

VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF CHRIST:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AUGUSTINE'S  
DONATIST CONTROVERSY FOR TODAY

GORDON R. LEWIS, PH.D.\*

Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries feared for their lives. No longer persecuted by the Roman emperors, they now suffered at the hands of other Christians! Separatists from the catholic (universal) church resorted to violence. The most zealous of the Donatist separatists, the Circumcellions, burned houses and churches, beat people, cut off a bishop's hands and tongue, and blinded others with a mixture of lime and acid.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of recent riots we can again picture the gruesome fate of the minister at Bagai, North Africa.

They rushed upon him while he was standing at the altar, with fearful violence and cruel fury, beat him savagely with cudgels and weapons of every kind, and at last with the very boards of the broken altar. They also wounded him with a dagger in the groin so severely that the effusion of blood would have soon put an end to his life had not their further cruelty proved of service for its preservation; for as they were dragging him along the ground thus severely wounded the dust forced into the spouting vein stanchd the blood, whose effusion was rapidly on the way to cause his death. Then, when they had at length abandoned him, some of our party tried to carry him off with psalms; but his enemies, inflamed with even greater rage, tore him from the hands of those who were carrying him, inflicting grievous punishment on the Catholics whom they put to flight, being far superior to them in numbers, and easily inspiring terror by their violence. Finally, they threw him into a certain elevated tower, thinking that he was by this time dead, though in fact he still breathed.<sup>2</sup>

Not all Donatists went to these extremes of physical torture, but many carried their separation to rather bizarre personal ends. They would not bury Catholics in their cemeteries, bake bread for them, greet them, sit in the same room with them, or answer mail from them.<sup>3</sup> If

\*Professor of Theology, Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver, Colorado.

1. Augustine, Letter 88, 6-7; Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, I*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) pp. 371-72; and Letter, 185, 7, 30; *Ibid.*, p. 644.
2. Letter 185, 7, 27; *NPNE*, IV, p. 643.
3. Geoffrey G. Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (London: SPCK, 1950), pp. 28-9.

they could usurp the Catholic churches, they evicted the people and washed the walls and floors with salt water.<sup>4</sup> Some who would not injure the body did not hesitate to defame the name of their opponents. Failing in the attempt to prove actual guilt for some immorality they raised suspicion. Said Augustine about A..D. 400, "The moment that any crime is either falsely alleged or actually proved against any one who makes a profession of piety, these men are incessant and unwearied in their efforts to make this charge be believed against all religious men. Those men...find what is sweet to their malicious tongues in those things which grieve us."<sup>5</sup> The Catholics found themselves in a difficult dilemma. Either they must be silent and thus unfaithful to their duty of proclaiming truth, or speak and bring calamity upon themselves and their people.<sup>6</sup>

### I. DEFINING THE CHARGE—WHAT IS A TRAITOR?

What could cause such animosity? How momentous must be the issue! It was not, however, a question of heresy versus fundamental truths of Christianity. The Donatists did not accuse the Catholics of apostasy (*lapsi*), abandoning a previously espoused faith for contrary beliefs. They called the Catholics traitors (*traditores*) to the faith because of failure to stand under Roman persecution. The catholic, or universal Christian church did not charge the Donatists with heresy, a violation of basic Christian doctrine. The charge was schism, a violation of Christian love and unity. The primary issue, then, was not one of doctrine, but one of practice.

Augustine clearly distinguished the Donatist position from that of the Arians, who denied the Deity of Christ. While the Arian controversy was an issue of heresy related to fundamental doctrine, the Donatist controversy was an issue of schism related to Christian conduct. All evaluation of the development of the controversy must consider this important distinction. The issue is not parallel to the Protestant Reformation or the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, but more parallel to differences between Christians with the same doctrines but different views of church union, or separation. It cannot be taken as a parallel to the inclusionist policy relating to those who deny the Deity of Christ, His substitutionary death and His bodily resurrection. One of the tragedies of some fundamentalism is its treatment of every Christian failure as worthy of the same discipline as apostasy from faith in Christ. Church historian John Henry Newman wisely classifies the issue between the Donatists and Catholics as a controversy on church discipline.<sup>7</sup> Of course, no exact parallel exists in modern times, but some parallels may be instructive at present.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

5. Letter 78, 5-6; *NPNF*, I, p. 347.

6. Letter, 185, 18; *NPNF*, IV, p. 640.

7. Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History I* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1933), p. 320.

How did such intense differences arise between adherents of the same Christian faith? When the Roman Emperor Diocletian tried to wipe out Christianity by burning its sacred Scriptures, Christians faced a tragic moral decision. All the options were bad: voluntarily place a Bible in the flames, deceptively give up other books, or die defending the Bible. Those who gave up their Bibles to be burned were called *traditores*. The Catholic Church and the Donatists agreed in condemning this turncoat practice. No issue existed between them on the sin of voluntarily giving over Bibles to be destroyed. But the Donatists extended the denotation of *traditor* to people who had not delivered up their Bibles.

Suppose for the sake of preserving his laboriously handwritten copy of the sacred writings, a bishop handed over to untutored soldiers demanding his Bible, copies of classical writings. What if he sensed the tragedy of the destruction of every Bible and determined in that way to preserve his? Was he a *traditor* or not? The Donatists said he was; he should have preferred death to even the appearance of giving up his Bible. On the other hand, the Catholics concluded that he had not in fact given up the Scriptures and therefore not betrayed his faith. Both agreed that delivering up the Bible made a man a traitor to Christianity. The real issue, often obscured, centered in a precise definition of the charge. Did it include the giving up of other books in place of the Bible in order to preserve the Bible?

Today, as then, it is not enough to hurl about the charge, *traditor* or compromiser. Such terms call for careful definition and application on the grounds of careful study of Christian ethical standards. It is no light matter to publish abroad that a man is compromising his faith without having defined "compromise." On the other hand, it is a **serious thing** to compromise one's faith, and we must determine exactly what constitutes compromise in order to be responsible in applying it to particular present-day practices. The case may be debatable, but before hurling charges at other Christians, we ought to define the charge with precision.

## II. DETERMINING THE FACTS—WHO IS A TRAITOR?

In addition to the ethical issue, there was the problem of determining the *facts* in each alleged infraction. In A.D. 311 the African Church split at one of its northern cities, Carthage, in the province of Numidia. Several years prior to the division Roman officials ransacked the churches for copies of Scripture. Mensurius, then bishop of Carthage, "ordered to be depositer in the Basilica Nouorum at Carthage certain heretical works, which were surrendered to the representatives of the proconsul Anulinus under the guise of holy Scripture."<sup>8</sup> At a council of Numidian bishops on March 5, 305, it was candidly admitted that several had to some degree also practiced a similar deception. The council even consecrated Siluanus, one of the 'guilty,' to the bishopric of Cirta.<sup>9</sup>

8. G. G. Willis, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

9. *Ibid.*

In A.D. 311, however, the Numidian bishops began to make this deception a test of fellowship and service. When the pastorate at Carthage was vacated by the death of Mensurius, his archdeacon Caecilianus was unanimously elected by the people, and consecrated as bishop by Felix of Aptunga without consulting the other Numidian bishops. Strong opposition to Caecilianus then arose on the ground that he himself had agreed to the action of Mensurius under whom he had served, and that his consecration by Felix, an alleged *traditor*, was null and void. Some 70 Numidian bishops descended on Carthage and elected another bishop, Maiorinus. A Carthaginian reader, Maiorinus was "no doubt the candidate proposed by Lucilla (since Optatus describes him as a *domesticus Lucillae*), who had bribed the Numidian bishops at a cost of 400 pieces of gold each, a vast sum of money."<sup>10</sup> Two bishops, and so two separate churches, then existed at Carthage for three centuries. The seventy bishops sent a letter to all African churches asking them to have no more communion with Caecilianus. When Maiorinus died in 315, he was succeeded by Donatus for whom the separatists were named.

Since the *raison d'être* of the Donatists rested upon the charges against Caecilianus, three trials were held to determine his guilt or innocence. The synod at Rome in 313 acquitted him. A trial in Africa found Felix, the consecrator of Caecilianus, innocent of *traditio* and his accusers guilty of forging the evidence against him.<sup>11</sup> The Donatists demanded a retial, but the Council of Arles, 314, found Caecilianus innocent a second time. The innocence of Felix was likewise reaffirmed, while all his accusers were excommunicated until their death. The Donatists appealed to the emperor for a further hearing. When the case was tried in Milan, 316, Caecilianus was acquitted for the third time.

Despite the lack of evidence, and failure to prove their case legally, the Donatist movement expanded in power and numbers. Whether the political authorities favored or opposed them, they multiplied and replenished Africa. In 320, oddly enough, evidence was produced to show that Secundus had also been involved in *traditio* so that the consecrator of Maiorinus, and consequently the consecration, was no more valid than that of Caecilianus! Even the Donatists' first bishop was not validly appointed!

Is it too late to establish the truth or error of Donatist charges? I am not qualified to answer that. Augustine, however, was certain of their falsity. About 80 years later he pled with them to return to the fold. "Though we hold in our hands the records of the Church and of the State, in which we read that those who ordained a rival bishop in opposition to Caecilianus were rather the betrayers of the sacred books, yet do not on this account insult you, or pursue you with invectives."<sup>12</sup> Again, "Your charge is false; you will never be able to prove it, . . . this then,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11. Letter 88, 4; *NPNF* I, p. 370.

12. Letters of Petilian, the Donatist II, 8, 20; *NPNF*, IV, p. 534.

you should do first; and then you might rise against us, as against men who were already convicted, with whatever mass of invective you might choose."<sup>13</sup> In another letter to the Donatists, Augustine observes, "It is easy for a man to believe of his fellowman either what is true or what is false; but it marks abandoned impudence to desire to condemn the communion of the whole world on account of charges alleged against a man, of which you cannot establish the truth in the face of the world."<sup>14</sup>

Whatever one may think of Augustine's position, it is clear that any charge against another must be based on evidence sufficient to prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt. This is required by sheer honesty, as well as Christian devotion to truth, and love of neighbor. For the sake of Christ and His church, let us get the facts straight before we publish across the nation that a given individual or institution betrayed the faith! Ought not Christian brothers to consider one another innocent until proven guilty? That alone could have kept the pages of church history unstained by much misunderstanding, torture, blindness, mutilation, and death.

#### DISCIPLINING THE GUILTY—

##### HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH DISCIPLINE A TRAITOR?

Complicating matters during the Donatist controversy was a difference of attitude toward a *traditor* and those who befriended him. According to the Catholic Church a proven *traditor* could be forgiven after evidence of genuine repentance and a period of probation. Ordinary channels of church discipline were to be employed. Individuals who had given up books other than the Scriptures were not guilty and needed no public restoration. The Donatists, on the other hand, considered both the one who had given up the Bible and the one who had given up other books equally unrecoverable. They must not only condemn them, but could not fellowship with them nor recognize their sacraments or ordinations. Furthermore, they could not regard anyone who fellowshiped with them or acknowledged their sacraments. Hence the Donatists practiced what is called first, second and third degree separation from the Catholics. They separated from the *traditores*, from those suspicioned of the crime, and all those who would associate with either. And this involved not merely ecclesiastical separation, but personal separation. It involved not merely avoidance of them, but an offensive attack against them. In its intensity this attack sometimes became violent.

The implications of the Donatist position were carried out with logical, if not factual, rigor. They could not possibly examine the history of every Catholic bishop to see if there were the taint of treason. It was simpler to excommunicate the whole African Church, and also any other church which remained in fellowship with it. Hence the only pure and

13. *Ibid.*, 8, 18; *NPNF*, IV, 533.

14. *Correction of the Donatists* 1, 4, *NPNF*, IV, p. 634.

true church that remained on earth was the Donatist sect in northern Africa.

Suppose, however, that the allegations of the Donatists were correct and the three tribunals which tried their case were "cajoled, misguided or bribed." Is the Church to be condemned, Augustine asks, because "she thought herself called upon to believe those who were in a position to judge it rightly, rather than those who, though defeated in the civil courts, refused to yield?"<sup>15</sup> And why should the Donatists insist upon rebaptizing the Catholics? Catholics were "guilty" of accepting "the testimony of the judges who decided the case as more worthy of credit than that of those by whom the accusation was brought."<sup>16</sup> In reality, then, a different concept of justice was involved. According to Augustine, "No man deserves to be blamed for a crime about which he knows nothing; and how could the whole world possibly know the crime in this case, whether the judges or the party condemned were guilty?" On the other hand, "Here is the justice of heretics: the party of Donatus condemns the whole world unheard, because the whole world does not condemn a crime unknown."<sup>17</sup> Here, then, is a radical difference of opinion on the question of Christian treatment of Christians actually guilty of the alleged crime, and of those who knowingly, or unknowingly, continued to associate with them.

Dissension developed among the Donatists on ways and means of supporting their cause. A second generation Donatist by the name of Tyconius was educated in both sacred and secular studies, and thought objectively about his own group as well as others. Willis observed, "He was intelligent enough to know the weak points in Donatism and honest enough to admit them, thereby rendering himself liable to attacks by Donatus and to expulsion from the Donatist party."<sup>18</sup>

The divisive tendencies of the movement are evidenced by some six subdivisions ranging from the most moderate Rogatists to the most violent Circumcellions. In addition there were the Urbanists, the Claudianists, the Primianists and the Maximianists. One of these groups would hurl charges at the others on the grounds of their accepting one another apart from rebaptism or penance. For example, Primianus, a Donatist bishop of Carthage, tolerated the Claudianists who had earlier separated themselves from other Donatists, and did not require any penance. The opponents of this laxity, led by Maximianus, were in turn successfully tried for illegally usurping a house of one of his opponents. But when Primianus was tried, he was excommunicated, among other things, for admitting the sacrilegious to the communion of the saints. Then Maximianus was elected bishop of Carthage, but since Primianus would not be excommunicated, there were three bishops at Carthage: a Catholic

15. Letter 89, 4; *NPNF*, I, p. 374.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Willis, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

and two Donatists. Political intrigue and struggle for power continued, with the Primianists gaining supremacy so that they forced some Maximianists to return to the Primianist fold. One immovable Maximianist bishop was attacked by Primianists and made to march through his city of Abitina with dead dogs suspended around his neck.<sup>19</sup>

When challenged for their unchristian activities and rebuffed by the government to which they appealed for justice, the Donatists developed a martyr complex. Numbers protested the great injustice by suicide. "Some went so far as to offer themselves for slaughter to any travellers whom they met with arms, using violent threats that they would murder them if they failed to meet with death at their hands. . . . Again, it was their daily sport to kill themselves, by throwing themselves over precipices, or into the water, or into the fire."<sup>20</sup> Augustine could not regard them martyrs. He held that the *cause* determines the validity of comfort in persecution. "It is not, therefore, those who suffer persecution for their unrighteousness, and for the divisions which they impiously introduce into Christian unity, but those who suffer for righteousness' sake, that are truly martyrs."<sup>21</sup> As Peter had written, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye. . . . But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters" (I Peter 4:14-15).

Are the Donatists misrepresented in this material which stems largely from the Catholic writers Optatus and Augustine? R. A. Knox answers, "If we hear little about the sect that is not scandalous in the literature of the time, that is because the literature of the time was concerned to emphasize the scandal; not out of common malice, but precisely in order to meet Donatist apologetics on its own ground."<sup>22</sup>

How much easier it would be to read the history of the Christian church if we could overlook these three centuries of grief! So much violence could have been avoided if. . . . But all our analyses will not change the record.

We can, however, do something about our own attitudes at present. Remembering the Donatist controversy, before we accuse another Christian of betraying the faith in a tragic moral choice we shall define precisely what we mean. Knowing that any choice involves some evil, we shall use the greatest care before condemning a brother. That care will be increased because decisions issuing from tragic moral choices are at least debatable. Whether the alleged violation of genuinely Christian conduct occurs in a left wing, right wing, or "extreme center" wing of contemporary movements, we shall responsibly define our charge!

In the second place, the Donatists remind us to be sure of our facts

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-34.

20. *Letter* 185, 3, 12; *NPNF*, IV, p. 637.

21. *Ibid.*, 2, 9; *NPNF*, IV, p. 636.

22. R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 67.

regarding the alleged infraction of Christian conduct or unity. Legal procedure in our courtrooms illustrates the complexity of establishing charges beyond cavil. Circumstantial evidence alone is insufficient. And until we have conclusive evidence the person charged with public betrayal of Christianity is to be considered innocent. Furthermore, whatever the limitations of disciplinary procedures, it is better to abide by such decisions than to take personal vengeance upon those we think exonerated though guilty.

Third, the Donatist controversy reminds us that Christians actually guilty of betraying their faith in conduct are not necessarily to be banished from Christian churches for life. The *traitors* might have been treated more severely had they been guilty of permanent apostasy from Christ Himself. Or more stringent discipline may be called for in the case of doctrinal heresy persistently maintained after no less than two admonitions (Titus 3:10). But when the ethical infraction is a single act under the threat of life or limb for the sake of preserving the Scriptures essential to Christianity, surely the party considered guilty may be restored to the church. And whatever confession and restoration may be necessary, we must not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (II Thess. 3:14-15).

In speaking to his day, Augustine speaks to us: "These things, brethren, I would have you retain as the basis of your action and preaching with untiring gentleness: love men, while you destroy errors; take of the truth without pride; strive for the truth without cruelty. Pray for those whom you refute and convince of error."<sup>23</sup>

23. Letters of Petilian, the Donatist I, 29, 31; *NPNF IV*, p. 529.