

Chapter 1

Justin (ca. 100–ca. 165) and Cyprian (ca. 300)

Justin, First Apology (mid-second century)
Cyprian, Epistle I to Donatus (third century)

In the early centuries of the Christian church preparation for baptism was a crucial part of enabling the transition from the dominant culture to another culture patterned on the way of Christ. Baptism marked the moment of transition but the catechumenate was the way in which a candidate for baptism was prepared for this moment. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in two conversion accounts, the first by the influential second century writer Justin and the second by the third century North African bishop, Cyprian. The latter's account is of his own conversion from an aristocratic lifestyle to a different pattern of behavior. What is striking about this is not so much the intellectual character of faith but the struggle to acclimatize to different patterns of behavior. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had told his disciples that their life should differ from contemporary culture (Mark 10: 42ff). What was required was to live as Jesus' followers taught and lived, a pattern of life which by all accounts was impressive and attractive to pagans. In the catechumenate, candidates for baptism learned how to live differently.

In Justin's account of his conversion the sense of oppression by larger powers and the release which fellowship in the Christian community afforded are brought out. This situation required an exorcism of the principalities and powers. The importance of such ideas is at the heart of William Blake's theology (see pp. 165–71) and has been a feature of recent radical theological writing by William Stringfellow (see below pp. 255–60) and more recently W. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; *Unmasking the Powers*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986; *Engaging the Powers*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993.

2 Justin (ca. 100–ca. 165) and Cyprian (ca. 300)

Source

C. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 249–50 and <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>

Further reading

A. Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999.

R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

W. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, New Haven: Yale, 1993.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 14

[The demons] struggle to have you as their slaves and servants, and . . . they get hold of all who do not struggle to their utmost for their own salvation – as we do who, after being persuaded by the Word, renounced them and now follow the only unbegotten God through his Son. Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in self-control alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of [their different] customs, now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, living according to the fair commands of Christ, may share with us the good hope of receiving the same things . . . The teachings of Christ were short and concise, for he was no philosopher, but his word was the power of God.

Cyprian, *Epistle I to Donatus* 3–4

While I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night . . . and remote from truth and light, I used to regard it as a difficult matter, and especially as difficult in respect of my character at that time, that a man should be capable of being born again . . . and that a man quickened to a new life in the laver of saving water should be able to put off what he has previously been . . . How, said I, is such a conversion possible, that there should be a sudden and rapid divestment of all which, either innate in us has hardened in the corruption of our material nature, or acquired by us has become inveterate by long accustomed use? These things have become deeply and radically ingrained within us. When does he learn thrift who has been used to liberal banquets and sumptuous feasts? And he who has been glittering in

gold and purple, and has been celebrated for his costly attire, when does he reduce himself to ordinary and simple clothing? . . .

But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years had been washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, had been infused into my reconciled heart – after that, by the agency of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth restored me to a new person; – then in a wondrous manner, doubtful things at once began to assure themselves to me . . . What before had seemed difficult began to suggest a means of accomplishment, what had been thought impossible, to be capable of being achieved.