

CHURCH HISTORY (8): Augustine and the Donatists

Although the Donatist controversy began in the early part of the fourth century, it would come to a head in the beginning of the fifth century. Unlike the Pelagian controversy (which we will consider next week), the Donatist controversy exposed some weaknesses in Augustine's doctrine (esp. his view of the church). As Warfield said, "It was Augustine who gave us the Reformation. For the Reformation, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church."¹

I. Augustine and the Donatists

1. *The origin of Donatism.* Donatism grew out of the church's last persecution from Rome. This began in 303 under Diocletian the emperor, and lasted until 313 and Constantine's conversion. "People were required to give over the Scriptures that they had in their homes or in their churches, and those were burned. Those who did were viewed as traitors (traditors) by the faithful" (Calhoun).² Following the persecution, disagreement came over the traitors. Should they be allowed back into the church or not? The church was divided. "The last great persecution under Diocletian had left the Church in North-West Africa bitterly divided. Large numbers of Christians refused to recognize the new bishop of Carthage, Caecilian (appointed in 311), because one of the bishops who ordained him had allegedly handed over the Bible to be burnt during Diocletian's persecution. The result was a split: two rival Churches came into being, each claiming to be the true Catholic Church in North-West Africa. One Church was led by Caecilian, the other by a rival bishop called Donatus (died 355). The followers of Donatus were called *Donatists*" (Needham).³

When Constantine became emperor in 313, he ordered all church property that was confiscated under Diocletian's persecution to be returned. "In North-West Africa, the local government gave the property to Caecilian and his followers. The Donatists appealed to Constantine to recognize them as the rightful owners of the property, on the grounds that they were the true Catholic Church in North-West Africa" (Needham).⁴ In 316, Constantine assembled a Council, wherein it was ruled "even the ordination administered by a traditor is valid, provided only that the persons so ordained remain reasonable; also, persons who had been baptized by heretics should be questioned only upon the Creed" (Seeberg).⁵ "Accounting the Donatists enemies of the State, Constantine deprived them of their churches, confiscated their property, and banished their bishops" (Armitage).⁶ After Constantine realized this failed to persuade the Donatists to return in peace, he cancelled the decree in 321. "For the next 100 years, the Christians of North-West Africa would be equally and bitterly divided between the two groups" (Needham).⁷

The *Donatists* were so called after the leader, Donatus. They were not heretics. In doctrine they were entirely orthodox. But they caused a division in the Church. During the severe persecution by Diocletian many Christians had lapsed; that is to say, they had denied the faith. The Donatists thought that the lapsed should not be re-admitted to the Church. Some bishops had surrendered their copies of the Bible to the government officials to be burned by them. The *Donatists* believed that such bishops were not

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 4:130

² David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 11:2

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:181

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:181-182

⁵ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:314

⁶ Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptist*, 1:189

⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:182

worthy to administer the sacraments or ordain others as bishops. They withdrew and organized churches of their own. There were many Donatist churches in North-West Africa.⁸

2. *The spread of Donatism.* Although persecution ended in Constantine's conversion (313), the merger of church and state brought further concerns for the Donatists. The movement grew rapidly throughout the fourth century, largely in reaction to this merger. "By the time we come to Saint Augustine, Donatism was a very active force in North African life and had been for almost a century. Perhaps the majority of Christians in North Africa were Donatists. This was not a small movement. It was, particularly in North Africa, a major movement" (Calhoun).⁹ "As Jerome stated in 392, the religion of Donatus 'gained practically all Africa.' Though Donatus himself died in 355, for thirty years after, his successor, a non-North African named Parmenian (362-392), ruled his church with assurance and vigor. No Emperor could shake him. The Orthodox were reduced to a calm though inwardly protesting minority" (Frend).¹⁰ After the death of Parmenian in 392, the Donatists largely spread into three forms: radical, strict, and moderate. (1) Radical. These despised the state and often took up arms against it. "Around the year 340, there appeared among the Donatists a group called *circumcellions*—a name which probably means they had their headquarters in martyrs' shrines. They were mostly peasants who resorted to violence. They were convinced that there was no death more glorious than those of the martyrs, and that now persecution in the old style had ended, those who died in battle against the perverters of the faith were also martyrs" (Gonzalez).¹¹ They were despised by all strict and moderate Donatists. (2) Strict. These tended to view themselves as the only true church. They necessitated rebaptism for all who joined their ranks (even those who left the catholic church in good standing). It was this form of Donatism that Augustine most strongly opposed. (3) Moderate. These mediated a moderate view between the catholic and strict Donatist groups. They upheld the major Donatist convictions, while not un-churching non-Donatists.

The church on the very same street in Hippo as Augustine's church was a larger, more impressive Donatist church with another bishop and a larger congregation. Perhaps it seems commonplace to us in the West to have churches all over the place, even on the same street, but you can imagine how strange it was at that time to have a Catholic church and a Donatist church in the small town of Hippo on the same street. While Augustine was preaching in his church, he said he could hear the singing in the other church. He did not like that singing much; he called it 'the roaring of lions.' He was biased, undoubtedly, against this rival church and its singing.¹²

In 392, when Augustine became bishop of Hippo, Donatism had a strong presence throughout North Africa. This was especially true in Carthage. In 405 a synod of Carthage petitioned the emperor (Honorius) to issue penal laws against the Donatists. This was issued but repealed in 409. In 411 a disputation was arranged in Carthage. Two hundred and eighty-six catholic and two hundred and seventy-nine Donatist bishops were present. Augustine represented the former (catholic). "For three days the debate lasted, and very severe measures were decided upon against them. In 414 they lost all civil rights, and in 415 they were forbidden to assemble for worshipping, under penalty of death" (Seeberg).¹³ "Donatism did not disappear all at once, in fact Donatist churches remained in North Africa

⁸ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 80

⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 11:2

¹⁰ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 654-655

¹¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:156

¹² David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 11:2

¹³ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:315

all the way until the seventh century when the Muslims came in and destroyed both the Catholic and the Donatist churches. Some people think that the reason Christianity so failed in North Africa, collapsed so completely, was that several centuries of antagonism existed between these two groups of Christians. That made it much easier for Islam to totally overrun the churches in North Africa" (Calhoun).¹⁴

3. *The beliefs of Donatism.* The beliefs of the Donatists have been hotly debated. Some have viewed them as heretical, whereas others have viewed them a necessary correction to carnal nominalism. It must be remembered that the views of the Donatists varied widely among themselves. "The presentations of both Seeberg (favored Augustine) and Verduin (favored Donatists) remind us of the danger of a simplistic, tunnel-visioned, black and white view of history. Such an approach tends to whitewash our heroes and vilify our enemies, just as Verduin vilifies Augustine and Seeberg the Donatists. Both the Donatists and Augustine embody great ideas which we must not disregard" (Waldron).¹⁵ In his, *History of Christian Thought*, Justo Gonzalez summarized the major points of contention (between the Donatists and Catholics) as three: "the nature of the church, the relationship between church and state, and the sacraments."¹⁶

(1) The nature of the church. The Donatist controversy largely concerned the nature of the church. "Although the controversy with the Donatists had many ramifications, the heart of the disagreement was the question of how to delineate the church of Christ. During this controversy Augustine described the church as the body of Christians (*Corpus Christianum*), and the Donatists continued to think of it as the body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*). Augustine was quite aware that this was the central issue. He said, 'The point at issue between us and the Donatists is the question where this body is located, that is, what and where is the Church' (Verduin).¹⁷ Augustine viewed the church as comprised of all baptized people. This meant, those baptized were viewed as a member of the body even though they evidenced no fruit nor attended church. The Donatists believed in a pure or regenerate church. A church comprised of only professing believers who evidenced their faith by a life of principled obedience. "The Donatists continued to see the church as a small body of the saved surrounded by the unregenerate. They said that with the Constantinian change 'the tares have verily increased but the wheat has decreased.' In their eyes a church that embraced a total citizenry was no longer the church of Christ" (Verduin).¹⁸ "The Donatists believed the true Church of Christ is the assembly of really pious persons only, and admits of no merely nominal membership. They dreaded any form of un-Christian membership which eats out the spiritual fellowship of a Gospel Church" (Armitage).¹⁹

During the fourth century, under the influence of Constantine, churches were divided into regions or parishes, that included a geographical location. Those who lived in that region, and were baptized, belonged to that church. Over each region was a bishop elected by church and state. "Donatism was a rebellion against the encroachments of 'Christian sacralism (i.e., the conflation of church and state),' or – as we could call it – 'Constantinianism.' It is an attempt to conserve the concept of the Church 'based on personal faith' and to obstruct the drift toward a Church 'including all in a given locality'" (Verduin).²⁰ It's possible, as many have suggested, that the Donatists were overly strict in pursuing a pure membership. Most likely the truth lies in-between Augustine and the stricter Donatists. Even Seeberg (who defended Augustine and condemned the Donatists), reluctantly admits this: "It is certain

¹⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 11:5-6

¹⁵ Sam Waldron, *unpublished lectures on Church History*, 31-32

¹⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2:28

¹⁷ Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 107-108

¹⁸ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 33

¹⁹ Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptist*, 1:187

²⁰ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 33

that, viewed dogmatically, the catholic position was the more correct, yet its victory was not a clear step forward. The ancient idea, that the people of God should consist of holy children of God, was forced another step backward."²¹

The Donatist controversy was a conflict between separatism (the church made of individuals) and Catholicism (the church made of a collective whole); between the idea of the church as an exclusive community of regenerate saints and the idea of the church as the general Christendom of state and people. It revolved around the doctrine of the essence of the Christian church, and, in particular, of the predicate of holiness. It resulted in the completion by Augustine of the catholic dogma of the church. The Donatists started from an ideal and spiritualistic conception of the church as a fellowship of saints, which in a sinful world could only be imperfectly realized.²²

In response to the Donatists, Augustine suggested the church should be viewed in two ways: (a) the visible church. This refers to all baptized people. Because baptism, according to Augustine, removed original sin, every baptized person was a part of the church (regardless how they lived). "Augustine maintained that the church did not consist solely and in every sense of those who were practically holy. It was like Noah's ark which contained clean and unclean animals, or the field which contained both tares and wheat which may not be separated till harvest" (Waldron).²³ And thus, for Augustine, the visible church remained holy (even though it was comprised of saved and unsaved). "Augustine rejected the Donatist's view of a pure church. Until the day of judgment, he said, the church must be a mixed multitude. Both good and bad people are in it. To support this idea, he appealed to Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares (Matt.13:24-30), overlooking the fact that Jesus was not speaking of the church but of the whole world" (Shelley).²⁴

(b) The invisible church. For Augustine, this referred to saints filled with love. These are true Christians joined to Christ by faith. Seeberg suggested that Augustine learned this from the Donatists, and was in part a concession. "Augustine's doctrine of the church is a complicated structure. Ideas evolved in the conflict with the Donatists, the popular conception of the church, his own doctrine of grace, and certain Donatistic tendencies are here brought into combination. Augustine was influenced especially by Tyconius's (a prominent Donatist) conception of the church" (Seeberg).²⁵ Augustine believed there was a church within a church. Seeberg summarized him: "It is not being outwardly in the church, nor partaking of the sacraments, that decides, but belonging to the church inwardly."²⁶ Augustine himself said: "But the enemies of brotherly love, whether they are openly without, or appear to be within, are false Christians, and antichrists. For when they have found an opportunity, they go out, as it is written, 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for had they been of us, they would not doubt have continued with us.' He does not say that they ceased to be of us, by going out, but that they went out because they were not of us."²⁷

(2) The relation of church and state. The Donatists separated the church and state, and viewed the church as a small minority within a fallen and hostile world. "The Donatists were accustomed to having Rome run things on the political level, and they no doubt realized with alarm that because of the Constantinian change the church would henceforth also have to take orders from Rome. This no doubt

²¹ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:315

²² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:365

²³ Sam Waldron, *unpublished lectures on Church History*, 31-32

²⁴ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 137

²⁵ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:324

²⁶ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:324

²⁷ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 4:445

contributed to the Donatists' attempt to obstruct the change" (Verduin).²⁸ "Donatists under the pressure of historical circumstances came to advocate certain general ideas of the nature of the church and the relation of the church to the state and the world which approximated and anticipated later Baptist views" (Waldron).²⁹ With the conversion of Constantine and the "Christianizing" of the Roman Empire, coercion became the new form of evangelism. "It was during Augustine's running battle with the Donatists that his theology of coercion took shape. Although the controversy with the Donatists had many ramifications, the heart of the disagreement was the question of how to delineate the church of Christ" (Verduin).³⁰ For Augustine, the state possessed the authority to punish heretics, and return them to the church by force and coercion. "To further support the bizarre idea that coercion was now right and proper, Augustine also referred to the parable of the wedding feast (Luke 14), and to the phrase 'compel them to come in.' Such exegetical stunting could be called clever if the matter had not been so serious. No responsible exegete would hang such a heavy load on such a frail a peg, the mere sequence in a parable of the verbs 'bring' and 'compel'" (Verduin).³¹ Augustine wrote in his work, *The Correction of the Donatists*: "Why should not the Church use force in compelling her lost sons to return, if the lost sons compelled others to their destruction? Is it not a part of the care of he shepherd, when any sheep have left the flock, to bring them back to the fold when he has found them, by the fear or even the pain of the whip, if they show symptoms of resistance?"³²

Christ shows this plainly enough in the parable of the wedding feast. After he had summoned the invited ones and the servants had said that it had been done as ordered and that there was still room, the Master says, 'Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in so that my house may be full.' Observe that with reference to those who came in during the former period it was 'bring them in' – by which the incipient situation in the Church was signified, during which she was but growing toward the position of being able to coerce. Since it is right by reason of the increased strength and might to coerce men to the feast of eternal salvation therefore it was said later to 'compel them.'³³

Augustine was one of the, if not the greatest men the Holy Spirit has ever given the church, yet he was the first and the chief architect of the theological justification for the use of physical coercion to enforce church unity. It was to his writings the Roman monster would go to justify its bloodbaths. When all has been said by way of legitimate qualification of Augustine's true teaching, this stain cannot be removed from his life. This is a great caution against too great attachment to any uninspired teacher.³⁴

The Constantinian change put an end to membership by decision: from that time on people were said to be Christians without any foregoing struggle of soul, which is impossible. They had never pondered an alternative, nor did they know there was one. They were Christians willy-nilly – a contradiction in terms. What was left of faith went flabby, for faith can be faith only when it stands in lively tension with its opposite. Grace lost is conditional quality, and salvation become something that is done to people. The call to conversion grew silent, and the urge to accept was heard no more.³⁵

²⁸ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 33

²⁹ Sam Waldron, *unpublished lectures on Church History*, 31-32

³⁰ Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 107

³¹ Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 109

³² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Augustine, 4:633

³³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Augustine, 1:546-547

³⁴ Sam Waldron, *unpublished lectures on Church History*, 31-32

³⁵ Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 113

(3) The nature and practice of the sacraments. The Donatists closely connected the piety of the clergy with the efficacy of the sacrament. "The opposition between the Donatistic and catholic churches was based upon their different conceptions of the sacraments. From the time of the Council of Arles (316), the great point of discussion was whether baptism and ordination administered by an unworthy person retained their validity" (Seeberg).³⁶ The Donatists viewed any baptism administered by traitors, as invalid. Since most (all) Christians equated baptism with forgiveness, those baptized by traitors, had to be rebaptized to join a Donatist church. While Augustine viewed the sacrament of baptism as bestowing forgiveness, he attributed no virtue to the water, but to God's grace as bestowed through the sacrament. Thus, the bishop's moral condition made no difference. "The sacraments are gifts of God, and the moral condition of the administrator cannot detract from the value of the gift conveyed" (Seeberg).³⁷ "What he (the bishop) gives is, nevertheless, real, if he gives not what is his own, but God's" (Augustine).³⁸ For Augustine, what God bestowed in baptism was irrevocable. This was also true of ordination. "Baptism and ordination impress upon man a fixed '*dominical character*'" (Seeberg).³⁹ Thus for Augustine, all bishops, regardless of moral character, could administer baptism properly. "There remains in him something sacred. The Spirit is preserved to him, not in a moral sense, but in the sense of an official equipment. He may have committed heinous crimes – may have severed himself from the church, yet this character once impressed upon him remains, and the sacraments administered by him retain their force. If he becomes converted, there is no need for a repetition of the sacrament" (Seeberg).⁴⁰

This high view of clerical ordination meant that even baptism administered by Donatist bishops was valid. Yet, Augustine distinguished between the sacrament being *valid* and *effectual*. Donatist baptisms, were valid but failed to become effectual until the person joined a catholic church. Seeberg summarizes Augustine's view: "Baptism imparts to the recipient an abiding character, but if he does not live in the church, the 'effect' in the forgiveness of sin does not follow. The baptism cannot, indeed, be repeated; but only when the individual is converted to the *unity* of the true church does it become effectual."⁴¹ This means, though the baptism received as a Donatists was valid, it did not become effectual until you left the Donatists. This allowed Augustine to maintain that those who left the catholic church for Donatism, did not need another baptism when they returned. Furthermore, bishops who left the catholic church, needed no further ordination when they returned. For Augustine, neither baptism nor ordination were ever repeated.

He who has received the baptism of Christ, which they have not lost who have separated themselves in any heresy or schism, when he shall have reformed and come to the fellowship and unity of the church, is not to be again baptized, because in this very reconciliation and peace it is offered to him, that the sacrament which, when received in schism, could not benefit, shall now in the unity of the church begin to benefit him for the remission of his sins.⁴²

³⁶ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:319

³⁷ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:319

³⁸ Quoted by Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:319

³⁹ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:319

⁴⁰ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:319-320

⁴¹ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 1:320

⁴² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Augustine, 4:411-412