

POST-BAPTISMAL SIN AND ECCLESIASTICAL DISCIPLINE
IN THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

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If any theme could be said to link the majority of the extant writings of the Apostolic Fathers, it would be the call for Christians to *live* like Christians. To those of their readers who were not living according to the ethics of early Christianity, these writings are filled with pleas and prayers for a change of heart and action—the transformative response of genuine repentance. But despite this emphasis, and in contrast to later Patristic writings, these letters, homilies, and apocalypses¹ contain surprisingly few references to established policies of church discipline for wayward believers. Exactly how did the post-apostolic church² deal with post-conversion sin among its members? What were the remedial procedures, by whose authority were they enforced, and were any sins considered unforgivable?

Any answers to these queries must contain an element of speculation, as not only are few sources available from the first half of the second century, but our knowledge of the authorship, dating, locale, and circumstances of these writings is limited, and the possibility of textual corruption is often present.³ Compounded with these problems is our inability to know whether the doctrines and opinions expressed in these writings were solidly within orthodox tradition (*1 Clement* and Polycarp are exceptions) or whether they were written from the fringes of early Christianity (possibly *Epistle of Barnabas* and *Shepherd of Hermas*), and how widely churches in various locales differed from each other in regard to dealing with sin in the church body, as there was yet little uniformity in practice.

¹ There is some debate as to whether *Shepherd of Hermas* is truly an apocalypse. Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 11-12, argues that, though some elements of its form are not apocalyptic, its function is similar enough to categorize it as an apocalypse.

² This paper will be limited to the period of the writing of the Apostolic Fathers: around AD 90-140. All biblical quotations are from the NIV, and all Apostolic Fathers quotations are from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992). I also avoid terms like “penance” and “excommunication” to prevent anachronistic connotations from later traditions influencing my description of disciplinary procedures from this era.

³ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1978), 198, calls our knowledge of penance in this era “bafflingly meager.” The developed episcopal structure in Ignatius makes his letters especially suspect of later textual corruption.

But while the Apostolic Fathers for the most part avoid specifics, they evidence a surprising unanimity in their understanding of and approach to post-baptismal sin in the life of the believer. In light of what can be known from their writings (and in contrast to later traditions), it can be argued that the earliest post-apostolic church, which emphasized the unfinished nature of salvation and individual empowerment by the Holy Spirit, practiced therapeutic discipline in the full hope of restoring any erring member to a right relationship with God and the church.

Salvation in the Apostolic Fathers

The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are surprisingly deficient of the clear, organized theology of either the Pauline writings of the New Testament or later apologists.⁴ Not only do they make little mention of the atoning work of Christ (and what they do write “smacks more of affirmation than explanation”),⁵ but their writings often sound more akin to traditional Jewish ethics: Christ is portrayed more as the “lawgiver, the bestower of knowledge, immortality and fellowship with God.”⁶ But this is still primitive Christianity trying to work through its relation with mother Judaism, and the internal conflicts that forced clarification had not yet occurred. For the most part, their soteriology reflects that of the Gospel of Matthew and the General Epistles more than Pauline theology. They agree that no one is immune from the damning effects of sin (Polycarp, *Phil.* 6:1), and preservation from the coming judgment of God cannot be extended to

⁴ John McRay, “The Church Fathers in the Second Century,” *Restoration Quarterly* 11:4 (1968): 213: “Their general attitude toward the New Testament books was one of virtual comparable authority. That is to say, they do not quote New Testament writings as sources of authority but as concurring evidence for their arguments. They did not apparently feel the need of the written sources so much at this early date since they themselves had known the living voices.”

⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 163.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 165. Perhaps this is also because of their exclusive use of the Old Testament—their only canon—for authoritative reference [James Paget, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” *Expository Times* 117:11 (Aug, 2006): 445].

those outside the church (*1 Clem.* 12:6; Ignatius, *Trall.* 7:1-2),⁷ nor can there be any opportunity for repentance after death (*2 Clem.* 8:5-6, 16:1; Ign., *Smyrn.* 9:1). Jesus instituted a “new law” which has now nullified the saving effects of Judaism (*Barn.* 1; Ign., *Magn.* 8:1), including its animal sacrifices. Now, “through the blood of the Lord redemption will come to all who believe and hope in God” (*1 Clem.* 12:6).⁸ All are called to repent of their wicked lifestyles or false beliefs and turn in faith and allegiance to Jesus, as publically evidenced in the rite of baptism.

Baptism

Baptism was widely regarded as entry into the great race of faith, as well as the faith community.⁹ But it was not yet equated just with signing a membership card: something supernatural was affirmed as occurring in this holy sacrament, first of which was remission of all prior sins.¹⁰ Through baptism, God purifies the heart and provides rebirth in a way that animal sacrifices never could.¹¹ Conversion, as publically indicated by baptism, “meant a basic change in

⁷ Including those who were once a part of it but have left or been excluded for unrepented sin [Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. and rev. by Francis Courtney (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1964), 25; cf. *1 Clem* 52:2].

⁸ Cf. *7:4*; *21:6*; *Did.* 10:2; *Barn.* 5:4.

⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 193. James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 24: “For the Christians of the postapostolic age, as for those of New Testament times, the Church was the community of salvation. To be welcomed into its gathering was to receive the blessing of salvation and that in turn evoked the praise and blessing of God.” This would soon be expressed overtly. Yet it must be noted that the pre-baptized catechumen was also considered a Christian, as the catechumenical period could be lengthy—he or she was “expected to live a good life, even to the point of martyrdom, which would count as his baptism if it should come about” [Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 15]. But they could not take part in the life-giving sacrament of the Eucharist or community prayer [Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 32].

¹⁰ *Barn.* 11:11: “While we descend into the water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits.”

¹¹ “So, since he renewed us by the forgiveness of sins, he made us men of another type, so that we should have the soul of children, as if he were creating us all over again” (*Barn.* 6:11; cf. *8:3*; *9:1*; *Herm. Vis.* 3.3.5: “your life was saved and will be saved through water”).

attitude and direction, a renewal of life, root, and branch. No one would choose baptism lightly nor imagine that the rest of one's life would be as it was before."¹² Not only is one's slavery to sin broken, and one is reborn, but God himself comes as the Holy Spirit to dwell in the heart and empower it for a life of holy, self-sacrificial living.¹³

The Race of Faith

But this work of grace was only a start—all Apostolic Fathers would have been appalled at the idea that one could “rest on one's laurels” and consider this past event to be all that was required maintain salvation. We see in their writings the tension between the “already” and “not yet” of salvation, though their emphasis is very much upon the latter.¹⁴ *1 Clement* affirms with Paul that is through the will of God and by faith that believers in Christ (including Old Testament saints) have been glorified and justified (32:3-4). Yet “Barnabas,” who is “hoping to be saved” (*Barn.* 1:3), warns against withdrawal from the community “as though you were already justified” (*Barn.* 4:10). While every grace was available to the repentant believer, the unrepentant member could only look forward to “punishment and torment” (*1 Clem.* 11:1-2).¹⁵ For the earliest church fathers, the post-baptismal life was a great race of faith, a contest (*1 Clem.* 7:1, 36:1), where one must stay on track and faithfully persevere in all holiness to the end to reach the grace of

¹² Jim Forest, *Confession: A Doorway to Forgiveness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 22.

¹³ *Barn.* 16:8-9; cf. *1 Clem.* 2:2; *Ign. Smyrn.* 4:2, 11:3; *Magn.* 12:1; *Pol.* 1:2; *Did.* 10:2. Kelly, 194, notes the Pauline conception of baptism as “the application of Christ's atoning death to the believer” had faded; instead, the remission of sins, rebirth, and the indwelling of the Spirit are emphasized in baptism.

¹⁴ Paget, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” 445; Michael Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna, *Letter to the Philippians*,” *Expository Times* 118:2 (Nov, 2006): 58.

¹⁵ They also could, through “doublemindedness” and a hardened, impure heart, “oppress the Holy Spirit that lives in you,” causing him to “intercede with God against you and leave you” (*Herm. Mand.* 10.2.5). Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna,” 59, notes that such sinful believers deny by their deeds what the heretics deny by their words; their present behavior raises questions about their future fate.

resurrection.¹⁶ One's choices now continued to have consequences of spiritual life or death—now even more *because* of the commitment given and cleansing and knowledge received via baptism.¹⁷ As the *Didache* warns, “All the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time” (*Did.* 16:2).

Sin's Danger to the Community

Along with the understanding of indwelling empowerment of God at baptism and the tenuous nature of salvation for the unrepentant believer is the earliest church's unique perspective of the communal danger of unrepented sin. Sin left untreated would become an infection that could destroy the whole community, endangering the salvation of all.¹⁸ Clement warns, “Take care, dear friends, lest his many benefits turn into a judgment upon all of us, as will happen if we fail to live worthily of him” (*1 Clem.* 21:1, cf. 37:5). Ignatius repeatedly cautions against giving ear to schismatics whose teachings poison and corrupt innocent faith and cause disunity in the church, leaving it vulnerable to the judgment of God.¹⁹ All believers are exhorted to admonish and “help one another to restore those who are weak with respect to goodness, so that we may all be

¹⁶ *Ign., Eph.* 14:2; *Pol.* 1:2-3, 2:3, 3:1; *Did.* 16:5.

¹⁷ *2 Clem* 17:1-3; *Ign., Eph.* 11:1; *Herm. Mand.* 4. Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna,” 58: “If salvation is a divine gift and promise, it is at the same time a matter of human achievement. For whether the past divine act on our behalf will in fact become actualized in the future depends . . . a great deal on how humans respond in the present.”

¹⁸ The postapostolic church's authoritative canon was the Old Testament, and from it they applied the theology of community purity and covenant obedience to themselves as the new people of God [John Anthony McGuckin, “Sin,” *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 310]. Even though it is founded on “better promises” (Heb 8:6), rampant faithlessness and moral impurity could damn it just as Israel's failures had excluded it from the promises of God (*1 Clem* 41:4).

¹⁹ *Ign. Eph.* 7:1, 16:1-2, 17:1; *Trall.* 11:1; *Phld.* 3:2; *Smyrn.* 4:1; cf. *1 Clem.* 14:1-3. Though not explicitly addressed, schism and moral failure also left the post-apostolic church vulnerable to the external persecution that always threatened it, as it gave credence to otherwise false charges.

saved” (2 *Clem.* 17:1-3).²⁰ 2 *Clement* also includes the enigmatic statement that those who follow his advice “will not regret it, but will save both himself and me as his advisor” (15:2).

This theology of the communal impact of sin is founded upon the understanding—deeply rooted in the apostolic church—of the church as the new covenantal community, the holy people of God, with each heart a dedicated Temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells.²¹ The requirements for holiness in the Mosaic covenant remain obligatory,²² and any “sin in the camp” endangers the entire community, as it pollutes the purity of the people of God.²³ The bar is set even higher for Christians: “Those, therefore, who do anything contrary to the duty imposed by his will receive death as the penalty. You see, brothers, as we have been considered worthy of greater knowledge, so much the more we are exposed to danger” (1 *Clem.* 41:3-4).

Church Discipline in the Apostolic Fathers

It is in light of their understanding of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer, the unfinished nature of salvation with the very real possibility of damnation for the unrepentant, and the danger unrepented sin posed to the faith community, that the post-apostolic church’s approach to discipline becomes coherent. Yet, we are left “completely in the dark”

²⁰ Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 20: “The whole community is concerned for division and sin affect the salvation or health of the whole body. We see in Clement’s letter, as in other early writings, a strong sense of internal cohesion, a vivid realization of the social character of sin and forgiveness, and the responsibility of mutual correction and acceptance.” Polycarp understood the threat of Valen’s avarice to be a “major threat both to the Philippian community’s stability (in that it blurred the boundary between insiders and outsiders) and its theological self-understanding (in that it led to questions or uncertainty about the meaning of righteousness)” (Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna,” 57).

²¹ 1 *Clem.* 29:1, 30:1; Ign., *Eph.* 9:1, *Tral.* 8:1-2; *Phld.* 7:2; *Did.* 14:1-2; *Barn.* 4:11, 6:15, 16:9. Kelly, 190: “The Church is regarded as the new, authentic Israel which has inherited the promises when God made to the old.” It is holy as it is “God’s chosen people and is indwelt by His Spirit.”

²² *Did.* 6:2: “For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect. But if you are not able, then do what you can.”

²³ Jonathan A. Draper, “The Apostolic Fathers: The *Didache*,” *Expository Times* 117:5 (Feb, 2006): 180, notes the *Didache*’s concern for ritual purity in the practice of baptism and the Eucharist.

regarding specific policies of church discipline.²⁴ But from what little evidence we have, the Apostolic Fathers appear to follow the principles advocated by their founders, the writers of the New Testament, of increasing levels of correction climaxing in exclusion from the community.

Rebuke and Intercession

In the post-apostolic age, bishops, elders, and deacons were to care for their flocks by rebuking and correcting wayward believers.²⁵ Clement of Rome begged the schismatics in his church to “submit to the presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart” (*1 Clem.* 57:1). The nature of this discipline is unknown, but Clement writes that he sent men to be “witnesses” between him and the schismatics, possibly as the final opportunity to repent before being excluded (cf. Matt 18:15-17). Polycarp lists the responsibilities of presbyters as “turning back those who have gone astray . . . [being] not quick to believe things spoken against anyone, nor harsh in judgment, knowing that we are all in debt with respect to sin” (*Phil.* 6:1-2). Ignatius urges Polycarp, as bishop of the Smyrnaean church, to “exhort all people,” individually if possible, and use a variety of “treatments”, “with gentleness bring[ing] the more troublesome ones into submission (*Pol.* 1:2-3; 2:1; cf. *2 Clem.* 17:3).²⁶ Intriguingly, he encourages Polycarp to request divine revelation of “unseen things” for gentle yet penetrating confrontation (*Pol.* 2:2-3).

While correction was one of the primary purposes of church leadership, at this time this responsibility still very much belonged to all members. “The reproof which we give one to another is good and exceedingly useful, for it unites us with the will of God” (*1 Clem.* 56:2). The *Didache*

²⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 199.

²⁵ NT scriptures that advocate rebuke: for all believers: Luke 17:3; for leadership: 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:13, 2:15.

²⁶ Irenaeus later writes that Polycarp composed a number of such letters “which he sent either to the neighboring churches, strengthening them, or to some of the brethren, exhorting and warning them” (Irenaeus, *Letter to Florinus* [in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.20.8], quoted in Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna,” 54.

urges its readers to correct each other impartially and “not in anger but in peace,” maintaining the spirit of love and grace (4:3; 15:3).²⁷ As each member possesses the Holy Spirit of God, each believer is called to help weaker believers, admonishing them to turn from sin to the principles of the faith (2 *Clem.* 17:2). And all members of the church are beseeched to pray for fellow believers caught in the snare of sin or false doctrine, interceding “with tears” for God’s mercy to intervene and provide the change of heart that is otherwise humanly impossible to achieve despite the best of correction.²⁸ For only God can truly “turn back those of [his] people who wander” (1 *Clem.* 59:4).

Confession

Confession—first of all to God and secondly to the church body—meant that one acknowledged one’s sin and was repenting of it.²⁹ This was the most important outward sign of repentance in the post-apostolic church, for the sinner, “instead of remaining obdurate in his own perverted will, humbly acknowledges his guilt and professes his readiness to do penance.”³⁰ In contrast to later church practice, 1 *Clement* lays no further stipulation for repentance than the sinner’s confession: The Master “requires nothing of anyone, except that he make a confession to him” (1 *Clem.* 52:2; cf. 51:3; 2 *Clem.* 9:7).³¹ 2 *Clement* warns to make haste to repent “with our

²⁷ 1 *Clem.* 14:3 emphasizes kindness when rebuking.

²⁸ 1 *Clem.* 2:3-4, 6; 48:1, 56:1-2; 59:1-2; *Ign. Smyrn.* 4:1; *Herm. Simil.* 5.1.5. NT scriptures that encourage church intercession for sinners are Luke 11:4; Acts 8:24; Jas 5:14-16; and 1 John 5:16, though the last verse also cryptically mentions a “sin that leads to death” that renders intercession useless—likely apostasy (1 John 2:19,22,26).

²⁹ NT scriptures that encourage ecclesiastical confession of sin are Jas 5:13-20 and 1 John 1:9.

³⁰ Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 22.

³¹ Poschmann, 22, observes that “confession” in 1 *Clement* usually indicates praise to God: the repentant believer in his or her affirmation of God’s truth marked a recommitment to that truth. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 20, believes the synagogue-like prayer of Clement in chs. 59-61 is an example of such a confession—primarily praise of God interspersed with acknowledgment of wrongdoing and petition for forgiveness.

whole heart,” as there can be no confession after death (8:3).³² In the *Didache*, individual, public confession of sin prior to ecclesiastical prayer and partaking of the Eucharist on the Lord’s day is advised, specifically in the case of interpersonal conflict, “so that your sacrifice may be pure” and not defiled (*Did.* 14:1-2).³³ Hermas repeatedly confesses his sins in private prayer to the Lord, though he was rebuked in his visions for not asking also for righteousness (*Vis.* 1.1.3; 3.1.5-6). The Christian church at this time took great care to emphasize inner heart transformation as well as submission to outward signs of repentance: “submit to the presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart” (*1 Clem.* 57:1).³⁴

Fasting and Almsgiving

The post-apostolic church (particularly in Egypt) tended to continue to follow traditional Jewish practices for atonement for sin even while professing the atoning power of the blood of Christ.³⁵ This is the only part of their approach to the treatment of sin that differs significantly from the New Testament writers. Foremost were fasting and almsgiving, as in *2 Clement*:

Charitable giving, therefore, is good, as is repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, while charitable giving is better than both, and ‘love covers a multitude of sins,’

³² *2 Clement* also has a moralistic definition of confession: “And how do we confess him? In doing what he says and not disobeying his commandments. . . . So then, brethren, let us confess him in works” (3:3-4; 4:3).

³³ Cf. 4:14, especially *Barn.* 19:12 and Matt 5:23-24. Dallen, 21, (and Poschmann, 23-24) believes this was a communal confession, “perhaps a prayer like those of the synagogue and that of *1 Clement* 60:1-4, admitting sinfulness and asking God’s forgiveness and grace.” Ferguson, however (and I believe rightly) states that this confession was individual confession of sins before the church, as “your” in 4:14 is singular [Everett Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” *Restoration Quarterly* 36:2 (1994): 91]. Draper, “The Apostolic Fathers: The *Didache*,” 179-180, notes this book’s Jewish (perhaps covenantal) concern with ritual purity in baptism and the Eucharist.

³⁴ Cf. *2 Clem.* 9:7, 17:1. Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 90, has a list of fourteen occurrences in the Apostolic Fathers of the phrases “to repent with the whole heart/soul” and “true repentance”: “These expressions indicate that in true repentance the sinner detests sin more because it offends God than because it hurts the self.”

³⁵ See Tobit 4:10-11, 12:9 and Sirach 3:14-15, 34:31, 35:1-5—books that would have been included in the early Christian canon.

while prayer arising from a good conscience delivers from death. Blessed is everyone who is found full of these, for charitable giving relieves the burden of sin (2 *Clem.* 16:1-4).³⁶

Hermas mentions grief, self-chastisement and fasting as popular external signs of repentance,³⁷ but he criticizes the latter as “accomplishing nothing with respect to righteousness,” preferring instead purity of heart and donation of the money saved from fasting to widows or orphans (*Simil.* 5.1.4-5; cf. Isa 58). The *Didache* also adds, “If you earned something by working with your hands, you shall give a ransom for your sins” (*Did.* 4:6, a phrase paralleled in *Barn.* 19:10). Everett Ferguson believes at this time such activities were personally initiated and were not yet formalized rituals imposed by the community.³⁸

Exclusion

The final step in the process of church discipline was exclusion from the faith community.³⁹ The contamination must be cut off before it spreads, and the shock, shame and fear

³⁶ Paul Parvis, “2 Clement and the Meaning of Christian Homily,” *Expository Times* 117:7 (2006): 268, observes that the point of this obtuse passage is that “Repentance is one of a whole package of attitudes and actions which together constitute the life to which the Christian is ever being called.” Repentance in 2 *Clement* is not that of a “camp-meeting conversion experience” but “a process of growth and conversion. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 21, also observes the link between fasting before baptism (*Did.* 7:1) and fasting here for penance.

³⁷ *Herm. Mand.* 10.2.4-5: “This grief, therefore, seems to bring salvation, because he repented after having done evil”; *Simil.* 7.4-5: “The one who repents must torment his own soul and be extremely humble in everything he does and be afflicted with a variety of afflictions” (cf. *Mand.* 4.2.2); Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 23.

³⁸ Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 92. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 114, sees a mixture in *Hermas*: testing and humbling are self-imposed but “afflictions” are imposed.

³⁹ NT scriptures that call for exclusion for sin are Matt 18:15-17; Eph 5:3-7; 2 Thess 3:14-15; Titus 3:10-11; 2 John 1:10-11, and most prominently 1 Cor 5:1-13. In each of these church community as a whole is responsible for avoiding or expelling transgressing, unrepentant believers—Paul soundly rebukes the Corinthian church for waiting for his advice instead of immediately cutting off the incestuous man.

of being outside the saving grace bestowed to the true people of God will hopefully drive the offender to authentic repentance.⁴⁰

For there are some who maliciously and deceitfully are accustomed to carrying about the Name while doing other things unworthy of God. You must avoid them as wild beasts. For they are mad dogs that bite by stealth; you must be on your guard against them, for their bite is hard to heal. There is only one physician, [Jesus Christ]” (Ign., *Eph.* 7:1).⁴¹

They are not to “speak to [the offender], nor let him hear a word from [them], until he repents”—a form of ostracism meant to shame into repentance (*Did.* 15:3). This extends even to speaking *about* the offender “either privately or publically” (Ign. *Smyrn.* 7:2). While the examples above refer to schismatics and false teachers, believers are also not to associate with or resemble people who exhibit laziness, arrogance, sexual impurity, or a variety of other moral transgressions that indicate a lack of fear of God (*Barn.* 10). Those who instigate rebellion and schisms are to step down from leadership and submit to the discipline of the faith community (*1 Clem.* 54:1-3).⁴² While the unrepentant were shunned by the church, it appears those who were repentant could attend services but were excluded from partaking of the Eucharist and as such were treated again like the unbaptized until their full readmission into the church body.⁴³ As this shows, repentance was, in one sense, a re-conversion (*metanoia*),⁴⁴ being a break from sin and a return to obedience

⁴⁰ The early Christians inherited the discipline of exclusion (later known as excommunication) from Judaism “both in a moral sense by transgressions of the law, and by concrete interdictions” as found in Talmudic literature and Matthew 18:16 (V. Grossi, “Excommunication,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. DiBerardino). See also John Anthony McGuckin, “Excommunication,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Cf. Ign. *Eph.* 9:1, 11:1; *Did.* 11:1.

⁴² Hans Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, trans. J.A. Baker (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), 90, believes they are requested to voluntarily expel themselves from the Corinthian church; “if they make this heroic decision, any other congregation will be only too glad to make them welcome.”

⁴³ L. Michael White, “Penance,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., Everett Ferguson, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 891. This is based on hints in the *Didache* and evidence from later periods.

⁴⁴ Repentance and conversion are both translations of *metanoia*, and many commentators of the Apostolic Fathers actually prefer to use “conversion” to indicate the full transformation that is involved in repentance.

to the law of God.⁴⁵ And at no point was exclusion irrevocable to the repentant—the church always held on to the hope of the sinner’s full restoration with God and with itself.⁴⁶

From these examples we see that the earliest church took sin amongst its members very seriously, and their treatment was (at least at this point) not punitive but remedial: to win back the wayward believer and reconcile him or her with God and the community, making it whole and holy again.⁴⁷ But at this time there was “little indication of set procedures or established rituals for excluding such sinners or for welcoming them back into the assembly and no sign of limitations imposed.”⁴⁸ Sincere repentance, evidenced by a change of conduct and heart, and submission to church discipline, was all that was required for reception back into the community of faith.⁴⁹

The Forgivability of Serious Sin in the Apostolic Fathers

Now that we have covered the procedures of discipline found in the Apostolic Fathers, we must ask whether they considered any sin to be too heinous to be forgiven, or if there were limitations to the number of times one could repent from serious sin. Apart from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, neither of these questions finds clear answers in the Apostolic Fathers, though hints exist.

⁴⁵ Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24. Soon, unfortunately, exclusion became excommunication, a punitive discipline that was more often than not a form of political bullying (Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 94).

⁴⁷ Dallen, “The Rite of Penance,” 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Though Hermas strongly argues against a rapid re-entry into the church: “Do you think that the sins of those who repent are forgiven immediately? Certainly not! But the one who repents must torment his own soul and be extremely humble in everything he does and be afflicted with a variety of afflictions; and if he endures the afflictions that come upon him, then assuredly the one who created all things and endowed them with power will be moved with compassion and will give some healing. And this will certainly be the case, if he sees that the heart of the one who repents is free of every evil thing” (*Simil.* 7.4-5). In this, perhaps, we can see the move toward ritualizing expression of repentance (Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 92).

The Early Apostolic Fathers

On one hand, the earliest writings seem to unanimously agree that no one genuinely repenting of their sin could be withheld forgiveness, either by God or the church body.⁵⁰ *First Clement* describes the offenses of those he wrote against as “jealousy and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and anarchy, war and captivity. . . . the young against the elders” (3:2; see ch. 1-3). Overthrowing the legitimate church leadership was “no small sin”! (*1 Clem.* 44:5).⁵¹ Yet it is those willfully defiant and destructive people he gently yet firmly calls to repentance and extends the hope of forgiveness:

So, then, for whatever sins we have committed and whatever we have done through any of the tricks of the adversary, let us ask that we may be forgiven. And those, too, who set themselves up as leaders of rebellion and dissension ought to look to the common ground of hope (*1 Clem.* 51:1).

For condemnation was only the destiny of those who persisted with hardened hearts (51:3), and only the deadline of one’s physical death prevented the reception of forgiveness and mercy (*2 Clem.* 8:1-6; *Ign. Smryn.* 9:1).

Ignatius is a bit more difficult to pinpoint: the patience of God is limited and should be feared (*Eph.* 11:1), and adulterers, blasphemers, false teachers, and schismatics “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (*Phld.* 3:2) but instead “will go to the unquenchable fire” (*Eph.* 16:1-2; cf. *Smryn.* 5:2-3). Yet, “the Lord, however, forgives all who repent, if in repenting they return to the unity of God and the council of the bishop. I believe in the grace of Jesus Christ, who will free you

⁵⁰ Kenan Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 53, would disagree, as he states there was a “general tendency toward rigorism, so that, once baptized, the Christian was seen as someone who ought never sin again.” While the early Christians believed a baptized believer *ought* not to sin again, they were well aware of its likelihood, and the strong rigorism seen in Hermas was still the minority view. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 20, concurs with my conclusion.

⁵¹ Dallen, “The Rite of Penance,” 18: “Even as late as the mid-second century, this experience and sense of identity as a tight community was so strong that the most serious sin seems to have been the formation of factions, particularly in opposition to the bishop or presbyters who symbolized the community’s oneness.”

from every bond” (*Phld.* 8:1; cf. 3:2). He acknowledges repentance from such hardened hearts is difficult, but “Jesus Christ, our true life, has power over this” (*Smryn.* 4:1).

Polycarp mentions the presbyter Valens, who with his wife appears to have embezzled church funds.⁵² Though “deeply grieved,” Polycarp begged the Lord to “grant them true repentance.” And he pleaded with the believers Valens had offended to “not regard such people ‘as enemies,’ but, as sick and straying members, restore them, in order that you may save your body in its entirety. For by doing this you build up one another” (*Phil.* 11:1).

Finally, the *Didache* proclaims, “if anyone is not [holy], let him repent. Maranatha!” (10:6). Yet it includes an important limitation: believers are not to test or evaluate any prophet who speaks in the Spirit (though only if he “exhibits the Lord’s ways”), for “every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven” (11:7)—a prohibition to forgiveness based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 12:31.⁵³

The Shepherd of Hermas

On the other hand, the *Shepherd of Hermas* advocates only a single opportunity for repentance after baptism. This can be taken several ways: he was a hardliner, who sought to tighten up lax discipline of sin, or he was advocating a more lenient stance than was the rigorist norm for his day,⁵⁴ or he was pleading for a middle position between the two.⁵⁵ Hermas could also

⁵² This was apparently a significant problem in the early church: the visions of Hermas condemn deacons “who carried out their ministry badly and plundered the livelihood of widows and orphans, and profited themselves from the ministry which they received to carry out” (*Simil.* 9.26.2-8).

⁵³ Matthew 12:31-32: “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

⁵⁴ Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 53-55; Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” *Expository Times* 117:10 (July, 2006): 399: “The fact that this is ‘revealed’ to Hermas by the angel/Shepherd and that he himself at first seems to object to it and to have problems with it, would indicate that this represents a fairly new

be countering a novel but localized policy of a few “certain teachers” in Rome who taught there was no forgiveness of post-baptismal sin (*Mand.* 4.3.1), in contrast to other churches in the Mediterranean.⁵⁶ Based on the evidence to the contrary in the other Apostolic Fathers, I believe this to be the most likely hypothesis, though it is ultimately impossible to ascertain the exact circumstances of his time.⁵⁷ But the belief of one public reconciliation with the church after post-baptismal sin as advocated in *Hermas* would quickly become the norm of the Mediterranean church from this period for centuries.⁵⁸

Hermas is unique in using the apocalyptic genre not to shed light on eschatological events, but to pastorally and pragmatically speak to a present situation in preparation for the end.⁵⁹ The Shepherd, who is the angel of repentance (*Vis.* 5.7), reveals the Lord is returning shortly, so he

view on the question of how to deal with post-baptismal sin. But in what sense is this ‘a new teaching’? It has been taken as a way of propagating lax attitudes, and SH has understandably been blamed for this by partisans of more rigorous minded movements, to witness Tertullian’s ‘Montanist’ critique. Modern scholars have shown more subtleness, and it has also been argued that SH was intent upon defending a more rigorist position than the one that was commonly held in Christian communities, admitting for only one such ‘conversion’ to be acceptable. The latter view has little to commend itself, as one runs into problems in trying to explain in this perspective Tertullian’s criticism who may have been correct in pointing out what was the really innovative character of Hermas’ teaching.”

⁵⁵ N. Brox, “Hermas,” *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*, Siegmund Dopf and Wilhelm Geerlings, eds., trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co, 2000), 278. Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 399. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 22, places the lenient part of *Hermas* at the end of the first century/beginning of the second and the more rigorist part near the middle of the second century, when “some teachers” insisted there was no repentance other than baptism as a reaction to the lack of fervor and holiness in the growing Roman community. He notes the Angel of Repentance “cautiously opposes such rigorists.” However, most contemporary scholars believe it to be the work of a single author, rendering Dallen’s divisional theory improbable.

⁵⁶ Though he does this in a coy manner, as the Shepherd admits their policy is “theoretically true, and is to be regarded as an ideal . . . but it is impracticable and is lacking in Christian charity” [Hallock, “Third Century Teaching on Sin and Penance,” *Anglican Theological Review* 4:2 (Oct, 1921), 129].

⁵⁷ Hallock, 129, also believes that Hermas was written to refute the rigorists, making the rigorist view the novel approach. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 114, can find little evidence one way or another whether these teachers represent mainstream thinking or a minority opinion.

⁵⁸ Osborne, “Justification and Reconciliation,” 54. It was even viewed by Christians as late as the fourth century as canonical scripture. As to the date of composition, it can be placed anywhere from AD 95-150, though most scholars choose a date closer to the 140s [David Aune, “Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 439].

⁵⁹ Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 398.

grants a special, one-time-only opportunity for everyone baptized believer who has committed a serious sin to repent and be readmitted to the church.⁶⁰ Anyone who relapses after this second repentance, however, is doomed: “If he sins repeatedly and repents, it is of no use for such a person, for he will scarcely live” (*Mand.* 4.3.4). Hermas uses a plethora of images and allegories to make his point that

the Church is a project still under construction. It is a dynamic process of ongoing inspection and improvement. For now the Church may be a *corpus mixtum*, but ultimately the goal is, and should be, to reach perfection. This should not be acquired, however, simply by throwing away all of the building material that is judged to be imperfect, but rather trying to ‘save’ and ‘recuperate’ as much of it as possible in the firm conviction that perhaps not all of it can be made useful again, but also that under no condition will ‘damaged goods’ be allowed to remain in use.⁶¹

Apparently, no sin was unforgiveable in this unique second absolution: “all the sins which they have previously committed will be forgiven them. Indeed, all the saints who have sinned up to this day will be forgiven, if they repent with all their heart and drive away double-mindedness from their heart” (*Vis.* 2.2.4).⁶² This included sexual sin (*Mand.* 4.1), avarice, malicious words, and apostasy (*Simil.* 9.26.5-8), though the latter was only forgivable if they had not “denied from the heart.”⁶³ Hermas displays a deep distress at impurity in the church, in both deed and heart,⁶⁴ yet he emphasizes the merciful heart of God, who desires all “who were called through his Son to be

⁶⁰ Hermas, *Vis.* 2.2.4-6; 3.10.2; *Mand.* 4; *Simil.* 9.26.2-8.

⁶¹ Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 399-400.

⁶² Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 114, observes that in *Hermas*, “it is not that ‘doing penance’ is a smart thing to do, but that the open heart is an understanding heart, which necessarily changes action from evil to good.”

⁶³ *Simil.* 9.26.2-8. Osiek, 249, sees the difference is that those allowed forgiveness “have been distracted all the way into denial of the faith” by wealth and business and withdrawing from association with other believers.

⁶⁴ And likely frustration at those who repent but repeatedly fall back into the same sin. H.B. Swete, “Penitential Discipline in the First Three Centuries,” in *Christian Life: Ethics, Morality, and Discipline in the Early Church*, Everett Ferguson, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1993), 323, speculates that Hermas knew of the Roman heretic Cerdon, who, Irenaeus wrote, repeatedly made public confession for teaching heresy, yet continued “teaching in secret,” until he was denounced and excommunicated from the assembly under Pius in the 140s (*Iren. A.H.* 3.4.3). Swete bases his dating on the Muratorian Canon, which claimed that Hermas was the brother of Pius. But since Swete wrote, the reliability and dating of the Muratorian Canon has been called into question (Osiek, 20).

saved” (*Simil.* 8.11.1). This pastoral heart causes him to be “more concerned with which sinners are capable of repentance than with which sins are forgivable. . . . he was more interested in repentant sinners rather than legal procedures for their readmission.”⁶⁵ But for those who do not take this opportunity, there is no more forgiveness for post-baptismal sin.

From the evidence we possess, it seems the early Apostolic Fathers held almost unanimously that any sin was forgivable after baptism, provided one genuinely repented of it through recognized means.⁶⁶ But a growing rigorist movement held the view, as found Hebrews 6:4-6 and 1 John 5:17 and strongly in *Shepherd of Hermas*, that remission of sins after baptism was impossible. Ferguson astutely observes that this shift in the second and third centuries is

away from the biblical understanding whereby grace covers postbaptismal as well as prebaptismal sins as long as the person maintains the means by which forgiveness was received in the first place, namely, faith and repentance. That shift involved a change from an emphasis on the free forgiveness of God to becoming worthy of forgiveness. This was expressed in works of satisfaction that could be viewed as a sacrifice for sin or making recompense for the sins.⁶⁷

Exhausting external persecution and destructive internal schism would soon exacerbate the rigorist position until it became the standard of the Mediterranean church for the next two centuries.

Authority to Discipline in the Apostolic Fathers

We have seen the theological basis for the post-apostolic church’s understanding of sin, the known ways they used to deal with sin among members, and the limits (or lack thereof) of pardon for serious sin. Now we must ask *who* was responsible for diagnosing the problem, authorizing the

⁶⁵ Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 23. As he notes, “such apparent laxity, however, later led Tertullian to call him the ‘shepherd of adulterers’.”

⁶⁶ My conclusion is in contrast to White, “Penance,” 891, who holds instead that the rigorist view was the common view held through the middle of the second century. I do not believe our existing evidence, as shown above, supports this. Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 96, agrees: the early texts emphasize that “reconciliation is available for ‘any transgression.’”

⁶⁷ Ferguson, “Early Church Penance,” 94.

discipline, excluding unrepentant members from the faith community, and allowing repentant believers back. With the generation of the original apostles (recognized figures of final authority) dead, the post-apostolic churches struggled with how to fill the gap. Each of the Apostolic Fathers (except *2 Clement* and *Barnabas*) list church leadership as consisting of bishops, elders/presbyters, and deacons, but in most churches the authority to discipline still appears to remain within the congregation, with the leadership “specializing” in this area.

The *Didache* mentions bishops and deacons, yet it also presumes the spiritual authority of itinerant apostles and prophets—it displays a period of transition of authority from the latter to the former, with some tension.⁶⁸ As seen above, this document excludes any mention of its bishops or deacons taking an exclusive role in enforcing the correction, confession, or exclusion it advocates—instructions on these subjects are directed to the church body, though it can be assumed that the leadership also dealt discipline as part of its “shepherding.”⁶⁹

Clement writes as the bishop/presbyter⁷⁰ of Rome to the church in Corinth, but any attempt to view in this as a superiority of his status over other bishoprics is at this point anachronistic.⁷¹ As

⁶⁸ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 30-31: “Although the main part envisages a church in which apostles, prophets and teachers lead, toward the end we read a direction of another kind”—election of bishops and deacons to “minister unto you the ministry of the prophets and teachers’ (*Did.* 14-15.1).” Hall believes this is because the *Didache* is a compilation book, “altered and adapted at various periods.” We can also see a bit of this tension in *Shepherd of Hermas*, as Hermas, a (lowly) layman prophet, is told to “speak to the officials of the church” (which included bishops, teachers, and deacons, *Vis.* 2.2.6) of his authoritative vision that challenged corruption among the deacons and corrected their policy of post-baptismal absolution.

⁶⁹ *Did.* 4:6, 14; 11:1, 7; 14:1-2; 15:3.

⁷⁰ The terms “bishop” and “elder” are used interchangeably in *1 Clement*, showing the fluidity of these roles at this time (Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, 84; cf. Acts 20:17-18 and Titus 1:5, 7). Clement (ch. 44) believes in and defends the apostolic succession of bishops, making theirs a permanent ministry (Hall, 33).

⁷¹ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 33-34, believes there is “no indication that either in Rome or in Corinth there was a single presiding bishop rather than a board of elders,” unlike that which Ignatius of Antioch envisions. In this case, Clement would just be one of the preeminent elders. It is interesting that Rome is the only place where Ignatius does not mention a bishop. The *Shepherd of Hermas*, written a generation later and set in Rome, suggests that “the congregations there were governed by boards of elders, who included prophets and teachers, and might be called bishops.” Von Campenhausen, 87, however, sees Clement as viewing himself to be “a successor

the legitimate leadership of Corinth had been deposed by a faction of younger men, other churches had to step in to restore order and peace. It is interesting that, other than sending “witnesses” to attempt persuade them in person, the only threat Clement offers the rebels is eschatological judgment from God. This could be due to the rhetorical style he chose, or because they were still in the early “rebuking” stage of discipline with harsher measures to follow.⁷² Or it could be that each church was still largely autonomous,⁷³ and there was little he, as bishop over another jurisdiction, would (or even could) do punitively—unlike later patristic periods.⁷⁴

The writer of *2 Clement*⁷⁵ includes admonition by the church elders and himself as the preacher, but he also exhorts all members to “admonish and turn back one another” (*2 Clem.* 17:1-3).⁷⁶ This dual system of authoritative correction and admonishment by both shepherds and their

of their own apostle, Paul” through his repeated quoting of 1 Corinthians. I instead view this not as Clement trying to attain a level of authority comparable to Paul, but rather using *Paul’s* unchallenged authority as a basis for mutual agreement in his argument to the rebels. 1 Corinthians is also used as a basis of commonality with this church.

⁷² *1 Clement*, along with Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, are examples of *paraenetic* letters, in which the writer is “the recipients’ friend or moral superior, who recommends habits of behavior and actions that conform to a certain model of character, in a letter typically directed ‘at those who had already been initiated into a social group and needed to habituate the initial learning’” (Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna, 54). Polite Hellenistic conventions might have precluded specific mentions of heavy-handed discipline in favor of gentle persuasion; this would not eliminate a possibility of enforcement of strong discipline by Clement upon the rebels in the Corinthian church.

⁷³ Hall, 35: “Each church had a leading figure responsible for the doctrine as well as the discipline of the community, since he would judge between claims to interpret the Bible correctly.” Not until later disputes and schisms spilled over into other churches did Mediterranean Christianity begin to submit to the authority of preeminent bishops like the bishop of Rome.

⁷⁴ We see Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, writing to the Philippians (also outside his “jurisdiction”) in the same manner: encouraging, exhorting, and warning; he specifically addresses the problem of the avaricious presbyter Valens. Perhaps he had a prior relationship with this church that encouraged them to seek his advice even if he was not their own bishop, or he was favored for his prominent Christian character (they also likely mentioned their reception of Ignatius [1:1], and requested discussion of righteousness [13:1], as well as copies of Ignatius’s letters [13:2]). Holmes, “Polycarp of Smyrna,” 56.

⁷⁵ This pseudonymous work was not written by Clement (nor did it claim to) and it is not a letter; rather, it is the “earliest surviving Christian homily,” dating to just before the mid second century (Parvis, “*2 Clement*,” 266).

⁷⁶ The *Epistle of Barnabas*, also a homily in form, makes no mention of deacons, elders, or bishops, but exhorts the people directly. But arguing such structures did not exist or did not possess presbyterian or episcopal authority would be an argument from silence, as this absence could have everything to do with its genre.

sheep appear to be most common of this era, and most closely follows the pattern set in the New Testament churches. All are actively involved in mutual correction and discipline of wayward members, though elders and bishops carry the greater burden of it as is due their leadership roles.⁷⁷

An emerging contrast to this congregational and presbyterian system was the episcopal authority demanded by Ignatius, who also was an early writer.⁷⁸ Time and again he advocates absolute obedience to the bishop as to Christ, and in “God’s voice” warns his readers to “do nothing without the bishop” (*Phld.* 7:2), for “the one who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge serves the devil” (*Smryn.* 9:1).⁷⁹ While elders are to be given the same respect as the NT apostles, the bishop must be present to preside over the Eucharist, baptisms, and weddings in the place of Christ—without him these rituals of graced are invalidated (*Smryn.* 8:1ff). While Ignatius could have been overstating his case to head off scenarios of revolt like we see in Corinth,⁸⁰ it is also unlikely that a strong episcopal structure would have been foreign to many his readers.⁸¹ In such episcopal congregations it is unthinkable that serious disciplinary measures like

⁷⁷ Though Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 31-32, believes that the bishops were responsible for discipline in most of these early churches: “The bishop is the ‘inspector’ who makes sure that the sacrifice offered is acceptable to God. . . . this role was so important that only the best existing officer could be appointed to it. The power to decide who was fit to offer and receive involved ultimate control over all the congregation’s possessions as well as the admission and discipline of members. He determined who should pray and who should preach; as doctrinal disputes increased he might alone do both. Since he would decide whether a visitor was to be admitted, correspondence with other churches was also his responsibility” (see also Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, 85). Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 23, also notes that the church elders have the role of offering prayer for the repentant sinner in Hermas, *Simil.* 5.

⁷⁸ Paul Foster, “The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (Part I),” *Expository Times* 117:12 (Sept, 2006): 487 argues for a mid-2nd century dating for these letters to account for the striking differences between the ecclesial concepts in Ignatius and the other Apostolic Fathers, but on the weak basis of extremely late dating for New Testament documents.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Ign. Eph.*, 5:3; *Trall.* 7:1; *Phld.* 3:2, 7:1, 8:1; *Smyrn.* 8:1.

⁸⁰ Or docetic/Gnostic opponents to orthodox teaching as Foster, 492, and Von Campenhausen, 99, believe.

⁸¹ Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 33-34: “Ignatius seems to be writing at a time when divisions in the churches, and especially conflicts over doctrine, make the need for a single bishop as the focus of unity apparent.” Von Campenhausen, 97, believes the advanced hierarchical structure in Ignatius is due to the metropolis scenario of Syrian Antioch.

exclusion and reconciliation would be administered without the bishop's direct authority.⁸² This restriction of authority for major ecclesiastical events and decisions to the bishop would soon become the universal norm in coming generations.⁸³

The earliest post-apostolic church firmly believed in the serious contamination of sin, yet also in the power and grace of God given to the faith community to forgive and heal it. While more rigorist positions that limited the extent of forgiveness for serious sin soon began to take hold, we still see in the writings of each of the Apostolic Fathers the desire for full restoration of any repentant sinner. Since each member of the church possessed the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all were called to keep each other accountable, correct and rebuke sinners, exclude the unrepentant, and receive with love those who repent. Church leaders—whether bishops, elders, or deacons—were especially responsible for dealing with errant sheep with firm love. Ultimately, we see in the Apostolic Fathers that repentance is an ecclesiastical event, not just an individual—it must occur within the church, with genuine repentance being seen and responded to by all.⁸⁴ For time was short, lions lay without, wolves lay within, and every measure must be taken to preserve the purity and holiness of the Bride of Christ for the day when the Bridegroom returns.

⁸² White, "Penance," 891. While not mentioning exclusion (or, as it was becoming, excommunication) in his letter to Polycarp, he urges Polycarp to use his authority as bishop of Smyrna to "exhort" all people and "with gentleness bring the more troublesome ones into submission" (*Pol.* 2:1). Polycarp's own letter to the Philippians indicates more of a presbyterian model in that church (though bishop of Smyrna, he heads the letter as being from him "and the presbyters with him" (1:1; cf. 6:1-2), and it does not mention what measures he undertook (if any) to discipline an avaricious elder (11:1). Also cf. *Hermas*, *Vis.* 2:4.

⁸³ Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, 20: "It was left to the bishop to determine the form in which the Gospel principles should be carried out, and to hold a just balance between severity in the imposition of penance and the divine readiness to grant forgiveness. It was only gradually that forms of administration became fixed. Common problems contributed to the process of unification; thus the rise of heresies like Montanism and Novationism, or mass apostasy during persecutions, called for a uniform regulation of penance sanctioned by conciliar decisions."

⁸⁴ Osborne, 55; Verheyden, 399. Ferguson, "Early Church Penance," 100: "Reconciliation with the church was considered necessary for reconciliation with God, and reconciliation with God was necessary for reconciliation with the church."

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