

The Early Church Fathers on Salvation Outside the Church

The Early Church Fathers were not shy when it came to condemning heretics and schismatics. They taught that those who put themselves outside of the Catholic Church had no hope of salvation. Some take that to mean anyone outside of the Church is lost. But that is not so. Their condemnations were aimed specifically at heretics and schismatics. Heretics and schismatics are individuals who at one point had the faith and later rejected it. Those who through no fault of their own do not know what Christ requires of them are not guilty and therefore not automatically condemned. God punishes rebellion not ignorance. He is not legalistic. As the apostle Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 4:5, men will be judged by the purposes of their hearts.

Clement of Rome

Let us go through all generations and learn that in generation after generation the Master has given a place of repentance for those willing to turn to him. Those who repented for their sins, appeased God in praying, and received salvation, even though they were aliens to God (*Letter to the Corinthians* 7 [AD 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

Be not deceived, my brethren: If anyone follows a maker of schism [i.e., is a schismatic], he does not inherit the kingdom of God; if anyone walks in strange doctrine [i.e., is a heretic], he has no part in the Passion [of Christ]. Take care, then, to use one Eucharist, so that whatever you do, you do according to God: For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup in the union of his blood; one altar, as there is one bishop, with the presbytery and my fellow servants, the deacons (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 3:3-4:1 [A.D. 110]).

Justin Martyr

We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and we have declared him to be the Logos of which all mankind partakes [John 1:9]. Those, therefore, who lived according to reason [Greek, logos] were really Christians, even though they were thought to be atheists, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them. . . . Those who lived before Christ but did not live according to reason [logos] were wicked men, and enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who did live according to reason [logos], whereas those who lived then or who live now according to reason [logos] are Christians. Such as these can be confident and unafraid (*First Apology* 46 [A.D. 151]).

Irenaeus

In the Church God has placed apostles, prophets, teachers, and every other working of the Spirit, of whom none of those are sharers who do not conform to the Church, but who defraud themselves of life by an evil mind and even worse way of acting. Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace (*Against Heresies* 3:24:1 [A.D. 189]).

[The spiritual man] 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, 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 they can bring about no "reformation" of enough importance to compensate for the evil arising from their schism. . . . 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 [i.e., the Catholic Church] (*ibid.*, 4:33:7-8).

Origen

There was never a time when God did not want men to be just; he was always concerned about that. Indeed, he always provided beings endowed with reason with occasions for practicing virtue and doing what is right. In every

generation the Wisdom of God descended into those souls which he found holy and made them to be prophets and friends of God (*Against Celsus* 4:7 [A.D. 248]).

If someone from this people wants to be saved, let him come into this house so that he may be able to attain his salvation. . . . Let no one, then, be persuaded otherwise, nor let anyone deceive himself: Outside of this house, that is, outside of the Church, no one is saved; for, if anyone should go out of it, he is guilty of his own death (*Homilies on Joshua* 3:5 [A.D. 250]).

Cyprian of Carthage

Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress [a schismatic church] is separated from the promises of the Church, nor will he that forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is an alien, a worldling, and an enemy. He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother (*The Unity of the Catholic Church* 6, 1st ed. [A.D. 251]).

Let them not think that the way of life or salvation exists for them, if they have refused to obey the bishops and priests, since the Lord says in the book of Deuteronomy: "And any man who has the insolence to refuse to listen to the priest or judge, whoever he may be in those days, that man shall die" [Deut. 17:12-13]. And then, indeed, they were killed with the sword . . . but now the proud and insolent are killed with the sword of the Spirit, when they are cast out from the Church. For they cannot live outside, since there is only one house of God, and there can be no salvation for anyone except in the Church (Letters 61[4]:4 [A.D. 253]).

The baptism of public witness [desire] and of blood cannot profit a heretic [one who holds the faith and then abandons it] unto salvation, because there is no salvation outside the Church (Letters 72 [73]:21 [A.D. 253]).

Lactanius

It is, therefore, the Catholic Church alone that retains true worship. This is the fountain of truth; this, the domicile of faith; this, the temple of God. Whoever does not enter there or whoever does not go out from there, he is a stranger to the hope of life and salvation. . . . Because, however, all the various groups of heretics are confident that they are the Christians and think that theirs is the Catholic Church, let it be known that this is the true Church, in which there is confession and penance and which takes a health-promoting care of the sins and wounds to which the weak flesh is subject (*Divine Institutes* 4:30:11-13 [A.D. 307]).

Jerome

Heretics bring sentence upon themselves since they by their own choice withdraw from the Church, a withdrawal which, since they are aware of it, constitutes damnation. Between heresy and schism there is this difference: that heresy involves perverse doctrine, while schism separates one from the Church on account of disagreement with the bishop. Nevertheless, there is no schism which does not trump up a heresy to justify its departure from the Church (*Commentary on Titus* 3:10-11 [A.D. 386]).

Augustine

We believe also in the holy Church, that is, the Catholic Church. For heretics violate the faith itself by a false opinion about God; schismatics, however, withdraw from fraternal love by hostile separations, although they believe the same things we do. Consequently; neither heretics nor schismatics belong to the Catholic Church, not heretics, because the Church loves God, and not schismatics, because the Church loves neighbor (*Faith and the Creed* 10:21 [A.D. 393]).

When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the position of the heart that we must consider, not that of the body. . . . All who are within [the Church] in heart are saved in the unity of the ark (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 5:28[39] [A.D. 400]).