

Forgive Us, as We Forgive: The Crisis of Idolatry

Osher Institute

Vanderbilt University

April 5, 2021

Summary of Prior Presentation

- The church community successfully worked out adaptations to new circumstances as it expanded from Palestine into the Roman Empire
 - Different stances toward Mosaic food law for Jewish and Gentile Christians
 - Adapting to the presence of idolatrous cults:
 - participation in rituals forbidden;
 - eating religiously consecrated food allowed outside a ritual context
 - Changing sexual practices:
 - Requiring mutual fidelity of both spouses.
 - Rejecting sexual union with anyone not a spouse.
 - Rejecting divorce with remarriage.
 - Allowing second marriages after death of a spouse (despite New Prophecy).
 - Procedures for approving adaptation had to be developed.

Cyprian of Carthage

- Cyprian was elected presbyter and then bishop of Carthage as a recently converted Christian in 249 CE
 - He was a wealthy, well-educated and prominent person in the city.
 - He was attentive to systems and procedures of governance.
 - A large collection of his correspondence and essays provides a detailed record of his episcopate.
- The Emperor Decius required all citizens of the Empire to offer sacrifice to the immortal gods for the success of the emperor.
 - Local commissions were established to issue certificates of compliance.
 - The decree did not require the abandonment of non-official religious cults.
 - Eating sacrificed meat, pouring an offering of wine, or burning incense were required.
 - The objective was compliance: those who refused were to be “persuaded” and punished only if they continued to resist.

Christians Responded Differently

- Some complied with the edict.
 - Some appeared voluntarily and required their entire household to comply.
 - Some appeared voluntarily but secured an exemption for their households.
 - Some protested that they could not perform the sacrifice and paid a fine (or bribe) in order to secure a certificate of compliance.
 - Some complied initially and they reversed themselves.
- Some avoided compliance by escape
 - Some were not prominent enough to attract the attention of authorities and were protected by sympathetic friends and neighbors.
 - Some moved to larger cities (Carthage) or rural areas and were protected by fellow Christians (some of whom had complied).
 - Nobles were expected to surrender their property and go into voluntary exile.
 - Cyprian did this and guided his church by letters and assistants.

Resisters were Arrested

- Resisters were incarcerated and held for trial before the head of the Roman province.
 - After attempts to persuade them to comply, most of these were sent into exile.
 - Others were held in prison and subjected to torture until the end of the persecution.
 - Those who survived exile or extended incarceration were called “confessors.”
 - Those who died under torture or in exile were regarded as “martyrs.”
- Resisters were considered to be in an influential position before Christ.
 - Matthew 10:32 and Luke 12:8 quoted Jesus as saying that he would acknowledge them in heaven before his Father.
 - They would advise Christ at the final judgment of the nations Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:28

How to Deal with the Fallen

- Cyprian gave instructions that all who complied were to be excluded from the eucharist and were to undertake penance for their sin.
 - None were to be reconciled until after the persecution was over and a policy could be agreed upon by general consultation of clergy and laity.
 - Anyone who was unwilling to wait was urged to reverse the prior compliance and suffer the consequences as a confessor or martyr.
 - Cyprian stated that he was not sure that the church had the power to forgive this sin because of Matthew 10:33 and Luke 12:9.
 - The fallen might have to do penance for the rest of their lives and appeal to Christ himself for forgiveness.
- Some of the lapsed sought and received letters from the confessors in prison that testified to their repentance and urged their reconciliation.
 - Cyprian asked the confessors to examine the lapsed carefully.
 - The giving of these letters was widely abused in Africa.

Initial Concessions

- After the intervention of the Roman clergy (its bishop was executed), Cyprian allowed the fallen who had letters from the confessors and were in danger of death to be reconciled.
 - Not all the fallen who made use of this privilege actually died.
 - The result was discrimination within the community.
- The Confessors, especially those anticipating their deaths, judged that they could help the church by promising to intercede for the fallen.
 - The fallen who had letters from martyrs demanded to be allowed back into communion.
 - A group of clergy disobeyed Cyprian and established a separate communion that relied on the letters of the martyrs.
- Cyprian insisted that no one could be saved in opposition to the church and its bishop.

The Power to Forgive and Bind Sins

- Christ had given the power to forgive and bind sins to the Apostles.
 - In Matthew 16:19, Christ gave the power to bind and loose sins to Peter as the representative of the Apostles.
 - In John 20.22-23, Christ gave the same power to all the Apostles.
- The method of giving the power showed its restrictions.
 - The Apostles all shared one power in common.
 - That power was passed from the Apostles as a group to their successors, the bishops, as a group.
 - Only the bishops who were in unity with the other successors of the Apostles had access to the power to forgive.
 - A bishop who left the college lost the power.
 - A bishop could delegate the power to presbyters or deacons of his church but they could exercise it only under his supervision.

The Exercise of the Power to Forgive

- The bishops were appointed as judges for the church on earth, to exercise the power to forgive and bind.
 - Their decisions were not subject to review by anyone on earth.
 - God, who could read the heart, would review their decisions.
 - God would reward or punish them for the way they used the power.
- Confessors might advise bishops in the exercise of the power.
- Martyrs would advise Christ as the final judgments but they had no role in the decisions of bishops. Matthew 19.28, Luke 22.28
 - Revelations 6:9-11 showed the limits of the intercessory power of martyrs.
 - Matthew 10.32-33 and Luke 12.8-9 had to be taken as a whole: reward of martyrs could not be separated from rejection of deniers.

Subsequent Decisions

- Those who confessed that they had been prepared to comply with the decree should they be compelled were advised to undertake private penance.
 - The church was concerned with actions.
 - Those who did not sacrifice but secured a certificate were allowed to do penance and be reconciled.
 - Those who had sacrificed and not publicly reversed it were allowed to do penance and promised reconciliation at the time of death.
 - By refusing to accept communion in schism without repenting, they had proven their loyalty to Christ.
 - Those who had gone into schism were judged to have denied Christ just as those who had sacrificed.
 - The schism was a second form of assault on the church by the devil.
- In anticipation of a renewed persecution, all those doing penance were later reconciled so that could resist the devil from within the church.

Reasons Offered for the Decisions

- The bishops searched the scriptures for guidance and could not reach a decision based on the evidence they found.
- A sinner could not be asked to do penance without being offered the hope of reconciliation and the prayers of the church at the judgment.
- Christians facing persecution must be offered the strength of the sacraments: They had to drink his blood to shed their own for Christ.
- The inequity of excluding those who had helped others remain in communion.
- Submission to the penitential discipline of the church was a confession of Christ working in and through the church.
- The bishops did not want penitents to suffer martyrdom (and gain heaven) without the support of the church.

Protecting the Purity of the Church

- The penitents were not allowed to take positions of leadership in the church.
 - Any who were clergy had to be removed from office.
 - To use the fallen as representatives would insult God.
- If a bishop sinned in a way that became known, he had to be removed from office so that church was not tolerating his malice or failure.
 - Toleration of an bishop known to be unfaithful would deprive the episcopal college (and thereby the church) of the power of the Holy Spirit entrusted to it by Christ.
 - The judgment seems to have been that one could become guilty of another's sin only knowingly, not if the sin was hidden.
- Judging the infidelity of bishops would prove very difficult.