

The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Cyprian of Carthage

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In the early centuries of the church, theology was confessed and hammered out in the fire of conflict. Doctrinal controversy led Christians deeper into God's word to apply it to their situations. These Christians confessed the gospel despite the consequences, and clarified the articles of the faith that were muddled by false teaching. Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200-258) was such a voice.

This study examines Cyprian's confession of the Lord's Supper and what he can teach modern Lutherans. First, the historical context and Cyprian's overall theological thought will be discussed. Second, Cyprian's views on the essence of the Supper will be presented. Third, Cyprian's understanding of the Old Testament witness to the Supper will be examined. Fourth, Cyprian's view of Communion fellowship and excommunication will be presented. Finally, the connections that Cyprian draws between the Supper and martyrdom will be explored.

I. The Historical Context

Born to wealthy pagan parents in North Africa, Thascius Cyprianus converted to Christianity around AD 246. He probably taught rhetoric before converting. Soon after his baptism, Cyprian was ordained a presbyter, then made bishop of Carthage a few years later (late 248 or 249).

As bishop, Cyprian faced two main theological issues. The first concerned mortal sin and repentance after baptism. In 249 or 250, the Roman emperor Decius began a major persecution of Christians throughout the empire that lasted about a year. This was the first empire-wide persecution against Christianity. A difficult pastoral situation arose. Many Christians kept the faith during persecution and were called "confessors," but others "lapsed" and sacrificed under duress to the Roman gods. There were three kinds of "lapsed." The *apostates* entirely abandoned Christianity, both during the persecution and after. The *sacrificati* (or *thurificati*) offered the pagan sacrifices. The *libellatici* did not sacrifice to the Roman gods, yet obtained certificates (*libelli*) which said

that they "passed" the religious tests required by Decius.¹ The *libellatici* may have obtained these certificates by dishonest means.²

After the persecution ended in 251, what was to be done with the "lapsed" Christians who had sacrificed but now wanted to return to Christ? Were those who had committed gross idolatry to be allowed back into Communion fellowship with the church? If so, how and under what circumstances? One answer was given by a certain Novatian (d. 258) and his followers, who refused ever to accept the lapsed back into Communion fellowship or recognize the possibility of their returning to faith at all. The Novatianists (also called *katharoi*) were strict, claiming that any Christian who fell into blatant, gross sin, such as idolatry, could not return to the faith. Not only this, but Novatian insisted that the church cannot make an efficacious absolution in the case of certain post-baptismal sins, including idolatry. Novatian's followers applied this rigorous approach to adultery and murder as well.

Cyprian and the orthodox pastors, on the other hand, insisted that mortal sin after baptism could be forgiven, though there were debates as to how and under what circumstances Christians could be re-admitted to absolution and Communion fellowship.³ Some early councils determined

¹ Robin Lane Fox gives an example of such a certificate: "To those appointed to see to the sacrifices: from Aurelia Charis of the Egyptian village of Theadelphia. I have always continued to sacrifice and show piety to the gods and now, in your presence, I have poured a libation and sacrificed and eaten some of the sacrificial meat. I request you to certify this for me below." This was followed by official signatures. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 455.

² Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 455. Fox suggests that some Christians obtained these certificates by bribery or forgery, which can explain why the early Christian councils that dealt with the problem of the lapsed made a distinction between those who merely had certificates by dishonest means, and those who actually sacrificed.

³ Glen Zweck, citing Marianka Fousek, gives four stages for the system of formal penance which was in place by the mid-third century: "1. Contrition (that is, sorrow for sins), 2. Confession of the sin to the bishop as the shepherd of the flock, 3. The rendering of satisfactions - a. Private satisfactions: prayer, fasting, gifts to the poor, abstinence from luxuries and pleasures; - b. Public satisfactions: exclusion from communion, self-humiliation from the brothers, standing at the back of the congregation (even in the vestibule, or behind the doors), 4. Absolution: a formal and solemn reconciliation, with prayer and the laying on of hands, in a public service." Zweck, "Why Did the Issue of Indulgences Trigger the Reformation?" in *Lord Jesus Christ, Will You Not Stay: Essays in Honor of Ronald Feuerhahn on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 70.

that the *libellatici* should be restored after long periods of repentance.⁴ Those who sacrificed, however, would be required to show the fruits of repentance for the rest of their lives, and could receive Holy Communion only on their deathbeds. This was seen by some as being too strict. In the summer of 252, another council decided that all who showed the fruits of repentance should be restored to Communion fellowship so that the Lord's Supper might strengthen them in their trial. This was the final decision made by the orthodox.

The second issue for Cyprian was the doctrine of the unity of the church. Does schism in the outward fellowship of the church on earth also create schism in the fellowship in Christ? Can the word and sacraments be efficacious in religious schisms? After Fabian, bishop of Rome, was martyred in 250, two claims were made to the Roman seat in 251, the first by a certain Cornelius, and the second, a few days later, by Novatian. Cornelius became bishop, but Novatian did not concede the election. He and his rigorous followers established rival churches in every province. They claimed to be the only true church, which the orthodox adversaries strongly opposed. So when people who were baptized by Novatianists wanted to transfer to orthodox churches, a controversy erupted. Does the baptism from Novatianist fonts count as the same baptism given at orthodox fonts?

The outspoken Cyprian argued that because the Holy Spirit is not divided against himself, he cannot be at competing altars, pulpits, and fonts simultaneously. William Weinrich summarizes, "For Cyprian, just as there is no 'outside' of the unity of the Triune God, so too there is no 'outside' to the place of His salvific activity, that is, there is no 'outside' to the church except that which establishes itself against God and is contrary to his will. Outside God and outside the church there is only sin, not the forgiveness of sin nor the holiness of the Holy Spirit."⁵ For Cyprian, Novatian's schism in the outward fellowship of the church was also a schism from Christ!⁶

⁴ John Chapman, "St. Cyprian of Carthage," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04583b.htm>.

⁵ William C. Weinrich, "Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine, and Augustana VIII: Remarks on the Church and the Validity of Sacraments," *CTQ* 55 (1991): 277.

⁶ It must be observed, however, that Cyprian distinguished between the schism that occurs, say, in a troubled family and ends in separation, and the religious schism created by Novatian and others. Cyprian had the pastoral sense to realize that some division in the outward fellowship would occur due to the pervasive influence of sin.

This also affected Cyprian's view of Baptism. Since for Cyprian the Spirit cannot be divided against himself, any religious split in the church also compromises the efficacy of the word and sacraments. Why is this? It is not because Cyprian doubted the word, or wanted to deny that God's word could be trusted with absolutely certainty. Rather, Cyprian came to see that no pastor can give what he has not been given to give. Cyprian held that if Novatian made a religious schism from the church created by the Spirit of truth and unity, then this would also be a separation from the Spirit who created that church. And since this was the case, Novatian and those pastors in fellowship with him could not give the Spirit or any of His gifts.

Hence, even if their baptisms were performed "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," nevertheless, because the Novatianists' schism constituted a separation from the church of the Spirit's blessing, their baptisms were also considered to be outside the Spirit's blessing. Thus, Cyprian taught that Novatian could not truly offer the Christian sacrament of Baptism. This is shocking, especially considering the fact that Novatian's teaching of the Trinity and the incarnation was in many ways like Cyprian's, and the liturgical formulas did not change. But, as Weinrich summarizes Cyprian's thought, "the false and unlawful bishops of the schismatics and the heretics are not in the church, do not possess the Holy Spirit, and therefore cannot give the Spirit in their baptisms."⁷

II. The Essence of the Supper

Historians remember Cyprian chiefly for his engagement of the issues discussed above. Like all faithful pastors, however, Cyprian also confessed the other articles of the faith, including the Lord's Supper. In a fairly recent book, Ernest Bartels claims that Cyprian had only a symbolic view of the Lord's Supper.⁸ Nothing could be further from the truth. Cyprian

This is likely why he writes that one can remain in the same faith and tradition even in certain cases of schism: "A schism must not be made, even although he who withdraws should remain in one faith, and in the same tradition," *Ad Quirinum testimonia adversus Judaeos*, Treatise 12.3.86, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 5:553 [henceforth ANF].

⁷ Weinrich, "Cyprian," 275.

⁸ Ernest Bartels, *Take Eat, Take Drink: The Lord's Supper through the Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 80. Referring to Phillip Schaff's church history, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958-1960), Bartels claims that "Cyprian called the wine an allegory of Christ's blood." It seems, however, that this quote from Cyprian is taken out of context: it refers to Cyprian's

recognized the union between the sacramental elements and Jesus' body and blood.⁹ This union is due to the consecration, or in Cyprian's terms, to its "sanctifying."¹⁰ As for the blood of Jesus in union with the wine, according to Cyprian, "When Christ says, 'I am the true vine,' the blood of Christ is assuredly not water, but wine; neither can His blood by which we are redeemed and quickened appear to be in the cup, when in the cup there is no wine whereby the blood of Christ is shown forth, which is declared by the sacrament and testimony of all the scriptures."¹¹ Cyprian comments on Genesis 49:11: "'He shall wash His garment in wine, and His clothing in the blood of the grape.' But when the blood of the grape is mentioned, what else is set forth than the wine of the cup of the blood of the Lord?"¹² For Cyprian, there was no separation of Christ's blood and consecrated wine. The wine is the blood of Jesus and vice versa.

The body of Jesus was likewise united with the consecrated bread so as to be inseparable. Cyprian comments on the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer:

So also we call it "our bread," because Christ is the bread of those who are in union with His body. And we ask that this bread should be given to us daily, that we who are in Christ, and daily receive the Eucharist for the food of salvation, may not, by the interposition of some heinous sin, by

comments on symbols of the Lord's Supper found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament as well as the New speaks to the reality of Christ's Supper. Yet because this reality was not yet instituted when the Old Testament was written, the Old Testament should not be read as if the Lord's Supper was actually occurring at that time. The words of the Old Testament can only be suggestive of the theology and presence of the Sacrament. This is what Cyprian means when he refers to the wine as an "allegory" of Jesus' blood. It is an allegory because it is not the consecrated wine of the New Testament, in which Christ's blood is present, but an Old Testament example of wine that Cyprian saw as an allegorical reference to the Lord's Supper.

⁹ The writings cited by Cyprian in this paper are those that are agreed as genuinely authored by Cyprian, such as his letters and treatises. In the Reformation period, a work on the Lord's Supper called *De Coena Domini* was falsely attributed to Cyprian by the Lutheran Reformers and the Roman Catholics. Modern scholarship, however, has identified this writing as a chapter from a larger work by medieval writer Ernardus Bonaevallis (1156) entitled *Liber de cardinalibus operibus Christi*. See Nicholas Thompson, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and Patristic Tradition in the Theology of Martin Bucer 1534-1546* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 76, n. 14.

¹⁰ Cyprian, Epistle 62.1 (Ep. 63 in the Oxford series), ANF 5:359. All numbering in this paper is that found in ANF unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Ep. 62.2, ANF 5:359.

¹² Ep. 62.6, ANF 5:360.

being prevented, as withheld and not communicating, from partaking of the heavenly bread, be separated from Christ's body.¹³

If the bread is "heavenly," as Cyprian says in this passage, it cannot be a mere symbol of Jesus' body. In warning that if one is prevented from partaking of the consecrated bread, one is also separated from Christ's body, Cyprian assumes a bodily presence of Christ in that bread. Finally, Cyprian draws a connection between several theological topics: Christology, salvation, the mystical union, repentance, the church, and the Supper. The Supper, because it is the "food of salvation," belongs in the area of salvation.¹⁴

What constitutes a true celebration of the Sacrament? Cyprian insists that the Lord's Supper is celebrated only if the elements used are those Jesus used: "We must not at all depart from the evangelical precepts, and... disciples ought also to observe and do the same things which the Master both taught and did."¹⁵ "It appears that the blood of Christ is not offered if there be no wine in the cup, nor the Lord's sacrifice celebrated with a legitimate consecration unless our oblation and sacrifice correspond to His passion."¹⁶ That is, unless the elements are what Jesus used at the institution of the Sacrament, it is not a "legitimate consecration." Cyprian saw that Jesus alone has authority to determine what elements are to be used in his Supper, and Jesus has demonstrated his decision by his institution. Jesus could turn water into wine, but a pastor who decides to consecrate only water does not truly distribute the blood of the Lord, even if he speaks the words of institution.

What does the Lord's Supper do? Cyprian not only referred to it as the "food of salvation," but also taught that Christ's body and blood, when eaten by the mouth, cleanse the believer's body and nourish his soul. That is, the Sacrament is not a reminder of spiritual healing, but an actual healing even for the body by means of the oral eating of the body and blood of Jesus. By partaking of it, a faithful Christian is brought into communion with God's healing grace.

The Lord's Supper contains the power of God, which is shown by the forgiveness received. Cyprian says:

¹³ *De dominica oratione*, Treatise 4.18, ANF 5:452.

¹⁴ Incidentally, this passage also shows that the Lord's Supper was celebrated daily in Cyprian's time (250's).

¹⁵ Ep. 62.10, ANF 5:361.

¹⁶ Ep. 62.9, ANF 5:361.

The Lord's cup . . . restores their minds to spiritual wisdom; that each one recovers from that flavour of the world to the understanding of God; and in the same way, that by that common wine the mind is dissolved, and the soul relaxed, and all sadness is laid aside, so, when the blood of the Lord and the cup of salvation have been drunk, the memory of the old man is laid aside, and there arises an oblivion of the former worldly conversation, and the sorrowful and sad breast which before was oppressed by tormenting sins is eased by the joy of the divine mercy.¹⁷

Cyprian rightly sees that the Lord's Supper gives the mercy of forgiveness, which eases the troubled but faithful heart. It is as if even the memory of sin which harassed the Christian is no longer an issue; the Sacrament has given freedom even from this. Therefore, Cyprian confessed the bodily presence of Christ, since an empty symbol cannot forgive or, for that matter, do anything substantial.

III. The Lord's Supper: Is It a Sacrifice?

As has been observed by modern scholars, the language of sacrifice permeates Cyprian's words on the Lord's Supper.¹⁸ It almost appears as if Cyprian were a Roman Catholic in the high middle ages, with his depiction of the Supper as a sacrifice offered by priests at the altar. Catholic scholar Raymond Johanny is particularly vocal about this: "Cyprian knew that Christ accomplished his sacrifice fully in the Supper and the cross taken together as two parts of a single totality."¹⁹ Yet Cyprian is not suggesting the "bloodless sacrifice" of the late-medieval scholastics. Though Cyprian sees a connection between New Testament pastors and the Levitical priesthood, his understanding of the Lord's Supper as "sacrifice" is more complex than modern Roman Catholic scholars admit. Cyprian believes, teaches, and confesses that the consecrated elements are the crucified body and blood of Jesus. So when Cyprian refers to the Supper as a sacrifice, he is speaking about the body of Jesus on the cross, which was a sacrifice and is now united with the bread.

According to Cyprian, the Eucharist is not the sacrifice of the priest or of the congregation, but is rather "the sacrifice of God the Father and of

¹⁷ Ep. 62.11, ANF 5:361.

¹⁸ Raymond Johanny, "Cyprian of Carthage," in *The Eucharist of the Early Christians*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978), 165-166; John D. Laurance, "Priest" as Type of Christ: *The Leader of the Eucharist in Salvation History according to Cyprian of Carthage* (American University Studies 7.5; New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1984), 195-202.

¹⁹ Johanny, "Cyprian," 167.

Christ."²⁰ In another letter, Cyprian describes it as "the Lord's sacrifices."²¹ The plural "sacrifices" is used because Cyprian as a bishop had oversight over many congregations where the Sacrament was celebrated, as opposed to just one "sacrifice" at one altar. The Father sacrificed his Son on the cross, and now, with the Holy Spirit, he sanctifies the common elements by uniting them sacramentally to that sacrifice of Jesus. Cyprian therefore understood "sacrifice" as the consecrated elements themselves bound to Jesus' passion, as opposed to the action performed by the pastor in the rite.

This understanding is suggested by Cyprian's description of the Lord's Supper as "the very sacrament of our Lord's passion and our own redemption."²² It is further suggested by Cyprian's language of "offering."²³ When Cyprian speaks of offering the bread or the cup, he does not mean that the bishop has an infused power that causes a transubstantial change in the elements. Instead, "offering" corresponds more to the unconsecrated elements themselves. The pastor offers up the unconsecrated elements to God, since the pastor in his person cannot bring about the presence of the body and blood of Jesus. Only the divine will does this, which is carried out by the words of institution spoken from the holy office.

This is how Cyprian normally understands offering and sacrifice, though he does make some comments troubling to Lutherans:

For if Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, is Himself the chief priest of God the Father, and has first offered Himself a sacrifice to the Father, certainly that priest truly discharges the office of Christ, who imitates that which Christ did; and he then offers a true and full sacrifice in the Church to God the Father, when he proceeds to offer it according to what he sees Christ Himself to have offered.²⁴

Perhaps the best way to explain this is to highlight Cyprian's attempt to connect the theologies of the Old and New Testaments. Cyprian saw that the "priest" offers the body of Jesus to God in the church service. Yet this

²⁰ Ep. 62.9, ANF 5:361.

²¹ Ep. 75.6, ANF 5:398.

²² Ep. 62.14, ANF 5:362. Johanny confirms this, but does not realize the implications of his words: "Cyprian certainly thinks of the eucharist as a true sacrifice; it contains the sacrifice of Christ, and from this sacrifice it derives its efficacy" (Johanny, "Cyprian," 165).

²³ See, e.g., Ep. 62.2, ANF 5:359, "Know then that I have been admonished that, in offering the cup, the tradition of the Lord must be observed, and that nothing must be done by us but what the Lord first did on our behalf, as that the cup which is offered in remembrance of Him should be offered mingled with wine."

²⁴ Ep. 62.14, ANF 5:362.

does not seem to be the high-medieval concept of a "bloodless sacrifice," that is, a second way of atoning for the sins of the people. It may simply mean that Cyprian offered the consecrated elements first to God as a request that God would use it celebrated at that specific time as a blessing for all, and not as a curse. Cyprian understood "that in the passion . . . of the cross is all virtue and power."²⁵ In the context of this quote, Cyprian understands the power in the cross as a victory over all enemies, particularly sin, death, and the devil. Thus, Jesus' death has all power over sin and does not require a second sacrifice in the Lord's Supper to pay the price for sins.

Like other early fathers, Cyprian sees many Old Testament types and figures of the Sacrament, not just those involving "sacrifice." Cyprian also mentions Noah, who drank wine and modeled Christ's passion in his drunkenness, Melchizedek, who gave bread and wine to Abraham, and Jacob's blessing of Judah, which includes a reference to garments washed in wine and cleansed in the blood of grapes. Cyprian also sees a eucharistic reference in Isaiah 63:1-6, where the Lord reveals that he has trampled the winepress in his anger and the wine has soaked his clothes.²⁶

These examples, along with his understanding of sacrifice, show how Cyprian coordinated Old Testament typology with New Testament reality. While he calls the Lord's Supper a "sacrifice," this is chiefly intended to mean that the sacrificed body and blood of Jesus are sacramentally united with the consecrated bread and wine. Cyprian's understanding is different than that of the later Middle Ages, when it was said that priests offered up a bloodless sacrifice in the Supper to atone for sins.

IV. The "Sacrament of Unity"

For Cyprian, the Lord's Supper is "the sacrament of unity."²⁷ In this sacrament, Christians are united to the Lord's body, which reinforces their prior unity with him by faith.²⁸ Cyprian states:

²⁵ *Test.*, Treatise 12.2.21, ANF 5:524.

²⁶ Ep. 62:3-7, ANF 5:359-360.

²⁷ Ep. 75.6, ANF 5:398.

²⁸ Cyprian also knew of the practice of infant communion and does not speak against it. In his treatise *De lapsis*, "On the Lapsed" (Treatise 3.25, ANF 5:444), Cyprian relates the story of an infant which was separated from its parents and later taken by the wet nurse to the town magistrates. The magistrates brought the baby to a pagan feast and fed it with bread and wine sacrificed to the idols. After this, the parents were reunited with the child. When they came to take the Lord's Supper, the infant was overtaken by dramatic resistant emotions, refusing the cup from the deacon. The deacon forced her to receive some of the Sacrament, and the result was that "in a profane body

When the Lord calls bread, which is combined by the union of many grains, His body, He indicates our people whom He bore as being united; and when He calls the wine, which is pressed from many grapes and clusters and collected together, His blood, He also signifies our flock linked together by the mingling of a united multitude.²⁹

As Johanny observes,

For Cyprian, then, the eucharist is sign, call for, source, and fruit of unity. The eucharist effects the one Church that is in communion with Christ. But at the same time the Church effects the eucharist in communion with the one shepherd and under his guidance. The unity of all looks always to Christ as to the source and goal of all true unity, for Christ contains us all. Consequently, the eucharist is the *sacramentum unitatis*, the sign and manifestation of the reality it contains and continuously effects, so that there is a ceaseless reciprocal action between Christ, the Church, and the eucharist.³⁰

Still, Cyprian did not teach that Holy Communion was to be given to all professed Christians. While he saw the Lord's Supper as a life-giving food, this food would also harm those who were unrepentant or who were outside the unity of the Spirit in the church. Therefore, as Werner Elert has observed, the bishop of Carthage regularly informed other bishops of those who had been excommunicated, and also received such information from them.³¹ This was no doubt practiced because of the desire to remain faithful to the scriptural teaching on fellowship. "The Sacrament of unity" could not create unity among believers where division existed.

As stated earlier, Cyprian said, "And we ask . . . that we who are in Christ, and daily receive the Eucharist for the food of salvation, may not,

and mouth the Eucharist could not remain; the draught sanctified in the blood of the Lord burst forth from the polluted stomach. So great is the Lord's power, so great is His majesty." Bartels, "Take, Eat," 77, confirms this practice in Cyprian, looking also at Schaff and at a sermon by Johann Gerhard, "Whether the Eucharist Should Be Given to Infants," trans. Ronald B. Bagnall, *Lutheran Forum* 30 (1996): 4.

²⁹ Ep. 75.6, ANF 5:398.

³⁰ Johanny, "Cyprian," 173.

³¹ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 128, 130, 150. Examples of such writings by Cyprian include: Ep. 10.4, where the bishop requests that the clergy list by name those who are accepted to the altar (ANF 5:291); Ep. 27.3, where Cyprian states that any pastor who gives communion to "the lapsed" should also be expelled from the Communion fellowship of those who did not (ANF 5:306); Ep. 37, which announces the excommunication of a certain Felicissimus (ANF 5:315); and Ep. 61.4, which says that certain women should be excommunicated if found to be promiscuous (ANF 5:358).

by the interposition of some heinous sin . . . be separated from Christ's body."³² Cyprian does not mean here that communicants are perfect in themselves and are without original sin, nor that they have no need of daily repentance and faith. The "sin" that separates a Christian from Christ's body is a grievous offense that clearly indicates the offender cannot be walking in the Spirit. In modern language, Cyprian prays that believers may not fall into unrepentant sin and faithlessness and, thus, be separated from Jesus. This also implies being separated from the altar, where Jesus communed with his people in his body and blood.

In his treatise *De lapsis* ("On the Lapsed"), Cyprian laments the lax Communion policies of certain pastors, who receive the unrepentant *sacrificati* to the Lord's Supper.³³ He writes,

Moreover, beloved brethren, a new kind of devastation has appeared; and, as if the storm of persecution had raged too little, there has been added to the heap, under the title of mercy, a deceiving mischief and a fair-seeming calamity. Contrary to the vigour of the Gospel, contrary to the law of the Lord and God, by the temerity of some, communion is relaxed to heedless persons—a vain and false peace, dangerous to those who grant it, and likely to avail nothing to those who receive it. They do not seek for the patience necessary to health, nor the true medicine derived from atonement.³⁴

Notice that the lax and irresponsible practice of communing the *sacrificati* not only harmed the unworthy, but, for Cyprian, was "dangerous to those who grant it" as well as "likely to avail nothing to those who receive it." This means that pastors who communed the *sacrificati* in the fellowship of the Spirit in the church were in spiritual danger as well.

Why do they call an injury a kindness? Why do they call impiety by the name of piety? Why do they hinder those who ought to weep continually and to entreat their Lord, from the sorrowing of repentance, and pretend to receive them to communion? . . . Such a facility [of irresponsible Communion practice] does not grant peace, but takes it away; nor does it give communion, but it hinders from salvation."³⁵

³² *Dom. or.*, Treatise 4.18, ANF 5:452.

³³ The *sacrificati* were those in the church who capitulated under persecution, offering pagan sacrifices and eating food sacrificed to Roman gods; see "The Historical Context" above.

³⁴ *Laps.*, Treatise 3.16, ANF 5:441.

³⁵ *Laps.*, Treatise 3.16, ANF 5:441.

Cyprian also quotes Leviticus 7:20 and 1 Corinthians 10:21 and 11:27 against allowing the openly unrepentant to the altar.³⁶ Pastors that administered the Sacrament to the *sacrificati*, who had left the fellowship of the Spirit by eating meat sacrificed to Roman gods, joined in their separation against the Holy Spirit. Thus, for Cyprian, a lax Communion practice is dangerous both to the unrepentant communicant who receives the body and blood and to the pastor who gives them.

The *sacrificati* were not the only ones to be singled out for the charge of impenitence: those lacking the fruits of faith would not be blessed by the Sacrament either. As Cyprian writes, "It is of small account to be baptized and to receive the Eucharist, unless one profits by it both in deeds and works."³⁷ For Cyprian, even if a baptized Christian receives the Lord's Supper, if he leads a consistently unrepentant and sinful life, participation will not bless him. Cyprian's warning against communing the unworthy was not heeded by all pastors. According to Bartels, not only did the unworthy participate in the Supper in some congregations, but also some North African Christians, as Cyprian was aware, observed the practice of taking the bread of the Lord's Supper home to eat it there with their families. There were apparently instances in which family members who were unworthy also ate of the consecrated bread that had been brought home.³⁸

Cyprian withheld the Supper not only from the publicly unrepentant, but also from pagans and even from schismatics. Novatian and his schismatic followers were considered unworthy communicants, just as the heretical Marcionites or Sabellians. Why was this? Novatian's theology on the Trinity and the person of Christ was orthodox and similar to Cyprian's,³⁹ but the Novatianists were banned from orthodox altars

³⁶ *Laps.*, Treatise 3.15, ANF 5:441.

³⁷ *Test.*, Treatise 12.3.26, ANF 5:529.

³⁸ "Some communicants also took consecrated bread home to be eaten at a later time. Tertullian and Cyprian both report that the Eucharist was given to women to carry home. Christians in North Africa did so in order that they might celebrate the Lord's Supper every day with their families. . . . In a sermon Cyprian spoke of 'lapsed' Communion with the cup being offered to those present at the service, and from which they drank at the time. The bread, however, was given into their hands so that they could eat it at once, or take it home and eat it there. . . . This practice was abrogated and prohibited at the First Council of Toledo in A.D. 390," Bartels, "Take, Eat," 73-74.

³⁹ See "A Treatise of Novatian Concerning the Trinity," ANF 5:611-644. Here Novatian argues for the scriptural attributes and Persons of God, the unity of God's substance, the division of Persons, the two natures in Jesus Christ, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Novatian specifically condemns the Sabellians by name (chap. 18), but also argues against the teaching of polytheists, Jews, and Gnostics.

because they rejected the church and hence the Spirit who created it, and set up their own bishops in place of the divinely ordained bishops. Cyprian, who considered Novatian heretical and not just schismatic, writes,

When we say, "Dost thou believe in eternal life and remission of sins through the holy Church?" we mean that remission of sins is not granted except in the Church, and that among heretics, where there is no Church, sins cannot be put away. . . . But he cannot sanctify the creature . . . , who has neither an altar nor a church; whence also there can be no spiritual anointing among heretics, since it is manifest that . . . the Eucharist [cannot be] celebrated at all among them.⁴⁰

It is in this sense that Cyprian reads Paul's words on the church's unity from Ephesians 4:4-6. Cyprian writes, "There is one God, and Christ is one, and there is one Church, and one chair founded upon the rock by the word of the Lord."⁴¹ But he does not stop there. "Another altar cannot be constituted nor a new priesthood be made, except the one altar and the one priesthood."⁴² Not only is there one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism, but for Cyprian, there is also one altar that has been given neither to schismatics nor to heretics. They may still have a similar piece of liturgical furniture in their meeting place (an altar), and they may speak the same words and perform the same actions over it as the orthodox, but since they have separated from the Spirit by separating from the church he created, Cyprian confesses that the schismatics do not have the altar of the Lord. The Lord has not given his altar and his presence to people who strive against his Spirit and create their own church. Thus, Cyprian could not allow for the Lord's Supper to exist outside of the church created by the Spirit of undivided truth and unity. This also means that Cyprian did not see the real presence of Christ's body and blood existing among schismatics, even if the same liturgical formulas were used.

Cyprian writes, "If Novatian is united to this bread of the Lord, if he also is mingled with this cup of Christ, he may also seem to be able to have the grace of the one baptism of the Church, if it be manifest that he holds the unity of the Church."⁴³ That wish, however, remained hypothetical. Because Novatian separated from the church, it would be deceitful for the orthodox to commune with him and his followers. John D. Zizioulas explains,

⁴⁰ Ep. 69.2, ANF 5:376.

⁴¹ Ep. 39.5, ANF 5:318.

⁴² Ep. 39.5, ANF 5:318.

⁴³ Ep. 75.6, ANF 5:399.

For Cyprian, who broadens the concept of the catholicity of the Church by making a synthesis of all the elements he had inherited from previous generations, that unity in the one Divine Eucharist and the one Bishop forms the criterion for the catholicity of the Church. A second Eucharist and a second Bishop in the same geographical area constitute a situation "outside the Catholic Church" [i.e., outside the church created by the Spirit of truth and unity].⁴⁴

Thus, for Cyprian, excommunication meant that salvation itself was in jeopardy as long as the unworthy remained in his theological error. This error could be a mortal sin, such as that of the *apostates* who put up little resistance to the emperor's demands of idolatry, heresy (e.g., Sabellianism), or religious schism (e.g., Novatianism).

In no way could those excommunicated from the orthodox North Africans join the Novatianists and receive the Spirit's gifts there. Likewise, a member under church discipline in Carthage could not go to the church up the road in the same fellowship and still receive the Spirit's gifts. Any willful resistance against a church that confesses the biblical teaching is also a willful resistance against the Spirit who gathers that church. If a person resists the Spirit's work in one place, he most certainly cannot find it in another, because he rejects the same Giver. Cyprian's theology of the church held that none of the Lord's gifts could be given in that circumstance. "Neither the oblation can be consecrated where the Holy Spirit is not."⁴⁵ Outside the church, there could be no Supper, just as there could be no Baptism or salvation, since the Spirit is not divided against himself. The church, as the Spirit's creation and dwelling, enjoys benefits and gifts that are not present within the sect that rejects him and creates itself.

Thus, excommunication is not a bureaucratic matter of church discipline, nor is it a mere theological tradition. In Cyprian's thought, excommunication shows the prior separation of the heart of the excommunicated from the body of Christ, either by impenitence or by a devilish confession. This is why excommunication was, for Cyprian, a heavy and important, though frequent, matter. Cyprian did not see the Lord's Supper as an unnecessary addition to the gospel. Rather, it is the fullest gospel. It is a Christian's participation in Jesus' redemption on the cross. If a Christian has the true faith, he is welcome to commune. For

⁴⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, 2d ed., trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), 145.

⁴⁵ Ep. 63.4, ANF 5:365.

Cyprian, this meant that those who were excluded from the altar did not have the true faith.

At the same time, however, it must also be remembered that the Lord's Supper is an act of the gospel. It was not a new law with which to burden consciences, including the conscience of the pastor administering it. Likewise, for Cyprian, it was the gospel, that precious gift of forgiveness and life that God has given to his church. It was therefore a necessary gift to be received with joy and thanksgiving in the unity of the church. And by receiving the sacrament of unity, the faithful were strengthened in the unity that they already shared.

V. The Lord's Supper and Martyrdom

Finally, Cyprian saw a unique connection between the Lord's Supper and martyrdom. Partaking of Jesus' sacrificed body and blood granted the would-be martyr the foundation for his own death. United to the body of Jesus, who sacrificed himself, the martyr is then given to do the same. This is because the martyr's body is to be conformed to Christ as a fruit of the Sacrament. Cyprian asks, "How do we make them fit for the cup of martyrdom, if we do not first admit them to drink, in the Church, the cup of the Lord by the right of communion?"⁴⁶ In the same epistle, Cyprian states, "He cannot be fitted for martyrdom who is not armed for the contest by the Church; and his spirit is deficient which the Eucharist received does not raise and stimulate."⁴⁷ For Cyprian, the Lord's Supper gives the basis, context, and significance for the martyr's death.

These comments reflect Cyprian's belief that the Lord's Supper is truly a bodily participation in the sacrificed body of Christ. Cyprian's view of sacramental martyrdom gives insight into Paul's words from Philippians 3:8-10:

Yet indeed I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ *and be found in Him*, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith: that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, *being conformed to His death* [emphasis added].

For Cyprian, the Lord's Supper is the fullest expression and reality of being found in Christ, which leads to fully knowing Christ, the power of

⁴⁶ Ep. 53.3, ANF 5:337.

⁴⁷ Ep. 53.4, ANF 5:337.

his resurrection, and conformity to his death. Hence, a worthy communicant is prepared to become a faithful martyr.

In connection with martyrdom, Cyprian's understanding of Old Testament types can once again be examined. John D. Laurance summarizes Cyprian's thought:

Just as Abel was found worthy to "bear the image of Christ" in his death because of his pious offering at the altar, so also are the martyrs made into types of Christ by their liturgical union with him. Those who lead the Eucharist in the Church are thus preparing Christians by ritual to be sacrificial victims with Christ in the fullest degree.⁴⁸

VI. What Can Lutherans Learn from Cyprian?

How does Cyprian's theology of the Lord's Supper relate to Lutheranism? It is important that the Confessions think of Cyprian as an orthodox teacher, referring to him ten times for historical support, including for the doctrines of justification (Ap IV, 322) as well as church and ministry (SA II, IV, 1; Tr 14–15; 26–27). The Confessions also refer to Cyprian four times for support on the Lord's Supper.⁴⁹ Likewise, AC XII, 9 condemns the Novatians for not absolving those who sinned after baptism yet repented.

Cyprian's sacramental theology can teach modern Lutherans several things. First, Cyprian teaches that only those elements which Jesus used at the Supper's institution should be used in celebrations of the Supper. Though he never had to face the issue of grape juice, Cyprian did deal with those who consecrated only water. In this, Lutherans can learn from Cyprian to use only bread and only wine in the celebration of the Sacrament, and not to introduce or make excuses for a different practice.

Second, Cyprian teaches the salvific significance of Holy Communion. It is not an addition to the gospel, but the Christian's participation in Jesus' death. Cyprian would likely be perplexed at modern congregations and

⁴⁸ Laurance, "Priest," 186.

⁴⁹ With regard to the Supper, the Confessions cite Cyprian to help resolve sixteenth-century difficulties. Thus Cyprian is mentioned to show that the bodily presence of Christ in the Supper was the orthodox view (FC Ep VII, 15); that the personal union of Jesus is an analogy for the sacramental presence (FC SD VII, 37); and that lay people were also given the chalice (AC XXII, 5 and Ap XXII, 4). The Torgau Book, which served as a resource for developing the Formula of Concord, also cited Cyprian's *De Lapsis* (XVI, XXII) to show that the bodily presence of Jesus in the Sacrament is received orally, as mentioned in FC SD VII, 66, n. 4, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 581.

pastors that resist having the Lord's Supper frequently. After all, the Lord's Supper strengthens those who confess the faith, unites them to Christ, and prepares them to be more fully conformed to Jesus' body. For Cyprian, the Lord's Supper is a treasure that God has only given to his unified church, created by the Holy Spirit. Why would any congregation gathered by the Spirit stubbornly refuse what the Spirit does and gives?

Also helpful for an understanding of the significance of Holy Communion is Cyprian's emphasis on the connection between this sacrament and martyrdom. While American Lutherans do not face the persecution that the Roman Empire faced under Decius, there are many embattled pastors and people in Lutheran churches today. Since the Lord's Supper unites the faithful with the crucified body and blood of Jesus, it also gives Christians the strength to suffer in a godly way. In other words, receiving the Supper worthily not only provides the necessary and God-given comfort of the gospel, but also provides the communicant with God's grace to suffer even more as he is joined to the body and blood of the Suffering Servant. As the Lord's Supper prepared martyrs in the third century, so today it prepares the faithful for the satanic opposition they face from inside and outside the congregation.

Third, Cyprian's use of the Old Testament enriches Lutheran hermeneutics. Not everyone will agree with Cyprian when it comes to Old Testament exegesis. Still, his concern for incorporating Old Testament typology with New Testament reality should be appreciated. Rather than ignoring such concepts as sacrifice, Cyprian attempts to answer how Old Testament theology is connected to the incarnation and the life of the church. Lutherans would do well to consider such hermeneutical issues.

Fourth, Cyprian challenges all who practice open Communion. He issues a necessary warning against admitting any self-identified Christian who comes to the altar but may be unworthy. Regarding the Lord's Supper as "the Sacrament of unity" may prove helpful. Sacramental theology is connected to ecclesiology. Where there is not unity in confession, the Lord's Supper cannot but harm. It harms not only those who receive it in an unworthy manner, but also those who administer it without regard to the worthiness of the communicant. Because schism can be as dangerous as heresy, Cyprian believed that Communion with schismatics is separation from God.

The same danger applies to the communing of the openly unrepentant. It is true that great pastoral care needs to be exercised in distinguishing willful impenitence from simple ignorance or discomfort over pastoral

practice. It is also true that a pastor should be gentle and peaceable in his approach rather than handling every disagreement and crisis with the threat of the "lesser ban" (refusal of Holy Communion) or excommunication. When a member's continued impenitence is clear and publicly known, however, the pastor may need to take the hard step and ask the member to refrain from the altar so that he will not be spiritually harmed by the Sacrament.

At the same time, the "Sacrament of unity" is a wonderful blessing of God's church, where the faithful are fed and strengthened in the unity they already share. The Lord's Supper is the very lifeblood of the church, by which Jesus unites his body and blood to his people. Here he gives spiritual cleansing for the body and spiritual nourishment for the soul. The heart struggling under the cross finds pure joy in the food of salvation.

VII. Conclusion

In summary, the Lord's Supper is a highly revered sacrament for Cyprian of Carthage. This third-century bishop saw in the "celebration of Christ's sacrifice" a blessed work of God and not a human action. The bishop offers the unconsecrated elements to the divine will that works in the words of institution, then offers the sacrificed body and blood of Jesus to the people. Cyprian found references to the Lord's Supper throughout the Bible, including the Old Testament. For him, it is the Sacrament of true unity, and so those who have divided themselves from the confession of the gospel in its fullness must be excluded from the altar, both for their own sakes and for the sake of the faithful. Finally, those who take it are also conformed to Christ, which is evident especially in the martyrs who selflessly sacrifice their bodies for the faith, as Christ did. The unity that the communing church has with Christ in the Lord's Supper thus provides the foundation, context, and significance for martyrdom.

Though modern Lutherans will not agree with everything this bishop writes, there is much in Cyprian from which Lutheran churches can learn. Cyprian of Carthage centered on Jesus, the Spirit, and the church, and so confessed the related sacramental teaching. He appreciated the fact that Jesus' body and blood as the life of the church were not to be far from his bride. According to Cyprian, the faithful eating and drinking of this sacred meal granted the believers participation in Christ's saving passion. May Cyprian's theology of the Lord's Supper be a blessing to us in our own confession of the mystery of Christ's body and blood, and of the church that partakes of this heavenly treasure.