

Donatists

David C. Mills
Born2Serve Ministries
April 6, 2006

This page intentionally left blank.

Down through history, God has built and preserved His church. We see its formation in the book of Acts. It is from that point until our present day in which independent, fundamental, bible believing churches have existed. Although down through the ages they have taken on many different names. Nevertheless, most of these independent churches have held to sound Bible doctrine and followed the scriptural example of a New Testament local church body.

Among these groups, an assembly of able defenders¹, emerges early on in the 4th century. They went by the name of the Donatists. In that area of the world, there were few like them. History has accounted only for the Novations who also held to comparable doctrine. Similar to the majority of the biblical local church assemblies through the ages, they underwent great persecution, primarily at the hands of the established church of the day. They are described by the American Heritage® Dictionary as “A member of a rigorist, schismatic Christian sect, strongly opposed by Saint Augustine, which arose in North Africa in the fourth century a.d. and believed in sanctity as requisite for church membership and administration of all sacraments.”² The writings of most of the groups, including those from Donatist theologians, were often destroyed by their enemies. Thus, very little has survived the ages, except for those accounts and quotations which were made by their adversaries. I believe what is most telling of the Donatists, is the content of these writings.³ In their attempt to silence the Donatists, they proclaim loudly the Biblical truth of these saints. Not only do they reflect many of the principles that

¹ History of The Donatists, David Benedict, Church History Research and Archive, 1985 pp. 8

² The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

³ History of The Donatists, David Benedict, Church History Research and Archive, 1985 pp. 47-63

independent Bible churches today would agree with, but they also are steeped in the Word of God.

In Mosheim's Church History book⁴, he describes them as a powerful and numerous group who were repeatedly condemned by councils. As stated by the Catholic Church, it is true that this group was primarily limited to Northern Africa⁵, although there were some small groups in Spain and Italy. The Catholic Church often times used their geographical dominance in an attempt to belittle the enemy; specifically here the Donatists, so that they might begin doubting what they knew to be true. As it is seen with the Donatist as well as truth down through history, the majority are rarely correct. This should be a reminder and encouragement to us as we stand, often alone, in the battle.

For thirteen years they endured a heightened state of continuous fury of their enemies, who sought to assassinate and massacre them in an attempt to diminish their power and influence in the region. Around the year 404 A.D., members began to be fined, often for not returning to the Catholic Church, and their possessions taken from them. After which, many of them were banished and eventually put to death.

It is interesting that time and time again, their persecution was based upon doctrine which we ourselves would hold dear, or at least claim to. They were often criticized and

⁴ Mosheim's Church History, 1833

⁵ A Concise History of the Baptists, G.H. Orchard, Bedfordshire, England, 1855, Chapter 2

persecuted for the adherence to closed communion (saved only), church purity (regenerate church membership) and re-ordination.⁶

One of their major focuses of the time was put on the doctrine and command of baptism. This was one of the major doctrines of the time that was under attack and being abused. Although, at this time, it was not a matter of the incorrect mode, but there was great error involving the subject. It was very important to them, as it was taught in the Holy Scriptures, that the church be kept pure in its membership, and thus baptism.

Interestingly enough, as the Word of God is under attack in this age, it is the independent Bible churches that are fighting for the truth of God's preserved Words. It should be noted that this also applies to the purity of the church in a day of ecumenicalism. And yet in the face of the heroism and deaths of the Donatists, and other like them, Christians today compromise base doctrines with nonchalant statements which echo a resounding, "it's not all that important".

As has been stated, much of their history is brought to us by their enemies. Though viewed by the Catholic Church, who was in direct opposition to them, as reproachable and traitorous, they were described by many as being full of zeal. Many have also stated that they were peoples that were full of confidence in the correctness.⁷ Simply, they believed the Word of God and were confident in it.

⁶ Mosheim's Church History, 1833

⁷ History of The Donatists, David Benedict, Church History Research and Archive, 1985 pp. 11

It was only in the last 16 years of Constantine's rule that the Donatists were not harassed, as they were in years prior. However, Donatus himself was eventually condemned at Rome, and kept there. Based on his confession, it was in direct retaliation of his re-baptizing of saved people and re-ordinations of "fallen" bishops.⁸ Once again, it was the subject of their baptism that was causing a stir, as the Donatists' required faith in Jesus Christ prior to baptism.

Optatus stated that "baptism makes a man a Christian, and that a second baptism destroys grace". This was principal in the disagreements that existed between the Donatists and the established church. Another sticking point was that not only did the Donatists believe that the one being baptized must have faith, but the person performing the baptism must also. This caused a great stir, and provoked the Catholic Church to take offense, stating that the Donatists thought they were "holier than thou". Interestingly, that is the same situation today for the Christian that decides to live a holy, separated⁹, pure lifestyle.

The Donatists saw the local church as a God-ordained and scripturally driven authority, where discipleship, membership and leadership were important components. Each member was held to high standards. As repentant sinners had to be prepared to suffer for Christ, while rejoicing and joyfully praising the Lord. They stressed the importance of many base doctrines such as scripture meditation, fasting, personal and ecumenical separation, and holy living. They especially expected and required such holy living from the leadership of church. They were people that were willing to suffer for Christ, and

⁸ History of The Donatists, David Benedict, Church History Research and Archive, 1985 pp. 13

⁹ A Concise History of the Baptists, G.H. Orchard, Bedfordshire, England, 1855, Chapter 2

even expected persecution. Additionally, they were especially concerned with spreading the gospel, not simply for numbers sake, but for true conversions. This was primarily driven by their extremely strong belief that Christ could return at any moment.

As part of our heritage, we should focus back to the Donatists and carefully count the cost, for much of what they and others died for; we lay at the feet of this world.

Bibliography

A Concise History of the Baptists, G.H. Orchard, Bedfordshire, England, 1855

A History of the Baptists, Thomas Armitage, 1890

A History of the Baptists, John T. Christian, 1922,1926

History of The Donatists, David Benedict, Church History Research and Archive, 1985

Mosheim's Church History, 1833

The American Heritage[®] Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

The Donatists, The Anabaptist Network, by Stuart Murray Williams,
www.anabaptistnetwork.com/donatists