

Christianity in Roman Africa Forgiveness of Sins

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Baptism and Penance

- Baptism effected the forgiveness of all prior sins and removal of all debt of punishment.
 - Baptism provided a basis for forgiveness of subsequent sins.
- Types of Sins
 - Minor “sins of daily living” were forgiven through prayer, fasting, almsgivings, and apology/pardon within the community (Matthew 18:18-21)
 - Major sins that affected an individual or the community as a whole were forgiven through a ritual of confession, temporary exclusion from communion, satisfactory works, and reconciliation, over all of which the bishop presided.
 - Sins against God or human as temple of God —idolatry, murder, adultery (Acts 15:20)— were to be confessed and repented but may not have allowed of reconciliation to the church’s communion.

Power to Forgive

- Power belongs to God but may be exercised by human agent
 - Intercessory by clergy, congregation, or martyr
 - Delegated by God to an officer of church or an individual harmed (Matthew 16:19, 18:18, 18:21-22)
 - Conferred upon Christians by gift of Holy Spirit (John 20:21-23), Lord's Prayer
- Limits to human use of power:
 - Question of sins against God or human as temple of God
- Efficacy dependent upon disposition of penitent
 - Human disposition are difficult to judge
 - Forgiveness may not be granted by God.
- Repeatable or allowed only once?

Ritual of Reconciliation—Tertullian

- Acknowledgement or disclosure of sin
 - Penitent could initiate process by confession
 - Leaders could initiate the process by accusation
 - Sins of public and private action; sins of intention alone (?)
- Suspension from community prayer and eucharistic communion
- Practices of repentance
 - Rejection of sin
 - Appeal for forgiveness
 - “Satisfaction” offered to God to demonstrate repentance
 - Enlistment of community support or appeal
- Intercession of community and of martyrs was effective
- Absolution of sin and restoration to eucharistic communion

Tertullian

- No reconciliation for sins against God
- Only one reconciliation for post-baptismal sin against second part of Decalogue
 - Hebrews 10:14-18, 26-31
- When reconciliation not allowed, private repentance urged, with prayer by community,
 - Penitent must reject sin and offer satisfaction to God
 - Penitent must appeal to Christ in judgment
- Martyrdom won forgiveness for the martyr alone
 - Rejected intercession of martyrs
 - Gift of Holy Spirit manifest by discipline rather than martyrdom

Conflict over Reconciliation

- Bishop claimed power to reconcile adulterers
 - Based on power given to Peter in Matt 16:19
- Tertullian rejected claim
 - Power was personal to Peter, along with other powers
 - “Saints” had power but do not use it lest they encourage sinning. (Matthew 18:18-21)
- Bishops of Africa agreed to reconcile adulterers
 - Bishop’s claim to delegation or empowerment
- Question: can penance be required without promising reconciliation?

Cyprian

- God forgives sins; bishops reconcile penitents to communion of church
 - Bishops are delegated to act as judges for God but can discern internal dispositions only by actions
 - Circumstances of sinning became increasingly relevant
- Laity involved in advising bishops on administration of reconciliation ritual
 - Admitting sinners to status of penitent
 - Recommending penitents for reconciliation
 - Confessors (those who suffered in persecution but did not die) had privileged role in recommending penitents
- Confession and Satisfactory Works
 - Petition God for forgiveness
 - Manifest repentance and renewed commitment to clergy and community
 - Protects community against “tolerating” sin

Cyprian: Reconciling Penitents

- Because of persecution of Decius, focus was on sin of idolatry by denying (or failing to confess) Christ and participating in pagan worship (idolatry).
- Christ had threatened to acknowledge or reject those who confessed or denied him (Matthew 10:32-33)
 - Strength for martyrdom in second trial was a sign of forgiveness.
- Could sinners remaining bound on earth be loosed in heaven? (Matthew 16:19, John 20:21-23)
- Could a sinner be asked to repent and then denied reconciliation?
- Bishops decided to reconcile penitents before death so they could be judged by Christ.
 - Had to have engaged in repentance while still healthy.
 - But not all the dying actually died.
 - What to do about survivors of “deadly” illness?
- Congregation and clergy had limited but essential role in forgiveness.

Appeal to Martyrs & Confessors

- Some of the lapsed (Christians who gave in to idolatry) appealed to the martyrs for intercession with Christ.
 - The resisters to idolatry were not executed but some died of deprivations in prison
 - Some of them promised to intercede with Christ for the fallen who pleaded with them; wrote letters to bishop.
 - A few deputized others to promise intercession by them for all the fallen.
 - The fallen who had letters then claimed that their sin was forgiven by Christ; demanded immediate reconciliation
 - Some clergy granted them immediate reconciliation without any signs of repentance.
- The martyrs claimed an authority that the bishops did not have: to guarantee forgiveness by Christ.

Cyprian: Authority to Bind & Loose

- Cyprian and his colleagues asserted that they, not the martyrs, had been given authority by Christ to grant or deny reconciliation.
 - The martyrs were claiming an authority for themselves contradicted by its scriptural foundation in Matthew 10:32-33.
 - They could intercede for the fallen only at the final judgment.
- Christ gave this authority to the apostles as a group (John 20:21-23) with the gift of the Holy Spirit for binding and loosening.
 - The bishops, also as a group, were heirs to this power, authorized to act for Christ until he returned to judge.
 - Only bishops who were faithful to Christ shared this power; others had to be excluded from the group to protect the power.
 - The power was held and exercised only in unity of the church and episcopal college.

Cyprian: Role of Bishops

- Bishops could grant return to eucharistic communion of the church
 - This gave penitents access to the judgment of Christ.
 - Bishops could not guarantee the forgiveness of sin and acceptance by Christ.
- Christians who refused the ministry of the bishops were excluded by Christ.
 - They were outside the eucharistic communion
 - They would not have access to Christ to plead for themselves or to be helped by the martyrs.
- The unity of the church and holiness of its bishops was essential to the salvation of Christians
 - Sinful bishops had to be removed from office
 - The holiness of the laity was not necessary for the church

The Donatist Controversy

- Following the Diocletian persecution, the African church split over the holiness necessary for the clergy.
 - Catholics and Donatists agreed that bishops who had failed during the persecution must be removed from office.
 - Donatists asserted that apostate bishops harmed those to whom they ministered and with whom they were in communion.
 - Their baptisms had to be repeated since they could not forgive
 - Bishops in communion with them were tainted by their sin and also lost their power to minister.
 - Catholics asserted that apostate bishops harmed only themselves; God continued to make their ministry (baptism, eucharist, penance) effective.
- Council of Arles (314 AD) supported Catholic position
 - Refused to allow (re)baptism of those converted from separated communions
- Augustine developed an explanation of this position

Augustine: Types of Sin

- Penitential ritual was rare event in a Christian's life
 - Sins of Decalogue
 - Galatians 5:19-21: sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness
 - Blasphemy, usury, dealing in slaves
- Daily sinning required daily repentance
 - Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving
 - Mutual reconciliation of Christians necessary and effective
- Unforgiveable sin: rejecting the unity of the church and the divine gifts of faith and charity (this prevents forgiveness of other sins)

Augustine: Power to Forgive

- The Holy Spirit was present in and operative through the whole body of faithful Christians who have love of God and neighbor—gift of Holy Spirit. (John 20:21-23)
- Extended to sins committed against God
- Only Christians in unity can exercise power to forgive
 - Disunity is a rejection of the Holy Spirit
- Individual Christians could and should forgive those who have harmed them (Matthew 18:15-22)
- The bishop declares this forgiveness as leader of the local congregation for sins that affected the whole group (Matthew 16:18)
 - If bishop was faithful, his holiness also mediated forgiveness; if not, that of the body of the faithful mediated it.
 - Forgiveness was accomplished by renewal of love of God and neighbor in sinful Christians.

Augustine

- Correction and Rebuke of sinners
 - By bishop and clergy
 - By anyone responsible for the person
 - By anyone who could intervene
- Involuntary Expulsion from Communion
 - Necessary when sin was notorious
 - Bishop could not reveal a secret sin
- Private Penance for secret, serious sin
 - Bishop's forgiveness was necessary
- Formal Penance and Reconciliation once in lifetime
- Delay of Repentance and Reconciliation
 - Deathbed baptism was effective in forgiving sins
 - Repentance for post-baptismal sin might not be effective
 - More dependent upon dispositions of the sinner
 - Ritual was granted to the dying, even if penance was not completed.

Augustine

- Charity (love of God and neighbor) gives power to forgive.
- Any and every sin can be forgiven the repentant
- Any and every sin must be forgiven the repentant
- Both a loosening and tightening of church discipline
- Church's intervention necessary for forgiveness
 - Intentional unity in love with community necessary for sanctification and salvation
 - Rituals cannot be rejected
 - Withholding of rituals by clergy does not prevent salvation