

Donatists

by William Cathcart

The sermon explores the history, beliefs, and challenges of the Donatist movement in early Christianity, highlighting their commitment to purity and separation from the established church.

Scripture: Matthew 5:10, Acts 5:29, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 6:14, 1 Peter 4:16

Topics: "Church History", "Ecclesiology"

Description

William Cathcart preaches about the historical context of the Donatists in North Africa during the persecution of Diocletian, highlighting the conflicts surrounding martyrdom, the actions of Bishop Mensurius of Carthage, the rise of the Donatist denomination under Bishop Donatus, and their strong stance on church purity and separation from the state. The sermon delves into the controversies between the Donatists and the Catholic Church, particularly regarding infant baptism, as seen through the lens of Augustine's writings and the Council of Carthage.

Transcript

In North Africa, during the fierce persecution of Dioclesian, many Christians courted a violent death. These persons, without the accusation, would confess to the possession of the Holy Scriptures, and on their refusal to surrender them, they were immediately imprisoned and frequently executed. While they were in confinement they were visited by throngs of disciples, who bestowed upon them valuable gifts and showed them the highest honor.

Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, disapproved of all voluntary martyrdoms, and took steps to hinder bloodshed. And if he had gone no farther in this direction he would have deserved the commendation of all good men. But by zealous Christians in North Africa he was regarded as unfriendly to compulsory martyrdom, and to the manifestations of tender regard shown to the victims of tyranny. And by some he was supposed to be capable of a gross deception to preserve his own life, or to secure the safety of his friends. When a church at Carthage was about to be searched for copies of the Bible, he had them concealed in a safe place, and the writings of heretics substituted for them. This removal was an act of Christian faithfulness, but the works which he put in the church in their stead were apparently intended to deceive the heathen officers. Mensurius seems to us to have been too prudent a man for a Christian bishop in the harsh times in which he lived. In his own day his conduct created a most unfavorable opinion of his religious courage and faithfulness among multitudes of the Saviour's servants in his country. Secundus, primate of Numidia, wrote to Mensurius, giving utterance to censures about his conduct, and

glorifying the men who perished rather than surrender their Bibles. Caecilian was the arch-deacon of the bishop of Carthage, and was known to enjoy his confidence and share his opinions.

Mensurius, returning from a visit to Rome, became ill, and died in the year 311. Caecilian was appointed his successor, and immediately the whole opposition of the enemies of his predecessor was directed to him. In his own city a rich widow of great influence, and her numerous friends, assailed him; a synod seventy Numidian bishops excommunicated him for receiving ordination from a traitor (one who had delivered up the Bible to be burned to save his life); and another bishop was elected to take charge of the church of Carthage. The Donatist community was then launched upon the sea of its stormy life.

Bishop Donatus, after whom the new denomination was named, was a man of great eloquence, as unbending as Martin Luther, as fiery as the great Scotch Reformer, whose principles were dearer to him than life, and who was governed by unwearied energy. Under his guidance the Donatists spread all over the Roman dominions on the African coast, and for a time threatened the supremacy of the older Christian community. But persecution laid its heavy hand upon their personal liberty, their church property, and their lives. Again and again this old and crushing argument was applied to the Donatists, and still they survived for centuries. Their hardships secured the sympathy of numerous hand of armed marauders called Circumcelliones, men who suffered severely from the authorities sustained by the persecuting church, "free lance" warriors who cared nothing for religion, but had a wholesome hatred of tyrants. These men fought desperately for the oppressed Donatists. Julian the Apostate took their side when he ascended the throne of the Caesars, and showed much interest in their welfare, as unbelievers in modern times have frequently shown sympathy with persecuted communities in Christian lands.

There were a few Donatist churches outside of Africa, but the denomination was almost confined at that continent. They suffered less from the Vandals than their former oppressors, but the power of these conquerors was very injurious to them; and the victorious Saracens destroyed the remaining churches of this grand old community.

The Donatists were determined to have only godly members in their churches. In this particular they were immeasurably superior to the Church Universal (Catholic), even as represented by the great Augustine of Hippo. Their teachings of this question are in perfect harmony with our own. They regarded the Church Universal as having forfeited her Christian character by her inconsistencies and iniquities, and they refused to recognize her ordinances and her ministry. Hence they gave the triple immersion a second time to those who had received it in the great corrupt church. Their government was not episcopal in the modern sense. Mosheim is right in representing them as having at one time 400 bishops. The Roman population on the North African coast would not have required twenty diocesan bishop to care for this spiritual wants. Every town, in all probability, had its bishop, and if there were two or more congregations, these formed but one church, whose services were in charge of one minister and his assistants. These church leaders were largely under the control of the people to whom they ministered. The Donatists held boldly the doctrine that the church and the state were entirely distinct bodies. Early in their denominational life, Constantine the Great, for the first time in earthly history, had united the church to the Roman government, and speedily the Donatists arose to denounce the union as unhallowed, and as forbidden by the highest authority in the Christian Church. No Baptist in modern times brands the accursed union between church and state with more appropriate condemnations than did his ancient Donatist brother. Their faith on this question is well expressed in their familiar says, "What has the emperor to do with the church?" Soul liberty lived in their day.

It is extremely probable that they did not practice the baptism of unconscious babes,-- at least in the early part of their history. It is often urged that Augustine, their bitter enemy, would not fail to bring this charge against them if they had rejected his favorite rite. His works now extant do not directly bring such an accusation against them, and it is concluded that they followed his own usage. This argument would have great weight if it were proved that all the Catholics of Africa baptized unconscious babes.

But there is no evidence of such universal observance. Outside of Africa, in the fourth century, the baptism of an unconscious babe was a rare occurrence. Though born in it of pious parents, Augustine himself was not baptized till he was thirty- three years of age. His words are bristling with weapons to defend infant baptism; they are the arsenal from which its modern defenders have procured their most effective arms, and if the custom had been universally accepted, he would have seen no cause to keep up such a warfare in its defense.

The frequency with which Augustine treats of infant baptism is striking evidence that its observance in his day and country was often called in question, and that had he directly pointed out this defect in the observances of the Donatists he would have been quickly reminded that he had better remove the opposition to infant baptism from his own people before he assailed it among the Donatists. This fact would account for the supposed silence of Augustine on this question. The second canon of the Council of Carthage, where the principles of Augustine were supreme, "Declares an anathema against such as deny that children ought to be baptized as soon as they are born." (Du.

Pin. i. 635. Dublin.) If this curse is against the Donatist, it shows that they did not practice the infant rite; if it is against other Africans, it gives a good reason why Augustine should be cautious in bringing charges against the Donatists on this account. Augustine wrote a work "On Baptism, Against the Donatists," in which, speaking of infant baptism, he says, "And if any one seek divine authority in this matter, although, what the whole church holds, not as instituted by councils, but as a thing always observed, is rightly held to have been handed down by apostolical authority." (Et si quisquam in hac re auctoritatem divinam quaeret. -- Patrol.

Lat., vol. xlii. p. 174, Migne Parisiis.) This book is expressly written against the views of baptism held by the Donatists; it was designed to correct their errors on that subject. And he clearly admits that some of them doubted the divine authority of infant baptism, and he proceeds to establish it by an argument from circumcision. Augustine was a powerful controversialist; to have charged the Donatists directly with heresy for rejecting infant baptism would have been an accusation against many in his own church, and he prudently assails his enemies on this point, as if only some of them regarded infant baptism as a mere human invention; and he boastfully and ignorantly, or falsely speaks of it as always observed by the whole church, while one of his own African councils pronounces a curse upon those who "denied that children ought to be baptized as soon as they are born."

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