

Forgive Us, as We Forgive: The Challenge of Change

Osher Institute

Vanderbilt University

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Review of New Testament Teaching

- Interaction of Divine and Human Forgiving
 - Forgiveness of Sins was understood as a belonging to God alone
 - Divine forgiveness of human sinners was inseparable from those sinners forgiveness of other human sinners.
 - The forgiveness that humans offered to one another could carry divine forgiveness of the same sin.
- Limits on the Forgiveness of Sins
 - Sins directly against the Deity or the Messiah
 - The teaching is somewhat unclear regarding failure to confess the Son of Man
- Human exercise of divine power to forgive
 - Power or Authority
 - Prayer of intercession for divine forgiveness

Change in Practice

- The disciples experienced great difficulty in understanding Jesus ministry.
 - Immediately after recognizing Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, Peter objected to the prediction of his rejection and death. (Matt 16:21-23; Mark 8:31-33).
 - The prediction was made again (Matt 17:22; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:44-45) and a third time (Matt 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-33).
 - The disciples resisted the arrest of Jesus, were rebuked by him, and then left him. (Matt 26:50-56; Mark 14:46-52; Luke 22:49-53).
 - The disciples were expecting a conquering warrior who would restore dominion and empire to Israel.
- After the resurrection, Jesus showed from scripture that his rejection and execution were integrated into the divine plan. (Luke 24:13-35).

The Universal Mission of the Church

- After his resurrection, Jesus claimed universal authority and sent his disciples to preach to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
 - Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:45-48; Acts of the Apostles 1:8.
 - Restoration of kingdom to Israel was not their concern (Acts 1:7).
- Initial reception of Christianity in Jerusalem
 - A Jewish-Christian community was established in Jerusalem but was not accepted by Jewish leaders. (Acts 2-5).
 - Division arose between Judean and Diaspora Jewish Christians (Acts 6:1-7)
 - Stephen, a Jew of the Diaspora disputed with other Diaspora Jews and was executed (Acts 6:8-7:60).
 - That conflict resulted in the spreading of Christianity outside Jerusalem (Acts 8:4-40).

The Mission to the Gentiles

- Paul, a devout Jew of the Diaspora, was converted to become a missionary of Christ, to “the Gentiles, and kings, and the sons of Israel.” (Acts 9)
 - Because of conflict in Jerusalem, Paul had to be removed and sent to work outside Palestine (Acts 9:26-30).
 - Paul’s initial mission to Diaspora Jews was more successful with Gentiles Acts 13-14
- Peter was called to baptize a Roman officer in Caesarea (Roman administrative headquarters in Palestine) (Acts 10:1-11:18).
- A conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians arose in Antioch
 - According to Acts 15, it was resolved in Jerusalem by a compromise.
 - According to Paul in Galatians 2, it remained unresolved.

Challenges in Christian Morality

- The compromise worked out at Jerusalem required that Gentile Christians abstain from things forbidden to all humans: rather than being responsible for the whole of the Mosaic Law.
 - idolatry, blood (eating animal blood or taking human life), unchastity, were forbidden; other rituals need not be observed (Acts 15:22-29; Genesis 9:1-7).
- Paul had to deal with similar issues in organizing the church at Corinth.
 - The man living with his step-mother (1 Cor 5:1-5).
 - Christians taking each other to court over disputes (1 Cor 6:1-8).
 - Sexual sins; use of prostitutes, theft and robbery; abuse of food and drink (1 Cor 6:9-20).
 - Legitimacy of marriage, even to an unbeliever; no divorce (1 Cor 7:1-39).
 - Idolatry (1 Cor 8:1-13, 10:1-11:1).

Tertullian

- Tertullian of Carthage
 - The first Latin Christian writer.
 - A native of Carthage, the capitol city of the Roman province of Proconsular Africa.
 - A lay person rather than a member of the clergy
 - His 32 surviving writings fill more than 1,450 pages in the modern edition.
 - His 32 treatises are dated between 196 and 212 CE.
- He began to follow the New Prophecy about 208
 - A Christian movement beginning in Asia Minor that expected the new Jerusalem to descend into modern Turkey.
 - It supported a rigorist moral program that refused to allow Christian sinners to return to the communion of the church.

Post-Baptismal Sin

- All prior sins were to be repented prior to baptism and were forgiven.
- Sins of human weakness in daily living were repented daily by prayer, almsgiving, and regular fasting from food and drink.
- The practice of private reconciliation (Matt. 18) was used for sins against fellow Christians.
- Serious sin after baptism indicated that the prior repentance had not been adequate.
 - A single repentance for serious sins committed after baptism was allowed.
 - Thereafter, a Christian sinner was to be urged to repent and seek mercy from Christ in the final judgment but was not allowed to return to the Eucharistic fellowship. (1 Cor 5:5)
- Martyrdom removed all sins committed after baptism.

The Ritual of Confession

- The process could be initiated by the sinner or the leader of the congregation (bishop).
 - The sinner was excluded by the congregational leader (bishop) from sharing the Eucharist and praying with the community.
- The sinner acknowledged a serious sin, private or public, before the congregation.
 - If the sin was within the competence of the church's power and authority to forgive, the sinner could be admitted to penitential status.
 - With the agreement of the congregation, the leader admitted the sinner to the status of penitent.
 - The penitent undertook appropriate activities to demonstrate repentance.
 - Prayer for forgiveness, pleading for the intercession of fellow Christians, fasting in food and drink, almsgiving to the poor, restricting personal grooming to indicate mourning.
 - These were remedial punishments rather than “satisfactory.”

The Ritual of Reconciliation

- The leader determined the length of the period of penance.
 - Determined by the nature of the sin and the manifestation of sincere repentance and amendment.
- The intercession of martyrs who had survived torture for witnessing to Christ was considered particularly effective in winning divine forgiveness.
 - They were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit and recognition by Christ in heaven (Matt. 10:20, 32-33).
- The penitent repeated the confession of the sin and was admitted to the eucharistic communion of the church.
 - The church believed that God had forgiven the sin and that the penitent would not endanger the holiness of the congregation.
 - The reconciled penitent may have been restricted from holding church office.

The New Prophecy

- Tertullian distinguished four types of sins and the way they were bound or loosened.
- Sins against nature (incest, blasphemy) would never be forgiven by God; Christians should abandon such persons (1 John 5:16-17).
- Sins against God or a human as the Temple of God (1 Cor 6:19) could be forgiven by God but must be held bound by the Church.
 - Peter was instructed to forgive sins committed against himself but not sins committed against God (Matt. 18:21-22).
 - Sins indicated in Acts 15:22-29: idolatry, murder (blood), adultery.
 - Sexual sins violated the members of Christ and Temple of God (1 Cor 6:18-19)
 - Christian morality on sexual sins was more strict than Roman law and culture
 - Sins added from the Decalogue: fraud, false testimony.

The New Prophecy

- Sins that could be forgiven by the church.
 - Cruelty, immodesty, anger, indirect contact with idolatry (particularly in blood sports).
 - Leaving the church in anger, pride, or jealousy.
 - Concealing one's Christian identity, evading a law requiring forbidden acts.
 - Refusing to repent for sins against fellow Christians.
- Sins that could and should be forgiven by all Christians
 - Sins against fellow Christians that would be forgiven by mutual reconciliation (Matt. 18).
 - Sins of human weakness could be repented by private penance
 - Anger allowed to go beyond sundown; striking or cursing another
 - Violating one's word, lying under compulsion or through shame
 - Casual contact with idolatry
 - Casual failings in eating, drinking, listening, and watching

Conflict with the Bishop of Carthage

- The Bishop of Carthage claimed the power and authority to forgive sins of adultery and fornication (but not idolatry and murder).
 - Penance was not to be done in vain, so repentance should be met with restoration to the Eucharist.
- Tertullian objected that the Holy Spirit (the source of the church's power) had declared that these sins would not to be forgiven.
 - Peter's powers had been given to him alone, for establishing the church
 - To forgive and bind sins (Matt 16:19)
 - To heal and raise the dead (Acts 9.36-43, 3.1-10)
 - Binding Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11)
 - Paul struck Elymas blind (Acts 13:8-12)
 - The power was given to the church but not connected to the office of leadership; only spiritual persons could exercise it.
 - Spiritual persons had been forbidden to do so by the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian: The Power to Forgive Sins

- The power to forgive and bind sins had been given to all Christians
 - The exercise of that power was limited to sins committed against human beings (and not as Temples of God)
 - Moreover, any Christian who had received a sacrament (Baptism & Eucharist) had the power to give that sacrament.
- Church leaders were appointed for maintaining good order
 - They presided at the Eucharist when it was celebrated by the whole congregation
 - Household Eucharistic celebrations were presided over by the head of the family.
 - They admitted members to communion in baptism
 - They excluded sinners and supervised their readmission
 - They did not share the personal powers of the given to individual apostles

Summary

- Moving from the Jewish to the Gentile culture require an adaptation of the church's teaching and practices about the (rituals of the) Mosaic Law.
 - The church was guided by the Holy Spirit and the actions of Christ in opening to the Gentiles but had to make the decision about the application of the Law.
- Jesus's actions in the New Testament had to be integrated to guide the practice of the church.
 - Different kinds of sins had to be distinguished.
- The New Prophecy raised the question of the power to forgive and bind sins.
 - Competition between the clergy, the martyrs, and the prophets.
- Procedures for adaptation and development of doctrine and practice had to be developed.