

Forgive Us, as We Forgive: Augustine

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Summary

- The controversy over baptism performed outside the unity of the church or by a sinful bishop within it was a consequence of Cyprian's insistence that the gift of the Holy Spirit was restricted to the unity of the church, and within it to the college of bishops that was successor to the Apostolic office.
 - The college as a whole was successor to the Twelve Apostles as a whole.
- The alternate theories focused on the efficacy of the invocation of the name of Christ or the Trinity and on the faith or repentance of the recipient of the ritual.
- The Donatist party claimed that all other bishops had been polluted by the apostasy of Caecilian, whom they had accepted and approved as a member of their episcopal college.
 - The Donatist church alone continued as a pure witness to Christ.

Sin and Love of God

- Sin was a privation, the absence of a desire, willing, or action that ought to be present.
- What ought to be present in every creature with intelligent and voluntary life was always:
 - The love of God above everything else and of everything else in orientation toward God.
 - Love of self and neighbor as equals and both in relation to God.
 - Love of the impersonal creation in ordination to the divine and subordination to the personal.
- Love of God for God's sake was itself a gift of God.
 - An operation within the person initiated and sustained by God
 - With the voluntary cooperation of the creature.
- Every other sin follows from the failure to voluntarily maintain the love of God.

The Origin of Human Sinning

- God created the first humans and endowed them with a love of God that ordered all their loves and desires toward God.
 - Humans were created with a protection from the mortality natural to an earthly body.
 - Humans were required to maintain that love voluntarily but were incapable of increasing this love. No creature can make itself better than God made it.
- Humans failed to sustain the guiding love of God and thereby fell into a condition of loving self as the guiding good without subordination to God.
 - This disorientation was manifest in the violation of the prohibition of the tree of knowledge—they believed that God was jealous of the knowledge of good and evil.
 - Humans suffered the loss of the gift protecting them from death.
 - As a just punishment, humans suffered the loss of control over the desires and appetites that sustained emotional and bodily life.
 - Manifest in the independence of sexual desire from personal guidance and control.

Inherited Sinning

- Human life was transmitted by disordered sexual generation.
 - The love of God had been lost and was not transmitted with human nature.
 - Each person was born with a love of self that was not subject to choice.
 - Each person was born with affections, emotions, and appetites that were not properly subordinated to personal, intellectually guided choice.
 - This condition was disordered, sinful, guilty prior to any personal choice or action.
- Prior to the awakening of voluntary self-guidance, humans follow affections, emotions, and appetites responsive to bodily mortality.
 - Each person attains personal understanding and responsibility in a state of debt and disability.
 - This can be opposed but not overcome by self-love and the guidance of parents and friends.
- Only a restoration of the love of God as guiding good could restore humans to their proper condition.
 - Because mortality and disorder remain, the love of God initiates conflict within the person that is witnessed by Paul in Romans 7.

Effects of Baptism

- Forgives the guilt of all prior sins (if the recipient is repentant).
 - Does not remove the sinful desire itself that was forbidden by the Decalogue: “Thou shalt not lust.”
 - “Lust” (not limited to sexual desire) is a sin and a punishment for sin.
 - The guilt returns if the person consents to the disordered desires or acts upon them. It must then be removed by the appropriate form of penance.
- Bestows the Holy Spirit upon the sincere faithful. The Spirit restores the love of God for God’s sake.
 - That love of God opposes the disordered desires and evil habits in the person.
 - The Christian begins to make progress by cooperating with Holy Spirit.
- Serves as the foundation for forgiveness of future sins into which a Christian may fall after baptism.

Sins of Daily Living

- The disordered desires take a toll in daily living.
 - Abuse of food and drink
 - Failures in conversation and social life
 - Lapses in attention and distraction, particularly in prayer.
 - Abuse of sexual relations even with a spouse (intercourse without the intention either of procreation or protecting a spouse from infidelity). Marital fidelity made the sin minor.
- These were like drops of water that had to be pumped out of the bilge of a boat or grains of sand that could weigh it down as they were multiplied.
- It was important to repent these sins every day in saying the Lord's Prayer
- Penitential actions: prayer for forgiveness; fasting and giving away one's food; giving money to the poor. Forgiving others was required.

Sins of Conflict with the Neighbor

- More significant offenses against a neighbor, or particularly a fellow Christian that might lead to a break in relations.
 - Fraud and theft, hatred (beyond frustration).
 - Follow the procedures of Matt. 18:15-23, in which one offered and sought pardon.
 - Sometimes the offense was against the witnesses as well: presuming they would approve.
 - Backed up by the parable of the two debtor servants. Matt. 18:21-35
 - Augustine argued that the greater debtor should have already forgiven the lesser debtor before he sought forgiveness from the master to whom he was indebted.
- In the Constantinian Empire, Christian bishops were civil magistrates whose judgment of conflicts between willing parties could not be appealed.
 - Augustine reported that he worked to achieve agreement among the parties.
 - Recognized that he could not unfairly favor the poor over the wealthy.

Sins that Required Formal Penance

- Adultery, Idolatry and Murder
 - Including astrology, use of spells, use of charms for cure of illness.
- Additional sins from the Decalogue
 - Theft, robbery, usury, perjury
- Sins from Galatians 5:19-21
 - sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness
- The process could be begun by the penitent or the bishop.
 - This could be used only once in a life-time.
 - Thereafter, one must do penance for the remainder of life and make an appeal to Christ in the judgment.

Sins excused from Formal Penance

- The Roman criminal justice system was an extension of the civil torts or damages system. One person had to sue another for an injury or damage to person or property.
- A public confession of a sin could be used against a person in the imperial courts.
- Any sin that was also a crime was to be confessed to the bishop in private and repented in a way that did not call attention to the offender and offense.
 - The bishop could not disclose anything that was revealed to him in this way.
 - The exception did not apply if the crime and criminal were already notorious. Such crimes had to be confessed as openly.

Correction and Vengeance

- Those with authority or influence over a sinner should impose punishments that would correct the behavior.
 - Augustine assumed that violation of a law required punishment.
 - He regularly exhorted Christians to pre-empt the divine punishment.
 - In punishing those for whom a Christian was responsible, forgiveness was to be operative in punishment.
 - This was one of the difficulty roles of the bishops as “overseers” of the congregation.
 - They addressed the whole community with warnings and admonitions.
 - They were charged with confronting and warning sinners, individually and in private, of the danger in which they were living. This was especially used for adultery.
 - Augustine explained that he had to be careful not to further alienate a sinner and make repentance even more difficult.
- A Christian might take justified vengeance on an offender but in so doing forfeited any claim on God’s forgiveness for sins.

Call to Repentance

- Like the original call to conversion and faith, the effective call to repentance was a divine operation within the sinner.
 - In many instances, a fellow Christian functioned as an (often unknowing) minister that God used to move the sinner.
 - In some cases, however, God alone could reach the hardened sinner.
 - Augustine used Lazarus, four days dead and weighed down by the earth in his tomb as the example.
 - In all cases, Christians were to pray for the repentance of sinners, that God would move their hearts and forgive their sins.
 - Christ's prayer for his persecutors was answered by massive conversions in the days following Pentecost. (Luke 23.33; Acts 2:37-42)
 - Stephen prayer for the forgiveness of his killers was answered by the conversion of Paul. (Acts 7.60-8.1, 9.3-6)
- The penitential ritual of the church was also required.

Unforgiveable Sin

- Tertullian had judged that certain sins would not be forgiven after baptism.
 - He named primarily sins against nature, such as incest and blasphemy.
- Augustine judged that rejecting the unity of the church and the divine gifts of faith and charity was a sin that would not be forgiven because these cut a person off from the means of forgiveness.
 - One could be saved while involuntarily outside the communion of the church while adhering to that unity intentionally.
 - A bishop could not block the salvation of a faithful Christian by excommunication.

Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit

- Matthew 12:28, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”
- Romans 5:5, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”
- John 20:22-23, “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”
- 1 Peter 4:8, “Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins.”