

The Early Church Fathers on Confession / Reconciliation

On the evening of the first Easter, Jesus gave his apostles the authority to forgive or retain sins in his name (John 20:20-23). This does not refer to the general body of believers as some claim. In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus said: "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions." Clearly believers do not have the option of retaining any one's sins. The passage in John 20 refers to the sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession, as it is more commonly known.

The Didache

Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . , On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure (*Didache* 14 [A.D.70]).

The Letter of Barnabas

You shall judge righteously. You shall not make a schism, but you shall pacify those that contend by bringing them together. You shall confess your sins. (*Letter of Barnabas* 19 [A.D. 74]).

Ignatius of Antioch

Where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 3 [A.D. 110]).

Tertullian

The Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge and adjudge (*Repentance* 10:21 [A.D. 203]).

Hippolytus

[The bishop conducting the ordination shall pray] God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your Royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles. . . and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command (*Apostolic Tradition* 3 [A.D. 215]).

Origen

[A filial method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, "I said, to the Lord, I will accuse myself of my iniquity" (*Homilies in Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]).

Cyprian

The Apostle [Paul] likewise bears witness and says: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord "[I Cor. 11:27]. But [the impenitent] spurn and despise all these warnings; before their sins are expiated, before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at the hand of the priest (*The Lapsed* 15:1-3 [A.D. 251]).

Firmilian of Caesarea

Therefore, the power of forgiving sins was given to the Apostles and to the Churches which these men sent by Christ, established; and to the bishops who succeeded them (*Letter to Cyprian* 75:16 [A.D. 268]).

Lactantius

But, however, because all the separate assemblies of heretics call themselves Christians in preference to others, and think that theirs is the Catholic Church, it must be known that the true Catholic Church is that in which there is confession and repentance, which treats in a wholesome manner the sins and wounds to which the weakness of the flesh is liable (*Divine Institutes* 4 [A.D. 307]).

Hilary of Poitiers

The power of binding and loosing given to the Apostles: In our present condition we are all subdued by the terror of that greatest dread. And now, out in front of that terror, He sets the irrevocable apostolic judgement, however severe, so that those whom they shall bind on earth, that is, whomsoever they leave bound in the knots of their sins; and those whom they loose, which is to say, those who by their confession receive grace unto salvation: these, in accord with the apostolic sentence, are bound or loosed also in heaven (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 18:8 [A.D. 353-355]).

Basil the Great

It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God's mysteries is entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist [Matthew 3:6], but in Acts [19:18] they confessed to the apostles. (*Rules Briefly Treated* 288 [A.D. 370]).

Ambrose of Milan

Let us now see whether the Spirit forgives sins. But on this point, there can be no doubt, since the Lord Himself said: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit. Whosoever sins ye forgive they shall be forgiven." See that sins are forgiven through the Holy Spirit. But men make use of their ministry for the forgiveness of sins, they do not exercise the right of any power of their own. For they forgive sins not in their own name but in that of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (*On the Holy Spirit* 3:137 [A.D. 381]).

But what was impossible was made possible by God, who gave us so great a grace. It seemed likewise impossible for sins to be forgiven through penance; yet Christ granted even this to His Apostles, and by His Apostles it has been transmitted to the offices of priest (*On Penance* 2:2:12 [inter 384-394]).

Gregory of Nyssa

For if the confession of the revered and precious Names of the Holy Trinity is useless, and the customs of the Church unprofitable, and if among these customs is the sign of the cross, prayer, baptism, confession of sins, a ready zeal to keep the commandment, right ordering of character... (*Against Eunomius* 11:5 [A.D. 382]).

John Chrysostom

Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed." Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding: but they can only bind the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? "Whose sins you shall forgive," he says, "they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men (*The Priesthood* 3:5 [A.D. 387]).

Augustine

Those of you who have defiled yourselves with unlawful sexual relations apart from your wives, if besides your wives you have slept with another woman; do penance, as it is done in the Church, so that the Church may pray for you. Nobody should say to himself, "I do it privately, I deal with God privately. God knows and He will forgive me, because I do penance in my heart." So, was there no point in the Lord saying, what you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 18:18, 16:19)? So, were the keys given to the Church of God for nothing? Are we to nullify the Gospel, nullify the words of Christ? Am I to promise you what He refuses you? Wouldn't I just be deceiving you? (*Sermon* 392 3 [A.D. 420]).