

# #748 The Cultural Roots of Schism (Part 1)

Colleagues,

Three Sundays from now the churches some of us lead or attend will celebrate the Reformation. I assume this habit is peculiar to Lutherans. The date we pick for it, after all, is pegged to the anniversary of Luther's posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. I grew up thinking and feeling about this event the way American children once did about Paul Revere's ride. It stirred my little store of Lutheran blood. I don't suppose it ever had the same effect on little Calvinists, or still less on Anabaptists. I imagine little Anglicans responding to it with, at best, a polite yawn. Little Catholics would have ground their teeth, if indeed they even knew the story. It strikes me these days that even little Lutherans have lost any sense of thrill over it.

I'll continue nonetheless this Reformation Sunday to invite some serious joy and thanksgiving from the people I preach to for the mighty deeds of God accomplished through the crusty, brilliant likes of Martin Luther and his fellow confessors of the Gospel. Did a gust of Holy Air, at once fresh and tumultuous, sweep through Europe in those days, reviving the Church and leaving treasures behind that we can revel in today? That strikes me still as undeniable. And if no one else in the Church at large has the wits to thank the Lord for this, then let Lutherans keep doing it for them. Thus do we serve the Body of Christ.

That said, it strikes me too that we will serve the Body better and praise God more faithfully if we bear in mind the profound ambiguities that shaped those sixteenth-century events. Simul iustus et peccator—at once saint and sinner—applied as much to

Luther, Melanchthon, and the folks who kept them employed and alive as it does to anybody. Did they operate with mixed motives? Of course. Was Christ their only master? Hardly, however much they may have wanted him to be. The hagiographies I read as a Lutheran boy left me thinking that the free course of the Gospel was the chief concern of Frederick the Wise. To think that still would be delusional in the extreme. Frederick was a politician, for crying out loud; and his subjects were as shaped and bound as he was by the social and cultural imperatives of their day. That includes his theologians, to say nothing of their opponents.

Some months ago Chris Repp, pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Carbondale, Illinois, sent us a paper he had written about the underlying and often determinative role that cultural commitments tend to play in serious church conflict. We think it's worth reading as a springboard for honest reflection on our own strands of church history and the locations, both theological and ecclesial, that they've brought us to. Such reflection will invite humility, if nothing else. It may also serve to magnify our praise of the God who alone has the power to craft silk purses from sows' ears. With him "all things are possible," as we'll be reminded this coming Sunday.

Chris, who holds a PhD in Russian church history, will walk us through two case studies of grievous conflict, arguing that each was shaped as much or more by competing cultural loyalties as by theological disagreement. He'll talk first about the Donatist controversy of the late third and early fourth centuries. Then he'll introduce us to the Old Believers' schism in the Russian church of the 17th century. We'll send you this in two parts, interleaved with a couple of other contributions that serve in their own way to underscore Chris's thesis. In other words, look for Part Two in three weeks.

Chris's paper, by the way, was originally presented in August, 2011, at St. Augustine's House, a Lutheran monastery in Oxford, Michigan. Hence his introductory comments.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

---

## **“Dividing The Kingdom: Case Studies in the History of Church Conflict”**

**by Arthur C. Repp**

I am thankful to Father John Cochran for giving me the opportunity to get my scholarly feet wet again by inviting me to give this lecture. It was during my four-year assignment with the ELCA's Division for Global Mission (as it was then) as an instructor of Church History and Systematic Theology at the seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russian and Other States, that Father Cochran and I first crossed paths. Since returning from that assignment, and after unsuccessfully searching for an academic position, I have devoted my attention to parish ministry and family life in Carbondale, Illinois. And so I was intrigued, but somewhat hesitant, when Father John approached me in May with the idea of presenting something on the history of conflict in the church as a way of putting recent troubles among Lutherans in perspective. I am in no way an expert on the material I present to you this morning, and my scholarly chops are a little rusty, if that's not a mixed metaphor. And besides that, when he first called me back in May I was preparing for a month of family travel in my wife's native England, during which I would have no time to read or write. But Father John is very persuasive. And I probably owe him for putting me up during a trip to Pittsburgh in November of 2002 for a conference of Russian historians, the last time I gave a

scholarly paper of any length. And so I stand before you with some trepidation, not as an authority, but as a fellow traveler (the Russian word for that is "sputnik,") a companion on a limited tour of two episodes in Church history that I think are instructive about the nature of church conflict in general. My conclusions will only be tentative, and I invite your own thoughts based upon what you hear, and upon what you perhaps know that I don't.

During the time I was teaching church history in Russia, and in subsequent survey courses presented to the Southern Illinois Learning In Retirement organization, I have increasingly come to believe that cultural differences and power politics lie at the root of most, if not all, church conflict. At the same time, I also suspect that culture and politics have an effect on the theology a given group finds compelling. It should be no surprise, for example, that the emphasis on freedom (from sin, death, the law) in early Christianity should have appealed to those who were least free in the ancient world-slaves and the lower classes of Roman society. It should not overly concern us that this is so. Christianity, after all, is an incarnational religion, which takes seriously the real lives of real people. At the same time, it is not bound by any particular culture or political arrangement, as the first significant conflict among Christians, concerning the proper way to incorporate Gentiles in the church, revealed.

The two case studies I will discuss this morning come from very different periods in the history of the church, one from late antiquity and the other from the cusp of the modern age. I had originally intended to speak about a third episode, a chapter in the history of the schism between the Eastern and Western churches, but I got so wrapped up in the other two that I ran out of time.

## DONATISM

I begin with the more famous of these two episodes, and not chiefly because it figured prominently in the career of the patron saint of this institution. The broad outlines of the Donatist controversy are well known to anyone who has a passing familiarity with the history of the ancient church. It centered on the question of whether or not the personal character and behavior of the church's clergy affected the validity of the sacraments they performed. The fundamental error of the Donatists lies in the assertion that a baptism or ordination performed by an unfaithful priest or bishop made those sacraments invalid. The orthodox principle, articulated by St. Augustine almost a century after the controversy erupted, was that a sacrament's validity cannot depend upon the moral virtue of the one performing it. To believe otherwise would force one to live in constant doubt. It was the promise of God in the sacrament, so said the church, rather than in the personal character of priests and bishops, in which one was to trust.

Donatism had its origins in the last of the major episodes of persecution of Christians by the Roman State, the so-called Great Persecution under the emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. Contrary to popular imagination, active official Roman persecution of Christians was only sporadic. In the quarter millennium between Nero's scapegoating of Christians for the burning of Rome and the Edict of Milan, which made toleration of Christianity official throughout the empire, sustained, official episodes of persecution were rare. Before the middle of the third century, such episodes were confined to specific provinces. A case in point is that of Bithynia-Pontus under the governorship of Pliny the Younger at the beginning of the second century, which established a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards Christians. This localized character of anti-Christian persecution changed in 249 with the first

empire-wide persecution (249-50) under Decius, and was followed less than a decade later by another general persecution (257-60) under Valerian. [1]

It was in the aftermath of these persecutions that the church faced a particular problem: what to do with those who had lapsed, those who—to one degree or another—had succumbed to the demand that they renounce Christianity and sacrifice to the traditional Roman gods under the threat of execution. During the first general persecution under Decius, all subjects of Rome were required to obtain a legal document certifying that they had performed the sacrifices in the presence of a Roman official. Many Christians defied the imperial edict and were martyred. Others performed the sacrifices and were spared, while many others were able to obtain the needed document without actually performing the sacrifices by bribing the officials in charge. After the Decian persecution in 249-50, many churches readmitted the lapsed immediately, while others allowed no possibility for reinstatement. A middle position emerged in the person of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, where the persecution had been particularly severe. Cyprian advocated for the restoration of the lapsed, but only after a period of penance. In a dispute that foreshadowed the Donatist schism of the following century, Cyprian together with other African bishops also insisted upon the rebaptism of the lapsed, and anyone who had been baptized by a lapsed bishop, on the grounds that they had separated themselves from the church, and only the church could perform legitimate baptism. This position was opposed by Pope Stephen, who insisted that baptism administered by lapsed bishops was legitimate by virtue of their office, and was not invalidated by their moral failures. Although Cyprian and Stephen never resolved this dispute, Cyprian's martyrdom in the next persecution under Valerian meant that it did not rise to the level of a schism within the church. This unresolved issue

would, however, be a factor in the Donatist schism of the next and following centuries.

Before proceeding to the events that led to the Donatist schism, it is helpful first to remember the context in which the schism developed. I will take a moment, therefore, to briefly survey the Roman occupation and settlement of the Diocese of Africa, as the area was known by the time of Constantine—the area of North Africa encompassing modern Algeria, Tunisia, and the western half of Libya.

In the third and second centuries BCE, the expanding Roman Empire fought the three Punic Wars with the Empire of Carthage for control of the western Mediterranean Sea. In the end, the city of Carthage and its surrounding territory, encompassing the northern half of modern Tunisia, was added to the Roman Empire as the province of Africa, later called Africa Proconsularis, or Proconsular Africa, in the middle of the first century BCE. The city of Carthage, which had been utterly destroyed at the end of the Third Punic War, was rebuilt by Julius Caesar. The surrounding territory of Proconsular Africa was rich in agricultural land suited for the growing of grain, and for that reason it was the part of Africa that was most quickly and most intensively settled with Roman cities. The province soon became a key source of food for the empire, exporting as much as two-thirds of its annual wheat crop across the Mediterranean. [2] By the middle of the first century CE, Carthage had become the second-largest city in the western half of the empire. But in spite of this growth in population and wealth, the province was not as Romanized as might be expected. As the dean of Donatist studies, W.H.C. Frend notes, “even in cities, Roman culture was more a façade than reality.” Roman gods replaced native ones in name only, and Punic remained the official language for at least the first three centuries of Roman rule. [3]

Adjacent to Proconsular Africa was the kingdom of Numidia, which corresponds roughly to northeastern Algeria and southern Tunisia. Numidia was subdued by Rome at the same time that Proconsular Africa was established (second century BCE), but it was not settled with Roman cities to the extent Proconsular Africa was. The region had long been contested by nomadic peoples and agricultural settlements, with the balance tipping to favor the latter under Roman rule. The high plains of Numidia were not as fertile as the neighboring province to the east, and were more suited for growing olive trees than grain. Olive oil was therefore its chief agricultural export. [4] Until the empire-wide economic crisis of the mid third century, Proconsular Africa was much more economically productive than Numidia, but after that time the more self-sufficient Numidian province began to export more of its produce. But because of its geographic location and the lack of natural seaports, its goods had to pass through Proconsular Africa, and Roman middlemen, in order to make it to the Roman market. This cut into the profits of the Numidians and was the source of some resentment. [5]

There was therefore a cultural and economic divide between the two provinces, and between the urban elites and the lower classes within Proconsular Africa. As Frend has suggested, "the clue to Donatism may be found in a comparative study of economic and social conditions in [the provinces of Numidia and Proconsular Africa], and of the popular religion which flourished there." [6]

The persecution under Diocletian, which led to the Donatist schism, began unofficially with a purge of Christians from the Roman army in the last decade of the second century. The official persecution followed in 303 with an edict revoking the legal rights of Christians and ordering the confiscation of their property and scriptures. Later edicts required universal public sacrifice, similar to the persecutions in the middle of



the previous century. Diocletian had divided the empire into four territories, ruled by two co-emperors who went by the title "Augustus" and two subordinates with the title "Caesar." The western-most quarter of the empire, present-day Britain and France, was ruled by Constantine. Perhaps influenced by his own mother's embrace of Christianity, Constantine was unenthusiastic about the persecution, enforcing only its original edict, which he reversed within three years. In Italy, Spain and western North Africa, however, the persecution was strictly enforced. In Africa, the persecution ended in early 305, although confiscated property was not yet returned as it was in Constantine's territories.

As with the persecutions of the second century, the question of what to do with those who had lapsed had to be faced by the church in the wake of the Great Persecution. And as in the previous persecutions, those who had lapsed had done so in different degrees. Worst of all were those who publicly sacrificed to the Roman gods. These were known as *thurificates* (a word related to incense, as *Thurible* and *thurifer*.) Others turned over their Bibles, service books, and church vessels. They were known as *traditores* (from the same root as *tradition*, that which is "given over," but also "traitor," one who betrays.) Some, however, turned over heretical books claiming that they were the church's scriptures to Roman officials who were unable to make such fine distinctions. These latter *lapsi* were similar to those in the second century persecutions who had obtained certificates of sacrifice without actually having sacrificed. Also as in the second century, the attitude toward those who had lapsed varied from place to place. In the North African context, as a general rule the more Romanized areas were generally more lenient in restoring them to the church, while in the more indigenous areas the attitude tended to be more harsh. But this generalization is complicated, as we shall see. One

important factor in the differing attitudes was the nature of the persecution itself in the respective provinces, and between the social classes in the cities. As Frend observed, "persecution in the cities, among the upper classes, took on a more tactful character than in the countryside" where the persecution was generally more bloody. [7] This disparity naturally fostered or exacerbated resentment on the part of those who had endured harsher treatment. (Frend makes a comparison [p.10] to the collaborators and members of the resistance after World War II.)

The complicating incident that directly precipitated the Donatist schism was the consecration of a new bishop of Carthage in or around 311. The lower, indigenous classes of Christians in the city favored one candidate, Majorinus, while the Christians belonging to the Romanized ruling class favored another, Caecilian, and apparently rushed through the election and consecration before the Numidian bishops could arrive to bolster the ranks of their opponents. The opponents, however, refused to accept Caecilian as bishop on the grounds that one of the three bishops who participated in his consecration had been a traditore in the Great Persecution, thus rendering the consecration invalid. When the Numidian bishops arrived in Carthage, they consecrated Majorinus as a rival bishop, beginning the schism. Majorinus, however, soon died, and it was his successor, Donatus of Casae Nigrae, who gave his name to the movement.

As I have already suggested, the social and economic disparity between the rival groups seems to have played a decisive role in this emerging conflict. Christian theology seems to have been of secondary importance. As Frend noted, "except for the question of the validity of sacraments dispensed by non-orthodox clerics, no serious theological difference separated [the Donatists] and the Catholics." [8]

This is borne out by the discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Donatists and the back-stories of their own leaders. A particularly instructive case is that of the sub-deacon Silvanus in the Numidian city of Cirta. When the previous bishop died during the persecution in 304, the more fanatical elements within the church, who were not inclined to wait until the persecution was over, put forth Silvanus to be the next bishop. What is interesting about their choice is that Silvanus had only a year and a half earlier played a part in handing over the church's silver chalices to the Roman authorities, and this was well known. He was also known subsequently to have robbed Roman temples, which may have redeemed him in the eyes of his supporters. The choice of Silvanus was opposed by the Roman citizen class of the church, who preferred that a citizen become bishop, but at least someone who had not been a traditor. Their opposition was overcome, however, when they were locked up in the tomb of the martyrs, and Silvanus was acclaimed by the crowd as the new bishop. Frend says the following about the significance of this incident:

"Here was a paradoxical situation. A self-confessed traditor had been chosen by fanatically Christian crowds as their bishop. Later, these same crowds would support Silvanus in making charges of traditio against Caecilian, the elected bishop of Carthage, thus forming the Donatist schism. There is no rational explanation for this...." [9]

This was not yet the end of the story. To become bishop, Silvanus still needed to be consecrated, and for that purpose twelve Numidian bishops travelled to Cirta. For the consecration to be valid it was also necessary that the bishops be in good standing, and upon examination, four of the twelve confessed to being traditores. They insisted, however, that as bishops their transgressions were between them and God alone, and at least one of them threatened schism if the matter was pressed. The

consecration went ahead with all twelve bishops participating. At this early date, the Numidians were not prepared to divide the church over this issue.

And yet by 311, when it came to a bishop not of their liking in the neighboring province, a bishop belonging to the ruling class and citizenship of their hated oppressors, schism seemed warranted. In their minds, however, it was not they who were schismatic. They justified themselves by insisting that the ones who had betrayed the church by handing over its sacred scriptures and vessels, not to mention those who had sacrificed to the Roman gods, had also by their betrayal cut themselves off from the church. Using the logic of Cyprian from the previous century, the sacraments and the scriptures belonged to the church. Only the church had the right to interpret scripture, and only the church could administer the sacraments. If a bishop had cut himself off from the church during the persecutions, it stood to reason that the sacraments he administered, most significantly ordination and baptism, were invalid. That made the priests he ordained, and the baptisms they in turn performed, equally invalid. It did not take long for the Donatist to regard as outside of the true church not only the priests and laity directly affected by these illegitimate sacraments but also anyone who associated with them and received them as fellow Christians. A key scriptural passage used by the Donatists to support their position was Jesus' saying about the vine and its branches in John 15. Those who had betrayed the faith were the fruitless branches that had to be cut off of the vine. And although Jesus says that it is his Father who is the vinedresser, the Donatists considered themselves his instruments.

The response by the supporters of Caecilian was first to deny that any of the bishops involved in his consecration had been traditores, but then to insist that even if they had been, that

would not invalidate the consecration, for the validity of a rite or sacrament does not depend upon the personal virtue of the one administering it, but upon their divinely bestowed office. The key scriptural passage used by the Catholics was the parable of the wheat and the tares. In contrast to the Donatist presumption to act for God was Jesus' command to let God and his angels sort out the good from the evil. In the early days of the conflict, though, neither side was very interested in convincing its opponents. Both were certain of the rightness of their cause, and both were confident that their position would win over the church at large.

Initially the Donatists appealed to Rome to invalidate Caecilian's consecration and affirm their own bishop. But this occurred in 313 as Constantine was conquering Italy, declaring the official toleration of Christianity, and presenting the Lateran Palace to Pope Miltiades. In spite of the fact that this pope was of Berber (Numidian) origin, the Lateran Council over which he presided supported Caecilian and condemned Donatus for rebaptizing lapsed clergy and causing a schism. [10] (The Donatists, it seems, were the original Anabaptists!) The Donatists appealed to a council held at Arles in the following year, and in 316 directly to the Emperor, both to no avail. The schism persisted, and by the middle of the century the conflict had turned violent, with both Donatists and Catholics raiding and looting each other's churches. [11] By this time it was clear that there would be no reconciliation.

What was it that kept these two groups apart? Why couldn't they remain together in spite of their differences on the matter of the lapsed, as the church of Africa had done in Cyprian's time? The key difference was that in the fourth century Christianity became not only tolerated, but also fashionable. Those who had been members of the church when it had been a persecuted sect had come to regard the secular world as their enemy. Choosing

the church for them had meant abandoning the world. With Constantine that reality changed. Now it was possible to be a member of the church and also a member of the broader society. Donatism, then, may be seen as one of several ways that Christians reacted to this new reality. Another, less drastic reaction was monasticism, separating oneself from the world, if not from the church. But there was also a positive reaction that embraced the new reality as God's will. In this scenario the emperor now became God's agent for spreading the faith. The Donatists' worldview and the emerging Catholic consensus, at least among the leaders of the church, could not have been more divergent.

By the time of Augustine, who found Donatism to be alive and well in the Numidia of his day (Hippo Regis was historically the residence of Numidian kings), the battle lines were drawn and the two sides were deeply entrenched. Although Augustine skillfully articulated the difficulty in the Donatist doctrine of the sacraments from the Catholic perspective, he came upon the scene much too late and with too much bad blood between him and his opponents to engage in any meaningful conversation that would serve to heal the schism. His eventual resort to coercion and his theological justification for it only served to exacerbate the situation.

It has been suggested, rather persuasively in my opinion, by the likes of W.H.C. Frend and the Augustine scholar, Peter Brown, that at the heart of the difference between the two sides lay divergent worldviews inherited from the respective cultures of North Africa and Imperial Rome. In his famous biography of Augustine, Peter Brown sums up the matter nicely:

*"[Both the Donatists and the Catholics] were faced by the fundamental problem of the relationship of any group to the society in which it lives. Briefly, the Donatists thought of*

*themselves as a group which existed to preserve and protect an alternative to the society around them. They felt their identity to be constantly threatened: first by persecution, later, by compromise... The Catholicism of Augustine, by contrast, reflects the attitude of a group confident of its powers to absorb the world without losing its identity. This identity existed independently of the quality of the human agents of the Church: it rested on 'objective' promises of God, working out magnificently in history, and on the 'objective' efficacy of its sacraments. It is a group no longer committed to defend itself against society; but rather, poised, ready to fulfill what it considered its historic mission, to dominate, to absorb, to lead a whole empire." [12]*

---

## Endnotes

[1] F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, (Oxford: OUP, 1997), q.v. Persecutions, inter alia.

[2] W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 33.

[3] Frend, 36.

[4] Frend, 46.

[5] Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 177.

[6] Frend, 24.

[7] Frend, 4-5.

[8] Frend, 2-3.

[9] Frend, 12.

[10] Frend, 15.

[11] Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 74. Tilley's work is a useful account of how Donatist use and interpretation of scripture changed over time as the circumstances and fortunes of the Donatist church changed. In my

opinion, however, it in no way significantly impacts the overall presentations and conclusions of Frend's landmark work, despite what strike me as overblown claims to the contrary made by the author and accepted by at least one reviewer.

[12] Peter R. L. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, A Biography*. London, 1967, 214.

---

*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

You can support the ministry of the Crossings Community with a tax-deductable donation via PayPal (click icon below).