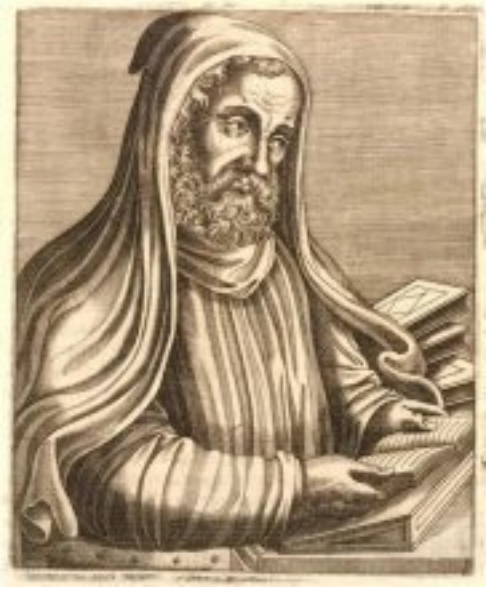
Patiently Bear: Tracking Down An Internet Quote

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 18 April 2023 - 20:31



Read time: 7 minutes
A few weeks ago, our minister quoted an excerpt from a conversation between John Chrysostom and an empress. She threatened him with exile and execution. He replied valiantly that she could do nothing to take away his ultimate treasure and comfort. It is a poignant story. But as I sat there, listening, a doubt crept in.

I knew John Chrysostom lived after Constantine, so Christian persecution in the Roman Empire had ended. Would a conversation like this have taken place? If this was a dialogue, how would this have been recorded, i.e. what is the primary source? (I later learned that John Chrysostom was exiled, but not because of general persecution of Christians.)

So I began digging on the Internet. Thankfully, someone had the same doubts, and done the heavy lifting and found the original quote [1]. The essence of the quote is true, but it was not said in a dialogue with the empress, but something to the same effect was said by John in a homily (sermon) regarding the matter that eventually got him exiled.

An interesting quote from that site regarding a collection of early Christian writings: "It seems a volume set like [Philip Schaff's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*] is so large, we hardly know what is there." How true! There are so many early Christian writings, I can imagine that even professional historians studying the early church fathers probably can't get through all the material available.

The journey described on that page reminded me of a journey I had started myself to find a primary source, and it inspired me to push through to the end. There is a quote, attributed to Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, which goes as follows:

> Let a man mercifully correct what he can, let him patiently bear what he cannot correct and groan and sorrow over it with love.

I love this quote, and have used it on this website before. It captures so well what it is for a Christian to be in the world, but not of it. However, the quote never came with a reference; at least, not to a primary source. I found a few instances of this quote on the Internet attributing it to Cyprian, e.g.

- https://cainscommonplaces.blogspot.com/2013/06/church-discipline.html [2]
- https://charliewingard.com/merciful-correction-patient-forbearance/ [3]

To complicate matters, I found one instance which attributed the quote to Augustine of Hippo. The game was thus on to find the true origin of this quote.

I did my digging over a couple of days, with a considerable gap between them. Therefore I'm not able to precisely retrace how I found what I found. The first step was that some websites did reference the quote in a modern day book. It was quoted in Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609 [4] by Scott M. Manetsch, which was published in 2015. This book referenced the quote as coming from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I found a useful resource online which was an interlinear translation of the Institutes with English and Latin. Having the original Latin1 proved to be helpful in the end. Calvin wrote [5]:

> Hence he [Augustine] infers from Cyprian [the quote in question].

Initially I did not know which work of Augustine the quote appeared in. This was daunting, as there is an enormous corpus of surviving writings from Augustine. I recently heard someone say that Augustine's writings is equivalent to a modern day author publishing a 300 page book every year of their career. Thankfully, in the Latin of *Institutes*, I saw that the reference was to Augustine's *Against the Epistle of Parmenian*2. In turn, I could only find a Latin translation of this work (thanks to this person on a message board [6]). I found the quotation in book 3, paragraph 15 [7].

Great, now the quote had been tracked down to Augustine; can it—even in essence—be made back to Cyprian?

Not quite. As Calvin wrote in the *Institutes*, Augustine *inferred* from Cyprian, he did not quote Cyprian directly. The Latin translation of *Against the Epistle of Parmenian* helpfully contained a reference to the work of Cyprian being referenced, namely Cyprian's "On the Lapsed" / "On the Fallen" (*De Lapsis* in Latin)3. Specifically, book 3, paragraph 16 [8]. Augustine cites the end of this paragraph, which itself is a quote from Psalm 89:30. In the immediate context of the quote, Cyprian says, in essence, that we must bear with falsehoods and evil which we see around us, because we know God knows about it, and will bring correction and judgement. From this Augustine formulated the quote in question. Therefore, I conclude, the quote as we find it on the Internet (and in Manetsch's 2015 book) is from Augustine, not Cyprian (although Cyprian is the "giant" on whose shoulders Augustine stood in this instance).

In conclusion, we are incredibly blessed that we have some many ancient resources available at our fingertips. Surely we would be the envy of any scholar who lived before the Digital Age! But it is lamentable that all this rich information can be a bit disorganised, and that much of it remains unexplored (outside of academia and esoteric scholarship). Every website which has made these resources available should be commended, but it still feels like more can be done to make them

accessible, not merely available. Lastly, honest mistakes can be made when citing a source. But Christians should be vigilant to not propagate mistakes (or, at worst, deliberate misinformation). It can be tedious to track down a reference (it took me hours to verify this one quotation). But I believe it is important, as Christians should be people of integrity. As such, my appeal: please always cite your sources, preferably from the primary sources! We do have the means to do so without labouring away in obscure libraries!

- 1. At this time, academic and theological work in the West was still largely written in Latin, even by Reformed theologians like John Calvin.
- 2. I should add that I cannot read or speak Latin, Greek or Hebrew. But because of Latin influence on English, and a little bit of knowledge about Latin, Greek and Hebrew that I've picked up over the years, I can get by, particularly (in the case of Greek or Hebrew) by leveraging tools such as Strong's Concordance] [9].
- 3. Augustine was writing against Parmenian [10], a Donatist [11] bishop. Donatists believed that Christians who caved under persecution (even if they did not become full apostates) could no longer be valid leaders in the church. Augustine held another view, which is that they could be forgiven and let into the church again. Augustine found inspiration in Cyprian's *De Lapsis*. Cyprian wrote this work before Donatism emerged, and it concerned how people who renounced their faith during persecution should be treated. Cyprian was of the opinion that they should be able to be forgiven and readmitted to the church if they repented.

Categories:

- Encouragements [12]

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- john chrysostom [13]
- cyprian [14]
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- scott manetsch [21]
- philip schaff [22]

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Links
[1] https://olddeadguys.com/2017/11/12/chrysostoms-reply-to-eudoxia/
[2] https://cainscommonplaces.blogspot.com/2013/06/church-discipline.html
[3] https://charliewingard.com/merciful-correction-patient-forbearance/
[4] https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/calvins-company-of-pastors-pastoral-care-and-the-emerging-reformed-church/
[5] http://calviniopera.dothome.co.kr/instxmli.php?page1=4&page2=12&page3=11&dic=LaEnDic
[6] https://www.puritanboard.com/threads/augustines-against-a-letter-of-parmenian.66326/
[7] https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/PLD/navigate/2739/2
[8] https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.iii.html#iv.v.iii-p16

[9] https://strongsconcordance.org/
[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmenian
[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donatism
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