

The Accusation of Donatism

QUESTION: Comment on the allegation that the AELC are like the Donatists because they left the LCA.

ANSWER: That is a cheap and nasty way of trying to score a point. You use a word people do not understand, and throw it at someone, preferably a foreign word. It sounds so awful that some people think, "They must be dreadful." People who hear it don't have to think. They just react emotionally, as people did to the foreign word "Apartheid".

People who don't know much church history should not exhibit their ignorance of it. What could possibly be the point of comparison with the AELC? The Donatists were a Christian sect that arose in North Africa when the pressure of the state persecution that began under emperor Diocletian lifted. There were some personal reasons involved, but the Donatists accused the Catholic clergy of surrendering copies of the Scriptures to the authorities during the persecution. They followed the strict line of the North African church father Cyprian, who differed from Rome on how to deal with people who had been baptised or ordained in sects or heretical groups. Cyprian had argued that only the Catholic Church could validly baptise or ordain. He said that no one could have God for his Father if he did not have the Catholic Church for his mother. So Donatists also insisted that Catholics who joined them had to be baptised again. Their Catholic Church had been able to do nothing at all for them because surrendering Scriptures polluted their clergy. Rome accepted the baptisms that had been performed in various sects, but said that the Catholic bishop had to lay his hand on such people when they joined the Catholic Church, to receive the Holy Spirit. In that practice we can already see a false view of what confirmation is and does.

The name "Donatists" comes from Donatus, the second bishop of their church at Carthage. The Donatists fastened in particular on an ordination in which a certain Felix, one of the clergy who assisted in the ordination of a Catholic bishop at Carthage had, they alleged, handed over copies of the Scriptures during the persecution. They argued that Catholic clergy who were tainted in such a way could only spread contagion and pollution on all those who received the sacraments from them. The Donatists were very numerous in the provinces of Africa and Numidia, and bands of them, called "Circumcellions" robbed and pillaged. In some cases Donatists simply took over local Catholic churches, and the authorities were powerless to intervene. A later series of official investigations vindicated the Catholic clergyman, Felix of Aptungi. He had not handed over the Scriptures. On the contrary, further investigations showed that almost all of the Donatist leaders had been guilty of that, or of other serious crimes.

The big mistake that the Donatists made was that they forgot that the sacraments are valid because of the words of Christ that are used in them. The big mistake that the Catholics made was to insist that membership in their external visible church body made the sacraments efficacious, though they admitted that they had been valid.

At various times in the history of the church there have been people who have tried to maintain that the sacraments were not valid if a clergyman who was at heart a wicked or hypocritical man distributed them. At the time of Peter Damien there were some who tried to rid the church of abuses by saying that people should refuse to commune from a priest who had gained his position by bribery, which was called "simony." or was living with a woman as a wife, contrary to canon law. The followers of John Wycliffe held a similar opinion. The *Augsburg Confession* article VIII makes a special point of saying, "Our churches condemn the Donatists and others like them who have denied that the ministry of evil men may be used in the church and who have thought that the ministry of evil men is unprofitable and without effect." Even in our opposition to women pastors, we would never say that the Gospel or the sacraments were invalid from a woman. The Gospel would be Gospel even if the devil preached it! However, we refuse to listen to the Gospel from a woman pastor or receive the sacraments consecrated by a woman, because of the disobedience to the Lord's command (1 Cor 14:33-38). Now, is there any point of comparison with the AELC anywhere here? Really! We have separated from the LCA. But if that were the basis of comparison, every group that has separated for doctrinal reasons anywhere in the world would be Donatists, which is absurd. We have not robbed anyone's property, like Circumcellions. We can easily say that some of us were treated very unjustly when it came to church property. We insist that the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel and the sacraments wherever they are used, and we praise God whenever the Gospel and the sacraments are used purely and rightly. When have we in the AELC ever said that the sacraments distributed in the LCA were invalid in the hands of certain LCA clergy? We have roundly criticised what some officials of the LCA have said and done, but never made such an allegation!

When the Bishop of Rome, Leo I, condemned what Eutyches had said about the person of the Lord Jesus

Christ, he made the remark that Eutyches had been badly catechised. Though he was a presbyter, he was very rash, and far too inexperienced. One wonders about the person who has raised such a charge against the AELC. When people are desperate, they sometimes think they have to say something, and that just about anything will do!