

PREFACE

Jesus said that ‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’¹ Tertullian, Cyprian’s predecessor in Carthage, must have had this verse in mind when he famously stated, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed [of the church].’² The blood-drenched soil of Carthage, from which Cyprian sprang, was fertile with the shed blood of dead saints. Around the time that Cyprian was born, a woman named Perpetua (d. 203) languished in prison awaiting her execution for the crime of *contumacia*, a Latin word that refers to an obstinate refusal to obey an authority, who in this case commanded her to renounce her faith. During the trial she was repeatedly asked to deny Christ, even at the tearful behest of her father,³ but her reply never wavered: *Christiana sum*, that is, ‘I

1 John 12:24, NASB.

2 Tertullian, Apology 50, ‘Of the church’, is often added to this phrase. It does not appear in the original text, but does communicate the sentiment.

3 Candida Moss remarks on the seriousness of disobeying one’s father in such a culture: ‘The female martyr’s death is often tied to the idea of rejecting one’s family’ (‘Blood Ties: Martyrdom, Motherhood, and Family in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,’ in *Women Seeking the Divine: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen

am a Christian.⁴ Perpetua, the young mother of a nursing infant and daughter of a well-to-do patrician, clung to her faith despite severe threats, and she was martyred along with her friends in the coliseum in Carthage. As Jesus promised, the grains of wheat planted in their deaths did not remain alone; they produced manifold fruit, none more important than Cyprian, who would in turn fall into the earth as a seed, so that he too could bear much fruit in his death.

Persecution for one's faith was not new in Cyprian's day, nor did it end when Constantine legalized Christianity. Persecution is a peculiar means by which God has chosen to grow His church throughout the ages. As I write this, Islamic militants are sweeping through Iraq and Syria, forcing ancient pockets of Christians either to flee or face martyrdom. Those who have fled are dying of starvation and those who remain are enduring horrendous deaths. One Christian man was forced to recite the *shahada* ('Allah is God and Mohammed is his prophet'), and even after he capitulated, the terrorists decapitated him. When persecution abates, and it always does, those who are left will have to answer difficult questions. What about Christians who spoke the *shahada* in a moment of fear and panic? Can those who denied Christ be readmitted to the church? What about Christians who pretended to be Muslims to avoid mistreatment? Can they come back to the church and pretend as though nothing ever happened? If they are allowed back into the fold, should there be any prerequisite before rejoining? If it is not Iraq or Syria, it will be another persecution somewhere else. The church of Jesus Christ is promised existence through tribulation.⁵ Perhaps no voice will be as important as Cyprian's in the coming days, who had to face these same questions when

P. Ahearne-Kroll, James A. Kelhoffer, and Paul A. Holloway [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010], p. 189).

4 The Passion of S. Perpetua, ed. J. Armitage Robinson, Texts and Studies 1.2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1891), p. 6.

5 John 15:18–20.



persecution threatened the church in the middle of the third century, and who furnished the church with the first answers to these difficult problems.

Another world crisis draws Cyprian to the fore. When I first started writing this, the deadly Ebola virus was decimating much of West Africa and had spread to America, though the outbreak is contained for now. In all the hysteria and panic, many, including Christians, were more concerned with quarantine than compassion. After the persecution of Decius, which will be addressed in the following pages, a great disease and famine broke out in northern Africa. Instead of retreating from the city, Cyprian and other Christians entered into the misery, caring for the sick, and exposing themselves to disease and death. The church of today can learn from this too. Whether it is Ebola, AIDS, or an unknown disease we will meet in the future, the church has the responsibility to enter into the world's pain with the gospel, setting aside the cares of this temporal world for the heavenly city. Until Christ returns, the world will be subject to plagues and persecutions, but these are precisely the arenas in which the love of Christ and the compassion of the church are most palpably demonstrated.

Thus, Cyprian of Carthage has much to offer Christians in the present day. He converted to Christianity later in life, ministered for a decade, faced multiple trials, and was martyred. But in that brief window of ministry, Cyprian was able to navigate the church through turbulent waters like a skilled sailor, which was remarkable given his brief time as a deckhand before promoting to captain. Almost all of his contributions centered on the importance of the church. Unlike those in the second century who wrote apologies of the Christian faith, and unlike those in the fourth century who wrote tractates on the Trinity, Cyprian was forced in the third century to fight a different battle. summed up in a simple question: what is the church? Persecution sent a seismic shock through the church,