

The Forgiveness of Post-Baptismal Sin in Ancient Christianity

DAVID BRATTSTON

1. Introduction

This article presents, in chronological order of document, how the Christian church dealt with the possibility and means of forgiveness of post-baptismal sin from its foundation until the Decian persecution of AD 249 to June 251. Rather than being a period of innovation or fresh starts, Christian writers of this period built upon and continued the approach and attitude of the apostles and their other Christian forbears.¹

2. The First Century

Being concerned mainly with leading Jews and pagans to Christian salvation and teaching and encouraging Christians in the way of life that pleases God, the New Testament has little to say on the subject of whether a Christian who has sinned after baptism can receive a further pardon and, if so, the means by which this is effected. Indeed, Acts 8:22² indicates that in the earliest days of the church the Apostle Peter did not know if a post-baptismal sin of attempted simony could be forgiven: 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, **if possible**, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.' (My emphasis).

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul, although never mentioning the method of reconciliation, held in II Thessalonians 3:14f.,³ Galatians 6:1⁴ and I Corinthians 5:3ff.⁵, that pardon could be obtained for post-baptismal sins. While it is clear from I Corinthians 5:3–5 that sins committed after baptism can be pardoned after death, it is not apparent whether the penitent Christian would be readmitted to the church and forgiven in this life or be pardoned only after death.

For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

These three verses from I Corinthians may be the basis for the belief held by Tertullian and other Montanists that there can be no remission of grave post-baptismal sins in this life but that God might save the repentant Christian in the next. Paul's words 'the destruction of the flesh' in I Corinthians 5:5 indicate a great antiquity of the physically painful (if not harmful) penances which Origen and other third-century churchmen believed to be essential before a wayward brother could be readmitted to the Eucharist and to Christian fellowship.

By dividing sins between mortal and non-mortal and stating that the latter, but not the former, could be forgiven by the prayer of a third party, I John 5:16f.⁶ took a middle position by holding that some post-baptismal sins can be remitted, while others cannot. This may well be the first written record of the doctrine subscribed to by Tertullian, Novatian and other rigorist writers of the first three Christian centuries that apostasy, murder, and perhaps adultery can never be forgiven—at least not by the church—while less serious sins can be pardoned on earth.

At 6:4–6, the Epistle to the Hebrews⁷ flatly denies the possibility of effectual repentance from and forgiveness for apostasy and other sins committed after baptism. Moreover, at 10:26f. the author states that 'there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins' for Christians who transgressed after baptism.

The fifth chapter of the letter of James⁸ takes a different position, affirming that post-baptismal sins can be forgiven (vv. 14–16 and 19f.) by anointing with oil, prayer and confession (vv. 15f.).

The evidence of the *First Epistle of Clement*⁹ is more ambiguous. On the one hand, Chapter LVI exhorts the Corinthian congregation to 'pray for those who have fallen into any sin, that meekness and humility may be given to them', and Chapter LVII encourages the usurpers to 'submit yourselves to the presbyters and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your hearts', thus assuming the shared acceptance of effectual post-baptismal repentance. On the other hand, from Chapter I it may appear that—as under the Mosaic regime—forgiveness can be obtained only for unwitting and unintended sins. Chapter I encourages the rebels to pray and beseech God 'if ye had been guilty of any **involuntary** transgression. (My emphasis).

The method that the author of I Clement describes for manifesting repentance or obtaining forgiveness for post-baptismal sins is strongly reminiscent of the long and humiliating penances mentioned by Tertullian, Origen, and some other Christian sources of the third century. At Chapter XLVIII Clement urges the usurpers at Corinth to desist from their conduct and: 'let us fall down before the Lord, and beseech Him with tears, that he would mercifully be reconciled to us, and restore us to our former seemly and holy practice of brotherly love'.

3. The First Half of the Second Century

The Church manual called *The Didache*¹⁰ states at XI.7 that every post-baptismal sin except trying or judging a prophet who speaks under the influence of the Holy Spirit can be forgiven. As to the manner of confession of post-baptismal sin, Chapter IV.14 assumes that confession will be public, in the face of the congregation, not private confession: 'In the church thou shalt acknowledge thy transgressions'.

At Chapter III of his Epistle to the Philippians, Ignatius of Antioch shortly before AD 107 held that repentance from sins committed after baptism both is possible and reinstates the offender in the church. Chapter XI of the Epistle of Ignatius' friend Polycarp to the same congregation, written almost immediately afterwards, expresses the same beliefs. The method is not mentioned.

In *The Shepherd of Hermas*¹¹ is the first evidence of a belief, therein mentioned as widespread, that is reasserted and often accepted by Christian authors during the next century and beyond. Although *The Shepherd* teaches at Book II, Commandment 4th, Chapter III, that repentance from post-baptismal sin is possible and is also accompanied by plenary pardon from all such sins, the same chapter and the immediately preceding Chapter I state that only one such repentance is valid, with second and subsequent repentances from sins committed after this one post-baptismal repentance being void and the oft-sinning Christian remaining unforgiven in this life and forever excluded from the church militant, '[f]or the repentance of the righteous has limits.' Restricting the opportunity of repentance from post-baptismal sin still further is the pronouncement in Book I, Vision 1st, Chapter III, that this sole post-conversion repentance must be performed before a fixed date, which the text does not specify.

In Book I, Vision 3rd, Chapters V–VII, *The Shepherd* contains the earliest mention of purgatory, a place whose existence softens the fate of Christians who offended after the one repentance permitted after baptism and thus cannot obtain remission of sins on earth. The existence of purgatory, or 'Hades' as other ancient Christian writers called it, frequently recurs in pre-Decian Christian literature as the place or state after death where a Christian who has not been fully cleansed of sin on earth is purged of his post-baptismal sins through suffering in the afterlife. When such purging is complete, he or she is admitted to heaven.

Book III, Similitude 7th, of *The Shepherd* alludes to a penitential modality in accord with that described in I Clement, Tertullian and some other Christian authors of the third and fourth of centuries: 'he who repents must torture his own soul, and be exceedingly humble in his conduct, and be afflicted with many kinds of affliction.'

In the Book of Leviticus only sacrilege and the very gravest offences merited the death penalty. Much of the early chapters of Leviticus details the kinds of sacrifices which atone for stated categories of sins. There was no bar to repeatedly sinning and repenting. By contrast, the gospel would not have been good news and no Jew of the first century AD would have been converted if it denied the efficacy of post-baptismal repentance. The number of times a man could sin, repent and obtain atonement and absolution after circumcision or *bar mitzvah* under the Mosaic code being unlimited, a Jew might have viewed Christianity as a terrifying religious straightjacket if it forever excluded converts who had offended only once after initiation. Moreover, if believers were permanently excommunicated for sinning after baptism or after *Hermas'* period of extension, the Christian population would have quickly diminished to a vanishingly small number instead of growing to encompass the whole Roman world and beyond.

However, although the law of Moses imposed no limit to the number of times a repentant Israelite could obtain pardon through sacrifices in the Tabernacle or Temple, the Mosaic code contained a vital and all-important distinction between the circumstances in which atonement was available and in which it was not. Numbers 15 provides that there is no limit to the number of atonements for sins committed unwittingly, but vv. 30f. warn:

But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him.

Thus, a Jew accustomed to the regime of frequent atonement through Temple sacrifices who was considering conversion to Christianity would have reasonably expected by analogy with Judaism that first he would be forgiven an infinite number of times for sins unknowingly committed after initiation into the Christian faith, and second there would be no pardon for offences knowingly or deliberately committed after baptism. Indeed, he might well be shocked at Christianity's teachings and practices on sin and atonement if the Christian faith treated deliberate transgressions on the same footing as those committed without knowledge or intent. The distinction made by Moses may well have been the basis of the position of many pre-Decian Christian writers that while some post-baptismal sins were forgiveable, others (especially the undeniably deliberate sin of apostasy) were not.

Only one Christian author before the middle of the second century wrote in any detail on the method of obtaining post-baptismal pardon other than (or in addition to?) abject confession. This exception is the

homilist of *II Clement*;¹² who mentions a variety of acts of penance: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Almost a century later Origen included these three in a similar list of his own.

Almsgiving was an improved method of atonement for a Diaspora Jew contemplating conversion to Christianity. Except in cases where retaliation, restitution or the death penalty were mandatory, an Israelite before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple completely atoned for unintended sins, however often repeated, by making a gift of specified items to the Aaronic priests. What is the difference between such donations, called 'sacrifices', and giving alms to the less fortunate, except that under the Old Covenant the gift went to feed a small élite and the giver, while under the New it feeds people in real need? For a Jew who resided far from Jerusalem, Christianity would provide a much more convenient method of forgiveness because alms could be given in the local community while making the sacrifices prescribed by the Mosaic code entailed long-distance arrangements for presenting the gift at the Temple.

4. The Second Half of the Second Century

The relevant work of Irenaeus of Lyons is *Against Heresies*, written between AD 182 and 188. Irenaeus does not doubt that heretics can be forgiven and reconciled to the orthodox church. According to III.xxv.7 and IV.xli.4, one of his main purposes in writing was that 'they may be converted to the truth and be saved'; and in the preface to Book V: 'to reclaim the wanderers and convert them to the Church of God'. On the other hand, Irenaeus took Matthew 12:31f. literally: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an 'irremissible sin' (III.xl.9). It follows that if one type of sin is irremissible, there must be types of sins which are pardonable.

As for the method of reconciliation, at I.xiii.7 when discussing women who had embraced the libertine heresy of Marcus and had been sexually seduced by him, Irenaeus wrote that some of them publicly confessed their sins but others were ashamed to do this and, despairing of restoration to the ways of God, completely apostatized.

Clement of Alexandria¹³ expressed every possible view on the remission of sins after conversion, and thus adds nothing to our study.

In two of his works Tertullian¹⁴ treated of the possibility of pardon for post-baptismal sins and the method of obtaining it: *De Poenitentia*,¹⁵ written before his conversion to Montanism, and his Montanist *On Modesty*.¹⁶

Despite the indignities prescribed in it, *De Poenitentia* is an exhortation for Tertullian's readers to make a post-baptismal repentance. Assuming at Chapter IX that there was only one opportunity for repentance after conversion, Tertullian wrote that it was more laborious in its probation than the catechumenate 'in order that it may not be exhibited in the conscience alone, but may likewise be

carried out in some external act.' Confession of sins to God and performance of penitential exercises are required because

by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession and repentance is born; by repentance God is appeased. And thus [it] is a discipline for a man's prostration and humiliation, enjoining a demeanour calculated to move mercy. With regard also to the very dress and food, it commands the penitent to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning, to lay his spirit low in sorrows, to exchange for severe treatment the sins which he has committed; moreover, to know no food and drink but such as is plain,—not for the stomach's sake, to wit, but the soul's; for the most part, however, to feed prayers on fastings, to groan, to weep and make outcries unto the Lord your God; to bow before the feet of the presbyters, and kneel to God's dear ones; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear this deprecatory supplication before God.

and at Chapter XI Tertullian mentions that penance is to be performed 'unwashed, sordidly attired, estranged from gladness, they must spend their time in the roughness of sackcloth, and the horridness of ashes, and the sunkeness of face caused by fasting'.

5. The Third Century, to AD 250, (except Origen)

The themes of Tertullian's *On Modesty* are the orthodox church's permitting marriages or second marriages and its assertion that it could forgive the sin of adultery. As a Montanist Tertullian argued the opposing case. Even when heaping abuse on the catholic church, he conceded in Chapters XVIII, XIX, and XXI that it had authority to absolve from all but the greatest sins. He and the orthodox agreed that idolatry (which included apostasy) and murder were sins the church had no jurisdiction to forgive; Tertullian's only difference of opinion was that he wished to add adultery to the other two unpardonables.

With two or three exceptions, the orthodox church of Tertullian's day believed that post-baptismal sins could be forgiven. The following is the most complete exposition available of the catholic position. It consists of the arguments of only the orthodox church as Tertullian phrased them, and such arguments of his own that reveal the doctrine and practice of the majority.

In Chapter XIX of *On Modesty* Tertullian thus phrased the teaching of the catholic church on the difference between which post-baptismal sins could be forgiven and which could not:

there are some sins of daily committal, to which we all are liable: for who will be free from the accident of either being angry unjustly, and retaining his anger beyond sunset; or else even using manual violence; or else carelessly speaking evil; or else rashly swearing; or else forfeiting his plighted word; or else lying, from bashfulness or

'necessity?' In business, official duties, in trade, in food, in sight, in hearing, by how great temptations are we plied! So that, if there were no pardon for such sins as these, salvation would be unattainable to any. Of these, then, there will be pardon, through, the successful Suppliant of the Father, Christ. But there are, too, the contraries of these; as the graver and destructive ones, such as are incapable of pardon—murder, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy.

As for the method of reconciling a repentant Christian to the church, Chapter I of *On Modesty* states that the early church's procedure for pardoning post-baptismal sins included 'dooming them to pour forth tears barren of peace, and to regain from the Church no ampler return than the publication of disgrace.' In Chapter II Tertullian appears to state a view held in common by the orthodox and, with a few exceptions, the Montanists: 'Every sin is dischargeable either by pardon or else by penalty: by pardon as the result of chastisement, by penalty as the result of condemnation'. Also in Chapter II, when speaking of penitent Christians: 'of course they sue for mercy, when out of repentance they weep and fast, and when they offer their self-affliction to God.' In Chapter XIII he asked the orthodox:

Why, do you yourself, when introducing into the church, for the purpose of melting the brotherhood by his prayers, the repentant adulterer, lead into the midst and prostrate him, all in haircloth and ashes, a compound of disgrace and horror, before the widows, before the elders, suing for the tears of all, licking the footprints of all, clasping the knees of all? And do you, good shepherd and blessed father that you are [this is probably a reference to the catholic bishop/pastor], to bring about the desired end of the man, grace your harangue with all the allurements of mercy in your power. . . ?

It is to be remembered that here Tertullian was describing catholic practice and that the immediately preceding paragraph hereof relates the first attested detailed particulars of the Christian method of forgiving post-baptismal sins, which method is not described in even depth by earlier authors. Acts 8:22 is no exception to this vagueness, for there Peter seems uncertain as to whether remission was and whether his prescription for it was effectual: 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you'. (Emphasis added). Whatever Peter's doubts, the forgiveness extended only to the intent, not to the act of attempted simony itself.

Caius [or Gaius]¹⁷ was a leading presbyter during the pontificate of Bishop Zephyrinus of Rome.¹⁸ He eventually became a bishop himself. In his *Against the Heresy of Artemon* Caius described the procedure by which one Natalius repented of being a bishop in Artemon's heresy and became reconciled to the orthodox church:

he arose early in the morning, and threw himself, clothed with sackcloth and covered with ashes, before Zephyrinus the bishop, with great haste and many tears, rolling beneath the feet not only of the clergy, but even of the laity, and moving the pity of the compassionate Church of the merciful Christ by his weeping. And after trying many a prayer, and showing the weals left by the blows which he had received, he was at length with difficulty admitted to communion.

This description of the outward manifestation of repentance in Rome accords with Tertullian's accounts of the penitential process of the same era in north Africa.

Hippolytus¹⁹ was bishop of Portus at the mouth of the Tiber, later bishop of Rome. In Book VI Chapter XXXVI of his *The Refutation of All Heresies*, also known as the *Philosophumata*,²⁰ he referred to the practice of the Marcite heretics of baptizing their converts a second time to cleanse them of sins committed since their original baptism. Hippolytus denied the efficacy of rebaptism and also that 'persons, after they had once been baptism, could again obtain remission.' His comments incidentally show how perplexing was the problem of obtaining remission for post-conversion sins that the Marcites resorted to rebaptism.

Commodianus, a bishop in north Africa, in his *Instructions of Commodianus in Favour of Christian Discipline against the Gods of the Heathens*²¹, Chapter XLIX, prescribed:

Thou art become penitent; pray night and day; yet from thy Mother *the Church* do not far depart, and the Highest will be able to be merciful to thee. The confession of thy fault shall not be in vain. Equally in thy state of accusation learn to weep manifestly. Then, if thou hast a wound, seek herbs and a physician; and yet in thy punishments thou shalt be able to mitigate thy sufferings. For I will even confess that I alone of you am here, and that terror must be foregone. I have myself felt the destruction; and therefore I warn those who are wounded to walk more cautiously, to put thy hair and thy beard in the dust of the earth, and to be clothed in sackcloth.

Cyprian of Carthage²² mentioned the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins in two of his works written before the Decian persecution and mass Christian apostasy of AD 249 to 251. In Book III, Head/ Testimony 28, of his *Three Books of Testimonies against the Jews*²³ he asserted that 'remission cannot in the Church be granted unto him who has sinned against God.' And he cites as proof texts Matthew 12:32 and Mark 3:28f. (which refer to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit) and I Samuel 2:25 ('If a man offend by sinning against a man, they shall pray the Lord for him; but if a man sin against God, who shall pray for him?').

At § 2 of his *On the Dress of Virgins*²⁴ Cyprian states that Jesus Christ more severely threatens those who have sinned after baptism

than the unconverted 'because it is doubtless a smaller fault to have sinned before, while as yet you had not known God's discipline; but **there is no further pardon for sinning after you have begun to know God.**' (My emphasis).

Ironically, a few years later when the church divided over the issue of whether Christians who had lapsed during the persecution could be absolved and re-admitted to Holy Communion, Cyprian was one of the main champions of the lenient party.

6. Origen Adamantius²⁵

Although Origen's writings clearly fit within the third century, he is here given a section of his own because of the sheer mass of his writings, not all of which have yet been published in modern languages. Thus, he constitutes his own open-ended category. In keeping with the methodology of the whole of the present article, his relevant works will be considered in chronological order:

*Sermons on St. Luke*²⁶: Pardon of post-baptismal sins is touched upon twice in these homilies. In Sermon XXXV he preached on purgatory, where sins unremitted in this life are removed by pain in the next. Origen also opined that at least some post-conversion sins can be forgiven on earth, but a human intermediary, like the present-day Roman Catholic priest, is indispensable to the process. At Sermon XVIII section 8 he informed his audience that if Christians sin, they are under a duty to make their faults known to God. If we make this confession, uncovering our sins both to God and to those who are able to cure our spiritual wounds and our faults, God will eradicate our sins. From XVIII.8 it appears Origen believed that confession of sins to God alone (*i.e.* without a human witness) is insufficient. Confession must be made to one or more other Christians who have the power to remit sins.

In *On Prayer*,²⁷ Chapter XXVIII section 8 Origen mentioned a twofold division in the power to pardon: we all have authority to forgive sins against ourselves. For other sins, the person inspired by Christ in the way apostles were and who can be known by his fruits as someone who has received the Holy Spirit has authority to forgive whatever God forgives. However, he cannot forgive and retain sins at will but is a mere spokesman for God, like the prophets, who spoke not their own words but the Lord's. In the next section of Chapter XXVIII, Origen explained the limitations on the power of some human beings to forgive sins against a third party. Using the Aaronic priesthood as an example, Origen stated that under the law of Moses priests were forbidden to offer a sacrifice to atone for adultery, intentional murder or similarly grave offence. The Aaronic priests had been authorized to make atonement only for specified inadvertent transgressions. He opines that the situation is the same in Christianity: when Jesus bestowed the pardoning power in John 20:22f., He did not grant an

unrestricted licence; rather, the apostles and their successors are priests under Christ as high priest and have been given knowledge by the Holy Spirit so that, like their Aaronic forebears, they know for which transgressions sacrifices are to be offered and for which sins it is wrong to sacrifice. Thus, the apostles (and, by implication, their successors) cannot be faulted for retaining some sins or for not pardoning them all.

At Section 10 of Chapter XXVIII of *On Prayer*, Origen condemned Christians who assert that they possess powers exceeding those of the orthodox clergy, boasting that through their prayers they can loose from idolatry, fornication and adultery. Origen denied that anyone on earth had such authority, and to this effect quoted I John 5:16:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is a sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that.

In Sermon XV, Section 3, of *Sermons on Leviticus*²⁸ Origen took a middle ground between the idea that repeated remission of post-baptismal sins can be obtained and the idea that only repentance is effectual, saying that reparation is always available for a post-conversion offence which is not a mortal sin, nor a blasphemy against the Faith, but merely a sin by word or deed, one of the ordinary lapses to which we are often exposed. On the other hand, Origen continued, only one single repentance is allowed for grave offences. At II.4 he set out six methods of cleansing from non-mortal sins: martyrdom, almsgiving, forgiving the sins of another Christian, leading a wayward brother back to God, abundance of love, penitence. Except for martyrdom, penitence is the most arduous and gruelling: like other early Christian authors, Origen maintained that it entailed constant weeping and consulting an appropriate official of the church in order to make confession and obtain a remedy. In an exegesis of I Corinthians 5:5 at XIV.4, Origen mentioned that this method involved affliction of the body called 'destruction of the flesh'.

At Book III Chapter LI of *Against Celsus*²⁹ Origen further sets out the method of purification from post-baptismal sins by suffering on earth:

Christians lament as dead those who have been vanquished by licentiousness or any other sin, because they are lost and dead to God, and as being risen from the dead (if they manifest a becoming change) they receive them afterwards, at some future time, after a greater interval than in the case of those who were admitted at first.

Or, at Book VI Chapter XLIV, in purgatory after death:

For it became God, who knows how to turn to proper account even those who in their wickedness have apostatized from Him, to place wickedness of this sort in some part of the universe, and to appoint a training-school of virtue, wherein those must exercise themselves who would desire to recover in a 'lawful manner' the possession which they had lost; in order that being tested, like gold in the fire, by the wickedness of these, and having exerted themselves to the utmost to prevent anything injuring their rational nature, they may appear deserving of an ascent to divine things.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*³⁰ Origen in large measure summarizes the majority of the foregoing authors: 'Not all men's sin, however, is taken away by the lamb of God, not the sin of those who do not grieve and suffer affliction until it is taken away'.

7. Conclusion

Despite differences in the judgments expressed during the first two centuries of the church's history by different Christian authors (and in some cases by the same author), the reservations of some writers as to whether both mortal as well as minor sins can be pardoned, and other indications that ancient Christianity was not completely of one mind as to whether and how post-conversion offences can be remitted, the majority consensus within the orthodox church as to the method of administering such forgiveness was that it was necessary for the repentant Christian to perform very unpleasant acts of penitence and to do so publicly in the presence of a properly-authorized official of the church. In addition, a substantial body (if not a large majority) of early Christians believed that minor post-baptismal sins could be forgiven, but not grave ones like murder and apostasy. Another sizeable school of pre-Decian Christian thought held that although due repentance could remit offences committed after baptism, such repentance was available only once: after the blotting out of all offences in baptism and the single post-baptismal cleansing, there remained no further opportunity of forgiveness in this life. Nobody suggested that remission of post-conversion sins could be obtained by faith alone.

If the above appears inconsistent with the concept of God as kind and merciful, two things should be borne in mind. First, God loves victims as well as sinners. The lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that Christians should love the less fortunate, just as the Samaritan loved the Jew who was assaulted, robbed and left for dead; nobody has ever maintained that the purpose of this parable is to teach how much God loved the robbers who victimized the Jew. Second, the justice systems prevailing in the United States and in the British Commonwealth of Nations would be outraged if free pardon were habitually extended to even occasional wrongdoers on the basis of no more than faith alone or confession of guilt or resolution to do

better in the future. In such countries, a plea of guilty is the beginning, not the conclusion, of punishment. To satisfy the demands of justice, especially to victims, there must be restitution, reparation, and—in order to deter both the offender himself and others who are tempted to commit the same offence—a meaningful punishment. The law provides that trials, pleas of guilty, and the pronouncement of punishment always be public. If Christianity granted pardon for theft after baptism on the basis of faith alone or confession of guilt or resolution to do better in the future and if the Christian thief were not, as a penance, obliged to restore the stolen property to his victim, then secular justice would be greater than the divine and God would love sinners more than victims, with the consequence that the reputation of Christian ethics would become odious.

8. Compatibility with the Doctrine of Salvation by Faith

The foregoing does not contradict the original doctrine of justification by faith alone, because in early Christianity faith as the means of salvation applied only to Jews and pagans who came to Christ for the first time, not to Christians who sinned after baptism.

In the New Testament the teaching of salvation by faith is confined to four Pauline letters, the gospel of John³¹ and the Lukan Acts. Even the Acts was written by a close co-worker and companion of the Apostle Paul. Moreover, references to justification by faith alone are disproportionately concentrated in Galatians, Romans³² and Acts. If the letter of James be canonical, one New Testament book actually denies that a person is saved by faith.

Galatians 2:15f. states: 'We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, because by works of the law shall no one be justified.' And Galatians 3:22: '... the Scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.' Both of these excerpts are part of a polemic against the Mosaic code and against those who asserted that salvation comes by obeying the law of Moses. For this reason, the apostle does not address the question of post-baptismal sin.

Paul's Letter to the Romans contains perhaps the longest argument for justification by faith before the Reformation. The relevant passages are 1:16f., 3:21–5:1 and 10:4.

Romans 1:16f.:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'³³

This panegyric is ambiguous as to whether faith remits post-baptismal as well as pre-baptismal sin.

Like the above quotations, Romans 3:21–5:1 and 10:4 clearly teach justification by faith alone, but in both epistles the contrast is between faith and the Torah and is not concerned with the issue of whether faith saves equally from pre- and post-baptismal sins. The conclusion of the discourse in Romans 3:21–5:1, found at 5:2–5, speaks of salvation as a past event, not the continuing process one would expect to find if faith alone saved from trespasses committed after baptism.

The fourth chapter of Romans is devoted to a discussion of Abraham, stressing that he was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised. Verse 11: 'He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.' Upon conversion to Christianity, a person receives baptism as a sign, seal or completion of the justification he had by faith before being initiated into the Christian religion. Circumcision and baptism are thus outward manifestations of saving faith, the first of the faith of Abraham, the other of the unbaptized convert to Christianity. Assuming that at least some post-baptismal sins can be forgiven, what is the manifestation, sign or seal of the justifying faith of a repentant Christian who sinned after conversion? This question applies equally to all the quotations from Galatians and Romans.

Philippians 3:8–11³⁴ give the impression that justifying faith was a unique event in Paul's life and that, at the time of writing, he was fearful lest by a post-baptismal sin he irretrievably lose his salvation:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith; that I may know his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain to the resurrection of the dead.

Ephesians 2:8³⁵ states: 'by grace you have been saved through faith'. Here the author employs the past tense 'have been saved', not a present tense such as 'are being saved'. If faith without any accompaniment remits post-baptismal sin, a reader would expect the present progressive tense, or at least some form of present tense of the verb.

While an epistle or gospel reflects the thought of only one author, editor or circle within the primitive Christian church, the Lukan Acts portrays a little wider view of early Christianity because it reports the actions and sermons of a number of apostles and their colleagues. Nevertheless, we must exercise caution with it and remember that it

was composed by a close colleague and junior associate of Paul and seldom mentions the other apostles after he takes centre stage.

In the Lukan Acts are four passages from which arguments are drawn to support the position that the apostolic church believed that faith justifies from post-baptismal sin, but when these quotations are closely examined, and the audience to which each was addressed is considered, it appears that these four say no more than that faith brings salvation to the unconverted who had never been baptized, to people who had never been in a position to have committed a post-baptismal transgression. Except for 8:22 to 24, the contents of the Lukan Acts do not extend to Christians who sinned after baptism.

Acts 8:22 reports part of Peter's rebuke of Simon Magus for offering money to buy the power to confer the Holy Spirit: 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.' Note the words 'if possible', which indicate that not even Peter knew with certainty whether post-baptismal sin could be remitted, at least by prayer.

All the other passages in Acts referring to salvation by faith alone are directed to the unconverted:

1. 10:43, where 'him' and 'his' refers to Christ: 'every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name'. Peter addressed these words to Cornelius, a pagan who was about to be converted. The Scriptures tell us nothing about his salvation or behaviour after his baptism.

2. 13:38f., where 'this man' and 'him' are references to Jesus Christ:

through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

This is part of a homily by Paul to a Jewish audience in a synagogue, that is to the unbaptized, and was not the sort of sermon in which the issue of sin after initiation into the Christian religion would arise.

3. 15:8f. is part of Peter's speech during the debates at the Council of Jerusalem:

God who knows the heart bore witness to [the Gentiles], giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between them and us, but cleansed their hearts by faith.

Peter's constant use of the past tense, particularly in the clause 'cleansed . . . by faith' indicates that he is referring to a past event (conversion) rather than to an ongoing process. He is saying that the Gentiles and the apostles were justified by faith at a point in the past without going further to say that their hearts were still being cleansed from sin by faith.

4. 16:31: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and

your household.' As in the case of Cornelius, the addressee was an unbaptized heathen. He was a Philippian jailer who did not know even the rudiments of Christianity and, because he was initiated into the Christian faith only later in Chapter 16, could not have committed a post-baptismal sin before Paul uttered these words.

John 3:16 is the famous 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' As with the Lukan Acts, we must consider to whom the discourse was addressed. In John 3 the sole hearer was a Pharisee not yet converted to Christianity and therefore not the sort of person with whom the consequences of sin after conversion would be a matter for discussion.

Although at least three authors of New Testament books leave no doubt that justification by faith alone was a tenet of Christianity from the beginning, none state whether faith redeemed a Christian who sinned after baptism. The only possible exception is I John 1:8f., which assumes that his readers are already Christians: 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' Dating from about the same period as John's gospel, I John does not specify to whom confession is to be made, of what it consists, or what manifestation of saving faith is required. As in the preceding part of this study, we must turn for the answers to these questions to the earliest Christian authors who were familiar with the unwritten traditions to which I Corinthians 11:2 and II Thessalonians 3:6 refer, and whom the Holy Spirit guided as part of the ancient Church.

James 2:24 flatly asserts: 'a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.' On the other hand, it is clear from I Clement XXXI (which was written in approximately the same era as the Epistle of James) that the doctrine of justification by faith alone was very much alive at the end of the first Christian century:

And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or by understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men.

Although the mixture of past and present tenses of 'to justify' renders the exact meaning unclear, the more probable exegesis of this passage is that both pre- and post-baptismal sinners are saved by faith. The faith which remits the sins of a pagan or Jew is perfected, signified or exhibited in baptism. The issue now becomes how the faith which remits the sins of a Christian who trespasses after baptism is perfected, signified or manifested.

It is clear from 'faith towards God justifies a man' at Book IV,

Chapter V, verse 5, of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* that salvation by faith alone was accepted doctrine in the AD 180s. However, it is very unclear from Book I, Chapter XXV, verse 5, of this work and from Chapter XXXII of Tertullian's *Against the Valentiniens*³⁶ whether the authors are quoting Gnostic arguments in order to refute them or in order to show a ground of agreement so that they may be more easily won to orthodoxy. A worse confusion as to ultimate sources arises in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta ex Theodoto*.³⁷

Against Heresies Book I, Chapter XXV, verse 5, states: 'We are saved, indeed, by means of faith and love' while *Against the Valentiniens* holds that all things die, including the human soul, 'except when it has found salvation by faith.' The questions of whether faith can remit post-baptismal as well as pre-baptismal sin and, if so, whether the faith which saves from offences committed after baptism must be manifested differently from pre-baptismal faith and must be accompanied by external acts, are answered by Tertullian's other works on the subject and by Irenaeus' assumption at *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter XIII, vv. 5 and 7 that public confession is a prerequisite to the remission of sins committed after baptism. In reference to a Christian woman who had committed adultery, verse 5 narrates that 'when, with no small difficulty, the brethren had converted her, she spent her whole time in the exercise of public confession; weeping over and lamenting the defilement which she had received from this magician.' I.xiii.7 says that when many baptized women had fallen into fornication, 'some of them, indeed, make a public confession of their sins; but others of them are ashamed to do this, and in a tacit kind of way, despairing of attaining to the life of God, have, some of them, apostatized altogether.'

The Instructions of Commodianus against the Gods of the Heathens teaches justification by faith but in a manner ambiguous as to whether salvation is granted only to converts or to the sinning baptized as well (Chapter XXIV): 'they who believe in Christ shall be led into a good place [after death], and those to whom that delight is given are caressed; but to you who are of a double mind, against you is punishment without the body.' At Chapter XXV: 'For it is needful only to believe in Him who was dead, to be able to rise again to live for all time'.

By prescribing long arduous penances for repentant Christians, Chapter XLIX resolves this ambiguity in favour of the proposition that only souls coming to Christ for the first time—not Christians who sinned after baptism—are justified by faith with nothing more.³⁸

Origen's *Sermons on Leviticus* create a similar situation. On one hand, Sermon IX.5 employs the case of the thief on the cross³⁹ as an example that whoever believes and confesses his faith will enter heaven, while Sermons II.4, VIII.10f., XI.2, XII.3, XIV.4 and XV.2 state at length that post-baptismal sin is remitted only through

outward acts, such as almsgiving, confession, and afflicting the body—which Origen would hardly have held to be necessary if faith *simpliciter* sufficed.⁴⁰

From the foregoing it appears that before AD 250 the majority of the Church of Christ believed and taught that the faith which justifies a repentant Christian was normatively (if not always) demonstrated through penances and only through penances in the same way that the faith which justifies a pagan or Jew was normatively (if not always) manifested through baptism. There are two apt summaries of the attitude of the section of the Church of this period which believed in the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins: 1. Philippians 2:12: ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’, and, 2. altering James 2:18 to read ‘Show me your justifying faith apart from your penitential works, and I by my penitential works will show you my justifying faith.’

DAVID BRATTSTON is a Barrister of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia.

NOTES

- 1 The Decian persecution is the *terminus* of the present study because it created the first widespread apostasy in Christian history and the consequent problem for the church on whether and how to restore large numbers of repentant apostates to full Christian life. The end of the persecution initiated a more liberal method of pardoning post-baptismal sins in one part of the church, and also a schism between the new leniency and the old rigour. The Decian persecution thus marks the end of the earliest age in the history of Christian penitence.
- 2 Written during the last third of the first century AD.
- 3 Written early AD 50s.
- 4 Written c. AD 55.
- 5 Written c. AD 55.
- 6 Written toward the end of the first century AD.
- 7 Written before AD 70.
- 8 Written in the late first century AD.
- 9 Written around AD 97.
- 10 Compiled in the last third of the first century AD or the first third of the second.
- 11 Both *Hermas* and *II Clement* were written in the middle of the second century AD.
- 12 Both *Hermas* and *II Clement* were written in the middle of the second century AD.
- 13 C. AD 153 to c. AD 217.
- 14 C. AD 150 to 220.
- 15 Written c. AD 200.
- 16 Written c. AD 222.
- 17 C. AD 160 to c. 217.
- 18 198 to 217 AD.
- 19 C. AD 170 to 235.
- 20 Written between AD 222 and 235.
- 21 AD 240.
- 22 C. AD 200 to 258.
- 23 Written before AD 246 and 248.
- 24 Written AD 248.
- 25 AD 185 to 254.
- 26 Written AD 233–234.

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- 27 Written before AD 235.
- 28 Written sometime between AD 239 and 242.
- 29 First half of third century AD.
- 30 Written in the second quarter of the third century AD.
- 31 Written at the close of the 1st century AD.
- 32 Written between AD 54 and 58.
- 33 The quotation is from Habakkuk 2.4.
- 34 Written sometime between AD 61 and 63.
- 35 Written in the early AD 60s.
- 36 Written after AD 207, that is during Tertullian's Montanist period.
- 37 See the 'premier aperçu' of the 'Introduction' of *Extraits de Théodote; texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes de François Sagnard* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970).
- 38 See the quotation from Chapter XLIX in '5. The Third Century', above, p. 339.
- 39 Actually, a robber. Luke 23:32 and 39–43.
- 40 See the summaries of *Sermons on Leviticus* II.4 and XIV.4 in '6. Origen Adamantius', above, p. 341.