused to deny the truth; they had paid the taxes demanded of them, reckoning their faith and their freedom of

[1] See Appendix 4: The Name of Jesus.
[2] *Hist. Berb*. 1:15 (de Slane p.215)

conscience beyond price. They, at least, had not turned their backs on Christ. They were remarkable men and women and we can be sure that a reward awaits them in heaven.

There are many and conflicting views among the Muslims themselves as to how the adherents of other religions should be treated in an Islamic state. We are often told that perfect religious freedom exists in a Muslim nation – any Christian can at any time become a Muslim. The Law of Gravity, of course, allows an apple such freedom to rise or to fall! But the position of a Muslim who turns to Christ is distinctly more perilous. Technically Christians and Jews were entitled to toleration if they were willing to accept the status of *dhimmi* or "protected ones" and pay the required tax. In Egypt and Syria, sizeable Christian communities opted to pay the tax; in North Africa those who chose to do so were relatively few. They were called *Rumi*, or "Roman", and this name is still used of Europeans in North Africa. Existing church properties might be kept in repair, but could not be improved or enlarged; new ones could not be built. A decree issued in Morocco about four centuries after the death of Muhammad read as follows: "The Christians may not increase the height of their churches, nor change the construction if the church is built of dry bricks and they wish to rebuild it of stones. If the outside has not been completed, they will be prevented from finishing it in any case." But if the building was already extant, it could be maintained and used for worship: "Neither Christians nor Jews will be prevented from putting finishing touches on any structure which has been built, from raising up a door if the level of the soil is raised, or to make the necessary arrangements to accommodate worshippers inside the building."[1]

By the ninth century, we know that Christians, though no longer numerous, were still to be found in all the major towns of North Africa, including the new centres established by the Arabs at Fes, Tlemcen, Tiaret, Bejaïa, Tunis, Kairouan and Mahdiya. Unfortunately, we know very little about these dogged survivors. Their faith must have been very determined if it resisted the pressure for so long. Such staunch perseverance speaks somehow of a true knowledge of God and of his power to protect and provide. They were poorly equipped for survival. They had no access to God's word (unless each generation learnt Latin and copied out the Scriptures by hand); they had no memory of a joyful growing church like that of Tertullian's day. They had scanty experience of vigorous personal discipleship, for they had been accustomed to a passive role in the Byzantine churches. They had inherited the accumulated superstitions and

[1] quoted by Cooley p.62

errors of the Donatists, Catholics and Arians. And yet, for all that, they could still be saved by simple faith in Jesus, and might yet experience day by day the loving-kindness of God their Heavenly Father. It may be that we actually find in this brave remnant a truer church of Christ than was to be found amidst the arches and pillars of the grandiose Byzantines.

But one by one the Christian communities inevitably succumbed to the pressure of taxation, discrimination and propaganda. Where the parents held to their faith, their children denied it; where a farmer stood firm, his labourers yielded. There was no one to rally them to the truth of God, no one to revive their embattled faith and their declining morale. The churches which disappeared earliest appear to have been those of the east – Alexandria, and then Carthage, Hippo, Sitifis – ironically the localities where the Christian community had been strongest, but also the places longest subjected to the sticks and the carrots of Islam.

Paradoxically, the Christians survived best where they had been weakest – in Morocco. Perhaps here their faith had remained purer and more personal, but this can only be speculation. A Christian community had existed at Volubilis since Roman times. It had been little affected by the Vandals or Byzantines: their influence never extended much beyond their outposts at Tangier and Ceuta. By the seventh century, Volubilis and the surrounding area were administered by a council of ostensibly Christian leaders with Latin names. Other Christians, fleeing the Muslim advance, reached Volubilis from east and west, seeking refuge in the Christian stronghold; among their number were the remnant of Kosaila's Awreba tribe. Inscriptions with Latin names and titles have been found there, dated AD 655, that is eight years after Oqba's march to the Atlantic.

An eighth century manuscript mentions a Christian Overseer at Tangier, and by AD 833 the church in Ceuta still had an Overseer. In AD 986, the Andalusian geographer el-Bekri found a Christian community with a meeting hall at Tlemcen, Algeria. Brief Latin inscriptions are found from the end of the tenth century in En-Ngila, Libya, and as late as the mid-eleventh century in Kairouan. Letters were still being written to Christian leaders in North Africa in the latter half of the eleventh century, and the fact that these letters were in Latin testify to the continuing survival of that language. We hear of an Overseer in Gummi (Mahdiya), Tunisia, in AD 1053, and a good sized Christian community at Ouargla throughout the tenth to thirteenth centuries.

But the traces of Christianity become sparser as the centuries progress. By the mid-eleventh century, there were no more than five Overseers known in North Africa, and twenty years later, only two. A new Overseer was chosen at Hippo in AD 1074, but he was sent by the Muslim governor to Rome for

the ceremony of appointment because the stipulated three Overseers could not be found in Africa. It might be wondered why the governor went to such pains: in fact the Arab rulers derived a considerable revenue from the taxes paid to them by the Christians and, understandably, did not always press for the conversion to Islam which would deprive them of such income. The churches of this time numbered among their members Christian captives and slaves of European origin. In AD 1114 there was still an Overseer in Bejaïa (Algeria) and it was in that town, in AD 1212, that the pathetic participants in the Children's Crusade were sold into slavery. There too Ramon Lull, the Catalan mystic and missionary, was martyred a century later.[1]

The decline in the number of known Overseers is very marked, but it is difficult to know how much weight to attach to this fact. Certain churches undoubtedly disbanded, and some buildings were vacated; many Overseers indeed ceased to be recognized as such. But the Christian community did not dwindle quite to the extent that the statistics might imply: otherwise it would surely have died out much more rapidly. It is possible that the decreasing number of Overseers indicates only that the Christians, meeting in their homes, gradually forsook a form of church government always problematical and now unworkable under the constraints of their changed circumstances.

Certain Christian communities survived, in fact, well into the period of the Almohades in the twelfth century. A Christian prisoner, brought from Spain at this time, during his long captivity in Fes, Morocco, copied and dated a manuscript of the Gospels in Arabic. It was not until the reformer Abd el-Moumen conquered Tunis in AD 1159 that the church in Carthage was finally dispersed and its Overseer exiled. It was then that this Muslim champion gave the remaining Christians a simple choice – conversion or death. Some escaped to Europe, but most could not. Abd el-Moumen's two edged sword dealt the final blow, in one way or the other, to the Church as a recognized body of Christians in North Africa.

* * *

But even after this mortal blow Christianity would not lie down and die. There still remained a scattered remnant, and even reports of Muslims accepting the Gospel. In AD 1228 an Almohadean prince gave permission for the baptism of certain converted Muslims.[2] We hear of a last Overseer in Morocco in AD 1246, and isolated Christians were still to be found in

[1] Cooley p.76; Walker *TGS* p.229
[2] Latourette Vol.II p.325

North Africa as late as the fourteenth century. But from then on, they were, for the most part, Mediterranean and Atlantic seamen captured by pirates, and incarcerated in the prisons of Meknes, Sala and Algiers.[1]

It is tempting to wonder whether Christian families and villages, hidden deep in the mountains of North Africa, might have kept the lamp of truth burning through the long centuries since then. Could there be any who have passed their faith down from generation to generation, as the Jews have done, even to the present day, unaware perhaps of any other believers within a thousand miles? Such a conjecture can find a place only in the imagination, for we have no evidence of any such survival – it would require amazing constancy in the midst of overwhelming odds. But such miracles, of course, are not impossible.

Primary sources for the Arab conquest are the Arab historians En-Noweiri, Ibn Abd el-Hakam and Ibn Khaldun. Secondary sources include Latourette, Vol.II pp.304-5, 325; Cooley pp.58-95; Mantran pp.204-206; Camps pp.129-137, 175-6, 180-192; Neill pp.62-5; Guernier pp.249-253; Norris pp.44-104; Coon pp.26-35; Newman pp.77-83.

[1] Cooley pp.64-79; Giles Milton, *White Gold: the extraordinary story of Thomas Pellow and North Africa's one million European slaves* (Hodder, & Stoughton, 2004)

31. Purpose and Providence

This, then, is the history of Christianity in North Africa – a story of great joy, and sometimes sorrow, of brave words and steadfast faith, of earnest life, and finally of sad decay and death. We have seen a grand and glorious Church, but one with fatal flaws, and one which, having stumbled, was bound to fall. We look back, perhaps, with wonder and with pity, and we seek to understand the reasons for the remarkable success of Christianity in North Africa, and the causes of its equally spectacular failure.

But the Church, we must never forget, is the Church of God. As we consider the words and the deeds of men, we can too easily overlook the fact that the affairs of mankind lie in the hand of the Creator. He knows our going out and our coming in: Scripture assures us of this. He knows the plans he has for us – for good and not for evil. He works all things together for the good of those who love him, those who have been called according to his purpose.[1] And so we must ask the essential question: how did the eternal God view the progress of the very human Christians of North Africa? Where was his hand in all that happened to them?

It is easy to see the providence of God in the wonderful early growth of the Church, but it may be somewhat harder to discern his purpose in its subsequent corruption and collapse. The earliest Christian communities experienced great blessing: thousands turned to Christ in response to the proclamation of the Gospel. They prevailed over the harshest persecutions and the most inauspicious social, religious and geographical conditions. Human factors alone cannot account for their astonishing success: it must be attributed to the power of God which so clearly lay upon them. They flourished, not because they were better people than those who came later, but because they were filled with the Spirit of Christ. They multiplied, not because of the skill with which they preached, but because their message was true. They prospered, not because they understood all the theology of the godhead, but because they were in touch with the living God himself. As long as they knew and believed and obeyed the One who was in control, they experienced his emphatic, abundant, joyful blessing.

* * *

The irony is that the great decline of North African Christianity came not in time of antagonism and conflict, but at the very moment of victory and

[1] referring to Ps 139:3; Jer 29:11; Rom 8:28

honour: breakdown came not with affliction and hardship, but with prosperity and ease. The movement failed not when faced by oppression, but in the face of unparalleled opportunity. Indeed, the churches of Augustine's day, having survived two and a half arduous centuries of persecution, stood on the threshold of what looked to be their golden age. With the demise of the pagan gods, a vast spiritual vacuum extended across the Roman Empire. The entire world stood waiting to receive the message of Christ. With peace, prosperity and royal favour, the Christians now had the freedom and the resources to carry the Gospel throughout its length and breadth. Never before had such a wide open door stood before them.

But the Christian Church, which should have moved boldly outwards, hesitated, stumbled, and collapsed feebly upon itself. The task was beyond it, or so it would seem. Why was this? What were the flaws which caused its sad failure? What were the mistakes it had made? And why did God allow it to make them? These are the questions we must ask.

The weaknesses, in fact, were not new. They had been present for years, and many Christians had called for a change of direction, warning of the coming disaster. The failure can be traced to three fundamental errors – compromise with the world, lack of personal fellowship and loss of missionary vision. And these three errors in turn gave rise to three unresolved problems – a debilitating burden of social and political commitment, a rigid separation between clergy and laity, and a general dearth of written Scriptures.

Firstly and all too obviously, the churches had become hopelessly entangled, as we have seen, with forces that were not Christian. If the Catholics were compromised by their political pact with the Roman state, the Donatists were no less embarrassed by their disastrous involvement with the Circumcellions. The sad conflict between the two had nothing to do with the Gospel of Christ, and it distracted and demoralized the Christian communities. But this very visible, outward worldliness was matched by a corresponding inner malaise equally apparent to the more discerning. Many people were Christian in name but showed little sign of it in practice: pagan superstition, selfishness and sin dragged them back from the call of Christ. Rebukes and exhortations were unavailing in a Catholic church containing more tares than wheat, and the Donatist leaders failed no less dismally to exercise discipline over their violent partisans. Love and purity were no longer the hallmarks of Christian character: the followers of Jesus were not seen to be the light and salt that they should have been in a sceptical pagan world.

And secondly, we might lay the blame for that great spiritual inertia on the lack of real fellowship within the churches. There was far too great a

dependence on the highly educated, celibate Overseer appointed to lead, teach and represent each congregation. Christian men and women had become passive members of an organization that did everything for them. Their sense of personal worship, service and accountability to God was very largely lost. Control from above and from afar had badly stifled local initiative: the Holy Spirit was thoroughly quenched.

Finally, it appears that the churches had all but lost their sense of purpose. As they looked inwards, preoccupied with their own problems, they lost sight of their high calling to take the love of God out to the waiting world. Christian leaders entirely failed to provide access to God's word in a language understood by the people of North Africa: even Latin Scriptures were in very short supply. This meant that believers could not verify the teachings they received, and they could not carry the Gospel with much effect into the deep interior where Latin was unknown.

Can we truthfully say that God abandons his people on account of failings such as these? Perhaps not. Certainly, the churches knew his blessing to the very end. They experienced his joy in worship, his strength in times of danger, his miracles in answer to prayer. We know that God's love for his children is not forfeited by their foolishness; his compassion is not quenched by their weakness. The Son of man came to seek and to save not those who are perfect but those who are lost; the Great Physician attends not those who are well but those who are sick.[1] The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ loves his wayward children with a kindness and a patience that transcends their offences and their follies. He will bear with them if he but sees in their hearts a sincere love for him and an earnest faith in the One he sent to die for them.

That genuine faith was found in Augustine and Cyprian, no less than Tertullian – and God's favour rested on each. God's blessing was poured out on those in every generation who knew him, honoured him and served him. But, as the centuries passed, men and women of this stamp became, sadly, a smaller and smaller minority in the towns and villages of North Africa. The churches of Augustine's day were hardly recognizable as the offspring of those founded four centuries previously by the apostles. Some still searched the Scriptures and prayed earnestly to know God's will and do it, but others hastened to do what seemed best to them, or what seemed best to their friends in higher places.

As the episcopal Church mounted the imperial throne, it became ever harder for its members to follow the Good Shepherd. A man cannot serve two masters. As the magnificent structure of the Catholic Church rose, it

[1] referring to Luke 19:10, 5:31

towered over all, dominating the skyline until the Saviour himself was all but lost to view. Time passed and the gentle humility of Christ found no place amidst the splendour of imperial ascendancy, his forthright words obscured by the customs and assertions of ambitious men. Having crushed all dissident voices, the Catholic Church became the chief obstacle to the spiritual growth of its members. It made the path of true discipleship ever more obscure. The path was still there, but the map had been redrawn and no longer showed the way. In the end few could walk that path any longer.

By Augustine's time, we might say, the glory, if not already departed, was moving steadily towards the door.[1] There were still men and women filled with the Spirit of Christ but they were bright corks bobbing in a murky sea – a strange company, a Church whose candlestick was soon to be removed, whose light was soon to go out.[2] We might still hesitate to see the collapse in terms of God's judgment on a Church which had turned from him, but the fact is that, straying, compromising, weakening, it ultimately succumbed to pressures which he did not restrain. The churches of North Africa had gone too far in the wrong direction; it was too late to bring them back.

Could God himself not have intervened to revive his people and restore them to spiritual life, perhaps by raising up a leader or a movement of reform? Yes he could, and perhaps some would see the Montanists, the Novatianists or even the Donatists in terms of such a movement. But these, each in turn, failed for reasons which we have seen. By the time of the Byzantines, only the Catholic Church remained. Revival would have met with a cool reception in such company – for revivals bring disorder, ushering in a fresh, vigorous spontaneity that spurns all human restraint. And human restraint was the very mortar which held together the bricks of Catholicism. God forces on his children neither his love, nor his blessing.

* * *

For six hundred years, the African Church had grown prodigiously. But fruit had given way to foliage, and by the seventh century, the foliage was badly out of hand. A pruning hook, in the hand of the gardener, does not point to his betrayal or his indifference. It shows, on the contrary, his loving concern; it proves he is preparing for the future. "My Father is the gardener," said Jesus. "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even

[1] 1 Sam 4:21
[2] Rev 2:5

more fruitful."[1] The destruction of the Church in North Africa, if it was a judgment, was surely one intended to open the way for fresh growth – the resurgence of the kingdom of God in this land.

As we turn the pages of the Bible, we see how often God allows his people to fail, and at times to fail badly. Warnings are given, prophets sent, and sins exposed, but if God's people still take no heed, disaster falls – and God does nothing to prevent it. Often, however, looking closer, we find amidst the devastation a grain of hope – sometimes great hope – held out by the Lord to those who seek him afresh. There is always a promise for the future.[2]

Many times, indeed, defeat has cleared the ground for a fresh start, and for ultimate victory. If God allows the house to fall he will not leave it in ruins. The stones may lie for decades, for centuries, but they are not forgotten by him.[3] After the years of captivity and exile he leads his people home. After sin, forgiveness; after the Fall, the promise of a Saviour; after Peter's denial, his commission; after Jonah's flight, his second chance. The Lord delays four days and Lazarus dies. "Do you believe?" Jesus asks, and Lazarus is raised to life.[4] In the pages of Scripture, God shows us, not once but many times, the same repeated pattern – after death, resurrection; after the grief, the glory; after the cross, the crown. Failure is, after all, the back door to success!

* * *

It is easier to cut down a tree than to remove its stump. All the branches may be burned, but still the stump survives. And when the rains fall, the stump will send forth shoots. Isaiah spoke of God's people who had failed him. Decay and destruction, he said, would fall upon them and upon their land: "It will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled." But, do not be so hasty as to overlook that broken stump: there is yet life in it. It contains a holy seed. Yes, Isaiah assures us, "The holy seed is its stump."[5] And from that stump the tree can sprout, and grow, and spread its branches, and rise as tall and broad as ever it was in the days of its youth.

And what of us? If we are to nurture this holy seed, we must be wise with the wisdom of God: we should learn all we can from those who have gone

[1] John 15:1,2
[2] See especially Isaiah chapters 27-32.
[3] Is 49:15-21
[4] John 11:26,43-44
[5] Is 6:13 RSV

before. Following in their footsteps, we can see and avoid the obstacles that tripped them up. The apostle Paul urged men to follow him, but only so far as he himself followed his Master: "Follow my example," he said, "as I follow the example of Christ."[1] We look back, inspired by the faith of the martyrs, aroused by the challenge of Tertullian, moved by the compassion of Cyprian, stirred by the exhortations of Augustine. We thank God for them all – but remember, even so, that they were human like us, and subject to the same frailties. The churches which they established and served, moreover, have not survived. As far as they followed Christ, we can follow them, but no further. In the end the great lesson of Christian history is a very simple one: holding Biblical principles, the churches flourished; forsaking those principles, they withered away. And this sends us back, beyond the men of North Africa, to the word of God. We ask not, "What did Tertullian say?" but, "What did God say?" We ask not, "What did Augustine do?" but, "What did Christ and his apostles do?" We ask not, "How did Cyprian organize his church?" but, "How did the Christians of the New Testament organize their churches?"

When it comes to evangelism and church growth, the New Testament is our authority and guide. In its pages we see exactly how the Spirit of God led the apostles of Christ. All is recorded by divine inspiration for our instruction and encouragement, and as an example to us. We should be slow to set it aside and claim a better method, especially when the simple apostolic strategy was so gloriously effective. We would scarcely be wise to prefer newer schemes devised by men whose churches have since disappeared. Indeed, it would be a gross misuse of Church history if we merely seek to deduce from it the past traditions of men and impose them on the churches of today. As we study the past we need to judge all things by the written word of God. Then we can hold fast to what is good.[2]

* * *

We can look back with hindsight and perhaps find fault with our fathers. But what would we have done, had we been in their shoes? How would we have led the growing churches through the transition from small persecuted groups into large, popular assemblies? Could we have planned things any differently?

The formal meeting, or service, was, in part, a testimony to the extraordinary success of the Gospel in the towns. Large numbers had

[1] 1 Cor 11:1

[2] This theme is developed in Robin Daniel, *Mission Strategies Then and Now* (Tamarisk, 2012).

believed. They flooded into the church, and it was difficult for the solitary Overseer to befriend each one personally and counsel him according to his own needs and capabilities. The multitude of newcomers certainly needed instruction in the tenets of the faith, but what, we might wonder, was the best way to teach them? Was a formal sermon from the pulpit really the ideal method? Jesus certainly taught the moral principles of God to the crowds, and so did the apostles. But the Master also ensured that those who responded with all sincerity would have the chance to ask questions and to talk about their new way of life individually, or in a small group.

Personal fellowship of this sort was conspicuously lacking in the churches of North Africa – at least among the Catholics – and this, it would seem, was the greatest weakness of all. Experience shows that spiritual leaders will always emerge in any group of Christian people, if given the opportunity to do so. They may not be the most educated, or the most wealthy, but they will be the ones whose hearts are drawn to the ways of God, and who long to help others. Such men and women might have guaranteed the future of the North African churches, if the ecclesiastical system had not snuffed out their gifts and their initiative.

What might have happened, one wonders, if each church had enjoyed the varied contribution of a dozen capable leaders – elders and helpers – who made it their task to know the members of their church, and to suggest practical ways that each might serve Christ, stimulating them to ask questions about the faith and discuss it among themselves? And those who were educated could have taught each new believer to read, and helped him copy out his own portions of Scripture. If each had passed on what he learnt, whilst learning more, all might have learned faster. And all might have thought more carefully, too, about their faith. "Give and it will be given to you," said Jesus. "The measure you give will be the measure you get."[1] It is a fact that the Christian, especially in time of trouble, often receives more help from his sympathetic brother than from the teacher or the theologian. "When pain is to be borne," said C. S. Lewis, "a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all."[2] And the one who helps often receives as much blessing for his pains as the one who is helped.

In such a church, baser souls might fall by the wayside, deterred by the high standards set before them and the efforts they must make. The churches might, for a time, be smaller and poorer: the dishonest and immoral would find little comfort in such a setting. But where each

[1] Luke 6:38; Matt 7:2 RSV

[2] Introduction to *The Problem of Pain*

Christian was a "fisher of men",[1] the church could not fail to prosper, and ultimately to become both healthier and happier – and perhaps more numerous too.

A church which is to grow must be a church which preaches the Gospel. If it fails to win outsiders into the kingdom of God, it will surely die. The Catholic churches of Augustine's time were hampered by their use of Latin and their dependence on cultured, educated Overseers. They found it hard to move inland among the tribes who lived simply and spoke Tamazight. Four hundred years previously, Christ had sent out his disciples two by two, as sheep among wolves, to the villages and towns of Palestine. "The harvest is plentiful," he said, "but the labourers are few."[2] Those men had been with him for only two years. He instructed them in what to do and what to say, and when they returned he talked with them about their experiences. They were disciples and teachers at one and the same time. As they learned, they taught, and as they taught, they learned.[3]

What would have happened, one wonders, if the North Africans had followed the method of Christ? Could they not have taken the earnest, godly members of their churches and sent them out to the hills and plains, to reach their own people in their own language? Could they not have encouraged their brothers and sons to set out, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel in unknown parts? If such men, ignorant of Latin but knowing God, had journeyed inland with the blessing (and if necessary the financial support) of the urban churches, they might have proved highly effective missionaries, establishing Christian communities in the villages and hamlets of North Africa, through the mountains, across the plains and down to the Sahara desert. What momentous results there might have been if the zeal for martyrdom and monasticism had been directed instead to the Great Commission.[4]

We know of several "Christian" tribes beyond the limits of the Roman Empire. They did not always act as one would expect Christians to act. It is cause for regret that there were not more – and that they were not better taught. Such tribes were badly hampered by the lack of Scriptures, but an evangelist who could read to them in their own tongue would not have found it hard to show them more clearly the way of Christ. If each tribe had reached its neighbour with the good news of God's love, in word and in deed, the conflicts that divided them could soon have ceased, with the Sermon on the Mount adopted as a way of life, its principles enshrined in

[1] referring to Matt 4:19
[2] Luke 10:2 RSV
[3] 2 Tim 2:2
[4] Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8

the famous written and unwritten laws and customs of the Imazighen throughout North Africa.[1]

In the end, it was left to those groups who had abandoned the Catholic Church to attempt this great enterprise. If the Catholics had caught the vision, or if the Donatists had not compromised it, the story of Christianity in North Africa might have been very different – less orderly, perhaps, but more vigorous, less stable but far more durable.

The study of Church history will be a fruitless exercise if it leads us merely to indulge in nostalgia and morbid regret. But if looking back helps us to look forward with a clearer perspective, then it has a very practical value. It points us back to the old paths – back beyond Augustine, beyond Cyprian, beyond Tertullian – back to the word of God itself. And then it points us forward to the future.

[1] Camps pp.334-341; Guernier pp.359-366. For an example of these traditional laws (in the southern Moroccan dialect), see Laoust E, *Cours de Berbère Marocain: Dialectes du Sous, du Haut, et de l'Anti-Atlas*, Paris, 1936 (pp.277-282); or Monteil, "Le Coutumier des Ait-Khebbash" (*Etudes et Documents Berbères*, 6, pp.30-41).

32. Renewal and Resurrection

A WORD TO MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN NORTH AFRICA

The story of Christianity in our land has taken us through almost two thousand years, but the story is by no means over. The future lies ahead, and our own deeds may even become the subject matter for a future historian.

The early believers could hardly have dreamed that by the year 2000 there would be 250 million Christians in the continent of Africa alone, or that 15 million Arabs throughout the world would claim to be followers of Christ. But their confidence in the ultimate victory no doubt made them patient in their sufferings and forbearing in their relations with those around them, assured that God's purposes could not fail and that he had chosen to fulfil his will through their peaceful testimony to the truth.

True followers of Christ feel no need to impose or defend their religion with human weapons – by force, by law or by intimidation. This is why nations with a Christian heritage allow religious freedom to the adherents of other faiths. And in countries where the Christian is in a minority, he is not disheartened. He will be a loyal citizen, a good neighbour, respectful, honest and kind. He will gladly explain his faith to all who are interested, but will leave each individual free to seek the truth from God for himself.

In the Middle Ages the efforts of worldly men to advance the Catholic Church by means of violent crusades failed in a dramatic fashion. Such a blatant denial of Christ's principles of love for all men and peaceful proclamation of good news was abandoned as soon as his followers were able to read and hear the Bible in their own languages. From then onwards, the churches have been guided by the word of God and "the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."[1] Much remains to be done, and we have been honoured with a great task, a task worthy of all we have and all we are.

The aim of the earliest Christians was very clear: to fill the world with the love of God – to proclaim the way of Christ to all creation. They set out to bring healing to those whose spirits were sick, hope to those in despair, peace and forgiveness to men and women alienated from God. The Christians were doctors and nurses, not of the body but of the soul, and their medicine was the love of God revealed in Christ. "It has always been my ambition," said the apostle Paul, "to preach the Gospel where Christ

[1] James 3:18

was not known... So we preach Christ to everyone. With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ."[1] The disciples were determined to carry out their Saviour's final command: "Go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."[2] They were the light of the world, and they longed for that light to shine in every place.[3]

They encouraged one another in this great enterprise as they met together to read God's word and to pray for his blessing on their endeavours. Christian fellowship was a tremendous strength to them. As they travelled, they were fortified by the loving support and prayer of the brothers and sisters they had left at home, and they were sure of a warm welcome when they returned. They were confident in the message which they were called to proclaim. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," said Paul, "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."[4]

God's word made sense of life and showed man for what he was. It brought understanding of the way people behaved and the concerns which preoccupied them, and it offered a sure hope for a better future. The apostle summed up the aim of Christian teaching, which satisfied both heart and head: "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."[5] The Christians had found a new way of living – loving their neighbours, forgiving those who hurt them, doing good to everyone. In their meetings they drew close to their Lord and to one another, and found strength for the task entrusted to them. There they worshipped the Lord in the beauty of holiness.[6] This was their joy and delight; this was the task entrusted to them; this was the purpose of the Church. This was the secret of their success.

* * *

The Romans had gathered people together for other purposes. They were masters of the large scale engineering project – irrigation works, aqueducts and roads. On the farms and estates, they had shown how to plan and

[1] Rom 15:20; Col 1:28 GNB
[2] Matt 28:19-20
[3] Matt 5:14
[4] Rom 1:16
[5] Col 2:2,3
[6] Ps 29:2

organize, and how to take communal decisions. The Romans introduced to North Africa a new way of working: peaceful co-operation for the good of the community – the uniting of individuals from different families and clans and races, setting aside their personal interests and wishes, to follow a methodical plan for the benefit and prosperity of society as a whole. And yet the labourers who carried the stones and dug the ditches probably had little sense of being part of a fine ideal. They worked on a project planned by others, and they bore no responsibility for it. Some were slaves; most were paid for what they did, and that was the extent of their commitment. But they nonetheless acquired the idea of working together. As for the pagan Imazighen, they had only ever united for one purpose: fighting – a brittle and temporary adhesion of clans and families in a moment of crisis, an impulsive and emotional response to an emergency, a sudden call to arms for defence or attack.

Christianity brought an entirely different type of unity: a unity based not on ambition, or fear, but brotherly love and compassion: not for the purpose of constructing buildings or organizing commercial enterprises, and definitely not in order to fight. True Christians do not unite to attack anyone or anything, nor to defend themselves against real or imaginary enemies. We do not meet in order to make money, or to gain influential friends, or to acquire material benefits. On the contrary, we come together in order to serve and help one another, and to do good to others outside our group. We meet in order to encourage and support our brothers and sisters, and to equip ourselves for service to the world around us. This is Christian fellowship. It flies in the face of pagan Amazigh history. It denies the deeply felt assumption that people are always motivated by selfish aims.

Christians do not pull together because they are slaves, or labourers paid for working on a scheme imposed by others. The Church of Christ is made up of free men and women. It belongs to each of its members, and all are responsible for its health and its growth. Each contributes in whatever way he can, for the good of all. Augustine did not become a Christian because he saw in the faith some personal advantage for himself – for his career, or his marriage. In fact, it ruined both. Perpetua, Flavianus, and Salsa did not follow Christ for what they could gain in this world. Indeed, they lost all they had, including life itself. The faith of Maximilian and Marcellus did not ensure their advancement. On the contrary, it secured their death. These people followed the way of Christ for one simple reason: they believed it to be the truth. And they longed not to receive from God or man, but to give – to give to the utmost of their ability and to the last ounce of their strength, so that others seeing their joy might share their faith. Their reward was in heaven; they looked for nothing here below.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."[1] This is the principle he taught, and the one he followed. He received very little, but gave all he had. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."[2] Such love moves our hearts, if they are not hearts of stone, and such love will constrain us to do as he did. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."[3] Each Christian is a seed. Until that seed is sown, it remains alone, but when it falls into the ground, it yields a great harvest.[4] When it devotes itself to the good of others it receives far more than it gives. "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you," said the apostle, and this was not hard for him because the friends to whom he wrote were, he tells us, "dearly beloved".[5]

This, then, is the Christian manifesto. This is the aim of the Church – not to gain but to give, not to keep God's blessing for ourselves but to take his blessing to our Christian friends and our pagan neighbours. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests," said Paul, "but also to the interests of others."[6]

And this we will do, with the help of God. We will care for the widow and the orphan. We will teach our children the difference between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood. We will gather together to read the word of God and to pray for one another. We will meet to celebrate the Lord's Supper. We will visit new believers and make them feel welcome. We will come together to write hymns, and to sing them. We will help our young people find Christian husbands and wives. We will support one another in time of trial. Above all, we will unite in the love of God, and set aside any foolish thing that divides us. And when we meet together, each one will think first of his brother and pray for a way to help and strengthen him in Christ.

We live today in a society shaped by the habits of the past. For thousands of years, the peoples of North Africa have gathered together when they feared conflict, or desired it. There are those who still view with suspicion any group of people meeting together regularly. Why is this? Perhaps they have an uneasy feeling that men and women will only ever form a society for selfish and aggressive purposes – to cause trouble, to complain about something or to fight for some rights which they fancy they have. The

[1] Acts 20:35
[2] John 13:1 RSV
[3] 1 John 3:16
[4] John 12:24-26
[5] 2 Cor 12:15 AV; 7:1
[6] Phil 2:4 RSV

desire to meet peacefully for the benefit of others is something outside the experience of many people, even those in high places.

And if they question us, we can show them the meaning of Christian love. We meet not to criticize, nor to oppose: not to cause trouble nor to engage in political matters. We meet simply to teach the principles of honesty and faithfulness, to learn the compassionate way of Christ, to pray for one another and for all men, especially those in authority. We meet in order to rekindle in our own hearts the love of God, that it might bring warmth to the whole world. This is our aim, and this is the challenge set before the churches of our day.

* * *

The challenge of Christian love comes afresh to every generation. Our fathers responded to it magnificently. The way of Christ was known in North Africa before it reached Britain, and many centuries before it found the continent of America or the far eastern lands of Asia. Christianity was born here on the shores of the Mediterranean, preached first in the rural communities of Palestine and then in the coastal towns around this great seaway. These are the heartlands of the Gospel.

The idea that the Roman Empire established Christianity in North Africa should be discarded once and for all. Such a notion is patently false. Roman governors and magistrates, as we have seen, did their utmost to suppress the faith, to destroy its leaders and to drive its followers back into the pagan temples. A relentless stream of stringent laws were enacted at the highest levels by a succession of tyrannical emperors, designed to wipe Christianity off the face of the globe. For two and a half centuries, the Imazighen heard and responded to the Gospel of Christ, not because of Roman power, but despite it. The Gospel brought them no material advantage or worldly benefit: it often meant the loss of all they possessed – property, liberty and life.

On the southern shores of the Mediterranean, Christianity was an indigenous religion – considerably more African than Roman. It reached far inland of imperial control and prevailed most widely and most vigorously in the guise of that unruly movement, Donatism, which was the bane rather than the artifice of Roman authority. It celebrated its African martyrs, appointed its African Overseers, and summoned its African conferences whilst still an unrecognized, illegal religion. Gifted Imazighen were boldly proclaiming the way of Christ two hundred years before a believer found his way to the imperial throne. The defiant writings of the North African Tertullian were perused by the heathen governors of Rome a century before

Constantine welcomed the elders of the church into his palace. The Gospel took root in North Africa as the vulnerable faith of a persecuted minority. And by the time Christianity became the religion of the Empire, that great political structure was already in decline.

The Christians of North Africa do not bring a new or foreign thing to this land today: we are simply rediscovering our African roots. We have a glorious Christian heritage, and one which is acclaimed throughout the world. Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine: these are great names, and their writings have reached every continent, their books translated into countless languages, their words quoted by each new generation. Christians are quite at home in North Africa, for it was in this lovely land that our fathers walked with Christ. We follow their footsteps, not building for the first time, but rebuilding the spiritual walls of the City of God – the walls that stood for eleven centuries and will stand once more, we trust, until Christ comes.

We look back on the heroes of the past, and marvel at their faith, their genius, and their compassion. It is easy to see them as special, unique, raised above the mundane level on which we live. But these men and women were by no means out of the ordinary. For thirty-five years, the young Tertullian had lived as an ill-disciplined pagan. Cyprian, until the age of forty-five, was just a conventional lawyer. Augustine, until he was thirty-two, laboured as one obscure teacher of rhetoric among many more famous than he. These three men hardly stood out from their peers: each could have sunk into utter oblivion, unknown and unsung – were it not for one peculiarity which they had in common: they had each encountered the living God. The man was transformed through faith in Christ, born again to a new life, possessed of capacities that he had hitherto not dreamed of.

Something in the Christian message – and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit – awakened in each of them abilities that previously lay dormant, enabling them to rise to heights that would otherwise have been beyond their reach. "Who makes you different from anyone else?" asked the apostle Paul. "What do you have that you did not receive?"[1] The latent gifts were from God, and so was the power that now brought those gifts to life. Many an ordinary man or woman has achieved great things when fired by the message of the Gospel and filled with power from on high. We are just such ordinary people. But in these plain earthenware pots there is a sparkling treasure – the Spirit of the living God.[2] There is no reason why we should not rise to their heights, and achieve in our day what they did in theirs.

[1] 1 Cor 4:7
[2] 2 Cor 4:7

The warm earth of Africa has soaked up the blood of the martyrs and gently covered their broken bodies. Their blood was holy seed, and it bore marvellous fruit. Their ready willingness to speak for Christ in the hour of trial, and to depart this life joyfully bearing his name – this proved to the world the compelling integrity of their faith, and demonstrated the firm hope it inspired. That old accuser, the devil, was thrown down: they had conquered him through the redemption of Christ and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.[1]

"Is not Africa indeed filled with the bodies of the holy martyrs?" declared Augustine. "And do they not bear witness to the truth?"[2] Their hope has not been disappointed, for they are with the Lord. And they will come with him when he returns in glory to this world. And on that Day thousands upon thousands of their brothers and sisters will rise from the fields and the plains – from the valleys of the Aurès and the Atlas, from Tunis, from Annaba, from Tangier and Fes. Rising, ascending, with joy that words cannot express, we will meet the Lord. Our Christian fathers, and you and I, will stand with them – with Perpetua and Saturus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine – and we will see the glory of God. We will speak to those whose names we know, and whose sons we are; we will be reunited with our Christian fathers – and nothing will separate us any more.

"We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep... the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage each other with these words."[3]

[1] referring to Rev 12:10-11 RSV
[2] *Letter* 78; *Sermon* 128:3
[3] 1 Thess 4:14-18

NEW LIFE

Look now at these pictures of God's power:
Winter, summer, spring and autumn.
Each one follows, with its own nature,
Its own character and its own fruit.
For earth is schooled by the plan of heaven
To clothe the trees once they are bare,
To colour the flowers anew,
To cover the earth again with grass,
To germinate the fallen seeds,
And not to germinate them till they fall.

How wonderful is the plan of God!
The waste ensures the growth,
Removes in order to restore,
Deprives in order to preserve,
Spoils but to renew,
Decreases but to enlarge.
For indeed this pattern restores to us
Richer things and finer things
Than those which it destroyed:
A blight which brings a blessing,
Oppression which yields a boon,
A loss which is a gain.

To sum this up, this perfect truth,
Renewal is everywhere.
Whatever you meet has been before;
Whatever you've lost returns to you;
All things come back whence they have gone;
All things begin that once have ceased.
They come to nought that they might be,
And nothing dies but lives again.
And so the order of earthly things,
The course of nature that turns full circle,
All of this bears testimony to
THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.

Tertullian [1]

"The dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" [2]

[1] from *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 12 (*ANF* Vol.III p.553; Bettenson *ECF* pp.161-162)
[2] Is 26:19 RSV

APPENDIX 1

The Imazighen Of North Africa

North Africa has become the adopted home of many peoples; some settled here long ago, and others more recently. The Phoenicians, the Romans, the Jews, and later the Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs and French have all built houses and raised families in this land, and their blood still flows in the veins of their descendants. But the people who lived here first, and those who have always been the majority, are the Imazighen, known by some as the Berbers.[1] They are the true North Africans, and the story of Christianity in this land is linked intimately with the history of its oldest inhabitants.

The origins of the Imazighen are lost in the mists of time, but many fanciful theories have nonetheless been offered concerning their ancestry. Some writers have seen them as descendants of the ancient Canaanites, driven out of Palestine by the Hebrews. Others prefer to trace their roots back to adventurous groups of Medes and Persians, or Indians. Some attach credence to legends of their ancestry in Troy or Greece. Others say they came from Yemen, early relations or rivals of the Arabs. Some, pointing to anthropological characteristics, look to Gaul, northern Europe, Sicily or Spain. Others see them as survivors from the lost land of Atlantis now sunk beneath the sea. Some believe that they came from the Near East – perhaps from Babel – one of many peoples spreading out from that region sometime before 2000 BC.

Archaeological research has unearthed abundant examples of men anatomically similar to many modern Imazighen, who lived as early as, and possibly prior to the Neolithic era. The oldest human skeletons are of a distinctly European, Caucasian type, dated by archaeologists to approximately 10,000 BC – just before the end of the Pleistocene era. These people crossed perhaps from Spain.[2] But a second racial group has also been identified – smaller, with finer bones of a more distinctly

[1] The Imazighen are known by other names in particular regions: in southern Morocco, *Ishelhayn*; in northern Morocco, *Irifiyen*; in Algeria, *Iqbilen* or *Kabyles*; in the Sahara, *Twareg*. Local dialects of their language are also given different names: *Tashelhayt* or *Tasousit* in southern Morocco; *Tarifit* in northern Morocco; *Taqbilt* or *Kabyle* in Algeria; *Tamashek* in the Sahara. A man of the Imazighen is an *Amazigh*; a woman is a *Tamazight*. We can also refer to an *Amazigh* custom or craft or king, using this word as an adjective.

[2] Hart p.342

Mediterranean type, which seems to have entered North Africa from the Near East about 8000 BC.[1] Anthropologists suggest that the descendants of the former group tended to be sedentary, the latter nomadic; the former were the ancestors of the agricultural peoples of the hills, and the latter of the pastoralists such as the Zenata and the Twareg of the far south.[2] But it seems clear that these two types mixed extensively: both are found now throughout North Africa. Wherever the Imazighen might place their origins, one thing is certain: since the Stone Age they have been the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa. To them belong the southern shores of that great Mediterranean Sea which has been the focus of advancing civilization since earliest times.

* * *

The name *Imazighen* itself appears to be derived from a root meaning "free men" or "masters".[3] Indeed, the North African chafes under bondage of any kind, but he will prove a loyal friend to all who have won his respect and love, regardless of ideological or cultural considerations. People matter to him more than facts, sometimes more than truth. He will support a beloved leader through thick and thin, failing to notice his flaws and fallibilities – or refusing to attach any importance to them, which amounts to the same thing. But woe betide anyone who attempts to ride roughshod over his feelings, puts him to shame in front of others, or criticizes him behind his back! He is most tolerant of the failings of his equals, and will suffer fools gladly, but a man who treats him with arrogance or scorn will earn his undying resentment.

The patience of the North African is proverbial, yet his temper can be hasty. Once convinced, he will maintain his position with fierce vehemence, and yet will yield happily to sweet persuasion the following day. He is warm hearted, laughs easily, and delights in a certain earthy wisdom which effortlessly draws the most perceptive of parables from the natural world and humorously exposes the foibles of human nature. The older generation have long been masters of the art of story-telling, and their tales – peopled as often as not by hedgehog, sheep and wolf – serve the double purpose of entertaining, and instructing the young in the art of living. The Imazighen have a natural gift for poetry, and their sentiment is both moving and profound. Analogies are drawn spontaneously from nature: the assiduous flight of the bee alighting where he will, the glorious freedom of the

[1] Camps pp.41-44

[2] Coon p.409

[3] ed. Camps *Encyclopédie Berbère* pp.562ff.

mountain goat skipping from crag to crag far beyond the reach of the hunter, the easy mastery of the buzzard soaring tirelessly in the empty sky. Their music is distinctive, based on pentatonic scales, with antiphonal statement and response, and marked by complex and progressively developing rhythmic structures. The modern banjo and guitar have only partially replaced traditional stringed instruments.

Dance still draws a village together and provides a focus for its social life. This is typical: when the Imazighen gather together for any purpose, their fellowship is always on a small scale. Geography and history have ceaselessly conspired to fragment this people, separating tribe from tribe, clan from clan, family from family, and even a man from his neighbour. The Imazighen have never been able to unite and make of themselves a nation. The icy pinnacles of the Atlas sever one valley from the next; the hot empty spaces of the Sahara divide oasis from oasis; the tempestuous Atlantic separates the lush Canary Islands from the mainland only 80 kilometres away. Since the dawn of history, the Amazigh has shown himself satisfied with the valley, the oasis, the village where he was born. Local groupings were all he needed for the building of terraces or irrigation channels, or the resolution of minor disputes. Large confederations held no appeal for a people who had no wish to wage war on a grand scale, to capture cities or conquer nations.

Although the Imazighen have failed to create a lasting nation of their own, they have always, and inevitably, felt ill at ease in a nation ruled by others. Successive empires have advanced across their land – from east, north, west, and later from the Arabized south – yet not one of the encroaching armies met with any concerted or united resistance. It is not that the invaders were ever more numerous, more intelligent or even more violent than the people they supplanted. But they were always better organized, and better equipped with the weapons of war.

The Imazighen have had famous kings who controlled substantial areas, such as Massinissa (c.240-149 BC), Jugurtha (c.118-105 BC), and Juba II (c.50 BC-AD 23). These rulers, for the most part, saw good reason to co-operate with their Mediterranean neighbours. They and their people benefited from the trade and the agricultural and engineering innovations brought by their sophisticated allies. Amazigh kings and chieftains were treated with respect by the Romans, who had no designs on their inland territories. These local rulers, however, never managed to control more than a limited area – the lands which they could reach and dominate by means of their own personal charisma. North Africa was a political patchwork no less than a geological one. Perhaps the nature of the rugged and disjointed

terrain lay at the back of this other fragmentation – mute testimony to the universal ascendancy of geography over history.

Settling on the Mediterranean coast, the earlier invaders – Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals – left the chiefs of the Imazighen to rule their inland territories much as they had always done. The Arabs, on the other hand, were colonists on the grand scale. Moving inland, siding first with one tribe and then with another, they gradually acquired the lands of the vanquished. Little by little the plains of North Africa became an Arab sea dotted with Amazigh islands – not that all in the sea were Arabs: many were Imazighen who had cast off their old loyalties in favour of new and more auspicious ones. But those whose lands were lost to the colonists took to the mountains, and the chaos gained in complexity and bitterness. The fragmentation was finally solidified and codified by the Muslim ruling class. Political boundaries were drawn up, tax districts defined, and officials appointed. The land of the Imazighen – called by some *Amur*[1] and by others *Tamazgha* or *Berbérie* – was carved up and shared out between the modern nations of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The Imazighen had become honorary Arabs – subject to whichever of those Muslim governments happened to control their lands.

The Imazighen, as Ibn Khaldun tells us, were reluctant converts to Islam; they apostasized twelve times before they would conform.[2] They seized upon any unorthodox teachings which came their way, and rallied to any heretical leader who rose among them. The Berghawata of western Morocco staunchly supported their "prophet", Saleh, taking to its logical conclusion the Islamic idea that a prophet is sent to each race. Muhammad, they said, came to the Arabs, so Saleh came to the Imazighen. El-Bekri tells us that the Berghawata began to use a Tamazight name for God, *Yakush*,[3] in place of the Arabic *Allah*. They moved the annual fast from the month of *Ramadan* to the month of *Rajab*; they decreed ten daily prayers instead of five, changed the date of the *Eid el-Adha* sheep feast, and allowed a man as many wives as he wished. Rituals which derived from ancient animistic beliefs were added to the customs learned from the Arabs, but the chief offence of Saleh in Arab eyes was to write a new Qur'an in his own

[1] In issue no.3/4 of the periodical *Amud* (1991) the name *Amur Meqquren* is used for North Africa as a whole (*Amud*, B.P.1293, Rabat Centre). *Amur* "the nation" is used in a more restricted sense, meaning "Morocco", in the booklet entitled *Traduction Berbère de la Declaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme* (Association Nouvelle de la Culture et des Arts Populaires, Dar Ech-Chabab, Av. Nur Yaakoub El-Mansour, Rabat).

[2] *Hist. Berb.* 1:15 (de Slane p.215); *Al Muqaddima* 3:9 (Monteil Vol.1 p.322)

[3] Camps pp.257-8. Variants of the name *Yakush* are considered in Chapter 3. The Berghawata used another ancient name for God, *Bakah*, which is known to us from much earlier Roman inscriptions in North Africa (Brockelmann p.202).

language, using the Arabic alphabet. This book had eighty chapters instead of the 114 suras of the orthodox *Qur'an*.[1]

But the Berghawata were not the only ones to turn from Arabic Islam to an Amazigh alternative. The unorthodox Ibadite teachers of tenth century Algeria wrote pages of religious doctrine in the Tamazight language using the Arabic alphabet and also the ancient Tifinagh script. The Saharan Twareg of the nineteenth century referred to God as *Amanay* or *Amanay maqqaren*, and sometimes as *Mesi*.[2]

* * *

In North Africa it seems that the conqueror is always mastered in the end by the people he thinks he has subjugated. It is the genius of the Imazighen that they seem able to absorb, to change and to "Berberize" any invader who places himself in the seat of power. The Phoenicians were the first to discover this. As they married the local women, their religion was wedded to the ancient beliefs of the Imazighen: their children forgot Punic ways and Punic speech. This happened once more with the Romans who fed on wheat and olives from the fields of the Imazighen, chose an Amazigh as their emperor, yet failed in the end to impose their language or their discipline on the hills and plains of Africa. The Vandals, in their turn, conquered the land and ruled its people briefly, but established no new or lasting thing among them. The Arabs introduced their language and religion to North Africa but then found that the Imazighen had so corrupted both language and religion that their colloquial speech could no longer be considered Arabic, nor their composite superstitions Islam.[3] And finally, nearer to our own times, we see the French, who introduced many marvels of modern European technology, engineering and medicine – but received small thanks for their pains.

These, however, were not the only outsiders to put down roots in North Africa. After the Arab conquest, slavery became a major commercial concern. Thousands of black Africans were seized from their homelands in the forests to the south of the Sahara, and after appalling sufferings, were sold by Muslim slave-traders in Zanzibar and in North Africa itself. Some bore offspring to their Arab masters; others eventually intermarried with the Imazighen, and their descendants are with us today.

[1] Norris pp.6, 95, 101-3, quoting the eleventh century Arab historian El-Bekri; Cooley pp.86-7

[2] Norris p.228

[3] Educated Arabs refer to colloquial North African Arabic as *ed-darija*, meaning "common" or "popular". The name *el-ɛarabiya* (Arabic) is reserved for the classical language. Orthodox Muslims also reject animistic practices and superstitions.

The Jews have been in North Africa for far longer. It is sometimes forgotten that they preceded the Arabs here by a thousand years. The Jews were different from any other race known to the Imazighen. For one thing, they were refugees. They never at any time sought to rule over the land, nor to impose their language or religion on it. They had come from necessity rather than a desire for adventure, commerce or power. Their homeland at the eastern end of the Mediterranean had been overrun by a succession of foreign armies; they had abandoned it in the hope of making a living elsewhere. Arriving over a period of centuries as small family groups and individuals, they settled here and there in the towns and villages, and in isolated parts of the countryside, wandering as far as the Atlantic coast and down into the Sahara.

The first Jews reached North Africa about 320 BC when the Greeks exiled a hundred thousand and physically transported them out of Palestine. They were landed at Carthage and moved westwards, leaving traces at Volubilis. A second group reached Morocco after 150 BC as fugitives from a persecution in Cyrenaica, modern Libya. These settled in the Moroccan Rif and Atlas mountains. Another company left Palestine and spread across North Africa after the great Jewish revolt of Simon bar Kochba had been crushed in AD 135. More were to arrive later from Spain and other parts of Europe, driven out by harsh imperial decrees, and in the fourth and fifth centuries by the violent depredations of the Goths, Vandals and others.

The Jews of North Africa had little cause to love the Romans. The legions had occupied their homeland and imposed their blasphemous pagan rule upon it. They had desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, finally destroying the holy places in AD 70. The Imazighen probably found in the Jews congenial neighbours who added fuel to the fire of their own mistrust of imperial power. The Jews, moreover, brought with them their experience of a well-developed civilization and an advanced knowledge of craft techniques such as metal working. Some of them had considerable business acumen, too, along with trade contacts forged in better days along the shores of the Mediterranean. They came as poor families of exiles, content with a humble station in life, evidently winning the respect of the people among whom they settled by their careful adherence to their own strict laws of honesty and integrity. Their firm faith in the one God who created all things would strike a chord in the hearts of those Imazighen who themselves sensed the existence of just such a God.

Certain tribes and villages actually adopted the Jewish religion, and some learned to write Tamazight using the Hebrew alphabet. Friendly relations continued through the centuries, right up to the time when the Arabs introduced a new brand of racial prejudice arising from their own quarrels

in the East. It is sad that many Imazighen in later days seeking to curry favour with their new overlords, turned against old Jewish friends and neighbours who had caused them no harm.[1]

* * *

Many and varied influences have filtered through North Africa, and each has left its mark on the character of its inhabitants, and on their language and customs. Since the dawn of history, the Imazighen have been skilled in the use of foreign languages. Many have been completely bilingual or even trilingual, and a large number still are today. From the Phoenicians they learned Punic; from the Romans, Latin. Later, the Arabs introduced their language, as did the French.

Foreign languages have always opened doors to new ideas and experiences, and from the earliest recorded times the people of North Africa have travelled extensively, bringing back to their homeland an awareness of all that was known and done in other places. They were part of the great Mediterranean civilization and participated fully in it. They knew how to read the literature of the world, and some of them – such as Manilus, Florus and Apuleius – contributed to the writing of it. They took advantage of the education offered by the schools of the Phoenicians and the Romans in much the same way that their descendants today seek a literary Arabic or French education. It opened up for them all sorts of opportunities. But the Phoenicians and the Romans never initiated a policy to suppress the use of the indigenous Tamazight language, nor to impose on those who spoke it a different tongue. They aimed to educate, but never to eradicate; they sought to add a new dimension, not to remove an old one.

Foreign languages come, and they go, but the Tamazight which preceded them has survived them all. Three millennia of foreign rule and foreign educational systems have not sufficed to destroy the original language of North Africa. It is still spoken in a dozen countries, from the Mediterranean to the Sahara, from the Atlantic to the Nile. Nowadays it embraces a

[1] The word *Tafaska* is used universally by the Imazighen for the annual Muslim sheep feast, in preference to the Arabic term *Eid el-Adha*, but most are unaware of its origin or significance. Prior to the Arab conquest, the Jews of North Africa had slaughtered a lamb every year on the festival of *Paskha* (Passover), remembering how the angel of death had recognised the lambs' blood on their doorposts and passed over their homes in Egypt. Many Imazighen had adopted the monotheism of the Jews and no doubt participated in these celebrations, referring to the festival in their own language as *Ta-Paskha* (*Tafaska*). The event thus dates back not to Abraham but to Moses, and its significance lies not in the meat but the blood. The New Testament then speaks of "Christ our paschal lamb", our *Tafaska* (1 Cor 5:7 RSV).

multitude of regional dialects and local variants, separated by tracts of land where Tamazight is unknown. Place names of Tamazight origin are found throughout North Africa, even in areas where Tamazight is no longer the language of the inhabitants. The fragments which remain testify to a world blown apart by outside forces but, equally, to a world which was once whole.

The dialects of modern Tamazight show both Hamitic and Semitic traits. There are certain similarities to other African languages such as Coptic Egyptian, Somali, Hausa, and also some resemblances to Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew.[1] Some scholars suggest that the Semitic aspects point simply to Punic influence during the Carthaginian period, but this is by no means proved. At least one writer considers Tamazight to be more akin to a particular European language – Greek – than to either Semitic or Hamitic.[2]

For thousands of years, the people of North Africa spoke a much purer form of Tamazight than we can find anywhere today. Every household article, every human feeling, every aspect of life had to be expressed in this tongue, and the names which people bore were pure Tamazight names. But no language is static. Original expressions and new words were constantly being introduced, and ancient inscriptions testify to local variations in the speech of the people from the earliest times. Ancient trade routes criss-crossed vast areas from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean, and then across to Europe. There was a continuous cross-fertilization of new ideas and of the words needed to explain them, along with exotic trade goods and techniques. From early times too, there were foreign settlers on the coast, speaking other Mediterranean tongues, and neighbouring tribes in the south who spoke African languages. Certain words entered Tamazight from these sources, especially vocabulary describing trade goods – chickens, oil-lamps, buckets – and also terms relating to such innovations as written laws and religious rituals, and novel architectural features such as towers and domes.

But the real decimation of the Tamazight language took place only with the advent of the Hilali Arabs in the eleventh century, for they did not restrict themselves to the coastal fringe. They were not content to be neighbours dwelling nearby or trading partners to be met occasionally in the market. Penetrating the plains as far as the foothills of the mountains and the sands of the desert, they were determined to occupy the house itself. Thus began the "arabization" of the Imazighen which has continued ever since. From that time the local Tamazight dialects, severed one from

[1] See Diakonoff; also article on *apparentement (de la langue berbère)* in ed. Camps *Encyclopédie Berbère* pp.812ff.

[2] Hanouz p.26

another in the upland valleys and the oases of the Sahara, continued to evolve in isolation. Today an Amazigh from Timbuktu will hardly understand one from Tangier, yet even so he recognizes the language as his.

* * *

Tamazight is usually considered an unwritten language. When a North African wishes to read or write he generally turns to Arabic or French. Yet Tamazight can actually boast an alphabet of its own which is far older than either Arabic or French. The Imazighen, like the ancient Egyptians and the Phoenicians, were writing short inscriptions and dedications hundreds of years before the concept of writing was introduced to other parts of the world. Tamazight is, moreover, the only modern African language, apart from Ethiopian, to have evolved its own alphabet. The other languages in this continent have merely adapted a foreign – European or Arabic – script for their own purposes.

The Tifinagh alphabet comprises circles, triangles and other geometric shapes, with combinations of spots to represent vowels, and it is written from left to right like European scripts.[1] It is difficult to trace the development of this alphabet. Its earliest form is known to scholars as Libyan and was probably derived, like Greek, from the early Punic (Phoenician) alphabet. Although the Libyan alphabet was not fully developed until sometime in the second century BC, characters which closely resemble those of modern Tifinagh are actually found far earlier. They are to be seen mingled with the oldest of the Egyptian hieroglyphs at Gizah, dated approximately 3000 BC, now on display in the Museum of Cairo. Characters of this type are also found in the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta stone, dated 196 BC, now in the British Museum, London. Some scholars suggest that the early Punic and Tifinagh characters developed from the hieroglyphs themselves. If so, this would make these the oldest characters which are still in use anywhere in the world, for Chinese writing appears only towards 1400 BC, and the archaic ancestors of other Near Eastern scripts – Hebrew and Arabic – considerably later than that.[2]

[1] The Tifinagh script clearly belongs to the same family as Punic and Greek, rather than that of Arabic or Ethiopic. Nevertheless, as the art of writing was adopted only after the Imazighen had already dwelt for many millennia in North Africa, the use of a European-type script does not resolve the puzzle as to the origin of the Imazighen themselves.

[2] The marked resemblance between Tifinagh and the ancient South Arabian script (dated about 300 BC) might indicate that the alphabet was introduced to North Africa by Sanhaja or Ketama immigrants from Yemen. The fact that Tifinagh inscriptions are found far inland of the area under direct Phoenician influence lends credence to this hypothesis.

Inscriptions using the Libyan alphabet are found abundantly throughout North Africa – in Tunisia, in the north-eastern part of Algeria, in the western plains of Morocco, and also near Tangier and in the eastern Sahara of Mauritania. The chief difficulty lies in dating these remains. The first inscription with a proven date is that found at a temple at Dougga, Tunisia, dedicated to the Amazigh king Massinissa by his son in 138 BC. But an urn containing bones, found at Tiddis, Algeria, bears a painted inscription in ancient Libyan which has been dated by Carbon-14 to somewhat earlier, 250 BC. Another Libyan inscription on an urn, from the island of Rachgoun, Algeria, is dated by this method earlier still: to the sixth century BC. One from Yagour, in the High Atlas of Morocco, is perhaps even older. Tifinagh in its modern form is found engraved on pottery at Fezzan in the Sahara, dating perhaps from the first century BC. At Tin Hinan, in the Algerian Hoggar, we find later Tifinagh inscriptions dating from some time before the 5th century AD.[1]

In the early twentieth century this script was still used for tattoos by the women of southern Morocco, and letters were written in Tifinagh by the Twareg of Niger.[2] Since then it has almost entirely died out. Nowadays the Tifinagh alphabet is, for practical purposes, used only by the Saharan Twareg, and even with them its use is quite restricted – mainly for identifying personal possessions, for tattooing, for inscribing pottery and for marking rock outcrops and desert tombs.

It is difficult to know what proportion of the population were literate in the Tifinagh script in ancient times. It is likely that only a small minority could ever read and write it fluently and even they rarely got so far as to compose documents or manuscripts. It is a cause for wonder that the script has survived at all, especially as it was never the medium of a great and influential literature, nor the property of a dominant, conquering people. For all that, Tamazight has outlived both Punic and Latin, and has survived longer as a living, written language than English or French. Even Arabic is no longer written as it is spoken.

One of the great myths of modern times is the belief that writing, education and civilization came to North Africa with the Arabs. The Amazigh child of today grows up with a detailed knowledge of Arab history and remains in ignorance of his own. Many are unaware that their forebears built a prosperous and advanced urban society in North Africa long before the arrival of the desert princelings from Arabia. The great North Africans – Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, not to mention the emperor Severus and kings such as Juba II – far surpassed the nomadic

[1] Camps pp.275-279

[2] Campbell pp.17,99-100

Arabians in culture, in education, in intellectual and literary achievement, in engineering skills, in the agricultural systems which they used, and in their knowledge and understanding of the religions of the world.

It is a strange fact that many Imazighen today, in ignorance of their Mediterranean heritage and ancestry, prefer to claim descent from more recent foreign colonists – and this despite the historical fact that no more than two or three hundred thousand Arabians ever settled in North Africa, among the seven or eight million Imazighen.[1] The fact that modern North Africans rarely look like modern Arabians leads one to conclude that "Arab" is a cultural rather than an ethnic term – symbolic rather than factual – expressing social and religious status rather than racial origin. This may explain why many people of Amazigh ethnicity decline to speak Tamazight in their own home. Their children are forced to see themselves as Arab, for lack of any other language and identity.

Yet through all the traumas of history, despite the fragmentation of their people, and the weight of disdain for their origins and their language, the Imazighen remain a distinct and unique race with a long and splendid history. They show today that strength of character in the face of difficulties which has typified them since the earliest times.

The Imazighen have raised a host of famous men and women: they have left their mark on history and influenced the course of events, not just in North Africa but throughout the Mediterranean, and Europe, and the whole world. Without a doubt, the greatest of them were those marvellous Christians whose bold words in the hour of opportunity won thousands to the way of Life, and whose memorable writings have influenced every generation since. They stand in the front rank, known and honoured everywhere.

It is their loyalty which perhaps strikes the warmest chord today – a loyalty so typical of their children – loyalty to one another and to their Saviour, a dedicated love which drew them together and filled them with hope. They were not afraid, and not ashamed. They refused to be in bondage to anyone or anything: they would not be enslaved by possessions or comforts. All was held lightly, enjoyed when available, and forsaken without a pang when the time was right. They clung to life no more than to house or orchard, and they did not hesitate to sow an earthly seed in order to reap a heavenly harvest.

[1] Camps pp.14,137,187; Guernier p.142; Meakin pp.32-33

APPENDIX 2

Creeds

TERTULLIAN'S RULE OF FAITH [1]

c. AD 230

We believe in one unique God..., who has a Son, his Word, who proceeded from himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. He was sent by the Father into a virgin, and was born of her, being both human and divine, Son of Man and Son of God, named Jesus Christ. He suffered, died, was buried, according to the Scriptures. He was raised again by the Father, and taken back to heaven, where he sits at the Father's right hand. He will come to judge living and dead. According to his promise, he has also sent, from heaven from the Father, the Holy Spirit, the *Paraclete*, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

THE CREED OF NICAEA [2]

issued at Council of Nicaea, AD 325

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible;

And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things on earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man. He suffered, and rose again the third day; he ascended into heaven. He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit.

[1] from *Against Praxeas* 2. Tertullian confirms that "this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the Gospel."

[2] Bettenson *DOTCC* p.25; Stevenson p.345; Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.537. The Creed of Nicaea was later revised. The revision became known as the Nicene Creed.

THE APOSTLES' CREED [1]

c. AD 750,
although creeds with similar wording date from c. AD 340

I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hades. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

[1] Schaff *HOTCC* Vol.II p.536

APPENDIX 3

Foreknowledge And Freewill

The semi-Pelagian position, in some form or other, is probably held by the majority of evangelical Christians today. They believe God's grace and Christ's atonement to be infinite in scope and value, by no means limited to a chosen few. In response to the question: Why then are not all men saved? they reply that the impediment to universal salvation must be found not in God, but in man – not in a loving God, who desires all men to be saved, but in self-willed people who do not all desire to be saved.

As an alternative to Augustine's system, they would maintain that:

1. GOD DESIRES, AND HAS PROVIDED FOR, THE SALVATION OF ALL.

God is an infinite Being and consequently his love and his grace are unlimited: his desire is for all people everywhere to have eternal life. Scripture tells us that he is not willing for any to perish. He sent his incarnate Son for the sake of all.[1]

The atonement of Christ is a limitless atonement. The death of the infinitely perfect and holy Son of God was sufficient to wipe away all the sin of all mankind for all time.[2]

2. GOD GRACIOUSLY REVEALS HIMSELF TO EVERYONE.

In his infinite grace, God lovingly reaches out to every human being,[3] so that all might be encouraged to seek for him, and that all might have the opportunity to find him.[4] God reveals himself to everyone in three specific ways:
– the natural world which testifies to the power and wisdom of the Creator;[5]
– the human conscience which manifests his moral purity;[6]
– the Holy Spirit who brings conviction of sin and assurance of the truth.[1]

[1] 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4; Ezek 33:11; Jn 3:16
[2] 1 Tim 2:6; Heb 2:9, 7:27; 1 Jn 2:2
[3] Tit 2:11-12; John 1:9
[4] Acts 17:24-28; Jn 12:32
[5] Rom 1:19,20; Acts 14:16-17
[6] Rom 2:15

The greatness of God's grace is shown in the fact that he grants these blessings to undeserving, rebellious, sinful men and women who could never, on their own, discover God's existence or discern his nature. Nor could they, on their own, understand the way of salvation or come to firm belief in Christ as Saviour. Nor, if left to their own devices, would they even wish to do so.[2]

3. GOD HAS GRANTED MAN FREEWILL TO ACCEPT OR REJECT SALVATION.

Man is created in the image of God, with freewill. He is thus given the liberty to respond to God's grace or to resist it.[3] Habitual resistance to the grace of God must end in eternal damnation, and this will be the just outcome of the individual's free choice.[4] Not everyone will benefit from the limitless atonement accomplished by Christ for the simple reason that not all will desire to do so.[5]

A continuing positive response to God's grace, however, will lead a person to saving faith in Christ. All who wish to be saved can be saved.[6] And they can have full assurance that they are saved.[7]

* * *

The majority of those who hold this theological position believe that the omniscience of God extends to a knowledge of which individuals will be saved. This, however, is by no means the same thing as predestination to salvation or damnation.

When the biblical passages referring to divine predestination are considered in their scriptural context, it is seen that they do not apply to the irrevocable eternal destiny of specific individuals. They refer to God's plan

[1] John 16:8-13. This universal revelation is supplemented in many circumstances by special revelation. God has revealed himself in history to particular nations and individuals through the ministry of his prophets, through the incarnate Christ and his apostles, and through the generations of faithful witnesses who have carried the Gospel to every part of the world. The clearest divine revelation is now found, of course, in the inspired Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16). This detailed verbal revelation will naturally find a ready acceptance with all who have already responded to God's general universal revelation (Rom 10:9-20). When the biblical Gospel is presented, such "prepared" people will receive it gladly, as did Cornelius and his Gentile friends at Caesarea (Acts 10).

[2] 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1-5

[3] Matt 23:37; Luke 7:30; Gal 5:4; Heb 12:15

[4] Matt 25:41-46; Jude 14,15; Rom 2:2,5-11; Heb 10:26-29

[5] Rom 1:18-32; John 3:18-21, 5:39-40; 2 Pet 2:1

[6] Matt 11:28; John 7:37, 10:27-28; Rev 22:17

[7] 1 John 5:10-13; John 5:24

for the Church *as a whole*,[1] or to his choice of individuals for a specific *earthly* ministry,[2] or to the predetermined role of particular nations such as Israel, Edom or Egypt in God's purposes *for this world*.[3]

God has certainly foreordained that a company of people will believe and be saved, but he allows each individual the choice as to whether he or she is among that company. God knows which men and women will go to heaven, and which will go to hell – but he does not *decree* the personal salvation or damnation of any one of them. The decision is theirs.[4]

How, then, is faith established in the heart of sinful man? Although we are totally unworthy of God's love, and have no right to demand his forgiveness, God in his infinite mercy lovingly reveals the truth to each one of us. The more we respond to the truth that he shows us, the more he reveals. In this way, through his increasing revelation and our growing response, faith gradually takes root within us – until our trust is fully placed in Christ as Saviour and Lord. Our responsibility is simply to receive what God offers.

Faith is a gift available to all. It is the fruit of God's universal grace and the individual's personal response to that grace.

Eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and holiness of character are divine blessings we could never deserve or contrive for ourselves through any moral or spiritual quality that we possess through our own efforts, good deeds, or intelligence. All we can do is accept the gifts of God humbly and thankfully. A beggar can claim no credit for the bread he receives at the King's door. Nevertheless, he must walk to the door with the strength God gives him, and he must stretch out his own hand to receive what is offered, trusting the King to give what has been promised.

"For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it."

[1] Rom 8:28-30; Eph 1:3-14; 1 Pet 1:1-2

[2] Jer 1:5; Gal 1:15-16; Neh 9:7; Ps 78:70-71, 106:23; Luke 6:13; John 6:70

[3] Rom 9:10-33; 11:2-6; 1 Chr 28:4

[4] In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as "chosen" or "elect" is *eklektos*, meaning "set apart for a special purpose" rather than "selected from a number of candidates". This meaning is clear when we see, for example, that Christ himself was "chosen" (Matt 12:18; Lk 9:35; 1 Pet 2:4-6), as were the holy angels (1 Tim 5:21). Therefore, when the New Testament writers refer to *believers* being "chosen" or "elect", the meaning is simply "set apart for God". As the "chosen" are always a collective group, the emphasis lies not in some process whereby individuals were individually saved but in the present standing of the whole body of believers as God's special "set apart" people (Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 1 Pet 2:9 etc.).

"Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift."[1]

NOTE: It is impossible to do full justice here to what is obviously a profound and controversial subject, and one upon which good men may well agree to differ.

Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History* (Highland Books/Bethany House, 1973) should be consulted for a discussion of pertinent Scriptures from a Semi-Pelagian standpoint, and Pink *The Sovereignty of God* (Banner of Truth, 1928) for the Augustinian/Calvinist position.

[1] Eph 2:8,9 GNB; 2 Cor 9:15 RSV

APPENDIX 4

The Name Of Jesus

Like most names in the Bible, "Jesus" is a name with a meaning. In its original form, *Yeshuε* is the Aramaic contraction of the classical Hebrew *Yehoshuaε*, meaning "Jehovah saves". It is a remarkable name. Scripture tells us that the name of our Lord is exalted above the names of the angels.[1] It is "a name above every name".[2]

When the archangel Gabriel was sent to proclaim the coming of the holy child, he announced this God-given name to Mary and Joseph, and he explained its particular significance: "You are to give him the name Jesus (*Yeshuε*), *because he will save his people from their sins*."[3] Indeed, as this child was the *Word* of God, it was fitting that his name should speak so eloquently of the divine purpose for which he came.

Gabriel evidently conversed with Mary and with Joseph in the Aramaic language, and it was in Aramaic that the name of Christ was first preached among the people of first century Palestine. The early Christian use of Aramaic is of importance, as we shall see, for it is akin to Arabic.

The apostles, however, quickly found that Greek, and later Latin, were more widely understood. They were led by the Holy Spirit to write the New Testament Scriptures in Greek. And it was through the medium of these classical languages that the majority of Mediterranean people, including the Imazighen of North Africa, first heard the Gospel.

Both Africans and Europeans had difficulty with the Aramaic pronunciation of our Lord's name *Yeshuε*.[4] Greek and Latin, lacking the "sh" sound, used "s" instead. These languages also lack the alphabetical character equivalent to the Semitic consonant *εayn* which terminates the word. And they have another peculiarity: masculine nouns must generally end with "-os" (in the case of Greek) or with "-us" (in the case of Latin).[5]

[1] Heb 1:4
[2] Phil 2:9
[3] Luke 1:31; Matt 1:21
[4] The symbol "ε" is used here to represent a consonant (*εayn*) which does not exist in English but which resembles a lengthened "aa" (a pharyngeal voiced fricative).
[5] Consequently, we encounter Biblical Greek names such as Paulos, Petros and Stephanos, and Latin names like Marcus, Augustus and Julius.

This explains why the apostles, speaking Greek, referred to Christ as *Yisous*, pronounced "Yeesoos".[1] Latin-speakers pronounced the name in much the same way, writing it *Jesus*.[2] This was, in fact, as close as these languages could come to the original Aramaic form of his name – with the addition of the suffix required by the grammatical structure of the language itself.[3]

It is apparent, then, that *Jesus*, pronounced "Yeesoos", was the name by which Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine and the early North African Christians knew their Lord. The Donatists and others, who used the indigenous Tamazight language for witness and worship, almost certainly pronounced it in the same way: the Gospel had come to them through the medium of Latin, and the original Tamazight dialects evidently did not possess the Aramaic or Arabic character *εayn*.

The word *εisa* (Aaissa) was introduced to North Africa by Muslim colonists from the seventh century onward. There is no trace of this name in any part of the world prior to Muhammad, and no clear indication of its origin, or its meaning: it appears to be his own invention. Some have suggested that *εisa* was an accidental corruption of *Yeshuε*, but there is no evidence that anyone apart from Muhammad ever evolved such a corruption. At first sight the word *εisa* looks similar to the original name of our Lord. When written it contains more or less the same letters. But they are jumbled, practically inverted, so as to form a different Arabic root altogether. The two words *εisa* and *Yeshuε* have no morphological connection according to the rules of the Arabic language.

It is unclear why Muhammad adopted this curious name, especially in view of the fact that there were many Aramaic-speaking Christians in Arabia and Syria where he lived and travelled as a young man. The Gospel, in fact, came very early to the Arabian peninsula. Visitors from Arabia heard Peter's message in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and were probably among the three thousand who believed at that time.[4] Arab Christians were never, at any point after this, cut off from the apostolic traditions of their brothers in Antioch, Damascus and Alexandria. When the newly-converted Saul of Tarsus wished to think and to pray, he went into

[1] Some scholars would suggest "Yasoos" or "Yaysoos".

[2] In the first century the Latin character J was pronounced "y". With the passage of time, the pronunciation changed gradually to "j". As the Latin spelling was used in early European translations of the Bible, the readers became accustomed to pronouncing the name Jesus as we do today. Other words of Latin origin (such as Jerusalem, John, James, Juba, Jugurtha, January, June, junior, juniper, just) also originally commenced with a "y" sound.

[3] The Greek-speakers went so far as to lengthen the final vowel of *Yisous* in the conscientious desire to render the name as accurately as possible.

[4] Acts 2:11

nearby Arabia.[1] More than once, in the years around AD 250, Origen travelled up from Caesarea on the coast of Palestine to northern Arabia, in order to help the Arabian Christian leaders resolve certain matters of controversy arising among them. Arabian Overseers were present at the Conferences (Councils) of Nicaea in AD 325, and Jerusalem in AD 335.[2]

Aramaic, throughout this time, was the common, or trade language of both Palestine and Arabia, and continued to be so until well after the time of Muhammad. Arabian Christian communities were well-established and widespread in his day, and their distribution has been thoroughly documented.[3] Muhammad, of course, grew up in a pagan milieu, but later he is known to have had contact with Christians from Ethiopia, and even acquired a Coptic Christian concubine. The Christians around him could certainly have told him the authentic name of Jesus as it was known and used throughout the Near East.[4]

Flourishing Arab churches in many lands today still preserve both the apostolic faith and the true name of Christ. For six hundred years before Muhammad, Christian Arabs had called their Saviour *Yeshuε*, or *Yesuε*.[5] For fourteen hundred years since then, they have continued to do so.

Recognizing, however, that many people cannot easily pronounce the Aramaic name of Jesus, other Christians have followed the apostolic example, using a Greek or Latin form of the name ("Yesoos" or *Jesus*). For the same reason, modern translations of the New Testament into many other languages adopt the "-ous" suffix of the written Greek text, although others prefer to go back to the *εayn* of the underlying spoken Aramaic. The choice depends largely on whether the language in question possesses the character *εayn* or not. Both the English *Jesus* and the Arabic *Yesuε* are valid representations of the name of Christ. The one follows the name of our Lord as it was written by the apostles; the other as it was spoken by the angel and by his earliest disciples.

[1] Gal 1:17

[2] Eusebius *Church History* VI, 33 and 37; *Life of Constantine*, 7 and 43 (*NAPNF* Vol.I).

[3] Trimingham (many references); ed. Brockelmann pp.10-11;14

[4] The Bible tells us that in the name of *Yeshuε* (Jesus) sins are forgiven, demons driven out, the sick healed, and the lost saved. The suggestion has been made that a "prophet" desiring to deny the deity of Christ might well be expected to eschew a name more powerful and more meaningful than his own. Others have thought that Muhammad simply confused our Lord with Esau (*εisu*) whose Hebrew name means "hairy" and who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup.

[5] Throughout the Near East, there have always been slight regional variations in pronunciation. We learn from Judges 12:6 that the word *shibboleth* was pronounced in some places as *sibboleth*; the Ephraimites could not manage the "sh" sound. It was the same with the name of Jesus. Some people called him *Yeshuε*, some *Yesuε*.

The introduction of a different name, with an unknown meaning, formulated by a non-Christian "prophet", would be a different matter altogether, especially when the person bearing this name was not God incarnate, did not come from heaven, did not die on a cross, nor rise from the dead, did not bear anyone's sins, and was not in any sense a saviour. The name *εisa* was not used by Christians until the twentieth century, when certain European and American missionaries decided to adopt it. This was surely a grave mistake.

The great significance attached to the name of Christ in Scripture is shown by verses such as: Matt 18:20; John 3:18; Acts 4:12; Col 3:17; 1 Pet 4:14; 1 John 3:23; Rev 2:13, 3:8.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Bible verses in brackets supplement those quoted in the book.

PART ONE

Do you think Perpetua was right to lay down her life despite the pleas of her father and the needs of her child? (Matt 10:37-39; Acts 4:18-20)

What teaching would you give to a Christian who lives in fear of demons, the evil eye, or spells which might be cast on him by others? (Mark 1:25-27; Acts 16:18; 1 Cor 3:16,17; 1 John 4:4,18)
What teaching would you give to someone who claims to be a Christian yet carries charms, follows ancient superstitions, or engages in sexual sin or drunkenness? (Acts 19:18-20; 1 Cor 10:18-22; 2 Cor 6:16-7:1; Rom 1:18-32; Eph 5:3-20)

PART TWO

What occupations would be unsuitable for a Christian today? (Gal 6:7-8; 1 Tim 5:24-25; 6:6-12; 1 Pet 3:10-16; 2 Pet 3:17-18) Should Christians be concerned about social inequalities? Should
Christians be involved with political parties? (John 18:36; 1 Cor 7:20-24)

Do you think Christians should enlist in the army, or other military forces? What reasons would you give for your answer? (John 18:36; Matt 5:39-44; see Chapter 5)

Do you think Tertullian was right to join the Montanists? Do you think he was right to leave them? On what grounds would you yourself consider separating from a supposedly Christian group? (Matt 24:4-5,23-25; 1 Tim 4:1-5; 3 John 9-11; see Chapter 7)

Is our church an "apostolic" church? If so, why? How can we ensure that it remains "apostolic"? (2 Tim 1:11-14; 3:10 – 4:5; see Chapter 8)

How should we respond to authorities who desire us to deny Christ? (1 Peter 3:13-18; 4:12-19; Acts 4:18-21; 5:40-42; Rom 12:17-21; 1 Tim 2: 1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-25)

How might we encourage Christians who are suffering persecution for their faith? (Rom 8:28-39; Phil 1:12-30; 1 Thess 2:1-20; 2 Tim 2:8-13)

PART THREE

What needy people are there around us? Can you think of ways we might help others in need? (James 1:27; 2:14-17)

How can we take the Gospel throughout our land? How can we help people to believe in Christ? (2 Cor 4:1-6; Rom 1:11-17; 10:13-17; 15:20; Acts 13:1-3; 1 Cor 9:19-23)

How should we appoint leaders in our churches? What sort of people should we entrust with spiritual responsibility? (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:1-13)

How should Christian leaders view their responsibilities? How should Christians regard the elders of their own local church? (Heb 13:7,17; 1 Peter 5:1-5)

How can we encourage everyone to participate in the fellowship and worship of the church? Is there something for each of us to contribute? (Rom 12:3-8; 15:13-14; 1 Thess 4:9-10; Heb 3:12-13; 10:24-25)

How can educated and uneducated, rich and poor mix in the local church? (Rom 12:1-3,9-10,16; James 2:1-10)

How can we integrate educated and well-known converts (such as Arnobius) into the church, when as yet they know little of Christian teaching? (Acts 9:26-28)

PART FOUR

How can we exercise discipline in the church? What should we do if a well-known Christian falls into serious sin? (James 5:19-20; Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 5:9-13)

What should we do if someone introduces a new doctrine into the church? (Rom 14:1-23; 2 Tim 2:14-19; 23-26; 1 John 4:1-6)

What should we do if someone insists on teaching false doctrines? (Rom 16:17-20; 2 John 7-11; Gal 1:6-10; 2 Cor 11:13-15; 1 Tim 1:3-7; Titus 3:9-11)

How can Scriptures that we have memorized help us in time of difficulty? How can we help one another to memorize God's word? (John 14:26; 2 Tim 3:16,17; Rom 15:4; Col 3:16)

Why were Christians so strongly advised not to marry unbelievers? Do the same reasons hold good today? (2 Cor 6:14-18; see Chapter 25)

PART FIVE

Do we have traditions in our church – practices and customs which are not found in the Bible? Are all traditions bad? Can we distinguish between a good tradition and a bad one? If so, how? (Mark 7:9-13; Col 2:8; 1 Cor 11:1-2; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6-7)

What language do most members of the church understand best? What language do we use in the meetings – for prayer, worship, discussion, teaching? Why? Can we use more than one language?
Could we have different meetings using different languages? (1 Cor 14:7-12)

On the eve of the Arab conquest, some Christian leaders and intellectuals fled, leaving the churches pitifully weak! Do you know of Christians who wish to flee and settle in easier places? Are they right to do so? What should they remember? (Mark 14:50; Luke 9:23-27; Phil 1:21; Neh 6:11) (cf. Acts 13:13; 15:37,38)

How should a Christian regard an armed invader intent on imposing a new religion by force? How should the Amazigh Christians have received the Arabs? Should they have submitted to them, fought
them, or resisted passively – refusing to co-operate, pay taxes, supply food etc.? Should they have paid the tax and stood firm? Should they have accepted Islam outwardly whilst still believing
the Gospel secretly? What would you do in similar circumstances? (Mark 12:14-17; John 18:36; Rom 1:16)

By what name should we speak of our Saviour? Why? What should we call him when talking with those who use a different name? (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:21; Phil 2:9; Matt 18:20, John 3:18, Col 3:17,
1 Pet 4:14, 1 John 3:23, Rev 2:13, 3:8; see Appendix 4)

What is the aim of our local church? What are we doing which contributes to the fulfilment of that aim? (Matt 22:37-39; 28:19-21; Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 15:58; 2 Cor 2:14-17; Rom 15:17-21)

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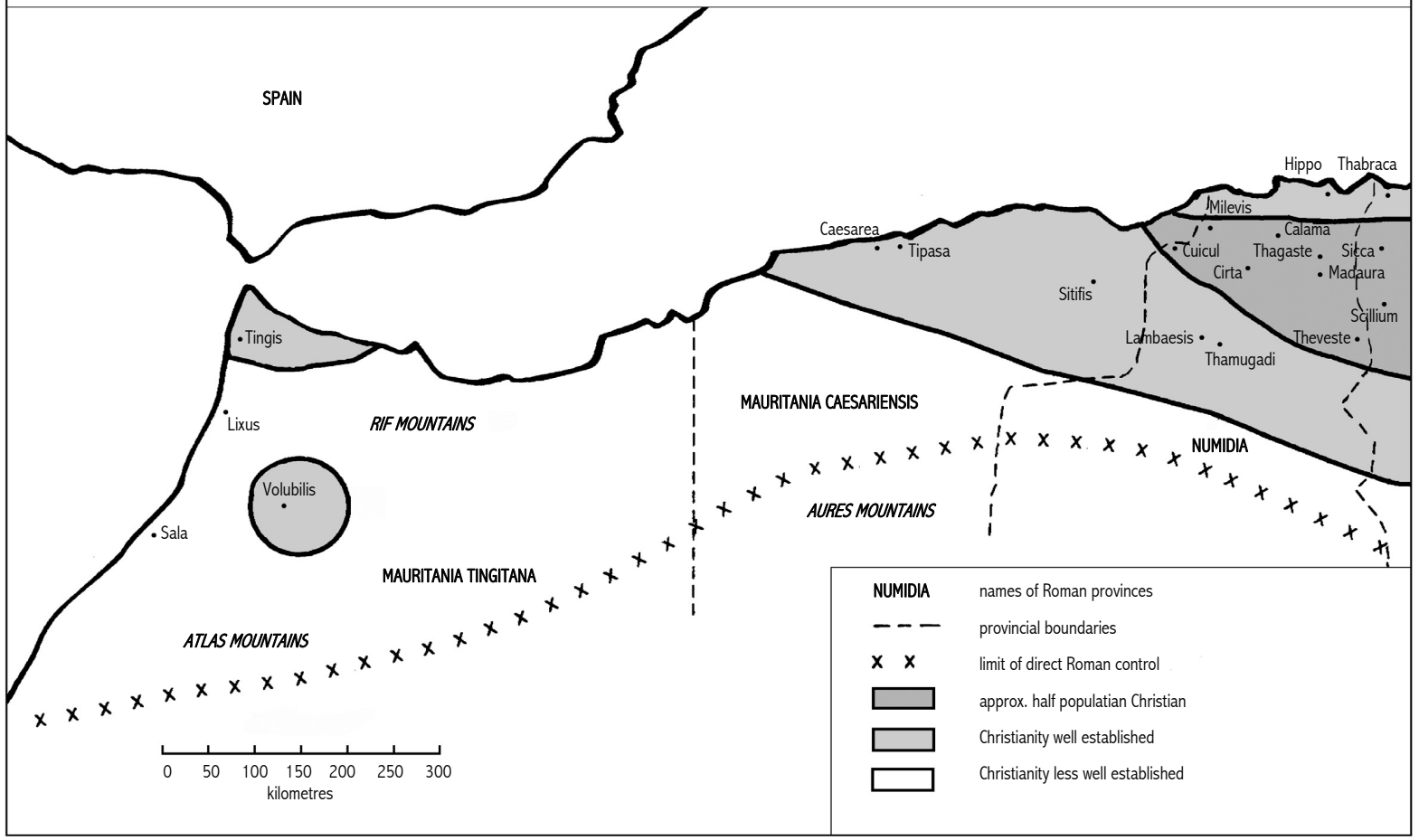
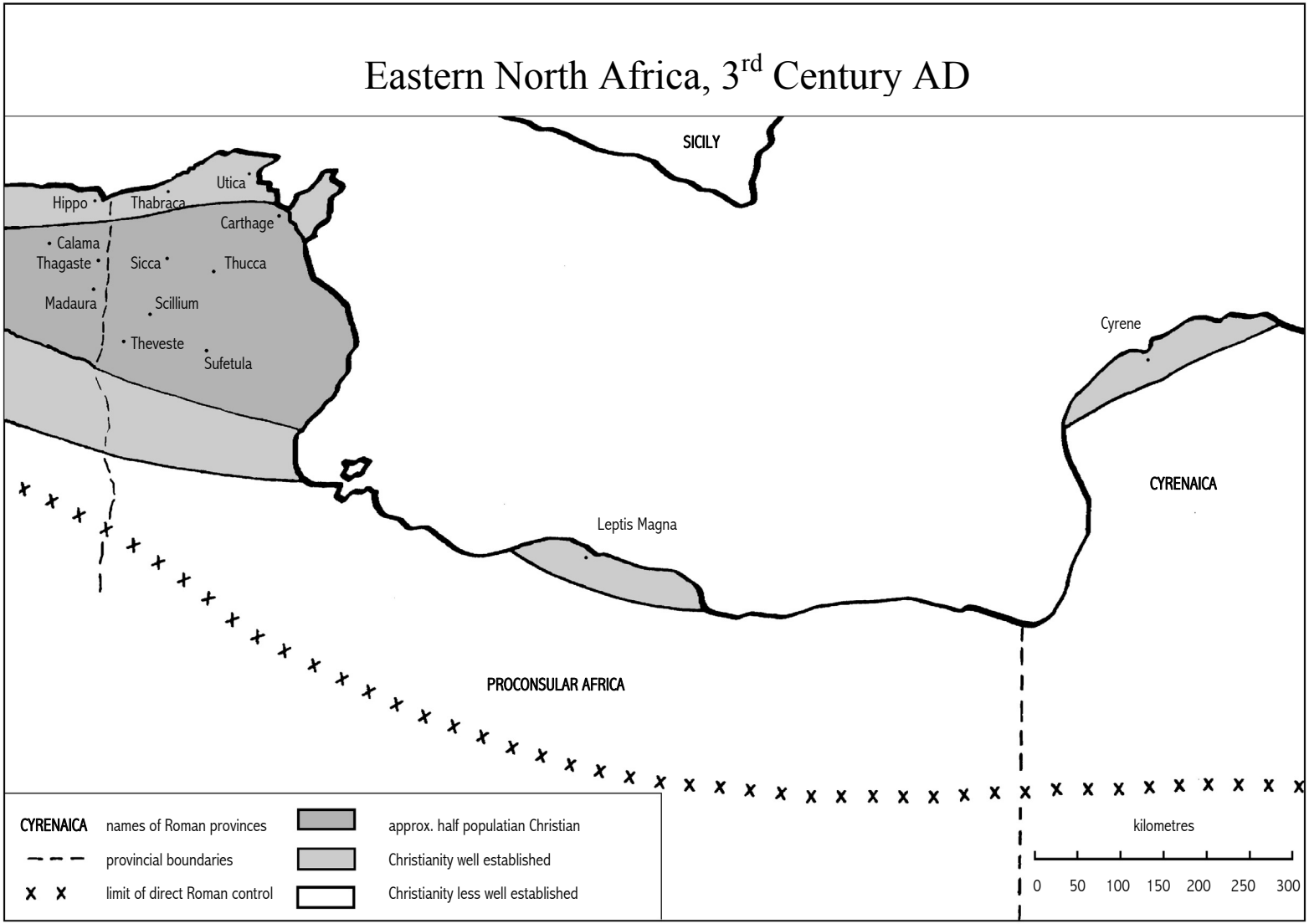
Western North Africa, 3rd Century AD




Eastern North Africa, 3rd Century AD
SICILY
Utica
Hippo
Thabraca
Carthage
Calama
Thagaste
Sicca
Thucca
Madaura
Scillium
Theveste
Sufetula
Cyrene
CYRENAICA
Leptis Magna
PROCONSULAR AFRICA
CYRENAICA names of Roman provinces
provincial boundaries
limit of direct Roman control
approx. half populatian Christian
Christianity well established
Christianity less well established
kilometres
0 50 100 150 200 250 300