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Two Treatises on Penance: an Inquiry into Tertullian's Exegesis and Montanism

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Introduction

This article will investigate the mutual influence between the method of biblical interpretation employed by Tertullian (AD 160-225) and his traditionally supposed lapse into Montanism.[1] Such an inquiry probes at least two questions. First is the basic issue of Tertullian's hermeneutical approach.

With the possible exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Tertullian approached the modern historico-grammatical method of biblical interpretation more than any other exegete in the first 1,700 years of Church history. The historical approach to scriptural exegesis has now found something approaching general acceptance among present day scholars. Accordingly, the study of Tertullian's work takes on special historical interest for us as perhaps the earliest example of current practice in exegetical methodology. Happily, Tertullian's hermeneutic did not necessitate the unfortunate modern tendency to oppose faithful submission to biblical authority to an ostensibly objective, detached, scientific examination of texts.

A second and more direct aim of this article is to contribute to the now definitely open question of Tertullian's supposed lapse into Montanism. After decades in which Tertullian's conversion to this ascetic, charismatic

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1   An initially charismatic movement originating in Phrygian Asia Minor which developed ascetic features and flourished in the late second and early third centuries in Roman Africa. See Eusebius *Church History* 5. 16-19 Philip Schaff and Henry Wace edd *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* vol 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982); G Nathanael Bonwetsch *Die Geschichte des Montanismus* (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert 1881); Timothy David Barnes 'The Chronology of Montanism' *Journal of Theological Studies* (NS) 21 1971 pp 403-8; T D Barnes *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971) pp 130-42; W H C Frend *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1965) pp 187-94; Adolf von Harnack *History of Dogma* vol 2 trans Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Norgate 1896) pp 94-108; Jaroslav Pelikan *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* vol 1 *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1971) pp 97-108.

sect was taken for granted, recent scholarship has exposed the weaknesses of such an assumption and challenged its most fundamental conclusions.[2] The two treatises *De paenitentia* and *De pudicitia* provide a unique opportunity for an analysis of both Tertullian's method of biblical interpretation and the question of his relationship to Montanism. Both treatises focus upon the subject of penance, including the question of forgiveness for post-baptismal sins. Also, for those who assert Tertullian's conversion to to Montanism, *De paenitentia* belongs indisputably to his pre-Montanist period while *De pudicitia* falls unquestionably within that period.[3] Thus, the two treatises invite an inquiry into the possibility of a shift in Tertullian's hermeneutical approach which might shed light upon the question of development in his method of biblical interpretation. In addition, this study should help answer the question of the possible impact of Montanism upon Tertullian's exegesis.

Overview

Despite the convergence of theme between the *De paenitentia* and *De pudicitia,* the occasion and tone of the two treatises have little in common. Originally, *De paenitentia,* usually rendered *On Repentence* or *On Penance,* was probably an exhortation to catechumens on the nature and importance of true repentence. Conversely, *De pudicitia,* usually rendered *On Modesty* or *On Purity,* was a harsh attack against a recent action of 'the bishop of bishops' considered lax by Tertullian.[4] This edict, which

2 See eg Gerald Lewis Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 23-5, 54-63; J Pelikan *The Christian Tradition* vol 1 *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* p 123 '. . . even in his Montanism, Tertullian "was in no sense unorthodox, and nowhere makes any claim that the new prophecy supercedes the apostolic faith"'. Cf Ernest Evans *Tertullian's Treatise again Praxeas* (London: SPCK 1948) p 79; Kurt Aland identifies two distinct forms of Montanism, an original charismatic, apocalyptic, and orthodox form and a later, more sober, ethical, and yet more doctrinally suspect form with Tertullian's active period straddling the point of transition between the two. See his 'Der Montanismus und die kleinasiatische Entwürfe' *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 1955 pp 109-16.

3 *De pudicitia* poses special problems for the assertion of Tertullian's conversion to the Phrygian sect since *'apud nos'* in *De pud* 19.5 most plausibly means 'among us Catholics', and the argument against heretical baptism pressed by the treatise was adopted at the Council of Carthage around AD 225. See Gerald Lewis Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 59-60.

4 *TTPP* (*Tertullian, Treatises on Penance: On Penitence and On Purity* trans William P Le Saint vol 28 *Ancient Christian Writers* Johannes Quasten and Walter J Burghhardt edd [Westminster Maryland: The Newman Press 1959]) p 54: *'Audio etiam edictum esse propositum, et quidem peremptorum. Pontifex scilicet maximus, quod <est> episcopus episcoporum, edicit: <<Ego et moechiae et fornicationis delicta paenitentia functis dimitto.>> O edictum cui adscribi non poterit: Bonum Factum!' De pud* 1.6. The identity of *'Pontifex Maximus',* the 'bishop of bishops' cannot be determined with certainty. Rome's bishop could be indicated but the Bishop of Carthage might as easily be in view.

provoked Tertullian's violent wrath, provided for the readmission of adulterous believers to full communion with the Church.

The means of restoration, 'exomologesis', was apparently an established practice for the recovery of those who sinned after baptism. This exomologesis, literally 'outward confession', required the confession of sin and the public performance of penance by offenders in order to satisfy the justice of God. Exomologesis provided external evidence of a confessing offender's true internal penitence.

In *De pudicitia* Tertullian opposed restoration by exomologesis in the case of adultery, because he believed that only God could pardon the capital or irremissible sins of idolatory, adultery and murder. The difference between the two treatises concerns the extent of the application of exomologesis. In *De paenitentia* Tertullian recognised no limit to the Church's power to forgive sins, whereas *De pudicitia* introduces the categories of remissible and irremissible sins: the bishop may forgive the former but only God the latter.

Analysis
We turn now to an examination of Tertullian's exegesis in the two treatises. Passages cited in both *De paenitentia* and *De pudicitia* will receive special attention but we will also consider selected passages cited in only one of these.

Luke 15
In *De paenitentia* Tertullian establishes the possibility and necessity of exomologesis for the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins. Chapter eight contains scriptural proofs for God's mercy.[5] Included are Luke's parables of the lost coin, sheep and son.[6] For Tertullian these parables prove that the Heavenly Father does forgive post-baptismal sins:

> Therefore He will take you back as His son, even though you will have wasted what he gave you. Even though you come back stripped of all things, He will receive you – precisely because you have come back.[7]

Tertullian's inclusion of Revelation 2:18-29 in this same compilation of scriptural proofs indicates his confidence that exomologesis sufficed even for the forgiveness of the so-called capital sins. After noting that the Thyatirenes were threatened and warned to repent, Tertullian says of the Father, 'He would not threaten the impenitent, if He failed to pardon the penitent . . .'.[8]

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5   *TTPP* pp 29-31
6   Luke 15:3-32
7   *TTPP* p 31 '*Is ergo te filium suum, etsi acceptum ab eo prodegeris, etsi nudus redieris, recipiet quia redisti . . .* ' *De paen* 8.8
8   *TTPP* p 30 '*Non comminaretur autem non paenitenti, si non ignosceret paenitenti . . .*' *De paen* 8.2

In *De pudicitia* these same passages are interpreted quite differently. Now Tertullian restricts the application of the three parables to pagans and he finds proof in Revelation 2:18-29 that only *God* may pardon, not the Church.[9] In contradicting his previous view, Tertullian argues from the context of the parables to support his restrictive (some would argue 'Montanist') interpretation. Since the Pharisees' condemnation of Jesus' fraternization with publicans and sinners occasions the parables, Tertullian insists that Christians, and thus the baptized, simply are not at issue.[10] he also exploits the lesser weight of the drachma as compared to the talent to contend that whatever significance the parable may have for the forgiveness of Christians' sins, the 'weightier' capital sins are not envisaged.[11] At this point Tertullian ignores Matthew 18:21-25 in which the king of the parable forgave his servant a debt of ten thousand *talents.*

In *De pudicitia* Tertullian criticizes the more lenient and inclusive understandings of the three Lucan parables. Such readings, he admits, often seem to harmonize beautifully with every detail of the parables. Indeed, his opponents admittedly construct an impressive, comprehensive interpretation. In Tertullian's view, however, it is developed without due attention to previously received doctrine and with excessive eagerness to exploit every detail of the parable for doctrinal reinforcement. He effectively says that his opponents construct their doctrines prior to their exegesis with a view to the exhaustive exploitation of each feature of the parable.[12] Tertullian seems to be arguing that previously established biblical doctrine ought to restrain the confidence and the drive to fit every detail of a parable into a comprehensive picture.[13] The danger of such interpretation is that in it 'a facile typology will be turned in a direction other than that which is required by the substance of each particular parable'.[14]

9   *TTPP* p 111 '*Haec enim erit paenitentia, quam et nos deberi quidem agnoscimus multo magis, sed de venia Deo reservamus.*' *De pud* 19.6
10 *TTPP* pp 68-70
11 *TTPP* p 72 '*Iuxta drachmae quoque exemplum etiam intra domum Dei ecclesiam licet esse aliqua delicta pro ipsius drachmae modulo ac pondere mediocria, quae ibidem delitescentia mox ibidem et reperta statim ibidem cum gaudio emendationis transigantur.*' *De pud* 7.20
12 Tertullian does not name his opponents, which might have been expected of a Montanist convert.
13 '*Vacuit scilicet illis solutis a regula veritatis ea conquirere atque componere, quorum parabolae videntur.*' *De pud* 8.12. 'Of course since they are not bound by the rule of faith, they are free to hunt up and piece together things which seem to be typified by the parables.' *TTPP* p 75. By biblical doctrine we mean what Tertullian refers to as the '*regula fidei*' or '*regula veritas*' which G L Bray has called 'the summary of the *lex* (ie Scripture) which could then be used as the fundamental rule in biblical interpretation'. G L Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) p 103; see also pp 47-54, 98-104. Understandably W P Le Saint finds it 'strange' that the 'Montanist' Tertullian could appeal to such an objective doctrinal standard. See *TTPP* p 225-6 nn 223-4. The denial of Tertullian's conversion to the charismatic sect immediately clears up this confusion.
14 *TTPP* p 74 '. . . *ne aliorsum temperetur facilitas comparationum, quam quo parabolae cuiusque materia mandavit . . .*' *De pud* 8.10

Tertullian recognizes that his own cautious, restrained hermeneutic, circumscribed by previously established and 'canonical' biblical doctrine, will leave ambiguous many details of the parables. However, he insists that the greater dangers of ignoring such restraint demand his more circumspect approach. Therefore, Tertullian prefers to have '. . . an incomplete rather than an incorrect understanding of the Scripture'.[15]

Defending his cautious approach, Tertullian points to the unhappy results of the alternative method. Contrived interpretation of the parables, while 'making sense' of every detail, nevertheless 'destroys the whole economy of salvation, which is founded on the preservation of discipline'.[16] Tertullian contends that 'bad exegesis is no less serious than bad conduct'.[17] These two statements provide the clue to Tertullian's essential exegetical interest in *De pudicitia*, namely the parallel and mutually complementary concerns of biblical authenticity and Christian discipline. In those instances where he advances a more rigorous interpretation against his previous leniency in *De paenitentia*, the dual concerns of biblical honesty and zeal for the will of God in the Christian life provide an adequate explanation for Tertullian's reversal.[18] One might reasonably argue that Tertullian's interest in discipline increasingly gained a certain superiority over his objectivity toward the biblical text. However that may be, his reversals are not proof of an abandonment of the historico-grammatical defence of his exegetical conclusions.

Matthew 18
Tertullian cites passages from Matthew 18 in both *De paenitentia* and *De pudicitia.* In chapter ten of *De paenitentia* Tertullian exhorts those who, having sinned after baptism, shun the exomolgesis necessary for absolution. Apparently many offenders in need of the *paenitentia secunda* shied away from the required confession and public satisfaction because of embarrassment and the fear of ridicule open penance risked. In order to reassure timid offenders, Tertullian reminds them that where 'there are two together, there is the Church . . . and the Church is Christ'.[19] He does not make extensive comments on Matthew 18 in *De paenitentia.* However,

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15 *TTPP* p 79 '*Sed malumnus in scripturis minus, si forte, sapere quam in conversatione.*' *De pud* 9.22
16 *TTPP* '*Totum autem statum salutis in tenore disciplinae constitutum subverti videmus ea interpretatione, quae ex diverso adfectatur.*' *De pud* 9.8
17 *TTPP* '*Non est levior transgressio in interpretatione quam in conversatione.*' *De pud* 9.22
18 G L Bray has suggested that such contradictory conclusions regarding a single issue of discipline represent a discernible consistency in Tertullian's approach, namely, a rigorist conception of disciplinary principles beside lenient application of those same principles in actual cases. See *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) p 4. In any case, plausible explanations of Tertullian's 'reversals' in matters of discipline are available other than either a shift in exegetical approach or a lapse into Montanism.
19 *TTPP* p 33 '*In uno et altero ecclesia est, ecclesia vero Christus . . .*' *De paen* 10.6

for our purpose it is significant that Tertullian considered Matthew 18 an important proof of the Church's role in the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 18 was also cited by Tertullian in *De pudicitia.* Concerning Matthew 18:20 (οὖ γάρ εἰσιν δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν) he disregards the 'two' in 'two or three' and emphasizes the 'three' as perhaps referring to the Trinity. Although the three might not necessarily represent three persons, to the extent that they do, Tertullian insists, they denote spiritual and not carnal persons. Therefore any number of spiritual believers may indeed forgive sins, but these spiritual persons are precisely those who would never dare to usurp the sovereign right of God alone to pardon capital sins.[20]

Before commenting on the issue of loosing and binding in Matthew 18:18, Tertullian insists that the power of the 'keys' was received by Peter personally, not by the Church.[21] However, even conceding the Church's power to bind and loose, Tertullian denies that this prerogative ever extended to the forgiveness of sins, certainly not to capital sins such as adultery, idolatry and murder. Instead, he imports Acts 15:10f into the discussion and contends that Matthew 18 is concerned with the application of the Law upon Gentiles. At this point Tertullian argues a weak case by uncharacteristically ignoring the immediate context of the passage which clearly has the forgiveness of sins in view.[22]

On the command to forgive 'seventy times seven' in Matthew 18:22, Tertullian offers an individualistic application of the text.[23] If someone sins against *you,* then *you* may forgive them seventy times seven. Moreover, the power to forgive sins is comparable to the power to perform marvellous works. The Lord and the apostles combined their prerogative to forgive with such wonders. Accordingly, those who claim the apostles as models ought to produce similar works. Unless and until one heals the sick or raises the dead for example, one ought not arrogate to oneself this other power, the power to forgive sins, which is commensurate with them.[24]

Ezekiel 18 and 33

In *De paenitentia* Ezekiel 18:32[25] and 33:11[26] are both used to prove

20 *TTPP* pp 121-2
21 *TTPP* pp 120-1; cf Matt 16:19
22 See Matt 18:15 ('Ἐὰν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ ὁ ἀδελφός σου . . .) in conjunction with Matt 18:21 (Κύριε, ποσάκις . . . ἀφήσω αὐτῷ) (UBS 2nd ed).
23 '. . . ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά'(UBS 2nd ed)
24 *TTPP* pp 118-20
25 'For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!' (*NIV*)
26 'Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" ' (*NIV*)

God's desire to forgive all sins and his command that pardon be sought.[27] In *De pudicitia* Ezekiel 18:32 is put in the mouth of Tertullian's adversaries as an objection to his discussion of excommunication. Tertullian admits that God is indeed merciful and kind and all of those things his opponents zealously assert. However, God is also just and sets limits to his tenderheartedness. In this instance, instead of directly contradicting the opposing interpretation of a particular passage, Tertullian simply amasses a collection of contradictory passages, indicating his opponents' failure to appropriate the *whole* biblical delineation of God's character with respect to forgiveness.

In *De pudicitia* chapter 18, Tertullian contends that pre-baptismal repentance is the divine preference to the death of the sinner in Ezekiel 33:11. Moreover, God's clemency avails for ignorant sinners, not for those who despise the gift of the *paenitentia prima* of baptism.

1 Corinthians 6
Commenting in *De paenitentia* on 1 Corinthians 6:1-6, Tertullian depicts Satan as grief stricken over the prospect of being judged by a pardoned sinner.[28] In *De pudicitia* Satan is pleased at the opportunity to unleash his attacks against the excommunicated sinner.[29]

1 Timothy 1
Paul ranks himself the foremost of sinners in 1 Timothy 1:16. Tertullian alludes to this passage in *De paenitentia* to establish the applicability of repentance to all sins.[30] In *De pudicitia* the passage is set beside 1 Timothy 1:13 to argue that as transgressions committed in ignorance are differentiated from post-baptismal sins, so ought their pardon to be distinguished.[31]

Matthew 5
Matthew 5:27-8 is used by Tertullian in *De paenitentia* to demonstrate that the divine condemnation of both spiritual and fleshly sins requires their pardon through repentance.[32] In *De pudicitia* the passage serves to prove that, in Christ, the strictness of the Old Testament Law is not abrogated, but rather intensified.[33]

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27 *TTPP* pp 20-1; see also *De res carn* 9 and *Adv Marc* 2.13 and 4.10 in which Tertullian cites the passages to prove the mercy of God. Both *Adv Marc* and *De res carn* were written after Tertullian's supposed conversion to Montanism. This argues against any radical shift in exegetical methodology between the earlier and later Tertullian.
28 *TTPP* p 28
29 *TTPP* p 58
30 *TTPP* p 20
31 *TTPP* pp 106-9
32 *TTPP* pp 17-21
33 *TTPP* pp 65-8

1 Corinthians 5-6 and 2 Corinthians 2

In *De pudicitia* Tertullian rejects the combination of 1 Corinthians 5-6 with 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 as the Church's authorization to pardon penitent fornicators. The crux of his case is the denial that the offender of 2 Corinthians is the fornicator of 1 Corinthians. However, Tertullian also finds support for his thesis independent of 2 Corinthians. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians to mourn treats the offender as dead, and thus beyond the reach of Church-mediated absolution.[34]

In 1 Corinthians 5:5 the Church is instructed to deliver the offender over to Satan both for the destruction of the flesh and 'in order that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord'.[35] Tertullian insists that the 'spirit' in question is not that of the fallen brother, but rather the spirit of the Church. Preservation of the spirit or the soul of the Church requires the expulsion, not the restoration, of the fornicator.[36]

Conclusion

How do we evaluate Tertullian's method of biblical interpretation in *De paenitentia* and *De pudicitia*? Have we uncovered any major shift in methodology in the two treatises? Must *De pudictia* have been written by a Montanist? Tertullian has been described as a remarkably modern interpreter of Scripture in terms of his attention to historico-grammatical concerns. *De pudicitia*, supposedly a Montanist document, evidences no departure from this historico-grammatical method. In both treatises Tertullian merits classification within the 'literal and realistic' school of interpretation.[37] Tertullian is at home, in both treatises, arguing from internal biblical evidence, first from the immediate passage and then from the canon as a whole.[38] The operative word characterizing Tertullian's exegesis is *simplicitas,* which means simplicity or straightforwardness.[39] In *De praesciptione haereticorum* Tertullian acknowledges adherence to the *regula fidei* and harmony as additional tests for orthodox biblical interpretation.[40]

34 *TTPP* pp 90-5
35 '... ἵνα τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῇ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ κυρίου' (UBS 2nd ed); '... *ut spiritus salvus sit in die Domini*' (Vulgate)
36 *TTPP* pp 85-90
37 Frederic W Farrar *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1986) p 177. Cf T D Barnes *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971) pp 127, 172, 183; G L Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 52-3 78-80
38 Where Tertullian deviates from a straightforward historico-grammatical exegesis of particular texts, he is most often driven by some interest touching upon sanctification and holiness about which other Scriptures have convinced him.
39 Cf eg T P O'Malley S J *Tertullian and the Bible* (Utrecht: Dekker & Van De Vegt NV Nijmegen 1967) pp 166-172; G L Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) p 98
40 Tertullian *The Prescription Against Heretics* 13-14 in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* vol 3 *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson edd (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1986) pp 249-50; cf *De praescr haer* 13.1-14.14

In addition to a doctrinal *regula fidei,* Tertullian also insisted upon what Adolf von Harnack has called a *'regula disciplinae* upon which he [placed] great value'.[41] In both the earlier and later works Tertullian recognised a two-pronged test for valid exegsis:

> *Ubi enim apparuerit esse veritatem disciplinae et fidei christinae,
> illic erit veritas scripturarum et expositionum et omnium
> traditionum christianorum.*[42]

Tertullian's ever present zeal for holiness in the Christian life compelled him to call for radical, corrective, disciplinary measures. In the case of *De pudicitia* this meant the denial of absolution for all capital offenders, including adulterers. This rigorist contradiction of his earlier view in *De paenitentia* does not involve a wholesale methodological reversal wherein Christian discipline replaces Scripture and tradition as the yardstick in biblical interpretation. Instead we should acknowledge in Tertullian a relative heightening of the role of the concern for Christian 'holiness and the will of God'.[43] To the extent that issues of sanctification and discipline are allowed to influence Tertullian's exegetical conclusions, perhaps one might argue that historico-grammatical concerns become proportionately less determinative.[44]

Still, Tertullian's fixation upon holiness was always there.[45] As, in Tertullian's view, the moral laxity of the Church increased, manifestations of the Spirit's gifts disappeared. This circumstance called into question the validity of her claim to be the true Church. In any case, Tertullian's tolerance of Montanism had reference not to doctrinal matters but to rigoristic moral seriousness. It has even been suggested that Montanism,

41 Adolf von Harnack *History of Dogma* vol 2 trans Neil Buchanan (London: Williams and Norgate 1896) p 31 n 6
42 *De praescr haer* 19.3 'For where true discipline and Christian faith will appear, there will be the true Scriptures and expositions and all of the Christian traditions' (my translation). See G L Bray's treatment of the interplay between Scripture, discipline and nature in Tertullian's exegesis *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 111-23.
43 Quote taken from the title of G L Bray's monograph.
44 On the over-riding of historico-grammatical concerns in Tertullian's exegesis, see G L Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 147-50.
45 Though direct testimony is lacking, it has been widely conjectured that Tertullian's initial attraction to the Church, and perhaps his conversion, focused upon the pure and disciplined lives of her adherents, and especially the courage of Christian martyrs. See Johannes Quasten *Patrology* vol 2 (Westminster MD: The Newman Press 1953) pp 246-8 but note T D Barnes' scepticism *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971) pp 245-7.

far from effecting any profound change in Tertullian, was probably influenced more by him than the reverse.[46]

Tertullian's conception of the authority of Scripture did not undergo any profound change, but his zealous pursuit of the holy life did, on occasion, obscure his vision of the wider biblical message. At times, Tertullian subsumed the cross of Christ under the commands of Christ. Perhaps we could say that in his zeal for Christ's honour as the Lord who requires and merits obedience, Tertullian neglected the honour due to the Saviour whose atoning death 'has fully satisfied for all [our] sins'.[47]

Nevertheless, Tertullian prophetically voiced what must remain a continuing expectation for holiness in the transformed, spirit-filled, Christian life. The Christ who died to liberate sinners from the curse of the Law and the coming wrath also came to free sinners and to accomplish in them what the Law could not.[48] The Lord gives what he commands. While we dare not go as far as Harnack, for whom Christianity was essentially a matter of behaviour and for that reason lauded the 'Montanist' Tertullian as 'an old-fashioned Christian', to whom the gospel was *conscientia religionis, disciplina vitae*' and *'spes fidei'*, we should insist that the sanctifying impulse valued and emphasised by Tertullian must not be marginalized in a genuinely biblical conception of the Christian life.[49]

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46 Jaroslav Pelikan *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* vol 1 *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1971) p 101 'Not for its theological novelty, if any, was he drawn to it, but for its moral zeal, so that, in Bonwetsch's apt formulation, "what he had previously demanded as a consequence of a pietistic and rigoristic conception of Christianity, he now required as a Montanist on the basis of divine authority".' '. . . Tertullian himself was obviously a man of such strong mind and will as to support the conjecture that he changed Montanism at least as much as he was changed by it.'

47 Philip Schaff ed and trans *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* vol 3 *The Creeds Of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1990) Heidelberg Catechism Answer #1 p 308

48 Rom 8:3-4

49 Adolf von Harnack *History of Dogma* vol 2 trans Neil Buchanan (London: Williams and Norgate 1896) p 11. Cf Louis Bouyer *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: Desclee Co 1960) pp 453-4. Also note these laudatory remarks: '. . . this hotblooded African, this stern foe of heretics, this resolute champion of *auctoritas* and *ratio*, this dogmatic advocate, this man, at once Churchman and enthusiast, nevertheless possessed a deep feeling for the main substance of the Gospel and a good knowledge of it as well': Harnack *What is Christianity?* trans Thomas Bailey Sanders (London: Williams and Norgate 1901) p 216. Despite such high praise, Harnack found in Tertullian conflicting views of the Church and held that the African Father shared the blame for the 'Gnostification' of the gospel owing to 'juristic bias' and contaminating philosophies, especially Stoicism. See his *History of Dogma* vol 2 pp 79, 196-200, 257, 261f and vol 4 pp 121-3 n 3. On the bewildering array of opinions asserting philosophical influence in Tertullian, see G L Bray *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979) pp 34-6, and note this pointed rejoinder to Harnack on p 87 '. . . there was a perfectly orthodox form of gnosis which was never condemned by the church'.

We also applaud Tertullian's penetrating insight into the subtlety of sin. He demolished the evasive, self-deceptive reasoning of the sinner. God's commands must not be sidestepped, God's mercy cannot be manipulated, and God's kindness is meant to produce repentance. Quite simply, Tertullian expected that spirit-filled Christians would make use of their God-given power to advance in righteousness. The laxity of even the catechumens of Tertullian's day meant, for him, that the prerogative of God alone to forgive post-baptismal sins needed reassertion. *De pudicitia,* which attempted just this reassertion, did not abandon the historico-grammatical approach to the Bible and certainly does not require its author's lapse into Montanism to explain its contents.

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