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SIN AND SALVATION

THE SINS OF THE CHURCH

THE WRITERS

Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536)

A humanist and Renaissance scholar, Erasmus engaged, among other things, in pioneering work in New Testament and patristic scholarship.

Cyprian of Carthage (c. 210–258)

The bishop of Carthage during periods of persecution, Cyprian is best remembered for his moderate policies for readmitting Christians who had lapsed from the faith. He was himself eventually martyred.

John Chrysostom (347–407)

The patriarch of Constantinople is revered for his preaching, and is commemorated with his contemporaries Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzus.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215)

An early Christian philosopher who worked to make Christianity comprehensible to a Hellenistic audience.

Basil the Great (329–379)

A bishop of Caesarea, Basil actively combatted Arianism and wrote several works on theology and monastic life.

John Milton (1608–1674)

Best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton argued extensively against both monarchy and a state church, promoting religious toleration and free expression.

Third Isaiah gives a clarion call for confronting religious and political corruption: “Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet” (Is 58:1, NRSVUE)! The problems are extensive and serious: hypocrisy, quarreling, violence and oppression cause God to look with disfavor on the religious activities of a selfish and self-serving people (58:3–4). In contrast, God proclaims they should eradicate injustice and provide for the poor and homeless. Only when God’s people fully live out their faith in love for the world around them can they truly be said to “take delight in the Lord” (58:14). Unfortunately, Christians throughout church history have too often ignored this vital teaching.

The scripture readings in this booklet emphasize this point. They warn against a hypocritical religion which fosters judgmentalism (Mt 7:1–5) and status-consciousness (Jm 2:1–7), and instead encourage God’s people to “do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow” (Is 1:17–18, NRSVUE). Doing great religious works without loving others can even make those works no more than worthless noise (1 Cor 13:1–3).

The need for love is underscored by Desiderius Erasmus when he warns that Christian leaders who lack love “savour or taste of Christ nothing at all” and feel nauseous when hearing the word of God. Cyprian of Carthage focuses deeply on the importance of love (for which he uses the term *charity*, which in Christian thought is the highest form of love), saying loving unity is essential in Christian churches. His concern is not merely theoretical—the church in Carthage split over whether to forgive Christians who had previously renounced the faith under persecution.

As Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 make clear, one of the main ways we foster love and unity is by refraining from judgmental thoughts and actions. John Chrysostom says a Christian who judges others is a hypocrite who “puts forward a mask of benevolence” but “is doing a work of the utmost wickedness.” This is particularly important when engaging in charitable works. We are to give to all, Clement of Alexandria reminds us, but equally important is *how* we give. We should not withhold aid based on appearances, but instead remember that within each person who comes for assistance “dwells the hidden Father, and His Son.”

This love should extend to all creation, of course, but many Christians promote an entirely exploitative view of nature (rooted in part in the work of the 16th–17th century Anglican philosopher Francis Bacon). Basil the Great, however, says our approach to the world around us should appreciate and nurture the “fellowship and harmony” and “one universal sympathy” for which God created it.

All of this depends upon humility, realizing that our knowledge and beliefs are always incomplete, and therefore our self-interest is never fully grounded. John Milton thus says the “golden rule in Theology” is a continual search for truth, and it is this search which “makes up the best harmony in a Church.”