

Forgive Us, as We Forgive: The Donatist Controversy

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Summary

- The Persecution of Decius sparked a crisis over the church's power to forgive sins committed after the initiatory baptismal cleansing.
 - By 230 CE the Christian bishops were allowing the reconciliation of adulterers.
 - In the 250's the bishops and the churches split on the treatment of apostates.
 - The Rigorist movement (Rome: Novatian) required life-time penance and withheld reconciliation to the church even at death.
 - The church could preserve its power to forgive only by maintaining its purity.
 - Christ alone could forgive the sin of apostasy.
 - The Laxist movement (Africa: Privatus) offered immediate reconciliation.
 - The intercessory power of the martyrs could secure God's forgiveness of apostasy.
 - Cyprian (Carthage) and Cornelius (Rome) agreed on requiring penance and giving reconciliation.
 - Initially in anticipation of death.
 - In face of anticipated renewal of persecution, immediately to all penitents.
 - The fidelity of the clergy would preserve the power to forgive given them by Christ.
 - No one could be saved outside the unity of the true church (led by faithful bishops).

The Rebaptism Controversy

- Some Christians were baptized in the Rigorist and Laxist churches.
 - Some of these attempted to move to the traditional communions
 - In Rome, they were received as penitents, by the imposition of the bishop's hands to confer the gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - This had been a long-term practice for the reception of converts from heretical (wrong teaching) Christian groups.
 - In Carthage, they were required to be baptized.
 - This practice had been adopted twenty years earlier in a council of bishops
 - Cyprian argued that the giving of baptism required that a church (i.e., its bishops) have the power to forgive sins.
 - Outside the unity of the episcopal college, no one had the power to forgive sins.
- Carthage and Rome split on this issue.
 - Cyprian and his colleagues recognized the independence of individual bishops.
 - The unity of the true church's communion would substitute for the absent baptism.
 - Stephen in Rome threatened to break communion with dissenters.

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

- The Rebaptism controversy was over the validity, not the repetition of baptism.
 - Ephesians 4:5 served as the guide for the debate.
 - The questions were whether baptism could be given only inside the unity of the church and/or by a minister who was not holy.
 - Would toleration of a colleague known to be unworthy bishop pollute the episcopal college?
- The Roman bishop required converts from the Rigorist party to acknowledge the bishop's power to forgive the post-baptismal sins of schism and apostasy.
 - The Roman church's reason for accepting baptism performed outside is now unknown.
- The African bishops required converts from the Laxist schism to acknowledge that one could become a Christian only within the church whose bishops held and exercised the handed-down power to forgive sins.
 - Acts 19:1-7 required Christian baptism even after the baptism of John the Baptist.
 - They trusted baptism more than the ritual of penance.
 - Since baptism was "one," only one church could give it. To recognize a rival's baptism was to abandon one's own.

The Treatise on Rebaptism

- Baptism had to be performed in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28:19) or of Jesus (Acts 4:12, Phil. 2:9-11; Matt. 7:22)
- Distinguished baptism in water with invocation of divine names from baptism in the Holy Spirit by imposition of bishop's hands.
 - Water baptism can be given even outside the church or by unworthy minister.
 - Baptism of the Holy Spirit may be given separately from water baptism:
 - Either by the imposition of hands or directly by God (Acts 8):
 - When a bishop was not available.
 - When the recipient had sincere penance and true faith.
 - Imposition of bishop's hands could be given later (interpreted as baptismal rather than penitential for schismatics).
 - Baptism in the Holy Spirit is necessary for salvation.
- The efficacy of the ritual could not depend on the (unknowable) holiness of the bishop.
 - The bishop is often not available.
 - Some bishops within the church were as unworthy as heretical and schismatic bishops.

The Donatist Schism

- The “Great” persecution named for Diocletian (one of four leaders responsible for it) required Christian church leaders (among other things) to turn over sacred books and vessels for destruction.
 - Christians considered compliance an act of apostasy.
 - Some members of the clergy escaped by subterfuge.
 - Others complied with the orders or implicated others to escape.
 - Church buildings were destroyed and resisters were executed.
- After the persecution ended, conflicts arose over the choice of replacement bishops for those who died.
 - Some clergy were proven to have failed through Roman imperial records
 - Others were accused in the absence of proof or by fabrications.

Conflict in Carthage

- Caecilian was chosen the bishops of his province to succeed to Mensurius and was consecrated/installed by three bishops.
- Bishops in the neighboring (Roman) province charged him with collaboration with the imperial persecutors and having been consecrated by a collaborator.
 - Having failed to prove their case, they elected Majorinus as rival bishop for Carthage.
 - He soon died and was replaced by Donatus, for whom the movement was named.
 - Caecilian consistently prevailed over Donatus in ecclesial and imperial trials in Italy and Provence. He was accepted as legitimate bishop by all overseas bishops but not by the majority of bishops in Africa.
 - The Council of Arles (314) provided the decisive support sought by Constantine.
 - The Donatist bishops refused to accept as valid any baptism given by a supporter of Caecilian.

The Acceptance of Schismatic Baptism

- The Council of Arles (314):
 - Found in favor of Caecilian;
 - Required the African church to accept the baptisms performed by heretics and schismatics.
- The African bishops abandoned Cyprian's theory of church holiness.
- The Donatist bishops claimed the patronage of Cyprian and assumed the status of a persecuted church opposing the Roman government.
 - Imperial attempts to enforce Christian unity in Africa were sporadic and generally unsuccessful in the fourth century.
 - Many Donatist bishops were sent into exile in the 350's by Emperor Constantius II.
 - Parmenian became Donatist bishop of Carthage (362 CE) during the short reign of Emperor Julian and re-established the church
 - Optatus, Caecilianist bishop of Milevis, opposed Parmenian's writings.

Optatus of Milevis

- Three elements in Christian baptism
 - The invocation of the Trinity
 - The faith professed by the recipient
 - The minister of the ritual.
- The Trinity and the Creed were the same in all Christian baptisms.
- The minister was changing and his religious qualifications were irrelevant to the success of the ritual.
 - Christ never performed the ritual himself (John 4.1-2) but always used a minister.
 - The church has the power to generate Christians
- The ritual of baptism always regenerates a person and makes a Christian.

The Caecilianist Position

- The holiness of the minister did not determine the forgiveness of sins and conferral of the Holy Spirit.
 - The minister had to perform the ritual properly.
- The dispositions of the recipient determined the sanctification conferred and retained.
- Donatists were considered Christians and were received into Caecilianist communion through the imposition of hands that was either baptismal or penitential.
- Converts from Donatism were not to be appointed to the Caecilianist clergy.

The Donatist Position

- Only a faithful bishop had the power to confer baptism effectively
 - The faith of the bishop was communicated to the recipient.
 - An unfaithful bishop would cause infidelity and guilt in the recipient.
 - A bishop had to avoid the sin of apostasy, both personally and in the college of bishops in which he participated.
 - Other serious sins, this did not disqualify Donatist bishops as ministers
 - In the absence of imperial persecution, a Donatist bishop could be unfaithful only by leaving the church to become a Caecilianist.
 - Even schism against the unity of the Donatist communion did not disqualify.
- No one could receive baptism outside the Donatist communion.
 - Converts from the Caecilianist church had to affirm that they were not Christians; only then could they receive baptism as a Donatist.
 - They could become clergy in the Donatist church.

The Fifth Century Challenge

- The Donatists accused the Caecilianists and the entire Christian church of having lost the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins through the apostasy of Caecilian a century earlier.
 - The Donatist narrowed the criterion of holiness to apostasy/idolatry, which was no longer a significant cause of failure because the Roman Empire supported Christianity.
- The Caecilianists responded in three ways.
 - Attacking the historical evidence of Caecilian's apostasy and demonstrating the apostasy of the bishops who accused him.
 - Developing an alternative to Cyprian's theory of the church's holiness.
 - Explaining that the Donatist were Christians who could be integrated into the unity of the "world-wide" church.