



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

### **Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)**

#### **Lesson 13 – The Wrong Track Taken by Donatism**

When persecution of Christians came to an end in northern Africa when Constantine became emperor, the churches were divided over the policy to follow concerning lapsed Christians, that is, those who had denied their faith to avoid persecution. This was not a new problem. It had occurred in northern Africa in the days of Cyprian of Carthage. In Rome there had been a similar split between the more lenient bishop Cornelius and the more rigid Novatian, who formed a new denomination that lasted for several generations.

Because the Diocletian persecution had been so severe, the number who fell away was large. Since all Christian books were to be destroyed, some Christian leaders had turned over their Bibles. Others had substituted other books and claimed they were genuine Scriptures. Some gave in to the pressure and the torture and worshiped the pagan idols. But many confessors had remained loyal to the true God and suffered the consequences: imprisonment, torture, and death.

As in the earlier controversy, the debate was between those who believed that the lapsed should be reinstated when they repented, and those who believed that there must be some form of penance (punishment) imposed on those who had been traitors. When an election was held to fill the bishopric of Carthage, Caecilian was elected. But a large number opposed him as being too lenient and elected their own bishop, Majorinus, who, after his sudden death, was replaced by Donatus, the leader of those who favored a more severe policy. Thus, there were two rival bishops of Carthage who claimed power: Caecilian and Donatus.

The controversy was disturbing the peace in northern Africa, so Emperor Constantine stepped in and declared Caecilian to be the true bishop. The Donatists (the followers of Donatus) did not accept this verdict. They did not accept Caecilian as having been properly consecrated, and they did not accept any of his actions as valid. It was on this point that the Donatists went too far. They claimed that the validity of a baptism or any other act of a priest or bishop was dependent on the worthiness of the priest or bishop. Caecilian's party contended that such a view would make all baptisms doubtful, since one cannot ever be sure of the administrator's faith. In the view of the Caecilianists, a baptism that was carried out according to Jesus' command or authority was valid regardless of the worth of the one administering it. Therefore, if a Donatist wished to join the Caecilianists, he would not have to be rebaptized, but if someone of Caecilian's party wished to join the Donatists, he would have to be rebaptized. The urban Christians tended to favor Caecilian, and the rural Christians favored Donatus.

The Donatists did not want the church to lose its vigor and strength through lenient and lax discipline, which was a danger in the days of Constantine and his successors. They went too far, however, in making the validity of a Christian action depend on the administrator's faith rather than on the Lord's Word and command. The split between the orthodox party and the Donatists continued for many years.

Beginning in 340 AD, the Donatists themselves were split by the rise of a fanatical group called the Circumcellions. This group used violence and believed that if they died in the defense of their cause, they would be worthy martyrs just like the confessors who had held out against the Romans. Some of them even jumped off cliffs to attain martyrdom. To keep peace, the Roman authorities had to intervene in many cases. Some Donatists did not favor the methods of the Circumcellions.

The Donatist denomination itself and the Circumcellions continued to disturb northern Africa until the seventh century.

---

**Questions:**

1. What controversy arose in northern Africa after the persecution ceased under Constantine?
2. Who were the leaders of the opposing sides in this controversy and what was the position of each?
3. Why was it wrong for Constantine to determine which side was correct?
4. Why did the Donatists not accept the baptisms of the opposing side?
5. How does the Donatist teaching make one doubt one's baptism?
6. What Bible passage would you use against the Circumcellions?
7. Why is it impossible to guarantee that a Christian pastor has genuine faith?
8. What determines whether a baptism is valid or not?