

Lecture 11-The Wheat and the Tares: Donatism

...he had a gift, too, of making a situation more clear than God intended it to be.
John Buchan, *Pilgrim's Way*, p. 172

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat...
Matthew 13:24-25

Assigned Reading

The Story of Christianity—chapter 16, review pages 88-90

Key Terms

Lapsed, Donatism

Objectives

- Explain the issue with the Donatists
- Discuss the importance of the Donatist controversy for the early church

Class Prayer

“Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve, pour down upon us the abundance of Thy mercy, forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.”
Leonine Sacramentary (440)

The Wheat and the Tares: Donatism

I. The Problem: Sins of the Christian

II. The Problem Focused: Treatment of “the Lapsed” Following the Decian Persecution (250)

A. The significance of the “Confessors”

B. The rigor of the Novatians (Novatian, a rival bishop of Rome)

C. The position of Cyprian (bishop of Carthage)

1. Separatism is unacceptable -“outside the church there is no salvation”

2. Baptism outside the “true” church is invalid

3. The bishop is the key to the unity and purity of the church

4. Lapsed clergy must be treated more strictly

5. Lapsed laity can be restored with care

6. The sacraments had no efficacy if offered by an unworthy minister (this point is not on CD)

Cyprian: “Christ’s Spirit could not be where Christ’s law was broken, and God would not hear the prayer of a guilty priest.”

III. The Problem Intensified: Treatment of “the Traitors” Following the Diocletian Persecution (303)

A. The rise of Donatism in North Africa (312)

1. Insistence on a “pure” church—“church of the martyrs”

2. Radical Donatism: the Circumcellians

B. Augustine’s view

1. The visible church is not perfect but is a pilgrim church.

2. Its unity must be maintained against the disruptive severity of the Donatists...

Augustine (quoting Cyprian): “Let a man mercifully correct what he can; let him

- patiently bear what he cannot correct, and groan and sorrow over it with love.”
3. ...even by force if necessary -“Compel them to come in”

Questions for Consideration

1. How were those who lapsed disciplined?
2. What did Cyprian mean by, “You cannot have God for your father if you do not have the church for your mother”?
3. What did the Donatists say about Peter’s betrayal of Jesus?

For Further Study

Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4, 11-13

Calvin reviews the writings of Augustine against the Donatists and offer some wise and pastoral counsel for the church of any age.