

**THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH**  
**Part I: The Ancient Church**

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**I. INTRODUCTION.**

Alas, our study brings us yet to another turn in the road that seeks to blend systematic and historical theology. The purpose of the three lessons that will make up the unit on ecclesiology shall be to trace the major developments in the church from a structural viewpoint. The initial lesson shall focus upon the nature, offices, and ordinances as they emerged prior to the time of St. Augustine. Admittedly, the survey will purpose to discuss the highlights.

**II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH.**

How did the early church define the institution of which they were a part? This is the focus of our study; how did the early Fathers define the visible body of Christ?

**A. The Church in the Apostolic Fathers**

The Fathers have frequent references to the church both visible and universal. Clement of Rome (*Letter to the Corinthians*, 29) speaks to the church at Corinth as an "elect portion." Ignatius implies the head-body analogy when he wrote (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 17), "For this cause the Lord received ointment on His head, that He might breathe incorruption upon the church." He further adds that the Catholic Church is found wherever Christ is present. (*Letter to the Smyrneans*, 8), "Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal church".

*The Epistle of Barnabas* (5) calls the church "the new people":

“But He Himself endured that He might destroy death and show forth the resurrection of the dead, for that He must needs be manifested in the flesh; that at the same time He might redeem the promise made to the fathers, and by preparing the new people for Himself might show, while He was on earth, that having brought about the resurrection He will exercise judgment. Yea and further, He preached teaching Israel and performing so many wonders and miracles, and He loved him exceedingly”.

Hermas (*Similitude*. 9, 17) speaks of the church as drawing its members from the whole world, gathered into one body:

“‘Because,’ saith he, ‘all the nations that dwell under heaven, when they heard and believed, were called by the one name of (the Son of) God. So having received the seal, they had one understanding and one mind, and one faith became theirs and (one) love, and they bore the spirits of the virgins along with the Name; therefore the building of the tower became of one colour, even bright as the sun. But after they entered in together, and became one body, some of them defiled themselves, and were cast out from the society of the righteous, and became again such as they were before, or rather even worse’”.

## B. The Church in the Apologists

1. **Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 100–ca. 165)** speaks of the church as “where those that are called brethren are collected.” He further views the believers as under the “new covenant,” the old having been abolished (*Dialogue to Trypho*, 11):

“‘There will be no other God, O Trypho, nor was there from eternity any other existing’ (I thus addressed him), ‘but He who made and disposed all this universe. Nor do we think that there is one God for us, another for you, but that He alone is God who led your fathers out from Egypt with a strong hand and a high arm. Nor have we trusted in any other (for there is no other), but in Him in whom you also have trusted, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But we do not trust through Moses or through the law; for then we would do the same as yourselves. But now—for I have read that there shall be a final law, and a covenant, the chiefest of all, which it is now incumbent on all men to observe, as many as are seeking after the inheritance of God. For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone; but this is for all universally. Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no

commandment, no ordinance. Have you not read this which Isaiah says: Hearken unto Me; hearken unto Me, my people; and, ye kings, give ear unto Me; for a law shall go forth from Me, and My judgment shall be for a light to the nations. My righteousness approaches swiftly, and My salvation shall go forth, and nations shall trust in Mine arm”.

2. **Aristides (ca. A.D. 125)** speaks of the church much like Barnabas as “a third race” or a “new race.” He explains that there are, besides pagans and Jews, a third category of people, Christians (*Apology*, 2):

“The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time ago was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it. This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and he had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished. But he himself was pierced by the Jews, and he died and was buried; and they say that after three days he rose and ascended to heaven. Thereupon these twelve disciples went forth throughout the known parts of the world, and kept showing his greatness with all modesty and uprightness. And hence also those of the present day who believe that preaching are called Christians, and they are become famous”.

3. **Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 140–202)** gathers together the main second-century ideas about the church and speaks clearer than his predecessors. Like his predecessors he regards the church as the new Israel (*Against Heresies*. 5, 32.2; 5, 34, 1). He stated in the latter:

“If, then, God promised him the inheritance of the land, yet he did not receive it during all the time of his sojourn there, it must be, that together with his seed, that is, those who fear God and believe in Him, he shall receive it at the resurrection of the just. For his seed is the Church, which receives the adoption to God through the Lord, as John the Baptist said: ‘For God is able from the stones to raise up children to Abraham.’ Thus also the apostle says in the Epistle to the Galatians: ‘But ye, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of the promise.’ and again, in the same Epistle, he plainly declares that they who have believed in Christ do receive Christ, the promise to Abraham thus saying, ‘The promises were spoken to Abraham, and to his seed. Now He does not say, And of seeds, as if (He spake) of many, but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ’”.

Of this body he wrote (*Against Heresies*. 4, 33,7) that it is the “glorious body of Christ”:

“He shall also judge those who give rise to schisms, who are destitute of the love of God, and who look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the Church; and who for trifling reasons, or any kind of reason which occurs to them, cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ, and so far as in them lies, (positively) destroy it,—men who prate of peace while they give rise to war, and do in truth strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel. For no reformation of so great importance can be effected by them, as will compensate for the mischief arising from their schism. He shall also judge all those who are beyond the pale of the truth, that is, who are outside the Church; but he himself shall be judged by no one. For to him all things are consistent: he has a full faith in one God Almighty, of whom are all things; and in the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, by whom are all things, and in the dispensations connected with Him, by means of which the Son of God became man; and a firm belief in the spirit of God, who furnishes us with a knowledge of the truth, and has set forth the dispensations of the Father and the Son, in virtue of which He dwells with every generation of men, according to the will of the Father”.

According to Irenaeus the church is endowed with mysterious powers which it exercises without charge and bestows grace which cannot be counted. And it is the unique sphere of the Spirit, Who has been indeed trusted to it, so that we can only attain communion with Christ there. This concept will be enlarged by Irenaeus’ disciple Cyprian, but there church is viewed as the depository of truth. He wrote (*Against Heresies*. 1, 10, 2):

“As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points (of doctrine) just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is

one and the same throughout the world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little, diminish it”.

In a classic passage from Irenaeus he wrote (*Against Heresies*. 3, 24, 1):

“Thus, then have all these men been exposed, who bring in impious doctrines regarding our Maker and Framer, who also formed this world, and above whom there is no other God; and those have been overthrown by their own arguments who teach falsehoods regarding the substance of our Lord, and the dispensation which He fulfilled for the sake of His own creature man. But (it has, on the other hand, been shown), that the preaching of the Church is everywhere consistent, and continues in an even course, and receives testimony from the prophets, the apostles, and all the disciples—as I have proved—through (those in) the beginning, the middle, and the end, and through the entire dispensation of God, and that well-grounded system which tends to man’s salvation, namely, our faith; which, having been received from the Church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth, as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also. For this gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as breath was to the first created man, for this purpose, that all the members receiving it may be vivified; and the (means of) communion with Christ has been distributed throughout it, that is, the Holy Spirit, the earnest of incorruption, the means of confirming our faith, and the ladder of ascent to God. ‘For in the Church,’ it is said, ‘God hath set apostles, prophets, teachers,; and all the other means through which the Spirit works; of which all those are not partakers who do not join themselves to the Church, but defraud themselves of life through their perverse opinions and infamous behaviour. For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth. Those, therefore, who do not partake of Him, are neither nourished into life from the mother’s breasts, nor do they enjoy that most limpid fountain which issues from the body of Christ; but they dig for themselves broken

cisterns out of earthly trenches, and drink putrid water out of the mire, fleeing from the faith of the Church lest they be convicted; and rejecting the Spirit, that they may not be instructed”.

**N.B.** The church is viewed as the sole depository of truth, because it has a monopoly on the apostolic writings, the apostolic oral tradition, and the apostolic faith; this in contrast to the variegated teachings of the Gnostics. To illustrate the succession of “truth,” he cites the Church at Rome, the imperial capital (*Against Heresies*. 3, 3, 2):

“Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vain-glory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assembly in unauthorized meetings; (we do this, I say,) by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also (by pointing out) the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the succession of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those (faithful men) who exist everywhere”.

Rome is an ideal illustration of the universality of the church’s true teachings because representatives of many churches flock. Thus, there is some guarantee that the faith taught at Rome faithfully reflected the apostolic tradition. The crucial issue is the truth, not geographic supremacy or prominent leaders! Hence a succession of truth, not men!

**4. The Alexandrians. Clement (ca. A.D. 150–211/16)** understands the church to be primarily a gathering of saints for instruction and the hearing of the Scriptures. He further wrote (*Stromata*. 4, 9), “The earthly church is the image of the heavenly as we pray also ‘that the will of God may be done upon the earth as in heaven’”. He says of the visible church, “I call a church not a place, but the collection, congregation, of the elect”; this he derives from the idea of *ekklesia*. He speaks of the unity of the church in terms of truth-succession (*Stromata*. 7, 17):

“From what has been said, then, it is my opinion that the true Church, that which is really ancient, is one, and that in it those who according to God's purpose are just, are enrolled. For from the very

reason that God is one, and the Lord one, that which is in the highest degree honourable is lauded in consequence of its singleness, being an imitation of the one first principle. In the nature of the One, then, is associated in a joint heritage the one Church, which they strive to cut asunder into many sects.

Therefore in substance and idea, in origin, in pre-eminence, we say that the ancient and Catholic Church is alone, collecting as it does into the unity of the one faith—which results from the peculiar Testaments, or rather the one Testament in different times by the will of the one God, through one Lord—those already ordained, whom God predestinated, knowing before the foundation of the world that they would be righteous.

But the pre-eminence of the Church, as the principle of union, is, in its oneness, in this surpassing all things else, and having nothing like or equal to itself”.

Hence, if one connects as co-ordinates gospel truth and the repository of truth (the church), then it is easy to understand the stress on no redemption outside the church.

**Origen’s (ca. A.D. 185–253/4) definition of the church universal and particular is quite helpful (*Against Celsus*. 6, 48):**

“In the next place, when the philosophers of the Porch, who assert that the virtue of God and man is the same, maintain that the God who is over all things is not happier than their wise man, but that the happiness of both is equal, Celsus, neither ridicules nor scoffs at their opinion. If, however, holy Scripture says that the perfect man is joined to and made one with the Very Word by means of virtue, so that we infer that the soul of Jesus is not separated from the first-born of all creation, he laughs at Jesus being called ‘Son of God,’ not observing what is said of Him with a secret and mystical signification in the holy Scriptures. But that we may win over to the reception of our views those who are willing to accept the inferences which flow from our doctrines, and to be benefited thereby, we say that the holy Scriptures declare the body of Christ, animated by the Son of God, to be the whole Church of God, and the members of this body—considered as a whole—to consist of those who are believers; since, as a soul vivifies and moves the body, which of itself has not the natural power of motion like a living being, so the Word, arousing and moving the whole body, the Church, to befitting action, awakens, moreover, each individual member belonging to the Church, so that they do nothing apart

from the Word. Since all this, then, follows by a train of reasoning not to be depreciated, where is the difficulty in maintaining that, as the soul of Jesus is joined in a perfect and inconceivable manner with the very Word, so the person of Jesus, generally speaking, is not separated from the only-begotten and first-born of all creation, and is not a different being from Him? But enough here on this subject”.

### III. THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH.

#### A. The Rise of Monarchial Government—Preserver of Truth

Much has been made of the shift in the second century from plurality leadership in the church to singularity, to an early episcopal form of government. Both in the New Testament and selected Fathers plurality was a common practice. For example Clement of Rome clearly envisions a plurality (*Letter to the Corinthians*, 42, 44):

“The Apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. Christ, therefore, was from God, and the Apostles from Christ. Both these appointments, then, came about in an orderly way, by the will of God. Having, therefore, received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed their first-fruits, having proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterward believe. Nor was this a new thing; for, indeed, many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus saith the Scripture in a certain place: ‘I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.’

Our Apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this cause, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those already mentioned, and afterward gave instructions that when these should fall asleep other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of the opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterward by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in lowliness of mind, peaceably, and with all modesty, and for a long time have borne a good report with all—these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out of their ministrations. For it will be no light sin for us, if office blamelessly and holily. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone



before seeing their departure was fruitful and ripe; for they have no fear lest any one should remove them from their appointed place. For we see that ye have displaced certain persons, though they were living honorably, from the ministration which had been honored by them blamelessly”.

The writer of the *Didaché* explicitly commands (15):

“Appoint (i.e., lay hands on), therefore, for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, not lovers of money, truthful, and approved; for they also render you the service of prophets and teachers. Despise them not, therefore, for they are your honored ones together with the prophets and teachers”.

It is interesting that Clement and Hermas, both churchmen at Rome in the second century express an awareness of plurality of eldership/bishop in the church; there is no hint of a singularity of ruler in the church.

However, particularly in Ignatius of Asia Minor, perhaps where John’s Revelation 2-3 was prominent, a shift from plurality to singularity is stated with the implication that “the Church” is intrinsically related to “the bishop.” He is not only the first to employ the term “catholic,” but also the first to speak of this singularity. He tells us (*Letter to the Smyrneans*, 8):

“[But] shun divisions, as the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the presbytery as the Apostles; and to the deacons pay respect, as to God’s commandment. Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal Church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which ye do may be sure and valid”.

Again, *To the Ephesians* he says (6):

“For some are wont of malicious guile to hawk about the Name, while they do certain other things unworthy of God. These men ye ought to shun, as wild-beasts; for they are mad dogs, biting by stealth; against whom ye ought to be on your guard, for they are hard to heal. There is one only physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true Life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord”.

The ecclesiastical shift is quite apparently from plurality to singularity; presbyters are divorced from bishops into a separate, plural, but subservient, office. *To the Magnesians* (2) he says:

“Forasmuch then as I was permitted to see you in the person of Damas your godly bishop and your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius and my fellow-servant the deacon Zotion, of whom I would fain have joy, for that he is subject to the bishop as unto the grace of God and to the presbytery as unto the law of Jesus Christ”.

And *To the Trallians* (2):

“For when ye are obedient to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, it is evident to me that ye are living not after men but after Jesus Christ, who died for us, that believing on His death ye might escape death. It is therefore necessary, even as your wont is, that ye should do nothing without the bishop; but be ye obedient also to the presbytery, as to the Apostles of Jesus Christ our hope; for it we live in Him, we shall also be found in Him. And those likewise who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ must please all men in all ways. For they are not deacons of meats and drinks but servants of the Church of God. It is right therefore that they should beware of blame as of fire”.

It is not crucial to demonstrate that this became the ecclesiastical position in the Ancient Church; it is blatantly self-evident. What remains, however, is to say something as to the historic origins of this shift. It must be realized that a monarchical bishop was not recognized in Rome until after 140 A.D.

1. According to Hegesippus, who is quoted by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*. 2, 23) a precedent was set when Simeon succeeded James as leader over the church in Jerusalem.
2. Clement of Alexandria indicates that bishops were endowed with higher authority than presbyters beginning with the Apostle John (*Rich Man*, 42):

“And that you may be still more confident, that repenting thus truly there remains for you a sure hope of salvation, listen to a tale, which is not a tale but a narrative, handed down and committed to the custody of memory, about the Apostle John. For when, on the tyrant's death, he returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit”.

3. Tertullian (*ca.* 155–240/60 A.D.) mentions the same origin of the shift so that the tradition must have been widespread (*Against Marcion*. 4, 5):

“Let us see what milk the Corinthians drank from Paul; to what rule of faith the Galatians were brought for correction; what the Philippians, the Thessalonians, the Ephesians, read by it; what utterance also the Romans give, so very near (to the apostles), to whom Peter and Paul conjointly bequeathed the gospel even sealed in their own blood. We have also St. John's foster churches. For although Marcion rejects his Apocalypse, the order of the bishops (thereof), when traced up to their origin, will yet rest on John as their author. In the same manner is recognized the excellent source of the other churches”.

4. Further, it must be realized that the early church embraced the necessity of the shift from a desire to preserve the truth in the church against the “isms” and “ics” of the day. Tertullian stated that truth is validated by its universality in the church. (*Prescription Against Heretics*, 20):

“Immediately, therefore, so did the apostles, whom this designation indicates as “the sent.” Having, on the authority of a prophecy, which occurs in a psalm of David, chosen Matthias by lot as the twelfth, into the place of Judas, they obtained the promised power of the Holy Ghost for the gift of miracles and of utterance; and after first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea, and founding churches (there), they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality,—privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the self-same mystery”.

5. In the development of the bishop's office, Irenaeus is of major importance for, unlike Tertullian or Origen, he attributes to bishops a certain special

gift for the custody of the truth, a function of which Ignatius has nothing to say. He wrote (*Against Heresy*, 4, 26):

“Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church,—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. but [it is also incumbent] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, [looking upon them] either as heretics of perverse minds, or as schismatics puffed up and self-pleasing, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of lucre and vainglory. For all these have fallen from the truth”.

Again, he wrote (*Against Heresy*, 4, 33):

“True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts [of God]”.

At this point in time, the bishop, an incorrupt guardian of the truth, was no longer the mere head of a local church; he has a relation to the Church Universal. He has a part in the episcopate which is one and single. The truth is guarded by the church as a “treasure in a precious vessel.”

At this point, Gonzalez has a remarkable statement concerning the nature of Apostolic Succession (*History*. 1, 151):

“What we have just summarized is that which may be found in early antiheretical writers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. But one must point out that at this time the understanding of apostolic succession was still not such that succession is required to confer validity to the episcopal office. On the contrary, some bishops had

that succession and others did not have it; but all their churches were apostolic because their faith agreed with the faith of the apostles as it had been preserved in churches whose bishops were in their succession. Later, and through a development that would take several centuries, this doctrine of apostolic succession would be developed to a point that would never be recognized by those who first advocated it”.

## **B. The Importance of Cyprian of Carthage (ca. A.D. 205–258)**

Although Irenaeus and Tertullian opposed the heretics by emphasizing the importance of the church and apostolic succession, neither of them took time to develop a doctrine of the church. Cyprian, the disciple of Irenaeus, is the first to do this and casts a sacerdotal shadow over it.

- 1. Cyprian and Unity.** Cyprian sees the unity of the church in the episcopate. The bishops are the successors of the apostles, and their authority, which derived from that succession, is the same that Christ granted to the apostles. Every bishop represents the totality of the episcopate. He wrote that each bishop is autonomous (*Unity of the Church*, 5):

“And this unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us also prove the episcopate itself to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brotherhood by a falsehood: let no one corrupt the truth of the faith by perfidious prevarication. The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole. The Church also is one, which is spread abroad far and wide into a multitude by an increase of fruitfulness. As there are many rays of the sun, but one light; and many branches of a tree, but one strength based in its tenacious root; and since from one spring flow many streams, although the multiplicity seems diffused in the liberality of an overflowing abundance, yet the unity is still preserved in the source. Separate a ray of the sun from its body of light, its unity does not allow a division of light; break a branch from a tree,—when broken, it will not be able to bud; cut off the stream from its fountain, and that which is cut off dries up. Thus also the church, shone over with the light of the Lord, sheds forth her rays over the whole world, yet it is one light which is everywhere diffused, nor is the unity of the body separated. Her fruitful abundance spreads her branches over the whole world. She broadly expands her rivers, liberally flowing, yet her head is one, her source one; and she is one mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated”.

No bishop has the right to dictate to other bishops; he postulates a federation of bishops that seek advice of one another, a parity of authority. He does give priority to Rome because of the primacy of Peter. He wrote (*Epistle. 54, 14*):

“To these also it was not sufficient that they had withdrawn from the Gospel, that they had taken away from the lapsed the hope of satisfaction and repentance, that they had taken away those involved in frauds or stained with adulteries, or polluted with the deadly contagion of sacrifices, lest they should entreat God, or make confession of their crimes in the Church, from all feeling and fruit of repentance; that they had set up outside for themselves—outside the Church, and opposed to the Church, a conventicle of their abandoned faction, when there had flowed together a band of creatures with evil consciences, and unwilling to entreat and to satisfy God. After such things as these, moreover, they still dare—a false bishop having been appointed for them by heretic—to set sail and to bear letters from schismatic and profane persons to the throne of Peter, and to the chief church whence priestly unity takes its source”.

On the other hand, Cyprian refused to grant the bishop of Rome any jurisdiction whatsoever in the internal affairs of his diocese as seen as his response to Bishop Stephen (*Epistle. 70, 3*):

“Neither must we prescribe this from custom, but overcome opposite custom by reason. For neither did Peter, whom first the Lord chose, and upon whom He built His Church, when Paul disputed with him afterwards about circumcision, claim anything to himself insolently, nor arrogantly assume anything; so as to say that he held the primacy, and that he ought rather to be obeyed by novices and those lately come. Nor did he despise Paul because he had previously been a persecutor of the Church, but admitted the counsel of truth, and easily yielded to the lawful reason which Paul asserted, furnishing thus an illustration to us both of concord and of patience, that we should not obstinately love our own opinions”.

2. **Cyprian and Salvation.** Cyprian is adamant that salvation is only in the church not in sacraments, but in truth. His staunch position must be viewed in light of the Novatian schismatics! He wrote (*Unity of the Church, 6*):

“The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous; she is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home; she guards with chaste modesty the

sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside the Church. The Lord warns, saying, 'He who is not with me scattereth.' He who breaks the peace and the concord of Christ, does so in opposition to Christ; he who gathereth elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ. The Lord says, 'I and the Father are one;' and again it is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, 'And these three are one.' And does any one believe that this unity which thus comes from the divine strength and coheres in celestial sacraments, can be divided in the Church, and can be separated by the parting asunder of opposing wills? He who does not hold this unity does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation".

Again, (*Epistle. 72, 21*):

"Can the power of baptism be greater or of more avail than confession, than suffering, when one confesses Christ before men and is baptized in his own blood? And yet even this baptism does not benefit a heretic, although he has confessed Christ, and been put to death outside the church, unless the patrons and advocates of heretics declare that the heretics who are slain in a false confession of Christ are martyrs, and assign to them the glory and the crown of martyrdom contrary to the testimony of the apostle, who says that it will profit them nothing although they were burnt and slain. But if not even the baptism of a public confession and blood can profit a heretic to salvation, because there is no salvation out of the Church, how much less shall it be of advantage to him, if in a hiding-place and a cave of robbers, stained with the contagion of adulterous water, he has not only not put off his old sins, but rather heaped up still newer and greater ones! Wherefore baptism cannot be common to us and to heretics, to whom neither God the Father, nor Christ the Son, nor the Holy Ghost, nor the faith, nor the Church itself, is common. And therefore it behooves those to be baptized who come from heresy to the Church, that so they who are prepared, in the lawful, and true, and only baptism of the holy Church, by divine regeneration, for the kingdom of God, may be born of both sacraments, because it is written, 'Except a man be

born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God””.

How can this church outside of which there is no salvation be defined and recognized? According to Cyprian, the church is recognized by its truth and unity. Although he affirms that truth is one of the characteristics, his opposition to schismatics led him to emphasize unity. He sees no truth without unity!

#### **IV. THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH.**

The Church’s sacraments are those external rites, more precisely signs, which the Ancient Church believed conveyed an unseen sanctifying grace.

##### **A. The Sacrament of Baptism.**

From the beginning, baptism was universally accepted as the rite of admission to the Church; similarly “it was always held to convey the remission of sins,” wrote Kelley (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 194). Barnabas tells us for example (*Letter*, 11):

“This He saith, because we go down into the water laden with sins and filth, and rise up from it bearing fruit in the heart, resting our fear and hope on Jesus in the spirit. And whosoever shall eat of these shall live for ever; He meaneth this; whosoever, saith He, shall hear these things spoken and shall believe, shall live for ever.”

Justin Martyr wrote (*Apology*, 61):

“I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, ‘Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ Now, that it is impossible for those who have once been born to enter into their mother’s wombs, is manifest to all. And how those who have sinned and repent shall escape their sins, is declared by Esaias the prophet, as I wrote above; he thus speaks: ‘Wash



you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from your souls; learn to do well; judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow: and come and let us reason together, saith the Lord. And though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white like wool; and though they be as crimson, I will make them white as snow. but if ye refuse and rebel, the sword shall devour you: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it””.

Clement of Alexandria understands that it imparts regeneration (*Instructor*. 1, 6):

“The same also takes place in our case, whose exemplar Christ became. Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal. ‘I,’ says He, ‘have said that ye are gods, and all sons of the Highest.’ This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing: washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly. Now we call that perfect which wants nothing. For what is yet wanting to him who knows God? For it were truly monstrous that which is not complete should be called a gift (or act) of God’s grace. Being perfect, He consequently bestows perfect gifts”.

## **B. The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.**

The early church held to an ambivalency concerning the table for they saw it both in terms of a spiritual reality and a thanksgiving. Of importance is that it focused on a past event, not an ongoing reality. The church conceived the eucharist with a natural and unconcerned realism. The *Didaché* states (9-10):

“9. But as touching the eucharistic thanksgiving give ye thanks thus. First, as regards the cup: We give Thee thanks O our Father, for the holy vine of Thy son David, which Thou madest known unto us through Thy Son Jesus; Thine is the glory for ever and ever, Then as regards the broken bread: We give Thee thanks, O our Father, for the life and knowledge which Thou didst make known unto us through Thy Son Jesus; Thine is the glory for ever and ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. But let no one eat or drink of this eucharistic thanksgiving, but they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord hath said: Give not that which is holy to the dogs.

“10. And after ye are satisfied thus give ye thanks: We give Thee thanks, Holy Father, for Thy holy name, which Thou has made to tabernacle in

our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which Thou hast made known unto us through Thy Son Jesus; Thine is the glory for ever and ever. Thou, Almighty Master, didst create all things for Thy name's sake, and didst give food and drink unto men for enjoyment, that they might render thanks to Thee; but didst bestow upon us spiritual food and drink and eternal life through Thy Son. Before all things we give Thee thanks that Thou are powerful; Thine is the glory for ever and ever”.

Ignatius says even more graphically (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 20): “Breaking one bread which is the medicine of immortality and antidote that we should not die but live for ever in Jesus Christ.” Justin wrote (*Apology*, 66):

“And this food is called among us *Eucharistia* [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, ‘This do ye in remembrance of me, this is My body,’ and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, ‘This is My blood;’ and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.”

The early church held to the ambivalent position of a Eucharist that at once was real, yet symbolic; memorial, yet spiritual. Of the Lord's Table Neve wrote (*History*. 1, 160): “In the day of Tertullian and Irenaeus and their predecessors it was altogether possible that a symbolical and in a sense a certain realistic conception of the gift in the Supper were not exclusive the one of the other.”

## V. CONCLUSION.

The purpose of this lesson has been to initiate a study of ecclesiology by focusing upon the first three centuries of the church. The church was viewed as the body of Christ, saved ones who had received the washing of baptism, and as a continuation of Israel. The church witnesses a shift from plurality to singularity of leadership, the episcopate, which

was both an autonomous federation of bishoprics and the sole receptacle of truth (hence, not salvation without the truth—the church). Hierarchical rule is explicitly rejected, even by Cyprian. The sacraments were viewed as grace conveyed: baptism the grace of regeneration and the eucharist as a memorial grace of sanctification.