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BAPTISM, SCRIPTURE, AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CHRISTIAN SINNER IN TERTULLIAN'S *DE PAENITENTIA* AND *DE PUDICITIA.*

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INTRODUCTION.

The contribution of the North African Church to early Christian literature and theology was second to none. Even the famous Church of Rome did not compare. There is ample evidence in the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius and Augustine of the struggles of this Church against paganism without and heresy and schism within. By far the most noteworthy ante-Nicene African writer was Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus. It was he who first coined the aphorism *Semen est sanguis Christianorum (Apologeticum)* 50.13.) Born in Carthage around A.D.155 Tertullian initially practised law at Rome. He was converted about A.D.190-95 and returned to his native city. In A.D.197 he began a career as a Christian apologist and his thirty or so extant writings are an invaluable source for many developments in this period. About A.D.207 he left the Catholic Church and joined the Montanists. He later became leader of his own group, 'the Tertullianists', who survived in Carthage into the fifth century. The year of his death is unknown but certainly occurred after A.D.220.

With the exception of his fellow African Augustine, Tertullian is the most important Latin author in the entire patristic period. He is often dubbed, 'the Father of Latin Theology', and his literary output in this realm was certainly prodigious. His contribution to the doctrines of the Trinity, the humanity of Christ, and the nature of man are particularly celebrious. However, I wish to restrict the parameters of this paper to a consideration of Tertullian's thought in relation to the problem of the Christian sinner. He clearly shifted his opinion on the question of the Church's power to forgive serious post-baptismal sin. Why did he do so and how did he do so? It is with particular reference to Tertullian's use of Scripture that I

wish in this paper to examine the evolution of his appraisal of the problem of the Christian sinner.

There are two main primary sources in which Tertullian addressed this subject;

a) *De paenitentia* (On Repentance) consists of 12 chapters and was composed in A.D.203 when Tertullian was still a member of the Catholic Church. In chapters 4-6 he deals with the necessary repentance required in any adult seeking baptism, and in chapter 7 with a 'second repentance' available to all Christians who fall into serious post-baptismal sin.

b) *De pudicitia* (On Modesty) consists of 22 chapters and is a later composition, written when Tertullian had become a Montanist. This is a rigorist and polemical work against the Catholic penetential system. According to chapter 1 Tertullian feels compelled to write because of the recent edict of an unnamed *Pontifex Maximus* in which forgiveness for sins of adultery and fornication had been proclaimed.

In exploring Tertullian's thought it will be convenient to proceed under three main headings: baptism, exomologesis, and rigorism.

1. BAPTISM.

From earliest post-apostolic times the indispensability of baptism was assumed by virtually all Christians (see for example, *Didache* 7.) The foundational scriptural text was, 'Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God', (John 3:5.) The universally accepted interpretation of this 'water' was that it referred to the water of baptism. Personal salvation was inextricably linked with personal baptism and Tertullian's *De baptismo* has the distinction of being the earliest extant patristic treatise on this sacrament. However it is in his longest work, *Adversus Marcionem*, that Tertullian indicates the four basic gifts believed to be conveyed in baptism (*Adversus Marcionem* 1.28.) These are: the remission of sins, deliverance from death, regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Although Tertullian wrote this when a Montanist, there is no reason to suppose other than that

he is here succinctly summarising the generally accepted beliefs concerning baptism at that time.

Tertullian is adamant that baptism is essential for salvation. He wrote *De baptismo* against a certain Carthaginian lady, Quintilla, who had dared to question this premise. In response to her observation that Jesus' disciples were not baptised, Tertullian points out that they were already apostles before Christ issued his declaration to *Nicodemus (De baptismo* 13.) Tertullian refused to follow an interpretation evidently current at that time explaining the disciples' baptism as having occurred when a storm on Galilee forced water into their boat (Matthew 8.21; *De baptismo* 12.) To a large extent Tertullian seems to have equated John's baptism with Christian baptism. He asserts that as the disciples had already received the former they could not therefore receive the latter.

Flowing from his interpretation of John 3.5., Tertullian believed that the Holy Spirit was actually present with baptismal candidates in the water. As an angel was believed to disturb the water at Bethsaida in the days of Christ (John 5.4.) so, he argued, an angel prepared the baptismal water for the Holy Spirit. 'Not that in the waters we receive the Holy Spirit; but in the water, under (the influence of) the angel, we are cleansed and (thus) prepared for the Holy Spirit' (*De baptismo* 6.) In several of his treatises Tertullian furnishes us with many interesting details as to how a baptism was performed at that time. Candidates were prepared by prayers, fasting and vigils (*De baptismo* 20.) They publicly renounced the devil and his angels (*De spectaculis* 4; *De idolatria* 6), before three immersions in water in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Adversus Praxean* 26.) On emerging from the water they were given milk and honey (*Adversus Marcionem* 1.1), anointed with oil (*De baptism* 7), and given the sign of the cross (*De resurrectione carnis* 8.) This anointing was a possible allusion to the Old Testament anointing of priests, as all believers are priests in Christ. The rite was completed by laying on of hands in accordance with Jacob's blessing upon Joseph's sons where Jacob crossed his arms, thereby making the shape of a cross (Genesis 48; *De baptismo* 8.)

The question of martyrdom provides an interesting addendum to Tertullian's doctrine of baptism. He referred to martyrdom as *secundum lavacrum* (*De patientia* 13.) In his mind, and that of many third-century Christians, martyrdom was clearly linked with baptism. Tertullian employed two key texts in support of this link. Firstly, Jesus had declared, 'I have a baptism to undergo' (Luke 12.50; *De baptismo* 16.) He had said this after receiving John's baptism and prior to his crucifixion. What else could Jesus have been referring to by this forthcoming baptism other than his own death? The crucifixion was of course the supreme example of martyrdom. The second key text is John 19.34 where we read that both water and blood issued from Christ's wound as he hung on the cross (*De baptismo* 16.) What else could this incident symbolise other than the 'two baptisms'? 'The blood' of this text was the martyr blood of God's Son and the 'water', which must refer to baptism, must obviously teach that martyrdom and baptism are closely linked. In subsequent patristic baptismal controversies, almost any scriptural reference to 'water' was interpreted as referring to some aspect of the sacrament of baptism.

From the tone of all that he wrote concerning baptism it is obvious that for Tertullian no heretic could, by definition, possess the Spirit. Referring to heretics and their sacrament he wrote, 'I am not bound to recognise in them a thing which is enjoined on me, because they and we have not the same God, nor one - that is, the same - Christ: and therefore their baptism is not one (with ours) either, because it is not the same'. (*De baptismo* 15.) This proved an awkward conclusion in relation to subsequent North African Church history. About A.D.200 a Carthaginian Council, comprising around seventy African bishops under the leadership of Agrippinus, confirmed the authentic North African position to be a requirement of 're-baptism' for those who had received schismatic or heretical baptism. (Of course in the eyes of the North Africans this was not actually a 're-baptism' but rather a first and only valid baptism.) Thus the seeds were sown for the later Cyprian/Stephen and Catholic/Donatist conflicts on this very issue.

2. EXOMOLOGESIS.

With hindsight, such a high understanding of the significance of baptism inevitably gave rise to problems within the Early Church, and specifically, the problem of the Christian sinner. How ought post-baptismal sin to be regarded? How should such sins be dealt with in the Church? Scripture appeared to be ambiguous on this matter. In the New Testament John writes that the sins of a Christian can be forgiven upon confession (1 John 1.9.) Later in this same letter John seems to indicate that there is a more serious class of sin, 'There is a sin that leads to death' (1 John 5.16.) Christian opinion on the subject of post-baptismal sin and how to deal with it was evidently still evolving in the early third-century. There had been a debate in the Roman congregation in the mid-second century as demonstrated in the Shepherd of Hermas. While acknowledging that those who are baptised ought to 'sin no more', Hermas holds out the offer of a once only forgiveness of sins after baptism. 'If a man should be tempted by the devil and sin, he has one repentance' (Mandate 4.3.1-6.) Such teaching permitted both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God to be held together in some tension. Neither slackness nor austerity prevailed.

The post-baptismal wound was re-opened by Tertullian with devastating consequences. His own view clearly hardened in that he came to adopt a rigorist position on this question. Initially though, in his treatise *De paenitentia*, which he composed about A.D.203, Tertullian enthusiastically supported a concept known as ἐξομολόγησις. This term (meaning literally, 'utter confession') describes one of the earliest mechanisms designed to grapple with serious Christian sin. Briefly, it involved an ongoing process of public confession of serious post-baptismal sin and the undertaking of specified disciplinary acts and self-humiliation. Confession was made publicly to bishop and congregation. Penitents were often required to wear sackcloth and ashes and were suspended from participation in the eucharist. Fasting, prayers, and almsgiving were common elements of this process which could last for days, weeks or even years depending upon the severity of the sins committed.

'Exomologesis, then, is a discipline which leads a man to prostrate and humble himself. It prescribes a way of life which, even in the matter of food and clothing, appeals to pity' (*De paenitentia* 9.) The theory behind this process was obviously that an individual could demonstrate the genuine depth of his or her repentance and thereby attract the mercy of God. Tertullian berates those who refuse to submit to this process. 'Yet most men either shun this work, as being a public exposure of themselves, or else defer it from day to day. I presume (they do so as being) more mindful of modesty than salvation; just like men who, having contracted some malady in the more private parts of the body, avoid the privity of physicians, and so perish with their own bashfulness' (*De paenitentia* 10.) Thus ἐξομολόγησις seems to have been a clumsy yet straightforward piece of ecclesiastical machinery which developed in response to the uncomfortable fact that not all Christians live a life free of sin after their baptism.

Tertullian advanced three main scriptural proofs in favour of ἐξομολόγησις. He cites the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, driven from his throne and living like an animal for seven years, whereupon renouncing his sins he was forgiven and restored to his throne. 'Long time had he (Nebuchadnezzar) offered to the Lord his repentance, working out his ἐξομολόγησις by a seven years' squalor, with his nails wildly growing after the eagles fashion, and his unkempt hair wearing the shagginess of a lion' (Daniel 4.25f. *De paenitentia* 12.) Secondly, as an example of the serious consequences which follow from refusal to submit to this process, the Pharaoh who rejected numerous opportunities to repent before God in the days of Moses and release the children of Israel, was drowned. This is a salutary lesson to us all (Exodus 14.15f. *De paenitentia* 12.) Thirdly, and somewhat less clearly, Tertullian cites Adam who was 'restored by ἐξομολόγησις to his own paradise' (Genesis 3.24; *De paenitentia* 12.) In addition to these examples, had not Christ Himself noted the sins of the Christians in Ephesus. Thyatira, Sardis. Pergamum, and Laodicea and asked each to repent? (Revelation 2-3; *De paenitentia* 8.) The principle is

clearly established as scriptural that Christian sin, even serious post-baptismal sin, can be forgiven within the Church.

Tertullian made a number of points regarding the use of 'utter confession'. It was of no benefit to those who abused it, that is to those who afterwards returned easily to their sins. It was no blank chequebook for Christian sinners but operated only where true repentance was exhibited. Tertullian is also adament that it can only be used 'once for all' (*De paenitentia* 7.) The process was not as cumbersome as it might at first seem to the modern eye. It was judged to be appropriate only for the most serious sins. Lesser sins could be forgiven by a simple act of confession which secured immediate restoration. Significantly, in *De paenitentia* Tertullian places no restriction upon the power of ἐξομολόγησις. As the sacrament of baptism secured complete cleansing from all previous sin, so this process operated as a 'safety net', enabling the Christian sinner to once again obtain complete cleansing. No post-baptismal sin was so serious as to be irremissible.

3. RIGORISM.

It soon became apparent that within the Church itself opinions still varied as to the status of serious post-baptismal sin. There was no universal agreement that a 'second repentance' was open to all. Tertullian himself demonstrates these opposing opinions. While in *De paenitentia* he sees no limit on the power of the Church to forgive all post-baptismal sin, in the later treatise, *De pudicitia*, he espoused a more rigorist line, arguing that the Church had no power to forgive certain serious sins. Two scriptural texts in particular were employed by Tertullian to establish the fact that a line must be drawn between less serious venial and more serious mortal sins. When Jesus breathed upon his disciples, thus imparting the Holy Spirit, he said; 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (John 20.23; *De pudicitia* 21.) The latter part of this text is interpreted as referring to the more serious mortal sins. Similarly, in his first letter, John distinguishes between sins which lead to death and sins which do not. (1 John 5.16; *De pudicitia* 19.) In *De*

pudicitia Tertullian states clearly that the Church possesses neither the power nor the authority to forgive mortal sins. He distinguishes between *peccatum remissibile* and *peccatum irremissible*. But what specific sins constitute mortal sins and how are they to be identified?

In its traditional form, the rigorist definition of mortal sin was threefold, (idolatry, adultery and murder), and Tertullian's *De pudicitia* is the oldest extant source to supply this threefold definition. He informs us in the first chapter of this treatise that it was composed in response to a certain *Pontifex Maximus* who had issued a recent edict declaring his willingness to pronounce forgiveness for those guilty of adultery (*Ego et moechiae et fornicationis delicta paenitentia functis dimitto.*) Tertullian, who would have accepted this edict in A.D.203 when he wrote *De paenitentia*, has now hardened his view and will not allow the Church power on earth to forgive such mortal sins. The ensuing ecclesiological debate featured two sides, laxist and rigorist. In short, Tertullian abandoned laxism and embraced rigorism.

It has often been asserted by scholars that Tertullian and other rigorists represent an older view, the assumption being that the rigorists were arguing against what they perceived to be falling Christian standards in their own generation. According to this theory, what were formerly regarded as unforgivable sins, like adultery, were now becoming more common and in consequence the Church assumed the power to pronounce forgiveness in such cases. It can equally be argued though that the opposite is the case, that in fact the rigorists were attempting to introduce new and higher standards in this realm of post-baptismal sin. In all probability there was a variety of opinions on these matters from earliest times in the Church. The writer to the Hebrews, for example, argued a rigorist line (see Hebrews 6.4-6; 10.26-31.) Not surprisingly Tertullian quotes approvingly from this epistle, which he attributed to Barnabas, as a preferable authority to that of 'the apochraphal "Shepherd" of adulterers' (*De pudicitia* 20.) For Tertullian the Montanist there is no 'second repentance' for adulterers and fornicators and Barnabas had learnt this from apostles and taught it with

apostles. It was perhaps over this very edict which spawned *De pudicitia* that Tertullian broke from the Catholic Church and became a Montanist. This subject was a live issue in other areas also. In the Roman Church, Callistus argued against Hippolytus for the *corpus permixtum* nature of the Church on the basis of two main texts; the parable of the wheat and tares where the tares represent the sinners within the Church, and Noah's Ark, an obvious type of the Church (see 1 Peter 3.20-21), which contained both clean and unclean animals. (See Matthew 13.24f.; Genesis 7.8; Hippolytus, *Refutationis omnium haeresium* 9.12.22-23.)

In seeking to advance a scriptural defense of his assertion that adultery is a mortal sin, Tertullian urged Christians to consider the Decalogue. He saw adultery as fixed by Divine appointment between the obvious mortal sins of idolatry and murder. 'Enclosed by such flanks, encircled and supported by such ribs, who shall dislocate her from the corporate mass of coherencies, from the bond of neighbour crimes, from their embrace of kindred wickedness, so as to set apart her alone for the enjoyment of repentance?' (*De pudicitia* 5.) Convincing and important as this 'scriptural argument' was to Tertullian, it is interesting to note that the Divine order he writes of is based solely upon the Septuagint! In modern translations the command to refrain from adultery follows the command to refrain from committing murder.

There are several interesting examples of Tertullian's use of Scripture in justifying his espousal of a rigorist stance. The three 'lost parables' of Luke 15 which he had previously interpreted as supporting God's willingness to forgive all post-baptismal sin (See *De paenitentia* 8) are now interpreted as referring only to forgiveness of sin at conversion. In answer to the charge that Jesus forgave all sinners including fornicators and adulterers, Tertullian argued that such biblical examples concerned Jesus alone and at no time were similar powers extended to the Church. 'This is lawful to the Lord alone', he wrote (*De pudicitia* 11.) Similarly, the 'keys of the kingdom' conferred upon Peter are interpreted as a purely personal conferment. (Matthew 16:19; *De pudicitia* 21.)

A further Tertullian example of a scriptural text being stretched to fit a theological frame is that of the case of incest in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5.1-5.) Tertullian writes that the reason for Paul's injunction that this man be 'handed over to Satan' is that in the last day the Spirit may be saved (*De pudicitia* 13.) Significantly, Tertullian interprets this as referring, not to the spirit of the man, but rather to the Spirit in the Church which must be kept free of the contamination which such serious sin incurs. He cites lesser sins in Corinth, like arrogance, which could be dealt with when Paul arrived in person. Such interpretations provided a scriptural foundation for Tertullian's rigorist position.

CONCLUSION.

Tertullian's rigorist position on post-baptismal sin, although supported by Cyprian, ultimately lost out to the laxist theories of Stephen and Augustine. The four blessings of baptism as enunciated by Tertullian were no longer tied to the precise moment of water baptism. The gift of the Spirit was now understood to be received in the laying on of hands which followed baptism. This enabled Stephen and others to argue that 're-baptisms' were unnecessary as all baptisms could be valid (yet ineffective until 'confirmed' by a Catholic bishop.) Baptisms performed by schismatics and heretics required only the imposition of Catholic hands to convey the gift of the Spirit, (which alone resided within the Catholic Church). Tertullian's rigorist concept of the pure Church, the *ecclesia spiritus per spiritalem hominem, non ecclesiae numerus episcoporum* was superseded by a broader concept of the Church as a *corpus permixtum* containing both saints and sinners. Such an outcome was arguably inevitable given the fact that so many Christians lapsed in third and fourth-century persecutions. Such events surely contributed to laxist victory over rigorism.

Tertullian remains the most important Early Church witness to the struggle for an agreed system of discipline. No more and no less than any other patristic writer, he sought to be scriptural in his teaching. He appears to have been wholly unfamiliar with the genre of continuous biblical commentary.

preferring to use batteries of individual texts as ammunition against his opponents. The most potent side affect of his use of Scripture was that virtually any argument could be portrayed as 'scriptural'. The impression is strong that texts and partial texts were more often stretched to fit theories than vice versa. Tertullian's interpretations of the parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son in *De paenitentia* 8 and *De pudicitia* 7 are diametrically opposed to each other and provide the most obvious example of Scripture being moulded to suit theory. His scriptural interpretations are invariably subservient to his theories, reflecting practical and catechetical concerns. His main objective is always practical, to edify the faithful and ensure the spiritual health of the Church.

An understanding of the sacrament of baptism and the capability to deal with the problem of the Christian sinner were crucial aspects of the emergent development of the doctrine of the Church. In North Africa a combustible mixture of rigorism, persecution, martyrdom, enthusiasm, schism and dominant personalities fuelled the forward motion of the ecclesiological engine. In the writings of Tertullian and others, more often than not, this forward motion was upon hastily laid scriptural track.

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