

LESSON TWELVE – Donatism and the Julian the Apostate

Donatism

What is debated between the Donatists and us is, where is to be found this body of Christ which is the church? Are we to seek the answer in our own words, or in those of the Head of the body, our Lord Jesus Christ? – Augustine of Hippo¹

- Those who followed the monastic way of life expressed their dissatisfaction with the new order by withdrawing to the desert, but others simply declared that the church at large had been corrupted and that they were now the true church. Of several splinter groups with this view, the most numerous was the Donatists.
- The Donatist controversy once again divided the church on the issue of what to do with the lapsed and how they should be restored.
- After each period of violent persecution, the church had to deal with the problem of what to do with those who had yielded their faith but were seeking to be restored to the communion of the faithful.
- Although there were similar issues and schisms in the East, it was mostly in the West, with its emphasis on law and order that such schisms were common and long-lasting.
- In the 4th century, the debate over the restoration of the lapsed became particularly strong in North Africa.
- The persecution had been very severe in that area and the number of those who had yielded was significant.
- There were some bishops who handed over heretical books to the authorities, leading them to believe they were Christian Scriptures.
- Others turned in genuine Scriptures claiming that doing so was preventing bloodshed and that this was their responsibility as pastors. Both clergy and lay people, succumbed to imperial pressure and worshipped pagan gods.
- There were many Christians who had stood firm and faced imprisonment, torture and death. Just like earlier, these Christians were called “confessors,” and were particularly respected for their faithfulness.
- Unlike during Cyprian’s time when the majority of the confessors were quickly willing to readmit the lapsed, after Constantine the confessors took the opposite stance, insisting on greater rigor than the church was applying.
- The confessors demanding more rigor believed that the lapsed were not only those who had worshipped pagans gods but also those who had handed over genuine Scripture to the authorities and considered those people traitors to the faith for allowing the Scriptures to be destroyed.
- Shortly after the end of the persecution an important bishopric in Carthage had become vacant. The election fell on Caecilian but he was not popular with the rigorist confessors, which elected Majorinus as his rival.
- The elections were full of intrigue and manipulation on both sides, so that each was justified in claiming his rival’s election had been irregular. Majorinus died shortly after being elected and his party elected Donatus of Casae Nigrae, who became their leader for

almost half a century and from whom the Donatist movement eventually derived its name.

- The rest of the church was intensely distressed by this schism in North Africa. The bishops of Rome and several other important cities declared Caecilian was the true bishop of Carthage and declared Donatus a usurper.
- Constantine, who wanted to keep the church together for the purpose of peace in the empire followed the lead of the bishops and sent instructions to his officers in North Africa, that should acknowledge only Caecilian and those in communion with him.
- This had practical consequences as well since Constantine was issuing legislation in favor of Christianity, such as tax exemptions for the clergy. Only those in communion with Caecilian could enjoy those benefits or receive any of the gifts Constantine was offering the church.
- This schism had theological, political and economic roots. The theological justification and immediate cause of the schism had to do with dealing with those who yielded during persecution.
- According to the Donatists, one of the three bishops that had consecrated Caecilian was a traitor who had handed over the sacred Scriptures to the authorities during persecution. This invalidated Caecilian's consecration.
- Caecilian and his party responded that the bishop was not a traitor and even if he was that does not invalidate the consecration.
- The heart of the issue was whether an ordination or consecration performed by an unworthy bishop was valid.
- The Donatists declared that the validity of such an act depended on the worthiness of the bishop performing it.
- Caecilian and his followers responded that the validity of the sacraments and of other such acts cannot be made to depend on the worthiness of the one administering them, for in that case all Christians would be in constant doubt about the validity of their baptism and of communion they had partaken.
- Since it is impossible to know the inner state of the soul of a minister offering such sacraments, there would be no way to dismiss doubt regarding their validity.
- The Donatists insisted Caecilian, whose consecration had been flawed with the participation of a traitor was not really a bishop and everyone he ordained were false ministers whose sacraments had no validity.
- In addition, the other two bishops involved in the consecration of Caecilian, had sinned by joining in communion with Caecilian. Their sacraments and ordinations were also invalid.
- The other theological issue involved in the debate had to do with two very different conceptions of the church.
- The Donatists held that the church, being the bride of Christ, must be pure and holy, while their opponents pointed to the parable of the tares and wheat, which suggests it is best for the disciples not to try pronounce who is worthy and who is not, but rather leave that judgement to the Lord.

- For one side the holiness of the church consisted of the holiness of its members and for the other side it was grounded in the holiness of the Lord.
- For the Donatists, what gave authority to a priest or bishop was his personal holiness; for their opponents such authority was derived from the office, which was a common principle of Roman law.
- It appears that among the Donatists there were some that had delivered the Scriptures to the authorities and even some who had made entire inventories of all the objects of the church used in worship in order to hand over such lists to the authorities.
- Yet, these people were still admitted among the Donatists. On top of that one of the early leaders among the Donatists was a man named Purpurius, who had murdered his two nephews.
- The two parties soon separated along social and geographical lines. In Carthage and its immediate surroundings, Caecilian and followers were strong. Further west in Numidia and Mauritania, the Donatists were very popular.
- Numidia and Mauritania were agricultural areas. A great deal of their produce was exported to Italy through Carthage. The result of this was that middle-men in Carthage, with less risk and labor, made more money from the crops than those who actually raised them.
- In addition, Numidia and Mauritania were much less Romanized than Carthage. They retained their own languages and customs and saw Rome and everything associated with it as a foreign and oppressive force.
- In Carthage there was a strongly Latinized class of landowners, merchants and military officers, and it was this class that was reaping the benefits of trade and other contacts with Italy.
- For those in Carthage, good relations with Rome and the rest of empire were of utmost importance. But in Carthage there were also many of the lower class whose feelings were similar to the feelings of those in Numidia and Mauritania.
- Long before Constantine, Christianity had made significant inroads in Numidia and Mauritania.
- Fewer members of the Romanized class of Carthage had embraced Christianity. This brought into the Christian community some of the class tensions of the rest of society.
- This situation changed drastically with the advent of Constantine and the peace of the church. Now one could be a good Roman citizen and a good Christian.
- Following the emperors lead, the Romanized classes flocked to the church. Others from the same social class who had been converted earlier saw this as a positive element, but the Christians from lower classes viewed these new developments as a process of corruption of the church.
- What these Christians always hated about in the Roman Empire was now becoming part of the church.
- It seemed necessary to resist this process and remind the newly converted powerful that when they were worshipping pagan gods, the supposedly ignorant of Numidia and Mauritania knew the truth.

- Caecilian was elected with the support of the Romanized Christians of Carthage. His election was opposed by the lower-class Christians and by all the clergy in Numidia.
- Without consulting the issues being debated, Constantine decided that Caecilian's party represented the legitimate church.
- The same was decided by the bishops of the great Latin cities and eventually by those of Greek cities. The Donatists were willing to accept the support of those members of the Numidian clergy who had weakened during persecution.
- The early Donatists were not opposed to the empire, but to the world. They repeatedly sought to persuade Constantine that he had made a mistake in endorsing Caecilian.
- Around the year 340, there appeared among the Donatists a group called the circumcellions, a name of debatable origin. They were mostly Numidian and Mauritanian Donatist peasants who resorted to violence.
- The circumcellions were religious fanatics who were convinced that there was no death more glorious than that of the martyrs and now that persecution had ended, those who died in battle against the perverters of the faith were also martyrs.
- The circumcellions became an important factor in the schism. Sometimes the Donatist leaders tried to disassociate from them but at other times, when they needed activist troops would appeal to them for help.
- Eventually many villas and land holdings in secluded places were abandoned. The rich and those who represented the empire did not dare travel through the countryside without a heavily armed escort. More than once the circumcellions appeared at the very gates of fortified towns. Credit suffered and trade almost came to a standstill.
- The Roman authorities had no choice but to use force in response. There were persecutions, attempts to dissuade the dissidents, military occupations and massacres. All to no avail.
- The circumcellions were the expression of a deep discontent among the masses and the empire was unable to stamp out the movement. The circumcellions and the Donatist movement would continue until the Muslim conquest late in the 7th century.
- Donatism, particularly its radical branch, was a response to the new circumstances brought by the conversion of Constantine.
- The serious theological questions they raised about the nature of the church and the validity of the sacraments would force other Christians, most notably Augustine to deal with these issues.
- It was partly in response to the Donatists that Augustine and others developed their doctrine of the church, the validity of the sacraments and the Just War theory.
- As is often the case, those whom the rest of the church eventually rejected as heretics and schismatics left their mark in the theology that was developed in order to refute them.

Julian the Apostate

This is how that very humane prince [Constantius, Constantine's eldest son] dealt with us, although we were close relatives. Without the benefit of a trial, he killed six of our common cousins, my father, who was his uncle, another uncle on my father's side and my older brother. – Julian the Apostate²

- Julian had many reasons to dislike both Constantius and the Christian faith that he professed. At the time of Constantine's death, most of the dead emperor's close relatives had been massacred.
- The only notable exceptions were the three brothers who inherited the throne and their cousin Julian and his older half-brother Gallus.
- The circumstances in which these crimes were committed are not altogether clear, and it might be unfair to lay the blame on Constantius.
- After Constantine died there were some questions as to who would succeed him. The army killed most of his relatives in order to make sure that power would go indisputably to Constantine's three remaining sons.
- Constantius was the only one in Constantinople where the massacre took place and for that reason the common opinion was that he ordered or at least condoned the death of his relatives.
- Julian was convinced that his cousin was guilty. Julian's father was the half-brother of Constantine and therefore Julian was the first cousin to the new three emperors.
- Of Julian's large family, only he and his brother Gallus survived. He later declared Gallus was only spared since he was very ill at the time and Julian himself was just a child of six who posed no real threat to the throne.
- It is possible Constantius ordered his two cousins spared because of their age and if the three sons died, these two cousins provided the only orderly succession to the throne.
- Gallus and Julian were kept away from court. While Gallus devoted himself to physical exercise, Julian became increasingly interested in philosophy. Both were baptized and received Christian instruction.
- In 350 Constantius, when he became sole emperor, called on Gallus to come and help him rule the empire. Constantius had no children to succeed him or aid him in ruling.
- In 351, Gallus was given the title Caesar, as a junior emperor and vast territories were given to him to rule.
- Turns out Gallus was not an able ruler and soon rumors arose that he was conspiring against his cousin. Constantius had him arrested and beheaded.
- Meanwhile, Julian had continued his studies in philosophy in Athens. It was in Athens that Julian became interested in the ancient-mystery religions.
- He abandoned Christianity and sought after truth and beauty in the literature and religion of ancient Greece.
- Constantius decided to set aside the bad experience he had with Gallus and called on Julian to share his power, giving him the title of Caesar and appointing him ruler of Gaul.
- When the barbarians arose, Julian led a successful campaign against them and gained the admiration of the army.

- None of this thrilled Constantius, for he feared Julian would seek to usurp him from the throne. Tensions increased between the two cousins and when Constantius was preparing a campaign against the Persia, he called the troops in Gaul to the East.
- The troops from Gaul rebelled and proclaimed Julian Augustus, the supreme emperor.
- As soon as Constantius was free from dealing with Persia, he marched against Julian and his rebellious troops. At the moment war seemed unavoidable, Constantius died. Julian had no difficulty marching on Constantinople and claiming sole rule of the empire.
- Julian's first act as emperor was to take out revenge on those he believed were most responsible for his misfortunes. His court condemned several of his worst enemies to death.
- Apart from this act of revenge, Julian was an able ruler, who managed to establish order in the chaotic administration of the vast Roman Empire.
- It is not those actions that Julian is most remembered for but for his religious policy which earned him the title the apostate.
- Julian sought to restore the lost glory of paganism and to impede the growth of Christianity.
- Julian wished to bring total restoration and reformation to paganism. He ordered that everything taken from the temples be returned and organized the pagan priests into a hierarchy similar to the church's hierarchy, complete with an archpriest that oversaw other pagan priests in each region.
- While this was being organized, Julian took more direct steps to restore the ancient worship of the gods.
- He saw himself as chosen by them to do this work; and therefore, while he waited for the entire empire to return to the ancient faith, he was committed to render unto the gods the worship and sacrifice that others did not render.
- By his order there were massive sacrifices in which the gods were offered hundreds of bulls and other animals at a time.
- Julian was a wise ruler and was well aware that his restoration of paganism was not as popular as he would have liked. It seemed necessary to also hinder Christianity, while he was promoting paganism.
- To this end Julian took a series of measures but he never ordered the persecution of Christians. There were martyrs but this was due to overzealous local officials and mob actions.
- Rather than persecuting Christians, Julian used a two-prong approach to hindering the progress of Christianity.
- The first thing he did pass laws forbidding Christians from teaching classical literature. This prevented Christians from using the great works of classical antiquity to spread their faith.
- The second thing Julian did was set out to ridicule Christians whom he called Galileans. He wrote a work called *Against the Galileans*, in which he demonstrated that he knew the Bible and mocked its contents and the teachings of Jesus.
- Although this work has been lost, its impact was such that 80 years later Bishop Cyril of Alexandria found it necessary to write a rebuttal in which he acknowledges that part of

the power of Julian's arguments stemmed from his having received Christian instruction and knowing the Bible.

- One of Julian's main arguments was that the Galileans had twisted and misinterpreted Jewish Scripture. Julian reinforced that argument with policy and decided to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, not out of any particular affinity toward Judaism but rather out of necessity for a practical rebuttal to the common Christian argument that the destruction of the Temple had been the fulfillment of prophecies in the Old Testament.
- As all of these projects were moving quickly along, Julian suddenly died when he was speared leading a campaign against the Persians. A famous legend, but one lacking any historical foundation, claims that Julian's last words were: "Thou hast conquered, Galilean!"

¹ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 173

² The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 193