

## Donatism

This is lesson 11, “The Wheat and the Tares: Donatism.” With the conversion of the emperor Constantine that we looked at in an earlier lesson, things changed radically. People reacted differently to the new situation that they found themselves in. The persecuted church was no longer the persecuted church, but rather the tolerated church, and before too long it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. There were different responses to that situation because as the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire of course many wealthy, prominent people joined for all sorts of reasons. Some people, like Eusebius of Caesarea in viewing what was happening, were so grateful for the freedom and prestige that had come to the church that they found it difficult to take a critical stance before the government or society. Others were dismayed at what was happening, at the growth of nominalism, a kind of lukewarm Christianity as they saw it. Many of those people fled to the desert or other remote places to take up the monastic life. There were others, the Donatists, whom we will learn about in this lesson, who simply broke away from the larger church and called themselves the true church. And there were others, whom we will look at later, who really longed for the good old days before Christianity took over. A pagan reaction set in that caused so much concern for some like Augustine. He wrote his largest book, *The City of God*, as a kind of answer to the pagan reaction of people trying to establish the old Roman religion after the days of the toleration of Christianity. The heart of the Donatist heresy had to do with forgiveness and restoration. So the prayer I will use today does not come from the Donatists but from the larger church from the middle of the fifth century. It is a prayer for mercy and forgiveness. Let us join together as I pray these words.

*“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.”*

Marcion and Montanis, back in the second century, had founded separate churches. They broke away from the main church and started their own movements. In the third and fourth centuries two very similar movements arose and broke away from the established church. These were the Novationists in the third century and the Donatists in the fourth century. The issue that motivated both of these schisms was this: what really is the nature of the true church? Those movements were very similar, and we will study them together. We will try to understand the problem these Christians wrestled with and what answers they brought to the problem. The struggle to answer the question, “What really is the true church?” helped establish the doctrine of the church. We have noted already, and we will note again, that when an issue came up, a question came up, a heresy arose, then the church tended to become very active in trying to deal with that problem. Here we have another example of a heresy or a schism that motivated the church to think seriously about the issue that was at stake. This whole struggle would also further the development of the Catholic Church into what we will soon be able to call the Roman Catholic Church. I have resisted saying when the Roman Catholic Church started because I do not know. But if I had to give one answer to that, which I do without much enthusiasm, I would say it started with Pope Leo in the latter part of the fifth century. But the history we will look at today certainly leads further toward developments that we can see as the emergence of the Roman Catholic Church from the early Christian church that we have been studying up until this point.

Well, what was the problem that caused all this controversy in the third and fourth centuries? The problem began with a long debate on how to view post-baptismal sin. We have already seen that the early church tended to view baptism as the sacrament that washes and cleanses away sin. But what about

sins committed after baptism? Different people had come up with different ideas on this. *The Shepherd of Hermus*, the second century book that we have referred to from time to time, had the rather odd view (to us) that God forgives one major sin, and one major sin only, after baptism. After that one major sin is forgiven there is no more forgiveness for major sins after baptism. Origen, the third century church father, believed that idolatry and adultery and fornication were three sins that could not be forgiven. Tertullian, also in the third century, had taken a more lenient view. But he changed his mind. As you remember, he became a Montanist and they are very, very strict on these things. He changed his mind and saw the *Shepherd of Hermus*, which had said one sin could be forgiven, and thought the Shepherd was too lax. In fact, he now called *The Shepherd of Hermus* the Shepherd of the adulterers. Tertullian held an even stricter view that forgiveness could not be granted to those guilty of adultery and fornication. Apparently the sins that worried the church fathers in this early period were sexual sins. How should they deal with people who had fallen into sexual sins and wanted to be restored to the fellowship of the church? Well, that issue was never really solved. Before long another sin was viewed as even more perplexing.

The problem of this emergence of another sin, we would call it apostasy, came in the third century. The middle of the third century you may recall was the time when Decius required all people to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Before about the year 250 AD, persecution had been present from time to time, but it had been sporadic. Now the first systematic, empire-wide persecution came. There were throughout the Roman world 18 months of terror during which Christians faced death if they did not comply to the edict of Decius. Many Christians did die during that time, but also many apostatized. The church soon had to deal with the problem of the lapsed. When persecution ended there were many who had made the sacrifices or who had bribed the officials to get the document saying they had sacrificed even if they had not, but they had survived through compromise. When it was all over many of these felt very bad about what they had done. They were sorry for what they had done and they wanted to come back into the church. The numbers of those who had apostatized and wanted back into the church were so great that the problem threatened the very identity of the church. Could the Christian church let all these people back in? Was it possible for all these fragments into which the church had divided to be re-gathered? Could the lapsed be restored to the church? And if so, how could they be restored to the church?

One interesting thing that started to happen at this time was that some people, not church officials—not bishops and presbyters, but people called confessors—began to rise in importance. A confessor was someone who had stood true during the persecution, who had refused to sacrifice, who had honored the name of the Lord. These were often people who had been persecuted, injured, but for one reason or another had not been killed during the persecutions. These were people who had stood true and had lived through the persecutions. You can see that these confessors would become heroes to the Christians and greatly venerated in the churches. The tradition developed that it was the confessors who could forgive the lapsed. If someone had failed under persecution, they could go to a confessor and ask for forgiveness. The confessor in many cases, perhaps in most or even all cases, would grant forgiveness. That situation, though, was problematic. For one thing, it brought a new level of power into the church that was not in the official government of the church, these charismatic leaders with their reputation for courage and sanctity. Some people believed that all of this was too easy. After all, others had suffered and died during the persecution. Was it possible for a person who had fallen to simply go to someone like a confessor and be forgiven and restored? That seemed like cheap forgiveness. The people who most strongly said, “All this is too easy,” were the Novationists. Novatian was a Roman presbyter who became a rival bishop to another bishop. He supported a very rigorous position that basically said the lapsed could not be forgiven. He believed the church must be a pure church, with people who had stood true. The church could not be compromised with people who had failed during the time of the persecution. The dissident church began to grow all across the Roman Empire, from Asia Minor to

Spain. But many of the Novationists were in North Africa. The Novationists were concerned about this issue and about the conversion of the multitudes into the church. They felt the standards were being let down and that the church was no longer a pure and holy church.

It was in the midst of all this debate and dissension that we have the great North African church father Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage. Cyprian was not a Novationist. He was a part of what we could call the Catholic Church. Cyprian gave a lot of thought and concern to the question, what really is the church? Many of the ideas that we will think about for the rest of this course we can trace back to Cyprian. Cyprian believed there was one church only. There could not be two churches. There could not be a Catholic Church and a Novation Church. Because Christ has only one body and because Christ has only one bride there is only one true church. Cyprian held that outside that true church there is no salvation. Consequently, baptism outside the true church—Novation baptism, for instance—is no true baptism at all. It is invalid. Therefore a person being converted from the Novation Church into the Catholic Church would have to be baptized into the Catholic Church. Cyprian held that the real authority in the church belonged to the bishops, not to the confessors, although he did greatly honor the confessors. Actually, when persecution came Cyprian fled. He always felt bad about that because he was afraid that he had in some way let down the church by fleeing. But that was not considered the same thing as compromising his faith. He simply left and lived in a safer place until the persecution ended. Later, however, he was martyred. So if he was sorry that he had escaped from the earlier persecution, he did honor God by his martyrdom at a later date.

For Cyprian, the authority in the church lay with the bishops and not with the confessors. However, he said the bishops had to be spiritually qualified men. If you were not a good man you could not be a good bishop. You could not be sinful and be a bishop. Christ's Spirit could not be where Christ's law was broken, and God would not hear the prayer of a guilty priest. That will become a very important point in a few moments as we come to the next step in the Donatist controversy. The authority in the church belonged, then, to the bishops. Therefore restoring lapsed clergy, clergy who had defined the faith, was a very serious matter. To restore that person was difficult and serious because the clergy must be holy in their lives. But Cyprian thought members of the church who were repentant could be properly disciplined and restored with care to the church. Cyprian did not make it too easy. But he did admit that God forgives sins, at least in the lives of church lay members, and they can be restored to the fellowship of the church. Actually, all of this is what we would consider a rather moderate position. Cyprian tried to make his way between what he saw as the two extremes, those who were too strict and those who were too lax. He was then greatly criticized by people on both sides. Some thought he had gone too far, and others felt he did not go far enough.

But all of this died down. Cyprian died, the persecution ended, and there was another long period of peace. The issue seemed to have been forgotten. But the problem came up again, intensified because of another persecution, the last of the great persecutions—the persecution of Diocletian. This began in 303 AD and lasted about 10 years. The requirement this time was not sacrifice but the surrender of the Scriptures. People were required to give over the Scriptures that they had in their homes or in their churches, and those were burned. Many people did exactly what they were asked to do. They were called *traditors*, or “traitors,” by the Christians. That is where we get our name “traitor” from. It was a title for people who had handed over things. These members of the church handed over copies of the Scripture. Sometimes they handed over books that were not really copies of the Scripture because the canon was being solidified and there were some books that were clearly outside the canon, but the Roman officials did not know the difference between canonical and non-canonical books. So some people escaped by handing over a non-canonical book. The problem was a real problem. There were others who handed over real copies of the Scriptures to the authorities. Finally we come back to the

same problem we had before. After the persecution was over people were sorry for what they had done. Could they be allowed back into the church? The leader of the strict group this time was a man named Donatus. The strict movement was largely in North Africa. We call it Donatism. Donatus was a rival bishop of Carthage. His movement began because when a bishop of Carthage was ordained, Donatus claimed, he was ordained by a bishop who himself was a *traditor*. This bishop had handed over the Scriptures during the persecution, and then he ordained the bishop of Carthage. This, according to Donatus, was an invalid act because a sinful bishop who was really a traitor had no power to ordain a bishop. Therefore Donatus claimed to be the true bishop of Carthage as over against the bishop who had been ordained by a lapsed bishop.

Both sides claimed Cyprian's support. There was something from Cyprian that the Donatists could take and something from Cyprian that the Catholics could take. So, claiming Cyprian's support, the Donatists insisted that they were the pure church. The Catholic Church was the mixed multitude. The Donatists said, "We are the church of the martyrs, a pure and holy church" as over against the worldly church of the Catholics. The debate became more than a debate in North Africa. The theological issue here was fueled by social and economic discontent. There was much anti-Roman sentiment in North Africa, and it was easy for the Donatists to capture this anti-Roman feeling, this feeling of not really liking the Romans and the Roman rule. This feeling was mainly found among the native Punic population of North Africa. This struggle, which became even a war, had many different elements involved. There was a religious element, a social element, and a political element. We will discover as we look at church history that religious wars are almost never purely religious wars. There are always other issues that complicate the situation. If you look at the history of Northern Ireland in the last several hundred years you will see that illustrated so clearly. By the middle of the fourth century the Donatists had become increasingly fanatical and violent. The radical Donatists were sometimes called Circumcellions. These were people, according to their name, who lived in tents. They would surround a church or a village and, living in tents, they would raid Catholic settlements, often destroy the Catholic churches, and put Catholics to death. These Circumcellions were careful not to use swords in their fighting against the Catholics because the Lord had forbidden the use of swords. But they got really big sticks, clubs, which Christ had said nothing about, and used those in their fight against the Catholics.

I want to skip ahead now about 100 years and talk about a man whom we will spend much time with. We have not really introduced Augustine yet, though we will. But it is necessary in this lesson to skip ahead to Saint Augustine because the Donatist problem was one he inherited. He was a bishop in North Africa. 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. The church in the very same street in Hippo as Augustine's church was a larger, more impressive 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.

This was a real problem. The church was split in two. How would that issue be solved, if it could be solved? Augustine had much to do with solving this issue. I want to talk a little about Augustine's views of the church here at the end of this lesson. Augustine insisted that the visible church is not perfect but is a pilgrim church. The Donatists had taken their stand on a pure church, with saints not sinners. Augustine disagreed. The church is a pilgrim church, not a perfect church. In his anti-Donatist writings

Augustine could point out that even the churches of the Donatists were filled with sinners. Despite their claims to being a pure church, there were people in those churches who were drunkards, adulterers, and even some guilty of apostasy. But that is not the major point Augustine made. He does not say, “Our church is better than yours,” or “You are just as bad as we are.” He does point out that there are sinners in both the Donatist churches and the Catholic churches. Augustine said, “It is like Noah’s ark. There were clean and unclean animals on the ark.” The Donatists used Noah’s ark as an example as well. “As the ark was pitched to keep out the water, so we keep out the sinners. Our church is like Noah’s ark, too, but in a different way than Augustine’s church.” What Augustine really argued here was that the holiness of the church is not based on the lifestyle of its members but on the purity of Christ. That is what makes the church holy. We are “one holy, apostolic church” not because we are so good, but because of Christ’s holiness. This is his church and therefore it is holy. Of course it is right for us to try to be holy as He is holy. But Augustine, I think, was always afraid that the Donatists’ insistence on a pure church would lead into legalism. That was another battle he was fighting at about the same time with the Pelagians, as we will see. There was too much in Donatism of a tendency to revert to the law, to say, “If we are good and righteous and holy then we find favor in God’s sight.” There was too much of that for Augustine. He said, “The church is holy because Christ is holy. We are a pilgrim church walking through this world, but we are not by any means a perfect or pure church in the sense of our own holiness.” Along with that, Augustine insisted that the unity of the church must be maintained. He said, “We must never neglect severe discipline in the maintenance of unity. But we must not by intemperate correction break the bond of fellowship.” There is a place for church discipline. It could even be severe. He tried to find a way that there could be standards and discipline but not excessive discipline that would “break the bond of fellowship” in the church. Augustine liked to quote Cyprian. As I said, both sides liked to claim Cyprian. But one of Augustine’s favorite quotes from Cyprian was, “Let a man mercifully correct what he can. Let him patiently bear what he cannot correct. And let him groan and sorrow over it with love.” Not only did Augustine love that quotation but John Calvin did as well. Calvin quoted it in the *Institutes*.

As time went on, the Catholics, including Augustine, felt that something had to be done. Donatism was finally condemned in a church council, which by this time really meant a state church council, in the year 411 AD. Augustine agreed with others that it would be right and proper to use force if necessary to cause the Donatists to forsake the error of their ways. After all, Jesus had said, “Compel them to come in.” And therefore they thought they should compel the obstinate to come into the true church. Unfortunately this began a long history that led to some very disastrous events in the history of the church where force was used for conversion and conformity. As you read Augustine on this it is really a little softer than it may sound from the way I have described it. I think Augustine felt it was necessary, but he was reluctant and heartbroken over all of this. He wrote this letter to the Donatists, saying, “You too are Christ’s sheep. You bear the Lord, and the Lord’s Supper you have received. But you have strayed and gotten lost. There is no reason for you to be angry with me because I am bringing back the strays and seeking the lost. It is better for me to do the Lord’s will—it is He who counsels me to compel you to return to His fold—than to give my consent to the will of the straying sheep and allow you to be lost. Do not say then what I always hear you saying, “I want to stay, I want to be lost.” It is better for me not to allow that at all so far as it is possible.” He did not really want to use force but he felt it was absolutely necessary to do everything possible to bring back the Donatists into the fold.

Well, Donatism was broken by this action. It did not disappear all at once, in fact Donatist churches remained in North Africa 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 that 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. You know it is strange to us because I have been talking now for a long time, a good many lessons, on the history of the early church, and so much of this took place in North Africa, which is not an area that we think of as being Christian today at all. It is now a Muslim area except for a significant Christian minority in Egypt, but nowhere else. We will come later to see that Muslim onslaught and its results in North Africa. Let me say one more word about Augustine's view of all of this. As you can tell from the quotation I just gave, Augustine held that the sacraments had an objective validity unaffected by the spiritual state of the minister. The person being baptized or the person receiving the Lord's Supper does not have to worry, asking, "Is my minister right with God? If he is not, then this will not do me any good." Augustine said, "The spiritual value of the sacrament is like light. Although it passes among the impure, it is not polluted." He noted that in a real sense all ministers are *traditores* because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Any minister who is administering the sacraments is a sinner because all have sinned. But the sacrament is not thereby lessened or made invalid because of the person who is giving it. For someone who is dying of thirst it makes little difference who is carrying the water—clean or dirty, intelligent or ignorant. The essential thing is not the bearer but the water.

The outcome of all of this is something we will study right through the Middle Ages and up until the Reformation. The church is now saying, "There is one, holy and apostolic church outside of which there is no salvation." Cyprian had said that. Cyprian said, "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your mother." Augustine quoted that. John Calvin also quoted that, and agreed with it. Of course, by the time we get to Calvin we have to ask, which church is he talking about? This is because the insistence that there is one church did not solve the problem permanently. By the 11th century there were two churches, the Eastern church and the Western church. Then in the 16th century the Western church divided into the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. Then almost immediately the Protestant Church divided into many Protestant churches. So the issue is still with us. What is the one, true church? The church is a holy church. This has to do with God's gift to the church, not with the inherent sanctity of members or ministers. Most of Christendom has come to embrace this as true. A church is not the church because of the higher level of sanctification of its members than any other church on the face of the earth. Rather, the church is the church because God has given the sacraments to the church and given the ministry to the church and given the Word to the church. This means that generally in church history baptism has been viewed as a valid sacrament wherever it is given so that it does not need to be repeated as a person moves from one church to another. Of course, not everybody agrees with that. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has refused to require re-baptism of Catholics coming into the PCA, but our denomination does allow the local church session to make a decision with the person as to whether that person will be re-baptized or not. In some ways we are somewhat on the fence on this issue. But we have not been willing to declare the Roman Catholic Church apostate or Roman Catholic baptism invalid. There are some Protestant churches that do require re-baptism. Some Protestants require re-baptism of people coming from other Protestant churches. But the general stream of church history has not gone in that direction.

So for the next 1,000 years after this we will think about one church. About halfway through that 1,000 years there will be two churches, the Eastern church and the Western church, both claiming to be the true church because of history and continuity. This continues until the Reformation, when another way of looking at the church will be introduced. The church is not based on age or size. Rather it is based on the presence of marks, generally described as the true preaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments.

It has been asked, how were the people who lapsed during the persecutions disciplined? It was mainly in terms of excommunication or being kept from the Lord's Table. This was often an exclusion that lasted for years; it was not often a short time. So they were excluded from the Lord's Supper for years during

which time there would be teaching and prayer. This was not yet the time of mechanical penance of the later Roman Catholic Church, where people had to say so many prayers, make pilgrimages, or buy indulgences. We have not come into that period yet.

It has also been asked, what did Cyprian mean when he said that you cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the church as your mother? Cyprian and Augustine would always qualify that by saying, “ordinarily.” I think they viewed some possibility of this not being true in rare cases. Generally, where there is the church a person must be part of that church to be a Christian. You cannot really be a Christian all by yourself. Part of the definition of what a Christian is is a person in fellowship with God’s people on earth. So this was their way of discouraging any individual or private Christianity. Calvin also held that, but I think Calvin as well as Augustine thought it was possible—*possible*—for a person to be a Christian without being a church member, but not ordinarily. And it is certainly possible for church members not to be Christians. Calvin believed that, as did Augustine and probably Cyprian as well. This is a rather difficult quotation to understand, especially for us Protestants in the West. We Protestants tend to diminish the role of the church, to see it as not so important. I think that is a mistake. Then when we hear a quotation like this it startles us that you could say that you have to be a member of the church to have God as your Father. Of course, we may be thinking of being a member of a particular, local church, and that was true back then, too. But when there was one church you were either in the church or not in the church, and Christians were in the church.

“The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).