CYPRIAN, AUGUSTINE AND THE DONATIST SCHISM

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When Augustine became bishop of Hippo in 395[1] he found himself compelled to deal with a schism which had existed in the church for some 85 years.[2] The schism consisted of mutual hostility and distrust[3] even though "both communions had the same episcopal constitution, the same priesthood, the same Creed and Sacraments."[4] The schism existed on two levels: the first was over the concern for purity in the Christian life and worldly separation while the second point of contention was doctrinal.

The tendency toward Donatist separation from the Catholic Church was caused by a concern for personal holiness. The only true church was fundamentally made up of the "communion of saints." Genuine holiness in a church's communion was the overriding characteristic which made unity possible and binding.[5] It was the contention of the Donatists that, "the church was defined as 'pure,' for if it was the only body in the world in which the Holy Spirit resided, how could its members fail to be pure?" This concept of the church sought to uphold the ideal of the Gospel in which Christ commanded his people. "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."[7]

The rise of imperial Christianity and the subsequent influx of 'common' Christians laid the foundation for the impetus to schism. It was the position of the Donatist church that the Catholic community was a "puppet of the secular government, an instrument of political ends, polluted by a consistent record of compromise with worldliness."[8] Whereas imperial Christianity had led some to desert monasticism as the expression of their rejection of the new order, others, such as the Donatists, declared the church at large to be corrupt and themselves to be the only true church.[9] In defense of their separation they made it a practice to quote the Divine command: "Come out from among them and be ye separate from them, and touch not the unclean thing."[10] Augustine would make it part of his task to show how the church was a mixture of both good and evil, an institution for sanctifying the masses, not merely a community of sanctified persons.[11] While both the Donatists and the Catholic agreed that Noah's Ark prefigured redemption throught the one Church; it gave the Donatists satisfaction to think the Ark contained only eight people.[12]

The questionable consecration of Caecilian to the bishopric of Carthage in 311 became the triggering event for the Donatist separation. A number of Numidian bishops were opposed to the validity of his orders on the grounds that one of this consecrators, Felix of Aptunga, was a *traditor*,[13] having surrendered copies of the Scriptures to the civil authorities during the period of the Diocletionic persecution.[14] Even though several councils had been called to review

the problem and declared the charge against Caecillian unsubstantiated the Donatist party was still resolved to separate.[15]

It would be to the writings of Cyprian of Carthage, that the Donatists would turn for support. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, was martyred in 258 and represented, both in his writings and, particularly, in his death, the archetypal contrast to an apostate, *traditor*.[16] One of the most popular books of Augustine's day, especially amongst the Donatist, being the *Acts* which included Cyprian. The literary works of Cyprian, and the Donatist writers who followed him, were concerned with ritual purity and "the fear of a sudden loss of spiritual potency through contact with an 'unclean' thing."[17] It was part of a severe African fervour which maintained a "stubborn protest against the best of what was secular."[18]

The theology and practice of Cyprian, however, had its roots in the late second century writer Tertullian.[19] Particularly important to this present subject is Tertullian's theological influence in the areas of the church and sacraments. In terms of ecclesiology, G.S.M. Walker has stated that, for Tertullian,

> Ecclesiastical unity must have a point of origin, since the apostolic church is founded on the apostles. Tertullian pertinently asks heretical sects to indicate the source of their existence, and if they wish to link themselves with the apostolic age, to show an episcopal succession deriving its authority from some apostolic figure at the beginning of the line.[20]

The succession of bishops ultimately runs back through the apostles to Christ, and from Christ to God. Thus, the Church and its sacraments are linked to God in this succession as the "real extension of the life of God."[21]

Tertullian also argued for an intimate connection between the sacraments, such as baptism, and the working power of God. For Tertullian at baptism, four gifts are granted: the remission of sins, deliverance from death, regeneration and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.[22] Tertullian often contrasted the Christian rites of baptism with those of pagan practice in which he would refer to their supposed "regeneration and release from punishment."[23]

Cyprian's theology and practice would mirror this theology of Tertullian. Cyprian would declare that only within the sphere of the Church can the divine promises be fulfilled. The Church as Christ's body was the exclusive vehicle of grace securing a sinner's pardon.[24] This high churchmanship reveals why Cyprian's primary metaphor for the Church was that of a mother.[25]

Cyprian's *De Unitate* is a summary of his understanding of the church. It begins with a defense of the episcopal office[26] based upon Matthew 16:18-19 with its authority to bind and loose sines. This authority is given to each bishop only insofar as he remains within the whole. Cyprian writes,

> The episcopate is a single whole[27] in which each bishop's share gives him a right to, and a responsibility for, the whole. If you abandon the Church and join yourself to an adultress, you are cut off from the promises of the church. You cannot have God for your father unless you have the Church for your mother. If you could escape outside Noah's Ark you could escape

outside the church.[28]

When Novatian attempted to set himself up as the bishop of Rome, Cyprian in defense of Cornelius, revealed the need for an historic succession. The unity of the Church is not an ideal, but actual, and in union with the succession of other bishops in each local church. Therefore, although Novation received a valid consecration, there was no local or authentic bishopric for him to succeed to. For "outside the succession there is no Church. No one can become a bishop unlesss he succeeds to a vacant seat. Thus Novation, for all his consecration by other bishops, was no bishop."[29] The Donatist schism with its rival bishops would thus represent a theological inconsistency with the nature of the Church.

This approach to the Church and spiritual life naturally led into the baptismal controversy of Cyprian's last years. In the year 255, a dispute broke out between Cyprian and Stephen (254-257), the new bishop of Rome, over the validity of heretical and schismatic baptism. It was the practice of Stephen to acknowledge any baptism which invoked the Holy Trinity according to the command of Christ. Upon being received into the Church the sacrament was only completed by the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit.[30]

This Roman custom of Stephen was in contradiction to the received African practice.[31] Cyprian responded to the confusion by holding a council at Carthage to review the question. The 71 bishops who met in 256 upheld the African custom and declared the "complete freedom in the administration of every bishop in his church, subject ultimately to God."[32]

During this period of debate Jubaianus a fellow bishop consulted Cyprian on the question in a letter, The letter was particularly concerned with whether it was necessary to "inquire who has performed a baptism."[33] He specifically mentions Marcion[34] as the source of the baptisms to which Cyprian responds,

> When the Lord sent his disciples out after the resurrection, he instructed them how to baptize.[35] He taught them the Trinity, in whose name the nations were to be baptized. Does Marcion hold that Trinity? Does he affirm the same God the Father, the Greator, as we do? Does he acknowledge the same son, Christ, born of the Virgin Mary,[36] the Word made flesh . . . How can we suppose that one who is baptized among them has obtained remission of sins and the grace of divine pardon by his faith when his faith is not the true one? For if, as some think, a man's faith enables him to receive something outside the church, surely he receives what he believes. But if he believes what is false, he cannot receive what is true.[37] For, since baptism brings salvation, how can it be conferred without the Holy Spirit in the succession of bishops.[38]

Therefore, it was Cyprian's practice and subsequently that of the Donatists to rebaptize all those coming into the Church from heretical or schismatic groups.[39]

Augustine would take on the task of replying to Cyprian's letter to Jubainanus and the Donatist claim to be upholding the principles of Cyprian. In his work,

On Baptism, Against the Donatists, Augustine attempts to not only reply to the problems related to Cyprian's theology but also to respond to the arguments put forth by others at the council of Carthage. The opening lines of this work against the Donatists sets forth his objective, Augustine writes,

> And this we propose to do, in order that all whose judgment is not blinded by party spirit may understand that, so far from Cyprian's authority being in their favor, it tends directly to their refutation and discomfiture.[40]

The Augustinian interpretation of Cyprian is grounded in the logic of Church practice and Scriptural argumentation based in universal catholic consent. For Augustine the customs of liturgical practices are based in an apostolic tradition. In regard to the custom of not repeating baptism Augustine writes,

> And this custom, coming I suppose, from apostolical tradition like many other things which are held to have been handed down under their actual sanction, because they are preserved throughout the whole Church, though they are not found either in their letters, or in the Councils of their successors.[41]

In regard to Scriptural interpretation, Augustine appeals to consent. For Augustine the "plenary council" and its authority are linked to his conception of the church. In the African tradition of Cyprian,[42] Augustine understands one of the basic characteristics of the church to be unity. It is based upon the reality of the church as the Body of Christ. As a result of Christ being the Head of the church he can be said to direct it through an apostolic succession of bishops up to the present age, covering the whole world making it Catholic. The plenary council was a guard against the individual interpreter.[43] Therefore, for Augustine, it was no contradiction whatever to acknowledge that the Scripture is the Word of God, and Divine, and yet to acknowledge the authority of the Church as its interpreter. The Scripture was one of the Church's possessions and the Church is indwelt by the Spirit.[44]

Using these two vehicles of doctrinal authority, Augustine in *On Baptism Against the Donatists,* seeks to explain the catholic teaching of Cyprian. The opening argument in Book I is an appeal to the logical implications of current baptismal practice. Augustine takes notice of the common feature of both the catholics and Donatist, that a person once baptized within the church but now returning from heresy or schism into the church is not rebaptized. The implication of this practice is that baptism once received in the Church cannot be lost and can be retained outside of it.[45]

Since baptism can exist outside the Church in the case of a single individual, it must also be possible in the case of a group in schism or heresy. Further, this must apply to ordination just as it does to baptism. Thus, since a sacrament may not be "wronged" and is retained outside the Church, it can also be given there.[46]

Therefore, in line with the present practice of the Church it is not necessary to rebaptize those who return to the Church. For while baptism can be confer-

red outside the Church, it is to no benefit without being within the pale of the Church. Concerning those returning from schismatic baptism Augustine writes,

> Not that they should begin to receive the sacrament of baptism as not possessing it before, but that what they already possessed should now begin to profit them.[47]

The reason why baptism is of no use to those in schism or heresy is because it breaks the rule of love. For "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us."[48] For in the same way that a person who receives baptism within the Catholic Church, with either deceit or without forsaking their evil deeds, does not receive the benefit of the sacrament, neither does the schismatic.[49] Referring to I Corinthians 13 he makes the point that in both cases there is no love, and, "insomuch as they have not charity, they cannot attain to eternal salvation, even with all those good things which profit them not."[50] Augustine thus separates baptism and the remission of sin, which Cyprian acknowledged in recognizing evil persons in the church, but failed to fully integrate into his ecclesiology.[51] For Augustine, "the sacrament is one thing, the operation (i.e. working of the Spirity, spiritual gifts) is another thing, and that operation (i.e. charity) is a third which only the good can have.[52]

In Augustine Catholic unity, love and the Holy Spirit are all inseparably connected.[53] The Holy Spirit is the possession of the Church which, by the Divine command, is able to remit sins.[54] If one is therefore to break from the unity of the Church, it is a break with love, which means separation from the Holy Spirit. Separation from the Holy Spirity means no remission of sins and no eternal life.[55] Therefore, it can be said "it is the Church that gives birth to all."[56]

While Augustine both inherited and developed the thought of Cyprian he was further pressed by the Donatists to explain his divergence with Cyprian's practices. It was his first task to address the custom of Cyprian and the ruling of the African Council under him, of rebaptizing all incoming heretics. The first point put forth by Augustine is that, if Peter "on whom He built His Church" could be in need of correction from Paul concerning circumcision, so could Cyprian's practice of rebaptizing.[57]

If the case of Peter provides the grounds upon which Cyprian could be questioned, the subsequent decisions handed down by plenary councils after him required it. Augustine's authority for rejecting the practice of rebaptism held by Cyprian and the African council was the superior authority of plenary councils and the further subsequent development of the doctrine. Augustine writes in Book II,

> Councils themselves, which are held in the several districts and provinces, must yield, beyond all possibility of doubt, to the authority of plenary Councils which are formed for the whole Christian world; and that even of the plenary Councils the earlier are often corrected by those which follow them, when . . . things are brought to light which were before concealed.[58]

And again,

> There was at one time a doubt upon the subject of baptism, those who held different opinions yet remained in unity. In course of time, owing to the certain discovery of the truth, that doubt was taken away.[59]

The real error of the Donatists was their failure to follow the more essential principles of Cyprian. Although Cyprian practiced rebaptizing converts, he did not break with those who disagreed with him for the reason of purity. According to Augustine, Cyprian held the unity of the Church to be more important and more effectual towards one's salvation than baptism. While Cyprian regarded it as necessary to rebaptize converts, he yet held communion with those who disagreed with him. Augustine is fond of quoting Cyprian's words,

> It remains that we severally declare our opinion on this subject, judging no one, nor depriving any one of the right of communion if he differs from us. For no one of us sets himself up as a bishop of bishops, or, by tyrannical terror, forces his colleagues to a necessity of obeying, inasmuch as every bishop, in the free use of his liberty and power, has the right of forming his own judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he can judge another.[68]

It was the opinion of Cyprian that unity, and a person's bond with that unity was of foremost necessity. In that same letter to Jubaianus, Cyprian is asked how heretics in time past were saved when the custom of the church previously had been not to rebaptize those persons. Cyprian's response is that custom may be wrong and error needs to be corrected, but concerning those of earlier ages,

> The Lord in his mercy is able to grant them indulgence and not separate from the privileges of his Church those who were received into the Church in good faith and have fallen asleep in the Church.[61]

Augustine takes this to mean that merely by the bond of unity, (which the Donatists had broken) even those, according to Cyprian, without a true baptism can "be admitted to a share in pardon."[62] Therefore, the bond of unity is more important than the once debatable issue of rebaptism which is now keeping the Donatists from eternal salvation.

The second point of contention was the issue of church purity. The Donatists regarded admission of heretics without rebaptism as polluting the Catholic church and its sacramental power. To this accusation Augustine points out the historical inconsistency of the Donatist position. Cyprian, argues Augustine, was willing to retain communion with heretics and schismatics without separation. Therefore,

> if the communion of wicked men destroyed the Church in the time of Cyprian, they (Donatist) have no source from which they can derive their own commuion.[63]

The implication of this argument is that it takes the validity of a sacrament out of the hands of the administrator. Drawing upon Cyprian's statement that in baptism Christ is the baptizer,[64] Augustine explains that the merits of the administrator are of no consequence. Because the sacraments belong to Christ even heretics and schismatics may be the administrators.[65] It is impossible for evil persons to profane or have the power over the water or the name of God which is invoked. For just as the Gospel in the hands of heretics belongs to the Church and retains its holiness, so does baptism.[66] The sacrament, because it belongs to Christ, cannot be anything less than holy. For according to Augustine,

> Neither the creature itself of water, nor the name invoked, is adulterous. But the baptism of Christ, consecrated by the words of the Gospel, is necessarily holy, however polluted and unclean its ministers' because its inherent sanctity cannot be polluted, and the divine excellence abides in its sacrament, wheter to the slavation of those who use it aright or to the destruction of those who use it wring.[67]

Cyprian lamented over sinners within the church even among the bishops, but he recognized and tolerated them, drawing the line of personal piety in not consenting with them in their sins.[68]

It had also been the argument of Cyprian that heretics could not receive a true baptism because of the error in the person's faith. Augustine's reply is to turn to the custom of infant baptism. It certainly cannot be contended that an infant receives what he or she believes. Rather, as they grow in Christian truth and their faith becomes clearer and brighter when they become an adult, they are not rebaptized though having greater maturity discarded youthful misconceptions. Augustine draws his argument from the contrasting lives of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham first believed and then received the sign of the covenant, but Isaac, without faith received the sign to which faith was added. In either case both were needed, but both not necessarily linked as a single event.[69]

Augustine also turns to the support of Scripture in his defense. He shows how people in Corinth were opposed to the teachings of Paul on the resurrection, yet were baptized.[70] Therefore, it is possible for people to possess "the one baptism who had not the one hope."[71]

This question of proper belief and the validity of the sacrament must also be able to take into account the inability of many administrators. Augustine observes that often ill-trained priests, in contradiction to the church, fail to sanctify the water properly. Are these people to be baptized anew? For Augustine, "if over some he offers an erroneous prayer, God is present to uphold the words of His gospel" for "He Himself consecrates His sacrament."[79] Only in the case where it is clear that the "baptism is not consecrated in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost should it be considered to be repudiated as unrighteous."[73]

The Augustinian critique of Cyprian's theology is rooted in a wider, more human conception of the Church. As G.S.M. Walker has aptly stated,

When Cyprian insisted that baptism must be either ecclesiastical or null, he saw the problem in terms of too rigid a separation into white or black; and when Augustine allowed that schismatic baptism might be valid although inefficacious, he painted a more human picture in varying shades of grey.[74]

Augustine's theology supersedes that of Cyprian's for the very fact that it is able to uphold ideals while remaining applicable to the present state of the human condition. The Donatist schism, on the other hand, was a failure in not recognizing the church as "chaff mixed with wheat."[75] It is a conflict between the institutional Church and personal spirituality. It caused Tertullian to step outside the church and it was the same conflict which was carried on by the Donatists and in much of the Reformation. Perhaps it also extends to the present.[76]

NOTES

[1]W.J. Sparrow Simpson, *St. Augustine's Episcopate: A Brief Introduction to his Writings as a Christian* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1944), p. 15-16.

[2]Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 77.

[3]Ibid, p. 77.

[4]Simson, p. 37.

[5]Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vo. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 309.

[6]Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 221.

[7]Matt 5:48b.

[8]Chadwick, p. 76-77.

[9]Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, VOL. I, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), p. 151.

[10]Simpson, p. 40-41.

[11]Ibid., p. 109-11.

[12]Chadwick, p. 77.

[13]It was part of Cyprian's theology that God rejects apostates from among the clergy. Sacramental power was lost and it was the duty of the congregation to separate from any such persons. See G.S.M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St. Cyprian* Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 31, 41, 52.

[14]J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), p. 410.

[15]Simpson, p. 36.

[16]Chadwick, p. 77.

[17]Brown, p. 218-219.

[18]G.S.M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St. Cyprian* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 7.

[19]Ibid. p. 11-14.

[20]Ibid. p. 13, After becoming a Montanist, Tertullian would have placed more reliance upon direct contract with the Holy Spirit.

[21]Ibid. p. 12.

[22]Pelikan, p. 163.

[23]Ibid. p. 165.

[24]Walker, p. 51.

[25]Ibid. p. 48.

[26]The original purpose of *On Unity* was a defense of Pope Cornelius against Novation, see Colman J. Barry, ed., *Readings in Church History*, I VOL., (Maryland: Christian Classics Inc., 1985), p. 31.

[27]The unity of the Church in the thought of Cyprian is contained in the one person of Peter as the "rock" upon whom the church is built. Peter is in fact the foundation being the first example and the source of obedient faith. His primacy is one of time, not jurisdiction. His position was unique to himself and not perpetuated in the later bishops of Rome, see Walker, p. 26-28, 33.

[28]Cyprian, *On Unity*, p. 6.

[29]See S.L. Greenlade, "Introduction" to *The Unity of the Catholic Church* in *The Library of Christian Classics*, VOL. V, (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, MCMLVI), p. 119-120.

[30]See Greenlade, "Introduction" to *The problem of the Lapsed*, p. 147.

[31]The African custom of rebaptism seems to have begun under Agrippus of Carthage in the early third century. It was approved of by Tertullian and subsequently carried on by Cyprian, see, Walker, p. 31.

[32]Greenlade, p. 148.

[33]Cyprian, *Letter 73*, 4.

[34]Marcian (d.c. 160), was a heretic who was excommunicated in 144 from a local church in Rome. He rejected the Old Testament with God the Father

as the source of creation and the Son as its fulfillment as the Messiah, see Gonzalez. p. 61-66.

[35]Cyprian adds the quote from Matt. 28:18-19.

[36]See 1John, 4:1-6.

[37]*Letter 73*, 5.

[38]Ibid, 3.

[39]Simpson, p. 39.

[40]Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists*, I. 1-1.

[41]Ibid., II. 7-12.

[42]See, Cyprian, *On Unity.*

[43]Simpson, 109-111.

[44]Ibid., p. 113.

[45]*On Baptism*, I. 1-2.

[46]Ibid., p. I. 1-2.

[47]Ibid., p. I. 5-7.

[48]Ibid., p. III. 16-21.

[49]Augustine makes fewquent reference to 1 Cor. 2:14, see *On Baptism*, III. 14-19.

[50]*On Baptism*, I. 9-12.

[51]Ibid., VII. 19-36.

[52]Ibid., III. 16-21.

[53]Ibid., III. 16-21.

[54]See John 20: 21-23.

[55]*On Baptism*, III. 18-23, 24-26.

[56]Ibid., I. 15-23.

[57]Ibid, II. 1-1.

[58]Ibid., 2-3.

[59]Ibid., II. 15-20, here Augustine is referring to the later councils of arles (314) and Nicea (375). see note 7 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VOL. IV. *St. Augustine: Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman Pub. Co., 1956), p. 431.

[60]*On Baptism*, II. 2-3.

[61]*Letter 73*, 23.

[62]*On Baptism*, II. 13-18.

[63]Ibid., III. 2-3.

[64]*Letter 73*, 23.

[65]*On Baptism*, III. 10-15.

[66]Ibid., VII. 47-93.

[67]Ibid., III. 10-15.

[68]Ibid., VII. 4-8; cf. IV. 13-20.

[69]Ibid., IV. 15-23; 24-32.

[70]1 Cor. 15:12.

[71]*On Baptism*, V. 26-37.

[72]Ibid., V. 25-47.

[73]Ibid., VI. 36-69.

[74]Walker, p. 60.

[75]*On Baptism*, V. 7-8.

[76]Walker, p. 14-16.