

Heresies and Errors

The Real-Life Impact of Theology Gone Bad

Lesson 3: Donatism

- If the pastor who officiated your wedding later denied the faith and claimed he had never believed in God, would the marriage still be valid?
- Should our church recognize as valid a Christian's baptism if it was performed in a very liberal Congregational church and the minister denies the divinity of Jesus?
- Are you not a Christian (was your conversion false) if you denied your faith because you felt peer pressure from your friends who were making fun of Christians?

Historical Context

In AD 303-305, Roman Emperor Diocletian persecuted Christians; this was particularly widespread in North Africa. Many were allowed to escape death if they poured a libation offering out to the emperor or handed over their Bibles for burning.

A number of Christians, including bishops and priests, were unwilling to face torture or martyrdom. Some caved under pressure and performed acts of worship to pagan gods. They had escaped torture and death but still wanted to be considered Christians. How should the church deal with them?

Some began to label those denied their faith as a heretic or traditor ("the one who had handed over"). Anyone who had done so were forever outside the visible church unless they were rebaptized.



Division in the Church

In 311 Caecilian was consecrated as Bishop of Carthage in North Africa. He may have handed over Scriptures and one of his three confirming bishops was a traditor.

Caecilian's election was declared invalid and another bishop was installed. That bishop died two years later and was replaced by Donatus.

Donatus, as Bishop of Carthage (313-347), began re-baptizing and re-ordaining those who repented and wanted to be reinstated. Donatists saw themselves as the only true church

Donatus believed that a church that didn't re-baptize or re-ordain traditores was mixed at and not a true church. This practice created a schism where the churches of North Africa separated from the rest of the church.

Augustine Bishop of Hippo was the most successful defender of orthodoxy against Donatists. He and the rest of the church accepted traditores as they did other backsliders; they were welcomed back into communion upon proper penance prescribed by their bishop.

Donatus was eventually exiled to Gaul by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 347; he died in 355. Donatism was the dominant church in North Africa at the time of his death, but sputtered out shortly after.

Key Issues

1. Perfectionism and assurance (Invisible/Visible Church)

Augustine particularly in his Homilies on the First Epistle of John addresses some of the problems with the Donatists. He frames the Donatist error as a failure to love God and love others. "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still" (1 John 2:9)

He points out that our sins do indeed cut us off from God, but "the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Donatists are prideful and naïve by claiming to be perfect. Only when we have sufficient humility to confess our sins can we turn to Christ. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8).

In some ways, the Donatists are not taking sin seriously enough! They can be merciless with the failings of the traditores but can't see their own sins. We can fall into the same manner when there are certain sins that we categorize as particularly heinous.

This teaching also prevents a Christian from having assurance. If a Christian sees sin in his or her life, Donatism would raise the question about whether or not the person is truly a Christian.

What sin disqualifies you from being a Christian? What invalidates your baptism?

Many churches today will propagate uncertainty by constantly questioning the authenticity of the believer's conversion.

Westminster Confession of Faith 18.2

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

Augustine affirmed that Christians can have assurance. He makes an important distinction between the visible and invisible church. He affirms that the church should strive to be pure (trying to identify and remove those who might not truly be Christians), but that the church will never be able to do that accurately or faithfully. We are not the Final Judge. The church will always have non-Christians in her bounds (see Matthew 13, wheat and tares).

WCF 25.1-2

1. The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.
2. The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

2. Unity of the Church

Augustine claims that their heresy is two fold: they claim their bishops are holy and they claim that the true church now only exists in North Africa.

The second point denies the New Testament truth that the gospel is for all people and that all nations will be blessed by Christ.

He claims that the division they make within the church actually divides Christ. This is where the Totus Christus point is made that to have Christ you have to have his body.

3. The role of the priest and the church in the sacraments

This grew out of teachings of Tertullian and Cyprian: Donatists taught that a priest's part in sacraments was substantial rather than instrumental. A priest had to be holy and in proper standing with the church for the sacrament to be valid.

WCF 27.3

3. The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

A question that many candidates for ordination stumble on in our ordination exams: Should a church baptize those who were previously baptized in the Roman Catholic church?

Why is Donatism attractive?

1. Sin is serious. Christians who don't take sin seriously are in danger themselves and in danger of misrepresenting the gospel.
2. It seems unjust or unattractive for clergy to deny the faith and still be restored to ministry, even after repentance.
3. Breaking fellowship and forming your own church is always easier than reconciling with those you don't agree with.

What is at stake in the gospel if we follow the Donatists?

1. The unity of Christ's body. When we have rival churches, it becomes unclear which (if any) represents true Christianity.
2. The Grace of the Gospel: Once we start excluding those from our community based on their behaviors, we begin to add to the gospel. It no longer becomes based on God's grace, but now requires our obedience.
3. Church and the sacraments: Our faith doesn't have to be shaken every time a scandal hits the church and ordained ministers. We weep over those sins but realize that the power of the message and of the means of grace are given by God through his church. These ministers hold an office, but the office is bigger than the man.