



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O Lord, forgive what I have been, sanctify what I am, and order what I shall be.

Teaching on Prayer in the Early Church: Expositions of the Lord's Prayer

As we mentioned last week, the Lord's Prayer had a special role in the early Church and appears in a variety of contexts in the second and third centuries A.D.

- It was recited during the three daily times of prayer according to *Didache* 8.3.
- It was used as a model prayer of divine origin, the exposition of which could provide instruction on prayer to those preparing for baptism or recently baptized.

It is with this last function that we are primarily concerned in today's lecture.

Issues addressed in early Christian expositions of the Lord's Prayer:

- Structure of the prayer
 - How to divide up the prayer into primary sections (e.g., two halves)?
 - How many separate petitions should be identified?
 - Seven? Or six, as commonly in the Greek fathers, who tended to treat "Lead us not into temptation" and "Deliver us from (the) evil (one)" as a single petition.
 - Should "Let your kingdom come" and "Let your will be done" be treated as essentially similar in meaning (with the latter being an explanation of what the former means)?
- Content of the Prayer
 - For whom is the Lord's Prayer intended (e.g. who is the "us" mentioned in the prayer and who is the "our" mentioned in the "Our Father")
 - What is the scope or intended referent of each of the various petitions (e.g. Father as Creator of all or as redeemer through Christ; "evil" or "Evil One")?
 - What is the intended time reference of the petitions (e.g. hallowing of the name, the coming of the kingdom, the giving of the bread)?
 - How does one deal with the remarkable claims made in the prayer concerning the relation of divine action to sin and temptation ("forgive...as we forgive..."; "lead us not into temptation")?
 - How should the unique terminology used in the Lord's prayer be interpreted (e.g. "*epiousios* bread")

Early North African Christianity

North Africa was, by comparison with Italy and Gaul (southern France) rather a wild, backward area in which peasants lived in tightly knit clannish groups with a sense of independence from Roman central authority and periodic displays of cultural resistance.

Persecution of Christians in North Africa was particularly severe. In the mid-third century persecution under Diocletian, for example, the proconsul of Africa, Anullinus, went beyond the letter of the edict to go after not only the clergy but also the laity. A certain demonization of the Roman central authorities and a veneration of the tombs of the local martyrs provided the basis for local Christian resistance to imperial persecution throughout the third century (in which Tertullian and Cyprian both lived).

Authors of Early Christian Expositions of the Lord's Prayer in Latin

Tertullian

Tertullian's Life

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, a native of Carthage in Roman North Africa (on the Mediterranean coast near modern Tunis [Tunisia]) was born c. 155 A.D. His parents were pagans and his father was a centurion in the proconsular cohort, which meant that he was a man of some standing in the community. Like most of the North African Latin-speaking élite, he was also fluent in Greek (compare Perpetua; Tertullian later wrote certain works in Greek). He had trained in law, apparently for a time functioning as an advocate at Rome, and his writing shows a mastery of the formal techniques of argument and persuasion. After his conversion c. 193, he served the Christian community at Carthage.

Precisely *how* he served the community is an open question. Jerome (*De vir. ill.* 53) seems to imagine that he was a priest, but any clear references to this are lacking in Tertullian's works. In several recent articles, Stewart-Sykes had argued that he was a *senior*, i.e. a kind of lay elder which seems to have significant authority in the earliest stages of the North African church (particularly over the management of the business of the church, possibly also over the testing and adjudication of prophecy after the service and the readmission of penitents) before it was displaced by the professionalization of the priesthood.

The origin and nature of this office of lay eldership is debated.

- It has been argued that it was a continuation of a practice found in the Jewish synagogue (the *z'qenim*), a theory canvassed already in the early eighteenth century in Campegius Vitringa's *De synagoge vetere*.
- Recent work (see esp. Stewart-Sykes) suggests that it emerged out of the village eldership found in the conservative North African society which remained close to its rural roots.

Tertullian's Works

Most of Tertullian's literary work seems to have been produced between 195 and 220 and includes both

- apologetic works (defense of orthodox Christianity over against the dominant paganism) and
- polemical treatises on controversial matters (against Jewish and heretical views which opposed and provided an alternative to orthodox Christianity within the North African milieu: *Adversus Judaeos*, *De prescriptione haereticorum*, *Adversus Marcionem*, *Adversus Hermogenem*, *Adversus Valentinianos*).

That many of Tertullian's extant works fall into these categories is probably to be accounted for by the severity of the persecutions experienced in North Africa, where the local authorities sometimes exceeded their explicit mandate in their eagerness to eradicate the Christian

movement. Robust and regular measures were therefore needed to defend the faith and to protect the endangered community from further schism.

- *Veritas non erubescit, nisi solummodo abscondi*=roughly, “Truth has no need to blush for shame, unless it be concealed.”) God is (and brings) the Truth whose coming puts the demons and corrupt powers of this world to flight.

Tertullian plays a very significant role in the development of ecclesiastical Latin of the early Christian period, perhaps second only to the Latin translation of the Bible. He introduces a number of words which become standard in discussing

- the nature of God as Trinity,
- the character and powers of the human soul and
- the significance of baptism.

(Also wrote some important early works which dealt with the nature of Christian marriage and the roles of women, see esp. his *Ad uxorem* [To His Wife], selections in Quatsten I, 303-304.) Indeed, Tertullian’s influence on Latin-speaking theology is such that it can be compared only with Augustine’s influence upon the writers of the Middle Ages. His reputation has sometimes been assailed because of his association with the New Prophecy (Montanism), a prophetic renewal movement of rural origin, which emphasized that spiritual leadership belonged to those whose speaking and actions were informed by the Spirit and took a strict position against second marriage and advocated a more demanding program of fasting.

Tertullian’s Treatise On Prayer

Tertullian’s *On Prayer* (perhaps 198-200??) is a practical treatise on the exterior and interior discipline necessary in prayer. Besides the exposition of the Lord’s Prayer in chapter 2-9 (which those baptized are to repeat on coming out of the water; see *De baptismo* 20), there are also some interesting incidental practical remarks:

Reconciliation to Others in the Community as a Prerequisite to Prayer

- The necessity of reconciliation with others and freedom from anger before one approaches God in prayer (chs. 10-12; cf. 18)
 - No one should abstain from the kiss of peace, not even those fasting, since it is the seal of prayer (ch. 19). (An exception is made for Good Friday as a fast obligatory for all.) I am not clear about what rite is under discussion.
 - Fasting should not prevent one from receiving Holy Communion. Those fasting may receive the elements and take them home, partaking when they break their fast (ch. 19).
 - Tertullian appears to hold that fasts were held on Wednesday and Friday (*On Fasting* 2.14; fasting 2 days a week was originally a Jewish custom according to the *Didache*, though the early Christians change the days of the week and the rationale for this practice), with the fast being broken at the ninth hour, when the main meal was taken.
 - Presumably Christians held an agape meal at the conclusion of the fast, but those sympathetic to the New Prophecy thought the time of fasting should be extended (*On Fasting* 10), causing conflict. (This is all speculative, since the passage and the practices it presupposes are far from clear.)

Posture and Attitude in Prayer

- Prayer described as a spiritual sacrifice—its power and efficacy (chs. 28-29).
- Prayer and worship presuppose standing with raised hands and a subdued voice (chs. 17), showing the appropriate modesty and humility in addressing God.
 - Prayer requires purity of heart, not just the washing of the hands (chs. 13-14; note that Tertullian may be offering a rationale for the raising of hands in prayer similar to that which we observed in John Chrysostom in last week's lecture)
- Kneeling appropriate on fast days and morning prayer, but not on Easter and Pentecost (ch. 23).
- Against irreverent practices in public prayer (chs. 15-16):
 - taking off the cloak during the worship service
 - sitting when prayers are ended
- The veiling of virgins (not just married women) appropriate within the church (chs. 20-22).
 - “Virgins” is often used in early Christian literature of unmarried women who before the church have vowed themselves to God and therefore don't marry but engage in extended prayer—a distinct order in the church, they sometimes sat in a particular place near the front of the church; Tertullian, however, seems to want to extend this toward other unmarried women.

Place and Times of Prayer

- Every place is appropriate for the offering of worship, as required by circumstances (ch. 24).
- While no special time for prayer is explicitly required, prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hours (i.e. 9 AM, noon, 3 PM) are recommended (ch. 25).
 - The “statutory prayers” mentioned there are possibly corporate meetings for instruction and reception of the Eucharist in the morning and the agape-meal in the evening, but this is speculative due to the vagueness of the text.
- Prayers should be offered in receiving or sending off a guest. Supplications may reasonably be ended with the Alleluia or a responsory psalm (chs. 26-27).

Tertullian's exposition of the Lord's Prayer:

- The Lord's Prayer=a new form of prayer introduced together with the new covenant; faith as trust is required for prayer (ch. 1)
- “Father” may be prayed only by believers and such prayer includes within it the Son and the Church as the mother of all believers, for they are united with the Father and through them the name of the Father is revealed (ch. 2).
- “Hallowed”= “glorified,” not only in believers but in all people (ch. 3).
- Inversion of “kingdom” and “will” clauses; “heaven” and “earth” indicated ourselves (comprehensive of all people) (ch. 4)
- “Kingdom come” among ourselves through the consummation of this age (eschatological interpretation of Kingdom) (ch. 5)
- “Bread”= either earthly needs or, better, Christ as the bread which nourishes the believer's life (ch. 6)

- “Pardon us our debts” shows that pardon is possible and our penitence acceptable to God (ch. 7).
- “Lead us not into temptation”= “Do not allow us to be led by the one that tempts” (i.e. the Evil One, Satan), for God tempts no one. It is possible to be preserved by God from Satan even in the midst of persecution (ch. 8).
- Divisions of prayer into discrete petitions, each with a particular goal in view, is briefly discussed (ch. 9)

Cyprian

Little is known of Cyprian’s life prior to his conversion except that he came from an affluent family belonging to the nobility that had vast land holdings. Finding his existence purposeless and disgusted by the corruption within government, he progressed toward conversion through his friendship with Caecilius, an elderly presbyter. During his brief catechumenate he divested himself of much of his land-holdings for the benefit of the poor and not long after his baptism was ordained a presbyter and then, within two years of his conversion, was elected bishop (by popular vote; not without some opposition from certain presbyters, esp. a certain Novatus) and ordained. At the outbreak of the Decian persecution in 249, Cyprian went into hiding so that he could continue the administration of his diocese without interference.

The persecution took an unexpectedly heavy toll on the church. Not only had many presbyters been put to death and copies of the Scriptures seized, but a significant number of the laity had conformed to the government’s requirement to offer sacrifice, either by actually sacrificing (which the early Christians regarded as apostasy) or by purchasing a bogus certificate saying that one had sacrificed (still a big problem but not as bad as actually sacrificing).

How was one to reconcile the lapsed to the church? (It is worth thinking here about what options were available to the church and also what you yourself might have done had you been the pastor of such a church.) North Africa was generally known for its hard-nosed approach to church discipline but Carthage, having more affluent church members, tended to take a softer stance. Those who suffered in the persecution for refusing to sacrifice but did not die (“confessors,” as opposed to “martyrs”) now assumed a special place within the community and were believed, like the martyrs to have a special relation to God, a special authority, and to be able to offer efficacious prayers that would find favor in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:18), so that what was bound on earth would also be bound in heaven (Mt. 18:18). Some of those who had lapsed and sacrificed had received letters from confessors, on the basis of which they might be readmitted to communion with the church. Cyprian was disinclined to do this but did not want to openly challenge the confessors to avoid creating a rift in the church. He waited until a council could be convened in 251, which allowed persons who had sacrificed (apostasized) and were penitent to be readmitted only when they were in danger of death, while those who had purchased a certificate but not sacrificed and had been performing penance could be readmitted to the communion of the church. The rigorist minority in the church rejected the council’s decision to readmit the latter and ordained another bishop of Carthage as a rival to Cyprian; this was the beginning of the Donatist schism (which continued to divide the church in North Africa until Augustine’s time).

The struggle between the rigorists and the laxists over the restoration of the lapsed also created one further controversy over the question of whether the lapsed needed to be rebaptized. What should be done when persons who belonged to one of the schismatic (rigorist) groups came back to the Catholic (=laxist) church? Should they be rebaptized or not?

- The practice at Rome was to accept any baptism made in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even if performed by some less savory group outside the Catholic church, performing a simple laying on of hands to reconcile the returning penitent to the Catholic church.
- Cyprian rejected this practice, citing the decrees of an earlier African council. Cyprian, following a train of thought that seems to have been influential in North Africa, argued that baptisms performed outside the Catholic church were invalid. *Baptism is intended to extend the forgiveness of sins through the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit is given for this purpose only to the one Church and not to those who depart from it and break communion with it. Sectarian and heretical groups are therefore trying to offer something which they are not qualified or authorized to offer, since they have broken away from the Church and are no longer part of it.*
 - Thus, Cyprian asserted (*De unitate* 6), “One cannot have God as a Father without having the church as a mother” (*habere non potest deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem*).
 - Similarly, in *Ep.* 55.24, Cyprian comments, “he is not a Christian who is not in Christ’s Church” (*christianus non est qui in Christi ecclesia non est*).
 - Since the remission of sins is promised only to those who are part of Christ’s Church, “whoever separates himself from the Church and attaches himself to an adulteress, separates himself from the promises of the Church, nor will he who leaves the Church attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger, he is unholy, he is an enemy (*De unitate* 6).
 - “There is no salvation outside the Church” (*salus extra ecclesiam non est*), Cyprian concludes (*Ep.* 73,21); the Church is like the ark of Noah, outside of which no one was saved (*De unitate* 6).
- This theological difference with the Roman Church could not be satisfactorily resolved before Cyprian was exiled and then returned to Carthage and martyred in 258.

The need to recognize and preserve the unity of the church is a theme that Cyprian reiterates a number of times in his treatise on the Lord’s Prayer. See especially ch. 8 and also the excerpts from chs. 24 and 30 on p. 21.

Introduction (1-6):

- In place of
 - Tertullian’s situating of the Lord’s Prayer within the context of a sharp division between the covenants (cf. his anti-Jewish polemic),
 - Cyprian associates the giving of the prayer with the coming of the Son as divine Truth (ch. 1-3; cf. ch. 2: “He who brought us to life taught us also to pray... What prayer could be truer in the presence of the Father than that which was conveyed by the Son, who is truth, from his own mouth?”; ch. 3: “When we make our prayer, let the Father recognize the words of his own Son.”
- Reverence in prayer discussed in a way not very different from Tertullian *On Prayer* 17 (cf. Cyprian, ch. 4: “Both the posture of our body and the modulation

of our voice should be pleasing to the divine eyes. For whereas the shameless groan and cry out, by contrast it is fitting that the reverent man should pray reserved prayers”; compare Hannah in ch. 5 and the tax collector in ch. 6)

Cyprian’s Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer (7-28):

- “Our” shows that we are praying with and on behalf of the whole body of believers, the Church which is united in harmony of spirit, being of one mind (ch. 8).
 - Compare Tertullian *On Prayer 2*, where Tertullian also interprets “Father” as indicating God’s paternal relation to the believer, rather than to all humanity.
 - Cyprian, however, emphasizes the unity of believers in the church more strongly than Tertullian does.
- “Father” shows clearly our adoption as a child of God and our consequent renunciation of our earthly ties (ch. 9; the implications draw out in ch. 11).
 - Cyprian develops in greater detail the idea of adoption found in Tertullian *On Prayer 2*.
- “Let your name be hallowed” in us, through persistence in path taken at baptism, receiving daily the forgiveness of sins and the sanctification of the Spirit (ch. 12).
 - Cyprian interprets this as specific to Christians in contrast to Tertullian, *On Prayer 3*, who does not limit it to believers but sees the request for hallowing as extending to all people.
- “Let your Kingdom come” = reign of the saints with Christ at the consummation (eschatological) (Christ “is himself the Kingdom of God”) (ch. 13).
 - Compare the eschatological interpretation of the Kingdom in Tertullian *On Prayer 5*.
- “Let your will be done” so “that we should be able to do what God wishes...For this to be done in us, there is need of God’s will, that is his aid and his protection, since nobody is strong in his own strength, but is kept safe in God’s kindness and mercy...We who desire to remain into eternity should do the will of God who is eternal” (ch. 14).
 - Christ’s perfect example of conduct shows what it is to fulfill the will of God (ch. 15).
- “In heaven and on earth”
 - =that the spirit and the body, at enmity due to sin, might be united in showing forth the fruits of the Spirit (ch. 16) OR
 - =the faithful and those who do not believe that they may share in the new birth (ch. 17).
 - This last interpretation parallels the interpretation of heaven and earth as comprehensive of all in Tertullian.
- “Daily bread”
 - =spiritually Christ as the bread of life (compare Tertullian *On Prayer 6*) OR
 - literally, the daily reception of the Eucharist, unhindered by sin (ch. 18) OR

- shows the daily dependence created by renouncing the world and the false security it finds in wealth (ch. 19-21)
 - Of the one who gives generously, Cyprians (ch. 20) comments, “Released and set free he accompanies his own possessions that he had previously sent on to the Lord.”
- “And pardon us our debts, just as we pardon our debtors” a daily reminder that we are sinners and that God is faithful to forgive our sins (cf. Tertullian *On Prayer* 7).
 - “After asking for the supply of food, we ask pardon for our sin, so that the one who is fed in God may live in God, and provision be made not only for this present and transitory life but for the eternal life to which we might come if our sins are pardoned” (ch. 22).
 - “Just as” sets a strict condition/prerequisite for us to receive forgiveness, so reconciliation/ brotherly agreement should be seen as a primary value (ch. 23-24; compare Augustine’s later interpretation of this petition).
- “Do not allow us to be led into temptation”
 - paraphrase close to Marcionite Gospel cited by Tertullian
 - compare Tertullian’s “Do not allow us to be led by the *one that tempts*” (God himself tempts no one)
 - shows that we should not fear the Evil One but rather recognize “that the adversary can do nothing against us unless God allows it beforehand” (ch. 25).
 - “For two reasons is power granted against us: for punishment when we sin and for glory when we are proved. . . Thus. . . everything is referred to God so that whatever is sought out of the fear of God and is requested with a view to his honor will be granted out of his goodness” (ch. 26).
- “But set us free from the evil one” “there remains nothing which should be sought thereafter,” so sums up entire prayer in looking to God for protection and security (ch. 27).

Concluding Practical Remarks (29-36)

- Christ’s example in prayer (ch. 29), esp. in commending the night vigil
- The need for single-mindedness the reason for the *sursum corda* (“Lift up your hearts”) (ch. 31)
- Almsgiving and works of charity to accompany prayer (ch. 33)
- Prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hours commended, with a Trinitarian rationale given (ch. 34)
 - Compare Tertullian’s commendation of prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hour.
- With change of dispensations, add also morning prayer celebrating the Resurrection and again in the evening (ch. 35)
 - Possibly parallel to the statutory prayers in Tertullian *On Prayer* 25